Quaderni del *Parliament of Fowls*

1

a cura di Elena Muzzolon e Sibilla Siano



PADOVA UP

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Sostenuti da una forte vocazione comparatistica e ispirati a uno stile di ricerca incentrato sul momento metodologico, i Quaderni del *Parliament of Fowls* formano una collezione di volumi collettivi nei quali si sedimenta il secreto di un'interrogazione critica che investe le scritture medievali e della prima età moderna, osservate come spazio magnetico di fondazione e negoziazione epistemologica dell'immaginario letterario europeo, nel dialogo con la tradizione antica, nella decisiva relazione tra mondo clericale e profano, nella fitta e osmotica circolazione di nuclei tematici, plessi mitico-simbolici e plot narrativi tra cultura alta e folklore.
Assumendo a campo di studio un "Medioevo esteso" – il lungo e il bel Medioevo di Jacques Le Goff, che mette in crisi la convenzione delle periodizzazioni scolastiche e decostruisce il mito della diversità rinascimentale –, questi Quaderni si fanno insegna della più nota tra le opere minori di Geoffrey Chaucer, quel *Parlamento degli uccelli* da cui si possono far discendere un'idea di plurivocità dialogante e una concezione dei testi come luogo di incessante ripresa e rigenerazione del patrimonio letterario condiviso.

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Quaderni del *Parliament of Fowls*
Conversazioni di attualità medievali e protomoderne

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Conversazioni di attualità medievali e protomoderne

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a cura di

Elena Muzzolon e Sibilla Siano

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Premessa

Alvaro Barbieri e Alessandra Petrina

Questo primo Quaderno del *Parliament of Fowls* è il battistrada di una collezione di volumi nei quali si sedimenterà in forma scritta il secreto di un seminario permanente che ha il suo fulcro nel Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari dell'Università di Padova e si fa insegna della più nota tra le opere minori di Geoffrey Chaucer. Nel poemetto chauceriano, il narratore vede in sogno un parlamento, una grande assemblea che raccoglie tutti gli uccelli del mondo, dove a tutti Natura concede di esprimersi: ci è parsa una felice metafora per la pluralità di voci che popolano queste pagine e, ci auguriamo, le pagine che verranno. Sorto "dal basso" per iniziativa di studenti progrediti, laureandi e dottorandi, il *Parliament* ha mantenuto intatta la sua impostazione libera, paritaria, dialogante e collegiale, ma si è strutturato in modi sempre più rigorosi e scientificamente esigenti, giungendo a organizzare serie di conferenze e colloqui di taglio coerente e di profilo elevato, con una vocazione speciale per i Medioevi letterari anglo-germanico, romanzo e arabo, non senza forti aperture verso le espressioni del protomoderno e fino al pieno Rinascimento.

Pur rinunciando a formulare dichiarazioni d'intenti ed enunciati programmatici che rischierebbero di apparire ridondanti e pretenziosi, i firmatari di questa *Premessa* non vogliono negarsi qualche riflessione liminare

sulle ragioni e lo spirito dell'atelier di ricerca i cui primi frutti confluiscono – coerentemente disposti e sapientemente introdotti dalle Curatrici Elena Muzzolon e Sibilla Siano – in questo libro collettivo. E forse, non per scorciatoia retorica ma per irresistibile cogenza di spinte interne, sarà consigliabile partire dall'immagine per tanti versi eloquente ed emblematicamente tesa del *Parlamento degli uccelli*. Cominciamo allora rammentando l'estensione davvero sesquipedale dell'immaginario ornitomorfo: in ogni civiltà umana e presso tutte le culture, dal pensiero arcaico delle popolazioni di interesse etnografico alle società ultramoderne del capitalismo avanzato, gli uccelli sono creature ad altissimo tasso di prestazione simbolica. Dacché mondo è mondo, sotto tutti i cieli e a ogni latitudine, l'avifauna globale si presta a veicolare i desideri di sublimazione maturati nelle tradizioni magico-religiose e, più in generale, a manifestare un bisogno di verticalità e slancio ascensionale. Nella limitatezza terricola della nostra specie albergano da sempre un prurito d'ali e un desiderio di volo che esprimono un'autentica ansia di trascendenza. E a questa smania di elevazione si aggiunge, nella tradizione orientale e occidentale dell'ornitologia simbolica, il cinguettio degli uccelli come rappresentazione quintessenziale della lirica e del ruolo eminente che essa svolge «nell'evento umano, attraverso, ma essenzialmente oltre, quanto chiamiamo letteratura»[1]. Dagli *auctores* classici alla poesia mistica di ʻAttār e fino a una folla di voci moderne e contemporanee – Giacomo Leopardi, Théophile Gautier, René Char, Fernando Bandini, Jacques Réda e molti altri – non si contano tra i poeti gli amici dei volatili. Ma non sono questi aspetti "primi" – cioè archetipici e universali – del simbolismo aviario ad essere attivamente implicati nei lavori e nelle conversazioni del nostro gruppo di ricerca. Ciò che più conta,

[1] A. Brandalise, *Le ragioni dell'usignuolo e la "bella voce" dei poeti. Da Platone a Leopardi passando per ʻAttār*, in *Tra le spade e le alcove. Tradizioni e letterature a confronto: dalle origini a Saʻdi e Petrarca*, a cura di C. Saccone e N. Norozi, Centro Essad Bey / Amazon IP, Seattle 2019, pp. 99-104, p. 99.

nella definizione progettuale del *Parliament of Fowls*, ci sembra risiedere proprio in due tratti decisivi e definitori del poemetto di Chaucer, la cui evocazione non ha dunque una funzione suggestivamente esornativa ma un ruolo indicatore di scelte metodologiche e orientamenti culturali.

Il primo elemento si riconnette in modo organico all'idea stessa di *Parliament*, ovvero alla parabola del coro discorde, alla conflittuale polifonia degli uccelli convenuti in assemblea plenaria nel giorno di San Valentino e dialetticamente impegnati a discutere, con radicali diversità di vedute, i temi cruciali dell'amore e della natura. Di questa tribuna plurivoca e dialogante, che articola gli sviluppi argomentativi e le prese di parola nelle forme della controversia e del *débat*, questo Parlamento padovano intende trattenere l'istanza non omologata della contraddizione e della critica puntuta, il gusto istintivo ma non indisciplinato delle dinamiche dibattimentali e soprattutto lo "stile" del *Mitdenken*, cioè il senso di quel pensare assieme – ma non univocamente – nel quale si possono trovare i presupposti e le motivazioni decisive di ogni serio lavoro seminariale. Si aggiunga che le stesse geometrie di volo degli uccelli metaforizzano l'idea di una variabilità intersoggettiva dei punti di vista: le traiettorie aeree dei volatili cambiano le prospettive al mondo, facendo passare le apparenze del reale per il prisma di una visione multipla e cangiante. E ancora: la composita avifauna radunata in conversevole e spesso polemica adunanza da Chaucer offre un campionario davvero diversificato per specie, morfologia e caratterizzazione "sociale" – aristocratici rapaci, mangiatori di vermi, starnazzanti acquatici di intonazione ribobolaia e popolaresca, umili uccelli dei campi che si cibano di sementi. E d'altra parte la loquacità dei pennuti e la possibilità che alcuni uomini d'alto grado giungano a comprendere il loro linguaggio aereo e segreto non sono soltanto luoghi classici delle iniziazioni eroiche e dell'agiografia (da Sigurdhr a san Francesco), ma possono ritornare nelle forme dialettiche del discorso ideologico novecentesco. Si

pensi solo al loico, petulante corvo marxista che, in un memorabile film-saggio di Pier Paolo Pasolini, accompagna un pezzo del cammino di Totò e Ninetto Davoli per gli scenari periurbani e periferici di un mondo sottoproletario di robusta vitalità e nondimeno quasi metafisico nella sua fisionomia paesaggistica sgranata e nella sua disorientante assenza di riferimenti: proscenio ideale per un confronto verbale trasognato e grottesco in cui si deve constatare l'impossibilità di qualsivoglia intesa e reciproca comprensione tra il pennuto intellettuale di sinistra, incapace di frenare la sua inclinazione a sdottorare con implacabile saccenteria, e i due sgangherati rappresentanti del *Lumpenproletariat*, che alla fine se lo mangiano arrosto (*Uccellacci e uccellini*, It 1966)[2].

Ma c'è un secondo aspetto del *Parliament* di Chaucer che ci sembra essenziale nel connotare il nostro gruppo di ricerca. Il *Parliament of Fowls* è aperto da un *incipit* di impronta paremiologica attinto agli *Aforismi* ippocratici ma passato per il filtro del *De brevitate vitae* di Seneca (*ars longa, vita brevis*), che si trasforma, sorprendentemente e inaspettatamente, in una definizione dell'amore: lontano dalle sdolcinature delle tarde propaggini dell'*amour courtois*, Chaucer prende a prestito da Boezio

[2] Si osservi di passata che questa notevole pellicola di Pasolini, tanto irrimediabilmente datata nelle ragioni centrali della sua ispirazione eppure così universale nella sua torsione esistenziale di fiaba metafisica e apologo drammatizzato *à la* Samuel Beckett, ripropone anche, in forma svisata e rivisitata, la sequenza topica del santo che sa intendere il linguaggio degli uccelli. Il racconto incastonato di frate Ciccillo e frate Ninetto riscrive in chiave ciociara il *Cantico delle creature*, riattraversando parodicamente un motivo classico della tradizione agiografica, che rinvia a modelli del pensiero magico e ad archetipi mitico-religiosi di ascendenza sciamanistica. Sul corvo parlante e sulla digressione evangelico-francescana in *Uccellacci e uccellini*, cfr. S. Petraglia, *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1974, pp. 64-72. E forse non sarà da escludere che l'idea di rappresentare il chierico marxista in forma corvina discenda «dalle pagine su Francesco di Spitzer, quelle in cui spiega come per la mentalità medievale, che vede negli animali figure allegoriche, non c'è nulla di assurdo nel rappresentare un volatile come un erudito, un dotto, un pennuto maestro» (R. Donati, *Leo Spitzer. Un profilo intellettuale*, Carocci, Roma 2026, p. 217).

una riflessione sull'amore come forza cosmica e generatrice, unico moto non solo per «il sole e l'altre stelle», ma per qualunque umana impresa. Ed è lo stesso amore a dare propulsione al poemetto, come (ci si passi l'immagine) è solo la passione per la letteratura che muove il nostro gruppo di giovani studiosi. Il *Parliament* è dunque fertile metafora per il Parlamento. Il poemetto onirico, apparentemente divagante eppure compaginato secondo un progetto di grande tenuta estetica, prende il via da una rivisitazione del *Somnium Scipionis* ciceroniano arricchita di intarsi danteschi, prosegue con la *descriptio* di un verziere d'incanti nella quale risuonano le note topiche del *locus amoenus* riecheggiate per il tramite del *Roman de la Rose* (porzione di Guillaume de Lorris) e potenziate da richiami allusivi al Paradiso Terrestre di *Purgatorio* XXVIII, trova poi un momento forte in una rappresentazione del Tempio di Venere che attinge al *Teseida* di Boccaccio, approdando infine a un poggio dove Natura, torreggiante deità raffigurata in plastica prosopopea *à la manière de* Alano di Lilla, presiede un rumoroso parlamento degli uccelli. Come avviene un po' in tutti i *dream poems* di Chaucer, il racconto attraversa e congiunge una serie di spazi canonici dell'immaginario letterario che costituiscono veri e propri luoghi archetipici della tradizione occidentale. La passeggiata visionaria del *Parliament* si snoda per territori libreschi che rimodellano e rimettono in gioco motivi desunti dagli antichi e dalla letteratura medievale, risultando da reminiscenze e spunti di lettura ora dichiarati ora sottaciuti, in una girandola intertestuale che si muove tra «esplicitazione e reticenza»[3], alternando citazioni scoperte e ammiccamenti, rinvii evidenti e allusività. Spazio di confluenza e riattivazione dell'archivio testuale e dell'immaginario occidentale, il *Parliament* non è però un museo di vecchi *clichés* o un repositorio di materiali di pronto impiego, tampoco un magazzino di rigattiere ricolmo di *bric-à-brac* letterario, sibbene un semenzaio, una pepiniera

[3] G. CHAUCER, *Il Parlamento degli uccelli*, a cura di P. Boitani, Carocci, Roma 2025: Introduzione. *Dormire, sognare, scrivere*, pp. 11-42, p. 21.

ricolma di linfe e germi pronti a rifiorire in nuove forme e creazioni originalmente declinate. Il repertorio classico viene inteso non come polveroso deposito, ma quale officina di incessanti ruminazioni e rigenerazioni. Grano nuovo coltivato nell'*humus* grassa di vecchi *terroirs*[4]:

> For out of olde feldes, as men seyth,
> Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere
> [Ché dai campi vecchi, dice la gente, / viene il grano nuovo d'anno in anno]

Amore e dedizione per il patrimonio letterario occidentale, persistenza e continuità dei classici attraverso la cultura letteraria tardo-antica e medievale, gioco intertestuale e lavoro stilistico sugli spessori della tradizione: nella poetica e nelle elaborate stratigrafie del *Parliament* sembra quasi di ritrovare in compendio la lezione di Erich Auerbach, Ernst Robert Curtius e Leo Spitzer. Ed è proprio questa la lezione da cui vorremmo trarre spunti e inneschi per le nostre conversazioni di attualità medievali e protomoderne.

Luogo di elezione e dominio privilegiato d'indagine dei nostri seminari sono le scritture del Medioevo euro-mediterraneo, ma nelle nostre intenzioni – e di riflesso negli interventi confluiti in questo Quaderno – l'età di mezzo non viene assunta come mero espediente di ordinamento cronologico secondo le periodizzazioni manualistiche correnti, bensì nell'accezione allargata, inquieta, molteplice e frastagliata che si profila problematicamente nei contributi postremi di Jacques Le Goff[5], nei quali si demistifica con ottime ragioni il mito della diversità rinascimentale, mostrando e valorizzando come i fattori di continuità siano predominanti su quelli innovativi di cambiamento o di schisi. In quanto modello di orga-

[4] Chaucer, *Il Parlamento degli uccelli*, op. cit., pp. 48-49.

[5] Cfr. J. Le Goff, *Un lungo Medioevo*, Dedalo, Bari 2006 (ed. or. *Un long Moyen Âge*, Tallandier, Paris 2004), pp. 19-68; Id., *Alla ricerca del Medioevo*, con la collaborazione di J.-M. de Montremy, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2012 (ed. or. *À la recherche du Moyen Âge*, Éditions Louis Audibert, Paris 2003), pp. 33-61; Id., *Il tempo continuo della storia*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2019 (ed. or. *Faut-il vraiment découper l'histoire en tranches?*, Seuil, Paris 2014).

nizzazione dei valori, attivo sia in ambito economico sia nella sfera politico-sociale, la cultura medievale sembra perdurare fino all'avvento della piena modernità, giungendo a sfaldarsi soltanto «tra il 1750 e il 1850, per concludersi definitivamente negli anni '50 del Novecento con la fine dei "terroirs" cara a Eugen Weber»[6]. Angoli e lingue di civiltà medievale – il lungo e il bel Medioevo – si insinuano da ogni lato dentro il cuore della modernità europea. Secondo il grande storico francese, bisognerebbe sostituire l'idea di una cesura Medioevo/Rinascimento con quella di una netta separazione tra Lungo Medioevo e Tempi Moderni, perché solo nella svolta decisiva dei secoli XVIII-XIX si arriverebbe alla liquidazione di quella fase dell'avventura occidentale che siamo soliti denominare come età di mezzo. Si tratta allora di cercare e dissotterrare un *Moyen Âge des profondeurs*, compromesso con le durate estese dei sistemi di produzione agraria e delle mitologie popolari, un lungo Medioevo le cui propaggini si spingono fino alla rivoluzione industriale e alla dissoluzione delle forme ideologiche di antico regime. Di più. Come si evince dalle dense annotazioni introduttive di Elena Muzzolon, il Medioevo del *Parliament* è un concetto articolato e plurimo, uno spazio multipolare di mediazioni, travasi e contraddizioni, ignaro del sentimento nazionale e senza rigidi tratti di demarcazione geografico-territoriale, ma osmotico, dialettico, conflittuale, attraversato da fili passanti e agitato da processi dinamici che ne ridisegnano il profilo nel segno di una estrema complessità di apporti, complementi e sincretismi. Ma soprattutto conterà per noi un'idea del Medioevo concepito come campo tensivo di storie, personaggi e rappresentazioni di grande forza germinativa, capaci di costituirsi come una zona magnetica e oltremodo vitale dell'immaginario europeo. In fondo il *medium tempus* che forma l'oggetto privilegiato del nostro seminario può essere visto come un grande sistema di forme mediante le quali l'Occidente pensa sé stesso, ed è per questo che il Medioevo, inteso in questa accezione non restrittiva e

[6] Le Goff, *Un lungo Medioevo*, op. cit., p. 53.

sottratto a riduzioni anguste e mortificanti, si rivela decisivamente come un formidabile laboratorio delle pratiche e del pensiero europei, un contenitore così traboccante di visioni e figurazioni da eccedere le definizioni che cercano di perimetrarlo. Allo stesso modo, dobbiamo ripensare la geografia. Nel dare centralità al Mediterraneo come culla e nodo di forze culturali e scambi letterari, scopriamo che le nostre scorribande critiche possono estendersi dalla Scozia all'Africa del nord, ritrovando linee di continuità e intercettando fertili contaminazioni.

Alla luce di queste considerazioni – e particolarmente degli spunti di riflessione ripresi da Le Goff – non sarà difficile comprendere perché il Medioevo del *Parliament* si proietti inclusivamente sull'*Early Modern*, accogliendo nel suo temario il tardo gotico *flamboyant* e l'Autunno del Medioevo di marca borgognona caro a Johan Huizinga. Allo stesso modo, entro le dinamiche transalpine di area romanza, l'*Orlando furioso* di Ludovico Ariosto può essere riguardato come un raffinamento estremo di un immaginario e di un dispositivo narrativo (l'*entrelacement*) che trovano i loro palinsesti – e talora le loro fonti documentabili – nelle prose cavalleresche della Francia feudale. E questo genere di osmosi è altrettanto verificabile per la letteratura inglese, sicché fa benissimo Sibilla Siano a insistere sul ruolo giocato dalla storia e dai paradigmi medievali nella riflessione che il teatro elisabettiano svolge attorno ai grandi temi del politico, dell'esercizio del potere e dell'istituzione monarchica. D'altra parte, non sono sporadici né inconsistenti i lavori che si impegnano a documentare l'appartenenza di Shakespeare al mondo e alla cultura medievali[7].

Nella sfera d'interessi e negli ambiti di studio visitati dal *Parliament* rientrano anche le variegate e multiformi manifestazioni del medievalismo europeo, visto non tanto come riproposta antiquaria di ingredienti e temi appartenenti all'età media, ma come ripresa viva

[7] Si veda, ad esempio, la monografia di H. Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, Arden Companions to Shakespeare, London 2010.

di nuclei mitici ed elementi storici capaci di costellarsi nei testi e nelle altre espressioni artistiche come immagini archetipe dalla riverberante eco simbolica. E a questo riguardo mette conto sottolineare come lo studio critico delle esperienze di *Fortleben* medievale, lungi dal costituire un momento di semplice ricostruzione storiografica, possa offrire in molti casi occasioni e suggerimenti per ritornare sulla letteratura dell'età di mezzo con uno sguardo più penetrante e inedite angolature ermeneutiche. Il lavoro di ricerca del nostro Parlamento insomma è teso a mostrare l'inutilità dello studio di un autore, o di un testo, o di una forma letteraria *in vitro*, e l'importanza di collocare gli oggetti dell'analisi all'interno di una realtà continuamente in flusso e in scambio. Date tali premesse, ci sembra di buon auspicio che l'attività di questo gruppo si sia evoluta all'interno di un Dipartimento in cui sono dominanti la poliglossia e la compresenza (oltre allo scontro per la più parte fecondo) di atteggiamenti teorici e modelli culturali assai diversi tra loro.

In coda a questi ragionamenti sulle motivazioni intime e i temi forti del nostro seminario, rimane da precisare che il *Parliament* ha una marcata inclinazione per le arti visive, che si concretizza in una speciale attenzione per i rapporti tra la dimensione testuale – colta anche in termini paleografici e codicologici – e quella iconica, non soltanto – com'è scontato – nell'ornamentazione e nella illustrazione miniata del libro manoscritto, ma anche nelle pitture parietali di argomento letterario e nei casi di "scritture esposte". A testimonianza di questa vena "iconofila", il nostro seminario si è dato per blasone un airone araldico e pensoso, creato dal talento illustrativo di Luca Zaccaria e sempre presente, a mo' di contrassegno, nelle iniziative del *Parliament of Fowls*, sia nelle locandine degli incontri di studio sia nella copertina dei Quaderni che qui si inaugurano. A partire dal *Physiologus* greco[8], l'airone occupa nella Voliera degli uccelli simbolici una posizione particolarmente esposta, se non altro per

[8] Cfr. *Il Fisiologo*, a cura di F. Zambon, nuova edizione riveduta, Adelphi, Milano 1982 (1ª ed. 1975), p. 83.

una sua predisposizione morfologica e posturale a un'esasperazione stilizzata delle forme. Ai trilli e al ciangottio squillanti del Parlamento aviario, l'airone aggiunge la prudenza e la misura di una riflessività silenziosa.

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Introduzione (parte prima)

Un lungo Medioevo: la fucina delle forme

Elena Muzzolon

Se si guarda indietro al Medioevo, ciò che si trattiene con più forza assomiglia a una riserva di possibilità: un'età capace di ospitare il meraviglioso e il dottrinale, l'esotico e il domestico, la violenza e la grazia, il riso e l'apocalisse, senza che questi registri si escludano. L'Età di mezzo agisce come una grande fucina di raccordo, un evo di cerniera in cui eredità antiche e forme nuove entrano in attrito, si trasformano, trovano equilibri provvisori e, soprattutto, vengono fissate nella letteratura e nell'immaginario: romanzi e *lais*, cronache e canzoni di gesta, prediche e parafrasi, testi che si lasciano innervare da energie diverse e le riorganizzano in figure riconoscibili. La letteratura dell'evo medio custodisce qualcosa che assomiglia a un archivio dell'immaginario europeo: un archivio, beninteso, che non ha nulla della forma sterile d'un repertorio immobile, ma che al contrario custodisce l'inestinguibile scintilla di una rovente officina in cui miti e istituzioni, archetipi e codici sociali entrano in dialogo. Schegge d'urto: metallo vivo che si fissa in forma, ma non si spegne, perché sotto la super-

ficie del testo persiste l'incessante pulsazione di un nucleo ardente.

Un caso emblematico – e, per molti versi, un punto d'osservazione privilegiato – è quello di Galvano. La carriera del nipote di Artù mostra come la cavalleria che conosciamo sia da subito un fatto europeo[1]: sem-

[1] Nel riferirmi a una *cavalleria europea* intendo la forma storicamente determinata che, fra X e XIII secolo, prende corpo nell'Occidente medievale come *istituzione* e come *immaginario*: un insieme di pratiche e ruoli, di costumi e "atteggiamenti mentali", di cornici sociali e lessici del prestigio, che matura nell'età delle crociate, degli ordini religioso-militari e della cultura cortese, e da lì alimenta a lungo la memoria letteraria del barone epico e del cavaliere errante, del paladino e dell'eroe "arturiano", fino alle grandi rifrazioni tardomedievali. È la cavalleria che riconosciamo come figura europea, perché lingua comune delle corti e dei testi, un codice di visibilità e di legittimazione, più che un semplice profilo tecnico-militare. Franco Cardini colloca lo sviluppo della cavalleria occidentale a partire dal X secolo insistendo sulla profondità di radici più antiche. La formula *europea* permane consapevole di una genealogia più vasta dell'Occidente: la storia del combattimento a cavallo, delle *élites* armate, delle forme iniziatiche e delle culture equestri appartiene a un lungo arco eurasiatico e mediterraneo; e lo stesso Cardini invita a riprendere il discorso delle radici andando a cercare nel buio dei secoli anteriori ai cosiddetti 'secoli bui', dove la domanda sulle *origini* (germani, *equites* romani, contatti con società militari musulmane nel tempo delle crociate) lascia il posto alla questione più profonda del prestigio quasi sacrale del cavaliere e del nesso archetipico uomo-cavallo (F. Cardini, *Alle radici della cavalleria medievale*, il Mulino, Bologna 2014; 1ª ed. La Nuova Italia, Scandicci [Firenze] 1981). Più che un punto di partenza assoluto, l'Europa rappresenta per la cavalleria una officina di rielaborazione: un luogo di convergenza in cui tradizioni militari, simbolismi, ritualità e modelli di autorità si ricompongono in una figura riconoscibile, esportabile, narrabile. La cavalleria non si limita a designare un corpo armato o un ceto, ma un punto di condensazione: il luogo in cui pratiche militari, etica dell'onore, simbolica del prestigio, modelli di autorità e forme narrative si incontrano e si rendono reciprocamente leggibili. Insistere sulla cavalleria significa allora assumere una categoria che eccede la propria dimensione tecnico-istituzionale e diventa forma mentale, dispositivo di rappresentazione e grammatica del valore. Nell'universo in cui nascono i testi qui considerati, *caval-*

bra emergere e definire il suo aspetto nello spazio d'*oïl*, dove le forme narrative appaiono già sorprendentemente mature[2], per poi mutare, riformularsi, fino a riemergere, secoli dopo, nel capolavoro medio-inglese *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Nelle vicende che riguardano Galvano resta sempre viva una memoria profonda, che affonda le radici negli archetipi primevi: la prova come espressione rituale, l'incontro con l'alterità, la sfida che mette in questione identità e reputazione; e al contempo prende corpo nel nipote di Artù l'emblema della cavalleria più matura, quella pienamente cortese, quella che la tradizione riconosce e fissa come la forma vulgata del mondo arturiano. Ma questa lucidatura di corte è una vernice sottile, al di là della quale affiora

leria non è semplicemente un tema fra gli altri, ma il vertice in cui convergono gerarchie, desideri, prove, conflitti; il nome di uno spazio dell'immaginario in cui l'azione si fa segno e il segno si fa criterio di legittimazione.

[2] Sebbene la piena elaborazione romanzesca della figura di Galvano (*Gauvain*) avvenga in area francese nel XII secolo, soprattutto nei romanzi in versi di Chrétien de Troyes, le sue prime attestazioni sono anteriori e si collocano nell'ambito della tradizione cronachistica anglo-normanna e, verosimilmente, in un sostrato brittonico. La prima menzione nota compare nelle *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (ca. 1125) di Guglielmo di Malmesbury, che riferisce del ritrovamento della tomba di Walwen in Galles; poco dopo, nella *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136) di Geoffrey di Monmouth, Galvano (*Walganus*) è presentato come nipote di Artù e valoroso comandante nelle guerre contro i Romani. Le cronache successive (Wace, Layamon) consolidano tale profilo eroico, accentuandone virtù guerriere e lealtà dinastica. L'elaborazione francese non crea dunque *ex novo* il personaggio, ma ne rielabora una figura già attestata, probabilmente di origine celtica e legata alle tradizioni del Nord della Britannia (ipotesi sostenuta, tra gli altri, da Rachel Bromwich), trasformandolo progressivamente in emblema della cortesia e della misura cavalleresca. La "nascita" francese di Galvano va quindi intesa non come origine assoluta, bensì come momento decisivo di formalizzazione letteraria e di irradiazione europea della sua figura. Cfr. R.H. Thompson, K. Busby, *Introduction* in *Gawain: A Casebook*, edited by R.H. Thompson, K. Busby, Routledge, New York – London 2006, pp. 1-36.

il graffio di un mondo più antico, in cui la prova non è soltanto esercizio di stile ma gesto brutale e rituale, e in cui l'onore si misura ancora sul filo della ferita. La civilizzazione non può obliterare la violenza: la disciplina e la mette in forma. E nel tessuto delle avventure restano segni che non si lasciano levigare: come una cicatrice, il racconto conserva la traccia dell'urto fra codici diversi – la grazia e la forza, il cristiano e il precristiano, la selvatichezza e la cultura –, memoria di una civiltà nata anche da frizioni e passaggi non pacificati. Sul corpo di Galvano si delinea con nitore l'operazione tipica del Medioevo: una corrente antica continua a scorrere sotto la superficie, e le forme nuove offrono a quella corrente un linguaggio, un ordine, una scena. L'acclimatazione adatta, irreggimenta e dà forma, ma non estingue la forza e la petizione squassante delle ragioni prime.

È proprio questa scena – in cui la parola diventa gesto, e il gesto diventa parola – che il titolo del volume vuole convocare, richiamando il *Parliament of Fowls*: la conversazione, più che un tema, vi appare come principio di organizzazione, un luogo in cui desideri e norme, individui e comunità, parole e poteri vengono messi alla prova. I contributi qui presentati si dispongono entro questa cornice e tornano, ciascuno in modo diverso, su una domanda centrale: che cosa produce la parola quando entra in rapporto con l'eros, con la cavalleria, con il sacro? E in che modo il discorso – letterario, rituale, dottrinale – diventa strumento di legittimazione o di rovina?

Un primo nucleo tematico riguarda la parola come prova, la conversazione che scivola in giudizio: l'accusa, la testimonianza, la reputazione, e la trasformazione del privato in fatto pubblico. È da questa prospettiva che muove il saggio di Gianluca Di Teodoro, proponendo una ricognizione ampia del motivo della donna ingiustamente accusata di adulterio (K2112), assumendo fin dall'avvio una postura metodologica netta: di fronte

a una proliferazione entropica di forme, luoghi e tempi, l'autore diffida sia della ricerca di un'origine unica sia di definizioni troppo rigide del motivo. Il nodo cruciale non è isolare un archetipo, bensì tracciare una costellazione mobile di realizzazioni: un "fascio" di tratti narrativi che si combinano in modo variabile, riconoscibili per prossimità e *somiglianze di famiglia*, secondo una classificazione politetica che privilegia la continuità e i gradienti rispetto ai confini netti. La schedatura tipologica diventa un modo per superare l'esercizio tassonomico e osservare come la calunnia agisca da dispositivo sociale. Di Teodoro mette in fila famiglie narrative diverse (dalla dinamica della "scommessa" sulla castità della moglie, fino ai complessi intrecci epici in cui la calunnia si intreccia con prigionia, espulsione, duello giudiziario e restaurazione della verità), mostrando quanto facilmente il motivo attraversi generi, registri e tradizioni, e quanto la sua trasmissione (anche orale, e dunque non pienamente ricostruibile) imponga cautela interpretativa. È soprattutto quando la calunnia colpisce la donna nel suo ruolo di nodo genealogico che la posta in gioco si chiarisce: nella scena di una crisi morale affiora il conflitto sul controllo della discendenza, dei possessi e dell'autorità[3]. La parola calunniosa funziona come leva "biopolitica" ed egemonica: manipola il credito pubblico del vero, delegittima una linea ereditaria,

[3] La reputazione femminile non è mai un dato, ma un effetto della parola che circola. Il dispositivo della calunnia, che nei testi narrativi prende forma come sospetto, insinuazione, prova da superare, appartiene anche alla storia politica. Non è casuale che una figura centrale come Eleonora d'Aquitania, snodo fra potere dinastico e cultura cortese, sia stata avvolta da una persistente leggenda nera: le accuse di dismisura e licenziosità che la colpiscono mostrano quanto l'autorità, quando si incarna in un corpo femminile, diventi immediatamente materia di racconto e di controllo simbolico. La parola che consacra è la stessa che può delegittimare. Cfr. D.D.R. Owen, *Eleanor of Aquitaine. Queen and Legend*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford / Cambridge, Massachusetts 1993, pp. 103-156.

apre o chiude possibilità matrimoniali, e può persino ridisegnare la geografia del potere. La conversazione è un rito di riconoscimento e insieme un'arena: chi riesce a imporre una versione credibile dei fatti governa il passaggio dal privato al pubblico e, con esso, la legittimità.

Su questo crinale si delinea il secondo nucleo, che analizza cavalleria ed eros come sistemi di lealtà concorrenti. Nel contributo di Sara Achillea, la *Mort le Roi Artu* appare come un luogo in cui l'eros cortese esce dal suo regime statutario di segretezza per rivelare la sua potenzialità distruttiva e la capacità di incrinare istituzioni. Achillea muove da un gesto inaugurale, programmatico: l'investitura di Lancelot nel *Lancelot en prose* si compie solo quando egli si cinge da sé della spada che la regina ha scelto per lui, spostando l'asse rituale dall'autorità del re alla mano di Ginevra. Nel corpo del cavaliere si inscrive una triplice appartenenza che non potrà più ricomporsi: Dio, Artù, la regina. La formula della *Queste* (*couuert de tenebres & de pechie mortel*), più che un giudizio morale, è la diagnosi di una frattura destinata a diventare politica, perché la fedeltà del cuore finisce per competere con la fedeltà del diritto. È al torneo di Winchester – proclamato da Artù come ultimo rito contro la fine delle avventure – che quella frattura trova la sua scena e il suo linguaggio. La conversazione si fa negoziazione impossibile tra codici: l'eroe che vuole restare invisibile viene legato da un *don contraignant* e accetta la manica della Demoiselle d'Escalot come insegna, lasciando che un frammento di stoffa lo ribattezzi pubblicamente *le chevalier de la manche* e produca, per via semiotica, una verità alternativa (l'infedeltà del cavaliere alla sua regina). E proprio perché la manica è una metonimia della dama esposta allo sguardo dei pari, essa porta con sé un carico di credito e di rischio che non può essere neutralizzato. La manica obbliga l'eros a slatentizzare il proprio potenziale di violenza, perché

la richiesta è esplicita – compiere prodezze d'armi per amore – e l'amore si manifesta solo passando attraverso l'urto ritualizzato del torneo[4]. È questo innesto (tessile e marziale al contempo) a rendere l'equivoco irreversibile: la gelosia della regina, già prefigurata come forza cieca, lungi dal risolversi in un accidente psicologico, rivela la sua natura fatale, perché costringe ciò che dovrebbe restare indicibile a farsi segno, e ciò che dovrebbe restare segno a farsi fatto. L'eros svela allora il suo volto più oscuro: non più, non soltanto energia che muove imprese, ma forza eversiva che si lega alla *vergogna* del sovrano e la moltiplica, fino a intaccare il tessuto intero della corte. La *fole amor* diviene veleno sottile e penetrante, coinvolgendo gli equilibri di fazione, corrompendo la fiducia, trascinando alleati e parenti nel sospetto, aprendo una guerra che non troverà pace. Nel suo viraggio a nero, l'amor cortese attossica il mondo arturiano e squilibra le convenzioni sociali, innescando il potenziale di violenza e il groviglio di faide che sono da sempre nel DNA del ceto feudo-cavalleresco: una vocazione all'aggressività che è costitutiva della classe militare, ma viene spinta fuori controllo dalla carica destabilizzante di un eros dirompente e scandaloso. E proprio qui, nel cono d'ombra che si allarga vertiginosamente, riaffiora con evidenza il sottotesto tristaniano: l'eros come destino di morte, la parola amorosa che risuona già di lutto, il registro dell''ultima volta' che

[4] Sul valore "semiotico" degli indumenti (maniche, veli, camicie) come pegni che trascinano l'eros entro il dispositivo del combattimento – intensificandone la carica, proprio perché esposti al rischio di essere lacerati o macchiati – e sulla loro funzione di oggetti-feticcio/relitti capaci di trattenere e rendere visibile l'energia dello scontro, cfr. A. Barbieri, E. Muzzolon, *Vestiti di sangue: oltranze e feticismi dell'eros cavalleresco*, in «Romània Orientale» 37 (2024), *Estetizzazione della violenza: parole, immagini, suoni*, a cura di C. Croitoru e J. Andreoli, pp. 59-98.

incombe sulle promesse e sulle fedeltà[5]. Non stupisce allora che, nell'economia della *Mort Artu*, la catena dei segni si muova con una coerenza quasi meccanica: dalla manica come emblema pubblico (che, nella percezione sociale, fa *essere* ciò che indica) si scivola rapidamente in forme sempre più inesorabili di evidenza. Quando la trama verbale non basta più e la verità esige una *monstrance*, la *nef funèbre*, il cadavere e la lettera letta ad alta voce davanti ai cavalieri trasformano l'amore in prova, e la prova in accusa pubblica. La Demoiselle – simbolo di *duty*, in contrasto con la passione fatale di Ginevra – diventa vittima sacrificale e segno foriero di un crepuscolo ineludibile: quando la parola della cavalleria produce verità incompatibili, entra nella propria zona d'ombra, dove gelosia e morte stringono i nodi dell'epilogo arturiano.

La tensione fra codici prende la forma di una dinamica insieme sensoriale e ideologica nel *lai* anticofrancese del *Vair Palefroi* che costituisce l'oggetto di un saggio di Elena Muzzolon: l'eros agisce come impulso motore e come soglia iniziatica, entro un regime di conversazione a distanza, quasi telepatico, sorretto da un pensiero che non conosce barriere, in grado di attraversare lo spazio fra i due poli del racconto. Su questa trama si innesta l'attrito generazionale: da un lato gli *juvenes*, con il loro linguaggio di ardore e di luce, perennemente catturati nel moto di una incessante *aventure*; dall'altro gli anziani, portatori di un lessico d'ombra, dominato dal controllo e dal possesso, che mira a ricondurre l'eros entro la forma dell'autorità. In mezzo a questi due registri irrompe il palafreno screziato: il suo manto *vair*, tinta indicibile e indecidibile, quasi colore "tra-i-colori",

[5] Per la lettura della *fole amor* come forza distruttrice che, saldandosi alla *honte* regale, si espande dalla sfera intima al corpo politico della corte (fino alla guerra), e per il richiamo alla materia tristaniana – in particolare alle tonalità più cupe della tradizione – cfr. A. Punzi, *All'ombra di Lancillotto. Storie e imprese del primo cavaliere della Tavola rotonda*, Carocci, Roma 2022, specialmente pp. 132-149.

ne palesa la natura di creatura liminale, capace di mediare fra stati dell'essere e piani di realtà, traducendo in movimento ciò che il desiderio prepara nel pensiero. Sotto la trama dei simboli scorre incessante un ritmo che fa da controcanto: l'ambio che sospende il corpo in una cadenza *altra*. La falsa alba lunare e la deviazione dal tragitto del reale trasformano il racconto in un laboratorio di stati liminali, dove la rivelazione prende forma come congegno di riconoscimento: il dicibile, il velato, il visibile – e dunque il giudicabile – si riallineano lungo la medesima traiettoria, fino all'istante in cui il "mondo altro", o *l'oltremondo del desiderio*, si lascia riconoscere.

Un terzo nucleo riguarda la trasposizione – non solo linguistica, ma culturale e spirituale – della materia sacra entro forme cortesi (e, specularmente, la rifunzionalizzazione del profano come lessico per dire il sacro). Il saggio di Marco Francescon riconsidera due parafrasi anticofrancesi in distici di ottonari – il Salmo 44 (*Eructavit*) e una parafrasi del *Cantico dei Cantici* (ms. Le Mans 173) – insistendo sul loro carattere di testi di frontiera: metro e moduli della narrativa cortese ospitano una teologia della *charitas* d'ispirazione cistercense, in quella continua interferenza fra linguaggio sacro e profano che costituisce il tratto più riconoscibile dell'operazione[6]. Per Francescon, però, non si tratta di semplici "versificazioni": la riscrittura funziona piuttosto come glossa metrica continua, dove la pericope biblica, inglobata nel verso, resta "generativa", secondo un procedere analogico che richiama l'habitus della *lectio divina* e, insieme, un'idea di traduzione come esposizione autorizzata del senso. Su questa base, l'epitalamio bibli-

[6] Il XII secolo vive insieme sotto il segno di una *aetas Ovidiana* e di una *aetas Salomoniana*: due poli – Ovidio e Salomone – fra i quali si distende, con molte sfumature, l'intero spettro della letteratura amorosa medievale. Cfr. F. Zambon (a cura di), *Trattati d'amore cristiani del XII secolo*, I, Fondazione Lorenzo Valla / Mondadori, Milano 2007, *Introduzione generale*, p. XIII.

co (Salmo 44 e *Cantico*) si configura come il luogo in cui si definisce un modello di mediazione: la poesia tende ad assimilarsi alla parola predicatrice, entro una retorica della *dulcedo* che mira a rendere assimilabile la dottrina a un pubblico "nel mondo" e che, nel caso della parafrasi del *Cantico*, trova nella *mansio* e nelle *imagines agentes*[7] una forma di sosta contemplativa sul Cristo terrestre e sulla Passione. L'autore formula – con cautela ipotetica – il calco *ordo charitatis* = *fin'amor*, con l'inversione decisiva che ne ridefinisce la dinamica (raffinamento per presenza, non per sottrazione) e con la domina come figura-ponte "dal chiostro alla corte, dal latino al volgare", entro un progetto che chiama in causa anche il mecenatismo femminile e una possibile "mistica muliebre" delle dedicatarie.

È su questo sfondo di un sacro in perenne compromesso – non di rado produttivo – con il laico e con i sedimenti precristiani dell'immaginario, che sempre affiorano nel tessuto culturale, che si comprende il contributo di Luca Zaccaria, il quale porta al centro della conversazione una figura capace, più di altre, di rendere pensabile l'unità profonda del Medioevo europeo: Michele arcangelo. Non soltanto *princeps militiae caelestis*, ma principio di gerarchia e mediatore tra ordine celeste e ordine terreno, Michele diviene, nella lunga durata, un operatore simbolico capace di legittimare l'autorità e insieme di esporla alla prova del limite. La tradizione micheleica prende forma in ambito orientale, dove l'arcangelo occupa fin dall'età tardoantica un posto centrale nella gerarchia celeste, e si radica progressivamente in Occidente lungo direttrici riconoscibili – Roma, il Gargano, Mont-Saint-Michel[8] – che ne fanno

[7] G. Paradisi, *La parola e l'amore. Studi sul Cantico dei cantici nella tradizione francese medievale*, Carocci, Roma 2009 [Biblioteca medievale. Saggi, 27], p. 109.

[8] Il culto di Michele è attestato precocemente in ambito orientale (area siro-bizantina e costantinopolitana) già tra IV e V secolo, dove l'arcangelo assume un ruolo centrale nella gerarchia angelica e nel-

uno dei poli simbolici più duraturi del Medioevo europeo. Come la cavalleria, le cui radici storico-antropologiche precedono la configurazione che essa assume nel mondo feudale occidentale – quando diviene insieme istituzione, codice etico e orizzonte immaginativo –, anche la figura di Michele nasce oltre i confini dell'Occidente latino e proprio qui conosce una rielaborazione teologica e politica. Il suo culto si integra pienamente nella costruzione dell'Europa cristiana, contribuendo a dare forma a uno spazio in cui gerarchia ecclesiastica, sacralizzazione del territorio e autorità terrena si riconoscono entro una medesima architettura simbolica. È in seno a questa costellazione che Zaccaria rilegge l'episodio del gigante di Mont-Saint-Michel nell'*Alliterative Morte Arthure*. Il poeta riorganizza la materia cronachistica britannica – dalla *Historia Regum Britanniae* alle sue rielaborazioni anglonormanne e medio-inglesi – secondo una logica coerente con la tradizione micheleica: il monte è già luogo consacrato, la prova cavalleresca assume i tratti di un pellegrinaggio, l'azione si colloca in un tempo liminare (*after even-song*), e il combattimen-

la rappresentazione della milizia celeste. La sua diffusione in Occidente, più che un semplice trasferimento devozionale, rappresenta l'innesto di un modello teologico e simbolico che si radica in luoghi strategici: Roma, il Gargano (con l'apparizione tradizionalmente datata al 492), quindi l'area normanno-bretone e il complesso di Mont-Saint-Michel. Nella tradizione *montoise*, la cosiddetta *migrazione sacra* dall'Oriente all'Occidente («Migremus ex his sedibus!») viene costruita come legittimazione teologica di uno spostamento che è insieme geografico e simbolico. A questa traiettoria si sovrappone una rete concreta di percorsi e di pellegrinaggi, la cosiddetta *via michelita* o *Via sancti Michaelis*, che collega l'Atlantico alla Puglia passando per la Val di Susa (Sagra di San Michele) e per la dorsale della Via Francigena: un asse europeo lungo il quale il culto dell'arcangelo si intreccia con la mobilità cavalleresca e con la formazione di un immaginario condiviso. Per una ricostruzione complessiva di queste dinamiche si veda F. Cardini, *San Michele. L'arcangelo armato*, Schena Editore, Fasano 2020 (prima ed. 2007), in particolare le pp. 23-41 (per le radici orientali), 63-85 (Gargano), 101-118 (tradizione *montoise* e migrazione).

to si svolge presso una sorgente, dettaglio che non appartiene alla tradizione cronachistica ma che introduce un preciso campo semantico: quello della liminalità. Una simile grammatica del transito – in cui oltrepassamento, acqua e prova segnano il punto di ridefinizione dell'identità cavalleresca – trova riscontri significativi anche in altri itinerari europei coevi, nei quali la figura micheleica presiede non soltanto al combattimento, ma al passaggio stesso[9]. La scena assume una dimensio-

[9] Una lettura comparativa consente di rilevare le risonanze fra l'episodio del Mont-Saint-Michel, così come reinterpretato da Zaccaria, e un'altra vicenda cavalleresca europea, quella di Galgano di Chiusdino. Nel poema medio-inglese, l'avvicinamento di Artù al monte consacrato avviene per il tramite di un paesaggio di transizione: attraversamento di un corso d'acqua, tempo liminare del vespro, incontro con una sorgente presso cui si compie il combattimento. Il dettaglio del *well*, assente nelle cronache latine, introduce un campo simbolico preciso: l'acqua come soglia, come luogo di passaggio tra stati, come punto di esposizione al rischio e insieme di possibile rigenerazione. Nel sogno di Galgano, tramandato nella tradizione agiografica, l'arcangelo Michele guida il giovane *miles* attraverso un itinerario strutturalmente analogo: un fiume difficile da attraversare – presso il quale si colloca il "mulino delle *vanitates*", allegoria della dispersione mondana –, quindi un prato luminoso, infine una cavità sotterranea che precede la rivelazione. L'intero percorso è stato interpretato come *peregrinatio spiritualis*: non semplice visione, ma esperienza di morte simbolica e di mutamento di stato, in cui l'attraversamento dell'acqua assume valore battesimale e iniziatico. Se nel caso di Artù il momento iniziatico si traduce in combattimento contro il tiranno – figura di sovversione dell'ordine e di superbia – nel caso di Galgano si risolve in conversione e rinuncia. Ma in entrambi i casi l'arcangelo è molto più di un patrono guerriero: è guida nel passaggio, garante del limite, figura che presiede al momento in cui l'identità cavalleresca viene messa alla prova. La differenza tra impresa militare e vocazione ascetica non offusca la comune grammatica simbolica: attraversamento, prova, rischio di morte, giudizio, trasformazione. La convergenza non implica dipendenza diretta, bensì l'appartenenza a un medesimo orizzonte europeo in cui la figura micheleica struttura itinerari di legittimazione e di mutamento, sia nella letteratura cavalleresca sia nell'agiografia. Lungi dal costituire una frattura, il passaggio dall'eroe arturiano al cavaliere eremita rappresenta una variazione in seno a un medesimo campo simbolico. Per l'interpretazione del sogno di Galgano come itinerario iniziatico e per il ruolo dell'arcangelo qua-

ne escatologica[10]; la caduta del gigante inscrive nel racconto la dinamica della superbia che precipita. La regalità di Artù appare come realtà sottoposta a misura: l'autorità trova legittimità nella conformità a un principio superiore. Michele agisce così come asse simbolico del poema, principio ordinatore che articola insieme fondazione teologica e verifica politica del potere. Il confronto con altre figure cavalleresche e con altri itinerari di trasformazione spirituale diventa inevitabile. Se Galvano, tra anticofrancese e medio-inglese, attesta la capacità della cavalleria di mantenere un'identità riconoscibile mentre si adatta a nuovi contesti linguistici, culturali e politici, conservando intatto il proprio nucleo simbolico, la figura di Michele arcangelo, d'altro canto, codificata nell'Europa medievale e insieme radicata in una genealogia più profonda, conosce una traiettoria analoga: attraversa spazi e secoli preservando un prestigio simbolico e culturale che ne fa un principio di riferimento stabile. Combattimento e conversione, impresa regale e rinuncia ascetica si dispongono come modalità diverse di una medesima vocazione cavalleresca: esercitare la forza entro una misura. L'arcangelo che abbatte il tiranno, il re che sottopone la propria autorità a verifica, il *miles* che attraversa il corso d'acqua e depone l'arma partecipano di uno stesso orizzonte, in cui la prova definisce l'identità e la gerarchia conferisce senso all'azione. Il Medioevo europeo prende forma in questa compresenza: l'ombra di Michele incarna con

le guida nel passaggio attraverso acqua, soglia e grotta, si vedano F. Cardini, *San Galgano e la spada nella roccia*, Edizioni Cantagalli, Siena 2000 [I Classici Cristiani, 293], in particolare le pp. 57-76 e 89-96; Id., *San Michele*, op. cit., pp. 117-118.

[10] La tradizione micheleica insiste tanto sull'arcangelo come *dux belli* quanto sulla sua funzione psicopompa: Michele è colui che guida le anime nel passaggio. La ricorrenza di luoghi d'acqua (fonti, fiumi, grotte sorgive) nei santuari micheliti non è priva di significato simbolico: l'acqua segna il limite tra stati, evoca purificazione e rigenerazione, e si presta a una lettura battesimale del transito. Su questi aspetti, e sulla connessione tra Michele, passaggio e rinnovamento spirituale, cfr. Cardini, *San Michele*, op. cit., pp. 45–52; Id., *San Galgano*, op. cit., pp. 89-96.

particolare evidenza la coerenza profonda di un immaginario composito, innervato da tensioni sacre e memorie pagane, da oralità e scrittura, da complesse relazioni tra eredità orientale e cristianesimo, tra mondo insulare e spazio continentale. La sua figura si colloca nel punto in cui queste linee si intrecciano e si confrontano, dando forma a un orizzonte simbolico attraversato da dinamiche di legittimazione e da conflitti politici che ne ridefiniscono nel tempo gli equilibri[11].

Seguire le concrezioni, le trasformazioni, le metamorfosi di Galvano e di Michele arcangelo significa assistere a una dinamica che trascende le realtà testuali: per durare, una figura deve cambiare forma; cambiando forma, essa cambia anche il mondo che la riconosce. È in questo punto che la filologia ritrova la propria responsabilità più alta, perché è chiamata a inseguire il lavoro che le forme compiono sulle comunità che le ospitano – ciò che autorizzano, ciò che rendono credibile, ciò che, tacitamente, interdicono. Ciò significa entrare nel laboratorio in cui l'Europa medievale ripensa e rifonda le proprie figure di autorità e di identità; e, quando questo laboratorio si fa udibile, appare come un'assemblea di voci, una polifonia di posizioni ideologiche e di prospettive valoriali che si realizza in una pluralità di creazioni e compimenti, caricati di segni diversi e svarianti tra differenti livelli di cultura: una comunità che si raduna nel dire, e nel dire si ridisegna, ogni volta in un ordine nuovo.

[11] La figura di Michele arcangelo conosce, nella tradizione dei santi militari, un significativo corrispettivo terrestre in san Giorgio, martire e cavaliere venerato originariamente tra Palestina, Libano e Caucaso e divenuto patrono degli eserciti bizantini e di diverse potenze occidentali. Tra tardo Medioevo e stagione delle rivalità anglo-francesi, la protezione di Giorgio e quella di Michele si distribuiscono simbolicamente lungo fronti contrapposti, generando una vera dialettica celeste, riflessa anche nell'iconografia e nell'araldica: il drago e il demonio assumono tratti intercambiabili, mentre la croce vermiglia di Giorgio si contrappone alla croce michelita d'argento in campo vermiglio. Cfr. Cardini, *San Michele*, op. cit., pp. 48-49.

Introduzione (parte seconda)

«What ish my nation?»: lingua, storia ed identità nazionale inglese dal medioevo alla prima età moderna

Sibilla Siano

Di fronte alle mura di una Harfleur ormai caduta, i capitani dell'esercito di Enrico V si confrontano sulle strategie di battaglia. L'inglese Gower, il gallese Fluellen, lo scozzese Jamy e l'irlandese MacMorris combattono al fianco di Enrico V come simbolo dell'unione di regioni geograficamente, linguisticamente e culturalmente diverse sotto un unico re. Così, nella sua opera *Henry V*, Shakespeare sembra rappresentare la propaganda nazionalistica Tudor. È tuttavia significativo che, all'alba dell'inizio della campagna d'Irlanda guidata dal conte di Essex, sia proprio MacMorris a chiedersi «What ish my nation?» (*Henry V*, III.iii), protestando contro le illazioni di Fluellen sul numero limitato di soldati irlandesi nell'esercito. In un'opera che si interroga continuamente sulle caratteristiche dell'identità nazionale, le successive parole del capitano irlandese suonano come un ammonimento: «Ish a villain and a basterd and a knave and a

rascal. What ish my nation? Who talks of my nation?» MacMorris sottolinea infatti come la sua identità irlandese sia stata in qualche modo inglobata in una universale identità inglese. Nonostante le divisioni linguistiche e territoriali, egli vuole essere parte di quella «band of brothers» che rischierà la propria vita sul campo di battaglia di Azincourt.

Eppure, queste riflessioni non nascono né si esauriscono nella sola Inghilterra elisabettiana. Le tensioni tra identità regionale e unità nazionale evidenti nell'opera di Shakespeare affondano le proprie radici nei conflitti che, nei secoli precedenti, avevano contribuito a definire la coscienza nazionale inglese. La seconda parte del volume si concentra quindi su opere, autori e studiosi inglesi che esplorano modi diversi di intendere il rapporto tra lingua / storia / nazione dal tardo Trecento alla prima età moderna con un'incursione nel medievalismo vittoriano. Sebbene caratterizzati da prospettive molto diverse, tutti i saggi indagano visioni della lingua e della storia d'Inghilterra che hanno contribuito ciascuno a proprio modo a forgiare un'idea di medioevo che è perdurata fino ai giorni nostri. A causa dei profondi cambiamenti che hanno interessato l'Inghilterra, gli ultimi due secoli del medioevo si impongono infatti come un momento di svolta nella definizione dell'identità nazionale. È forse per questo che le guerre contro la Scozia e la Francia, le riflessioni religiose e linguistiche e gli scontri dinastici sono stati ripetutamente letti come eventi fondativi e momenti nei quali si sono cristallizzate alcune caratteristiche dell'inglesità. Le campagne militari di Edoardo I a cavallo tra Due e Trecento avevano esteso il dominio inglese a Scozia e Galles. Tuttavia, la questione legata ai possedimenti della corona sul continente rimaneva ancora pericolosamente irrisolta. Nonostante fosse re a pieno titolo, Edoardo I, come i suoi predecessori, era tenuto a rendere omaggio al re di Francia come suo vassallo in Guascogna. Il suo rifiuto comportò la confisca della regione e una successiva campagna per la sua riconquista. Il conflitto si protrasse per un decennio e si concluse con

un nulla di fatto: Edoardo I avrebbe mantenuto i suoi possedimenti a patto di rendere debitamente omaggio al re di Francia. Il nipote, Edoardo III, non si mostrò incline ad ottemperare ad un obbligo che, ai suoi occhi, comportava uno svilimento della sua dignità reale. A pochi anni dalla sua incoronazione arrivò quindi non solo a rifiutare l'omaggio, ma addirittura a dichiararsi legittimo re di Francia. Iniziò così il conflitto più lungo del medioevo, la Guerra dei Cent'anni, che attraversò Tre e Quattrocento alternando vittorie schiaccianti a pesanti sconfitte[1]. Durante il conflitto, la propaganda fece del suo meglio per garantire al re d'Inghilterra le risorse economiche necessarie a finanziare le campagne sul continente. A tale scopo, ogni strumento retorico venne dispiegato. Reiterando una narrazione già utilizzata da Edoardo I durante la prima fase del conflitto in Guascogna, Edoardo III dichiarò ripetutamente che il re di Francia era intenzionato a portare una tale distruzione in Inghilterra da cancellare la lingua inglese stessa dalla faccia della terra, «linguam anglicam omnino de terra delere proponit»[2].

Sebbene certamente infondata, tale dichiarazione rivela il potenziale politico del volgare come fattore identitario. Nonostante un'idea di identità nazionale inglese fosse ben presente in Inghilterra fin dal dodicesimo secolo, è nel Trecento che il repertorio di caratteristiche fondanti si arricchisce dell'elemento linguistico[3]. A seguito della conquista normanna, il francese si diffuse in ogni ambito della cultura scritta e acquisì autorità come lingua letteraria accanto al latino. Ma se è vero, come sostiene Isidoro di Siviglia, che dalle lingue nascono le na-

[1] M. Prestwich, *Edward I*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1997, p. 85.
[2] W. Stubbs, *Select Charters and Other Illustrations of English Constitutional History, from the Earliest Times to the Reign of Edward the First*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford 1921, p. 480; A. Ruddick, *English Identity and Political Culture in the Fourteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2013, p. 1.
[3] L. Ashe, *Fiction and History in England, 1066-1200*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, pp. 94-5.

zioni e non viceversa («ex linguis gentes, non ex gentibus linguae exortae sunt» (IX.1.14))[4], il largo utilizzo dell'anglonormanno in Inghilterra non poteva che essere percepito come problematico. I testi di questo periodo sono costellati di riflessioni volte a motivare l'utilizzo della lingua inglese. Sebbene in molti casi tale scelta linguistica venga associata al desiderio di rendere disponibili ad un pubblico inglese monoglotta opere ritenute essenziali per la formazione dell'individuo, in altri la scelta del volgare diventa occasione per formulare apertamente l'associazione lingua / nazione[5]. Così all'inizio del quattordicesimo secolo, l'autore anonimo del *Cursor Mundi*, una lunga storia della Cristianità in versi, identifica nella lingua inglese un criterio identitario: «Of ingland þe nacione | Er englijs men in comune» (vv. 241-2)[6]. Poco dopo aggiunge che in Francia difficilmente viene utilizzata una lingua diversa dal francese, «Seldom was for ani chance | Englis tong preched in france» (vv. 245-6) dimostrando quindi per differenza che è la lingua nazionale a costruire l'unità geografica[7].

È in questo contesto di forte attenzione all'uso della lingua che si inseriscono i due testi anonimi di fine Trecento *Pearl* e *The Cloud of Unknowing* analizzati nel presente volume rispettivamente da Aurora Biasiolo e Lorenzo Zaggia. Sebbene accomunati da una profonda riflessione sul rapporto tra esperienza spirituale, linguaggio e interpretazione, le strategie espressive e teolo-

[4] Isidori Hispaniensis Episcopi, *Etymologiarum Sive Originum*, ed. by W. M. Lindsay, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1911.

[5] J. Wogan-Browne, N. Watson, A. Taylor, R. Evans (eds.), *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280–1520*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter 1999.

[6] R. Morris (ed.), *Cursor Mundi (The Cursur of the World) a Northumbrian Poem of the Fourteenth Century in Four Versions*, Trübner, London 1874.

[7] W. Scase, *Vernacularity,* in *The Routledge Companion to Medieval English Literature*, ed. by R. Radulescu and S. Rikhardsdottir, Routledge, New York and London, 2023, pp. 27-38; G. Heng, *The Romance of England. Richard Coeur de Lyon, Saracens, Jews, and the Politics of Race and Nation,* in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. by J.J. Cohen, Palgrave, New York 2001, pp. 135-71.

giche utilizzate sono profondamente diverse. *Pearl* è una lunga visione in sogno incorniciata da una sequenza narrativa che riporta il dolore di un padre che cerca, senza trovarla, la sua Pearl. L'oggetto prezioso si rivela ben presto un'immagine per la giovanissima figlia morta qualche tempo prima. Lo strazio per una tale perdita conduce il padre (significativamente identificato come un gioielliere) in uno stato intermedio tra sonno e perdita di coscienza, permettendogli di accedere ad una rivelazione che eccede le possibilità della comprensione umana. La condizione stessa della piccola Pearl, ora beata tra le vergini regine del Paradiso, così come le meraviglie della Gerusalemme celeste, sfuggono ad una descrizione pienamente razionale. Tuttavia, ciò che non può essere direttamente detto o compreso trova nel poema una forma di rappresentazione simbolica nella figura della perla stessa. Quest'ultima, caricata dell'immaginario biblico e lapidario medievale, diventa il luogo stesso in cui il linguaggio poetico riesce a condensare e a rendere comunicabile l'esperienza della grazia, operando una sintesi tra dimensione materiale e realtà spirituale. Il contributo di Aurora Biasiolo si propone quindi di rileggere la descrizione della perla come oggetto fisico e spirituale alla luce della tradizione lapidaria medievale e delle sue declinazioni allegoriche.

Come evidenziato dal contributo di Lorenzo Zaggia, *The Cloud of Unknowing* si configura come una guida alla preghiera contemplativa e si inserisce pienamente nella tradizione che reinterpreta la teologia negativa dello Pseudo Dionigi l'Areopagita in chiave affettiva. L'autore insiste sull'inconoscibilità di Dio e sulla necessità di un progressivo abbandono delle immagini e dei concetti, rappresentato dalle due nubi della non conoscenza e dell'oblio. Solo l'amore può raggiungere il principio ineffabile della realtà. La riflessione dell'autore sull'uso del linguaggio acquista una valenza che va oltre la sola pratica contemplativa. La sua cautela non deriva da una sfiducia assoluta nella parola, ma dalla consapevolezza del suo potenziale fraintendimento. Assumono quindi cre-

scente rilievo strumenti retorici come la metafora e l'allegoria, che si riallacciano alle molte riflessioni teologiche e letterarie che si sviluppano lungo tutto il corso del medioevo a partire dall'esegesi biblica. Tuttavia, l'autore mostra come anche il linguaggio quotidiano possa fungere da tramite verso significati più profondi, purché inserito in una disciplina rigorosa dell'espressione e della lettura. In questo senso, ciò che viene reso realmente accessibile non è l'esperienza mistica nella sua immediatezza, ma il linguaggio che la trasmette e la interpreta, trasformando visioni ed eventi miracolosi in *exempla* morali e spirituali.

The Cloud of Unknowing mostra inoltre un particolare interesse per la sintesi tra dimensione fisica e spirituale operata allegoricamente dal linguaggio. Allo stesso modo, in *Pearl*, la tensione tra corporale e spirituale si risolve nella perla come oggetto fisico e immagine della grazia. Pur muovendosi in direzioni diverse, i due testi condividono una preoccupazione per le modalità di ricezione e interpretazione dell'esperienza spirituale. Entrambi affrontano il problema di come comunicare il divino senza ridurlo a ciò che può essere compreso dall'intelletto umano. In *Pearl*, questa tensione non si traduce in una riflessione teorica sul linguaggio, ma emerge nella descrizione della perla stessa, che attraverso un fitto repertorio di immagini e figure sembra spingere il linguaggio poetico fino ai limiti della sua capacità espressiva.

La questione linguistica porta con sé riflessioni più ampie legate al concetto stesso di *auctoritas*. Se nell'ambito sacro, l'utilizzo dell'inglese per esprimere la parola di Dio investe questa lingua della stessa autorità del latino, in quello secolare, il vernacolo diventa il veicolo attraverso il quale creare un canone letterario nazionale. L'anonimo autore di *King Richard* definisce nel prologo una diretta associazione tra letteratura, lingua e nazione. La Francia dimostrava di possedere già una solida tradizione letteraria in lingua francese, era necessario quindi dotare l'Inghilterra di un repertorio analogo in lingua inglese che avesse per protagonisti re e cavalieri d'Inghil-

terra, «Noble gestes, ich vnderstond, | Of dou3ti kni3tes of Inglond» (vv. 27-8)[8]. La scelta linguistica prende così una valenza politica nella costruzione del repertorio simbolico nazionale. Gli eroi della *Matter of England*, quali Guy of Warwick, Bevis of Hampton, King Horn e Re Riccardo, diventano quindi l'incarnazione stessa delle virtù fondative della società. Romanzi e *chansons de geste* sono inoltre trasformati in un teatro in cui vanno in scena lotte dinastiche, riflessioni sui limiti del potere regale e sulle caratteristiche dei grandi re, tematiche centrali in un paese che, prima della fine del quindicesimo secolo, avrà assistito alla deposizione di tre re consacrati, Edoardo II, Riccardo II ed Enrico VI, per aver tradito il proprio popolo e aver favorito cortigiani spregiudicati a discapito del maggiore interesse nazionale.

Tuttavia, l'identità di un popolo si fonda non solo su una lingua nazionale, ma anche su origini storiche condivise[9]. Già nel dodicesimo secolo, il gallese Geoffrey of Monmouth aveva reimmaginato la storia d'Inghilterra dalla sua mitica fondazione ad opera del troiano Bruto fino all'ultimo re celtico, Cadwallader, e all'ascesa della nuova dinastia anglosassone. Tuttavia, larga parte dell'opera è dedicata alla leggendaria figura di Artù, che diventa eroe e simbolo della nazione. Sebbene *Pearl* non mostri riflessioni politiche ed ideologiche esplicite, si presenta, nel suo contesto manoscritto, unitamente al romanzo arturiano *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, probabilmente opera dello stesso autore. Tale poema si apre con una rievocazione della guerra di Troia e della successiva *translatio studii et imperii* ad opera dei fuggiaschi troiani.

> SIÞEN þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye,
> Þe bor3 brittened and brent to bronde3 and askez,
> Þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wro3t
> Watz tried for his tricherie, þe trewest on erthe:

[8] D. Burnley, A. Wiggins (eds.) *The Auchinleck Manuscript,* https://auchinleck.nls.uk/ [Accessed on 01/10/2023]
[9] A.D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Blackwell, Oxford 1987, p. 22.

> Hit watz Ennias þe athel, and his highe kynde,
> Þat siþen depreced prouinces, and patrounes bicome
> Welneȝe of al þe wele in þe west iles.
> Fro riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swyþe,
> With gret bobbaunce þat burȝe he biges vpon fyrst,
> And neuenes hit his aune nome, as hit now hat;
> Tirius to Tuskan and teldes bigynnes,
> Langaberde in Lumbardie lyftes vp homes,
> And fer ouer þe French flod Felix Brutus
> On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez
> wyth wynne, (ll. 1-15)[10]

Il "tulk" che tradì i suoi connazionali per salvarsi la vita è probabilmente un riferimento ad Enea[11]. Eppure, questo gesto non ne diminuisce la statura eroica, poiché egli, secondo quanto specificato nei versi seguenti non è solo artefice di un tradimento descritto come «þe trewest on erthe», ma anche il fondatore di Roma e di numerose altre città europee. Con un colpo di magistrale revisionismo, Enea «þe traitour» è trasformato in Enea «þe athel». Poiché in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Artù e i suoi cavalieri sono descritti come ancora giovani e inesperti, il riferimento alla loro illustre discendenza troiana non è un semplice espediente retorico, ma un mezzo per legittimare il loro dominio e garantire la loro futura grandezza. Il romanzo si conclude con un riferimento quasi identico al mitico fondatore dell'Inghilterra: «Syþen Brutus, þe bolde burne, boȝed hider first, | After þe segge and þe asaute watz sesed at Troye» (ll. 2524-5), creando una struttura quasi speculare che ripercorre a ritroso la storia del paese fino alla sua origine. Tuttavia, questa riscrittura della storia antica d'Inghilterra non si limitava certo all'ambito letterario. Alla fine del quattordicesimo secolo, i fatti legati al regno di Bruto e la sua successiva suddivisione tra i figli si erano arricchiti di un profondo

[10] M. Andrew, R. Waldron (eds.), *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript,* Liverpool University Press, Exeter 2007, pp. 207-208.
[11] E. Steiner, *Alliterative Poetry and the Time of Antiquity,* in *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature (800-1558),* vol 1, ed. by R. Copeland, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, p. 393.

significato politico. Durante il conflitto anglo-scozzese, i due contendenti non si erano affrontati solo sul campo di battaglia, ma avevano esteso la controversia all'arena giudiziaria. Ciascuno cercava di dimostrare la maggiore antichità del proprio paese e quindi il diritto alla sua sovranità attraverso una meticolosa analisi e talvolta falsificazione delle cronache. Così gli Scozzesi inventarono il mito di Scota per superare Bruto in termini di antichità, per poi essere scalzati a loro volta dall'inglese Albina, che sarebbe giunta nelle Isole Britanniche ben prima dell'arrivo del comandante troiano. Anche la leggenda arturiana era stata piegata agli stessi scopi politici: in quanto discendenti di Artù, i re inglesi dovevano regnare di diritto su tutta l'isola, compresi Scozia e Galles. La propaganda aveva chiuso il cerchio. Se nell'opera di Geoffrey of Monmouth si diceva che il leggendario re sarebbe ritornato per salvare le popolazioni celtiche sottomesse, nel quattordicesimo secolo, la sua sovranità era a servizio degli stessi oppressori.

La storia inglese resta al centro della scena anche nel Rinascimento, con diverse opere storiografiche di grande diffusione, come l'*Anglica Historia* di Polidoro Virgili, commissionata dallo stesso Enrico VII per legittimare la sua ascesa al trono, o *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and Yorke* di Edward Hall e *The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* di Raphael Holinshed. La Battaglia di Bosworth Field del 1485 è stata convenzionalmente identificata come momento conclusivo del medioevo inglese. Nello scontro perse la vita Riccardo III, ultimo esponente della dinastia plantageneta e ascese al trono il primo re Tudor, Enrico VII. Questa battaglia segnò la fine di una lunga e sanguinosa guerra dinastica passata alla storia con il nome di Guerra delle Due Rose[12]. Le lotte fratricide tra i membri delle famiglie Lancaster e York si rivelarono ben presto un repertorio di ispirazione inesauribile per il teatro elisabettiano a causa delle complesse implicazioni politiche e della di-

[12] M. Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages: A Political History,* Routledge, Abingdon 2005, pp. 390-1; pp. 414-8.

retta discendenza della sovrana da Enrico VII stesso. È in questo contesto che il tardo medioevo inglese viene rielaborato come *speculum* politico, fornendo agli autori rinascimentali una serie di modelli narrativi e simbolici attraverso i quali interrogare le forme del potere e la sua legittimità. A poco più di un secolo dalla vittoria Tudor, Shakespeare scrisse due tetralogie sui re tardo medievali inglesi utilizzandoli come *exempla* per riflettere sulle qualità ideali di un sovrano e sui diritti di successione[13]. D'altra parte, Elisabetta I stessa era ascesa al trono in condizioni di grande instabilità, poiché frutto di un'unione da molti considerata illegittima e di una madre, Anna Bolena, giustiziata per tradimento. Le sanguinose persecuzioni religiose che avevano caratterizzato il regno della sorellastra Maria le avevano consegnato un paese profondamente lacerato al suo interno e minacciato da potenze internazionali. Elisabetta stessa fu scomunicata dal papa per il suo ruolo di capo della chiesa d'Inghilterra e dichiarata deposta ad appena un decennio dalla sua incoronazione[14]. La sua posizione era quindi tutt'altro che sicura, in bilico com'era tra la necessità di governare e quella di non soccombere ai suoi oppositori. Non sorprende, dunque, che il teatro storico elisabettiano abbia trovato nel medioevo un terreno privilegiato per riflettere sulle condizioni di esercizio del potere monarchico e sulle caratteristiche di un buon re.

I due contributi rinascimentali si concentrano entrambi sulle opere di Shakespeare dedicate ai re tardo medievali. Il saggio di Sibilla Siano, in particolare, propone l'ira come filtro attraverso il quale comprendere il delicato equilibrio tra potere e coscienza. Sebbene la distinzione teorica tra giusta indignazione (*ira*) e furia incontrollata (*furor*) sembri chiara, la sua applicazione pratica risulta tutt'altro che ovvia. Ogni azione di Enrico, anche la più brutale, potrebbe infatti essere interpretata

[13] L.B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Histories. Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy*, Methuen, London 1964, p. 119.
[14] P. Collinson, *Elizabeth I*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, pp. 64-78.

come motivata dal bene maggiore per il proprio popolo: così il re inglese avrebbe dato il controverso ordine di uccidere tutti i prigionieri francesi durante la battaglia di Agincourt per evitare ulteriori e gravi perdite nell'esercito inglese o i cittadini di Harfleur sarebbero stati minacciati di pesantissime ritorsioni solo per evitare ulteriore spargimento di sangue da entrambe le parti. La valutazione morale di queste azioni viene così delegata allo spettatore, chiamato a decidere quale Enrico intenda riconoscere: il sovrano giusto o il tiranno. L'eroe senza macchia che combatte con e per il suo popolo sembra lasciare via via il posto ad un uomo non privo di ombre. Non a caso *Henry V* si inserisce in un contesto di opere che riguardano la fine (ingloriosa) della dinastia plantageneta. Il debole re Riccardo II è stato deposto da Enrico IV che durante il suo regno si trova a fronteggiare non poche ribellioni. Quest'ultimo consegna al figlio, Enrico V, una corona ancora macchiata dalla sua usurpazione. La morte prematura del vincitore di Azincourt lascia il regno nelle mani del suo giovanissimo figlio, Enrico VI, che si rivela tanto inabile a governare il paese da gettarlo nella guerra civile. Il periodo si chiude drammaticamente con Riccardo III, re machiavellico per eccellenza, colui che avrebbe potuto «set the murderous Machiavel to school» (*Henry VI*, part 3, III.ii). Questo quadro sconfortante pone degli interrogativi sulla figura di Enrico V che sarebbe quindi l'unica interamente positiva ed eroica delle due tetralogie. Tuttavia, non è solo il re ad essere in qualche modo messo in discussione: l'immagine di Marte seguito da fame, ferro e fuoco, rappresentati dai tre mastini infernali nel prologo di *Henry V*, mette in crisi la dimensione eroica della guerra ponendo l'accento sulle sue drammatiche conseguenze.

Le battaglie sono combattute da uomini, che devono essere esortati a combattere. Mentre Enrico V vaga travestito nell'accampamento la notte prima della battaglia, scambia alcune riflessioni con tre soldati comuni, Williams, Bates e Court, e si rende drammaticamente conto che la retorica della giusta causa forse non è sufficien-

te. Nel discorso di San Crispino, Enrico fa ricorso ad una strategia diversa. Il re combatterà al fianco dei suoi soldati e morirà con loro, se necessario. La battaglia è capace di annientare ogni differenza sociale e di rendere tutti fratelli e nobili di fronte ad uno scopo più alto. L'onore non è parola vuota, ma diventa garanzia di nobiltà d'animo e di un posto nella memoria collettiva dell'intera nazione.

Il saggio di Giacomo Sanavia esplora proprio la retorica della guerra e l'influenza dell'*Arte della Guerra* di Machiavelli in *Henry V* e *Richard III*. Al sapiente discorso di Enrico fanno eco le due arringhe dei capitani degli eserciti schierati a Bosworth Field. Il futuro Enrico VII e Riccardo III si dimostrano entrambi abili oratori e seppur con strategie diverse dimostrano di saper motivare i propri soldati. Le due opere mostrano un'analisi puntuale della dimensione politica della guerra e delle sue conseguenze. Attraverso la voce dei due capitani Shakespeare affronta temi fondamentali come la necessità di mantenere alto il morale delle truppe e l'effetto psicologico dei presagi e dei sogni premonitori. Ed è forse qui che il medievale ed il rinascimentale si fondono. Raccogliendo un topos di lungo corso, Shakespeare descrive le notti che precedono le battaglie mostrando l'umiltà dell'esercito vincitore contro l'immotivata euforia degli avversari. Così William of Malmesbury aveva raccontato la notte prima della Battaglia di Hastings, con i soldati di Harold Godwinson che festeggiavano e si ubriacavano convinti com'erano che avrebbero colto una vittoria schiacciante, mentre quelli di William the Conqueror pregavano in silenzio. In *Henry V*, i soldati inglesi si interrogano sul proprio destino e mettono umilmente le loro vite nelle mani di Dio. I Francesi, per contro, si mostrano arroganti e sicuri della propria superiorità numerica. Benché in *Richard III* i due leader mostrino atteggiamenti per certi versi opposti, l'esito è analogo: solo colui a cui Dio consegnerà la vittoria potrà dormire serenamente. Nonostante Riccardo III sia un potente avversario, Richmond non

può che trionfare poiché Dio ha stabilito che la sua causa è giusta.

Sebbene la dinastia Tudor sia stata legittimata da Dio stesso, il fatto di avere una regina sul trono poneva diversi interrogativi sulla sua idoneità ad adempiere ad uno degli obblighi principali di un buon sovrano: la difesa militare del suo popolo. Eppure, in uno spettacolare virtuosismo retorico, Elisabetta I aveva dissipato ogni dubbio circa le sue intenzioni e di fronte all'approssimarsi della spaventosa Armada spagnola, dichiarò di essere disposta «in the midst and heat of the battle, to live and die amongst you all». Le strategie di battaglia si fondono quindi alle riflessioni sulle caratteristiche ideali di un buon sovrano[15]. Tuttavia, l'assolutismo dei suoi successori, Giacomo I e Carlo I, portò infine ad una frattura con il parlamento che si tramutò, alla metà del Seicento, in guerra civile fra royalists e parlamentari. L'esercito del re venne sconfitto da quello guidato da Thomas Fairfax e Oliver Cromwell. Il sovrano venne catturato, condannato per alto tradimento e giustiziato nel 1649. La repubblica sopravvisse in Inghilterra per una sola decade. Alla morte di Cromwell, nel 1658, gli successe il debole figlio e appena due anni dopo, nel 1660, l'erede al trono, Carlo II, fu richiamato dall'esilio in Francia per tornare a sedere sul trono d'Inghilterra. Significativamente, durante la parentesi repubblicana, la storia che aveva fino a quel momento legittimato i re venne riscritta nuovamente per indebolire le loro pretese al trono. Rievocando un topos antico, che affonda le sue radici negli scritti dello storico tardo medievale Robert Mannyng de Brunne e ancor prima in quelli di Orderico Vitale, l'invasione Normanna è presentata come la «quinta plaga» che ha

[15] C. Mceachern, *Foreign War*, in *Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and War*, ed. by D. Loewenstein, P. Stevens, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2021, p. 61; L.S. Marcus, J. Mueller (eds.), *Elizabeth I Collected Works*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2000, p. 385; S. Frye, *The Myth of Elizabeth at Tilbury*, «The Sixteenth Century Journal», 1992, XXIII, pp. 95-114.

reso schiavi coloro che una volta erano liberi[16]. *An appeal to the House of Commons* scritto da Gerrard Winstanley all'alba della decapitazione di Carlo I descrive infatti come i Normanni avessero portato in Inghilterra il sistema feudale che successivamente avrebbe arrecato grande sofferenza e danno al paese[17]. L'uccisione di Carlo I non poteva quindi che essere vista come il momento in cui era stata spezzata la linea di sangue che legava le sorti del paese ai discendenti dei Normanni[18].

Tra la fine del Settecento e l'inizio dell'Ottocento, la riscoperta dei testi medievali sembra rispondere nuovamente all'esigenza di trovare nel passato una chiave interpretativa del presente. A mano a mano che l'impero britannico andava ampliandosi fino ad estendersi su tutti i continenti, la necessità di affermare una propria identità nazionale si faceva più stringente. In una sorta di seconda *translatio studii et imperii*, i discendenti di Bruto si facevano portatori di una cultura da loro ritenuta superiore ed affermavano il loro dominio fin nei luoghi più remoti del pianeta. Il revival medievale ottocentesco interessò tutte le arti e fu spinto da un desiderio di affermare un'identità culturale insulare, attraverso una rilettura del passato medievale. In ambito letterario, questa reinterpretazione generò un repertorio di figure mitiche

[16] Robert of Brunne, *Peter Langtoft's Chronicle, (as Illustrated and Improv'd by Robert of Brunne) from the Death of Cadwalader to the End of K. Edward the First's Reign*, vol 2, ed. by Thomas Hearne, Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford 1725, p. 8.

[17] G. Winstanley, *An appeal to the House of Commons, desiring their ansvver: vvhether the common-people shall have the quiet enjoyment of the commons and waste land; or whether they shall be under the will of lords of mannors still. Occasioned by an arrest, made by Thomas Lord Wenman, Ralph Verny Knight, and Richard Winwood Esq; upon the author hereof, for a trespass, in digging upon the common-land at Georges Hill in Surrey. / By Gerrard Winstanly, Iohn Barker, and Thomas Star, in the name of all the poor oppressed in the land of England.* In the digital collection Early English Books Online. https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A96689.0001.001. University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. Accessed February 19, 2026.

[18] A. Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, p. 225.

quali Artù e Robin Hood, che incarnavano l'idea stessa di inglesità, pur rimanendo legate ad un'epoca percepita come oscura, barbarica e culturalmente distante. Il saggio di Lucrezia Scarpa esamina gli aspetti contraddittori dell'atteggiamento ottocentesco verso il Medioevo. Sebbene gli stessi antiquari che ne promossero la riscoperta considerassero spesso la produzione letteraria medievale segnata da evidenti limiti stilistici e da pregiudizi e superstizioni legati al contesto cattolico di produzione, tali testi venivano al contempo valorizzati come testimonianza di una fase primitiva della letteratura inglese e come repertorio di motivi poetici ancora vitali. Si dimostravano inoltre portatori di valori fondanti per la nazione, in quanto contribuivano a costruire una narrazione delle origini fondata su idee di continuità storica e appartenenza ad una comunità con una cultura e una lingua condivise. Già nel tardo medioevo, le cronache si trovarono di fronte al grosso problema di rappresentare il passato di un solo popolo in un paese ciclicamente soggetto ad invasioni. Tali momenti di discontinuità furono reimmaginati in modo da minimizzarne durata ed impatto e da dare quindi l'impressione di una storia della nazione coesa e coerente. È invece nella lingua che Walter Scott individua l'agente in grado di attuare la sintesi tra gli usi e i costumi di genti diverse[19]. Così come l'antico inglese ed il francese si fusero nell'inglese moderno, l'inglesità risulta essere frutto dell'unione di identità diverse. Le posizioni di Scott rivelano quindi un'enfasi sul medioevo come momento fondativo dell'identità nazionale. Il desiderio di ancorare la nazione ad una storia illustre portò a riscrivere il passato per piegarlo alla propaganda del presente. Nel 1860, in piena età vittoriana, un monumento equestre a Riccardo Cuor di Leone, opera dell'artista italiano Carlo Marochetti, fu posizionato nella

[19] J. Watt, *Sir Walter Scott and the Medievalist Novel*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2020, p. 163; W. Scott, *Ivanhoe*, ed. by G. Tulloch, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1998.

Old Palace Yard accanto al Palazzo di Westminster[20]. Nonostante la scelta abbia provocato non poche polemiche, un'immagine del sovrano plantageneto si staglia ancora davanti al Parlamento. Eppure, Riccardo, come Artù, non poteva certo sfoggiare un pedigree di incontaminata inglesità. Il figlio ribelle che fece vacillare il trono di Enrico II, che trascorse quasi tutto il suo regno tra la Terrasanta e il Continente, che amava i suoi possedimenti in Francia più della sua stessa Inghilterra, tanto da voler essere sepolto lì, era stato e continuava ad essere eretto a incarnazione dell'eroismo e della regalità ideale inglese[21].

I saggi proposti esplorano quindi varie visioni del medioevo attraverso i secoli. Le riflessioni linguistiche che interessano tanto gli scritti religiosi quanto quelli secolari hanno permesso alla lingua nazionale di eguagliare in termini di status l'anglonormanno. Sebbene con declinazioni profondamente diverse, l'ambito mistico non è rimasto indifferente alle riflessioni linguistiche del tempo, riconoscendo alla lingua inglese la capacità di esprimere anche le più sofisticate questioni dottrinali. Il binomio lingua e letteratura ha consentito inoltre la creazione di un canone letterario nazionale in lingua inglese e la definizione ulteriore di un repertorio di valori fondanti per la comunità. Tuttavia, l'identità nazionale si basa anche su radici storiche condivise che vengono abilmente riscritte e ridisegnate per creare una lunga storia di grandezza che congiunge i sovrani tardo medievali ai mitici fondatori di Albione. Su queste premesse si fonda la lunga fortuna del medioevo inglese nei secoli successivi, come mito culturale e lente attraverso la quale vedere ed interpretare il presente.

[20] S. John, *A Crusader Duel at the Crystal Palace: The Statues of Godfrey of Bouillon and Richard the Lionheart at the Great Exhibition,* «Journal of Victorian Culture», 2021, XXVI, pp. 449-67.
[21] J. Gillingham, *Richard I*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1999.

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False to his bed? What is it to be false?[1] Introduzione al motivo della donna calunniata per adulterio nella letteratura medievale

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Abstract. Il motivo della donna ingiustamente accusata di adulterio [K2112] ha una vasta diffusione in culture anche molto distanti tra loro. L'obiettivo del contributo è quello di fornire un'inedita panoramica d'insieme dei tipi narrativi e dei testi che realizzano il soggetto in epoca medievale. Alla schedatura in questione, si accompagneranno alcune prime riflessioni di carattere generale sulle possibili ragioni intrinseche e contestuali dell'intensa propagazione del motivo tra i secoli XII e XIV.

Parole chiave: motivo – calunnia – adulterio – medioevo

[1] William Shakespeare, *Cimbelino*, in *Teatro completo: I drammi romanzeschi*, VI, a cura di G. Melchiori, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milano 1995, («Meridiani»), p. 362.

Il soggetto narrativo della donna ingiustamente accusata di adulterio rappresenta un motivo di larghissima diffusione. È, infatti, rintracciabile in racconti anche molto distanti tra loro, sia in diacronia che in diatopia[2]. Tale entropica proliferazione tipologica – se sommata alla variabilità insondabile della trasmissione orale e della tradizione scritta non pervenutaci – scoraggia qualsiasi tentativo di ricostruzione storicistica tesa all'individuazione di una forma originaria datasi in un luogo e in un tempo precisi e dalla quale tutte le successive forme si diramerebbero in direzioni più o meno rintracciabili. Si potrebbe dire che il motivo non esiste al di fuori di quelle stesse realizzazioni storiche che ne denunciano la presenza. Anche l'impegno verso una delimitazione netta e certa della costellazione invariabile di tratti narrativi che compongono e definiscono il motivo, è da accogliere allora con sospetto. Le prospettive teoriche avanzate da Massimo Bonafin per lo studio di un motivo letterario – dunque l'applicazione di attrezzi metodologici quali le classificazioni politetiche e le somiglianze di famiglia (sulla scia, tra gli altri, degli studi sui giochi di Wittgenstein e di quelli antropologici di Rodney Needham) – mi sembrano in tal caso opportune:

> Si può dire che ci sia sicuramente un'aria di famiglia fra tutti i campioni prelevati, anche se non ha sempre l'abbagliante nitore dei legami intertestuali, che filologi e letterati "in purezza" desidererebbero. A me sembra che l'indagine su questo motivo realizzi quella che, scientificamente, si potrebbe chiamare una classificazione politetica: infatti, si può dire che gli individui (testi) che costituiscono la classe (il motivo) possiedono un certo numero di tratti comuni, ma nessuno, a rigore, è esplicitamente presente in tutti[3].

[2] Il motivo è indicizzato K2112: cfr. *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends,* revised and enlarged edition by S. Thompson, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1955-1958.

[3] M. Bonafin, *Alcune implicazioni tassonomiche dello studio di un motivo etno-letterario*, in *L'Immagine Riflessa. Testi, società, culture. Somiglianze di famiglia: tipologie e classificazioni tra scienza e letteratura,* Anno XX, Edizioni dell'Orso, Alessandria 2011, pp. 33-54: 39.

Lo studio del motivo letterario può svilupparsi, a partire da queste precisazioni, attraverso una procedura classificatoria non chiusa, bensì sfumata, incerta, mobile. All'obiettivo della definizione rigida, si sostituisce una prioritaria e maggiore aderenza alla natura metamorfica delle forme culturali. Fatte queste lapidarie ma necessarie premesse, con la presente trattazione si intende proporre qualche primissimo ragionamento sulle realizzazioni medievali dello sviluppo motivico in questione[4].

Una panoramica a partire dal teatro

Il medioevo è un'epoca di grande fertilità per il personaggio femminile casto, virtuoso, calunniato per adulterio. I numerosi intrecci che attualizzano il plesso motivico, se guardati dall'alto, in una prospettiva d'insieme, lasciano senz'altro intravedere la naturale loro tendenza a raggrupparsi sulla base di tratti narrativi caratterizzanti. Tenendo salda la consapevolezza dell'improbabilità di una rigorosa tassonomia, ritengo tuttavia efficace proporre una trattazione a grappolo che possa comodamente dotarci di un quadro generale utile alla percezione della fortuna e della potenza trasformativa che qualifica il nostro motivo. Si tratta per di più di una prima occasione attraverso la quale saggiare in maniera più

Il motivo va idealmente costituendosi come un fascio di tratti narrativi equivalenti – nessuno dei quali risulta quindi indispensabile per la definizione del motivo stesso – che di volta in volta si ricombinano in canovacci differenti (eppure sempre capaci di far percepire una "somiglianza di famiglia" con l'insieme delle altre realizzazioni).

[4] La focalizzazione esclusiva sul medioevo sarà da considerarsi in linea con la parzialità di queste iniziali approssimazioni all'argomento di studio prescelto. Un'indagine più ampia in diacronia e in diatopia – che peraltro è una delle implicazioni più rilevanti delle premesse teoriche esposte – sarà sicuramente da tenere in conto all'interno di un'esplorazione motivica che si voglia più esaustiva. In tal modo si avrà l'opportunità di individuare i possibili significati profondi, antropologici, che si annidano nell'essenza del motivo stesso.

concreta, seppur parziale, i testi che compongono il corpus e le varie tematiche da loro poste in gioco.

Come ha sapientemente dimostrato Alexandre Micha, il teatro religioso del XIV secolo può rischiarare a posteriori quelli che furono i precedenti sviluppi letterari del personaggio della donna calunniata[5]. Il medievista francese ha infatti notato come, in sette dei quaranta *Miracles de Notre Dame par personnages* conservati nei due volumi manoscritti *français* 819-820 della Bibliothèque nationale de France a Parigi, la tematica è riattivata attraverso tutte o quasi le tipologie di racconto precedentemente sviluppatesi su di essa. Focalizzandosi esclusivamente sull'incriminazione per adulterio, è possibile procedere a un'esplorazione per famiglie (o cicli).

La famiglia più folta è sicuramente quella che nel 1903 Gaston Paris ha ribattezzato con la formula *Cycle de la Gageure*[6], ovvero quell'insieme di opere che condivido-

[5] Cfr. A. Micha, *Le femme injustement accusée dans les* Miracles de Notre-Dame *par personnages*, in *De la chanson de geste au roman, Études de littérature médievale offertes par ses amis, élèves et collègues*, Librairie Droz, Genève 1976, pp. 479-486. La calunnia alla quale si riferisce Micha non è strettamente legata al presunto gesto adulterino, e questo fa sì che nel suo studio rientrino testi nei quali l'accusa è mossa da altre motivazioni (es. *Manekine*, *Berthe aux grands pieds*). Nel resoconto che propongo prenderò in considerazione solo i racconti di false incriminazioni relative a un tradimento sessuale.

[6] G. Paris, *Le cycle de la Gageure*, «Romania», 32, 1903, pp. 481-551. Nella sua vasta e acuta esposizione, il filologo francese non rinuncia tuttavia – secondo la tipica postura positivistica – all'illusione di una forma originaria del racconto in oggetto e alla collocazione geografica della stessa: «Ce récit original est donc celui-ci: Un jeune héros vante sa soeur à la cour d'un roi. Le roi (ou un autre) se fait fort de la séduire, et le héros est mis en prison jusqu'au succès de l'épreuve; il mourra si elle tourne mal pour lui. La soeur reçoit la déclaration du séducteur, feint de l'accueillir, et lui envoie dans la nuit une servante. Il lui coupe un doigt, assure avoir gagné la gageure; le héros va être mis à mort, quand la soeur arrive et montre son doigt intact. […] De cette forme primitive, quelle peut être la date et l'origine? […] Je suppose donc que le conte (avec la soeur) a été inventé en Orient (Babylone? Perse?) et a passé de là en Europe, où la soeur s'est maintenue quelque temps, puis a cédé à l'épouse, et dans l'Inde, où on ne trouve que l'épouse dans la seul forme connue» (pp. 546-547). Queste conclusioni – per quanto abilmente motivate dal-

no un *plot* condizionato dalla presenza del motivo della scommessa[7]: un uomo si fa garante – impegnando i propri averi – delle virtù di castità e fedeltà di una dama (con la quale solitamente intrattiene un rapporto amoroso o di parentela) di fronte alla diffidenza di un contendente che si propone di dimostrare la slealtà (lussuriosa) della stessa. Nel suo denso saggio, Gaston Paris passa in rassegna un numero ampio di versioni, muovendosi in un arco temporale e in uno spazio geografico estesi, ma tutto sommato perlopiù centrati – almeno rispetto alla quantità delle testimonianze – al territorio europeo e all'età di mezzo. Tra le realizzazioni letterarie di spicco appartenenti a questo ciclo, è d'obbligo citare il *Guillaume de Dole* di Jean Renart[8], la novella di Zinevra (II, 9) presente

la constatazione di un maggior grado di arcaicità e di orientalismo rintracciabile nei tratti narrativi del legame fraterno (e non coniugale) tra donna ed eroe e della sostituzione con il taglio del dito – devono però confrontarsi sia con possibili e insondabili ipotesi di poligenesi o contaminazioni, sia con una quantità troppo importante di versioni andate perdute. Questo secondo aspetto è confermato dal medesimo Gaston Paris che, dopo aver ricordato come quasi tutti i racconti studiati intrattengano tra loro rapporti indiretti, è costretto a concludere: «il faut donc se représenter une masse de versions intermédiaires perdues» (p.549). La situazione va sfumandosi irrimediabilmente, dunque, quando si considera la caratterizzazione fortemente popolare del soggetto della scommessa, che dovette trasmettersi energicamente in forma orale.

[7] Si tratta del tipo *882 The Wager on the Wife's Chastity*, cfr. H.-J. Uther, *The types of international folktales: Classification and Bibliography Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson*, Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia – Academia Scientiarum Fennica, Helsinki 2011.

[8] Il *Roman de la Rose* di Jean Renart è una di quelle narrazioni schedate da G. Paris in cui, a dire il vero, la dinamica della scommessa tra i due uomini non è affatto presente: è il siniscalco di re Conrad che, intenzionato ad annullare i programmi matrimoniali di quest'ultimo e allo stesso tempo a limitare il ruolo che Guillaume detiene a corte, accusa Liénor di aver già consumato la propria verginità. Tuttavia, l'influenza del canovaccio della *gageure* e dunque l'inserimento di questo testo nel reticolo di opere studiate dal filologo francese, non sono mai stati realmente messi in discussione. L'assenza di quello che sembrerebbe essere il tratto narrativo che fonda e definisce il motivo della scommessa (e dunque l'insieme di

nel *Decameron* boccacciano e il *Cymbeline* di Shakespeare. In ambito francese medievale – probabilmente il contesto di maggiore diffusione del "wager type" – si segnalano, oltre al romanzo di J. Renart, il *Comte de Poitiers*, il *Roman de la Violette* (e una sua realizzazione in prosa del XV sec.), *Le Roi Flore et la belle Jeanne*, *Le miracle d'Oton, roi d'Espagne*, la *Nouvelle de Sens* e due racconti presenti nel ms. di Tours 468. A queste opere si aggiungono numerose narrazioni popolari sparse in tutta Europa, con una nutrita rappresentanza italiana.

Un secondo raggruppamento di testi – sempre acutamente indagato da Gaston Paris[9] – è quello che Micha definisce come "Le cycle du *Comte de Toulouse*"[10]. Questa famiglia, meno numerosa rispetto alla precedente, è caratterizzata da uno sviluppo narrativo che unisce elementi provenienti da tradizioni diverse: la donna, in assenza del re, è accusata da un malintenzionato[11] che ha

testi che sul motivo stesso vanno raggruppandosi), non deve affatto sorprenderci o renderci scettici rispetto alla validità dell'inclusione del *Guillaume de Dole* nel ciclo in questione. Il caso specifico, infatti, non fa altro che rispecchiare perfettamente una delle assunzioni teoriche che hanno aperto il presente articolo (vedi nota 2). Nell'aggregare serie di documenti testuali si può seguire «un'ottica politetica, cioè [...] un principio tassonomico che valorizza la flessibilità nella definizione delle classi e degli individui messi a confronto. Non classi rigide, ma sfumate, *fuzzy*, sfocate quasi, trapassanti una nell'altra, da collocare in un gradiente di focalizzazione piuttosto che in una struttura binaria fissa e impermeabile, come quella del pensiero digitale (sì/no, *aut aut*) refrattario a ogni forma di dialettica: un ordinamento politetico, infatti, mette insieme individui che condividono il maggior numero di caratteristiche senza che una sola possa essere necessaria o sufficiente a rendere un individuo membro del gruppo: come nelle somiglianze di famiglia» (M. Bonafin, *Oltre la filologia e la critica del particolare e dell'universale*, in *Critica del testo* XXIII/3: *Lo statuto metodologico di una filologia della contemporaneità*, a cura di P. Maninchedda, G. Murgia, P. Serra, Viella, "Sapienza" Università di Roma 2020, pp. 131-146).

[9] Cfr. G. Paris, *Le roman du Comte de Toulouse*, in *Annales du Midi: revue archéologique, historique et philologique de la France méridionale*, t. 12, n.45, 1900, pp. 5-32.

[10] Micha, op. cit., p. 481.

[11] Talvolta la falsa accusa può essere mossa da due personaggi, riproducendo così lo schema tripartito che caratterizza l'archetipo bi-

precedentemente tentato – con risultati fallimentari – di sedurla; l'accusa è mossa sulla base di uno stratagemma escogitato dal seduttore stesso, che convince una terza persona a infilarsi nel letto dell'innocente, così da insinuare l'idea di un rapporto extra-coniugale; a differenza delle altre narrazioni, in queste la donna non viene esiliata, espulsa, dal regno, ma viene imprigionata in attesa di un difensore che si cimenti in un duello giudiziario; la verità è appunto ristabilita attraverso un combattimento finale sostenuto da un eroe che non è mosso (almeno nelle versioni più antiche) da un sentimento amoroso nei confronti di colei che si accinge a salvare. Questi tratti ovviamente si modificano, si intersecano o anche spariscono, in vario modo nelle diverse realizzazioni del ciclo. Tra queste segnaliamo, per il contesto di riferimento, un romanzo inglese del XIV sec., *Erle of Tolous* (per il quale si tende a immaginare una fonte francese), il miracolo della *Marquise de la Gaudine* e un racconto delle cronache catalane di Bernart Desclot (XIII sec.).

Accostabile alla famiglia del *Conte di Tolosa*, è il poliedrico insieme di racconti che possiamo soprannominare, sempre con Micha, *cycle d'Octavien-Macaire*[12]. Le narrazioni interne a esso – *Macario*, *Olive*, *La Reine Sebile*, *Sir Tryamour*, *Doon de la Roche*, ecc. – si distinguono da quelle del precedente gruppo per l'espulsione della donna dalla corte: la condannata, infatti, viene esiliata e l'allontanamento porta con sé un fiorire di avventure che la riguardano in prima persona[13].

Infine – concludendo quest'ampia rassegna panoramica –, si deve menzionare la classe di testi che è abitualmente intitolata con il nome di una delle eroine che la abitano, *Crescentia*[14], e che Wallensköld ha ribattezzato come *Conte de la femme chaste convoitée par son be-*

blico di Susanna e i due vecchioni (*Libro di Daniele*, XIII).

[12] Micha, op. cit., pp.481-482.

[13] Sui rapporti interni tra il *Florent et Octavien* e la *Reine Sebille* (e affini), si veda l'efficiente analisi di Alexandre Krappe: A.H. Krappe, *Florent et Octavien*, in «Romania», 65, 1939, pp. 359-373.

[14] Tipo *712 Crescentia* in Uther, *op.cit.*

au-frère[15]. La leggenda in questione si caratterizza per la specifica identità del seduttore (poi accusatore), che non è altri che il cognato della donna, e per le vicende conclusive del racconto, che descrivono l'esiliata come guaritrice degli stessi persecutori che si sono succeduti nell'articolarsi delle sue peripezie (a seguito della confessione delle loro malvagità). Tali circostanze, che abitualmente vengono fatte risalire a una formulazione originaria collocata in Oriente, si rilevano all'interno di diversificate cornici narrative dell'età di mezzo: dalle disparate versioni del *Florence de Rome* al miracolo *L'empereris de Rome*.

Alle radici del successo: intrinseca virtualità, figure leggendarie e sfondi socioculturali

La pur approssimativa esplorazione svolta risulta sufficiente per alcune prime considerazioni riguardo le modalità di diffusione del motivo letterario indagato. È necessario, anzitutto, ribadire l'ampiezza di tale propagazione in epoca medievale: la quantità di opere riconducibili a questo schema dimostra che il personaggio femminile calunniato per adulterio si costruisce una fama narrativa tutt'altro che marginale. Se a questo si aggiunge la varietà tipologica che caratterizza tale propagazione[16], si conferma l'immagine di un motivo ad alta gradazione metamorfica e, soprattutto, dotato di una forte duttilità. I diversi tipi citati sembrano giungere nel medioevo occidentale e cristiano da culture lontane e secondo traiettorie difficilmente ricostruibili. Non si ha intenzione, in questa sede, di riprendere tali prospettive d'indagine – per le quali, ferma restando anche la lo-

[15] *Florence de Rome, chanson d'aventure du premier quart du XIIIe siècle* publiée par A. Wallensköld, Firmin-Didot pour la Société des anciens textes français, Paris 1907-1909, 2 t., pp. 105-130.

[16] Propagazione per di più rintracciabile all'interno di diversi generi letterari – seppur esclusivamente in quelli di impianto espressamente narrativo – e quindi slegata da un rapporto privilegiato ma incalzante con un sistema formale unico.

ro attitudine a porsi come ipotetiche o probabilistiche, si ha l'impressione che quanto più ci si avvicini a una ricostruzione ordinata tanto più ci si stia allontanando dall'oggetto di studio stesso. Sostando momentaneamente agli inizi dell'epoca medievale è però utile richiamare alcuni personaggi storici il cui fascino ha alimentato leggende che, mescolandosi a racconti finzionali di altra provenienza, informano alcune delle opere citate. È il caso, ad esempio, delle narrazioni relative al Conte di Tolosa. Gaston Paris[17] ha individuato tre versioni (o fasi) differenti del racconto e ha ipotizzato un percorso evolutivo nel quale, su una forma originaria di derivazione germanica, si innestano elementi caratteristici dei cicli di *Crescentia* e dell'*Octavien*, le leggende di Gundeberga e Gunilde[18], ma soprattutto gli intrighi di corte che vedono coinvolti il conte di Tolosa e di Barcellona[19] Bernardo I di Settimania e l'imperatrice Giuditta di Baviera. L'esempio permette anzitutto di sottolineare l'importanza indiscussa che riveste la storia della regina dei Longobardi Gundeberga – accusata di adulterio e successivamente liberata attraverso un giudizio di Dio – per la diffusione del motivo nell'alto medioevo[20]. La stretta corrispondenza poi, rintracciata tra i personaggi finzionali della tipologia tolosana e le figure di Giuditta e Bernardo, illumina l'indagine direzionata all'individuazione delle diverse

[17] Paris, *Toulouse*, cit., pp. 5-32.

[18] La seconda, moglie di re Enrico III, non ha mai subito una reale incriminazione di adulterio. La leggenda che la riguarda, tuttavia, per qualche motivo insondabile – probabilmente la confusione e la sovrapposizione con storie di altre donne –, accoglie tra le proprie maglie il motivo qui studiato. Cfr. *ibid.*; F.J. Child (a cura di), *The English and Scottish popular ballads*, II, Dover Publications, New York 1965, 59: «Sir Aldingar».

[19] Il titolo catalano è evidentemente da far risalire al "groupe catalan" individuato da Gaston Paris: *ibid.*

[20] Al fianco di Gundeberga è necessario ricordare anche i nomi di Emma di Normandia (la madre di Gunilde), Cunegonda (moglie di Enrico II e poi Santa) e Riccarda di Svevia (moglie di Carlo il Grosso), le cui leggende ci raccontano di inique denunce di adulterio (non sempre documentate storicamente).

dinamiche che concorrono al successo (almeno nei suoi momenti iniziali) della specifica narrazione.

> Mais il est évident que les partisans de Bernard et surtout les populations qui des deux côtés des Pyrénées vivaient sous son autorité et lui étaient toutes dévouées, proclamèrent bien haut l'innocence de l'impératrice et traitèrent de vils calomniateurs les deux comtes Hugon et Madfrid. Le triomphe de Judith à Aix-la-Chapelle, la confusion des accusateurs, l'offre que fit Bernard, à Thionville, de combattre en champ clos ceux qui soutiendraient la calomnie, devaient bien facilement, dans l'imagination de ses fidèles, éloignés du théâtre des événements et n'en recevant que des échos altérés, se transformer en un drame autrement simple et pathétique[21].

Tenuta dunque in conto la specifica implementazione motivica che alcune situazioni storiche possono stimolare, varrà ora senz'altro la pena perlustrare il peculiare contesto culturale ed etnografico che favorisce la circolazione dei racconti qui studiati[22].

Prima di tutto, è senz'altro utile constatare la privilegiata collocazione cronologica nella quale si situa la proliferazione delle opere interessate. Queste, infatti, sono per la maggior parte rintracciabili all'interno di un arco temporale che va dagli ultimi anni del XII alla fine del XIV secolo. Per quanto, in precedenza, vi fossero già racconti mossi dal medesimo motivo e risulti facile immaginare una ancor più vivace esistenza di essi in forma orale, la folta concentrazione di attestazioni scritte in lingua

[21] *Ibid.*, p.17.

[22] Uno studio che si propone di offrire una ricognizione esaustiva rispetto alle ragioni della peculiare diffusione di un motivo, non può prescindere dal serrato raffronto col particolare dei singoli testi, di volta in volta chiamati in causa come base di partenza o come elemento di verifica delle riflessioni generali. Nelle pagine che seguono, si procederà invece con un'argomentazione piuttosto diffusa, intenzionata a offrire alcune possibili ipotesi di lavoro, frutto di primi tentativi di accostamento all'insieme di testi descritto. Lontana, dunque, da qualsiasi proposito di completezza o esaustività, l'aspirazione è quantomeno quella di stimolare la percezione riguardo alla complessità del groviglio di istanze sociali, religiose, politiche e culturali che nutre la circolazione del soggetto femminile calunniato per adulterio.

volgare nei due secoli summenzionati suggerisce la presenza di un legame intenso – di alimentazione reciproca – testo-contesto. Tenendo conto, ovviamente, che si tratta di un periodo di grande produzione manoscritta e intensa circolazione di opere in volgare (con tutto ciò che ne consegue), è a ogni modo necessario chiedersi come mai contenuti dapprima sporadicamente rintracciabili e legati a una dimensione prevalentemente folclorica siano entrati a pieno titolo e con il fervore constatato tra le soluzioni narrative predilette[23].

Tra le tante considerazioni generali possibili, l'impressione è che una rilevanza particolare debba essere assegnata alla crescente attenzione, insieme sociale e religiosa, che dal XII secolo in poi l'ambiente intellettuale dedica alla donna:

> Dalla fine del secolo XII fino a tutto il secolo XV queste parole si fanno più numerose e concitate: una serie di testi, scritti da uomini di Chiesa e da laici, si susseguono l'uno dopo l'altro a testimoniare l'urgenza e la necessità di elaborare valori e modelli di comportamento per le donne. [...]
>
> Nel passaggio dalla 'donna' alle 'donne' si produce uno sconcerto, un momento di indecisione e perplessità, in cui ognuno cerca e sperimenta soluzioni più o meno efficaci, più o meno articolate. In questa fase di sperimentazione, destinata a durare per tutto il secolo XIII, le donne invadono numerose e diverse i testi pastorali e didattici che stentano a trovare un criterio unanime per individuare e classificare l'uditorio femminile a cui si rivolgono[24].

Un impegno anzitutto didattico e classificatorio, dunque, ritenuto necessario al fine di regolare i diversi spazi che le donne assumono all'interno di una società in estrema evoluzione (e complessificazione). Esemplari in tal senso, anche per la notevole ricchezza con la quale si

[23] La rilevanza che il motivo ha nel contesto letterario francese del periodo è per di più testimoniata dalla presenza di esso all'interno di due romanzi a forte carattere meta-letterario, il *Guillaume de Dole* e il *Joufroi de Poitiers*.

[24] C. Casagrande, *La donna custodita*, in G. Duby, M. Perrot, *Storia delle donne. Il medioevo*, a cura di Ch. Klapisch-Zuber, Editori Laterza, Bari 2022: pp. 88-91.

diramano le trattazioni, sono le opere di Umberto da Romains e di Francesco da Barberino. Tra le numerose direzioni assecondate da questo inedito (almeno per le sue proporzioni) sforzo definitorio e insieme conoscitivo[25] rivolto al femminile, la questione matrimoniale è sicuramente una delle più sondate[26]. Nel XIII secolo, a seguito di un dibattito pregresso molto vivace, la natura sacramentale del matrimonio tende ad affermarsi e, con essa, un tentativo di regolamentazione (Concilio Lateranense, 1215) che muove soprattutto dal carattere monogamico del legame e dal *consensus*[27]. Sul piano teologico, la "castità coniugale" è la virtù indispensabile, quella che consente il rapporto sessuale all'interno del matrimonio per fini esclusivamente legati alla generazione della prole. I concetti di fedeltà e di adulterio entrano prepotentemente all'interno di quest'orizzonte di pensiero che, per di più, rispecchia la decisiva valenza sociale e contrattuale del matrimonio. Si tratta, infatti, del nucleo sul quale e

[25] Alla volontà di regolamentazione e definizione del mondo femminile, si accompagna evidentemente una grande azione di recupero e di esegesi di quelle porzioni testuali – in particolare bibliche, patristiche e aristoteliche – nelle quali esso è in qualche modo coinvolto.

[26] Cfr. S. Vecchio, *La buona moglie*, in Duby, Perrot, op. cit., pp. 129-165 : «Nella rinnovata attenzione con cui, all'altezza del XIII secolo gli intellettuali ecclesiastici guardano la figura femminile, le mogli occupano certamente un posto di primo piano: ultime nella scala della perfezione, le donne sposate svolgono tuttavia un ruolo essenziale nella costruzione del modello sociale che i chierici vengono elaborando e costituiscono, a ben guardare, l'elemento dinamico dell'intero sistema» (p. 130). Ma per approfondire la questione matrimoniale si veda tutta la porzione centrale ("Le donne nelle strategie familiari e sociali", pp. 195-401) del volume citato.

[27] Entrambi questi insegnamenti ecclesiastici, e particolarmente il reciproco consenso degli sposi, si affermarono con difficoltà e lentezza: «Malgrado l'insegnamento della Chiesa sul consenso degli sposi, padri, madri, amici e parenti organizzavano il futuro dei propri figli, nipoti e discendenti; e anche i giovani maschi, in particolare gli eredi di un casato, non avevano diritto di parola più di quanto ne avessero le loro coetanee. Solo nei ceti sociali inferiori […] si riscontrano maggiori libertà» (C. Opitz, *La vita quotidiana delle donne nel Tardo Medioevo*, in Duby, Perrot, op. cit., p. 338).

dal quale tutta la società si articola: l'accordo matrimoniale segna l'istituzione di nuovi rapporti familiari che sono allo stesso tempo politici ed economici. La riconfigurazione delle dinamiche di potere stimolata dall'unione matrimoniale guadagna stabilità futura nella pratica monogamica che favorisce la trasmissione per discendenza legittima. All'interno di questo meccanismo, l'adulterio rappresenta inevitabilmente il pericolo più temuto, quello le cui conseguenze di destrutturazione e disordine possono rivelarsi irrimediabili sia sul piano religioso che su quello socio-politico.

Non sorprende che un quadro storico di questo tipo stimoli una maggiore diffusione di quelle narrazioni giocate sulle tematiche matrimoniali e di progenie. Queste sono talvolta esplicitate, sin dall'inizio del racconto e in tutta la loro importanza, nel segno di una mancanza che grava sulle spalle dei personaggi. Un re (o un conte), famoso per il buon governo del proprio regno, è tuttavia circondato da un'atmosfera di timore diffuso che riguarda direttamente il futuro del potere che detiene: l'assenza di una famiglia, e in particolare di una moglie e di un figlio, affonda l'idillio della propria corte in uno sfondo di paure e incertezze. Nel *Roman de la Rose* di Jean Renart, l'imperatore Conrad, descritto come il migliore che ci sia, è tuttavia circondato da vassalli che, preoccupati per la continuità e la stabilità del potere, vorrebbero vederlo ammogliato[28]. Nella medesima condizione si trova, ad esempio, re Claudin nella *Nouvelle de Sens*; in *Le roi Flore et la belle Jehanne*, le vicende dei due protagonisti,

[28] Jean Renart, *Le Roman de la Rose ou de Guillaume de Dole*, Traduction, présentation et notes de J. Dufournet avec le texte édité par F. Lecoy, Champion, Paris 2008, («Champion classiques. Moyen Âge»): «Qu'il n'avoit encor point de feme / (mes le voeil a ceaus de son regne / en eüst il prochainement) / mout en parloient tuit sovent li haut baron li un as autres: « Se ciz bers, qui est mieudres d'autres, / muert sanz hoir, nos somes tuit mort!» » [Siccome non aveva ancora preso moglie, malgrado il desiderio di quelli del suo regno, tra di loro ne parlavano spesso gli alti baroni: «Se questo valoroso, migliore di tutti gli altri, muore senza erede, per noi sarà la fine!»] (vv. 121-127).

inizialmente sviluppate in parallelo, si giocano sulle difficoltà di avere figli per l'uno e sulle dinamiche nuziali imbastite dai familiari per l'altra; nel *Miracle d'Othon*, si dispiega alla perfezione, a partire da una mancanza (la morte della moglie di Othon, nipote di re Lotario), il legame tra la possibilità di una nuova unione coniugale e i suoi diretti vantaggi sul piano politico territoriale (Othon sposerà la figlia del re di Spagna e, sotto l'ala di re Lotario, governerà il territorio iberico appena conquistato). In alcuni casi l'accusa è mossa proprio da coloro che in qualche modo sentono di subire, attraverso le nozze imminenti, la nuova conformazione dei rapporti di potere: si pensi al siniscalco di Conrad o al consigliere e ciambellano di re Claudin, Enguerran de Coucy.

Se le opere di questo tipo terminano spesso proprio con il matrimonio[29] e quindi con la possibilità di una discendenza che dia stabilità e forza al potere, in realtà la gran parte delle realizzazioni medievali del motivo studiato principiano con una fase di crisi, causata proprio dall'indebita accusa, interna al matrimonio stesso. Le vicende narrate procederanno allora verso la ricerca dell'equilibrio perduto e il ristabilirsi della precedente situazione relazionale (non senza qualche nuovo vantaggiato acquisito sul piano economico e/o territoriale e/o di lignaggio). Negli altri testi della *Gageure*, la stretta correlazione tra unione matrimoniale e dinamiche di potere è esplicitata nel gesto stesso della scommessa. I due contendenti impegnano i rispettivi territori sulla fedeltà o infedeltà della donna: Gerart di Poitiers e Gerart di Nevers perderanno in tal modo il governo sui propri possedimenti rispettivamente nel *Comte de Poitiers* e nel *Roman de la Violette*. Nel primo, gli aspetti positivi dell'unione ritrovata, oltre che essere evidenziati dal guadagno territoriale di Gerart (ora conte di Poitiers e duca di Normandia), sono approfonditi dalla seconda sezione del romanzo. Gui, figlio concepito dalla coppia riunitasi,

[29] È evidente che nei casi simili a quelli del *Guillaume de Dole* l'accusa nei confronti dell'eroina non sarà tanto di adulterio quanto di aver perso, prima e al di fuori dell'unione coniugale, la verginità.

diverrà re di Costantinopoli dopo aver aiutato l'imperatore di Roma, Costantino, nella conquista della città e dopo aver sposato la figlia dell'emiro, Parise. Dunque, qui la "questione privata" della scommessa è reinserita in una sorta di dimensione provvidenziale di crociata, nella quale è ancora il sacramento del matrimonio a porre un felice sigillo conclusivo.

Esemplare per l'esplorazione delle dinamiche di potere che s'intersecano nella figura femminile è certamente il *Doon de la Roche*. La *chanson de geste* della fine del XII secolo narra le vicende di Olive, qui sorella di Pipino, data in sposa a Doon come ricompensa per le nobili azioni che questi ha compiuto al servizio del re. La celebrazione delle nozze risulta particolarmente disagevole a Tomile, discendente non a caso di Gano, che desidera vedere sua figlia Audegour al fianco del nobile cavaliere. Da qui l'allestimento di una strategia menzognera che finisce per incriminare Olive di adulterio e per aprire lo spazio alla nuova unione matrimoniale desiderata – passaggio fondamentale al fine di prendere il controllo della città ed espropriare Doon stesso dai suoi possedimenti. Seguono le diverse avventure, le numerose battaglie, nelle quali a duplicare la rivalità di Doon e Tomile c'è quella che vede protagonisti Landri e Malingre, figli rispettivamente di Olive e Audegour (e quindi potenziali eredi). Dinamiche di potere, dunque, gestite attraverso tattiche basate perlopiù sulle presenze femminili in quanto mogli e madri. Come si vede, il nucleo motivico in oggetto si interseca inscindibilmente con il plesso fondamentale della conservazione e della trasmissione dell'egemonia e del dominio, disciplinate per il tramite delle politiche matrimoniali nel quadro di un sistema normato e basato sul controllo delle linee di discendenza e dei legami parentali. Dietro le questioni di fedeltà e rettitudine morale si colgono le poste in gioco biopolitiche ed egemoniche della legittimità dinastica e della gestione dell'autorità.

Non sarebbe difficile continuare in questa direzione osservando le modalità attraverso le quali l'ingiusta accusa di adulterio è mossa nei confronti di una donna la

cui posizione sociale le assegna un ruolo di garante nei confronti di nessi (maschili) politico-economici. Tuttavia, ritengo sia ora utile sollecitare maggiormente i significati religiosi sui quali il medioevo investe le proprie riflessioni inerenti l'immaginario femminile. Le virtù cristiane della verginità e, in una sua forma meno "pura", di castità coniugale sono strettamente legate al modello di Maria. Parallelamente – e in maniera complementare – alla variegata e portentosa interrogazione riguardante le donne, la figura di Nostra Signora acquisisce un'importanza inedita sia all'interno delle meditazioni e delle rappresentazioni religiose di estrazione colta, sia in quelle di diffusione popolare. Il culto mariano, tra i secoli XII e XIV, fa registrare picchi di amplificazione in precedenza mai visti.

> Maria. È l'epoca trionfante della sua devozione, da Chartres ad Amiens, la sua splendida estate. I canti più appassionati delle sue lodi vengono dall'ambiente monastico, e soprattutto dai Cistercensi nella scia del dottor mellifluo, Bernardo di Chiaravalle. [...] A partire dall'inizio del XIII secolo, i Mendicanti, i Francescani soprattutto, prendono saldamente il primato. È nella tensione verso la Vergine che la mistica medievale prende lo slancio: pietà filiale, più che mai pietà di figlio[30].

Molte delle opere che sfruttano il personaggio della donna casta, vergine, ingiustamente accusata di un illecito rapporto sessuale non possono che alimentare e a loro volta essere alimentate dalla presenza contestuale di questo inedito anelito religioso nei confronti della Vergine Maria[31]. I numerosi *Miracles de Notre-Dame* ne so-

[30] J. Dalarun, *La donna vista dai chierici*, in Duby, Perrot, op. cit., pp. 24-55: 48.

[31] La verginità, condizione virtuosa sulla quale si fonda tutto il discorso didattico e religioso riferito alle donne, tra l'XI e il XII secolo è oggetto di un'esaltazione senza precedenti. Il modello preso come riferimento è ovviamente quello di Maria, la cui verginità, però, rimarrà ancora per lungo tempo al centro di numerose riflessioni e interrogazioni teologiche tese a districarne l'apparente ambiguità (senza tuttavia mai metterla realmente in discussione). All'elemento verginale, l'intensità che il culto mariano farà registrare tra i secoli XII e XIV affiancherà altri caratteri peculiari che entreranno

no la prova più evidente. Essi – o meglio le *légendes de la Vierge* sulle quali basano buona parte dei loro contenuti –, riprendono trame popolari sparse tra romanzi e canzoni di gesta valorizzando o inserendo *ex novo* elementi pertinenti la fede mariana. In queste brevi narrazioni, l'intervento della Vergine in aiuto del virtuoso personaggio in difficoltà (nel nostro caso la casta dama condannata) contribuisce alla designazione della Madre di Dio come "l'avocate du genre humain", come essere misericordioso per eccellenza e allo stesso tempo come entità divina dotata di una potenza ineguagliabile. È il culto diffuso dagli ordini monastici nelle sue manifestazioni più "umane" e popolareggianti[32].

Anche in quei racconti in cui l'ispirazione religiosa non si situa prioritariamente alla base delle intenzionalità narrative, la presenza di *Notre Dame* può manifestarsi con una certa risonanza. Le caste dame calunniate, rivolgendo le loro preghiere e le loro richieste di aiuto alla Vergine, si collocano sotto l'ala protettrice di questa. Esemplari in tal senso sono le parole che la contessa di Poitiers pronuncia (inutilmente) per difendersi dalle incriminazioni del duca di Normandia:

> De male flame soit bruï
> Ma chars et a porre ventee,
> S'onques d'ome fui adesee
> Carneument ainc se de vous non.
> S'en trai Nostre Dame a tesmon,
> A cui jou sui ancele lige [...][33]

per sempre nell'immaginario e nel culto relativi alla Madre di Dio (misericordia, compassione, maestà, intercessione tra l'uomo e Dio, ecc.).

[32] «On peut caractériser la Vierge des Miracles, de même que celle des légendes, comme l'avocate du genre humain; le suprême motif de son intervention, c'est son amour des hommes, qui fait qu'on la considérait comme l'expression suprême de la miséricorde, à tel point qu'on fait appel à elle, même par des paroles amères. Les impies, comme les pieux, ont recours à sa bonté, qui se manifeste de la façon la plus diverse» (H.P.J.M. Ashmann, *Le culte de la sainte Vierge et la littérature française profane du moyen âge*, N.V. Dekker, Utrecht 1930, p. 131).

[33] *Le conte de Poitiers*, roman du treizième siècle édité avec introduction, notes et glossaire par V.-F. Koenig, Droz, Paris 1937, vv. 420-

La devozione nei confronti di Maria è uno dei motivi per i quali Frédéric Koenig, nella sua edizione del *Conte de Poitiers*, rintraccia in un "*exemplum* ayant pour bout de glorifier la Vierge" la fonte alla base del romanzo[34].

Un altro esempio eloquente – in cui la Vergine Maria si configura come l'interlocutrice privilegiata delle orazioni alle quali i personaggi delle vicende si abbandonano – è rappresentato dal *Doon de la Roche*. La *chanson de geste*, non a caso, è stata oggetto degli studi che Ashmann compie all'interno della letteratura profana medievale al fine di rintracciare elementi legati al culto mariano[35]:

> Ces deux chansons [si riferisce al *Raoul de Cambrai* e al *Doon*], surtout la dernière, prouvent un culte très remarquable de la Vierge, non seulement par le ferveur avec laquelle on y recourt à elle, mais aussi parce que les croyances de cette époque au sujet de Marie y trouvent une expression caractéristique: la Vierge y apparaît comme la *douce dame del ciel*, *la roïne couronnée*, *la virge henourée*, *la mere Jhesus Crist*, *qui a ses bons amis fet secours et aïe*, toutes expressions, attestant le haut rang d'honneur qui lui est assigné comme mère virginale et divine du Christ et comme avocate puissante du genre humain[36].

425. «La mia carne sia bruciata da crudeli fiamme e ridotta in polvere al vento se è vero che mi unii sessualmente a un uomo diverso da voi. Si prenda Nostra Signora, di cui io sono una fedele ancella, a testimone».

[34] Koenig sottolinea in particolare i versi 544-550 nei quali la donna, in procinto di essere uccisa dal conte Gerart che la crede adultera, invoca la protezione della Vergine in nome della castità. Appena dopo, a impedire l'omicidio sarà un leone comparso dal folto della foresta. A ogni modo, non intendo qui soffermarmi sulla validità di una tale ipotesi, per di più criticata da Bertil Malmberg, l'ultimo editore dell'opera (*Le roman du comte de Poitiers*, poème français du XIIIe siècle publié avec introduction, notes et glossaire par B. Malmberg, Gleerup, Lund; Munksgaard, Copenhague 1940). In questa sede preme semplicemente sottolineare come la presenza del culto mariano traspaia con una certa intensità (o per la quantità dei suoi rimandi o per le modalità e i luoghi delle sue occorrenze).

[35] Si rimanda direttamente alla trattazione di Ashmann per l'individuazione degli estratti testuali di riferimento: Ashmann, op. cit., p. 58.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

Le protagoniste delle narrazioni introdotte in precedenza, dunque, sono ancelle di Maria e il loro comportamento è sempre ispirato da quelle virtù che l'immagine della Vergine emblematicamente compendia. In seno a questa alleanza, le vicende tendono verso uno scioglimento positivo e una finale consacrazione delle qualità femminili dapprima messe in discussione. Si sarebbe tentati, a giusto titolo, di dire – sulla scia, tra gli altri, di Gaston Paris e di Douglas Buffum[37] – che questi racconti propongono una esaltazione della donna (in contrasto con la tendenza generale dei testi medievali e non solo). Se questo è vero[38], è altrettanto vero che a ciò non corrisponde affatto un reale scarto nei confronti della definizione dei generi (maschile e femminile) caratterizzante il modello culturale dell'età di mezzo e finemente studiato da Didier Lett[39]. Già diversi studi lo hanno osservato in vario modo[40]. Per di più, le vergini calunniate narrate nel medioevo, proprio corrispondendo al modello mariano, si pongono in una situazione di eccezionalità e lontananza nei confronti di una generalizzata rappresentazione bassa, lussuriosa e ingannevole del femminile. La loro atipicità superlativa – spesso esplicitamente posta a modello didattico – emerge nel segno di una unicità che si esprime col ricorso a una narrazione sempre rivolta al singolo soggetto e mai allargata alle "donne". L'utilizzo del plurale *femes* (o del singolare *feme* con valore esteso) in queste opere si lega comunque e prioritariamente a

[37] Paris, *Gageure*, cit., p. 550; *Le roman de la violette ou de Gérard de Nevers* par Gerbert de Montreuil, publié par D. L. Buffum, Champion pour la Société des anciens textes français, Paris 1928, p. LIV.
[38] Salvo restando sempre la necessità di un'approfondita verifica caso per caso.
[39] D. Lett, *Hommes et Femmes au Moyen Âge. Histoire du genre. xii^e^-xv^e^ siècle*, Armand Colin, Paris 2013, («Cursus Histoire»).
[40] Si vedano, a titolo esemplare, gli articoli di R.L. Krueger, *Double jeopardy: the appropriation of women in four romances from the* cycle de la gageure, in *Women readers and the ideology of gender in Old French verse romance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, cap. 5 e D. Régnier-Bohler, *Le corps mis à nu. Perception et valeur symbolique de la nudité dans les récits du Moyen Âge*, «Europe», 61, 1983, pp. 51-62.

commenti malevoli nei confronti del genere femminile – che non fanno altro, dopotutto, che evidenziare quel sentire comune in base al quale l'accusa di infedeltà (confermandolo) trova terreno fertile[41].

Le opere che sfruttano il motivo della donna calunniata per adulterio sembrano configurarsi come dei luoghi privilegiati all'interno dei quali esperire e ricercare la nota duplicità che in questo periodo contraddistingue l'immaginario relativo alle donne: sempre fluttuanti tra Eva e Maria, tra l'originaria colpa del peccato – al quale la donna è allora "naturalmente" orientata – e la possibilità della redenzione, le donne sono oggetto di desiderio e di repulsione e permangono in un alone di mistero affascinante e inquietante allo stesso tempo per cui l'uomo avverte la necessità – oltre che di un'azione di controllo – di una rappresentazione esorcizzante.

[41] Le porzioni testuali del corpus qui delineato, che approfondiscono l'immaginario negativo riguardante la donna, sono molte e capaci di sollecitare la gran parte dei numerosi stereotipi misogini che lo nutrono (non solo la tendenza lussuriosa e la volubilità, ma anche la chiacchiera inopportuna, l'astuzia diabolica, ecc.). Piuttosto che tentare un'improbabile esposizione sintetica, cito – chiudendo circolarmente il riferimento espresso dal titolo del presente articolo – le battute esemplari affidate a Iachimo nel *Cymbeline* (l'opera probabilmente più rilevante tra quelle del *Cycle de la Gageure*), durante la scena della scommessa: «You [Postumo] are a friend, and therein the wiser. If you buy ladie's flesh at a million a dram, you cannot preserve it from tainting; but I see some religion in you, that you fear» [Siete innamorato e perciò prudente. Anche se compraste una donna a un milione al grammo, non riuscireste a salvarla dal corrompersi. Ma vedo in voi un residuo di coscienza che vi fa tentennare]. Quel "residuo di coscienza" (*some religion*) – potremmo dire quel senso comune – che, una volta incriminata Imogen, Postumo sfogherà nel suo disperato monologo contro la Donna, «Is there no way for men to be, but women /Must be half-workers? We are all bastards, …» ["Non si potrà nascere senza che le donne facciano metà dell'opera? Siamo tutti bastardi, …]. Cfr. William Shakespeare, op. cit., pp. 278-279 e 336-241.

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"Couuert de tenebres & de pechie mortel": The Crepuscule of Chivalry in the Figure of the Demoiselle d'Escalot

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Abstract In the early 13th century *Lancelot en prose*, the eponymous hero completes his knighting ceremony by girding himself with a sword chosen by Guenevere, officially becoming her knight under the tenets of courtly love. The corpse of the Demoiselle d'Escalot constitutes overwhelming evidence of the adultery and poses a crucial question: what does Lancelot cherish more, the ideals of courtly love or the chivalric code of honour?

Mort Artu; Demoiselle d'Escalot; Lancelot; Guenevere; chivalry

Ha! Amors! ce sont li guerredon de vos servir;
car qui del tout a vos s'otroie,
il n'en peut eschaper sanz mort,
et tel loier rendez vos de loiaument amer[1].

[1] J. Frappier (ed. by), *La Mort le Roi Artu. Roman du XIIIe Siècle*, Droz, Genève 1954, p. 73; «Ah! Love! such are the rewards for serving you,

La Mort le Roi Artu is the epilogue of an extraordinary cycle of Arthurian prose works, starting with the death of Christ in the *Estoire del Saint Graal* leading to the dissolution of Arthur's kingdom[2]. The chain of causality that leads to the fall and destruction of the Arthurian world is quite intricate, but the scholarship unanimously identifies its chief causes in the sinful love between Lancelot and Guenevere, and in the famously turbid conception of Mordred[3]. The epigraph is uttered by Lancelot when, having just returned from Winchester, is denied a private meeting with the queen who, blinded by jealousy, deems him unfaithful. I believe the quote above exemplifies the three main themes of *La Mort le Roi Artu* – love, jealousy, and death. These threads are exposed in the tournament of Winchester which, announced and advertised by Arthur as a way of exorcising the end of adventures for the knights of the Round Table, proves to be a turning point in the way it reveals Lancelot's conflicting allegiances, especially in regard to Guenevere. In examining Lancelot's allegiance, my contribution seeks to trace the hints and clues scattered throughout the *Lancelot en prose* regarding the fall and destruction of Camelot in order to demonstrate how they converge in the figure of the Dem-

for he who gives himself up entirely to you cannot escape without death, and such reward you give for loving faithfully». All further quotations of this text are taken from this edition. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

[2] The *Vulgate* cycle, also known as *Lancelot-Grail* cycle, consists of five romances: the *Estoire del Saint Graal*, a prose version of Robert de Boron's *Merlin*, the *Lancelot propre*, *La Queste del Saint Graal*, and *La Mort le Roi Artu* (later abbreviated to *Mort Artu*). The order in which I have mentioned the five romances is not the order of composition, as the *Vulgate* has been arranged in a thematical and chronological order, with the *Estoire* and the *Merlin* preceding the latter three texts (also referred to as *Lancelot en prose*) as prequels. For further information and a summary of each text, refer to: J. Frappier, *The Vulgate Cycle*, in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History*, ed. by R.Sh. Loomis, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1959, pp. 295-318.

[3] On this point, see: M.V. Guerin, *The Fall of Kings and Princes*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1995, pp. 7-86.

oiselle, who functions both as a symbol of duty – in contrast to Guenevere, who represents passion – and as an embodiment of the crepuscule of chivalry.

The Making of a Knight and the Fracturing of Loyalty: Lancelot's Threefold Allegiance

The time has come for the King's Son, Lancelot of the Lake, to be instructed about the tenets of Christian knighthood by his foster mother, the Lady of the Lake, and to be knighted[4]. Upon their arrival at Camelot, the Lady wishes Arthur to knight the handsome youth accompanying her with the white robes she has provided. As soon as news spread of his arrival at court, queen Guenevere wishes to see the boy, whereupon he is brought to the great hall: Lancelot is immediately struck by her, «la fontaine de biauté»[5], and becomes so visibly flustered that the queen stops her questioning, fearing that she may be the cause. This first meeting proves to be of utmost importance for Lancelot, leading him to decide that he will be knighted by worthier hands than the king's – a choice that will undoubtedly shape both his destiny and that of Camelot.

The morning of the knighting ceremony, Lancelot and the other candidates are brought to mass to initiate the

[4] Christian knighthood emerged as a formal institution around the 12th century and was later theorised by Majorcan clergy man Ramon Llull. On the development and representation of knighting ceremonies, see: R.W. Ackerman, *The Knighting Ceremonies in the Middle English Romances*, «Speculum», 1944, XIX, pp. 285-313. Ackerman highlights the close relationship between historical practices and their literary depictions, noting that «the poets were, in general, following actual practices in portraying the *adoubements* of their heroes», p. 306. See also: F. Lyons, *Aspects of the Knighting Ceremony*, in *The Medieval Alexander Legend and Romance Epic, Essays in Honour of David J.A. Ross*, ed. by P. Noble, L. Polak and C. Isoz, Kraus International, Millwood 1982, pp. 125-130.

[5] A. Micha (ed. by), *Lancelot: Roman en Prose du Treizième Siècle*, VII, Droz, Genève 1980, p. 274; «The font of beauty». Translation mine; however, this is the edition I have used for verification: N.J. Lacy, J.E. Burns (ed. by), *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation,* II, Garland, London 1993.

ceremony. Once the mass is sung, Arthur gives the accolade to each candidate but does not gird them as he wants the last step of the ritual to take place in the great hall. This gives Lancelot the opportunity to create a diversion, for which he is dutifully scolded, causing Arthur to interrupt the ceremony and resume it with the customary banquet. Yet, amidst this confusion «ne menbra il au roi ne a autrui de l'espee que il li avoit oublié a chaindre» Lancelot with[6]. After the banquet, a foreign knight enters the great hall to ask assistance on behalf of the lady of Nohaut, and Lancelot proposes himself for the adventure, claiming that, as an unexperienced knight, it is best for him to embark on such a journey rather than Arthur's valiant and truly valuable men. Thus, he arranges to give his squire a sword, «car il bee a estre chevaliers d'autrui main que de la main le roi»[7], and takes his leave from the queen. At that moment, Yvain realises that Lancelot has not been girded, and Lancelot promptly answers that his squire has the sword he would like to be girded with, and dashes after him. This is yet another diversion because Lancelot would later send a message to the queen with a fellow knight, alongside two ladies he just rescued:

> Si dites a ma dame la royne que li vallés qui va secorre la dame de Nohaut les li envoie et li dites que je li mant que por moi gaaignier a tous jors, que ele me fache chevalier et qu'ele m'envoieche une espee com a chelui qui ses chevaliers sera, car mes sires li rois ne me chainst point d'espee, quant il me fist chevalier[8].

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 280; «Neither the king nor anyone else remembered the sword the king forgot to gird».
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 284; «For he eagerly desired to be the knight of someone else's hand rather than the king's».
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 298; «Tell to my lady the queen that the youth who will help the lady of Nohaut is the sender and tell also that I send them to win me forever, that she makes me knight and that she sends me a sword fit for he who will be her knight, for my lord the king did not gird me with the sword, when he made me knight».

The knight is back with «une espee moult boine et moult richement appareillie de feure et de renge»[9], and reveals to Lancelot that the queen demands him to gird himself with it. According to the medieval knighting ceremony, girding is the final stage of the ritual and as such it «will determine whose knight he is»[10]. In this instance, Lancelot successfully becomes Guenevere's knight. And yet, since Lancelot girds himself and does not kneel in front of any authority, to some extent he becomes his own knight. One could argue that Lancelot's self-girding takes place under extraordinary circumstances, made permissible by the queen's approval and gift, therefore not requiring further justification. However, since the events leading to this moment are deliberately set in motion by Lancelot himself, it is reasonable to suggest that he perceives himself as possessing a certain degree of autonomy or perhaps even sees himself, to some extent, as Guenevere's equal. At this point in the narrative, it is clear that Lancelot is simultaneously bound to three allegiances: to God, to Arthur, and to Guenevere.

The three all equally contribute to this knighting ritual: Arthur has been invested with God's authority and is considered His appointed representative on earth; Guenevere could be considered Arthur's second-in-command, and Lancelot is the figure who simultaneously saves and undermines the kingdom of Logres. As one of the most valiant and accomplished of Arthur's knights, Lancelot earns renown through his unmatched skills in battle, his unwavering courage, and the many feats of chivalry he performs in Arthur's name. His reputation as the epitome of knighthood seems to be rooted in his loyalty to the ideals of Camelot and the authority of the king. However, a more attentive and critical reader soon realizes that Lancelot's actions, though outwardly aligned with Arthur's cause, are in fact motivated by a deeper,

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 298; «A very fine sword and very richly decorated with a scabbard and belt». I have used Samuel N. Rosenberg's translation for "renge", in Lacy, Burns, *Lancelot-Grail*, II, cit., p. 71.
[10] Rosenberg, Footnote 11, in Lacy, Burns, *Lancelot-Grail*, II, cit., p. 67.

more personal allegiance: his passionate and forbidden love for the queen. In this sense, Guenevere becomes his true liege lord – not in name or title, but in emotional and moral authority. It is for her that Lancelot undertakes his greatest risks and endures his most difficult trials, blurring the lines between feudal duty and romantic devotion. His chivalry, then, is not merely political or religious; it is profoundly shaped by the inner conflict between his public role as knight of the realm and his private fidelity to the queen.

Lancelot and Guenevere quickly become the adulterous couple *par excellence*, and the affair is surprisingly not frowned upon as much as one would expect. The fiery passion that binds them is reminiscent of Andreas Capellanus's *De amore*. In his 12th-century Latin treatise on love, Andreas explains what love is, between whom it can spring, how it can end, and how one can recover its lost love. In the seventh dialogue in which «a man of higher nobility speaks with a woman of the simple nobility»[11], the man is professing his love to the woman, asking her to be her servant. During their lengthy conversation, the woman relates to the man a fact, «by no means trivial»[12], which prevents her from loving the man – her husband. The man is surprised at the mention of her husband and of the affection that binds them because «love can by no means exercise its functions between husband and wife, but has wished to withdraw its privileges completely»[13]. The only feeling possible within marriage is affection, whereas love is most appropriate for lovers. Undoubtedly, this refers to secret lovers, for «what is love but an inordinate desire to receive passionately a furtive and hidden embrace?»[14]. Love is a complex emotion, composed of many elements, with jealousy defined as its very «substance», its «mother and nurse»[15]. As a clergy-

[11] Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, a cura e traduzione di J.J. Parry, Columbia University Press, New York 1960, p. 91.
[12] *Ibid*., p. 100.
[13] *Ibid*., p. 101.
[14] *Ibid*., p. 100.
[15] *Ibid*., p. 101.

man, Andreas did not believe in love within marriage, yet he did not want to glorify extra-marital relationship as they were sinful[16]; however, his noble patronesses, Marie of Champagne and Eleanor of Aquitaine, were much more interested in a love that was «new and wonderful», not to be confused with «the political and procreative alliance that was a feudal marriage»[17]. Lancelot and Guenevere do correspond to the image of lovers embracing each other in secret, despite it being known to Bors and Galehaut, and it is precisely this secrecy and the jealousy they feel for one another that increases their love. As predicted by Andreas, problems arise when their love is made public. Already towards the end of the *Lancelot propre*, there is a foreshadowing of the consequences of their love visible in the *Mort Artu*:

> Mes sanz faille li rois Artus amoit tant Lancelot, se il seust combien il l'amast, si s'en mervillast touz, car maintes foiz dist il en son privé conseil qu'il ne savoit liquel il amoit plus, ou mon signor Gauvain ou Lancelot, ne ja jor de lor vie cele grant amor ne fust departie, se ne fust Agravains l'orguillex et Mordrez qui par lor grant envie distrent puis au roi que Lanceloz li faisoit honte et deshonor de sa fame qu'il maintenoit par delez lui. Si an distrent tant que li grant parenté le roi torna a mort et a destruction[18].

[16] Both Andreas Capellanus and Chrétien de Troyes underline the controversy inherent in courtly love ideals, which are immoral and adulterous, and therefore incompatible with the Christian doctrine. Alexander Denomy suggests that courtly love should be considered amoral in the sense that it is wholly divorced from Christianity, and Felix Schösser concludes that, according to Andreas, courtly love and Christianity are «each absolute in its own sphere; both are confined to predetermined areas and do not overlap». In Charles Moorman's view, for the *Vulgate* author «l'*amour courtois* existed not only as a paradox, a literary ambivalence, but as a fundamental dilemma of life». A.J. Denomy, *The Heresy of Courtly Love*, P. Smith, Gloucester Mass., 1965, p. 28. Felix Schösser quoted in D. Kelly, *Courtly Love in Perspective: The Hierarchy of Love in Andreas Capellanus*, «Traditio», 1968, XXIV, p. 119; Ch. Moorman, *Courtly Love in Malory*, «ELH», 1960, XXVII, p. 165.

[17] S. Painter, *French Chivalry. Chivalric Ideas and Practices in Medieval France*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1964, p. 121.

[18] Micha, *Lancelot,* VI, cit., p. 15; «Without doubt king Arthur loved Lancelot so much that if he had known how he loved him, he would

After this rather overt foreshadowing of Camelot's destruction, the *Vulgate* author carefully scatters other hints regarding the consequences of their love. A case in point can be found in *La Queste del Saint Graal*. The quest, undertaken by several knights of the Round Table, serves not merely as a physical adventure but as a profound spiritual journey: it becomes a test of faith, purity, and inner strength. This is especially true for Lancelot, who strives to be as deserving as Galahad but is prevented to do so. Lancelot himself states that «car des lors que ie fui primes cheualier ne fu il onques eure que ie ne fuisse couuert de tenebres & de pec[h]ie mortel»[19]. In order to begin his journey of penitence and redemption, Lancelot must first confront and confess his sin with the queen: he renounces Guenevere and appears willing to pursue this new path towards sanctity. However, the central problem lies in the motivations behind his repentance. Although Lancelot renounces Guenevere, he does so for the wrong reasons: instead of seeking righteousness and restoring his spiritual union with God, Lancelot strives to emulate Galahad because he feels the need to reclaim his lost honour and to prove his worth, therefore underscoring how his redemption is compromised by his pride and competitive spirit. Pauline Matarasso very acutely points out that Lancelot's spiritual sight will not be restored, not even at the end of the adventure because

have been amazed, for when he was alone he often said that he did not know which one he loved more, Sir Gawain or Lancelot, and never from them this great love would have gone, if it were not for Agravain the proud and Mordred who for their own great envy later said to the king that Lancelot brought him shame and dishonour through his wife, whom he was keeping behind his back. So much they said that the great line of the king was led to death and destruction». My reference for this excerpt was Carleton W. Carroll's translation in Lacy and Burns, *Lancelot*, III, cit., p. 282.

[19] H.O. Sommer (ed. by), *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, VI, The Carnegie Institution of Washington, Washington, 1913, p. 45. «Ever since I was first made knight there has been no time when I was not covered in darkness and mortal sin».

«something has been irretrievably lost in the corruption of innocence and the long perseverance in sin»[20].

La Queste del Saint Graal could serve as the epilogue of the *Vulgate* cycle, as it reaches the narrative climax with the accomplishment of the Holy Grail. Galahad, the purest of knights, dies after fulfilling his divine mission; Perceval withdraws into a hermitage within the sacred city of Sarras, where the Grail is now kept; and Bors returns to Camelot, where Arthur welcomes him and eagerly listens to the account of the Grail quest, instructing his court scribes to record it for posterity. The closing lines of the *Queste* recount how King Henry commissioned Master Walter Map to translate the story from Latin into French, while simultaneously declaring that there will be no further tales concerning the Holy Grail[21]. Yet, as Arianna Punzi argues, the *Queste* cannot be the definitive conclusion to the cycle – despite its potential to do so – because a crucial narrative thread remains unsolved: the *fole amour* between Lancelot and Guenevere. This illicit relationship, which has lingered in the shadows of the *Lancelot en prose*, needs to be addressed especially for what concerns Lancelot's relationship with Arthur[22]. The tension that lies at the heart of *La Mort le Roi Artu*, the final instalment in the cycle, can be explained through the dichotomy between *féodalité de droit* and *féodalité de cœur*[23]. Lancelot belongs to the latter category in the sense that he values the service to his queen more than the one he owes to his king and to God. Ideally, this tension should have been interrupted with the end of the Grail quest, and yet less than a month after Lancelot's return to court, he has already fallen back into temptation and resumed his sinful relationship with the

[20] P. Matarasso, *The Redemption of Chivalry: A Study of the* Queste del Saint Graal, Droz, Genève 1979, p. 119.
[21] Sommer, *Vulgate*, VI, cit. pp. 198-199.
[22] A. Punzi, *All'ombra di Lancillotto. Storie e imprese del primo cavaliere della Tavola rotonda*, Carocci, Roma 2022, p. 135.
[23] H. Blake, *Étude sur les structures narratives dans la* Mort Artu *(XIIIe siècle)*, «Revue belge de Philologie et d'Historie», 1972, L, p. 737.

queen. Already upon entering the story of the *Mort Artu*, the whole court witnesses the reignited passion: they have lifted the veil of secrecy surrounding their relationship and do not care about the consequences, not even when their own lives are at stake. The core issue is not so much that they have sinned but rather the fact that they are causing a breach into Arthur's authority and are, therefore, guilty of treason.

As anticipated in the *Lancelot propre*, Agravain deeply envies Lancelot and seeks to prove that Arthur's most celebrated knight is unworthy of such title by exposing his affair with Guenevere. However, Agravain overlooks the consequences his envy might have on Arthur's authority and Camelot's stability. Arthur initially dismisses Agravain's accusations, attributing the illicit affair to Love's irresistible force: «ge sei bien veraiement que Lancelos nel penseroit en nule maniere; et certes se il onques le pensa, force d'amors li fist fere, encontre qui sense ne reson ne puet avoir duree»[24]. Arthur's reaction is very much political as he must maintain composure and should not act rashly, lest his concern is interpreted as weakness and impacts the stability of his kingdom. He must, therefore, act with caution and discern the truth. This dynamic shifts after the tournament of Winchester, when Arthur dwells at Morgan's castle and he is confronted with visual evidence of the affair. Indeed, Lancelot had been imprisoned for two winters and a summer by Morgan, Arthur's sister, and painted his most heroic deeds and his love for Guenevere on the walls of his chamber, where Arthur is later lodged. As Arthur is visibly torn and cannot discern the truth from fiction, Morgan confirms Lancelot's treason with a brief account of the affair. This prompts the reader to question Arthur's reaction, unsure as to whether it is motivated by personal jealousy or if it should be interpreted as a king's obligation to preserve

[24] Frappier, *Mort Artu*, cit., p. 5; «I know very well that Lancelot would not think in such a way; and surely even if he thought about it, it was because the force of love made him do it, against which neither good sense nor reason can stand».

order. As a status symbol of his kingdom, Arthur cannot afford to act against his people's expectations: Agravain thinks Lancelot should be executed for his treason, and Morgan firmly believes that Arthur should act accordingly to his laws[25]. Undoubtedly, Arthur is faced with a great dilemma: inasmuch as Arthur loves Lancelot and to part from him would be too painful, he cannot overlook the evidence he has been presented with. Interestingly enough, this passage uses lexicon that pertains to jurisprudence: the images «tesmoignent» that Lancelot has disgraced his «honnir», shamed him through his wife and is therefore guilty of treason[26]. Not only he has visual evidence, but he has two oral testimonies: if he does not provide his people with the justice they expect him to, he will no longer wear his crown. This tension between public duty and private desire is central both to Arthur's identity as king and to Lancelot's identity as knight; unfortunately, it is precisely this tension that becomes their undoing. Arthur's need to uphold justice in the eyes of his people, even at great personal cost, mirrors the ancient Greek concept of *τιμή* (timè), that is the public esteem of a person granted based on one's own value, but it also exposes the fragility of a rule built on appearances. For what concerns Lancelot, this is more poignantly illustrated in the episode of the Demoiselle d'Escalot, where the conflict between personal loyalty and public obligation reaches its tragic peak when the damsel dies of unrequited love.

[25] While Arthur cannot be accused of unilateral decision-making, he is nonetheless poorly advised: both Agravain's accusation and Morgan's testimony stem from personal envy, as do Mordred's treason and Gawain's grudge against Lancelot for the death of his brothers. Even if they had Arthur's best interests at heart, their actions would still undermine the stability of the kingdom. Moreover, the fact that Agravain, Gawain, Morgan and Mordred – who will ultimately deal the final blow to Arthur's reign – are his own relatives adds another layer of complexity. On this point, see: L. Leonardi, *Artù, Lancillotto e il Graal*, IV, Einaudi, Torino 2023, pp. 258-261.

[26] Frappier, *Mort Artu*, cit., p. 64.

Bound by the Sleeve: The Demoiselle d'Escalot and the Limits of Lancelot's Loyalty

La Mort le Roi Artu begins with Bors' return to court and the assessment of the lives lost during the Grail quest. After the accomplishment of the quest, Arthur is painfully aware that the kingdom of Logres will no longer be able to witness such grand adventures, therefore he decides to announce one last tournament for his knights, which is to be held in Winchester. The tournament is the king's way of postponing the permanent dwelling of his knights at court and thus a way of exorcising the end of the grandeur of the Round Table. This is also the perfect occasion for Agravain to expose Lancelot's treason and Guenevere's infidelity to Arthur, who decides to test his nephew's accusations by having Guenevere stay behind and not go to the joust. As Arthur's retinue leaves Camelot, Lancelot arranges a private meeting with the queen, his lover and liege lord, to inform her about his decision to attend the tournament and joust in disguise, asking for her permission. The reason behind Lancelot's request can be traced back to Arthur's initial desire to give his knights one last chance of bearing arms. Lancelot wishes to prove his prowess and valour in combat, especially after the hard blow suffered during the quest. As it is merely a question of honour, had Lancelot gone directly to him, Arthur would have understood his motives and granted permission. Perhaps, it was Arthur that Lancelot sought so eagerly to impress.

Lancelot leaves Camelot as the sun is setting in order to avoid being recognised; and yet, Arthur does almost immediately. Lancelot is granted lodging and maintains his anonymity with the lord, and his two sons, who had recently been knighted. He requests a shield to wear at the tournament for fear that his own would be recognised by his kin and, as one of the lord's sons was ill and could not attend the tournament, Lancelot wears the lord's son's, which was all vermillion as was customary for new knights. Before leaving for Winchester, Lancelot meets the lord's daughter, a beautiful damsel who cour-

teously kneels before the knight. This episode constitutes the turning point of the narrative as it will have baleful consequences on the triad Arthur-Lancelot-Guenevere and on Camelot as a whole. The damsel greets Lancelot with the motif of the *don contraignant*[27], a request that must be granted even if the donor does not know the nature of the promise; consequently, the donor cannot withdraw from it without risking damage to their reputation. For the motif to work, Lisa Jefferson argues that there must be either a relationship of some sort between the characters, or «a bond of obligation to a third party must be invoked», primarily through the phrase *par la foi que*[28]. The damsel appeals to Lancelot «par la foi que tu doiz a la riens el monde que tu mieuz ainmes»[29]: while Lancelot and the reader immediately identify the third person with Guenevere, she invokes her unknowingly. The expression is used to underline Lancelot's «psychological consistency»: owing his faith to Guenevere both in a political and in an affectionate sense, Lancelot is indeed bound to grant a request made in her name, which is slightly «out of character» for him because he is potentially jeopardising Guenevere's honour as he does not know the nature of the promise[30].

The damsel reveals her wish: «Et savez vos que ce est que vos m'avez otroié? Vos m'avez otroié que vos por-

[27] See L. Jefferson, *Don – Don Contraignant – Don Contraint: A Motif and its Deployment in the French Prose Lancelot*, «Romanische Forschungen», 1992, CIV, pp. 27-30 for a thorough summary of the various definitions of the *don contraignant* provided by the scholarship. The one commonly used today is Jean Frappier's *don contraignant*, although Philippe Ménard argues that *don en blanc qui lie le donateur* is more appropriate. J. Frappier, *Il motivo del don contraignant*, in *Il Romanzo*, ed. by M. L. Meneghetti, il Mulino, Bologna, 1988, pp. 347-387; Ph. Ménard, *Le don en blanc qui lie le donateur. Réflexions sur un motif de conte*, in *An Arthurian Tapestry. Essays in Honor of Lewis Thorpe*, ed. by Kenneth Varty, University of Glasgow, Glasgow 1981, pp. 37-53.
[28] Jefferson, *Don – Don Contraignant – Don Contraint*, cit., pp. 35-36.
[29] Frappier, *Mort Artu*, cit., p. 10; «By the faith you owe to whomever in the world you love best».
[30] Jefferson, *Don – Don Contraignant – Don Contraint*, cit., pp. 37-38.

teroiz a ce tornoiement ma manche destre en leu de panoncel dessus vostre hiaume et feroiz d'armes por l'amoir de moi»[31]. This revelation burdens Lancelot as it compromises his sense of integrity: while refusing to wear the damsel's sleeve would be a discourteous breach of chivalric conduct, accepting the sleeve – and, by extension, the woman's love – makes Lancelot more adulterous than ever before. Consequently, this act not only complicates his own moral standing, but it also casts doubt on the figure of Guenevere. Lancelot firmly believes that he shall not be blamed for his commitment to the chivalric code, thus the queen should take pride in Lancelot's alignment with the code of conduct. And yet, Lancelot is aware of the irony at play: Guenevere will be understandably hurt because by accepting another woman's love, Lancelot appears to diminish the value of her own and he will, therefore, be blamed and deemed unfaithful. This appears to be an inextricable paradox for, although Lancelot appears to value each of his allegiances equally, he cannot uphold one without betraying the other[32]. Nevertheless, lest he taints Guenevere's honour by rescinding from the *don en blanc*, Lancelot reluctantly agrees to wear the damsel's sleeve.

This gesture is reminiscent of a long, established tradition of love tokens of inspiring and ensuring the knights' success «on the real or allegorical battlefield of love» while simultaneously overturning such tradition as it defies established gender roles and courtly conventions[33]. A

[31] Frappier, *Mort Artu*, cit. p. 10; «And do you know what you have granted? You have agreed to wear my right sleeve as your insignia on your helmet at this tournament and you will perform feats of arms for my love».

[32] According to Amy L. Ingram, the Demoiselle bears a resemblance to Fortune in the way «for a brief moment, she holds the key to the kingdom in the palm of her hand». A.L. Ingram, *Death of a Maiden: La Demoiselle d'Escalot in* La Mort Artu, «Vox Romanica», 2003, LXII, p. 134. See also: J. Frappier, ***Études sur*** La Mort le Roi Artu, Droz, Genève 1961, pp. 258-273.

[33] J.E. Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading Through Clothes in Medieval French Culture*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Pennsylvania 2002, p. 9.

lady is allowed to gift love tokens to her beloved only after the man has initiated a love-suit and she has conceded, in compliance to the hierarchy of roles. The damsel overturns such conventions because she is the one who initiates a courtship and also gives a love token that is supposed to be her personification on the battlefield, inspiring the knight to perform magnificently. While it perfectly obscures Lancelot's real identity and allows him to create a new one based on the expectations of society and the audience[34], the sleeve misrepresents Lancelot's desire and prompts the audience – and Guenevere – to believe that the knight is involved in a romantic relationship with the lady, therefore baptising him *le chevalier de la manche*. The mysterious knight wins the tournament but, having been deeply wounded by another combatant, swiftly departs with his companion towards his aunt's residence. Gawain, eager to know who hides behind the adorned helmet, hastily follows the knights but soon loses their trail. The following day, the king and his retinue ride to Escalot castle, where Gawain and his brothers are lodged in accommodations just outside the fortress. By chance, Gawain is assigned the very room where Lancelot's shield is hanging, although he has not yet entered it. That evening, Gawain dines with his brothers and other knights, and he meets the damsel, who inquires about the tournament and the arms borne by the victorious knight:

[34] S.E. Gordon, *The Man with No Name: Identity in French Arthurian Verse Romance*, «Arthuriana», 2008, XVIII, pp. 70-75. Many scholars have argued that the sleeve obscured Lancelot's identity in such a way that it almost caused his death. Yet, Lancelot has deliberately chosen to disguise himself: he asked the lord of Escalot's castle to provide him with a shield because his was already too known and recognizable. Had the audience and the combatants recognised Lancelot, they would have not jousted against him for fear of wounding Arthur's best knight. It would have defeated the whole purpose of Lancelot's request to Guenevere. Creating this new identity and having a new epithet that could conceal his name was possibly the best outcome for Lancelot.

> Demoisele, fet messier Gauvains, unes toutes vermeilles, et avoit dessus son hiaume une manche ne sei a dame ou a damoisele ; et tant vos di ge bien veraiement que, se ge estoie damoisele, je voudroie que la manche fust moie, par si que cil m'amast par amors qui la manche portoit, car ge ne vi onques a nul jor de ma vie manche mieuz emploiee que ceste n'a esté[35].

These words are a source of reassurance for the damsel, who then reveals that she was the one who asked the knight to wear her sleeve, a token for which the knight «si en a tant fet, la seue merci»[36]. Gawain at last has the opportunity to discover the knight's identity and asks the damsel for his name; she does not know the name of her beloved but she offers to show Gawain his shield. Similarly to the sleeve becoming a surrogate for the lady's presence, the shield becomes a personification of Lancelot and it reveals to Gawain what he would have never imagined: Lancelot of the Lake, the most reserved knights, publicly displayed his love for the vavasor's daughter, while simultaneously clearing himself from Agravain's evil accusations. Back at Camelot, Gawain informs the monarchs about his recent discovery: it is with great joy and relief that Arthur hears his news, while Guenevere is left in anguish and believes her lover has betrayed her.

A month after the Winchester tournament, the damsel goes to her aunt's residence, where Lancelot is still convalescing and she spends days and nights tending to him, her love growing to the point that she can no longer be silent about it. The damsel confesses her love in a rather unconventional way by asking Lancelot whether a knight who refuses a lady's demand for love ought to be deemed a villain. In this instance, the damsel is framing

[35] Frappier, *Mort Artu*, cit. pp. 22-23; «Damsel, said sir Gawain, one all vermillion, and had on his helmet a sleeve from I do not know which lady or damsel; and I will truly tell you that, if I were a maid, I would want the sleeve to be mine, because it would mean that he who bore the sleeve loved me, for I never saw in any day of my life a sleeve better employed than that one was».

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 24; «Has done so much, out of graciousness».

a possible rejection as a moral failure on Lancelot's part by referring to the moral obligation knights have to respond favourably to such love. She is not appealing to spontaneous emotion or affection as she seems to view love as duty; however, she soon understands that Lancelot's heart is in someone else's hands and, hence, he does not love her. This is another turning point for the narrative because it is with these words that Lancelot causes the damsel's death: had he been less frank, he «m'eüssiez mis mon cuer en une langor replenie de toutes bones esperances, si que l'esperance me feïst vivre en toute joie et en toute douceur ou cuers amorex porroit demorer»[37]. Unable to make Lancelot change his mind, the damsel prophesies her death, the only thing that could release her from Love's grip; indeed, from the moment she first saw Lancelot, she loved him fully and purely, and after his rejection she could not «boivre ne mingier, ne dormir ne reposer, einçois ai puis traveillié jusques ci en pensee et toute dolour et toute mesaventure soufferte de nuit et de jour»[38].

One day, Arthur sees from his tower that a beautiful boat is approaching the shores of Camelot around noon[39]. He and Gawain are compelled to go near it be-

[37] *Ibid*., p. 42; «Would have placed my heart in a languor full of all good hope, and that hope would have made me live in all joy and sweetness where an amorous heart could dwell».

[38] *Ibid*., p. 67; «Drink nor eat, sleep or rest, instead I have been tortured in mind and have suffered every grief and every mischance night and day». Interestingly enough, Lancelot loves Guenevere with the same burning passion the damsel feels for Lancelot, and he displays the same lovesickness as her. Lancelot laments his condition as lover in the epigraph, although it is less eloquent than the damsel's: whereas she expresses her suffering by describing how love has deprived her of sleep and nourishment, and invokes death as release, Lancelot explicitly denounces love itself, claiming that a loyal lover is never rewarded but only met with death instead of praise. Figuratively speaking, Lancelot feels he might die of lovesickness because of Guenevere's words, while the damsel dies precisely because of Lancelot's words. While Guenevere rebuffs Lancelot only apparently, his rejection of the damsel is final and lethal.

[39] Dominique Demartini-Franzini underlines that at noon the sun is at the zenith and thus it is the warmest moment of the day, conse-

cause it is too beautiful to the point that Gawain believes it is a miracle[40]: «Par foi, se ceste nacelle est ausi bele dedenz com dehors, ce seroit merveilles; a poi que ge ne di que les aventures recommencent»[41]. However, their hope is crushed when the knight enters the boat and finds that it hosts a beautifully arrayed corpse. After careful inspection, Gawain recognises the body as the Demoiselle d'Escalot and Arthur wishes to know the cause of her death, as if he suspects that something has happened between the damsel and Lancelot. Perhaps the damsel's face bore signs of grief, or perhaps the king simply inferred something happened because, if their love had endured, she would not have died. Here, Death is con-

quently the moment when one would feel the thirstiest. Demartini believes thirst is a connotation of erotic desire, in a way reminiscent of King's argument of fountains or wells symbolising Guenevere and therefore Lancelot's adultery, also drawing from Proverbs 5:15-23. Water carries a message, and in this case, it is both a symbol of fidelity and of infidelity: for Guenevere, the damsel's body is proof of Lancelot's fidelity; for Arthur and the whole court, the letter is almost equivalent to surprising Lancelot and Guenevere in the same room. D. Demartini-Franzini, *De la lettre de la demoiselle d'Escalot dans la* Mort Artu *à la lettre de Bélide dans le* Tristan en prose*: écriture et réécriture de la lettre d'amour*, «Bien Dire et Bien Aprandre», 1996, XIII, pp. 106-107. D.S. King, *Allusive* Fonteinnes*: Love as Trouble in* La Mort le Roi Artu, «Romance Notes», 2016, LVI, p. 455.

[40] The damsel's funeral barge can be interpreted as an analogue of Solomon's boat described in the *Queste*. Designed to deliver a message to Solomon's descendant, Christ, similarly to the damsel's boat it departs swiftly towards its final destination, without crew or sails; moreover, it is welcomed by Galahad and Perceval with the same exceptional marvel as Arthur and Gawain welcome the damsel's. On Solomon's bed rests a wallet which contains a letter offering «not so much an explanation as a *mis-en-abîme*; in fact, it is nothing other than that part of the story we have just read». While the damsel's *nef funèbre* does not have the same messianic and spiritual connotation as Solomon's *nef merveilleuse*, it is interesting how the author uses this symbolism in the *Mort Artu* in a secular way. L.H. Cooper, *Bed, Boat, and Beyond: Fictional Furnishing in "La Queste del Saint Graal"*, «Arthuriana», 2005, XV, pp. 26-50.

[41] Frappier, *Mort Artu*, cit., p. 88; «By my faith, if this boat is so beautiful on the inside as it is on the outside, it would be a miracle; I would almost say that adventures are beginning again».

sidered most «vileinne et ennuieuse» as opposed to «si bele damoiselle»[42]. If Arthur suspects Lancelot to be the cause of grief and, consequently, of her death, then he is most villainous as well. It is only a matter of moments before they understand the cause of the damsel's death: Gawain spots a pouch suspended on the damsel's belt, out of which he draws a letter. He hands it over to Arthur, who reads it aloud:

> A touz les chevaliers de la Table Reonde mande saluz la damoisele d'Escalot. Je faz a vos touz ma complainte: non mie por ce que vos le me puissiez amender jamés, mes por ce que vos connois a la plus preude gent del monde et a la plus envoisiee, vos faz ge savoir tout pleinement que por loiaument amer sui ge a ma fin venue. Et se vos demandez por cui amour ge ai souferte engoisse de morte, je vos respont que ge sui morte por le plus preudome del monde et por le plus vilains: ce est Lancelos del Lac, qui est li plus vilains que ge sache, car onques ne le soi tant prier o pleurs et o lermes que il volsist de moi avoir merci; si m'en a tant esté au cuer que g'en sui a ma fin venue por amer loiaument[43].

Not only does Arthur read the letter because he is the most authoritative character of the two, but because he is the recipient of the letter through which his suspicions are confirmed: the damsel has died of grief, and the man who caused her such anguish is none other than his best knight, and also the most treacherous. With the adverb *loiaument*, the damsel inserts herself once again in-

[42] *Ibid*., p. 88; «Villainous and upsetting» and «such a beautiful damsel».

[43] *Ibid*., pp. 89-90; «To all the Knights of the Round Table sends greetings the damsel of Escalot. I make a complaint before you all: not because you can ever avenge it, but because I know you as the most valiant men of the world and the most pleasant, I let you know plainly that for loving loyally I have come to my end. And if you wonder for the love of whom I have suffered thus the anguish of death, I tell you that I died for the most valiant man in the world and for the most villainous: that man is Lancelot of the Lake, who is the most villainous man I have ever known, for never when I begged him such with crying tears he was willing to take pity on me; this burdened upon my heart so much that I have come to my end for loving faithfully».

to the ideals of courtly love and reveals the expectations she once had of Lancelot acting accordingly to the *clichés* of courtly love, shattered by his rejection[44]. It is only fair that she denounces his lack of courtesy in front of the most courteous men in the world, the knights of the Round Table, without realising that her own death symbolises the twilight of chivalry. Patrick Moran defines the Demoiselle d'Escalot a sacrificial victim, meaning that her death exemplifies the stubbornness and disorder of the Arthurian world[45]. The damsel's only mistake is having acted as if they were still in a courtly age but, as exemplified by Lancelot's reluctance to wear her sleeve, it has come to an end. It would be reasonable to suggest that chivalry imploded after the quest of the Holy Grail was accomplished: while Lancelot had renounced Guenevere, he did so for the wrong reason. His conversion appears to have been more grounded in his desire to equal his son's abilities rather than establishing a connection with God. This is because it sprang from «the tenacity of life-long attitudes and habits», which leads Matarasso to argue that the «effects of the Fall are permanent and cannot be erased»[46]: Lancelot would have fallen back into sin even if his conversion had been more grounded in righteousness.

In this sense, the Demoiselle d'Escalot and her *nef funèbre* also ratify the end of adventures: after the *Queste*, the principle of proliferation that feeds the narrative does not exist anymore[47]. Moran believes that the damsel's tale exemplifies a disenchanted dimension, fuelled by the hope of a return of adventures to the point that it goes back to the past until it loses its meaning. The circularity of the text is now visible and it is made explicit by the closing lines of the *Mort Artu*:

[44] Demartini-Franzini, *De la lettre de la demoiselle d'Escalot*, cit., p. 105.
[45] P. Moran, *À quoi sert l'histoire de la demoiselle d'Escalot? Prolifération narrative, suspense paradoxal et écriture pathétique dans la* Mort Artu, «Revue des littératures et des arts», 2021, XXIII, p. 6.
[46] Matarasso, *The Redemption of Chivalry,* cit., pp. 130-136.
[47] Moran, *À quoi sert l'histoire de la demoiselle d'Escalot?*, cit., p. 6.

> Si se test ore atant mestre Gautiers Map de l'*Estoire de Lancelot*, car bien a tout mené a fin selonc les choses qui avindrent, et fenist ci son livre si outreement que après ce n'en porroit nus riens conter qui n'en mentist de toutes choses[48].

This is the author's way of saying that, after this, the Arthurian realm is no more. Building on what has been discussed so far, *La Mort le Roi Artu* serves not only as the epilogue to one of the most renowned cycles of Arthurian prose, but also as a powerful depiction of the crepuscule of chivalry and of courtly love. The Arthurian legend seems to have exhausted its potential[49]: the only path to originality for the next generation of authors lies in transposing and reimagining Arthurian legends within their own cultural traditions, thereby paving the way for a new cycle of adaptations that address the social and political issues of their times.

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[48] Frappier, *Mort Artu*, cit., p. 263; «Here master Walter Map ceases the *History of Lancelot*, for he has brought it to its end according to the events here narrated, and here finishes his book so outrightly that what follows can tell nothing else but falsehood».

[49] This is not to say that Arthurian legends will cease to be written, but rather that the story of Arthur's death at the hands of his kin and his most trusted knight has already been told. There will, of course, be other legends, but they will turn their attention to different characters, such as the *Tristan en Prose* and the cycle recounting the adventures of Guiron le Courtois, or explore new concerns.

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States of Revelation: Nocturnal Rides and the Liminal Grammar of Desire in the *Vair Palefroi*

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Abstract: This essay offers a reading of Huon le Roi's *Vair Palefroi* centred on what I call "states of revelation": brief intensifications of perception through which the *lai* lets desire pass into visibility. Against the critical tendency to treat the poem as a rationalised, purely courtly rewriting of marvellous motifs, I argue that the tale is structured by an "Otherworld of desire" whose presence is less overtly supernatural than formally generative. The narrative's spareness – organised by sharp binaries (YOUNG/OLD, LIGHT/SHADOW, ENCLOSURE/PASSAGE) – creates a symbolic topography in which the lovers' separation becomes a device for erotic and visionary charge. At the *lai*'s centre, the nocturnal ride functions as an initiatory threshold: a passage governed by moonlight, vigil, false dawn and sleep, where ordinary geography yields to a liminal grammar of transit. The mottled palfrey, defined by its unstable "non-colour" (*vair*) and by the trance-like cadence of its amble, emerges as a psychopomp figure. The *lai*'s happy ending is not merely a plot resolution but the formal completion of a passage from the veiled to the "open" (*tout en apert*).

Keywords: Vair Palefroi; Huon le Roi; Breton lai; Otherworld; liminality; fin'amor; nocturnal ride; palfrey (vair); amble

The story is as old as time itself. Once upon a time, there was a young man who loved a maiden, and she loved him in return. Their love, hindered in every way, ultimately triumphs, thanks in part to the intervention of magical and mysterious forces, against all odds. The plot of *Vair Palefroi* does not stray far from this familiar storyline. In a vaguely sketched, fairy-tale Champagne, a young knight, Guillaume – «rich in heart, poor in possessions» (*riches de cuer, povres d'avoir*[1], l. 37) – loves a maiden of noble birth. She loves him back, but her father, now elderly, widowed and jealous guardian of his only daughter, refuses to give her in marriage to a landless, penniless knight. On the girl's advice, Guillaume turns to his powerful and wealthy uncle for a loan, hoping that this will make him acceptable. The uncle pretends to agree, but plots behind his nephew's back and asks for the girl's hand in marriage himself. The old father enthusiastically agrees, and the wedding is hastily organised. As the maiden has no mount befitting her rank, the old man sends a messenger to Guillaume to claim his palfrey, an extraordinary animal with a mottled coat. The young knight, though hurt, agrees to give it up for love. That night, misled by the moonlight and muddled by drink, the castle sentry believes it is already dawn and wakes the procession charged with escorting the girl to the chapel. The old knights, still half asleep, set off through the forest, but the palfrey veers towards Guillaume's manor, recognising the road it has travelled so many times before. At dawn, the young woman finds herself before her beloved: the two are married immediately, in the presence of the chaplain. Within three years, the maiden's father and

[1] Quotations and line references from the *Vair Palefroi* are taken from my edition: Huon le Roi, *Il Palafreno Screziato*, edizione, traduzione e commento a cura di E. Muzzolon, Carocci, Roma 2025 («Biblioteca medievale», 168).

Guillaume's uncle die, leaving the lovers united and in possession of a rich inheritance.

As critics have long noted, the underlying motif of the story[2] has a precedent in a fable attributed to Phaedrus, *Duo iuvenes sponsi dives et pauper*, preserved in the fifteenth-century *Appendix Perottina*, in which it is listed by the humanist Niccolò Perotti under the title *Virgo et proci duo.* In the short Latin text, the plot is reduced to its essential outline: two young men, one rich and one poor, compete for the same maiden. Naturally, the wealthy suitor prevails, but the poor suitor is rescued, just as in *Vair Palefroi*, by a mount, which this time is a donkey. A sudden storm does the rest, driving away all the guests who came for the wedding. The donkey thus has little difficulty 'abducting' the girl undisturbed and leading her along the path he knows, the one that leads to the poor knight's house.

The story of Huon le Roi cannot be reduced to a mere transposition of Phaedrus' fable[3]. Many elements unknown to the latter come into play in *Vair Palefroi*, start-

[2] The motif is indexed by Stith Thompson as N721, "Runaway horse carries bride to her lover", in the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature.*

[3] The relationship between the Latin fable and the *Vair Palefroi* cannot be assessed in terms of direct textual derivation; rather, the two narratives should be seen as different realisations and variations that can only partially be traced back to the same narrative type. This is what Långfors (Huon le Roi, *Le Vair Palefroi avec deux versions de La Male Honte* par Huon de Cambrai et par Guillaume. Fabliaux du XIIIe siècle, édités par A. Långfors, Champion, Paris 1912 ("Les classiques français du Moyen Âge", 8), p. iv) implies when he describes the fable *Virgo et proci duo* as «la plus ancienne version du conte qui forme le fond du *Vair Palefroi*». Further evidence may be found in a fifteenth-century French tale published by Ernest Langlois (*Nouvelles françaises inédites du Quinzième siècle*, Champion, Paris 1908 («Bibliothèque du XVe siècle», 6), pp. 71-76), *De Erard de Voysines, qui espousa Philomena*, whose version of the pattern shares features with both the Phaedrian fable and Huon's *lai*. As in the Latin text, it is the storm that disperses the wedding party; yet the two contenders now differ in age, one young – Erard – the other old – his uncle Sinados. A noteworthy detail is Erard's «très bon cheval» «qui aloit trés bien les embles» (*ibid.*, p. 72): the motif of the amble – so fateful in Huon's tale – reappears here, but

ing with the main opposition between the two contenders: in *the* Old French *lai*, it is not two young men of different backgrounds, but a young man and an old man. The difference in social class is therefore compounded by the age gap: the poor knight in the prime of his life is opposed by the 'old' knighthood, represented by the figure of the elderly father, a *miles* now past his prime, and that of his disloyal and treacherous uncle. A generational and ideological challenge emerges between two conflicting social strata: on the one hand, the martial initiative of *the juvenes*, the spearhead of the feudal retinues, always in search of fame and prizes from tournament to tournament; on the other hand, the landed, castle-dwelling nobility, lazy in their sedentary lifestyle and endowed with rich appanages. The palfrey is central: it is not merely «an object of chance, and a simple aid to the poor young man»[4], but a mount that blends with the knight as his natural extension, embodying the possibility of crossing the threshold of what can be experienced. And it is precisely the decision to part with it, in contrast to the greed of the two elderly men, that brings happiness, or rather *joie*, to the two young lovers. This is a trait that Frappier has already identified as constitutive of what we might call the "narrative mode" of the *lais*: «l'irruption de l'événement extraordinaire ouvre aux héros et aux héroïnes l'accès à un monde autre que celui où ils vivaient auparavant»[5]. An unexpected apparition, an exceptional event, or a deviation from the norm determines the departure from the ordinary condition: a break in level then occurs, a

in a more muted form, since the storm assumes the decisive, dispersive function.

[4] A.M. Babbi, *Attorno al «Vair Palefroi»*, «Siculorum Gymnasium», n.s., LIII, 1-2, *Studi in onore di Bruno Panvini*, promossi da M. Pagano, A. Pioletti, F. Salmeri, M. Spampinato, a cura di G. Lalomia, Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, Università di Catania, Catania 2000, pp. 37-45: 42.

[5] J. Frappier, *Remarques sur la structure du lai. Essai de définition et de classement*, in *La littérature narrative d'imagination: des genres littéraires aux techniques d'expression*, Colloque de Strasbourg, 23-25 avril 1959, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1961, pp. 23-39: 34.

split that projects the hero into an unknown elsewhere, into a different dimension or into an altered state of consciousness. At the heart of this narrative mechanism lies the Celtic *Weltanschauung*, based on the porosity and permeability of the boundaries between this world and the Otherworld. The adventure of the *lai*, which shakes and marks the destiny of the protagonists, usually takes the form of a transgression and an infringement in both directions. The movement runs in both directions: from here to elsewhere, in the hero seduced by the fairy; and from the supersensible realm to profane reality, in the dream lover who unites with a mortal woman. In both cases, transgressive eros, driven to its highest pitch in the extreme forms of amorous *mania*, throws open the doors to the afterlife. This is why 'shamanic' initiation is often mediated by a traumatic and shocking encounter with a celestial lady[6]: through the embrace with the dream woman, a transhumanisation of the senses takes place, facilitating the passage to the beyond.

Critics have repeatedly emphasised Huon le Roi's tendency to rationalise the marvellous[7]. The author demonstrates a remarkable ability to strike a balance between the folkloric *arrière-plan* and the demands of a mature courtly consciousness. These demands converge around Guillaume – significantly the only character to be given a proper name – who functions as the tale's anchor in 'history', the point at which ideological impulses (and even sociological markers) are fused with the symbolic substance of the narrative design. Guillaume embodies chivalry in its youth: the knighthood of ardour and no-

[6] See E. Zolla, *L'amante invisibile. L'erotica sciamanica nelle religioni, nella letteratura e nella legittimazione politica*, Marsilio, Venezia 2003[3] (1ª ed. 1986).

[7] See Huon le Roi, *Le Vair Palefroi*, publication, traduction, présentation et notes par J. Dufournet, Honoré Champion, Paris 2010, p. 15; G. Dulac, L. Dulac, *Lire un lai. Le* Vair Palefroi *entre morale et merveilleux*, in Jean-Claude Aubailly *et al.* (éds.), *Et c'est la fin pour quoy sommes ensemble. Hommage à Jean Dufournet*, 3 voll., Champion, Paris 1993, II, pp. 503-512: 508.

bility of spirit, favoured by a sense of divine election yet grounding its identity in quest and *aventure*[8].

From Huon le Roi's opening declaration of intent, we glean two important elements. First, the narrator aligns himself ideologically with the protagonist and with the social group Guillaume represents: a knighthood whose nobility is secured by valour and by a way of life shaped by courage rather than by wealth and landed possession. For this reason, Huon places himself and his work on the side of those who are *vaillanz et preus* – the same qualities repeatedly attributed to Guillaume, who is described as *chevaliers preus* (l. 35) and as endowed with *vaillance* (l. 736). The valiant and courageous are set against the *envïeus*, puffed up with plutocratic self-assurance and driven by greed (*couvoitise*, l. 635), despised by the maiden and – naturally – by Huon himself (l. 25).

Second, the narrator foregrounds his own narrative procedure: he declares that he wishes to "unfold" (*desploier*, l. 33) his *dis*, that is, to make its *sens* manifest (l. 30); to this end, he sets out to *redire* (l. 35) the story by fashioning it into a *lai*. In this self-conscious play on words, Huon gestures not only to the art of storytelling but also to a literary mode – that of the *dit*[9] – and to the new form that the tale's *matière* — in all likelihood drawn from an oral repertoire — assumes once it enters the lai's textual weave (or, as Chrétien de Troyes would say, its *conjointure*). Yet more is at work in this new fabric: beyond the Phaedrian motif, faerie and folkloric elements play a crucial role in Huon's tale – aptly designated a *lai*. Borrowing Jean Fourquet's critical termi-

[8] In Old French romance, *aventure* represents the sense-generating irruption that breaks ordinary time, and, by extension, the narrative form it brings into being. Huon anticipates its kairotic arrival (*Et quant aventure avendra*, l. 752) and, in the explicit, designates the whole tale as *Ceste aventure que j'ai dite* (l. 1340), so that *aventure* becomes the very nucleus and self-name of the *lai*.

[9] On the genre of the *dit*, see M. Léonard, *Le dit et sa technique littéraire des origines à 1340*, Champion, Paris 1996; for the use of the verbs *emploier* and *desploier*, see *ibid.*, p. 33.

nology for Chrétien de Troyes' romances[10], we might say that in the *Vair Palefroi* a narrative construction grounded in a *double cohérence* – mythic and chivalric – finds one of its most accomplished realisations. The *matière de Bretagne* is placed in the service of a fully self-aware courtly ideology; yet, as in Chrétien's romances, the refined weave of the *conjointure* neither obliterates nor overwhelms the older enchantment of Breton story. On the contrary, mythic and folkloric elements – like a perfume's base notes – are heightened by the new formulation that assimilates them, in a process of renewed chivalric "mythopoiesis".

In an important paper – delivered at the 1959 Strasbourg Colloquium on imaginative fiction – devoted to the *lai*'s structure, definition, and classification as a literary genre (*Remarques sur la structure du lai. Essai de définition et de classement*), Jean Frappier analyses the features that ensure continuity between the earliest compositions and the *recentiores* and identifies two essential ingredients: a faerie element of Celtic ancestry and *aventure* as a fundamental component. The latter is marked by what Frappier calls a rare «sign, an act, a gesture, a word»[11]: a concrete, uncanny detail which reveals a being's "high quality" or conveys the well-deserved promise of an exceptional destiny. Within a genre marked by homogeneity and continuity, Frappier distinguishes between the older «Breton» *lais*, «semi-Breton» *lais* (such as those attributed to Marie de France), and «non-Breton and purely courtly» *lais*[12], among which he places the *Lai de l'Ombre* and – of greatest interest here – the *Vair Palefroi*. In this last subcategory, the Breton element is said to disappear entirely, giving way to "purely" courtly tales. Yet, Frappier notes, their structure remains strikingly close to that of the Breton *lai* proper: *aventure* may

[10] J. Fourquet, *Le rapport entre l'oeuvre et la source chez Chrétien de Troyes et le problème des sources bretonnes*, «Romance Philology», 9, 3, 1956, pp. 298-312.
[11] Frappier, *Remarques sur la structure du lai*, cit., p. 31.
[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

shed its overtly marvellous character, but it re-emerges in metaphorical form. He insists on the structural force of the *trait insolite* or «événement singulier», in which «il subsiste […] une parenté avec les merveilles de Bretagne et une valeur structurale du même ordre»[13]. It is this singular irruption that grants the hero and heroine entry into «un monde autre»[14] beyond the everyday – an erotic, faerie realm accessible only to «des êtres d'élite»[15]. While Fourquet highlights the coexistence – and at times the friction – of two forms of coherence in Chrétien's romances, one courtly and the other mythical, Frappier attributes the *lai*'s appeal to the «close union» and the «admirable synthesis» of two mythologies: one "primitive" and "marvellous", the other *de l'esprit et du cœur*[16]. At the centre of this synthesis lies a key notion in Celtic mythology: the Otherworld, a "world other" than that of the living, yet in communication with it. This notion of a "world other", Frappier argues, can be extended to the domain of *fin'amor*: an *eros* barred to the uninitiated and reserved for an elite, capable of transcending moral and social law[17] and of raising existence to a higher plane of experience. But above all – and this is surely the crucial point in Frappier's analysis – the motif of a "world other", which I shall call the *Otherworld of desire*, has a structural value in the *lai*: it is both formative and generative of meaning. The narrative unfolds between two planes: an earthly, everyday realm and an ideal, transcendent one. The *aventure* mediates between these levels, giving the story momentum and upward rhythm towards an open conclusion – or, indeed, a happy ending. In the *Vair Palefroi*, this *Otherworld of desire* functions as an invisible keystone: a foundational tension that shapes the tale's

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 34.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 31.
[17] «Les adeptes de la *fine amor* ne s'enferment-ils pas dans un univers à eux, privilégié, interdit aux profanes, réservé à une élite, hors des lois de la morale courante et de la servitude sociale?» (*ibid.*, p. 31).

architecture and kindles moments of revelation at its principal junctures.

From the outset, the narrative is marked by its spareness of outline and by a rhetoric of contrast, which drives the story forward through rapid parallels and antitheses. Two knights are set against one another: Guillaume, young and valiant, a lover of tournaments and fearless in battle; and the old prince-father, weary and confined to his hall, no longer able to ride. The young knight's holdings are meagre, whereas the old man's lands are fertile and rich. The former's "fecundity" lies in daring prowess and bodily freshness; the latter's rests on the sheer abundance of property. Both are obsessed with the maiden: the old man out of anxious vigilance, the young man out of an irrepressible desire to have her. The story's topography mirrors its underlying binary logic. The characters' movements unfold between two poles: the castle where the maiden lives, imprisoned beneath her father's gaze, and Guillaume's manor. Between the two lies the great "desert" of the *forest soutaine* (l. 188); scarcely any other setting comes into view. At first glance, the staging is strikingly spare: we know that Guillaume comes and goes to the tournaments in which he excels (at Galardon, for instance, l. 487), yet Huon never takes us to the places where the young knight fights and jousts, as though everything occurs beyond the edge of the frame, in a sort of elusive off-stage space. Nor are we told much about Medet, the residence of the treacherous uncle (l. 457); Guillaume's journeys admit no descriptive lingering. Movement, instead, is carried by the palfrey, which shuttles from one end of the forest to the other. The effect is that of a stylised, almost magnetic theatre: Huon shifts a handful of figures back and forth between the two strongholds, as if drawn by a barely perceptible force. Every movement and every moral stance seem to fall into two overarching categories – two polar symbolic spaces: light and shadow. A black-and-white dichotomy runs through the entire tale, shaping characters, settings, and meanings alike: on the one hand, the

long, dark, overwhelming shadow cast by the *ancïen*[18]; on the other, the radiance of the young lovers[19]. The YOUNG/OLD antithesis, which plays a decisive role in organising the text's moral and ideological values, is articulated in several ways and draws on a constellation of long-established *topoi*. Central among them is the figure of the authoritative, wealthy *senex* who exerts coercive control over a desirable woman, excluding the ardent, impoverished young knight from the erotic horizon: a type codified in the *fabliau* tradition and invested with wide anthropological resonance.

Yet Huon le Roi does not mobilise this material in a satirical key, as a mere comedy of deception, nor does he bend it to the farcical logic of a pochade, producing a purely novella-like effect. Rather, the tension between the two poles operates at a deeper level, along more nuanced lines. Guillaume stands in the fullness of youth, brimming with ardour and strength; his vital energy – also figured in the brightness of his clothing – echoes the luxuriant vegetation of the warm season. The spring chronotope gathers the sap of youth, the keen edge of martial fervour, the blossoming of *eros*, and a joyful sense of being alive. And yet the hero's youth is not exhausted by the vital exuberance of his green years: it is also articulated in sociological and ideological terms, in line with the sense of *juventus* defined by Georges Duby and Erich Köhler – namely, as the embodiment of the lifestyle and values of the most dynamic and warlike component of the knightly class, with its martial ide-

[18] For the (at times) stereotyped figure of old men in certain Old French *lais*, including the *Vair Palefroi*, see H. LEGROS, *Les amours des vieillards et leur cortège de vice*, in *Vieillesse et vieillissement au Moyen Âge*, Presses universitaires de Provence, Aix-en-Provence 1987, pp. 151-165.

[19] The *lai* verbalises this polarity as an incompatibility of states – *cler* cannot coexist with *oscur*. The black-and-white logic is verbalised in the antithesis *N'a point d'oscur en la clarté / Ne point de cler en l'oscurté* (ll. 671-672), staging light and darkness as mutually exclusive states and reinforcing the tale's moral polarities (youth/age; generosity/greed).

als and its compelling, stylised self-display. The *juvenes* – the spearhead of feudal aggression and a driving force in medieval warfare – are unmarried knights: the sons of noble families who have been dubbed, but have not yet "settled", secured land, or married an heiress. Guillaume displays all the hallmarks of the *juvenes*: poor yet handsome (and *preus*); an itinerant tournament-fighter, perpetually in search of profit and plunder[20]; ever ready to prove his prowess and to hurl himself into the *mêlée*; never 'playing the *forclose*'[21], impetuous in battle, yet joyful and courteous in society; and intent on union with a wealthy, high-born maiden[22].

The lovers' spatial separation also feeds the hypnotic play of echoes, parallels, and doublings that Huon weaves with such care. The stronghold where the maid-

[20] The *lai*'s economy of acquisition is crystallised in the loaded term *proie.* It occurs at two structurally charged moments in the *lai*. The wealthy father refuses to give [his] daughter to *a chevalier qui vit de proie* (l. 320), casting Guillaume as a land-poor, tournament-errant knight who lives off winnings and booty rather than rental income and landed property. At the close, the term returns in a transfigured echo: Guillaume rejoiced greatly, like one who *de sa proie / estoit molt liez en son corage* (ll. 1314-1315). The repetition shifts *proie* from a dismissive marker of precarious chivalry to the sign of fulfilled *aventure*: no mere spoils, but the narrative (and erotic) consummation that the earlier contempt could not foresee.

[21] *N'avoit soing de dosnoiement* / *Ne de jouer a la forclose*, ll. 62-63. "To play / make a forclose" is a technical term from medieval warfare for a surprise manoeuvre (often involving a feigned retreat by a small troop) meant to catch the enemy off guard by encircling them or striking from the flank/rear and cutting off escape. Such ruses were common in feudal fighting and even in mêlée-tournaments, yet they sit uneasily with the chivalric ideal of the frontal charge. Huon stresses that Guillaume refuses this logic: he acts "straight on", in arms as in love, unlike the elders' intrigue.

[22] The lexicon used to describe Guillaume settles on a distinctly youthful register. Old French *bacheler* (l. 649) denotes the socially "unsettled" young knight (often an unmarried cadet), marked by physical freshness, mobility, and readiness for risky exploits. In the same key, *baus* (from Frankish **bald*, ll. 290, 305) and *envoisie / envoiseüre* (ll. 69, 71) convey an exuberant, boisterous high-spiritedness, in which martial boldness and amorous exhilaration tend to merge.

en lives with her wealthy prince-father lies within the forest, surrounded by extensive and fertile holdings (ll. 106-108). To reach it, Guillaume has cut a secret path deep in the woods (l. 119): a track unknown to the outside world, familiar only to the knight and his horse. Exploiting the resources of verse, Huon stresses that no man alive – *omme qui fust en vie*, rhyming with *mie* (ll. 119-120) – can ride that path, as though it were barred to ordinary existence. Only the elect, only heroes, gain access to such Otherworld routes. The beloved's castle, in turn, bears all the hallmarks of this inaccessible world *other*. Perched on a rock (*rochier*, l. 138), encircled by a deep moat (*fossez*, l. 135) and a thicket of brambles (*espinois*[23], l. 136), the stronghold rises haughty and impregnable amid the forest's "desert". The descriptions of the two fortresses are arranged symmetrically, at opposite ends of the dark wood, and they also mark the tale's thresholds: the opening frame and the great central night-ride. Guillaume's dwelling, by contrast, emerges only in the *lai*'s final movement, when the almost "heavenly" bride arrives there after her dreamlike passage through the night. Having passed a large mound (*tertre*, l. 1024) – a traditional fairy-haunt in Celtic lore – the palfrey guides the maiden along the narrow track it has travelled so many times with its master. Guillaume's manor, too, bears features that place the scene within an elsewhere, a world set apart.

First, there is the mound: the *síd*[24], the place where Irish tradition locates the Otherworld. A second element

[23] Beyond representing one of the recurrent obstacles along a difficult path, brambles and thornbushes often function as signs of a shift in tempo: borders at once sharp and impassable, signalling the difficulty and danger of crossing into another level – entering a different, foreign realm. See PH. WALTER, *L'épine ou l'arbre-fée*, «PRISMA», V, 1, 1989 = *L'arbre*, I, pp. 95-108; J.E. MERCERON, *Le miracle et les gués de l'aubépine: signe de salut et seuils de l'aventure dans la matière de France et de Bretagne*, in K. Busby, B. Guidot, L. E. Whalen (eds.), *«De sens rassis». Essays in honor of Rupert T. Pickens*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-New York 2005 («Faux Titre», 259), pp. 445-465.

[24] See F. LE ROUX, CH.-J. GUYONVARC'H, *I Druidi*, nuova edizione italiana riveduta e aggiornata, a cura di C. Ferretto, ECIG – Edizioni Cultu-

is the ford (*gué*, l. 1107). The watercourse marks a boundary between the realm of the living and the beyond, and crossing it coincides with a break in level – an initiation into change. To pass the ford is to leave one order of reality behind and enter another mode of being[25]. This architecture of doubles and reflections – two knights, two castles, two opposites – corresponds to a double temporal structure. Two dawns punctuate the long night at the *lai*'s heart: the first is false, lunar, and deceptive, announcing shadow and transition; the second is true, solar, and vertical, sealing return and revelation.

The secret path runs between two manors sunk in the thicket, twin figures mirroring one another at the edge

rali Internazionali Genova 2000[2] [éd. or. *Les Druides*, Ouest-France, Rennes 1986[4]], p. 540. The *síd* may manifest itself to humans in the form of a *bansíd* ("woman of the *síd*"), who comes to seek out a mortal 'to lead him to the land of eternal youth'. Behind the maiden of *Vair Palefroi* one may indeed discern the avatar of an otherworldly lady who leads mortals along the paths of elsewhere – the only vigilant participant in the nocturnal procession. The Celtic Otherworld, Frappier reminds us, lies not only in the *îles élyséennes* ("Elysian isles") of the western sea and in underwater paradises, but also in deep subterranean spaces – *tertres hantés* ("haunted mounds") and 'palais souterrains' ('subterranean palaces') (J. Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes. L'homme et l'œuvre*, Hatier, Paris 1957, p. 59). These correspond to two classic models of otherworldly topography: a horizontal one, which displaces the supersensible realm beyond a liquid boundary (river, ford, arm of the sea), and a vertical one, which locates it underground. It follows that water-crossings and descent (*catabasis*) – sometimes combined in representations of the 'difficult' itinerary – are among the most common modes of travel into the Otherworld.

[25] See A. Barbieri, *Varchi contesi e impediti passaggi: il duello al guado come prova iniziatica sulle vie dell'altro mondo*, in C. Lupu, A. Ciolan, A. Zuliani (eds.), *Studii romanice* II. *Omagiu Profesorilor Florica Dimitrescu și Alexandru Niculescu la 90 de ani*, Editura Universității din București, București 2018, pp. 977-993: 980. For the symbolism of water, see M. Eliade, *Immagini e simboli. Saggi sul simbolismo magico-religioso*, prefazione di G. Dumézil, Jaca Book, Milano 1987[3] (ed. or. *Images et symboles. Essais sur le symbolisme magico-religieux*, Gallimard, Paris 1952), pp. 135-143; A. Seppilli, *Sacralità dell'acqua e sacrilegio dei ponti. Persistenza di simboli e dinamica culturale*, Sellerio, Palermo 1977, p. 100.

of visibility. The tale's space unfolds along this span: two distant poles, and a line of passage which, though traced through the forest, does not obey mundane geography alone. The distance is inhabited – bridged, even – by the lovers' *pensser*: a feverish back-and-forth that stretches between the poles of waiting, asymptotically tending towards an encounter that seems impossible. The *ambleüre*[26] of the faerie palfrey echoes the inner tempo of this bond: an oscillation, a trance-like cadence. The text unfolds through writing woven from echoes and phonetic attractions: *manoir, remanoir*[27]. Love stretches between the two castles like a sonic filament – a mental trace that ceaselessly seeks its own form and its own return. From the outset, the bond between the lovers takes shape as a form of love *ses vezer*[28] ("love without seeing"). The first mention of the feeling presents it as a thought (*penssoit*, l. 80), with no explicit reference to a face-to-face encounter. The second mention still moves within a lexicon of

[26] Huon marks the fairy palfrey by its ambling gait: *amblant* (l. 779) and *ambleüre* (l. 1101) denote the smooth, comfortable lateral pace prized for effortless riding. In the *lai*, this technical detail is stylised into a rhythmic sign of otherworldly guidance: unlike the elders' stumbling, noisy progress (*friente*, l. 1030), the palfrey seems almost soundless, until it "touches down" on the bridge into Guillaume's *manoir* (*esfroi*, l. 1127), as though the animal were descending from an otherworldly glide into human space.

[27] Huon repeatedly couples *manoir* ("dwelling, manor") with *remanoir* ("to remain, stay"), always in rhyme, to mark a narrative arc: first the lovers cannot "remain" at either end of the path between the two *manoirs* (ll. 109-110); then the girl cannot "remain" freely, being held by her father (ll. 615-616); finally, in a paradoxical resolution, she can at last *remanoir* in Guillaume's *manoir* (ll. 1197-1198).

[28] I refer not only to *the* famous *vida* (Jaufre Rudel, *L'amore di lontano*, a cura di G. Chiarini, Carocci, Roma 2003 [«Biblioteca medievale», 85], p. 142), but above all to the songs of Jaufre Rudel:
«Nuils hom no·s meravill de mi
s'ieu am so que ja no·m veira,
que·l cor joi d'autr'amor non a
mas de cela qu'ieu anc no vi»
[No one should marvel at my case if I love one who will never see me, for my heart rejoices in no other love than that of her whom I have never seen] (*Non sap chantar qui so non di, BdT* 262.3, ll. 7-10) (*ibid*., pp. 56-57).

attention and mind: *a la damoisele entendi* ("he turns his attention to the maiden", l. 98), where *entendre a* again suggests a concentration of thought – a directed tension towards a mental object, an application of the intellect.

From the outset, Guillaume's love for the maiden is shadowed by a radical prohibition. The court in which the lady of his desire is held appears as a hermetically sealed, impenetrable space: It seems impossible to speak to her at close quarters, to see her, or even to meet her gaze. The only accessible passage is a crack in the fence (*planche d'un defoiz*, l. 134) through which a few words slip, but no open view. The text reinforces this impossibility of vision through dense semantic and phonic reiteration that verges on obsession: *voie, voit, veoit, revider, resgarder, veoir*, culminating in *viaire* (l. 164), the face that cannot be seen. Space tightens; the verbal fabric thickens around the leitmotif of impediment – *defoiz* (ll. 126, 134) – which gives amorous waiting its inner form, condensing it into unresolved tension and a thwarted gaze, and thereby intensifying its erotic and visionary charge. As in the troubadour topography of *amor de lonh*[29], Guillaume's obsessive movement – circling the stronghold without ever entering it – traces a closed figure: a mental ring, a circuit of desire that folds back on itself. Around this inaccessible centre – the desired lady – extends Guillaume's world, governed by a hypnotic, outward-pulling force. This empty orbit is set against the palfrey's path, which crosses the interval between the two dwellings with imperturbable regularity. The animal's gait establishes a different pulse, a rhythm into which the desiring self is cast as it strains to press against the limits of the visible and the real. Huon thus draws an inner topography of desire: space is not measured in leagues, but in the undertow of thought as it pursues the form of what

[29] As in a Rudelian scenario, the beloved is confined and held captive in a remote and inaccessible castle (*Luenh es lo castelhs e la tors*...), imprisoned not by a jealous husband, but by a greedy father. See Jaufre Rudel, *Pro ai del chan essenhadors*, *BdT* 262.4 (Jaufre Rudel, *L'amore di lontano*, ed. cit., pp. 68-69).

remains veiled. At the heart of this impasse, the writing slips into dream. Some twenty lines imagine an impossible contact, a dreamed union – *se l'une bouche touchast a l'autre…* (ll. 201-202) – in which desire takes on a body in language[30]. With sight denied and touch impeded, hearing comes to the fore: the bond between Guillaume and his beloved is sustained by an intimacy at once profound and intangible, almost mystical – spiritualised by the impossibility of carnal contact and sublimated into the immaterial, aerial forms of verbal exchange.

Immediately after the imagined kiss, Huon names what binds the lovers as *acointance* (*De l'acointance de ces deus / par estoit molt ardanz li feus*, ll. 203-204). The word-family (*acointer*, *acointe*, *acointance*) ranges from acquaintance and encounter to physical contact[31] – almost a collision – so that "meeting" becomes a diagnostic of the bond's quality. With only three occurrences, the *lai* sketches a small symbolic spectrum: the lovers' radiant *acointance* (l. 203), the *ancïenes acointances* of shields and lances (l. 529) as an epic memory of truthful prowess, and, at the opposite pole, the feared *viel acointance* (l. 879), a senescent tie emptied of light.

Though they cannot look at one another openly, the lovers are already bound by a connection that transcends the gaze: an almost telepathic attunement through which thought can overcome any barrier. The palfrey – eager (*engrés*, l. 1098) to lead the maiden "where she must go" – embodies in movement what thought accomplishes

[30] *Volentez* (<VOLUNTAS) is less "will" than an inner drive of desire. The binomial *volentez et penssement* (l. 210) couples desire and thought: desire is both deliberate inclination and mental fixation. The pairing condenses the *lai*'s erotic psychology, where inward attention becomes a form of action – as if longing and thinking formed a single, almost tactile impulse before any physical contact.

[31] See N. MORATO, *Incontri arturiani. La famiglia di* acoint *da Chrétien de Troyes alla «Mort Artu»*, «Carte Romanze», 8/2, 2020, pp. 183-204; Id., *Lancillotto e la sfera dell'intimità (con appunti su* acointer *nella narrativa arturiana)*, in *Confini e parole. Identità e alterità nell'epica e nel romanzo*. Atti del Convegno, 21-22 settembre 2017, Sapienza Università di Roma, a cura di A. Perrotta e L. Mainini, Sapienza Università Editrice, Roma 2020, pp. 167-190.

without motion: crossing distance, becoming bridge, vehicle, passage. The palfrey thus emerges as a figure of drive, a visible translation of desire in its most elemental and irresistible direction. The tension that runs through the *lai* resolves itself at dawn, when desire, having taken form, comes to the threshold of the visible. The dream-bride arrives at Guillaume's manor: a silent apparition, sculpted in moonlight. The sentry – a projection of the knight – peers through a small opening in the postern gate, a diaphragm-like aperture that mirrors the crack in the fence which had divided the two dream-lovers. The guard immediately recognises the palfrey (*bien l'a connut et ravisé*, l. 1155), but not the girl[32]: the vision remains suspended, still held back. A sequence of recognitions unfolds, moving swiftly towards unveiling. Guillaume hears the announcement – *l'entent* (l. 1187) – then the girl's voice – *l'oï* (l. 1205). The impalpable veils that have checked the senses begin to fall away: recognition of the palfrey (*son palefroi a conneü*, l. 1207) precedes the sight of the maiden (*la pucele voit et avise*, l. 1209). The verb *connoistre*, used of the palfrey, confirms its role as a liminal, psychopomp figure – an intermediary between worlds. The open vision – announced, almost proleptically, at the beginning of the *lai* (*tout en apert*, l. 165) – is fulfilled at the end of the night, when the "world other" fades back into the world of the living.

Winding through a labyrinthine forest of mirrors and reversals – charged with erotic tension and an extraordinary intensity of perception – the movement of Guillaume and the mottled palfrey takes shape as a path towards the overcoming of dualism and separation. In this thorny, hypnotic tangle of reflections, parallels, and reverberations, routes to elsewhere lie concealed; yet for the initiated, blocked passages open and paths into the Otherworld begin to unfold. It is at precisely this point – where the narrative surface is scored and everyday to-

[32] Although the sentinel describes the maiden rather generically, he is nonetheless correct in identifying her as a fairy (*Mien escient, c'est une fee*, l. 1181).

pography begins to give way – that the long nocturnal sequence is set in motion. In the central episode of the *Vair Palefroi* – the dreamlike ride – spatial and temporal barriers, and even the boundaries of the narrative itself, are tested and traversed. Veiled in mystery, the scene begins by moonlight, under the sign of a planet long associated with the deepest and most intuitive dimensions of the feminine. A symbol of becoming, a measure of cosmic rhythms, a guide for the dead, a weaver of destinies, an emblem of cyclical death – never final, always followed by rebirth – the moon is closely bound to rites of initiation. Under this mystical, transformative light, the heroine finds the way (or rather, the way finds her) and overturns a fate that has seemed immutable. On the evening before the Great Night, once everyone has eaten their fill, the old father instructs the sentry and the household to be ready before daybreak, and to move without a sound (*sanz estormie et sanz desroi*, l. 920)[33]. Everyone sleeps, except the bride-to-be, who does not close her eyes and keeps vigil through the night (*tuit dormirent, ele veilla*, l. 926). In the initiation rites described by Mircea Eliade[34], the novice's resistance to sleep signals conscious presence and heightened awareness: a mode of living atten-

[33] It is worth noting that the old man's order also has the ring of a warning: to keep silent on the paths leading to elsewhere – an injunction the old knights disregard as they ride on in a disorderly, noisy fashion.

[34] M. Eliade, *La nascita mistica. Riti e simboli d'iniziazione*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2020[5] (ed. or. *Birth and Rebirth: The Religious Meanings of Initiation in Human Culture,* Harper & Brothers, New York 1958), p. 31. The refusal of consciousness to yield to sleep becomes a potent metaphor for spiritual awakening and for a renewed way of inhabiting the world. Those who withstand fatigue and the pull of drowsiness recover possession of themselves and act with full awareness. By keeping watch, the novice proves herself present to herself – lucid, poised, and ready to confront the terrors that gather in the dark. Night, as suspended time, is charged with possibility: an interval in which the former self may be surpassed and another may emerge, tempered and renewed. As in initiatory traditions, where readiness for a new life is tested through vigilance, the girl in *Vair Palefroi* prepares herself for transformation by sustaining attention and active expectancy at a moment of profound change.

tively. The girl's nocturnal vigil can thus be read as an initiation – an ascetic exercise that precedes the imminent rite of passage – and, at the same time, as a sign that sets her apart from the world. Immersed in the milky, diffused light of an ominous lunar sky, the night becomes the theatre of an inner transformation marked by sharpened perception: a darkness of indistinctness that both precedes and heralds a change of state.

The procession pushes deeper into the forest, which grows ever denser, until the moonlight – which had illuminated everything – can no longer penetrate it (ll. 1026-1027). At this point the vegetation takes on the aspect of another kind of woodland: *enhermie* (l. 1025), meaning "wild", but also, in its etymological force, "deserted" – a space stripped of ordinary markers and landmarks, deprived of light, dark as a cave[35]. Despite the noise of the cavalcade, the old knights doze in their saddles, overcome by sleep. The castle sentry, clouded by repeated libations, rouses them too early, mistaking the unnaturally intense brightness of the moon for the first glimmers of dawn. *Vair*, the adjective that describes the palfrey's coat, denotes a shifting, iridescent colour: a liminal quality that mirrors metamorphic identity. In Old French, *vair* can denote both a prized squirrel fur and a shifting, var-

[35] The paradoxical traversal of the path – and, in a broader reading, the passage through the "womb" of the dense forest, wholly dark and closed off from the sky and moonlight – may be read as a narrative enactment of what initiatory discourse calls the *regressus ad uterum*, the return to the womb that precedes a new birth (Eliade, *La nascita mistica*, cit., p. 80). The text repeatedly defines the forest through its deprivation of light, calling it *obscure*, *tenebreuse*, *ombrage*, and *parfonde*. It is the great desert-forest that dominates the medieval imagination (J. Le Goff, *Il deserto-foresta nell'Occidente medievale*, in Id., *Il meraviglioso e il quotidiano nell'Occidente medievale*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1999[3]), but also the Great Night of symbolic death and mystical rebirth: as Eliade notes, "initiatory death is often symbolised by darkness", by the cosmic Night, and by figures of a telluric matrix (the hut, the belly of a monster, and the like). Such images express a regression to a pre-formal, latent state, complementary to pre-cosmogonic "Chaos" (Eliade, *La nascita mistica*, cit., p. 14).

iegated or bluish-grey colour rather than any fixed hue. Huon exploits precisely this instability. When the palfrey is first introduced, the narrator insists that no comparison can domesticate its appearance: it is *vairs* «and of rich colour», yet no flower can furnish a likeness for it, nor can any describable colour be chosen to match it:

> Vairs ert et de riche color;
> La samblance de nule flor
> Ne color c'on seüst descrire
> Ne savroit pas nus hom eslire
> Qui si fust propre en grant biauté. (ll. 173-177)

The coat is thus less a pigment than a sign: a "non-colour", marking the animal as extra-ordinary, already half withdrawn from the ordinary palette of the world, already announcing passage and metamorphosis[36]. The horse belongs to the logic of the threshold – an animal of

[36] Old French *vair* (FEW XIV, 182b, s.v. *varius*) denotes a prized squirrel fur widely used for aristocratic linings; in heraldry it becomes the conventional vair pattern (alternating blue and silver). The adjective can also refer to an iridescent, cold-luminous chromatic field hovering between white, grey and blue. Its semantic mobility is already exploited in epic: e.g., the *Chanson de Roland* describes Ganelon's eyes as vairs (l. 283), where *vair* suggests a shifting brilliance rather than a single hue. The same ambiguity underlies later oscillations between fur and glass, famously in the "pantoufle de vair / de verre" confusion in Cinderella tradition, and the manuscript reading *voirre* in Béroul's *Tristran* (v. 2032), generally emended to *vair*. In *Vair Palefroi* the narrator turns this lexical indeterminacy into a poetic principle: the palfrey is vairs "and of rich colour", but "the likeness of no flower" and no describable colour can match it (ll. 173-177), so that vair functions as a threshold-term, naming an ineffable coat that signals otherworldly provenance and metamorphic identity. A striking conjunction of *var* and oneiric desire occurs in *Qui non sap esser chantaire* (*BdT 262.7*), a poem transmitted under Jaufre Rudel's name: the lady's *mantel var* (ll. 21–22) is evoked in the same stanza in which the lover, enriched by the night, imagines clasping her in his arms in a dream (ll. 25–27; Jaufre Rudel, *L'amore di lontano*, ed. cit., pp. 134–135). The adjective *var* may retain, alongside the material sense of "vair", the visual force of "variegated" or "mottled"; in conjunction with the lady's remoteness and her bodily accessibility only in dream, the *mantel var* lends her a faintly faerie, otherworldly inflection.

crossing, a guardian of passage. The track it takes – narrow, unknown, silent – is more than a shortcut: it conceals an ancient initiatory route, a secret access invisible to the living, a fissure in the fabric of the ordinary world. Escorted by a procession of old knights who advance drowsily, as if in a dream, raising a disorderly din (*friente*, l. 1030), the maiden rides in silence on her beloved's palfrey[37]. Where the world groans and creaks, the profound journey unfolds in muffled suspension. The palfrey beneath her turns onto the narrow track it has so often taken (in the opposite direction), carrying its master from his manor to the dwelling of his beloved. She is swallowed by the deepest darkness, entering what appears as a paradoxical passage into an elsewhere. Guided by the mottled palfrey, she moves into the heart of the Otherworld. The old knights, dozing on their horses, notice nothing; the animal continues undisturbed along its path.

Here Huon stages what looks like a parody of a long-standing motif: dozing off on horseback[38], attested in medieval lyric as early as William IX's *Vers de dre-*

[37] "Secrecy in love is an absolute requirement both in courtly doctrine and in folklore, where the fairy is in love with a mortal" (Frappier, *Remarques sur la structure du lai*, cit., p. 31). Moreover, silence may be read in an initiatory key: "The prohibition against speaking can also be interpreted in this dual sense: of death or of regression to early childhood. The neophyte is both 'dead' and newly 'born', or more precisely, about to be born" (Eliade, *La nascita mistica*, cit., p. 34). The path, unknown to the world of the living, is wrapped in absolute silence, which underscores its character as a threshold – between profane and sacred, known and unknown. The silence observed by the protagonists is therefore not merely a strategy of discretion: it also acquires symbolic force, recalling the ancient taboo against speaking aloud what belongs to the sacred, lest its power be dispersed or its mystery violated.

[38] For an overall analysis of *the* literary *topos* of equestrian dreams in medieval French literature, see M. Stanesco, *"Entre sommeillant et esveillé" – d'une technique chevaleresque à une expérience poétique*, in Id., *Jeux d'errance du chevalier médiéval. Aspects ludiques de la fonction guerrière dans la littérature du Moyen Âge flamboyant*, Brill, Leiden 1988, pp. 148-172.

it nien (*BdT* 183.7)[39]. The motif receives some of its most iconic realisations in Chrétien de Troyes' romances – in Lancelot's equestrian "dreaming" in the *Charrette*, and in Perceval's contemplative states in the *Conte du Graal*[40]. There, the pensive (*pansif*) hero, caught in the vertigo of meditation, slips into a second state of consciousness as the senses fold in upon themselves, opening onto further dimensions. Here, by contrast, the old knights ride in a slouched, disordered fashion: the movement of men who are not present to themselves, who grope forward in the darkness of a clouded consciousness. In the great nocturnal procession, Huon le Roi stages two antithetical modes of riding. On the one hand, there is the somnambulistic, uncertain pace of the old knights[41], fatigued and weighed

[39] Guglielmo ix, *Poesie*, a cura di N. Pasero, Mucchi, Modena 1973 («Studi, testi e manuali», 1), pp. 83-112. See H. Braet, *Lancelot et Guilhem de Peiteus*, «Revue des langues romanes», 83, 1979, pp. 65-71.

[40] On the equestrian dreams of Lancelot and Perceval, see A. Barbieri, *Verso le case di Ade: modelli sciamanici nel* Cavaliere della Carretta, in Id. (a cura di), *Eroi dell'estasi. Lo sciamanismo come artefatto culturale e sinopia letteraria*, Edizioni Fiorini, Verona 2017, pp. 157-214; Id., *Cavalieri trasognati: il motivo dell'estasi equestre nella* Charrette *e nel* Conte du Graal, in D. Mariani, S. Scartozzi, P. Taravacci (a cura di), *«Tra chiaro e oscuro». Studi offerti a Francesco Zambon per il suo settantesimo compleanno*, Università degli Studi di Trento, Dipartimento di Lettere e Filosofia, Trento 2019, pp. 53-76. The trance of the medieval knights has been compared to the practice of sleeping while riding – attested among the *Reitervölker* of Central Asia and mentioned by M. Mauss (*Les techniques du corps* [1936], in Id., *Sociologie et anthropologie, précédé d'une Introduction à l'oeuvre de Marcel Mauss par C. Lévi-Strauss*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1999[8], pp. 363-386: 379) in his study of "techniques of the body". Yet the mental drift of the knights of Brittany seems closer to the experiences of mystics, who seek ruptures of level by dissolving illusory appearances and ordinary perception: «the suspension of conscious thought creates a void and thus propitiates the flights of the soul» (Barbieri, *Verso le case di Ade*, cit., p. 174). In the mystical gallop of the ecstatics, "one rides enclosed in a thought, without feeling or remembering anything, almost without knowing that one exists" (*ibid.*).

[41] Particularly revealing of the parodic mode is the detail of the head hanging and swaying under the repeated blows of sleep (ll. 1012-1013). The torpor is such that the old knights ride hunched forward,

down by the previous evening's banquet (*plus pesaument en chevauchoient*, l. 991) and by the unexpected early rising; on the other, there is the heroine's light, enchanted movement: alert and fully self-possessed, she is in the ideal psychophysical state to ride above the abysses of otherworldly paths, letting herself be carried by the horse's instinctive foreknowledge.

A second element clearly distinguishes the girl's ride from that of the old knights: her different relation to the night-time paths into elsewhere. The route traced by Guillaume – and now retraced, in reverse, by the mottled palfrey – is defined above all by the narrowness of the track. Yet the animal takes it unhesitatingly, familiar with it (*li vairs palefrois savoit bien / cel estroit chemin ancïen*, ll. 1021-1022). By contrast, it does not know the road along which the old knights' procession advances (*ne sot pas le chemin avant / ou la grant route aloit devant*, ll. 1039-1040). The palfrey knows the paths of the Otherworld, unlike the old knights who, though already on the narrow track, fail to perceive the otherworldly passage "visible" only to the elect and the initiated. The narrowness of the route (*estrece*[42]) functions as a sign of election and a means of transcendence for the palfrey and its rider; for the old knights' procession, by contrast, it remains

almost dangling from their saddles. Nothing remains of the upright bearing of the knight in the prime of his beauty; but neither is there anything of the hero's outward drowsiness coupled with inward vigilance and concentration, as in the chivalric "dream-ride". There is no trace here of the hallucinatory half-sleep of ecstatic gallop or heroic catabasis: the old knights' dozing in the saddle is mere, everyday somnolence, with no suggestion of an initiatory pattern or mystical order.

[42] Old French *estrece* / *estroit* ("narrowness", "narrow") name the physical constriction of the path linking the lovers' dwellings, but Huon turns it into a selective threshold. Guillaume first finds the path "too narrow" (*quar trop li est la voie estroite*, l. 244), yet later the elders find the track so tight that "two could not go together" (*le chemin… si estroit / que dui ensamble ne pooient aler*, ll. 978-980), and it is precisely this *estroit chemin* that makes them lose the maiden (l. 984; l. 1266). The "narrow passage" thus operates like a filter: it opens to the true couple and closes upon the profane pursuers.

merely a profane, material constraint, forcing them to ride in single file.

The *lai* takes shape as a rhythmic body, articulated in three movements that modulate its tone: a programmatic opening, dominated by the authorial voice and shading into an elsewhere; a long night of prohibitions and bewilderment, in which desire enters a forest of the impossible; and, finally, a resolution that coincides with unveiling. At its beating heart, the writing grows more urgent, more tense: the pace quickens, and *enjambments* multiply like broken steps in the night. Syntax proceeds by successive displacements, mimicking both the old knights' hesitant gait and the maiden's secret, measured progress.

Thus, the very rhythm of language – with its interrupted breaths, its broken lines – becomes an internal figure within the narrative: a cadence that foreshadows passage.

Beyond its mottled coat, Guillaume's palfrey is defined by the excellence of its smooth, flowing gait. Its liquid amble combines prodigious speed with almost paradoxical gentleness, allowing the palfrey to cover considerable distances without jolt or strain. This gait – fluid and soft, yet remarkably swift – acquires symbolic force, binding the animal to a long-standing literary memory[43]. In Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide*, the *vair*-coated palfrey given to the heroine by her cousin is praised for the gentlest of gaits[44] (l. 1379): so smooth that even a child could ride it, and so yielding that those who sit it have the impression of gliding – like a ship – over the surface of water[45].

[43] For these aspects, see E. Muzzolon, *Tra due mondi: la cavalcata di sogno e l'asintoto del desiderio (*Vair Palefroi*, vv. 974-1219)*, «Medioevi», 9, 2023, pp. 29-76.

[44] Chrétien de Troyes, *Érec et Énide*, texte établi, traduit, présenté et annoté par P.F. Dembowski, in Id., *Œuvres complètes*, édition publiée sous la direction de D. Poirion, avec la collaboration d'A. Berthelot, P.F. Dembowski, S. Lefèvre, K.D. Uitti, Ph. Walter, Gallimard, Paris 1994 («Bibliothèque de la Pléiade», 408), pp. 1-169, 1053-1114.

[45] «Einz va plus a eise et soëf Que s'il estoit an une nef.» (ll. 1389-1390). These "mystical" virtues of the palfrey's enchanted amble no-

In the Welsh tale of *Pwyll, Prince of Dyved*[46], the beautiful Rhiannon rides at a walking pace, yet remains unreachable: her mount proceeds according to another logic, one that bends space and alters perception. And in a *cobla* from *Quan lo rossinhols el foillos*, Jaufre Rudel entrusts the paradox of desire to the horse's gallop: the more the lyric I hastens towards the lady, the more he seems to fall back, while she recedes ever further[47]. The horse – galloping, yet unequal to the task – moves forward without making progress, as though distance were to grow in proportion to momentum; only Love, if it so wishes, can halt the beautiful woman[48]. In this accelerating, frustrating pace, the figure of an impossible approach is traced, in which *eros* finds not fulfilment but vertigo. In each case, the ride sketches an initiatory motion[49]: a rhythm shifted into another register, crossing the visible and bending it to another law. The amble thus becomes the rhythmic form of transit – a measured breath that inscribes an unstoppable nostalgia for origins in the body of time.

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netheless rest on a profane, functional, and pragmatic basis: unlike the warhorse – impetuous and high-strung – the riding palfrey is prized for the docility of its gait and the smooth, steady sweetness of its pace, which makes it suitable even for ladies and maidens.

[46] *Les Quatre Branches du Mabinogi et autres contes gallois du Moyen Âge*, traduit du moyen gallois, présenté et annoté par P.-Y. Lambert, Gallimard, Paris 1993 («L'aube des peuples»), pp. 42-44.

[47] Jaufre Rudel, *L'amore di lontano*, ed. cit., p. 122. T.D. Hill (*Jaufré, Pwyll and the Receding Lady: An Essay on Comparative Horsemanship*, «French Studies Bulletin», 37, 1990-1991, pp. 1-3: 3) and J. Hemming (*Reflections on Rhiannon and the Horse Episodes in* Pwyll, «Western Folklore», 57, 1, 1998, pp. 19-40: 32) have also compared the Provençal *cobla* to the Welsh tale.

[48] The beautiful Rhiannon, for her part, seems to 'stop' only when Pwyll implores her: «Jeune fille, pour *l'amour* de celui que tu aimes le plus, attends-moi» (*Les Quatre Branches du Mabinogi*, éd. cit., p. 44; italics mine).

[49] Yasmina Foehr-Janssens, *La chevauchée merveilleuse. Le* Vair Palefroi *ou la naissance d'une fée*, «Reinardus», 13, 2000, pp. 79-95: 88.

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Tra *ordo charitatis* e *fin'amor* Ancora sulle parafrasi epitalamiche antico-francesi e le loro fonti monastiche

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Abstract. Il saggio propone una rilettura delle parafrasi antico-francesi del *Salmo 44* (*Eructavit cor meum verbum bonum*) e del *Cantico dei Cantici* alla luce dell'esegesi monastica dell'epitalamio biblico. Proseguendo una linea di ricerca pregressa, l'analisi cerca di identificare le fonti teologiche che sottendono la definizione di un concetto di traduzione e di trasposizione della materia sacra entro i moduli cortesi, e di chiarirne l'articolazione con il progetto di una 'mistica muliebre' indirizzata alle dedicatarie dei poemetti.

Parole chiave: Eructavit – Cantico dei Cantici – parafrasi bibliche – teologia monastica – dedicatarie

Due parafrasi[1] antico-francesi in *octosyllabes*, l'una del *Salmo* 44 (*Eructavit cor meum verbum bonum*)[2] e l'altra del *Cantico dei Cantici*[3], spiccano nel *corpus* dei primi volgarizzamenti biblici in lingua d'*oïl* per una cifra stilistica e tematica comune, che si potrebbe riassumere nella trasposizione di una teologia della *charitas* di matrice monastica negli stilemi e nel lessico dell'amor cortese[4].

[1] Mi attengo, qui, alla terminologia preferita da G. Lobrichon, *Les paraphrases bibliques dans l'espace roman des XII^e et XIII^e siècles*, in Id., *La Bible au Moyen Âge,* Picard, Paris 2003, pp. 194-210 [già in Id., *La poésie biblique, instrument théologique. Les paraphrases bibliques (XII^e-XIII^e siècles)*, in *La scrittura infinita. Bibbia e poesia in età medievale e umanistica*. Atti del convegno di Firenze (26-28 giugno 1997), a cura di F. Stella, Edizioni del Galluzzo, Firenze 2001, pp. 155-176], per cui si ha parafrasi quando «un texte donné est retravaillé, et donne lieu à une nouvelle rédaction, soit dans la même langue, soit dans une langue différente de celle de l'original, en ajoutant ou en simplifiant l'*ornatus*, en utilisant un *genus elocutionis,* voire un *ductus* déterminés» (p. 195). Sui problemi relativi alla definizione del 'genere' dell'*Eructavit*, a partire dalla prassi spesso contraddittoria dei copisti, cfr. D. Ruini, *Appunti sull'Eructavit antico-francese e le sue attribuzioni*, «Studi mediolatini e volgari», 2008, LIV, pp. 211-248: 213-215.

[2] Edizioni di T.A. Jenkins del 1909 (*Eructavit, an Old French metrical paraphrase of psalm XLIV*, published from all known manuscripts and attributed to Adam de Perseigne, Halle 1909) e di W. Meliga del 1992 (*L'«Eructavit» antico-francese secondo il ms. Paris B. N. fr. 1747*, Edizioni dell'Orso, Alessandria 1992), che tuttavia si concentra soprattutto sull'analisi dei suoi tratti occitanici del codice N, escludendo «programmaticamente […] commento e interpretazione del testo» (p. 18, n. 7). Recentissima è l'edizione approntata da Daniele Sorba nell'ambito della sua tesi di dottorato, cui ci riferiamo qui per il testo critico (cfr. D. Sorba, *La parafrasi anticofrancese del salmo 44 (Eructavit cor meum)*, tesi di dottorato, dir. R. Tagliani, F. Zinelli, Università di Siena aa. 2023/2024).

[3] La parafrasi di Le Mans si legge nell'edizione Pickford (*The Song of Songs. A Twelfth-Century French Version*, edited from ms. 173 of the Bibliothèque Municipale of Le Mans, Oxford University Press, London-New York-Toronto 1974), con le opportune annotazioni di Hunt al testo critico (cfr. T. Hunt, *The OF commentary on the Song of songs in MS Le Mans 173*, «Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie», 1980, XCVI, pp. 267-296).

[4] M. Sampoli Simonelli, *Sulla parafrasi francese antica del Salmo Eructavit, Adamo di Perseigne, Chrétien de Troyes e Dante*, «Cultura neolatina», 1964, XXIV, pp. 5-38: 17-18. Sulla stessa linea, Benton, che

Se diversi elementi riportano i testi alle corti del Nord-est della Francia, tra la fine del XII e l'inizio del XIII secolo[5], nessuno fra questi si è dimostrato decisivo per risalire agli autori. Non sono mancati, tuttavia, i tentativi di attribuzione. Secondo un'ipotesi indiziaria, ma che si è spesso ripetuta passiva negli studi, l'*Eructavit*, dedicato a Marie de Champagne, «la jantis suer le roi de France» (v. 2079), sarebbe opera di Adamo, canonico di Saint-Augustin, poi cistercense a Pontigny, quindi abate di Perseigne[6] – fortemente legato, stando alla testimonianza del *De apibus* di Tommaso di Cantimpré, alla casa comitale di Champagne, dove fu forse il confessore privato della con-

parla di «Interplay [...] between secular and religious material» (J.F. Benton, *The court of Champagne as a literary center*, «Speculum», 1961, XXXVI/IV, pp. 551-591: 566), e McCash: «Spiritual concerns in secular terms» (J.H. McCash, *Eructavit cor meum: Sacred Love in a Secular Context at the Court of Marie de Champagne*, in *Earthly Love, Spiritual Love, Love of the Saints*, ed. S. Ridyard, University of the South Press, Sewanee, pp. 159-178: 169).

[5] Al pari del problema dell'attribuzione dell'*Eructavit*, anche quello relativo alla sua datazione resta ancora dibattuto. Gli estremi devono essere tesi da una parte al 1180, anno in cui Filippo Augusto succede a Luigi VII sul trono di Francia – e Marie di Champagne può quindi essere chiamata a ragione «suer le roi» –; dall'altra al 1198, anno della morte della contessa cui l'opera è dedicata. In generale, si tende ad indicare il periodo tra il 1183 e il 1187 come il più probabile per la composizione del poemetto, che in aderenza al suo tema natalizio-epitalamico potrebbe essere stato recitato durante il Natale del 1184 (J.H. McCash, *Eructavit cor meum*, cit., p. 165) o nel dicembre del 1185 (G.F. McKibben, *The Eructavit: An Old French Poem. The Author's Environment, His Argument and Materials*, Furst, Baltimore 1907, p. 13), o ancora in occasione delle nozze della figlia omonima di Marie nel gennaio del 1186 (M. Boland, *The Eructavit and Marie of Brabant*, «Tamkang journal of Humanities and Social Sciences», 2002, X, pp. 64-89: 67). Non sono mancate, tuttavia, ipotesi di una redazione precoce (M. Sampoli-Simonelli, *Sulla parafrasi francese antica del Salmo Eructavit*, cit., pp. 6-9) o più tarda (C. Luttrell, *The Creation of the First Arthurian Romance. A quest*, Arnold, London 1974, pp. 28-29). Per un riepilogo puntuale delle posizioni circa la datazione dell'*Eructavit*, si rimanda a Sorba, ed. cit., pp. 21-24).

[6] Per una biografia aggiornata, cfr. M. Long, *Adam de Perseigne chanoine, moine noir et moine blanc. Pour une réévaluation critique de sa biographie*, «Revue Mabillon», 2018, XXIX, pp. 83-100.

tessa[7]. È invece spesso citato a suffragio della possibile attribuzione della *Parafrasi al Cantico* all'altrimenti oscuro Landri de Waben, un passo della *Cronaca dei Conti di Guînes* in cui Lambert d'Ardres menziona una traduzione dei «Cantica canticorum, non solum ad litteram, sed ad misticam spiritualis interpretationis intelligentiam, de Latino in Romanum» composta da un certo «virum eruditissimum magistrum Landericum de Wabbanio»

[7] «Prope autem nostra tempora fuit mulier nobilissima, Maria Campaniae Comitissa: haec nupta nobilissimo Henrico Campaniae Comiti, filia fuit Lodovici Pii, Regis Francorum; Philippi Regis soror, aeque Regis francorum. Laborans in extremis, abbatem Persaniae, Adamum scilicet, sanctissimum et eloquentissimum virum, migratura, venire mandavit» (Tommaso di Cantimpré, *De apibus*, I, VII, 7). Va osservato tuttavia che Jenkins, il primo ad aver proposto questa attribuzione (XIII-XVIII), non si richiamava direttamente al *De apibus*, ma ad alcune carte che testimoniano la presenza a corte di un *Dominus Adamus*, già cappellano della stessa Marie (XV). La tesi della paternità di Adamo è stata in seguito smentita da Benton (*The court of Champagne as a literary center*, cit., pp. 582-585) sulla base di alcune discrepanze ideologiche tra il poemetto e l'opera dell'abate; quindi di nuovo riabilitata da Sampoli Simonelli (*Sulla parafrasi francese antica del Salmo Eructavit*, cit., pp. 6-36) in un diffuso studio comparativo inteso a mettere in luce le affinità di stile tra gli scritti latini di Adamo e il poemetto volgare. Per stessa ammissione della studiosa, tuttavia, i rilievi non sono sufficienti a spingere la teoria oltre «i limiti dell'approssimazione ipotetica». Se a ciò si aggiungono i dubbi sull'attendibilità storica degli aneddoti del *De apibus* (cfr. Long, *Adam de Perseigne*, cit., pp. 88-89 e Th. Evergates, *Marie* of *France: Countess of Champagne, 1145-1198*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2019, pp. 98-99; Benton, *The court of Champagne as a literary center*, cit., pp. 582-584), non resta che ripetere il reciso giudizio di Varvaro, secondo cui l'attribuzione del poemetto ad Adamo, ad oggi, «non ha alcuna base» (A. Varvaro, *Le traduzioni in versi della Bibbia nella letteratura francese del sec. XII; committenti, autori, pubblico*, in *La scrittura infinita. Bibbia e poesia in età medievale e umanistica*. Atti del Convegno [Firenze, 25-26 giugno 1997], a cura di F. Stella, L. S. Olschki, Firenze 1999, pp. 493-509: 500). Alla stessa conclusione giunge anche la recente disamina di Sorba, che nella sua tesi di dottorato ritorna sulla sostanziale infondatezza delle principali proposte attributive dell'Eructavit – Adamo di Perseigne, Pietro di Celle e Gautier de Coinci – tentate nel corso degli anni (Sorba, ed. cit., pp. 15-21.)

per il conte Baldovino II[8]. Se le due opere sono state raramente[9] accostate tra loro, ciò si deve anche alla disparità delle rispettive fortune manoscritte. L'*Eructavit*, infatti, occupa un posto di assoluto rilievo tra i primi volgarizzamenti biblici, con ben venti testimoni che lo conservano, per intero o frammentario, e fra i quali figura anche l'unico testimone della parafrasi al *Cantico*: il manoscritto Le Mans, Médiathèque Louis Aragon, 173. Così, mentre la parafrasi del *Salmo 44* si novera tra i capolavori della prima letteratura cortese di Francia, esempio di uno sviluppo parallelo del romanzo[10] e delle riscritture del salterio[11] in volgare lungo l'asse anglonormanno-champenois, il poemetto di Le Mans viene più spesso riportato alle altre parafrasi sulle nozze di Salomone entro una «tradizione esegetica in lingua francese» sul *Cantico dei Cantici*[12].

Le analogie formali tra i due poemetti non si fermano tuttavia all'*octosyllabe*, ma si possono scorgere, ad uno strato più profondo, nel principio che governa la riscrittura esegetica attorno al dettato biblico. Anche in que-

[8] Lamberti Ardensis *historia comitum Ghisnensium*, edidit Iohannes Heller, in *MGH SS*, vol. XXIV, 1879, pp. 550-642, c. 81, p. 598; cfr. Pickford, *The Song of Songs*, cit., p. XVIII.

[9] Tra le eccezioni, Morgan Powell, che al termine del suo studio sull'*Eructavit* cita la *Parafrasi di Le Mans* come analogo esempio di traduzione-riscrittura ordita attorno alla figura di una dedicataria, auspicando un'analisi comparativa dei due testi a partire dal contesto cortese «as the receptacle of a layman's audiovisual encounter» (M. Powell, *Translating Scripture for Ma dame de Champagne. The Old French "Paraphrase" of Psalm 44 [Eructavit]*, in *The Vernacular Spirit. Essays on Medieval Religious Literature*, ed. R. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, D. Robertson, N.B. Warren, Palgrave, New York 2002, pp. 83-103: 97), e Daniele Sorba, per il quale, «dal punto di vista dell'argomento trattato, senza dubbio la traduzione del *Cantico dei Cantici* testimoniata dal manoscritto O dell'*Eructavit* (conservato a Le Mans) è quella che più si avvicina a quest'ultimo» (p. 43).

[10] Cfr. i richiami tra l'*Eructavit* e l'*Erec et Enide*, in particolare riguardo al topos della *joie de la cour*, discussi da Sampoli Simonelli, *Sulla parafrasi francese antica del Salmo Eructavit*, cit., pp. 28-34.

[11] Cfr. G. Rector, *Courtly romance, the vernacular psalms, and generic contrafaction*, «Viator», 2014, XLV, pp. 117-148: 127-128.

[12] G. Paradisi, *La parola e l'amore: studi sul Cantico dei cantici nella tradizione francese medievale*, Carocci, Roma 2009, pp. 70 e ss.

sto, peraltro, si ravvisa un'ascendenza monastica: ad una più attenta analisi, quelle che sono state spesso chiamate 'versificazioni' o 'parafrasi' si presentano piuttosto come delle glosse (metriche) continue, che svolgono un'*amplificatio* variata del dettato veterotestamentario, dove la pericope è perlopiù inglobata al verso, ma esercita al contempo, rispetto ad esso, una funzione 'generativa'. Questo particolare procedimento ricorda il metodo analogico per accostamenti e accumulazioni di tessere scritturali improntato alla *lectio divina*, tipico del commentario monastico e più diffuso all'epoca della redazione dei due poemetti, prima di essere soppiantato dalla glossa scolastica[13].

La stessa matrice monastica invita, infine, a considerare, dopo il 'genere' della riscrittura, anche il genere del testo-fonte. Sia il *Cantico dei Cantici*[14], tradizionalmente attribuito a Salomone ed interpretato nell'esegesi rabbinica come figura dell'alleanza tra Dio e Israele, sia il *Salmo 44*, composto per le nozze fra un re israelita e una

[13] Cfr. G. Dahan, *L'exégèse chrétienne de la Bible en Occident médiéval (XII^e^-XIV^e^ siècles)*, Les éditions du Cerf, Paris 1999, pp. 81-82. Mi permetto di rimandare, su questo punto, al mio contributo per gli Atti del XLIX Convegno Interuniversitario di Bressanone, dove mi soffermo maggiormente sugli aspetti formali della 'glossa poetica' (M. Francescon, *La glossa poetica dell'*Eructavit *antico-francese e della parafrasi al* Cantico dei cantici *del ms. Le Mans 173*, in *Le mille facce della glossa. Forme testuali della spiegazione.* Atti del XLVIII e del XLIX Convegno Interuniversitario (Padova, 9 luglio 2021 – Bressanone/Brixen, 8-10 luglio 2022), a cura di A. Barbieri, G. Peron, F. Sangiovanni, Esedra, Padova 2024, pp. 71-88: 77).

[14] La definizione origeniana – «Epithalamium […] id est nuptiale carmen» (Origene, *Commento al Cantico dei Cantici*, *Prologus*, ll. 5-6) – è ripresa dalla *Glossa ordinaria*, seguita d'appresso dall'esegesi volgare di Le Mans: «Ex hoc autem libro gentiles sibi epithalamium vendicarunt, et istius generis carmen assumptum est» (*Glossa ordinaria: in Canticum Canticorum*, in *Biblia cum Glossa ordinaria in Glossae Scripturae Sacrae electronicae [Gloss-e]*, edizione digitale a cura di M. Morard, IRHT-CNRS, https://gloss-e.irht.cnrs.fr/php/editions_chapitre.php?id=liber&numLivre=30&chapitre=30_Prol.1).

regina fenicia di Tiro[15], sono epitalami, canti nuziali. In continuità con i modelli religiosi latini, il tema richiama, anche nella trasposizione volgare, l'esegesi tradizionale dello Sposo-Cristo, o Verbo, e della Sposa-Chiesa (*allegoria*), ovvero della Sposa-anima (*tropologia* o *moralitas*), codificata soprattutto dall'esegesi monastica del XII secolo:

> Ceste sentence premeraine
> Allegorie nos amaine,
> Kar ço ke nos avomes dit,
> Tot est de Sainte Eglise escrit.
> Mais el sens de moralité,
> Li a dulceur e pieté.
> Al cuer toche plus dolcement
> Cho ke chascons de soi entent.

[15] Il *Salmo 44* è chiamato *epithalamium* da Agostino: «Solent dici ab scholasticis carmina quaedam uxores ducentibus et nubentibus, quae vocantur epithalamia; quidquid ibi cantatur ad honorem cantatur sponsi et sponsae» (Agostino, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, XLIV, 3, 8, p. 538); *epithalamium* e *laus thalami* degli autori della *Glossa Ordinaria* e della *Glossa Magna*: «Epithalamium id est laus thalami» (*Glossa ordinaria: in Psalmos*, *XLIV*, in *Biblia cum Glossa ordinaria in Glossae Scripturae Sacrae electronicae [Gloss-e]*, edizione digitale a cura di M. Morard, IRHT-CNRS, https://gloss-e.irht.cnrs.fr/php/editions_chapitre.php?id=liber&numLivre=26&chapitre=26_44); Nel sintagma «Unde et hoc carmen dicitur epithalamium, id est laus thalami, quia laus sponsi et sponse hic cantatur» (*Glossa magna in Psalmos*, *XLIV*, in *Glossae Scripturae Sacrae electronicae (Gloss-e)*, edizione digitale a cura di M. Morard, IRHT-CNRS, https://gloss-e.irht.cnrs.fr/php/editions_chapitre.php?id=magna&numLivre=26&chapitre=26_44). L'espressione «chançon de chambre» (v. 2075) con cui l'autore dell'*Eructavit* antico-francese designa il salmo – e quindi anche il suo volgarizzamento – si è tentati di riconoscere una resa perifrastica di *epithalamium* (cfr. McKibben, *The Eructavit*, cit., p. 29, n. 1; Jenkins, ed. cit., p. XIX), o anche un calco di *laus thalami*: ma cfr. G. Rector, *The Romanz Psalter in England and Northern France in the Twelfth Century. Production, Mise-en-Page, and Circulation*, «Journal of the Early Book Society», 2010, XIII, pp. 1-38: 22 e Sorba, ed. cit., pp. 54-56 sulla possibile accezione squisitamente cortese, o volutamente ambigua, della locuzione *chanson de chambre*, che potrebbe rimandare anche all'esecuzione 'cameristica' del poemetto devozionale, con riferimento alle *chambres* delle dame.

(*Parafrasi al Cantico*, vv. 113-120)

David, qui Sainte Eglise apele
sa fille, con une pucele
qui de son parenté fu nee
et de ses droiz oirs engendree,
parole a lui mult doucement
si mostre son ensaignement
a chascune ame crestienne
[…]
(*Eructavit*, vv. 1346-1353)

Sulla scorta dell'esegesi canonica dell'epitalamio biblico, il nucleo del simbolismo nuziale dei due testi è quindi «le fondement de nostre loi» (*Eructavit*, v. 2074), ossia l'Incarnazione intesa in quanto partecipazione umana al Verbo divino – con l'allegoria delle «noces» tra Dio e la Chiesa (*Eructavit*, vv. 111-116) o del bacio, «li beisiers», sigillo di umanità e divinità (*Cantico dei Cantici*, vv. 103-112) –, nella sua duplice intelligenza, e cioè nella dimensione collettiva della storia della Salvezza (*allegorie*) come in quella più intima, individuale, preferita dalla mistica cistercense (*moralité*).

I poli della riscrittura e i suoi presupposti teologici invitano quindi a prediligere un taglio 'sincronico', dove i due testi si lasciano accostare nell'ambito, più vasto, della prima letteratura allegorica in lingua d'*oïl*[16] come rappresentanti di un genere parafrastico particolare, incentrato sulla metafora nuziale, che raccoglie l'eredità dell'esegesi monastica del XII secolo proseguendone i due indirizzi principali: l'elemento oggettivo della relazione dell'uomo con Dio e la sua controparte soggetti-

[16] Cfr. H.R. Jauss, *La transformation de la forme allégorique entre 1180 et 1240, d'Alain de Lille à Guillaume de Lorris*, in *L'humanisme médiéval dans les littératures romanes du XII^e au XIV^e siècle.* Actes du Colloque organisé par le Centre de philologie et de littératures romanes de l'Université de Strasbourg (29 janvier – 2 février 1962), publiés par A. Fourrier, Klincksieck, Paris 1964, pp. 107-146; M.-R. Jung, *Études sur le poème allégorique en France au Moyen Âge*, Francke, Bern 1971; ma anche Varvaro, *Le traduzioni in versi della Bibbia nella letteratura francese del sec. XII*, cit., pp. 493-509.

va[17]. Nel loro insieme, questi rilievi suggeriscono un'interpretazione incrociata dei due poemetti che potrebbe mettere in luce aspetti finora trascurati, specie riguardo alla commistione degli stili (o fra stile e argomento) che ne rappresenta il carattere peculiare, e tuttavia a lungo trascurato a favore degli scrutini eruditi sui possibili autori e sui loro materiali. La 'scoperta' delle fonti monastiche ha infatti indotto gli studi, nel tempo, a dirigere la loro attenzione quasi esclusivamente sull'aspetto teologico, mettendo in ombra quello cortese[18], tacitamente ridotto ad un fatto di vocabolario, come nell'idea di una spontanea aderenza della lingua letteraria, il volgare dei «conte si vain et plaisant», allo stile e al lessico che le sono propri.

> Aime le Roi par fine amor
> s'embeliras de jor en jor,
> et con plus sera l'amor fine,
> plus iert la biautez enterine.
> Fille, aimme le Roi finement,
> nule riens plus ne te demant
> Fine amors t'aprendra a faire
> comment tu li porras mieuz plaire.
> Fines amors viennent de lui
> et fins joies con de celui
> qui onques d'amer ne se faint,
> Ne ne demant fors c'on l'aint.
> (*Eructavit*, vv. 1443-1454)

[17] «[…] Il primo fu studiato soprattutto dai benedettini neri, il secondo dai cistercensi» (J. Leclercq, *Cultura umanistica e desiderio di Dio: studio sulla letteratura monastica del Medio Evo*, Sansoni, Firenze 1965, p. 288 [ed. or. *L'amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu*, Les éditions du Cerf, Paris 1957]).

[18] In questo senso, la stroncatura dell'edizione Pickford si è estesa forse in modo ingeneroso anche alla sua proposta interpretativa: «Professor Pickford, in a utterly misleading introduction to his edition, lays a misplaced emphasis on the work's affinity with courtly litterature (p. XXXV) and persist in calling the work a romance (pp. XXX, XXXIV)!» (Hunt, *The OF commentary on the Song of songs*, cit., p. 272).

L'esortazione al perfezionamento dell'amore che Davide, personaggio-poeta dell'*Eructavit*, rivolge alla Chiesa/Anima – e, di riflesso, alla dedicataria –, ricorda i precetti di un'*ars amatoria*, svelando il progetto stilistico dell'autore: rifondere il tema sacro nel lessico cortese della *fin'amor* – sintagma peraltro piuttosto raro, al tempo, nel Nord della Francia[19]. Fatta salva la costitutiva ambiguità del lessico amoroso della prima lirica romanza, che sfida le nette ripartizioni tra sacro e profano[20], l'operazione sembra rispondere ad un programma poetico, e richiede perciò di essere adeguatamente discussa, anche in relazione alla novità rappresentata dai due poemetti nella diacronia delle 'Bibbie francesi'. A quest'altezza, infatti, una traduzione biblica non può mai dirsi neutrale, né nella sua accezione più ristretta, né tantomeno in quella più vasta, e più consentanea alla concezione medievale, di 'riscrittura', com'è quella messa in atto dalle due parafrasi.

Retorica cortese e ideologia clericale

Nel segnalare alcuni *loci* contraddittori tra l'opera di Adamo di Perseigne e l'*Eructavit* antico-francese, Benton citava una lettera in cui l'abate non nascondeva il suo giudizio severo sulle traduzioni volgari delle Sacre Scritture, dissuadendo così la critica dal voler riconoscere la sua sinopia dietro un autore che non solo volge «le saume [...] en romanz» (vv. 17-18), ma lo fa in un'*amplificatio* insistita del dettato biblico e in una disinvolta *conjoin-*

[19] Cfr. Rector, *Courtly romance, the vernacular psalms, and generic contrafaction*, cit., p. 131.

[20] «In principle it is easy to recognize that much of the language used in medieval love-lyric has both a sacred and a profane potential; [...] A medieval poet may, more consciously or less, exploit both sacred and profane connotations in the words he chooses» (P. Dronke, *The Song of Songs and Medieval Love Lyric*, in *The Bible and Medieval Culture*, ed. by W. Lourdeaux, D. Verhelst, Leuven University Press, Leuven 1979, pp. 236-262: 243. Cfr. anche T. Hunt, *The Song of Songs and courtly literature*, in *Court and Poet. Selected Proceedings*, ed. by G.S. Burgess, Cairns, Liverpool 1981, pp. 189-196).

ture fra materiali latini e volgari[21]. Pur non ricavandone una prova a sostegno della tesi contraria, Sampoli-Simonelli ha sottolineato giustamente come questa apparente incoerenza – insieme ad altre – potesse «essere valutata storicamente, come segno cioè del mutarsi del generale clima spirituale», che nella fattispecie avrebbe portato Adamo a ricredersi sull'opportunità di volgarizzare un libro biblico[22]. Nel passo che segue, tuttavia, la contraddizione sembra a tutta prima manifesta, e tutta interna all'*Eructavit*, senza che si senta il bisogno di interrogare altri scritti di 'Adamo':

> Sains Esperis qui nos ensaingne,
> qui si belement acompaingne
> le viez prophete et le novel,
> nos mostre que Ezechïel
> et sainz Jehans ensamble sont,
> qu'ambedui gardent contremont.
> Cil sont plus pres dou Roi a destre,
> cil dui nos noncierent tout l'estre
> dou regne Dieu et de sa gloire,
> si le nos mistrent en memoire.
> Ce sunt li dui qui plus haut volent,
> que si parfondement parolent
> qu'en romanz nel poons escrivre
> si con nos le trovons ou livre.
> (*Eructavit*, vv. 1065-1078)

Non fosse che l'autore non condanna la traduzione *tout court*, ma «si con nos le trovons ou livre» (v. 1078), e precisamente in ragione della profondità dell'eloquio profetico – «si parfondement parolent…» (v. 1076) – che non si lascia svuotare dal senso 'carnale'. L'interdetto, quindi, riguarda la sola traduzione letterale, mentre è implicitamente ammessa una forma di "traduzione", come quella svolta dal poemetto, in cui traduzione vera e

[21] Benton, *The court of Champagne as a literary center*, cit., p. 583.
[22] Sampoli-Simonelli, *Sulla parafrasi francese antica del Salmo Eructavit*, cit., p. 13.

propria e glossa scorrono quasi «fuse insieme»[23]. Qui il volgare non è solo la lingua della traduzione, ma è anche la lingua della glossa, dove la traduzione propriamente detta rientra in un complesso più ampio di 'spiegazione' che comprende anche l'allegoria: quasi un'effusione poetica[24] di contenuti spirituali altrimenti impenetrabili, se non fuorvianti, specie quando si tratta di canti nuziali.

Mi sembra, quindi, che l'interpretazione dei due testi debba muoversi lungo la sempre incerta linea di confine tra latino e volgare nel quadro delle relazioni tra scrittori religiosi e uditori secolari, cercando di trattenere i due momenti della riscrittura: la ricezione della fonte latina-teologica e la sua rielaborazione volgare-letteraria. A quanto mi risulta, una simile prospettiva è stata esplorata, fino ad ora, dal solo Morgan Powell, in uno studio sull'*Eructavit* che lasciava da parte, per una volta, l'annoso problema attribuzionistico, per ripercorrere la trama di rapporti figurali intessuta fra l'autore, il pubblico e i loro *doubles*[25] all'interno del contesto performativo della corte. Ricordiamo, in breve, la cornice narrativa della parafrasi:

> Come i grandi signori sono soliti annunciare con anticipo l'incoronazione o le nozze dei propri figli, così anche Dio volle che l'avvento del «Vero Re» fosse preannunciato dai

[23] Come già notava Varvaro, quando proponeva di chiamare i primi volgarizzamenti biblici in versi non 'parafrasi', bensì 'traduzioni', perché è la traduzione stessa a presentarsi in «forme che spesso sfidano ogni distinzione tra *letre* e *glose*» (Varvaro, *Le traduzioni in versi della Bibbia nella letteratura francese del sec. XII*, p. 505).
[24] M. Zink, *Poésie et conversion au Moyen Âge*, Vrin, Paris 2003, p. 178.
[25] «From the outset, the poem has two (human) authors, David and the authorial voice of the text, Marie's instructor; and – from the point David is actually introduced as a character – two performers, David and the singer/*jongleur* whom the audience actually saw and heard. There are three audiences: the King and the Queen of Heaven, Marie and the present audience. There are, in fact, four different levels of communication in play: God's communication to David, which first inspired his song; David's communication to the King and Queen of Heaven; the instructor/poet's communication to Marie; and the performer's communication with a wider lay audience» (Powell, *Translating Scripture*, cit., pp. 87-88).

> profeti: fra loro, Davide, che, rapito in cielo «in visione», si ritrovò un giorno davanti alla porta dell'Eden. La porta, tuttavia, era chiusa, perché dopo il peccato originale e fino all'Incarnazione nessun uomo «carnale» avrebbe potuto ammirare la «gioia del Paradiso». Non osando parlare, il Profeta cominciò a cantare per il Re che riposava nel giardino, ma una voce tonante gli intimò di tacere e di scrivere il suo canto sulla carta o sulla cera. Davide rifiutò – la sua lingua avrebbe scritto meglio del calamo di qualunque scriba –, ma pregò di poter contemplare la bellezza del mistero dell'Incarnazione anche solo per un istante. Si udì un frastuono: Davide fu circondato dalla luce e sentì una mano sollevarlo fino alle porte del Paradiso, che gli erano state aperte. Ora il Profeta poteva finalmente cantare la sua visione.

Da un punto di vista teologico, il canto volgare di Davide, e cioè la stessa esegesi allegorica al *Salmo 44* che leggiamo, rappresenta una trasgressione flagrante dell'interdetto pronunciato dalla voce, in quanto si tratta, a tutti gli effetti, di una rivelazione nel *tempo dell'enunciazione* della *joie du paradis* (= l'Incarnazione / Parusia) agli «hons charneus», ossia all'uditorio secolare, cui tale rivelazione era destinata solo alla *fine dei tempi*[26]. Dietro questa infrazione Powell ha ravvisato una sorta di «retorica di complicità» dell'autore-traduttore nei confronti del suo pubblico[27], beneficato anzitempo da ciò che Davide-*jongleur* ha appreso in visione. In particolare, tra le figure – interne o esterne – incarnanti l'autore e il pubblico del poemetto, si instaurano diverse relazioni comunicative fondate sul 'vedere' e il 'sentire' a partire dalle variazioni attorno al versetto 11 del Salmo (Audi filia et vide, et inclina aurem tuam). In questo versetto, Davide e, attraverso di lui, l'autore della parafrasi in volgare, incapsulano il loro programma poetico: tradurre l'esperienza visionaria in poesia (volgare) per l'uditorio secolare. La «prestazione audiovisuale»[28] di Davide si attua tra la divaricazione 'gerarchica' dei piani comunica-

[26] «The overlapping between these different levels of communication obscures any temporal distance between them» (ivi, p. 89)
[27] Ivi, p. 87.
[28] Ivi, p. 89.

tivi – Davide e, per estensione, il poeta 'vedono'; la Sposa, Marie e l'uditorio secolare, 'sentono' – e la loro confusione in un presente enunciativo[29] 'mistico' in cui la Sposa ha infine «udito e visto» insieme. La contrazione dell'*interim* della storia nell'attimo mistico corrisponde infatti alla *reductio ad unum* delle due esperienze sensoriali: «Fille, or as oi et veu» (*Eructavit*, v. 1427).

Così illustrata, attraverso il complesso sistema di relazioni tra l'autore, il pubblico e le loro diverse incarnazioni, la teoria di una 'traduzione' a più livelli – esegetico, linguistico, stilistico – assume contorni più nitidi entro il quadro di relazioni tra scrittori clericali e uditori secolari che si è indicato come possibile chiave dell'analisi di questi primi volgarizzamenti biblici, ma resta un'ipotesi, per quanto suggestiva, priva di fondamenti testuali. Come ho cercato di mostrare altrove[30], questi possono essere ritrovati nel quadro della spiritualità cistercense, e in particolare a partire dai significati teologici che i monaci bianchi attribuivano al magistero della predicazione. Nei commenti cistercensi attorno alla dittologia verbale del versetto 11, infatti, si delinea una riflessione, discontinua ma coerente,[31] sul mandato della parola predicatrice che appare fondata su una legge di «precedenza dell'udito rispetto alla vista nel percorso che conduce all'intimità col Verbo»[32] – *audi et vide*, appunto:

> FIDES EX AUDITU. Dignum quidem fuerat per superiorum oculorum fenestras veritatem intrare ad animam; sed hoc nobis, o anima, servatur in posterum, cum videbimus facie ad faciem. Nunc autem unde irrepsit morbus, inde remedium intret, et per eadem sequatur vestigia vita mortem, tenebras lux…[33]

[29] Ivi, p. 90.
[30] FRANCESCON, *La glossa poetica*, cit., pp. 81-88.
[31] Se è vero, come ritiene Gilson, che il pensiero bernardino non è privo di una certa sistematicità (cfr. É. GILSON, *La théologie mystique de Saint Bernard*, Vrin, Paris 1986, p. 9).
[32] P. LIA, *L'estetica teologica di Bernardo di Chiaravalle*, Edizioni del Galluzzo, Firenze 2007, p. 133.
[33] BERNARDO DI CHIARAVALLE, *Sermones Super Cantica Canticorum*, in *Opere V/1, 2*, ed. J. Leclercq, C. Stercal, Scriptorium Claravallense, Milano 2006, XVIII, 5, p. 411.

In breve, dal momento che «la visione diretta dello *Splendor Patris* è inaccessibile agli occhi carnali»[34], l'anima deve affidarsi al suono della parola in cui il Verbo si adombra nel mondo – e cioè, dopo quella dei profeti, alla parola dei predicatori: nella concezione cistercense, gli 'spirituali' hanno il compito di trasmettere ai carnali, attraverso la parola, ciò che essi apprendono *visu*, proprio come Davide canta la sua visione per Marie e per il suo pubblico 'carnale'. Il sensorio cistercense mostra così una relazione diretta con la teologia della storia, perché lo iato tra udito e vista è coestensivo a quello tra il peccato Originale, in cui l'uomo si allontana dal volto di Dio, e la visione *facie ad faciem*[35], come ricordano anche le parole della Voce dell'*Eructavit* quando dichiara che dopo il peccato di Adamo e fino all'Incarnazione nessun «uomo carnale» avrebbe potuto vedere la «gioia del Paradiso» («Ne puet veoir nus hom charneus | quex est la joie esperiteus», vv. 223-224). Di rimando, la visione paradisiaca di Davide-profeta allude all'eccezione rappresentata degli 'spirituali', i quali hanno la facoltà di pregustare il Verbo nei loro prestigi contemplativi, anche se solo per un istante, e l'onere di 'tradurre' questa esperienza visiva in esperienza verbale per i 'carnali'. L'eloquenza del predicatore prosegue, da un lato, quella della Scrittura ('Verbo esteso') che prepara all'Incarnazione intesa davvero come parola intensiva, visiva ('Verbo abbreviato') e ripete, dall'altro, il movimento del Verbo incarnato nel suo incurvarsi verso l'uomo, distillando l'amarezza e la sublimità del mistero nella dolcezza di una parola perspicua[36]: *sublimitas in humilitate*, per ricorrere a categorie auerbachiane – riecheggianti, in realtà, una termi-

[34] Lia, *L'estetica teologica di Bernardo di Chiaravalle*, cit., p. 133.
[35] Cfr. ibid., p. 133.
[36] In un sermone dal titolo eloquente, *De doctrinae amaritudine per praedicatores temperanda*, Bernardo paragona il predicatore ad Eliseo, che fece portare la farina per raddolcire l'amarezza della pentola avvelenata: allo stesso modo il predicatore deve saper addolcire il cibo della dottrina prima di offrirlo alla bocca dei carnali – «altro, infatti, è il sapore del cielo, altro quello della terra» (Bernardo di Chiaravalle, *Sermones de diversis*, XCV, 2).

nologia già cristiana, anzi bernardina. Per questo, come scrive Pierluigi Lia,

> l'eloquenza del predicatore non è da intendersi come arte puramente umana [...] nella sua prospettiva – infatti – l'arte della predicazione risponde innanzitutto alle esigenze della verità rivelata in visione che ordina il proprio linguaggio [...] Nella Chiesa abbiamo dunque, anche a questo proposito, una struttura gerarchica al cui vertice sta chi ha avuto la visione della verità [...] questi deve portare l'onere della predicazione[37].

Questa concezione della parola predicatrice, necessario *pendant* dell'elemento propriamente mistico della dottrina cistercense, sembra riflettersi nel programma poetico e spirituale dell'autore dell'*Eructavit* e di Davide, suo alter-ego *en abyme*, che assimila la poesia alla predicazione in quanto mediatrice del mistero, dove la mediazione è innanzitutto 'traduzione'.

Una simile ideologia clericale affiora anche dalla *Parafrasi di Le Mans*: non però entro una cornice narrativa – di cui la parafrasi è sprovvista –, bensì dalla selezione dei topoi e delle allegorie che l'autore trasceglie, come sembra, tra quelle che rimandano al tema della parola dei predicatori come unico tramite tra il breve raggio dell'intelletto carnale e le vertigini della Scrittura, sempre all'interno di una fraseologia della *dulcedo* in cui la parola si assimila all'Incarnazione stessa in virtù del suo movimento, dal sublime all'umile. Solo un esempio: la pericope *Meliora sunt ubera tua vino* (*Ct* 1, 2) veniva interpretata tradizionalmente con l'opposizione tra la dolcezza del «latte del Nuovo Testamento» che stilla dai seni di Cristo e la durezza del «vino dell'Antica Legge»; l'autore, tuttavia, precisa come Cristo presti i suoi seni a «cels ki sevent dire | e preechier bein par droiture | A chascon solonc sa mesure» (vv. 188-190). Dio, infatti, «parla attraverso coloro che ne portano la parola»: «(...) Deus parole | Par chaus ki dient sa parole» (vv. 3375-3376).

[37] Lia, *L'estetica teologica di Bernardo di Chiaravalle*, cit., p. 151.

"Visibile parlare"

Nella letteratura religiosa in volgare della Francia del Nord «il riconoscimento da parte del *clericus* del ruolo particolare che le sue competenze gli riservano impone per converso il dovere della volgarizzazione della cultura alta (religiosa) a favore del *laicus*»[38]: l'una e l'altra facciata di questa intenzione allocutiva trovano espressione nelle due parafrasi epitalamiche, dove il discorso ideologico è affidato ora al dispositivo metalettico in cui Davide è al contempo il salmista e una figura interna del poeta-predicatore[39], che si vuole *jongleur*[40], ora alle allegorie che alludono all'indispensabile ruolo di mediatori esercitato dagli spirituali rispetto all'aristocrazia e alle sue ambizioni immateriali. È vero, quindi, che attraverso la poesia il laicato esce in qualche modo vittorioso dall'interdizione clericale alla visione, come vuole Powell[41], ma ciò avviene perché la poesia, qui equiparata alla parola predicatrice, si fa mediatrice del mistero, come l'Incarnazione stessa, sacrificando infine se stessa alla visione. Colta attraverso il prisma del pensiero cistercense, la poesia, che è insieme glossa e traduzione, ha il compito di distillare la sublimità del mistero nell'umiltà della parola[42].

Lasciando da parte, in questa sede, il momento ideologico[43], interessa proseguire lungo la linea 'mistica', che peraltro è autorizzata solo da queste premesse dottri-

[38] E. Burgio, *Il pubblico della letteratura religiosa nella Francia settentrionale*, in *Lo spazio letterario del Medioevo, 2. Il medioevo volgare*, dir. P. Boitani, M. Mancini, A. Varvaro, vol. III. *La produzione del testo*, Salerno, Roma 2003, pp. 53-78: 58.

[39] Che come ha notato Powell rappresenta la più importante, se non l'unica, invenzione dell'autore dell'*Eructavit* (cfr. Powell, *Translating Scripture*, cit., p. 94).

[40] «Juglerre sui, sages et duiz» (*Eructavit*, v. 235).

[41] Powell, *Translating Scripture*, cit., p. 96.

[42] Ruini, *Appunti sull'Eructavit antico-francese e le sue attribuzioni*, cit., p. 240.

[43] Per il quale, rinvio ancora al mio saggio Francescon, *La glossa poetica*, cit., pp. 83-88.

nali. Se, però, l'ideologia clericale definisce la posizione dell'autore, la mistica riguarda più da vicino la dimensione del pubblico: i due poli sono beninteso collegati, ed è proprio la glossa a costituire questo collegamento; non solo in quanto traduzione ed esposizione della *littera*, ma anche nello scarto che questi testi marcano dal genere del commentario monastico a quello del trattato meditativo, in una transizione che ripercorre quel superamento (con conservazione) dalla dimensione oggettiva alla dimensione soggettiva della relazione con Dio propria alla mistica cistercense, e specie quella fiorita attorno all'esegesi del *Cantico*. Il contenuto concettuale delle due glosse metriche è, come si è detto, la Salvezza. Nell'*Eructavit*, questa coincide soprattutto con l'Incarnazione, innestata sul motivo del *reditus* al Paradiso Terrestre, dove Davide – vicario, in questo caso, di Adamo e Seth – canta l'unione fra Dio e la Chiesa per allegorie. Nella *Parafrasi di Le Mans*, si tratta piuttosto della Passione, che sulla scorta delle letture contemporanee del *Cantico* diventa il «vero polo costitutivo» dell'esegesi[44], lungo la linea figurale che accosta, con andamento antifrastico, gli ornamenti di Salomone alle pene della Croce, le immagini di derelizione a quelle di trionfo. Ma su questa trama tipologica, intessuta di richiami figurali tra Antico e Nuovo Testamento, si impone uno sviluppo ulteriore, che sebbene non sia disgiunto dal nucleo dottrinale tende ad accentuarne soprattutto i valori espressivi: non più solo l'Incarnazione e la Passione nella loro portata salvifica nella storia della salvezza, adempimento delle figure dell'Antico Testamento, ma la contemplazione commossa di Cristo nella sua umanità, soprattutto dal punto di osservazione privilegiato del Calvario. Nel suo libro sulla tradizione anticofrancese del *Cantico dei Cantici*, Gioia Paradisi ha indicato l'elemento definitorio della poetica della parafrasi di Le Mans nella *mansio*, e cioè nella stazione[45], che rom-

[44] Paradisi, *La parola e l'amore*, cit., p. 99.
[45] «Vien i par contemplacion, | Aprés i sera mansion» (vv. 2443-2444).

pe l'andamento drammatico/narrativo in indugi lirici e contemplativi rivolti al Cristo terrestre:

> Il ricorso alle *imagines agentes* come oggetto di meditazione non solo ci fa capire come la parafrasi era recepita dai suoi destinatari, ma rivela anche, da parte dell'interprete (e della tradizione esegetica a cui egli si richiama), una forte attenzione alla corporeità di Cristo.[46]

Se si prosegue nella lettura monastica dei due poemetti, questa *picta poesis* è ricompresa nello stesso programma letterario racchiuso nel versetto *Audi et vide*, dove la 'traduzione' della visione in parola è tutt'uno con la 'traduzione' linguistica (dal latino al volgare) e allegorica (la glossatura): un movimento dall'ineffabile al sensibile – dal sublime all'umile – che imita quello dell'*exinanitio*, e cioè dell'Incarnazione stessa, del Verbo che umiliandosi si rende visibile.

Come insegna Varvaro, l'*attualizzazione* costituisce il carattere essenziale della glossa[47]. L'interpretazione di queste opere dallo statuto incerto, dove traduzione e glossa coincidono, dovrà quindi proseguire nella ricerca delle fonti (monastiche) non ad un fine erudito, ma ermeneutico, che colga gli scarti dalle fonti o il significato che le fonti assumono quando sono calate in un contesto nuovo. Il primo fra questi 'scarti' riguarda precisamente l'attenzione riservata all'umanità di Cristo. Se infatti è vero che, rispetto ad altri indirizzi cristologici ancora legati a posizioni assunzioniste o sussitenzialiste[48], la

[46] Paradisi, *La parola e l'amore*, cit., p. 109.
[47] Ivi, pp. 506-507.
[48] «Nel grande dibattito del secolo dodicesimo, la figura di Cristo era conseguente alla concezione trinitaria. La nuova teologia aveva difficoltà a concepire il Verbo come persona distinta dal Padre e dunque a vedere la pienezza della divinità del Cristo storico; per questo parlava della natura umana di Gesù come di un vestito; oppure come una sussistenza della divinità. Uno sparire dell'umanità sotto e dentro la divinità, Per questo si è potuto dire che la nuova teologia formulava un nichilismo cristologico, cioè riduceva a nulla l'umanità di Gesù, e non è a caso che si formulasse l'interrogativo *utrum Christus habuit esse*, "se Cristo abbia avuto un essere"» (C. Leonardi, *Il Cristo*, vol. IV, *Testi teologici e spirituali in lingua latina da Abe-*

cristologia cistercense si mostrava più incline a considerare il Cristo nella sua umanità, essa restava al contempo strutturata sulla separazione fra la carne e lo spirito: l'immagine del Cristo della Passione non rappresentava la meta finale dell'unione con Dio, ma un suo grado preliminare, particolarmente indicato ai carnali ma insufficiente agli spirituali, e cioè ai monaci, ai quali «vanno dette cose diverse rispetto a quelle che si dicono a coloro che vivono nel mondo o, certo, almeno in modo diverso», come recita l'esordio dei *Sermones in Cantica*[49]. Di conseguenza, i commentari e i sermoni cistercensi dedicati ai monaci non indugiano a lungo sul Cristo in umanità, spesso considerato come l'abbrivio sensibile ad una delibazione del Verbo in cui «non vi è nulla di corporeo o immaginario»[50]. Invece, mentre anela a conoscere Nostro Signore in «haltesce» e «grandesce» (vv. 2237-2238), la Sposa della *Parafrasi al Cantico* deve fare rimembranza della «persone de Jhesu Christ»,

> Comment por moi fu circomcis
> E laidengiez sovent, e pris,
> Liez, batuz e demenez
> Tant laidement e tant penez,
> Comment il soffri passion
> Por la moie redempcion [...]
> (*Parafrasi al Cantico*, vv. 530-536)

Si tratta quindi, per la Sposa, di considerare il Verbo «en terre, quant ome se fist», e «cors e aneme eut come verais om» (2766-2777); insomma di «Deu conoistre come ome» (3124), ossia nella sua Incarnazione, quando «humilitez fu sains mesure» (v. 3167), e Passione, quando «com vrais om mort redota» (v. 2783). Mentre contempla questa serie di stazioni sull'umanità di Cristo, la lettrice

lardo a san Bernardo, Fondazione Lorenzo Valla-Mondadori, Milano 1992, p. XVII; cit. in Paradisi, *La parola e l'amore*, cit., p. 110.

[49] «Vobis, fratres, alia quam aliis de saeculo, aut certe aliter dicenda sunt» (Bernardo di Chiaravalle, *Sermones in Cantica*, I, 1).

[50] «Vide autem tu, ne quid nos in hac Verbi animaeque commixtione corporeum seu imaginarium sentire existimes» (Bernardo di Chiaravalle, *Sermones in Cantica*, XXXI, 6).

(o il lettore) non si affiderà, quindi, alla *ratio* mistica, ma alla facoltà della *memoria*, inestricabilmente legata all'opera terrena del Verbo (*memoria passionis*), come sembra suggerire anche il gioco di *annominatio* tra *menmbre* e *menmbrer* – «cil est beals, et tot si membre | Dont jo.n dirai cho que m'en membre» (vv. 2743-2744): una memoria emotiva, e attiva, che rievoca la Natività e la Passione suscitando compassione e dispone, quindi, ad una contemplazione agita in cui si ha già una forma di *imitatio*. La corsa inquieta della Sposa si spezza fra le stazioni del *Cantico*, rese *machinae memoriales* della vita terrena di Cristo, come l'allegoria dei sette salti del cerbiatto – *ecce iste venit, saliens in montibus, transiliens colles. Similis est dilectus meus capreae, hinnuloque cervorum* (*Ct* 2, 8-9) –, che ripercorre le sette tappe della vita del Salvatore, dalla nascita alla resurrezione (vv. 879-890). Altrove, la morte di croce è rievocata dal rossore e del candore dello Sposo (vv. 2683-2740 = *Ct* 5, 10: *Dilectus meus candidus et rubicundus electus ex milibus*); ma basta il balenare del nastro purpureo a cui sono paragonate le labbra della Sposa perché riaffiori alla mente l'immagine della gloriosa Passione (vv. 1834-1846 = *Ct.* 4, 3: *Sicut vitta coccinea labia tua*). Anche se l'*Eructavit* si attiene ad un'esposizione in definitiva più didattica, fedele all'allegoria, vi si può notare la stessa tendenza della glossa a farsi *mansio* sulla scorta della pericope *Propterea benedixit te deus in eternum* (44, 3), che induce a cantare le grazie del Cristo dalla «naissance» al «mont Esclavaire» (v. 442), dove il Verbo non difetta in bellezza, anzi irradia una «biauté qui tot esclaire» (v. 441), e nella Resurrezione, quando la bellezza umana del Cristo eclisserà tutte le altre, perché la sua carne rifiorirà e sarà come una nuova veste (vv. 453-456). Più oltre, sono le allegorie della mirra, dell'aloe e della cassia che profumano le vesti dello Sposo a ricordare l'esistenza terrena del Messia: le vesti significano l'Incarnazione, l'effluvio amaro della mirra la Passione, l'aloe balsamica la Resurrezione e la cassia la 'Vera Croce'. Nel senso profondo che l'*ars praedicandi* assume nella teologia monastica, la parola predicatrice / parola poetica non

si limita a riferire la visione, ma la ripresenta agli occhi carnali in un 'visibile parlare': così, la Sposa del *Cantico* può dire, infine, «Or me semble que jo le voie» (*Parafrasi al Cantico,* v. 2699).

Ars amandi Deum

Su questo punto, l'antropologia cistercense è chiara: agli 'spirituali' si chiede di conoscere Dio secondo lo spirito, ai 'carnali' di conoscerlo secondo la carne. Non tanto ai perfetti, quindi, ma agli spiriti meno avvezzi alla contemplazione, è destinata l'immagine del Cristo crocifisso[51]. Se la trasposizione di questa dicotomia antropologica in ambito teologico fa del Cristo in umanità il viatico più adatto ad una 'mistica laica' come quella dei due poemetti, in presenza di un epitalamio occorre forse considerare un altro aspetto, che rappresenta in pari tempo un ulteriore *trait d'union* tra le due parafrasi in versi francesi. Si è detto che la destinataria (almeno ideale) dell'*Eructavit* è indubbia; per la *Parafrasi di Le Mans*, la notizia di Lambert d'Ardres su una traduzione-glossa composta da Landri de Waben per Baldovino II ha spesso oscurato la dedica ad un'altra *domina*, che resta tuttavia innominata:

> Por l'oneur Deu premierement,
> Mais cele por cui jo travail,
> Quar tot est suen, se jo rien vail,

[51] «Ergo in perfectis quidem, qui rimari ac penetrare arcana sapientiae et puritate conscientiae audent, et intelligentiae acumine possunt, habitant in foraminibus petrae. De reliquo in cavernis macerie, ut qui in petra fodere per semetipsos aut non sufficiunt, aut non praesumunt, in maceria fodeant, contenti vel gloriam sanctorum mente intueri. Si cui ne hoc quidem possibile sit, huic sane proponet Iesum, et hunc crucifixum, ut et ipse absque suo labore habitet in foraminibus petrae, in quibus non laboravit» (Bernardo di Chiaravalle, *Sermones in Cantica*, LXII, 6; cit. in J.-M. Déchanet, *La Christologie de saint Bernard*, in *Bernhard von Clairvaux, Mönch und Mystiker:* Internationaler Bernhardkongress (Mainz, 1953), Herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Joseph Lortz, Steiner, Wiesbaden 1955, pp. 63-75: 73).

Certes molt s'esmerveilleroit
S'ele altre chose n'en doit,
Quar jo li ai maintes foiz dit
Qu'aster signe Saint Esperit.
(*Parafrasi al Cantico*, vv. 2363-2378)[52]

Il fatto in sé non deve sorprendere, se è vero che molti fra i primi volgarizzamenti biblici in versi – come la *Bible* di Evrat, scritta per la stessa Marie de Champagne, o anche gli anglonormanni *Proverbes de Salomon* di Sanson de Nanteuil e l'anonimo commentario del salterio, offerti rispettivamente ad Aeliz de Condet e Lauretta d'Alsazia – furono dedicati a nobildonne. Ma va da sé che nel caso degli epitalami biblici il *patronage* femminile o la semplice dedica ad una *domina* depongano da subito per un'identificazione, più o meno allusa, tra la destinataria dell'esegesi e la Sposa del *Cantico.* Bernardo ha lasciato un ricco epistolario femminile in cui si trova una lettera *Ad Sophiam Virginem* tutta intarsiata di citazioni dal *Cantico* e dal *Salmo 44* che paragonano la destinataria alla *Sponsa Christi*[53]. Come altre lettere di Bernardo indirizzate a monache, tuttavia, anche la lettera a Sofia tende perlopiù ad esortare la novizia ad osservare il voto di castità, e cioè a preferire all'amore carnale l'amore spirituale per lo Sposo del *Cantico*: il tono è parenetico, venato a volte di un risentito moralismo per la perdizione del mondo al di fuori del chiostro. Più 'mistica' si presenta invece una delle lettere che Adamo di Perseigne scrive alla monaca Agnese; una sorta di missiva augurale alla futura sposa in procinto di consacrarsi allo Sposo-Cristo, dove gli ammonimenti del padre spirituale sono anche 'glosse' a ritagli del *Cantico dei Cantici*, come le nostre parafrasi – tanto che proprio le lettere ad Agnese sono state citate a suffragio dell'attribuzione dell'*Eructavit* an-

[52] Cfr. anche vv. 3495-3501.
[53] Bernardo di Chiaravalle, *Epistolae* (1-210, 211-548), in *Opere* VI/1, 2, ed. J. Leclercq, E. Paratore, Milano, Scriptorium Claravallense 1986-1987, CXIII: Ad Sophiam Virginem.

tico-francese ad Adamo[54]. Anche qui si tratta di motivi tipici della teologia cistercense: quel che interessa osservare, piuttosto, è come, in modo simile a ciò che avviene nella *Parafrasi di Le Mans* – ancor più che nell'*Eructavit* –, la lettera dell'abate di Perseigne non si limiti a raccogliere una serie di precetti per la buona monaca attinti dal complesso nuziale, ma delinei un vero e proprio itinerario spirituale di unione col Verbo, che è il Verbo incarnato, scandito dai versetti del *Cantico*. In questo opuscolo di mistica muliebre, la monaca sperimenta il *languor*, la malattia d'amore che affligge la Sposa per l'assenza dello Sposo – *Fulcite me floribus, stipate me malis, quia amore langueo* (*Ct.* 2, 5) – liquefacendo l'anima – *Anima mea liquefacta est* (*Ct* 5, 6) –, che può così trasfigurarsi a Sua immagine – *Dilectus meus mihi et ego illi* (*Ct.* 2, 16). La figura di Cristo è posta al centro di un amore mistico che, ancorché spirituale, accentua la sua espressione carnale, perché carnale è il suo stesso oggetto. Al contempo la monaca assurge a vera protagonista dell'*itinerarium mentis* – Adamo la chiama «Domini mei sponsa, et ideo domina mea»[55] –, in una «retorica della complicità» più affine a quella dei parafrasti.

Se poi si guarda ai (rari)[56] commentari o trattati ascetici di provenienza cistercense riservati a congregazioni femminili, la metafora nuziale si offre volentieri all'itinerario della monaca verso l'unione con Dio, come avviene ad esempio nell'anonimo *De modo bene vivendi* e nel *De institutione inclusarum* di Aelredo di Rievaulx, entrambi indirizzati a delle *sorores* paragonate alla Sposa del *Cantico*. Nel *De institutione inclusarum*, in particolare, dopo aver impartito una serie di precetti per la vita

[54] Cfr. Sampoli Simonelli, *Sulla parafrasi francese antica del Salmo Eructavit*, cit., 19-20.
[55] Adamo di Perseigne, *Epistola XXII*, in *Lettres, 2 (16-32)*, ed. J. Bouvet, Les éditions du Cerf, Paris 2015² (1960).
[56] P. De Santis, *Abelardo interprete del Cantico dei Cantici per il Paracleto?*, in *Pascua mediaevalia. Studies voor prof. dr. J. M. De Smet*, redaktie R. Lievens, E. Van Mingroot, W. Verbeke, Universitaire Pers Leuven, Leuven 1983, pp. 284-294: 225, cit. in Paradisi, *La parola e l'amore*, cit., p. 95.

d'ogni giorno, Aelredo propone alla *Sponsa Christi* una «triplice meditazione riguardo al passato, al presente e al futuro»[57] in una serie di *mansiones* che ricordano da vicino quelle delle nostre parafrasi anche nel modo in cui il padre spirituale, attraverso il largo utilizzo di *verba videndi*, sembra voler porre davanti agli occhi della lettrice gli episodi della nascita e della vita di Cristo[58], ma soprattutto della sua Passione, in cui «vere homo est»[59].

È vero che attraverso il tema epitalamico l'identificazione della destinataria con la Sposa si rende più immediata e i termini corporei della sua *ars amandi* possono quindi risaltare fuor di metafora, senza attenuazioni psicologiche. Ma, come si è detto, per i Cistercensi la contemplazione del Cristo in umanità non era che un primo passo verso l'*unio mystica* col Verbo, che doveva poi saper rinunciare alle sue ambagi carnali. In questi trattati di mistica femminile, invariabilmente scritti da uomini, l'elezione del Cristo-uomo a viatico principale dell'ascesi sembra così tradire un pregiudizio che tende ad equiparare lo *status* delle donne, ancorché monache, a quello dei carnali, come suggerisce un passo in cui Aelredo invita la *soror*, incapace di attingere a cose sublimi (*potiora*), a lasciare a Giovanni il 'petto', da cui sgorga il vino della divinità, per i 'seni' dell'umanità, da cui stilla il latte:

> Iam nunc exulta, virgo, accede propius, et aliquam tibi huius dulcedinis portionem vindicare non differas. Si ad potiora non potes, dimitte Ioanni pectus, ubi eum vinum

[57] Aelredo di Rievaulx, *De institutione inclusarum*, in *Opera omnia I: Opera ascetica*, ed. C.H. Talbot, Brepols, Turnhout 1971, pp. 635-682: 662.

[58] Nell'invito a «retorquere oculos» all'annunciazione, a «videre» l'ingresso dell'angelo e «audire» il suo saluto; quindi ad «admirare» come il Signore, riempiendo la terra e il cielo, si sia conviscerato nella Vergine, ecc. (cfr. Aelredo di Rievaulx, *De institutione inclusarum*, ed. cit., 29, pp. 662-664).

[59] La monaca è allora esortata a raggiungere la stanza dell'Ultima Cena, ad osservare Cristo mentre si alza da tavola e lava i piedi ai suoi discepoli, a seguirlo sul monte degli Ulivi, a guardarlo, sia pure da lontano, mentre inizia ad avere paura di fronte ai suoi aguzzini, e poi nel sinedrio, col capo chino e gli occhi abbassati dinanzi a Pilato (cfr. ivi, 31, pp. 669-670).

> laetitiae in divinitatis cognitione inebriet, tu currens ad ubera humanitatis, lac exprime quo nutriaris.[60]

E, ancora, nell'avvertenza – una ripresa quasi letterale del precetto che Guglielmo di Saint-Thierry riservava agli «uomini animali»[61] – a non privarsi mai dell'immagine di Cristo crocifisso:

> Sufficiat tibi in altari tuo Salvatoris in cruce pendentis imago, quae passionem suam tibi repraesentet quam imiteris, expansis brachiis ad suos te inuitet amplexus, in quibus delecteris, nudatis uberibus lac tibi suavitatis infundat quo consoleris[62].

Tuttavia, questa *deminutio* dell'amore muliebre può rovesciarsi nel suo opposto attraverso l'elemento carnale che le è intrinseco, e in relazione a quello che in fondo restava il modello immediato per una mistica femminile dedita al Cristo crocifisso: la *mater dolorosa*. Nei *Sermoni in lode alla Vergine Madre*, Bernardo torna a citare il *Salmo 44*, stavolta identificando esplicitamente la sposa regale con Maria:

> Merito autem concupivit Rex decorem Virginis. Fecerat enim quidquid longe ante praemonita fuerat a patre suo David dicente sibi: AUDI, FILIA, ET VIDE, ET INCLINA AUREM TUAM, ET OBLIVISCERE POPULUM TUUM ET DOMUM PATRIS TUI, ET, SI HOC FECERIS, CONCUPISCET REX DECOREM TUUM. Audivit quippe et vidit, non ut quidam, qui audientes non audiunt et videntes non intelligunt, sed audivit et credidit, vidit et intellexit[63].

[60] Ivi, 31, p. 658.
[61] «Huiusmodi homini oranti vel meditanti, melius ac tutius, sicut iam dictum est, proponitur imago Dominicae Humanitatis, Nativitatis eius, Passionis et Resurrectionis: ut infirmus animus, qui non novit cogitare nisi corpora et corporalia, habeat aliquid cui se afficiat, cui iuxta modum suum pietatis intuitu inhaereat» (GUGLIELMO DI SAINT-THIERRY, *Epistola ad fratres de Monte Dei*, in *Opera omnia III*, ed. P. Verdeyen, S. Ceglar, Brepols, Turnhout 2003, 43).
[62] AELREDO DI RIEVAULX, *De institutione inclusarum*, ed. cit., 26, p. 658.
[63] BERNARDO DI CHIARAVALLE, *In laudibus Virginis Matris*, in *Opere II*, ed. J. Leclercq, C. Leonardi, Scriptorium Claravallense, Milano 1990, pp. 44-135: III, 3.

Nella concezione cistercense, la Vergine ha la facoltà di elevare l'esperienza del Cristo in umanità da prefazio a vertice dell'*unio mystica*, mostrando un'altra via, più diretta, rispetto ai gradi dell'amore-conoscenza[64]. Così, anche nell'*Eructavit* l'esortazione 'udire' prima di 'vedere' rivolta a Maria/Marie sembra intesa ad un superamento dell'*ordo verborum* nell'*ordo charitatis*: «David insists on two things – scrive Powell –: the privilege of presence, the living voice, as necessary to the adequate delivery for the message, and the agency of Mary in the incarnation»[65]. Con Maria, l'*ordo* della rivelazione – *ex auditu, ex visu* – è suscettibile di essere abolito, perché lo scarto tra udito e vista non è più protratto nella storia che sospira la sua fine, ma sussunto nel tempo mistico di un contatto, di una relazione immediata e spontanea – 'tattile', si vorrebbe dire, introducendo un *tertium quid* al sensorio cistercense –, quando, nel pieno accordo di volontà umana e divina[66], la bellezza della divinità abita carnalmente la Vergine[67], dove il Verbo si rifà carne. Questa 're-incarnazione' è conoscenza che trascende la parola; una conoscenza immediata, intima, carnale e insieme spirituale, a cui, come Maria, si può giungere solo attraverso l'amore:

> A rationalibus autem omnibus quidem capi potest per cognitionem, sed a bonis tantum capitur per amorem. In solis ergo bonis ita est, ut etiam sit cum ipsis propter concordiam voluntatis. Nam dum suas voluntates ita iustitiae subdunt, ut Deum non dedeceat velle quod ipsi volunt, per hoc quod ab eius voluntate non dissentiunt,

[64] Cfr. Lia, *L'estetica teologica di Bernardo di Chiaravalle*, cit., pp. 138-146.
[65] Powell, *Translating Scripture 44*, cit., p. 95.
[66] Cfr. Bernardo di Chiaravalle, *In laudibus Virginis Matris*, ed. cit., IV, 8.
[67] A mano a mano che la corsa mentale della Sposa-monaca volge alla Passione, ai verbi inerenti alla sfera dell'si aggiungono, in numero crescente, i verbi si inframmischia un numero crescente di verbi di 'contatto' in relazione al corpo di Cristo. Il crescendo culmina in un'immagine sorprendentemente icastica quando, nel saldarsi dell'immaginario nuziale con quello passionale, la monaca beve il sangue che sgorga dalle piaghe del Crocifisso. (Aelredo di Rievaulx, *De institutione inclusarum*, ed. cit., 31, p. 671).

> Deum sibi spiritualiter iungunt. Sed cum ita sit cum omnibus sanctis, specialiter tamen cum Maria, cum qua utique tanta ei consensio fuit, ut illius non solum voluntatem, sed etiam carnem sibi coniungeret, ac de sua Virginisque substantia unum Christum efficeret[68].

Ma non è conoscenza indolore. Al contrario, poiché ha per oggetto il Verbo annientato nella nascita umana e nella crocifissione, e per *medium* l'esperienza – nel significato profondo che i Cistercensi assegnavano a questo termine –, la sua diatesi contemplativa corrisponde a quella dei patimenti interiori della madre, che rinnovano quelli esteriori del figlio. Nella meditazione proposta da Aelredo di Rievaulx alla *soror*, lo sguardo della Sposa deve fondersi con quello di Maria, fino a piangere le sue stesse lacrime (*collacrimatio*):

> Quid tu? Non mirum si sole contristante, tu contristaris, si terra tremiscente, tu contremiscis, si scissis saxis, tuum cor scinditur, si flentibus iuxta crucem mulieribus, tu collacrymaris [...] Quid ergo? Tu sine lacrymis, amantissimae dominae tuae lacrymas videbis? Tu siccis manes oculis, et eius animam pertransit gladius doloris?[69]

Segni esteriori della liquefazione dell'anima, così predisposta alla conformazione divina, le lacrime sono già una forma di *imitatio Christi*: «Liquefactionem vero humilitatis ad ignem sancti amoris devotionis lacrimae *testantur* foris»[70]. Questa via all'*unio mystica* non poteva che essere indicata dalla Vergine ai piedi della croce, vera mediatrice della nuova *devotio*, come avverrà anche con la comparsa del *planctus Mariae* nel dramma religioso. Accade così che mentre l'esegesi al *Cantico* suggerisce l'oggetto della *mansio*, il tema mariano ne definisca il soggetto. Nella *Parafrasi* volgare, la pericope *Surge amica mea speciosa mea et veni columba mea in foraminibus petrae in caverna maceriae* (*Ct*. 2, 13-14) segue l'esegesi tradizionale dello sguardo che si insinua nelle brecce del corpo piagato di Cristo come la colomba annidata nelle

[68] Bernardo di Chiaravalle, *In laudibus Virginis Matris*, ed. cit., III, 4.
[69] Ivi, 31, 1161-1183, pp. 670-671.
[70] Adamo di Perseigne, *Epistola XII*.

fenditure nella roccia e nei nascondigli dei dirupi[71] – ma l'inserto «de gracie plaine» (v. 1001) indica il modello di questa meditazione appassionata in Maria:

> Vien enz, dolce, de gracie plaine,
> Se tu ne dotes travail ne paine,
> Fui t'ent as pertuis de la piere,
> E al cavain de la mesiere
> La met ton cuer, donc entendras
> Ke tu por grant petit rendras.
> Voies mes mains, voies mes piez
> Tant dolerosement perciez.
> Se cho ton cuer n'esmuet assez,
> Voies la plaie de mon lez,
> Dont il eissi del sanc grant onde,
> Kar ele fu grande e parfonde.
> Cho firent li felon a tort,
> Ki me voldront vaincre par mort.
> Men cuer perchierent a la lance
> Sans nule dote de venjance.
> (*Parafrasi al Cantico*, vv. 1001-1016)

Qui, la voce dello Sposo insiste affinché lo sguardo della Sposa sprofondi nelle piaghe, sospingendo l'intenzione contemplativa fin dentro le aperture dell'immagine[72]. In una successiva *mansio*, scaturita dal versetto sul fascetto di mirra, l'ascesi rimemorante giunge alle soglie dell'*imitatio*, con le ferite esteriori dello Sposo che aprono quelle interiori della Sposa – la *collacrimatio* sfocia infine nella *convisceratio*:

> Kant [l'espose] se porpense k'il sofri
> Sains son meffait e tot por li
> Les comps tant durs, e les liens
> Que il sofri, tien eie a siens
> Li clous k'il eut par mi les piez,
> Est en son cuer fort enfichiez

[71] Cfr. Bernardo di Chiaravalle, *Sermones in Cantica*, LXI.
[72] Il riferimento è a G. Didi-Huberman, *L'image ouverte: motifs de l'incarnation dans les arts visuels*, Gallimard, Paris 2007 [tr. it. *L'immagine aperta: motivi dell'incarnazione nelle arti visive*, Mondadori, Milano 2008]. Cfr. Paradisi, *La parola e l'amore*, cit., p. 105.

> Les clos des mains; tote la croiz
> Met en son cuer li granz destroiz.
> Cele corone del Saint Chief
> Li fait al cuer dolors molt grief.
> Trestot par compassion sent
> Qua[n]qu'il sofri corporeilment.
> E lest uns espirz avec lui,
> Se sont com un tot li anui.
> Molt a de mirre en cesti part
> Al cuer celi ki d'amor art.
> (*Parafrasi al Cantico*, vv. 2079-2094)

Vale la pena ricordare, allora, che dopo la *Parafrasi al Cantico* e il *fabliau* del *Vilain aisnier*, il manoscritto di Le Mans riporta un *planctus* mariano volgare che comincia con *Plorez trestot por Jhesu Crist* (f^{os} 110v-111r), quasi a suggellare la compiuta transizione tra l'esegesi allegorica dell'epitalamio e la pietà mariana. Per i Cistercensi, Maria è paradigma di una «conoscenza carnale perfetta»[73] che in modo solo apparentemente contraddittorio fa di Cristo «le comencement» e già «un sommet» dell'ascesi[74]. Una conoscenza, quindi, che almeno nell'attimo mistico non ha più il bisogno di un tempo della Rivelazione, e quindi neppure delle parole delle Scritture e dei predicatori:

> Nolo ut fiat mihi aut declamatorie praedicatum, aut figuraliter significatum, aut imaginatorie somniatum, sed silenter inspiratum, personaliter incarnatum, corporaliter invisceratum.[75]

Credo quindi che si possa guardare a queste parafrasi volgari come a degli esempi di mistica muliebre, del tutto letteraria, riflesso cortese della nuova pietà laica votata alla meditazione del Cristo-uomo nella sua incarnazione e passione. L'itinerario contemplativo, all'insegna

[73] Lia, *L'estetica teologica di Bernardo di Chiaravalle*, cit., p. 143. Infatti, «la carne diviene luogo di un volere dell'uomo conforme al volere di Dio, e ancor più, luogo dell'attualità storico-salvifica dell'operare concorde dell'uomo e Dio» (*ibid.*).
[74] É. Gilson, *La théologie mystique de Saint Bernard*, p. 109.
[75] Bernardo di Chiaravalle, *In laudibus Virginis Matris*, IV, 11.

della *memoria Passionis*, è diretto e autorizzato dalla parola del predicatore, pronta tuttavia a cedere il passo, sia pure nella finzione poetica, alla visione, ossia ad un'apprensione più immediata, carnale e affettiva, com'è quella insegnata dalla Vergine madre. Sull'esempio di Maria, la conformazione all'immagine divina avviene attraverso l'amore-*charitas*, che assurge a vero e proprio principio formale (stilistico, linguistico) delle parafrasi: l'epitalamio è infatti un canto d'amore – «chançon d'amor» (*Parafrasi al Cantico*, v. 1404) –, un libro d'amore – «d'amor est li livres faiz» (v. 7) –, una parola d'amore – «d'amor est ceste parole» (v. 1444); ed è perciò nella *charitas* che deve essere definito il 'programma' della traduzione-glossa come *medium* tra mondo clericale e mondo secolare. Tentiamo allora di abbozzarlo:

1. Da una parte, l'amore-*charitas* riassume l'intenzione e il gesto del volgarizzamento in relazione al paradigma dell'Incarnazione-Passione concepita in quanto *exinanitio* lungo un movimento figurale, dal sublime all'umile. Lo schema si ripete a più livelli, rilevato dall'isotopia della dolcezza e dell'infusione[76], che assimila il movimento della parola predicatrice – e cioè, in questo caso, della poesia – a quello dell'Incarnazione: (a) nel passaggio dalla visione alla parola, (b) nella glossatura della lettera nell'allegoria, (c) nella traduzione dal latino al volgare. Rendere sensibile e quindi intelligibile ciò che sfugge all'intelletto carnale è compito della parola, vicaria dell'Incarnazione storica, ed è allo stesso modo un atto d'amore e di *humilitas* da parte degli spirituali che 'traducono' il mistero per i semplici[77]. Di conseguen-

[76] È la costellazione semantica che caratterizza la mistica del 'Dottore Mellifluo' e che fa capo all'unzione-Incarnazione.

[77] Per il tema della *jonglerie* nel pensiero cistercense in relazione al concetto di *humilitas*, cfr. Zink, *Poésie et conversion au Moyen Âge*, pp. 164-170 e J. Leclercq, *Le thème de la jonglerie dans les relations entre saint Bernard, Abélard et Pierre le Vénérable*, in *Pierre Abélard, Pierre le Vénérable. Les courants philosophiques, littéraires et artistiques en occident au milieu du XII^e siècle* (Abbaye de Cluny, 2-9 juillet 1972), pp. 671-687, dove si cita, in particolare, la lettera di Bernardo al monaco Ogerio (cfr. Bernardo di Chiaravalle, *Epistolae* (1-210,

za, la traduzione stessa – che è anche trasposizione, transcodifica – si configura come *exinanitio* linguistica, 'incarnazione' del latino nel volgare, entro un coerente progetto artistico in cui l'*humiliatio* è condizione necessaria all'*expressio*, o anche alla *repraesentatio*, dove con questa s'intende, in senso letterale, la restituzione di una presenza.

2. Di rimando, dalla parte del pubblico, l'*ars amandi Deum* dell'*Eructavit* antico-francese e della *Parafrasi di Le Mans* è volta al raggiungimento di questa presenza, che segna il momento propriamente mistico delle due parafrasi. Ciò impone di tornare, per un momento, sulla tradizione cistercense (e non solo) della mistica del *Cantico*, e in particolari sui due poli o generi d'amore fra i quali si svolge l'*itinerarium mentis*: il *languor – amore langueo* (*Ct* 2, 5; 5,8) – e la *charitas – ordinavit in me caritatem* (*Ct* 2, 4). L'interpretazione del *languor*, infatti, può darsi su due linee, le stesse sulle quali si articola l'esegesi tradizionale dell'epitalamio:

a. Sulla linea tipologica, collettiva, che identifica la Sposa con la Chiesa, il *languor* è la condizione esistenziale dell'uomo nella *Regio dissimilitudinis*, malattia dell'esilio e insieme fomite di desiderio, *morbus* e *concupiscentia*, descritta da Agostino, come un affetto insostanziale – non «aliena natura» ma corruzione della nostra stessa natura –; una mancanza ad essere radicale, primigenia, insorta con il Peccato Originale, «illo magno primi hominis peccato»[78], destinata ad essere risanata solo dall'Incarnazione del Verbo e poi, alla fine dei tempi, dalla Parusia. Il *languor* è quindi la *Stimmung* del tempo fra la

211-548), in *Opere VI/1, 2*, ed. J. Leclercq, E. Paratore, Milano, Scriptorium Claravallense 1986-1987, *LXXXVII: Ad Ogerium*, 12).

[78] «Unde illo magno primi hominis peccato, natura ibi nostra in deterius commutata, non solum facta est peccatrix, verum etiam generat peccatores; et tamen ipse languor quo bene vivendi virtus periit, non est utique natura, sed vitium: sicut certe mala in corpore valetudo, non est ulla substantia vel natura, sed vitium; et licet non semper, tamen plerumque malae valetudines parentum ingenerantur quodammodo, et apparent in corporibus filiorum» (Agostino, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*, 2, 57).

Caduta e l'Incarnazione, e tra questa e la visione *facie ad faciem*, dell'*interim* della presente condizione umana, alienata dal volto di Dio:

> Quel mal ceste dame avoit fait
> Dunt ele maine si gra[n]t plait
> Ki ne peut estre pardonez
> Se li beisiers ne fust donez?
> Li maus dunt ele fu reprise,
> Dunt ele fu en eisil mise,
> Dura tres le mors de le pome,
> En dusque Deu prist forme d'ome.
> (*Parafrasi al Cantico*, vv. 83-90)

b. Lungo una linea tropologica, individuale, che prosegue la prima *in interiore homine*, il *languor* definisce più precisamente la malattia che affligge la Sposa del *Cantico* quando è identificata con l'anima che arde di desiderio per lo Sposo. «Dove c'è amore c'è languore, se manca la cosa amata»[79], scrive Bernardo: negli scritti cistercensi il *languor* diventa l'amore per un oggetto assente, la cui lontananza «rende l'anima impaziente», mentre la «dilazione la tortura»[80]. Si tratta, pur nella sua novità, di una ripresa fedele della concezione agostiniana, che appare al contempo approfondita, ovvero introiettata e rivalutata. Il *languor*, infatti, designa sia il sentimento luttuoso per ciò che si è perduto, come in Agostino, sia il desiderio di ritrovarlo alla fine dei tempi, e qui sta la sua caratteristica ambivalenza[81]: se da una parte il *languor* è una tortura per l'anima – che «amat, aestuat, anhelat, et suspirat»[82] per l'assenza – dall'altra, in considerazione del suo oggetto, «iuvat sic aegrotare»[83]. La malattia mortale di Agostino è rivalutata fino all'ossimoro:

[79] «Cum prope est quod amatur, viget amor; languet cum abest» (Bernardo di Chiaravalle, *Sermones in Cantica*, LI, 3).
[80] «Impatientem facit repulsa, et excruciat amantem dilatio» (Bernardo di Chiaravalle, *Sermones in Cantica*, XXVIII, 13).
[81] Così nella *Parafrasi al Cantico* la Sposa è allo stesso tempo in *leece* e *destreece* (vv. 1715-1716).
[82] Baldovino di Ford, *Tractatus diversi*, *PL* 204, col. 540C.
[83] Ivi, col. 545A.

«salubris languor»[84]. È proprio nella trama del *Cantico*, il libro più caro ai cistercensi, che il morbo di Adamo, epitome della condizione umana, stretta tra la coscienza dell'Esilio e speranza nella Grazia, assume le caratteristiche tipiche dell'affetto amoroso, una «mentis hebetudo» ed «insolita quaedam inertia spiritus»[85] che Guglielmo di Saint-Thierry, insieme ad altri, descrive come una sorta di ebbrezza[86]. Il *languor* è, in effetti, un amore smodato e disordinato[87], ossia privo di *ordo*, a causa dell'assenza del suo oggetto – di rimando, la *charitas* deve essere *ordinata* precisamente da una presenza.

Per comprendere come si configuri questa presenza, si deve chiarire, da ultimo, un aspetto decisivo per l'interpretazione complessiva dell'epitalamio. L'esegesi tropologico-anagogica che da Origene giunge sino a Bernardo prendeva le mosse dall'idea dell'elevazione di un amore che si presenta *prima facie* come carnale in amore spirituale. In questo senso, la *charitas ordinata* non è altro che l'amore sensuale di cui parla il *Cantico* quando è 'ordinato' o 'raffinato' nell'amore disincarnato (*non ut carnem et sanguinem*) per Dio:

> Ama et Deum, sed ama illum non ut carnem et sanguinem, sed ut spiritum: «qui» enim «adhaeret domino, unus spiritus est». Igitur ordinata est caritas in perfectis[88].

Come per Origene, anche per i Cistercensi l'amore di cui si parla nel *Cantico* è un amore spirituale. Tuttavia,

[84] Adamo di Perseigne, *Epistola XII*, in *Lettres*, 3 voll., ed. J. Bouvet et P. Deseille, Les éditions du Cerf, Paris 2015² (1960).
[85] Bernardo di Chiaravalle, *Sermones in Cantica*, ed. cit., LXIII, 8.
[86] Guglielmo di Saint-Thierry, *Expositio super Cantica Canticorum*, in *Opera omnia II*, ed. P. Verdeyen, S. Ceglar, Brepols, Turnhout 1997, II. Cfr. la *Parafrasi al Cantico*: «Ceste ivresce est de Deu amer» (v. 269); e ancora: «M'enivra de tel ivresce, | Ki done al cuer molt grant destrece» (vv. 741-742).
[87] «Amans nempe et multum amans, nisi in ipso amore inordinata esset, si prudenter, si temperanter, si fortiter, si juste amaret, non langueret» (Guglielmo di Saint-Thierry, *Expositio super Cantica Canticorum*, ed. cit., II).
[88] Origene, *Omelie sul Cantico dei Cantici*, a cura di M. Simonetti, Fondazione Lorenzo Valla-Mondadori, Milano 1998, II, 8.

a differenza di Origene, l'ordinamento di questo amore non si dà nei modi di un'astrazione, in ossequio alla concezione intellettualistica ed elitaria dell'esegesi alessandrina, bensì nell'empito affettivo e nel possesso della presenza del Verbo-Sposo, che mostrandosi e celandosi suscita le *eructationes* della Sposa:

> Laise, fait ele, que dirai?
> Tote de fail ja perirai;
> Amors m'a mise en grant destroit.
> Cil cui jo aim le seit e voit.
> A lui ferai de lui clamor,
> Kar il me fait languir d'amor.
> Mes Amis seit conbien jo l'aim,
> E de quel cuer jo le reclaim.
> En cest siecle riens ne me plaist,
> Ke plus i sui, plus me deplaist.
> Quan que jo voi, tot m'est a fais,
> Ne.l puet mes cuers porter en pais.
> Jo ne desir se lui sol non,
> Ne sai se lui demant un don.
> Jo li dirai, e tres bien sent,
> Ke trop ferai grant hardement,
> Mais neportant ne lairai mie.
> Destroit d'amor me fait hardie.
> Vieigne Li Dolz, e si me baist,
> D'un sol baiser mon cuer rapaist.
> (*Parafrasi al Cantico*, vv. 129-148)

La sintomatologia tratteggiata nella *Parafrasi di Le Mans* è la stessa descritta molte volte dai Cistercensi. L'amore per lo Sposo è un desiderio esclusivo («Jo ne desir se lui sol non», v. 141), che getta nell'angoscia («destroit») e induce al disprezzo dei beni terreni («En cest siecle riens ne me plaist | Ke plus i sui, plus me deplaist», vv. 136-137), caduti in disdoro di fronte all'unico oggetto d'amore. Questo è la presenza di Dio – «Sa presence»:

> Sa PRESENCE me doinst sentir,
> Cho est li baisiers ko jo desir.
> (*Parafrasi al Cantico*, vv. 149-150)

E poiché, come si è visto, la meta dell'ascesi proposta dai due poemetti volgari non è il Verbo in quanto *invisibilis imago Dei*, ma il Verbo incarnato, *visibilis imago Dei*, la «presence» che ordina il *languor* nella *charitas ordinata* altro non è che la presenza di Cristo, «li baisiers», ossia l'Incarnazione. Così, anche nella parafrasi del *Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui sancti* che funge da dossologia conclusiva a molte versioni dell'*Eructavit* antico-francese e chiude il manoscritto di Le Mans, dopo il *planctus* mariano, i «langorz» sono, in senso cristologico, le pene scaturite dal peccato originale e risanate dal sangue del Salvatore:

> Sire, qui toutes nos dolours
> et nos pechiez et noz langours
> preistes sor vostre biau cors
> et toutes les portastes fors
> et lavastes par le biau sanc
> qui vint de vostre destre flanc,
> lavez moi, Sire, par cele onde
> dont vos lavastes tout le monde.
> (*Eructavit*, vv. 2153-2160)

Al centro della poetica delle due parafrasi epitalamiche antico-francesi vi è l'incontro fra due parole d'amore: quella 'effusa' nelle *eructationes* della Sposa, che non può tacere l'amore[89], e quella 'infusa', 'ordinata'[90], che tramite la presenza in visione dello Sposo-Cristo risana il *languor* in *charitas ordinata*. Si può arrivare a supporre che l'operazione svolta dai parafrasti prenda le mosse, in fondo, dalla suggestione scaturita da un calco a posteriori, *ordo-charitatis* = *fine-amor*, dove l'amor sacro è trasponibile nei termini dell'amor cortese in quanto anch'esso impone un *ordo*, ma con un'inversione decisiva: mentre nell'amor cortese il raffinamento avviene grazie alla lontananza e nella sottrazione dell'oggetto, nell'*ordo*

[89] «L'Espeuse ne s'i puet taisir | E ne.l fait pas por milez laisir; | Mais grant amor ki son cuer art | Le torne tote de se part, | E fait loer celui k'ele aime, | Cui son seignor son ami claime» (vv. 1455-1460).
[90] «Parole dolce e ordenee | Est miels e laiz e plaine ree» (vv. 2295-2296).

charitatis l'amore della Sposa è tutto ebbro e arruffato per l'assenza dello Sposo, ma ordinato e raffinato dalla sua presenza. L'atto traduttivo trova la propria legittimazione nell'epitalamio stesso, o meglio nella sua esegesi simbolica, che parla dell'amore di un mistero che si annienta in parola e carne, mostrandosi: allo stesso modo, il latino mistico si flette nel codice del pubblico – volgare, letterario e cortese. Dal lato del pubblico, invece, la 'mistica' dei due poemetti indica ancora una volta la *domina* – stavolta nella sua sovrapposizione alla *Sponsa Christi* e alla Vergine – come la mediatrice di conoscenza, dal chiostro alla corte, dal latino al volgare.

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The Tradition of saint Michael the Archangel in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*

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Abstract The Middle English poem *Alliterative Morte Arthure* relates the war between king Arthur and the emperor of Rome, Lucius. This paper isolates one specific episode, namely the fight between Arthur and a giant on Mont St Michel, to show how the European tradition of saint Michael the archangel deeply influenced the poet in his retelling, allowing him to expand upon the chronicles by adding a religious dimension to the narrative that further complicates the figure of Arthur and his role as a Christian king.

Keywords: Arthur, giant, saint Michael

Introduction

The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (henceforth *Morte*) is a poem that tells the story of the rise to power of King Arthur, his victory over the Roman emperor Lucius and

his final demise at the hands of the treacherous Mordred. Its 4366 alliterative lines originated from the hand of an anonymous author in Lincolnshire[1] and they survive thanks to the work of Robert Thornton, a Yorkshire scribe who composed the manuscript Lincoln Cathedral MS 91, which contains the only copy of the *Morte*. There is no clear consensus regarding the date of the poem, but both linguistic and thematic evidence seems to suggest that it was written somewhere in the second half of the XIV century, with some scholars going as far as positing the first years of the XV century[2]. With sometimes drastic variance in opinion, the early scholarly approaches to the text identified the XII century chronicles of Geoffrey of Monmouth (*Historia Regum Britanniae*), Wace (*Roman de Brut*) and Layamon (*Brut*) as the main sources[3] and, indeed, the *Morte* follows them for the main plot. However, a closer analysis strongly suggests that the poet had access to a wide variety of texts, employed through a «principle of selectivity»[4] that directed his use of the sources in order to fit a particular vision. The very structure of the poem speaks to this somewhat careful rearrangement of the materials, with the first half organized as a sort of prefiguration, fulfilled in the second half according to a

[1] P.J. MURPHY, F. PORCHEDDU, *Robert Thornton, the* Alliterative Morte Arthure*, and Cambridge University Library MS Dd. 11. 45*, «Modern Philology», 2016, CXIV, pp. 130-47.

[2] W. MATTHEWS, *The Tragedy of Arthur*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1960, pp. 182-92; M. HAMEL (ed. by), *Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition*, Garland, New York-London 1984, pp. 53-8.

[3] P. BRANSCHEID, *Über die Quellen des* Morte Arthure, Erhardt Karras, Halle 1887, pp. 6-7; MATTHEWS, *The Tragedy of Arthur*, cit., pp. 3-5; HAMEL, *Morte Arthure*, cit., pp. 34-8; TANIA VORONTZOFF, *Malory's Story of Arthur's Roman Campaign*, «Medium Ævum», 1937, VI, pp. 107-13. While in this study I mainly focus on these three chronicles for comparison, it is worth noting that the episode of the giant of Mont St Michel is present without significant variation in the French *Suite Vulgate du Merlin (*also known as *Premiers Faits du roi Arthur)* and in the Middle English *Prose Merlin*.

[4] HAMEL, *Morte Arthure*, cit., p. 52.

pattern of rise and fall typical of a tragedy[5]. The most important secondary sources are the following: the legends of Alexander the Great, that inform much of the characterization of king Arthur[6]; the Middle English poem *Sir Ferumbras*, probably an inspiration for the original character called Sir Priamus, who fights against Gawain in the latter portion of the poem (ll. 2513-2649)[7]; *The Siege of Jerusalem*, a XIV century poem that probably lies behind the sometimes contradicting use of the dragon imagery, associated with both Arthur and the Roman legions[8].

The peculiar use of the sources, the presence of many French words in an English poem and the fact that a series of episodes bears some resemblance to actual events of the Hundred Years' War led scholars to debate over the precise intention of the writer. The debate largely polarised between those who underlined the propagandistic aspect of the text, imbued with British nationalism, and the opposing side that saw the poem as a critique of imperial conquest[9]. Indeed, the text provides evidence for both readings, simultaneously exalting Arthur as the rightful king and depicting his ruinous fall, caused by his violent warmongering fuelled by the capital sin of pride. The present paper attempts to move beyond this stale-

[5] R. Peck, *Wilfulness and Wonders: Boethian Tragedy in the* Alliterative Morte Arthure, in *The Alliterative Tradition in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. by B.S. Levy, P.E. Szarmach, The Kent State University Press, Kent 1981, p. 157.

[6] Almost the entirety of Matthews' book is devoted to the exploration of this inflluence of the Alexander Legends.

[7] Hamel, *Morte Arthure*, cit., pp. 39-40; on the issue of the use of Sir Ferumbras instead of its French original see: H.R. Griffith, *Malory,* Morte Arthure *and* Fierabras, «Anglia», 1909, XXXIII, pp. 389-98; J. Finlayson, *The* Alliterative Morte Arthure *and* Sir Ferumbras, «Anglia», 1974, LXXI, pp. 380-86.

[8] Hamel, *Morte Arthure*, cit., pp. 46-52.

[9] For a brief but comprehensive review of this polarisation see: F. Tolhurst, K.S. Whetter, *Memories of War: Retracting the Interpretive Tradition of the* Alliterative Morte Arthure, «Arthuriana», 2019, XXIX, pp. 88-108. Although providing some valuable insights, these scholars seem to play into the same dynamic without being able to move forward.

mate, granting that both readings of the poem are equally valid, but need to be incorporated in a wider coherent vision. To do so, I focus on what I argue is another secondary source, largely overlooked by the scholarship, namely the European tradition of saint Michael the archangel. To explore the influence of this tradition I analyse one of the central episodes of the story that relates the fight between king Arthur and a giant that lives on top of Mont St Michel (ll. 841-1222). In the chronicles, which narrate Arthur's entire career, it occupies a small place, but in the *Morte* it is «one of the poet's major expansions»[10], recognized by scholars to be a narrative tool that heightens Arthur's heroism[11]. The *Morte* poet summarises Arthur's rise to power in the first 77 lines, immediately introducing the Roman legacy that challenges his authority and demands his submission. After a war council, the British swiftly move to the continent but the actual encounter with the Roman forces is delayed until line 1231 and what occupies the first quarter of the poem is the build-up to the fight with the giant. Not only does it appear to be the first real challenge for the king, but both Finlayson and Rudnyztky Schray consider it to be a microcosm of the whole poem[12], establishing without question its importance in the general balance of the poet's work. Moreover, only in the *Morte* Mont St Michel already bears this name and the dedication to the archangel upon Arthur's arrival, being «saint Michel mount, there miracles are shewed»[13] (l. 899). This would appear to draw away the narrative from an historical perspective, putting the

[10] Matthews, *The Tragedy of Arthur*, cit., p. 24.
[11] J. Finlayson, *Arthur and the giant of St. Michael's Mount*, «Medium Ævum», 1964, XXXIII p. 115; K. Rudnytzky Schray, *The Plot in Miniature: Arthur's Battle on Mont St. Michel in the* Alliterative Morte Arthure, «Studies in Philology», 2004, CI, pp. 2-6.
[12] Finlayson, *Arthur and the giant*, cit., pp. 112-3; Rudnytzky Schray, *The Plot in Miniature*, cit., p. 2.
[13] L.D. Benson, E.E. Foster (ed. by), *King Arthur's Death, the Middle English* Stanzaic Morte Arthur *and* Alliterative Morte Arthure, Medieval Institute Publications, Kalamazoo 1994. All quotes for the *Morte* are taken from this edition.

stress more on the symbolic aspect[14]. There is indeed a great difference between dedicating a place to the saint after having defeated a monster, as it happens in the chronicles, and reclaiming a sacred place from a usurping one. Every chronicle sets the episode in the past and, according to Tatlock, Geoffrey of Monmouth showed a lot of interest in the region of Brittany, stating that «it is certain that [he] had detailed knowledge of Mont saint Michel»[15]. Nonetheless, Geoffrey writes that the giant was hiding «in cacumine montis qui nunc Michaelis dicitur»[16] and both Wace and Layamon reproduce this pattern without significant variation.

Besides the centrality of this fight and its implications on the entire poem, I argue that approaching the *Morte* through Michael helps to reframe the ambiguities of the poem in a way that goes beyond the polarisation found in the scholarship. In fact, this tradition predates the chronicles by centuries, yet it persisted throughout the Hundred Years' War, with attempts by both Britain and France to appropriate the saint's legend for nationalistic purposes. If the poet was familiar with this tradition, his use of English and French (and the sympathy he shows towards France) might become less surprising, especially in light of the complex discourse on kingship, tyranny and the justification of war that runs through the entirety of the poem. Moreover, the poem's heavily religious tone has been unequivocally recognized by the scholars, and it is indeed the first element encountered by the reader in the form of the introductory prayer, which states that an attentive listening would be profitable in order to reach the Kingdom of Heaven (ll. 1-26).

[14] Ch.L. Pipkin, *Monster Relics: The Giant, the Archangel, and Mont-Saint-Michel in the* Alliterative Morte Arthure, «Arthuriana», 2017, XXVII, p. 99.
[15] J.S.P. Tatlock, *The Legendary History of the Kings of Britain*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1974, p. 87.
[16] Geoffrey Of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. by M.D. Reeve, traduzione di N. Wright, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge 2007, p. 225. «to the summit of the mount now known as St Michael's».

Although there seems to be a tendency to consider these expressions as formulaic, the overall tone of the poem suggests a more serious consideration. I maintain that by taking this religious frame seriously and exploring the lore of the angelic figures of Christianity, even the ambiguity created by Arthur's praise and his depiction as the worst of sinners becomes less problematic. The intimate relationship between kingship and the angelic hierarchy allows for the simultaneous praise of the former, while affirming its unavoidable subordination to the latter.

In the first section of this paper I give an account of the historical connection between the archangel and the idea of hierarchy, central to both the general premise of the *Morte*, where the narrative is set in motion by Arthur's refusal to submit to the Roman authority, and the episode of Mont St Michel, where the struggle is re-enacted in the fight between the rightful king and the tyrannical giant. The second section deals in detail with the episode of the fight, following three guiding ideas that clarify the connections with the tradition of Michael: pilgrimage, the passage from life to death and Antichrist.

Heavenly Hierarchy and Earthly Authority

Records of saint Michael are found from the Middle East to the northern regions of Europe and even predate the Old Testament accounts. The importance of the cult of the angels in the Eastern Church is attested since the IV century[17], and its prominence and dissemination led the Council of Laodicea (360-80) to intervene with a rather unsuccessful attempt to curb its excesses[18]. In the V

[17] J. Kramer, H. Magennis, R. Norris (ed. by), *Anonymous Old English Lives of Saints*, Harvard University Press, London 2020, («Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library», LXIII), p. XXIV.

[18] A. Heinz, *Saint Michel dans le 'Monde Germanique'. Histoire-Culte-Liturgie,* in *Culto e santuari di san Michele nell'Europa Medievale*, Atti del Congresso Internazionale di studi (Bari – Monte Sant'Angelo, 5-8 aprile 2006), ed. by P. Bouet, G. Otranto, A. Vauchez, Edipuglia, Bari 2007, p. 40.

century, a basilica on the Via Salaria in Rome was dedicated to Michael and on the 8th of May 492 an apparition of the saint on top of Mount Gargano in Apulia marked an important point in a history of devotion that maintained a strong grip well into the XX century, when the German youth used this imagery for their nationalist propaganda[19]. More importantly, *De Coelesti Hierarchia*, a V century text which explores the angelic hierarchies and their meaning, endured throughout the centuries as part of the Western tradition thanks to figures such as pope Gregory the Great and Thomas Aquinas. Gregory's homily 34 (where the main concepts of *De Coelesti Hierarchia* are summarised) became one of the sources for the Latin chronicles (IX to XII century) that relate the story of the foundation of the monastery of Mont St Michel in Normandy. These texts report the first appearance of the archangel on Mount Tumba, the consecration of the site and the establishment of the monastic community. The *Revelatio ecclesiae sancti Michaelis archangeli in Monte Tumba*, considered the first and most important one among these texts[20], offers a theological justification for the presence of the monastery, referring to the Easter message of the angels «Migremus ex his sedibus!»[21] when they left the East to settle in the West. As further evidence of the enduring nature of the angelic traditions, the *Revelatio*, written around the IX century, established the validity and orthodoxy of the cult amidst Alcuin and Charlemagne's reforms that wanted to curb many superstitious practices[22]. In doing so the author outlines a «véritable théologie du monde celeste»[23] creating a connection between royal power and the archangel Michael through a concept deeply tied to the very structure of re-

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
[20] Pierre Bouet, Olivier Desbordes (ed. by), *Chroniques latines du Mont Saint-Michel (IX-XII siècle) les manuscrits du Mont Saint-Michel. Textes fondateurs 1*, Presses Universitaires de Caen, Caen 2009, p. 10.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 93. «Let's leave this place».
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 38.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 38. «veritable theology of the Heavens».

ality, that of hierarchy. This text seems to have been central to the monks of the mount, as it incorporated small treatises and prayers that expand on the lore of the angels, reflect on the role of Lucifer, and grapple with the nature of Hell and the events of the Last Judgement[24].

As the Latin chronicles of Mont St Michel suggest, the history of the abbey is one of strong independence and careful balance, achieved through both theological and political means. According to the legend, saint Aubert founded the abbey by direct command of Michael, and historical evidence shows that he was a bishop related to the dynasty of the Pippinids, being installed to the seat of Avranches after the battle of Tertry in 687[25]. Mont St Michel was not the only place that used the angelic hierarchy to legitimise its position since, in the wider region of Austrasia, the aristocracy saw Michael as «un protecteur susceptible de favorises leur access et leur mantien au pouvoir» [26]. In Portugal as well, from the end of the IX century, with a surge in the XI century, Michael was the patron saint of different churches belonging to the most powerful aristocratic families[27], and around the same time, the archangel played an important role at the court of the Spanish kings of Asturias and Navarre[28]. Even in England, in the area of Herefordshire, the archangel was the «patron of churches associated with royal power – whether major centres, places with putative royal cha-

[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.
[25] C. Beaune, *Naissance de la nation France*, Gallimard, Paris 1985, p. 191.
[26] V. Juhel, C. Vincent, *Culte et Sanctuaires de Saint Michel en France*, in *Culto e Santuari di san Michele nell'Europa Medievale*, cit., p. 191. «a protector susceptible of favouring their access and keeping of power»
[27] M. De Gouveia, *S. Miguel na religiosidade moçárabe (Portugal, séc. IX-XI)*, in *Culto e Santuari di san Michele nell'Europa Medievale*, cit., p. 96.
[28] P. Henriet, *Protector et defensor omnium. Le Culte de Saint Michel en Péninsule Ibérique (Haut Moyen Âge)*, in *Culto e Santuari di san Michele nell'Europa Medievale*, cit., p. 119.

pels, or small manors»[29], and a considerable number of sites dedicated to him were located in the area of Lincolnshire, where the *Morte* is said to have been created[30].

Although these pieces of evidence are chronologically distant from the date of composition of the *Morte*, under the guidance of Robert de Thorigny (1154-85), Mont St Michel enjoyed a period of particular prosperity and a vernacular rendition of the Latin chronicles was commissioned to Guillaume de saint Pair[31]. His *Roman du Mont Saint-Michel* survives in two manuscripts, one of which, British Library Additional 26876 (dated circa 1340), presumably reached the shores of England in the fifteenth century[32]. The *Roman* was likely indebted to Geoffrey's *Historia* and was specifically addressed to the pilgrims who came to the monastery and wanted to know more of its history[33]. Although the popularity of Geoffrey's *Historia* makes it a more suitable candidate as a direct source of the *Morte*, the tradition of Michael was enduring and well-established, so much so that the poet might have come across some of its expressions. Moreover, as I will discuss later, the centrality of the pilgrimage, the description of the surroundings of the mount and the focus on the relics in the *Morte* find no parallel in any of the chronicles but they are all mentioned in the *Roman*.

A Contested Saint

As I have anticipated above, scholars have argued for a possible relationship between the *Morte* and the events of the Hundred Years' War as during this period Michael

[29] G. Jones, *The Cult of Michael the Archangel in Britain*, in *Culto e Santuari di san Michele nell'Europa Medievale*, cit., p. 165.
[30] *Ibid*., p. 152.
[31] Beaune, *Naissance de la nation France*, cit., p. 190.
[32] Guillaume de Saint-Pair, *Le Roman du Mont Saint-Michel (XII siècle) : les manuscrits du Mont Saint-Michel. Textes fondateurs 2*, ed. by Catherine Bougy, Presses Universitaires de Caen, Caen 2009, p. 45.
[33] *Ibid*., p. 11.

still retained much of his importance in the power struggle. Although the house of Valois adopted his patronage only after their ascent to power, other branches of the royal lineage were devoted to Michael during the central years of the war. The family Blois-Penthièvre, whose dominions were near Mont St Michel, had a veneration for the saint and his image figured on the white banners of Charles de Blois at the battle of Auray in 1364 (fought on the 29th of September, which is one of the dates when the saint is celebrated)[34]. The Ecreux-Navarre family, established in the lower part of Normandy, had a particular devotion to the archangel and Charles le Mauvais, in 1360, gave ample gifts to Mont St Michel abbey as did his son. Charles' younger brother, Louis, went twice on pilgrimage (1358-68), leading Colette Beaune to affirm that for a time «la region et le culte apparaissent donc comme navarrais ou meme proanglais»[35], to the point that even the abbot Geoffrey de Serron swore loyalty to the English king, Edward III, in 1364. The archangel seems, therefore, to have been claimed by the opposing factions, leading to the definitive adoption of Michael as the royal national saint of France under Charles VII[36]. The presence of Michael in a contested zone in the midst of the Hundred Years' War is rather relevant for the *Morte*, whose "loyalty" has been at the centre of much of its scholarly debate, with differing positions that argued for its French rather than English origin[37]. The glorification of an Arthur reminiscent of Edward III is coupled in the poem with a sympathetic focus on France and its people; this creates a picture that transcends national boundaries through a figure who was part of the common European heritage. Although any perfect parallel between the events of the

[34] Beaune, *Naissance de la nation France*, cit., p. 192.
[35] *Ibid.*, p. 193. «the cult appeared, then, as Navarrese or pro-English».
[36] Beaune, *Naissance de la nation France*, cit., p. 194.
[37] Matthews, *The Tragedy of Arthur*, cit., p. 4; p. 182; T. Vorontzoff, *Malory's Story*, cit., pp. 109-113; T.L.N. O'loughlin, *The Tragedy of Arthur. A Study of the* Alliterative Morte Arthure *by William Matthews*, «The Review of English Studies», 1963, LIV, pp. 179-82.

war and the story of the *Morte* has been discouraged by George Keiser's careful analysis[38], it seems reasonable to suggest that the narrative was at least partly informed by it. In particular, the symbolism of Michael's legitimation of hierarchical power is one of the central aspects of the episode of the fight between Arthur and the giant, which reproduces the focus on the archangel that had become central to the power struggle during the years of the war.

Pilgrimage to a Monster

The *Morte* poet reframes the encounter on Mont St Michel in a way that places the archangel at the centre, making him the axel around which both structural elements and details are reorganized. Indeed, Arthur's approach to the mountain becomes a pilgrimage to a holy site and the insertion of a scene that is strongly reminiscent of a passage from life to death helps to introduce the language and imagery associated with the later fight against the giant, which has been turned from a chivalric adventure into a religious endeavour.

Upon reaching the shores of France it is not a mere messenger that relates the news of the giant to the king, but a Templar, already marking the first major change from the chronicles[39]. Having been informed of the fate of the maiden, Arthur initially conceals his true intent, telling Kay and Bedevere that he «will pass in pilgrimage privily hereafter / [...] / For to seeken a saint by yon salt stremes» (ll. 896-8). Leaving aside the more strictly political implications of this episode, the *Morte* fight with the monster might be conceptualized as a sort of spiritual combat that Arthur must engage alone: «I will seek this saint by myselve one» (l. 937). Moreover, although he wants his men after «even-song be armed at rightes» (l. 894), he also commands them to be ready to make of-

[38] G. Keiser, *Edward III and the* Alliterative Morte Arthure, «Speculum», 1973, XLI, pp. 37-51.
[39] For more on the Templar see G. Heng, *Empire of Magic*, Columbia University Press, New York 2003, pp. 115-128.

ferings «menskfully at saint Michael, full mighty with Christ» (l. 940). The images of spiritual warfare permeate the entirety of the episode, adding another symbolic layer to the detailed description of Arthur's arming (ll. 901-14), that once again is performed «after even-song» (l. 900). The office of even-song, or vespers, was celebrated at sundown and it is interesting to report that in the monastery of Tallaght (Ireland) the monks used to sing the hymn of saint Michael (*In Trinitate Spes Mea* also called St Michael's circle of protection) before going to sleep to invoke the archangel for special protection during the night[40]. The knights are, therefore, approaching the mountain during a liminal moment, that becomes even more symbolically charged when they ride by a river through what can be described as a *locus amoenus* (ll. 920-32). The landscape is paradisiacal, and a series of different birds can be heard, among whom the cuckoo and the nightingale are singled out as being particularly cheerful (ll. 927-30). The poet links the singing of birds to the healing powers of water since «that whate swowing of water and singing of birds, / It might salve him of sore that sound was never» (ll. 931-2). All these elements should not be considered mere embellishments on the poet's part, since they find a series of striking parallels with the tradition of Michael. As stated in an XI century Old English homily the archangel had the power «Þa geomriendan he blisanð and Þa wanhalan he gelacnað»[41]. When one considers that in Britain the association of Michael with baptismal fonts was a central aspect of his cult[42] and that the fight with the giant occurs near a well (l. 884; l. 949) – never mentioned in the chronicles – these images start to gain a certain level of coherence. Moreover, in the *Morte* this episode is balanced in the later part of the poem with another adventure that

[40] J.M. Picard, *La Diffusion du Culte de Saint Michel en Irlande Medievale*, in *Culto e Santuari di san Michele nell'Europa Medievale*, cit., p. 139.
[41] Kramer, Magennis, Norris, *Anonymous Old English Lives of Saints*, cit., p. 451. «to cheer the sad and heal the sick».
[42] Jones, *The Cult of Michael the archangel in Britain*, cit., pp. 168-75.

mirrors the knight riding out alone and fighting a foe by a stream, after having passed through a *locus amoenus*. Gawain, the best of Arthur's knights, fights Sir Priamus and their encounter poignantly ends with the healing of both heroes through a magic balm, filled with the waters of Paradise, in a scene that has all the characteristics of baptismal death and resurrection (ll. 2501-2716)[43].

As previously mentioned, none of these elements can be found in the chronicles, but the *Roman du Mont Saint-Michel* proves particularly useful. When the pilgrims that accompany the relics coming from Apulia are approaching the mount, the delightful scenery described is very similar to that of the *Morte*. Not only do the pilgrims chant but also the cattle and the horses express their joy and «neis par les bois chantouent tuit / Li oiselet grant et petit»[44] (ll. 777-8). The passage of the relics heals the sick (ll. 921-4) in such a prodigious way that «autes enfers I out assez / De diverses dolors sanez; / Gariz I out tant des fievrous / Que je nel sei aconter vos» [45] (ll. 941-4). Aside from the description of the place and the healing aspect, even the importance of the relics is reproduced in the *Morte*, although somewhat obliquely. Indeed, while in the *Roman* the relics help to establish and legitimise the authority of the place, in the *Morte* the poet plays in an ironic and ambivalent manner with this image, having Sir Bedevere jokingly confuse the saint with the monster at the end of the fight (ll. 1162-9)[46]. It would appear that the paradoxical nature of the relics of an incorporeal being was not lost on the poet, who used this element as well to further complicate his discourse on the

[43] It might be useful to remember that the Sir Priamus character is based on Sir Ferumbras, a Saracen giant.
[44] Guillaume de Saint-Pair, *Le Roman du Mont Saint-Michel*, cit., p 151. «The birds, small and big, sang in the woods».
[45] *Ibid*., p. 157. «There were many others healed from different illnesses: so many were healed from the fever that I cannot enumerate them all».
[46] The joke at the lines 1162-9 is thoroughly analysed by Pipkin, pp. 95-113.

balance between authority and tyranny, in full display during the fight between Arthur and the giant.

Journeying through Death

The passing by a river through the woods at evensong, alongside the parallels to the strong baptismal imagery in the encounter with Sir Priamus, suggests the interpretation of this episode as an allegorical journey into death. Again, according to the Old English homily previously mentioned, the archangel not only received the soul of Abel, the first martyr, and that of Mary after her death but he will also «se ðe onra gehwilces soðfæstes mannes saule gelædeð Þurh Þa gatu Þæs ecan lifes to hefena rice»[47], effectively making him a ferryman from this life to the next. In the *Morte*, Arthur is making his way alone towards Mont St Michel, which the poet has carefully established as a place of death: the Templar has told the king that on top of the crag «there may thou find folk fey withouten number» (l. 886); upon reaching the top of the mount Arthur will find a widow on the grave of the maiden, who will spare him no admonishments, calling him «unblessed» (l. 964) and predicting his death: «But thou art fey, by my faith, and that me forthinkes!» (l. 973). During the fight the king will risk his life many a times and even when he is able to slay the monster, the battle has been so fierce that the Arthurian knights are convinced that their champion has been killed in the melee (ll. 1152-5). Considering the combination of these elements, it is interesting to note that Mont St Michel was at times called Mount Tumba in the chronicle tradition and according to the Latin chronicles of the mount, incorporated in the *Roman*, «Mont Tombe que l'archange a choisi pour y faire édifier un sanctuaire en son honneur [...] a

[47] Kramer, Magennis, Norris, *Anonymous Old English Lives of Saints*, cit., p. 447. «lead the soul of every single faithful person through the gates of eternal life to the Kingdom of Heaven.». The stated intention of the poem is to learn how to reach the Kingdom of Heaven.

la forme de l'arche de Noé, grace à laquelle fut sauvé de l'anéantissement le genre humain.»[48]. Although I do not argue that the poet was aware of every facet of this complex tradition associated with the sanctuary of Mont St Michel, it is indeed noteworthy that in the *Morte* the episode of the fight with the giant is preceded by a voyage on a boat where the king is visited by a prophetic dream (ll. 758-833). In the dream a dragon and a bear face each other in a terrible combat. The philosophers summoned by the king interpret it as a prefiguration of the upcoming fight that will see Arthur, the dragon, victorious over the tyrannical giant, represented by the bear. The *Morte* poet once again takes this opportunity to create a more refined picture than that found in the chronicles. Indeed, he has the audience draw closer and closer to the king who is slowly falling asleep, in a careful progression that shows him «in a grete cogge […] in a cabane enclosed […] within on a rich bed» (ll. 758-61), effectively conjuring the image of an entombment and creating an almost perfect parallel with the Mont St Michel episode that will come right afterwards. In light of these elements, the introductory prayer is revealed as not merely a formulaic invitation to focus on the morally edifying meaning of a seemingly simple chronicle account, but also as a point of access to the deeper meanings informed by the tradition of saint Michael.

A King against the Antichrist

Having established this deeply religious framework, almost every remaining element of the fight becomes more intelligible. At its centre lies the specifically Christian opposition between humility and pride, respectively embodied by God the Father and Satan. The first one is the figure of supreme authority who entered history

[48] Bouet, Desbordes, *Chroniques Latines du Mont Saint-Michel*, cit., p 30. «Mount Tombe that the archangel has chosen as the place where his sanctuary should be built has the form of Noah's Ark, thanks to which humanity was saved from annihilation.».

by becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ, the only «king of kings» (Revelation 17:14) who chose to become the least among his peers and to die a shameful death. The second figure, Satan, who was already the brightest of the angels, proudly rebelled against God and tried to substitute Him. In the form of the serpent, he corrupted humanity, caused the Fall and put in motion the very process that required the Incarnation and the final Apocalypse. It is in this scheme of Fall caused by the sin of pride, and Redemption through the virtue of humility, that the figure of saint Michael makes its appearance. Once again, the Old English homily on the saint clearly explains his eschatological role:

> Þis is se halga heahengel Sanctus Michael, se ðe ær Þisse worulde ende ofslihð Þone ealdan feond, Þæt is se micla draca se ðe æt frymðe middangardes gesceapen wæs to ðam beorhtestan engle. Ac he selfa hit forworhte mid ði he cwæð, "Ic hebbe min heahsetl to norðdæle, and ic beo gelic Þam heahstan cyninge." And Þa gefeol he and gehreas mid his werode on niwulnesse grund, efene se illca Antacrist se ær ðisse worlde ende cymeð on ðisne middangeard to ðam Þæt sceal gesamnian ða ðe his sindon. Þanne cymeð Sanctus Michael and hine ofslihð forðorn ðe he hit æfre geðohte Þæt he scolde gelic beon ðan heahstan cyninge[49].

This passage is worth quoting in full, since it can be considered the blueprint for the *Morte* reimagining of the Mont St Michel episode. Indeed, the giant's actions and appearance establish him both as a tyrant, who despises any authority, and as a veritable Antichrist, that is confronted and cast into the abyss by king Arthur through the intercession of the archangel. Not only does the

[49] Kramer, Magennis, Norris, *Anonymous Old English Lives of Saints*, cit., pp. 449-51. «Before the end of this world (he) will slay the ancient enemy, that is, the great dragon who at the beginning of the earth was created as the brightest angel. But he ruined it himself when he said, 'I will raise my high seat in the north, and I will be like the highest king.' Then he fell and tumbled down with this host to the bottom of the abyss, exactly the same Antichrist who before the end of this world will come to this earth in order to gather those who are his. Then Saint Michael will come and slay him because he ever thought that he should be like the highest king.».

Morte poet describe the giant as a veritable foe of Christianity in his cannibalistic meal of baptized children (ll. 844-5), but he also inserts in his narrative the presence of Saracen forces throughout the entirety of the poem, adding a crusading frame to the battles of the Arthurian knights[50]. As rightly observed by Finlayson, the description of the giant is not a mere exercise in imagination on part of the poet, but rather it helps to create a character that strikingly resembles the devils in medieval wall paintings[51]. Composed of an impressive list of wild animals, this monster «engendered of fendes» (l. 843) has all the exterior characteristics of the devil. Moreover, the fact that he is not a generic monster, but a giant further reinforces his association with Satan. In fact, borrowing from the writings of Church Fathers like Augustine and Isidore of Seville, the medieval conception of the giant was closely related to that of the devil himself. Isidore writes that «Nemrod gigas diaboli typum expressit, qui superbo appetitu culmen divinae celsitudinis appetivit, dicens: Ascendam super altitudinem nubium, et ero similis Altissimo.»[52].

Even the apocalyptic overtone is present in the *Morte*, where every encounter is framed in a religious scheme that seems to go beyond the simple political implications that could be derived from the chronicles. There are multiple mentions of the Last Judgement scattered throughout the *Morte*. In the first part of the poem, the dispute with Lucius should be resolved with a duel: «the Drighten at Doomsday dele as Him likes» (l. 1278). When Gawain and the Duke of Lorraine face each other in battle, the author evokes the fight in the Vale of Josaphat (l. 1875), the place where the Final Judgement is bound to

[50] There are twenty mentions of Saracens forces both in the Roman army and in the army of Mordred.
[51] Finlayson, *Arthur and the Giant of St. Michael's Mount*, cit., p. 114.
[52] Isidorus Hispaliensis, *Allegoriae quaedam scripturae sacrae*, ed. by J.P. Migne; PL 83, 1850, p. 103. «The giant Nimrod is a type of the devil, who desired to reach the summit of divine height with his prideful appetite saying: I will ascend above the clouds and will be like the Most High.».

take place according to Joel 3:2 and 3:12, and during this encounter the word «judge» (l. 2876) describes the demise of two enemy knights. Even in the last part of the poem this imagery is still relevant when the philosophers who interpret Arthur's dream of the Wheel of Fortune and the Nine Worthies tell the king that he will be «deemed on Doomesday for deeds of armes / for the doughtiest that ever was dwelland on erthe» (ll. 3448-9).

This straightforward reading might be deceitful since the *Morte* poet did not seem content with a simplistic characterization of Arthur as the good king against the evil giant. Through a complex discourse on the legitimacy of power, the poet keeps shifting his position perhaps to remind the reader that no matter how righteous the king, he still belongs to a fallen world where the wheat will grow together with the chaff until the very last day. As stated above, the discourse on the legitimacy of kingship is the starting point of the *Morte*, but it takes a central role in the Mont St Michel episode. When the British troops disembark, the Templar tells Arthur that a «tyraunt» (l. 842) is tormenting his people in Normandy, and only subsequently describes him as a «giaunt» (l. 843). The term tyrant is present throughout the poem, used to describe many of the giants and knights of the Roman army (l. 2408; l. 2574), but also for the unjust request of tributes by the Romans (l. 273). Only in the *Morte* the defilement of the maiden is coupled with the unlawful possessions by the giant of «mo florins […] than Fraunce […] and more treasure […] than in Troy» (ll. 885-7). Moreover, Arthur's stated intention is to speak to the giant «to trete with that tyraunt for tresoun of landes / and take trews for a time til it may tide better» (ll. 878-9). He repeats this to Kay and Bedevere, telling them that he will «mele[53] with this master mann that this mount yemes» (l.

[53] Mary Hamel, elaborating upon Valery Krishna's comments that 'mell' can have the double meaning of negotiate and mingle in combat, maintains that, given the context, the 'negotiating' aspect is prevalent in this early dealing with the giant. Hamel, *Morte Arthure*, cit., p. 290.

938) and upon meeting the old widow he states this one last time (ll. 990-2). The widow goes along with this narrative, suggesting that Arthur should «kneel in thy kirtle and call him thy lord» (l. 1024) when he meets him at supper, effectively creating the same image of the arrival of the Roman messengers at the beginning of the poem and prefiguring a later event when the Romans are defeated (l. 2312)[54]. The widow's description of the giant establishes that a key aspect of his monstrosity is his living outside the law «as lord in his owen» (l. 997). Significantly, these very same words will be employed to describe Arthur later in the poem when he reaches the ultimate stage of unbridled power[55] (l. 3092). The *Morte* poet also transforms the game-like request of Arthur's beard by the giant into an economic issue. In all the chronicle accounts, the giant possesses a kirtle made of the beards of those he has defeated, and his desire is now set on the king's beard. In the *Morte* the beards that make up this kirtle are described as tributes («fermes», l. 1005), given every Easter by fifteen realms and once again, the same images will be used by the poet to describe Arthur's own tyrannical behaviour (l. 2305). Even during the fight itself, the complexity of the poet's discourse on power and legitimacy clearly emerges when one of the giant's blows throws to the ground Arthur's «crest and the coronal, the claspes of silver» (l. 1108).

This ambiguity in the relationship between Arthur and the giant is not haphazardly inserted by the poet, but it appears to be carefully planned from the start. Some hints are already present in the dream that precedes the episode of Mont St Michel, where Arthur has a vision of a dreadful Dragon confronted by a hideous Bear, resulting in the victory of the former. The philosophers interpret the Dragon as being Arthur and the bear

[54] Arthur even lies about his identity saying that he is a "messenger to this mix" (l. 989), sent by the king to treat with the tyrant.

[55] This is once again a reference to the status of Satan as described in the Old English homily, who wants to rule independently from God's authority. In this respect, the more Arthur exhibits tyrannical aspects, the more he is embodying the satanic sin of pride.

as either the tyrants he must slay, or the giant he will face on Mont St Michel. Göller notes that the dream represents «in an encoded form [Arthur's] entire life»[56]. In fact, some of the details that describe the Bear are not only shared by the giant, but by Arthur as well when he slowly descends into a tyrannical figure that comes to resemble the foe he has slain on top of Mount St Michel[57]. The ambiguity surrounding Arthur appears to support Göller's assertion that the king comes to represent both the Dragon and the Bear in the *Morte*. This critical duality suggests that the anonymous poet employed this level of complexity to reflect on issues of kingship and tyranny through the opposing figures of the Giant and Michael. The poet was aware of the Christian association of the Dragon with «evil, heresy, and the Anti-Christ»[58] and he consciously decided to play into this aspect, made problematic by the traditional tie of King Arthur to that monster[59]. In the *Morte* the Dragon is «dredful to behold» (l. 762), it has come to «drenchen» (l. 763) the people and Arthur is so disturbed by it that he tells his men that he was «drenched with a dragon» (l. 813). The ambiguity is only heightened when the philosophers tell the king that the monster «soothly and certain thyselven it is» (ll. 817-9). As the giant is judged through the authority of saint Michael at the top of the mountain, King Arthur as well will be judged and incur divine retribution upon reaching the pinnacle of earthly power, having committed the very sin that he shares with both Satan and the giants of the Bible, namely the sin of «surquidrie» (l. 3406).

[56] K.H. Göller, *The Dream of Dragon and Bear*, in *The* Alliterative Morte Arthure. *A Reassessment of the Poem*, ed. by K.H. Göller, St. Edmundsbury Press, Bury St. Edmunds 1981, pp. 131.
[57] For a fuller treatment of this resemblance see L. Zaccaria, *Wrestling with Giants. Kingship and Tyranny in the Alliterative Morte Arthure*, Unpublished Master Thesis, University of Padua, 2025, pp. 51-67.
[58] Göller, *The Dream of Dragon and Bear*, cit., p. 132.
[59] J.S.P. Tatlock, *The Dragons of Wessex and Wales*, «Speculum», 1933, VIII, pp. 223-35.

The *Morte* poet seems to have been deeply aware of the risks of using an important figure such as that of Michael, linking him to the most famous of the British kings. Indeed, a seemingly minor detail seems to bring together the *Morte* poet and the author of the *Revelatio* in their attempt to achieve complete orthodoxy. Devotion to this angelic mediator could have devolved into his worship at the expense of the one true God, reproducing once again the pattern of Satan, who tried to substitute himself to the Most High. To deal with this, the *Morte* poet has Arthur redirect the praise away from himself when he is greeted as a saviour: after the defeat of the giant, he thanks God for his grace «and no gomes elles, / For it was never mans deed, but might of Himselven / Or miracle of his Moder, that mild is till all» (ll. 1209-11). Even if victory came under the sign of the archangel, Arthur is quick to point to God and Mary, reproducing in narrative form the same substitution that in Spain and in England has been attested in the dedication of churches and holy sites[60].

The proud ascension to the top of the mountain, the refusal to bow to any authority, the killing of children, raping of the young maiden and hoarding of riches all concur in transforming the simple monster of the chronicles into an apocalyptic figure of Antichrist that needs the intervention of saint Michael himself in order to be defeated. Against this formidable opponent, notwithstanding all the ambiguity present in the episode, Arthur is still the worthiest of the earthly Christian kings and indeed it is through him that divine authority is enforced in the world. As I have mentioned in the first part of this paper, it was through the figure of saint Michael that many of the European royal houses legitimised their claim to power, and I argue that it is in this context that Arthur's speech before defeating the giant should be placed. Right

[60] The importance of Mary is repeated even during the sea-battle against the forces of Mordred, when the poet states that Arthur had fought all his battles under the banner with the effigy of the Virgin (ll. 3648-9).

before launching his attack, Arthur tells the monster that «I shall merk thee thy meed as thou has much served / Through might of Saint Michel that this mount yemes[61]! » (ll. 1068-9). Acting through the power of the saint, Arthur is able to restore the peak of the mountain (the highest point of the hierarchy of authority) to its rightful owner, exacting retribution in the same way as the archangel. As if the invocation of Michael was not enough, at the end of the fight the fiend is cast down from the heights together with Arthur, «Fro the heghe of the hill unto the hard rock / They feyne never ere they fall at the flood marches» (ll. 1146-7), reproducing the pattern of the archangel's story in a way that is not present in the chronicles, where the fight ends on the top of the mountain.

Conclusions

In a narrative as complex as that of the *Morte*, bestowing an excessive importance on a single episode would be a mistake. However, a close analysis of the fight between king Arthur and the giant of Mont St Michel helps to reveal the extent to which the tradition of saint Michael the archangel influenced the anonymous poet, in turn allowing for a more balanced view of the meaning of the poem and a more accurate placement in its historical context. In fact, the coherence of the elements that compose the episode suggests that the poet worked within some set boundaries and that the changes from the chronicle tradition should not be accounted as mere embellishments and expansions. As I have argued throughout this paper, both the structure of this episode, framed in the *Morte* in a pattern of rise and fall, and its many new details that create a distinctly religious overtone fall inside the tradition of saint Michael as it was expressed in a variety of texts and in a series of practices of his cult

[61] Yeme: 3. To have the command or oversight of; to rule, govern, manage, control. *Oxford Dictionary Online*, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/yeme_v?tab=meaning_and_use#13762793. (16 dicembre 2025) No chronicle account records this speech.

in the European context. Moreover, the wider discourse on the difference between kingship and tyranny reflects some of the tensions present in many of the European courts that employed Michael as their patron saint, and more specifically in his contention between France and Britain during the Hundred Years' War. Although the complexity and the ambiguities of the *Morte* should not be explained in a way that aims at resolving them completely, establishing more firmly the religious grounds upon which the poem stands proves helpful in going beyond its simple categorization as a propaganda piece for either a positive or a negative depiction of war, showing the nuanced way in which the anonymous poet created his own particular vision of one of the most famous of the British kings.

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From «Perle plesaunte» to «mayden of menske»: the Lapidary Tradition and Duality in *Pearl*

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This research examines the process of transformation of the pearl from inanimate object to spiritual guide in the anonymous Middle English poem *Pearl*. Through the intentional engagement with the Christian lapidary tradition and scriptural references, the author enhances the pearl's significance while creating a powerful allegorical connection between the material and the spiritual realms turning the pearl into a liminal figure between the earthly and the heavenly.

Keywords; Pearl, Transformation, Lapidary Tradition, Liminality

Pearl

Pearl, the opening poem in London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero A.x, stands as one of the most intricate

and symbolically rich compositions of Middle English literature. Preserved alongside *Cleanness*, *Patience* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in a single manuscript redacted in the late fourteenth century, *Pearl* introduces a collection of poems which share stylistic *formulae*, imagery and theological visions. The manuscript, written in Gothic cursive, consists of ninety vellum leaves that measure 4¾ × 6¾ inches and display the poems in one column of thirty-six lines to a page.[1]

The poems of the manuscript share an inclination for detailed descriptions of settings and garments employing gemstone imagery and luxury terminology that relate *Pearl*, *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to the deeply rooted mediaeval tradition of identifying the affinity between Christian virtues and stones. Indeed, all but one poem, *Patience*, show a conspicuous use of specific terminology and images associated to gemstones, and particularly to pearls.

This chapter will argue that the cumulative use of specific jewellery and gemstone terminology is a signal of the popularity of the lapidary tradition during the creation of the poems contained in the Cotton Nero manuscript, particularly in *Pearl*. The evident similarities and the use of the images that clearly relate the first poem of the manuscript to lapidaries, encyclopaedias and bestiaries highlight the importance that this tradition had in the period in which the poems were written.

The Importance of Lapidaries in Mediaeval England

To fully understand and appreciate the poems contained in London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero A.x,

[1] For detailed studies on the characteristics of the manuscript see, A.S.G. Edwards, *The Manuscript: British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x*, in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. by Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, D.S. Brewer, Woodbridge 2002, pp. 197-219; and H.N. Duggan, *Meter, Stanza, Vocabulary, Dialect*, in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. by Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, D.S. Brewer, Woodbridge 2002, pp. 221-242.

and in particular the first poem of the manuscript, it is essential to focus on the lapidary tradition which was highly relevant during the Middle Ages. Lapidaries widely circulated throughout mediaeval Europe and provided allegorical interpretations of gemstones which were imbued with moral and spiritual significance. The tradition surrounding stones was deeply theological, offering moral *exempla* and spiritual metaphors through familiar objects. Indeed, since ancient times, gemstones have always been considered objects with peculiar and distinctive properties. Precious gems occupied a significant place in the Greek and Latin traditions and their relevance persisted throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.[2] In the ancient world, their natural attributes were inserted in encyclopaedias and lapidaries; the latter being texts either in verse or prose which describe the gemstones' material and medical properties. Lapidaries and encyclopaedias were not the only literary genres where information about precious stones appeared. Classical authors and mediaeval scholars knew and attributed the creation of some precious stones, such as pearls, to different kinds of animals. The attributes and the process of creation of such stones were deeply analysed and described in bestiaries, compositions that describe the attributes of animals, both real and fantastic, which were interpreted as spiritual and moral lessons.[3] Similarly to the information about stones, knowledge about animals was initially located inside encyclopaedias where general material about the natural world was gathered. However, the mediaeval period witnessed an increase in associations of moral and Christian attributes associated with these beasts. These attributes, whether real or fictional, referred to the physical aspects of crea-

[2] G.F.Kunz, *The Curious Lore of Precious Stones*, Halcyon House, Philadelphia 1938, pp. 1-2.
[3] W.B. Clarck, M.T. McMunn, *Beasts and Birds of the Middle Ages: the Bestiary and Its Legacy*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1989, p. 1.

tures, to their behaviour and to their relationships with other animals or humans.[4]

As largely attested in the lapidary and bestiary traditions, in the Middle Ages the interest in the properties of gemstones increased. However, their supposed magical qualities were lost, specifically due to the influence of the Christian Church which «opposed to magic in all its forms, condemned the engraved talisman, but carried on the tradition of the medical amulet»[5]. Indeed, during the Middle Ages, a new perspective on gemstones arose: not only they were believed to carry medical traits, but were also perceived as carriers of Christian virtues and allegories. While their qualities and descriptions continued to be compiled in encyclopaedias and lapidaries, their Christian allegories started to appear in commentaries of biblical passages.

The mediaeval interest in the study of gemstones, and in particular in recognizing the gemstones as carriers of Christian virtues, was due to the importance gained by the passages in the Old and New Testaments which describe precious stones: the twelve stones of the high priest's breastplate (Exodus 28:17-20), the nine ornaments of the king of Tyre (Ezekiel 28:13), and the twelve foundation stones of the heavenly city of New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:19-20).[6] This new Christian perspective changed the way in which gemstones were perceived and the approach according to which precious materials were described. Biblical commentaries, especially the ones focusing on the Apocalypse, began to examine precious stones outlining the possible connections between them and Christian virtues and allegories. The interest in perceiving gemstones as Christian allegories is proven by the increasing production of European Christian lapidaries during the early Middle Ages. Indeed, «if med-

[4] M. Pastoreau, *Bestiari del Medioevo*, Einaudi, Turin 2012, p. 19.
[5] J. Evans, *Magical Jewels of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Particularly in England*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1922, p. 29.
[6] P. Kitson, *Lapidary Traditions in Anglo-Saxon England: Part I*, «Anglo-Saxon England», 1978, VII, p. 20.

ical lapidaries in the first millennium were few and had few readers, Christian lapidary writings were more numerous and much more read»[7]. This growing interest in the symbolic interpretation of gemstones contributed to the development of a Christian lapidary tradition, which emerged primarily through commentaries on biblical passages.

From the twelfth century, the distinction between works which focused solely on the stones' natural attributes and works which described their Christian virtues began to disappear. Indeed, the natural and Christian attributes of gemstones started to be compiled together.[8] The Christian commentaries were still being read during the twelfth century and their influence can be detected in a new type of lapidary which compiled all gemstones' qualities together, an approach that was bound to supplant the earlier method employed to organize the contents of lapidaries. This new type of lapidaries did not change the basic qualities traditionally attributed to the gemstones, instead mediaeval scholars focused on joining in a single compilation all the natural, medical and religious characteristics of the gems. The popularity these lapidaries enjoyed in Europe during the Middle Ages is attested by the numerous copies that were transcribed and are still extant in France, England and Italy.[9]

The later mediaeval period saw a renewed interest in the natural world as interpreted through a Christian lens. Compilations of knowledge from earlier traditions were reorganized and adapted to reflect a worldview where every element of creation was seen as symbolic or as divine truth. These encyclopaedic works often followed a structured format, moving from the natural world to human nature, and finally to theological subjects, including gemstones and their properties. The aim of these texts was not the scientific study of nature but the gathering of information to illustrate allusions, similes or metaphors

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 20.
[8] *Ibid.*, pp. xvi-xviii.
[9] Evans, *Magical Jewels*, cit., p. 51.

to understand biblical passages.[10] The common belief behind these literary works is that everything that belongs to the material world is an image or symbol that mirrors the spiritual and divine realms, thus the natural world becomes a symbol of the divine understandable by men.[11] This perfectly ordered worldview did not consider animals and gemstones as mere objects of an external reality but imbued them with a hidden meaning. Only unravelling their true meaning would lead men closer to a fuller understanding of God and nature.

It is within this rich symbolic tradition that the poems of Cotton Nero are situated. The poet demonstrates a deep awareness of the Christianized perception of the natural world, frequently drawing on the symbolic associations developed in lapidaries and bestiaries to structure his moral and theological arguments. His use of gemstone imagery reveals a sustained engagement with the Christian lapidary tradition. *Pearl* stands as a particularly significant example, in which the gemstone acquires complex and multifaceted symbolic functions.

The Influence of the Lapidary Tradition in *Pearl*

Pearl takes its name from the first word with which it begins, «Perle». Pearls were particularly significant in the lapidary tradition and in Christian religion. In the mediaeval period, they were recognized as symbols of uniqueness, innocence, purity and virginity.[12] Their traditional attributes mainly derived from their place of origin, colour, shape, the way it was believed to be conceived and the processes which allowed to find them. Generally, they were described as pure gems with a brilliant white colour and a round and perfect shape.

[10] F. Zambon, *Bestiari Tardoantichi e Medievali: i Testi Fondamentali della Zoologia Sacra Cristiana*, Bompiani, Milan 2018, p. xi.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. xiv.
[12] G.A. Luttrell, *The Mediaeval Tradition of the Pearl Virginity*, «Medium Aevum», 1962, XXXI, pp. 194-200.

The Holy Scriptures played an important role in the attribution of virtues to elements of the natural world. The popular mediaeval tradition that perceived nature as an image that mirrored the spiritual and divine realms pervaded literary works. The poems contained in Cotton Nero, and in particular the first poem of the manuscript, align with this view by employing the gemstone imagery and symbology to develop allegories and *exempla*. To fulfil and convey more clearly their didactic purpose, the poems reference in subtle and explicit manners passages of the Bible where the gemstone imagery is employed. In *Pearl*, the author devises the episodes and their symbolism in connection to the Holy Scriptures and, indeed, passages from the Bible are frequently paraphrased and quoted. It is through these texts and references that the poet is able to create and fully develop the image of the pearl and of the figures and virtues associated with it. Although the author employs traditional gemstone imagery, the poem displays different meanings associated with the pearl.

The descriptive terminology used by the poet to refer to the pearl alludes to its common mediaeval image and the method applied in its lapidary descriptions. *Pearl* shares its approach and terminology with the mediaeval lapidary texts, which, like the poem, describe the gemstone through its colour, shape, brightness and preciousness. In the first poem of the manuscript, the pearl is given the most elevated attributes. It becomes part of a process of personification, from inanimate perfect object to guide and model of salvation. The author gathers the Christian attributes carried by the pearl and infuses its qualities into the Maiden. In doing so, he creates an overlap between the Christian values of the inanimate object and the attributes of the Maiden, establishing the pearl as symbol for the Maiden, the blessed souls, New Jerusalem and Christ. The transformation from inanimate object to spiritual guide, either symbolized by the Pearl-Maiden or the blessed souls, is achieved through the various meanings the pearl carries in the Christian

lapidary tradition. The *Pearl*-poet displays knowledge of lapidary descriptions and to further analyse the pearl he employs the passages of the Bible that directly refer to this precious stone. By quoting, paraphrasing and reinterpreting holy passages where the pearl is mentioned or is employed as a metaphor, the poet creates an exceptionally strong link between the gemstone and the holy figures previously defined by the Bible, lapidaries, encyclopaedias and bestiaries.

In the poem, the image of the pearl is developed from the first section which opens with a conventional formula, the *propositio* that treats of the real inanimate object and arranges the proper premises for its elaboration.[13] The opening apparently presents a literal celebration and appreciation of the «perle», which in these lines is valued adopting earthly terms.[14] Although the first three lines, and in general the first section of the poem, present the gemstone as an inanimate object, the pearl is described as «plesaunte», an adjective that can be used to refer to both an inanimate object and a human quality. The author describes its setting as «clanly clos in golde so clere»[15] (l. 2), an allusion to the pearl's inanimate state, and its place of origin, «Oute of oryent» (l. 3), characteristics that connect the poem with the lapidary tradition and emphasize the pearl's link with earthly values.[16]

The process of transformation begins at line 4, where the poet refers to the pearl with the female personal pronoun «her» (l. 4). In the first section, pronouns oscillate from the feminine ones, «her» (ll. 4; 6), «hyr» (ll. 8; 9) and

[13] P.M. Kean, *The Pearl: An Interpretation*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 2020, p. 10.
[14] P. Martin, *Allegory and Symbolism, A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. by Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, D.S. Brewer, Woodbridge 2002, pp. 315-328.
[15] A. Malcolm, R. Waldron (eds.), *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript. Pearl, Cleanness, Patience and the Green Knight*, Liverpool University Press, Exeter 2007, p. 1. Unless otherwise specified, this is the reference for all the quotations from the poems.
[16] R.J. Blanch, *Color Symbolism and Mystical Contemplation in Pearl*, «Nottingham Mediaeval Studies», 1973, XVII, pp. 58-77.

«hir» (l. 23), to the neuter pronoun «hit» (ll. 10; 13; 31; 41; 45; 46). Thus, the personification of the pearl starts to emerge slowly while the poet continues to alternate the use of personal pronouns up until the end, when the real meaning of the pearl is disclosed to the reader. The pronouns employed are variable throughout *Pearl*. While in the first section the function of the feminine pronouns is to provide the foundations for the later identification of the pearl with the Maiden, the neuter pronouns allow to maintain the meanings and symbolism carried by the inanimate object.[17] The unusual employment of pronouns to refer to the pearl creates further associations between the gemstone and its meanings. This use may be ascribed to the double meaning of the gemstone, the pearl as an inanimate object and as a feminine figure, the Maiden. The precious gemstone starts to transform itself into the allegory for the «mayden of menske», preparing the reader for the later complete identification of the pearl with the Maiden.

Another detail that suggests the duality of meaning carried by the pearl is the description placed at line 6, which reads «so smal, so smoþe her syde3 were». The adjectives employed by the author are equally appropriate for the descriptions of the precious stone and of feminine beauty. The association of the gemstone with the Maiden is strengthened by the description of the narrator's grief as «luf-daunger» (l. 11), a compound noun which refers to the power the mistress has over her suitor.[18] Although this word is reminiscent of the *topos* of courtly love, here it is used as a generic metaphor to suggest the longing for a beloved person or object increasing the ambiguity on the real meaning of the pearl.[19]

After the next two sections which focus mainly on the description of the landscape where the narrator finds himself after his «spyryt [...] sprang in space» (l. 62), at line 162, the query about the real meaning of the precious

[17] Malcolm, Waldron, *The Poems*, cit., p. 53.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 54.
[19] Kean, *The Pearl*, cit., p. 13.

stone reemerges, when the «mayden of menske» (l. 162) appears to the Dreamer. This first general description of the Maiden shares her characteristics with the «perle» previously described in the first stanza of the poem. Firstly, they share colour: the Maiden is described as wearing a white robe, «Blysnande whyt watz hyr bleaunt» (l. 163), and her skin is white, «Hyr vysayge whyt as playn yuore» (l. 178). Moreover, in both descriptions, the author references gold: while in the first stanza this material is said to be the position in which the pearl is settled, «to clanly clos in golde so clere» (l. 2), in the third and fourth sections it is employed to extend the characteristics of the Maiden. In the third section, the precious metal is used as a simile to describe the Maiden's ability to shine, «As glysnande golde þat man con schere,/So schon þat schene anvnder schore» (ll. 165-166). In the fourth section, the poet further reiterates the link between the precious material and the Maiden. In the lines devoted to the description of the Maiden, gold is used as a simile to describe the hair which frame the Maiden's face and shoulders, «As schorne golde schyr her fax þenne schon,/ On schylderez þat leghe vnlapped lyȝte» (ll. 213-214), reiterating the image introduced in the second line of the poem. The light that gold carries within both descriptions displays a marked progression in intensity. The quality of brilliance carried by the Maiden herself and by her garments establishes her role as a guide for the revelation of divine wisdom since the poem narrates the Dreamer's ascension to the light of eternal Truth.[20] The gold imagery shared by the pearl and the Maiden hints at the influence of the lapidary tradition in the poem. In the mediaeval Christian lapidary tradition, this precious material is the symbol of purity and glory and carries the Holy Scripture's majesty and honour.[21] This material represents celestial purity, wisdom and the charity of the Lamb and,

[20] L. Blenkner, *The Pattern of Traditional Images in "Pearl"*, «Studies in Philology», 1971, LXVIII, pp. 26-49.
[21] Blanch, *Color*, cit., p. 65.

indeed, in the poem, gold ornaments are only worn by the Maiden, the blessed souls and Christ.

In the third section of the poem, the Dreamer hints again at the overlap between the pearl and the Maiden. From line 164, the Dreamer begins to display the certainty that he, indeed, already met and knew the Maiden, creating a clearer association between the inanimate object introduced in the first line of the poem and the Maiden introduced in this section:

> I knew hyr wel, I hade sen hyr ere.
> [...]
> On lenghe I loked to hyr þere;
> Þe lenger, I knew hyr more and more.
> The more I frayste hyr fayre face,
> Her figure fyn quen I had fonte,
> Suche gladance glory con to me glace
> As lyttel byfore þerto watz wonte.
> [...]
> And euer þe lenger, þe more and more.
> (*Pearl*, ll. 164-180)

At the beginning of the fourth section, the figure of the Maiden becomes even more ambiguous. Through the paraphrase of lines 5 and 6, the poet clearly conveys the real meaning of the image of the pearl in relation to the figure of the Maiden:

> Þat gracios gay wythouten galle,
> So smoþe, so smal, so seme sly3t,
> Ryse3 vp in hir araye ryalle,
> A precios pyece in perle3 py3t. (*Pearl*, ll. 189-192)

Such a paraphrase hints at the identification of the Maiden with the lost pearl introduced in the first line of the poem. This process is reinforced by the adjectives employed in this section which reiterate the previous description of the pearl. Although the description of the Maiden can be inscribed within the mediaeval traditional portrayal of the lady, the connection between the depictions of the gemstone and the Maiden is particularly evident in the use of variations of the word «araye», a

noun that carries a double meaning. Indeed, according to the *Middle English Dictionary*, the term may refer to clothes or the setting of a jewel, in this instance of the pearl.[22] To emphasize the duality of meaning of the gemstone, the poet employs both definitions. While in the first section «araye» is employed to refer to the gold setting the pearl is placed in, «So rounde, so reken in vche araye» (l. 5), later in the poem, since the association between the pearl and the Maiden has been made explicit, it refers to her royal clothing (l. 191), her rank in heaven (l. 491) and the rank of those who can enter the City of New Jerusalem (l. 719).

Moreover, in this section, the *concatenatio* gives further emphasis to the concept that the precious stone is the allegorical counterpart of the «mayden on menske». The keyword «pyȝt» and its variations, earlier forms of the modern English "pitched", are employed with their specific meaning of "set, adorn with gems" to describe precisely the Maiden's garments and appearance.[23] The use of the *concatenatio* word appears to be linked in every instance with «perle», its plural form «perlez» or one of its synonyms. In the description of the Maiden's attire and appearance, pearls are her predominant adornment and are employed as terms of comparison. She is depicted as «A precios pyece in perlez pyȝt» (l. 192), her garments and tunic are adorned with «perlez pyȝte of ryal prys» (l. 193) and her crown is described as «A pyȝt coroune […] / Of marjorys and non oþer ston» (ll. 205-206). She is wearing a symbolical attire, white garments covered with pearls, with a crown decorated with the same set of jewels and a pearl that adorns her breast and, for what concerns her age, fully mature.[24]

[22] *Middle English Dictionary* <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED2315/track?counter=1&search_id=66772662> (28/06/2024)
[23] T. Turville-Petre (ed.), *Pearl*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2021, p. 61.
[24] W.H. Schofield, *Symbolism, Allegory, and Autobiography in the Pearl*, «PMLA», 1909, XXIV, pp. 651-652.

The complete identification of the pearl with the Maiden is achieved in the fifth section of the poem. The passage reports the first dialogue between the Maiden and the Dreamer, where the narrator addresses her with an *invocatio*:

> 'O perle,' quoþ I, 'in perlez pyȝt,
> Art þou my perle þat I haf playned,
> Regretted by one on nyȝte?
> Much longeyng haf I for þe layned,
> Syþen into gresse þou me anglyȝte. (*Pearl*, ll. 241-245)

Although the moment of recognition had already begun in the previous section, «I knew hyr wel, I hade sen hyr ere» (l. 164), the Dreamer now fully understands who this figure truly is. Indeed, he greets the Maiden by calling her «my perle» (l. 242). Furthermore, in this section, the Dreamer repeats the term «daunger» (l. 250) to echo the motif of the «luf-daungere» found in the first stanza. However, if it is true that the Dreamer finally recognizes the Maiden, he reverts to motifs and constructions that echo the descriptions of the inanimate object. He does so by recalling the moment when the pearl was lost in the grass, still being incapable of acknowledging this event as death.[25] The Dreamer's recognition of the Maiden is attested by her gestures and replies. The Maiden, who in the previous stanza greeted the Dreamer by bowing and taking off her crown in recognition of their relationship, now looks at him and replaces it on her head. Moreover, the intimate relationship between them emerges from the Maiden's use of personal pronouns to address the Dreamer. At first, she addresses him by using the formal constructions, «Sir» and «ȝe», but from line 264, she uses «þou», a pronoun much more intimate than the previous one.[26] The Maiden does not correct the Jeweller when he addresses her as «perle», she only reproaches him about the attitude he is displaying in not accepting her departure. While the narrator complains about his lost pearl,

[25] Turville-Petre (ed.), *Pearl*, cit., p. 75.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

she tells him that his perceptions are mistaken, that the gemstone, thus herself, is not lost, she is now in the garden of bliss. In this section, she exploits the *concatenatio* word «juel» and the images carried by the «cofer» by reinterpreting them to reprimand the Jeweller. The imagery of enclosure links, once again, the inanimate object to the Maiden, hinting at the lexicon of enclosure introduced in the first section to describe the pearl. However, at the beginning of the poem, the narrator had described the pearl as he was desperately lamenting the «perle þat þe watz penned» (l. 53), providing negative connotations to the gemstone's enclosed state. On the contrary, the Maiden now describes herself «in cofer so comly clente» (l. 259) and tells the Dreamer that it is the nature of the casket in which she is placed that allows her to be «a perle of prys» (l.272). Thus, as the narration progresses, the imagery of enclosure moves from negative to positive, as the Maiden turns her death into a delightful event which has allowed her to enter the most positive form of enclosure one could aspire to, the garden of delights.

The image of the pearl and its meaning in the poem is expanded by the value the gemstone carries in the Gospels. Matthew's Gospel attributes to the pearl two different meanings, divine wisdom (Matt.7:6), and salvation (Matt.13:45-46), core concepts of the lapidary tradition and of the Cotton Nero poems. In Matt.7:6, the pearl is attributed qualities of purity and holiness, features that synthetize perfectly the figure of the Pearl-Maiden, the blessed and Christ:

> Nolite dare sanctum canibus: neque mitattis margaritas vestras ante porcos, ne forte conculcent eas pedibus suis, et conversi dirumpant vos.[27]

In this passage, the pearl symbolizes something holy and valuable, that is, divine wisdom. The correlation be-

[27] «Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls in front of pigs, or they may trample them and then turn on you and tear you to pieces» A. Colunga, L. Turrado (eds.), *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam: Nova Editio*, Biblioteca de autores cristianos, Madrid 1959, p. 1102.

tween this precious stone and eternal truth is reiterated in *Pearl* where it is symbolized through the Pearl-Maiden. The «mayden of menske» is ascribed the role of *exemplum* of divine wisdom; indeed, she is the Dreamer's guide who has to teach the Jeweller the difference between earthly and heavenly values. Through her intercession, the Dreamer is able to see the Maiden's dwelling place:

> Þat schene sayden: 'Þat God wyl schylde;
> Þou may not enter withinne Hys tor;
> Bot of þe Lombe I haue þe aquylde
> For a syȝt þerof þurȝ gret fauor.
> Vtwyth to se þat clene cloystor
> Þou may, bot inwyth not a fote;
> To strech in þe strete þou hatz no vygour,
> Bot þou wer clene, withouten mote. (*Pearl*, ll.965-972)

The intercession of the Pearl-Maiden finally reconciles the narrator with God. The Dreamer commits his pearl to the Lord and he is able to recognize that redemption may be obtained only through the sacrifice of Christ. In the last section, the Jeweller returns to the initial place of the narration, the garden, and reflects on his failure. The circular movement of the poem, developed through the *concatenatio* and the physical return of the Dreamer to the first setting, allows the reader to reflect on how much the Jeweller's spiritual state has been changed by the vision of the Pearl-Maiden and her divine wisdom. Indeed, he is finally able to understand the difference between earthly and heavenly values, and in the last lines of the poem he recalls the pearl as symbol of salvation and divine wisdom, hoping to become one of God's pearls himself.

The pearl is used in another passage from Matthew's Gospel, Matt.13:45-46, also known as the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price. This passage associates the pearl with the general meaning of salvation. In *Pearl*, Matthew's parable symbolizes the figures and places connected to the concepts of Christian salvation, the blessed souls and, by implication, the Pearl-Maiden, the city

of New Jerusalem and the major *exemplum* of salvation, Jesus Christ.

While, in Matt.7:6, the pearl maintains its symbology as something holy, in Matt.13:45-46, it acquires a further level of meaning, salvation:

> Iterum simile est regnum caelorum homini negotiatori, quaerenti bonas margaritas. Inventa autem una pretiosa margarita, abiit, et vendidit omnia quae habuit, et emi eam.[28]

In this passage, while the merchant represents a good Christian, the Pearl of Great Price symbolizes salvation. The merchant, after having found the most valuable pearl, sacrifices everything so that he may completely appreciate what he has gained. The gemstone catches his attention and concludes his search when he finds the one of great value. In relation to the meanings of the parable, the Pearl of Great Price represents those who are just, in the poem personified in the blessed souls of the city of New Jerusalem, and in the Pearl-Maiden. The poet references Matt.13:45-46 to create a complex imagery which links the Pearl-Maiden and the Dreamer with the characters of the parable. The Jeweller is the merchant from Matthew's Gospel to whom the Pearl of Great Price is revealed. In the poem, the pearl from Matt.13:45-46 is employed to indicate the general concept of salvation which the Pearl-Maiden is the symbol of, and indeed, it is the main ornament of the Maiden and the blessed souls' garments. In the thirteenth section, the author paraphrases directly Matthew's Gospel with the intention of developing correlations between the characters of the poem:

> Þat þe jueler soȝte þurȝ perré pres,
> And solde alle hys goud, boþe wolen and lynne,
> To bye hym a perle watz mascellez.
> 'This makellez perle þat boȝt is dere.
> Þe joueler gef fore alle hys god (*Pearl*, ll. 730-734)

[28] «Again, the kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls; when he finds one of great value he goes and sells everything he owns and buys it» Colunga, Turrado (eds.), *Biblia Sacra*, cit., p. 1010.

The pearl symbolism, which was abandoned in the fifth section, now is adopted again in correlation to the Maiden and the Jeweller through the paraphrase of Matthew's Gospel. While in the fifth section, the narrator refers for the first time to the Maiden as «perle of prys» (l. 272), in the thirteenth section the Dreamer reiterates this specific Christian gemstone symbology through the use of the Holy Scriptures. The relations between the two passages are evident: the poet employs as *concatenatio* word «juel» and its variables, with the term «jueler» / «juelere» being used seven times (ll. 252; 264; 265; 276; 288; 289; 300). It is in this passage that the Dreamer is introduced for the first time as "jeweller", creating a strict correlation between Matthew's parable and the poem. From the fifth section of the poem the author references, though subtly, the parable of the Pearl of Great Price, to develop it fully in the thirteenth section. In the fourteenth section, the Maiden proceeds in widening the symbolism carried by the pearl in Matthew's Gospel and associates the pearl with the City of New Jerusalem, one of the main *exempla* of salvation in Christian religion:

> This makellez perle þat boȝt is dere,
> Þe joueler gef fore alle hys god,
> Is lyke þe reme of heuenesse clere—
> So sayde þe Fader of folde and flode—
> For hit is wemlez, clene, and clere,
> And endelez rounde, and blyþe of mode,
> And commune to alle þat ryȝwys were (*Pearl*, ll. 733-739)

Thus, the Pearl of Great Price is now fully associated with the «reme of heuenesse» as they share Christian attributes. However, the poet further enhances the characteristics of the pearl, particularly the ones introduced by Matthew's Gospel. Earlier in the poem, the Pearl of Great Price had been already mentioned as one of the ornaments from the Maiden's garments, «Perlez pyȝte of ryal prys» (l. 193). However, in the thirteenth section, the poet clarifies that the characteristics shared by the Pearl of Great Price, the Maiden and the City of New Jerusalem are «commune to alle þat ryȝwys were» (l. 739). The

City of New Jerusalem, the Pearl-Maiden and the blessed souls share the essential Christian qualities, purity, light and joy, and it is through the specific lapidary terminology and images that the solid reiteration of religious attributes is possible.[29]

The pearl from Matthew's Gospel is then employed again as a decoration of the Maiden's dress, now referencing the Pearl of Great Price as main ornament:

> Lo, euen inmyddez my breste hit stode:
> My Lorde þe Lombe, þat schede Hys blode,
> He py3t hit þere in token of pes. (*Pearl*, ll. 740-742)

Thus, the Pearl of Great Price becomes the symbol of the Maiden, a concept that is further reiterated in the next stanza where the author is referring to her as the bearer of the Pearl of Price, «"O maskelez perle in perlez pure,/Þat berez," quoþ I, "þe perle of prys"» (ll. 745-746). While in this section she is referred to as the only figure who carries the Pearl of Great Price, in the fifteenth section, the Maiden alludes to the idea that all the blessed souls carry this gemstone on their breast:

> 'Lasse of blysse may non vus bryng
> Þat beren þys perle vpon oure bereste,
> For þay of mote couþe neuer mynge
> Of spotlez perlez þat beren þe creste (*Pearl*, ll. 853-856)

This information is reiterated again in the nineteenth section, where the author discloses that all the blessed souls of the Heavenly City are given a pearl on their breast. The author does not explicitly use the term «perle of prys» nor one of its variations; however, he is alluding to the pearl from Matthew's Gospel. The description of the garments of the «vergynez» is not as detailed as the previous description of the Maiden's dress and ornaments recorded in the fourth and fifth sections, nonetheless, from the few details the author alludes to and the first lines of the stanza, reading «Of such vergynez

[29] R. Field, *The Heavenly Jerusalem in Pearl*, «The Modern Language Review», 1986, LXXXI, pp. 7-17.

in þe same gyse/Þat watz my blysful anvnder croun» (ll. 1099-1100), the virgins' attire is identical to the Maiden's, described in the fourth and fifth sections. The author strengthens the concept that they are all dressed in the same manner and in the next lines, where he analyses the procession of the virgins, he explains that «all in sute her liuréz wasse» (l. 1108). Through the various intersections and descriptions in the poem, the author at first relates the Pearl of Great Price only to the Maiden, and then, through constant reinterpretations and allusions, he widens the symbology referring to all the blessed souls of the City of New Jerusalem. Thus, it may be inferred that the precious gemstone gathers more than one meaning with which the poet meticulously creates associations widening the traditional associations that derive from the Christian and lapidary traditions.

Thus, the poem evolves through a climax from the material to the spiritual world. The images from the opening section serve as foundations for the symbolism the author plans to develop and disclose throughout the poem. By transforming and developing the pearl imagery of the first sections, the author accesses the reinterpretations of a symbolism already familiar to the readers, providing them with different connotations to reproach the Dreamer. The author leads his audience from the descriptions of the material attributes of the precious gemstone to the pearl as symbol preached to reach in order to achieve the spiritual qualities of the Pearl-Maiden and to attain the joys of Paradise. This symbolic transition is further enriched by the pearl's established connotations in the Christian tradition and mediaeval lapidary texts where it is often associated with the concept of liminality, a state of transition between earthly and spiritual realms. Indeed, this gemstone does not entirely belong to the inanimate or the animate state: it is a precious stone conceived and created by an animate creature, the oyster. Perhaps it is because of its connection with the concept of liminality that it is associated with the Pearl-Maiden. She is one of the blessed souls who is seen by the Jewel-

ler through a dream vision, an event which allows him to witness the magnificence of the heavenly realm, a figure that plays the role of mediator between the heavenly and earthly values.

The liminality of the gemstone is rooted in the process concerning its conception which was extensively analysed in lapidaries and that associates the oyster and the pearl with the Virgin Mary and Christ. In the lapidary tradition, the generation of the pearl is usually compared to the Immaculate Conception. Here, the Virgin Mary is compared to the oyster, and Christ is associated with its product, the perfect and pure pearl. Isidore of Seville describes pearls in multiple sections of his *Etymologiae*, where the pearl is always ascribed great value and pureness. In the passage devised for the description of the oyster he explains «Dequibus tradunt hi qui de animantium scripsere naturis quod nocturno tempore litora appetant, et ex caelesti rore margaritum concipiunt»[30]. Moreover, in the chapter titled "De Lapidibus et Metallis", in the section devoted to the description of "de candidis" (white gems), he adds «gignitur autem de caelesti rore, quem certo anni tempore cocleae hauriunt»[31], reiterating the mediaeval belief that finds in the celestial dew the substance that impregnates the oyster. The same concept is described in Bartholomeus Anglicus' *De Rerum Proprietatibus* where the conception of the pearl is attributed to the same substance. However, before disclosing this detail to his reader, Bartholomeus specifies that this information comes from lapidaries «Dicitur in Lapidar»[32], thus, testifying once again to the popularity

[30] «People who have written on the nature of animals say concerning these creatures that they seek the shore at night, and conceive the pearls by means of celestial (caelestis) dew». Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. by Stephen A. Barney, W. I. Lewis, et.al, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 262.

[31] «It is made from celestial dew, which shellfish absorb at a certain season of the year». *Ibid.*, p. 324.

[32] «As it is said in lapidaries». Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De Rerum Proprietatibus*, Minerva, Frankfurt 1964, p. 746 (facsimile of a 1601 edition).

and wide knowledge derived from these works. Marbodus de Rennes narrates a similar process of conception, describing it as strictly related to the morning dew:

> Conchae, temporibus certis, referuntur hiantes
> in coelum, patulae rores haurire supernos
> ex quibus orbiculi cadentes concipiuntur (ll. 632-634)[33]

These encyclopaedic and lapidary works hint at the divine state of the pearl by tracing back its conception to this divine material. Moreover, the whiteness and purity of the gemstone is connected to the substance that impregnates the oyster, since it refers to something divine connected to the heavenly spirit. Some lapidaries are more explicit in the various correlations between the pearl's conception and the miracle of the Immaculate Conception. Philip de Thaun's *Bestiary* explicitly states the associations between the Virgin Mary and the oyster and the pearl and Jesus Christ. In the first part of the passage dedicated to the description of the oyster, he simply states:

> Del cel la ruseie receivent, de cele enpreingnent, de cel veient,
> Ceo fusent vives creatures, puis se revugnent senz faitures;
> Tant est la rusée en la pere, que la rusée devent pere,
> E tuz jurz i est altretant cum mere porte sun enfant (ll. 1490-1493)[34]

This general analysis of the pearl introduces the association with the Christian Nativity through the image of a mother carrying her child. However, in the following

[33] «In certain seasons, the shells are said to have their valves/ Spread in the air, opened absorbing its dew/ From which candid corpuscles are born». Marbodo di Rennes, *Lapidari: La Magia delle Pietre Preziose*, ed. by B. Basile, Carocci, Rome 2006, p. 88.

[34] «They receive the dew of heaven, become impregnated with it,/ and live by it, as if they were living creatures, then become again without shapes;/ the dew is so long in the stone, that the dew becomes stone,/ and it is there always as long as the mother carries her child». Philippe de Thaon, *Bestiary*, in *Popular treatises on science written during the Middle Ages, in Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-Norman, and English*, ed. by Thomas Wright, Taylor, London 1841, pp. 127-128.

passage of his *Bestiary*, Philip de Thaun explicitly connects the Christian tradition to the conception and birth of the precious stone by adding:

> UNIO, ki naist de rusée e ki en pere est engendrée,
> Unio Jhesu signefie, pere dunt naist Sancte Marie;
> Unio, ki naist de rusée, signefie grace aprestée
> Par grace fud que li Fiz Dé fud à la virgine presenté;
> Par grace en cuillit le salud, e par grace fud conceud;
> Cum la pere overe senz faiture, e ele se joinst senz crevue;
> Cum la pere fait la rusée, si fud la Virgine consecrée,
> E issi concut e enfanta la Virgine ki Jhesu porta;
> Virgine concut, virgine fauta, virgine parmist e parmaindrat.[35]

While other lapidaries and encyclopaedic works are subtler in the associations between the Christian figures and the gemstone, Philip de Thaun explicitly refers to this connection. As the Virgin Mary was consecrated by receiving the Holy Spirit and carrying the Son of God, the oyster is blessed in receiving the heavenly dew and in the birth of a gem which symbolizes the purity and cleanness of Christ.

Similarly to these works, the Aberdeen Bestiary describes the pearl conceived from "rore celi" ("heavenly dew") and connects the precious gemstone with the Virgin Mary referencing Isaiah's passages in the Holy Scriptures and the words pronounced by the archangel Gabriel during the Annunciation (Luke 1:35):

> Lapis ergo iste qui diciture conchus, figuram gerit sancte Marie. […] Sicut

[35] «Unio, which is born of the dew and which is engendered in stone,/ unio signifies Jesus Christ, the stone from which was born St. Mary,/ unio, which is born of dew, signifies grace that is made ready;/ it was by grace that the Son of God was presented to the Virgin;/ by grace she received the salvation, and by grace he was conceived;/ as the stone opens without making, and it joins itself without crack,/ as the stone does the dew, the Virgin was consecrated,/ and thus the Virgin who carried Jesus conceived and was with child;/ a virgin she conceived, a virgin she brought forth a child, a virgin she remained and shall remain.» *Ibid.*, p. 128.

> enim de mari ascendit ille lapis, sic sacta Maria ascendit de domo patris sui ad
> templum dei, et ibi accepit rorem celestem.[36]

The author associates the stone to the Virgin Mary and explains that the moment when the mussel opens its mouth to receive the heavenly dew corresponds to the occasion when she welcomed the Holy Spirit to be pregnant with the Son of God. However, this explanation is quite ambiguous since it would identify the Virgin Mary with the oyster and the pearl with Christ, following the explanations and associations of the previous works. The author of the Aberdeen Bestiary creates ambiguous associations which hint at the connection between Jesus and the pearl, rather than between the Virgin Mary and the gemstone.

In the Cotton Nero poem, this tradition is employed and developed through the use of the pearl and its imagery in connection to Christian figures. The numerous references to the imagery of enclosure suggest a connection between the lapidary tradition which describes the pearl as enclosed inside the oyster and the figure of Christ as enclosed inside the Virgin Mary's womb. In the poem, the verb "enclose" is repeated multiple times and in all the instances it is employed to describe the state of the Pearl-Maiden «clanly clos in golde so clere» (l. 2), a *formula* repeated in later passages when the overlap between the gemstone and the Maiden is not complete, «Now þur3 kynde of þe kyste þat hyt con close» (l. 271), «Now, hynde, that sympelness cones enclose» (l. 909). Although the author in the poem does not explicitly refer to the oyster, the connection with the lapidary tradition and its *formulae* is clear. The employment of the imagery of enclosure is one of the most reiterated themes in

[36] «The stone, therefore, is called conchus; it symbolizes Saint Mary. […] For just/ as the stone rises from the sea, so Saint Mary went up from the house of her/ father to the temple of God and there received the dew from heaven». *The Aberdeen Bestiary* <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f96r> (28/06/2024)

the sections of the lapidary works concerned with the description of the pearl.

From this analysis, it is evident that the gemstone is used as the main ornament and symbol for the liminal and mediator figures both in the Christian tradition and in the narration. The use of stone imagery as main features of particular characters helps the reader identify a foreshadowing of the protagonist's need for intercession.[37] The Jeweller needs the help of the Pearl-Maiden to understand the difference between earthly and heavenly values. However, the symbolic meanings carried by the pearl are central to the poem, and it is through the understanding of the duplicity of the figure of the Pearl-Maiden and the lapidary imagery that the homiletic purpose of the poem may be achieved.

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[37] S. J. Sprouse, *Lady Bertilak's Pearls: "Instrumenta Dei" and the Stone Imagery that Unites the Cotton Nero A.x. (art.3) Poems*, «Arthuriana», 2018, XXVIII, pp. 25-45.

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Saints as Witnesses: Seeing God in *The Cloud of Unknowing*

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This article investigates the interpretation of episodes in the lives of Saint Martin and Saint Stephen in chapter 58 of the Middle English devotional text *The Cloud of Unknowing*. A fundamental aspect of this text is that the practice it promotes, contemplation, must be entirely performed in the spirit, while the body remains still: the contemplatives must be able to distinguish between these two realms. A close reading of chapter 58 reveals how the author uses this knowledge to offer a spiritual meaning to the physical experiences of the two saints and develops a theory of linguistic expression, as he argues that some forms of communication are expressed through a physical medium but also contain a spiritual meaning. Thus, their correct understanding lies in knowing the importance of both planes without confusing them. This also allows the author to conceive a more unified understanding of contemplation. The report of spiritual visions and their interpretation is thus an important point in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, because its discussion brings some of the major themes of the text to the forefront: the dialectic between the body and the

soul, signifier and signified, singular experience and collective knowledge.

Keywords: The Cloud of Unknowing, devotional literature, hermeneutics, allegorical interpretation, Bible, Legenda Aurea, Saint Martin, Saint Stephen

Introduction: *The Cloud of Unknowing*

The Cloud of Unknowing is a Middle English devotional manual written very probably towards the end of the fourteenth century; there is no certain information regarding its author (which will subsequently be referred to as the *Cloud*-author), but it is highly likely that he belonged to the Carthusian order.[1] The work aims at instructing its readers in contemplation, which the *Cloud*-author claims to be the highest possible degree of devotion that a Christian can aspire to, the practice that only the most accomplished and perfect souls can undertake.[2] It consists, in fact, of a single activity:

> Lift up þin herte vnto God wiþ a meek steryng of loue; & mene himself, & none of his goodes. & þerto loke þee loþe to þenk on ou3t bot on hymself, so þat nou3t worche in in þi witte ne in þi wille bot only himself. & do þat in þee is to for3ete alle þe creatures þat euer God maad & þe werkes of hem, so þat þi þou3t ne þi desire be not directe ne streche to any of hem, neiþer in general ne in special. (ch. 3, p. 9)[3]

[1] P. Hodgson, *Introduction*, in *The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises on Contemplative Prayer*, ed. by Phyllis Hodgson, Catholic Records Press, Exeter 1982, p. xi; J.P.H. Clark, *The Cloud of Unknowing: An Introduction. Volume 2: Notes on The Cloud of Unknowing*, Analecta Carthusiana, Salzburg 1996, pp. 13-4; V. Gillespie, *Preaching to the Choir: Another Look at English Carthusian Transmission of Vernacular Spiritual Writings*, in *The Capital's Charterhouses and the Record of English Carthusianism*, ed. by Julian Luxford, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto 2023, p. 196.
[2] Clark, *The Cloud of Unknowing: An Introduction*, cit., p. 20.
[3] *The Cloud of Unknowing*, in *The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises on Contemplative Prayer*, ed. Phyllis Hodgson, cit. p. 9 (this

What is required of the contemplatives is at the same time incredibly simple and incredibly difficult: desiring God and God only, all the time, and forgetting anything else, ideally without interruption. But concentrating on God's being is not a simple task, because he cannot be approached as any other object of desire. This is because

> At þe first tyme when þou dost it, þou fyndest þot a derknes, & as it were a cloude of vnknowyng, þou wost neuer what, sauyng þat þou felist in þi wille a nakid entent vnto God. Þis derknes & þis cloude is, howsoeuer þou dost, bitwix þee & þi God, & letteþ þee þat þou maist not see him cleerly by li3t of vnderstonding in þi reson, ne fele him in swetnes of loue in þin affeccion. (ch. 3, p. 9)

In contemplation, the soul cannot be immediately led to God, but rather lingers in the place where he is hidden, constantly trying to approach that which can never be seen, understood or defined in this mortal life.

This understanding of God is very clearly influenced by the late medieval reception of the theological tradition initiated by the fifth- or sixth-century Syrian monk known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.[4] Dionysius' theological thought is known as *via negativa* or apophatic theology; its premise is that God is absolutely unknowable and undefinable by human beings. Dionysius develops this teaching in his *Mystical Theology*, where he describes God by progressively denying all things, from those that are less like him to those that are more like him, until the soul finally approaches him in a silence that transcends language and being.[5] Dionysius saw negation as an essentially rational and intellectual process, but a tradition that flourished in the thirteenth cen-

is the edition used for all subsequent quotations of the text).

[4] HODGSON, *Introduction*, cit., p. xi; CLARK, *The Cloud of Unknowing: An Introduction*, cit., pp. 30-2.

[5] D. TURNER, *The Darkness of God. Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, pp. 19-20, 28; P. ROREM, *Pseudo-Dionysius. A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1993, p. 213.

tury introduced a different understanding of it.[6] In his commentaries on Dionysius' texts, the Victorine abbot Thomas Gallus (died in 1246) recasts negative theology as a spiritual itinerary involving all of the soul's faculties to attain a knowledge of God; but love, not the intellect, can contain this knowledge.[7] This new conception of the *via negativa* was also developed into a practice: *Viae Syon lugent* and *De contemplatione*, written between the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century by the Carthusian spiritual guides Hugh of Balma and Guigo de Ponte, attest the proliferation of such conceptions even in devotional manuals.[8]

Written almost a century later, *The Cloud of Unknowing* is evidently part of this tradition. Its very title is taken from the place where Moses encounters God in Exodus 19:1-25, a central image in Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*.[9] The *Cloud*-author wants to lead his readers in that very cloud, so that they can approach God in a way that is not too different from what Thomas Gallus conceived:

> Of alle oþer creatures & þeire werkes… May a man þorou grace haue fulheed of knowing, & wel to kon þinke on hem; bot of God himself can no man þinke… For whi he may wel be loued, bot not þou3t. By loue may he be getyn & holden; bot bi þou3t neiþer. (ch. 6, p. 14)

The heart of contemplation is the contemplative's exclusive desire for God. But in order to reach and preserve this desire all other forms of mental activity must be avoided at all costs, because they are dangerous:

> Þof al it be good sumtyme to þink of þe kyndnes & þe worþines of God in special, & þof al it be a li3t & a party

[6] A.J. Minnis, *Affection and Imagination in The Cloud of Unknowing and Hilton's Scale of Perfection*, «Traditio», 1983, XXXIX, pp. 324-5.
[7] B.T. Coolman, *Knowledge, Love and Ecstasy in the Theology of Thomas Gallus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, pp. 19-20.
[8] D.D. Martin, *Introduction*, in *Carthusian Spirituality. The Writings of Hugh of Balma and Guigo de Ponte*, ed. and transl. Dennis D. Martin, Paulist Press, New York 1997, pp. 9-10, 13-15; Coolman, *Knowledge, Love and Ecstasy in the Theology of Thomas Gallus*, cit., p. 14.
[9] J.P.H. Clark, *Sources and Theology in The Cloud of Unknowing*, «Downside Review», 1980, LXXXXVIII, p. 85.

> of contemplacion: neuerþeles in þis werk it schal be casten down & keuerid wiþ a cloude of for3etyng. & þou schalt step abouen it stalworþly, bot listely, wiþ a deuoute & a plesing stering of loue, & fonde for to peerse þat derknes abouen þee. (ch. 6, p. 14)

The contemplatives must use two clouds, which represent the two sides of contemplation: the cloud of unknowing, where they cast their love towards God, and the cloud of forgetting, where they must leave all that is not that desire for God. While the former activity is directly inspired by grace, the latter must be learned: part of the method of contemplation requires the abandonment of all other mental activities, such as rational thought and sensible experience, along with religious practices that rely on the senses, request the adoration of holy images and are stimulated by linguistic expression, such as disciplined meditation.[10] Still, even if contemplation only requires a very specific movement by a part of the soul, the remaining faculties can help by providing the right context for contemplation, serving as a temporary support until the whole practice is integrated to the contemplatives' lives.

Since contemplation is conceived as a purely interior activity that can only be performed in the soul, a conspicuous part of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is dedicated to criticising those who fail to acknowledge the radical otherness of spirituality and approach it according to the parameters of everyday experience: the senses, imagination and reason.[11] In some chapters, the *Cloud*-author warns the readers by providing examples of people who mistakenly intellectualize contemplation and end up engaging in deformed versions of it, a practice that turns them into "Antecriste disciples" (ch. 56, p. 58).[12] His key injunction is to

[10] M. Glasscoe, *English Medieval Mystics. Games of Faith*, Longman, London 1993, pp. 188-9.
[11] Turner, *The Darkness of God*, cit., pp. 207-9.
[12] T. Chartrand-Burke, *Against the Proud Scholars of the Devil: Anti-Intellectual Rhetoric in* The Cloud of Unknowing, «Mystics Quarterly», 1997, XXIII, p. 128.

> Beware þat þou conceyue not bodely þat þat is mente goostly, þof al it be spokyn in bodely wordes. (ch. 61, p. 63)

There is a clear distinction to be made between what belongs to the body and what belongs to the soul, and this difference is also carried over to linguistic expression. This is because despite his disdain for intellectualism and the doubts on the possibilities of language he inherits from the apophatic tradition, the *Cloud*-author is also a careful, organized and pragmatic teacher. To be transmitted, his teaching must be mediated, and he understands that one of his duties is doing so in the best, clearest way possible. His warning, that some meanings refer to the body while others to the spirit, is central to understand how the *Cloud*-author conceives linguistic expression.[13] In chapter 58 of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the *Cloud*-author reveals how he is not the only one to write by relying on the difference between the physical and the spiritual, but that this conception functions as a premise for all texts reporting visionary and transcendent experiences. By extending his analysis even beyond what he teaches and writes, he develops a fully-fledged hermeneutical theory and method.

Misreading Contemplation

As it often happens in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the *Cloud*-author takes the opportunity to outline his method when he distances himself from the dangerous actions and ideas of others. Thus, after having described the «many wonderful contenaunces» (ch. 53, p. 54) of those who follow a mistaken, materialistic conception of contemplation, in chapter 57 he takes the discussion a bit further.[14] The problem is that

> Þees 3onge presumptuous goostly disciples misunderstonden þis oþer worde UP… 3if it so be þat þei ouþer rede, or here redde or spoken hou þat men schuld lift up here hertes vnto

[13] Glasscoe, *English Medieval Mystics*, cit., p. 179.
[14] Turner, *The Darkness of God*, cit., p. 207.

> God, as fast þei stare in þe sterres as þei wolde be abouen þe mone, & herkyn when þei schul here any aungelles synge oute of heuen. (ch. 57, p. 58)

The *Cloud*-author specifies something that he is already fully aware of: these people misunderstand contemplation and spiritual experiences because they fail to interpret correctly the texts that report them. The *Cloud*-author is evidently worried that this might be the destiny of *The Cloud of Unknowing* itself, which is prefaced by a prologue where he takes all possible precautions against potential misreadings, warding off unworthy readers and carefully instructing deserving readers on how to approach it.[15]

These concerns are not abandoned after the prologue: in chapter 57, the *Cloud*-author declares that there are already groups of people who have developed superficial, sense- and intellect-based interpretations of spiritual and devotional practices. What they end up undertaking is a foolish parody of the true practice of contemplation. This, in turn paves the way for the devil's intervention, who

> Feyneþ queinte sounes in þeire eres, queynte li3tes & schinyng in þeire i3en, & wonderful smelles in þeire nosen; & al is bot falsheed… & 3it wene þei not so; for hem þink þat þei haue ensaumple of Seynte Martyn of þis upward lokyng & worching, þat sawe by reuelacion God clad in his mantel amonges his aungelles, & of Seinte Steuen þat sawe oure Lorde stonde in heuen, & of many oþer; & of Cryste, þat assendid bodily to heuen, seing his discyples. (ch. 57, p. 59)

These people approach contemplation as a physical experience, so they rely mostly on their senses to understand if they are doing it right: so the devil sends them pleasant sensations to deceive them, making them believe they have reached a sort of beatitude. Still, when they are criticized for their methods, which are likewise mostly composed of physical movements, these contemplatives defend themselves by declaring that their prac-

[15] T.J. Morris, *Rhetorical Stance: An Approach to The Cloud of Unknowing and Its Related Treatises*, «Mystics Quarterly», 1989, XV, p. 16.

tices are based on authoritative texts and well-known visionary experiences. Saint Martin is one of the most popular saints in Christianity, the subject of many hagiographies in late antiquity and the Middle Ages, the most important being perhaps the *Legenda Aurea*; Saint Stephen's vision is recounted in the Acts of the Apostles; the Ascension of Christ is reported in the Gospels of Mark and Luke and the Acts of the Apostles.[16] But the popularity of these texts does not frighten the *Cloud*-author, who argues that while it is true that sometimes in «bodely obseruaunce» (ch. 57, p. 59) one might feel the need to lift eyes or hands to the sky, this action is neither necessary for the practice of contemplation, nor is it the most meaningful aspect of faith:

> Þe werk of oure spirit schal not be directe neiþer upwardes ne donwardes, ne on o side ne on oþer… as it is of a bodely þing. For whi oure werke schuld be goostly, not bodely, ne on a bodely maner wrou3t. (ch. 57, p. 59)

The need to distinguish between the body and the spirit will be the central premise of the following chapter, where it will function as the tenet of the *Cloud*-author's strategy to claim that these biblical passages actually attest the legitimacy of his own method of contemplation.

Saint Martin's Vision

In beginning chapter 58, the *Cloud*-author does not waste time in giving his point of view regarding these specific narratives:

> For þat þei sey of Seynte Martin & of Seinte Steuen, þof al þei sie soche þinges wiþ þeire bodely i3en, it was schewyd bot in miracle & in certefiing of þing þat was goostly. (ch. 58, p. 59)

[16] P. Hodgson, *Commentary*, in *The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises on Contemplative Prayer*, ed. Phyllis Hodgson, Catholic Records Press, Exeter 1982, pp. 171-2; K. Harkaway-Krieger, *"And Most Semely for to Be": Julian of Norwich and The Cloud of Unknowing on Spiritual Similitude*, «The Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures», 2021, XXXXVII, pp. 49, 51-2.

With this first declaration, the *Cloud*-author immediately sets himself apart from the people he introduced in chapter 57, who relied on the examples of Saint Martin and Saint Stephen to justify their practice. While the other contemplatives only consider the physical and experiential elements of such visions, approaching them as events that can be perfectly reproduced to obtain a similar result, the *Cloud*-author's first concern are not the contents of these visions but rather their form. The visions were certainly historical events, but the context in which they took place cannot be ignored.[17] This attention to context is a central concern for the *Cloud*-author, who tries to prescribe it to his potential readers, declaring they should read, discuss or comment on *The Cloud of Unknowing*

> Al ouer. For, parauenture, þer is som mater þerin, in þe beginnyng or in þe middel, þe whiche is hanging & not fully declared þer it stondeþ; & 3if it be not þere, it is sone after, or elles in þe ende. (Prologue, p. 1)

Just as each section of *The Cloud of Unknowing* can only be understood as part of a greater whole, so the divine visions can only be understood as parts of a greater text, the Bible or the *Legenda aurea*, with the specific purpose of reporting the project of universal human salvation enacted by God through his grace. In particular, the events involving Saint Martin and Saint Stephen, as well as the Ascension, are to be understood as miracles. They are not everyday forms of experience, but special events that go beyond their singularity and their physical contingencies to convey a spiritual and universal meaning that God conveys to the Christian community. In this light, constructing devotional practices from these miracles is meaningless, because that is not how they are meant to be approached. They are better understood as acts of communication, as the *Cloud*-author himself will show, starting off from the first of the two saintly visions he mentioned.

[17] Harkaway-Krieger, *Julian of Norwich and The Cloud of Unknowing*, cit., p. 51.

According to the *Legenda aurea*, upon entering the town of Amiens, Martin, a Pannonian soldier, notices a beggar who is in need of clothes, so he cuts his cloak in half with his sword and gives one to the beggar. During the night, he has a vision of Christ in heaven wearing the cloak he gave to the beggar.[18] And the *Cloud*-author is certain that even those who use this narrative to promote their vision of contemplation are aware that

> Seynte Martyn mantel come neuer on Crystes owne body substancyaly, for no nede þat he had þerto to kepe him fro colde; bot by miracle & in licnes for alle us at ben abel to be sauid, þat ben onyd to þe body of Criste goostly. (ch. 58, p. 59)

The *Cloud*-author notes how even by following a strictly literal interpretation of the event its physical dimension must be put into perspective: obviously, Christ does not need Martin's cloak to survive. Rather, this image matters because it can convey a spiritual meaning that every Christian will be able to understand. Specifically, it recalls God's own words:

> & whoso cloteþ a pore man & doþ any oþer good deed for Goddes loue, bodily or goostly, to any þat haþ need, sekir be þei þei do it vnto Criste goostly, & þei schul be rewardid as substancyaly þerfore as þei had done it to Cristes owne body. Þus seiþ hymself in þe Gospel. & 3it þou3te he it not inow3, bot 3if he affermyd it after by miracle; & for þis skyle he schewed hym vnto Seynte Martyn by reuelacion. (ch. 58, p. 59)

The miracle is thus an occasion for God to transform his words into a sensible image, so that it may be understood more clearly. The *Cloud*-author refers to the process by which God turns his words into image to make them more understandable with the verb *schewe*, but Saint Martin's vision is not, in itself, a clarification of God's intent: it still requires an act of interpretation for it to have an effect. Specifically, the *Cloud*-author suggests that Saint Martin's vision is finally understood by turn-

[18] G. Ryan (ed.), H. Ripperger (transl.), *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine, Part Two,* Longmans, London 1941, p. 663-4.

ing to the Bible, and to Matthew 25:40 specifically.[19] The image serves as a reminder of Christ's words: «I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me»[20]. One of the most important aspects of Saint Martin's vision, then, seems to be that it has been recorded and disseminated in books, and that these books, such as the *Legenda aurea*, lead readers to the most important book of the Christian community, the Bible, and the Gospel in particular, which records the words of Jesus. The miracle, the *Cloud*-author seems to suggest, is an event that finds its purpose in being recorded in a text, and both actively point back at other texts; it has an eminently discursive vocation. The further developments of chapter 58 only reinforce this conception.

Miracle as Allegory

After his analysis of Saint Martin's vision, the *Cloud*-author develops a general rule that will help him approach the two other visions he mentioned in chapter 57, and perhaps silence definitively all practices based on interpretations that differ from his own:

> Alle reuelacions þat euer sawe any man here in bodely licnes in þis liif, þei haue goostly bemenynges. & I trowe þat & þei vnto whome þei were schewid, or we for whome þei were schewid, had ben so goostly, or couþe haue conceyuid þeire bemenynges goostly, þat þan þei had neuer ben schewed bodily. & þerefore late us pike of þe rou3 bark, & fede us of þe swete kyrnel. (ch. 58, p. 59)

Miracles happen because of the existential conditions of mankind. The postlapsarian human mind is unable to fully grasp the functions and the values of the plane of existence the *Cloud*-author is pointing towards, the spiritual one. These *reuelaciouns* are thus a way for God to better convey his teachings, in particular, to the hu-

[19] Hodgson, *Commentary*, cit., p. 171.
[20] *The Holy Bible. New International Version: Containing the Old Testament and the New Testamen*t, ed. International Bible Society, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 1984, p. 702.

man faculty of reason, which the *Cloud*-author contends to be always entangled with the illusions created by imagination, the faculty that elaborates the physical experience.[21] While reason and imagination must be ultimately suppressed in the act of contemplation, the *Cloud*-author concedes that with the help of sensible, physical images they can become a great vehicle to understand how the spiritual must be approached, and eventually develop the correct form of contemplation.[22] The *Cloud*-author is not alone in envisioning a pedagogical function for the imagination: Thomas Gallus and other Victorine thinkers such as Richard of St Victor developed the anagogical method of Scriptural interpretation, which was based on the idea that the biblical writers relied on symbols and images in order to convey the divine teachings and meanings to their readers.[23] But the *Cloud*-author ends the passage quoted above by mentioning *bark* and *kyrnel*, which point in a different direction: they are terms that traditionally refer to allegorical interpretation. There is a superficial, literal meaning to the event, but the Christians must go beyond this *integumentum* to uncover its true, hidden, spiritual and moral value.[24] This emphasis on the need to interpret these events and treat them like an act of communication sanctions, once again, a primarily textual and hermeneutical approach to the miracle. But this is also a strategy for the *Cloud*-author to distance his readers from the event itself, to make it essentially inaccessible as an experience. *Bark* and *kyrnel* are thus charged with additional values: the allegorical interpretation starts from the physical meaning, the *bark*, to reach a spiritual meaning, a *kyrnel*, but the awareness of the difference between the two planes is gathered by undertaking the practice promoted by the *Cloud*-author. Importantly, his practice of contemplation does not cul-

[21] Minnis, *Affection and Imagination*, cit., p. 341.
[22] Glasscoe, *English Medieval Mystics*, cit., p. 179.
[23] Minnis, *Affection and Imagination*, cit., p. 343.
[24] K. Brownlee, *Allegory and Interpretation in the Roman de la Rose*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, ed. Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010, pp. 126-7.

minate with the erasure of one plane to the advantage of the other, but rather with the establishment of a balance between and respect of both planes of existence.

This position, in turn, reflects how the *Cloud*-author believes texts should be approached: their spiritual meanings should be retrieved

> Not as þees heretikes done, þe whiche ben wel licned to wode men… Þat euer whan þei haue dronken of a faire cup, kast it to þe walle & breke it… We schul not so fede us of þe frute þat we schul dispise þe tree; ne so drynke þat we schul breke þe cuppe when we haue dronken. Þe tre & þe cuppe I clepe þis visible miracle, & alle semely bodely obseruaunce þat is acordyng & not lettyng þe werke of þe spirite. Þe frute & þe drync I clepe þe goostly bemening of þees visible miracles, & of þees semely bodily obseruaunces, as is liftyng up of oure ı3en & oure handes vnto heuen. (ch. 58, pp. 59-60)

The *Cloud*-author's defence of allegorical interpretation is almost meta-literary, as he himself uses metaphors to prove how their interpretation can be useful. In this he imitates God, whose physical miracles convey his spiritual word and law, by using metaphors, where everyday language is a means to access broader and deeper issues of behaviour and spiritual practice. But the *Cloud*-author also translates this newfound esteem for the physical to the *bodily obseruaunces* in the practice of contemplation. He places the sole caveat that they should be *semely*, a term of great importance in the whole text, especially when discussing practice and behaviour. It means "pleasing", either to sight or to other senses, but also "appropriate" and "natural"; for the purposes of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, it is specifically used to indicate the type of physical behaviour that is instinctively developed once contemplation is fully established, which allows to communicate one's spiritual disposition to others.[25] The contemplatives' behaviour, too, can always potentially be interpreted, and if it is inspired by the right spiritual state it can function as an example to others, just like the miracles. This is why the *Cloud*-author's concern is that

[25] *MED*, sub voce "Semeli (adj.)", 1-3; Harkaway-Krieger, *Julian of Norwich and The Cloud of Unknowing*, cit., pp. 51-2.

the behaviours to be observed during religious practice should be truthful to the spirit of the person who undertakes them:

> 3if þei ben done by steryng of þe spyrit, þen ben þei wel done; & elles ben þei ypocrisie, & þen ben þei fals. 3if þei ben trewe & contynen in hem goostly frute, whi schuld þei þan be dispisid? For men wil kysse þe cuppe, for wine is þerin. (ch. 58, p. 60)

This return to metaphorical language indicates once again that striking the balance between the body and the soul is a central objective for the contemplatives: both the spiritual and the physical dimensions are essential to communicate with others. It is not by chance that the final image, the kissing of the cup, has eucharistic overtones: the Incarnation is the most important physical event that testifies to the spiritual truth of the redemption of mankind.[26]

The Ascension

The reference to the Incarnation remarks the intimate connection between Christ's advent and the work of the contemplatives, its strict connection to the work of divine grace, but it also allows the *Cloud*-author to turn to the central topic of the chapter: he will consider the Ascension first and then Saint Stephen's vision.[27] Now, the *Cloud*-author immediately differentiates his approach to the Ascension from that of the other contemplatives:

> & what þerof, þof oure Lorde, when he assendid to heuen bodely, toke his wey upwards into þe cloudes, seing his moder & his disciples wiþ þeire bodely i3en? Schul we þerfore in oure goostly werk euer stare upwardes wiþ oure bodely i3en, to loke after hym 3if we mowe se hym sit bodely in heuen, or elles stonde, as Seinte Steuen did? Nay, sekirly he schewid him not vnto Seynte Steuen bodily in heuen forþi þat he wolde 3eue us ensaumple þat we schuld in oure goostly werk loke bodely up into heuen. (ch. 58, p. 60)

[26] Glasscoe, *English Medieval Mystics*, cit., p. 178.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 183.

Since approaching Saint Martin's vision has led him to establish a general rule that relates, by means of analogy, the allegorical function of human language and divinely established miracles, the *Cloud*-author can approach these latter events from the point of view of God himself, who uses them as a means to communicate with mankind. This is because allegory itself has a duplicitous quality. A way to interpret human language allegorically is to see it as composed of two meanings, a physical and a spiritual one, with the former leading to the latter.[28] But once this mechanism is well understood it can be used not only to interpret other texts, but also deliberately to write new ones that follow the same principle: alongside allegorical interpretation, one can use allegory as a compositional technique.[29] Since the *Cloud*-author sees miracles as discursive acts comparable to allegorical language, he is able to gather some insight on how God uses these events as language, to understand what he means by them.[30]

In these passages, the *Cloud*-author repeats his argument: God does not intend these events to act as models for the physical behaviour of contemplatives, and this also includes the Ascension. In keeping with the apophatic character of the *Cloud*-author's theology, the position and actions of Christ's body in heaven should not be considered:

> Howso his body is in heuen — stondyng, sittyng, or ligging — wote no man. & it nediþ not to be wetyn; ne no more, bot þat his body is anhiȝed wiþ þe soule, wiþouten departing. Þe body & þe soule, þe whiche is þe Manheed, is onid wiþ þe Godheed wiþoutyn departyng also. (ch. 59, p. 60)

The need to interpret physical phenomena as spiritual lessons is thus driven to the heart of existence itself, where the conditions of Christ's body in heaven are relevant insofar as they reflect the composition of the human

[28] J. Whitman, *Allegory. The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1987, p. 3.
[29] *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.
[30] Minnis, *Affection and Imagination*, cit., p. 343.

being and function as its model. Thus, it does not matter what Christ's body is doing, and perhaps this knowledge is unattainable; what matters, instead, is its mere presence in heaven and that it is in harmony with the soul. The coexistence of body and soul is then a sign of the union between Christ's humanity and his divinity. In Christ too, then, the body and the soul are perfectly aligned, and thus he naturally behaves in the same way accomplished contemplatives do:

> Of his sittyng, his stonding, his liggyng, nediþ not to wetyn, bot þat he is þere as him list, & haþ him in body as moste semely is vnto hym for to be. For ȝif he schewid hym liggyng, or stondyng, or sittyng, by reuelacion bodely to any creature in þis liif, it is done for sum goostly bemenyng, & not for no maner of bodely beryng þat he haþ in heuen. (ch. 58, p. 60)

The *Cloud*-author, here, remarks the difference between the actual state of Christ's body in heaven and his choice to manifest himself to humans and have his appearance recorded, which allows him to convey a spiritual meaning to the whole Christian community. Significantly, Christ's behaviour in heaven is described with the same word the *Cloud*-author uses to indicate the behaviour of the perfect contemplatives. Even in heaven, where no one can know how he behaves, Christ's countenance is *semely*: a posture that communicates the attainment of a perfect spiritual disposition. By discussing the ideal behaviour of the contemplatives, the *Cloud*-author has managed to gain an insight into God's own intentions when he communicates with mankind; his approach to Saint Stephen's vision will strengthen this understanding.

Saint Stephen's Vision

The *Cloud*-author begins his explanation of Saint Stephen's vision with an apparent detour: instead of analysing the biblical passage, he discusses the potential meaning of one of the postures that can be assumed by Christ or any human body, arguing that

> By stondyng is vnderstonden a redynes of helping. & herfore it is seide comounly of oo frende to anoþer, whan he is in bodely batayle: 'Bere þee wel, felaw, & fi3t fast, & 3iue not up þe bataile ouer-li3tly; for I schal stonde by þee.' He meneþ not only bodely stondyng… Bot he meneþ, whan he seiþ þat he schal stonde bi hym, þat he schal be redy to helpe him. (ch. 58, p. 60)

The *Cloud*-author returns, with greater emphasis, to the signification of the body, which becomes here a sign that can be interpreted as the bearer of a spiritual meaning. But what strengthens his argument is that he has not elaborated this mode of communication by himself: it appears, instead, to be a widespread way of communicating between friends. In this case, maintaining an upright position to signify standing by someone, assisting them, conveying a sense of solidarity and participation, seems a common mode of expressing one's will.[31] This reference to the everyday use of language, the *Cloud*-author's emphasis of what is «saide commonly» (ch. 58, p. 60), testifies how important vernacular language, and specifically English, is for the *Cloud*-author. As noted by Taylor, vernacular expression is a key influence over the *Cloud*-author's stylistic choices, leading him to adopt different modes to address his readers and establish his own idea of pastoral care.[32]

In this specific reference to what appears to be a diffused mode of communication, however, the vernacular seems to acquire an additional value, as it becomes a major justification for the *Cloud*-author's theory of interpretation and expression. He claims, in fact, that this specific use of the word *stonden* is at the origin of Saint Stephen's vision:

> For þis skyle it was þat oure Lorde schewid him bodely in heuen to Seinte Steuen, when he was in his martirdome… As he had seide þus to Seynte Steuen, in persone of alle þoo þat suffren persecucion for his loue: 'Loo, Steuen! as verrely

[31] *MED*; sub voce Stonden (v., 1), 1a, 1b.a, 1b.d.

[32] C. Taylor, *Paradox Upon Paradox: Using and Abusing Language* in *The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Texts*, «Parergon» 2005, XXII, pp. 33-4.

> as I open þis bodely fyrmament… & lete þee se my bodily stondyng, trist stedfastly þat as verrely stonde I biside þee goostly, by þe my3t of my Godheed. & I am redy to helpe þee'. (ch. 58, p. 61)

First, the *Cloud*-author notes how Christ chooses to appear because he himself is aware of this *skyle* and decides to move accordingly. The term indicates a form of appropriate, rational behaviour, but also a strategy; its use is significant, as the *Cloud*-author has frequently employed it elsewhere in the text to refer to refer mostly to the clever stratagems the readers can employ to ease the performance of contemplation.[33] The use of this word testifies a significant change in the *Cloud*-author's conception of the body as a signifier: in the preceding parts of the chapter, he had only dared to hint at the possibility that Christ might have chosen to present himself in a specific way to convey a determinate spiritual meaning. Here, however, the fact that Christ chooses to employ strategies that are comparable to the way contemplatives present themselves, to use the positioning of his body to transmit a spiritual meaning to Stephen and all who read about his vision, is almost taken for granted.

Stephen's vision is narrated in Acts 7:55-6, and it happens in the last moments of his life. As he is accused of blasphemy against Moses and God, he is brought to the Sanhedrin, where he accuses Israel to be constantly in conflict with its visionary leaders, and declares that its religious authorities have killed the son of God himself. As he concludes his speech

> Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.[34]

[33] *MED*; sub voce Skil (n.), 2a, 6b; Turner, *The Darkness of God*, cit., p. 197.
[34] *The Holy Bible. New international Version*, cit., p. 776.

In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Christ's pose is immediately provided with a meaning that recalls other passages of the Bible. What the *Cloud*-author renders as Christ's words to Stephen are also addressed to everyone that is reading of the event:

> '& þerfore stonde þou stifly in þe feiþ, & suffre booldely þe fel buffetes of þoo harde stones; for I schal coroune þee in blis for þi mede, & not only þee, bot alle þoo þat suffren persecucion for me on any maner.' (ch. 58, p. 61)

Christ's encouraging words towards his martyr recall, in fact, specific biblical passages on the rewards awaiting those who are persecuted because of their faith.[35] The first part might refer to James 1:12:

> Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.[36]

The other part of the sentence the *Cloud*-author deduces from Saint Stephen's vision evokes instead Matthew 5:10-2, a part of Christ's speech on the beatitudes that openly discusses, again, the possibility of martyrdom:

> Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.[37]

As happened in the case of Saint Martin's vision, then, the *Cloud*-author chooses to reconnect the report of the divine vision to the spiritual and moral meaning that can be better evinced in the Bible. The one difference in the *Cloud*-author's report of Christ's intended speech is the recommendation to «stonde… stifly in þe feiþ» (ch. 58, p.

[35] Clark, *The Cloud of Unknowing: An Introduction. Volume 2: Notes on The Cloud of Unknowing*, cit., p. 198.
[36] *The Holy Bible. New International Version*, cit., p. 854.
[37] *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, cit., p. 683.

61), an invitation to Stephen and the readers to mirror, at least spiritually, his posture, to remain aligned to orthodoxy. Rather than his actions, then, this addition emphasizes Saint Stephen's moral qualities.

The chapter concludes with the *Cloud*-author repeating the thesis he has developed by discussing Saint Martin's vision: «& þus maist þou se þat þees bodely schewynges were done by goostly bemenynges» (ch. 58, p. 61). While the result is the same, however, there is a slight difference between the two saintly visions, signalling that the *Cloud*-author's method of outlining his theory has changed through the chapter. The choice to analyse the Ascension between the two visions allows the *Cloud*-author to introduce a subtle shift in what is perhaps the most delicate part of his argument: the connection between Christ's appearance in the visions and the biblical texts. In Saint Martin's vision, Christ is in heaven wearing the same cloak, which is clearly linked to the biblical passage the *Cloud*-author references, so much that it can be argued that it is the starting point of the analogy. Conversely, it seems that Christ's appearance in Saint Stephen's vision does not allow such a close connection with Scripture. Thus, the *Cloud*-author introduces an intermediate passage from the visionary report of Acts 7:55-6 to James 1:12 and Matthew 5:10-2, where he develops an original connection through the everyday use and meaning attributed to the word *stonden*. The care he puts into acknowledging how common such an interpretation of *stonden* is, along with his ongoing interest and use for verbs that describe one's condition, both physically and morally, are key elements of this interpretive choice. Establishing the universality of the meaning of this word allows to uncover the spiritual meaning of the event. In addition, relying on everyday language allows the *Cloud*-author to connect two very different modes of existence: on the one hand, the experience of divine vision, in its seemingly irrepressible singularity, and on the other the codified, universal system of everyday behaviour shared by the Christian community, which is rooted

in the Bible. It is also extremely significant that this interpretation is centred on a verb that refers, primarily, to how the body is disposed, and has additional meanings pointing, to the spirit, to one's will and disposition. This ambiguity allows the *Cloud*-author to transition from physical meaning to spiritual meaning and harmonize the two planes of existence.

Conclusion: *Discretio*, Interpretation and Discipline

This particular approach to the interpretation of Saint Stephen's divine vision reveals a lot about the *Cloud*-author's attitude towards linguistic expression. One of his concerns is, evidently, being misunderstood and misread, especially by those who have an intellectual formation, and he inherits the suspicion towards language that is typical of the apophatic tradition.[38] Despite these preoccupations, however, the *Cloud*-author never disavows language; rather, he develops a method of literary interpretation and production that can be arduous to attain but eventually, once mastered, grants great creativity and freedom. This is because this method of interpretation is developed from the very practice of contemplation and partakes of the same playfulness the contemplatives enjoy once they learn to fully align their will to God's grace.[39] The *Cloud*-author's methods of textual expression and interpretation are based on understanding the difference between the physical and the spiritual, and the best way to become aware of it is by undertaking contemplation, an individual experience that yields universal results. In this way love and the intellect rein-

[38] Chartrand-Burke, *Against the Proud Scholars of the Devil*, cit., p. 117.

[39] R. Tixier, *"Good Gamesumli Pley", Games of Love in The Cloud of Unknowing*, «The Downside Review», 1990, CVIII, p. 235; R. Field, *From Rhetorical Theory to Spiritual Pedagogy in The Cloud of Unknowing*, «Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies», 2023, LIII, p. 275.

force each other in a virtuous cycle: a strictly affective devotional practice can provide the intellect with knowledge that can be used to preserve that same practice. This knowledge falls under the dominion of *discretio*, a virtue the *Cloud*-author elaborates from a pre-existing tradition. *Discretio* was first established in Saint Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where it was presented as the ability to assess the origin of supernatural experiences. Part of the subsequent tradition continued to develop *discretio* as a tool to assess the status of both visions and visionaries, while other writers recast it as a form of self-control and self-discipline, integrating it to the set of virtues required for undertaking life in a religious order.[40] Founding this virtue on the knowledge gathered in the practice of contemplation, *The Cloud of Unknowing* employs both traditions to craft a unique conception of *discretio* that can act as the foundation of many activities related to contemplation. Chapter 58 shows *discretio* as the origin of the *Cloud*-author's model of textual interpretation and linguistic expression, but it is, at large, one of the major structuring elements of the practice of contemplation itself, the community of those who undertake it and the forms of communication and behaviour that regulate it.

As has already been noticed, however, this highly organized system of shared practices and knowledge imposes some limits. It requires a balance that can be upset by the more radical, individual and unique elements of the contemplative experience, which can go beyond the control exerted by the *Cloud*-author's discipline. The most evidently problematic event in this respect is ecstasy, or *rauisching*, as the *Cloud*-author calls it: the moment where the soul is transported to a mode of knowing and loving God that suspends the processes of natural

[40] W.L. Anderson, *The Discernment of Spirits. Assessing Visions and Visionaries in the Late Middle Ages*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2011, pp. 22-37.

life.[41] Towards the end of *The Cloud of Unknowing* the *Cloud*-author downplays its importance in the practice he promotes to avoid criticisms. For the people who have mastered his practice, the normal state of existence and contemplation are in a continuum:

> For parauenture, whan it likiþ vnto God, þoo þat mowe not at þe first tyme haue it bot seeldom & þat not wiþouten grete trauayle, siþen after þei schulen haue it whan þei wile, as ofte as hem likiþ. (ch. 72, p. 71)

The transcendent experience of ecstasy is not the end point of contemplation: as they develop their method, contemplatives no longer need it. It can be argued, however, that the *Cloud*-author still ensures them a form of self-transcendence. The very knowledge of the difference between body and soul allows them to choose the spiritual plane, the ideal place to undertake many activities taught in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In the spirit, contemplation can be safely performed until it is perfected, communication is less ambiguous, and sacred texts are more clearly understood. By offering an interpretation of the visions of Saint Martin and Saint Stephen, then, the *Cloud*-author does not simply reclaim them from other interpretations he thinks are wrong. He tries to convince his readers that his teaching is the best and safest way to approach God, but also to make the events of the divine vision as inaccessible as possible to them: his commentaries turn them from forms of experience that can be potentially replicated into edifying moral allegories to be merely pondered upon. The *Cloud*-author's use of hermeneutics to prevent the reports of a spiritual experience from being directly put into practice is not an isolated case. In her book *Fruit of the Orchard: Reading Catherine of Siena in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* Jennifer N. Brown notices something similar in *The Orcherd of Syon*, the Middle English translation of Saint Catherine of Siena's *Dialogo*, where the use of multiple commentaries around the Saint's reports of her spiritual encounters

[41] Clark, *The Cloud of Unknowing: An Introduction. Volume 2: Notes on The Cloud of Unknowing*, cit., p. 117.

with God serve as a means to distance the reader from said events, and potentially avoid imitation.[42] Likewise, the layer of textual interpretation added by the *Cloud*-author to the biblical events is a gloss that distances the experiences depicted therein from the readers. In this light, the fact that Saint Martin and Saint Stephen have been direct witnesses of God's immediate presence in creation seems to matter less than the fact that they are actors in a unique scene prepared by God so that it can be recorded and preserved for all mankind by discussing its meaning. The only miracle the *Cloud*-author wants his readers to replicate from these experiences seems to be the one that is accessible to all and connects all: language itself.

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[42] J. N. Brown, *Fruit of the Orchard: Reading Catherine of Siena in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2019, pp. 137-9.

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Ira and *Furor* in Shakespeare's Portrait of Henry V

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Shakespeare's *Henry V* has always elicited opposing reactions in the audience, as well as in the scholarly community. For some, he is the embodiment of ideal kingship, a great military leader and national hero; for others, a Machiavellian ruler who conceals his political machinations under a veil of piety. His anger, constantly oscillating between righteous indignation, *ira*, and unrestrained fury, *furor*, may reflect contrasting aspects of his personality. Through the analysis of three key episodes in which Henry's anger holds centre stage, this article aims to offer further insights into the complexities of Shakespeare's character.

Shakespeare, Henry V, furor, ira, Renaissance politics

In his 1977 seminal article *Rabbits, Ducks and Henry V*, Norman Rabkin drew on a Gestalt principle to describe contrasting scholarly reactions to Shakespeare's

Henry V[1]. The selective nature of human visual perception allows for the identification of only one figure at a time. Therefore, until the rabbit recedes in the viewer's mind, the duck cannot be seen. Similarly, Shakespeare's play forces the audience to choose between two opposing perspectives: either the eponymous king is perceived as the very embodiment of ideal kingship or as the perfect Machiavellian ruler, who conceals political machinations under a veil of piety. The lack of scholarly consensus about the playwright's intentions would thus reveal a fundamental ambiguity at the heart of the king's character itself[2]. The binary interpretation inherent in the rabbit-duck illusion can also apply to one of Henry V's most striking features: his fiery temper. The king's vehemence against his enemies frequently challenges the very limits of moral acceptability, thus turning royal – righteous – indignation into unrestrained brutality. This paper thus aims to explore how Shakespeare's *Henry V* constructs a multifaceted portrait of kingship through the strategic use of anger. By dramatizing the subtle line between *ira* and *furor* the play appears to reveal a monarch constantly torn between public duty and the desire for private revenge.

Henry's Portrait and the Centrality of Anger

The staging of extreme emotions was a defining feature of epic poetry from classical antiquity to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance[3]. Amongst these emotions, an-

[1] N. Rabkin, *Rabbits, Ducks and Henry V,* «Shakespeare Quarterly», 1977, XVIII, pp. 279-296.
[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 279-80; 295.
[3] For instance, an analysis of the concordances of the *Song of Roland* reveals that anger enjoys great prominence in the text. Curucus / Curuciez (3 + 1) [irascible; to anger, to become angry]; Esrages (1) [to become angry]; Ire / Ireement / Irur (11+3+6) [rage, fury]; Maltalant / Maltalentifs (2+1) [angry reaction]; Mortel rage (2) [mortal rage]. J.J. Duggan, *A Concordance of the Chanson de Roland*, Ohio University Press, Columbus 1969, pp. 71; 96;141; 185-6; 240; 316; S.D. White, *The Politics of Anger*, in *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion*

ger held a particularly complex status. It was often associated with heroism and honour, and yet its appropriateness was consistently questioned, especially when displayed by kings[4]. In classical antiquity, just like any other human feeling, anger could be displayed with varying degrees of intensity. When one's anger did not exceed the limits of proper conduct, it was considered to be guided by reason and thus not only justified, but even necessary. Just anger had to be prompted by an undeserved offence that threatened a person's dignity[5]. In Senecan Revenge and Tyrant tragedies, *furor* is depicted as «the consuming rage which could signify simultaneously both sinful passion and epic *θυμός* [thymos], both mad delusion and visionary heroism»[6]. Significantly, Seneca's representation of *furor* already reflects that same duality that later emerges in Christian thought, where anger could be considered not only one of the seven deadly sins, but also an instrument of moral correction. In a Christian context, a crucial distinction was in fact drawn between wrath – *ira* – and rage – *furor*. In Chaucer's late fourteenth-century *Canterbury Tales,* the parson in fact specifies that «ire is in two maneres»: one of them is good, the other wicked.[7] Anger was only deemed acceptable insofar as it was directed at oneself or at someone else's sins, thereby allowing it to be transformed into *bona ira* [8]: «nat wrooth

in the Middle Ages, ed. by Barbara H. Rosenwein, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1998, pp. 127-152.

[4] G. Althoff, Ira Regis*: Prolegomena to a History of Royal Anger*, in *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages,* ed. by Barbara H. Rosenwein, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1998, p. 60.

[5] M. De Poli, *L'ira «giusta» e il perdono: Aristotele, i Greci, la tragedia (quasi un'introduzione)*, in *Il teatro delle emozioni: l'ira*, ed. Mattia De Poli, Padova University Press, Padova 2021, pp. 11-20.

[6] R.S. Miola, *Shakespeare and the Classical Tragedy. The Influence of Seneca*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1992, p. 122.

[7] G. Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1987, p. 305.

[8] P. Hyams, *What Did Henry III of England Think in Bed and in French about Kingship and Anger?*, in *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages,* ed. by Barbara H. Rosenwein, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1998, p. 106.

agayns the man, but wrooth with the mysdede of the man»[9]. Conversely, if one's anger is provoked by their desire for revenge, «wikked wil to do vengeance», it stands as an instance of the wicked kind, which «comth of felonie of herte»[10]. Rulers were expected to be mild, merciful, and patient, while simultaneously capable of commanding respect and instilling fear[11]. When the king's honour was insulted or his country threatened, he was expected to show resentment to preserve his reputation[12]. Therefore, it was not the performance of anger itself, but rather the motivations behind it, that determined its legitimacy. For instance, in crusading epic contexts, the anger of the Christian army and their leaders was described as unambiguously righteous, as it stemmed from the desire for just revenge against those who were believed to be God's enemies[13].

In Shakespeare's play, this distinction is all but straightforward, as the two kings are both Christians and their quarrel merely dynastic. Henry's indignation should thus be understood more in political than moral terms[14]. In the *Prince*, Machiavelli argues that a good ruler must be firm and, when necessary, unmerciful, to maintain peace and justice within the state.

> Debbe, pertanto, uno principe non si curare della infamia di crudele, per tenere li sudditi suoi uniti e in fede; perchè con pochissimi esempli sarà più pietoso che quelli e'quali, per

[9] Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, cit., p. 305.
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] Althoff, Ira Regis, cit., p. 61.
[12] White, 'The Politics of Anger', cit., p. 143.
[13] S.J. Spencer, *Emotions and the "Other": Emotional Characterisation of Muslims Protagonists in Narrative of the Crusades (1095-1192)*, in *Literature of the Crusades*, ed. by Simon Thomas Parsons, Linda M. Paterson, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2018, p. 45.
[14] G.K. Paster, *Instrumentalizing Anger. Warfare and Disposition in the Henriad*, in *Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and War*, ed. by David Loewenstein, Paul Stevens, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2021, p. 120.

> troppa pietà, lasciono seguire e' disordini di che ne nasca occisioni o rapine[15].

From this perspective, a ruler should aim to be feared rather than loved[16].

> Nasce da questo una disputa: s'egli è meglio essere amato che temuto, o e converso [...] E gli uomini hanno meno respetto a offendere uno che si facci amare che uno che si facci temere [...] Debbe, nondimanco, el principe farsi temere in modo, che, se non acquista lo amore, che fugga l'odio[17].

Though not explicitly mentioned, anger may be understood as part of the king's emotional repertoire aimed at asserting his authority. In this sense, Henry's numerous outbursts of anger may be perceived as politically motivated wrath, justified by the greater goal of securing the stability and well-being of his kingdom. However, a further passage from *The Prince* suggests a more nuanced scenario. In the Middle Ages, *furor* was often described in animalistic terms, standing in opposition to the civilised *ira* of Christian kings. Machiavelli conversely seems to advocate for the combination of bestial and human features in the ideal ruler.

> Dovete adunque sapere come sono dua generazioni di combattere: l'uno con le leggi, l'altro con la forza: quel

[15] N. Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, ed. by Piero Melograni, Rizzoli, Milan 1999, pp.158-161. «Therefore, if a ruler can keep his subjects united and loyal, he should not worry about incurring a reputation for cruelty; for by punishing a very few he will really be more merciful than those who over-indulgently permit disorders to develop, with resultant killings and plundering.» N. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. and transl. by Quentin Skinner, Russel Price, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, p. 58.

[16] A. Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics*, The Arden Shakespeare, London 2004, p.11.

[17] Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, cit., pp. 158-161. «A controversy has arisen about this: whether it is better to be loved than feared, or vice versa... Men are less hesitant about offending or harming a ruler who makes himself loved than one who inspires fear...Nevertheless, a ruler must make himself feared in such a way that, even if he does not become loved , he does not become hated.» Machiavelli, *The Prince*, cit., p.59.

> primo è proprio dello uomo, quel secondo è delle bestie: ma, perché el primo molte volte non basta, conviene ricorrere al secondo. Pertanto, a uno principe è necessario sapere bene usare la bestia e l'uomo. [...] Sendo dunque uno principe necessitato sapere bene usare la bestia, debbe di quelle pigliare la golpe e il lione; perché il lione non si defende da' lacci, la golpe non si defende da' lupi[18].

According to this view, both law and brute force must be available to a successful ruler, who will choose between them not on the grounds of moral principles but of political circumstances. Although in Machiavelli's argument the lion stands for strength rather than rage, its association with bestiality and to some extent brutality seems to challenge those same limits that transform just and appropriate anger into unrestrained fury.

For his portrait of Henry V, Shakespeare mainly relied on two sixteenth-century chronicles, Edward Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and Yorke* and Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles*, as well as from the anonymous play *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*[19]. These sources generally aligned with the glorious image of the king dominating both contemporary and posthumous biographical accounts[20]. However, yet another historical figure might have inspired Shakespeare's play. The scholarly consensus is that *Henry V* was written in 1599[21], during the early stages of Rob-

[18] *Ibid.* pp. 164-167. «You should know, then, that there are two ways of contending: one by using laws, the other, force. The first is appropriate for men, the second for animals; but because the former is often ineffective, one must have recourse to the latter. Therefore, a ruler must know well how to imitate beasts as well as employing properly human means. [...] Since a ruler, then, must know how to act like a beast, he should imitate both the fox and the lion, for the lion is liable to be trapped, whereas the fox cannot ward off wolves.» *Ibid.*, p. 61.

[19] Britland, Cottegnies, *Introduction*, cit., p. 5; Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, cit., p. 195.

[20] For further details on medieval bibliographies on Henry V see, A. Gransden, *Historical Writing in England, ii, c. 1307 to the Early Sixteenth Century*, Routledge: London & New York 1996, pp. 194-219.

[21] The English army led by Devereux left in March 1599, only to return defeated and disgraced six months later, in September 1599. W. Shakespeare, *Henry V*, ed. by Gary Taylor, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, pp. 4-5.

ert Devereux's campaign in Ireland. Yet, the allusion to the earl's expedition in the Chorus of Act 5 does not only provide a *terminus a quo* for the composition of the play, but it might also offer further insights into the centrality of anger. The «General of our gracious Empress» (5.0, 30) was well known for his ebullient temperament and quickness to anger, so much so that George Chapman depicted him as a «living instance of the Achileian vertues», in the dedication to his 1598 translation of the *Iliad*[22]. In an attempt to secure Devereux as patron, Chapman meticulously shaped Achilles' portrait to reflect traits commonly ascribed to the Earl, most notably his irritable disposition[23]. In particular, although anger already held centre stage in Homer's work, as the *Iliad* famously opens with Achilles' implacable wrath, *μῆνιν*, Chapman possibly exaggerated this aspect to reinforce the parallel with Devereux. Shakespeare might also have shaped his portrait of Henry V on that of the earl in order to give anger centre stage. Yet, Devereux was no king. Therefore, the consequences of his outbursts of anger were admittedly more limited in scope. Conversely, when a king was involved, the characterisation of anger as well became more complex. In the play, *furor* and *ira* do not merely serve Henry's political purposes, but rather reflect the tension between his private self and his public persona. Henry's emotional duality may in fact mirror the double nature of the king's body. Therefore, his body politic may be represented by his calculated use of anger, whereas his moments of unrestrained fury may stand for his human body[24].

The prologue to the play opens with an invocation to a «muse of fire», possibly an allusion to the «ascential muse» mentioned in the dedication to Chapman's *Achilles' Shield*.[25]

[22] J.C. Briggs, *Chapman's* Seaven Bookes of the Iliades*: Mirror for Essex*, «Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900», 1981, XXI, p. 59.
[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 61; 69.
[24] E.H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies,* Princeton University Press, Princeton 2016.
[25] G. Chapman, *Achilles Shield Translated as the Other Seuen Bookes of Homer, out of his Eighteenth Booke of Iliades, Iohn Windet*, London 1598.

> O, for a muse of fire that would ascend
> The brightest heaven of invention!
> A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,
> And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!
> Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
> Assume the port of Mars, and at his heels,
> Leashed in like hounds, should famine, sword, and fire
> Crouch for employment. [...] (*Prologue*, 5-9)[26]

Fire may well be the highest and brightest element, ascending by its very nature towards the heavens; however, in Early Modern humourism, it is also the element traditionally associated with the choleric nature caused by the pre-eminence of yellow bile[27]. This condition was also believed to be characteristic of youth. Significantly, merely four lines later, King Henry is transformed into the very embodiment of war itself, the god Mars, who was also traditionally associated with anger[28]. In Marsilio Ficino's fifteenth-century commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*, Mars is described as the personification of wrath[29]. To put it another way, only through anger can a man resemble the god of war.

> In brief, man is the whole world through his intellect he resembles the firmament to some extent, through his reflective reason he resembles Saturn; through his practical reason, Jupiter, through his expression of both, Mercury, through his senses and imagination, the Sun; through his wrathful tendency, Mars through his strong desires, Venus, through his invigorating nature, the Moon, through his means of conveyance, the heavens, and through his tangible body, the elemental realm[30].

The portrait of Mars perfectly matches not only the centrality of anger in Henry's personality, but also his

[26] W. Shakespeare, *Henry V*, ed. by Gary Taylor, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008. (This is the edition I used throughout)
[27] Paster, *Instrumentalizing Anger*, cit., p. 111.
[28] T.O. Jones, *The Influence of Marsilio Ficino on Elizabethan Literature*, Mellen, Lewiston 2013, p. 128.
[29] A. Farndell (ed.), *All Things Natural: Ficino on Plato's Timaeus*, Shepheard-Walwyn, London 2010, p. 81.
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 127.

double nature. For instance, in his sixteenth-century *Fountaine of Ancient Fiction*, Vincenzo Cartari provides an allegorical portrait of Mars characterised by the juxtaposition of hot and cold, of fury and prudent calculation[31].

> Some also haue appropriated vnto him the wolfe, being a most rauenous & deuouring beast, and therefore attributed vnto him; in that all souldiers and men of warre, vpon their first furie and heate are giuen much to spoiling and consuming of goods, ruinating and ouerthrowing all things whatsoeuer, that happen vnto them in the pride of their choler, & first inflamation of their bloud: or else because this beast . . . seeth most perfectly in the darkest night, as wise and prouident captaines and commaunders ought to doe, that is, that they with all all-foreseeing aduisednesse and circumspection, preuent and frustrate the secret, darke, and hidden plots, and close-contriued stratagemes of the enemie whatsoeuer, for by the sharpe-sighted eyes of this beast is vnderstood the farre-reaching capacitie and wittie braine of a politicke commaunder, in discouering and seeing through the secret and concealed intendements of his aduersarie[32].

The wolves described by Cartari closely resemble the three monstrous hounds at Henry's heels: famine, sword and fire. Although this representation of war is certainly not unprecedented, as soldiers were often compared to wolves, in the context of the Prologue it creates some sort of textual circularity[33]. The same fire that has raised Henry to the level of the worthies and of the warriors of the Faith in the Prologue will shortly engulf his military campaign in almost infernal flames[34]. In his appeal to gain

[31] Paster, *Instrumentalizing Anger*, cit., p. 113.
[32] V. Cartari, *The Fountaine of Ancient Fiction*, transl. by Richard Linche Islip, London 1599, *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.
[33] Significantly, during the Siege of Harfleur, the English soldiers are described as «greyhounds in the slips | straining upon the start» (3.1.31-2), Paster, *Instrumentalizing Anger*, cit., p. 112.
[34] Henry V is included in Robert Fletcher's 1606 *The Nine English Worthies*, a work devoted to all English past and future kings, whose name was Henry. This text was meant to create an evocative parallel between the legendary worthies of medieval literature and more recent kings: «Nine former Worthies Stories theirs extend | Some of them vp to heauen, with endlesse praise: | All of them liv'd

the king's support, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the English nobles urge Henry to follow in the footsteps of his Plantagenet ancestors, «the former lions of your blood» (1.2, 124), and lawfully claim the throne of France. Canterbury disturbingly evokes the same imagery introduced in the Prologue, «O let their bodies follow, my dear liege, | with blood and sword and fire, to win your right» (1.2, 130-1). Nevertheless, the replacement of famine with blood, which simultaneously entails the idea of violent bloodshed and dynastic right, contributes to creating a view of war constantly oscillating between chivalric ideals and harsh reality.

The genuineness of Henry's concerns about the lawfulness of his claim is possibly undermined by the unexpected appearance of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely as the very first characters on stage. The two prelates are in fact discussing how to avoid losing their properties by offering their king the longed-for pretext to invade France[35]. The scenario is one of open bribery. And yet, one is under the impression that Church and State are in fact playing a well-arranged part. As soon as the archbishop assumes responsibility for the

most worthy in their dayes. | But all were not of one, nor oneselfe sort: | Three excellents, of God ordaind before: | Three other valiant, famous by report. | The first three Kings, one Prophet, valour store:| All three commended heauenly vertues lore. | Three other were profane, but valiant men: |Three Christian Kings, that vsed pike for pen.» R. Fletcher, *The Nine English Worthies: or, Famous and Worthy Princes of England Being all of One Name; Beginning with King Henrie the first, and Concluding with Prince Henry, Eldest Sonne to our Soueraigne Lord the King*, Iohn Harrison, London 1606.

[35] The interpretation and legitimacy of the Salic Law may have been perceived as an extremely relevant topic at the end of the sixteenth century, as the Tudor claim to the throne was also based on female inheritance. Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Histories. Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy*, Methuen, London 1964, p. 261. For further discussion on the legitimacy of Henry's claim see, Rosanna Camerlingo, «*Henry V* and the Just War: Shakespeare, Gentili and Machivelli», in *Machiavellian Encounters in Tudor and Stuart England. Literary and Political Influences from the Reformation to the Restoration*, ed. by Alessandra Arienzo, Alessandra Petrina, Routledge, London and New York 2013, pp. 103-19.

most assured spill of innocent blood, «The sin upon my head» (1.2, 97), the king is easily persuaded. His concerns are now only related to the defence of England's northern border in his absence. This attitude towards responsibility appears to be part of a larger scheme in which the king always tries to blame someone else for his vengeful conduct in order to maintain an untarnished image of himself[36]. Similarly, the derogatory gift consisting of a casket of tennis balls, delivered by the French ambassador, gives the English king the opportunity to blame the Dauphin for what was in fact a previously planned invasion of France. The siege of Harfleur is another such moment, as Henry makes the governor of the town responsible, «guilty in defence» (3.3, 123), for the English brutal retaliation[37]. Although the king provides no motivation for his decision to have all prisoners killed during the battle of Agincourt, he may have been prompted by the sound of a new French charge. And yet, Captain Fluellen finds it necessary to justify the king's conduct with the massacre of the boys in the English camp at the hands of the French. This flimsy attempt to find a chivalrous explanation for the king's otherwise unchivalrous behaviour is even more disturbing, as the order is uttered at a time when Henry is clearly unaware of the events in the camp. Significantly, all three instances are marked by Henry's outbursts of anger. The analysis of these episodes may provide further insights into the king's intentions and complex personality, as well as reveal whether these outbursts are intended to be genuine windows into the king's soul or merely calculated performances designed to gain political or strategic advantage.

[36] D.S. Kastan, *"The Question of These Wars". Shakespeare, Warfare, and the Chronicles*, in *Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and War*, ed. by David Loewenstein, Paul Stevens, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2021, p. 105.
[37] J.S. Mebane, *"Impious War": Religion and the Ideology of Warfare in* Henry V, « Studies in Philology», 2007, CIV, p. 258.

«France being ours we'll bend it our awe, | or break it all to pieces»[38]

The exchange between King Henry and his counsellors ends with a clear resolution to make war on France. Nevertheless, as soon as the French ambassador is admitted, the king declares himself unbiasedly open to hearing the Dauphin's thoughts.

> KING HENRY
> We are no tyrant, but a Christian king,
> Unto whose grace our passion is as subject
> As is our wretches fettered in our prisons.
> Therefore with frank and with uncurbèd plainness
> Tell us the Dauphin's mind. (1.2, 241-5)

Henry emphasises that although the passion of the former prince Hal is still part of his personality, what prevails is now the grace of his body politic. Two different similes are drawn: the king's personal feelings are compared to subjects and prisoners. In both cases, the king's ebullient temperament has admittedly not been replaced by one more befitting a Christian king. Though in chains, it is still untamed and ready to show the full extent of its rage upon provocation. Therefore, Henry, as a good Machiavellian ruler, retains features of both the beast and the human being. The first statement being somehow contradicted by the subsequent lines is predictive of what happens as soon as the ambassador uncovers the nature of the Dauphin's gift. King Henry's response is a climax of fearful threats directed at both France and the architect of such an insult: «I will rise there with so full a glory | That I will dazzle all the eyes of France, | Yea, strike the Dauphin blind to look on us» (1.2, 278-80); «We'll chide this Dauphin at his father's door» (1.2, 308)[39]. However, in the Folio version, a significant change appears halfway through Henry's speech: the "royal we"

[38] 1.2, 224-5

[39] The shiny imagery evoked both by the muse of fire and by this passage is already mentioned in the monologue of Prince Hal in Henry IV part 1 in which he says that he will imitate the Sun.

characterising the first part of his argument is abruptly replaced by the singular first-person pronoun. This shift might well be connected to stylistic reasons or to the textual tradition; nonetheless, it may also have been genuinely intended to blur the boundaries between just and excessive anger, between the righteous indignation of the king's body politic and the rage of the warlike Henry.

As stressed by Gary Taylor, the text survives in two different redactions: the Quarto version dating from 1600 and the Folio version dating from 1623. All subsequent editions appear to have been based on the latter, which also shows «every sign of having been printed directly from an authorial manuscript draft»[40]. The general agreement is that Q was conversely the result of a reconstruction of the play as recollected from memory[41]. The Quarto in fact presents a significantly simplified and straightforwardly patriotic play, possibly aimed at appealing to an unsophisticated audience[42]. This may be the reason behind the Quarto choice to use systematically the "royal we" in order to offer an uncomplicated portrait of the king instead of having him oscillate between his private self and his public persona[43].

At the end of *Henry IV part 2*, during his coronation ceremony, Henry rejects Falstaff by claiming to have turned away from his former self[44]. The French gift reveals that the Dauphin assumes he has not. The change in the use of pronouns takes place at a crucial moment in Henry's speech, when he threatens the Dauphin to show him the full extent to which he was wrong.

KING HENRY

[40] Shakespeare, *Henry V*, ed. by Gary Taylor, cit., p. 12
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 22; Id., *The First Quarto of King Henry V*, ed. by Andrew Gurr, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, pp. 1-5.
[42] *Ibid.*, p. 23.
[43] This view has been endorsed by Gary Taylor in his edition of the play. W. Shakespeare, *Henry V*, ed. by Gary Taylor, footnote to line 276, p. 116.
[44] (5.5, 57) W. Shakespeare, *Henry IV part two,* ed. by René Weis, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008.

> We are glad the Dauphin is so pleasant with us.
> […] And we understand him well,
> How he comes o'er us with our wilder days,
> Not measuring what use we made of them.
> We never valued this poor seat of England,
> And therefore, living hence, did give ourself
> To barbarous license, as 'tis ever common
> That men are merriest when they are from home.
> But tell the Dauphin I will keep my state,
> Be like a king, and show my sail of greatness
> When I do rouse me in my throne of France. (1.2, 266-275)

What awakens Henry's fury is the fear that his transformation is not believed to be genuine by everyone. And yet, this very same unrestrained fury is what reveals that, after all, Henry's passions are far from having been subjected to his grace or confined to the prison of his royal majesty. From that point onward, the threats unleashed by King Henry also involve those layers of the populations that are usually spared from retaliation.

> And tell the pleasant prince this mock of his
> Hath turned his balls to gun-stones, and his soul
> Shall stand sore chargèd for the wasteful vengeance
> That shall fly with them; for many a thousand widows
> Shall this his mock mock out of their dear husbands,
> Mock mothers from their sons, mock castles down;
> And some are yet ungotten and unborn
> That shall have cause to curse the Dauphin's scorn.
> (1.2, 273-87)

Henry's argument has reached its climax: the blame for the consequent wasteful vengeance is entirely on the Dauphin. The constant repetition of the word "mock", both as a noun and as a verb, creates an effect of amplification in which the Dauphin's scorn is turned into a multitude of deformed bestial laughter deriding the suffering of his own defenceless people. In the last few lines of his tirade, the king describes himself almost in divine terms, as his cause is not merely just, but also sacred, «well-hallowed». His conclusion further emphasises that Henry wants his rage to be understood as royal wrath,

justified by his desire to protect his country's reputation against a foreign enemy. Nevertheless, the nature of the threats unleashed, the tone of personal defiance against the French prince, as well as the change in the use of the pronouns disturbingly reveals a different story. Henry's fury certainly oversteps the boundaries of appropriate royal behaviour and yet it may elicit in the audience opposite reactions. They might interpret Henry's outbursts of anger as a sign of his genuinely human nature and thus sympathise with him. However, they might also wonder whether Henry meticulously planned even the performance of his own indignation, just as he did with the invasion of France. In this passage, anger thus functions as an interpretative key emphasising once again the complexity of Henry's character.

«Will you yield and this avoid, | Or, guilty in defence, be thus destroyed»[45]

The entire siege of Harfleur, which historically lasted about a month, is summarised in Shakespeare's play in three main phases: the breach in the defences, the discussion between the English captains on the efficacy of the mining operations and the last parley with the subsequent surrender of the town. This last stage of the siege can be taken as yet another example of Henry's resentment. In the fifteenth-century chronicle *Gesta Henrici Quinti*, the anonymous author emphasises that Henry V offered peace terms to the town according to the twentieth chapter of the Deuteronomic law.

> Rex noster, qui non bellum, sed pacem quesivit, ut causam sui incepti operis maioris armaret innocencie clipeo, iuxta Deuteronomium legis XXmo, proposuit pacem obsessis si sibi aperirent ianuas et villam illam, nobilem porcionem hereditariam corone sue Anglie et ducatus sui Normandie, redderent, ut deberent, libere et sine vi[46].

[45] (3.3, 122-3).
[46] «Our king, who sought not war but peace… in order to arm with the shield of innocence the just cause of the great enterprise upon

The law cited gave a king the right not only to lay siege if the town refused to surrender, but also to put the male population to the sword and take women and property as spoils once God had delivered the place to him.[47]

> Siquando accesseris ad expugnandam civitatem, offeres ei primum pacem. Si receperit, et aperuerit tibi portas, cunctus populus, qui in ea est, salvabitur, et serviet tibi sub tributo. Sin autem foedus inire noluerit, et coeperit contra te bellum, oppugnabis eam. Cumque tradiderit Dominus Deus tuus illam in manu tua, percuties omne quod in ea generis masculini est, in ore gladii, absque mulieribus et infantibus, jumentis et ceteris quae in civitate sunt. (*Deuteronomy* 20.10-14)[48]

Shakespeare does not explicitly mention the recourse to this law; nonetheless, Henry's threats are undoubtedly shaped on the Biblical text. The main difference lies in the targets of the prospected violence. The Biblical law in fact forbade the killing of women and children, whereas in Henry's speech they are repeatedly mentioned as victims of the brutality of the unbridled English army. The desolation portrayed by Henry is reminiscent of that

which he had embarked, offered, in accordance with the twentieth chapter of the Deuteronomic law, peace to the besieged if, freely and without coercion, they would open their gates to him and, as was their duty, restore the town, which was a noble and hereditary portion of his crown of England and of his duchy of Normandy». F. Taylor, J.S. Roskell (eds), *Gesta Henrici Quinti the Deeds of Henry V,* Oxford Medieval Texts, Oxford 1975, p. 34.

[47] Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, cit., p. 200.

[48] *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy%2020&version=VULGATE> (15 August 2025) «When thou comest nigh unto a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it. And it shall be, if it make thee answer of peace, and open unto thee, then it shall be, that all the people that is found therein shall be tributaries unto thee, and they shall serve thee. And if it will make no peace with thee, but will make war against thee, then thou shalt besiege it: And when the Lord thy God hath delivered it into thine hands, thou shalt smite every male thereof with the edge of the sword: But the women, and the little ones, and the cattle, and all that is in the city, even all the spoil thereof, shalt thou take unto thyself; and thou shalt eat the spoil of thine enemies.» King James Version, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy%2020&version=KJV> (15 August 2025)

evoked in his first speech to the French ambassador, and yet, the circumstances make these threats more actual and impending. No one at this point can guess the king's real intentions.

Violence against defenceless and innocent people grows fiercely throughout the speech. The appalling image of destruction brought by the «hard of heart» (3.3, 91) English soldiers is depicted through the constant use of alliteration, such as «fresh fair virgins» (3.3, 94), «blind and bloody soldiers» (3.3, 114), «shrill-shrieking daughters» (3.3, 115) and «mad mothers» (3.3, 119). Sound is masterfully used to conjure the grinding and slavering hounds of war presented in the play's prologue. Significantly, Henry is simultaneously Mars himself and one of those bloody hounds at the heels of the god of war: «For as I am a soldier, | A name that in my thoughts becomes me best» (3.3, 85-6). Far from being heroic, impious war is thus described as «Arrayed in flames like to the prince of fiends» (3.3, 96). Repetition also plays a pivotal role in the creation of a feeling of oppressing helplessness. Twice Henry states his indifference for the fate of Harfleur «what is then to me» (3.3, 95); «What is't to me» (3.3, 99), twice he emphasises that he has full agency to prevent the massacre, as his army of bloodthirsty hounds is still under his control, «Whiles yet my soldiers are in my command» (3.3, 109); «Whiles yet the cool and temperate wind of grace | O'erblows the filthy and contagious clouds | Of heady murder, spoil, and villainy» (3.3, 110-2).

This passage has always proved problematic for subsequent representations. For instance, in the Quarto version all threats to the population of Harfleur are omitted, possibly to align with the untarnished portrait of the king presented throughout the play[49].

> KING HENRY
> How yet resolves the Governor of the town?
> This is the latest parley we'll admit,

[49] J.D. Mardock, *The Critical Backstory*, in *King Henry V. A Critical Reader*, ed. by Line Cottegnies, Karen Britland, Bloomsbury, London 2020, p. 27.

Therefore to our best mercy give yourselves,
Or like to men proud of destruction,
Defy us to our worst. For as I am a soldier,
A name that in my thoughts becomes me best,
If we begin the battery once again
I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur
Till in her ashes she be buried.
The gates of mercy are all shut up.
What say you, will you yield and this avoid,
Or, guilty in defence, be thus destroyed? (Q, 7.15, 22-33)

In the 1989 film *Henry V* featuring Kenneth Branagh in the title role, the ambiguity is resolved by assuming that Henry was merely playing a part as an actor on stage, threatening the governor with something he would probably never do, in order to scare the besieged and persuade them to surrender. In the film, Henry carries out his speech with violence and determination and yet, as soon as the governor surrenders, he almost faints in the arms of Exeter; he has just succeeded in avoiding further bloodshed. This reading is supported by the concluding lines of the scene.

KING HENRY
Open your gates.
Come, uncle Exeter,
Go you and enter Harfleur. There remain,
And fortify it strongly 'gainst the French.
Use mercy to them all for us, dear uncle.
The winter coming on and sickness growing
Upon our soldiers, we will retire to Calais.
Tonight in Harfleur will we be your guest.
Tomorrow for the march are we addressed. (3.3, 131-8)

Henry's army has suffered great losses during the siege and is now seeking to return to England as soon as possible. Although both Holinshed and Halle cite the subsequent pillaging of the town, «The souldiours were raunsomed and the toune was sacked to the greate gayne of the Englishmen», Shakespeare deliberately omits this

event and instead insists on showing Henry's clemency[50]. This would make this entire passage an instance of just wrath aimed at saving his fellow nationals from further loss. Nevertheless, the reference to the massacre of the innocents ordered by Herod towards the end of Henry's speech seems to undermine any straightforward interpretation of his intentions.

> Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
> Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused
> Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry
> At Herod's bloody-hunting slaughtermen. (3.3, 118-21)

Not only were his actions universally considered abominable, but Herod himself was considered the very portrait of bestiality in Medieval theatre. Although the *Coventry Cycle* was last performed in 1579, the repertoire of imagery created by the plays proved to be long-lasting and Shakespeare might have had the opportunity to attend these performances as he was a child[51]. In the cycle, Herod is depicted as possessed by mad fury: on hearing that the Magi have not kept their words and returned to their lands instead of providing him with details about baby Jesus, he yells wildly. According to the stage directions he «ragis in þe pagond and in the strete also»[52]. Significantly, in the Coventry Cycle, Herod was dressed in exotic fashion and wielded a *fauchoun*, the sword customarily associated with Saracens[53]. This comes as no

[50] E. Halle, *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York*, Rychard Grafton, London 1550, p. 49. As stressed by Lily Campbell, the mercy ascribed to Henry V in the play is not recorded for the medieval king, but rather for Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, during his siege of Cadiz, in 1596. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Histories*, cit., p. 287.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

[52] J.Q. Adams (ed), *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas: A Selection of Plays Illustrating the History of the English Drama from its Origin down to Shakespeare*, The Riverside Press, Boston 1924, p. 163; *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[53] P. King, *Coventry Mystery Plays*, Coventry Branch of the Historical Association, Coventry 1997, p. 19. Significantly, in Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*, Mars is similarly described as the very

surprise, as in crusading narratives, *furor* was taken as a symbol of the Saracens opposition to Christianity and is thus juxtaposed to the divinely ordained wrath of the Crusaders[54]. For instance, in the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman *Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi*, *furor* is used to describe the wrath of the Saladin and his troops and only rarely that of King Richard I[55]. Once again, Henry's outbursts of anger disturbingly oscillate between *ira* and *furor*, thus possibly casting a shadow on the untarnished image of the Christian king.

«I was not angry since I came to France | Until this instant»[56]

In spite of the brutality of the threats unleashed by the English king against the unarmed population of Harfleur, his order to kill the French prisoners is possibly the most controversial action ascribed to him. During a lull in the Battle of Agincourt, a new alarm makes Henry think that the French troops were rallying again. Rumours of the

image of *furor*: he wields a «fachioun» and he is possessed by such rage that his facial features appear distorted, «writhing his face with mony angrie word.» (l. 189). R. Henryson, *The Complete Works*, ed. by David J. Parkinson, Medieval Institute Publications, Kalamazoo 2010.

[54] Spencer, *Emotions and the "Other"*, cit., pp. 40; 45.

[55] Some instances of the use of the word *furor* referring to the Turks or the Saladin: «Suum furor non explet affectum, ira ferrum repetit, quod taedium percutientis abjecit» (1.xl, p. 91) [The Turk's rage could not be satisfied and even when they were sick of killing, their anger drove them on (1.xl, p. 96)]; «Saraceni eminus a montanis quod acciderat prospicientes, ultra modum desolate, hoc Salahadino notificaverunt, qui statim ut audierat, barbam suam arripiens prae ira et furore depilavit.» (2.xlii, p. 209) [Seeing what happened from far off in the mountains, the Saracens were devastated. They informed Saladin. On hearing the news he pulled out his hair and tore his beard in his furious rage (2.xlii, p. 199)]. All Latin quotations are taken from W. Stubbs (ed), *Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi*, Longman, London 1864, whereas all translations are taken from H.J. Nicholson (ed), *Chronicle of the Third Crusade: A Translation of the* Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi, Ashgate, Aldershot 1997.

[56] (4.7, 50-1).

French reinforcements' arrival further prompts him to give the heinous order. This brutal decision was regarded by contemporary as well as posthumous chronicles as problematic and unchivalrous. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the account provided by the *Gesta Henrici Quinti* is somehow ambiguous.

> Sed ecce statim, nescitur in qua ira dei, clamor factus est bellum equestre posterius hostium, in incomparabili et recenti multitudine, stacionem et aciem resarciri ad veniendum super paucitate et lassitudine nostra. Et statim captivi, non attenta differencia personarum, exceptis ducibus Aurilianensis et Burbonii et certis aliis illustribus qui erant in acie regia, et paucissimis aliis, vel suorum captorum vel aliourum subsequencium gladiis, ne nobis in ruinam essent in venienti prelio, ceciderunt[57].

The omission of any subject for the verb «ceciderunt» might have deliberately been intended to free Henry from any responsibility in the massacre and conversely give the impression that it almost occurred spontaneously. In an attempt to find a chivalrous explanation for the king's behaviour, Holinshed's *Chronicle* describes it as a direct response to the pillage of the English camp and the subsequent slaughter of the boys guarding it at the hands of French soldiers.

> But when the outcrie of the lackies and boies, which ran awaie for feare of the Frenchmen thus spoiling the campe, came to the kings eares, he doubting least his enimies should gather togither againe, and begin a new field; and mistrusting further that the prisoners would be an aid to his enimies, or the verie enimies to their takers in déed if they

[57] «But then, all at once, because of what wrathfulness on God's part no one knows, a shout went up that the enemy's mounted rearguard (in incompatible number and still fresh) were re-establishing their position and line of battle in order to launch an attack on us, few and weary as we were. And immediately, regardless of distinction of person, the prisoners, save for the duke of Orleans and Bourbon, certain other illustrious men who were in the king's 'battle', and a very few others, were killed by the swords either of their captors or of others following after, lest they should involve us in utter disaster in the fighting that would ensue.» Taylor, Roskell (eds), *Gesta Henrici Quinti, cit.,* p. 90.

> were suffered to liue, contrarie to his accustomed gentleness, commanded by sound of trumpet, that euerie man (vpon paine of death) should in-continentlie slaie his prisoner. When this dolorous decree, and pitifull proclamation was pronounced, pitie it was to see how some Frenchmen were suddenlie sticked with daggers, some were brained with pollaxes, some slaine with malls, other had their throats cut, and some their bellies panched, so that in effect, hauing respect to their great number, a few prisoners were saued[58].

As a good king, Henry would have merely been prompted by the desire to avenge the deaths of some of his innocent subjects. Nonetheless, this explanation may not have been perceived as entirely convincing even for Holinshed, who hastens to clarify that the king acted «contrarie to his accustomed gentleness». It might be worth noticing that "gentleness" somehow encompasses all royal qualities ranging from courtesy and nobility to mildness and freedom from harshness and violence[59]. This last meaning may reveal that the king was perceived to have lost his self-control and given in to *furor*.

In the play, the order is given twice, probably to emphasise Henry's exhaustion and desperation. The first instance appears to be motivated by the fear of a new French charge.

> KING HENRY
> But hark, what new alarum is this same?
> The French have reinforced their scattered men.
> Then every soldier kill his prisoners.
> Give the word through. (4.6, 36-39)

The scene ends with Pistol repeating the king's command, «Coup' la gorge» (4.6, 39). The subsequent one opens with two captains of Henry's army, Fluellen and Gower, discussing the reasons that prompted him to give the order. Both appear to believe that the decision was an act of just revenge against those who have broken all

[58] R. Holinshed, Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland, iii, Johnson, London 1808, pp. 81-2.
[59] 'Gentleness' in *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://www.oed.com/> (15 August 2025).

the laws of war, by killing the boys guarding the camp, «'tis expressly against the laws of arms» (4.7, 1-2). Gower concludes that Henry has thus behaved as a «gallant king» (4.7, 10). The irony cannot have escaped Shakespeare's audience who has earlier witnessed the English king threatening the people of Harfleur with harming women and children. Furthermore, the explanation provided proves completely groundless, as there are no signs in the play that the king has been informed about what had happened in the camp. He is not even on stage when Fluellen and Gower discuss the matter[60]. Despite what the two captains and the audience may believe were the real reasons behind the order, the subsequent parallel proposed by Fluellen may cast yet another shadow on the conduct of the king. Henry V is in fact compared to Alexander the Great, a character that evoked mixed reactions in both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as alternatively the embodiment of tyranny and heroic courage[61]. Fluellen's remarks seem to lean dangerously towards the former portrayal of Alexander.

> FLUELLEN If you mark Alexander's life well, Harry of Monmouth's life is come after it indifferent well, for there is figures in all things. Alexander, God knows and you know, in his rages and his furies and his wraths and his cholers and his moods and his displeasures and his indignations, and also being a little intoxicates in his prains, did, in his ales and his angers, look you, kill his best friend, Cleitus. (4.7, 29-35)

Rage, fury, wrath, choler, displeasure, indignation are the sole characteristics ascribed to the Macedonian

[60] J.B. Altman, *"Vile Participation". The Amplification of Violence in the Theater of* Henry V, «Shakespeare Quarterly», 1991, XLII, p. 30; P. Mason, Henry V. *'The quick forge and working house of thought'*, in *Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare History Plays*, ed. by Michael Hattaway, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 186.
[61] C. Sukic, *New Directions. 'His Bruised Helmet and his Bended Sword' – The Politics of Criminality and Heroism in* Henry V, in *King Henry V. A Critical Reader*, ed. by Line Cottegnies, Karen Britland, Bloomsbury, London 2020, p. 195.

king[62]. As the argument unfolds, the parallel becomes increasingly disturbing.

> As Alexander killed his friend Cleitus, being in his ales and his cups, so also Harry Monmouth, being in his right wits and his good judgments, turned away the fat knight with the great-belly doublet; he was full of jests and gipes and knaveries and mocks—I have forgot his name. [obviously referring to Falstaff, but also to Bardolph and Nim] (4.7.40-5)

The trait the two conquerors share is their inclination towards rage and brutality, which could even amount to killing their friends[63]. And yet, unlike Alexander, who disposed of Cleitus under the influence of alcohol, Henry rejected Falstaff when he was in all his «right wits and his good judgments». Fluellen might well have intended his comparison as celebratory, but the audience cannot fail to notice a hint of ill humour. His mispronunciation of the name of the Macedonian king «Alexander the Pig» may reinforce the idea that this passage was conceived as some sort of comic interlude;[64] however, as stressed by Christine Sukic, the remarks about Alexander «deflate the idea of the monarch's greatness, shifting its signification from honourable virtue to physical mass: "Why, I pray you, is not pig great?"»[65]. These opaque associations can only emphasise the multifaceted nature of Henry's character[66].

The captains' discussion regarding the analogies between Alexander the Great and Henry ends with the sud-

[62] As stressed by Judith Mossman, the portrait of Alexander the Great mentioned in the play derives from Plutarch's *Lives*. Significantly, the model for Plutarch's Alexander is Achilles himself. J. Mossman, Henry V *and Plutarch's* Alexander, «Shakespeare Quarterly», 1994, XLV, p. 73.
[63] Mebane, *"Impious War"*, cit., p. 260.
[64] A.M. Miller-Blaise, G. Venet, *Performance History*, in *King Henry V. A Critical Reader*, ed. by Line Cottegnies, Karen Britland, Bloomsbury, London 2020, p. 53.
[65] Sukic, *New Directions*, cit., p. 195; Paster, *Instrumentalizing Anger*, cit., p. 125.
[66] C. Sukic, *New Directions*, cit., p. 196.

den entrance of the king who offers a tangible example of the fury just described.

> KING HENRY
> I was not angry since I came to France
> Until this instant. Take a trumpet, herald.
> Ride thou unto the horsemen on yond hill.
> If they will fight with us, bid them come down,
> Or void the field. They do offend our sight.
> If they'll do neither, we will come to them
> And make them skirr away as swift as stones
> Enforcèd from the old Assyrian slings.
> Besides, we'll cut the throats of those we have,
> And not a man of them that we shall take
> Shall taste our mercy. Go and tell them so. (4.7, 50-60)

The king's return onstage marks a dramatic climax: far from dispelling the ambiguity surrounding the prisoner massacre, his words intensify the brutality of his earlier command. Henry claims that the French had not yet tasted the full extent of his rage, thus retroactively framing his previous threats to the people of Harfleur as restrained by comparison. The repetition of the order, combined with the vivid description of the ensuing violence, reinforces the impression that the king is no longer guided by reason, but rather overtaken by passion.

Although it is beyond the scope of the current essay to assess the full range of reactions to the massacre of the prisoners, it might be worth noticing that no French source openly condemns Henry's actions[67]. Honoré Bouvet's late fourteenth-century treatise *Tree of Battles* may offer a clue for this lack of condemnation. Mercy towards prisoners was admitted only insofar as it did not entail further danger for one's army[68]. In this light, the king's behaviour would have been perceived as within the limits of appropriateness. However, the flimsy and unsuccessful attempts to find a justification for Henry's actions

[67] A. King, *'Then a great misfortune befell them': The Laws of War on Surrender and the Killing of Prisoners on the Battlefield in the Hundred Years' War*, «Journal of Medieval History», 2017, XLIII, p. 114.
[68] *Ibid.*, p. 117.

and the disturbing parallels with Alexander the Great shape a much more ambiguous and complex portrait of the medieval king than that long celebrated in a tradition that regarded him as a univocal symbol of national greatness[69].

Conclusion

As stressed in the prologue of *Henry V*, the eponymous character is simultaneously an ideal king and the personification of war itself. Since the play is part of a tetralogy, it raises specific expectations. The audience that has seen Prince Hal's wilder days at the tavern now wonders whether after rejecting Falstaff he has truly turned away from his former self. Yet, even if this transformation had occurred, it would be far from complete, as what emerges from the play is the portrait of a king perpetually negotiating the demands of self and state[70]. The multiple outbursts of anger characterising the literary Henry V might have been meticulously calculated to shed light on his multifaceted personality. The king's body politic can only experience the kind of just anger arising from his desire to defend his country's interests and reputation, whereas the human fallibility characterising his physical body prompts him to indulge in unrestrained rage. The boundary between *furor* and *ira* is thus a mere matter of perspective, as the sole factor which allows the distinction between these two emotions is the validity of their motivation. Although fortune made Henry's sword, his military achievements prove as transient as a falling star and disintegrate in the space of a generation. Henry's determination and single-mindedness were not transfused into his son, whose meek temperament and pious devo-

[69] The play has become part of English national heritage, as it has often been interpreted as an exclusively patriotic text. Karen Britland, Line Cottegnies, *Introduction*, in *King Henry V. A Critical Reader*, ed. by Line Cottegnies, Karen Britland, Bloomsbury, London 2020, p. 1-2.

[70] Rabkin, *Rabbits, Ducks and Henry V,* cit., p. 296.

tion made England bleed. The play refuses to offer any unambiguous representation of Henry V and conversely emphasises the extent to which the boundaries between good and bad kingship, moral integrity and brutality, personal rule and tyranny are unavoidably blurred.

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Peter Whitehorne's *The Arte of Warre*, published in 1562, represents the first English translation of a Machiavellian work; it would be followed only thirty years later by the publication of the *Florentine Histories* (1595) and, later still, by *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy* in the seventeenth century. While these works were undoubtedly circulating in manuscript form, it is the military aspect that forms the core of the initial English dissemination of Machiavelli's ideas, preceding the political, ethical, and historical dimensions of his work. However, although the impact of these aspects of Machiavelli's thought on Elizabethan theatre has been explored since Meyer's pioneering studies, the potential influence of the Florentine Secretary's military theory has remained largely overlooked in scholarly discourse. This neglect is particularly striking given the cultural and political significance of military discourse in sixteenth-century England. Since Peter Whitehorne's *The Art*

of Warre represents the first truly modern technical manual of warfare to appear in England, and since its success inspired a wave of new treatises, it is plausible to assume that it also exerted some influence on Shakespeare's conception of warfare. The analysis of selected passages from *Richard III* and *Henry V* seems to support the hypothesis of a familiarity with the *de re militari* tradition exemplified by Machiavelli's work, offering a more nuanced understanding of the Florentine's influence within the theatrical culture of Elizabethan England.

Machiavelli – Military Thought – Shakespeare – The Art of War – Shakespeare on War

Machiavelli's *The Art of War* in Early Modern England

The English cultural context notably offers some of the earliest and most significant reactions to Machiavellian thought: by the late 1530s, Machiavelli had already found readers and critics in England. Expressing two opposing views, Cardinal Reginald Pole, in his 1539 *Apologia ad Carolum Quintum*, described *The Prince* as a book «written by the hand of Satan», whereas in a contemporary letter addressed to Thomas Cromwell, Henry Parker referred to the work as essential reading[1]. Moreover, in the following decades, *The Prince* circulated in England in manuscript translation, while the 1580s saw the appearance on English soil of the well-known Italian-language editions (with false publishing details) produced

[1] A. Petrina, A. Arienzo, *Introduction*, in *Machiavellian Encounters in Tudor and Stuart England: Literary and Political Influences from the Reformation to the Restoration*, ed. by A. Petrina, A. Arienzo, Routledge, London 2013, pp. 1-12: 5 (see also in the same volume A. Petrina, *Reginald Pole and the Reception of the "Principe" in Henrician England*, pp. 13-27).

by John Wolfe[2]. However, alongside this early interest in the works of the Florentine Secretary England also offers one of the most prominent representations of Machiavelli within the framework of the so-called «Black Legend», which followed directly from Machiavelli's condemnation in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* in 1559 and his subsequent transformation into an icon of tyranny[3]. Indeed, during the final decades of the sixteenth century, the Florentine became in England a malevolent presence – a bloodthirsty, duplicitous, and deceitful advisor – perfectly suited to the theatrical conventions of the Elizabethan age. In a context where the theatre served as the most widespread form of literary expression, characterized by a unique fusion of high cultural sophistication and popular appeal, Machiavelli emerged as an instantly recognizable embodiment of evil, meeting the expectations of an audience still steeped in the medieval theatrical tradition in which the Devil functioned as the very image of moral corruption. Within this framework, the name «Machiavelli» and its linguistic transformations – most notably *Machiavelli/Much evil* – operated as a powerful shorthand for treachery, cunning, and moral depravity[4].

[2] *Anglo-american Faces of Machiavelli. Machiavelli e machiavellismi nella cultura anglo-americana (secoli XVI-XX)*, Atti del Convegno di Napoli, 26-27 febbraio 2007, ed. by A. Arienzo, G. Borrelli, Polimetrica, Monza 2007; A. Petrina, *Machiavelli in the British Isles: Two Early Modern Translations of The Prince*, Ashgate, Farnham 2009; Id., *Machiavelli in Inghilterra: John Wolfe e la stampa elisabettiana*, in *Bibliografia delle edizioni di Niccolò Machiavelli 1506-1914*, ed. by P. Innocenti, M. Rossi, Vecchiarelli, Manziana (Rome) 2015-2023, pp. 17-32.

[3] On the subject, see at least the pioneering works of E. Meyer, *Machiavelli and Elizabethan Drama*, Fellber, Weimar 1897, and M. Praz, *Machiavelli and the Elizabethans*, «British Academy Proceedings», 1938, XIII, pp. 3-51. See also A. Petrina, *Contaminare lo spazio dell'innocenza. Machiavelli e gli elisabettiani*, in *Prigioni e paradisi. Luoghi scenici e spazi dell'anima nel teatro moderno*, Convegno di studi in ricordo di Umberto Artioli (1939-2004) Padova, 19-21 maggio 2010, ed. by E. Randi, Esedra, Padua 2011, pp. 31-43.

[4] A striking example can be found in the prologue to The Jew of Malta, a tragedy written by Christopher Marlowe and first performed

However, despite this early and sustained interest in the innovative treatise *De Principatibus* and most controversial aspects of the Florentine Secretary's thought, the first of Machiavelli's works to be printed in English was not *The Prince*, but rather his seven-book military dialogue *The Art of War*. As had occurred a few years earlier in Spain and France, the translation of *The Art of War* appeared in Peter Whitehorne's translation in 1562, thus preceding translations of Machiavelli's other writings[5]; it would be followed only thirty years later by the publication of the *Florentine Histories* (1595) and then, in the seventeenth century by *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*. Therefore, as Giuliano Procacci and, more recently, Sydney Anglo have already noticed, the military question lay at the heart of the first European diffusion of Machiavelli's thinking, even before the political, ethical and historical features of his work[6]. In the case of Eng-

around 1592. Here, the prologue is delivered by Machiavelli himself: presumed dead, the Florentine Secretary reappears in spectral form, haunting Malta (and, symbolically, England), and evoking people's deepest fears. Another example is the recurrence of Machiavelli's name in Shakespearean drama, where it carries distinctly pejorative connotations: in Henry VI, Part 1 (V, 4), we find for example the line «Alençon! that notorious Machiavel!»; in Cymbeline and in Othello we find terms such as «Florentine» and «Italian».

[5] N. Machiavelli, *The Arte of warre, written first in Italian by Nicholas Machiavell, and set forthe in Englishe by Peter Whitehorne, student at Graies Inne: with an addicion of other like marcialle feates and experimentes, as in a Table in the ende of the Booke maie appere, printed by J. Kingstone for N. Inglande*, London 1560 [1562]. Quotations from the work in the text will be indicated with the abbreviation TAOW, followed by the corresponding folio number in Arabic numerals.

[6] The early dissemination of Machiavelli's military thought was highlighted by Giuliano Procacci from the very outset of his studies on the European reception of the Florentine Secretary (collected in G. Procacci, *Machiavelli nella cultura europea dell'età Moderna*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 1995). Building on Procacci's contribution, Sydney Anglo – the other major specialist to whom we owe the most systematic study of the Secretary's international fortune – devotes ample attention to the early circulation of the Art of War in his *Machiavelli The First Century. Studies in Enthusiasm, Hostility and Irrelevance*, Warburg Studies, Oxford 2005. On the European circulation

land – though the same could be said of France – Machiavelli's reception was in some respects bifurcated, notably because *The Art of War* seems to have retained a certain degree of autonomy from the more forceful and problematic authorial identity that developed over the course of the sixteenth century. Although over time *The Art of War* was partially – and inevitably – absorbed into the complex trajectory of its author's reception, the military treatise nonetheless followed a distinct path: it contributed meaningfully to the development of English (and European) military thought, to the point that throughout the sixteenth century Machiavelli was known above all as an authority on military science.

Published in 1521, *The Art of War* reflects both the state of conflict that Florence had endured since 1494 and Machiavelli's own experience in the service of his Republic during wartime[7]. The dialogue is framed around the figure of Fabrizio Colonna, a seasoned *condottiere* long in the pay of the Spanish crown, who addresses a circle of young Florentines gathered in the *Orti Oricellari* (the gardens of the Rucellai residence). To them, he insists on the need to learn from the ancients, particularly from classical military treatises such as Vegetius's *Epitoma rei*

of the *Art of War*, see now also A. Guidi, *Books, People, and Military Thought. Machiavelli's "Art of War" and the Fortune of the Militia in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, Brill, Leiden 2020, pp. 35-62.

[7] Machiavelli's work can be read in the volume of the *Edizione Nazionale delle opere di Niccolò Machiavelli* (N. Machiavelli, *L'Arte della guerra – Scritti politici minori*, ed. by J.-J. Marchand, D. Fachard, G. Masi, Salerno Editrice, Rome 2001), as well as in the English translation by C. Lynch (N. Machiavelli, *Art of War*, ed. by C. Lynch, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2003). In addition to the entry «Arte della guerra» (by G. Masi) in the *Enciclopedia Machiavelliana* (ed. by G. Sasso, G. Inglese, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Rome 2014), see at least D. Fachard, *Implicazioni politiche nell'"Arte della guerra"*, in *Niccolò Machiavelli politico storico letterato*, Atti del Convegno di Losanna 27-30 settembre 1995, ed. by J.-J. Marchand, Salerno Editrice, Rome 1997, pp. 149-173; B. Cassidy, *Machiavelli and the Ideology of the Offensive: Gunpowder Weapons in "The Art of War"*, «The Journal of Military History», 2003, 2 LXVII, pp. 381-404 and T. J. Lukes, *Martialing Machiavelli: Reassessing the Military Reflections*, «The Journal of Politics», 2004, 4 LXVI, pp.1089-1108.

militaris and Frontinus's *Stratagems*: these sources, he argues, provide useful guidance for reforming both military institutions and broader society in the modern age. Across its seven books, the dialogue explores in meticulous detail a wide array of organizational and logistical aspects, including highly technical discussions of troop formations, marching orders, camp layouts, and the methods for besieging or defending cities and fortresses. These technical prescriptions culminate in a simulated battle scene in Book III and are further reinforced by a set of military diagrams appended to the work – an unprecedented innovation in the European tradition[8]. Yet *The Art of War* is not confined to technical matters: it also offers a rich analysis of the political dimensions of warfare, as well as its ethical and psychological implications. For instance, it considers the figure of the commander – the essential qualities of leadership, organizational skill, and rhetorical ability – the strategic use of deception and cunning in warfare, and the challenges posed by increasingly large armies, including the discipline of troops, the dangers of mercenaries, the arming of the citizenry, and the democratization of military service.

This work quickly attracted European interest, shaped by the unprecedented and permanent conflicts that marked the sixteenth century. As is well known, the tactical innovations of these wars and the new role of warfare in both society and politics created a pressing need for a literature able to move beyond the outdated chivalric tradition and address modern realities: new weapons, new fighting techniques, new types of soldiers and new forms of command and organization. Alongside philologically precise editions of ancient texts fostered by the spread of humanistic culture and by the renewed influence of the Roman model on military practice, between 1550 and 1650 European presses thus produced a vast corpus of military writings – ranging from treatises and war manuals to works on weaponry, fortification,

[8] J.R. Hale, *A Humanistic Visual Aid. The Military Diagram in the Renaissance*, «Renaissance Studies», 1988, 2 II, pp. 280-298.

contemporary conflicts, and legal-historical debates on the causes of war[9]. Within this context, Machiavelli's *The Art of War* was both pioneering and influential: paradoxically rooted in antiquity, it can be seen as the first truly modern technical manual of warfare; at the same time, its wide circulation inspired a wave of new treatises and helped shape a European military culture centred on discipline, organization, and the revival of Greek and Roman models[10].

In England too, the publication of Peter Whitehorne's translation of *The Art of War* inaugurated a renewed interest in military affairs: released at a moment of heightened concern over warfare, the text addressed an urgent debate. Although initially excluded from continental conflicts, from the late 1530s England was in fact increasingly involved in European warfare. At the same time, the difficulties of ruling subject kingdoms and the need to limit the power of the nobility gave rise to an unprecedented reflection on the kingdom's political condition and the structure of its armed forces. A realm without a standing professional army thus gradually began to experiment with new levies and reorganize its military apparatus[11]. In this context, military questions also attracted the attention of humanist scholars, who sought to educate captains through classical letters: this is reflected in the 1539 translation of Frontinus's *Stratagems* by the dip-

[9] If we set aside the various national military bibliographies, the first thematic survey of the military works published between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is owed to M.J.D. Cockle, *A Bibliography of English Military Books, Books up to 1642 and of Contemporary Foreign Works,* Simpkin-Marshall-Hamilton-Kent, London 1900. In more recent times, several studies have been devoted to this vast body of works; with regard to England, see P. Scannell, *Conflict and Soldier's Literature in Early Modern Europe: The Reality of War*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2015; D. R. Lawrence, *The Complete Soldier: Military Books and Military Culture in Early Stuart England, 1603–1645*, Brill, Leiden 2009.

[10] Anglo, *Machiavelli The First Century*, cit., p. 5; Guidi, *Books, People, and Military Thought*, cit., p. 173.

[11] I.F.W. Beckett, *The Amateur Military Tradition, 1558-1945*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1991, pp. 18-19.

lomat Richard Morysine, as well as in the 1544 English version of Giacomo Porcia's treatise[12]. Yet, the demand for military knowledge became still more pressing after the death of Queen Mary. In the early years of Elizabeth's reign, England was impoverished, led by a predominantly Protestant ruling class in a Catholic Europe and militarily backward in the face of rapid technological change. It was precisely in this climate that the soldier Peter Whitehorne, who had recently returned to England after years of military service abroad, published his translation of *The Art of War*. Like many of his contemporaries, he dedicated the work to Queen Elizabeth, thereby aligning himself with the renewed emphasis on military education promoted by the *Militia Act* of 1558[13]. By translating the text, Whitehorne assumes the role of military advisor, offering a comprehensive reflection on what he considered a matter of essential public utility[14]. He does so not only through his translation of Machiavelli's text, but also by appending an original contribution: a separate military treatise entitled *Certain Waies for the Orderying of Souldiers in Battelray*. This treatise dealt with fortification, fireworks, and signalling methods and served as a technical appendix to Machiavelli's

[12] FRONTINUS, *The strategemes, sleyghtes, and policies of warre, gathered togyther, by S. Iulius Frontinus, and translated into Englyshe, by Rycharde Morysine*, T. Berthelet, London 1539. A series of texts written in the final years of Henry VIII's reign, which take up Vegetius's discussions on the selection and training of troops, further confirms this interest in the political and military knowledge of Antiquity (see J. RAYMOND, *Henry VIII's Military Revolution: The Armies of Sixteenth-Century Britain and Europe*, Tauris Academic Studies, London 2007, p. 10).

[13] L. BOYNTON, *The Elizabethan Militia, 1558-1638*, University of Toronto Press, London-Toronto 1967, pp. 113; 117-118.

[14] For the reasons behind Whitehorne's translation, see F. SCHURINK, *War, What Is It Good for? Sixteenth-Century English Translations of Ancient Roman Texts on Warfare*, in *Renaissance Cultural Crossroads: Translation, Print and Culture in Britain, 1473–1640*, ed. by S.K. Barker, B.M. Hosington, Brill, Leiden 2013, pp. 121-138.

work, further enhancing the utility of the volume[15]. Conceived in this way, Whitehorne's edition enjoyed significant success, as revealed by its publishing history: first printed in London, it was republished at key moments in sixteenth-century English history – specifically in 1573 and again in 1588 – in direct response to periods of political and military unrest[16].

Shakespeare on War: *Richard III* and *Henry V*

As we have noted, in the Elizabethan era, war became a matter of urgent and pressing relevance. For this reason, alongside studies on the considerable proliferation of military texts, many scholars have examined the impact of warfare on the period's literary production. Within this context, several studies have focused on Shakespeare, exploring both his general conception of war and the specific depictions of warfare in individual plays, and revealing the wide range of issues and questions – including those linked to contemporary military events – that his works address[17]. Following this line of inquiry,

[15] P. Whitehorne, *Certain waies for the orderyng of souldiers in battelray and settyng of battailes after divers fashions, with their maner of marchyng: And also fygures of certaine new plattes for fortificacion of Townes: And more over, how to make Saltpeter, Gunpoulder, and divers sortes of Fireworkes or Wilde Fyre, with other thynges apertaining to the warres. Gathered and set foorthe by Peter Whitehorne*, printed by J. Kingstone for N. Inglande, London 1562.

[16] N. de Somogyi, *Shakespeare's Theatre of War*, Ashgate, Aldershot 1998, pp. 2-3.

[17] The seminal study on this subject is by P.A. Jorgensen, *Shakespeare's Military World*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1956. Numerous studies have been published after the 1990s, such as T. Meron, *Henry's Wars and Shakespeare's Laws. Perspectives on the Law of War in the Later Middle Ages*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1993; Id., *Bloody Constraint. War and Chivalry in Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998; N. Taunton, *1590s Drama and Militarism*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2001; S. Barker, *War and Nation in the theatre of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2007; *Shakespeare and War*, ed. by R. King, P. Franssen, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2008;

the focus of the current article is on the influence of military thought sparked by the circulation of Machiavelli's *The Art of War* and its possible impact on two major historical dramas, *Richard III* and *Henry V*. Research on Shakespearean warfare has often concentrated on *Henry V*, which traces the French campaign from its causes to its glorious – though contested – outcome. Yet, the study of the play's military sources still leaves many questions open, largely due to the nature of both Shakespeare's use of sources and the sources themselves. As Ros King notes in her analysis of the probable influence of William Garrard's *The Art of Warre*, Shakespeare does not merely reproduce textual passages, but rather adapts, transforms, and reshapes them[18]. Meanwhile, contemporary military texts were often composite works, layering multiple sources. Garrard's treatise, for example, incorporates sections from Thomas Styward, Guillaume du Bellay, and Bernardino Rocca. These, in turn, include entire passages – sometimes *verbatim* translations in the cases of du Bellay and Rocca – derived from Machiavelli's *The Art of War*, alongside substantial engagement with classical sources. In this context, identifying direct citations from a single source proves less productive than examining the dialogue Shakespeare establishes with these overlapping traditions and their thematic concerns. The many representations of war in these plays can be analysed through the lens of Machiavellian military thought, recognizing that the circulation of *The Art of War* and the treatises it inspired provided a model for a comprehen-

P. Pugliatti, *Shakespeare and the Just War Tradition*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2010; F. Quabeck, *Just and Unjust Wars in Shakespeare*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2013. Some notable references to the uses and impact of Shakespearean reflections on warfare up to the contemporary period can be found in *Shakespeare at War: A Material History*, ed. by A. Lidster, S. Massai, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2023; A. Lidster, *Wartime Shakespeare: Performing Narratives of Conflict*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2023.

[18] King, '*The Discipline of War*': *Elizabethan War Manuals and Shakespeare's Tragicomic Vision*, in *Shakespeare and War*, cit., pp. 15-29: 16.

sive military treatise – one grounded in classical texts yet approaching military theory with striking rationality.

Richard III and Henry V

It is particularly interesting to begin the analysis with Shakespeare's *Richard III*, as the play features one of the most unmistakably Machiavellian characters of the Elizabethan stage: King Richard himself, who by his own admission, at the end of *Henry VI*, claims he could «set the murderous Machiavel to school»[19]. While it cannot be said that *Richard III* contains direct references to Whitehorne's translation of Machiavelli's military dialogue, looking more closely at the play, one can identify a specifically "military" section, corresponding to *Act 5, Scenes 2–3*. Within a fluid narrative structure, Shakespeare engages in this context with many issues that are considered foundational to military science (and are extensively treated by Machiavelli in *The Art of War*), using a distinctly military vocabulary that was likely popularized in part by Whitehorne's text. This section depicts the eve of the battle of Bosworth Field, in which Richard is famously defeated by Richmond (the future Henry VII). Shakespeare structures these scenes with great care: the eve of battle unfolds through a shifting perspective that alternates between the two camps, detailing the preparations made by both Richmond and Richard – and culminating in the famous dream sequence in which Richard's victims prophesy his downfall and Richmond's triumph. Even if in a narrative fashion, the preparations for battle undertaken by the two factions include precise references to technical aspects of warfare, such as the construction of the camp, the assessment of available forces, attention to terrain and geography (including strate-

[19] In Henry VI, Part 3 (III, 2), we find the line: «I can add colours to the chameleon, change shapes with Proteus for advantages, and set the murderous Machiavel to school». Although uttered in Henry VI, this line is famously transferred to Richard's opening monologue in Laurence Olivier's 1955 film adaptation of Richard III.

gic positioning and the distances between opposing armies), and the deployment of troops. Beyond these technical elements, the play also incorporates themes long considered essential in classical military treatises: the need to maintain troop morale, the psychological effect of omens, the captain's address to his soldiers, the use of deception and stratagems to mislead the enemy, and the recurrence of prophetic dreams on the eve of battle. Since these are all issues that Machiavelli, drawing on ancient sources – especially Vegetius – examines in detail in *The Art of War*, Shakespeare, depicting Richard's actions in particular, seems to be outlining something akin to a miniature military treatise.

Upon arriving at the battlefield, Richard pitches his tent and consults with his vassals regarding the comparative strength of the opposing forces («Richard: Who hath descried the number of the traitors? Norfolk: Six or seven thousand in their utmost power. Richard: Why, our battalia trebles that account», *V, 3, 10-12)*[20]. He then summons his loyal followers to inspect the terrain («let us survey the vantage of the ground», *V, 3, 16*), orders to «call for some men of sound direction» and commands: «let's lack no discipline, make no delay» (*V, 3, 18-19)*[21]. Later, Richard checks his equipment («is my beaver easier than it was? And all my armour laid into my tent?», *V, 3, 53-54*; «saddle white Surrey for the field tomorrow. Look at my staves be sound and not too heavy», *V, 3, 69-70*), inspects the sentinels («use careful watch, choose trusty

[20] See the correspondence with the guidance offered by Machiavelli regarding «what respectes a Captaine ought to have, before he lead his men to fight» (TAOW, f. 62v). Among other points, Machiavelli emphasizes: «The greatest and most important advertisement, that a Captaine ought to have, is to have about him faithfull men, that are wise and most expert in the warre, with whom he must continually consult, (and) reason of his men, and of those of the enemies, which is the greater number» (TAOW, f. 63r). Shakespeare quotations are from W. Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. by S. Wells and G. Taylor, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988.

[21] Always among the instructions to the captain before battle, Machiavelli states that he and his vassals «ought to consider the place where they bee» (TAOW, f. 63r).

sentinels», *V, 3, 57*), dispatches messengers («send out a pursuivant-at arms to Stanley's regiment», *V, 3, 63-64*) and expresses concern for the morale of his troops («Ratcliffe: Thomas the Earl of Surrey and himself [lord Northumberland] […] went through the army, cheering up the soldiers. Richard: So, I am satisfied», *V, 3, 74-77*)[22]. Similarly, immediately before the battle, Richard outlines the disposition of his forces in a manner that clearly echoes *The Arte of Warre* and other contemporary military treatises:

> Richard: I will lead forth my soldiers to the plain, and thus my battle shall be ordered: my foreward shall be drawn out all in length, consisting equally of horse and foot; our archers shall be placed in the midst. John Duke of Norfolk, Thomas Earl of Surrey, shall have the leading of this foot and horse. They thus directed, we will follow in the main battle, whose puissance on either side shall be well winged with our chiefest horse (*V, 3, 310-317*) [23].

Lastly, both Richard and Richmond demonstrate the qualities of exemplary captains in the classical model

[22] Obviously, issues related to equipment, messengers, and sentinels are discussed by Machiavelli in various specific sections of *The Art of War* (instructions on sentinels, for example, can be found in TAOW ff. 84r -84v). Moreover, according to Machiavelli, the morale of the troops must be a central concern for the captain: «And above all thing thou oughtest to take heede, not to conduct the armie to fight when it feareth, or when in any wise it mistrusteth of the victory: for that the greatest signe to loose, is when they beleeve not to be able to winne» (TAOW, f. 63v).

[23] Machiavelli provides detailed explanations of various tactical dispositions in the more technical sections of his work, subsequently illustrating them in the diagrams placed at the end of the text (see, for example, TAOW ff. 32v-33r; 35r; 35v-36v). It is also worth noting the marginal headings added by Whitehorne to these passages – also included in the book's final index – as they demonstrate the practical use that could be made of these tactical instructions: How to order a band of men after such sort that they may make their front against the enemie of which flanck they hit; How a battaile is made with two hornes; The ordering of a battaile with a voide space in the middest.

when addressing their troops in their famous speeches[24]. In particular, Richard's speech employs one of the rhetorical strategies frequently recommended in military treatises – and specifically by Machiavelli: the tactic of putting down the enemies. His address, in fact, is composed almost entirely of such deprecation, aimed at undermining the opposition:

> Richard: Remember whom you are to cope withall, A sort of Vagabonds, Rascals, and Run-awayes, A scum of Brittaines, and base Lackey Pezants, Whom their o're-cloyed Country vomits forth To desperate Adventures, and assur'd Destruction (*V, 3, 316-320*) [25].

It is worth noting that all these measures are carried out by Richard with the rational attitude toward warfare that constitutes one significant and innovative element of Machiavelli's treatise. Richard knows what he is doing and, at least on the surface, appears to maintain complete control of the situation. This is evident, for instance, in his indifference to adverse weather or the strange letter received in camp:

> Richard: The sun will not be seen today. […] Not shine today? Why, what is that to me more than to Richmond. (*V, 3, 299-302*).
> Norfolk [showing a letter]: This found I on my tent this morning […] Richard: A thing devised by the enemy. (*V, 3, 321-324*).

Like the exemplary ancient captains praised by Machiavelli, Richard is not frightened by omens or signs[26].

[24] As Machiavelli observes: «it was requisite that the excellent Captaines were oratours: for that without knowing how to speake to all the army, with difficultie may be wrought any good thing to the army» (TAOW, f. 65r).
[25] Machiavelli, when describing the various options available to the military orator, suggests: «make thy men to esteme little the enemie, as Agesilao a Spartaine used, who shewed to his souldiou[r]s, certain Persians naked, to the intent that seyng their delicate members, thei should not have cause to feare them» (TAOW, f. 65v).
[26] On the necessity of guarding against omens and ill signs, Machiavelli discusses this in Book VI: «Old Captaines had a trouble […] , which was to interprete to their purpose the sinister auguries» (TA-

Just as Richard is portrayed as an experienced man of war, Henry V is immediately defined by his martial qualities at the very beginning of the play: the Chorus calls him «warlike Harry» (*Prologue, 5*). Moreover, once the expedition to France is decided, the king declares explicitly, «we have no thought in us but France» (*I, 2, 304*), echoing, in a sense, the advice of *The Prince (chapter* XIV) that a prince should devote himself entirely to the art of war[27]. From these early indications, it becomes clear that, far more extensively than in *Richard III*, military concerns dominate *Henry V* from the outset, shaping both the argument and the vocabulary of most scenes. Even within the coherent narrative of the most famous episode of the Hundred Years' War, references to military issues in Shakespeare's play seem to reflect, in a broader sense, the central aim behind the surge of military treatises from the late sixteenth century onward: the systematic analysis of all aspects of the art of war. This includes strictly military matters – logistics, tactics, siege and defensive techniques, and fortifications; politico-military considerations – the relations between warring powers, the institutional management of armies, troop formation and composition, army hierarchy, the characteristics and morale of soldiers; and juridical issues – the *ius in bello*, *ius ad bellum*, and the justification of war.

What emerges from reading the play is a comprehensive view of war, where elements of the medieval tradition coexist with innovative themes drawn from the military treatises that dominated the publishing market of the period[28]. Legal aspects of war, such as international

OW, f. 90v). On letters and other «deceipts» commonly used in war, Machiavelli discusses this in Book VII (TAOW, f. 101v).

[27] N. Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, ed. by M. Martelli, N. Marcelli, Salerno Editrice, Rome 2006, pp. 209-210.

[28] Paola Pugliatti highlighted the encounter, at the end of the sixteenth century, between the war ideologies underpinning the medieval debate (the late-antique tradition, the technical-juridical tradition, and the canonist tradition) and the new military texts emerging in the publishing market. See P. Pugliatti, *The Art of War in Shakespeare and in European Renaissance Treatises, in Shakespeare in Euro-*

law, the justification of conflict, the duties of subjects, the responsibilities of rulers, the rights of the vanquished and of prisoners, and the issue of cruelty, are given significant attention in scenes such as those with the bishops of Canterbury and Ely (*I, 1-2*), with the governor of besieged Harfleur (*III, 3*), with the soldiers William and Bates during Henry's night walk (*IV, 1, 87- 230*), and in the episode of the murder of the young men in the English camp (*IV, 7*). Issues related to the democratization of the army, the characteristics of soldiers, and the perspectives of combatants at every level emerge in episodes featuring characters such as Nym, Bardolph, Pistol, Gower, Fluellen, and MacMorris (for instance, *II, 1* and *3*; *III, 2*). The play also includes iconic episodes that evoke ancient military biography, particularly Plutarch, such as Henry V's incognito night walk (*IV, 1*) and the comical praise of the Dauphin's horse (*III, 7*). Finally, the play extensively addresses issues related to the political management of conflicts, from reflections within the war councils (for instance *I, 2*; *II, 4*), to considerations of the risks of invasion during an overseas campaign (*I, 2, 136-183*), the problem of treason (*II, 2*), pre-war negotiations and discussions with ambassadors (for instance, *I, 2, 235-311*; *II, 4, 76-146*) and finally the complex peace negotiations (*V, 2, 1-97* and *292-383*).

Within this inexhaustible array of situations and themes – all carefully embedded in a coherent narrative – there are frequent allusions to topics traditionally discussed in both ancient and modern military treatises, as well as in Machiavelli's work. As in *Richard III*, many of these references are concentrated in the figure of Henry, who shows concerns for issues such as disease and the risks of winter warfare (*III, 3, 55)*, seeks to avoid battle when at a disadvantage (*III, 6, 148-156)* and reassures his soldiers with calm composure before the engagement

pe. History and Memory, ed. by M. Gibinska, A. Romanowska, Jagiellonian University Press, Kraków 2014, pp. 57-78: 57-62.

(*IV, Chorus, 30-34*) [29]. Like Richard, Henry also delivers two remarkable speeches to his troops, before Harfleur and at Agincourt, thus demonstrating the careful attention an ancient-model commander must pay to addressing his soldiers (*III, 1*; *IV, 3, 18-67*). Similar to Richard's oration, Henry's Agincourt speech is clearly informed by a Machiavellian precept: inspired by Westmoreland's wish that «had here but one ten thousand of those men in England» (*IV, 3, 16*), Henry launches into a stirring exhortation on the glory of victory, especially when achieved by few. In doing so, the king follows Machiavelli's guidance for a captain whose troops are hesitant to enter battle, namely

> to shewe them to be unworthie, and with an oration for the purpose, to reprehend them of their cowardnesse, and for to make them ashamed, to tell them that you will fight alone, when they will not beare you company (TAOW, f. 64v) [30].

In addition to these parallels with *Richard III*, *Henry V* also touches upon different issues, likewise rooted in the guidance typically offered in military treatises and in Machiavelli's work. Notably, for instance, the play repeatedly criticizes the amorality of modern soldiers, vividly depicted by Captain Gower through references to their fearsome appearance and blasphemous language – an echo of the prologue to *The Art of War:*

[29] Among the operations that good captains must carry out before battle (Book IV of *The Art of War*), there is «to consider the place where they bee, and whether it be more to the purpose for the enemie, then for him: which of them hath vectualles most commodious, whether It bee good to deferre the battaile, or to fight it» (TAOW, ff. 63r-63v). The issue of diseases is discussed in Book VI (TAOW, f. 86v); later in the same book, Machiavelli also addresses winter warfare, explicitly stating that: «There is nothing more undiscrete, or more perilous to a Captaine, then to make warre in the Winter, and much more perrill beareth he, that maketh it, then he that abideth it» (TAOW, f. 93r).

[30] Machiavelli's precept, moreover, is based on an anecdote concerning Caesar reported by Frontinus (Frontinus, *Strategematon*, in Id., *"The Stratagems" and "The Aqueducts of Rome"*, ed. by C. E. Bennett, M. B. McElwain, Harvard University Press-William Heinemann, Cambridge (Mass)-London 1980, I, xi, 3.

> Gower: Why, 'tis a gull, a fool, a rogue, that now and then goes to the wars, to grace himself at his return into London under the form of a soldier. And such fellows are perfect in the great commaneders' names, and they will learn you by rote where services were done: [...] and this they con perfectly in the phrase of war, which they trick up with new-tuned oaths: and what a beard of the general's cut and a horrid suit of the camp will do among foaming bottles and ale-washed wits is wonderful to be thought on. (*III, 6, 72-85*)[31].

Moreover, this description represents just one of the many references in the play to the issue of military order and discipline, which culminates in the scene with Bardolph and the punishment he receives «for robbing on a church» (*III, 6, 107*). Attention to this matter, as recently highlighted by Andrea Guidi, likely represents one of the principal contributions that *The Arte of War* offered to early modern military thought[32]. Considering undisciplined mercenary soldiers as the main cause of the defeats suffered by Italian armies of his time, Machiavelli devotes sustained attention in his text to order, discipline, and the figures responsible for enforcing them (military ranks and, consequently, the hierarchical organization of armies). Following the Roman model, *The Arte of War* also contains a significant section on the punishments and rewards to be assigned to troops, grounded in the conviction that

> ... it sufficeth not to make these orders [gli ordini militari] good, except they bee caused to be onserved, with a great severitie, for that there is nothing that would have more

[31] Gower's description is, in a sense, reiterated in the Duke of Burgundy's speech at the end of the play: according to the duke, the soldiers' defining traits are their propensity for «swearing and stern looks» (V, 2, 61). These characteristics are echoed in the description of soldiers that opens *The Art of War*, where it is stated that «if any determine in the exercise of that kinde of service [the exercice of war] to prevaile, that incontinent he doeth not only change in apparel, but also in custome and maner, in voice, and from the facion of all civil use, he doeth alter. [...] Nor it semes not convenient for him to use the civill gesture and ordinarie words, who with fasing and blasphemies, will make afraied other menne» (TAOW, f. 1r).

[32] GUIDI, *Books, People, and Military Thought*, cit., p. 5.

> observation, them is requisite in an armie: therefore the lawes for (the) maintenance of the same, ought to be sharpe (and) harde, and (the) executor thereof most harde (TAOW, f. 84v).

Beyond these more general resonances, typical of Machiavelli's work and the tradition to which it belongs, the play also includes a reference to the issue of climate and its correlation with martial valour. Its presence in the text can only be fully understood as reflecting Shakespeare's deliberate intention to establish precise connections with the textual tradition *de re militari:*

> Constable: *Dieu des batailles!* Whence have they this mettle? Is not their climate foggy, raw, and dull, on whom, as in despite, the sun looks pale, killing their fruit with frowns? (*III, 5, 15-18*) [33].

Finally, *Henry V* also contains references to numerous technical issues, often only briefly mentioned – and less narrowly focused than in *Richard III* – yet still appreciable for the richness of their detail. Once Henry decides to embark on the campaign in France, for instance, he immediately turns his attention to the recruitment of troops («Therefore let our proportions for these wars be soon collected», *I, 2, 305*); meanwhile, the French king organizes his defences (instructing his vassals «to line and new repair our towns of wars with men of courage and with means defendant», *II, 4, 7-8*). The siege of Harfleur is sketched briefly by the Chorus («Behold the ordnance on their carriages, with fatal mouths gasping on girded

[33] See what Machiavelli says on the matter: «They which unto the warre have given rule, will that the men be chosen out of temperate countries, to the intent they may have hardinesse, and prudence, for as much as the hot countrie, breedes prudent men (and) not hardy, the colde, hardy and not prudent» (TAOW, f. 11v). This rule is obviously drawn, with some modifications, from Vegetius' *Epitoma*: «Omnes nationes quae vicinae sunt soli, nimio calore siccatas, amplius quidem sapere sed minus habere sanguinis dicunt ac propterea constantiam ac fiduciam comminus non habere pugnandi, quia metuunt uulnera qui exiguum sanguinem se habere nouerunt» (Vegetius, *Epitoma rei militaris*, ed. by M.D. Reeve, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2004, pp. 6-7 (I, II).

Harfleur», *III, Chorus*), but shortly thereafter the text immerses the audience in a discussion among soldiers on mines and countermines (*III, 2, 57-67*)[34]. Throughout the play, there are also references to the measurement of terrain (*III, 7*), as well as to the comparative strength of Henry's and the French king's forces (*IV, 3, 3-4*). In these passages, and more generally throughout the play, the frequent use of technical military vocabulary is particularly striking (not limited to a few scenes, words such as «coursing snatchers», «proportions», «muster», «scaling-ladders», «squares of battle», «vawar», «ranks», «order», «helmet», «spur», are dispersed across the entire play)[35]. As noted, Whitehorne's translation of Machiavelli's work undoubtedly contributed both to the dissemination of this specialized lexicon and to the engagement with many of the themes explored in the play; although Shakespeare does not treat these topics systematically or technically, the precision and frequency of their appearance reveal a deep familiarity with military matters, as well as with classical and contemporary writings on the art of war.

Shakespeare's Uses of the *de re militari* Tradition

While this analysis demonstrates how Shakespeare actively engages with the *de re militari* tradition exemplified by Machiavelli's *The Art of War*, certain additional elements in the two plays suggest that he attributes spe-

[34] Machiavelli alludes to the issue of mines in Book VII (TAOW, f. 102v). The topic, however, receives much more attention in the technical treatises that appeared from the second half of the sixteenth century onwards, and it is also addressed by the translator Whitehorne in a dedicated chapter of his Certain Waies: «Of Muynes and placing of poulder undergrounde, wherewith invinsible fortresses, by fire maye bee ruignated, when ordinaunce cannot bee broughte unto them», WHITEHORNE, *Certain waies*, cit., f. 38v.

[35] On Shakespeare's military language, see the interesting study by C. EDELMAN, *Shakespeare's Military Language. A Dictionary*, The Athlone Press, London 2000.

cific functions to this very tradition. What is particularly striking in *Richard III*, for instance, is the difference in military knowledge between Richard – portrayed as an experienced man of war – and Richmond, who appears considerably less prepared. Whereas Richard is depicted as proficient in both the techniques and tactics of warfare, Richmond's preparations reveal a notable absence of such expertise. It is true that, in the scenes involving him, Richmond asks about the distance between the armies (at one point he asks where Lord Stanley is «quartered») and claims to be occupied with preparations on the eve of the battle (he asks for «some ink and paper» to be brought to his tent and says: «I'll draw the form and model of our battle, limit each leader to his several charge, and part in just proportion our small power» (*V, 3, 25-27*). It is also true, as noted, that Richmond delivers an earnest address to his troops. Nevertheless, the narrative provides little detail regarding the technical aspects of his military planning, and the character of Ratcliffe clearly asserts that «he was never trainèd up in arms» (*V, 3, 86*). Why, then, does Richmond ultimately triumph? Because, as he himself declares in his address to the troops: «God, and our good cause, fight upon our side» (*V, 3, 254*). This motif recurs frequently in the portions of the play concerning him: «Virtuous and holy be thou Conqueror» (*V, 3, 136*), says the Ghost of Henry VI; «Good Angels guard thy battell, Live and Flourish» (*V, 3, 147*), says Clarence. Similar blessings are offered by the other ghosts who appear to both him and Richard in dreams, as well as by Buckingham, who says: «God, and good Angels fight on Richmond's side» (*V, 3, 187*). Machiavelli himself, in *The Art of War*, cites modern captains like Charles VII of France, who claimed to speak with God in order to motivate their troops[36]. In this sense, Richmond's attitude

[36] «Many have told how God hath appeared unto them in their sleepe, who hath admonished them to fight [...]. In our fathers time, Charles the seventh king of Fraunce, in the warre which hee made against the Englishmen, said, hee counsayled with a maide, sent from God, who was called every where the Damosell of Fraunce, the which was occasion of his victorie (TAOW, f. 65v). This passage can

can also be interpreted as a rhetorical strategy. However, Richmond and his men truly believe in God and in the justice of their cause, just as they truly believe in the wickedness of their opponent: Richmond makes this clear when he offers his solitary prayer to God: «O Thou, whose captain I account myself, Look on my forces with a gracious eye; put in their hands Thy bruising irons of wrath, that they may crush down with a heavy fall» (*V, 3, 114-117*). Beyond the obvious psychological effect – clearly reflected in Richmond's serene attitude on the eve of battle – Shakespeare also hints that divine support could manifest as tangible aid on the battlefield: «every man's conscience is a thousand men, to fight against this guilty homicide» (*V, 2, 18*), Oxford says to Richmond.

Henry also prays on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt (*IV, 1, 231-290*) and repeatedly emphasizes divine support for his victory (for example, *IV, 8, 109-115*). Neither Henry nor the French, however, despite their military expertise, offer a representation of the *de re militari* tradition comparable to that embodied by Captain Fluellen. From his very first lines, Fluellen appears to represent the officer well-versed in the art of ancient warfare – that is, the captain who knows by heart works such as Machiavelli's. We first encounter him during the siege of Harfleur, where he assesses the conduct of the Duke of Gloucester and evaluates the qualities of Captain MacMorris, Captain Jamy, and himself according to their knowledge of the «true disciplines of wars», also referred to as «the Roman disciplines» or «the knowledge in th'auncient wars» (*III, 2, 62, 75, 81*). Shortly thereafter, he appears with Captain Gower, to whom he praises the qualities of the Duke of Exeter, «as magnanimous as Agamemnon» and capable of demonstrating «excellent discipline» in military actions, and of the «auncient Pistol», who is «as valiant as Mark Antony» (though he later condemns him «for discipline ought to be used», *III, 6, 6, 12, 14, 57*). However, this representation soon proves ambig-

be found precisely among the recommendations that Machiavelli gives to the military orator.

uous, if not openly mocking. Fluellen gradually acquires the status of a comic figure (so much so that he has been called a «quixotic war-manual maniac»[37]) particularly when he reproaches poor Gower at night – using far too many words for someone simply asking for the silence that reigned in Pompey the Great's army (*IV, 1, 69*) – or when he attempts an absurd comparison between Henry and Alexander the Great – based on the unlikely similarities between Macedonia and Monmouth (*IV, 7, 1-55*). Moreover, during the siege of Harfleur his diligent request to Captain Jamy for «a few disputations [...] partly concerning the disciplines of the war, the Roman wars» (*III, 2, 99-101*) appears as a veritable parody of a dialogical treatise such as Machiavelli's. Almost as if they were in the *Orti Oricellari*, Fluellen requests a discussion in the form of a «friendly communication [...] touching the direction of the military discipline» (*III, 2, 102-105*). Captain Jamy is ready to respond, but Captain MacMorris interrupts them, stating: «It is no time to discourse [...], the town is beseeched, and the trumpet call us to the breach, and we talk, and, be Christ, do nothing» (*III, 2, 110-115*). What could better illustrate the gap between theoretical formulations and military practice, upon which the primary critique of Machiavelli's *The Art of War* is founded?[38]

It is evident that these kinds of contrast may have served the propagandistic aims Shakespeare was pursuing. The Richard and Richmond of the play do not correspond to their historical counterparts, and Shakespeare's emphasis on Richard's qualities as a warlike sovereign ultimately serves to underscore, by contrast, divine

[37] Pugliatti, *The Art of War in Shakespeare and in European Renaissance Treatises*, cit., p. 63.

[38] This critique stems from the famous anecdote recounted by Bandello, in which Machiavelli fails to arrange the troops assembled in the square in Florence. This account, together with the opinions of Machiavelli's earliest military detractors, is based on his alleged incompetence in the practice of war and has influenced the perception of subsequent generations and their engagement with *The Art of War* (Procacci, *Machiavelli nella cultura europea*, cit., p. 185).

endorsement of the Tudor dynasty's rise to power. Similarly, the portrayal of Harry and his military prowess, juxtaposed with the comically flawed vision of martial art embodied by Fluellen, certainly functions to highlight an internal contradiction within the text, also historically grounded, between one of England's most beloved kings and the outcomes of his campaigns (not peace and prosperity, but «famine, sword and fire» as the Chorus states, *Prologue, 7*). Such considerations have been central to much historical criticism, whereas more recent studies have sought to extract from the two plays insights into Shakespeare's ideological positions[39]. However, considering the constantly opposing conclusions reached by these latter works, the interpretations emphasizing the essential polyphony of Shakespeare's plays appear more convincing[40]. Therefore, attention is drawn to the fundamental ambiguity underlying the very functions assigned to the representation of military art in the two plays. The skilful captain Richard, for instance, seems to contradict at least one of Machiavelli's core teachings. Richard's self-control completely collapses after the terrible night in which he dreams of his victims: «O Ratcliffe, I fear, I fear». When Ratcliffe tries to reassure him by saying he should not be «afraid of the shadows» Richard expresses his full terror at the power – both, psychological and military – of those visions: «Richard: By the apostle Paul, shadows tonight have struck more terror to the soul of Richard than can the substance of ten thousand soldiers armed in proof and led by shallow Richmond» (*V, 3, 229-*

[39] On one hand, see at least E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, Chatto and Windus, London 1944; on the other, see the opposing results of L. Lerner, *Peace Studies: A Proposal*, «New Literary History», 1995, 3 XXVI, pp. 641-665 and S. Marx, *Shakespeare's Pacifism*, «Renaissance Quarterly Spring», 1992, 1 XLV, pp. 49–95; or works such as A. M. E. Walkowicz, *Counsel, class, and just war in Shakespeare's Henry V*, in *Intersectionalities of Class in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. by R. Arab, L. Ellinghausen, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2023.

[40] See Pugliatti, *The Art of War in Shakespeare and in European Renaissance Treatises*, cit., pp. 63-64.

232). Even though he regains control of his emotions afterwards, this brief moment of despair seems highly significant, not only because it foreshadows the end of Richard's arc, but also because it recalls the confusion of Henry when he must conquer not a country, but the heart of Queen Katherine. «If I could win a lady at leapfrog, or by vaulting into my saddle with my armour on my back, [...] I should quickly leap into a wife», says Harry (*V, 2, 139-143*). Yet, to get the princess «with scambling» proves only partially possible. In this moment, the warlike king who has led a handful of Englishmen to conquer France finds himself without tactics, and the military orator who has persuaded with his magnificent speeches is left without words. Harry is thus forced to pray – not to God, but to the beautiful Kate: «take a soldier, take a soldier, take a king» (*V, 2, 171*).

It is important to underline this ambiguity and, more broadly, the multiple functions attributed to the representation of military art in *Richard III* and *Henry V*, as they rely on a mechanism parallel to that which shapes the discourse of Machiavelli's *The Art of War*. Just as Machiavelli reworks elements of ancient military thought to meet the needs of modern warfare, Shakespeare similarly draws on ancient sources, on Machiavelli, and on other *de re militari* treatises, adapting them in ways that produce new and varying meanings[41]. References to key *topoi* of the *de re militari* tradition can serve to underscore Richard's martial prowess and the supposed divine support for the Tudor cause, or, alternatively, to celebrate Henry's qualities while interrogating the consequences of his campaigns. In this respect, one may also consider the commonplace of preparing for war in times of peace – a theme found in Vegetius, in Machiavelli, and in Whitehorne's dedicatory letter to Queen Eliz-

[41] For Machiavelli's use of sources, see A. Salvo Rossi, *Il Livio di Machiavelli: L'uso politico delle fonti*, Salerno Editrice, Rome, 2021. For discussions on this matter specifically concerning *The Art of War*, see also J.C. Zancarini, *Machiavel, la guerre, les Anciens. 'Les Antichi scrittori' dans l'"Arte della guerra"*, «Parole Rubate: rivista internazionale di studi sulla citazione», 2016, XVIII, pp. 119-151.

abeth[42]. Shakespeare, significantly, assigns this motif to the French Dauphin in *Henry V*:

> Dauphin: My most redoubted father, it is most meet we arm us 'gainst the foe; for peace itself should not so dull a kingdom, though war nor no known quarrel were in question, but that defences, musters, preparations, should be maintain'd, assembled and collected, as were a war in expectation. (*II, 4, 16-22*).

A familiar motif of the *de re militari* tradition takes on a specific dramatic function, once again emphasizing the fundamental ambiguity that underlies Shakespeare's treatment of warfare. Without pursuing its broader implications, it is nevertheless worth noting that considering the English translation of *The Art of War* as a potential source for this military commonplace allows for the attribution of particular weight to the passage in *Henry V*. Since Whitehorne places this theme at the centre of his dedicatory letter, where he evokes the threat of invasion faced by Elizabethan England, the speech delivered by a French character offers a significant point of reflection on the climate of conflict shaping England in the final decades of the sixteenth century.

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[42] For the reworking of the Vegetian topos in Machiavelli, see the entry «Guerra e Pace» (by J.L. Fournel and J.C. Zancarini), in the *Enciclopedia Machiavelliana*. Whitehorne, on the other hand, begins his dedicatory letter to Queen Elizabeth by emphasizing the necessity of always being prepared for war: «it is to bee thought (that for the defence, maintenaunce, and advancement of a kyngdome, or Common weale, or for the good and due observacion of peace, and administracion of Justice in the same) no one thinge to be more profitable, necessarie, or more honourable, then the knowledge of service in warre, and dedes of arme: because considering the ambicion of the worlde, it is impossible for any realme or dominion, long to continue free in quietnesse and sauvegarde, where the defence of the sweard is not alwaies in a readinesse» (TAOW, unnumbered).

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Chivalry and Romance: The Image of the Middle Ages in 19th Century Britain

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Terms such as «Middle Ages» and «medieval» are relatively new coinages and imply the existence of an age that temporally stands in between two other ages, which are arguably easier to define. The boundaries that should define the medieval period are often blurred and were even more blurred when, at the turn of the nineteenth century, amateur scholars started what would then become a great revival of the medieval English heritage. This paper aims to examine the self-contradictory attitude of the antiquarians who rediscovered medieval romances towards the literature of the Middle Ages, focussing especially on the idea of the medieval past as a barbarous and dark age. It also analyses the extent to which this barbarity was perceived as potentially appealing for a modern poetical re-interpretation.

Kewywords: Antiquarians, Romance, Middle Ages, Barbarism

Introduction

The expression «medieval revival» is commonly used to indicate a process of rediscovery and especially re-elaboration of the medieval past that began in Britain in the late eighteenth century and flourished throughout the nineteenth. Its impact was massive since it involved every aspect of society, from literature to politics to fashion, even though the definition of Middle Ages was rather blurred and unstable, at least until the second half of the nineteenth century.[1] Books such as Alice Chandler's *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* (1971) and Mark Girouard's *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (1981) provide an in depth analysis of the many faces this phenomenon assumed over more than a century, as well as of the historical background that contributed to making it attractive. While these authoritative studies examine respectively the political impact of medieval revival and the idealization of knighthood and the consequent reshape of the idea of the Victorian gentleman, the pres-

[1] The term "Middle Ages" was first coined during the Renaissance to refer quite literally to the span of time that divided the classical past from the present. It, however, soon gained negative connotations connected to the idea that classical past was followed by a "dark age". By the end of the eighteenth century, there were various terms that could be used to refer to the Middle Ages, such as Gothic – which initially possessed a more neutral connotation – or ancient. As David Matthews points out, "The beginnings of a rehabilitation for the term 'Middle Ages' and the period denoted by it can be found in the late eighteenth-century romantic revival, when such antiquarians as Thomas Percy and Thomas Warton used the period term in largely positive senses. Partly as a result of their influence, in the nineteenth century the term came into more widespread use, particularly in the neutral sense that was then espoused by the discipline of medieval studies as it developed in the course of that century." For further analysis on the birth and evolution of the term: D. Matthews, *From Mediaeval to Mediaevalism: A New Semantic History*, «The Review of English Studies», 2011, LXII, pp. 695-715; T.E. Mommsen, *Petrarch's Conception of the 'Dark Ages'*, «Speculum», 1942, XVII, pp. 226-242; F.C. Robinson, *Medieval, the Middle Ages*, «Speculum», 1984, LIX, pp. 745-756.

ent article mainly focuses on the niche topic of antiquarianism and aims to analyse the self-contradicting attitude that the antiquarians who rediscovered most of the medieval romances showed while editing them for the general public. The period taken into consideration spans from the publication of Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765, to the moment in which Scott's *Essay on Romance* appeared in the supplement of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, in 1824. Clearly, the choice of Percy and Scott as the boundaries of this timeline is not arbitrary: Thomas Percy's work gave the first impulse to the rediscovery of the medieval past and became a model for a number of later antiquarians. However, it was Walter Scott who ultimately paved the way for a more widespread use of medievalism, extending its application beyond the confines of mere antiquarianism.[2]

More specifically, the main aim of the current article is, on the one hand, to address the ideology underlying the nineteenth-century tendency to label medieval poetry as inherently barbarous and, on the other, to explore the self-contradicting attitude of antiquarians who simultaneously debased such poetry and advocated for its rediscovery. The analysis will first focus on the historicistic, religious and literary implications of barbarism in this context. It will then turn to the idea of simplicity as a characteristic that offers the modern poet the opportunity to redeem the utter alterity and nothingness of medieval literature through his skilful refinement. Ultimately, it aims to shed light on the role of antiquarians in the origin of the medieval revival.

[2] Walter Scott is often recognised as a key figure in nineteenth-century medieval revival. Alice Chandler has analysed the importance of antiquarianism in Scott's education and its impact in his production both as a novelist and as a poet: A. Chandler, *Sir Walter Scott and the Medieval Revival*, «Nineteenth-Century Fiction», 1965, XIX, pp. 315-332; A. Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature*, Routledge, London 1971.

A brand-new image of the antiquarian

Eighteenth-century Enlightenment brought important innovation to the field of historical research and, more significantly, imposed a new attitude towards history. Accuracy started to play a key role in the process and a new impulse to rediscover original sources led to a growing interest in manuscripts. Most of the people who indulged in this pastime were not scholars in the strictest sense, but amateurs with a strong interest in relics of the past and were known with the name of antiquarians. A key figure in this process was Bishop Thomas Percy, whose *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) achieved considerable editorial success not only in England, but also on the Continent. This collection immediately became a source of inspiration – and sometimes of debate – for future generations of antiquarians. The centrality of Percy's work in the subsequent medieval revival can hardly be underestimated since the *Reliques* not only revived an entire field of study – mainly that of medieval ballads and romances – but also partially contributed to reshaping the role of the antiquarian himself. At the end of his *Essay on the Ancient Metrical Romances*, Percy states that:

> [...] it has happened unluckily, that the antiquaries, who have revived the works of our ancient writers, have been for the most part men void of taste and genius, and therefore have always fastidiously rejected the old poetical Romances, because founded on fictitious or popular subjects, while they have been careful to grub up every petty fragment of the most dull and insipid rhymist, whose merit it was to deform morality, or obscure true history.[3]

By discrediting old antiquarians' textual choices, Percy hints to a new characteristic that should define the modern antiquarian: literary taste. Indeed, in his view, his predecessors had focussed on poetry that was simultaneously literarily bland and historically mislead-

[3] T. Percy, *The Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, Republished by Ex-Classics Project, 2016, p. 539.

ing, failing both the aim to entertain their audience and that to provide them with an authentic picture of ancient manners. Conversely, metrical romances «contain a considerable portion of poetic merit, and throw great light on the manners and opinions of former times», elements that make them deserve to be «rescued from oblivion»[4]. In this passage, Percy implicitly seems to connect the idea of literary readability with historical interest, suggesting that what is pleasurable to read may also be valuable for different ends. Clearly, this affirmation should not be overestimated: Percy openly acknowledges the literary and aesthetic limits of romances, which «cannot indeed be put in competition with the nervous productions of so universal and commanding a genius as Chaucer»[5]. Nevertheless, he recognises in them «a simplicity that makes them be read with less interruption, and be more easily understood: and they are far more spirited and entertaining than the tedious allegories of Gower, or the dull and prolix legends of Lydgate»[6]. The stress on simplicity is essential in this context since it hints at a poetry that stands at the earliest stage of its evolution and recalls the fascination with the primitive characterising the second half of the eighteenth century.[7] Moreover, his insistence on the necessity to re-discover popular subjects perfectly aligns with the increasing interest in folklore that was developing at the time.[8] Interestingly enough, Percy's own *Reliques* paved the way for a larger retrieval of ancient ballads and provided a marketplace both for antiquarian anthologies of medieval poetry and for contemporary rewritings on the same subjects.

Percy's concern with finding a marketplace and an audience for this new kind of medieval literature he aimed to retrieve is epitomised in his claim that:

[4] Percy, *Reliques*, cit., p. 538.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 538
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 538
[7] D. Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History*, D.S. Brewer, Woodbridge 2015, p. 6.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

> Should the public encourage the revival of some of those ancient Epic Songs of Chivalry, they would frequently see the rich ore of an Ariosto or a Tasso, tho' buried it may be among the rubbish and dross of barbarous times.[9]

By openly inviting his public to support future publications on medieval romances, Percy is trying to popularise them and, at the same time, make them appealing to an elite reading public. The open reference to the chivalric poems of Ariosto and Tasso, along with the suggested parallels between their works and medieval romances, may be read as an almost contemporary advertising strategy meant to attract the readers' attention by recalling something already familiar to them. Indeed, although Percy acknowledges the lower artistic value of these earlier productions, he nonetheless suggests that they should be read as embryonic stages of later and more refined literature, tracing a faint line connecting the masterpieces of Ariosto and Tasso with their medieval predecessors. In this way, despite being labelled as barbarous, medieval romances could benefit from being linked to their refined counterparts by partially sharing in their fame and reputation.

Indeed, as David Matthews pointed out, late eighteenth-century antiquarians' works – mainly Percy's, but also Warton's – helped to reorient prevailing conceptions of the Middle Ages, fostering a process of domestication and presenting the past as a fertile ground for literary colonization.[10] Although they adopted a detached and frequently ambivalent attitude toward the Middle Ages and its perceived barbarism – an aspect explored in greater detail later in this article – they were also instrumental in reviving and in popularising medieval literature. Such efforts had the direct effect of reshaping the next generation's vision of medieval times. They helped to concep-

[9] Percy, *Reliques*, cit., p. 539

[10] D. Matthews, *The Ballad Revival and the Rise of Literary History*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism*, ed. Joanne Parker, Corinna Wagner, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2020, pp. 118-119.

tualise a Romantic Middle Ages by balancing the negative attributed commonly associated to the period with some positive ones, mainly linked to feudalism and chivalry.[11] Thus, it may be argued that they began the process of de-alienisation of medieval literature – and medieval past more in general – by searching for its potential rather than being instantly repugned by its apparent alterity. Such attitude favoured the growing of interest for the material they retrieved and contributed to an evolution in the perception of the Middle Ages.

Moreover, as the quote from Percy demonstrates, they contributed to create a sense of continuity between the medieval past and the present. This sense of connection, rather than repulsion, may account for the pervasiveness of the medieval in every aspect of Victorian life. In literature, this domestication of the literary past generated a new repertoire of mythological figures and settings that could be appropriate and adapted to modern sensibility and morals. Characters such as King Arthur or Robin Hood gained renew popularity and were endlessly reshaped throughout the century to conform with the new social and moral standards expected of them.[12] The result was a degree of hybridisation between present and past, perceived as a rediscovered territory suitable for modern cultural colonisation.

Hybridity, however, is not a feature limited to nineteenth century rewritings, it is also inherent in antiquarians' attitude towards the medieval originals, which they often re-elaborated in order to adapt them to the refined

[11] For a detailed analysis on the two faces of Middle Ages, the Grotesque Middle Ages and the Romantic Middle Ages, consult the chapter "How Many Middle Ages?" in D. Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History*, D.S. Brewer, Woodbridge 2015.

[12] For instance, the myth of Robin Hood was largely re-adapted to modern sensibility in order to align with some specific political visions. For a detailed analysis of the reinvention of the myth from Ritson onwards, consult S. Knight, *Chartism and Medievalism: Retrospective Radicalism in the English Nineteenth Century,* in *Subaltern Medievalisms: Medievalism 'from below' in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. David Matthews, Michael Sanders, D.S. Brewer, Woodbridge 2021.

taste of their contemporaries. Percy was openly accused by later antiquarians – mainly Ritson – to have distorted the texts he edited, making them more appealing to contemporary audience, but less authentic. Indeed, he approached the texts in the Folio as an author, rather than a philologist or an editor: taking advantage of the manuscript's fragmentary nature, he significantly altered and reshaped the original texts, adapting them to the vision of the Middle Ages he wanted to present to the public.[13] Nevertheless, scholarly rigour was not a widespread feature in early editions of medieval poetry, even in the works of antiquarians who professed to value accuracy over pleasure.[14] Thus, early antiquarians' collections and editions were themselves modernised and hybridised rewritings of medieval materials, blurring the boundaries between philological retrieval and literary adaptation. This liminal state surely provided an inspiring precedent for nineteenth-century tendency to reshape and adapt medieval literature to answer more urgent questions about modernity.

Romances as historical records

As already mentioned, in his *Essay on the Ancient Metrical Romances* Percy primarily proposes an historicistic approach to texts: romances are valuable because they shed light on the manners and the opinions of ancient peoples, providing the modern with a range of information useful to reconstruct an objective and realistic image of the past. This statement is clearly problematic, not only for the unrealistic elements the romances present, but most of all for the paradox that such a reasoning im-

[13] D. Matthews, *The Making of Middle English 1765-1910*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1999, p. 10.
[14] For a detailed study on the absence of rigour in the antiquarians' editing of medieval sources consult D. Matthews, *The Making of Middle English*; and M. Santini, *The Impetus of Amateur Scholarship: Discussing and Editing Medieval Romances in Late-Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Peter Lang, Bern 2010.

ply. As Simon Dentith points out, the result of such a way to read ancient literature is a cycle where the characteristics of society in its earlier stages are deduced from the texts and the authenticity of the texts is provided by the presence of those same characteristics in the very same texts.[15] At the same time, however, these texts counterbalance the present by highlighting and embodying the profound social changes that led humanity – or at least Western peoples – from an earlier stage of civilization to the late eighteenth century condition. In other words, the medieval world is relevant because it is «a distant, irretrievably other, historical past»[16] that helps to shape and reinforce the modern through contrast. The oddity and the alterity of medieval manners, as depicted in the romances (and in medieval poetry more broadly), serve as objective evidence of societal evolution, confirming the eighteenth-century faith in progress.[17]

Evidently, this historicistic attitude is not confined to Percy, but it was shared by most of his sources and contemporaries. At the beginning of the first letter in his *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762), Thomas Hurd justifies his interest in exploring the nature of romances by inviting his audience to let the ancient peoples «have the telling of their own story».[18] While acknowledging the sense of absurdity these tales may evoke in the modern reader, Hurd emphasizes the necessity to adopt a position of critical superiority in order to discern what is truly valuable in this kind of productions. Consequently, the role of the enlightened man is to search beyond the surface of the texts, digging inside the nonsense to search

[15] S. Dentith, *Epic and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 5.
[16] Matthews, *The Making*, cit., p. 15.
[17] Both Matthews in *The Making of Middle English* and Santini in *The Impetus of Amateur Scholarship* explore the intrinsic alterity of medieval sources which are considered rude in comparison with modern taste.
[18] R. Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry and Romance with the Third Elizabethan Dialogue*, ed. Edith J. Morley, Henry Frowde, London 1911 [original: 1762], p. 80.

for an ulterior, most profound sense. In short, to make sense of the nonsense.[19]

In the Preface to his *History*, Thomas Warton seems equally convinced of living in an enlightened age which stares back at its own past only to prove its degree of evolution from that earlier despicable state of society:

> We look back on the savage condition of our ancestors with the triumph of superiority; we are pleased to mark the steps by which we have been raised from rudeness to elegance: and our reflections on this subject are accompanied with a conscious pride, arising, in great measure, from a tacit comparison of the infinite disproportion between the feeble efforts of remote ages, and our present improvements in knowledge.[20]

Warton seems to suggest that the manners and opinions deduced from medieval literature are relevant because of the «contrast with those of our own times»[21], a position that closely resembles Hurd's. Nevertheless, Warton's perspective introduces an ulterior ideological complication, as it seeks to analyse poetry not merely to provide an historically valid representation of ancient manners, but also to reconstruct a coherent history of English poetry. The result is a reorientation of the collection's aim: rather than simply proving the intrinsic alterity between past and present, it strives to create a continuum by seeking the exact moment in which the social and artistic process of refinement began.[22]

Thus, in Percy's and in Warton's works – as in the works of later antiquarians – the Middle Ages, especially after the establishment of feudalism[23], started to be in-

[19] «The modes and fashions of different times may appear, at first sight, fantastic and unaccountable. But they, who look nearly into them, discover some latent cause of their production». HURD, *Letters*, cit., p. 79.
[20] T. WARTON, *The History of English Poetry from the Close of the Eleventh to the Commencement of the Eighteenth Century*, vol I, Dodsley, London 1774, p. i.
[21] T. WARTON, *History*, p. ii.
[22] D. MATTHEWS, *The Making*, p. 30.
[23] Warton in *History of English Poetry* affirms that feudalism «had the most serious and salutary consequences in assisting the gene-

terpreted as the first step in the process of refinement that allegedly reached its maximum expression in the cultural stage of late eighteenth century. From this point of view, barbarism associated to the Middle Ages is still historically denoted: what stands at the beginning of the timeline toward progress must be an earlier expression of what comes next, so it must be less advanced, thus more barbarous.[24] The enlightened stage of modern society implies – and partially necessitates – a previous time of obscurity, a stage of human civilization that supposedly lacked all the positive connotations of the modern world: progress, refinement, knowledge.

Catholicism and barbarism

As some antiquarians openly point out, darkness and barbarism were also linked to a religious discourse that regarded the Roman Catholic past as a period of religious bigotry and fanaticism, reducing people to slaves of absurd superstitions.[25] For example, in *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës* (1802) Joseph Ritson, while acknowledging that a certain degree of superstition can be ascribed to the classical time too, is particularly vocal in denouncing medieval fanaticism as the most dangerous and extreme of all:

> There is this distinction, indeed, between the heathen deitys, and the christian saints, that the fables of the former were

ral growth of refinement, and the progression of civilization, in forming the manners of Europe, in inculcating the principles of honour, and in teaching modes of decorum.» (*Dissertation I*, the number of page is not provided).

[24] D. Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1990, pp. 6-7.

[25] Michael Wheeler's *The Old Enemies: Catholic and Protestant in Nineteenth-Century English* provides a full account of the prejudices associated to Catholic faith during the Victorian Age and it explores the ways in which Roman Church was perceived as something inherently ancient and savage. M. Wheeler, *The Old Enemies: Catholic and Protestant in Nineteenth-Century English Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006.

> indebted for their existence to the flowery imagination of the sublime poet, and the legends of the latter to the gloomy fanaticism of a lazy monk or stinking priest.[26]

Even though he labels them «Christian saints», in this passage Ritson is referring to chivalric romances in which, he states, the knights possess the same characteristics as saints. In order to prove his point further, he cites *The famous history of the seven champions of Christendome*, a reputedly early seventeenth-century romance converting the seven most famous knights of romances into equally renowned Christian saints. Even though Ritson's atheism may partly account for the harsh tones he adopts in exploring the connection between romance and religion, it is equally evident that Christianity is portrayed as far worse than paganism. Although both literary productions are the result of «a system of superstition», the pagan poet at least possesses «flowery imagination», an expression that hints to the intrinsic artistic value of classical epic in comparison with Christian productions. On the contrary, chivalric romances are labelled as «mischievous and sanguinary legends» that were used as a sort of pro-Christian propaganda during the crusades. Ritson is particularly accurate in describing the violence of Christians – while, for instance, the violence portrayed in the Homeric epic is never accounted for – emphasising how Christian knights «voluntarily and wantonly, invade, attack, persecute, slaughter, and destroy»[27] their Saracen counterparts in this kind of tales. Although these harsh comments can be interpreted as arising from the repulsion for religion inherent in Ritson's atheistic view, it is nevertheless the Christian faith – strictly connected to Catholicism during the Middle Ages – that appears to be the main target of this hate. Thus, the Middle Ages become synonymous with the religion that was predominant at the time and that allegedly forced

[26] J. Ritson, *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës*, vol. I, Bulmer and Company, London 1802, p. xxxiii.
[27] Ritson, *Ancient Engleish*, cit., p. xxxiv.

its beliefs «upon the minds of a bigoted and idiotick people».[28]

In his eminent *Preface* to the 1817 edition of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, Robert Southey is equally ferocious in his attack against the medieval «Romish church», as he denominates it. The *Preface*, rather than providing a scholarly introduction to Malory's work, seeks to recollect the various sources that the writer used to compile his prose version of the Arthurian cycle, occasionally adding personal comments on their plots or main themes. While discussing the Graal episode, Southey reports a quote from a French source which states that the resurrected Jesus Christ is the original author of the story of the Saint Graal. Southey comments the passage in this way:

> Whether this blasphemous fiction be the unpardonable license of a romancer's fancy, or the pious fraud of some *zealous believer in transubstantiation*, I presume not to determine: in the *dark ages* there were no bounds either to such fancies or such frauds. Legends not less impudent have obtained belief in the *Romish church;* and if the light of knowledge, which at one time trembled in its socket, had been put out, the Sainct Greaal, with whatever intent it was written, might possibly have become one of the sacred books of the west [...].[29]

From this excerpt, it is evident that a close connection between Catholic faith – the religion of zealous believers in transubstantiation – and the dark ages is traced. The darkness of the Middle Ages is directly caused by the obscurity of Catholicism, a faith that naturally lacks the enlightened characteristics of Reformed Christianity. Other severe considerations on medieval beliefs and morals are frequent throughout the *Preface* where the romances are described as current among «all savages of whom we have any full account».[30] This last remark fits perfectly into the aforementioned rhetorics of progress that inter-

[28] *Ibid.*, p. xxxiv.
[29] R. Southey, *The Byrth, Lyf and Actes of Kyng Arthur*, Longman, London 1817, p. xxiv (emphasis added).
[30] Southey, *The Byrth*, cit., p. II.

preted the Middle Ages as an earlier stage of human civilization, a barbarous age where (Catholic) savages lived.

In his *Essay on Romance* (1824) Sir Walter Scott, who should have originally been the co-editor of the 1817 edition of Malory's *Morte*, seems to share Southey's position in considering romances as a product of a savage and bigoted civilization.

> [...] Romance [...] professes to be a narrative of real facts, and is, indeed, nearly allied to such history as an early state of society affords; which is always exaggerated by the prejudices and partialities of the tribe to which it belongs, as well as deeply marked by their idolatry and superstition.[31]

Originally intended to be plain historical records, romances had eventually been distorted by religious beliefs and lost much of their historical value. While Scott does not point directly to Catholicism when he speaks of «idolatry and superstition», the reference can still be inferred by the context of the essay. Later in his dissertation he proceeds to distinguish the Romance genre into two distinct subgenres: the temporal, which is centred on the deeds of knights searching for worldly glory, and the spiritual, which deals with the lives and martyrdoms of saints. Nevertheless, these subgenres are only superficially different, and Scott acknowledges a great degree of similarity in their nature and in their narrative patterns. Moreover, by referring to narratives centred on the lives and martyrdoms of saints as a distinct genre of Romance, he makes it clear that the religious background he denounces as superstition infecting reality is specifically the Catholic one. As a consequence, Scott's point of view seems consistent with Southey's.

More interestingly, in Scott's essay Protestantism is openly quoted as one of the direct historical reasons that caused the decreasing of interest on the genre of romance.

[31] W. Scott, *An Essay on Romance*, in *The Miscellaneous Prose Works of Sir Walter Scott*, vol. VI, Robert Cadell, London 1834, p. 139.

> But by degrees of new opinions in religion, the promulgation of a stricter code of morality, together with the important and animating discussion which began to be carried on by means of the press, diverted the public attention from these antiquated legends. The Protestants of England, and the Huguenots of France, were rigorous in their censure of books of chivalry, in proportion as they had been patronised formerly under the Catholic system; perhaps because they helped to arrest men's thoughts from more serious subjects of occupation.[32]

This statement suggests a series of noteworthy implications. In the first place, the Reformation introduced a stricter moral code, implicitly casting the Catholic faith as less moral and its doctrines and ideas as unsuitable for a more refined society. In other words, Catholicism is regarded as a less enlightened religion and romances, being direct products of that faith, are seen as embodying an antiquated system of beliefs.

Barbarism and simplicity

The intrinsic barbarism of medieval texts, however, can be traced also in their stylistic and linguistic characteristics, not only in their subjects. While recognising contemporary poetry as the highest expression of a sort of universal standard of refinement, medieval poetry conversely emerged as an abomination of skill and taste.[33] For the most part, medieval poets – Chaucer being an exception – were thought to lack the ability to be interesting and coherent, to insert unnecessarily long descriptions, and to fail to give depth both to characters and situations. In the words of Utterson, they «appear to have had little power beyond that of making a vigorous sketch of the subject, without attempting to give body and col-

[32] Scott, *Essay on Romance*, cit., p. 187.

[33] David Matthews in *The Making of Middle English* affirms that: «Contemporary standards of criticism were governed by a notion of taste that demanded that poetry conform to absolute, rather than historical, standards, and in these conditions, the later medieval literature was regarded as primitive and barbaric». (p. 7).

ouring to the meagre outline.»[34] In his *Preface*, Southey is equally critical of romances' narration style.

> Nothing can be more inartificial in structure then the Romances of the Round Table. Adventure produces adventure in infinite series; not like a tree, whose boughs and branches bearing a necessary relation and due proportion to each other, combine into one beautiful form, but resembling such plants as the prickly pear, where one joint grows upon another, all equal in size and alike in shape, and the whole *making a formless and misshapen mass*. Even this clumsy mode of transition is often disregarded, and the author passes from adventure to adventure without the slightest connection [...].[35]

The metaphor of the tree and the prickly pear is particularly significant in this context. The tree serves as a symbol of perfection and symmetry, associated with the idea of coherent narration and, consequently, with a beautiful and harmonious result. In contrast, the prickly pear represents the tree's abomination – its inherent opposite – lacking both coherence and beauty. The language used to describe it evokes an almost monstrous being, formless and grotesque.

In his *Essay on Romance*, Scott is meticulous in distinguishing the inherent characteristics of the epic and the romance in a manner that recalls Southey's own position, while simultaneously expanding it.

> Where the art and the ornaments of the poet chiefly attract our attention – where each part of the narrative bears a due proportion to the others, and the whole draws gradually towards a final and satisfactory conclusion – where the characters are sketched with force, and sustained with precision – where the narrative is enlivened and adorned with so much, and no more, of poetical ornament and description, as may adorn, without impeding its progress – where this art and taste are displayed, supported, at the same time, by a sufficient tone of genius, and art of

[34] E.V. Utterson, *Selected Pieces of Early Popular Poetry: Republished Principally from Early Printed Copies in Black Letters*, vol I, Chancery Lane, London 1817, p. ix.
[35] Southey, *The Byrth*, cit., pp. xxxi-xxxii (emphasis added).

> composition; the work produced must be termed an Epic Poem [...].[36]

As the quote indicates, Scott identifies epic literature as possessing the very characteristics that, according to Southey, are absent in romance. Epic literature is a harmonic composition where all elements are essential and collaborate to the sense, leading to a satisfactory conclusion. Moreover, the poet is skilled in the use of language and in the disposition of descriptions. The result is, evidently, a tree, a graceful composition generated by the genius of an author who is endowed with the necessary artistic taste. Romance is the opposite; it is a prickly pear.

> On the other hand, when a story languishes in tedious and minute details, and relies for the interest which it proposes to excite, rather upon the wild excursions of an unbridled fancy, than upon the skill of the poet – when the supernatural and the extraordinary are relied upon exclusively as the supports of the interest, the author [...] is still no more than a humble romancer, and his works must rank amongst those rude ornaments of a dark age, which are at present the subject of our consideration.[37]

Scott's rhetoric strategy frames epic and romance as not merely different but diametrically opposed. He subsequently classifies romance as an inferior form of composition, emphasizing the poet's inability to engage the reader through his literary skills. Therefore, poetry results inartificial, in Southey's sense of the word. Scott claims that, when a poet lacks skill, the only way to engage the audience is through fanciful and extraordinary devices. Consequently, the resulting literature, consistent with the «dark age» that produced it, possesses little literary value.

Late eighteenth-century antiquarians tended to agree with Scott's remark on the superiority of classical epic and on the intrinsic lack of literariness of medieval texts. This overall judgement, however, seems to contrast with the antiquarian impulse to recover medieval materials

[36] *Ibid.*, pp. 137-138.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 138.

typical of the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. As David Matthes points out, there is an evident «bifurcation» in the attitude antiquarians showed towards old texts: on the one hand they point out their absence of literary value to the extent they feel obliged to apologize for treating such insignificant materials, on the other they remark the importance of these same texts.[38] Such alleged importance lays upon two main factors, one more evident than the other. In the first place, as examined above, medieval texts – and especially romances – could be read from an historicistic point of view with the aim of studying the manners of ancient peoples. In the second place, however, they may present «occasional flashes of genius»[39] – to cite Scott – that can easily engage and entertain the audience. Therefore, although the barbarous conditions of the times in which these works had been composed imply a certain degree of imperfection, romances may still be of interest from a literary point of view. As stated above, the reader is invited to seek a different kind of literary value, not based on contemporary standards of poetic refinement, but grounded in a simplicity that is emblematic of earlier stages of society.

This attitude is evident in Percy: it is the necessary condition for the theorization of the antiquarian as a man of taste, as noted above. In Percy's view, antiquarians should rescue from oblivion texts that are both useful and enjoyable, a position that also reasonably influenced the value he attributed to those texts. The idea that medieval texts «contain a *considerable* portion of poetic merit»[40] is not neutral, it suggests an inherent degree of dignity in the edited material, however barbarous it may seem. The result is a self-contradictory approach that aimed to expose «the beauties and defects of the Romance»[41] as almost equally important. The same attitude

[38] Matthews, *The Making*, cit., p. 14.
[39] Scott, *Essay on Romance*, cit., p. 138.
[40] Percy, *Reliques*, cit., p. 538 (emphasis added).
[41] Scott, *Essay on Romance*, cit., p. 186.

is evidently shared by Warton, whose aim is to valorise medieval poetry in order to identify the exact moment when the process of refinement first began[42], and later by Weber, who states that in selecting metrical romances for his collection «the principal object of preference was their intrinsic merit»[43].

Evidently, recognising a kind of primordial poetic merit in the works of medieval minstrels does not call into question contemporary superiority in poetry. In *Selected Pieces of Early Popular Poetry* (1817) Utterson points out that «[i]n the rude attempt of these early poets we are not to expect rich or highly-finished colouring»[44], all characteristics that are evidently expected in modern poems rather than in medieval ones. Nevertheless, simplicity – the main characteristic that Utterson attributes to medieval poetry – justifies the modern reader's engagement with this ancient literature.

> It is no small praise to the productions of the early minstrels, that the subjects of the simple poems, which in the middle ages were recited from castle to castle, should, in the present enlightened state of society, again rise into notice and consideration, interest us by their simplicity, and charm us by the naïveté of their representations.[45]

Utterson's primary interest towards medieval poetry shifts from the simple picture of manners to a more specifically artistic sensibility concerning «simple poems». Simplicity was regarded as an intrinsic characteristic of the age, since it was commonly believed that an earlier stage of civilization entailed a closer relationship with nature and, consequently, a lesser degree of artificiality. In this context, however, such closeness with nature do not necessarily have a negative connotation. As mentioned above, the renewed interest in the medieval past

[42] Matthews, *The Making*, cit., pg 32.
[43] H. Weber, *Metrical Romances of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries: Published from Ancient Manuscripts*, vol. I, Constable, Edinburgh 1810, p. xi.
[44] Utterson, *Selected Pieces*, cit., p. viii.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. vii.

that emerged during the Romantic period fostered the idea that the Middle Ages possessed something valuable that had been lost in the subsequent period and ought somehow to be recovered.[46] In other words, antiquarians who re-edited – or re-wrote – and re-published medieval texts recognised in their enjoyable simplicity the primary justification for their rediscovery and rewriting. Walter Scott may be cited as a paradigmatic figure in this process: he was an antiquarian, but at the same time he drew on his antiquarian knowledge to compose both poems and novels set in the Middle Ages, inspiring much of the later medieval revival and becoming a paradigmatic figure for Victorian medievalism. His double nature – both antiquarian and writer – allowed him to become the epitome of Percy's antiquarian ideal and to recreate in his works a believable and saleable image of the Middle Ages, which contributed to reshape nineteenth-century imagination of the period.

The role of the modern poet

Interestingly enough, some antiquarians openly encourage modern rewritings of medieval materials. For instance, Utterson sees in the charming simplicity of medieval poetry an opportunity for the contemporary poet to enrich that «vigorous sketch» with modern concerns. From the very beginning of his *Preface*, he places the poet – alongside the antiquarian and the philologist – as a potential recipient of the retrieval and re-publication of medieval texts. While the philologist may be engaged in studying the history of the language, the poet may find «interesting images of ancient manners, which, chosen by taste, and remodelled by genius, tend to enliven the narrative, and increase its interest».[47] In this new context, the recurrent idea of the ancient manners to be rediscovered partially loses its historicistic value and as-

[46] D. Matthews, *Medievalism*, p. 25.
[47] Utterson, *Selected Pieces*, cit., p. vi.

sumes an artistic significance: the man of genius – here no longer an antiquarian, but a poet – is the one who selects and remodels the ancient into the new. Therefore, the success of the poet depends also on «the subjects which have been selected by his judgment, and embellished by his taste»[48], a position that seems to concede some credit to the originals too.

Hence, Utterson's view suggests a practical use of the textual heritage that antiquarians had patiently collected and republished over the years. In this framework, the poet is positioned as a paradigmatic figure in the study of the subject and, especially, in its re-adaptation.[49] While the historian and the antiquarian give the audience a realistic and objective picture of the past, the poet can reshape it with the aim to make it relevant to the present, more refined stage of society.

> The best modern imitations of the romance poems have been necessarily more gorgeously adorned. They have been clothed in attractive language, enjoying the pomp of verse, and embued with the delicacy of sentiment; added to which, all the powers of description have been brought into action to give perfection to the tale. The enlightened taste of the present day required these adjuncts [...].[50]

Utterson's statement presents a further development of Percy's and Warton's positions. In this context, the medieval literary past is openly framed as an unknown territory, fertile ground for literary colonisation, paraphrasing David Matthews. The poet acts as a mediator in this process, possessing the taste and skill both to select valuable material from the original and to sublimate it into a more refined form. Through this transformation, the barbaric medieval past is completely domesticated, los-

[48] *Ibid.*, p. VI.
[49] Utterson claims that «To account, therefore, for the renewed popularity which has attended this subject, we must principally look to the little sketches of manners carelessly introduced, which, as illustrating the ruder ages, and pourtraying the progress of society, are become interesting subjects of research to the antiquary, the historian, and the poet». (pp. ix-x).
[50] Utterson, *Selected Pieces*, cit., p. X.

ing the problematic implications that had rendered earlier antiquarians' evaluations of the period ambiguous. In short, the poet can model the intrinsic alterity of medieval materials into something significant for his contemporaries, infusing medieval rudeness with contemporary refinement. The result, clearly, is the elevation of medieval tales to a renewed state of perfection, cleansed of its problematic attributes.[51]

Although Utterson's solution may seem unique within the framework of early nineteenth-century antiquarianism, it nonetheless anticipates a question that would recur in the following years, particularly among poets seeking to remodel and repurpose medieval materials. This concern is particularly evident in Tennyson's *The Epic*, the framed prologue of 1842 version of *Morte d'Arthur*, in which the poet Everard Hall, following a debate with friends about the relevance of epic poetry in contemporary times, reads aloud his Arthurian poem. It is said that Everard had burnt all his twelve books of Arthurian poetry since «He thought that nothing new was said, or else / Something so said 'twas nothing – that a truth / Looks freshest in the fashion of the day».[52] The implication is that the ancient world is fundamentally distinct from the present, and that, as a result, it is futile to seek value in a past that can never return.[53]

However, it came about that the eleventh book of Hall's epic had been preserved by Francis, one of his friends, in order to be saved from oblivion. In this context, as David Matthews brilliantly points out, the *Morte* becomes a

[51] M.L. Morris, *'Recalled to Life': King Arthur's Return and the Body of the Past in Nineteenth-Century England*, «Arthuriana», 2011, XXI, pp. 5-27.

[52] A. Tennyson, *The Epic*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Adam Roberts, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, ll. 30-33.

[53] «Why take the style of those heroic times? / For nature brings not back the mastodon, / Nor we those times; and why should any man / Remodel models? these twelve books of mine / Were faint Homeric echoes, nothing-worth, / Mere chaff and draff, much better burnt.» (ll. 35-40).

relique[54] which survived the passing of time only thanks to the work of a man of taste, Francis, who played the role of the antiquarian. So, mimicking the minstrels of the past, Hall is asked to declaim his poem, the surviving fragment of a more extensive production, while the audience sat silently, «rapt» by the performance. At this point, the narrator attempts to account for the source of this collective awe, and he affirms that «perhaps some modern touches here and there / redeem'd it from the charge of nothingness»[55], a statement that echoes Utterson's conception of the poet as someone capable of refining medieval materials while infusing them with modern concerns. In other words, instead of standing as a static and unrecognisable other, the Middle Ages emerge as an imperfect mirror of the present, a space in which fragments of identity can be safely explored. Arthur's return as a modern gentleman – even if only a dream – at the end of *The Epic* exemplifies this tendency to reshape the medieval world in modern terms, preserving what is deemed relevant and embellishing or erasing what is considered too barbarous to refine. The result is, to quote Ritson, a «perfect illusion» in which modern sensibility is used for «supplying the defects of barbarian ignorance»[56] and the medieval, emptied of its historical specificity, becomes an aesthetic vessel through which one can speak about the present.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century attitude towards medieval literature was profoundly self-contradictory. On the one hand, medieval texts were seen as intrinsically barbarous since they were regarded as products of a bigoted and superstitious time, the Catholic past. On the other hand, however, it

[54] Matthews, *The Making*, cit., p. 143.
[55] *Ibid.*, ll. 278-279.
[56] Ritson, *Ancient Engleish*, cit., p. cxli.

sparked curiosity and engaged, partly because of the picture of ancient manner it painted, but also because of its inherent simplicity. The contradiction, however, may be partially solved by the contemporary poet who, in Utterson's perspective, becomes one of the preferred recipients for medieval literature, together with the antiquarian and the philologist. His specific role is to reshape medieval barbarism into a refined and modern product, infusing it with concerns that can result appealing for the contemporary audience. However, the study is still incomplete and further research on the topic of medieval barbarism and its impact on later medievalist literature should be conducted.

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Le forme hanno una vita più lunga delle società che le hanno generate. Figure, miti, gesti e parole attraversano i secoli, cambiano lingua e funzione, entrano in nuovi sistemi di senso trattenendo il segno delle loro attivazioni precedenti. L'età di mezzo in Europa è stata una delle grandi officine di queste metamorfosi. Il Medioevo continua ad accadere. Eredità antiche in nuovi stampi: sacro e profano, violenza e grazia, Oriente e Occidente entrano in contatto e si fertilizzano reciprocamente in un gioco di incessanti mutamenti. Seguirne e ricostruirne le tracce significa osservare il punto in cui una cultura si ricompone attraverso ciò che eredita, altera e trasmette. È dentro questo moto di sopravvivenza nella variazione che si situa il Primo Quaderno del *Parliament of Fowls*, i cui contributi guardano ai testi letterari come luogo di ascolto delle forme nel loro passaggio e nelle loro rideterminazioni storiche.

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