

THE IDYLLS OF THE KING RECONSIDERED

María Luisa DAÑOBEITIA

Universidad de Granada

The precise idea of our study is that of investigating the manner in which Tennyson appropriates the figure of King Arthur¹ with the purpose of transforming him into a character of the Victorian era: an outsider. For Tennyson Arthur is an honest, good-willed, noble and innocent man: a man who embodies values which are no longer considered as worthy in his own kingdom. For his people, religion, honour, truth and fellowship have become just words. Arthur cannot perceive this, and so he becomes an outsider: a man who cannot see that he is blind until it is too late.

Because Arthur is living in a lost ideal, and so in a dream, Tennyson perceives that he, like Don Quixote, is not aware of his own reality. Unlike Ruskin, Tennyson does not want to present the Middle Ages as an ideal period, but as a historical phase not unlike his own, especially the late Middle Ages, since during the late Middle Ages great changes were taking place, and accordingly certain ideals were abandoned for the sake of new ones. Tennyson's revival of the Order of the Round Table must not be understood in terms of Ruskin's longing for the Middle Ages. He has not presented that age as a sort of Second Eden, or a Christianized Golden Age: he is a Victorian projecting Arthur and his knights within the pale of his own world, and so Arthur's drama is that of any Victorian who must perform the role of an outsider in his own land.

Liberty, as Ruskin² understands it, is not the kernel of *The Idylls of the King*: Tennyson is speaking of another kind of freedom, that is, the freedom of Gareth's sovereignty to cross, or not, the gate of Camelot in order to serve or reject Arthur. This king is a hero «whose quixotic perfection [Tennyson] felt to be a needed example for the modern man»³. A hero who

¹ For the study of the manner in which Tennyson uses Malory's works see Robert Pattison, *Tennyson and Tradition* (Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1981).

² J. Ruskin, *Unto this Last*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 22.

³ J. P. Eggers, *King Arthur's Laureate* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), p. 38.

created the Order of the Round Table because he wanted to restore the peace, the law, and the order that was necessary to control a lawless land. The situation that Tennyson presents before the Coming of Arthur is one of hopelessness, and this shows that Arthur's quest is not a useless one. He restores order, but he cannot grasp that a pure heart like his is the exception not the rule, with the result that his order does not last long, and his land becomes again a wasted land. The King is a dreamer, a man who cannot perceive the existence of defeated «Souls» because he lacks the ability to read the signs of deterioration correctly.

The England of Tennyson was experiencing an industrial revolution causing an excess of changes in a short period of time. The effects of drastic changes bring more often than not a painful and bitter moral crisis —the type of crisis that creates individuals who cannot accept the new order of things, thus becoming isolated beings, symbols of the «essential despair of the single lonely individual— with the worm of death in the centre of his life»⁴. Tennyson's choice of the mythical Arthur is perfect because he is a good example of a dated hero, of a man crushed by the realities inherent in his own society: a society that transforms him into an outsider, loved by a few such as Gareth.

Gareth and Lynette is a difficult Idyll. It offers problems arising from the ludicrous nature of Gareth's adventures in opposition to the seriousness cognate to the religious symbolism used by Merlin, or by the poet when he depicts Camelot's gate. This opposition creates an internal tension that is onerous to reconcile. This constraint however serves to show the incongruity inherent in life. There is an obvious similarity between the entrance to Camelot and the gate of any heavenly city. The ironic touch lies in the fact that the city is heavenly not because it is heavenly, but because Arthur renders the city a New Jerusalem. The city's worth derives from his dream, and it will last as long as Arthur's dream lasts. The religious aspect of this Idyll has been considered by critics⁵, for this Idyll constitutes a study of the consequences inherent in the destruction of religious values: values, morals and scruples arising from religious principles that dictate patterns of behaviour which make it possible to endure the harshness intrinsic to life. If Arthur's dreams are destroyed by those who consider his New Jerusalem the product of an illusory dream, people will be equally destroyed, and this for Tennyson is regrettable.

Another way of understanding this tale is that of seeing it in the light of a humorous not to say critical parody of the chivalric genre. This possibility has been hinted by Littledale when he wrote; «I do not know whether there

⁴ Ed. J. Killham, *Critical Essay on the Poetry of Tennyson* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 200.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

is a double meaning intended in underground»⁶, because a *double entendre* exists, arising from the poet's parodic intention at work throughout the tale. The parodic design functions within two different but not unrelated levels of meaning. One which is part of the ludicrous element inherent in Gareth's adventure; an exploit that shows that in spite of what Ruskin thinks about the worth of chivalry, chivalry is not perfect and accordingly the Middle Ages do not offer the solutions to cure the ills of his own age⁷. Two, a level that casts light on the worthiness of the individual, on the merit of a man who despite adversity preserves his values intact. Chivalry is not glorious but Arthur and Gareth are.

The true follower of Arthur was Gareth; a man who like Sancho believed that his lord could keep alive the Order of Knighthood. Gareth says that he wants to be one of Arthur's knights, «to cleanse the world». (*G & L*, 24), and those are the words that Don Quixote pronounces when he resolves to be a knight. Owing to the fact that the only reality for Gareth's mother is her son, she cannot understand why he wants to serve King Arthur. For her, Arthur is not a worthy king to serve. Deep down it is not a question of the worth of the king, but that of rejecting anything that lies beyond the boundaries of her private world; a world that contains Gareth. Arthur's lack of an unquestionable right to rule is her excuse to keep her child with her. She pleads with him to stay, and she uses arguments that are irrelevant to her; «Wilt thou leave/ These easeful biding here, and risk thine all,/ Life, limbs, for one that is not proven King?/ Stay, till the cloud that settles round his birth/ Hath lifted but a little. Stay, sweet son» (*G & L*, 125-9). She argues this because she must persuade him to stay, thus concealing her true motives: love. Her reasons are not dishonourable, and yet her distortion of reality must be understood in terms of a basic motif that is always at work in *The Idylls*: the deformation of values native to knighthood.

Malory's version does not have a «grotesque dénoûment»⁸ as the finale of the tale, for in Malory's the grotesque and the sublime coexist as part of Arthur's world. This coexistence achieves a balance that Tennyson rejects. So the grotesque element that in Malory is almost unobtrusive becomes evident in Tennyson's, and so the feeling that «the sublime is divided at times by a very thin partition from the ludicrous»⁹. In *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Gareth's adventure begins with a gathering of knights at Arthur's court during the days of Pentecost: a motif that is frequently used in the Arthurian Cycle as the starting point of an adventure. Their feasting is interrupted

⁶ Harold Littledale, *Essays on Lord Tennyson's Idylls of the King* (London: MacMillan, 1839), p. 111.

⁷ Tennyson's understanding of the Middle Ages is very similar to that of J. Huizinga. See J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (New York: A Double Day anchor Book, 1954).

⁸ Harold Littledale, op. cit., p. 110.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

with the arrival of Gareth, and this is not how Tennyson begins his tale¹⁰. Before we see Gareth in Arthur's court, we see his home, his arrival at Camelot, and his crossing of the city gate.

In Malory, Gareth does not meet Merlin because there is no gate to cross, simply because Malory does not depict Arthur as an outsider, but as an essential part of Camelot. To Gareth's questions about Camelot, Merlin says: «there is nothing in [Camelot] as it seems/Saving the King; though some there be that hold/The king a shadow, and the city real:» (*G & L*, 260-68), thus confirming the reaction of Gareth's attendants when they see Camelot. What Gareth's attendants and Merlin have to say about Camelot shows a division of opinion that renders Arthur, as well as Gareth's wish to serve him, as both real and unreal. (*G & L*, 194-204). Camelot is Arthur's «vision» and so it is must be Gareth's too: a revelation that will vanish when Arthur faces reality. However, Arthur is no changeling but a man who owing to his qualities seems to belong to another race than his own.

Since Gareth sees the city through Arthur's eyes, for him it is not a *visio*. Nonetheless Gareth's acceptance of Arthur's dream must be interpreted in terms of a quest that proves to be a futile chimera. The uselessness of Gareth's quest is foreshadowed by his language:» Despite of Day and Night and Death and Hell», (*G & L*, 865), and by his childish repetition of «the quest is mine», (*G & L*, 840). What he must face is exactly the façade of the black-knight», High on a night black-horse, in knight-black arms,/With white breast-bone, and barren ribs of Death,/and crowned with fleshless laughter», (*G & L*, 1346-8) in opposition to its internal reality, «the bright face of a blooming boy/Fresh as the flower new-born, and crying. "Knight,/Slay me not"». (*G & L*, 1373-4).

The tone of *The Marriage of Geraint*, unlike that of Gareth's, is one of seriousness. Geraint has been described as a brave, accomplished and esteemed knight, married to the worthy Enid. Both are happy, but their happiness does not last because Geraint's heart is assailed by doubts. He is not sure of Enid's faithfulness because of what he has heard about Guinevere. (*The Marriage*, 24-32). He is afraid of the Queen's influence on his wife, and accordingly he leaves Arthur's court. Not knowing the truth, Arthur loses a good knight: and he believes Geraint when he deceives him as to the reasons for his departure. If Geraint's behaviour is not pleasant, the conclusion of the tale is less pleasant because Geraint cannot look with an open mind into the future: «And though Geraint could never take again/That comfort from their converse which took/Before the Queen's fair name was breathed upon,/He rested well content that all was well». (*G & E*, 948-50) because his faith in the Queen has been destroyed and so he will always distrust everybody, including his.

¹⁰ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur* (London: The Penguin English Library, 1969), p. 232.

Balin & Balan is a dreadful tragedy: that of two brothers that arises from the fact that Balin who is a half-man, and so in need of the rational support of his twin brother, Balan, «chooses the wrong emblem for emotional support. He looked not to the king —that is, the ideal man, —but to Lancelot and Guinevere as models to imitate»¹¹. When he learns that, due to Guinevere's sin, his emblem is a corrupted one, he changes it for another. Balin has no longer the necessary emotional support because he forgets that his emblem «was only a shadow of the king», not the king. To make matters worse, Balan, his rational brother, was not there to help him regain his mental stability, shattered by the destructive love of the Queen and Lancelot.

Balin's source of mental stability was as much of a dream as that of Arthur. Because he has not been able to distinguish between the king and the queen, his dream has been destroyed and so he looks elsewhere but there is nothing to replace it, and thus he becomes insane. Balin's awakening to reality is so vivid, and his derangement so agonizing that for those who cannot understand the moral worth of his ordeal, he gives the impression of suffering from a cause that is more unnatural than it really is: «This fellow had wrought some foulness with his/Queen:Else never had he borne her crown, nor raved/ And thus foamed over at a rival name:» (*B & B*, 556-8).

By rejecting his Queen's emblem Balin rejects his assumed identity and by doing so he brings about his tragic end. His changing of emblem proves to be tragic because Balan takes him for another knight and so he fights a mortal battle with him in which both are killed. Balan's mistake functions as a metaphor of liberty and thus of the freedom that he has to choose the wrong cause so that the man that he attacks is no longer Balin, but the embodiment of the wrong choice.

Once more the poet has played with the contrast between reality and fiction, reality and myth, reality and dreams; and reality proves to be a lethal weapon for these two brothers, because they were not aware of the fact that the Queen's myth, as in Arthur's case, was their only source of happiness. Even when he is dying Balin cannot face reality, and this is a fact that Balan understands well enough, and so he reassures him that the Queen is as «pure as [their] own true mother. It is a lie but Balin can die peacefully in his brother's arms.

The moral of this Idyll is gloomy; its tone is graver than its antecedent Idyll, for the consequences of Guinevere's guilt, and of Arthur's ignorance are far more serious than those of Enid's vexing trial. The death of the two brothers shows that to worship the queen, as good vassals must do, proves to be a very dangerous ideal. Their fatal ending adds weight to Guinevere's

¹¹ Clyde de L. Ryals, *From the Great Deep: Essays on Idylls of the King* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1967), p. 183.

guilt, while it serves to introduce the wily Vivien- the destroyer of the fabricator of dreams, Merlin.

Of all the Idylls that of *Merlin & Vivien* is the most unpleasant one, however it has a very precise function within the thematic fabric of the *Idylls of the King*. By means of this Idyll the poet expands his theme of Will versus Reason in order to show that the complete destruction of Reason by Will is the cause of Merlin's end, thus foreshadowing that of Arthur. Merlin is fully aware of the power inherent in the Senses, and therefore he willingly succumbs to his will, because he is also aware of the power and dangers cognate to dreams. His fall embodies an ironic twist in the plot's development not unrelated to Arthur's destruction. Merlin's metaphoric attitude towards his own destruction becomes evident when bearing in mind the way he accepts Vivien's answers after talking to her about the existence of pure hearts like those of Percival and the king: «O, ay; what say ye to Sir Lancelot, friend/ Traitor or true? That commerce with the Queen,/ I ask you, is it clamoured by the child/ Or whispered in the corner? Do ye know it?» (*M & V*, 767-70). Merlin knows the truth, and possibly wanting to avoid seeing the destruction of his own creation, Arthur, he chooses to destroy himself using as his lethal weapon the same instrument that is going to ruin Arthur, a woman.

Undoubtedly Vivien's character is very disagreeable, but her vileness is a necessary instrument because it serves to cast some light on Arthur and Merlin's destruction. By rendering her vile the author shows clearly the ugly workings of the Senses. She is also the instrument that obliquely reveals the nature of Lancelot's blindness because it is equally irrational to become the slave of a queen as it is to become the slave of Vivien, for the line that separates the moral worth of both women is very thin indeed. Vivien's unpleasant nature worries the critics. Swindburn says that Vivien is simply a subject for the police court¹², and he is a little too hasty when affirming this. Vivien is base, true, but her base nature has a precise function within the thematic fabric of the Idylls because it is merely a base replica of Guinevere's. Thus, Merlin, like Arthur, will be deceived by a deceiver¹³.

The Idyll of *Lancelot & Elaine* is a metaphor of the of the last chance for those who wish to rectify. The fall of Merlin is an omen, and yet although Lancelot perceives the meaning of Merlin's fall, he cannot overcome the power of the Senses. Lancelot's last chance to repent, a chance that is

¹² *The Critical Heritage*, ed. J. Jumps (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 35.

¹³ Moreover, the Middle Ages saw in women the source of all evil because they were the daughters of Eve. Many medieval writers such as Boccaccio, Capellanus and Chaucer, to name just three, depicted women not as Tennyson depicts Vivien, but in a far worse light. Yet Tennyson's intentions are not those of Boccaccio or Capellanus. Vivien is a motif he uses to illustrate his thesis, because in his mind if Guinevere is guilty, so is Lancelot.

offered to him when Guinevere's sin is no longer a secret, but a fact well known to everybody except Arthur, «[Who]never had a glimpse of [Guinevere's]untruth» (*L & E*, 125). There was hope for Arthur, a hope that resided in Lancelot's acceptance of Elaine's worth, not to say love. However it cannot be so because the Queen does not give Lancelot the freedom he needs to regain his manly honour through Elaine's affection. Tennyson is merciless with Guinevere. Malory never depicts Guinevere as a sarcastic woman, and even less as accusing Arthur of a fault that is none other than his honourable nature: «Breaking into a little scornful laugh:/ Arthur, my lord, Arthur the faultless king/That passionate perfection, my good lord-/ But who can gaze upon the sun in heaven?» (*L & E*, 120-3). Guinevere is a realistic woman because she knows that she cannot be honourable, like her husband. Malory's Guinevere is lovely, gentle and tender, in short a worthy Courtly Lover. Tennyson's Guinevere is foolish because instead of her husband she prefers an inferior man, thus destroying Arthur's dream about her love for him. To place Guinevere in the correct light Tennyson uses Elaine as the queen's foil: Elaine is all softness and goodness while Guinevere is irrational and selfish.

Guinevere's sin is the cause of a domestic tragedy: the hospitality of Elaine's family is repaid with Lancelot's treachery: a disloyalty that her brother, Torres, wants to avenge (*Lancelot & Elaine*, 1060-5). With Lancelot's failure the corruption of the Round Table spreads everywhere. Sir Gawain behaves like a second-class villain, Sir Perceval like a scandal-monger, and Sir Pelleas goes mad. Pelleas's derangement is worse than that of Balin since Balin is soothed by his brother, and ransomed by death. Pelleas roams around in frightful despair, and a general hysteria dominates Arthur's knights due to the quest for the Holy Grail. Arthur does not participate in the quest because he cannot do so: he has become an outsider.

Tennyson changes Malory's ending of *Pelleas & Ettarre*: Pelleas does not fall in love with the damsel of the lake but becomes the wrathful knight of «The Last Tournament»: a tournament in which the laws of courtesy are for ever broken: the final catastrophe is now inevitable. By the end of the tournament Arthur's Golden Age has been destroyed, and all that is left is an appalling Iron Age, not unlike that which is described at the beginning of the *Idylls*. Arthur faces reality, but alone. His awakening is drastic and hence nothing can alleviate his anguish, and his sense of failure. The same must be said of Don Quixote. Not even Sancho manages to alleviate his sadness. Both heroes confront reality and in this confrontation they know they have been alone, outsiders, because there was no place for them on this earth. Arthur's last words show his acceptance of the fact he is a dreamer. The light that used to shine on Arthur's world is gone: his land is dark, and he is ready to face the ultimate darkness of his life: death. (*Guinevere*, 439-580). He goes to another world, to a better world, for he is dead, and «passes to be king among the dead» (*The Passing of Arthur*, 449), and so to his rightful place.

