

MALORY'S 'VERTUOUSE LOVE' AS METAPHOR OF DECLINE: ELAINE OF ASTOLAT AND THE DOWNFALL OF CAMELOT

Abstract

This note aims to reassess the character of Elaine of Astolat as she is represented in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, by arguing that, far from functioning as a mere moralizing device—as Malory criticism has traditionally assessed—the tragic story of the Fair Maid of Astolat and her “vertuose” love for Lancelot in fact embodies and ominously foreshadows the tragic downfall of Arthurian civilization. In order to do that, this note examines the ideological configuration of Elaine as a symbol that incarnates the inherent contradictions (and subsequent tragic decline) of an entire code of chivalric ideals. Elaine might not be an agent in such decline, as, arguably, Guinevere is. Yet, somehow she comes to *signify* it, for Elaine's idealized characterization, as well as her position within the story determine the fact that her tragic personal fate actually anticipates and mirrors the ineluctable doom of Camelot, along with the ideological repercussions brought about by the failure of such an idealized social code. **Keywords:** Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, Arthurian Studies, Elaine of Astolat, Camelot, decline, courtly love, chivalry, Arthurian romance.

Resumen

Esta nota pretende reevaluar el personaje de Elaine de Astolat según está representado en *Le Morte Darthur* de Malory, arguyendo que, lejos de funcionar como una mera estratagema moralizante—como tradicionalmente la ha evaluado la crítica de Malory—la historia trágica de la bella doncella de Astolat y su amor “vertuose” por Lanzarote de hecho materializa y prefigura la trágica caída de la civilización artúrica. Para hacer eso, esta nota examina la configuración ideológica de Elaine como un símbolo que encarna las contradicciones inherentes (y el subsiguiente declive trágico) de un código completo de ideales caballerescos. Puede que Elaine no sea un agente de tal declive como lo es, discutiblemente, Ginebra. Sin embargo, llega a *significarlo*, pues la caracterización ideal de Elaine, así como su posición en la historia, determinan que su trágico destino personal anticipe y refleje el sino ineluctable de Camelot, junto con las repercusiones ideológicas que acarrea el fallo de dicho código social idealizado. **Palabras clave:** Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, estudios artúricos, Elaine de Astolat, Camelot, declive, amor cortés, caballerías, romance artúrico.

ANY STUDY OF LOVE AS A THEME IN THOMAS MALORY'S *LE MORTE Darthur* (edited and first published by William Caxton in 1485) must explore the clear-cut antinomy of courtly love *vs.* “vertuose love” (Malory 1971: 649)¹ and the (apparently irrefutable) ideological implications of such binary opposition. If, as Charles Moorman argued, the treacherous love between Lancelot and Guinevere serves as one of the three leitmotifs—along with the Lot-Pellinore feud, and the Grail quest—that provides unity and coherence to the book edition of Malory's romances by articulating in narrative form the birth, flowering, and *decline*

¹ All quotes from Malory are in reference to Vinaver 1971.

of Camelot (Moorman 1960: 163, my italics), Elaine of Astolat's tragic, unrequited, and "vertuouse" love for Lancelot should operate then as the ideological counterpart to the kind of despicable love that becomes the incidental cause to the downfall of King Arthur's kingdom, for such love embodies the vicious values that ultimately "bring crashing down the whole fabric of the Arthurian civilization" (Moorman 1960: 175). Yet, at this note seeks to demonstrate, Elaine's love does not figure simply as the ideological opposite to those corrupted values that brought about the decline of Camelot, but as a symbolic embodiment of Camelot itself or, rather, as symbolic embodiment of the inherent fatality of Camelot's idealization. That is to say, this study argues that Elaine of Astolat is a character who, far from functioning as a mere moralizing device, is defined by an ominous self-awareness that both illustrates and anticipates the tragic but ineluctable downfall of Camelot, doomed by its own internal contradictions and—as Elaine—by its conception of itself as an idealized, almost heavenly civilization.

Alexander Denomy explained that "despite the sensuality that [courtly] love implies in Christian eyes, for the troubadours such love was spiritual in that it sought a union of hearts and minds rather than of bodies; it was a *virtuous love* in so far as it was the source of all natural virtue and worth" (1953: 44, my italics). Yet, even if such might have been the original conception and representation of courtly love in romances, as Sarah Kay has argued, in the post-Vulgate era, "the tension between secular and religious preoccupation is mitigated, with religion coming off best: Lancelot's love for Guinevere is 'sinful' and prevents him achieving the (now more emphatically Christian) adventure of the Holy Grail" (2000: 87). In Malory's *Morte*, the representation of courtly love has then been tainted. It has become sinful, degrading, and dangerous for the welfare of the community. Indeed, the development of the plot confirms this notion for, as Moorman describes, "Misunderstandings lead to separations and reunions [between Lancelot and Guinevere]; the pious vows of the Grail quest are forgotten; the adultery cannot be ignored at court and becomes a formidable weapon in the hands of Mordred" (1960: 174). Thus Camelot actually—though incidentally—falls because of the debased adulterous

love between Lancelot and Guinevere.² To such debauchery, Malory's criticism has traditionally argued, the romances oppose the notion of "vertuose love:"

Therefore, lyke as May moneth flowryth and floryshyth in every mannes gardyne, so in lyke wyse lat every man of worshyp florysg hys herte in thys worlde: firste unto God, and nexte unto the joy of them that he promysed hys feythe unto; for there was never worshypfull man nor worshypfull woman but they loved one bettir than anothir; and worshyp in armys may never be foyled. But firste reserve the honoure to God, and secundely thy quarrel muste com of thy lady. And such love I calle vertuose love. (Malory 1971: 649)

Such description of virtuous love follows—quite eloquently—the story of Elaine of Astolat, who lets herself die, for she is tormented by the unrequited love she feels for Lancelot. Such love, indeed, always remains chaste, even if she loves him "oute of mesure" (641): "And I take God to recorde, I loved never none but hym, nor never shall, of erthely creature; and a clene maydyn I am for hym and for all other" (639). Hence Elaine's love—a rarity in itself for it indeed "strikes a marked contrast to similar tales of *men* whose love and gazes remain unrequited" (Martin 2010: 149, my italics)—seems in line with the (original) most spiritual conception of courtly love. As Joachim Bumke argues, "the idea that courtly love in its highest form was platonic was derived from the notion that the purifying and ennobling power of love could only take effect if a man's desires remained without final bodily fulfilment" (1991: 366). Such description does not correspond to the illicit love between Guinevere and Lancelot. *Per contra*, such pure and ennobling love can indeed be related to Elaine's feelings and actions. Elaine's love is the kind of love that makes people better and more virtuous—the kind of love that cannot be a sin before God (Bumke 1991: 373).

Malory's depiction of courtly love as sinful and degrading—thus opposing his own definition of "vertuose love"—is in fact determined by a particular *Zeitgeist* characterized by the decadence of its own ideals of

² "Mordred's rebellion and the battle of Salisbury Plain are no longer treated as repercussions of extraneous events; they are links in the chain of human actions and feelings developed as the story progresses: fateful shadows arising from the depths of man's own noblest passions" (Vinaver 1971: ix).

chivalry and feudalism. Barron defines Malory's age as "an age whose feudal polity, based on the ownership of land, was being rapidly transformed by the mercantile economy on which it now rested and whose idealization of the mounted knight was contradicted by the increasingly tactical and mechanized nature of war" (1987: 148). In such a context, Malory thus created "a display of chivalry so comprehensive as to contain its own critique of the code" (Barron 1987: 148). Hence *Le Morte Darthur* not only narrates the birth, flowering *and* decline of Camelot, but in fact trails an ineluctable road to decline, prophesized from the very beginning and eloquently (and ominously) summarized by the title of its book edition—*Le Morte Darthur*; that is, the *death* of Arthur. In this regard, Malory's romances are no longer interpreted as the narration of the story of Camelot, King Arthur, and his knights as the embodiment of an ideal (and somehow unrealizable) social code, but simply as the narrative articulation of the inescapable decay of such social code.³ For in this view Malory's works do not tell the story of Arthur's life, but of his *death*.

Indeed, the story of Elaine of Astolat is also the story of her death. The idealized notion of "vertuose love" that Elaine represents—and that determines the character's tragic destiny—indeed opposes the adulterous love of Lancelot and Guinevere. Courtly love—*ab origine*; that is, as it was inherited from the French sources—represents indeed an idealization, originally "amoral and detached from Christian values as a subject for lyric verse of enormous technical complexity" (Barron 1991: 29). Yet, once the idealization is confronted with reality, courtly love—as the entire code of chivalry—is subjected to failure and decay. This becomes especially obvious in the fifteenth century. Barron explains:

Chivalry fascinated the fifteen century as a historical ideal, but centuries of literary celebration had not resolved its inherent contradictions: the conflict between its absolutism and the principle of *mesure* (balance and moderation), its glorification of the individual, and the social service which was its professed aim. Whatever its continuing value as a personal code its limitations as a political model were as apparent to

³ "What is surprising is a fifteenth-century author's instinctive understanding of the principle of 'singleness' which underlies the normal structure of a modern work of fiction. Nowhere perhaps in Malory's comprehension of it more apparent than in his remodelling of the story of Arthur's death and of the destruction of the Round Table" (Vinaver 1971: viii).

Malory in the failure of the dynastic dream of Arthurian Britain as in the chaotic nightmare of contemporary England. (1991: 148)

Insofar as the tragic story of Elaine of Astolat provides an explicit alternative to the tragic paradox of courtly love—ennobling and yet adulterous—it has often been interpreted as a brief interlude in which chivalric values do triumph over vice and degradation. However, there is little triumph in the story of Elaine's death, at least as far as Elaine herself is concerned. Right before her death, she writes a letter of complaint and asks to be laid on a barge which will take her dead body, along with the letter, down the river Thames and onto Camelot. There, Queen Guinevere finds the letter, and King Arthur has a clerk read it:

Moste noble knyght, my lorde sir Launcelot, now hath dethe made us two at debate for youre love. And I was youre lover, that men called the Fayre Maydyn of Astolate. Therefore unto all laydes I make my mone, yet for my soule ye pray and bury me at the leste, and offir ye my masse-peny: thys ys my laste requeste. And I clene maydyn I dyed, I take God to wytnesse. And pray for my soule, sir Launcelot, as thou arte pereles. (Malory 1971: 641).

It seems like, in the end, Elaine's only triumph is that she is able to tell the story of her own tragic fate—sort of like Malory's romances tell the story of the tragic fate of Camelot. Yet, Elaine of Astolat is not only unable to prevent her own downfall; she brings it up upon herself, and does so consciously. Indeed, as this note argues, Elaine's character is defined by a fatal self-awareness that in fact sets her own destiny. She refuses to renounce her love, thus refusing to live: "Why sholde I leve such thoughtes? Am I nat an erthely woman? And all the whyle the brethe ys in my body I may complayne me, for my belyve ys that I do none offence, thou[gh] I love an erthely man (...) hit ys the sufferaunce of God that I shall dye for so noble a knyght" (Malory 1971: 639). As far as Elaine can see, "hit ys the sufferaunce of God" that she shall die. She lets herself die not because she *wants* to die, but because she understands she cannot live any longer, in so long as she loves Lancelot. Unrequited love—her idealized, pure, "vertuose" love—actually *kills* her. As she says to Lancelot, "for but yff ye woll wedde me, other to be my paramour at the leste, wyte you well, sir Launcelot, my good dayes ar done" (Malory 1971: 638). As Molly Martin argues, "The Fayre Maydyn's immediate reaction

to seeing and falling in love with Launcelot is to participate in codified courtly behavior" (2010: 150). Indeed, as Elaine falls in love, she offers Lancelot a token of hers to wear during the tournament, thus seeking to become his lady and so enter the heavily-coded social organization of chivalric Camelot and become functional within it. Martin explains: "Her initial reactions betray a woman trying to fit herself into a typical female role in the courtly scenario. She wishes to be the lady who both inspires and judges Launcelot's masculine acts" (2010: 151). Elaine wishes to become Lancelot's wife, or else his paramour—that is, as Martin argues, she wishes to fit herself into a *courtly* female role—and it is precisely that wilful integration into the courtly society of Camelot that leaves her no choice but to embrace her own downfall, because Lancelot's response to her demands is as eloquent as it is tragic: "Payre damesell (...) of thes two thynges ye muste pardon me" (Malory 1971: 638).

After rejecting her love—unwillingly but wittingly condemning her to death, for Elaine has warned him of the destiny that awaits her—Lancelot can only grant Elaine's final request, after King Arthur asks him to oversee her funeral. Elaine, as the king commands, is buried worshipfully: "and so upon the morn she was entered richely. And sir Launcelot offird her masse-peny; and all tho knyghtes of the Table Rounde that were there at that tyme offered with sir Launcelot. (Malory 1971: 642). As Sue Ellen Holbrook explains, "[Elaine's] moral character is honoured, her demand for reparation is granted, and her life is memorialized" (2007: 156). In consequence, according to Holbrook's argument, "the larger implication of this resolution is that Arthur's court has managed to operate as an idealized forum for making order even in a crumbling world" (2007: 156). Yet, even though it is undeniably true that there is a ritualized order in Camelot and that its social and behavioural code attempts to dignify Elaine's tragedy, from the perspective of this article it cannot be argued that such ritualized order redeems the senselessness of Elaine's calamitous fate. If anything, her death is used at court as a moralizing example for others that not only proves to be entirely futile, but might even be regarded as morbidly ironic, seeing as it precedes the (ultimately tragic) climax of the story of Lancelot and Guinevere. At the time of Elaine's death, and in spite of the ritualized order that transpires her funeral, it is already much too late for the moral redemption of Camelot. Holbrook argues: "Elaine's letter of complaint

concerns the death of a feminine lover with moral integrity. The ladies are not invoked to warn them of a transgression. Rather, they are to be witnesses to women who love, live, and die well and whose stories are to become absorbed into women's collective feminine knowledge" (2007: 177). Yet the exemplary nature of Elaine's story becomes little but an exercise in futility in a world whose morals have already devaluated to the point of bringing about the destruction of Arthurian civilization. When Elaine dies of unrequited love, the tragic doom of Camelot is imminent. Her story is not a warning as much as the lament for "the way things might have been" (Moorman 1960: 167). In fact, the taming of Elaine's character with regards to her manipulative and vindictive counterpart in Malory's sources⁴ entails that "to the Fayre Maydyn's final act, then, we can attribute not only the increase of Launcelot's masculinity through her praise and her fatal love, but also the increasing of his masculinity through his re-entry into Gwenyver's good graces" (Martin 2010: 155), because Elaine's letter exculpates Lancelot in the Queen's eyes from any form of unfaithful behaviour. In this view, then, the story of Elaine and the story of Lancelot and Guinevere appear not directly confronted as symbolic and ideological opposites, but actually interwoven and integrated as to simultaneously conform the narrative of courtly love that embodies the ennobling nature of the code of chivalry—incarnated in the "moste noble knyght," yet traitorous Lancelot—and the ineluctable doom brought about by its inherent contradictions.

Holbrook as argued that "as the Round Table experiment breaks apart and this Arthurian world fills with hate and inestimable grief, Elaine's story affords not only what some call pathos but also an interlude of hopefulness" (2007: 177–8). But the social ideal of Camelot has already failed—especially when considered from the perspective of a late fifteenth century text—so there seems to be no future to be hopeful for. In fact, this note explores the opposite argument; that is, the hypothesis that far from affording "an interlude of hopefulness" (Holbrook 2007: 178) before the imminent downfall of Camelot, the story of Elaine in fact embodies and ominously foreshadows the tragic end of Arthurian civilization. Holbrook is absolutely right when she states that "the story of the smiling body in the boat bearing the letter of complaint to the court of Arthur

⁴ *Vid.* Knepper (qt. in Martin 2010: 155).

exemplifies a satisfying attempt at formal order: Elaine's letter is read, her request for reciprocation is granted, and Lancelot fulfils his obligation in terms she sets and he finds himself able to perform" (2007: 177). Yet, this study finds such an attempt at order hardly "satisfying," insofar as it merely conforms, as Holbrook points out, an "at attempt at *formal order*" (2007: 177, my italics). The ritual performed after Elaine's death is a vain rite. It is precisely that: mere form. It is simply a futile representation. The honours that Elaine's dead body is paid are all in vain. Inasmuch as those honours cannot prevent or redeem (or even justify) Elaine's tragic death, they stand as the empty honours of a debased code of chivalry that ineluctably results in the downfall of Camelot.

The fact that Lancelot appears to fulfil his moral obligation to Elaine—after his cold rejection sets her tragic destiny—by granting her last request to be buried at Camelot seems to corroborate Sheila Fisher's argument that, in Malory, "women often figure significantly not so much for their own sakes, but in order to become involved in the construction (and at times, the destruction) of men's chivalric identities" (2000: 152).⁵ Paradoxically, and even though Elaine does not figure as a character for her own sake, it could also be argued that she is neither involved in the construction, nor in the destruction of Lancelot's chivalric identity (though she wishes to be). When Elaine meets Lancelot, he has already been depicted as the most chivalrous of knights, capable of the noblest deeds. At the same time, he has also been proven unworthy of succeeding in the quest of the Holy Grail, as "ponyshemente for the four-and-twenty yere that he had bene a sinner" (Malory 171: 597). Lancelot's worth as a knight is a paradox in itself and his attitude towards Elaine reinforces that paradox rather than resolving it. Therefore, rather than a means to construct (or destroy) Lancelot's chivalric identity, Elaine arguably stands a symbol of the inherent contradictions (and subsequent tragic downfall) of an entire code of chivalric ideals. She is not an agent in such a downfall, as, arguably, Guinevere is. Yet, she somehow *signifies* it, for Elaine's position within the story—at the beginning of "The Book of Sir

⁵ Or, in Molly Martin's words, "[Women] have thus far been shown to participate as (often objectified) images that initially disrupt masculine performance, but ultimately incite it" (2010: 148).

Launcelot and Queen Guinevere”—determines the fact that her tragic fate actually anticipates the impending doom of Camelot.

As the idealized society incarnated in Camelot itself, Elaine of Astolat is not simply aware of her own tragic fate once she falls in love with Lancelot; she willingly brings it up upon herself. Thelma Fenster has argued that Arthurian female characters are “apparently valorised but paradoxically always-already-condemned” (Fenster xx1). Indeed, such is the case of Elaine. But, even more significantly, such is the case of Camelot. *Le Morte Darthur* valorises—but also celebrates, and mourns—the story of an idealized legendary civilization that was ultimately destined to fail, as it was founded upon inherent contradictions. In Malory’s rendering of the Arthurian cycle, in fact, the story of “the birth, flowering, and decline of an almost perfect earthly civilization” (Moorman 1960: 163) was *consciously* structured around those inextricable contradictions; that is to say, the failures in love, in loyalty and in religion. In a parallel symbolic structure, the story of Elaine of Astolat embodies an idealization of ennobling love that functions as counterpart to the social, political and ideological ideal represented by the code of chivalry. She is an ‘almost perfect earthly woman’ as Camelot is an “almost perfect earthly civilization” (Moorman 1960: 163). As Elaine’s “vertuose” love determines her tragic fate, the paradoxical nature of the chivalric code dictates the inevitable downfall of Camelot. Despite the ideological standpoint which underlies the usage of courtly love as a symbol of moral and spiritual decay in Malory, this note has argued that the virtuous, ennobling and even perhaps moralizing story of Elaine of Astolat does in fact carry the resonance of tragic self-awareness and inexorable ruin that characterizes and ultimately defines the doom of Camelot.

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