

GUENEVERE SPEAKS: FROM MALORY TO MNOOKIN

A number of authors, from the Middle Ages up to the end of the twentieth century, have felt attracted to the mystery which has always surrounded the final years of Queen Guenevere's life, from the moment she entered the convent of Almesbury after her relationship with Lancelot was discovered. Keeping our study within the bounds of English speaking authors, we will take Malory's *Morte Darthur* as a point of departure for our analysis, since the beautiful description that we find in the last book of his work has been a constant source of reference for an important number of authors, particularly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹

Our interest centres on Wendy M. Mnookin's poem "Guenever Speaks" (1987), written five centuries after Malory's Work, but still heavily dependant upon it. It expressly makes use of certain passages which Mnookin versifies and adapts, transforming them into the frame of reference for her own interpretation of Guenevere's mysterious life within the convent walls. She

¹ Editorial aspects regarding the printing of Malory's Work are of importance when considering what edition poets from different ages have used. Since, in the case of Mnookin's reelaboration of Malory's text it is logical that she has benefited from the most authoritative text, that is, the one carefully edited by Eugene Vinaver in 1947 (and later often reprinted and enlarged), based on the Winchester manuscript, discovered in 1934. However, it cannot be forgotten that the text edited by W. Caxton in 1485 (Cfr. Lawlor, J. & Cowen, J. 1969) not only was reprinted five times after its first publication (1498, 1529, 1559, 1582, 1634), but served as the basis for other editions, such as the 1816 and 1817, and even for the more scholarly ones of 1891, as well as for Vinaver's first edition of 1929, previous to the discovery of the Winchester Manuscript. It must therefore be born in mind that most literary works derived from Malory's *Morte Darthur* previous to the 1947 edition are indebted to the text rendered by Caxton. Of special interest for our study is Southey's 1817 edition which was in all certainty employed by William Morris for *The Defence of Guenevere and other Poems*, as well as by Algernon Charles Swinburne for his *The Day Before the Trial* (1860). Cfr. on this matter A. S. G. Edwards, 1996: 241-253 as well as James Douglas Meryman, 1973, and David Staines, 1973: 439-64 and 1982.

allows us to hear her own voice, which, speaking in the first person, enables us to enter her private world.

As we survey the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the echoes of Guinevere's words reach us in a variety of ways. At times she sounds feeble and weak, as in the case of Mnookin, whereas on other occasions her voice is clear and daring, or even, at times, firm and balanced.

It is even possible that the same author depicts her in two antithetical ways. This is the case with William Morris "Defence of Guinevere" and "King Arthur's Tomb", both published in 1858.¹ Since, whereas in the first poem, Guenevere is self-sufficient to face a jury before whom she doesn't regret her past behaviour, but whom she indicts and boldly threatens,

*(...) she stood right up, and never shrunk,
But spoke on bravely, glorious lady fair!
(...) Nevertheless you, O Sir Gawaine, lie,
whatever may have happened through these years
(...) let God's justice work! Gawaine, I say,
See me hew down your proofs.
(...) Therefore, my lords, take heed lest you be blent
With all this wickedness; say no rash word
Against me.*

in "King Arthur's Tomb" she looks terror-stricken and shows clear signs of mental confusion,

*(...) she went slow,
As one walks to be slain, her eyes did lack
Half her old glory, yea, alas! the glow
Had left her face and hands
(...) "I am not mad, but I am sick; they cling,*

¹ Cfr. on these poems Dennis R. Balch, 1975: 61-70; and, on the possibilities of interpreting the justification which Guenevere offers for her past and present behaviour before the jury regarding the difficulty of judging fairly from the appearance of things, cfr. James P. Carley, 1990: 20-22. In his article, Carley reconsiders the interpretation of the example which Guenevere provides to explain her situation. She argues that she chooses the blue piece of cloth because of its celestial implications, but the angel informs her that, against all predictions, it means hell, whereas the red cloth, surprisingly, leads to salvation.

God's curses, unto such as I am"

which reveals itself in contradictory and incongruous attitudes on her part towards Lancelot, who exclaims:

*"Yea, she is mad: thy heavy law, O Lord,
Is very tight about her now, and grips
Her poor heart."*

Unlike Morris, John Masefield's portrait of Guenevere in the two poems he publishes in 1928 "Gwenivere Tells" and "The Death of Lancelot as told by Gwenivere", insists on the same side of her character, which in both cases appears self-confident and well-balanced. These two poems constitute, in my opinion, the best homage to the memory of this mythic character who, without raising her voice against anyone or feeling anguished at the idea of the unknown or at the closeness of death, nevertheless adopts a constant attitude towards the beloved one, that neither old age nor death ever lessens:

*Now he lay dead, old, old, with silver hair,
I had not ever thought of him as old...
... I went to search
For flowers for him dead, my king of men.
(...) Myself shall follow when it be God's will;
But *whatsoe'er my death be, good or ill,*
Surely my love will burn within me still.
(...) Death cannot make so great a fire drowse.*

Neither phantasmagoric visions¹ nor feelings of oppressive blame or a struggle against the wish to see the beloved are to be found in this poem. All bonds, not only conjugal but also religious and kingly, are broken for love's sake without ever showing a sign or regret:

*What though I broke both nun's and marriage vows?
April will out, however hard the boughs.*

¹ In "King Arthur's Tomb" we are told: "... a spasm took / Her face and all her frame / ... terribly she shook."

The tone of Guenevere in these poems is clearly different from the plaintive and interested voice which resounds in the text “Guenevere”(1911) by the American author Sara Teasdale. There she painfully regrets the loss of her queenly privileges, which she contrasts with the fleeting and painful pleasure she derives from her relationship with Lancelot,¹ which in no moment proves completely satisfactory:

I was a *queen*, and he who loved me best
Made me a *woman* for a night and day
And now I go *unqueen*ed for ever more.

Even though we could have been led to believe that the figure of the king would have received greater emphasis in this poem, Guenevere hastens to state that her rights to the crown are hereditary:

I was a queen, the daughter of a king.

and it is therefore unnecessary to stress her relationship with king Arthur, who, however, had been a central figure in A. Tennyson’s emblematic poem “Guinevere” (1859).² There the most intimate feelings of a martial king had been shown in all its intensity, for after having made Guenevere realize the degree of her sin (which, according to the king, had given rise to the kingdom’s instability, including the death of numberless knights as well as Mordred’s treason and the Saxon attacks):

Bear with me for the last time *while I show*,
Ev’n for thy sake, *the sin which thou hast*
sinned.

he nevertheless felt deeply touched by a slight movement his wife made when, fallen upon her knees, she came an inch closer to him:

He paused, *and in the pause she crept*

¹ These are Guenevere’s words: “...I was weak, / And in my breast I felt a wild, sick pain. / Quickly he came behind me, caught my arms, / That ached behind his touch... / All this grows bitter that once was so sweet.”

² Cfr. J. Philip Eggers, 1971 and Maureen Fries, 1991: 44-55.

an inch

Nearer, and laid her hands about his feet.

(...) Arthur then admitted that he still loved her:

(...) My doom is, I love thee still.

Let no man dream but that I love thee still.

and revealed the strong attraction that he felt for her (he tenderly recalled the past when he played with Guenevere's hair and let her know how passionately her imperial beauty still moved him).

But how to take last leave of all I loved?
O golden hair, with which I used to play
Not knowing! O imperial-moulded form,
And beauty such as never woman wore.

These words on the part of the king elicit Guenevere's reaction when she is left by herself after the king's farewell. We then hear her exclaim that she also loves him, even though he may never be aware of it since he has promised never to see Guenevere again:

Is there none
will tell the king I love him tho' so late?

Guenevere's response to Arthur's words of love in Tennyson's poem looks very different from her reaction in Algernon Charles Swinburne's *The Day Before the Trial* (1860), where Arthur's most humane portrayal is to be found. He repeatedly says: "my wife, that loves not me", while calling Guenevere's beauty and her cold look to mind.

For all these years she grew more fair,
(...) But ever as I looked on her
Her face seemed fierce and thin.

This king who, like Tennyson's,¹ is jealous of Lancelot:

¹ These are King Arthur's words: "I am thine husband, not a smaller soul, / Nor Lancelot, nor another."

*Down to my hands the blood went hot
in a dull hate of Launcelot
For all the praise of her he got.*

unlike him, places his love for Guenevere before his kingly duties. He complains of the weight of the crown upon his head:

*... and on my head
the gold crown seemed not gold but lead*

while referring to Guenevere, not as queen but as wife:

*I had the name of King to bear,
And watch the eyes of Guenevere,
My wife, who loves not me.*

And, above all, he expresses his anguish and fear before the imminence of Guenevere's trial:

King Arthur says being alone
*Now the day comes near and near
I feel its hot breath, and see it clear,
How strange it is and full of fear,
And I grow old waiting here,
Grow sick with pain of Guenevere.*

which sharply contrasts with the king's attitude in other texts where he is usually depicted as cold¹ and distant.²

¹ Guenevere's recollections on his first encounter with Arthur in the text by Tennyson is eloquent: "And moving thro' the past unconsciously, / Came to that point where first she saw the / King / ... glanced at him, thought / him cold / high, self-contain'd, and passionless." And, later on, when she is visited by him in Almesbury, his sternness is stressed: "... then came silence, then a / voice / Monotonous and hollow like a ghost's / Denouncing judgement, but tho' changed, / the King's."

² The qualities that Morris's Guenevere isolates in Arthur are most telling: "... I was bought / By Arthur's great name and his little love."

In Swinburne's poem,¹ however, the lover's characteristic weakness and vulnerability are attributed to the king ("I felt half sick"), who contrasts sharply with Guenevere's callousness ("Her face seemed fierce and thin").

After this general survey of the main texts which for a period of five centuries have paid attention to the love which Guenevere feels and awakens, we return to Wendy M. Mnookin's recent poem "Guenever Speaks", where she reproduces -in a slightly modified form- fragments by Malory, placing them at the beginning and the end of her poem. These fragments, which she versifies, follow the pattern of a quotation and mention their source.

The first fragment is preceded by the heading "Guenevere learns of Arthur's Death" and it almost literally reproduces the final part of Book XXI, Section IV of *Morte Darthur* "The Day of Destiny". Mnookin in this way reminds the reader that Guenevere, after the king's death, retreated to Almesbury, where she lived in prayer and penitence, arising the people's admiration at her virtuous change.

Mnookin introduces a change into the quotation which is apparently a minor one, although when retrospectively considered, it acquires fuller sense. I am referring to the substitution of "slay" for "die" at the beginning of the poem. Mnookin writes:

And when Queen Guenever understood
King Arthur *was slain*

where Malory said:

And whan quene Gwennyver undirstood that kyng
Arthure *was dede*.

The ensuing effect is the anticipation of Guenevere's feeling of guilt which is all pervasive in the poem. Her obsession with the weight of her guilt will lead her to a prolonged vigil which might avoid the recurring nightmares which present before her in all its poignancy the deaths that her attraction for Lancelot has originated. She has no wish to contemplate again how Gaheris

¹ Cfr. David Staines, 1978: 53-70.

Gareth is killed by Lancelot when he rescues her¹ and neither does she want to see King Arthur dead after fighting against Lancelot, for, like “crazy Anne”, she feels responsible for it. The parallelism between “crazy Anne”, who killed her husband and lives entombed in a house of stone, and Guenevere, who is kept secluded in Almesbury, is increased by the juxtaposition of this image to that of Lancelot fighting Arthur dead. This, in turn, leads to Guenevere’s refusal to shut her eyes, even though they are so irritated by the lack of rest that the air when touching them is compared to pieces of broken glass.

The nuns return from morning prayers
to sleep. Three hours
until Prime. Three hours
to lie awake.
 entombed
 a stone house built around her:
 Crazy Anne: killed her husband
 eyes closed
 I see you
 fighting Arthur lying dead
Air cuts my eyes
like broken glass.
I will not close my eyes.

In the fourth and last section of Mnookin’s poem: “The Sisters Tell Lancelot of Guenevere’s Last Words”, she reproduces with certain changes the text of Malory’s *Morte Darthur*.²

Mnookin goes as far as to maintain archaisms, such as the plural form of “eye”, “eyen”, in order to make the quotation sound authentic. It is a way of driving attention away from an important and deliberate omission introduced by her to further develop the subject of the poem.

¹ This allusion to Gaheris Gareth, although elliptical, transmits the weight which the death of this knight at the hands of Lancelot had in the text by Malory, and, specifically, in the section “The Vengeance of Gawain” (Book XX, Section II, 685-700), where this character, enraged at the death of his brother, rejected all explanations given by Lancelot, and declined all offers of reconciliation on his part.

² Book XXI, Section V, ‘The Dolorous Death and Departing out of this world of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere’, Thomas Malory, Works, Eugène Vinaver (ed), 1977 (2nd ed.): 718-725

Mnookin almost literally quotes Malory as follows:

Thither he cometh as fast as he may,
wherefore I beseech Almighty God:
may I never have the power
to see Lancelot
with my worldly eyen.
And thus was ever her prayer
these two days,
till she was dead.

Whereas Malory's text reads as follows:

"And hyder he cometh as faste as he may to fetch my cors, and besyde my lord kyng Arthur he shal berye me." Wherefore the quene sayd in heryng of hem al, "I beseche Almyghty God that I may never have power to see syr Launcelot wyth my worldly eyen".

"And thus", said al the ladyes, "was ever hir prayer these two dayes tyl she was dede".

Mnookin explicitly omits Malory's allusion to Lancelot's reason for visiting Guenevere in the convent. It is not merely a lover's visit but that of a saintly character who has spent his last years in prayer and fasting, to the point that by means of a vision he has been announced Guenevere's agony, and commanded to give her saintly burial by her legitimate husband, King Arthur. Guenevere, whose sins have also been redeemed by a life of prayer and penitence, nevertheless fears a last meeting with Lancelot, aware that she still loves him, and therefore insistently craves God to spare her that encounter which could hinder her everlasting peace.

The two modifications introduced in Malory's text by Mnookin, that is to say, the substitution of "slay" for "die" in the first versified fragment, as well as the omission of the allusion to Guenevere's imminent death and to the aim of Lancelot's visit to the convent in the second, have important consequences for the portrayal of Guenevere. Both her feeling of self guilt is intensified and her inner tension is increased, as the result of an unattainable love which excludes the idea of eternal rest by the legitimate husband, as well

as the repentant attitude of a lover that in Malory consumes himself praying over their mutual grave.

There is, however, an important feature of Malory's depiction of Lancelot which is carefully reproduced by Mnookin in her poem, although with a significant change: I am referring to Lancelot's physical deterioration which takes place during the six weeks that mediate between Guenevere's death and his own. The difference lays in the fact that Mnookin transfers these characteristics to another character, significantly to Guenevere. In her poem, she, like Lancelot in Malory, loses her appetite, and, even though the nuns insist that she should eat (the bishop behaved in a similar way with Lancelot) she, like Lancelot, refuses to do so, visibly losing weight before been taken seriously ill, and finally expiring.

Malory describes Lancelot's final days in the following terms:

Thenne syr Launcelot *never after ete but lytel mete, nor dranke,*
tyl he was dede, for than *he seekened* more and more and *dryed*
and dwyned awaye. For the Bysshop nor none of his fellowes
myght not make hym to ete and lytel he dranke, and he *was waxen*
by a kybbet shorter than he was, that the peple coude not knowe
hym. For evermore, *day and night,* he prayed ... Ever he was lyeng
grovelyng on the tombe of kyng Arthur and quene Guenever, and
there was no comferte ... Soo wythin syx wekys after, syr
Launcelot *fyl seek and laye in his bedde...*

So whan syr Bors and his felowes came to his bedde they founde
hym *starke dede;* and he laye as he had *smyled.*

This last image of Lancelot's smile is also present in Mnookin's depiction of Guenevere, although in her poem it serves a different purpose. It is not employed, as in the case of Lancelot, to convey the idea of beatific happiness achieved by someone after a life of self-denial and sacrifice, but, on the contrary, it completes the characterization of Guenevere's increasing mental feebleness.

The religious interpretation of Lancelot's smile is supported by the visionary dream experienced by the bishop, which takes place at the same time as Lancelot's death. He contemplates Lancelot's triumphant entrance in

heaven, surrounded by angels. This is a means of sanctioning in a positive way Lancelot's extremely rigorous behaviour with himself during the last six weeks of his life when he didn't get any food or sleep. This positive sanction of Lancelot's final days is completely absent from Mnookin's depiction of Guenevere's progressive physical deterioration in the convent where the weight of her sins weaken her to the point that she swoons at Vespers. A single stroke on the part of Mnookin eloquently portrays Guenevere's attitude when the nuns urge her to eat:

I move the food around
and smile.

This smile is far from connoting spiritual peace, as in the case of Malory's description of Lancelot, but rather suggest an increasing mental instability, which is about to collapse, as it was the case with "crazy Anne, who killed her husband". What leads her to take some food, with the only hope of remaining awake, is precisely the dread she has of recalling her own husband's death, that assaults her whenever she closes her eyes:

I must eat some bread. A little bread
so I won't swoon. So I can stay awake.

The result of such prolonged vigil and fasting is, as with Lancelot, a visible thinness. If, according to Malory, Lancelot "was waxen by a kybbet shorter", to the point that "people coude not knowe hym", Mnookin's description of Guenevere brings to mind anorexia nervosa in its terminal phase:

lying in bed
hip bones push
against skin.

That anorexic thinness together with the smile on her face when she plays with the food complete a characterization which has been unfolded along section 2, "Guenever retreats to Almesbury", where Mnookin has invited us to have a close look at the inside of the convent, while scrutinizing the words he borrowed from Malory regarding Guenevere's behaviour:

*She lived in fasting, prayers and alm-deeds.
Never creature could make her merry.
All manner of people marvelled
how virtuously she was changed.*

That she fasted -maybe too strenuously-, we doubt not, in the same way as we are persuaded of her unvarying sadness, although its cause lies not - unlike in Malory's account- in his penitent efforts to achieve heaven, but rather in the weight of her sin that she cannot stand, as well as in the obsessive presence of Lancelot, whom she cannot remove for a single moment from her mind. This is so to such an extent that when she partakes of community tasks, such as the recollection of aromatic herbs or the reading of devotional books, Lancelot's presence becomes so powerful that she feels deeply disturbed.

But this is Guenevere's secret, and we are allowed to share it by means of the inner monologue that she mentally addresses Lancelot. In it she contrasts her apparent obedience to the instructions she receives from the nuns:

the sisters say walk,
walk in the garden, so I do. I work
in the garden ...
 The sisters say read, why
don't you read?
 The sisters say rest,
get some sleep ...

with her inner rebelliousness. She walks in the garden, works in it, seeks some rest, whenever she is told to do so. But, no matter her occupation, everything makes her think of Lancelot: the intense smell of the herbs she recollects (thyme, basil, cinnamon, sage, mint), however strong and able to make her dizzy, nevertheless cannot remove the smell of Lancelot, which Guenevere retains in her fingers:

Smell makes me dizzy ...
Fingers smell rich ... Spice fingers ...
*I save the smell of you
on fingers.*

She has decided to remain in Almesbury for ever, even though the thought of Lancelot and his message haunt her. The cause of her decision is stated in a concise and efficient manner:

I cannot look
at Lancelot's face
again.
I cannot lose him
again.

She doesn't feel strong enough to endure the pain of parting from him again. The fear of damnation is completely absent from the pain Guenevere feels. She is exclusively anguished at the idea of losing Lancelot again.

These words again remind us of Malory's passage where Guenevere, when visited by Lancelot at the convent, insistently craves him never to look her in the eyes again. Mnookin introduces the following change: Guenevere doesn't address these words to Lancelot but utters them to herself, being overheard by Sister Margaret.

Guenevere's plea in Malory:

"I requyre the and beseche the hartily, for all the love that ever was betwyxt us, that *thou never se me no more in the visauge*, (And I commaunde the, on Goddis behalff, that thou forsake my company)"

has been transformed into:

I cannot look
at Lancelot's face.

The pain behind the second sentence, where she explains the cause of her decision:

I cannot lose him
again

is also present in Malory's description of the pain which ensues from their parting:

There was lamentacyon as they had be stungyn wyth sperys, and many tymes they swounded.

But in spite of all the similarities, there are marked differences between Mnookin's and Malory's descriptions of the couple. One of them lies in the effect produced by the attribution to Guenevere of characteristics which in the source text belonged to Lancelot, particularly his physical deterioration, which was the consequence of his prolonged fasting and sleeplessness. At the same time, Mnookin endows Lancelot with a self-assuredness and authority which are completely absent from Malory.¹ These two changes, as well as the addition of elements which point to Guenevere's mental instability result in the loss of the balance between both characters which was present in the source text. There, although Guenevere agonized asking God never to see Lancelot again because she still felt a strong attraction for him (the quotation which Mnookin places at the end of her poem), Lancelot was nevertheless equally devoted to her. Even though he keeps the word given Guenevere of never meeting her again, and although he, like her, leads a life of penitence and prayer, after her beloved's death, he abandons himself to his own sorrowfulness and spends the final days of his life moaning over the tomb where Guenevere's body lies by that of her husband.

In Mnookin's poem, however, all kind of religious comfort is suppressed as well as any possible allusion to the wish of final reconciliation with Arthur. At the same time, Lancelot is depicted as a stronger character, which makes Guenevere's inner conflict more acute. Its result is her physical and mental weakness, the issue of her obsession with her own guilt, and, above all, the consequence of her inability to forget Lancelot, whom she misses every day of her life, within the convent walls.

¹ She seems to reverse precisely the change which Malory deliberately introduced in the final books of his work, where the self-contained attitude of knights and the traditional feminine silence on the subject of love are transformed into an undistinguishable language which is used by men and women alike, and where the characteristic Malorian restraint is loosened. Cfr. on this aspect Elizabeth Edwards, 1996: 51-52.

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