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The 'Heroic Quest': Reginald Heber's Arthurian Poems and his Poetic Struggle in the 1810s

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In a letter of 1819, Reginald Heber (1783–1826), an Anglican clergyman and later bishop of Calcutta, remembers 'a sort of epic poem on the subject of Arthur', which was abandoned because of the pressure of his parochial duties.¹ This was the *Morte D'Arthur* (hereafter *Morte*), posthumously published as a three-canto fragment in 1830.² According to his widow Amelia, it was begun around 1812,³ a dating which places Heber as an Arthurian writer well before Alfred Tennyson or even Walter Scott (with his *Bridal of Triermain* in 1813). Henry Hart Milman writing in 1830 deems it as 'among the least successful [. . .] of his poetical attempts' because it 'wants the stirring life of romance'.⁴ We have to note, however, that Milman was writing eighteen years after *Morte* had been started. Its belated publication destroyed the impact it would have had on the public in the 1810s. *Morte* was one of the serious literary ventures he was drawing up in the 1810s, when he was struggling in search of his future as a poet, and its significance is to be sought primarily in its novelty: he clearly pushed ahead with Walter Scott's project of a poetry based on the medieval romance.⁵ Not only did he handle traditional stories as they were, Heber also found a no-man's land to explore in the minds of their (especially marginal) characters, provid-

ing a prototype of Tennyson, Browning, and Morris.

Heber distinguished himself as a promising poet while at Oxford. His prize-winning poem *Palestine* (1803) almost singly earned the twenty-year-old student a fame to last for a decade. In 1809, when his *Europe* was published with a smaller success, he married Amelia Shipley and settled in the rural parish of Hodnet, Shropshire. With an extraordinarily busy life as a parish priest at hand, it seemed certain that he would be bound to the periphery of the literary circle. In 1811 Scott jokingly urged Richard Heber, Reginald's half brother and a noted bibliophile, to ask him 'if like the foolish bard in the Gaelic proverb he has burnd [*sic*] his harp for a woman? for I think we have not heard it since his marriage'.⁶ He was, however, at least for the first years of his profession, far from abandoning the hope to be an established man of letters while never neglecting his duty as a country rector: he was invited to contribute to the newly launched *Quarterly Review*, started to compose hymns with a future publication in view, and planned a few poems of epic scale, including *Morte*.

Composing a new poem based on the medieval romance was a practice that had been originated and authorized by Scott's first three modern romances: *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), *Marmion* (1808), and *The Lady of the Lake* (1810). His aim was to graft his own creative writing on the authenticity of medieval romance and balladry which decades of scholarship had established. Yet both in words and practice, Scott made it clear that his objectives were 'the customs and manners' of old and the poetic form of the medieval romance.⁷ Scott's followers rarely attempted retelling traditional stories as they were; even *The Bridal of Triermain*, Scott's own Arthurian piece, does not relate an authentic Arthurian plot, and was published anonymously. Heber, in contrast, tackled the traditional cycle head on: it is obvious from what we have that

he intended to follow the major storyline of Malory from Arthur's marriage to his end. Here he pushes Scott's strategy one step ahead, claiming the story itself, firmly based on a medieval romance, to be authentic. Heber was all but originating a new branch of 'the School of Scott'.

While taking advantage of the authenticity of the medieval romance in terms of source material, however, Heber substitutes the Spenserian stanza for Scott's verse form, which earned notoriety among critics. Given that *The Faerie Queene* was the first post-medieval Arthurian poem, his choice does not look singular. In a sense, *Morte* was an attempt to give a Spenserian poem a more authentic subject (than even Spenser's own) while improving the genre of modern romance with Spenser's poetic form, which is, in Heber's own words, 'at once the richest and the most difficult of any that have been familiarly used in English'.⁸ It is also highly likely that *Morte*, in its material and form, was a direct response to Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.⁹ Published in March 1812, *Childe Harold* was a 'romaunt' to describe the journey of the nobleman 'Childe Harold' in the Spenserian stanza, but it was obviously an antithesis of the 'modern romance' of Scott's line. Heber's tactics of double legitimation can be deemed as an attempt to exploit the successes of Scott and Byron in one work.

Morte begins with the wedding ceremony at Pentecost of King Arthur and Ganora (or Ganore, the name Heber adopts for Queen Guenever).¹⁰ She has been raised as a village maid but is actually, undisclosed to the others, the daughter of King Ladugan. It is not a happy marriage for her, for she had fallen in love with a forester called Cadwal during her village life, though he had left her seven years before. Suddenly a white hind breaks into the feast, pursued by a beautiful huntress. Though she advises Ganora to kill the hind, her 'fiercest foe' (l. 47), Ganora mercifully protects the prey. In the second canto, we are

informed that the hind is a disguised form of Morgue, Arthur's sister, who became a sorceress after the enraged Arthur had slain her lowborn lover. Now she is at court, and nightly resuming her human form, plots the destruction of Arthur for the sake of Modred, her son by the murdered lover. Canto III relates how Ganora, forty days after the wedding, wanders into a chapel, which safeguards the Holy Grail, and recognizes in the mural paintings a likeness of her Cadwal. Above his image are the arms and name of Sir Lancelot, Arthur's first knight. She learns from court damsels that Lancelot disdains all ladies of the court, nursing a love for an unknown rustic maiden said to live in Derwent, where Ganora was brought up. The fragment ends with this discovery.

In *Morte*, Heber gathers and regularizes a number of Arthurian sources available to him to produce a coherent narrative.¹¹ Despite his epic framework (beginning *in medias res*), however, the motivation of the story development is looked for in Ganora and not in Arthurian heroes. The illicit love affair between Malory's Guenever and Launcelot, which brings destruction upon Arthur's kingdom, is in *Morte* substituted by the pretty love story of Ganora and Lancelot. This has irritated modern critics, even those who are willing to attach some importance to Heber's early-nineteenth-century essay at an Arthurian epic. While Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer think that Heber's 'innovations' of this kind 'usually prove less effective than the medieval source',¹² James Douglas Merriman laments what was lost in Heber's hands:

The emotional interest in Heber's *Morte D'Arthur* is shifted almost exclusively to the soul-searchings of the unfortunate innocent harboring a sinful passion in her breast, and the fierce tragedy of the old myth is converted to a bittersweet tale of star-crossed lovers, a sentimental epic of a bad conscience.¹³

If we do not ask whether Merriman's opinion is not prejudiced by his own conception of 'the old myth', his accusation cannot be accepted without qualification.¹⁴ We must, I should emphasize, take it more seriously that Heber chose as his theme an innocent love oppressed by the powerful. It was not simply due to his will to rectify the immorality of the old legend, and the theme recurs in his short play, *Blue-Beard*. Through this play, we reach its probable source, a drama that enjoyed enormous success at the time: George Colman the Younger's *Blue-Beard; or, Female Curiosity!*, to which we now turn our attention first.

According to Peter A. Tasch, Colman 'followed Sheridan as England's most popular playwright'.¹⁵ His *Blue-Beard*, first performed at Drury Lane on 16 January 1798, was based on the French programme of Grétry's opera *Barbe Bleue* (Colman therefore did not see the original) and intended to be a pantomime surrogate. Following the convention of pantomime, *Blue-Beard* puts more emphasis on the effects of scenery and machinery than on the plot. The prodigal stage setting was used to heighten the exotic and Gothic atmosphere of the story. In the first scene of act I, we find young lovers, Selim and Fatima, attempting to elope but caught by Fatima's father, Ibrahim, who has decided to marry his daughter to the powerful Abomalique, also known as Blue Beard. Abomalique comes for Fatima and, in spite of the lovers' plead, spurns Selim and brings Fatima away to his castle. Abomalique is a murderous tyrant who has successively killed his twelve former wives. For all of them failed a test in which they were strictly forbidden to enter the 'Blue Chamber'; Abomalique is afraid of the prediction that his life will be endangered by the curiosity of his wife, and looking for a wife without disastrous curiosity. While he puts Fatima to the fatal test, Selim succeeds in procuring the help of his spahi comrades. Fatima, as the plot

requires, fails the test and faces danger of her life, though it is her sister Irene who actually opened the chamber door. At this point Selim and his comrades intervene, and the drama concludes with Abomalique's death.

Summarized in this way, this drama appears to be nothing but a meagre dramatization of Gothic novels of the late eighteenth century, but it assumed an irresistible force on stage. As Barry Sutcliffe remarks, '[i]n just two years it stood unopposed as the most frequently performed afterpiece of the eighteenth century'.¹⁶ More important to our context is that its popularity continued well into the nineteenth. Heber had seen it staged at least once by 1806;¹⁷ and it was revived at Covent Garden on 18 February 1811, a very sensational revival employing living animals (as many as sixteen horses) in a licensed theatre for the first time.¹⁸

Heber's short play entitled *Blue-Beard: A Serio-Comic Oriental Romance*,¹⁹ which can justly be called a well-organized reduction of Colman's grandiose pantomime, was intended for private Christmas entertainment: he often invited his guests and friends 'to join in the favourite rectory pastime — theatricals and charades'.²⁰ Heber's version, as a matter of course, could not rely upon the extravagant stage setting of great theatres, and therefore he re-organizes the original's structure, in the cheerful rhyming dactyls, to attain a dramatic effect more easily. A number of unnecessary characters and scenes in terms of plot development are cut out, and instead he clarifies and emphasizes the relationship of the three main personages, Selim, Fatima, and Abou Malek (Colman's Abomalique). An important alteration is introduced to emphasize the contrast between the innocent lovers and the tyrant: Heber's Abou Malek is completely unaware of the love between Selim and Fatima. Colman's young couple implore Abomalique to leave them alone. Fatima states that she has loved only Selim and that '[o]ur hopes and joys were ripening daily: You came, and all are blighted!'. Hearing

all this, Abomalique can still shout, 'Tear them asunder. — Insulted!'.²² On the other hand, Heber's Abou Malek hears nothing of the couple's love, Selim withdrawing from the stage before Abou Malek's arrival and Fatima never mentioning Selim to him. Heber's Abou Malek, besides, is depicted as capable of true, though certainly selfish, love. When he finds that Fatima has failed the test, he cannot see her in the face because 'should my arms once enfold thee, | My purpose [of killing her], I feel, in a moment would cool'.²³ At the end of his life, he even exclaims, 'The first of my wives whom I loved is — the last!' (p. 246). Out of Colman's Gothic love romance, Heber purposefully makes a more intensified relationship in which a misplaced love of a tyrant torments an innocent couple.

This melodramatic love triangle was so appealing to Heber that he took it up as the thematic framework of *Morte*, a work of more importance to him. The relationship between Fatima, Selim, and Abou Malek as Heber depicts it is more delicately transplanted to King Arthur's court. Ganora spent her girlhood among mountains as 'an untaught village maid',²⁴ and fell in love with Cadwal-Lancelot. Arthur, on the other hand, unknowing of her early love, has brought her to his stately court. Since Lancelot does not make his appearance in the fragment, we cannot say much of him. But it should be certain that he can never be so aggressive to his rival as is Selim to his, and that for this reason his predicament will be still greater. Indeed, the 'oppressor' figure in this love triangle is made more irresistible than a simple villain because of his innocence. Arthur really loves Ganora in his own way — as does Abou Malek more brutally — and his love begins to change her heart:

She was his wife! for this she strove to bear
Of that portentous eye the tawny glow;

And those deep indents of ambitious care
 That mapp'd his dark and melancholy brow;
 She was below'd; for well the fair might know
 How that stern heart was fix'd on her alone,
 When, melted all in love's delirious flow,
 The vanquish'd victor at her feet was thrown;
 And she was inly vain to feel such power her own. (III. 5)²⁵

It is predictable that Ganora will be distressed by every word and deed of the loving King, far more than by cruel treatments from a villainous tyrant.

His love notwithstanding, Arthur is thus assigned the role of a great cause of misery. His position is also attested by another female character, Morgue. She is a sort of Ganora's dark double and calls Arthur — the murderer of her lover — 'the tyrant' (I. 25). Revengeful sorceress, however, she is by no means depicted as a diabolical figure:

So sad, so beautiful, so sternly bright,
 Skimming the silent air with magic tread,
 And fairer seen beneath the fair moonlight,
 That elfin lady stood by Arthur's bed.
 A tear, in spite of strong disdain, she shed;
 One little tear, as o'er the sleeping twain
 Her dark eye glanc'd; then, with averted head,
 'Ye whom I serve forgive this transient pain;
 I little thought,' she sigh'd, 'that Morgue would weep again.'
(II. 6)

Morgue is seen sincerely pitying the bride, whom she is to use to

destroy Arthur's kingdom: she says, 'And thou, poor victim of another's crime, | Hell knows I hate not thee, — thy simple breast | Sought not to so sad eminence to climb!' (II. 9). The two women are, in a sense, united in their position as victims of oppression. In fact, Morgue is the only other character in the poem whose inner thought is minutely described (in the first half of canto II). As Taylor and Brewer remark, 'Heber must be credited for endowing his characters with a psychological complexity not found in earlier nineteenth-century British Arthurian works.'²⁶ But it must be emphasized that the psychological complexity is given almost exclusively to female characters like Ganora and Morgue. In its theme and form, *Morte* is a story of heroines.

An explanation for Heber's twist can be sought in his desire for novelty and authenticity at once. The genre of modern romance was an innovation which nevertheless was deeply rooted in more traditional literature. This contradictory nature of the genre naturally demanded a cautious calculation of the poets if they were to achieve originality while keeping in accord with the acknowledged tradition. It was surely a novel attempt for Heber to select an existing medieval legend as his basis, but it at the same time put a new set of fetters on him. It was only after *Morte* had been abandoned at last that he reflected on the difficulty of dealing with established sources. Although, argues Heber, it is a poet's accredited licence 'to warp and mould historical events according to his fancy', an injudicious exercise of this liberty is more likely to displease reader. And, he goes on,

[t]his displeasure is felt even when the liberty in question has been taken, not with sober historic truth, but with an old and familiar fable. It has been one main cause of the total and signal failure of the different epics which have been attempted on the

subject of Arthur, that they have given us a hero formed on a classical model, instead of that 'good king Arthur' of the romances and ballads, the favourite of our childhood, and the subject even now of innumerable popular tales among our peasantry.²⁷

The weight of tradition as he felt it would render the poet's originality more difficult to achieve, and for this reason, I believe, Heber found in the psychological space of his dramatis personae a suitable field in which to exercise greater liberty. Ganora and Morgue were, so to speak, bound to occupy the main roles in *Morte*, since they are kept, as female characters, marginal in traditional stories: their characterization was more open to invention. Understood in this way, those female personages can be viewed as a production of, and indeed a reflection of, Heber's weak poetic self. Like Ganora, the innocent poet's soul is distressed by King Arthur's undeniable presence and longs for good old days when he was free from care. This dimly allegorical interpretation is partly supported by the style Heber adopted for *Morte*, that is, Spenserian allegory.

In 1811 Heber reviewed one of the fruits of Romantic Spenserianism, Mary Tighe's *Psyche*. Stressing the limited effect of bare allegory, he insists upon the importance of 'its graphical truth and vigour'.²⁸ Greg Kucich, without knowing its authorship, views this argument as an example of the standard revisionary strategy of Spenserianism of this period, which replaced the more allegorical characters of *The Faerie Queen* with 'descriptive / reflective format' to create wider scope for psychic reality of allegory.²⁹ Heber does not seem to have so clearly recognized this process as Kucich presumes, since his point is the smooth connection between the lively description and the following

moral musing. His preoccupation with Spenserian allegory, however, necessarily made his own Spenserian poem a psychological drama where the author's inner space is subtly externalized. *Morte*, with the weak female characters as its protagonists, thus can be read as an attempt to map out the poet's personal problems at several different levels.

The most naïve reading would suspect a relation between Ganora's forbidden love and Heber's own 'love affair' with Charlotte Dod. Three years younger than Heber, Dod was a daughter of his father's close friend. They often met at archery meetings in the neighbourhood in which Heber joined enthusiastically on vacation from Oxford. According to Derrick Hughes, a modern biographer of Heber, '[i]t is said that Heber proposed marriage to Charlotte at least once, and was refused, but there is no firm evidence for the story.'³⁰ Even after his marriage to Amelia, however, he continued to write to Dod frequently and affectionately, and she remained unmarried till 1834. Their friendship was probably innocent, but he was so cognizant of the possibility of misinterpretation that, presumably when he left for India, he asked Richard to transmit a packet to Dod in the event of his death. He pledges that 'its contents are of a nature perfectly innocent, and whatever my poor wife's suspicions have been, Charlotte Dod is pure and innocent of offence towards her', and yet the packet could never be left to Amelia's disposal.³¹ Hughes also quotes a manuscript poem entitled 'From the Spanish' found among Dod's papers, which is, he is sure, in Heber's handwriting:

Yes, I have nursed a secret love,
And still through weal and woe must bear it.
Death may to other worlds remove,

But from my bosom will not tear it.
But do not thou the flame reprove,
That flame! a sister need not fear it.

Yes! I have gazed upon thy face
And I could gaze on thee for ever;
But of those eyes the tranquil grace
Would lull to rest my folly's fever.
Could I that heavenly calm deface?
Could I offend thee? Never, never.

No more my feelings I'll disguise,
No more my chastened passion smother;
Nor, Lady, thou the heart despise
Whose faith is plighted to another.
Behold me now with fearless eyes,
Thy Friend, thy Guardian and thy Brother.³²

Whether Heber translated the poem or just transcribed it, this 'indiscreet' poem makes it manifest that Heber was fairly conscious of the ambiguous nature of their relationship.³³ It is of no consequence for our argument whether the relationship was innocent or not, but it must have provided him with an inspiration when he explored Ganora's mind suffered from her 'secret love'. Even if we do not expect a precise correspondence between *Morte* and Heber's real life, the love triangle in which the powerless Ganora is involved would, with this information, come to look vivid, perhaps excessively.

At another level, the distressed queen could, as I have briefly suggested, represent Heber's poetic self tackling the Arthurian legend, or

the weight of the past in general. In this reading, Lancelot would mean the poet's originality, which, in Heber's opinion, is prone to collide with tradition. If the poet is completely absorbed in tradition, he or she will lose the fresh glow of originality. Too strong affection for originality, on the other hand, will result in neglect of traditional matters.

Ganora's distress could also be read as projecting Heber's deep apprehensions about his future poethood. *Morte* was started when he was at the turning point of his life. He chose a life of parish priest, flinging off the fame he had been enjoying at Oxford as a promising poet. He believed that he was right in his choice of profession, but who knows if he did not sometimes feel regret for his early muse? He gloomily reflected in 1813 on the difficulty to compromise his profession and other pursuits:

It is very foolish, perhaps; but I own I sometimes think that I am not thrown into that situation of life for which I am best qualified. I am in a sort of half-way station, between a parson and a squire [in his brother's place]; condemned, in spite of myself, to attend to the duties of the latter, while yet I neither do nor can attend to them sufficiently; nor am I quite sure that even my literary habits are well-suited to the situation of a country clergyman. I have sometimes felt an unwillingness in quitting my books for the care of my parish; and have been tempted to fancy that, as my studies are Scriptural, I was not neglecting my duty. Yet I must not, and cannot, deceive myself; the duties which I am paid to execute, have certainly the first claim on my attention; and while other pursuits are my amusement, these are properly my calling.³⁴

Although he is citing, as the most excusable example, Scriptural stud-

ies, what he is recording is clearly the split between literary indulgence and social responsibility, something which, according to Kucich, Romantic Spenserianism found in Spenser. In Heber, the dichotomy took the form of poetry and religion, or rather, poethood and priesthood, which might be translated into Lancelot and Arthur respectively. Ganora knows that Arthur's caring but overbearing love is true and invaluable. But it becomes a greater cause of sorrow to Ganora, for 'turning from that kingly front severe, | Roam'd her sad memory o'er each milder grace | Of him her earliest love, the forestere'.³⁵ It is she who, unable to relinquish the faint memory of youthful love, makes it painful to live a new life with Arthur. Her early love was true, but insignificant in front of Arthur's royal and heroic presence. Reason therefore teaches her 'to bear | Of that portentous eye the tawny glow; | And those deep indents of ambitious care | That mapp'd his dark and melancholy brow' (III. 5). But she is bound, as the story dictates, to discover that her early lover is none other than Arthur's first knight, who will be back soon. She — or the poet — is now placed in an agonizing dilemma.

None of these interpretations of mine, however, can singly exhaust the complexity of a long narrative poem like *Morte*, of course. Nor will I insist that Heber had in mind a clear set of allusions of these kinds. My point is that both the poetic style and the source materials chosen by the poet required the poem to reflect his mental space in one way or the other. In consequence the fragmentary *Morte* as we have it became a psychological quest romance of a heroine (or possibly, with Morgue, two heroines). As it is solidly founded on an old story that has long been provided with a decidedly tragic ending, *Morte* is, as it were, destined to remain unfinished in order for the poet's psyche to avoid the devastating end. Put another way, it is a generic contestation between

tragedy and romance (that is, quest romance) that produced the fragment as it is.³⁶ In this sense, its last lines, where Ganora, in tears, leaves the court damsels talking about Lancelot, can be said to provide a very appropriate closure to this unfinished tale: ‘And with her kerchief shrouding close her face, | [Ganora] Broke from th’ unfinish’d tale and sadly left the place’ (III. 42). In a shorter, lighter-hearted Arthurian piece, however, Heber was able to explore further what he had found fruitful during the composition of *Morte* and made it a sort of appendix to his graver unsuccessful romance.

From among Heber’s short compositions intended for Christmas entertainment, Amelia takes as an example a poetic drama entitled *The Masque of Gwendolen* alone. It was drafted, she informs us, during his absence from home in November 1816 ‘to heighten the enjoyment of a merry Christmas party’.³⁷ Although she also tells us that *Masque* was taken from Chaucer’s *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, adding, ‘but in the introduction of Titania and her fairies, of Merlin, and of the personages of Arthur’s court, it differs from the original story’,³⁸ Heber’s play is obviously based upon ‘The Marriage of Sir Gawaine’, a story of Gawain and the Loathly Lady found in Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. ‘The Marriage of Sir Gawaine’ has a much simpler structure than *Masque*.³⁹ Drawing on this ancient ballad well known to those interested in medieval literature, Heber once more spotlighted its heroine, whose thoughts, as is expected, are not explored in the original. It became again a story of the distressed, but this time a happy ending was promised.

Masque’s first scene sees Gwendolen, sister of Lord Llewellyn of Harlech, reject the suit of the powerful but diabolical Merlin, consequently offending him beyond measure, who casts a spell to transfigure her into a hideous hag: a spell which will be broken only when the best

knight in Britain kisses and crosses her. In the second scene we find Llewellyn pressing King Arthur hard for a decree to punish Merlin. But the King does not agree and, agitated, sentences the young lord to death for capital treason. Here Gawain, Llewellyn's good friend, intercedes, though he also irritates his uncle King and is banished from Arthur's kingdom with one condition: he and Llewellyn will be pardoned only if Gawain can give the right answer to the question Merlin devised years before — 'What do women mostly crave?'.⁴⁰ The third scene presents Titania and fairies tending Gwendolen sleeping in a wood. The fairy queen reports on Merlin's death caused by his jealous paramour the Lady of the Lake, but his curse, she says, continues to be effective. The fairies leave, and Gwendolen wakes up to eavesdrop on Gawain and his clown's conversation which relates the danger Gawain and Llewellyn are facing. Having learnt the answer of the riddle from Merlin, Gwendolen is able to help them and therefore persuades the knight to promise that he should do anything she asks if the answer she gives him is the right one. In the fourth scene, Gawain and Gwendolen come back to the court of Arthur, who is now deeply repentant: he was unknowingly controlled by the malignant Merlin. Gwendolen's answer that 'Power is their passion' proving right (fol. 18^v; p. 289), she demands that Gawain should marry her, and he, in spite of his friends' objection, consents. The final scene is set after their wedding. Though married, Gawain has no intention to live with his loathsome bride and declares to go knight-errantry. However, pitying Gwendolen, who reproaches him for cruelty, the bridegroom kisses her — but crosses himself shuddering from horror. Although it was unintentional, this series of action breaks Merlin's spell, and Gwendolen resumes her former beauty. Joined by the anxious Arthur and Llewellyn, Gawain discovers that she is Llewellyn's sister Gwendolen. With this happy discovery, the play ends.

The basic plot of *Masque* gives, unlike *Morte*, the heroine a means to thrust aside all the misfortunes forced on the weak by the oppressor figures. By producing two tyrants in Arthur and Merlin, moreover, *Masque* opens up a way to reconciliation with the oppressing power, which is impossible in *Morte*. Merlin is ruined by the Lady of the Lake, significantly, offstage (it is only reported); Arthur turns out to have been manipulated by the malicious wizard. Both for the characters and for Heber the author, to be sure, this is only to avert an open conflict with the essential problem. *Masque* therefore can be thought a work of wish fulfilment in either case. Even if this reading is true, however, Heber's heroine can now be independent and lively thanks to this structure, which, moreover, allows him to bring this 'heroic' quest romance to a satisfactory end.

One of the most fascinating scenes in *Masque* is that which depicts Gwendolen consciously calculating the timing of disclosing the crucial information she possesses. Eavesdropping Gawain's conversation with his clown, she is delighted that she might save her brother's life:

Llewelin doom'd to death? — that riddle save him —
What women love! — Oh happy, happy hour!
I know the riddle, Merlin taught it me.
But how reveal myself! (fol. 16^v)

The pair's dialogue reveals that they are looking for the potent witch in the wood, of which she instantly decides to avail herself: she presents herself before them, saying, 'What daring mortal seeks my woodland haunt?' (fol. 17^r). On hearing Gawain's tale, she continues to make believe:

To-morrow's noon!

Oh then, be brief — I know, I know Sir Knight
Thy riddle and its answer. — Yet Oh Heaven (*aside*)
Forgive me brother, that in thy distress
I think upon mine own. Both, both at once
I thus may remedy. (*aloud*) Gawain, I know it;
But force may not compel me to disclose
The wondrous mystery. Our fairy teachers
Brook not that we divulge their oracles.
Nor will I, must I name it. (fol. 17^v)

Her false refusal induces Gawain to promise any reward that he can give her in return for the craved answer, and he hands a ring as a token of his promise. This is what Gwendolen has expected; her confused joy is rather humorously described:

GWENDOLEN

Oh my heart!

My throbbing heart — down, down! — I take thy ring.
Now pass we toward the city. By the way
I will unfold of Merlin's oracle
The most strange meaning. Happy, happy hour;
I saw him in my dream, this is the youth,
The best and noblest of the table round,
Who shall redeem me. Happy happy hour
Which gives me back my brother and myself;
Yet much remains to do.

GAWAIN What sayst thou Lady?

GWENDOLEN An incantation to protect our way.

The stars are setting, hasten, hasten Gawain! (fol. 17^v)

It is almost astonishing to see how a mysterious figure of the traditional Loathly Lady is 'transformed' into a woman with a modern, cunning but charming personality. In *Morte*, the circumstances under which Malory placed his Guenever are reworked to make the queen an innocent girl. In contrast, Gwendolen's behaviour is basically faithful to the original: the hideous woman of 'The Marriage of Sir Gawaine' (or of any other medieval Loathly Lady stories), it proves in the end, cleverly negotiates with male characters. And yet, the narrator does never deign to penetrate her inner thoughts and leaves her enigmatic. Heber responded to the story differently. Focusing upon a marginal figure as he did, he endeavoured to understand and interpret her motives. It is obviously due to the happy accord of the story, the theme, and the form of this play: in this 'masque', the theme of the oppressed innocent is brought to a happy ending promised by the existing story.

Modern critics have, if at all, praised Heber's characters such as Arthur which 'anticipate the modern psychological exploration of traditional and legendary figures which would soon prove so important in the works of Tennyson and Morris'.⁴¹ Probably Heber was not aware of his 'pioneering' position in this respect. Judging from the personal and historical contexts of his works, the process seems to have been the other way around: the material was first presented before him, and he took pains to make them his own. It was the circumstances under which he was working and his sincere response to them that produced his Arthurian psychological quest romances of the heroines, works surely worthy of greater attention of Arthurian scholars.

NOTES

- * This essay is an expanded version of a paper I read on 28 July 2005 at the 21st International Congress of the International Arthurian Society held at the University of Utrecht.
- 1 Letter to T. E. S. Hornby (17 May 1819), in *The Life of Reginald Heber, D.D., Lord Bishop of Calcutta*, by Amelia Heber, 2 vols (London: Murray, 1830), I, 504-05.
- 2 *Life*, II, 529-85.
- 3 *Life*, I, 372.
- 4 [Henry Hart Milman,] Rev. of *Life of Heber*; and *The Last Days of Bishop Heber* by Thomas Robinson, *Quarterly Review*, 43.86 (October 1830), 366-411 (p. 386).
- 5 For Scott's strategy and its public reception, see my 'Walter Scott's Poetry and Romantic Medievalism', *Studies in English Literature* (Tokyo), English number 46 (2005), 19-36.
- 6 Letter from Scott to Richard Heber (7 February 1811), *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. by H. J. Grierson and others, 12 vols (London: Constable, 1932-37), XII (1937), 328.
- 7 See his preface to *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, in *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. by J. Logie Robertson (London: Frowde, 1904), p. 1.
- 8 [Heber,] Rev. of *Psyche* by Mrs Henry [Mary] Tighe, *Quarterly Review*, 5.10 (May 1811), 471-85 (p. 478).
- 9 Though we cannot be sure whether or not he read the first two cantos of *Childe Harold*, Heber at least commented on its third canto in 1816 (*Life*, I, 447).
- 10 Hereafter I refer to the text in *The Poetical Works of Reginald Heber* (London: Murray, 1841), pp. 189-270, instead of the one found in *Life*, by the canto and stanza number.
- 11 Besides Malory, who provides the hind incident and Balin's adventure, Merri-man and Simpson list Ellis's *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances* and his notes to G. L. Way's translation of Le Grand's *Fabliaux*. See James Douglas Merriman, *The Flower of Kings: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in England between 1485 and 1835* (Lawrence, KS : University Press of Kansas, 1973), p. 169; and Roger Simpson, *Camelot Regained: The Arthurian Revival and Tennyson, 1800-1849* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1990), p. 98. To them I would add Scott's note to *Marmion* giving the name 'Ganora', and his imitation of the ballad 'Thomas the Rhymer' in *Minstrelsy* providing an evident model for

- Heber's minstrel who sings of Tristan's tragic love. Percy's *Reliques* also furnishes the story of the chaste wife of Sir Caradock (Heber's Carados).
- 12 Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer, *The Return of King Arthur: British and American Arthurian Literature since 1800*, *Arthurian Studies*, 9 (Cambridge: Brewer; Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1983), p. 61.
- 13 Merriman, p. 170.
- 14 Merriman's complaint goes hand in hand with his opposition to Heber's 'moralizing' tendency — a tendency to add moralistic contemplations — which cannot be denied. My contention is that these characteristics are not simply due to Heber's moralistic (as opposed to moral) inclination.
- 15 Peter A. Tasch, Introduction to *The Plays of George Colman the Younger*, ed. by Tasch, 2 vols, *Eighteenth-Century English Drama*, 11 (New York: Garland, 1981), I, pp. xi-lvii (p. xi).
- 16 Barry Sutcliffe, Introduction to *Plays by George Colman the Younger and Thomas Morton*, ed. by Sutcliffe, *British and American Playwrights 1750-1920 ser.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1-57 (p. 41).
- 17 He saw the play performed at Buda, Hungary, on 2 July 1806 during his northern tour, and criticized its changes from the original for the worse (*Life*, I, 301).
- 18 For the impact of the revival, see Sutcliffe, p. 43.
- 19 Heber, *Blue-Beard: A Serio-Comic Oriental Romance*, in *Poetical Works*, pp. 295-324.
- 20 Derrick Hughes, *Bishop Sahib: A Life of Reginald Heber* (Worthing: Churchman Publication, 1986), p. 51.
- 21 Colman's original has thirteen scenes in two acts. Heber makes them into a play of four scenes.
- 22 Colman, p. 8 (I. 1).
- 23 *Blue-Beard*, p. 321.
- 24 *Morte*, I, 27.
- 25 Heber sometimes seems to count women's trifle vanity of this kind as a possible cause of their sufferings. I have discussed this point in 'Frailty, thy Name Is Human: The Tragic Quality of Reginald Heber's *Morte D'Arthur*', *Geibun-Kenkyu (Keio Journal of Arts and Letters)*, 78 (2000), 115-31.
- 26 Taylor and Brewer, p. 62.
- 27 [Heber,] Rev. of *The Fall of Jerusalem* by H. H. Milman, *Quarterly Review*, 23.45 (May 1820), 198-225 (pp. 200-01).
- 28 Heber, Rev. of *Psyche*, p. 472.

- 29 Greg Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), pp. 98-99.
- 30 Hughes, p. 64.
- 31 Letter to Richard Heber (n.d.), in Hughes, p. 65. Amelia, in *Life*, almost completely suppresses the existence of Dod, whose name is mentioned only twice: in Heber's letter (1819) expounding Calvinistic doctrines and in another (18 November 1824) entitled 'To my dear Wife — in case of my death' sending best wishes to his close friends. See *Life*, I, 533; and II, 269.
- 32 Quoted in Hughes, p. 66.
- 33 Hughes tersely remarks: 'Did he write it, or only copy it? In either case, it was indiscreet' (p. 66).
- 34 Letter to John Thornton (May 1813), in *Life*, I, 392-93.
- 35 *Morte*, I, 13.
- 36 Borrowing Balachandra Rajan's terminology, we may say that *Morte* is at once 'incomplete' (in that the finished form was clearly aimed by the author as his goal) and 'unfinished' (inasmuch as the narrative and thematic drives, though essential to the poem, nonetheless prevented its completion). See Balachandra Rajan, *The Form of the Unfinished: English Poetics from Spenser to Pound* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 3-23.
- 37 *Life*, I, 448. Though *Life* gives only some fragments of 385 lines in total (I, 449-59), a complete manuscript of the work exists. It was transcribed by Amelia after 1822 (as the watermarks tell us) and bears some differences from the published version. I shall make full use of it by kind permission of its present owner, Professor Toshiyuki Takamiya, Keio University, to whom this issue of the *Keio Journal of Arts and Letters* is dedicated. For more details of the manuscript, see my 'Reginald Heber's "The Masque of Gwendolen": An Arthurian Manuscript in the Takamiya Collection', *Book Collector*, 53.1 (2004), 70-75.
- 38 *Life*, I, 448.
- 39 Thomas Percy, ed., 'The Marriage of Sir Gawaine', in *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry: Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs and Other Pieces of our Earlier Poets, Together with Some Few of Later Date*, 4th edn (London: Rivington, 1794), pp. 11-24.
- 40 *Masque*, fol. 12^v. I shall also give in the later references the page number of the published fragments as found in *Poetical Works*, pp. 273-93, where possible.
- 41 Taylor and Brewer, p. 62.