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Forbidden Forest, Enchanted Castle: Arthurian Spaces in the Harry Potter Novels

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Forbidden Forest, Enchanted Castle: Arthurian Spaces in the Harry Potter Novels

Abstract

Examines the influence of the landscape and structure of Arthurian legends on the world of Rowling's Harry Potter novels.

Additional Keywords

Rowling, J.K.—Knowledge—Arthurian romances; Arthurian romances—Influence on J.K. Rowling; Forests

Forbidden Forest, Enchanted Castle: Arthurian Spaces in the Harry Potter Novels

Alessandra Petrina

The huge success of the Harry Potter novels has triggered a series of reactions, some of which are reasonably predictable, such as the mass-media machinery that has been built around each successive publication of a new volume, welcomed every time as an “event” rather than an ordinary book; others less so, and in this category I would include many critical reactions. Favorable reviewers have had little more to do than count sales, while even slightly unfavorable reviewers have been compelled to move very cautiously, since their mildest remark might suddenly draw them to the centre of the stage, asked to explain what seemed an inexplicable hostility to everybody’s favorite.¹ Many commentators—and this, seen in perspective, is probably the strangest reaction—felt they had to account for the success of the novels, find the secret that made these novels memorable (or at least eminently saleable) and, presumably, hand down the formula of J. K. Rowling’s success to future generations of children’s novelists. This seems to me not a very profitable exercise, since we are, after all, dealing with a very much manufactured event: it would be probably more interesting to reckon with the success of the Harry Potter novels in, say, fifty years’ time, to see if it could survive immediate furor and really become a children’s classic.

Whether criticism was favorable or not, however, it was generally agreed that the readers’ enthusiasm found its main origin in the air of familiarity of these novels, in the lack of totally original, *unheimlichen* elements that might have confused and disoriented the younger readers in particular. Pioneering the movement was Wendy Doniger’s extremely witty and informative article in the *London Review of Books*, “Can You Spot the Source?” Written as a review of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, the article started by analyzing the novels hitherto published as a variant of the Family Romance, of the English boarding school story and of the jocular magic story, to continue thus:

the fact that the Harry Potter books are an amalgam of at least three familiar genres works for, not against, their spectacular success. [...] Myths survive for centuries, in a succession of incarnations, both because they are available and because they are intrinsically charismatic. Rowling is a wizard herself at the magic art of *bricolage*: new stories crafted out of recycled pieces of old stories. (Doniger 26)

It is clear at once that such a reading, illuminating as it is, offers no reason for the success of Rowling's novels, especially if we consider the number of relatively unsuccessful young-wizards-at-boarding-school novels that have been published after the Harry Potter books became outstanding best-sellers. It is, nonetheless, a true reading: true insofar as it states a fundamental principle underlying these books, rather than determining their literary value. *Bricolage* is, after all, what most narrative is made of. But, apart from the fun, playing the "can you spot the source" game offered little in the way of constructive criticism, especially since it was limited to the general lines of the plot of each novel: after all, the structure of fairy tales tends to be formulaic, and it can be imagined that Vladimir Propp had the same fun in analyzing Russian fairy-tales and looking for recurring narrative elements. For the same reason, it is hard to see why this interpretation should be turned *ipso facto* into a barbed criticism. Some of Rowling's detractors, though rightly sensing the conventionality that is at the back of most of the material used for her novels, seem to have confused conventionality with formulaic plot, predictable story with predictable narration. The use of traditional material *per se* did not bother writers until the nineteenth century, and, strictly speaking, should not bother children's writers even now; criticism has generally been more profitably employed in analyzing *how* the traditional material is used. I suggest that in the case of the Potter novels the debate has been caused by the success, but has still found no wider scope than a general recognition of sources.

The counterpart, and in part the inevitable consequence, of this critical attitude was the comparison of the Harry Potter books with other children's classics; while the writer herself claimed an affinity with C. S. Lewis's Narnia tales, reviewers preferred a more exciting comparison with another Inkling, J. R. R. Tolkien, and his Middle-earth saga (Jacobs 35-38).² The comparison was (as perhaps was intended) to the detriment of Rowling's books, since the latter lacked the powerful invention of

Tolkien's work. Where Tolkien had created new heavens and a new earth, asking his readers to venture into a Middle-earth that was, from the point of view of literary tradition, almost completely uncharted territory, and would in fact require a rather laborious process of recognition and identification on the part of the public, Rowling reassured her readers by asking them to re-visit together old beauty spots of merry Scotland, castles and forests with which generations of children's stories' addicts had been familiar. In this, it may be added, the affinity she claims with the Narnia tales is amply demonstrated, since Lewis did not desire his books to achieve true mythopoeic status, but was happy to create "a world in which all the varieties of mythology meet and find their home" (Jacobs 36). Lewis's allusions to former myths are not only explicit, but often incongruously jumbled together: a memorable instance is an open-air feast including among its participants a squirrel, two satyrs, a dwarf and a dog-fox, and which is visited by Father Christmas and the White Witch (this scene is presented in some of the best pages of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*). The same unconcerned mixture of different types of lore can be found in Hogwarts, a castle housing, together with witches and wizards, ghosts, a basilisk, pixies, werewolves and a poltergeist.

There is no doubt that much of what Rowling tells us is known to or at least recognizable for readers, even very young ones: a case in point is the astonishing series of animals she presents us with, which (while we are waiting for the new installments of the series, and for new magical apparitions) have momentarily been catalogued in the very funny *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, attributed to one Newt Scamander: a booklet Rowling wrote in 2001 for charity purposes (and which is mentioned in the novels as one of Harry's textbooks), but which is very helpful to determine her attitude towards the enormous literary tradition at her disposal. The booklet is a cross between a medieval bestiary and a school manual, its predictability redeemed by a constant undercurrent of irony that is one of the least recognized qualities of Rowling's writing. Animals of literally all kinds are put together: the expected unicorns and dragons (the latter, evidently among the writer's favorites, are even carefully classified and divided into ten subspecies), the classical chimaera and sphinx and a would-be classical new entry such as the acromantula, animals deriving from local folk-lore such as

the pixie, the mooncalf, the kelpie and the leprechaun, and a number of animals invented for the occasion: among the most notable instances we find the dugbog, the pogrebin, the bowtruckle, and the lobalug. For the very carefree spirit in which it seems to have been written, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* represents a good instance of Rowling's uninhibited ransacking of her sources.

The Harry Potter novels, in fact, were endowed with a heavy heritage at birth: children's novels dealing with witchcraft in a boarding school had obviously been written before, even if they had been received with less success; besides, the subject in itself pointed towards a literary environment, a space of the mind, that has always found much favor with children's literature, that is, medievalism. Rowling, and this is greatly to her credit, does not strive for historical accuracy, and sometimes her handling of pointedly medieval material may appear lame, as when she has Harry writing an essay on witch-burning in the fourteenth-century: witch-hunting was an almost non-existent issue in the Middle Ages, but then, heretic-burning would have sounded much less interesting to the young reader (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 7). We have the same impression when a page from "a very old library book" (from what we are led to infer, a medieval bestiary), describing basilisks and their habits, refers to the "crowing of the rooster" as deadly to these serpents, since presumably the "crowing of the cock" might have offended tender ears (*Chamber of Secrets* 215). On the other hand, she evidently enjoys handling the enormous amount of material the "medievalistic" tradition offers her: in the case of animals, thus, her sources can be indifferently medieval bestiaries, classical epic poems, Germanic lore, or better still, twentieth-century treatments of all the repertoire the earlier sources offered.

In this wilderness of sources, it might seem unlikely for any one specific tradition to have a place of honor. But Rowling is not merely reveling in the huge variety of material at her disposal: in spite of the international success she has been enjoying, the setting of her books remains firmly English, occasionally even nationalistically so, and her treatment of the Hogwarts lore adheres to this principle. While details may be borrowed anywhere, or invented, the structure of the novels remains faithful to the school-story tradition, and in its main lines the setting of the novels is firmly ensconced in a very specific source of

medieval motifs that is Arthurian romance, or, very occasionally, Arthurian romance revisited by twentieth-century writers.

The exploitation of Arthurian motifs in modern fiction has been the subject of much critical discussion. John Stephen and Robyn McCallum offer an excellent survey of "Arthurianism," prefacing it with a general typology on the uses of Arthuriana in children's literature:

Spatio-temporal *setting* is always the pivotal categorizing element. [...] The primary group, both chronologically and numerically, consists of retelling of stories about Arthur and his knights, eclectically put together from Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century *Morte Darthur* (itself in part a compilation) and various other medieval sources. [...] A second and very important group consists of historical fictions set in premedieval Britain [...]. Third, there are various forms of fantasy which use material that is vaguely medieval, and not specifically Arthurian. [...] This is the realm of sorcery, and of supernatural events and supernatural creatures, such as dragons and unicorns. (127-28)

The affinity of Rowling's novels with the third group is evident, though even within this generic typology their peculiarities should be pointed out. Any easy slipping into a fantastic medieval time is carefully avoided: the setting of the Potter novels is almost aggressively twentieth-century: Rowling is very precise about dates, and we know that Harry's final year at school—containing, presumably, his greatest adventures—will take place in the year 2000, with the inevitable portentousness this choice implies. Each book is framed by a prologue and a very short epilogue set in middle-class, suburban England, and every reference to the Muggle world is punctuated by mentions of modern appliances, generally implying a not too subtle criticism of modern technology: thus Sirius Black is said to be armed with a gun, "a kind of metal wand which Muggles use to kill each other" (*Azkaban* 34); computers are mentioned only to describe a boor like Dudley playing with them, and stopping his cousin Harry from touching them, or smashing them in a tantrum; Harry, who has voluntarily renounced technology once he has entered Hogwarts, comments: "bit stupid really, now he hasn't even got *Mega-Mutilation Part Three* to take his mind off things" (*Goblet of Fire* 27-28); more importantly, when the hero is faced with a particularly complex

task, the solutions offered by modern devices are presented only to be derisively rejected:

Hermione squashed this plan by pointing out that, in the unlikely event that Harry managed to learn how to operate an aqualung within the set limit of an hour, he was sure to be disqualified for breaking the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy—it was too much to hope that no Muggles would spot an aqualung zooming across the countryside to Hogwarts. (*Goblet* 418)

In fact, as the novels progress one of Rowling's great problems is to reconcile the characters' choice for magical rather than technological solutions to their problems, with the readers' awareness that in many cases a mobile phone might be far more practical than a post owl, or that nobody really needs to make "a pineapple tapdance across a desk" (*Philosopher's Stone* 191), though it might be very funny to see one do so. This difficulty is partly solved (or at least made less evident to readers) since, in spite of the twentieth-century allusion, Hogwarts and its surroundings maintain a perfect equilibrium between the fascination of medievalism and the unobtrusive presence of modern comforts: toilets, when not magically transformed to host basilisks and secret chambers, work with a functional plumbing system, and the food, though magically obtained, tastes reassuringly modern. Magical objects may be used, but the mood they evoke belongs to adventure stories: thus wands are whipped out at the slightest notice, and the often-used incantation "Expelliarmus," meant to blast objects away from enemies' hands, may be very doubtful Latin, but it is also one more variant of the fastest-gun-in-town motif. Yet every mention of Hogwarts also points to a Middle Ages of the mind, and it may be said, returning to the *vexata quaestio* of Rowling's success, that much of the novels' extreme readability depends on this equilibrium.

Given this literary context, the Arthurianism of the Harry Potter novels can be better understood. Without looking for a specific literary source, there is a more generic Arthurianism of sorcery, of supernatural events and supernatural creatures, in accordance with Stephens and McCallum's classification. It is this side of Arthurianism that is more likely to meet with the young readers' approbation, and it is generally linked with other children's classics we associate with Arthurian motifs.

An obvious instance is the allusion to T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone*³ we find in the episode of the Gryffindor sword, which Harry unexpectedly extracts from a magical hat in the second volume of the series: it is not so much the magical act in itself (a sword out of a hat may remind the reader, particularly if adult, more of prestidigitation than of magic), but the sudden and unpredictable nature of the event, the simplicity of the trick by which a child may get out of an impasse, together with its association with the idea of being a chosen one: "'Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled that out of the Hat, Harry,' said Dumbledore simply" (*Chamber* 235, 245).⁴

But there is also a more specific, more complex Arthurianism connected with the settings chosen for the main events of the novels, that is, the Hogwarts castle and the surrounding Forbidden Forest. In the first novel of the series, the castle of Hogwarts is shown to Harry and the other bemused first-years in all its magnificence, and the zoom-in effect, underlined by the narrative device of registering the viewers' reaction before describing the view, creates an appropriate dramatic emphasis on the astonishment caused by its apparition:

"Yeh'll get yer firs' sight o' Hogwarts in a sec," Hagrid called over his shoulder, "jus' round this bend here."

There was a loud "Ooooooh!"

The narrow path had opened suddenly on the edge of a great black lake. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers. [...]

And the fleet of little boats moved off all at once, gliding across the lake, which was as smooth as glass. Everyone was silent, staring up at the great castle overhead. It towered over them as they sailed nearer and nearer to the cliff on which it stood.

"Heads down!" yelled Hagrid as the first boat reached the cliff; they all bent their heads and the little boats carried them through a curtain of ivy which hid a wide opening in the cliff face. They were carried along a dark tunnel, which seemed to be taking them right underneath the castle, until they reached a kind of underground harbour, where they clambered out on to rocks and pebbles. (*Philosopher's Stone* 83-84)

A lake, a high mountain or a cliff, a castle with a dark, secret entrance. These are recurring elements in Arthurian literature, as well as in Scottish landscape. While they are sure to entrance a young reader, since they are conventional signals for romance (the hero always has to cross water in order to enter the castle of adventures), to a more experienced reader they might appear too pat in their conventionality. The lake, charged with mysterious meaning in Thomas Malory's last tale and beloved of late re-writers of the Arthurian myth, is great and black, yet smooth as glass: this is romance in its initial, peaceful and entrancing stage; in the following novel the lake is again "smooth, black, glassy" (Rowling's choice of adjectives tends to be rather predictable), though this time this is a signal for a hidden danger rather than for enchantment, since Harry and Ron risk plunging into it from a height (*Chamber* 58). In the fourth and probably darkest volume of the series, instead, we have "a storm-tossed, fathoms-deep lake," in which a very young student risks losing his life, snatched by "a giant sea-monster" (*Goblet* 159). In the same volume the lake will reveal some more of its mysterious contents: merpeople, water demons, and the ever-present ghosts. From the same lake the huge Durmstrang ship emerges, having apparently accomplished an underwater journey. More than the celebrated Hogwarts train, the lake connects Harry and his fellow students with a form of magic that seems deeper and more fascinating than the conjurer's tricks learnt at the castle. As for the castle, its many turrets and towers add to the confusion of the students once they are inside and try to find their way:

There were a hundred and forty-two staircases at Hogwarts: wide, sweeping ones; narrow, rickety ones; some that led somewhere different on a Friday; some with a vanishing step halfway up that you had to remember to jump. Then there were doors that wouldn't open unless you asked politely, or tickled them in exactly the right place, and doors that weren't really doors at all, but solid walls just pretending. It was also very hard to remember where anything was, because it all seemed to move around a lot. (*Philosopher's Stone* 98)⁵

But funnily enough for a children's book, it is soon made clear that the wonder and the confusion are only in the eye of the beholder; Harry and Ron soon move at ease in the innumerable secret passages and dark

corridors, and the castle turns out to be a real home for the parentless Harry. Rowling, however, goes even further than that, and in the fourth volume we are told that Hogwarts may look to Muggle eyes as nothing more than a not-too-exciting tourists' sight: as the all-knowing Hermione informs us, "if a Muggle looks at it, all they see is a mouldering old ruin with a sign over the entrance saying DANGER, DO NOT ENTER, UNSAFE" (*Goblet* 148). It is one of the liminal passages of the novel, revealing an important detail of the boundary between magical and non-magical world: what Rowling seems to be showing us at this point is in fact an adult reading of the Hogwarts wonders: a child might see in a "mouldering old ruin" all the sparkling windows, turrets and towers that imagination will provide; on the other hand, what is terrifying from the outside becomes welcoming once the hero penetrates it. This is not an isolated instance: as I was suggesting above, the underlying irony of the Potter novels—forgotten only in the darker, more Gothic passages, such as the duel between Harry and Voldemort concluding *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*—constantly implies a second, more aware reading of the texts. It is in this irony, rather than in the conventional details of castle and lake, that we see an affinity with Arthurian literature in its most original instances. Thus, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the protagonist finds himself lost in the wood, a prey to doubt and despairing solitude, when a sight, at the same time astonishing and reassuring, meets his eyes:

he wat3 war in þe wod of a won in a mote,
 Abof a launde, on a lawe, loken under bo3e3
 Of mony borelych bole aboute biþe diche3:
 A castel þe comlokest þat euer kny3t a3te...
 As hit schemered and schon þur3 þe schyre oke3...
 Towres telded bytwene, trochet ful þik,
 Fayre fylvole3 þat fy3ed, and ferlyly long,
 With coruon coprounes craftyly sle3e.
 Chalkwhyth chymnees þer ches he inno3e
 Vpon bastel roue3, þat blenked ful quyte;
 So mony pynakle payntet wat3 poudred ayquere,
 Among þe castel carnele3 clambred so þik,
 Þat pared out of papure purely hit semed.

(Tolkien and Gordon ll. 764-67, 772, 795-802)

A castle with all the trimmings, appearing exactly at the right moment, so perfect and providential, the author suggests, that it might be not a mirage, but a fabrication: simply made out of paper (as a matter of fact, it *is* made of, in the sense of created on, paper). This is also a castle that strikes the viewer with awe at its magnificence from the outside, but will become cozy, cheerful and even seductive once Gawain enters it. The reader is invited to take part in the game of romance, and at the same time to distance him/herself from the suspension of disbelief this game requires, remaining aware of it being a game. We may say that in this case Rowling has borrowed more than the external details of a castle, but also the ambiguous nature of its apparition for characters and readers. Things are not what they seem, either at Hogwarts or in Bertilak's castle, but even when the hero is shown the greatest hostility in the castle the reader realizes that he is being tricked for his own good.

It would seem, besides, that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has inspired Rowling also for other details of the castle: like the hall at Camelot, Hogwarts's Great Hall is also set with a high table for teachers and important guests and lower tables for the students; Dumbledore, king of the feasts like Arthur in the *Gawain* poem, can take all participants in a single glance. There is the same interest in interior architecture, and in the details of the feasts; perhaps, the same longing for a ceremonial order that, in the case of Rowling, is highlighted by the almost ritual structure of each novel (and, from what may be glimpsed, by the overall structure of the yet incomplete opus), and by the infinite care with which ceremonial details, generally organised in symmetric structures, are dwelt upon:

When they went down to breakfast on the morning of the thirtieth of October, they found that the Great Hall had been decorated overnight. Enormous silk banners hung from the walls, each of them representing a Hogwarts house—red with a gold lion for Gryffindor, blue with a bronze eagle for Ravenclaw, yellow with a black badger for Hufflepuff, and green with a silver serpent for Slytherin. Behind the teachers' table, the largest banner of all bore the Hogwarts coat of arms: lion, eagle, badger and snake united around a large letter 'H.' (*Goblet* 208)

The same symmetry is observed in more tension-charged scenes, such as the duel between Harry and Voldemort in the fourth novel: a duel that is represented as a geometric, ritual dance, and whose outcome does not depend on strength, sleight of hand or magical expertise, but simply on will-power, nerves, and the capability to resist, as is the case, once again, of the Beheading Game in *Sir Gawain*. In its impeccably wrought structure, the fourteenth-century poem seems to have helped Rowling to build a saga of extreme narrative tightness, in which every detail, however irrelevant may seem at the moment in which the reader is first faced with it, will prove crucial at a later point. It is not surprising that Rowling, having apparently completed the overall structure (if not the actual writing and publication) of all novels, is now confiding to interviewers that she might write an encyclopedia of Hogwarts, with all the pieces of information that could never fit into the novels: "hit were to tore for to telle of þe tenþe dole" (Tolkien and Gordon l. 719).

Clear links with Arthurian literature can also be found if we take into consideration the other important setting of Rowling's novels: the Forbidden Forest, whose name sounds as premonitory as Syege Perelous, or the Waste Forest surrounding the Grail Castle, or even T. H. White's Forest Sauvage. The associations here are immediate: the forest of the hunt of the magical, half-human white stag in Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec et Enide*, or simply the forest as a place reserved for hunting and provided with a gamekeeper; the forest as the place of wilderness and outlawry, in which the werewolf loses its human traits and is turned from an unfortunate hero into a figure of destruction, as in the anonymous *Arthur and Gorlagon*; or even, in more philosophical readings, "an allegorical world of untamed emotion and passion" (Saunders 19). Rowling's Forbidden Forest is all this, and although its most complex aspects are revealed only in the later novels, it assumes a mysterious and menacing significance from the start: "First-years should note that the forest in the grounds is forbidden to all pupils" is stated almost as soon as Harry enters Hogwarts (*Philosopher's Stone* 94). Not only does Harry meet with particularly dangerous adventures, or particularly terrifying animals, in the forest; there he also meets his true self:

"Who did you think it was?"

"I think—" Harry swallowed, knowing how strange this was going to sound. "I think it was my dad."

Harry glanced up at Hermione and saw that her mouth was fully open now. She was gazing at him with a mixture of alarm and pity.

"Harry, your dad's—well—dead," she said quietly.

"I know that," said Harry quickly. [...]

And then it hit him—he understood. He hadn't seen his father—he had seen himself [...] (*Azkaban* 297, 300)

Other characters will be faced with their worst fears (an example is Ron surrounded by the huge, terrifying acromantulas in the second volume) or lose the identity they had painfully built to plunge into schizophrenia, as is the case with the prim and righteous Barty Crouch becoming almost a Wild Man in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Even cars go wild (or become humanized, depending on the characters' points of view) in the forest. The forest is both a real and a symbolic landscape, a frightful but indispensable element in the hero's development.

As for the eponymous hero of Rowling's novels, he sums many of the traits of the knights of the Matter of Britain; whatever the various Christian Parents associations that have been fighting against these novels may think, Harry Potter is a latter-day version of the Christian knight (Zipes 174). He resembles Arthur not only in being the chosen one for the magical sword, but also for his qualities as a natural leader, and in an assumption of responsibility, for himself and his peers, that begins at a very early age. He also shares some characteristics of other Knights of the Round Table. A modern-day Perceval, whose purity is only rivaled by that of the innocent victim of the fourth novel, Cedric Diggory, he is brought up in complete ignorance of his identity and of his noble calling. Like a true knight, he is courteous and protective towards women and towards anyone younger or weaker than himself, however irritating they may be (as in the case of the Creevey brothers). Also, he has a deep respect for his elders and betters: even to defy the Dursleys openly, he must be driven to the end of his tether; as for Dumbledore, half-father, half-god, resembling the popular picture of Merlin in his flowing beard and robes, Harry's attitude towards him approaches veneration. Dumbledore in his turn appears aware that his own role is limited to teaching to Harry, guiding him, preparing him for what presumably is

future greatness. To come back to our former comparison with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Harry resembles Gawain not only in the red color of his Quidditch robes (constantly opposed to the green of the evil Slytherins) but also in the virtues he so determinedly upholds, all represented in the fourteenth-century poem by Gawain's device of the pentangle.

On a more general level, the Potter saga derives its strength from the Matter of Britain also as concerns more controversial issues. Arthurian myths have often been used to celebrate the greatness of England: "Arthur, originally a war-leader in legends of uncertain historical validity concerning British resistance to the invading Anglo-Saxons in the late fifth century, became the hero of an embryonic epic of great psychological significance for the defeated Celts" (Barron 30). At a later point of the tradition Geoffrey of Monmouth included Arthur in a genealogy spanning from the legendary Brutus to Cadwallader (and the *Gawain*-poet went as far as reconstructing the same genealogy from the Trojan hero Aeneas), but in any case we have the reiteration of the same theme: the young, unknown but outstanding leader bringing his weakened, defeated people to a new fight against very powerful enemies and to improbable victory. This theme—counterattack against the forces of evil and redemption from a condition of enslavement—is largely exploited in the Potter novels: Harry's youthful age, small stature and general inexperience are often stressed against Voldemort's age-old knowledge and almost infinite power, just as the well-meaning but rather inept right-thinking wizards (Arthur Weasley, a very likeable bungler, is a case in point) are set against the cunning and malicious Death Eaters.

But the theme of the greatness of England also takes less expected overtones. One of the more problematic consequences of Rowling's use of Arthurian motifs, in fact, is a certain stress laid on nationalism, occasionally even a superficial racism revealed by the use of stereotypes: the few black students are funny and engagingly friendly, the very few Indians are female and enticingly beautiful. The question of nationalism is less superficial, particularly since, given the strictly Manichean ideology of the novels, the difference between "us" and "them" leaves little room for ambiguity or tolerance. Nationalism is mainly expressed in the creation of negative associations for all that does

not sound English, a creation perfected by Rowling's masterly craft in inventing names. Non-English names tend to sound either French or half-Germanic, half-Scandinavian: an example is the Beauxbatons Academy of Magic, not intrinsically evil but full of either silly, affected boys, or beautiful, conceited girls, the most beautiful and accomplished among the latter bearing the very musical name of Fleur Delacour (*nomen omen* is an understatement in this case). The school of Durmstrang, needless to say, will be all that is menacing, surly and hostile. But, if the equation is consistently maintained with every Germanic-sounding name (Lord Voldemort, who refuses his original English name and is to be found hiding in the Black Forest or "in the forests of Albania," is the most obvious instance) (*Chamber*, 242), French is more ubiquitous and less narrowly connoted: it can be associated with nobility (Gryffindor), with quasi-majestic authority (Madame Maxime), with treachery (Malfoy). It is a more familiar language (readers are expected to understand the connotations of French names, and even some very brief French sentences, while in the case of names such as Karkaroff the negative association does not depend upon meaning, but simply upon sound), entering into everyday English and generally representing not otherness, but what escapes from the common or banal; as in the case of the French names present in Malory's tales, they belong to our world, though distinguishing themselves from the commonplace. Names and magical words, however, can also carry more explicit Arthurian echoes: it is no chance, surely, that the terrible incantation Voldemort uses to evoke the symbol of the Death Eaters, his followers, is *Morsmordre*, both a death formula and a reminder of Arthur's last and deadliest enemy. The second book of Malory's collection, *The Tale of the Noble King Arthur that was Emperor Himself through Dignity of his Hands*, opens with the introduction of the emperor Lucius, a character appearing already in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, "procurour of the publyke wele of Rome" (Vinaver 113), attempting to submit Arthur to his will by the strength of his authority. Unsurprisingly, in Rowling's novels Lucius Malfoy is the name of an evil character, carrying an authority that adds much to his personal power (he is one of the Hogwarts governors, and the head of an ancient and powerful wizarding family) and often behaving as Voldemort's spokesman.

The most important conclusion we draw from these observations is that Rowling's use of her sources is only superficially straightforward. Arthuriana, as we have seen, work very clearly for readers of all ages as indicators of a mood, or useful tags for a character; but the writer also uses them as references for a more complex reading, that might take into account the *Bildungsroman* aspect of the novels, their intricate narrative structure, the ironic interplay with traditional motifs. We may, perhaps, fulfil one of Rowling's wishes if this analysis of her novels is concluded by the following epigraph, taken from the preface to Caxton's edition of Malory's works but equally applicable to king Arthur's Camelot and Harry Potter's Hogwarts: "For herein may be seen noble chyvalrye, curtosye, humanyté, frendlynesse, hardynesse, love, frendshyp, cowardyse, murdre, hate, vertue, and synne" (Vinaver xv).

Notes

¹ A rather funny instance of fame taking the less-than-favorable reviewer by surprise is told by Jack Zipes (171-72).

² More recent criticism has been also motivated by the simultaneous apparition of two much-publicized films, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* and *The Lord of the Rings*, both promising their viewers a number of sequels.

³ I assume this is the link the young reader would create, though of course the sword in the stone is to be found in Malory, too.

⁴ Wendy Doniger (26) notes another link with *The Sword and the Stone* "in the gift of talking to animals, that White's Merlin gives to Arthur (Harry just does snakes)."

⁵ Incidentally, in the film version of this novel the confusion was admirably rendered with a Piranesi-like atmosphere.

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