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Heroes and Monsters:
The Faerie Queene
Foreshadowing Modern Fantasy

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Table of contents

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Abstract

The present study is concerned with the relationship between *The Faerie Queene* and modern fantasy literature; Spenser's poem, a "continued Allegory, or darke conceit", repeatedly alludes to historical, political and religious issues that were objects of controversy at the time when it was written. Initially conceived as a twelve-book epic poem, it is set in the magical Faerie Land, where the Faerie Queene has sent her knights on various quests.

More specifically, the issue addressed is whether, and to what extent, *The Faerie Queene* can be considered an ancestor of fully-developed modern fantasy. While there is general consensus that fantasy is a phenomenon that begins in the nineteenth century, some critical studies of the history of the genre mention *The Faerie Queene* in passing, but they do not dwell on this association.

The first chapter presents a survey of the most compelling critical approaches to the genre, as well as an outline of its recurring themes; the second chapter attempts to chart the allegorical subtext of the poem, and analyzes the characters of Arthur, Redcrosse, Britomart and Calidore, concentrating on the aspects that put them in conversation with modern fantasy; in the last chapter the focus shifts to animals and fantastic creatures, another recurrent presence in *The Faerie Queene* and a stock feature of fantasy literature.

Introduction

The Faerie Queene is undoubtedly one of the prominent and most studied works not only of the Renaissance, but of the whole canon of English literature; its author, Edmund Spenser, was born in London in a humble family, probably in 1552 or 1553. Facts and events about his life, especially his early years, are sparse[1]; Andrew Hadfield, author of Spenser's most detailed and exhaustive biography, begins his *Edmund Spenser: A Life* by saying that "Edmund Spenser's life will probably always be shrouded in a certain mystery"[2], as there are no legal documents or personal letters that survived. His date of birth, for example, is a conjecture derived from *Amoretti* 60, where he writes that he is 40 or 41 at the moment of writing, that is to say in 1594 or shortly prior to that:

> So since the winged God his planet cleare,
> Began in me to moue, one year is spent:
> The which doth longer vnto me appeare,
> Then al those fourty which my life outwent.
> (sonnet 60, lines 5-8)[3]

However, a couple of important facts about his biography are worth mentioning since they are rather relevant to his writing. Firstly, Spenser was a well-read man; he studied at Pembroke Hall, Cambridge, where he attained both his BA (in 1573) and his MA (in 1576). The relevance of his studies and the breadth of his knowledge can be observed in all his works, in particular in his *magnum opus*, *The Faerie Queene*; in this lengthy poem Spenser

[1] Heale, Elizabeth, *The Faerie Queene: A Reader's Guide*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 1.
[2] Hadfield, Andrew, *Edmund Spenser: A Life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, p.1
[3] Hadfield, *Edmund Spenser: A Life*, p.18.

weaves together ancient and classical mythologies, Arthurian and medieval traditions and references to contemporary customs and historical events. A second momentous event that marked Spenser's life took place in 1580, when he moved to Ireland to serve as secretary to the newly appointed Lord Deputy, Arthur Grey de Wilton. Two years later, Lord de Wilton lost the support of the English Court and was forced to resign, but Spenser stayed on in Ireland, where he lived in New Abbey (in Kildare, near Dublin), a fortified rebel property which he had leased. In those years Ireland was a theatre of political turmoil and colonial upheaval against the English power, and Spenser's imagination was heavily influenced by this panorama of constant warfare; he was an eyewitness of several massacres, oppressions, famines and of harsh living conditions. His *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (written between 1595 and 1596) deals precisely with the Irish predicament: cast as a dialogue between two fictional characters, Eudoxus and Irenius, this political tract advocates that resolution and firmness should be pursued at all costs in order to bring civilization into a land wasted by barbarism and savagery. As far as *The Faerie Queene* is concerned, Spenser's stay in Ireland was highly influential, not least because he wrote his masterpiece principally in his estate of Kilcolman (near Cork), which he had acquired in 1589. Furthermore, the poem is replete with references to Irish traditions, events and places: some of the best-known examples include the marriage between the Thames and the Medway in Book IV, canto XI, and the invention of "a fanciful legend of an offended Diana to explain the unhappy and desolate state of Ireland", in Book VII, canto VI, 55[4].

The complexity and richness of *The Faerie Queene* becomes all the more evident by looking at its structure: it is composed of six books (of twelve cantos each), plus a seventh book, of which only the two "Mutabilitie Cantos" survive, along with two stanzas from an unfinished canto. The title of the poem refers to Gloriana, the Faerie Queene, who is a clear

[4] Gray, M. M., "The Influence of Spenser's Irish Experiences on the Faerie Queene", *The Review of English Studies*, VI, 24 (1930): 413.

allusion to Queen Elizabeth I. Although she never shows up directly in the poem, the reader learns that she is the "greatest Glorious Queene of *Faerie* lond" (I.I.3.3)[5], that is to say the sovereign of Spenser's imaginary world; she sends out various knights on different quests, and each book narrates the adventures of a single knight. However, there are some exceptions, since Book IV has no single hero but picks up some of the narrative threads from the previous book. In general, it can be noticed that the different stories that are narrated throughout the whole poem are often left off and picked up later by the narrator, thus giving birth to a structure where characters come and go on the scene. The poem is written in nine-line stanzas, of which the first eight lines are iambic pentameters, and the last is a single alexandrine line in iambic hexameter; apart from some exceptions, the rhyme scheme is ABABBCBCC. This pattern was unprecedented at Spenser's time, and therefore it goes by the name of 'Spenserian stanza'; it may have been influenced by the ottava rima of the Italian poets Ludovico Ariosto and Torquato Tasso, and it has been subsequently used by many other poets, such as Lord Byron and John Keats.

Given the plurality of traditions that *The Faerie Queene* encompasses, and considering the many analyses that have been carried out to study its relationship with the epic tradition and its medieval background, with contemporary history and politics, with religion and other events with which Spenser's contemporaries were certainly familiar, one interesting issue relates to how this work can be put in conversation with fantasy literature. Even on a first reading, it is easy to notice that the presence of knights, witches, sorcerers, princes and princesses, wicked characters and dreadful monsters, magic objects and continuous transformations constitutes the texture of the whole poem. However, it is also worth bearing in mind that scholars generally set the beginnings of modern fantasy during the Victorian Age. While there is no universal agreement on a date or work that officially and

[5] Henceforth all the direct quotations from *The Faerie Queene* will be taken from the following edition: Spenser, Edmund, *The Faerie Queene*, Penguin Books, London, 1987. The four numbers, two Roman and two Arabic numerals, indicate respectively book, canto, stanza and line(s) quoted.

conventionally starts the tradition of modern fantasy, it is generally acknowledged that J. R. R. Tolkien's works represent a cornerstone in this tradition, and that every subsequent fantasy writer has to come to terms with him, either drawing their inspiration from or rejecting Tolkienian patterns and motifs.

The present study addresses precisely the issue of the relationship between *The Faerie Queene* and fantasy literature; the aim of this thesis is to try and explain why the two have been put in relationship with each other, and to what extent Spenser's grand poem can be considered a work that prefigures modern fantasy literature. There are in fact several critical introductions to and dissertations about fantasy which mention *The Faerie Queene*, albeit en passant; despite firmly arguing that modern fantasy fully develops only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some scholars have felt the need to include a brief reference to *The Faerie Queene* in their publications, especially in those sections which trace the ancient literary works that paved the way for modern fantasy. For example, Sullivan, despite being in disagreement with "Lin Carter's argument, in *Imaginary Worlds*, that fantasy has been around since epic, saga, and myth"[6], acknowledges that "some of the elements of epic, saga, and myth - as well as legend and folktale - appear in modern fantasy"[7]. He also explains that the term fantasy was firstly conceived as a reaction against eighteenth-century realism, since before that "the *Beowulf* poet, the *Gawain* poet, Shakespeare and Spenser (to name but the most prominent) could use what we would now call the elements of the fantastic without anyone's remarking on them as such"[8]. Peter Hunt includes *The Faerie Queene*, along with Caxton's *Reynard the Fox*, Sidney's *Arcadia*, and many of Shakespeare's plays, among the so called "primitive fantasy" works; he maintains that they are undoubtedly fantasies which were

[6] Sullivan III, C.W., "Fantasy", in Dennis Butts (ed.) *Stories and Society. Children's Literature in its Social Context*, Palgrave, Balingstoke, 1992, p.97.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

"absorbed effortlessly into literature and drama from the oral tradition"[9]. Mathews's landmark survey, *Fantasy*, is preceded by a section entitled "Chronology", where the author lists several works that are considered either fantasy literature or paving the way for it, starting from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* until the twentieth century, and *The Faerie Queene* is included in this list[10]. These are just a few examples that show how Spenser's poem has been considered at least a part in the literary history that precedes modern fantasy.

The first chapter of this thesis will draw principally on Mathews's aforementioned book and on Sullivan's article "Fantasy", as well as on other critical essays and articles, in order to provide a theoretical discussion about fantasy, since the term itself has given rise to ambiguities and somewhat diverging definitions. It will attempt to trace a brief history of the genre, starting from its forebears in ancient times up to modern works that are accepted as belonging to fantasy by all accounts. In so doing, this chapter will bring to the fore the main recurring features of the genre, and will refer to a few narratological concepts that will be later applied to shed light on the functions of some characters. In particular, it will refer to Propp's Functions and his *Morphology of the Folktale*, and to Greimas's actantial model, which further develops Propp's ideas and applies them to the mythic pattern; I will show how Spenser brings these devices to bear on his work, thereby using narrative structures that are as old as time to talk about facts and issues that were close to his contemporary audience.

The second chapter will take into consideration the Spenserian hero; not only does every knight embody a virtue, but the whole poem is full of references to allegories, which in some cases are made explicit by the poet, whereas on other occasions they are left deliberately ambiguous. Allegory was of paramount importance during the Renaissance, and Spenser's contemporaries were very familiar with this practice. Given that a thorough analysis of every hero that appears in the poem is beyond the scope of this study, some cases in particular will

[9] Hunt, Peter and Lenz, Millicent, *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy* Fiction, Continuum, London and New York, 2001, p.15.
[10] Mathews, Richard, *Fantasy. The Liberation of Imagination*, Routledge, New York and London, 2002, p. xvi.

be taken into account: the presence of King Arthur and the influence of the so called Matter of Brittany represent a centuries-old tradition which is still nowadays a source of inspiration for fantasy novels, films and TV series; the Redcrosse Knight, the hero of the first book, is probably one of the most interesting and modern characters of the poem, since his quest to slay the dragon is also a quest for his personal identity; Britomart, the heroine of Books III and IV, may be taken into consideration to make some reflections about gender, as she is the only female knight to whom a quest has been assigned by Gloriana; Sir Calidore's quest brings into the narration the theme of a pastoral and bucolic world, and a sense of nostalgia for the past. The functions that these heroes perform can be analysed in the light of the narratological concepts that are presented in the first chapter, and that are quite common in modern fantasy. A section of this chapter will reflect on how modern fantasy is often concerned, albeit to varying degrees, with the issue of national identity, and specifically of English identity as far as this study is concerned. The idea of Englishness is rather a slippery concept, and a thorough analysis of what it implies would bring together different disciplines, such as history, literature, sociology, biology, and visual arts, just to mention a few. However, it is possible to notice how the best-known works of modern fantasy include hints to the theme of national identity; from Tolkien's hobbits dwelling in the Shire to J. K. Rowling's magic community, which exits alongside present-day London, elements that relate to national identity are often brought into the narration. I shall discuss how *The Faerie Queene*, though set in the magic realm of Fairy Land ("Faery Lond"), is replete with innuendoes to past or contemporary events that are quite relevant to the English political panorama. It should be borne in mind that Spenser was always abreast of current affairs in his time; he lived in Ireland for over a decade and was also received by the Queen herself in 1590, so he must have known very well the dynamics of the English Court in an epoch when the issue of the succession to the throne was certainly a hot topic.

The third chapter is devoted to animals and fantastic creatures; again, it will not be possible to provide a full analysis of every creature, but the examples that will be presented have been selected according to the division into helpers and opponents, which refers to Greimas's actantial model. On the one hand, the lion that makes a quick appearance in Book I indeed acts as a helper when Una is in peril; despite being a minor character in the narrative, the choice of assigning this role to a lion, and not to other animals or fantastic creatures, may be analyzed in the light of heraldry and the meaning that this animal carries in the English tradition. On the other hand, the dragon that the Redcrosse Knight has to face and defeat will be considered as an evil character that exemplifies the group of the opponents. Once again, it seems no coincidence that Spenser made this choice; by narrating the fight between the Redcrosse Knight (whose name itself is rather telling) and a dragon, Spenser not only points directly to the legend of Saint George, the Patron Saint of England, but he also harks back to medieval literary antecedents, such as *Beowulf*, in which the dragon is one of the antagonists that the hero needs to vanquish. In the descriptions of both the lion and the dragon, other well-known fantasy works will be referred to so as to compare and contrast Spenser's descriptions with more ancient and recent ones; they will show how these characters have become 'building blocks' in the writing of modern fantasy literature.

Chapter 1. Fantasy across the ages

1.1 Fantasy: marking the boundaries

In order to be able to analyse a literary work through the lens of fantasy literature it is necessary to understand what this term implies, especially when it is used in the field of literature and criticism. The fact that there is no agreed-upon definition of fantasy, nor a date or a work that is conventionally used to signal the official outset of this literary tradition, calls for an introductory chapter; therefore, in this section I will aim to explore what the implications of the term 'fantasy' are, as well as tracing a sort of history, or rather, a pre-history of the genre.

The English Oxford Dictionary defines fantasy in general terms as "[t]he faculty or activity of imagining impossible or improbable things"[1]; then, it provides a more specific definition which applies to the literary field, that is to say: "[a] genre of imaginative fiction involving magic and adventure, especially in a setting other than the real world"[2]. What we first understand from these definitions is that fantasy has to do with something that goes against or beyond the laws of nature, something which contemplates impossible things. The second definition specifies that it has to do with magic, and that the setting is usually an imaginary world. If we stopped our analysis here, we could safely argue that *The Faerie Queene* is by all means a fantasy work, since it features magic and supernatural characters on several occasions, and it is also set in an imaginary world, that is to say Faery Lond (or Fairyland).

[1] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/fantasy, accessed May 2019.
[2] Ibid.

However, upon closer inspection, it possible to notice that fantasy has come to us as a more complex phenomenon; critics have provided many definitions in the attempt to clearly mark the boundaries of this elusive concept. Irwin's narrow definition of fantasy as "the literature of the impossible"[3] placed emphasis on the fact that it is a gamelike genre founded upon "an overt agreement between writer and reader"[4], thereby excluding most Secondary-World texts[5]; Manlove argues that the supernatural and the impossible (whereby he means something "of another order of reality from that in which we exist and from our notions of possibility"[6]) are essential categories for every kind of fantasy; Attebery "attempts to make the term a little more self-referential: for him, fantasy violates 'what the author clearly believes to be natural law'"[7]; he suggests that all genres should be approached as "fuzzy sets", thereby defining them not by boundaries, but by a centre which defines its essential features[8]. Attebery formulates this definition after conducting a survey ("an unscientific experiment"[9]) which involved asking the participants to rank forty literary works on a scale of one to seven; the lower the score, the closer to fantasy was the participant's perception of the book. The result was that *The Lord of the Rings* received the lowest score, thereby implying that each and every one of the participants saw it as the highest form and prototype of fantasy literature, the "centre" that defines Attebery's "fuzzy sets". These are only some of the definitions that have been put forward in the effort to delineate fantasy[10]; however, the sheer number of attempts is sufficient to explain why James and Mendlesohn started their introduction to *The*

[3] Irwin, W. R., *The Game of the Impossible*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1976, p.4.
[4] Clute, John and Grant, John, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 1997, [http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php?nm=irwin_w_r, accessed May 2019].
[5] Ibid.
[6] Manlove, Colin, *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1965, p.3.
[7] Hunt, Peter and Lenz, Millicent, p.10.
[8] Attebery, Brian, *Strategies of Fantasy*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1992, p.12.
[9] Attebery, p. 13.
[10] For a more exhaustive set of definitions, see C.W. Sullivan III, "Fantasy", pp. 97-100, and Hunt and Millicent, *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*, pp. 10-11.

Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature by saying that "fantasy literature has proven tremendously difficult to pin down"[11].

One first issue relates to the use that has been made of the terms 'fantasy' and 'fantastic'; they are often used as synonyms, but Todorov[12] makes the fantastic a distinct literary genre. Drawing on Frye's *The Anatomy of Criticism*, he analyzes a set of texts as the best representatives of fantastic literature, namely Potocki's *The Sargasso Manuscript*, Nerval's *Aurélia*, Balzac's *The Magic Skin*, the *Arabian Nights*, Cazotte's *Le Diable Amoureux*, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, and tales by E. T. A. Hoffman, Charles Perrault, Guy de Maupassant, Nicolai Gogol, and Edgar A. Poe. The originality of Todorov's study lies in the fact that he does not define the fantastic on grounds of the themes it deals with, but he focuses on the reaction it provokes on the reader. He argues that fantastic literature can only be defined in relation with two other genres, the strange and the marvellous, since it is to be located at the crossroads between these two: the strange relates to something that on a first glance seems extraordinary, but never contradicts the laws of nature, and eventually a rational explanation for events that are seemingly unnatural is always given (for example, in detective fiction); the marvellous is typical of fairy-tales, where fairies, witches, monsters and other "impossible characters" exist without ever being a source of anxiety for the reader, who accepts the presence of such elements even if they do not belong to the real world; finally, fantastic literature is subtler and more complex, since it elicits hesitation and anxiety, thereby obliging "the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described"[13]. In other words, the reader of fantastic texts is never able to understand whether there can be a rational

[11] James, Edward and Mendlesohn, Farah (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, p. 28.
[12] Tzvetan Todorov was a Bulgarian-French historian, sociologist and literary critic, and his seminal work *Introduction à la Littérature Fantastique* was originally written and published in French in 1970; it was translated and published in English three years later by Richard Howard with the title *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*.
[13] Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, translated by Richard Howard, Case Western Reserve University Press, Cleveland, 1973, p. 33.

explanation to the events that are narrated (as in the case of the strange), or there are supernatural forces that drive the plot (as in the case of the marvellous). Therefore, it becomes evident how this precise connotation, which hinges upon the reaction of the reader, places the fantastic on a different level from what we normally consider fantasy literature, even when broadly speaking.

As far as the present study is concerned, it is clear that *The Faerie Queene* is by no means a fantastic text, since all the supernatural characters are unmistakably unreal, in that they can only exist in Spenser's world: the treacherous witch Duessa, the nefarious queen Lucifera, the club-wielding giant Orgoglio, and the scaly dragon (just to mention a few characters from Book I), as frightening and dreadful as they can be, are clearly imaginative characters who cannot be part of the reader's world, at least if taken at face value (the fact that they can be read symbolically or allegorically is a different issue). As a consequence, Spenser's masterpiece would feature in what Todorov called the category of the marvellous. This is the reason why this study is not concerned with the fantastic as was defined by Todorov, and thus I have decided to avoid using the term "fantastic" in order to distinguish it from 'fantasy'; however, on several occasions critics do not take on Todorov's perspective upon the fantastic, but continue to use both words with the same meaning (for example, see Sullivan's definition below), which is why I have felt the need to include this brief clarification and specify that henceforth, whenever quotations from other authors will be included, "fantastic" will never be employed in the meaning suggested by Todorov.

Coming back to fantasy and its implications, one of the criteria that is commonly adopted to demarcate its boundaries is its historical dimension, as it is a genre which is temporally circumscribed. Sullivan argues that:

> fantasy literature, which (...) is fiction set in a Secondary World where the fantastic (departures from consensus reality) occurs in believable ways, is a product of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and should be approached as such.[14]

These lines, which encapsulate the author's stance about fantasy literature, provide a quite straightforward definition of the genre, both in its mode (it departs from reality and the laws of nature), and in its chronology (no literature before the nineteenth century can be treated as fantasy).

Then, the next issue is: why cannot we apply this word to any work before the nineteenth century? Or, in other words, what happened in the nineteenth century that literary critics felt the need to refer to a set of works with a new label? How are these works different from previous works of fiction, since there is no denying the fact that fictional narratives have existed long before the nineteenth century?

As previously mentioned in the introduction, Sullivan notices that fantasy developed as a response to eighteenth-century realistic fiction; realism was only a century older than fantasy, and it developed from other seventeenth-century literary genres, such as journalism, essay, history and biography[15], whose aim was to capture real events rather than create an invented story. Following up on Sullivan's argument, Hunt points out that "fantasy requires some concept of realism before *it* can exist"[16]; consequently, "to trace a history of fantasy 'back' to *Beowulf* or Arcadia or Spenser's *The Faerie* Queene, or Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's* Dream is to ignore the status of 'fantasy' that they portray"[17]. Sullivan's and Hunt's observations place fantasy in a dimension which is temporally circumscribed, since no

[14] Sullivan III, C.W., p.100.
[15] Sullivan III, C.W., p.97.
[16] Hunt, p. 15
[17] Ibid.

literature before the advent of realism can be addressed to as fantasy (and Hunt even mentions *The Faerie Queene* as an example). Furthermore, Sullivan quotes Hume to explain that fantasy and realism should be considered as "separate ends of a continuum"[18], rather than two polar opposites. In her *Fantasy and Mimesis*, Hume puts forward the idea that every piece of literature is the product of two forces or "impulses", that is to say 'mimesis' and 'fantasy': the former is the desire to imitate, describe and narrate events in a way that is as truthful and close to reality as possible, whereas the latter is "the desire to change givens and alter reality"[19]. This implies a constant tension between realistic and fictional elements, which basically can be detected in every literary work. However, Sullivan and Hume point to a keener awareness of such tension, which developed only in the eighteenth century after the rise of the novel and of realism as a fully-developed literary genre.

Another compelling approach to the issue is Attebery's distinction between fantasy as mode, genre, and formula. Fantasy-as-mode refers to a broad view whereby every fictional narrative is a fantasy (including the ancient epics, Shakespeare, Dante, etc.); on the other hand, fantasy-as-formula describes the narrow end of the spectrum, since it points to fantasy as a commercial product, something that should follow a predictable pattern to meet the reader's expectations. Fantasy-as-genre is theorized to be located in between the mode and formula, since it is somewhat varied (or at least not entirely predictable, as the formula is), and capable of artistic development, and at the same time it is confined to a particular period of time[20]. Although Attebery concentrates on fantasy as a genre, and confines the term "fantastic" to the mode (thus rejecting Todorov's definition), the idea of fantasy as a mode indeed represents an interesting take, especially when dealing with works that predate eighteenth-century fantasy, as it is the case for *The Faerie Queene*.

[18] Sullivan III, C.W., p.97.
[19] Hume, Kathryn, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, Methuen, New York, 1984, p.20.
[20] Attebery, p. 2.

Other than the chronological aspect previously discussed, there is yet another factor which should not be overlooked. In his article Sullivan contends that "one cannot merely toss a few 'impossible' characters, creatures, items, or events into a narrative and call it a fantasy, however; he or she must create a place in which the impossible can exist"[21]. In other words, the presence of dragons, magicians, witches and monsters is not a sufficient element to state that *The Faerie Queene* belongs to fantasy literature, and it is not even enough to say that it prefigures modern fantasy tout court, in the same way as the presence of elves, hobbits, orcs, dwarves and wizards is not enough to say that *The Lord of the Rings* represents the epitome of High Fantasy. In fact, Tolkien's famous trilogy is not simply a jumble of supernatural and invented characters thrown into the narration with no criteria; what made Tolkien the best example of modern fantasy, and a model to be either imitated or rejected by subsequent fantasy writers, is the fact that he not only created a secondary world in which his works are set, but he did it in an extremely coherent, consistent and sophisticated way.

Tolkien was not only a fantasy writer, but first and foremost a philologist and critic, and his lifelong passion for languages can be detected in all his works. As a critic, he wrote a noteworthy essay entitled "On Fairy-Stories", which is the closest piece of writing to a fantasy manifesto. He writes that

> [w]hat really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful "sub-creator". He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is "true": it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken;

[21] Sullivan III, C.W., "Fantasy", p.98.

> the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside[22].

The idea of sub-creation entails a high level of complexity; what is extraordinary and somewhat unprecedented in Tolkien's fantasy is the fact that he does not only invent a story whose protagonists act in an imaginary world, but he frames this world with so many elements that it acquires internal consistency and credibility. In other words, Tolkien created his Middle-earth and provided it with its history and legends, with its maps and geography, with its traditions and customs, with inhabitants who belong to different races, and, most importantly, with different invented languages. No fantasy writer before him had attained such a level of sophistication, and this is the reason why the Professor is commonly regarded as a watershed in the history of fantasy; the creation of a consistent imaginary world, of a multiracial company, of invented languages are only a few of the tropes that we commonly associate with fantasy and that entered this tradition precisely thanks to his works. After Tolkien, two attitudes can be observed: on the one hand, the so-called "derivative fantasy" imitates his works or takes its cue from them, and, on the other hand, some authors endeavoured to create something completely different. Just to mention a few examples, among the first category we can find *The Sword of Shannara* (1977) by Terry Brooks, who heavily drew on Tolkien's legendarium (so much so that Shippey wrote that his imaginary world deserves the term "tertiary universe"[23]), and *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* (1977) by Stephen R. Donaldson, who tried to create a sort of anti-hero rather different from Tolkien's characters, and yet he had clearly in mind the Professor's works; on the other hand, Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* series, and Robert Holdstock's works, especially *Mythago*

[22] Tolkien, J. R. R., "On Fairy-Stories", online version [http://heritagepodcast.com/wp-content/uploads/Tolkien-On-Fairy-Stories-subcreation.pdf, accessed September 2019].
[23] Shippey, Tom, "Literature,Twentieth Century: Influence of Tolkien", in Michael D. C. Drout, *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, Taylor & Francis, New York and London, 2007, p.380.

Wood (1984) and *Lavondyss* (1988), are two examples of authors that, while acknowledging Tolkien's influence in the tradition, have managed to escape his shadow and create something new and original. However, all these writers set their stories in an imaginary world, which either exists in itself or relates to 'our' real world.

The concept of 'Secondary World' is a crucial aspect of every modern fantasy. In this respect, an aspect which merits consideration is the relationship between the Secondary or invented World, and the Primary or real one. Picking up on some of the aforementioned fantasies, Tolkien's Middle-earth or Brooks's Shannara are two examples of a self-contained universe, which does not relate to our world; on the other hand, Donaldson's secondary world, the Land, is tangent to the primary one, and characters come and go from one dimension to the other. Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* is arguably one of the best pieces of criticism that delves into this aspect. It distinguishes four kinds of fantasy according to how the primary and the secondary worlds relate to each other. Firstly, in "portal-quest" fantasy there is a threshold or a portal which allows characters to access the imaginary world, and possibly to come back; the most representative example is C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and especially *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, where the wardrobe serves as a portal to Narnia. Secondly, in "immersive" fantasy there is no distinction between primary and secondary world, but the invented universe is the only one existing, and the reader is asked "to share not merely a world, but a set of assumptions. At its best, it presents the fantastic without comment as the norm both for the protagonist and for the reader"[24]. The third category goes by the name of "intrusion" fantasy because the fantastic intrudes into the ordinary world and causes disruption and chaos; unlike portal-quest fantasy, the boundary between reality and fantasy is never clearly demarcated, and the reader is never expected to become accustomed to the supernatural. In the fourth category, named "liminal" fantasy, the otherworldly still

[24] Mendlesohn, Farah, *Rhethorics of Fantasy*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2008, p.xx.

intrudes into the real world, but it is the reaction it provokes that is remarkably different: unlike intrusive fantasy, the magical origins of the events "barely raise an eyebrow"[25], and characters are unimpressed by any supernatural occurrence that surrounds them. In the final part of her study Mendlesohn includes some works that feature elements of more than one category, and thus cannot be analyzed as fully pertaining to any single one of them; in addition, she points out that her classification, far from being an absolute truth aimed at creating universal rules, is just a conventional tool which purports to provide a better understanding of the tension between realistic and fantastic elements in fantasy literature.

One final aspect that is worth mentioning in the attempt to further circumscribe fantasy literature, or at least better understand this complex phenomenon, is its relationship with other contiguous genres that deal with impossible, magic, or non-realistic subjects, such as epic, fairy tale, romance, gothic, horror, children's literature and science fiction. The borders between fantasy and these categories are not always clear-cut, as they cannot be regarded as exactly the same as fantasy, and yet they do share some features, and on several occasions there are works that cross genres and categories: one of the best examples is Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, which was firstly conceived as a bedtime story for the author's children, but is always analysed and treated as one of the most accomplished examples of fantasy.

For the scope of this thesis, it is not possible to carry out an in-depth analysis of each of the aforementioned genres and go over their different nuances; however, a brief account of what fairy tale and epic refer to may come in handy, since Spenser's masterpiece also borrows elements from these traditions. Nikolajeva notices that "[w]ithin the context of children's literature, the concepts of fairy tales and fantasy are often used indiscriminately to denote anything that is not straight realistic prose"[26]; in the attempt to draw a distinction between them, one mistake, or rather an oversimplification, that has been made is stating "that fairy

[25] Mendlesohn, p.xxiii.
[26] Nikolajeva, Maria, "Fairy Tale and Fantasy: From Archaic to Postmodern", *Marvels and Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, XVII (2003), p. 138.

tales are short texts while fantasy takes the form of full-length novels"[27]. Moreover, in the Victorian Age, that is to say the period when fantasy is hypothesized to have been born, there was no awareness of the different implications that the two labels would carry: for example, MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858) begins with a fairy who grants a wish; the subtitle of Kingsley's fantasy, *The Water-Babies* (1863), is "a fairy tale for a land-baby"[28]; and Carroll always referred to the *Alice* books as a traditional fairy tale[29]. Therefore, there is no denying that nineteenth-century fantasy would not have developed without borrowing several elements from the fairy tale, such as the presence of some stock characters and the power of magic, which often results in metamorphoses[30]. What separates out fantasy from the traditional fairy tale (whose origins are intimately related with myth and oral tradition) is its more eclectic nature, as it displays a higher cultural awareness, and it is able to blend "seemingly incompatible elements in one and the same narrative - for instance, pagan and Christian images, or magic wands and laser guns"[31]. Furthermore, the happy ending is a necessary prerequisite for any fairy tale, whereas it is not an element to be taken for granted in fantasy literature, especially in modern works, where the genre seems to have taken a darker and more sombre trajectory; the hero of fantasy narratives faces longer and more complex quests, which frequently parallel their maturation or personal development, and in this respect the theme of personal identity is a pivotal one since fantasy particularly lends itself to dealing with it.[32] One more difference, and arguably the most striking, concerns the idea of space and time: while fairy tales are always set in an undetermined past (signalled by the opening formula

[27] Ibid.
[28] Manlove, Colin, *From Alice to Harry Potter: Children's Fantasy in England*, Cybereditions, Christchurch, 2003, p.17.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Tosi, Laura, and Paruolo, Elena, "Alla scoperta dei mondi della meraviglia: la *fantasy* vittoriana", in Laura Tosi and Alessandra Petrina (eds.) *Dall'ABC a Harry Potter: Storia della Letteratura Inglese per l'Infanzia e la Gioventù*, Bononia University Press, Bologna, 2011, p.177.
[31] Nikolajeva, Maria, "Fantasy Literature and Fairy Tales", in Jack Zipes (ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p.181.
[32] Grenby O., Matthew, *Children's Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2008, p.164.

"Once upon a time..."), fantasy is rooted in a universe which is recognizable to the reader[33]. This process can be carried out in two ways: either the characters start their adventures in the real world and subsequently enter the secondary one (for example, Alice in Oxford, the Pevensie siblings during World War II, Harry Potter in London), or the magic intrudes into contemporary reality (for example, the Psammead or Sand Fairy, and the phoenix in the novels by Edith Nesbit[34]). This shows how fairy tale and fantasy, though sharing many stock elements, do feature some differences; some of them, especially the hero's quest which becomes also a quest for personal identity, and the idea of a secondary world which, albeit chronologically and geographically unspecified, bears the traces of a more circumscribed historical reality, will be picked up in the second chapter to explore how they can be helpful to shed light on *The Faerie Queene*.

As far as epic is concerned, the boundaries that separate it from fantasy become all the more blurred, so much so that Epic Fantasy and High Fantasy have been often used interchangeably. 'High Fantasy' is a term coined by Lloyd Alexander in an article entitled "High Fantasy and Heroic Romance", included in *The Horn Book Magazine* in 1971[35]. It refers to the highest expression of fantasy, a kind of narrative that is unequivocally fantasy, a story which unfolds entirely in a secondary world where supernatural characters and occurrences are the order of the day; it is usually centered on a hero, who is assigned a task or a quest which s/he has to fulfil with the aid of other characters or travelling companions, usually belonging to different races. It is very often narrated throughout multiple books, which form part of a saga, so as to allow the reader to follow the hero while he grows and goes through his adventures and obstacles. It is evident how the most representative example

[33] Nikolajeva, p. 142.
[34] Tosi, Laura, and Paruolo, Elena, "Alla scoperta dei mondi della meraviglia: la *fantasy* vittoriana", p.178.
[35] Sinclair, Frances, *Riveting Reads plus Fantasy Fiction*, School Library Association, Wanborough, 2008, p. 47.

of High Fantasy is Tolkien's trilogy, *The Lord of The Rings*[36]. Traditionally, epic goes as far back as the first civilizations that inhabited the planet, and was deeply rooted in the oral tradition; the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is always recognized the status of first epic and earliest surviving work of literature ever, and it is commonly dated circa 2100 BC. The great classics by Homer and Virgil would exert a strong and inescapable influence upon all the subsequent epics, since they set the conventions of the genre. Again, there is no space here to further explore what these conventions are, as this study is not concerned with epic literature per se; nevertheless, it is necessary to at least touch on this aspect, not least because Spenser clearly wanted to place his *magnum opus* within the classic epic tradition, as he explicitly states in the "Letter to Raleigh":

> I haue followed all the antique Poets historicall, first Homere, who in the Persons of Agamemnon and Vlysses hath ensampled a good gouernour and a vertous man, the one in his Ilias, the other on his Odysseis: then Virgil, whose like intention was to doe in the person od Aeneas: after him Ariosto comprised them both in his Orlando: and lately Tasso disseuered them againe (...) [37]

Spenser's debt to the epic tradition becomes all the more visible by looking at some of the structural and thematic elements of *The Faerie Queene*: supernatural forces are frequently mentioned (especially in "Canto xi of Book IV, with its list of sea-gods and founders of kingdoms and the fifty daughters of Nereus and Doris"[38]), they play a crucial role in many events (and on some occasions some classical deities even show up, such as Neptune, Diana,

[36] However, it is well to remember that originally Tolkien had not conceived his masterpiece as a trilogy, but as a unique volume; for editorial reasons, he was then forced to publish it in three instalments, which became the trilogy as we now know it. Each of the three books is divided into two books, so technically it is a six-book saga, but it is always referred to as a trilogy for the sake of simplicity.
[37] Spenser, "The Letter to Raleigh", p. 15.
[38] Draper, John W., "Classical Coinage in The Faerie Queene", *PMLA*, XLVIII (1932), p. 97.

and Jove in *The Mutabilitie Cantos*), there are references to classical myths and legends, the language of the poem is replete with similes, metaphors, periphrases, epithets and other stylistic and rhetoric devices that are dear to epic narrative (e.g. the invocation to the Muse), and the original plan was for twelve books, a number which definitely rings a bell to readers of epic, since Virgil's *Aeneid* was composed precisely of twelve books, whereas Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* had twenty-four. Finally, epics are generally conceived to celebrate a nation, or at least to narrate the legends and myths in which a national identity is grounded, and Virgil is arguably the best and most obvious example of this. However, fantasy too is often connected with national identity, though in a less explicit way; still, while claiming that fantasy solely purports to celebrate and extol the glory of a nation is certainly preposterous, in many fantasies it is possible to trace elements that relate to national identity. How this issue comes to the fore in *The Faerie Queene* will be an object of discussion in the next two chapters.

To conclude this introduction to fantasy, it is possible to observe how this genre has given rise to quite some trouble in the attempt to provide a clear definition of its features, last but not least the development, in recent years, of several subgenres, such as dark fantasy, historical fantasy, urban fantasy, and comic fantasy, just to mention a few. As a consequence, labelling a work of literature as fantasy or non-fantasy can become a somewhat arbitrary decision, depending on how broadly (or narrowly) we conceive the boundaries of the genre.

1.2 From antiquity to modernity: a pre-history of Fantasy Literature

Now that the implications of the word "fantasy" have been discussed, this section will attempt to outline a brief history of the literary works that paved the way for its development before its "official" advent in the nineteenth century. Mendlesohn and James reiterate the

argument that there can be no intentional fantasy prior to that, but they make the point that "the ancient Greek and Roman novel, the medieval romance, and early modern verse and prose texts all commonly use what we consider to be the trope of fantasy"[39]; Manlove firmly argues that no account of fantasy literature would be adequate if it neglected the thousand years of its existence before 1800, since it represents "an essential part of our history"[40]. Such are the assumptions that underpin the present overview on some of the forerunners of fantasy; I will dwell more on what came before the Victorian Age, since it is precisely in this "pre-history of fantasy" that *The Faerie Queen* can be placed, whereas I will leave out any in-depth analysis of works that are universally accepted as belonging to the genre, such as Tolkien's, Lewis's, and Le Guin's sagas, just to mention the most popular. I shall articulate my brief survey into four groups, although this is by no means intended as a hard-and-fast classification of literary works, but it only serves the purpose of presenting them in a simpler chronological order.

The first group includes ancient epics and classical poems. According to Mathews, the first fantasy ever is "The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor", an Egyptian story that was recorded on papyrus circa 2000 BC; it features some of the archetypal elements that became recurrent themes in fantasies of every time, since "an uninitiated hero on a sea journey is thrown off course by a storm, encounters an enchanted island, confronts a monster, and survives, wiser for the experience"[41]. Its narrative frame prefigures *The Arabian Nights*, and all those narratives in which one or more tales are presented as part of a larger narrative frame; the presence of a monster clearly prefigures the greatest fantasy monster of all time, the dragon[42]. It is rather evident that "[n]early all of the surviving literature of the ancient

[39] Mendlesohn, Farah, and James, Edward, *A Short History of Fantasy*, Libri Publishing, Faringdon, 2012, p. 7.
[40] Manlove, Colin, *The Fantasy Literature of England*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1999, p.7.
[41] Mathews, p. 6.
[42] Ibid.

world, from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to *The Odyssey*, is rooted in fantasy"[43]; however, what makes these texts different from modern fantasy does not lie in any intrinsic element, but in how they were perceived, since back in the time when they were composed they were believed to be true by those who heard or read them[44]. Although "it is clear that even the earliest fantastical prose fiction was constructed by its authors as *fiction* rather than as history"[45], the emphasis was still placed on the metaphorical meaning that those texts acquired. Their main purpose was to explain, to account for some natural phenomena, from the most complex and transcendental (such as how the world originated) to smaller, culture-bound traditions (for example, explaining that the olive tree is the symbol of Athens because of a contest between Athena and Poseidon). Another purpose was to educate; there are countless myths that either show how worshipping a god results in an immediate reward or a blissful afterlife, or they warn against pride and arrogance (the so-called "hubris", a leitmotif especially in ancient Greek mythology). The idea of morality is pivotal in *The Faerie Queene*, and it is Spenser himself who states that in "The Letter to Raleigh", which serves as a sort of foreword to the whole poem: "[t]the generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertous and gentle discipline"[46]. He then goes on to explain that the original choice of planning twelve books had its source in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, even though it is clear that he must have drawn on some other source, since the set of virtues that are presented in the poem does not correspond with Aristotle's classification[47]. Spenser's original plan was rather straightforward: each of the twelve books should be centered on the adventures of a knight, and each knight was to embody one of the twelve "Aristotelian" virtues; however, we know that Spenser only managed to complete six books, and that not

[43] Mathews, p. 5.
[44] Mathews, p. 6.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Spenser, "The Letter to Raleigh", p. 15
[47] Heale, p. 9. Here Heale points out that when Spenser wrote the *Letter*, he was still in the early phase of planning his *magnum opus*, because the reference to Aristotle is misleading, and the descriptions of the first three books conflict with the poem as we now have it; nevertheless, it still represents an invaluable piece of writing to trace his grand paradigms and his guidelines for the whole poem.

every book strictly corresponds to one single hero, as Book III and Book IV represent an exception. However, the idea that each knight epitomizes a virtue to the full, and that all their deeds should be grounded in that precise virtue, clearly shows the moral import of *The Faerie Queene*. Exactly like Spenser's masterpiece, modern fantasy cannot be reduced to a tale whose sole purpose is to teach some values and to shun others, but it also presents a strong commitment to morality. Tolkien's fantasy, to name but the most prominent example, is entirely based on the idea of hope: all the characters that, despite the several adversities and perils that they are forced to face, never abandon hope are eventually rewarded (as it is the case of the hobbits), whereas those who yield to temptation and give up on their task are severely punished (as in the case of Denethor, the Steward of Gondor, who prefers to commit suicide rather than stand in defence of his besieged kingdom). It can be observed how these fictional stories, from ancient myths to modern fantasies, always contain a moral undertone, and their protagonists embody and pursue values that, far from being confined to an invented, imaginary, impossible world, are much closer to the readers (or listeners) than it might seem at a first analysis.

The second group comprises Medieval and Renaissance literature: its best-known representatives may be *Beowulf*, which was written down only in the Middle Ages (even though the precise date of its manuscript, Cotton Vitellius A.XV, is unknown and loosely set between the tenth and the eleventh centuries), and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As it was the case for the previous group, there are of course others texts that were composed in this long time frame, and that largely feature fantasy elements: some examples are the *Poetic Edda*, the *Chanson de Roland*, the *Nibelungenlied*, the *Divine Comedy*, the *Canterbury Tales*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Night*, and *Morte d'Arthur*. However, I have chosen *Beowulf* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* because they are somewhat iconic in this pre-history of fantasy. The first is a Germanic text, maybe the Germanic text par excellence,

and it has inspired many books and movies up to the present; in particular the presence of the fire-breathing dragon will be referred to in the last chapter so as to see how this monster is a stock character in fantasies of all times, but its presence acquires a different connotation in *The Faerie Queene*, where it is explicitly linked to the legend of Saint George. That *Beowulf* had a significant bearing on fantasy literature is testified by Tolkien's seminal lecture "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics", which he gave at the British Academy in 1936; academics and scholars unanimously concur that Tolkien's study was so influential that it "utterly re-shaped *Beowulf*-criticism"[48]. In his ground-breaking essay the Professor "made the first widely accepted case for viewing *Beowulf* as aesthetically successful, and he showed how the monsters in *Beowulf* were symbolic (not allegorical) representations of chaos and night, set in opposition to stability and civilization"[49]; another issue that Tolkien grappled with is the debate over whether the poem should be regarded as Christian or Pagan, and his conclusion was that it is both, since "Germanic heroic values and Christianity coexist within the epic"[50]. Therefore, it is possible to see how once again a text blends together epic and fantasy (or rather, pre-fantasy) elements. As for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it definitely represents a piece of literature that is extremely different from both the ancient epics and *Beowulf*; and yet, Spenser's play (which dates back to roughly the same period when the second edition of *The Faerie Queene* was published) owes much to both classical mythology and fairy lore. The division into the realm of Athens, the rational world of law and order governed by Theseus and Hippolyta, and the wood, the magical world of the irrational, may be reminiscent of the juxtaposition between primary and secondary worlds discussed in the previous section of this chapter. Of course the wood over which King Oberon and Queen

[48] Drout, Micheal D.C., "J.R.R. Tolkien's Medieval Scholarship and its Significance", *Tolkien Studies*, IV (2007): p. 135.
[49] Drout, Micheal D.C., *J. R. R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, Routledge, New York and London, 2007, pp. 59-60.
[50] Chance, Jane, *Tolkien's Art: A Mythology for England*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 2001, p.5.

Titania preside lacks the internal consistency and sophistication that characterize the imaginary worlds of modern fantasy; and yet, it still represents an environment where impossible things happen, metamorphoses take place and supernatural creatures live and come into contact with the main characters from the "primary world". Hence, it can be concluded that *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, even though its plotline and structure are extremely different from Spenser's grand poem due to the fact that it is a play that was meant primarily to be staged, still partakes of some of the conventions of fantasy, both in the remarkably diverse sources upon which it draws (e.g. classical mythology, Celtic folklore, French epic), and in how the two worlds of rationality and irrationality are pitted against each other.

The third group refers to Victorian fantasy, and may be represented by the *Alice* books. It includes works that can be fully accepted as belonging to the genre, even though the awareness towards its literary conventions is not so acute as in the following century. Edith Nesbit's fantasies can be placed in this category as well, since she wrote between the end of the Victorian and the beginning of the Edwardian Age. William Morris's *The Wood Beyond the World* is the first nineteenth-century novel in which the full potential of High Fantasy was fulfilled[51]; as Mathews explains, his contribution to the genre was substantial because "[b]y creating a fully consistent and coherent fantasy reality, he in effect provides a parallel world, a world of correspondences (...) where imagination can shape alternative ideals"[52]. Along with Kingsley's *The Water Babies* and MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*, Sullivan considers Morris's fantasy as one of the works that set the stage for subsequent fantasy, both in the following century and in how we read it nowadays[53].

The fourth group is exemplified by Tolkien's fantasies, and includes all his imitators, as well as those who have tried to create something completely different, but always

[51] Sullivan III, p.103.
[52] Mathews, p.52.
[53] Sullivan III, p.104.

acknowledging his legacy. It is modern fantasy as we know it today: its stories generally develop over several books, the hero and his/her quest represent the pivot around which the whole plot revolves, characters belonging to different species and races are involved, and it conventionally closes with a happy ending. As a genre, fantasy has been increasingly burgeoning, and many works are now familiar to a wider audience by virtue of the film adaptations that have been made (again, Tolkien's fantasies represent a case in point). Some of the possible reasons why fantasy has always received wide acclaim, and shows no sign of waning, will be discussed in the next section, devoted to singling out some of the recurrent themes of the genre.

The aim of this drastic simplification has been to trace a general pre-history of fantasy by showing how some of the best-known texts of all times include elements and conventions that would later lay the foundations for a more consciously developed literary genre[54]. It goes without saying that if we accept Sullivan's stance[55] (which is widely shared among literary critics and experts in fantasy), the first two groups cannot be treated as fantasy; nonetheless, far from questioning any scholarly approach to the genre, or calling into question its chronological borders, my objective here is to show how literary texts that appeared long before the modern and contemporary age can prefigure what is universally accepted as fantasy.

[54] For a more exhaustive account of the history of fantasy literature, see Mathews, R., *Fantasy*; and Mendlesohn F. and James E., *A Short History of Fantasy*.
[55] see above, p. 16.

1.3 The themes of fantasy

So far I have attempted, firstly, to illustrate the most compelling theoretical approaches to fantasy literature that have been put forward, and, secondly, to outline a general pre-history of fantasy by mentioning some of the best-known fictional narratives of all times and their contribution to the genre as we know it nowadays. In this section I shall explore some of the recurrent themes of modern fantasy; the reason for this is that many of them can be traced in *The Faerie Queene*, even though they are only hinted at, or however not as finely developed as they have been in more recent works. Once again, for the reasons discussed in the previous sections, Tolkien's works will be profusely referred to, and taken both as a sample to single out the main themes of modern fantasy, and as a benchmark against which Spenser's poem will be measured to explore how it relates to fantasy.

1.3.1 The dignity of fantasy

Before presenting the reader with a list of the dominant motifs of fantasy literature, I would like to spend a few words in order to dispel some of the common beliefs that in several circumstances have led to the disparagement of this genre. In particular, fantasy has been belittled on account of three damning critiques, that is to say that it is formulaic, childish, and escapist.[56] Now all scholars specialized in the genre unanimously agree that such ideas are

[56] Hunt, p. 2.

groundless and based on a superficial reading, or in some cases a complete misreading of the texts.

The first idea that fantasy is formulaic is reminiscent of Attebery's conception of "fantasy-as-formula", and basically conceives it as a set of structures and patterns that are established *a priori*, thus leaving very little space for creativity and originality (Hunt refers to such constraints as "the grip of formula"[57]). It is an idea that does have a grain of truth, since fantasy literature indeed features several stock elements that cannot be overlooked and that every fantasy author cannot ignore or leave out: the questing hero, the strong opposition between good and evil forces, the presence of supernatural creatures, the importance of magic are just some examples. However, several writers have succeeded in showing how these conventions did not prevent their imagination from flourishing and bringing elements of originality into their works. For instance, Tolkien took elements from traditional fantasies, such as dragons and wizards, but he also created brand-new fantasy creatures (the hobbits), or refashioned other existing characters (e.g. the elves, the dwarves, or the Balrog, a monster that shares some features with traditional dragons, but also displays some peculiarities that place him on a different level); Le Guin's originality lies in the fact that she started one of the most important trends in the 1970s, that is to say "the move of some science fiction writers across the borders into a solid identification (at least on the part of their readers) with fantasy"[58]. Furthermore, the abiding success of fantasy and its continuous development into new branches or sub-genres represent the most irrefutable evidence that this kind of literature is much more than a formulaic, conventional, ready-made set of rules.

The second idea that fantasy is childish links it to children's literature, a genre to which fantasy is undeniably akin. As a genre, fantasy has been targeted for being simplistic, for lacking complexity and sophistication; what lies at the roots of this critique is the idea that a

[57] Hunt, p. 3.
[58] Mendlesohn, Farah, and James, Edward, *A Short History of* Fantasy, p. 91.

literary output that has been specifically meant for children, or for an uneducated reader, should be placed on a lower level, since it does not touch on any philosophical or psychological issue. Leaving aside the idea that rating the dignity of every literary genre would be an extremely thorny process, there is no doubt that fantasy literature and children's literature conceal a degree of complexity that legitimates them to claim at least the same status as "mainstream literature" (this term is commonly used by critics to refer to all those works that are indisputably recognized as literature, regardless of their genre). Ever since its origins and its early forms, fantasy has always grappled with themes that lie at the heart of the existence of every human being: its heroes are tasked with combating dark and evil forces, the destiny of the whole universe depends on their actions and their success, and the danger of death and concern over what a potential afterlife would be like are always looming over their adventures. The fact that fantasy literature lends itself to giving vent to imagination, and that it has proved highly suitable to treat universal themes which appeal to all ages, definitely accounts for its enduring popularity and success.

The third critique presented against fantasy concerns its escapist function; in other words, writers are accused of inventing a secondary world whose creation makes no sense precisely because it is secondary and cannot realistically exist. However, it should be borne in mind that all literature is in a way creation and fiction, and realistic literature itself is not a complete, one-to-one reproduction of the world; even Joyce's remarkable attempt to meticulously narrate twenty-four hours in Dublin cannot be a completely faithful record of real events. As for fantasy, it has been downplayed for being escapist because, as the term suggests, it escapes real problems, it avoids tackling complex or metaphysical issues by seeking refuge in a world that has nothing to do with our reality; it is evident how this idea is related to the one previously discussed, according to which fantasy is childish. However, any in-depth analysis of fantasy reveals that "invented worlds cannot be 'merely' places of wonder

or delight: they must mean something else (morally, rather than inevitably) if they are to be interesting or valuable"[59]. In Spenser's Fairy Land the eponymous Queen Gloriana and other characters, along with many events that take place throughout the poem, are reminiscent of historical facts that were familiar to the reader of the Renaissance; for instance, the enemy of Book V, Grantorto, whom Artegall has to fight to rescue Irena, has been associated with the oppressive power of Catholicism, and especially with the figures of the Pope and Philip II, the King of Spain. In the following centuries the level of sophistication of invented worlds has increased; it has gathered momentum thanks to the flourishing of utopian and dystopian literature, where "each world is in part set up as a comparator of our own"[60]. Manlove notes that this process can be exemplified by Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), a work "in which the impulse for social criticism is paramount, and we are continually aware of reference to our own world"[61]. Thus, it is clear that setting a story in another world does not necessarily imply being escapist; rather, it means using a different tool to deal with themes and issues that are still familiar to contemporary readers.

In attempting to explain how formulaic, childish and escapist are labels that not only play down the importance of the genre, but also fail to understand its deeper meaning and structure, many of the recurrent motifs of fantasy literature have already been mentioned. In the remainder of this section I will sketch some of the thematic building blocks that are considered stock elements of all modern fantasy narratives.

[59] Hunt, p. 5.
[60] Manlove, Colin, *The Fantasy Literature of England*, p. 40.
[61] Ibid.

1.3.2 Good vs Evil

First of all, the juxtaposition between Good and Evil is the hallmark of all fantasies, from the ancient classical epics to more modern works of fiction, from Tolkien's widely acclaimed masterpieces to the diverse sub-genres in which fantasy appears in the bookshops nowadays. In this respect, what distinguishes fantasy from other genres is the fact that Good and Evil are polarized to such an extent that could not be possible in a mature real world[62]; in other words, the reader has no doubts about who the hero and the antagonist are, as the separation between the two contrasting forces is always clearly demarcated. This glaringly obvious binary opposition is one of the reasons why fantasy has been disparaged for being simplistic, a critique which has been raised also against other fictional genres, such as fairy-tale and myth; however, in his landmark essay "The Structural Study of Myth" (1955) Claude Lèvi-Strauss argued that:

> [t]here are different sorts of complexity. A myth is complex vertically, as it were; it lays out its pairings again and again, piling opposition upon opposition. The same binary pair might show up on one level as eternally battling forces; on another as complementary components of a whole (...). Finding the binaries is only the first step. Then one must look for the way they are bundled, and for the ways the groupings change throughout the narrative.[63]

[62] Hunt, p. 5.
[63] Attebery, Brian, "Structuralism", in Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, p. 95.

Although Lèvi-Strauss's analysis focuses on myth, Attebery observes that it can be applied to fantasy as well[64]. In many ancient and modern fantasies there are indeed moments in which Good and Evil either take turns or coexist within the same character. For example, in the final part of *The Fellowship of the Ring* Boromir tries to seize the Ring from Frodo in order to take it to Gondor and wield its power against Sauron, but he eventually repents and is redeemed through his death in the vain attempt to prevent Marry and Pippin from being kidnapped by the orcs; Saruman is another example of a character who was initially good, as he was the leader of the Istari, but then is driven by lust for power and decides to join Sauron in order to seize the Ring and take dominion over Middle-earth; in the *Harry Potter* saga the situation becomes more complicated because it is only in the final book that we discover that a piece of Voldemort's quintessentially evil soul has always lived inside Harry (which accounts for him being able to speak Parseltongue, and for the strong mental connection that the two have); and it is always at the end of *The Deathly Hollows* that the backstory of Severus Snape is uncovered, and the reader realizes that he has been playing the part of a Voldemort's henchman all along, while in fact his only intention was to protect Harry. This shows how in more recent works of fantasy the borders between Good and Evil have become increasingly blurred. This aspect undoubtedly impinges on the reader's reaction, because no one, while reading Tolkien's trilogy, feels sorry after the death of an orc, or is disappointed to read that Sauron in eventually vanquished; on the other hand, it is far more likely that a reader sympathizes with Snape and is moved by his poignant death at the hands of the Dark Lord, regardless of how he acted in the previous books. Even Voldemort, despite being the cruellest of all characters and the epitome of Evil, is given a psychological dimension and a backstory when Rowling narrates his childhood in *The Half-Blood Prince* by virtue of some past memories that Harry is able to access through Dumbledore's pensieve; it turns out that he has

[64] Attebery, Brian, "Structuralism", p. 92.

not always been the serpent-like deformed monster that craves to take control over the whole magic community, but he was Tom Riddle, the son of a Muggle who had to go through a lonely childhood in an orphanage, and was then admitted to Hogwarts, where he started to hatch a plot to kill his father and to nurture the desire to achieve immortality and become the most powerful wizard ever.

This level of integration and sometimes overlapping between Good and Evil cannot be observed in *The Faerie Queene*, where the plots of the various quests are still anchored in a fixed polarization between the two forces; no matter if the protagonist errs, is defeated or yields to temptation in some circumstances, the reader never has any doubt whatsoever about the Redcrosse Knight being the good, exemplary hero, and the dragon being his ultimate antagonist, repository of pure evil to be vanquished at all costs. Nor is any antagonist or monster associated with emotions, given a human-like psychology or a backstory. The intermediary or "secondary" characters also occupy a well-defined position in this polarization: Archimago, Error, Duessa, Lucifera, Orgoglio are some of the antagonists from Book I, and all they do is try to hinder Redcrosse from fulfilling the quest that Gloriana has assigned him.

1.3.3 Quest and identity

The quest theme is another topos which is not exclusive of modern fantasies, but can be traced as far back as the most ancient epics and myths: after his friend Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh sets out on a quest to seek a secret to achieve immortality; Jason and the Argonauts travel far and wide to find the Golden Fleece; Odysseus's long and perilous journey back to Ithaca is not the classical quest for a magical object, but takes the shape of the

'nostos', a coveted homecoming after the decade-long Trojan War. As W. H. Auden points out,

> [t]o look for a lost colar button is not a true quest: to go in quest means to look for something of which one has, as yet, no experience; one can imagine what it will be like but whether one's picture is true or false will be known only when one has found it.[65]

Therefore, looking for food, water or clothes is not going on a quest, unless they are symbolic, magical and supernatural objects, whose search entails adventures and considerable dangers for the hero. The most emblematic example is probably the quest for the Holy Grail, which basically consists in a hero (traditionally one or more of King Arthur's knights) that sets out on a journey to find the sacred chalice from which Jesus Christ is reported to have drunk during the Last Supper[66]. Tolkien's contribution to the quest theme is once again outstanding: he reversed it by assigning his hero the task of undertaking a journey to destroy a magical object rather than search for it. In his trilogy, "[r]ather than seeking a dragon hoard (as did Bilbo) or the Grail (as did Arthur's knights), Frodo must throw away the powerful magic yet remaining in Middle-earth"[67]; this is an element of originality that distinguishes *The Lord of the Rings* from traditional ancient and medieval quest stories. Although it is evident how the quest theme is not exclusive to fantasy per se, today it has acquired a broader meaning than the concrete hunt for a specific object that it had originally with the legend of the Holy Grail: Bilbo's journey is a quest to deliver Erebor from the dragon Smaug, the

[65] Auden, W. H., "The Quest Hero", online version [https://www.scribd.com/doc/279341368/auden-hero-quest, accessed May 2019].

[66] This is only a simplification of a centuries-old legend which has been passed down the ages in various forms; the Grail is a magical and miraculous object with different powers, such as healing and giving eternal youth, happiness and abundance to those who find it. It is commonly represented as a chalice, cup or vessel, but in less notorious versions it also takes the shape of a dish or a stone.

[67] Miller, David M., "Narrative Pattern in *The Fellowship of the Ring*", in Jared Lobdell (ed.) *A Tolkien Compass*, Open Court, Chicago and La Salle, 2003, p. 94.

Pevensie siblings' adventures are a quest to save Narnia from the White Witch, Harry's search for the Horcruxes is a somewhat traditional quest, whose aim is to destroy the magic objects that are sought out rather than take possession of them and benefit from their powers, and also the adventures of Spenser's knights in Fairy Land are quests insofar as each of them has been entrusted with a specific task by Gloriana. Such tasks are no ordinary actions in that they entail facing dire perils of all sorts; they range from slaying a dragon and marrying a princess in Book I to killing a malevolent witch in Book II, from looking for the true love despite not knowing him (in the case of Britomart in Books III and IV) to vanquishing the Giant Grantorto and dealing out justice in Book V, or chasing down the infamous Blatant Beast in Book VI.

In virtually all works of fiction the quest for a magic object goes hand in hand with a subtler, more psychological motif, that is the inner quest for identity: as explained by Melanson, "the outward journey is an apt metaphor for the parallel inner search for identity, for the elusive true self and the sense of wholeness such a goal promises"[68]. In modern and contemporary fantasy this inward journey is more sophisticated and nuanced by virtue of round characters endowed with a deeper psychological characterization; the fact that today fantasy generally takes the shape of a novel, or rather of groups of novels or sagas, allows the reader to follow the heroes on their quests for a longer period, thereby making their growth and their maturation more palpable. In *The Faerie Queene* all of the characters are by and large archetypes who fully belong to either the sphere of Good or of Evil, and thus they act accordingly. Unlike most modern fantasy heroes, Spenser's characters never experience doubt or anxiety, they never question whether they are following the right path or not, they never reflect upon their role in the world; and yet, their journey and their adventures in Fairy Land can be read as a quest for identity, as a twofold process that is not only meant to bring order,

[68] Melanson, Lisa Stapleton, *The Hero's Quest for Identity in Fantasy Literature: a Jungian Analysis*, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 1994, p. 2.

justice and other moral values into their world by fulfilling the mission that they have been given by Gloriana, but it also takes the shape of a personal inner growth.

Furthermore, the leitmotif of identity is not limited to a journey of self-discovery on the part of the protagonists, but it frequently relates to the broader field of national identity. While ancient epics were specifically meant to lay the foundations of the culture of an entire population, modern fantasy does not have the celebration of national identity among the priorities of its agenda; nevertheless, to a greater or lesser degree, it often includes references to peculiarities of a national culture. From Tolkien's Shire and his Hobbits' lifestyle, which remarkably bring to the reader's mind the idea of Englishness, to Harry Potter's magic school and his life outside it among the Muggles, it is easy to notice how fantasy characters, their actions and their settings are highly influenced by, or in some cases they fully embody, the most widely shared components of a certain national identity, but also its common places and stereotypes. No further example is needed here, since I shall devote the next chapter to the discussion of how both personal and national identity are played out in *The Faerie Queene*.

1.3.4. Medievalism and nostalgia for the past

Another recurrent feature concerns the pervasive sense of nostalgia for the past that characterizes both the setting of the stories and the actions of its characters. The events of every fantasy unfold in an imaginary world which is given a certain temporal dimension; sometimes the chronology is explicitly given by the narrator, whereas in other circumstances no dates are given and the reader needs to infer the time where the story is set. In post-war fantasy such sense of nostalgia often acquires a specific, historical connotation, since it points

to a lost empire, to the desire and curiosity to explore faraway unknown lands that would never be colonized[69]. However, by and large it can be observed that the vast majority of fantasies are set not in the contemporary age, but in a previous era that can range from antiquity to the Middle Ages.

Medievalism, that is to say the revival of traditions and customs which were typically associated to the Middle Ages, is a paramount theme in fantasy literature, for it constitutes the backdrop against which many of the events take place. One of the greatest contributions was given by William Morris, whose fantasies feature "a medievalized faery universe of heroes and maidens, witches and wonders, which has little to do with our reality or any possible one"[70]. Therefore, it would not be inappropriate to qualify Morris's late prose romances as escapist; tapping into the Victorian fascination with the Middle Ages and the Arthurian legends, he creates worlds that are totally unrelated to ours, thereby "setting up a thorough-going fiction within the fantastic world"[71] that he creates.

Tolkien and Lewis, arguably the most famous and influential medievalists of all time, took this process a step further, since their secondary "medievalized worlds devoid of technology"[72] cannot be regarded as mere escapes. Tolkien's works were written during World War II, but Middle-earth bears no traces of jet fighters, cannons, shotguns, bombings, or similar things. His intimate knowledge of medieval literature was not second to his mastery in crafting and adapting it to his legendarium. Although it is a secondary world so carefully devised that the narrator provides the reader with its calendar and division into the different ages in which the events take place, the description of Middle-earth and of its denizens is highly reminiscent of medieval society: people fight with swords and shields, with bows and

[69] Petrina, Alessandra, "Nuovi mondi, altri universi: la *fantasy* dal secondo dopoguerra a oggi", in Laura Tosi and Alessandra Petrina (eds.), *Dall'ABC a Harry Potter: Storia della Letteratura Inglese per l'Infanzia e la Gioventù*, Bononia University Press, Bologna, 2011, p.317.
[70] Manlove, Colin, *The Fantasy Literature of England*, p. 43.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Manlove, Colin, *The Fantasy Literature of England*, p. 49.

arrows, with axes and spears, they ride horses and combat in either duels or open warfare. Tolkien's medievalism is by no means escapist; Bilbo called to act as a burglar in *The Hobbit* anticipated the scenarios of World War II, where ordinary men had to fight the most monstrous forms of evil[73]. *The Lord of the Rings* still carries a strong Christian message since Frodo has to give up on his domestic life in the Shire in order to save the world[74]; however, religion is never explicitly depicted in Middle-earth, as neither the trilogy nor *The Hobbit* include mentions of gods or rituals.

On the contrary, Lewis's medievalism shows evident references to religion; the best example is Aslan's sacrifice to save the world, which is highly reminiscent of Jesus Christ's. Although Tolkien and Lewis shared an abiding passion for and a sound knowledge of medieval literature, so much so that they used to meet up at the Eagle and Child Pub in Oxford and read their works to each other, it is important to note that their medievalism draws on quite different sources: Tolkien's wellspring is mostly Germanic, and especially Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse, whereas Lewis blends together a wider variety of sources, as is exemplified by a scene in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, in which a family of squirrels, two satyrs, a faun and a fox celebrate together the visit of Santa Claus[75]. This episode, which brings together fictional characters from different traditions, was harshly critiqued by Tolkien, who disapproved of its lack of consistency[76].

Although different from Tolkien's and Lewis's works, a medieval background can be detected in *The Faerie Queene* too; even though it was written almost four centuries earlier, and the Middle Ages were not as far back in time as they were for Tolkien's audience, Spenser's world is not a depiction of his contemporary society, but harks at least one or two centuries back to the medieval world of chivalry and courtly love, of tournaments and jousts.

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[73] Lurie, Alison, *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups. The Subversive Power of Children's Literature*, Little, Brown, Boston and New York, 1990, p. 158.
[74] Petrina, p. 325.
[75] Petrina, p. 323.
[76] Ibid.

Perhaps the most significant element of medievalism in Spenser's poem is the role performed by King Arthur; the fact that he is not confined to one single book, but his presence spans the whole poem is revelatory of the importance that he acquires as a character. Since the implications of such a choice are intimately related with the theme of national identity, a more detailed discussion will be postponed to the following chapter on the Spenserian hero, in which a section will be specifically devoted to the legendary Briton king.

Furthermore, in the proem of Book V the poetic voice broaches the topical theme of the relationship between a lost golden antiquity ("the golden age"[77]) and a forlorn and corrupt modernity ("a stonie one"[78]), where all ancient values have been abandoned and justice (the virtue around which the entire book is centered) has been turned upside down:

> For that which all men then did vertue call,
> Is now cald vice; and that which vice was hight,
> Is now hight vertue, and so us'd of all:
> Right now is wrong, and wrong that was is right,
> As all things else in time are chaunged quight.
> (Book V, Proem, stanza 4, lines 1-5)

Besides its medieval characterization and the juxtaposition between a mythic past and a dreary modernity, *The Faerie Queene* shows another, probably more striking instance of nostalgia for the past, that is to say the pastoral and bucolic world, which is portrayed in Book VI, especially in cantos IX and X. Sir Calidore's quest is temporarily paused when he is attracted by the life of some shepherds that he meets while he is chasing the Blatant Beast. Spenser owes a huge debt to the pastoral tradition, not only in relation to the aforementioned

[77] Proem of Book V, stanza 2, line 1.
[78] Ibid.

cantos, but especially in the writing of *The Shepheardes Calender*, his major poetic collection that predates *The Faerie Queene* by over ten years. I shall explore how the bucolic world of Book VI relates to Calidore's quest in the next chapter, as the theme of a peaceful, humble and frugal life comes to the fore in other fictional works both before and after Spenser's time.

1.3.5. Magic and transformations

In attempting to define fantasy it has been noticed that supernatural, unnatural and impossible characters and events are among the basic ingredients of which the genre is composed. This results in their actions being supernatural too; in other words, characters avail themselves of instruments that allow them to do things that are not possible according to the laws of nature.

Magic is indeed a stock element of fantasies of all time. Initially, especially in the Middle Ages, it was believed to be pure evil; it is significant that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Oberon tells Puck: "But we are spirits of another sort"[79], meaning that he is not a wicked spirit whose only aim is to deceive the main characters, as Shakespeare's readers may have expected. In fact Oberon's words dissociate him from the spirits of the dark, even though he concedes to Puck that they must act swiftly and finish their work before dawn[80]. Today we are more used to seeing magic deployed to pursue beneficial ends and save the world, since its use is embedded in the lingering tension between Good and Evil. Consequently, we can

[79] Shakespeare, William, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, 2006, Act 3, scene 2.
[80] Bevington, David, "'But We Are Spirits of Another Sort': The Dark Side of Love and Magic in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", in Richard Dutton (ed.), *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, New Casebook series, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1996, p. 25.

find good wizards, like Gandalf, who act to protect the hero, versus evil magic, epitomized for example by the Dark Lord Sauron, and later on by Saruman in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The wizard is a stock character in fantasy literature, and over the second half of the twentieth-century up until the present there has been an increasing interest in this figure, as well as a sort of reshaping of its role. From being a traditional helper, as in the cases of Merlin and Gandalf, it has gained the status of protagonist of a whole saga in the *Harry Potter* series; from the old, experienced, wise, bearded man who knows the ways of the world, it has developed into a teenager who goes to school, makes friends, has love stories with his classmates, learns from his/her mistakes, and lives a quite common life. Le Guin pioneered this shift in her *A Wizard of Earthsea*, which explores what the life a young wizard is like: we find Ged, the protagonist, in a magic school which anticipates Hogwarts, the iconic School of Witchcraft and Wizardry where young wizards and witches study different subjects, have a fixed weekly schedule, as well as holidays, homework and exams.

In these worlds punctuated by magic one recurring theme that stands out on account of its age-old tradition and its role within the plotlines is that of transformations and metamorphoses. The *Harry Potter* saga is crammed with transformations, and their importance in Rowling's magic community is testified by the fact that 'Transfiguration' is a subject that all students must mandatorily study at school, where it is taught by Professor Minerva McGonagall. Other than this, students also attend classes of 'Potions' and learn how to prepare the Polyjuice Potion, a sleight of hand to which they resort multiple times since it allows them to assume the form of any other character for a limited amount of time; some characters have developed such great transfiguration skills that they can turn into an "Animagus", that is, they can assume the shape of an animal at their will and for as long as they want, as it is the case for Sirius Black changing his shape into that of a black dog; Professor Lupin is doomed to transform into a werewolf every full moon as a consequence of

lycanthropy, a degenerative metamorphosis which he cannot control but only keep at bay by virtue of the Wolfsbane Potion; other transformations include the world of 'Herbology', another school discipline that allows Harry to take on a fish-like shape and breathe underwater, and the numerous ghastly forms in which Voldemort appears throughout the saga, from the back face of Professor Quirrell in *The Philosopher's Stone* to the serpentine quasi-human monster after his comeback in *The Goblet of Fire*.

In Rowling's blockbuster saga the motifs of magic and transformation arguably reach their climax. However, they represent an ancient literary convention that dates as far back as literature itself; the most famous and influential work that deals with such themes is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a fifteen-book narrative poem that comprises myths and legends of old in which transformations constitute a common thread. It is a work that had an enormous impact on all Western literature; it served as a source of inspiration for many of the best-known authors of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, such as Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton and, last but not least, Spenser himself. After Ovid's influence declined in the following two centuries, Manlove notices that metamorphosis was still a recurrent theme in the nineteenth-century, both in Victorian children's literature (especially in the period 1840-80), and in Victorian adult fantasy[81]; such interest in transformations stemmed from the appeal held by the notion of plasticity "in an era increasingly surrounded by so many solid and heavy manufactured objects, not to mention the rigidities of moral and religious codes"[82].

In *The Faerie Queene* magic and metamorphoses represent both a recurrent motif and a device since they provoke several misunderstandings and mishaps. The two themes are often intertwined, especially when it comes to one of the opponents of Book I, namely the treacherous wizard Archimago. Lyne argues that Ovidian intertextuality underlies the whole

[81] Manlove, Colin, *The Fantasy Literature of England*, p. 173.
[82] Ibid.

poem, but it is possible to notice "a decrease in the presence of Ovid from Books I-III to Books IV-VI, before a resurgence in the Mutability Cantos"[83]. Since the very first canto Archimago tries to deceive Redcrosse and lead him astray; when he makes his first appearance he looks like a poor, old, wise hermit on a pilgrimage:

> An aged Sire, in long blacke weedes yclad,
> His feete all bare, his beard all hoarie gray,
> And by his belt his booke he hanging had;
> Sober he seemde, and very sagely sad,
> And to the ground his eyes were lowly bent,
> Simple in shew, and voyde of malice bad,
> And all the way he prayed, as he went,
> And often knockt his brest, as one that did repent.
> (I.I.29.2-9)

Spenser's usage of the verb "seemde" (for "seemed", line 5) can be read as a hint that, despite his appearance, Archimago does not fit into the figure of the wise benevolent sage. In fact, he turns out to be a deceitful magician only a few stanzas later in the same canto, when he summons Morpheus and other gods and spirits from the underworld in order to conjure nightmares into Redcrosse. This is also the moment in which one of the several metamorphoses of the poem takes place: Archimago casts a spell on one of the spirits and makes it assume the form of Una in order to coax Redcrosse into thinking that he has sexually abused her during the night. When the wizard finds out that his tricks are not working, he turns another spirit into a young knight so that Redcrosse is deceived into believing that Una

[83] Lyne, Raphael, *Ovid's Changing Worlds: English Metamorphoses 1567-1632*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, p. 84.

has slept with him; this scheme works out better, as Redcrosse is distraught by what he thinks is Una's behaviour, and makes up his mind to resume his quest and leave her behind the following morning. Other subsequent metamorphoses in the same book include: Archimago taking on the shape of Redcrosse, Duessa (a witch who is also a master in transformations) turning Fradubio into a tree, and constantly changing shape herself (so that Redcrosse believes that she is a beautiful princess named Fidessa), Archimago transforming again into a pilgrim at the end of canto VI, and into a messenger at the end of canto XII, when he makes one last attempt to blame Redcrosse for being unfaithful to Una.

In the following books that narrate the events of Fairy Land magic continues to play a crucial role, not least because Book II begins with Archimago who manages to escape after being imprisoned at the end of the preceding book. The most striking instance of magic is provided by the story of Florimell and her duplicate: in Book III the beautiful young virgin takes shelter in the house of a witch whose son falls in love with her; after she escapes, he is desperate and her mother magically crafts a Florimell look-alike who is identical to the real one. Here the themes of duplicity and of reality vis-à-vis appearance come to the fore again, after they had already represented a central motif in Book I, especially with the figures of Una and Duessa, whose names basically mean "one" and "two". On the one hand, the real Florimell strives to protect her virginity from numerous sexual advances, including one from the sea god Proteus, who is a shape shifter and brings back the theme of metamorphosis, as he transforms into a Fairy Knight in the vain attempt to seduce her; the iconography of Proteus, who also shows up in *Colin Clouts Come Home Again*, derives principally from Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Georgics*, and in the Renaissance the water deity is given "the paired attributes of shape-changing and prophecy"[84]. On the other hand, the false Florimell is claimed by many would-be knights who actually cannot separate out semblance from reality;

[84] Hamilton, A. C. (ed.), *The Spenser Enclyclopedia*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Buffalo and London, 1990, p. 560.

in addition to the braggart Braggadochio, who wants her but is too coward to fight, Blandamour, Paridell, Claribell, and Duron are the four knights who duel in a tournament to win the love of false Florimell, before the trick is eventually laid bare in Book V, canto III, and the replica vanishes. Besides the presence of look-alikes, monsters and otherworldly creatures, other supernatural elements include the magic items that are used by many of the heroes: Arthur's sword, his squire Timias's horn, the healing potion that Arthur gives Redcrosse, Britomart's spear, Merlin's glass and Cambell's magic ring are the most iconic examples.

1.3.6. Eucatastrophe and happy ending

As far as the plot of fantasy is concerned, there are a few more elements which are worth mentioning in this attempt to provide a synopsis of the genre. In his "On Fairy-stories" Tolkien does not distinguish fantasy from fairy tales or fairy stories as Nikolajeva and modern critics do[85], which is one of the reasons why his essay is considered outdated; however, in addition to the concepts of Secondary World and 'sub-creation' already discussed, he comes up with some engaging ideas about the structure and development of fantasy stories (or 'fairy-tales', to use his terminology).

One is definitely the "Eucatastrophe", a term coined by Tolkien himself which is derived from the combination of two Greek words, that is to say "eu", meaning good, and "catastrophe", which refers to a sudden, unexpected turn of events; he alters the common meaning of "catastrophe" as a disastrous, tragic event, and confines it to "Dyscatastrophe",

[85] See above, p. 22, and Nikolajeva, Maria, "Fairy Tale and Fantasy: From Archaic to Postmodern", *Marvels and Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, XVII (2003), pp. 138-156.

whereas Eucatastophe points to the exact opposite idea, according to which the evil forces are about to triumph when a sudden coup de théâtre, a plot twist, changes the course of the action. *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as other ancient and modern works of fiction, is replete with scenes that adhere to this pattern: when the army of Rohan is besieged at the Helm's Deep and is on the brink of being defeated by the orcs of Saruman, Gandalf arrives with reinforcements led by Erkenbrand; when Gondor is attacked by the armies of Mordor and is on the verge of succumbing, the arrival of King Theoden from Rohan first, and of Aragorn and the armies of the Dead Men of Dunharrow afterwards are the events that turn the tide of the Battle of the Pellennor Fields and determine the final victory over the forces of Sauron. In *The Faerie Queene* there are several moments that can be qualified as Eucatastrophes. One of the most emblematic is certainly Redcrosse's imprisonment at the hands of the giant Orgoglio in Book I; here the quest seems to have come to a standoff or, even more tragically, to a dead end, since the hero is thrown into the dungeons of Orgoglio's castle. It is Arthur's intervention the eucatastrophic event that determines a plot twist; he slays the wicked giant and rescues Redcrosse, thus allowing his quest to resume. It is worth bearing in mind that this pattern, according to which there is a sudden turn of events, is not exclusively found in fantasy literature or fiction, but the aforementioned polarization between Good and Evil makes it part of the backbone of this genre, because it plays a crucial role in the tension towards the final victory of Good over Evil.

The happy ending is another controversial issue; according to Tolkien, it is a necessary convention that cannot be left out from any fairy story.

> Far more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending. Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it. At least I would say that Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is

> true of Fairy-story. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite — I will call it Eucatastrophe. The eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function.[86]

This is one of the most controversial passages of "On Fairy-stories"; its flaw lies in the fact that Tolkien places on the same level two literary genres, namely fairy stories and tragedy, that are markedly different from each other regardless of their ending being happy or unhappy. We have seen how a play that is conceived first and foremost to be staged like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can partake of many conventions of fantasy literature, but in the passage quoted above Tolkien is trying to establish a far-fetched connection between fairy stories and drama by setting them up as polar opposites. However, despite this unfitting mention of drama, he makes an important point, that is to say that the happy ending is a distinctive feature of fantasy as he conceives of it; he then adds that the Eucatastrophe is the device through which it is attained. The question becomes vexed if we take into account the distinction between fairy tale and fantasy and the different nuances that the two genres display; as has been formerly discussed, the "happily ever after" is a set formula of all fairy tales, at least in their traditional and best-known versions, whereas modern fantasy, especially after Tolkien, does not seem to require a happy ending, or at least not in the same terms as it is achieved in fairy tales. Typically, in works of fantasy the hero fulfils his task, vanquishes his enemies, but there is no (or not necessarily) "happily ever after": at the end of *The Return of the King* Frodo, together with a group of other characters, leaves for the Grey Havens, but there is no mention that he will live forever, since, when the time comes, he will have to face death as all the mortal peoples of Middle-earth. Moreover, victory may be achieved at very

[86] Tolkien, J. R. R., "On Fairy-Stories", online version [http://heritagepodcast.com/wp-content/uploads/Tolkien-On-Fairy-Stories-subcreation.pdf, accessed September 2019].

high prices, as in the case of Harry Potter, who, in addition to being an orphan, is forced to witness the death of many people dear to him before he is finally able to defeat Voldemort.

In discussing the happy ending in *The Faerie Queene* we should not neglect the fact that Spenser's poem as we now read it today is not the final product that its author had originally devised; therefore, we do not know how the events were supposed to unfold in Fairy Land after the Blatant Beast manages to break free in Book VI, and we are not able to fully interpret the episode of Mutabilitie in the two surviving cantos of Book VII, as they do not seem related to any quest previously narrated. However, all the single missions with which Gloriana has entrusted her knights are successfully accomplished, and thus the happy ending is indeed present in the poem: Redcrosse wins his battle against the dragon, Britomart eventually meets Artegall, who in his turn succeeds in defeating Grantorto, and Calidore eventually captures the Blatant Bleast. This traditional trajectory, which follows the hero along many dire perils and life-threatening situations but eventually leads him/her to the final victory, prompts us to think that Spenser had originally conceived a happy ending for the whole twelve-book poem, in which King Arthur ended up marrying Gloriana in a union which would not be exempt from symbolical and political allusions. Many other narrative threads are left off by the narrator and, despite suggesting that they are going to be picked up in later books, they never reach a dénouement: at the end of Book I Redcrosse is engaged to Una but does not marry her immediately because he has other duties to fulfil, and yet the two are never reunited again; likewise, after meeting Britomart, Artegall has to leave her because he must go and deal out justice in Fairy Land and fight Grantorto together with his squire Talus, which is what all Book V is all about in a nutshell; and finally, after Calidore manages to subdue the Blatant Beast, the slanderous monster escapes and no one knows if he will ever be tracked down again, thus concluding the whole poem with a somewhat open ending.

1.4 Propp's functions and Greimas's actantial model

While the previous section has been devoted to the analysis of the most recurrent thematic elements of fantasy literature, here I shall explore the genre from a structural point of view by focusing on two compelling approaches, namely Propp's functions and Greimas's actantial model. As previously discussed, modern fantasy has been targeted for being formulaic both in its modern, stricter, temporally circumscribed dimension and in its broader meaning that comprises ancient fictional narratives. The idea that there is a formula, a fixed pattern that underlies every manifestation of the genre has made it particularly suitable for structuralist studies.

In brief, the origins of structuralism date back to Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), and it can be defined as "a way of thinking that works to find the fundamental basic units or elements of which anything is made"[87]; therefore, it represents an approach that can be adopted not only in the field of literature, but also in anthropology, mathematics, linguistics, sociology and other areas of cultural criticism. Today it is no longer as fashionable as in the 1960s and 1970s[88], since it is clear that a literary text cannot be analyzed merely by looking at its structure, but there are other elements that should be factored in. Nevertheless, it still represents an insightful mode, as every approach labelled as 'poststructuralist', 'semiotic', or even 'deconstructionist' builds upon structuralist concepts[89].

The Russian Formalists represent a remarkable example of structuralism, and in particular Vladimir Propp's study on the folktale proved hugely influential in the field of literary criticism. While today the fact that fairy tales always appear in a fixed pattern seems

[87] Klages, Mary, *Literary Theory. A Guide for the Perplexed*, Bloomsbury Academic, London and New York, 2006, p. 31.
[88] Attebery, Brian, "Structuralism", p. 91.
[89] Ibid.

obvious, nobody before Propp had brought to light this aspect. Despite not dealing with fantasy literature, his *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) focuses on a genre that is akin to fantasy and presents some observations that can also come in handy for the scope of the present study. It is also worth remembering that in 1928 there was no awareness of what fantasy literature was, not least because Tolkien's theoretical essay "On Fairy-stories" and his fictional masterpieces would be published a couple of decades later. And yet, besides shedding light on the structure of the magic folktale, which is what is commonly referred to as fairy tale, Propp's groundbreaking study influenced much other critical research that came in later years. He analyzed a vast corpus of fairy tales belonging principally to the Russian tradition, and he discovered that they all follow the same pattern and display the same functions, regardless of the characters that perform them. He broke down the fairy tale to 31 functions, which he listed with the rigour of a scientist; not all of them necessarily show up in any fairy tale which is taken under scrutiny, but their order cannot be altered. There is no space here for an in-depth analysis of all thirty-one; however, by and large they "can be grouped into larger movements such as preparation, complication, struggle, return, and recognition of the hero"[90]. Such pattern can be traced in many modern fantasies, for example it is easily noticeable in Tolkien's and Le Guin's novels; *The Lord of the Rings* "conforms to the morphology described by Propp: a round-trip journey to the marvelous, complete with testing the hero, crossing of a threshold, supernatural assistance, confrontation, flight, and establishment of a new order at home"[91]. If we bear in mind that not all of the functions listed by Propp must mandatorily be included, it is possible to notice that even ancient epics such as *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid* partake of this pattern.

As far as *The Faerie Queene* is concerned, the heroes' quests seem to adhere to Propp's scheme too, even though in different ways. It is rather evident that the conventional sequence,

[90] Ibid.
[91] Attebery, Brian, *Strategies of Fantasy*, p. 15.

which starts with a journeying hero/heroine who comes across perils and hardships, but subsequent to such complications is able to succeed and fulfil his/her quest, can be detected especially in Books I, II, V and VI; all of them revolve around one single knight, whose name is explicitly written at the beginning of each book along with its title and the virtue that s/he embodies. To mention just an example from Book I, this starts with Redcrosse's quest to slay the dragon; although the reader discovers only in a later moment (canto VII, stanzas 43-44) that the reason behind such perilous quest is that the dragon has imprisoned Una's parents in their own castle, this may be reminiscent of Propp's first function, namely "absentation". In this case Una's parents (we could also say Redcrosse's prospective in-laws) does not physically absent themselves from home, but the presence of the dragon basically alienates them because they are reduced to the status of prisoners in their own kingdom; and even though this is not made explicit in the opening cantos, it still is the reason why Redcrosse's quest becomes necessary. The thirty-first of Propp's functions is "wedding", according to which "the hero is married and ascends the throne"[92]; although Redcrosse and Una do not marry at the end of Book I, they become engaged, which suggests that they will marry in the future, after Redcrosse has completed all the tasks that the Fairy Queen has assigned him. In mentioning the variables of this function, Propp states that "[i]f a new act of villainy interrupts a tale shortly before a wedding, then the first move ends with a betrothal, or a promise of marriage"[93]; in this case the new act of villainy is represented not by Archimago's last-ditch attempt to blame Una for being unfaithful, since he is promptly unmasked, but by the other unmentioned quests that Redcrosse has to embark on before eventually being allowed to marry Una. Nonetheless, the book does end with a betrothal, and thus it can be argued that Propp's thirty-first function is fulfilled. These are only two examples of how Book I begins and ends with the first and the last of Propp's functions, albeit in a slightly varied form.

[92] Propp, Vladimir, *Morphology of the Folktale*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1968, p. 63.
[93] Propp, p. 64.

Throughout the book, and throughout the whole poem, they recur over and over again, with a major difference in Books III and IV, which follow the adventures of Britomart, but present a less linear structure.

After listing and describing all the thirty-one functions, Propp proceeds to analyze how they are distributed among the dramatis personae, which he calls "spheres" and we commonly call "characters". He distinguishes 7 spheres of action:

- the Villain;
- the Donor;
- the Helper;
- the Princess (and her father);
- the Dispatcher;
- the Hero;
- the False Hero.

There is not always a one-to-one correspondence between characters and spheres of action, but one character may be involved in several spheres, or they can be split between two or more characters. Book I of *The Faerie Queene* can be taken as an example to see how this model can be applied to the poem. The Villain is first and foremost Archimago, who schemes to hinder the Hero from fulfilling his quest; however, this function is also performed, albeit to a lesser degree, by other characters, such as Error, Duessa, Lucifera, Orgoglio, and ultimately the dragon, which the Hero needs to slay in order to free Una's parents and bring peace back to their kingdom. The Donor may be traced in the figure of King Arthur when he gives Redcrosse a magic potion that can heal any wound; however, the legendary King of Camelot also acts as a Helper when he intervenes to free Redcrosse from the Castle of Orgoglio. Again, he shares the sphere of action of the Helper with other characters: the dwarf who accompanies Redcrosse along his journey, Una, and Caelia, in whose house the hero is

spiritually regenerated and prepared for his final battle against the dragon. Less complex is the situation of Una, who can thoroughly be identified with the sphere of action of the Princess, even though in this case she is not properly "a sought-for person"[94], but she journeys with Redcrosse to rescue her parents and their kingdom. The Dispatcher is on a first reading Una's father, but ultimately Gloriana, the Faerie Queene herself, since she has given the quest to the Redcrosse Knight, who in his turn perfectly embodies the sphere of Hero. As for the False Hero, the closest character to this figure is arguably Archimago; by assuming different shapes he tries to abduct Una and have a relationship with her, and such a function reaches its climax at the very end of Book I, when he suddenly shows up at Una's parents' court asserting that Redcrosse has been unfaithful to Una, thus trying to present himself as the real Hero and to lay claim on the princess.

Propp's breakthrough analysis proved fundamental for later criticism because many studies were built on his model, and even those who criticized his ideas still used his study as a point of departure. One of the critiques raised against Propp is that he concentrated solely on the Russian fairy tale; while seeking to carry out a study as scientific as possible, he left out many other narrative genres which do not necessarily share the same features that he included in his list, in the same order that he provided. Lèvi-Strauss received the same kind of criticism for his analysis of the myth, which he broke down to basic units named "mythemes". Among the different approaches that have been put forward, one which is worth mentioning is A. J. Greimas's actantial model.

Greimas was a French literary critic whose studies blended together structuralism and semiotics. Building on Propp's model, he postulated a level of thought prior to language, which is constituted by purely logical and conceptual oppositions that are not given any

[94] Propp, p. 79.

anthropomorphic shape, that is to say they are not embodied by a specific character[95]. Such oppositions are made up of units called "actants" and represent the basis for his model. When they are given "rôles", or individuating qualities, they become "actors" ("acteurs") or characters, as we commonly call them[96]. This implies that characters of fairy tales or myths are more actants that actors, since they are rather abstract and do not display a complex psychology; less scientifically they are referred to as "flat characters". On the contrary, characters of a modern novel are more likely to partake of the actors than of the actants, since the reader's attention is drawn more to their "history, relationships, motives, habits, ethical dilemmas, quirks and every internal contradictions" than to their role as heroes in a quest for love and fortune[97]; they have been commonly called "round characters". The structuralist influence on Greimas's model can be clearly seen from the fact that he identifies six actants, which necessarily show up in binary pairs:

- Subject vs. Object;
- Giver or Sender vs. Receiver;
- Helper vs. Opponent.

The Subject corresponds to Propp's "Hero", and therefore can be clearly associated to the function performed by the Redcrosse Knight in our case-study. The Object is what the Subject desires and pursues, and corresponds to Propp's Princess, or "sought-for person"; it is personified by the character of Una for the same reasons that account for her association with Propp's Princess. However, Greimas's approach, though it may seem identical to Propp's, lays stress on the fact that Subject and Object are structurally, logically, formally opposed, and they are defined in relation to one another: what quintessentially characterizes the Subject is that he/she pursues the Object, and what quintessentially characterizes the Object is that

[95] Scholes, Robert, *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1974 p. 103.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Attebery, Brian, "Structuralism", p. 92.

he/she is pursued by the Subject, regardless of the characters, or rather the actors, that fulfil these functions. Such paired opposition was totally absent in Propp's analysis, which only provided a list of dramatis personae, of "spheres", without providing rules to explain how they were linked.

Likewise, Sender ("destinateur") and Receiver ("destinataire") only work in relation to each other; they cannot be fully identified with any specific function among those described by Propp, but the Sender has been loosely compared to the Dispatcher. This association works in Spenser's Book I insofar as the Sender is defined as the actant who sends the Subject on his/her quest in pursuit of the Object; it can be identified with Gloriana, since her role is clearly stated as early as in canto I, in which her importance is emphasized by two anaphoric and alliterative lines (2-3) that identify her as the one who has assigned the "Gentle Knight" a quest, even before specifying what such quest is about:

> Vpon a great aduenture he [Redcrosse] was bond,
> That greatest *Gloriana* to him gaue,
> The greatest Glorious Queene of *Faerie* lond,
> To winne him worship, and her grace to haue,
> Which of all earthly things he most did crave
> (I.I.3.1-5)

As for the Receiver, it has been defined as the entity that receives the Object pursued by the Subject. In the paradigmatic quest for the Holy Grail the Receiver is the whole of humanity, since God (Sender) sends the Hero (Subject) in pursuit of the legendary Grail (Object)[98]. In the case of Redcrosse's quest, we need to ask ourselves who benefits from the final victory

[98] Scholes, p. 105.

over the dragon in order to identify the Receiver. Thus, this actantial role can be performed primarily by Una's parents, who have been imprisoned by the dreadful monster, and ultimately by all the members of their kingdom and of Fairy Land, since slaying the dragon means eradicating a source of evil and sorrow from Spenser's imaginary world. Greimas points out that in some narratives Subject, Object, Sender and Receiver can be represented by two actors only, as in the case of a simple love story, in which the boy could be both Subject and Receiver, and the girl Object and Sender[99]; in more complex stories, such as the Grail quest or the adventures of Gloriana's knights, they are all performed by different actors.

Last but not least, Greimas adds one more binary opposition, namely the Helper and the Opponent. This was clearly borrowed from Propp, but once again Greimas underscores the dual relationship in which they stand with each other. More specifically, Propp's Helper and Donor are subsumed in Greimas's Helper, since it is assumed that a character who gives the Hero a magic object to help him succeed in his/her task is performing both of Propp's functions at once. As a consequence, the role of Arthur in Book I does not need to be split between two "spheres of action", but can safely be labelled as Helper. On the other hand, the Opponents are clearly a legacy of Propp's sphere of "villainy"[100], and they also include the False Hero considering that such figure always acts against the real Hero.

Propp's and Greimas's approaches are not the only structuralist studies of fictional narratives that have been carried out, and they have both been critiqued for being arbitrary since everyone could potentially come up with their own list of functions (or spheres, or actants); and yet, they still represent a compelling example of how we can gain a deeper understanding of the structure of a text. Besides showing through a selection of examples that they can be applied to Book I of *The Faerie Queene*, I have decided to discuss them for the scope of this thesis because Greimas's actantial model, and in particular the opposition

[99] Ibid.
[100] Propp, p. 79.

between Helpers and Opponents, will be picked up in the third chapter devoted to animals and fantastic beasts; the two actors that I will analyze, namely the lion and the dragon from Book I, perform precisely the role described by these two actants.

2. The Spenserian Hero

This chapter will analyze some of the heroes that stand out in *The Faerie Queene* by virtue of the role they play within the poem, of their possible relationship with other characters of fantasy literature, and of their references to the historical and literary contexts that influenced Spenser in shaping them. After a brief overview on the significance of allegory in the Renaissance, and on how Spenser made use of this practice, I shall investigate four characters taken from the poem: King Arthur and the so called Matter of Brittany, the Redcrosse Knight and his direct reference to English national identity through the legend of Saint George and the dragon, Britomart and her somewhat unusual role as a female knight, and Sir Calidore and his visit to the bucolic and pastoral world of Pastorella and Meliboe.

2.1 Heroes and allegories: a Renaissance practice

The first aspect deserving of attention in the analysis of Spenser's heroes is the fact every knight embodies a virtue. Although he does not directly borrow his list of virtues from Aristotle, as he claims in his prefatory "Letter to Raleigh", Spenser's moral aim is made explicit by choosing such virtues as the common thread of the different books. Each of them begins by naming its protagonist, the knight whom Gloriana has entrusted with a mission, alongside the virtue that he/she embodies:

- The Redcrosse Knight is the embodiment of Holiness;
- Sir Guyon is the knight of Temperance;
- Britomart is the knight of Chastity;

- Book IV is an exception since, as per the title, its heroes are supposed to be Cambell and Telamond (who never shows up in the poem[1]), the embodiments of friendship; however, they are not knights on a quest, but rather secondary characters who make their appearance in a limited number of cantos;
- Artegall embodies Justice;
- Sir Calidore embodies Courtesy.

Scholars have long strived to identify the source on which Spenser drew for his selection of virtues; Hankins suggests that they have been inspired by *Vniversa Philosophia de Moribus* (1583) by Francesco Piccolomini[2]; building on Aristotle's work, its author attempted to speculate as to what unnamed virtues might be comprehended within those mentioned by the famous Greek philosopher[3]. Additionally, his work also accounts for Spenser's treatment of magnificence, the virtue embodied by Arthur, which is the most perfected, as it includes all the other ones; although Piccolomini does not explicitly regard magnificence in this way, he compares it to the role played by charity among the theological virtues, a role which he describes as "the mother, root, nerve, form, and spirit of all other virtues"[4].

The relationship between knights and virtues in *The Faerie Queene* is momentous for the understanding of how the plot develops, since the protagonists are not simply static representations, but the fact that they embody a certain virtue means that they are called to act accordingly. The adventures of Redcrosse and the successful accomplishment of his mission are embedded in a Christian undertone that is not only limited to the red cross which is painted on his shield and on the breastplate of his armour, and after which he is named; from

[1] There is no Telamond in the whole book. Some critics argue that he is to be identified with the three brothers, Priamond, Diamond and Triamond, since their destiny is strictly linked to one another; other editions propose to identify Telamond with Triamond, the youngest of the three who eventually marries Cambell's sister, Canacee.
[2] Hankins, John Erskine, *Source and Meaning in Spenser's Allegory. A Study of the Faerie Queene*, Oxford University Press, London, 1971, p. 2.
[3] Hankins, J. E., p.3.
[4] Hankins, J. E., p.8.

Error to Lucifera and the personifications of the seven deadly sins, the enemies that he has to face before the final showdown against the dragon carry strong religious connotations. This idea, according to which Spenser's knights are meant to be the perfect fulfillment of the virtues that they embody, recurs in every book.

In this respect Book V represents another outstanding example, even though it has often been regarded as the least popular and successful book of the entire poem; here Artegall and his travelling companion Talus (an "yron man"[5]) relentlessly deal out justice. Again, the hero's quest is basically an escalation in the administration of justice in Fairy Land before facing Grantorto and freeing Eirena and her land from his tyranny. In canto I, for example, Artegall is arbiter in a controversy between a squire and a knight who both claim a lady; when, echoing the judgement of Solomon[6], he proposes to cut the lady into two half and only the knight agrees, whereas the squire is willing to give up on her rather than seeing her body split in two, Artegall finds out the truth and punishes the deceitful knight. In so doing, he always avails himself of Talus's help; Talus personifies the execution of Justice, which is often carried out violently if necessary: "Pollente (...) has his head exhibited on his castle walls, as a warning to others; Munera is drowned in the castle moat, having first had her golden hands and silver feet chopped off and nailed on high; the Giant is unceremoniously thrown off the cliff"[7]. Talus is indeed the prime example of how justice can degenerate into violence, so much so that Britomart has to stop his fury against Radigund's people in Canto VII:

> Yet when she [Britomart] saw the heapes, which he [Talus] did make,
>
> Of slaughtred carkasses, her heart did quake

[5] V.I.12.2.
[6] For this episode Spenser drew on I Kings 3.16-27.
[7] Hadfield, Andrew, "*The Faerie Queene*, Books IV-VII", in Andrew Hadfield (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spenser*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 130-131.

For very ruth, which did it almost riue,

That she his fury willed him to slake

(V.VII.36.4-7)

In addition to the main heroes, most of the other characters partake of the conventions of allegory by virtue of their name. In some cases their allegorical meaning is only alluded to: for instance, Una represents truth as her name literally means "one", unequivocal and unambiguous; Duessa represents falsehood as her name means "two", thereby pointing to her double-faced and treacherous demeanour; Eirena has a double meaning since her name is derived from the Greek "*eiréne*" (peace) but carries also a pun on "Erin", an Irish name that alludes to Ireland. In other circumstances the allusion is made all the more explicit by naming the characters after the virtue or vice that they allegorize: for instance, Error is the personification of "error" in that he tries to lead Redcrosse astray; the same goes for Despair, Furor and Occasion; sometimes their name is borrowed from other languages, as in the case of Orgoglio, the Italian word for "pride", and Grantorto, Italian for "great wrong".

That being said, it is worth bearing in mind that allegories are much older than *The Faerie Queene*; they represent a practice whose origins can be traced as far back as the earliest forms of literature, such as Homer's epic poems. While some ancient philosophers "imposed" allegory upon Homer to defend him from charges of immorality that had been pressed by other poets, it is undeniable that his poems "contain not a few genuine allegories, not imposed, not merely excogitated by the poet's over-zealous defenders, but intended by him and actually implicit in his own words"[8]. Some examples of such allegorical, or quasi-allegorical figures in Homer are: Terror (Deimos), Rout (Phobos), Discord (Eris), Uproar

[8] Small, G. P. Stuart, "On Allegory in Homer", *The Classical Journal*, XLIV, 7 (1949), p. 423.

(Kydoimos), and Destruction (Ker); all of them are allegorized by naming them with their ancient Greek term, in the same way Spenser portrays Error, Orgoglio, etc[9].

In a way, as Frye notices,

> all commentary is allegorical interpretation, an attaching of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery. The instant that any critic permits himself to make a genuine comment about a poem (e.g., "In *Hamlet* Shakespeare appears to be portraying the tragedy of irresolution") he has begun to allegorize. Commentary thus looks at literature as, in its formal phase, a potential allegory of events and ideas.[10]

This means that, as in the case of Homer, oftentimes critics provide an allegorical interpretation of a literary work even if its author did not specifically conceive it as that allegory. Tolkien himself, despite admitting *a posteriori* that his work carries a notable religious undertone[11], felt the urge to counter many allegorical interpretations of his texts; in his "Foreword" to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings* he states that his masterpiece has no "inner meaning", and that it is "neither allegorical nor topical"[12]. He then goes on:

> [o]ther arrangements could be devised according to the tastes or views of those who like allegory or topical reference. But I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. (...) I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but

[9] Ibid.
[10] Frye, Northrop, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1971, p. 89.
[11] Tolkien, J. R. R., *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, eds. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien, online version [https://timedotcom.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/the_letters_of_j.rrtolkien.pdf, accessed September 2019].
[12] Tolkien, J. R. R., "Foreword" to *The Lord of the Rings. The Fellowship of the Ring*, Del Rey, 2012, p. x.

the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.[13]

By drawing a clear line between applicability and allegory, Tolkien clearly wants to distance himself from any allegorical or symbolical reading of his work; in other words, he roundly rejects statements along the lines of "Frodo's journey is the journey of all humankind".

Frye picks up on this idea when he asserts that through the use of allegory "the poet explicitly indicates the relationship of his images with examples and precepts, and so he tries to indicate how a commentary on him should proceed"[14]. By and large, it is safe to say that this is not applicable to Tolkien, since in no part of his novels does he suggest that a certain character should be interpreted as the embodiment of a virtue or that an event stands for something different from and on a bigger scale than its role in the plot[15]. On the contrary, Frye's observation can easily apply to Spenser; by naming his characters Error, Lucifera, Orgoglio, Dispair, etc. or by linking every knight with a virtue, he legitimates an allegorical interpretation upon them. For example, Error is not simply a monster, but it takes on a deeper meaning, as it alludes to error in life, to going astray and taking the wrong path; it is this interpretation that captures the essence of allegory, a word whose Greek root means "say, speak" ("*agoreúo*") and "other" ("*állos*") precisely because it refers to something else, other than its literal meaning in the context of the plot.

However, in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance allegories gained impetus and came to represent a widely used practice not only in literature, but also in the field of the visual arts.

[13] Tolkien, J. R. R., "Foreword" to *The Lord of the Rings. The Fellowship of the Ring*, pp. x-xi.
[14] Frye, Northrop, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 90.
[15] To be meticulous, the names of Tolkien's characters too are not chosen at random but carry a deeper meaning; for example, Saruman is the Mannish translation for "Curunír", a word that in Sindarin means "Skilled Man" or "Cunning One", thus alluding to two qualities that definitely characterize the wizard. However, for the sake of my argument, it should be noticed that such process is extremely different from the naming of characters in *The Faerie Queene*: while Tolkien's names are rooted in his invented languages and his passion for philology, allegories are what lie at the heart of Spenser's poem in its entirety.

Dante, Spenser, Tasso and Bunyan are probably the best-known authors that made use of this practice throughout their works; as Frye argues, the narrative of *The Faerie Queene* "systematically refers to historical examples and the meaning to moral precepts, besides doing their own work in the poem"[16]. Here, by mentioning "historical examples", Frye is referring to those episodes and characters that have a clearly identifiable historical counterpart. One of the most representative examples is the trial of Duessa (Book V), which has been straightforwardly read as "an allegory of the trial of Mary, Queen of Scots"[17], an interpretation so close to the poet's intention that "James VI was seriously offended by the allegory and demanded that Spenser be punished"[18]; arguably, this is the reason why after Mercilla's virdict of guilty, the actual execution of Duessa is not described within the poem[19].

This shows how *The Faerie Queene* is a multi-layered allegory, in that it unfolds on multiple levels. First of all, it is a moral allegory insofar as its ultimate objective is "to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline"[20]; the moral intention is self-evident even for an unlearned reader, as every episode revolves around the personification of a virtue fighting the forces of evil, which take on multiple different shapes throughout the six books. In this respect it is significant that the poem starts with Redcrosse's rooting out of Error in her pitch-dark cave. The second level on which allegory operates in *The Faerie Queene* is the religious one, which is naturally linked to its moral intention. Una's and Duessa's names have been identified respectively as the Protestant Church and the Catholic Church of Rome: the former is faithful to its humble origins, whereas the latter is false and double-faced. In addition to their names, this interpretation is bolstered by how the two characters are depicted. Such contrast can be appreciated by their first appearance on the scene:

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[16] Frye, Northrop, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 90.
[17] Hadfield, Andrew, "*The Faerie Queene*, Books IV-VII", p. 133.
[18] Hadfield, Andrew, "*The Faerie Queene*, Books IV-VII", pp. 133-134.
[19] Hadfield, Andrew, "*The Faerie Queene*, Books IV-VII", p. 134.
[20] See "The Letter to Raleigh", quoted above in chapter 1.

A louely Ladie rode him faire beside,

Vpon a lowly Asse more white than snow,

Yet she much whiter, but the same did not hide

Vnder a vele, that wimpled was full low,

And ouer all a blacke stole she did throw,

As one that inly mournd: so was she sad;

And heauie sat vpon her palfrey slow;

Seemed in heart some hidden care she had,

And by her in a line a milke white lambe she lad.

(I.I.4.1-9)

The image that emerges from this stanza is that of a lady whose main attributes are beauty, purity and humility. These qualities underscore her identification with the Protestant Church, which rose out of the desire to retrieve the lost simplicity and humility of the corrupted Church of Rome. In the stanza quoted above, this idea is conveyed by words such as "lowly" and "low", which literally describe something not tall, but allegorically point precisely to her quality of being humble. The animal imagery is also explicitly evocative of Biblical scenes: the "Ass" on which Una is riding is reminiscent of Jesus's triumphal entry in Jerusalem narrated in the Gospels, and the "white lambe" is a reference to the Lamb of God. Both animals are low, in the sense that they are humble, and they are both described by Spenser as white, which adds to the aura of purity that surrounds the character of Una. By contrast, Duessa's first appearance characterizes her as the exact opposite of purity:

He [the Saracen/Sans Foy] had a faire companion of his way,

A goodly lady clad in scarlot red,

Purfled with gold and pearle of rich assay,

And like a *Persian* mitre on her hed

She wore, with crownes and owches garnished,

The which her lauish louers to her gaue;

Her wanton palfrey all was ouerspread

With tinsell trappings, wouen like a waue,

Whose bridlerung with golden bels and bosses braue.

(I.II.13.1-9)

Duessa's "scarlot red" dress accounts for her association with the Scarlet Whore of Babylon of the Book of *Revelation* in the Bible, an image that is repository of falsehood, lust and blasphemy. She flaunts her opulence through elements such as "gold", "pearle", the "*Persian* mitre", "crownes and owches", and "golden bels and bosses braue"; all these elements mark a stark contrast with the purity and simplicity that characterize Una. Duessa is the epitome of false and deceitful appearance, as she is never what she looks like; from a religious point of view she has been identified with the Catholic Church of Rome, which had to face multiple accusations of spreading sin and corruption in Spenser's days. This reference brings us to the third dimension of Spenser's allegory, that is to say the historical (and sometimes political) level; there are several allusions to historical events in the poem, and Duessa's association with Catholicism, as well as her process in Book V (see above), are definitely some hints that Spenser's contemporaries could not miss.

What is more, Spenser himself authorized an allegorical reading of his *magnum opus* not only through the names of his characters, but at the very start of the "Letter to Raleigh" he openly discloses his ultimate intention of writing an allegorical work by pointing out that:

> knowing how doubtfully all Allegories may be constructed, and this booke of mine, which I have entituled *The Faery Queene*, being a continued Allegory, or darke conceit, I haue thought good, aswell for auoyding of gealous opinions and misconstructions, as also for your better light in reading thereof, (being so, by you commanded,) to discover vnto you the general intention & meaning, which in the whole course thereof I haue fashioned (...)[21]

Furthermore, allegories are intimately related with another widespread convention in the Renaissance, that of "Emblems", symbolic representations of virtues and vices composed of a body (an image) and a soul (a motto, usually in Latin). It is a tradition that has its roots in the Middle Ages, where the so called *tituli* "perpetuated the habits of joining words to a picture"[22]. However, it gained momentum in the Renaissance, especially thanks to Andrea Alciati's *Emblemata* (1531), which definitely represents a cornerstone in the tradition; in his book the Italian jurist and lexicographer included over two hundred emblems and laid out the principles to be followed by anyone who wanted to make use of them. In this respect, another book that was hugely influential in both literature and the visual arts was Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1593; enlarged edition 1603); as Brooks-Davies notices, its publication follows *The Faerie Queene* by few years, which is why Spenser did not have it on his table when he wrote *magnum opus*[23]. Nevertheless, Ripa's work represents a compendium of all the allegories that had been used starting from the depiction of virtues and vices in ancient Greek and Roman sources up until the late sixteenth century; therefore, it is very likely that Spenser,

[21] Spenser, "The Letter to Raleigh", p. 15.
[22] Heckscher, William S., "Renaissance Emblems: Observations Suggested by Some Emblem-Books in the Princeton University Library", *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, XV, 2 (1954): p. 58.
[23] Brooks-Davies, Douglas, "Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. A Critical Commentary on Books I and II", Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1977, p. 6.

despite not knowing Ripa's *Iconologia*, was knowledgeable about his sources and familiar with the material dealt with by the Italian iconographer[24].

One classical example is that of Justice, which was commonly portrayed through scales, the same image that Spenser uses in one episode in Book V, canto II: here Artegall confronts a Giant holding precisely a pair of scales in his hand and claiming that wealth should be redistributed following strictly egalitarian lines. Before having him thrown off into the water, the hero of Justice rebuts that everything is set in its natural position, and such harmony, which has been ordained by God, must take into account the differences between the diverse elements of which the world is composed. What is significant in this episode is the fact that the image of scales certainly struck a chord with the Renaissance reader owing to the well-known practice of associating it with Justice.

In modern and contemporary literature the practice of using allegories has dwindled, if not disappeared, at least in the terms on which it was conceived in the Renaissance. In an age where works of fiction are centered on round characters, it is no longer appealing to read about people who bear the name of a virtue or a vice; modern fantasy heroes have either real or invented names, but still feature human traits to which readers can generally relate. Some characters, as well as some books, can be read as allegories; it is easy to interpret *The Chronicles of Narnia* as a Christian allegory, but in this case all the Biblical references just provide a sort of background or parallel story. On the contrary, in *The Pilgrim's Progress* the Christian allegory is not merely a background or a source of interpretation to shed light on the plot; rather, it constitutes the story itself, the real essence of a plot whose protagonist himself is named Christian.

Hence, it can be observed how Spenser, despite setting his poem in a secondary world punctuated by fictional characters and supernatural occurrences, deploys conventions with

[24] Ibid.

which his contemporary audience was very familiar. The relationship between modern fantasy and allegory is a rather complex one, as it is clear that modern fantasy does not build its plots upon the practice of allegory in the same way Spenser or Bunyan did; this is due to the fact that, as discussed earlier on, fantasy and allegory are per se slippery concepts upon whose definition there is no universal scholarly agreement. Lynette Hunter's study *Modern Allegory and Fantasy: Rhetorical Stances of Contemporary Writing* (1989) sets out to distinguish between the two terms, which have been object of a confusion "rooted in materiality and belief – in other words in rhetoric"[25]. And yet, this study creates even more confusion; in her review E. Ann Kaplan provides a trenchant critique of Hunter's work by cogently arguing that its author never comes up with a clear distinction between fantasy and allegory, which was supposed to be its ultimate aim. In addition to decrying her language as "opaque" and full of mistakes, Kaplan criticizes Hunter's obsession with definitions and classifications; she quotes Derrida, who said that "[e]very text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, *yet such participation never amounts to belonging*"[26].

Be that as it may, if modern fantasy cannot be considered a fully-fledged allegory in the manner as Spenser, it seems to have left at least a legacy. While in modern fantasy it is neither common nor fashionable to name characters after a virtue or a vice, it is nevertheless possible to trace an allegorical trajectory in works where the struggle between Good and Evil represents the dominant motif that lies at the heart of every plot, especially if we take on the concept of "allegory" in the broad way designated by its etymological meaning "to say something else". In this respect, Aslan's sacrifice in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* has been analyzed as an allegory of Christ's sacrifice, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (in spite of its author's protestations and rejection of allegory) has been seen as an allegory of World

[25] Hunter, Lynette, *Modern Allegory and Fantasy: Rhetorical Stances of Contemporary Writing*, Macmillan Press, Basingstoke and London, 1989, p.1.
[26] Kaplan, E. Ann, "Review of *Modern Allegory and Fantasy: Rhetorical Stances of Contemporary Writing*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, XXXVII, 2 (1991): p.341.

War I on account of its horrific battles and the final episode of the Scouring of the Shire, and Micheal Crichton's *Jurassic Park* features dinosaurs who have been interpreted as allegories of the misuse of genetic engineering on the part of scientists[27].

It can be concluded that the extent to which modern fantasy is, or makes use of, allegory is an open question whose answer depends very much on how these two concepts are defined and conceived by the reader; however, it is worth noting how literary genres such as fantasy and science fiction particularly lend themselves to being read allegorically as compared with realistic fiction.

2.2 Prince Arthur between history and legend

> I chose the historye of king Arthure, as most fitte for the excellency of his person, being made famous by many mens former workes, and also furthest from the daunger of enuy, and suspition of present time.[28]

Spenser's justification for choosing Arthur as the hero whose presence unifies the different books of the poem can be broken down into three reasons. First of all, his "excellency", a word that in Present-day English is used to refer to people who hold an important role or position (for example, an ambassador), but its Latin root is to be traced in the verb *excellere*, which means "to surpass". Therefore, it used to be referred to an

[27] For further examples see *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works and Wonders*, Gary Westfahl (ed.), Greenwood Press, Westport and London, 2005, p.19.
[28] Spenser, "The Letter to Raleigh", p.15.

outstanding quality or ability in doing something; Spenser links it with Arthur's "person", thereby implying that the ultimate hero of his poem is to be identified with someone who embodies thorough perfection only by virtue of his presence or appearance on the scene. Hence, it is clear how this choice is functional to "[t]he generall end (...) of all the booke", that is to say to fashion a virtuous and noble gentleman[29]. The other two reasons are more practical: Arthur's fame is what made him known by everyone, thanks to "many mens former workes", that is to say thanks to the numerous rewrites and retellings of the Arthurian legends; furthermore, the celebration of someone who lived several centuries before the publication of *The Faerie Queene* is a strategy to avoid any reference to contemporary politics or historical events ("suspition of present time"). This last mention can be interpreted in the light of an episode that had concerned Spenser himself: in *Mother Hubbard's Tale*, an allegorical poem written circa 1580 but published a decade later, Spenser lampooned the Elizabethan Church, and especially Lord Burghley and his project to marry Elizabeth to the Catholic D'Alençon[30]. Many attempts were made in order to suppress and censor this book since the influential politician did not receive well the satire that compared him to a fox in Spenser's tale.

The strategy of having Arthur show up in all six books is an interesting choice in that it allows him to perform different roles. A contemporary reader might be reminded of the *Narnia* books, each having a different hero or group of heroes, but the common presence throughout the saga is that of Aslan, the Christ-like majestic lion who makes his appearance in every book. Aslan is presented as the king of Narnia, thus referencing Jesus Christ as King, and many of the periphrases through which he is referred to in the Bible (such as "new David", "son of David", etc.).; Spenser's Arthur is not the consummate king ruling over Camelot, because he needs to find and marry Gloriana in order to accomplish his mission. In a way he is an anomaly: he is the most perfected hero, as he embodies all the virtues in his

[29] Ibid.
[30] Heinemann, Margot, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980, p.57.

character and partakes of the plot of every book, but he also lacks his own specific plot. In other words, we rarely see him on his own quest, undertaking his adventures to seek fame, but his appearance on the scene comes about only when he crosses paths with other characters.

His initial appearance in Book I, canto VII serves the purpose to break an impasse in Redcrosse's quest. The Knight of Holiness has been made prisoner in the dungeons of the Giant Orgoglio, and Una is desperate; she comes across a knight, whose description spans 8 stanzas (I.I.29-36) and qualifies him as a heroic and majestic figure. Particular emphasis is placed on his knightly attire (he is "arayed meet"[31], that is to say dressed properly, fittingly); all the paraphernalia of heroic knights are mentioned, namely his armour, his baldrick (a belt worn over one shoulder to carry a sword), his sword in an ivory sheath, his helmet with a dragon crest, his adamantine shield which no weapon can destroy. All these elements are decorated with precious and rich jewels and give an overall idea of brightness; two examples that are taken from the first stanza in which Arthur is described are: "His glitterand armour shined farre away, / Like glauncing light of *Phoebus* brightest ray" (I.VII.29.4-5), and "Athwart his brest a bauldrick braue he ware, / That shynd, like twinkling stars, with stons most pretious rare" (I.VII.29.8-9). The reference to "Phoebus", epithet of the ancient Greek and Roman god of the sun Apollo, is an epic simile that adds to the sense of glare created by the portrayal of Arthur; it is only the first of a series that goes on in the following stanzas: one stone of his baldrick is compared to the light of Hesperus, the evening star or planet Venus (I.VII.30.1-5), his shield radiates a light which is so blinding that it would dim even Apollo's golden face or eclipse Cynthia (the moon) in the same way magicians were believed to do (I.VII.34.6-9). Furthermore, Arthur's magic shield has been linked to other mythological images: Mitsi notices that "it recalls both the mirror-shield of Perseus, used to slay Medusa,

[31] I.VII.29.3.

and the petrifying gaze of the Gorgon"[32]; it has also been related to Atlante's shield in *Orlando Furioso* by virtue of its dazzling powers.

While Arthur qualifies himself as a noble knight right from the first stanza in which he is described, his identity is not immediately uncovered[33]. However, the reader, even if unaware of "The Letter to Raleigh", can infer who he is by means of the mention of Merlin in stanza 36, which also starts to give some information about his life:

> It *Merlin* was, which whylome did excell
> All liuing wightes in might of magicke spell:
> Both shield, and sword, and armour all he wrought
> For this young Prince, when first to armes he fell (...)
> (I.VII.36.4-7)

Merlin's role as Arthur's mentor and advisor, as well as his magic powers, is something that readers of every historical period are familiar with; Arthur is here referred to as a "young Prince" because he has not married Gloriana yet. It is in the following lines that his quest is revealed: after his death the Faerie Queene herself has decided to transport him into Faerie Land, where he lives in a sort of afterlife seeking her out in order to fulfill his destiny. Arthur's fame seems to be familiar to Una as well: after an epic combat in canto VIII, in which Orgoglio is killed, she calls him "Prince *Arthur*, crowne of Martiall band" (I.IX.6.5) even though he has not introduced himself before.

The role that Arthur performs in Book I, and by and large in the whole poem, is that of helper; he shows up, mostly by chance (or by virtue of a providential pattern, depending on

[32] Mitsi, Efterpi, "Veiling Medusa: Arthur's Shield in *The Fairy Queen*", in Mike Pincombe, *The Anatomy of Tudor Literature*, Ashgate Publishing, New York, 2001, pp. 131.
[33] Despite not being explicitly named within the actual canto, there is a "spoiler" in the few introductory lines ("*Prince Arthur meets with Vna...*"), so the reader is actually aware that Arthur will show up at some point and will talk to Una.

the take that one has) in order to help other characters and lead the plot towards what Tolkien would call "eucatastrophe", which the Professor deemed necessary and inescapable for every fantasy story. In Book II Arthur has the same function; he makes his appearance in canto 8 to help Guyon and the Palmer in their fight against Cymochles and Pyrocles. This battle proves extremely difficult for him, as he suffers serious wounds from the two brothers, but eventually he succeeds in killing both of them with only little help from the Palmer, who gives him Guyon's sword when he is disarmed. This episode parallels the fight against Orgoglio in Book I in that the titular hero of the book is knocked out and not able to give even a little contribution in the fight against the enemy: Redcrosse had been imprisoned, whereas Guyon lost consciousness and is believed dead. In other words, had it not been for Arthur's intervention, the quest of the titular hero would have not only come to a halt, but it would have resulted in utter failure.

This radically reverses all those critical approaches that in the past have considered the figure of Prince Arthur as a secondary character, a problematic presence and an unsuccessful, undeveloped figure in *The Faerie Queene*. One example of such interpretations is Thomas Warton's analysis that goes back to the Augustan Age:

> The poet [Spenser] ought to have made this 'brave knight' the leading adventurer. Arthur should have been the principal agent in vindicating the cause of holiness, temperance and the rest. If our hero had thus, in his own person, exerted himself in the protection of the twelve virtues, he might have been deservedly styled the perfect pattern of all, and consequently would have succeeded in the task assigned, the attainment of glory. At present he is only a subordinate or accessory character. The difficulties and obstacles which we expect him to surmount, in order to accomplish his final achievement, are removed by others. It is not he who

> subdues the dragon, in the first book, or quells the magician Busirane, in the third. These are the victories of St. George and of Britomart. On the whole, the twelve Knights do too much for Arthur to do anything; or at least, so much as may be reasonably required from the promised plan of the poet. While we are attending to the design of the hero of the book, we forget that of the hero of the poem.[34]

Warton did not mince his words: he calls "subordinate or accessory character" the hero that Spenser himself had devised as the "most fitte for the excellency of his person". To put it in another way, he maintains that Spenser's grand project fails precisely because Arthur's story in the poem is not only aborted, but even when he is present on the scene he is overshadowed by the other characters. Even a partial reading that takes into account Arthur's role only in Books I and II (in the episodes mentioned above) proves this interpretation wrong: while Warton claims that "the twelve Knights do too much for Arthur to do anything", it is clear that his intervention is crucial for the two titular heroes' quests. Therefore, in order to fully understand Arthur's role in the poem, one should not look at him as a classical independent hero, whose adventures proceed in a linear way; rather, his quest should be seen as intertwined with the other knights' quests, as if helping them in moments of grave peril and dire need was part of that ultimate mission of meeting with Gloriana, an event that is often alluded to, but never comes about.

My point in bringing up Arthur's role in Book II is also related to what the encounter and marriage between Arthur and Gloriana would signify. While in Book I Arthur disappears after defeating Orgoglio and releasing Redcrosse from prison, in Book II he stays longer with Guyon as they rest in the Castle of Alma. There they spend time with two ladies named Praysdesire and Shamefastednesse, and they also explore the castle. Their attention is

[34] Warton, Thomas, *Observations on 'The Faerie Queene' of* Spenser, R. and J. Dodsley, Oxford, 1754, pp- 5-6.

captivated especially by three rooms: in the first one a sage called Phantastes can tell the future, in the second another sage is highly knowledgeable about the present age (law, philosophy, politics, sciences, arts), and in the third one an old man named Eumnestes is sitting on a chair and a young boy named Anamnestes helps him whenever he wants to retreive any of the documents, scrolls and books that are part of the room. As their names suggest, these two sages are highly knowledgeable about history. The importance of past events and the retrieval of memories is a recurrent feature in modern fantasy, in which new discoveries about the past have considerable bearing on the present. Unlike science fiction, fantasy needs no time machine to travel back and forth in time; literary devices may vary to inform characters (and readers) about historical events or backstories that shed a new light on the hero's quest. One way of doing so is the writing of a prequel: Lewis published *The Magician's Nephew* in 1955 as the sixth book in order of publication, but the first in the chronological order of the history of Narnia, as it narrates its creation by Aslan. Another example consists in having an old character who tells the younger stories that they are not aware of: it is the case of the ageless Elf Elrond in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when during his council he informs Frodo and the other characters who gathered in Rivendell about the forging of the Ring of Power by Sauron, and the ensuing war against the Dark Lord, thereby giving a sense of how it all started and adding relevant information on the history of Middle-earth. In the *Harry Potter* saga another device is used, this time a magical one, namely Dumbledore's Pensieve; this basin can be filled with memories, which take on a liquid or gaseous form, and which can be explored at any time. Its importance is enormous since every time Harry looks into it he discovers things that utterly reverse his (and the reader's) perspective on the story. In *The Faerie Queene* this recollection of the past occurs when Arthur picks up a book in the room of Eumnestes; its title is "Briton moniments", and it deals with a record, a history of Britain. This historical account is not the most riveting part of the

poem, and yet it plays a crucial role by linking Arthur (and his prospective marriage with Gloriana) to a genealogy that goes as far back as Troy and the Roman times. In the meantime Guyon reads about the history of Faery Land; Arthur's book culminates with his father Uther Pendragon, and Guyon's with Tanaquill, another name for the Faerie Queene or Elizabeth I[35]. The fact that Spenser devotes one full canto to relate Arthur's and Gloriana's genealogies underlines the importance of giving a historical and royal lineage to his two main characters; it also suggests that "he views these chronicle histories as forming an integral part of the epic tradition, (...) and that a knowledge of the past is crucial in establishing both the identity of the hero and (...) the larger *telos* to which his mission is directed"[36]. This links back to the idea previously discussed that the past (or history) and the future (or destiny) are what define characters' identity and role.

Literary criticism has occasionally tried to pin down the allegory of Arthur by identifying him with a specific historical character, in the same way as Gloriana is a representation of Queen Elizabeth I. Once again, this idea is not devoid of problems, first of all because Spenser's allegory is multi-layered and polysemic, and secondly because not only did he leave his original plan unfinished, but he also revised it. Vitkus's article "The Unfulfilled Form of *The Faerie Queene*: Spenser's Frustrated Fore-Conceit" convincingly argues that the significant change in Spenser's original intention (his fore-conceit) is rooted in his disillusionment with what historians have called "the marriage question", that is to say the looming problem of Elizabeth's succession to the throne. According to this interpretation Robert Dudley, First Earl of Leicester, could be identified with the Prince Arthur of *The Faerie Queene* in Spenser's fore-conceit; he was Spenser's patron for some time and one of the most likely suitors to marry the Queen of England. A marriage between Leicester and

[35] The narrator had already referred to Gloriana calling her Tanaquill in the Proem to Book I; the name is taken from Caia Tanaquil, the wife of the fifth of the seven kings of Rome, Tarquinius Priscus.
[36] Bates, Catherine, "*The Faerie Queene*: Britain's national monument", in Catherine Bates (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 133.

Elizabeth I would stand for, in Spenser's original allegory, the ultimate union between Magnificence (Arthur) and Glory (Gloriana). Historical events witness the widespread belief that their marriage would eventually take place: when Leicester was sent to the Low Countries to fight the Spanish Catholic forces, "the preliminary spectacles that greeted Dudley represented a symbolic marriage with Elizabeth in which their personal impresae were joined with the inscription '*Quoa Deus coniunxit homo non separet*' – whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."[37] However, Leicester's secret marriage with Lettice Knollys was revealed in 1579, and subsequently Spenser's hope was frustrated and estinguished[38]; even though the first edition of *The Faerie Queene* was published in 1590, it is worth bearing in mind that Spenser had started to think about his grand poem and to write drafts as early as the mid-1570s, when the marriage question was extremely heated. Therefore, even if Leicester was the most likely candidate to marry the Queen back then, "Spenser was shrewd enough to come up with a conceptual blueprint for his prophetic project that would be adaptable to changing political conditions"[39]. In other words, the character of Prince Arthur allows for no straightforward identification with any historical character. If at least initially the identification with Leicester could have been plausible, later in the poem Spenser refuses to construct a one-to-one correspondence; he achieves such indeterminacy by having Arthur show up to allegorize historical events that took place even after Leicester's death[40].

As far as such historical events are concerned, ample evidence can be found in Book V. In addition to the trial of Duessa mentioned above, other examples include the tyranny of the Giant Gerioneo, associated with the Spanish oppression of the Low Countries, and Burbon's loss of his shield, a direct retelling of the king of France Henry IV's recusancy and conversion to Roman Catholicism. On the one hand, in the episode of Gerioneo the

[37] Frye, Susan, *Elizabeth I: The Competition for Representation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 93.
[38] Viktus, Daniel, "The Unfulfilled Form of *The Faerie Queene*: Spenser's Frustrated Fore-Conceit", *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, XXXV, 2 (2012), p. 86.
[39] Viktus, p. 93.
[40] Viktus, p. 110.

identification Arthur-Leicester works perfectly, as it was precisely Leicester who was sent by the Queen to help the Low Countries against the Spanish oppression; Belgae's "seuenteene goodly sonne" (V.X.7.4) stand for the seventeen provinces of which the Low Countries were composed, whereas stanzas 16-17, in which Arthur asks Mercilla permission to fight for Belgae's cause and then takes leave, allude to Leicester's acceptance of the governorship, an act that angered the Queen so much that "[s]he gave peremptory orders that he was to renounce the title as publicly as he had assumed it."[41] On the other hand, the episode of Burbon references a historical episode that took place roughly five years after Leicester's death; to be precise, it is worth pointing out that Arthur is not directly involved in this episode as he is in the fight that he wins against Gerioneo and his idol-beast, but he has just left a few stanzas earlier in order to keep pursuing his search for Gloriana. All these episodes, and Book V in particular, are heavily concerned with religion: Mary Stuart was a staunch Catholic who persecuted the Protestants, the pretext for the hostility between England and Spain in the Low Countries was their religious divergence, and Henry's "convenience conversion" is still nowadays remembered for his legendary line "Paris is well worth a mass".

There is no space here for an in-depth analysis of Spenser's sources in the shaping of the character of Arthur. He was certainly aware of some of those works that have always represented a cornerstone in the Arthurian tradition, namely Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (1136) and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485); Monmouth is credited with the introduction of some enduring Arthurian traditions, such as the figure of Merlin, whereas Malory's work crystallized the legends related to King Arthur as a medieval subject[42]. Such medieval dimension and background, despite being less historically accurate, has proved more fruitful across the centuries, and Spenser took it on board; he shapes the character of Arthur as a fully fledged medieval figure by virtue of his knightly accoutrements

[41] Neale, J. E., *Queen Elizabeth I*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1934, p. 293.
[42] Mendlesohn, James, *A Short History of Fantasy*, p.10.

and courtly behaviour, and by giving him a squire through the presence of Timias. In fact it is well to remember that the real King Arthur, if he actually existed, did not live in the Middle Ages; scholars concur that his life could be placed between the Late Roman Age and the Saxon invasion, that is to say between the fifth and the sixth century. His direct connection with the dawn of British history has contributed to make him one of the symbols of national identity, an idea on which Spenser drew when he planned to make him the champion of his *magnum opus*. Since its earliest sources the figure of King Arthur has always lived in the borderland between history and legend, which is the reason why the Arthurian matter has been, and continues to be, a wellspring for literature and cinema; as Mendlesohn and James note, the Arthurian cycle has periodically been revived to support the English monarchy[43]. Just to mention a few outstanding facts that testify to its enduring popularity and fame, Milton, the greatest poet of the generation following Spenser's, had originally planned to write his grand epic poem on King Arthur precisely for the reasons previously mentioned, and he later decided to deal with a Biblical subject instead; Alfred Lord Tennyson rewrote stories about Arthur and his knights in his twelve-poem cycle *Idylls of the King*, which has been read as an allegory of Victorian society, as "it strikes home most effectively when it clinches the heritage of legend with the power of contemporary belief"[44]. T. H. White's four-novel book *Once and Future King* (1958) is an example of modern fantasy that has been hugely influential and never out of print; characterized by anachronisms and playfulness, this collection of novels becomes darker in its tone as the story progresses, and it features themes that sound familiar to the reader of *The Faerie Queene*: some of them include the "depressing lament for a past age"[45], the reference to contemporary Britain[46], and the importance of Arthur's genealogy stressed by Merlyn at the end of *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, which,

[43] Ibid.
[44] Tucker, Herbert F., "The Epic Plight of Troth in Idylls of the King", *ELH*, LVIII, 3, (1991): 704.
[45] Mendlesohn, James, *A Short History of Fantasy*, p.32.
[46] According to Mendlesohn and James, T. H. White's work very much reflects Britain's experiences in the 1940s in its longing for a bygone age (ibid.).

despite being much shorter in length and having a different purpose, is reminiscent of the historical digression of Book II, canto X:

> Even if you have to read it twice, like something in a history lesson, this pedigree is a vital part of the tragedy of King Arthur. It is why Sir Thomas Mallory called his very long book the Death of Arthur. Although nine tenths of the story seems to be about knights jousting and quests for the holy grail and things of that sort, the narrative is a whole, and it deals with the reasons why the young man came to grief at the end. It is the tragedy, the Aristotelian and comprehensive tragedy, of sin coming home to roost. That is why we have to take note of the parentage of Arthur's son Mordred, and to remember, when the time comes, that the king had slept with his own sister.[47]

From this survey of the character of Arthur it is possible to conclude that the variety of sources and the legendary character that surrounds the so called "Matter of Britain" have resulted into an ever-expanding galaxy of retellings and adaptations; Spenser shapes his own version of Arthur, making him the prime hero of his masterpiece, the personification of magnificence and repository of all virtues, an allegory that occasionally alludes to events of historical, political and religious import. Spenser's Arthur swings between an afterlife in Faerie Land, where he was transported by Gloriana after his death, and the longed-for epithalamic finale that is never fulfilled in the actual poem; in other words, he is a "once and future king" insofar as he acts in a temporal dimension stretching backwards towards the past, which is represented by his genealogy that the reader learns about in Alma's castle, and

[47] White, T. H., *The Once and Future King*, Collins, London, 1958, p. 323.

pointing forward towards the future encounter and marriage with Gloriana, which will ultimately make him the king he is meant to become.

2.3 The Redcrosse Knight: national identity and modern heroism

A Gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine,
Y cladd in mightie armes and siluer shielde,
Wherein old dints of deepe wounds did remaine,
The cruell markes of many a bloudy fielde
(I.I.1.1-4)

Book I is generally the most widely read of the entire poem since it lends itself to being analyzed as a single and self-contained story with a traditional beginning, a development and an end (the same would not be true of Books III and IV for example). Its opening lines are *in medias res* as they describe the protagonist by presenting him as a knight who is riding through a plain; however, he is no ordinary knight, but a "Gentle" one, an adjective that points to his moral virtues. The next line proceeds to identify him with the specific virtue that he embodies, that is to say holiness. The key to understand this identification is to be found in "The Letter to Raleigh", in which Spenser himself explains that Redcrosse's armour (his "mightie armes") is "the armour of a Christian man specified by Saint Paul"[48]; furthermore, Spenser provides the reader with his source, namely Ephesians (6.11-17). His Christian identity is further disclosed in the following stanza, which opens with the

[48] Spenser, "The Letter to Raleigh", p. 17.

mention of "a bloudie Crosse" (I.I.2.1) on his breast, "The deare remembrance of his dying Lord" (I.I.2.2).

While Redcrosse is depicted as a noble Christian knight from the very beginning, his figure is shrouded in aura of mystery for the majority of the book; there is no mention whatsoever of his origins (as opposed to Arthur's genealogy in II.X), and even his name is not mentioned until canto II, stanza 15. The fact that a few lines before he is also identified with Saint George, the patron saint of England, links him with the theme of national identity already discussed in the first chapter[49].

Once again, the association is made explicit by the narrator himself in two circumstances. In canto II, stanza 11, Redcrosse is referred to as "the true *Saint George*" (I, II, 12, 2); his religious identity is emphasized in the same stanza by his encounter with Sans Foy, a "faithlesse Sarazin" (I, II, 12, 6). The stark contrast between the two is favourable to Redcrosse, who, besides being presented as a saint and the allegory of Holiness, gains the upper hand in the conflict and kills his enemy. The second instance that explicitly mentions Saint George is in canto X, when the knight of Holiness needs to go through a process of moral and physical recovery after being prisoner of Orgoglio; he meets an old man named Contemplation, a prophet who has received many visions from God. Here Redcrosse, who has been unaware of his own origins all along, learns about his past and his destiny; and it is here, by virtue of Contemplation's words to him, that his identification with Saint George is made even more explicit, as his role of patron saint of England is already given to the reader:

> For thou emongst those Saints, whom thou doest see,
> Shalt be a Saint, and thine owne nations frend
> And Patrone: thou Saint *George* shalt called bee,

[49] See 1.3.3.

Saint *George* of mery England, the signe of victoree.

(I.X.61.6-9)

If one thinks of the title of Book I, "contayning the Legende of the Knight of the Red Crosse, or Holinesse", it is no surprise that Redcrosse's ultimate destiny is to be a saint; and the specific saint figure that Spenser assigns him is precisely the patron saint of England.

As regards the legend of Saint George slaying the dragon, Spenser drew on multiple sources. English versions of the story were modelled on *The Golden Legend* by Jacobus da Varagine, Archbishop of Genoa, who wrote a collection of hagiographies (lives of the Saints) that was very influential and widespread in the Middle Ages. Spenser was familiar with the famous versions of Varagine and Caxton, as well as with the less known tale by Lydgate and the Latin *Vita sancti Georgii* by Mantuan[50]. The original legend of Saint George is set in Cappadocia, but he was accepted as a saint of the Church of Rome in the sixth century. His fame is linked to two anecdotes: the defeat of the dragon, and his fierce resistance against the harsh anti-Catholic persecutions under the emperor Diocletian; while the latter is the more historically accurate, it is mostly for his legendary fight against the dragon that he has been remembered throughout the centuries. The adventures of Redcrosse can be read as a retelling of the legend, with the major difference that Spenser's knight immediately slays the dragon after a three-day combat, whereas in the original legend the dreadful beast was firstly tamed and later killed. Exactly as with the legend of Arthur, Spenser drew on material that struck a chord with his audience; in a way it is as if Redcrosse represented not one single legendary individual, but everyman. By virtue of his identification with the patron saint of a nation, he is by extension every member of that nation, an idea which is connected to the allegorical and moral subtext of the poem: in life everyone can make a mistake (and be ensnared by Error),

[50] Hamilton, A. C., p. 190.

everyone can be deceived (by the falsehood of Archimago and Duessa), everyone can fall prey to pride (and be imprisoned by Orgoglio), everyone can lose all hopes (and be put to the test by Despair). And at the same time, despite all the obstacles and pitfalls of life, everyone has to persevere with their journey and find rest and recovery in hope, faith, charity and humility (the virtues that Redcrosse encounters in the House of Caelia in canto X).

It is precisely this identification with the "Everyman" that makes Redcrosse more a modern hero than a traditional one. Traditional epic heroes are commonly remembered for being flawless and upright. This category can be exemplified by Achilles, the Greek warrior who fought in the Trojan war; besides his outstanding skills and courage in battle, he shows a strong sense of justice when he refuses to continue fighting after being deprived of his slave Briseis by Agamemnon, and a humane sense of mercy and sympathy when he agrees to give Hector's body back to his pleading father Priam at the end of the *Iliad*. It is emblematic that his only vulnerability is in his heel, whose wound will cause his death, and which is still today an idiomatic expression to refer to someone's weakness. On the other hand, modern heroes have to experience loss and failure before the eventual "eucatastrophe". Tolkien's Aragorn and Frodo are two models of the modern hero, very different from each other, but at the same time entwined in their journeys and their destiny. Flieger calls Aragorn "a traditional epic/romance hero"[51], as he is a warrior, a fighter who is able to gain the upper hand even against supernatural enemies such as the Nazgûl. The reader admires him, but knows that he/she cannot identify with him, as his deeds are above any kind of ordinary situation; he combines what Northrop Frye called romance and high mimetic modes[52]. The other model is embodied by Frodo (or Bilbo in *The Hobbit*); Tolkien's masterstroke lies in the creation of hobbits precisely because these fantasy creatures allow identification on the part of the reader. Flieger

[51] Flieger, Verlyn, "Frodo and Aragorn: The Concept of the Hero", in Rose A. Zimbaldo and Neil D. Isaacs (eds.), *Understanding The Lord of the Rings: The Best of Tolkien Criticism*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston and New York, pp. 124.
[52] Ibid.

labels Frodo "a fairy-tale hero"[53], whose greatness lies in his being an ordinary man; he represents what Frye called "low mimetic hero, the hero of realistic fiction"[54]. While Aragorn's quest is somewhat traditional in that it ends with his marriage and his coronation as king of Gondor, Frodo's quest is turned upside-down; the hobbit sets out not to find but to get rid of a magic object. And during his journey he has to face numerous doubts and losses; such obstacles reach their climax when Frodo is taken captive in the lair of the spider Shelob, and subsequently taken to Cirith Ungol by the orcs of Mordor. It is the intervention of his companion Sam, who had previously believed him dead, that rescues him and allows the quest to continue as far as the cracks of Mount Doom.

This episode can be compared to Redcrosse's defeat and imprisonment at the hands of Orgoglio; exactly as Frodo, Redcrosse is made prisoner and cannot resume his quest until someone (in this case Arthur, called on by Una) comes to rescue him. Frodo is deceived by Gollum in the same way Redcrosse is multiple times deceived by Archimago and Duessa. Moreover, Frodo is many times doubtful about his quest and his task as ring-bearer, and often considers the idea of abandoning all hopes, so much so that at the end of *The Return of the King* it is Sam who ends up physically carrying him when they climb the slopes of Mount Doom; Redcrosse's encounter with Despair allegorically represents the loss of hope and of the desire of life. When the knight enters Despair's "darkesome caue" (I.IX.35.1), the hideous villain tries to persuade him to commit suicide by means of a series of pressing rhetorical questions and by reminding him of his sins: "Thou falsed hast thy faith with periurie, / And sold thy selfe to serue *Duessa* vilde, / With whom in all abuse thou hast thy selfe defilde?" (I, IX, 46, 7-9). Had it not been for Una's prompt intervention, Despair would have succeeded in his evil intent; therefore, once again Redcrosse falters and needs to be saved. This passage

[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.

marks an all-time low for Redcrosse, as after that he starts a process of regeneration and recovery that will culminate with his final success over the dragon.

However, the multiple occasions on which he is led astray, commits a sin, is defeated, imprisoned, and needs help make him an ordinary man rather than a traditional, epic, flawless hero. Despite his rank of Faerie Knight, he is in a way more similar to Frodo than to Aragorn, whom Flieger also describes as "larger than life"[55]. In addition to this, it is worth pointing out that Aragorn himself, despite featuring many of the characteristics of the traditional hero, is not flawless; he is the rightful heir to the throne of Gondor but he chooses to become a Ranger, and after Gandalf's fall at the hands of the Balrog in Moria, he is in charge of leading the fellowship, but he fails and the group is scattered. Therefore, in this respect he distances himself from the ancient, perfect, Achilles-like hero.

However, it is worth pointing out that there is a major difference between Spenser's text and Tolkien's: *The Lord of the Rings* is a series of novels and there is much more space to give voice to the characters' thoughts and feelings, as well as to describe their interactions. In Spenser's poem, written well before the rise of the novel as a genre, such moments are allegorized rather than described; there are no moments of deep psychological insight to describe Redcrosse's mistakes, sins, fears and doubts, but he simply comes across characters named Error, Orgoglio and Despair. The only fact that he encounters them means that he is not following the right path and has strayed from perfection.

In conclusion, it can be observed how Redcrosse's identification with Saint George and his being imperfect are two elements that put him in conversation with heroes of modern fantasy stories. The idea that lies behind this choice on the part of Spenser and other, more recent fantasy (but also non-fantasy) authors, is that a character who, despite belonging to a noble or superior rank, displays human features and flaws is much more appealing to the

[55] Ibid.

readers, who are able to identify with and relate to their adventures even if their stories are clearly fiction.

2.4 Britomart: the gendered hero

Picking up on some of the critiques that have been presented against fantasy as a genre in the first chapter[56], Hunt notices that one of the staples of fantasy, which has led many to label it as "formulaic", is the fact that it has often been a male-centered genre[57]; the huge majority of characters that show up are men, and women are usually stereotyped and confined to a few typified roles, such as the damsel in distress who needs to be saved by the hero and eventually marries him. In *The Lord of the Rings* even a superficial reading is sufficient to see how female characters are heavily outnumbered by "traditional" male heroes, since all of the members of the Fellowship are males (belonging to different "races" or peoples that inhabit Middle-earth), as well as the main antagonists; however, it is worth noticing that the few female characters of Tolkien's trilogy have been modelled on multiple Celtic and Old Norse sources and characters (e.g. the Valkyrie), and play a crucial role in the storyline, from the Elf Queen Galadriel, who bestows useful gifts upon the heroes and helps them with their quest, to the shield-maiden Éowyn, who avenges her uncle King Théoden's death by killing the King of the Nazgûl in one of the most powerful and riveting scenes of the saga, in which gender conventions are turned upside down. Nonetheless, Tolkien's fantasy still remains strongly male-centered.

The Faerie Queene makes for compelling views on the theme of gender in that it presents the reader with an interesting variety of female characters, some of whom drift away

[56] See 1.3.1.
[57] Hunt, p.3.

from the traditional role of women. As a matter of fact, women were commonly associated with the object of desire, for example the princess who needs to be saved by the hero in order to be married; in this respect, Una is a somewhat traditional character, insofar as Redcrosse must slay the dragon and free her parents' kingdom to be allowed to marry her[58]. This model is also known as "damsel in distress". Another type that is featured in the poem is the female villain; its most accomplished version is the treacherous and false Duessa. It usually manifests itself as a lady who is sexually appealing and flaunts her apparent beauty, which turns out to be a trap for the hero.

However, as far as the protagonists are concerned, the most fascinating example of woman in *The Faerie Queene* is Britomart, the allegory of Chastity. She is the only female knight to whom Gloriana has assigned a quest, and from her very first appearance she stands out for her beauty and for her skills and fierceness in battle. When Guyon sees her at the beginning of Book III, he immediately charges her but is violently unseated; he does not recognize Britomart at first, and does not realize that her spear is enchanted. Moreover, he does not know that he has been defeated by a woman, which would add to the shame that he already suffers after being knocked off his horse:

> Great shame and sorrow of that fall he tooke;
> For neuer yet, sith warlike armes he bore,
> And shiuering speare in bloudie field first shooke,
> He found himself dishonoured so sore.
> (III.I.7.1-4)

[58] I said "somewhat traditional" because Redcrosse does not need to directly save Una from the clutches of the dragon, but still needs to free her parents' kingdom before he can marry her; furthermore, she is not a passive object of desire, but accompanies Redcrosse along his journey and often ends up saving him, for example when she calls on Arthur's help to save him from Orgoglio's castle, or when she prevents him from committing suicide in Despair's cave.

This episode clearly shows Britomart's prowess in battle, as she soundly defeats the hero of Book II; however, right after these lines, the narrator directly addresses Guyon and points out that he should not be ashamed for being unseated, as his defeat is not due to his inferiority to his adversary, but to Britomart's magic spear, which Spenser borrowed from Bradamante's spear in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*: "For not thy fault, but secret powre vnseene, / That speare enchaunted was, which layd thee on the greene" (III.I.7.8-9). Nevertheless, despite this explicit mention by the narrator, Britomart's magic spear does not seem of great importance in defining her qualities. Griffith argues that for Guyon Britomart's magic is unimportant because "losing to a magic wielding enemy is acceptable; losing to a girl is not, regardless of whether she was using magic."[59]

This is connected to the second piece of information that the narrator provides, that is to say the revelation of Britomart's gender. Up until stanza 8 she is referred to with masculine pronouns:

> They [Guyon and Arthur] spide a knight, that towards pricked faire,
> And *him* beside an aged Squire there rode,
> (...)
> *He* them espying, gan *himselfe* prepare,
> And on *his* arme addresse *his* goodly shield
> That bore a Lion passant in a golden field. [Italics mine]
> (III.I.4.2-3 and 7-9)

The fact that when Britomart is wearing her armour and her helmet she is repeatedly mistaken for a man implies that knights were supposed to be male, and thus she is

[59] Griffith, John Lance, "Britomart's Spear and Merlin's Mirror: Magics Meaningful and Meaningless in *Faerie Queene* Book III", *Medieval and Early Modern Studies* XX (2012): 78.

unconventional in her role. In a way the armour can be considered as a device that Spenser resorts to in order to make his character plausible; in her seminal study *Deconstructing the Hero* Margery Hourihan argues that heroism is traditionally gendered, as female heroes commonly happen to be "little more than honorary men who undertake male enterprises in a male context and display 'male' qualities: courage, single-minded devotion to a goal, stoicism, self-confidence, certitude, extroversion, aggression"[60]. This idea is the key to understand the character of Britomart, whose identity can be defined in the terms listed by Hourihan.

Furthermore, the way she dresses plays a crucial role in building her gender identity, especially in the interactions with other characters. At the end of canto I Britomart's cross-dressing causes a considerable misunderstanding, when she spends the night in the castle of Malecasta. The Lady of Delight, "all ignourant of her contrary sex, / (For she her weend a fresh and lusty knight)" (III.I.47.2-3), falls completely in love with her, and after being turned down during dinner, she sneaks into her bed while Britomart is asleep, creating mayhem in the whole castle. Another episode concerning the role of her armour takes place in Book V, when Talus calls on her to rescue Artegall, who has been imprisoned by the Amazon Radigunt. She spends the night at Dolon's place, and her host tries to persuade her to take off her armour, which she refuses to do:

> Then *Britomart* vnto a bowre was brought;
> Where groomes awayted her to haue vndrest.
> But she ne would vndressed be for ought,
> Ne doffe her armes, though he her much besought.
> (V.VI.23.2-5)

[60] Hourihan, Margery, *Deconstructing the Hero*, Routledge, London, 1997, p.68.

Her suspicions prove to be right, as Dolon tries to entrap her to take revenge for the death of his eldest son, who had been killed by Artegall. Once again, in this episode Britomart's armour connotes her attachment and faithfulness to her role and the cause she is meant to fight for; even though she would have been more comfortable had she taken off her knightly attire during the night, "she had vow'd, she sayd, not to forgo / Those warlike weedes, till she revenge had wrought" (V.VI.23.7-8). She totally embraces the Code of Chivalry, according to which she should not take any pleasure until her task is successfully completed.

Despite acting like a cold and imperturbable knight, Britomart proves also capable of showing feelings and emotions that are usually associated with a female sensitivity. When she and Glauce are told by Merlin that he knows the cause of her suffering (i.e. her overwhelming love for Artegall, whom she does not know yet), she blushes: "The doubtfull Mayd, seeing her selfe descryde, / Was all abasht, and her pure yuory / Into a cleare Carnation suddeine dyde" (III, III, 20, 1-3). The canto goes on with Merlin's prophecy about her future marriage with Arthegall and their progeny, which is reminiscent of the history of Arthur's and Gloriana's lineages in Book I, canto X, with the difference that here the narrator provides an anticipation of future events rather than a historical account. Another moment that depicts Britomart giving way to feelings is the aforementioned episode in which she sets out to rescue Artegall from Radigund. Jealousy is typically considered one of the female emotions *par excellence*, and Britomart seems to be no exception; when Talus brings her the news that Artegall is prisoner of a woman, she immediately questions his faithfulness despite knowing that he is a virtuous knight:

> Yet his [Artegall's] owne loue, the noble *Britomart*,
> Scarse so conceiued in her iealous thought,
> What time sad tydings of his balefull smart

In womans bondage, *Talus* to her brought

(V.VI.3.1-4)

The "yet" that opens the stanza counters the narrator's previous statement that Artegall never even thought of being unfaithful, and in spite of Radigunt's sexual offers, his love for Britomart has always been unwavering. Once again, Spenser drew on *Orlando Furioso* in order to build the character of Britomart, whose worries about Artegall's unfaithfulness recall Bradamante's for Ruggiero.

Last but not least, there is one fundamental element that defines Britomart in terms of gender, and this is chastity, the virtue that she embodies. Chastity has always been referred to "qualities desired more from women than from men"[61]; one technique used by the narrator to portray Britomart's chastity is through epithets (e.g. "chaste damzell"[62]) and through her association with the colour white (e.g. "the warlike Mayd / All in her snow-white smocke"[63]). Therefore, Spenser could not have a male hero as the thorough embodiment of chastity, but rather devised a character who performs a strictly masculine role without stripping her of some markedly feminine traits.

2.5 Calidore: bucolic and pastoral tradition

The bucolic and pastoral mode is an age-old tradition, whose initiators can be traced back to ancient Greek and Latin literature with Theocritus's *Idylls*, and Virgil's *Eclogues*

[61] Casey, Jennifer, "Chastity", in Cheris Kramarae and Dale Spender (eds.), *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women: Global Women's Issues and Knowledge*, Routledge, New York and London, 2000, p. 154.
[62] III.I.53.7.
[63] III.I.63.6-7.

respectively. Generally speaking, it consists of poetic compositions where characters are shepherds of humble origins and primitive principles who live their frugal life in a natural, idyllic environment characterized by green meadows, shady trees, luxuriant vegetation, crystal brooks, sheep and birds, and other elements that are deeply connected with nature. The descriptions of such settings is not exclusively found in this kind of pastoral literature, but certainly represents its main and distinctive feature, and constitutes a topos which has become known as *locus amoenus*. The Renaissance witnessed a revival of bucolic literary traditions; after the Italian poet Jacopo Sannazaro published *Arcadia*, several sixteenth-century English poets took on the bucolic mode in their works: the most prominent examples are Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (the title speaks for itself), Christopher Marlowe's *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love*, Shakespeare's comedy *As You Like It*, and Edmund Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender*.

It is precisely thanks to *The Shepheardes Calender* that Spenser is considered the first great pastoral poet in England; this work consists of twelve eclogues (one per month) narrating the life of the shepherd Colin Clout throughout an entire year, hence the title "calendar". However, the pastoral mode is a recurrent theme that accompanies Spenser throughout his literary career. Hadfield notices that his *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, published in 1595, is not a return to pastoral because he never left it; the fact that the 1596 *Faerie Queene* comes to a close in a bucolic mode implies that his progression from pastoral to epic, a journey that he tried to imitate from Virgil, was never fully accomplished[64].

The bucolic world of Book VI seeps into the narration starting from canto IX, and soon becomes integral part of the plot and of Calidore's quest. The knight of Courtesy stops in a plain and asks the locals whether they happened to see the Blatant Beast that he is chasing; when they respond that they did not, Calidore does not leave but rests and drinks with the

[64] Cheney, Patrick, "Spenser's Pastorals: *The Shepheardes Calender* and *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*", in Andrew Hadfield (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spenser*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 82.

shepherds. He becomes acquainted with their humble habits and keeps noticing that such a frugal lifestyle is undoubtedly praiseworthy. He is particularly attracted by the natural beauty of Pastorella, Meliboe's daughter (though later it will be revealed that he is not her real father); the names are rather telling, as Pastorella alludes to the pastoral and bucolic mode in general, and Meliboe is directly taken from a character of Virgil's *Eclogue 1*.

Calidore's deep appreciation and love for the pastoral world is juxtaposed to his routine as a knight:

> How much (sayd he) more happie is the state,
> In which ye father here doe dwell at ease,
> Leading a life so free and fortunate,
> From all the tempests of these worldly seas,
> Which tosse the rest in daungerous disease?
> Where warres, and wreckes, and wicked enmitie
> Doe them afflict, which no man can appease,
> That certes I your happinesse enuie,
> And wish my lot were plast in such felicitie.
> (VI.IX.19.1-9)

This stanza, in which Calidore is addressing Meliboe, allows to distill the two spheres of pastoral life and knighthood. The former is described by all positive terms belonging to the semantic area of happiness ("more happie", "at ease", "free and fortunate", "happinesse", "felicitie"), whereas the latter is associated with troublesome situations that are emphasized by the alliteration in line 6 "Where warres, and wreckes, and wicked ...". This seems to suggest that Calidore's admiration for pastoral life is so profound that he even comes to despise his

noble role of Faerie knight. While he is wisely advised by Meliboe that he should not be jealous of the shepherds' life because everyone has been assigned their own destiny, bucolic life is constantly described in an extremely positive way.

As discussed in the first chapter[65], this mode usually denotes a sense of nostalgia for the past, for an idyllic place where people could live happily and peacefully, without wars and weapons. Oftentimes modern fantasy presents elements that, more or less explicitly, point to the loss of and the desire to retrieve a past world devoid of all the evils of the present age. It is not by chance that Hunt refers to Tolkien's Shire as "the *bucolic* world of the Hobbits" (italics mine), when he maintains that "it is easy to see the same nostalgic, 'escapist' characteristics in Tolkien, Grahame and Milne: the world is moving on, and the bucolic world of the Hobbits is under threat – and, at the end of *The Return of the King*, the Shire is severely damaged by industrialization."[66] The Hobbits live in peace, they do not know what war is, and when Bilbo and Frodo have to embark on their journeys they are required to step out of their comfort zone. Industrialization has brought about war and destruction in the Middle-earth; Saruman has deforested a huge section of the Forest of Fangorn to develop cutting-edge machines capable of breeding orcs for his army, an action that would later turn against him when Treebeard and the Ents awaken and decide to rebel against Isengard.

In the above quotation Hunt also mentions Kenneth Grahame, the author of *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). This fantasy takes the shape of an animal story whose protagonists are animals that display human features; despite being a very different text from *The Faerie Queene*, it combines the themes of the nostalgia for a lost past and of national identity: the English countryside is envisioned as a sort of "Arcadia", and the vast green spaces, the boat trips on the Thames, the picnic in the glades seem to represent the quintessential elements of

[65] See 1.3.4.
[66] Hunt, p. 32.

Englishness and of a "merry England" which is uncontaminated by industrialization and modernity[67].

In conclusion, it can be observed that Calidore's encounter and stay with the shepherds in the final section of Book VI can be interpreted as a celebration of a past time over the modern age, a theme that the narrator of *The Faerie Queene* had already addressed when speaking in first person in Book V, both in the proem and at the beginning of canto I.

[67] Tosi, Laura, "Dalla favola antica a *Madagascar*: storie di animali", in Laura Tosi and Alessandra Petrina (eds.), *Dall'ABC a Harry Potter*: *Storia della Letteratura Inglese per l'Infanzia e la Gioventù*, Bononia University Press, Bologna, 2011, p. 303.

3. Animals and Fantastic Beasts

I have ended the previous chapter by mentioning *The Wind in the Willows* to see how the theme of a bucolic, pastoral past is deployed by Spenser and by more modern fantasy stories, and how it relates and alludes to the theme of national identity. Grahame's work belongs to a branch of fantasy and children's literature that criticism has categorized through different labels, all of them underscoring the pivotal role of animals in their plots: "animal story", "pet story", "animal fantasy", "beast fable", "beast story" are only some attempts to come up with a classification of this sub-genre.[1] While animal stories have an ancient tradition and go as far back as Aesop's Fables, *The Faerie Queene* cannot be said to belong to this category because its protagonists and all the characters involved in the main actions are humans. Nevertheless, the presence of animals in modern fantasy seems to be a stock feature of the genre, albeit to varying degrees; they can either take on human-like traits (e.g. Aslan, the talking lion of Lewis's fantasy), or be represented as magic and supernatural creatures that do not exist in nature. This last case is the most prolific and gives more space to the writers' creativity, from traditional dragons to more modern inventions such as Tolkien's Balrog, or the large repertoire of fantastic creatures in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, in which learning how to deal with them is a fundamental part of a wizard's education.

In this respect Spenser's poem treats animals and fantastic beasts no differently from modern fantasy in that it features both "natural" animals, with no additional superpower, and supernatural creatures whose description contradicts the laws of nature and biology, but that always take on an allegorized meaning in the quest. For the sake of this study, I will consider two examples taken from Book I, namely the lion and the dragon; drawing upon Greimas's

[1] Tosi, "Dalla favola antica a *Madagascar*: storie di animali", p. 293.

actantial model[2], my analysis will follow the division into helpers and opponents, the two actants that the lion and the dragon respectively embody in their role of actors.

3.1 The Lion: English monarchy and heraldry

I have occasionally mentioned Aslan, the most emblematic example of lion in modern fantasy whose very name means precisely "lion" in Turkish[3]. Another famous fantasy work that features the presence of a lion is L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1990), in which the Cowardly Lion has lost his courage, the characteristic that is supposed to distinguish him and his species from the others. In the *Harry Potter* saga the presence of the lion is subsumed under the image of the griffin, the mascot of the house of Gryffindor at Hogwarts; its distinctive values are once again those commonly associated to the lion, that is to say courage, determination and chivalry.

Spenser's poem features, mentions or alludes to lions seven times in a meaningful way[4]:

1. In I.III Una is saved and protected by a lion for almost the entirety of the canto, until the lion is killed by Sansloy at the end of it.
2. In I.IV Wrath rides a lion, which is here symbol of violence in a negative way.
3. In III.XII in the House of Busirane Britomart attends a masque in which Cupid rides a "Lion rauenous" (III.XII.22.2) and is followed by other dreadful monsters performing a sort of parade.

[2] See 1.4

[3] Akdikmen, Resuhi, "Lion", *Langenscheidt Pocket Turkish Dictionary: Turkish-English, English-Turkish*, Lagenscheidt, Berlin and Munich, 2006, p. 428.

[4] Alkaaoud, Elizabeth Furlong, *"What the Lyon ment": Iconography of the lion in the poetry of Edmund Spenser*, Rice University, 1984, pp. 32-33 [https://it.scribd.com/document/267195573/Furlong-Iconography-of-the-Lion-in-the-Poetry-of-Edmund-Spenser, accessed September 2019].

4. In IV.III Cambina's chariot is drawn by "two grim lyons, taken from the wood, / In which their powre all others did excell" (IV.III.39.2-3).
5. In V.VII Britomart has an oneiric experience in the Temple of Isis, where she envisions herself giving birth to a lion "of great might" (V.VII.16.6).
6. In V.IX Mercilla's throne is embossed with a lion and a fleur-de-lis, the two insignia that represent the royal arms of England and France respectively.
7. In the *Mutabilitie Cantoes* Nature's face is compared to a lion's when she makes her majestic appearance on Arlo Hill (Mutabilitie VI).

Besides these seven appearances or mentions, all listed in Alkaaoud's study[5], the lion is mentioned in some similes that are not discussed here because the presence of the animal is not as significant as in the other allegories (for example, in II.VIII.40 Arthur's fierceness is compared to a lion's when the Palmer gives him Guyon's sword and he resumes his fight against Pyrocles and Cymochles). However, there is an additional instance that should have been included in Alkaaoud's list, between point 2 and point 3: it is the lion depicted on Britomart's shield ("that bore a Lion passant in a golden field", III.I.4.9"). In terms of allegory this element cannot be overlooked; the lion symbolizes the British monarchy, and it is therefore a crucial element in defining the identity of Britomart, who is ancestor of Brute, and whose name is modelled on the word "Britain". This historical trajectory is projected onto a future dimension by the prophetic images that Britomart sees in the Temple of Isis; the prophecy, besides being an allegory of justice and an allegorical account of a love match, is "a prophecy of a dynastic union from which will come the Tudor line, symbolized by the royal lion"[6].

[5] Ibid.
[6] Heale, p. 137.

The importance of the lion as a symbol of the monarchy to emphasize its power and its strength is a convention that goes back to the very origins of heraldry, the study of coats of arms and symbols of royal families; in his *Handbook of English Heraldry* Boutell notes that "[f]rom the dawn of the heraldic era (...) the Lion is blazoned on the Shields of Sovereigns, Princes, and Nobles"[7]. He then proceeds to classify different types of lions in heraldry according to the way they are represented and to their position; one is the "passant", which is exactly the term used by Spenser to pinpoint the kind of lion on Britomart's shield. More precisely, it refers to a walking lion that is fiercely looking ahead, with three paws on the ground and one lifted upwards. The fact that Spenser uses this technical term suggests that he was well acquainted with the heraldic tradition and with one of its most famous and widely reproduced symbols; moreover, the image of the lion could not be left out in the allegory of Britomart, who is precisely one of the characters that to some extent portrays Queen Elizabeth.

However, the most interesting example of lion, and the only real lion character in *The Faerie Queene*, is the one that Una encounters in Book I. While all the other mentions are just similes or static symbols, Una meets a real lion, whose life the reader is able to follow, even though only in a tiny portion. In fact if one focuses only on canto III and its events, it turns out that the lion has a crucial role; despite a fierce and aggressive appearance, upon seeing Una's beauty, he immediately becomes meek. He is first qualified as "rampant Lyon" (I.III.5.2), another term that Spenser borrowed from heraldry; the "ramping lion" is traditionally depicted "erect, [with] one hind paw on the ground, the other three paws elevated, (...) looking forward and having his tail elevated"[8]. Yet, this is no static image, but this lion undergoes a change: at first he rushes towards Una so as to devour her, but he

[7] Boutell, Charles. *The Handbook to English Heraldry*, online version [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/23186/23186-h/23186-h.htm#chapIX, accessed September 2019].
[8] Ibid.

suddenly loses his aggressiveness by virtue of Una's beauty, a process which is rendered by Spenser's alliterative line "forgat his furious forse" (I.III.5.9).

Una's lion takes on the traditional role of helper in that he turns out to be a guide when she is lost, given that in the previous canto Archimago had deceived Redcrosse into believing that she had been unfaithful, and therefore the knight of holiness had abandoned her. Furthermore, the lion acts as a sort of confidant for a desperate Una who is in her turn convinced that Redcrosse has betrayed her; she addresses the lion thus:

> But he [Redcrosse] my Lyon, and my noble Lord
> How does he find in cruell hart to hate
> her that him lou'd, and euer mosrt adord,
> As the God of my life? why hath he me abhord?
> (I.III.7.6-9)

The reason why Spenser's lion here cannot be considered a fantastic beast in the same sense as Aslan is the fact that he is a natural, realistic character: he does not speak, nor does he have any supernatural power or wisdom. Nevertheless, Spenser is presenting the reader with an animal that is endowed with human-like traits: he is made tender by Una and accompanies her as a real friend. He also retains those features that are commonly associated with the beast: his fierceness, his hunger, his noble countenance, his royal dimension.

On top of that, the fact that the lion is "humanized" does not make him less aggressive, but rather emphasizes the aura of innocence and purity that surrounds Una. This becomes evident when he ruthlessly tears Kirkapine up into pieces, in the scene in which the criminal enters the house where Una and the lion are resting overnight (I.III.20). However, at the end of the canto the lion is killed by Sansloy, and Una is left without any protection and

kidnapped by him and Archimago. This last endeavour to protect Una, who is here a "damsel in distress", further stresses the courage and the loyalty of the lion, a beast that is able to separate out good and evil and pledge his allegiance to the innocent and wronged character to such an extent that he is killed in the attempt to save her.

In the Christian tradition there are examples of fierce beasts that are tamed by the encounter with a defenceless virgin in distress; it is the case, for instance, of Thecla in Saint Ambrose's retelling of one of the Acts of the Martyrs, namely the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. In a nutshell, this story features Thecla, a young virgin disciple of Paul the Apostle, who, "condemned through her husband's rage, changed even the disposition of wild beasts by their reverence for virginity" (II.3.19)[9]. The lion in Saint Ambrose's version replaces the lioness of the original, who is killed by a male lion in the attempt to defend the virgin; the sex-reversal has been interpreted as a sign of "masculine reverence for the self-sacrificing virgin who, we are told, freely offers to the lion her "vital parts" (*vitalia ipsa*)"[10]. However, the outcome of the virgin's encounter with the "fierce lion" is the same that Una experiences in I.III: in Ambrose's story, which is dated circa 377, the lion "was to be seen lying on the ground, licking her feet, showing without a sound that it could not injure the sacred body of the virgin" (II.3.20)[11]; this image of the lion licking the virgin's feet can be paralleled with Spenser's lines "In stead thereof he [the lion] kist her wearie feet, / And lickt her lilly hands with fawning tong, / As he her wronged innocence did weet." (I.III.6.1-3).

An allegorical reading of the poem through the lens of religion has led to an interpretation of the lion in I.III as Henry VIII, the initiator of the Reformation who broke free from the papal authority and the Catholic Church of Rome. Hadfield points out that Henry

[9] Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning Virginity*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), vol. 10, Buffalo, New York, 1896, online version [http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/34072.htm].
[10] Burrus, Virginia, "Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius", *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, III, 1 (1995): 32.
[11] Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning Virginity*, online version.

VIII was an ambivalent figure in his attitude towards Protestantism because he inaugurated, limited and suppressed its spread[12]. Likewise, the lion "defends Una, is able to break down doors, and offsets some threats, but does nothing to stop their entry into the catholic Abessa's house ('Nine hundred *Pater nosters* every day, / And thrise nine hundred *Aues* she was wont to say' (I.iii.13)) and fails to protect her from Sansloy"[13]; while the lion attempts to confront Sansloy with all his might and is killed just because his adversary proves to be stronger, Hadfield's emphasis is placed on Una's entrance into Abessa's house. By allowing Una to enter, the lion is in a way jeopardizing the purity and truthfulness to which her name alludes and that she epitomizes to the full. As a matter of fact, she is threatened by what Heale calls a "nefarious trio"[14]: Abessa, whose name hints at her absence and withdrawal from active religious life, her mother Corceca, whose name means "blind devotion" and who is a satire of supersition, and Kirkapine, literally meaning "church robbery". All these flaws were attributed to the Catholic Church of Rome, and here they allegorically endanger Una's Protestantism.

The association between the lion and the English monarchy is nowadays visible in the three lions or leopards which are still the arms of the king of England; this goes as far back as 1177, when they occurred on a seal used by King John, son of Henry II[15]. However, while it is evident that Spenser drops hints to the theme of national identity in the characters of Arthur, Redcrosse and Britomart, the lion of I.III does not act as a ruler or a sovereign, as the association with the royal lions may lead readers to think; rather, Una's lion embodies the idea of service, of risking (and losing) one's life to fight evil for a good cause, as he could have very well stayed away from trouble and kept preying on other animals. This idea, which is embedded in a religious context made explicit by all the characters he crosses paths with (i.e.

[12] Hadfield, Andrew, "The 'sacred hunger of ambitious minds': Spenser's savage religion", in A. Hadfield (ed.), *Edmund Spenser*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, p. 185.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Heale, p. 28.
[15] St John Hope, W. H., *A Grammar of English Heraldry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1953, p. 1.

Una, Abessa, Corceca, Kirkapine, Sansloy), is in line with the moral trajectory of the poem to instruct people and spread virtue, which ultimately is the "generall end" stated in the "Letter to Raleigh".

3.2 The Dragon: the final combat

Even the most casual reader cannot help but notice that the presence of dragons is a major ingredient in every fantasy story; in their *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* Clute and Grant begin the entry "Dragons" by pointing out that in most traditional European and Mediterranean mythologies dragons are gigantic serpents that are first and foremost associated with evil[16]. This is a necessary statement to begin with because the figure of the dragon has also been revisited by more modern authors, and in some circumstances its association with evil has been reversed; in Chinese mythology, for example, dragons are usually benevolent, intelligent and wise[17]. However, there is no denying the fact that in the Western tradition dragons are the most common enemy that heroes need to slay in order to fulfill their quest, marry a princess and become legitimate kings.

Hourihan discusses dragons, along with wolves, ogres and other beasts, in a chapter entitled "The Wild Things"; the choice of the adjective "wild" is meaningful in that it alludes to the binary opposition between the civilized and the wild, between order and chaos, good and evil, reason and basic instinct, which are all dualisms that underlie the vast majority of all traditional hero stories[18]. Therefore, the category of the wild represents the "Other", something that is either unfamiliar or threatening to the reader and to the natural order of

[16] Clute, John and Grant, John, *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 1997 [http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php?nm=dragons, accessed September 2019].
[17] Ibid.
[18] Hourihan, p. 107.

things; and yet, the hero needs the evil forces to exist in order to be a hero and stand out in his world, or else s/he would be just an ordinary individual. This idea is beautifully expressed by a line from Micheal Ende's *The Neverending Story*, which Hourihan quotes at the beginning of her chapter on "The Wild Things": ""Monsters," said Hykrion, winking at Bastian and stroking his huge moustache, "monsters are indispensable if a hero is to be a hero.""[19] In this unconventional story, which in many ways subverts the classic image of the male hero, Hykrion represents a parody of the traditional hero; he is described as "a fair-haired knight in shining armour, straight from the world of mediaeval romance, who finds himself redundant in Fantastica because there is no call for his obsolete skills"[20].

Dragons have proved particularly fitting to embody the role of opponents; as early as in Greek mythology some examples can be found, such as the Colchian dragon, who guarded the Golden Fleece, and Ladon, who guarded the guarded the golden apples in the Garden of the Hesperides. These dragons are described as gigantic serpents that lack the legs and wings of more modern dragons, which started to be introduced in their description in the Middle Ages[21]. It is worth noticing that both the Colchian dragon and Ladon perform a similar role, that is to say they are guardians of a magic or precious item which is the object of desire of the main hero and the reason why the Argonauts (in the case of the Golden Fleece) and Heracles (whose eleventh labour consisted in stealing the golden apples) embark on their quests.

The dragon acting as a guardian became a topos and is still a convention in numerous works of modern fantasy. Beowulf's need to engage the dragon in a deadly fight is caused by a slave who awakens the beast by stealing a jewelled cup from the treasure that he was guarding; in *The Hobbit* Smaug, inspired precisely by *Beowulf*, is the epitome of greediness in that he guards the treasure of the dwarves in the kingdom of Erebor; in the *Harry Potter* saga

[19] Ibid.
[20] Hourihan, p. 72.
[21] Hard, Robin, *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004, p. 296.

there is an almost biological interest for dragons as different breeds are described throughout the books (some examples are the Romanian Longhorn, the Chinese Fireball, the Norwegian Ridgeback and the Hungarian Horntail). This variety adds to the complexity of the parallel magical world created by Rowling, in which dragons still act as guardians; it is significant that one of the occasions on which the narrator dwells on dragons is the Triwizard Tournament, whose first challenge has the contestants fight one specific breed of dragon because the dreadful beasts are guarding a golden egg that they need to retrieve in order to successfully accomplish their first task and be able to move to the next. However, the guardian-dragons in *Harry Potter* do not end with the Triwizard Tournament; the Gringotts Wizarding Bank, the only bank for wizards and witches, which is described as the most secure place in the world, is run by goblins, but the high-security vaults are guarded by a dragon belonging to the Ukrainian Ironbelly species. This is an interesting example of dragon as it does not entirely fit the category of opponent in the same way as the others previously mentioned; aged and almost blind, he is extremely ferocious, but has also developed a sort of Pavlovian conditioning to the sound of clankers, which the goblins use to tame him whenever they need to access one of the vaults that he is guarding. Hermione's remark on this barbaric treatment in a way humanizes him, or at least attempts to account for his ferocity and aggressiveness; eventually,\ the dragon turns into a helper because Harry, Ron and Hermione manage to mount him to escape the Gringotts after their break-in has been discovered.

While the Gringotts guardian ends up helping the protagonists, but still retains his violence when he flies away from the bank, there are examples of dragons that utterly reverse the stereotypical image of the savage and aggressive beast that threatens the hero's life. One outstanding example is Grahame's short story "The Reluctant Dragon", originally published as a chapter of his collection *Dream Days*, which followed up on the adventures of five children narrated in *The Golden Age*. The physical aspect of Grahame's dragon does not look too

different from more traditional dragons: he is described as having claws and a tail, and "as big as four cart-horses and covered with blue scales"[22]. What is strikingly different is his role and his attitude; he is presented as "the most modest and retiring dragon in the world"[23], kind, polite, and he even writes poetry and dabbles in storytelling. At the beginning he is also a bit naive, as he invites the narrator's family over for dinner, but the narrator brings him back to reality: "You see there's no getting over the hard fact that you're a dragon, is there? (...) You're an enemy of the human race, you see!"[24]. Grahame's dragon is reluctant to accept the fact that the world sees him as a monster whose only intention is to harm people and wreak havoc. The deconstruction of the traditional beastly dragon is played out through the contrast between the dragon's own reality, which he himself has constructed in his cave, and the expectations that people have in the world; the dragon is expected to fight Saint George, and ultimately succumb and be slain, because this is the story that everyone has always been told:

> "Now, dragon, dragon," said the Boy imploringly, "don't be perverse and wrong-headed. You've *got* to fight him some time or other, you know, 'cos he's St George and you're the dragon. Better get it over and then we go on with the sonnets. [25]

In order to handle this complex situation the characters come up with a plan: Saint George and the dragon pretend to fight, and they agree on the point in which the Saint's spear has to hit the dragon, who only needs to feign death. Therefore, the conclusion is an absolute happy ending in that everyone makes the most of the situation: Saint George satisfies people's expectations but at the same time he does not have to kill anyone, the dragon is unscathed and

[22] Grahame, Kenneth, "The Reluctant Dragon", *Draghi e Principesse. Fiabe impertinenti dell'800 inglese*, Laura Tosi (ed.), Marsilio, Venezia, 2003, p. 158.
[23] Grahame, p. 156.
[24] Grahame, p. 154.
[25] Grahame, p. 164.

gains popularity in society, and the boy-narrator is happy because he is still friends with the dragon.

The renewed interest in dragons during the Victorian era was prompted by the new impetus gained by disciplines such as geology and paleontology; the discovery and study of many pre-historic fossils spurred a new fascination with dinosaurs and other forms of life that became extinct millions of years ago[26]. Dragons of all sorts prominently feature in Edith Nesbit's *The Book of Dragons* (1900), a collection of eight stories meant for children; some examples include the Red Dragon that flies out of the pages of *The Book of Beasts*, the purple dragon of Rotundia in "Uncle James, or The Purple Stranger", and the dragon made of pure ice that George and Jane encounter in "The Ice Dragon, or Do as You Are Told". Nesbit's dragons perform a variety of roles: the dragons that threaten the England in "Deliverers of Their Country" are of course an evil force that Saint George refuses to even try to fight, and that the protagonists Harry and Effie eventually manage to defeat, thus gaining the gratitude of the entire nation; on the other hand, "The Last of the Dragons", which was written at the same time as *The Book of Dragons* but published in 1925 as a part of *Five of Us – and Madeline*, features not only a resourceful princess who wants to fight the dragon instead of being rescued, but also an unconventional dragon who lives a solitary life in his cave and becomes emotional when he is called "dear".

All these stories, which are deserving of attention for how the cruelty and ferocity of dragons are deconstructed and reversed, are set in a background that is recognizably English: the well-known legend of Saint George recurs so frequently that it becomes an almost automatic association with the presence of a dragon, and the narrator clearly specifies that the setting is none other than England by naming the Downs, the famous chalk hills of Southern

[26] Tosi, *Draghi e Principesse. Fiabe impertinenti dell'800 inglese*, p. 24.

England, in "The Reluctant Dragon"[27], or by pointing out that the last dragon could be found only in England for historical and cultural reasons:

> And at last there were no more dragons in France and no more dragons in Germany, or Spain, or Italy, or Russia. There were some left in China, and are still, but they are cold and bronzy, and there were never any, of course, in America. But the last real live dragon left was in England, and of course that was a very long time ago, before what you call English History began.[28]

The Middle Ages witnessed both a refashioning and an explosion of the figure of the literary dragon; in this respect Germanic and Old Norse texts provided a source of inspiration for the shaping of the medieval dragon, which commonly crystallized into the well-known big, scaly, winged, four-legged, fire-breathing beast. I have already mentioned the dragon that Beowulf slays at the end of the poem, and by whom he also ends up being killed; the well-known Germanic text is "the oldest epic-length heroic poem in any of the Germanic languages and contains the earliest dragon-slayer narrative in English"[29]. It was Tolkien's main source for the characterization of Smaug, whose role is exactly that of "hordweard", guardian of the hoard. In her chapter "The Dragon Episode" Rauer distills four main characteristics of the Beowulf dragon, namely his strong association with fire and heat, the hoarding and guarding of treasure and gold, his nocturnal nature and his inquisitiveness[30]. This text exerted an enormous influence upon subsequent dragons, not only in the Middle Ages but also in modern and contemporary works of fiction; one example is George R. R. Martin's saga *A Song of Ice*

[27] Grahame, p. 140.
[28] Nesbit, Edith, "The Last of the Dragons", *Draghi e Principesse. Fiabe impertinenti dell'800 inglese*, Laura Tosi (ed.), Marsilio, Venezia, 2003, p. 204.
[29] Evans, Jonathan, "The Dragon-Lore of Middle-earth: Tolkien and Old English and Old Norse Tradition", in George Clark and Daniel Timmons (eds.), *J. R. R. Tolkien and his Literary Resonances. Views of Middle-earth*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 2000, p. 25.
[30] Rauer, Christine, *Beowulf and the Dragon. Parallels and Analogues*, D. S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 33-34.

and Fire, which features different kinds of fire-breathing dragons capable of dreadful destruction, but who also display some sort of intelligence in that they can be trained to respond to basic commands, even though they can never be fully tamed.

My point in discussing the dragon from *Beowulf* here is not limited to its undeniable influence on subsequent monsters; Tolkien's aforementioned essay "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics"[31] brings to light the twofold significance of the *Beowulf* monsters, as they blend together Germanic and Christian elements. The presence of religion is key to gaining a thorough understanding of the allegorical level on which Spenser's dragon acts in Book I. Picking up on the dualism between the civilized and the wild discussed at the beginning of this section, the dragon is placed in the negative end also in relation to religion; it is significant that the treasure that the ferocious beast is guarding in *Beowulf* is qualified as "haéðnum horde"[32], literally "heathen hoard". The adjective "heathen" connotes the treasure and its gold as profane, since the term is a derogatory form to refer to pagans.

This association between dragons and the unholy is derived from *Revelation* 12, where a gigantic red dragon with seven heads and ten horns attempts to devour a lady who is giving birth to a child; the story referenced here is that of Satan, of his rebellion and the ensuing war in Heaven and of his defeat by the Archangel Micheal and his soldiers:

> [9] And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.
>
> (*Revelation* 12:9) [33]

[31] See 1.2.
[32] Anonymous, *Beowulf*, online version [http://www.heorot.dk/beowulf-rede-text.html, accessed September 2019].
[33] The edition that has been used is *The Bible. Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*, with an Introduction and Notes by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997.

In the following chapter the dragon teams up with the Beast from the Sea and the Beast from the Land, thus giving birth to a sort of "Unholy Trinity" led by the dragon himself; the ultimate meaning of this specific revelation that John witnesses in the last book of the Bible is the idea that Satan, despite having been defeated and thrown out of Heaven, is constantly seeking to deceive humankind, to lead people astray and to tempt them into sinning against God.

The Book of *Revelation* has been identified as a framework that holds together the first book of *The Faerie Queene* as a whole, a sort of common thread whereby some of the Biblical revelations that John is shown by God are revived through the journey of Una and Redcrosse. Heale notices that that the vivid images from *Revelation* are deployed by Spenser to describe the conflict of good and evil in Book I[34]. For example, the character of Redcrosse himself recalls a warrior named Faithful and True (identified with Christ) who defeats the forces of the Antichrist in Rev. 19[35]; Una and Duessa have been compared, respectively, with the Woman clothed with the Sun who flees from the dragon in Rev. 12 (see above) and with the Whore of Babylon in Rev. 17[36]; and the dragon, as mentioned above, is one of the many shapes that Satan assumes to spread evil and sin.

From an allegorical perspective, the role of the dragon that holds Una's parents captive is precisely this; and it makes absolute sense that the Knight of Holinesse has to defeat sin and temptation in order to be able to embody the virtue to the full. I have already discussed how the journey of Redcrosse carries a strong religious overtone, and how it is, by extension, a journey that everyone is called to undertake in their life; it is possible to notice an escalation in the enemies that the titular hero of Book I encounters along his way, from Error, a monster that he single-handedly defeats, to Orgoglio and Despair, against whom he needs the help of

[34] Heale, p. 23.
[35] King, John N., "Spenser's religion", in Andrew Hadfield (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spenser*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 210.
[36] See 2.1 about the contrast between Una and Duessa.

Arthur and Una. The dragon represents the ultimate enemy, the final showdown, the greatest threat that the "Everyman" personified by Redcross has to face in his journey towards holiness; Wofford's stance that, in Redcrosse's encounter with the dragon, "an apocalyptic tone tells us that this battle is more than just one man's heroic mission"[37] sums up these two ideas: firstly, that the description of the battle has the distinctive colours of an apocalyptic, all-out combat whose outcome can only be either the ultimate triumph of good over evil or the total debacle at the hands of Satan, and secondly, that this combat is something that everyone has to go through in their life.

As far as the physical appearance of Spenser's dragon is concerned, the monster does not look different from its Germanic ancestors or the traditional dragons of the medieval tradition; he is described as a dreadful beast with wings, brass scales, a long tail, and red eyes like blazing fire. The spiritual dimension of Redcrosse's battle against him is highlighted by the process of moral and physical regeneration that he has to undergo in the House of Caelia, a sort of preparatory ritual that precedes the final challenge. However, the battle lasts three days and also involves a continuous process of spiritual and bodily regeneration, as at the end of each day there is a truce that allows Redcrosse to heal his wounds and regain strength for the next day. It is significant that he does so thanks to the Well of Life (I.XI.29) and to a stream flowing from the Tree of Life mentioned in *Genesis*; the image of the water, in both the well and the stream, is explicitly associated with life and regeneration, and with baptism, one of the two sacraments, along with the Lord's Supper, which Protestants retained out of all the seven of the Christian tradition.

While the religious subtext in the following books is not as strong as in Book I, the legend of Holiness still represents the basis for the subsequent virtues of the poem. In Book II, for example, Guyon's ultimate enemy is represented by Acrasia, the personification of

[37] Wofford, Susanne L., "*The Faerie Queene*, Books I-III", in Andrew Hadfield (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spenser*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 119.

intemperance that "hints at a satirical portrayal of the Roman Church as a devouring mother who preys upon her offspring"[38]. In Book VI the Legend of Courtesy is an attack against both Catholic idolatry and the excesses of Protestant iconoclasm[39]; the Blatant Beast is an explicit personification of slander, and therefore it does not have a direct connection with religion. And yet, if one interprets the final episode through the lens of religious allegory, slander and lying are still sins that are widespread among humankind; in this way, the final escape of the monster seems to signify that sin, temptation, error, and all that can lead people astray, are vices that are always lurking behind the corner, and that everyone needs to be on their guards at all times to become the "noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline" that *The Faerie Queene* has set out to fashion.

[38] King, p. 213.
[39] King, p. 215.

Conclusion

Rather than come up with a straightforward conclusion or provide a hard-and-fast rule to categorize fantasy and non-fantasy works, my hope in this thesis has been to bring to the fore some of the critical issues that concern Spenser's *magnum opus* by putting it in conversation with modern fantasy. That *The Faerie Queene* can be considered at least as a distant relation of modern fantasy is evident only by taking a look at the setting in Faerie Land, the presence of magic, and of supernatural characters and creatures; these features recur throughout the whole poem and enable readers to establish a connection with fantasy as a genre.

However, the situation is far more complex, and a critical analysis of a major work like Spenser's epic poem cannot be limited to noticing the presence of some stock characters or situations that are also recurrent in modern fantasy. One of the greatest issues in carrying out a study of this kind lies in the fact that fantasy itself has often been a problematic category, a "fuzzy set"[1], since it is not possible to provide a universal and agreed-upon definition to circumscribe it; this is also due to the many sub-genres and sub-categories that usually come into play within the same text. As far as its literary genre is concerned, several formal and thematic elements locate *The Faerie Queene* in the tradition of the great epics, but its medieval background also partakes of the conventions of romance.

My experiment in this study consists in stretching the temporal dimension of fantasy backwards, hypothesizing that its chronological boundaries are not so rigid as to confine it in the last three centuries of history. This does not mean that Sullivan's (and other critics') stance that fantasy is a product of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries[2] is groundless; on the

[1] See Attebery's definition in 1.1
[2] Sullivan, p. 100.

contrary, it has the merit of placing it in juxtaposition with the realistic narratives that thrived in the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, even totally embracing the idea that fantasy develops from the nineteenth century onwards, it is obvious that it does not spring up out of the blue; rather, it is to be intended as a mode that blends together other, more ancient literary genres, such as epic, myth, romance, and fairy-tale. Therefore, I have argued that *The Faerie Queene* could legitimately be included in what I have called the "pre-history of fantasy" to avoid any contradiction or overlapping with the general consensus.

Throughout my study I have on several occasions called attention to the formal and thematic elements that have shaped fictional narratives far older than modern fantasy and of *The Faerie Queene* itself. Some of them are definitely prompts for further analysis and reflection; for example, the theme of national identity is very often alluded to, more or less explicitly, both in Spenser's poem and in modern fantasy. This does not imply that any work of literature needs to include references to national identity in order to be categorized as such. Another question that remains open is how the theme of national identity is deployed in Spenser and in modern fantasy; it is always risky to come up with statements such as "in this work the author wants to celebrate the glory of his country...", or "by alluding to contemporary events the author wants to satirize the ruling class of his time...". In other words, fantasy cannot be reduced to the alleged objective of its author, or interpreted solely in the light of it. And yet, it seems to provide fertile ground for such a complex theme precisely because it leaves room for a sort of indeterminacy; in *The Faerie Queene* this aspect can be observed in the character of Arthur, who cannot be identified with one single historic character[3].

[3] See 2.2.

In one of his *Letters* Tolkien explicitly states that his legendarium aims to create a "mythology for England", in order to make up for the lack of a solid mythic tradition similar, for example, to that of the ancient Greeks:

> Having set myself a task, the arrogance of which I fully recognized and trembled at: being precisely to restore to the English an epic tradition and present them with a mythology of their own (...).
>
> ... a living language depends equally on the 'legends' which it conveys by tradition. (For example, that the Greek mythology depends far more on the marvellous aesthetic of its language and so of its nomenclature of persons and places and less on its content than people realize, though of course it depends on both...
>
> (Letter 180)[4]

Richard Helgerson's landmark study *Forms of Nationhood* is prompted by a line from a letter that Spenser wrote Gabriel Harvey in 1580: "Why a God's name," Spenser exclaimed, "may not we, as else the Greeks, have the kingdom of our own language?"[5]. The idea is the same that Tolkien expressed in the letter quoted above, with the same reference to Greek mythology as the prime example of a mythological system to be looked at and imitated. Therefore, there seems to be at least a connection between this need for a "mythology for England" and the fact that, as Manlove maintains, England has been uniquely hospitable to fantasy, and home and origin of much of it[6].

[4] Tolkien, J. R. R., *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, eds. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien, online version [https://timedotcom.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/the_letters_of_j.rrtolkien.pdf, accessed September 2019].
[5] Helgerson, Richard, *Forms of Nationhood*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1992, p.1.
[6] Manlove, Colin, *The Fantasy Literature of England*, p.1.

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