
Malory's Balin and Spenser's Bourbon

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Spenser's debt to Malory has been long acknowledged, if not often elaborated upon. Recently Andrew King's *The Faerie Queene and Middle English Romance* has added much to our understanding of Spenser's use of the romance tradition in his native language, specifically how Spenser puts that tradition to work in behalf of a political Protestant agenda. I offer as a small contribution toward that same end an observation of a Malory-derived episode, which includes a direct allusion to *Le Morte*, in the fifth book of the *Faerie Queene*.

Near the end of the second book of *Le Morte Darthur*, as printed by Caxton in 1485, the knight Balin dies tragically at the hands of his own brother, Balan. This battle is occasioned by Balan's inability to recognize his brother, who has cast away the shield that serves to identify him to other knights. The events unfold with tragic economy:

Syr, said a knyght to Balyn, me thynketh your sheld is not good; I wille lene yew a byggar, therof I pray yow. And so he tooke the sheld that was vnknowen and lefte his owne, and so rode vnto the iland and put hym and his hors in a greete boote. And whan he came on the other syde he met with a damoyssel, and she said, O knyght Bayln, why haue ye lefte your owne sheld? Allas, ye haue put yourself in grete daunger, for by your sheld ye shold have ben knowen. (Malory 76)

Malory creates a sense of inevitable doom; a seemingly insignificant decision takes on the proportions of classical tragedy. The consequences come swiftly, as in the next paragraph we are told that "Whan this knyghte in the reed beheld Balyn, hym thought it shold be his broder Balen bycause of his two swerdys, but bycause he knewe not his sheld, he demed it was not he" (Malory 77). The tragic error is reiterated after the battle: "bycause ye had another shild, I demed ye had been another knyght. Allas, said Balyn, all that maade an vnhappy knyght in

the castel, for he caused me to leaue myn owne sheld to our bothes destruction” (Malory, 77). Malory puts heavy emphasis upon the causal link between the abandoned shield and the tragic deaths of both Balin and Balan.

Spenser, in the second installment of the *Faerie Queene* (1596) will “moralize” this causal link in accordance with his opening claim that “Fierce warres and faithfull loves shall moralize my song” (1.proem.1). In the eleventh canto of the fifth book, Artegall, the knight of justice, comes upon a knight and his lady oppressed by a “rude rout” (Spenser 5.11.44). The knight, called Burbon, is a clear allegory for Henri of Navarre, and his lady, Flourdelis, is best understood as Paris itself. To the dismay of his English admirers, the Huguenot Henri chose to join the Catholic communion in order to solidify his claim to the French throne, particularly by appeasing the Catholic League and gaining entry into Paris. In reference to Henri’s politically motivated conversion, Burbon has cast away the shield given to him by the Redcrosse Knight, Spenser’s knight of holiness. Burbon’s discarded shield is the true faith abandoned by Henri.¹

Spenser apparently works from the precedent in Malory to build a sense of impending tragic outcome into his critique of Henri’s political calculations. Malory’s “why haue ye lefte your owne sheld? Allas, ye haue put yourself in grete daunger” (Malory, 76) is transformed in the *Faerie Queene* into “But why have ye (said *Artegall*) forborne / Your owne good shield in dangerous dismay?” (Spenser 5.11.52). The phrasing is close enough to suggest that Spenser took Malory’s tale as a direct source. Furthermore, Spenser emphasizes the shield’s role in Burbon’s reputation, what Malory would have called “worship”: “Albe that it most safety to him gaue, / And much did magnifie his noble name” (Spenser 5.11.46). A few stanzas later we are told that “That is the greatest shame and foulest scorne, / Which vnto any knight behappen may / To loose the badge, that should his deedes display” (Spenser 5.11.52). Burbon seems to make himself unknowable by casting away the shield. In fact, that may be his very motive, as he claims that he laid the shield aside because “many did that shield enuie, / And cruell enemies increased more” (5.11.54). Balin’s unintentional disguise is transformed by Spenser into Henri’s dishonorable attempt to hide his true self for political gain. The parallel with Balin would suggest that a

Protestant not distinguished as such is in danger of being slain by his brethren. The parallel may be offered as a veiled threat, but, more likely, as in the source material the brother dies too, it is meant as a Cassandra-like warning that equivocation can only result in tragedy. Although we don't see Burbon again in the *Faerie Queene*, we are perhaps meant to surmise that, like Balin, Burbon rides to his death.

Notes

1. For the standard understanding of the allegory in the Burbon episode, see Prescott. For Elizabeth's intervention in Henri's struggle for the throne see Doran 57-58.

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