

In the Middle: Queer intentions in *El rapto del Santo Grial* (1984) and *Historia del Rey Transparente* (2005)¹

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Abstract: This article examines non-normative figurations of the Middle Ages in two contemporary Spanish novels: Paloma Díaz-Mas' *El rapto del Santo Grial* and Rosa Montero's *Historia del rey transparente*. Drawing on Carolyn Dinshaw's notion of a "queer touch across time", this study focuses on how chronological narrative emplotment of conventional historiography is *bent* and even *broken*, as the two novels court a postmodern penchant for anachronism, non-linearity, irony, pastiche and "strangeness" that refuses to understand past and present as discrete and distinct. Both Paloma Díaz-Mas and Rosa Montero's novels are presented as rehearsing familiar myths and stories – the Arthurian cycle, the Holy Grail, the heroic quest – in order to advance alternative, feminist inflected versions critical of a hetero-patriarchal system whose naturalised grounding in the Middle Ages continues to haunt the present.

Keywords: Queer Studies; Spanish Fiction; Postmodernity; Medievalism; Arthurian cycle

Resumo: Este artigo analisa as representações não-normativas da Idade Média em duas narrativas espanholas contemporâneas: *El rapto del Santo Grial* de Paloma Díaz-Mas e *Historia del rey transparente* de Rosa Montero. Partindo da formulação de Carolyn Dinshaw de um "queer touch across time", este estudo analisa o modo como o enredo narrativo cronológico da historiografia convencional é *dobrado* e até mesmo *quebrado*, quando os dois romances recorrem à propensão pós-moderna para o anacronismo, a não-linearidade, a ironia, o *pastiche* e a "estranheza", recusando-se a entender o passado e o presente como discretos e distintos. Tanto a novela de Paloma Díaz-Mas como a de Rosa Montero são apresentadas como

representações de mitos e histórias familiares – o ciclo artúrico, o Santo Graal, a viagem heroica – com o objetivo de apresentar versões feministas alternativas e críticas de um sistema hétero-patriarcal cuja fundamentação naturalizada na Idade Média continua a assombrar o presente.

Palavras-chave: Estudos *Queer*; ficção narrativa espanhola; Pós-modernidade; Medievalismo; ciclo artúrico

Ahora ni siquiera me tizno la cara para pasar más desapercibida. Ahora camino retadora, o más bien retador, dentro de mi nueva sobreveste azul, y los viandantes parecen reconocer esa diferencia que hay en mí.

Rosa Montero (2005)

1.

On the horizon of Leola – the main character of Rosa Montero’s book – is always Avalon, the island of the Arthurian legend where Merlin takes King Arthur to cure his wounds. It is said to be an island where it is always spring, governed by an extraordinarily wise and beautiful queen. The reconciliation with death is thus predicated on the fantasy of rejoining a place beyond reality, and a return that will bring a female revolution. This final fragment of the *Historia del Rey Transparente* inspires a message of female empowerment, triggering the question of how medievalist fiction can *queer* our perception of the past by creating narratives of sexual liberation and gender bending in a well-known but unexpected medieval scenario:

Con Nyneve, y con Morgana le Fay, la bella y sabia bruja. Con Arturo, el buen Rey, que allí [en Avalon] se repone eternamente de sus heridas; con la Hermosa Juventud, rescatada de la derrota y de la muerte [...] Y regresaremos, y seremos millones. (Montero 2005: 514)

Fiction novels such as *El rapto del Santo Grial o el Caballero de la Verde Oliva* (1984) by Paloma Díaz-Mas and *Historia del Rey Transparente* (2005) by Rosa Montero provide ample opportunities for alternative, queer visions of the Middle Ages.² The protagonist's life in *Historia del Rey Transparente* spans twenty-five years, but in terms of historical data mentioned, the narrated events encompass roughly two hundred years, creating a storyline that is “voluntariamente anacrónico, o, mejor dicho, ucrónico” (Montero 2005: 532). Time is therefore twisted in order to “atrapar los mitos y los sueños, el olor y el sudor de aquellos tiempos” (*idem*: 532); in doing so the texts illustrate, as Carol Robinson and Pamela Clements (2009: 62) claim, that postmodern medievalist texts construct their fictional universe with “perceptions of perceptions (and of distortions), done without a concern for facts or reality”. Similarly, *El rapto del Santo Grial* recreates a stereotypical “Middle Ages of the so-called Tradition [...], an eternal and rather eclectic, even ramshackle structure, swarming with knights” (Eco 1986: 71) that, nevertheless, symbolically functions as the unconscious of the contemporary period. In fact, neither the medieval or the contemporary time frame stands as a neutral agent and both fall victims to satire when they are “judged in each other's light” (Hutcheon 1988: 39). As Paloma Díaz-Mas and Rosa Montero's stories demonstrates through their storyline, time's fluctuations – between the past we think we know and the past a medievalist text brings to its readers – have strange repercussions on expected gender roles. As Jonathan Hsy (2014: 44) puts it, “contemporary queer theory amply demonstrates that time need not be conceived as entirely straight – in all senses of the word”.

Queer theory is a dynamic field of academic inquiry that has been increasingly investing in questioning a variety of dominant, straight, symbolic discourses. It also invites us to rethink stable boundaries and causal links between historical periods.³ In her influential work *Getting Medieval* (1999), Carolyn Dinshaw proposes a “queer touch across time”, that encompasses both “the queer historian” and his/her collection of medieval texts, engaging in a cross-temporal simultaneity. According to Carolyn Dinshaw (2001: 205), queer analysis opens up historical artifacts as sites of potential community-building and thus as sites of potential political disruption. Likewise, in *Queer Movie Medievalisms* (2009), co-editors Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Tison Pugh assert that for contemporary creators, the

Middle Ages can be a space for reflection and reinvention unfettered from the demands of historical accuracy and charges of anachronism. To understand this process, they argue that queer theory is a useful mode of questioning postmodern engagements with the medieval past, “in part, because queer theory has the power to disrupt our notion of linearity and of a differentiating temporality” (Kelly/Pugh 2009: 1–2). Even Norman Cantor in the well-known *Inventing the Middle Ages* (1991) enacts his own kind of queer touch with the past by taking the project of understanding how twentieth-century renowned medieval scholars and fiction writers “invented” the Middle Ages – from C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien to Marc Bloch and Eileen Power – by drawing from their own historical and personal circumstances.

When it comes to the two novels here under consideration, it can be argued that the “queer touch across time”, starts in the present of their reception by the readers, and then stretches back to the creation of the medievalist text – in this case, the late 80’s and the early 2000 – and ends in the Middle Ages themselves. By jumping time frames, these novels invite the readers to distance themselves from what is narrated but, at the same time, to project onto them their own situations, including their needs and desires for a past. Paloma Díaz-Mas confirms that writing about the Middle Ages is “sólo una forma irónica de escribir sobre la actualidad” (Díaz-Mas/ Diéguez 1988: 79). Likewise, Rosa Montero explains that she tried to recreate the Middle Ages, but she hoped the readers would establish connections with their own historical reality: “Hay una reconstrucción del XII, que he intentado que sea veraz. No en el detalle, sino en lo profundo. He pretendido que el lector se vea catapultado al pasado pero que los sentidos le metan en ese siglo” (Montero/ Marchal 2005). As it becomes apparent, by inhabiting several temporalities simultaneously, postmodern recreations of the Middle Ages seek to “get inside the head of medieval culture”, as Jonathan Hsy (2014: 45) explains, as much as it aims to transform the current world.

2.

Paloma Díaz-Mas’ short novel *El rapto del Santo Grial* mixes several intertextual references – from Spanish *romances* to chivalric novels – but focuses on a long-familiar adventure of the Arthurian legends: the Grail Quest. Nevertheless, readers should not

expect the text to reinforce “what are seen as positive medieval values in danger of being lost in the contemporary world” (Simmons 2001: 22), as we so often encounter in the fictional recreation of the Matter of Britain. The novel begins with the following premise: the Grail is finally within reach of the knights, in the castle of *Acabarás* kept by *Blancaniña* and one hundred fair maidens. After all the bloodshed in the quest, all the violent wars waged, *men* will finally find the peace and prosperity they so eagerly fought for.

Three knights embrace the adventure of seeking, one last time, the Holy Grail: Lanzarote, Perceval and a young female knight, known as *Caballero Morado* [Purple Knight] or *Caballero de Santa Águeda* [Knight of St. Agatha]. In secrecy, the King calls for a fourth young knight, Pelinor – also known as *Caballero de la Verde Oliva* – whom he charges with the task of not allowing any of them to reach their final destination.⁴ As the King explains through a long list of rhetorical questions to the incredulous Pelinor, it is vital that Pelinor succeeds in this task:

Es la costumbre de matar a sus semejantes el más noble hábito del hombre, pues por el se distingue de los brutos animales. [...] En este hábito se base el honor humano porque ¿qué podría afirmar “noble soy” sin haber matado a alguno de sus semejantes? ¿Qué rey se consideraría poderoso si nunca hubiese vencido a un enemigo? [...] Una vez hallado el Grial: ¿de que hazañas podrán gloriarse mis caballeros? [...] Mis caballeros, que toda su vida se dedicaron a la guerra y a la lucha, ¿qué harán? [...] Es preciso que, al menos durante un tiempo, siga habiendo luchas y disputas [...] Es por eso que necesito que vayas al castillo de Acabarás y impidas que allí lleguen los otros caballeros. (Díaz-Mas 1984: 20-23)

The story goes on to narrate each knight’s adventures in the quest to find the Holy Grail. The encounter between Lanzarote and the woodsman is worth mentioning as it indulges in the disparity of the discourses we came to know about the Middle Ages through medieval – and, especially nineteenth-century – literature portraying the banality of Romantic chivalric idealization ironically.⁵ When Lanzarote explains the functions of his sword, shield and insignia to the woodsman, the latter ridicules his words and ideals by questioning its practicality:

- Sin duda eres un poco tonto para ir por el mundo con semejante cachivache. Pero dime: ¿qué diablos es eso tan brillante que llevas en el otro brazo?
- Escudo es su nombre y tu eres el hombre más ignorante que he visto en mi vida.
- [...] Ea, cuéntame; ese trapo que ondea en la punta del palo que tú llamas lanza, ¿sirve acaso para indicarte la dirección del viento? (Díaz-Mas 1984: 33)

As far as the Purple Knight is concerned, when she is confronted by her opponent during the journey to *Acabarás*, she does not disclose her identity – as she has promised to the King – and claims to be the *Caballero de Santa Águeda*.⁶⁷ As a proper knight, Pelinor should not hesitate before any challenge, so he unwaveringly kills the girl, unaware that she is his beloved girlfriend. Both shall die in their loyal eagerness to fulfil the contradictory missions that the monarch has entrusted to them. Ultimately, they are both pawns of the honour code and militarism that defines their social system. In this story, all the heroes will have the same destiny: a dishonourable death, unworthy of medieval knights.⁸ As these and other such scenes demonstrate, masculinity and the values associated with it – or, indeed, the hetero-patriarchal system as a whole – is an iniquitous social construct: one that medieval and contemporary society validate in order for its power to cohere, yet one that relies on obvious social and cultural deficiencies. In the end, the Grail, a legendary symbol of virtue, is taken away to Turkey by the woodsman, hidden between flour sacks. And so concludes – *acaba* – this tale of knights and conquests, without glory or honour.

The protagonist and first-person narrator of the *Historia del Rey Transparente* begins her narrative with three sentences that set the tone for the novel: “Soy mujer y escribo. Soy plebeya y sé leer. Nací sierva y soy libre” (Montero 2005: 11). Leola is writing her own history from the beginning, while hiding somewhere in the south of France, where she and several Cathar women are taking shelter from the imminent threat of the Christian crusaders. Although Rosa Montero argues that *Historia del Rey Transparente* is not an historical novel – because it has no realistic intentions – she recreates a temporal frame in the late Middle Ages that includes historical moments from both the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries. It is the age of troubadours and Provençal refinement as it is also the time of great religious unrest, such as the conflict between the Catholic Church and the

Cathars. In this “men’s world”, the story begins when Leola, a fifteen years old girl, decides to wear the clothes of a warrior that lay dead on the ground, and assume a new identity, reinventing herself as a male warrior: “Escondida dentro de mis nuevos ropajes, me siento más segura... ahora ya no soy una mujer. Ahora soy un guerrero” (*idem*: 27).

The protagonist soon learns that fighting is a dance, a choreography she needs to master in order to survive. While travelling through France, Leola – or Leo – takes part in several adventures alongside Nyneve, a witch he finds hanging from a tree. During his journey, Leo will be knighted at the age of seventeen by Duchess Dhuoda. Later on, he will meet Leonor of Aquitaine and her cortège of poets and philosophers debating *fin’amor* and high theology. He becomes, at last, a “Blood Merchant”, a mercenary in the pay of the lower classes of society. It is not until he falls in love with Gastón when he sees him at a pub, that Leo will, once again, start wearing women’s clothes. Soon after, Leola and Nyneve meet a group of Cathars and help them escape because, as Rosa Montero explains in an interview, “[los cátaros] eran unos *progres* [...] y fueron los cátaros los que protagonizaron el necesario cambio religioso. Eran una gente muy racional, muy logica” (Montero/ López 2005: 62) and the protagonists see their own values reflected on this community. At this point, the readers know that the end is near. The novel, although closing with the suicide of the protagonist, leaves a hopeful message into the future: “Y regresaremos, y seremos millones” (Montero 2005: 514).

Paloma Díaz-Mas’ short novel also finishes with death. Taking the chivalric code of death presented in both stories to its ironical extreme, the narrator asks rhetorically in the end “¿Qué será de un pueblo cuyo rey es un muerto?” (Díaz-Mas 1984: 86). The knight Pelinor possesses a power so great that even after death he defeats the *Caballero de Hierro* [Iron Knight] and wins his kingdom over a bet: which could provide a better feast. When the Iron Knight goes to claim his victory, such a lavish banquet awaits him that he realises he cannot win, admits defeat to the dead Pelinor and willingly goes into exile. In both stories, death prevails in a paradoxical understanding of victory in defeat.

Used to incorporate a new fictional level in Rosa Montero’s novel, the paratext – and title – of the transparent king is a legend that many characters know about, but that none of

them manages to tell entirely.⁹ It is not until the end of the book, that the readers will find out about the legend of a king that overthrows his father thanks to his magical ability of telling lies that everyone believes in. Suddenly he starts to become transparent and, unable to find an antidote for the curse, the king consults a dragon. The dragon tells him a riddle which, if solved, will heal him: “cuando tu me nombras ya no estoy” (Montero 2005: 525). Before the king can answer, the story ends with the words “La respuesta es...” (*idem*: 525-26) followed by a blank page. “Silence” is the word the king will never manage to say. With this epilogue, Rosa Montero’s novel points out to what has not been said, the postmodern anguish with the blank pages, the silences that occupy so much space in our past and, thus, also evidence the immense power of writing and creating. In Leola’s words, having learnt how to write is “mi mayor victoria, mi conquista, el don del que me siento más orgullosa; y aunque las palabras están siendo devoradas por el gran silencio, hoy constituyen mi única arma” (*ibidem*: 11).

By favouring the identification of a well-known intertext, such as the Arthurian legend, both novels compose a pastiche “in the sense they cite, allude to, refer to, borrow from or internalize other texts and representations, both real and fictional. They belong to a more general cultural condition in which cultural forms recycle, repeat, reshape and rewrite past forms” (Currie 1998: 2). The manuscript of *El rapto del Santo Grial* was actually returned from one publisher with some of the obvious references from Spanish *romances* and chivalric novels circled in red. Not without some irony, Paloma Díaz-Mas observes that “they missed some [references to medieval texts]” (Díaz-Mas/ Diéguez 1988: 80). As we can also notice in other Spanish medievalist novels, such as Félix de Azúa’s *Mansura* (also published in 1984) the repetition and imitation of past works should be perceived as a postmodernist intent to convey new meanings to the previous narratives; an approach that actually plays with the concept of “originality”, a clearly modern – not medieval – literary quality criterion.

As we have seen so far, Paloma Díaz-Mas and Rosa Montero embed intertextual references to earlier novels and myths, political/ religious ideology, as well as historical characters and events that locate the readers in a specific past historical moment, while

using use metafictional techniques to defamiliarize that historical background. Metafiction and intertextuality are among the features that create the ambiguity and ambivalence that have become standardized in postmodernist fiction, by provoking a reflection upon the relation between seemingly different elements. In order to do so, the novels privilege two modes of narration that problematize the notion of subjectivity and produce an undermining of meaning. In *El rapto del Santo Grial* an overtly controlling yet ironically distant narrator seeks to mitigate the inconsistencies of the story. This ironic approach induces the readers to remain skeptical regarding what is being told. As far as *Historia del Rey Transparente* is concerned, as Victoria Rivera-Cordero (2011: 120) suggests, it seems that Rosa Montero is offering the readers a new look at the past, through the female protagonist and narrator's perspective, trying to prove that the capacity for gender-based resistance in the Middle Ages – as we will see further on – was greater than is generally recognized.¹⁰ In both cases, it seems that Paloma Díaz-Mas and Rosa Montero are inviting the readers to think that, even when a “well-known story” is told, perhaps there is always room for an unconventional alternative version.

3.

When Judith Butler (1988: 523) writes “the body is invariably transformed into his body or her body”, she is addressing the issue of how bodies are performed into genders. Using her eloquent metaphor, “gender is an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene” (*idem*: 526), that is to say that gender standards are nothing other than a “well-known story”, repeated so often that have become a commonly accepted cultural fiction. For Paloma Díaz-Mas and Rosa Montero, the Middle Ages becomes a space to express their discomfort with normative gender and sexual roles assigned by heteropatriarchal culture to men and women. Their stories disrupt the historical constrictions that the realistic recreation of the medieval setting often imposes, by introducing characters who experience gender and sexuality in a way that do not conform to the readers' prior expectations.

When King Arthur asks for volunteers to embrace the Grail Quest, the youngest of seven daughters of an old knight that sat on the round table says: “[...] yo iré y te juro que no he de volver sin haber vencido diez peligros” (Díaz-Mas 1984: 14). Paraphrasing a popular Castilian oral *romance* known as “romance de la doncella guerrera”, King Arthur questions the young girls’ ability to represent him at this quest:

– Doncella, lo que dices no me parece bien. ¿Qué harás con tus trenzas doradas? Enredarse se enredarán entre las patas de tu caballo y tú y él caeréis por tierra. Pero ea, no discutamos más. Te armaré caballero si eres capaz de meter mi espada en tu vaina. Si así lo haces, podrás marchar en busca del Grial; mas si no lo consigues, hemos de verte profesar en un convento de monjas. (Díaz-Mas 1984: 15)

By proving her ability to “put his sword in her scabbard”, the girl from *El rapto del Santo Grial* manages to participate in an essentially masculine activity: to take part in an adventure. The equivalence between lance and phallus suggests a relation between masculinity and violence that surfaces throughout the narrative, lending an ironic tone to hetero-patriarchal discourses about masculinity, virginity and sexuality.¹¹ The sexual reference is taken yet further when the narrator explains the young girl’s reaction: “mucho se entristeció la doncella por su amigo, el valiente Pelinor, que tenía amor con ella y al que ella había prometido no envainar en su vaina más espada que la del joven caballero” (Díaz-Mas 1984: 15).

King Arthur then asks her how she wishes to present herself. The girl chooses to call herself *Caballero Morado* (Purple Knight) and will wear as her insignia the mirror of Venus with a closed fist drawn inside. The reference to the emblem of the Anarcha-feminism movement, creates once again a transtemporal dialogue, spurring a desire for resistance by freeing female existence from their historical constrictions and from patriarchal/phallogocentric systems. However, as we have seen, neither the feminist symbols nor the love and virtue she represents will shield the maiden from the selfish drive of medieval men.

When Judith Butler (1988: 522) argues that the feminist impulse has often emerged from the recognition that “my pain or my silence or my anger or my perception is finally not

mine alone”, one can understand what Carolyn Dinshaw (1999) means when she refers to the creation of “queer communities across time and space”. As she claims, readers can “get medieval” by forming communities through partial connections across time, organized around shared interests, events or causes. By wearing the symbol of the Anarcha-feminism movement, the Purple Knight is taking part in a community that will come long after her time with which she shares, nonetheless, a common aim: to question and to break the hetero-patriarchal system.

Understanding the body as a set of historical possibilities, not predetermined by any “interior essence” but capable of agency and determination, leads Rosa Montero to create a protagonist and narrator with a fluid gender identity. If, as proposed by Judith Butler (1988: 520), humans are not born male or female, but her or his identity is shaped by discursive practices that take place throughout life and are open to possible changes, it becomes understandable that “identity” – and in this case “gender identity” – is a construction that can be both deconstructed and reconstructed. The ultimate power of gender identity is its intrinsic plasticity, the fact that it can be reshaped anew according to the circumstances. As we have seen, in the first part of the novel, Leola learns how to fight and how to behave in order to be recognized as a man: “Mientras estuve aprendiendo a combatir con el Maestro, intenté adquirir gestos y maneras de varón: para sentarme, para caminar, para mover las manos. Además hablo siempre en voz baja y susurrante, en el registro más grave que puedo extraer de mi garganta (Montero 2005: 111)”.¹² Leola’s successful performance as a male reveals that maleness itself is somewhat fragile. As Nicole Robilotta (2018: 15) cleverly asks: “If women can just change clothes, get a sunburn, and assume the socially more powerful position of manhood, what happens to the privilege of being male?”.

Gender is, even so, a performance with clear punitive consequences. To assume the masculine gender and to be recognized as a male knight means to disguise female physical attributes as much as possible. Queerness emerges from the evident tortured disjunction between body and spirit that she enacts, as well as from her singular status within the medieval context. This tension is often expressed by the protagonist when she says: “mi

cuerpo virginal, atrapado dentro de los ropajes de caballero” (Montero 2005: 76) or “este pobre cuerpo prisionero, que pugna por salir y derramarse” (*idem*: 229). It can perhaps be argued that the gender binary continues to be reinforced, taking into account that Leola never fully assumes a hybrid, queer identity as her own. As it becomes clear, even though she tries to embody a *bigender* identity, she perceives herself as *strange*, showcasing the problematic relationship between the “virginal” female body and the shining and powerful male armor.

The story plays with gender and sexuality yet further, when Duchess Dhuoda tries to seduce Leo. By explicitly suggesting a lesbian sexual scene, Rosa Montero is subverting the expectations of normative sexuality in a setting so heavily associated with the catholic hetero-normative-based system of sexuality as the medieval one.¹³ It also proves that often the disguise not only alters and subverts socially given gender roles as it also confuses and redefines sexuality:

Dhuoda alarga la mano y roza mi boca con los pétalos de rosa, para hacerme callar. Luego me agarra por la cintura con el otro brazo y tira de mi hacia ella. Continúa sentada sobre la alta cama y su rostro está a la altura de mi pecho.

– Duquesa...

– ¿Quieres volar conmigo Leo? No hace falta subirse a las almenas... Podría untar miel de cantárida en mis labios... y podrías comerla de mi boca.

– [...] No puedo hacerlo, Dhuoda. Y, además, ¡vos sois la Dama Blanca!

La Duquesa ríe.

– Claro que lo soy. ¿Y eso qué importa? Dime, mi buen Leo... ¿por qué no puedes hacerlo? ¿Porque no te gusto? ¿O acaso tienes miedo de que descubra tu verdadero cuerpo?

Callo, consternada.

– Mi querida Leo, mi linda guerrera... ¿acaso creías que me tenías engañada? Hace tiempo sueño con tus ojos azules... y con las suaves y redondas formas que se ocultan bajo tu cota de malla. (Montero 2005: 137)

4.

Both *El rapto del Santo Grial* and *Historia del Rey Transparente* relate in more than one occasion to the story of *Le Roman de Silence*, a thirteenth-century Arthurian *roman* by

Heldris of Cornwall discovered only in the twentieth-century. The medieval narrative depicts the Nature vs Nurture debate – both personified as women – allegorically addressed through the main character: Silence is the daughter of Candor and Eufemie of Cornwall, raised as a male in order to be eligible to lawfully inherit the family fortune by circumventing King Ebain’s misogynistic inheritance laws.

Even though Silence’s escape from daily female life is only temporary, it is this decision that fuels the fictional possibilities of the whole story, as it also happens with Leola and, to a lesser extent, with the Purple Knight. Ultimately, transvestism is necessary for the acquisition of power and recognition in the medieval public sphere. All three of them occupy, for some time, a third space, a space for resistance. Because the signifiers of heroism, strength and virtue are understood as masculine, the masculinization, and therefore, the cross-dressing of the female characters is what allows them to thrive and to have a voice (at least for a while).

Echoing, yet again, the story of the transparent king, Silence asks “Who am I then?” (l. 2532); a question answered in the end, as Jane Tolmie (2009: 15) points out, “with silence”:

La vertés nel puet consentir
Que jo vos puisse rien mentir,
Ne jo n’ai soig mais de taisir.
Faites de moi vostre plaisir. (ll. 6624-27)

[Truth does not permit me
to keep anything from you,
nor do I care to keep silent any longer.
Do with me what you will. (ll. 6624-27)]¹⁴

With a classical fairy tale ending, Heldris of Cornwall sets the world back on a *straight* line, with men and women settling back into their nature-mandated roles. The conservative ending of the *roman* – the revealing of Silence’s femininity and her forced marriage to King Ebain – could be read as undercutting the implicit subversive message. Yet, we should consider Silence as a representation of the systematic refusal of univocal

meaning (Bloch 1986: 88) and, as Jane Tolmie (2009: 14) argues, understand that “[...] the characters within the poem, draw our attention to issues of gender performance in such a manner as to render it impossible for the poem’s conservative ending to unsay or undo (to silence) the main body of the romance”. Indeed, several critics have disregarded the option of a literal interpretation of the text, by emphasizing the layers of irony the *romance* depicts when addressing femininity and masculinity. Despite the numerous punning comments about how it is desirable for women to be silent, it is certain that *Le Roman de Silence* indulges in an ironic presentation of medieval perception of a “natural social order”, inviting its contemporary readers to question rigidly defined gender roles and to criticize expectations of hyper-masculine (and overly preformed) chivalric culture.

5.

Understanding the process by which the Middle Ages are constructed as a discourse – which is often used to address the concerns of another time – showcases the problematic relation between queer and medievalism that Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Tison Pugh refer to when they re-signify the famous title of Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Condition of Postmodernity*:

In combining these terms – queer and medievalism – we take as a premise that [post]modernity is a “condition” (to borrow from Lyotard), a condition characterized by an elaborate and conflicted preoccupation with the past, and therefore deserving of interrogation. (Kelly/ Pugh 2009: 1)

As we have seen so far, *El rapto del Santo Grial* and *Historia del Rey Transparente* testify that *queer* potential emerges when playing with a frequently inaccurate and simplified understanding of gender, as the foundations of gendered identities are rendered unstable, sometimes unrecognizable, in the interaction between the medieval and the postmodern.

The stories repeatedly question and subvert the meaning of gender and sexuality, pointing out to the limits of their enactments and inviting critics to investigate the limits of binary systems such as male/ female, language/ silence, medieval/[post]modern. In *El*

rapto del Santo Grial, King Arthur is a lustful old man, exhausted and unreliable, a pathetic figure. From the beginning, the readers realize that the story indulges in a parodistic re-imagining of King Arthur's traditional role and the virility associated with it. In this world of Arthurian adventure, the cultural value of masculinity is taken to such an extreme that readers are forced to understand it as a contestation of the hetero-patriarchal system, proving further its unstable and peculiar foundations. While Paloma Díaz-Mas uses the medieval setting to ferociously and humorously deprecate the cult of masculinity, Rosa Montero uses a *topos* with the same symbolism to emphasize a message of female empowerment. Against all odds, a young girl manages to successfully take the masculine knight's identity – supporting Judith Butler's understanding of gender as merely a social construction and not a biological mandate – and, in doing so, to subvert the foundations of the “natural social order” of the medieval system, as Silence did before her.

As it so often occurs in postmodern fictional representations of the Middle Ages (Soares 2016), in reconstructing a heavily hierarchical and hetero-patriarchal structure as the medieval one, authors use metafictional techniques that enhance the readers' adhesion to a critical view of what is being told. When Paloma Díaz-Mas and Rosa Montero play with the collective imaginary and with the expectations of the readers by queering the past, the authors establish unexpected connections between now and then, highlighting the need to change medieval cultural discourses of gender that prevail in contemporary society. As Elizabeth Ordóñez (1991: 152) notices: “if we chuckle at Arthur's distorted values and bewilderment, we find ourselves laughing subversively at the perversity of our own culture's dominant values”.

NOTAS

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² This seems more a time for questions and proposals than for defining statements. After all *queer* – although it failed to do so – was put forward to challenge and break apart conventional categories, not to become one itself. Therefore, we use here the expression “queer Middle Ages” referring to a flexible space, a “site of permanent becoming” (Jagose 1996: 56) and a space of continuous re-analysis of Western cultural themes.

³ Contemporary queer theorists such as Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam and Katheryn Boyd Stockton have encouraged flexible notions of temporality that move beyond the normative and progressive linear notion of time.

⁴ Note that Pelinor’s name echoes the one of the antagonist of the late 14th-century Middle English chivalric romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

⁵ The disregard for the Romantic idealization of the past – and for the Romantic notion of “writing” as a sublime activity – is exemplified when Paloma Díaz-Mas explains in an interview that “escribo porque me lo paso bien escribiendo y, como no me parece que la misión del escritor sea trascendente, no tengo ninguna ambición de que eso quede por los siglos de los siglos como llegado al Universo” (Díaz-Mas/ Diéguez 1988: 80).

⁶ Note that the verb “acabar” means in Spanish “to finish/ to end”. The toponym “castelo de Acabarás”, therefore plays with the idea that the knight’s journey will end in “Acabarás”, in the end.

⁷ Santa Águeda (Saint Agatha) is a Christian saint and virgin martyr that lived between 231 AD and 251 AD. Saint Agatha is often depicted iconographically contemplating her excised breasts on a platter in her hands, as in, for instance, Bernardino Luini’s *Saint Agatha* (XVI century). According to the legend, she was imprisoned by Quintianus for her Christian faith. While in prison, she was submitted to torture, including having her breasts cut off with pincers. Paloma Díaz-Mas clearly makes this reference aware of the symbolic meaning of the breasts when it comes to gender recognition: in order to become a knight, the young girl needs to disguise herself, hoping not to be perceived as a woman.

⁸ Perceval is shipwrecked and Lanzarote is killed by the simple woodsman.

⁹ The legend is presented as being part of a manuscript kept at the Universidade de Coimbra and found by a scholar called Nuria Labari.

¹⁰ The female-to-male disguise motif is frequent in medieval literature (Hotchkiss 1996).

¹¹ The scene when the young Pelinor kills his lover reinforces the symbolic relation between, on the one hand, the phallus and the sword and, on the other hand, between the scabbard and the vagina: “La espada entró bien, hasta la empuñadura, tan fácilmente como si se introdujera en la vaina. Pero no sangró la carne porque una vez el caballero había envainado la espada de Arturo y habían manado de su vientre unas gotas de sangre; y desde entonces sólo sangraba el vientre del caballero en las noches de luna nueva” (Díaz-Mas 1984: 62-63). Likewise, when the *Caballero de la Verde Oliva* arrives to the castle and finds *Blancaniña*, the girl tells him: “me llena de alegría la visión de una lanza tan inhiesta como la tuya [...] tu lanza ha de cumplir bien su cometido y que ninguna dama a cuyo servicio la pusieres quedaría enojada o poco satisfecha” (*idem*: 72).

¹² Later on – in a parallel description where the verb “to learn” seems to confirm the performative nature of gender – Duchess Dhuoda will teach Leola how to be a lady: “Por su parte, Dhuoda está empeñada en enseñarme a mí los modos refinados de las damas. [...] Dhuoda me explica cómo tengo que sentarme y agacharme, cómo he de mantener el cuello al mismo tiempo erguido y un poco arqueado, cómo debo mover la falda [...]” (Montero 2005: 140).

¹³ In a similar situation to the one experienced by Duchess Dhuoda and Leo, Queen Eufeme from *Le Roman de Silence* develops a sexual interest in Silence, but her attempts are not successful. When Silence rejects Eufeme’s sexual advances, she accuses Silence of homosexuality and rape, and demands revenge from King Evan on her (ll. 4146-47). Regarding the queen’s accusations of homosexuality, note that – unlike in Rosa Montero’s book – Eufeme is accusing Silence unaware that she is a biological female disguised as a male knight.

¹⁴ All quotations are taken from Sarah Roche-Mahdi’s edition and translation *Silence: A Thirteenth Century French Romance*.

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