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Female cunning on the edges of chivalry in Gerbert de Montreuil's *Continuation to the Conte du Graal*

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In courtly and Arthurian literature, violence against women is usually not condoned. However, from the onset of knightly romances with Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide* around 1165, threats of physical coercion against female characters have been a common topic of Arthurian narratives.² Such threats originate from antagonists of the hero, and therefore appear as socially unacceptable, and as a wrong which the heroes of romances have to make right. Thus, it is surprising when the hero of an Arthurian romance has to inflict harm upon female protagonists. The situation may nevertheless occur, as it does within the *Continuation of the Conte du Graal* by Gerbert de Montreuil, written around 1230.³ This romance contains many accounts of violence against women, while also showing a strong concern for the definition of chivalry and of correct behaviour for knights, especially when interacting with female characters.⁴ Therefore, Gerbert's *Continuation* shall be our leading text to consider how violence and retribution against women is described in literature from the early thirteenth century, how it functions in that classical age of courtly literature, and what it means for the allowed modalities of female behaviour. Further on, we shall give consideration to how the category "female" functions as the usual representative of the category of "otherness" in relation with the leading category of chivalry and its literary idealisation, the Arthurian knight.

Gerbert's romance functions as a third continuation to Chrétien de Troyes' unfinished *Conte du Graal*, in parallel with another *Continuation* by Manessier.⁵ Gerbert's narrative, at slightly over 17000 lines, is the longest of the four continuations to Chrétien, which were all written by different authors,

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² Chrétien de Troyes. *Erec et Enide*, trans. by Fritz, J. (ed.) (Paris. 1992). See Pintarič, M. 'Le rôle de la violence dans le roman médiéval: l'exemple d'*Erec et Enide*' in *Senefiance: La violence dans le monde médiéval* 36 (1994) pp.413-423; for a more general overview, see Gravdal, K. 'Chrétien de Troyes, Gratian, and the Medieval Romance of Sexual Violence', in *Signs* 17 (Spring 1992) pp.558-585.

³ Gerbert de Montreuil. *La Continuation de Perceval. Quatrième Continuation*. Le Nan, F. (ed.) (Droz. 2014). The editor's introduction summarizes pp.50-80 the scholarly debate which concluded that the *Continuation's* author is the same Picard writer as that of the *Roman de la Violette*, and that he wrote the *Continuation* between 1226-1230, under the patronage of Marie, countess of Ponthieu.

⁴ Such a moral and didactic purpose is a linking topic of Gerbert's two romances, and also of a small *serventois* attributed to him. See Le Nan's introduction in Gerbert. *La Continuation*. pp.52-57.

⁵ Manessier. *La Troisième Continuation du Conte du Graal*. trans. by Toury, M., Roach, W. (ed.) Toury (Paris. 2004). Both texts follow up on the plot of the *Second Continuation*, apparently unaware of each other. The two manuscripts giving Gerbert's text interpolate it before Manessier's text (supposedly having removed the original ending of Gerbert's tale); thus I avoid using the misleading title of 'Fourth Continuation' for Gerbert's narrative. For general studies and summaries on the Continuations, see Hinton, T. *The Conte du Graal Cycle: Chrétien de Troyes's Perceval, the Continuations, and French Arthurian Romance*. (Cambridge. 2012); Tether, L. *The Continuations of Chrétien's Perceval: Content and Construction, Extension and Ending*. (Cambridge. 2012); Bruckner, T.M. *Chrétien continued: a study of the Conte du Graal and its verse continuations*. (Oxford. 2009).

although it remains the least studied of them.⁶ Its length allows for some thirty episodes, mostly organised in series of two or three episodes with echoing themes, with the didactic purpose of illustrating ambiguous topics such as the use of violence.⁷ This didactic aim is underlined by three long sermons given by hermits to Perceval, all regarding how a knight should behave, and which divide the text in three parts. That the romance should be structured around these three didactic scenes, one for each third of the text, should not appear as surprising;⁸ commenting on the *Lancelot en prose*, contemporary to Gerbert's romance, Jean-Charles Payen and Frans Diekstra have underlined the importance of the pedagogical purpose in Old French romances, and how the (often Arthurian) narrative texts give more instruction on behaviours and ideals of knighthood than any theoretical treaty.⁹

The first sermon is especially interesting, because it tells Perceval how he should be the protector of the weak, of the oppressed, and especially of the Church. Making use of the allegory of the two edges of a knight's sword, a hermit preaches the following to Perceval:

‘De tels armes se doit armer
Chevaliers qui Dieu velt amer,
S’il velt estre preus et vaillans.
Il a l’espee as deus taillans;
Savez por coi? On doit entendre
Que l’uns taillans est por desfendre
Sainte Eglise, sachiez de voir:
En l’autre taillant doit avoir
Droite justice terriene
Por garder la gent crestiene
Et por tenir droite justiche
Sans trichier et sans covoitise.’

Gerbert. *Continuation*. vv.2761-2772.¹⁰

(‘Such are the arms with which a knight should arm himself if he seeks to love God and to be valiant and worthy. A knight's sword has two cutting edges: do you know why? It should be understood, truly, that one edge is for the defence of Holy Church, while the other should administer earthly justice, protecting Christian people and upholding justice without deception or self-interest.’)¹¹

⁶ While most of the four continuations range over 10000 lines, it can be noted that Arthurian romances by Chrétien de Troyes, like *Erec et Enide* or *Yvain ou Le Chevalier au Lion*, are typically 6000 to 7000 lines long, although his unfinished *Conte du Graal* ranged above 9000 lines.

⁷ For a reading of the romance as a space of equivocalities and an attempt to disambiguate signs, see Seguy, M. ‘L’Ordre du Discours dans le Désordre du Monde. La Recherche de la Transparence dans la *Quatrième Continuation*’ in *Romania* 113 (1992-1995) pp.175-193.

⁸ In Le Nan's edition, these sermons run vv.2728-2798, than vv.8425-8854, and finally vv.14100-14341.

⁹ Payen, J.C. and Diekstra, F.N.M. *Le Roman*. (Turnhout. 1975) pp.66-7.

¹⁰ *Gerbert de Montreuil, la Continuation de Perceval*.

¹¹ Unless otherwise stated, all English translations from *The Complete Story of the Grail: Chrétien de Troyes' Perceval and its Continuations*. trans. by Bryant, N. (Cambridge. 2015).

The announced model of behaviour, which ultimately stems from the interpretation on the sword with two cutting edges in *Revelation* 1:16, seems ideal, but the situation here is actually not perfect, for the hermit continues, explaining how the worldly edge has become too sharp, cutting and killing too many men, while knights just go on ransoming:¹²

‘Chascuns chevaliers taut et taille
les povres homes et raient
sans che qu’il n lor mesfont nient.
De cele part est trop trenchans
l’espee et cil est Dieu trichans
qui tele espee avec lui porte.’

Gerbert, *Continuation*, vv.2776-81.¹³

(‘Every knight hacks and hews the poor and holds them to ransom,
though they’ve done him no wrong at all! So that edge of the blade is
very sharp, and a knight who carries such a sword is deceiving God!’)

Thus, this sermon acts as a good summary and preview of the narrative to come, which essentially resolves around assisting those who were wronged through excessive physical or sexual violence, mostly women as the typical representative of the “weak and oppressed”; thus far, all seems fine, and the sermon fits both with the clerical ideal and with the typical didactic message of an Arthurian romance.

Indeed, Gerbert’s romance can be divided into two parts, with a first half mostly revolving around matters of love, sexual desire, and marriage, culminating in the marriage of the hero Perceval himself with Blanchefleur, and a second part around vengeance, revenge, and having to face the consequences of killing.¹⁴ This topic of knightly violence and behaviour is thus not only precisely outlined on specific occasions such as that hermit’s sermon, but it also constitutes a running trend throughout the whole narrative; therefore, it appears to constitute a problem which the author aims to address.¹⁵ In this we take the position, as advocated for by Gabrielle Spiegel, of a literary history which is ‘genuinely

¹² A similar teaching is given to the young Lancelot by the Lady of the Lake in the prose romance *Lancelot du Lac*. trans. by Mosès, F., Kennedy, E. (ed.) (Paris. 1991). This ideology of knighthood having to defend the weak appears to originate in commentaries by (pseudo-)Origen and Caesarius of Arles of *Revelation* 1:16, 2:16, 19:15 and 19:21, on the (sometimes double-edged) sword coming out of the mouth; its developments throughout the Middle Ages have been analyzed by Flori, J. *L’Idéologie du Glaive: Préhistoire de la Chevalerie* (Geneva. 1983), esp. pp.57-62, 68-73 and 168-173.

¹³ *Gerbert de Montreuil, la Continuation de Perceval*.

¹⁴ While deserving development outside the scope of this paper, it should be noted how the main topic for the first half of the romance – free and mutual consent between lovers - strongly resonates with the definition of marriage as debated during the Council of Lateran IV (1215), which gives equal importance to free mutual consent of both spouses.

¹⁵ For further reflexions on Arthurian romances as critical mirrors of society, see Wolfzettel F. ‘Temps et Histoire dans la Littérature Arthurienne’ in Faucon, J.C. (ed.) *Temps et Histoire dans le Roman Arthurien*. (Toulouse. 1999) pp.9-31 (esp. pp.13-14).

integrated' in the cultural context which shaped it, and which in return it aims to shape.¹⁶

Felisse and the thieves

Considering such a didactic potentiality, the following scene can only appear as quite surprising in a courtly text. While Perceval is riding in the forest, he is halted by a lady in distress asking for his help. But this turns out to be a trap, for this woman, Felisse de la Blanclose, has actually been playing bait for her band of brigands, who steal out of the wood to rob Perceval's horse and equipment. Despite being alone against many, the future hero of the Grail overcomes them. Those he has not killed have to flee, but Perceval pursues them to a kind of half-abandoned castle serving as their lair; there he finishes them off, and at that point the robber-woman charges at Perceval:

Es vous la desleal, la fole
qui vint corant a destesee;
une hache tint entesee.
A Percheval vait escriant:
'Vassal, por voir le vous creant,
que vous estes mal arrivez !
Le plus bel jor veü avez
que vous doiez ja mais veoir.
Vous n'avez force ne pooir,
de vo sanc vo teste ert lavee'
Lors a la hace amont levee,
que bien quidoit venir a chief
de Percheval colper le chief;
mais Perchevax si le hasta
et de li si pres s'acosta,
ansdeus li a les poins trenchiez,
a poi que ses cuers n'est tronchiez.

Gerbert. *Continuation*. vv.15566-82.¹⁷

(Suddenly the mad traitress came rushing, clutching an axe and screaming at him: 'You made a mistake coming here, I swear! You've seen the best day you'll ever see! There's nothing you can do – your head's going to soak in your blood!' And she raised the axe aloft, aiming to behead him; but he charged in close and sliced off her hands – which pretty much broke her heart.)

Then Perceval goes on, cleaving in two the rest of the bandits. Realising their utter defeat, Felisse, without her hands, starts to run away while screaming, but Perceval pursues her. It must be emphasised how, taken out of context, he would appear here as a typical evil rapist knight, rather than

¹⁶ Spiegel, G. 'History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages' in *Speculum* 65. (1990) pp.59-86, p.75. She adds, p.77: 'Texts both mirror *and* generate social realities.' Such a trend of historicism has been more specifically applied to medieval literature in the wake of R. Howard Bloch's studies such as *Medieval French Literature and Law* (Berkeley. 1977).

¹⁷ *Gerbert de Montreuil, la Continuation de Perceval*.

the saviour of damsels in distress he proves to be in numerous occasions!¹⁸ When Perceval catches up with Felisse:

Lors la saisie par la treche
et vers un ort putel s'adrece,
ens l'a getee et balanchie.
Ore est finee a grant haschie

Gerbert. *Continuation*. vv.15601-4.¹⁹

(And he seized her by the hair, headed for a foul mire and hurled her in. She came to a sticky end.)

Such an outcome, with a female character apparently left to die of her injuries (no further mention is given of Felisse), is quite surprising, and possibly unique in the corpus of Arthurian romances.²⁰ The message appears clearly: if you raise a weapon to attack a knight, you are punished at the exact place of your transgression. Just as here both hands are cut off, before being dealt with in the worst possible way: befitting your villainous behaviour. Although, it could be argued, Felisse only attacked Perceval when she saw him kill her 'robber' companions. Should she then just have watched passively? Or should Perceval have been more merciful? Was she already condemned to death, just for being of assistance to the robbers? This leads us to question, what are the allowed modalities of action for female figures in Arthurian romances?

Gerbert leads his audience toward such questioning by using fiction as a space of thinking about problems related to his socio-cultural context, by outlying liminal cases, more specifically regarding male and females courses of action and recourse to violence.²¹ The episode with Felisse is one of Perceval's last adventures, and thus constitutes an achievement of the hero's path toward moral liminality. This is illustrated with how Perceval's dealing with Felisse and her band of robbers is back-to-back celebrated by nearby inhabitants and condemned by the next hermit Perceval meets.²² To better outline this liminality, we shall now go back to previous episodes of the *Continuation*.²³

¹⁸ Which could contribute to both a denunciation and an aestheticizing of symbolic violence against women, such as analysed by Gravdal, K. *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in medieval French Literature and Law*. (Philadelphia. 1991) pp.42-71.

¹⁹ *Gerbert de Montreuil, la Continuation de Perceval*.

²⁰ While a similar ending awaits the hag opposing Fergus at Castle Dunnottar, her description classified her in the domain of monstrosity to be destroyed by the civilizing hero; see Guillaume le Clerc, *The Romance of Fergus*, Frescoln, W. (ed.) (Philadelphia. 1983) vv.4077 *sqq.*

²¹ For a survey of critical approaches on literature and its connections to medieval society, see Ruiz-Domènec, J.E. (trans. Grogard, A.) 'Littérature et Société Médiévale: Vision d'Ensemble' in *Le Moyen Âge* 88 (1982) pp.77-114. On how the medieval audience itself reflected upon the educating force of courtly romance, see Jaeger, C.S. 'Book-burning at *Don Quixote*'s: thoughts on the educating force of courtly romance', in Busby, K. Kleinhenz, Ch. (eds) *Courtly art and art of courtliness*. (Cambridge. 2006) pp.3-28.

²² *Gerbert de Montreuil, la Continuation de Perceval*. Le Nan, F. (ed.). vv.15622-78 and vv.15814-26.

²³ Gabrielle Spiegel, who sees literature as a cultural construct, a 'symbolic expression of a social order' and an 'interworked system of construable signs' akin to a ritual, the social historian's field of inquiry and vocabulary

Interestingly, only two women are killed by Perceval in the romance: Felisse, and an old hag he had to behead. The latter was leading an army of knights and besieging Perceval's master-at-arms, Gornemont de Goron. Furthermore, she was openly claiming to be an obstacle to Perceval's quest for the Grail. But her appearance and actions – she was an ugly giantess using sorcery to raise the fallen members of her army every night – put her into the realm of the monstrous antagonist to be destroyed by a civilising hero. But these two female executions are exceptions. Most other women of the narrative act with one of two possible roles: motivators for male protagonists to kill, or, oppositely, mediators preventing killing – various situations which shall now be considered.

Women as contractors of death and peace

The first type of situation, which could be summarised as the hiring of a knight as killer for revenge, is not necessarily depicted negatively. On the contrary, it will appear that a woman intending to get revenge for her killed lover is entitled to ask for a knight's help, even as a hired killer. One such lady is met by Perceval while she is grieving over the body of her lover, killed by the so called '*Chevalier au Dragon*' (the Knight with a Dragon), whose shield is inhabited by a fire-breathing demon. Perceval, having just acquired a holy white shield to counter the dragon-headed one, promises to avenge the grieving lady. She then advises Perceval for when encountering the Knight with the Dragon:

La pucele qui ot non Claire,
qui el char maine son ami,
pensa et douta et gemi
por Perceval, si li ensaigne
que de la crois face s'ensaigne,
quant Celui au Dragon verra [...]
Dist Perchevax: 'Je ne sais moigne
qui j'en creïsse mix de vous.'

Gerbert. *Continuation*. vv.9286-99.²⁴

(The damsel – her name was Claire – still carrying her lover in the cart, feared and fretted and grieved for Perceval; and she told him to make the sign of the cross when he saw the Dragon Knight [...]. 'I'd trust no monk,' Perceval said, 'more than I trust you.')

This last answer is quite interesting, as monks in romances are usually advisers, especially when dealing with the supernatural and the devil in the various Grail romances. Here, it is a woman, and not

benefited from anthropological studies on concepts such as 'liminality', 'communitas' and 'ritual anti-structure'; see Spiegel, G. 'The Social Logic of the Text', p.66; see also Geertz, C. *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays*. (New York. 1973) p.14, and Culler, J. 'Literary history, Allegory and Semiology', in *New Literary History* 7 (1976) pp.259-70.

²⁴ Gerbert de Montreuil, *la Continuation de Perceval*.

some holy hermit, who is seen as the best adviser – which is particularly ironic in the case of a demonic enemy.²⁵ Therefore, it clearly appears that at least an advisor's role is allowed for women.

The text even goes quite far to illustrate how the advising and plotting role is very much suited for women, even when the hero Perceval is on the receiving end of such a situation. In the episode immediately preceding the one with Felisse, he meets a lady sunk waist deep into an ice-cold fountain in punishment, for she had said to her lover that Perceval was a braver knight than he. Perceval rescues the lady out of the fountain, then fights and kills her jealous friend. Perceval is thanked by the lady for rescuing her, then, tired, he falls asleep in her bosom. At that point, the lady asks a passing rider to kill Perceval, arguing that the hero caused the death of her lover.²⁶ The rider refuses and rides on. Perceval wakes up, having actually heard the conversation, and also rides on, disappointed: he does not search any retribution for the murderous intent of the lady from the fountain. It appears that as long as a woman plots to kill someone, but has other (of course, male) agents doing the weapon wielding, no harm shall come to her.

A glance into German romances from the same time period supports such conclusions, showing that these themes were widely spread across European courtly society. In Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan* romance from around 1210, when Isolde is considering killing Tristan for avenging her uncle's death, the Morholt killed by the young hero, Tristan himself states the incompatibility of femininity and knightly weapons:

‘Ôwe der liechten hende
Wie zimet daz swert dar inne?’

Gottfried, *Tristan*, vv.10164-5.²⁷

(‘Alas for these white hands, how could the sword they're holding suit them?’)

Later in the same episode, Isolde's mother makes a similar statement:

‘Tohter, waz tiutest dû hie mite?
Sint diz schoene vrouwen site?
Hâstu dînen sin verlorn?’

Gottfried, *Tristan*. vv.10169-71.²⁸

²⁵ For example, in *Gerbert de Montreuil, la Continuation de Perceval*. vv.2493-2600, the devil takes the guise of a beautiful woman to try to seduce Perceval.

²⁶ *Gerbert de Montreuil, la Continuation de Perceval*. vv.15210-15224.

²⁷ Gottfried von Straßburg. *Tristan*. trans. by Krohn, R., Ranke, F. (ed.) (Stuttgart. 2006) 3 vols. The English translations are my own; I hereby thank my colleague Christine Putzo for her advice with these.

(‘Daughter, what are you meaning with this? Are these the habits of a beautiful woman? Have you lost your senses?’)

Again, female vengeance is problematised as the turning point, where female behaviour threatens to go over the edge of the socially accepted, into the realm of what is proscribed and punished. For indeed, what possibilities of actions are left to the woman whose ‘protector’, the male paternal or husband figure, is dead?²⁹

This is also Kriemhild’s problem in the middle High German *Song of the Nibelungen*, composed around 1200. It is an interesting text to use here for comparison. It has clearly epic roots, which, as pointed out by Yasmina Foehr-Janssens, allows female characters to act according to their ‘irascible passions’, unbound by any courtly code of behaviour.³⁰ Thus, when Kriemhild plots to have the murderers of her husband, Sigfried, assassinated, she does not try to hide her motives or purpose, which indeed shall bring her no harm. It is only after she decapitates with her own hands Haagen, the last and chief of her husband’s murderers, using the very sword of her late husband, that she is herself struck down by Hildegard, who had taken Haagen prisoner but assured to keep him safe.

Hildebrant mit zorne zuo Kriemhilde spranc,
er sluoc der küneginne einen swæren swertes swanc. [...]
Was mohte si gehelfen, daz si sô grœzlîchen schrê? [...]
Ze stücken was gehouwen dô daz edele wîp.

Nibelungenlied. §2376,1-2377,2.³¹

(Hildebrand leapt at Kriemhild in fury and struck the Queen with a heavy swing of his sword. [...] But what could her loud shrieks avail her? [...] The noble lady was hewn in pieces.)³²

It appears that because, as a woman, she acted directly by the sword, and not anymore indirectly through her male agents, she had to be punished by the sword. But the strength of the transgression of her gender boundaries are magnified through how her punishment not only imitates, but amplifies her

²⁸ Ranke, F. *Gottfried von Straßburg, Tristan*.

²⁹ It is to be noted that this concept of women needing “protection” was an actual feature of the medieval judicial system; see Kelleher, M. ‘Later Medieval Law in Community Context’ in Bennett, J. Karras, R. (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*. (Oxford. 2013) via Oxford Handbooks Online <<http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199582174.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199582174-e-020>> September 2016. For further reading on the legal status of women in the Middle Ages, see Menuge, N.M. *Medieval Women and the Law*. (Woodbridge. 2001).

³⁰ Foehr-Janssens, Y. *La Veuve en Majesté: Deuil et Savoir au Féminin dans la Littérature Médiévale*. (Geneva. 2000) p.123.

³¹ *Das Nibelungenlied*. trans. by Grosse, S., Bartsch, K. and De Boor, H. (eds.) (Stuttgart. 2002).

³² *The Nibelungenlied*. trans. by Hatto, A.T. (London. 1969).

crime, as she is not merely decapitated but cut into pieces while screaming in horror.

More generally, a woman killing a man is seen to have acted treacherously, unlike fair killing in open fights. Interestingly, in the *chanson de geste Boeve de Haumtone* (end of twelfth century), the heroine Josiane is twice married by force. With her first husband, she uses a magical drink to prevent him from consummating their marriage. For the second one though, she has to kill him by strangulation on their wedding night, for which she is condemned to being burnt alive.³³ The use of witchcraft, with the first husband, was apparently much less problematic.

Similarly, in the *Continuation* by Manessier to the *Conte du Graal*, a lady is accused of having killed another knight, her brother, 'with a steel sword, during the night and in treason'.³⁴ But later on, it is revealed that it was the deed of another knight, an Arthurian companion, Dodinel the wild. Gawain will rescue both the lady and Dodinel; interestingly enough, Dodinel will never be punished for his actions. Is it by virtue of being a knight or of being a man? We shall come back to that later on.

Let us underline how punishments inflicted upon women for their assumed crimes often display a strong symbolic aspect, proving how their behaviour constituted a transgression from a kind of ontological taboo.³⁵ For example, in Gerbert's text, there is a woman trying to lure Gawain to her bed, where she hid a dagger under the pillow with the intent to kill Gawain, who himself is the killer of her brother. But Gawain finds the dagger, disposes of it, and rapes the maiden. The narrator himself depicts the woman's behaviour as sinful, emphasising that she was not just motivated by revenge for her killed brother, but has a habit of such treacherous killing in bed.³⁶ Surprisingly enough, the raped woman herself accepts having earned her fate:

Weille ou non, sosfir li estuet
le ju de monseignor Gavain.
La dame, qui le cuet ot vain,

³³ *Beuve de Hamptone*. trans. by Martin, J. (ed.) (Paris. 2014) v.2129. Let us remember that it was topical in medieval romances to have a female character be sent to the stake as a punishment for what was labelled as 'treason': So of Yseult when taken in the act of adultery with Tristan, so also of Guinevere in *La Mort le Roi Artu*, when convicted of having handed a deadly poisoned apple to a knight of Arthur's court.

³⁴ *la Troisième Continuation*. vv.35417-25.

³⁵ On a generic level, it can be observed that medieval women who act as male-gendered have to endure either a harmful path to sainthood, or a warrior's life bound to end in a violent death. In Arthurian literature, the prototype of the former is Perceval's sister, sacrificing herself to provide the sword necessary for the Grail quest; see Traxler J.P. 'Dying to Get to Sarras: Perceval's Sister and the Grail Quest' in Mahoney, D.B. (ed.) *The Grail: A Casebook*. (New York. 2000) pp.261-78. The chief example of female warriors are Amazons, such as Camille; for Virgil's text, see Bolens, G. 'Le Corps de la Guerrière: Camille dans l'*Énéide* de Virgile.' in Gerlach, F.F. Kreis-Schinck, A. Opitz, C. Ziegler, B. (eds.) *Körperkonzepte / Concepts du Corps: Contributions aux Études Genre Interdisciplinaires*. (Münster. 2003) pp.47-56; for the medieval version, see Stock, L.K. 'Arms and the (Wo)Man in Medieval Romance: the Gendered Arming of Female Warriors in the *Roman d'Eneas* and Heldris's *Roman de Silence*' in *Arthuriana* 5 (1995) pp.56-83.

³⁶ *La Continuation de Perceval. Quatrième Continuation*. vv.12572-80.

dist a soi: 'C'est ore a bon droit
s'il m'est mescheü orendroit;
tele en est ore ma cheanche,
porchacié ai ma mesestanche.'

Gerbert. *Continuation*. vv.12638-44.³⁷

(Willingly or not, she has to bear Sir Gawain's game. The lady, whose heart was feeble, said to herself: 'It is rightfully that woe betided me in this place; such is my luck, for I have sought my undoing.')

She wanted to commit a crime in the bed, but it became the place where she deserved a punishment. Somehow though, the narrative has the events turn out well for both characters: this woman, Boiesine, falls in love with Gawain, and even goes as far as to help him when he is attacked by the rest of her family. Especially when her father has Gawain outnumbered and cornered, she actually goes as far as to save him, pretending to take him prisoner, when she actually wants to keep him in a 'prison' of her love:

La teste li eüst colpee,
quant la damoisele avant salt
et dist : 'Sire, se Diex me saut,
a ceste fois pas nel ferrez [...]
Livrez le moi seürement ;
en ma prison le garderai
et demain le vous liverrai [...]
Onques n'ait il piors amis
que moi, assez avra torment
anuit.' Puis a dit coiemment :
'En tel prison estera mis
con doit estre loiaus amis,
quant est avec sa douce amie.'
Lors prent Gavain, ne targa mie,
par les chavex petit le tyre.
Ce fist ele par majestire,
qu'ele les voloit dechevoir
c'on ne s'en peüst perchevoir.
Chascuns a dit, quand il l'esgarde :
'Cist est cheüs en male garde.'

Gerbert. *Continuation*. vv.13346-76.³⁸

([Gawain's] head he [the father] would have cut off, when the maiden jumped in-between and said: 'Sir, God save me, this time you won't do it [...] Deliver him safely to me; I shall keep him in my prison and deliver him to you tomorrow. [...] Never was there worse ami than I, he will have sufficient turmoil tonight.'

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

Then she said secretly: 'In such a prison you shall be put as befits loyal ami, when he is with his sweet amie.' Then she took Gawain, without hesitation, and slightly pulls him by the hair. That she does with authority, for she wanted to deceive them so that I may not be noticed. Everyone said, when they looked at him: 'This one has fallen into ill custody.'

On the following day, after a night of shared love, she pretends that Gawain is holding her hostage, thus allowing him to get out of his tricky situation: she has again used her cunning skills in deception, like with the dagger under her pillow, but this time to achieve peace between Gawain and her family. Later on, she will continue her action as mediator to prevent her father and Gawain from killing each other in their duel, by openly pleading for peace, until both finally accept and go their way. To summarise this episode, Boiesine's initial intent to use a weapon was punished by the hero Gawain, but then her deceptions and lies saved his life and earned her his trust, and finally her action of mediator provided the hero with safe passage.

Perceval has a similar misadventure on his own adventures: he is attacked by four brothers wanting to avenge their father the Red Knight, who was killed by Perceval.³⁹ Outnumbered, Perceval has to threaten killing one of the brothers' children, unless he may fight in a fair one-on-one duel. Here again, it is a woman, the mother of the captured child, who jumps in-between and, thanks to her weeping and begging, manages to negotiate a peace between Perceval and the four brothers.⁴⁰ Boiesine, to protect Gawain, had mostly acted with deception, which was maybe more in accordance with her natural tendencies, while the lady helping Perceval acted through her tears of compassion for her husband. Nevertheless, they both had a successful action of mediation and of reconciliation between the professional male fighters and killers that knights are. Moreover, such an intercessory female role echoes strongly with the figure of the Virgin Mary as *mediatrix*, intercessor, which underwent strong development throughout the 12th century.⁴¹

A male mediator?

What to say then, when male figures try to resort to negotiation rather than armed combat, as a mean to achieve an objective? Intriguingly, while such actions have beneficial outcomes for female

³⁹ This was the *Chevalier Vermeil* killed by Perceval at the beginning of Chrétien de Troyes. *Le Conte du Graal ou Le Roman de Perceval*, Méla, Ch. (ed.) (Paris. 1990) vv.1020-75.

⁴⁰ *La Continuation de Perceval. Quatrième Continuation*. vv.12094-07 (e.g. *de plorer s'est auques demise, en haut s'escrie a hautes vois*)

⁴¹ Chiefly illustrated by Bernard of Clairvaux's sermon '*Dominica infra octavam assumptionis*' (also known as '*De duodecim stellis*') on Rev 12:1, to be found in *Sancti Bernardi opera*. Leclercq, J. and Rochais, H. (eds.) (Rome. 1968) vol.5, pp.262-74; for a French translation, see Saint Bernard. *Sermons pour l'année*. Emery, P. (ed.) (Taizé. 1990) pp.682-696; for other such texts, see *St. Bernard's sermons on the Blessed Virgin Mary*, trans. by Luddy, A. (Chumleigh. 1984).

characters and their male companions, it is mostly judged negatively when undertaken by men.

In Chrétien de Troyes' romance *Erec et Enide*, when Gawain manages to delay Erec by engaging him in casual talking, and thus allows the Arthurian court to catch up with them, he succeeded where other knights failed when resorting to direct combat. However Erec complains against Gawain cunning cleverness:

‘Ahi ! Gauvains, fait il, ahi !
Vostre granz sens m’a esbahi ;
Par grant sens m’avez retenu.’

Chrétien de Troyes. *Erec et Enide*. vv. 4143-45.⁴²

(‘Ah! Gawain,’ he says, ‘your shrewdness has outwitted me. By your great cunning you have kept me here.’)⁴³

Gawain's actions appear even more problematic when, in the *Conte du Graal*, he again offers to go discuss with Perceval, to invite him to the Arthurian court, instead of capturing him in combat – which Senechal Key had tried to do and failed miserably. For this, Key rebukes Gawain in the following way:

A cest mot Keus se correça
Et dit a mon seignor Gauvain :
‘Vos l’an amanroiz par la main
lo chevalier, mais bien li poist. [...]’
Bien savez vos paroles vandre,
Qui molt sont gentes et polies. [...]’
Certes, en un bliaut de soit
porroiz ceste besoigne faire,
ja ne vos i covenra traire
espee ne lance brissier.’

Conte du Graal. vv.4302-4325.⁴⁴

(And he said to Sir Gawain: ‘You would bring back the knight in your hand, for very well you could do it. [...]’
You know well how to sell off your words, which are much gentle and polite. [...]’
Indeed, wearing a silken tunic you could achieve this task, for which you shall never be required to draw your sword or to break your spear.’)

There is a hint there that Gawain does not act manly enough, although, by putting such reproaches in

⁴² *Erec et Enide*.

⁴³ Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide*, trans. by Comfort, W.W. (Cambridge. 1999) [reprint from 1914] <http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/erec_comfort%20.pdf> March 2015.

⁴⁴ Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Conte du Graal*.

Key's mouth, Chrétien seems to side with Gawain.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, when Wolfram von Eschenbach adapts this scene in German in his *Parzival*, around 1205, he further develops Key's accusation of effeminacy:

Keie der zornes rîche
sprach : 'Hêre, erbarmet iuch mîn lîp ?
Sus solten clagen altiu wîp. [...]
Och enist hie ninder vrouwen hâr
weder sô mûrwe noch sô clâr,
ez enwære doch ein veste bant
ze wern strîtes iwer hant.
Swelch man tuot solhe diemuot schîn,
der êret ouch die muoter sîn:
vaterhalb solter ellen hân.
Kêrt muoterhalb, hêr Gâwân :
so wert ir swertes blicke bleich
und manlîcher herte weich.'

Parzival. §298,12-§299,12.⁴⁶

(Key called him out in anger: 'Sir, do you feel compassion for my body? So do old maidens complain! [...] No hair of any of the ladies here would be too feeble or thin for you ; it would be strong enough to bind you hands when it is time to fight. Really, a man who displays so much courtesy honours his mother: although he should have courage from the side of his father. Run back to your mother's lap, Sir Gawain: for at the sight of swords you became pale and your manly courage becomes feeble, when men are harshly pressed to get into business.')

The German adaptation thus stresses the problematic aspect of the male negotiator motif, even amplifying it. Negotiating is acting womanly, more in a motherly than fatherly way, and therefore it is unknighly, or so according to Key. Again, while this recourse to talking instead of fighting might be more positively valued in a courtly context, such behaviour, while potentially allowed, appears less "appropriate" for a knight. Conversely, knightly behaviour is seen as strongly "forbidden" to anyone who is not a knight

This latest category is actually not just represented by women. An interesting case is made by Gerbert through his frequent use of minstrel characters. In one episode, Perceval displays reluctance in a tournament to fight against some knights wearing minstrel instruments over their armour, unaware that these are truly knights, who are currently posing as minstrels wanting to participate in the tournament; Perceval, of course, deems it unworthy to attack those he believes to be mere jesters and not actual

⁴⁵ Putter, A. 'Arthurian Literature and the Rhetoric of "Effeminacy"' in Wolfzettel, F. (ed.) *Arthurian Romance and Gender*. (Amsterdam, Atlanta. 1995) pp.34-49, p.47.

⁴⁶ Wolfram von Eschenbach. *Parzival*. trans. by Knecht, P., Lachmann, K. (ed.) (Berlin, New York. 2003).

⁴⁷ Wolfram von Echenbach, *Parzival*, trans. by Edwards, C. (Cambridge. 2004).

knights.⁴⁸

In the episode with the four sons of the Red Knight, Perceval was also assailed while sleeping in their castle by fellow knights seeking vengeance from him for the killing of their lord. A minstrel is present and wakes Perceval before this ambush, literally saving the hero's life. But the minstrel further tries to assist Perceval, grabbing a war axe – a knight's weapon – and attacking the assailing knights, although with apparently little skill: he quickly breaks his axe and receives a blow cutting off his axe-wielding arm, eventually dying from the ensuing bleeding.

La hache fiert el pavement,
issi tres angoisseusement
qu'ele depieche et vole en .ii..
Quant li traïtres a veü
qu'ele brisa, joie a eü.
Le menestrel fiert de s'espee
que l'espaulle li a colpee
si que le tendron du costé
li a avec l'espalle osté;
cil chiet qui de rien ne se coevre.

Gerbert. *Continuation*. vv.11741-53.⁴⁹

(The axe hits the stone floor and clashes with it so painfully that it breaks, two parts flying off. When the traitor has seen that it broke, he becomes joyful.

He hits the minstrel with his sword, so that he cut off his shoulder, taking both the cartilage and the shoulder away; he who does not protect himself with anything falls.)

Again, it appears that despite his assistance to the hero, the minstrel overstepped his boundaries by acting with the tools of knighthood, which could only lead to his death. This outcome appears both logical (he wielded his weapon quite clumsily) and symbolic (breaking his weapon after the first blow emphasises how inappropriate his action was, and having his arm cut off underlined the transgressive nature of his action), echoing the fate of the robber woman Felisse. This also illustrates that, in Manessier's *Continuation*, Dodinel could escape retribution for murdering a knight by his virtue of being a knight, independently of being a man or a woman.

⁴⁸ This is the concluding tournament of the so-called 'Tristan menestrel' episode (*Continuation*, vv.4321-4498).

⁴⁹ Gerbert de Montreuil, *la Continuation de Perceval*.

On the edge of the problem

Gawain's and the minstrel's cases allow us to relativise the apparent gendered opposition of allowed actions that we have underlined up to now. It can be argued that there is a phenomenon of exclusion going on, but that it does not solely concern woman wielding knightly weapons, but rather all who are non-knights: it is the unknighthly which is rejected from the use of knightly instruments, and transgressing this rule calls for swift and symbolically strong retribution. Thus, knighthood can define itself as different from everything which is unknighthly, which is "other"; it just happens that quite often, what is the most radically "other" in these romances are female figures.

That ideal courtly behaviour of both women and knights was a topic of thought and debate in the first half of the thirteenth century is illustrated by how the topic of women faced with the need of vengeance spread throughout French and German romances, with the latter underlining the pertinence of the topic by often emphasising the related scenes in their adaptations of French narratives. Gerbert de Montreuil also makes it a major theme of his romance through its structure. It relies much on echoing and mirroring scenes to point out that something is going on, by virtue of repetition, and by virtue of multiple small variations it underlines that there is no easy way to solve it. One of its main points is how the direct use of weapons is a boundary to female behaviour. The line on which to walk before being sanctioned or condemned is thin, and it may not be too far fetched to speak of a moral compass which puts you on one side of the boundary or on the other when interaction with weapons is required. This compass would be the question of intention and motivation. It should indeed be recalled how the ladies depicted negatively had the wrong motivations: the lady at the fountain had as *ami* a knight embodying the sin of *superbia*, outraged by her claim that Perceval would be better knight;⁵⁰ nevertheless, just as Kriemhild in the *Song of the Nibelungen*, she tried everything to carry on the legacy of her dead lover and to avenge him. In a similar fashion, Felisse de la Blanclose, member of a band of thieves, appears as an embodiment of *invidia*.⁵¹

Moreover, actions apparently similar can be sanctioned differently depending on the context and the intention behind it, while maintaining some limits, like the exclusive usage of knightly weapons. In a similar fashion, a behaviour may be deemed 'feminine', like Gawain's tendency to negotiate and ask questions before rushing into battle. Yet those uttering such mockeries are the likes of Key, who appears to represent a more old-fashioned epic warrior type, itself apparently mocked by the likes of Chrétien de Troyes, who valorises Gawain's wise behaviour in an courtly context. And even in a less courtly setting, the *Chanson de Roland* taught us that what is valiant is not necessarily the wisest.

⁵⁰ Gerbert de Montreuil, *la Continuation de Perceval*. vv.15003-15153

⁵¹ Although both positive and negative allegorical figure may be represented as such, it must be noted how especially Pride and Envy are prone to being depicted allegorically as mounted ladies, such as in British Library MS. Yates Thompson 3, f. 159r.

Interestingly, women seem to be wiser in the use of ruse and deception than most men, be they knights or non-knights (like minstrels).⁵² It appears that, if they are restricted from directly using weapons, women have an advantage, a “compensation”, which is the female quality of being more skilful at acting differently than solely through using weapons.

Thus, in the end, chivalry, or rather its courtly idealisation, has to act as a superior social category which is able to use all capacities (armed combat, cunningness, negotiation), even those shared by “inferior” categories. The chief quality of the courtly knight is being able to judge for the modality of action most appropriate to each situation. This leads towards the notion of being able to correctly read and decrypt reality, and also of mediating between reality and the ideal models proposed by normative speeches. This is illustrated by the end of Gerbert’s romance when Perceval has to use a ruse to imprison again a devil, which he liberated by error, following a visit to a hermit who explicitly forbade Perceval from using deception, the instrument of the *gorpil* (fox) and of *losengier* (deceivers)!⁵³ This recalls how a lot of Perceval’s actions, throughout the narrative, come into conflict with the first hermit’s sermon about knights needing to restrain their murderous actions, and how it is finally female mediation (with the sons of the *Chevalier Vermeil*) or Perceval’s own deceiving speech (with the devil he needs to imprison) which procure alternatives to killing.

It should be noted that the split of competences between male and female does not correspond to a differentiation of an active male and of a passive female. The very ideal from Arthurian romances is that of an active female character, who acts through speech and courtliness. Achieving this, while rejecting passivity, is the whole point of *Erec and Eneide*’s story: the female role shall be specifically that of actively assisting through advice (*consilium*), while not overstepping that limit.⁵⁴ Many Arthurian quests could only be achieved through the presence and determining action of female characters, who, while not being able to directly act as agents of violence, may willingly or unwillingly trigger the use of violence by male characters.⁵⁵ While voice and speech appear as the

⁵² While female ingenuity is often celebrated, it must be underlined how it is often ambiguously related with the threat of female’s sexuality, such as in the other long narrative by Gerbert de Montreuil. *Le Roman de la Violette ou de Gérard de Nevers*. Buffum, D.L. (ed.) (Paris. 1928); see Krueger, R.L. *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance*. (Cambridge. 1993) pp.128-155.

⁵³ *Gerbert de Montreuil, la Continuation de Perceval*. vv.14100-14556 (esp.14241-14285), which is the third sermon (see n.8) and its immediate aftermath.

⁵⁴ In his letters to Melisande, Queen of Jerusalem, Bernard of Clairvaux specifically instructs her to act in a spirit of wisdom (*consilium*) and strength (*fortitudo*); see Krahmer, S.M. ‘The Virile Bride of Bernard of Clairvaux’ in *Church History* 69 (Jun. 2000) pp.304-327.

While such a relationship may be seen as disempowerment by feminist scholarship – such as Wynne-Davies, M. *Women and Arthurian Literature: Seizing the Sword*. (New York. 1996) – it can also be seen as acknowledging the unalienable link of women with male warrior prowess, as underlined in the classical study by Chênerie, M.L. *Le Chevalier Errant dans les Romans Arthuriens en vers des XIIe et XIIIe siècles*. (Geneva. 1986) p.412.

⁵⁵ Or, using Maureen Fries’ terminology, the point is to no only be an instrument, a ‘heroine’, but to become a selfless agent, a ‘female hero’, who remains in the supportive role of the male hero from which, on the contrary the female ‘counter-hero’ becomes too independent – from the point of view of the patriarchal system; see Fries,

allowed weapons for women, so are they sometimes for knights too, especially when the latter are confronted with the trickiest of situations.⁵⁶ Gerbert wanted to emphasise how such difficult, “on the edge” situations occur much more frequently in the reality of the adventures than in a hermit’s normed sermon, especially when Gerbert has Perceval say that the women whom he meets on his travels prove better advisors than hermits, and also that even though deeds are worthier than words, none can be perfect in his actions:

‘Mius que parole valt bien fais,
Mais a paines est nus parfaits.’

Gerbert. *Continuation*. vv.7971-2.⁵⁷

(‘Deeds are indeed worth more than words, although none is perfect in his efforts.’)

In a similar fashion, the narrative is not necessarily aiming to present the ideal solution to the problem, but rather to outline *how* it is something problematic, on the edge of normed behaviour, whilst testing the liminality of morale, ethics and concrete action. Thus, for women especially, it seems that the use of deception, cunning and ruses is permitted and advised, if not often mandatory for those having to defend themselves. It is never the unproblematic best way to act, but simply quite often the only possible one. These allowed modalities of female behaviour are problematic especially when they become the sole possible acts of independent women, orphans or widows – those who are not anymore protected by a male relative, brother or husband. Such modalities of acting, through means other than weapons, go from problematic to merely troublesome when required of knights, because such actions are associated with beings (at best) seen as “suspicious”, such as women, non-noble men, or tricksters like Tristan, Renart or even the Devil. But these suspicious, “lady-like” and worrisome behaviours actually make the element of otherness which is part of the courtly knight’s nature, such as celebrated in Arthurian romances.

M. ‘Female Heroes, Heroines and Counter-Heroes: Images of Women in Arthurian Tradition’ in Slocum, S.K. (ed.) *Popular Arthurian Tradition*. (Bowling Green. OH. 1992) pp.5-17. Fries’ trichotomy is moderated by Burland, M.J. ‘Chrétien’s Enide: Heroine or Female Hero?’ in Wheeler, B. and Tolhurst, F. (eds.) *On Arthurian Women. Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*. (Dallas. 2001) pp.167-186, p.182, who underlines the possible coexistence in a same character of both the ‘heroine’ and ‘female hero’ types, due to how ‘gender expectations, including those of the character herself, lead to manifest heroism through actions and attitudes different from those of a male hero.’ See also the chapter on Enide in Burns, E.J. *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature*. (Philadelphia. 1993) pp.151-202.

⁵⁶ Other textual universes, outside the realm of Arthurian romances, can change this limitation of female characters, such as when implying the one entity which, by definition, is bound by no rule: God, who condones and assumes the action of Judith against Holofernes. Of course, fabliaux can also jest with such rules, most famously perhaps in *Berengier au long Cul*.

⁵⁷ *Gerbert de Montreuil, la Continuation de Perceval*.

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