

Zeitschrift: Vox Romanica
Herausgeber: Collegium Romanicum Helvetiorum
Band: 45 (1986)

Artikel: Chivalry in Le Chevalier à l'épée and La Mule sans frein
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-35467>

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Chivalry in *Le Chevalier à l'épée* and *La Mule sans frein**

In Chrétien de Troyes's romances, the character of Gauvain generally served as a flawed model: the paragon of chivalry, yet marred by irresponsibility and fickleness. The best illustration of his character may well be his actions after Yvain's wedding;¹ he sets about to play on his friend's chivalric pride, persuading him that if he does not immediately leave his wife, his reputation as a knight will suffer. Gauvain is unable to remain faithful either to a goal or (as witness his relationship with Lunete) to a person; and his views are set in a simplistic, «either/or» mold (that is, either you are a husband and stay with your wife, or you are a knight and you seek adventure with me – but not both). Yet, throughout most of these works, the flaws in Gauvain's character bore no significant implications for chivalry itself, the efficacy and nobility of which went largely unchallenged. Chrétien's last romance, *Le Conte du Graal*, adds a new dimension: in the second half of the work, the author begins to take his character – and chivalry – less seriously and to use the former as a means of suggesting shortcomings of the latter. Whether by Chrétien's influence or simply because Gauvain had inevitably outgrown his original role, later authors expanded and exploited the implications of a Gauvain who retains his original abilities and aptitudes, but whose flaws of character seriously compromise himself and his chivalric vocation.

The two short Gauvain romances entitled *La Mule sans frein* and *Le Chevalier à l'épée* are companion pieces which (as Busby and others have shown) provide ideal material for a study of the evolution of Gauvain's character.² The romances are preserved, consecutively, in a single manuscript that may be the product of a single author, and although the suggestion that that author may have been Chrétien de Troyes³ cannot easily be accepted, he was clearly well acquainted with Chrétien's work (*La Mule's* attribution to one Paien de Maisières is generally taken, of course, as an ironic reference to Chrétien, and *Le Chevalier* refers explicitly to Chrétien). Moreover, in addition to offering similar views of the hero, the texts resemble each other in their presentation of chivalry, and

* This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the 14th Triennial Congress of the International Arthurian Society (Rennes, France, 19 August 1984).

¹ See CHRÉTIEN DE TROYES, *Yvain (Le Chevalier au lion)*, ed. T. B. W. REID, Manchester 1961, v. 2484–2538.

² KEITH BUSBY, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, Amsterdam (Rodopi) 1980, p. 248–263. For the texts themselves, see R. C. JOHNSTON and D. D. R. OWEN (eds.), *Two Old French Gauvain Romances*, New York (Barnes & Noble) 1973.

³ Johnston and Owen offer, with apparent conviction, a number of arguments in favor of attribution to Chrétien but finally back away from a definite conclusion: «But when all is said, the debate must still remain open. If not the author, then Chrétien was the inspirer of our texts...» (p. 9).

those views take chivalry in the same direction as (but further than) the second half of the *Conte del Graal*. These facts, as well as the poems' importance as dual sources for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, justify their treatment, for practical purposes, in the same study.

In any discussion of the evolution (or, rather, devolution) of the chivalric ideal, we must consider both the character of Gauvain and the nature of the world in which he finds himself. He had traditionally been presented as just short of perfection, his single flaw, as I suggested, being irremediable fickleness; he continues a quest or a flirtation only until another captures his attention. In Chrétien's last romance, he exhibits this same trait, although emphasis on it is less marked. On the other hand, the chivalric world itself has changed in *Le Conte del Graal*, and Gauvain is led repeatedly to undertake, with the highest seriousness, the most trivial of exploits⁴. For example, he is led to jump his horse across a chasm *not* to reach his beloved, pursue a quest, or accomplish anything of import – but simply because a lady tells him that others have done the same for her and that she will think well of him if he follows suit. Moreover, he nearly fails in this pointless exercise: he falls down the steep bank and is saved by his horse. He later fetches a key and a horse, and performs other equally meaningless feats.

As a result, even the qualities that had made him the most admired member of Arthur's court are in a sense devalued here; specifically, the qualities are intact, but they accomplish nothing of note. And, significantly, Gauvain remains apparently unaware of the «trivialization of chivalry», pursuing virtually pointless goals with the same high-minded determination that Yvain (for example) used to liberate 300 enslaved maidens. Yet, the most important fact is that Gauvain, always the marvelous, indomitable, seductive, and hopelessly frivolous knight, has not changed significantly; the world has. Gauvain proves himself entirely capable of achieving goals set for him, but those goals are of decidedly dubious value; they have been divorced from the *raison d'être* of chivalry. Gauvain's inconstancy had earlier prevented him from accomplishing his goals; now he is adept in the accomplishment of largely pointless tasks.

Le Chevalier à l'épée and *La Mule sans frein* make one radical change in Gauvain's character: here, for perhaps the first time, his frivolity and fickleness are nowhere in evidence. In fact, he seems to remain far more constant than those around him, a surprising and doubtless humorous development for readers well-acquainted with his traditional persona. It would, indeed, be scarcely an exaggeration to posit Gauvain's newfound constancy and resolve as the primary theme of both poems; moreover, both of them (and especially *Le Chevalier*) emphasize the opposition of Gauvain's constancy to the inconstancy of others. As we shall see, the effect of placing a frivolous Gauvain in contrast with others more devoted than he, is entirely different from that of a steadfast Gauvain pitted against an irresolute and fickle world.

⁴ See my «Gauvain and the Crisis of Chivalry in the *Conte del Graal*», in *The Sower and his Seed*, ed. RUPERT PICKENS, Lexington (French Forum) 1983, p. 155–64.

La Mule sans frein is, in my view, the more effective composition and the better parody. The author offers amusing views of a large number of romance conventions, but his primary emphasis remains on the unaccustomed constancy of Gauvain. Throughout the poem, trivialization rules. The entire story treats the quest for a bridle, lost by a woman whose laments for it exceed the bounds of reason: although the importance of the bridle is not clear – it does not appear to be magical or particularly valuable – she weeps for it, tears her hair, and insists (referring to her *grant martire*) that she will never be happy again and that she prefers death to life without her bridle (see v. 75–81, 297–303). Keu immediately volunteers to recover it for her, and predictably, he fails, whereupon Gauvain (with equal predictability) undertakes the quest. The contrast between their styles and actions is underlined several times, often in the use of small details: whereas Keu mounts the mule «par l'estrier» (v. 115), Gauvain comically jumps onto it in cowboy style (v. 351: «Si sailli dedenz les arçons»). The woman refuses a kiss to Keu but readily accords one to Gauvain, apparently recognizing the greater capability of the latter. And of course, Gauvain laughs at the dangers that made Keu abandon the quest.

Once he finds his way to a castle where he expects to recover the bridle, Gauvain is required to do battle with two lions, with a knight, and with two serpents. After each episode, he immediately asks only for the bridle; e.g.,

«De cestui est finé la guerre»,
 Fet Gauvains, «et fete la pes.
 Or me rent», fet il, «desormés
 Lou frainc...» (v. 742–5)

He systematically resists all attempts to distract him from his purpose. Curiously, the most frequent potential distractions are themselves trivial; they are not so much offers of love or adventure as they are repeated offers of food; in fact, everyone he encounters appears obsessed with eating and, especially, with Gauvain's own need for nourishment (see v. 654, 751, 927). He consistently refuses all such invitations until, finally, he is required to dine with a woman (the sister of the bridle's owner) in order to achieve his goal. *Gauvain's* obsession, of course, is not food, but the bridle: he will run any risk and resist any distraction until he has recovered that insignificant item for a woman whom he does not know and who, once it is returned to her, will leave court with hardly a word of thanks.

Here we have, on the one hand, the kind of behavior that Gauvain traditionally exhibited, ignoring danger, welcoming adventure, proving his valor, and impressing a woman. Yet, the theme of constancy becomes the author's primary focus, since Gauvain, though pursuing a virtually pointless quest, does so with a single-minded devotion quite uncharacteristic of him. He has now become the very model of fidelity to a cause. His resolve is repeatedly tested, but never found wanting. In addition to the episodes already mentioned, there is a beheading test in which Gauvain participates.

His adversary is beheaded, yet returns the next day (perhaps the ultimate proof of one's willingness to keep one's word!); when he is about to claim Gauvain's head, he desists, and we learn that he was testing *Gauvain's* willingness to keep *his* word.

Throughout, Gauvain resists love, power, and distraction, determined to keep his word and deliver the bridle. As in the *Conte del Graal*, events and persons conspire against Gauvain, to test him; uncharacteristically, he exhibits unwavering devotion to his cause, however meaningless. It would be incorrect, however, to imply that the results of his actions are themselves without meaning; herein lies one of the larger ironies of the work: in the course of his wandering, Gauvain performs what Busby (p. 262) calls a messianic task – but without realizing it (since he was intent only on recovering the bridle). As he leaves a castle to return to Arthur's court, he notes that the formerly deserted streets are now teeming with people, celebrating joyously. He learns that he himself has liberated them by killing the beasts from whom they hid. This, we are told in two almost parenthetical verses, pleases Gauvain («... A Gauvain mout bien atalente», v. 1037), but he wastes no time considering his accomplishment; in fact, he appears almost indifferent to it, turning immediately and setting out for court, to return the bridle.

Le Chevalier, a less unified presentation than *La Mule*, offers nonetheless a fascinating permutation of the constancy motif. This work provides a mixture of traditional and untraditional views of Gauvain. He is presented, of course, as handsome, courageous, and proud; and he has a typical desire to leave court in search of adventure and pleasure. More to the point, he defies danger on more than one occasion, solely in order to avoid damage to his reputation: on one occasion, he points out that he would be forever reproached if he refused an invitation simply because (as he had learned from a shepherd) his host was likely to kill him (v. 197–202). Later he risks death from a magic sword suspended above a bed, and his reason is that he would be shamed if it were ever known that he had lain in bed with a woman and not taken his pleasure; after all, «miais vient il a anor morir / Qu'a honte vivre longuement» (v. 588–9). And although he is slightly wounded in the sword attack, he risks a reprise; his reasons are the same, but they are presented with more detail and with more vehemence:

Gauvains remest pensis et morne,
 Qu'il ne set coment se contiegne.
 Se Dieus done qu'il s'en reviegne
 Jamés arriere en sa contree,
 Ja ceste chose n'iert celee,
 Que il ne soit partot seü
 Qu'il avra sol a sol jeü
 A nuitiee o une pucele
 Qui tant est avenanz et bele,
 Si que onques rien ne li fist,
 Ne de rien ne li contredist
 Fors la manace d'une espee...

(v. 622–33)

And his conclusion is that «... seroit mes toz jorz honi...» (v. 635); that is, his reputation as a ladies' man – not as a knight vulnerable to sword attack – would be compromised. He acts not to defy the sword or the threats of his host, but only in order that his manliness not be impugned.

If these are exaggerated expressions of Gauvain's character, they are not entirely novel ones, and the text so far contains no surprises (with the possible exception of an admission of fear on Gauvain's part, v. 299). His actions are entirely predictable when his reputation is on the line, or when events hold out a promise of adventure or, especially, love – or, *more* especially, sex.

The surprises, however, are not long in coming, and beyond this point, readers who know Gauvain from other romances will scarcely recognize him here, for he will be conspicuous for his fidelity and constancy. Uncharacteristically, he willingly remains a good while at the castle of his host (his wife's father); eventually, however, he announces that it is time to leave; even here, his relative patience is likely to surprise the reader. In any event, his wife refuses to go without her beloved hounds. Once she collects them, she and Gauvain depart, but very soon they encounter a knight who covets the woman. Gauvain, armed only with sword, lance, and shield, dares not do battle with the knight. Instead, a bargain is struck: the woman can choose the man she wants. Reasonably enough, Gauvain expects her to choose him, but she does not, and the text explains that, already knowing how her husband performs in bed, she now wonders about the stranger's aptitude (v. 984–97). Having only recently married Gauvain, she now shows herself to be instantly ready to leave him for a complete stranger – and she does so with virtually no preamble.

Here is a strange turn of events, indeed: a woman leaves Gauvain, rather than being abandoned by him. Her faithlessness is underlined in her departure. As she had earlier done, she says that she must have her dogs. Gauvain refuses to surrender them, insisting that the dogs are his, since his wife now belongs to another. The implied contrast between the dogs and the woman becomes structurally explicit when the earlier agreement is renewed: now the dogs can choose to go or stay, and just as Gauvain had erroneously expected the woman to remain with him, the stranger expects the dogs to choose him. The structural and thematic echoes are an effective means by which the author can underline the woman's infidelity; the dogs prefer to remain with Gauvain and show themselves to be more constant than she. The episode is not finished, however; the end of the poem is occupied by a long and bitter antifeminist diatribe («Que nature et amor de chien / Valt miauz que de feme ne feit», v. 1108–09), followed by a battle in which Gauvain kills the other knight: the hero, who refused to do battle for his wife, is willing to do so for the hounds. Fidelity, it seems, is rewarded. Here we have a number of reflections of the principal theme of the work: the woman is faithful to her dogs; Gauvain is faithful to her; even the dogs are faithful to the hero, and he to them. But the *woman* is glaringly lacking in fidelity to the man who twice risked his life for her.

After the death of the man for whom she abandoned Gauvain (and, presumably, for want of a better alternative), she asks now to come back to her husband, contending that she left with the stranger only because she otherwise would fear for Gauvain's life. The narrator, of course, has earlier taken care to reveal her motivation, and the contrast between her words and his proves that she is not only fickle and lascivious, but dishonest as well. The viciousness of Gauvain's diatribe then increases, as, ironically, he berates her for what had been precisely his own traditional flaw. Now *he* is the champion of constant devotion, but he finds himself married to a woman who abandons him for a stranger not long after the wedding. Turn about, apparently, is fair play.

A study of *Le Chevalier* and *La Mule* permits us to draw important conclusions both about the evolution of the chivalric ideal in literature and about possible methods of presenting that evolution. In works such as Chrétien's first four romances, one of the primary ways of indicating a knight's flaws was to show him mistaking the means for the ends of chivalry. Most often this meant seeking adventure for its own sake or mistaking the tools and trappings of chivalry for its purpose (cf. *Perceval*). This notion could also serve the author's purpose when his point was not simply to dramatize the failings of a particular person but to develop the broader implications of such failings. If, traditionally, a knight might be required (for example) to jump heroically across a chasm in the course of a quest, it then happens (in *Perceval*) that Gauvain jumps a river to accomplish nothing more than the leap itself: the means have *become* the end. Chivalric forms and acts have been divorced from their motivation.

The next step in this process is fascinating: if a poet could criticize Gauvain by dramatizing his frivolity, a small but radical change of method could shift the focus of the critique from the character to chivalry itself. Ironically, this shift could – and most often did – involve a character who adheres rigidly to a primary tenet of chivalry. It consisted not of greater emphasis on a knight's flaw, but ironically of the *removal* of that flaw; the author thus insists on a knight's perfection in the implementation of an imperfect ethic. If Gauvain's flaw had been fickleness and frivolity, he now, in the two romances in question, becomes remarkably constant. In *La Mule*, especially, he demonstrates exceptional and unwavering devotion to his cause, but the entire system is now put into question, first because his cause (as it was in *Perceval*) is largely trivial, second, because certain of his possible distractions are more valid and noble than his immediate goal, and finally, because when he does accomplish a messianic task, he remains almost indifferent to it. Here, Gauvain's primary (or only?) flaw is removed, and despite his virtual perfection, chivalry does not work; or rather, it is directly effective only in the accomplishment of largely meaningless goals. It does not further right or preserve the social order; it does liberate people, but only coincidentally; it *does* however procure a bridle for a mule. Chivalry is devalued, and constancy is humorously shown to be less the efficacious virtue than it might have been considered.

These two short texts are comically appealing, but their comedy has a serious point. Gauvain is here a link between the Gauvain of the *Conte del Graal* and Aucassin. In

earlier texts, chivalry worked, but Gauvain was unable to achieve the faithful devotion to a cause that a knight should show. Gradually, his flaw was remedied, but he then found himself in realms where chivalry itself was flawed and capable of accomplishing nothing or accomplishing trivial goals. It is only a small step to Aucassin, who is comical not because of what he is (an archetypal, if unrealistic, courtly lover), but because of *where* he is: in a world which neither understands nor accepts his ethic and manner. In *Le Chevalier* and *La Mule*, clearly, we see a new Gauvain, devoted to causes even when those around him are as faithless as he once was, doggedly pursuing a quest in spite of all distraction – and in spite of the fact that those distractions appear to be far more significant than the quest itself. Since Gauvain has been (and, for the most part, will remain) the primary exemplar of Arthurian chivalry, the *Païen de Maisières* texts, along with Chrétien's *Conte del Graal*, represent major steps in the eventual dismantling of chivalry as a serious and efficacious literary or social ideal. The potential flaws in the chivalric system are potential no more.

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