

## Could Gauvain be considered the hero of *Escanor*?

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The verse romance of *Escanor*, composed c. 1280 by Girart d'Amiens and running to some 26000 octosyllabics, presents the reader with a panoply of interesting characters in a story whose true focus is not always easy to discern. This is partly because the romance combines two principal narrative strands and quests: that of Kay for Andrivete, the daughter of the King of Northumberland with whom he falls in love, and that of Gauvain, seeking to clear his name in response to a false accusation of murder on the part of the eponymous Escanor (Escanor le Bel).

Gauvain's participation in the romance interweaves with that of Kay. Apart from joining in some early court banter, he plays no part in the narrative for the first sixteen hundred or so lines. Initially the story concentrates on Kay, who sets out to undertake the challenge of the tournament at Bauborc (Bamburgh), organised by the King of Northumberland as a means of finding a suitable husband for his daughter. During the tournament Kay and Andrivete will fall in love and subsequently spend most of the rest of the romance trying to be re-united. However, the story of Kay's journey covers only the somewhat comic encounter with Mordred and his damsel before attention switches to Gauvain, who, in response to a personal appeal, sets off for Brittany with his friend Gifflet to quell the lawlessness and rebellious behaviour of some powerful barons and their followers in that part of Arthur's domains (vv. 1634-3046).<sup>1</sup> With local assistance he soon defeats the rebels, but in revenge a handful of them then plot his downfall. They poison the mind of the Pucelle de Nantes, telling her that her vast lands are in danger from Gauvain, and blackening his character with lies about him ('Pluz i a, il est soudomites / Et plainz d'autres oevres despites' ('Moreover, he is a sodomite, and full of other vices'), vv. 1547-48). They persuade her to use her magic arts to destroy him. With the aid of a magic goshawk she lures Gauvain into a series of three ambushes, from all of which he emerges the victor. In between the first and second of these encounters Gauvain comes upon a hermit, with whom he stays the night, sharing his humble fare and hearing mass the next morning. This incident is perhaps intended as a corrective to the dismissive attitude he displayed to a hermit who was trying to advise him in the *Queste del Saint Graal*.<sup>2</sup> Not only does he hear mass, but he does so willingly, and

afterwards feels uplifted by it ('Mesire Gavainz s'esjoy / Du service Dieu qu'il oy', 'Messire Gauvain rejoiced at the Divine Office that he heard', vv. 2157-58). In the second ambush there is one knight, clearly of considerable distinction, who stands aside whilst the others attack Gauvain, and engages with him only after Gauvain has defeated the rest of them. The combat between Gauvain and this knight, who turns out to be the Bel Inconnu ('Li Biauz Desconeüz', v. 2560), is lengthy and arduous, but is characterised by mutual courtesy and respect: the Bel Inconnu forbids the others to come to his aid in the fight, and Gauvain waits while his opponent gets to his feet when they are both unhorsed in the initial onslaught. In fact as a point of honour the Bel Inconnu stops fighting and admits defeat when the others do try to intervene on his behalf. Then out of concern for Gauvain's safety and survival, his opponent courteously warns him of the plot to kill him, and of the danger he is in from further ambush. Despite this warning, Gauvain continues following the hawk to the next trap laid by the Pucelle de Nantes, politely turning down the Bel Inconnu's offer to accompany him, sending him instead to Arthur's court. Gauvain routs the third ambush, thanks to the increase in his strength at midday, a gift given to him, we are told, by the fairies that presided at his birth.<sup>3</sup> He is then approached by a remorseful and admiring Pucelle de Nantes, who explains that she was cruelly misled into arranging the attacks on him. After a courteous exchange between them, in the course of which Gauvain explains his views on how women should behave (vv. 2918-33), he rejoins Gifflet.

What narrative purpose is served by this episode, which occupies some fourteen hundred lines? Primarily it serves to show Gauvain in a good light, underlining as it does his special qualities, his prowess and exemplary courtesy, as he wins over both the Bel Inconnu and the Pucelle de Nantes. The Bel Inconnu becomes attached to Arthur's court, while the Pucelle de Nantes volunteers to abandon henceforth her 'nigremance' (v. 2939). There is a definite impression of a charismatic personality about Gauvain in the way that others respond to him. On the other hand, the Brittany episode is really self-contained. It could be excised from the romance and exist on its own as a separate story of how Gauvain brings to heel a rebellious province. In such an independent story he would undoubtedly be considered the hero. However, the episode needs to be viewed within the wider context of the whole narrative, and the question then arises whether he would still be seen as the hero; for within the complete narrative this episode is really something of a sideshow, boxed in by the two main narrative strands. Kay's story has already begun, and Gauvain's own quest is about to do so, as Escanor le Bel conveniently comes to court during his absence in Brittany. The episode is therefore far from gratuitous, as it ensures that Gauvain is out of the way when the mysterious knight arrives at Arthur's court and accuses him of treachery. At the end of the episode Gauvain is anxious to leave and participate in the Bauborc tournament (vv. 3048-51),

but his wounds keep him in Brittany. This is a further narrative convenience, as his absence from the tournament allows Kay to shine and be considered the winner.

The account of the Bauborc tournament is lengthy, and the reader/listener might well be forgiven for assuming that the principal subject of the romance is to be about Kay and Andrivete, with the Brittany interlude allowing the appropriate passage of time for Kay to reach Northumberland and take part in the tournament. At its close Kay returns to court, his relationship with Andrivete unresolved, as neither of the lovers has yet confessed his or her love to the other. It is at this point, with the poem having already run to some seven thousand lines, that the mysterious knight comes to court at Pentecost and issues the challenge to Gauvain for the alleged unwarranted slaying of his cousin (v. 6958 ff.).<sup>4</sup> He leaves with the promise of safe conduct and an adjournment of forty days to allow Gauvain time to return and answer the challenge. When Gauvain does return ('L'endemain de le Saint Jehan', 'The day after Saint John's day', v. 7236), he is at first joyously welcomed as he recounts the events of the Brittany episode. The celebration of his return again underlines his status and importance at court, and the presence of the Bel Inconnu testifies to the success of the mission; but when he learns of the arrival of the mysterious knight he becomes deeply aggrieved at the accusation levelled against him and at the failure of his friends to ascertain the name of his accuser. He unattractively berates Arthur in particular for this failure, which he sees as poor reward for his absence overseas on the king's service. He is puzzled by the accusation, as he cannot think who he is supposed to have killed, but he concludes that the adversary must be very confident of his abilities to challenge him, or is merely envious of him. His understandable concern and uncertainty, plus the slur on his reputation and the hurt at the thought that his friends have let him down, drive him to a state of melancholy, marked by frequent acts of devotion.<sup>5</sup> Some at court, observing his behaviour and state of mind, wonder whether the accusation may have some truth in it, and that guilt might consequently cause Gauvain to be defeated (vv. 7843-51). As Gauvain's melancholy state persists, Arthur questions him, and he replies that he fears the confidence and prowess of the unknown opponent, while retaining faith in his own prowess (there is no mention of him relying on fighting him at midday). This fear of the unknown humanises Gauvain, who is taking nothing for granted, and he thereby displays a certain humility ('Mesire Gavains humlement / Se tenoit pluz qu'il ne fist onques', 'Messire Gauvain behaved more humbly than he had ever done before,' vv. 8538-39). Meanwhile Gifflet's brother Galentinet seeks to do Gauvain a favour by attacking Escanor unawares on his way to court for the postponed challenge. Galentinet's intention is to kill Escanor, but he succeeds only in seriously wounding him. Two damsels from Escanor's entourage are sent to Arthur's court, where they issue a scathing attack on Gauvain, accusing him of further treachery, and on Arthur,

for failure to ensure the promised safe conduct for their lord (vv. 8561-708). The news of the attack further increases Gauvain's misery and feeling of humiliation, and he fears that this fresh accusation will only lend credence to the original one in the eyes of the court (vv. 8824-65). At this point, with the court in sombre mood, the story reverts to Kay.

The reaction of Gauvain throughout this whole section concerning the accusations made against him (vv. 6958-8890) is entirely negative. He makes no attempt himself to discover who his mysterious adversary is, but merely bemoans the inconsiderateness of the court in not asking him his name, and descends into melancholy and self-doubt. On the other hand, Gauvain's state of depression is psychologically understandable in the circumstances, even if it is not how we would expect a hero or someone of his status to behave.

During the following four thousand or so lines in which Kay's story is developed there is no mention of Gauvain, apart from his promising along with others at court to aid Kay in due course in rescuing Andrivete from her uncle Aiglin's attempts to take over her lands and marry her off to someone of no consequence whom he could control (vv. 10620-25). However, Kay is obliged to arrange the Whitsun festivities at Caerleon before any move can be made, but once they are over Gauvain, who now appears to have recovered from his melancholy, feels the need to get out of court and seek adventure, so he sets off with Gifflet for the Perron Merlin, where he hopes to find a challenge: 'Tel chose ou nos cors esprover / Porrommes et conquerre pris' 'Such an adventure where we may test ourselves and win esteem,' vv. 12992-93. In fact when they arrive there they are set upon in an ambush prepared by Escanor le Grand, uncle of Escanor le Bel, in order to capture Gauvain, though how he could have anticipated that Gauvain would be there is not clear. In the ensuing fight, Gauvain and Gifflet are wounded and Gifflet is taken prisoner. Gauvain is prevented from chasing after him to rescue him because the reins of his horse snap, and he loses track of them. Frustrated and angry, he is taken back by companions to Caerleon to recover from his wounds. Meanwhile Escanor le Grand counts on Gauvain following to rescue the captured Gifflet, so that Gauvain himself might be taken prisoner.

At a point roughly half-way through the poem Gauvain is finally involved in the quest which will eventually lead him to his avowed enemy, and before the narrative proceeds further, we are told of the reason for the enmity of the two Escanors. It begins with the uncle, Escanor le Grand, who was apparently born at the same hour as Gauvain, and his mother, using necromancy, foretold that Gauvain would prove the stronger of the two in combat, so the ambitious Escanor sought him out and fought him. Gauvain beat him but spared his life, after which the wounded Escanor bore him a lasting grudge.<sup>6</sup> Then Escanor le Grand's nephew, Escanor le Bel, also decided to measure his prowess against Gauvain, which accounts for his

arrival at court with the false accusation of the murder of a cousin as an excuse for challenging him. Following the treacherous wounding of Escanor le Bel by Galentinet, Escanor le Grand's hatred for Gauvain redoubled, as he blamed Gauvain for the attack, and so he arranged the ambush to catch Gauvain.

When Gauvain recovers from his wounds, Arthur sets out with a select band to try to get news of Gifflet's whereabouts and rescue him. The two story strands are now coming together, as the troop soon comes into contact with Andrivete, without knowing who she is, and she is able to assure them of Gifflet's safe keeping, having by chance run into him being led away by his captors. She now becomes something of a go-between, as she takes the opportunity to seek out Gauvain and promise to find out where Gifflet is in return for his help in her need. In fact Gifflet is being held prisoner by the Reine des Traverses, Escanor le Bel's sister and a cousin of Andrivete. When the latter then visits her, having heard that that is where Gifflet is being held, she manages to ensure that he is well treated and that no harm will come to him.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile Arthur and his company make for North Wales and arrive at the château of Brian des Illes who, in an echo of Escanor le Bel, challenges Gauvain to a fight, though in disguise, accusing him of the treacherous murder of a cousin! Esclarmonde, his beloved, who was a *fée*, had once told him that Gauvain was the best and most courteous knight there was (vv. 15784-93), so Brian determined to find a way to fight against him. He is defeated, and then confesses the subterfuge without revealing his true identity. Whilst Arthur and his company are staying with Brian des Illes, Gauvain is summoned by Andrivete, who confirms Gifflet's safe-keeping at Traverses, and Gauvain asks her to keep an eye on him and reassure him that he will be released, again promising in return to aid her. Arthur summons larger forces with which to attack Traverses and the two sides assemble ready for battle. Despite their personal willingness, Escanor and Gauvain are each discouraged by their respective entourage from settling their differences immediately by single combat. Escanor's grievance, of course, now concerns the treacherous attack on him by Galentinet, because he assumes that Gauvain was the perpetrator; and Gauvain wants to scotch all suspicion of the double treachery of which he has been accused.

When the battle eventually begins, Gauvain and Escanor le Bel are prominent in it, but at the end of the first day Escanor's troops have clearly had the worst of things and he is devastated to learn that his uncle has lost his special horse Gringalet to Gauvain, having borrowed it and lost it in an encounter with Arthur's nephew. This horse had been given to Escanor le Bel by the *fée* Esclarmonde, but when Gauvain has it, it refuses to eat, until Felinete removes a secret sachet of powder from its ear. In preparing to resume the conflict an individual fight between Gauvain and Escanor is at last agreed, and it is ended only when Felinete intervenes, at a

point where Gauvain is about to slay Escanor. Once this quarrel is resolved Gauvain plays a crucial intermediary role in bringing about the reconciliation and marriage of Kay and Andrivete and Gifflet and the Reine des Traverses. Andrivete confides in him about her uncle and he once more promises her Arthur's aid to regain her lands, recommending that she first pay homage to Arthur so that through her he can regain control of her lands in Northumberland. Gauvain reassures her about Kay's feelings and encourages her to forgive him his earlier outburst against women, which was occasioned by a misunderstanding. A shy meeting of the lovers eventually takes place thanks to Gauvain, who also brings together Gifflet and the Reine des Traverses. Arthur agrees to a double wedding, provided Escanor, once he is well again, also agrees. After the weddings and before Arthur sets off for Northumberland on Andrivete's behalf, Gauvain pays tribute to Escanor's qualities, having quite forgiven him the accusations against himself (vv. 23220-46). However, in the campaign against Aiglin to regain Andrivete's lands, Gauvain plays no prominent role, merely giving advice when asked.

In a romance as lengthy as is *Escanor*, attention naturally focuses on more than one character, so that at different moments within the text Kay, Gauvain, or Escanor are to the fore. Given that Kay's story begins at the outset of the romance and is not finally resolved until near the end, and that it involves his marriage after many vicissitudes, together with the assumption of responsibility for a substantial part of Arthur's domains, a case could be made for him being seen as the hero of the whole tale. Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann considers that 'the love-story and Kay's quest form the nucleus of the text'.<sup>8</sup> The main weakness of any argument in favour of seeing him as the hero, though, is that for much of the latter part of the tale far more is done on his behalf by others, notably by Andrivete and Gauvain, than by Kay himself. He is largely left out of the negotiations and actions that affect him. What, then, could be said in favour of the rival claims of Gauvain, or indeed of Escanor?<sup>9</sup> The latter appears only late in the poem, rather like the hero of a classical tragedy, though the concluding thousand or so lines are concerned solely with him and his uncle. The pious tone of these lines provides a minor-key conclusion to the poem and is clearly intended to evoke the admiration of the reader/listener for the actions of Escanor and his uncle.

This brings us finally to Gauvain, whose part in the romance can be divided into three sections: his quelling of Brittany, his prolonged phase of melancholy and inaction, and his involvement in the search for and rescue of Gifflet. His trajectory within the romance therefore begins with a successful campaign; then he is brought morally low by Escanor's accusations and the suspicion of his involvement in the wounding of Escanor; and finally he is involved in a campaign, the success of which is in large measure thanks to his actions and diplomacy. The position within the narrative of this final triumphant phase, which results in the resolving of all the

principal issues of the romance, is akin to that of a hero in a Chrétien-type romance. Yet, unlike a Chrétien hero, Gauvain derives no personal benefit or advancement therefrom.

Any writer at the end of the thirteenth century who includes Gauvain in his work inherits a host of well-established characteristics for him: he is either the exemplary knight of earlier verse romance or the denigrated one of the prose Grail romances, in which he tends to be compared unfavourably with more successful or purer knights. Girart chooses to restore Gauvain to his earlier reputation for exemplary courtliness and unsurpassed prowess. When Gauvain addresses Kay in the scene at the beginning at court, mildly chiding him for his sharp tongue, he says to him: 'Ne dites pas quanque pensez, / Mais dites chose que plus siece,' (Do not say whatever you think, but say what is fitting) (v. 320-21), speaking as though he were a seventeenth-century *honnête homme*. His reputation for unscrupulous dalliance, though, which goes back to Chrétien, is not entirely overlooked. He flirts with no damsel in this poem, but Kay alludes sarcastically to his reputation for using women and then discarding them when news of the Bauborc tournament first reaches Arthur's court (vv. 286-91). On the other hand Felinete trustingly refers to his reputation for aiding damsels who need help (vv. 20181-86); and indeed he demonstrates his reliability and unfailing courteousness in the way he helps Andrivete and responds to Felinete. He is a charismatic figure whose reputation for prowess attracts enmity and jealousy in the two Escanors and in Brian des Illes; they all want to measure themselves against him. But do all his actions in the poem add up to making him a hero figure? Writing of his participation in earlier verse romances, and therefore not including *Escanor*, Keith Busby has made the point that lack of love in a true sense, or of devotion, excludes him from being a hero, as there is no interplay between inspiration and commitment.<sup>10</sup> He also states that Arthurian romances mostly 'take as their heroes young knights, whose quests and adventures help them to the status of mature manhood.'<sup>11</sup> He sees Gauvain as a rather static figure from one romance to another and argues that even where Gauvain is the chief protagonist in a romance, he is not necessarily a hero, as there is no progression or 'educative process'.<sup>12</sup> By these rather restrictive criteria most of those texts that Alexandre Micha considers to have Gauvain as hero would probably not qualify, though they include ones that Busby discusses.<sup>13</sup> It is true, of course, that main protagonist and hero are not necessarily the same thing, and it may well be that Girart did not intend there to be any individual hero in the strictest sense in his romance; for at its heart the story tells of how Arthur reasserts control over rebellious areas of his domains and gains further control through the taming of Escanor.<sup>14</sup> In this process characters such as Kay or Gauvain are means by which the kingdom is strengthened and expanded, so that the 'hero' in terms of progression and



advancement may not be any individual person, but the collective, the court and kingdom itself. Yet within the broad canvas that Girart paints, it is unquestionably the exemplary Gauvain who is the major player in all that he is involved in, and far from being a static character, he moves from success, through a stage of self-absorbed and negative depression, to one in which his self-confidence, prowess and tact lead once more to altruistic success. The individual and collective changes in fortune could not have been achieved without him, and to that extent he may well lay claim to heroic status.<sup>15</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All line references and quotations are taken from Girart d'Amiens, *Escanor: roman arthurien en vers de la fin du XIIIe siècle*, ed. Richard Trachsler, 2 vols, TLF449, Geneva, Droz, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> *La Queste del Saint Graal*, ed. Albert Pauphilet, CFMA 33, Paris, Champion, 1965, p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> The topos of the extra strength at midday goes back to the First Continuation of the *Conte du Graal* (Gauvain Continuation), in which it appears on more than one occasion (vv. 902-07 etc.). J. Frappier, 'Le personnage de Gauvain dans la *Première Continuation de Perceval*', *Romanic Philology* 11 (1957-58), 331-44, refers to this as his "privlège mythique" or "privlège merveilleux" (343-34).

<sup>4</sup> "De moustrer que vilainement / A murtri et desloiaument / Mon cousin et sanz ochoison" (vv. 6979-81). Escanor had hoped to meet Gauvain at the tournament at Bauborc, but was prevented by injury from attending (vv. 4611-13). Gauvain, meanwhile, was engaged in Brittany.

<sup>5</sup> Alexandre Micha is rather harsh in his comment on Gauvain's reaction here: 'Le Gauvain audacieux du début devient, quand il doit affronter son accusateur, d'une pleutrenie imprévue qui le jette dans de curieuses pratiques de dévotion', *Grundriss der romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters*, IV/1, Heidelberg, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1978, p. 398.

<sup>6</sup> *L'Âtre périlleux* offers a curious parallel to this story. Gauvain rescues a damsel from the devil at the perilous cemetery, and she informs him that the knight whom he is pursuing, who had left court taking the damsel entrusted to Gauvain by Arthur, is Escanors de la Montaigne (ed. B. Woledge, CFMA 76, Paris, Champion, 1936, v. 1598), which is one of the names of Escanor le Grand in *Escanor*. She also reminds Gauvain that his mother had warned him that Escanor would be his most dangerous and difficult opponent, and that she could not tell what might be the outcome of an encounter with him (vv. 1575-1605). When they do meet, Escanor admits that he sent the damsel whom Gauvain is seeking to Arthur's court in order to provoke a fight with Gauvain by then leaving with her (vv. 2090-97). They fight; Escanor's power wanes after 'nones' (vv. 1620-24 and 2163), and Gauvain eventually slays him (v. 2462). Gauvain's adventure concerning Escanor occupies only the early part of *L'Âtre périlleux*.

<sup>7</sup> In *La Vengeance Raguidel*, the Dame del Gaut Destroit keeps Gauvain's brother Gaheriet prisoner as a lure for Gauvain, with whom she has fallen in love (v. 1726 ff.), except that unlike her counterpart in *Escanor*, she is exceptionally cruel to her prisoner, and whereas Gifflet is well looked after, Gaheriet is kept in squalor and ill-treated, being beaten and not properly fed, so that he is barely alive (vv. 2572-81). He is rescued by Gauvain.



<sup>8</sup> Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 270. In an article, 'Ausklang der altfranzösischen Artusepik: *Escanor* und *Meliador*', in *Spätmittelalterliche Artusliteratur*, ed. Karl-Heinz Goller, Paderborn-Munich-Vienna-Zurich, Schöningh, 1984, pp. 41-52 (42), she suggests that 'Roman de Keu' would be a more appropriate title for the romance. See also Peter S. Noble, 'The unexpected hero: the role of Kay in *Escanor*', in *Courtly Romance*, ed. Guy R. Mermier, Medieval and Renaissance Monograph Series, 6, Detroit, Fifteenth Century Symposium, 1984, pp. 161-68.

<sup>9</sup> Girart d'Amiens does not indicate a title for the poem in either the prologue or epilogue; however the MS (BNF fr. 24374) has on f. 218 'Explicit Escanor' (see Trachsler, p. 12).

<sup>10</sup> Keith Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1980, pp. 392, 394-95.

<sup>11</sup> Busby, p. 291.

<sup>12</sup> Busby, p. 392. See also his 'Diverging traditions of Gauvain in some of the later Old French verse romances', in *The Legacy of Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. Norris J. Lacy, Douglas Kelly and Keith Busby, 2 vols, Faux Titre 31 and 37, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1987-88, II, pp. 93-109; reprinted in *Gauvain: A Casebook*, ed. Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby, New York and London, Routledge, 2006, pp. 139-55.

<sup>13</sup> Micha classifies the following romances as those in which Gauvain is the hero: *Les Enfances Gauvain*, *La Mule sans frein*, *Le Chevalier à l'épée*, *La Vengeance Raguidel*, *Humbaut*, *L'Atre Perilleux*, and *Beudous* (pp. 380-87).

<sup>14</sup> On the possible historical and political dimension within the romance and the conflicts of Edward I, see Trachsler, pp. 27-29, and 56-67, and Schmolke-Hasselmann, *Evolution*, pp. 271-72.

<sup>15</sup> An earlier and shorter version of this article was read as a paper at the 12th Triennial Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society, Lausanne-Geneva, July-August 2007.