

Gauvain's Guilt in *L'Âtre Périlleux* : the Subtext of Sexual Abuse

Neil Thomas
University of Durham

As with the majority of post-Chrestien verse romances both the dating and authorship/patron questions concerning *L'Âtre Périlleux*¹ have proved highly problematical so that the most that critics have been able to hazard is that it was written perhaps in the period 1230-1250 (on the basis of superficial resemblances between other verse romances such as *Fergus and Hunbaut* - themselves of uncertain date). There has been much speculation as to the professional status of the narrator of this anonymous romance but none of it has proved convincing. Critical opinion has tended to see the text as being most noteworthy for its presentation of Gauvain as its protagonist, to which might be added the fact that the latter is a *flawed* hero happily bearing a greater affinity with Chrestien's Erec, Yvain and Perceval than with the tediously infallible heroes of some other 'late' verse romances. Gauvain, who has the reputation as the most renowned of Arthur's knights, apparently fails to live up to that reputation when he neglects to respond with sufficient alacrity to his special duty to protect a female cupbearer from being abducted from the Arthurian Court by the insolent challenger, Escanor. Reacting tardily to his duty (Keu had preceded him but had been unhorsed) Gauvain finds that all his interlocutors think him to be dead because a double of his had recently been villainously slaughtered. Gauvain assures those that he meets that this is not in fact the case but will not reveal that he is Gauvain until *he* might recover his (good) name (he presently goes by the sobriquet of 'cil sans nom'). Eventually he tracks down and kills the villainous Escanor and releases the female cupbearer (having first saved a maiden from long sexual abuse by a demon in the 'haunted cemetery' episode which gives the romance its name). In the next series of challenges Gauvain acts as a conciliator between sundry warring couples (still without revealing his identity). He agrees to reveal his name only when he has defeated the two knights who had murdered the Gauvain-lookalike and blinded a youth who had tried to oppose

them - these two bad knights have the speaking names of Le Fae Orgellox and Goumeres sans Mesure. Gauvain condemns both of them for their action and orders Orgellox to put his magic powers to a good, rather than bad, use by bringing the dead lookalike back to life again and by restoring vision to the other victim of their crime. After this miraculous feat has been accomplished at Gauvain's behest there follows a conciliatory, hymeneal ending.

The narrator tells his story with fluency and skill, creating genuine suspense as to whether all disquieting 'loose ends' will eventually be tied up. A novel aspect of the romance is the way that the opening premise of so many romances - that of a knight 'losing his name' - is told with an intriguing mixture of the literal and metaphorical through the use of a Doppelgänger device. When Gauvain mounts his tardy rescue of the cupbearer he finds three maidens lamenting 'his' death (in fact that of the double). Although he assures the maidens that Gauvain is alive and well and that he had seen him recently at Camelot, he does not reveal his identity at this point, appearing to accept the symbolic justice of his supposed death and vowing to reveal his name only when he has 'found' it again, i.e. performed knightly offices sufficient to retrieve his 'name' and hence reputation once again.

Clearly apprehending a form of mystical consanguinity between himself and the slain knight, he is convulsed to the point of speechlessness when he witnesses the maidens mourning the knight whom they call the 'bon chevalier' (ll. 626-630). The phrase that he perceives them to be mourning 'por lui' (l.629) is of course nicely ambiguous, implying that he sees them mourn his double at the literal level but also his own, 'buried' reputation at the metaphorical level. There is then, from Gauvain's perspective, a reproachful dramatic irony in the maidens' plaint to Death that he unjustifiably takes the good and leaves the bad to prosper (ll.581-594). It is this reproach - all the stronger for being unwitting - which causes Gauvain's both grief-stricken and conscience-stricken reaction to the other knight's death, for at one point he says that it should have been he who had faced the murderers and that it *would have been* had he not been so tardy in leaving the Court (ll. 650-654). That Gauvain has learned the lesson of this reproach is made clear by his renewed sense of urgency in finding Escanor and the abducted cup-bearer (ll. 636-638).

The narrator conveys Gauvain's conscience-stricken *metanoia* with telling details and so motivates satisfactorily his ensuing penitential journey, and yet it seems to me that critical questions remain

concerning his initial fault - which can at best only be inferred from the fact of his initial tardiness. Summaries of the romance do not always make clear that Gauvain's failure to go to the immediate assistance of the cupbearer was a tactical rather than a moral error. That is, the news of the abduction puts Gauvain in a dilemma (ll. 208-221). Should he breach etiquette by rising from table early or wait till after the meal? He thinks long and hard about this question and decides to delay only because he knows that his famous horse Gringolet will be able to catch up with the abductor in short order (ll. 220-221). Retrospectively of course this decision turns out to have been a mistake, and one of which Gauvain repents - but it seems to me that he does so with such a degree of self-abasing recrimination that the reader/listener might be led to speculate about additional reasons for his extreme reaction.

We are hampered in our speculations because the romance begins more or less *in medias res* and lacks a *Vorgeschichte*, some account of how the 'bon chevalier' happened to fall from grace, such as we have in the *premerains vers* of Chrestien's *Erec* which, being an extended, semi-biographical romance, is able to convey well the whole process whereby that hero's initial keen chivalric commitment descends into sloth and uxoriousness. It might of course be objected that the character of Gauvain occurs so frequently, either as hero or as foil, in the post-Chrestien verse romances that such a preamble would scarcely have been necessary. Did not Gauvain frequently appear as a less-than-perfect, even burlesque figure who had never been able to live down his old role as the rather worldly and fallible foil to Chrestien's Perceval and is he not often thereafter gently mocked for his sexual and other foibles, as for instance in the romances of *Hunbaut*, *Gliglois*, *Le Chevalier a l'Epée*, *La Mule sanz Frein*?² This argument is valid to a degree - there must always be a measure of intertextual 'interference' when romances use a well-nigh identical repertoire of characters. In the case of Gauvain we have a knight whose reputation preceded him, but however 'formulaic' we may think the later verse romances to be, they are all independent and self-contained works which are finally 'unrelated to each other.'³ In modern media terms they comprise a series rather than a serial in which *various* conceptions of Gauvain emerge with no one image exerting a normative influence. The key to Gauvain's (shifting) character must be sought in each of the individual works. In the case of *L'Âtre Périlleux* I think we may seek clues to the true

complexity of Gauvain's character in the figure of the abductor, Escanor.

Just before Gauvain faces Escanor, the girl whom he had rescued from the demon in the haunted cemetery warns him of the evil strength and power of his proposed adversary. She has it on the incontrovertible authority of the devil who ill-treated her that this knight has matchless strength which remains undiminished until sunset when, just after the hour of nones, a slight weakening occurs, which continues until compline (1558-1569). Such a peculiarity is of course a well-known legendary characteristic of Gauvain himself, whose strength declines after noon, and in such a striking similarity between the two knights there is surely a hint to an informed audience of at least a partial equation of the figures of Gauvain and Escanor. This impression is reinforced by the testimony of Gauvain's own mother, here imagined as being a *fee*, l. 1579, the kind of supernatural figure often credited in Arthurian literature with being able to see beneath hypocritical façades,⁴ who had said that she feared for her son's safety in no combat save one with Escanor. Although she possessed divinatory powers, she could not predict the outcome of any battle between her son and him, and always warned him of the dangers of any combat with *that* opponent (ll.1575-1602). These verses strongly suggest that the opponent the mother means is her son's own alter ego, the bad side of his character (with which the devil in the cemetery had been intimately acquainted). Here then is an effective repetition of the Doppelgänger technique: the combat against Escanor will be unprecedentedly difficult because Gauvain will essentially be fighting himself.

This impression is further strengthened by attending to the dialogue between Gauvain and Escanor before their combat. Escanor taunts Gauvain by expressing scepticism as to whether Gauvain *really* intends to fight him. He (Escanor) had proceeded in a deliberately tardy fashion the day before: surely Gauvain had had time to catch up with him before now, he taunts. He also reveals that he had unleashed the discord at Court solely in order to provoke Gauvain into fighting him (the 'abducted' girl had been in collusion with him; ll. 2081-2097). Gauvain, for his part, cries out in terms that suggest he wants to finally face down his nemesis and resolve the issue with an opponent who had been spoiling for a fight for so long:

Et Gavains dist: 'Ce est l'estrox;

Ja en averés la meslee,
Quant vous tant l'avés desirree.⁵

It is because Gauvain, remembering his mother's darkly prophetic words at the appropriate time (ll.2448-2451), realises that this is the one opponent with whom it would be wrong to prevaricate, that he cleaves him from head to shoulders in preference to showing mercy (ll.2456-2462). Such brutal conduct, which had, to be sure, characterised Gawain in Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* when he had peremptorily slain the Roman Gaius Quintilianus, had hardly been Gauvain's way at the romance stage of his legendary evolution, and is perhaps a further confirmation that he feels that he cannot temporise with *this* evil: here there simply must be a battle *à l'outrance*.

If the fight with Escanor is read as Gauvain's battle for his own soul, the positioning and import of his preceding combat with the demon in the churchyard becomes clearer. It has been objected that this is the one episode of the work which does not fit well the overall clear structure of the narrative.⁶ In that former episode, it will be recalled, Gauvain defeats the devil by seeking inspiration from the cross and (according to the testimony of the oppressed girl) with the help of the Virgin Mary too (ll.1406-1407). He saves the girl from her fate as the devil's whore and exercises a more general redemptive function for the local inhabitants who now rejoice that their land is restored and that their cemetery has lost its evil reputation (ll.1436-1443). Because adventures in the romances are commonly narrated in ascending order of gravity and importance we would expect the cemetery episode, so laden with metaphysical meaning, to be placed after the merely knightly combat with Escanor. However, in this case it is clear that Gauvain's battle with the devil within him presents a greater challenge to him than that of the objective demon of the perilous churchyard, which I believe explains satisfactorily what otherwise might appear to be an anomalous narrative inversion.

In a romance which clearly favours the Doppelgänger device it appears that the abductor Escanor is yet one more incarnation, in this case of the bad part of Gauvain's character. By slaying Escanor, Gauvain has excised an evil from his own soul, and the opening sequence, where Escanor abducts the girl (notwithstanding the fact that this was really a charade meant to provoke Gauvain) indicates that this evil concerns the cynical abuse of women, 'sexual kleptomania' as it has been aptly termed in contemporary feminist discourse. This form

of abuse, notoriously, is a male speciality in which to some extent all men are Doppelgänger of each other, as the *amie* of Espinogre states with utter certainty when giving him reasons for not surrendering to his sexual demands:

Puis me dist; 'Ce vous en eslogne;
 Une cose vous nuist vers moi:
 La trecerie que je voi
 Par tout le monde communal;
 Car tant sont trestout desloial
 Que cascuns qui a cief en trait,
 Et de s'amie ses bons fait,
 Je n'en voi nesun trestout sous
 Que des que il en est saoul
 Que tantost autre ne requiere.⁷

It is perhaps significant that Gauvain is strongly suspected by Codrovain of filching his *amie* in the rather comic incident when the former, having vowed to retrieve the girl's sparrowhawk, has to remove his armour to climb the tree on which it is perched - with the result that Codrovain supposes from the sight of the discarded armour that his betrothed had been enjoying an extra-mural tryst (ll.2573-2760). In this incident the suitor's reproach in fact contains multiple ironies. Objectively his accusation of Gauvain is false - for of course Gauvain has now overcome the sexually delinquent part of his nature symbolised in the text by the external figure of 'Escanor' - but the suitor, unlike the audience, is not to know that. The narrator at another point even gently provokes his audience to doubt whether Gauvain had really turned over a new leaf when sheltering the girl in the forest (Codrovain had left them stranded when he irately rode off with Gringalet). For at this point he teases his listeners to speculate 'what other pleasures' the couple might have enjoyed there (ll.2804-2806) before assuring us that their 'bed', that is, the bare soil, was hard and uncomfortable and that Gauvain spent the whole night asexually in the harshest discomfort, shielding the girl from the biting cold elements (2807-2825).

That a contemporary audience might have found the image of Gauvain spending a chaste night with a pretty girl somewhat incongruous (notwithstanding the anaesthetising cold) is perhaps in itself an index of the change which we are asked to believe has come

over him. Indications that this change has been something of very recent occurrence are signalled in the ensuing sequence of encounters where the erstwhile 'chevalier amoureux' now appears in the (historically) anomalous role of 'marriage broker' to a variety of estranged couples - in which interviews some comic tensions between the 'two Gauvains' emerge. To return to the Espinogre incident: here the girl's suspicion that Espinogre would quickly ride off to future conquests after enjoying her body proves all too true, and when Gauvain encounters him on the road he is on his way to conquer another beauty. Espinogre tells Gauvain of his intention to desert his amie with that bluff and barefaced effrontery which characterises all male conspiracies against the female sex, the difference now of course being that Gauvain is not (or no longer) the kind of sexual cynic which Espinogre took him to be, and he is yet further nettled by Espinogre having taken his name in vain. That is, Espinogre had agreed to the girl's demand that he defeat Gauvain before enjoying her precisely because he shared the common assumption that Gauvain was dead, and so confidently agrees to her demand (upon which consensus between them she prematurely surrenders to him).

Gauvain's anger at Espinogre's duplicity catapults him into the unwonted role of apologist for conventional sexual morality, and Chrestien's easy-going, rather sensual knight 'de molt grant mesure' sounds rather strident and immoderate in his reproach to the wayward philanderer:

'Bien vous doit ore Dix confondre'
 Fait Gavains, 'et si di que fax,
 Car laidement avés or sax
 A la pucele son servise.
 Vous l'avés novelement conquisse,
 Et si l'avés trois ans proïe
 Et c'est la premiere foïe
 K'ox en avés eü vos buens,
 Si devés estre trestox suens
 Par le counvent que li feistes,
 Si qu'a vostre dit li meïstes
 En plege le bon chevalier,
 Or alés un autre proïer.
 Ci ne voi je mot de raison,
 Car vous n'avés nule ocoison

Par quoi enhaïr le doiïés:
 Por Diu vous pri que vous soiïés
 Vers la damoiselle loïax.
 C'il qui sont treceor et fax
 Vers celes qui ne lor meffont
 Fuscent or tout segnié el front,
 Pleust a Diu le tout poisçant;
 Car il en a par le mont tant
 Qu'i font as loïax grant contraire⁸

Gauvain's testy locutions here have a somewhat wounded tone. Still battling to 'clear' his name (which he does not finally reveal until line 5734) he feels that his name should 'mean something', embody a principle commanding universal respect, which is why he determines to fight Espinogre: not to do so would be an insult to his name. This he explains to Espinogre whilst still posing as a 'nameless' knight with such overwhelming admiration for Gauvain that he will not let Espinogre's implicit slight of him go unavenged:

J'amai tant monseignor Gavain
 Ke je feroie que vilain
 Se je soufroie qu'il eüst
 Reproce la u mes cors fust,
 Ne se il a mort u a vie
 Estoit retés de vilenie.⁹

Gauvain's words here imply a sense of pique and shame - and even after defeating Espinogre and successfully reconciling him with his *amie*, he will not reveal his name for, he says, disconsolately and even somewhat petulantly of it, 'je l'ai perdu, / Si ne sai ki le m'a tolu' ('I lost it and I don't know who took it from me'; ll.3451-2). The tone of such words implies his rueful awareness that a part of what his peers used to refer to as the 'bon chevalier' lies dead with the corpse of the double who had died in his stead earlier in the narrative. It is for that reason that he continues to call himself the nameless knight, a self-abasing sobriquet usually only applied to unproven knights: in *De Ortu Walwani* the youthful Walwanius (=Gawain) was called *puer sine nomine* whilst of course his legendary son is termed *li biaux desconeus* in the Fair Unknown cycle; and there is indeed a sense that Gauvain is imposing upon himself an arduous recapitulation of his

life in order to regain his adult identity once more. This would also explain why Gauvain is not content merely to vanquish the murderers of his double: he must also force the magician among them in the fantastical conclusion of his quest to resuscitate the dead 'Gauvain'. Not for the first time in this romance is there a piquant linkage of the literal and the metaphorical.

On the basis of certain lines of the poem Brian Woledge once speculated that the narrator of the romance might have harboured misogynistic tendencies.¹⁰ At the point in the narrative where Codrovain sees Gauvain's armour lying on the ground, he impugns not only Gauvain but also the girl for playing tricks on him behind his back (ll.2690-2691), to which the narrator adds the words:

Por mon conte que je n'aloing
 Ne veul lor barate descrire.
 Assés m'en avés oï dire
 En autres lius, si m'en tairai.¹¹

At another point Gawain is imposed upon by the same sparrowhawk girl to procure food for her, an office which Gauvain performs only with considerable difficulty when he has to beg it from a decidedly inhospitable hostess. This enforced detour prompts Gauvain to make tart comments about 'the ass crumbling under too heavy a load' (l.4004) and the narrator to opine that the man who travels alongside a woman is no longer free (ll.4010-11), a judgement which he backs up with a piece of Solomonic wisdom:

Salemons dist en un sien livre
 Que cil n'est pas del tot delivre
 Ki conpaignie a femme prent.¹²

There is, notoriously, 'no such thing as a joke' in the sense of a neutral and innocuous pleasantry, and what the world calls humour is undoubtedly a very sharp weapon indeed, but there are surely grades of offensiveness, and the instances cited above strike me more as badinage than as mordant analytical commentary. Furthermore, these throwaway lines are unrelated to the moral texture of the romance itself and so I am inclined to go along with Nancy Black's verdict to the effect that 'male teasing of women is not an uncommon feature of works written for mixed-gender audiences', this being a phenomenon

common to Chrestien and other contemporary authors.¹³ If our narrator is misogynistic, he is not specially so for his time.

But the strongest argument against the postulation of a militantly masculinist ethic dominating the work is surely its unsparing analysis of the *male* sex. The subtlest analysis here is of the figure of Gauvain who, haunted far more by his inner demons than by the demon of the cemetery, exemplifies a finely nuanced dramatisation of male sexual guilt, the kind of guilt that every man must experience who knows in his heart of the existence of an abusive *Doppelgänger* of himself. It is this figure, prone to oversensitive responses and afflicted by self-doubt, whose sermonising to others on the virtues of sexual fidelity has such a strangulated, 'Pecksniffian' air, who best represents the psychological and moral plight of the male wrestling to regulate the excesses of his potentially destructive sexuality. Fortunately for him his amour-propre and jealousy of his 'good name' - that benign, medieval variant of Norman Mailer's *mot* to the effect that no man's name and reputation can be better than his last exploit - join forces with his deeper moral resources to rehabilitate him in his own eyes and in those of his peers, the resolution of his own problem being happily consistent with the hymeneal conclusion of the work and its celebration of regular, consensual unions.

The author of *L'Âtre Périlleux* will probably never be known to us, but for me his most noteworthy poetic signature is this image of Gauvain wrestling with unresolved sexual tensions, an image which bears some likeness to Wolfram von Eschenbach's treatment of the Gawan figure in his *Parzival*.¹⁴ Codrovain's unjust allegation that Gauvain had made free with his amie together with the teasing remarks subjoined by the narrator himself to that episode are reminiscent of the three occasions when Wolfram deploys sexual innuendo, implying (again, falsely) that Gawan might not be above the kind of sexual abuse which he combats in others. In the Antikonie incident, Wolfram's Gawan is dallying consensually with that sexually assertive lady only to be accused of rape by another knight. Later the ferryman before *schastel marveil* simply assumes that Gawan will have had his way with his young daughter, a false charge which Gawan rightly denies, whilst on a third occasion Sir Keye implies that the ladies whom Gawan has (meritoriously) saved from the magician Clinschor represent some kind of private harem.

In both romances of course negative innuendo is cancelled logically by positive confutation: both heroes rise morally triumphant over a

host of abusers and bring about a hymeneal dénouement; yet still the hints of carnal weakness contain a subsidiary, suggestive power which is not so lightly cancelled, and such hints provide an indispensable moral dynamic as regards the heroes' sexual conduct, compelling each hero to vindicate *himself* at the same time as he conquers *external* sexual predators. I am not of course trying to argue that the French author would have known Wolfram's work, although I do think it pertinent to suggest that the two authors might have been 'twin temperaments', to borrow Ray Baron's phrase concerning Chrestien and the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.¹⁵ What can be claimed with certainty is that the figure of Gauvain in *L'Âtre Périlleux* is no bland figure above the brawl of events, and takes on some of the complexity of Chrestien's Perceval, Erec and Yvain. Although he has no specially designated *Vorgeschichte* telling of his lapse *in propria persona*, the initial complacency which his inaction suggests together with the frequent hints that he may not be as dissimilar to Escanor as he might ideally wish, appear to shock and 'radicalise' him and make him search his soul with an unprecedented conscientiousness. It had been the presentation of flawed characters which had enabled Chrestien to explore tensions within the knightly, patriarchal value-system which he described. His anonymous successor was clearly interested to continue that exploration.

NOTES

¹ Edited and translated by Nancy B. Black, New York and London 1994, from which citations from the original Old French texts and English translations will be taken. In her Introduction (ix-xliv) Black provides such details of authorship and presumed dating as can be conjectured and an up-to-date bibliography. An introduction to and translation of the text into modern French with short bibliography is provided by Marie-Louise Ollier, in *La Légende Arthurienne; Le Graal et la Table Ronde*, ed. Danielle Régnier-Bohler, Paris 1989, pp.607-708.

² See Keith Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, Amsterdam 1980, and Beate Schmolcke-Hasselmann, *Der Arthurische Versroman von Chrétien bis Froissart* (Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie 177), Tübingen 1980, for the fullest accounts.

³ Busby, as in previous footnote, p.245.

⁴ In the Latin romance *De Ortu Walwani*, Gawain's mother is named Morcades, a name which could be related to Morgan, but Chrestien does not mention her possession of prophetic powers and the author of *L'Âtre*

Périlleux must either have made up this motif ad hoc or resurrected an older tradition here to fit in with his imaginative purposes. It is possible that he may have had in mind a tradition like that of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* (1150/1) where Merlin is able by dint of supernatural insights to reveal to king Rodarch that his apparently faithful wife Ganieda is in fact an adulteress.

⁵ ll.2098-2100. 'And Gawain said; "It's decided! You will surely have the battle that you have desired for so long"'.

⁶ Alexandre Micha, 'Miscellaneous French Romances in Verse', in R.S. Loomis ed., *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, Oxford 1959, pp.367-69.

⁷ ll.3210-3219. 'Then she said: "There's something that holds me back; one thing speaks against you in my eyes. I see the treachery committed by everyone around and about; for they are all so disloyal that anyone who reaches his goal and takes his pleasure with his amie - I don't see a single one among them who, as soon as he is satisfied, doesn't run off to another'."

⁸ ll.3304-3327. "'May God confound you' said Gauvain, 'Even if I speak foolishly. For you have paid your young woman meanly for her service. You have just now conquered her, after three years of courting. It's the first time that you have had your reward. And you ought to be entirely hers, according to the bond you made with her and that you told me was guaranteed by the bon chevalier. Yet now you go to seek another. I see no reason in this, for there is no occasion for you to hate her. I pray you in the name of God to be loyal to this young woman. As for those who are false and cheating to lovers who make no affront: may it please God to mark them on their brows with a sign of infamy! For there are so many who are disloyal.'"

⁹ ll.3371-3376. 'I love Sir Gawain so much that I would be a villain if I allowed him to be reproached in my presence - whether he is dead or alive - if he was accused of villainy.'

¹⁰ *L'Âtre Périlleux: Etudes sur les manuscrits, la langue et l'importance littéraire du poème, avec un spécimen du texte*, Paris 1930, p.41.

¹¹ ll.2692-95. 'So that my story not grow too long I won't describe women's tricks. You have heard me speak of them elsewhere, so I will keep silent.'

¹² ll.4009-11. 'Solomon says in his book that he is no longer free who keeps company with a woman.'

¹³ Introduction, p.xiii.

¹⁴ Cf. my 'Sense and Structure in the Gawan adventures of Wolfram's Parzival', *MLR* 76 (1981), pp.848-856.

¹⁵ W. R. J. Barron, 'Chrétien and the Gawain-poet: Master and pupil or twin temperaments?' in *The Legacy of Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. Norris J. Lacy, Douglas Kelly, Keith Busby, 2 vols., Amsterdam, 1988, vol.2, pp.255-258.