

## Demons and Angels: Female Portrayal in *Escanor*

Leslie C. Brook  
University of Birmingham

*Escanor* is a lengthy, complex romance in which the author, Girart d'Amiens, includes a number of female characters who play a significant role in the narrative. All of them belong to the aristocratic world of traditional Arthurian romance, and a number of them are related among themselves through kinship. Together they therefore represent a fairly restricted circle with shared basic values and outlook, yet their characters do display differences, as occasioned by the particular circumstances in which they are cast. There are two points of interest concerning them: (a) what kind of image of womanhood do they reflect? and (b) how far will an analysis of them tell us something of the assumptions and attitude of the writer?

None of the women to be discussed brings with her any literary baggage in her own right, though comparisons could sometimes be made with other characters already established in Arthurian romance, given that *Escanor* is a late composition, dating from c. 1280. The six characters to be examined are the damsel accompanying Mordred, the Pucelle de Nantes, Andrivete (Kay's fiancée), La Reine des Traverses, La Reine de la Blanche Montaigne (wife of Escanor le Bel), and Felinete. Of these some are presented as 'bad', and others 'good', or as a mix of the two, and in fact only Mordred's *amie* could be placed firmly and solely in the 'bad' category.

The female characters displaying unpleasant and hostile characteristics occur only in the first half of the romance, and among these the damsel accompanying Mordred appears early in the story. She forms part of a basically comic scene involving Kay, who has just left Arthur's court on his way to Northumberland to take part in a joust in which the prize is to be the hand of Andrivete, daughter of the King of Northumberland. However, before leaving court Kay has been on the receiving end of some teasing which has upset him, and he makes his way to Northumberland engrossed in thought at this unjust treatment. He comes upon Mordred's damsel, who has been left at a fountain with a

dwarf whilst her lover Mordred and Dinadan, who also happens to be accompanying them, have gone off into the forest in response to the cries for help of another damsel. Mordred's damsel is described as being beautiful, and when Kay arrives she is admiring herself in a mirror ('La pucele tint en sa main / Un mireoir ou se miroit' [*The damsel was holding in her hand a mirror in which she was admiring herself*], 630-31),<sup>1</sup> a gesture which was probably intended to be no more than an indication of vanity in this instance. We are also informed that she is proud to be Mordred's *amie*, and some of his aggressive character seems to have rubbed off on her: 'Dont moult se faisoit orgueilleuse, / Et fiere, et male, et despiteuse' [Which made her very conceited, proud, disagreeable and insolent] (641-42). Kay meanwhile is so preoccupied that at first he does not notice her. She promptly takes offence at being ignored, attributing it to pride and rudeness on Kay's part, so she insults him and wishes him ill:

Et dist: 'Biax Sire Dix, aïe!  
 Qui vit oncques mais baceler  
 C'a pucele n'osast parler?  
 Riches puet il estre d'avoir,  
 Mais en lui n'a senz ne savoir  
 Ne il n'est ne franz ne gentix ... (856-61)

- Voire, que honte li aviengne,  
 Dist la pucele, et male joie ... (866-67)

Je m'esmerveil que li deables  
 Ne l'a pieça honi et mort,  
 Car a rienz nee ne s'amort  
 C'a dire anui et vilonie ...' (874-77)

[*And she said: 'Dear God, for pity's sake! Who ever saw a young man who didn't dare speak to a damsel? He may be wealthy, but he has no sense or manners, nor is he noble-minded or high-born ... Indeed, may shame befall him', said the damsel, 'and ill fortune ... I wonder that the devil has not long since harmed and killed him, for he approaches no living soul except to annoy and insult'*]

The dwarf joins in and echoes her insults, and when Kay eventually becomes aware that they are speaking of him he angrily throws the dwarf into the fountain and trades insults with the damsel before riding on his way, leaving her in tears. When Mordred and Dinadan return and find

her weeping they each fight against Kay and all three are wounded. The text makes it clear that their shared plight comes about through the damsel's behaviour. As for Kay, he is the victim of a tongue-lashing that takes him by surprise, as he does not understand what he is supposed to have done wrong. The damsel's unpleasantness is underlined by Dinadan's expressed attitude to women: he refuses to allow them to accompany him, as he considers that they invariably cause trouble, and in a rather comic way Mordred's damsel proves to him his point.<sup>2</sup> The last word on this damsel is had by Kay when he returns to court from Northumberland and says to Arthur:

“Car onques ne vi la pareille  
 Garce ne si tres malparliere  
 Langue ne vi ainsi maniere  
 De dire anui et mesestance:  
 Encore en ai bien sovenance.” (6886-70)

[*‘For I never came across such a bitch, nor suh an evil tongue so used to uttering annoying and provocative words; I still remember it clearly’*]

The next female character to display hostility towards a knight is the Pucelle de Nantes, who comes into play when Gauvain is sent to quell a revolt in Brittany. He deals successfully with the main insurrection, but a small group of determined rebels decide to try to destroy Gauvain, and for this they enlist the help of a relative of theirs, the Pucelle de Nantes, who possesses magic powers. They prejudice her against Gauvain by telling her that he threatens the safety of her own lands and by generally blackening his character, including claiming that he is a sodomite (1847), an accusation which is risible in view of Gauvain's normal reputation in romance! She agrees to help them, and lends them a magic hawk, which could be used to entice an adversary into a trap. Gauvain is beguiled in this way, but overcomes three successive groups lying in wait for him, whereupon the Pucelle spontaneously approaches Gauvain and apologizes, declaring that she has been misled about him:

Lors li dist: “Sire, je sui ci  
 Venue pour crier merci  
 A vouz de mon tres grant meffait.  
 Et sachiez, quanques j'en ai fait  
 Est par fauz conseil desloial  
 Et pour ce m'en est pris si mal.” (2885-90)

[*Then she said to him: 'My lord, I have come to beginning your mercy for my great wrong. And let me say that whatever I did was through false, disloyal counsel; that is why I behaved so badly.'*]

Her apology continues over several more lines (to 2908), and she explains how she came to be misled. Her graciousness is matched by that of Gauvain's response:

"Mais puis qu'ensi est, doucement  
Le vouz pardoing, car a pucele,  
A dame ne a damoisele  
N'aurai ja guerre ou que je puisse  
N'en quelque liu que nule en truisse." (2916-20)

[*'But since it is so, I forgive you graciously, for I shall never quarrel with a damsel, a noble lady, or maiden, where I can avoid it, or wherever I come upon one'*]

He then adds a point about female behaviour that may echo Girart's own view:

"Mais pucele redoit doutanz  
Estre touz jors qu'ele ne face  
Chose dont sa valor efface.  
Car pucele doit courtoise estre,  
Sage et plaisanz et de simple estre  
Et de tout bon affaitement;  
Et pour ce me merveil coment  
De tel nature se desvoie." (2926-33)

[*'But a damsel should always have a care not to do anything that might destroy her good name. She should be courtly, wise, pleasing, unpretentious and well-mannered, and I marvel that she could ever stray from such a nature.'*]

The Pucelle promises not to use her 'nigremance' [*magic acts*] for evil again, explaining that 'Deable m'en ont tant apris / Pour coi tant me soie meffaite' [*Devils taught me so much that I acted so wrongly*] (2942-43), and she becomes almost sycophantic in her reiterated apology:

"Et sachiez, je n'ai chose faite  
Dont je soie tant corecie  
Ne dont j'aie si grant haschie

Conme de vouz, dont mout me poise:  
 Car vo franchise est si cortoise  
 Et a esté jusques a ci  
 Que dolente sui que j'ainsi  
 Vouz mis de mort en aventure." (2944-51)

[*And let me say that nothing I have done has so upset me or caused me such distress as my behaviour towards you, which weighs heavily upon me; for your noble nature is so courteous, and has always been so, that it grieves me that I risked your life*']

As Gauvain again pardons her ('Et le vouz pardoing de bon cuer' [*And I forgive you whole-heartedly*], 2961) she gives him her magic hawk as a reward for his prowess, promising him that it will not harm him, but adding that it will live for only a couple of months, 'Puis l'emporteront li deable' [*Then devils will take it*] (2984).

While both Mordred's damsel and the Pucelle de Nantes are purely circumstantial characters who play no further part in the romance, Andrivete is the principal female character. She first appears as a spectator at the joust in Northumberland, in which Kay, though wounded during it, is considered generally to be the winner. At this tournament she and Kay fall in love, without either having the courage to reveal the fact to the other when she pays several visits to him as he is convalescing. At this joust there are also the first indications that she can speak forthrightly, when she replies quite aggressively in conversation with some of the other female spectators (3880-88 and especially 5493-5544). The gentler side of her character is shown, however, in the later two encounters with Kay, when he returns to visit her secretly at Bamburgh and they at last make mutual promises of fidelity. This happens against the background of the machinations of her uncle Aiglin, who since the recent death of Andrivete's father, has tried to prevent any marriage between her and Kay in order to gain Andrivete's inheritance for himself by marrying her off to a weak husband whom he could control. She is rescued and sheltered by a faithful *chatelain* called Yonet at Bamburgh, but is then besieged by her uncle. She nevertheless manages to escape and make her way to Arthur's court in search of her beloved. Unknown to her, however, Aiglin has meanwhile forged a letter from Yonet to Kay stating that in the latter's absence Andrivete has married a man of low birth, and that there is therefore no further point in his attempting to raise troops to rescue her from the siege. Kay is understandably devastated to receive this letter and gives way to an outburst against women in general and their lack of fidelity: 'Car n'i a nule loiauté, / Fors barat et

desloiauté' [*For there is no loyalty only deceit and disloyalty*] (11656-57). He does, however, send a trusted messenger to Bamburgh to verify the news. Meanwhile Andrivete is on her way to Arthur's court, and meets up with Espinogre and Dinadan. Espinogre challenges Dinadan to a joust, but Dinadan refuses, seeing casual jousting as a futile pursuit. Espinogre is surprised at this refusal to conform to what he sees as normal behaviour, and he chides Dinadan with being a coward, who clearly lacks an *amie* to inspire him. This chance remark allows Dinadan to deliver a forceful diatribe against involvement with women, who in his view only cause trouble for a knight. He would, he says, never fight on their behalf:

“Car, par le foi que je vouz doi,  
Pour dame ne pour damoisele,  
Tant soit savereuse ne bele,  
Ne me quier metre en aventure.” (11828-31)

[*For by the faith that I owe you, I do not seek to risk my safety for any noble lady or damsel, however attractive or fair she may be.* ]

Overhearing Dinadan's remarks Andrivete, who was hoping for news of Kay, is shocked that anyone could slander women so, and she at once takes a strong dislike to him:

Li veut mal si tres durement  
Qu'ele ne peüst nulement  
Autant nul chevalier hair. (11904-06)

[*She wishes him ill so strongly that she could not hate any knight more*]

There is some irony here, since we are told that generally Dinadan's remarks are not taken seriously ('Que chascunz n'acontoit .ij. nois / A rienz nee qu'il lor desist' [*For no-one cared tuppence about anything he said to them*], 11872-73). Andrivete is mischievously invited by Espinogre to comment on what Dinadan has said, and she does so at length (11920-72), setting the tone of her response from the outset:

“Li chevaliers a en l'escole,  
Biauz sire, esté de mal penser,  
De vilainement dispenser  
Sa vieuté et sa ribaudie.” (11920-23)

[*'Fair sir; the knight has been trained in the school of evil thought, and villainously dispenses his baseness and lack of respect'*]

She berates him for defaming women, and reminds him of his chivalric duties:

“Chevaliers ne doit pas mesdire  
Des dames, n'estre ent despitoz,  
Ainz doit chevaliers devant touz  
Estre nes, courtois et jolis,  
Parez d'onor, franz et polis,  
Les bones oevres si emprenre  
Que nuz hom ne l'en puist reprendre,  
Car sifaite est la seingnorie  
De l'ordre de chevalerie.” (11949-57)

[*'A knight should not speak ill of noble ladies, nor despise them; rather he should surpass all in being pure of heart, courtly and merry, adorned with honour, noble-minded and polite, undertaking good deeds so that no-one can criticise him; for such is the superior nature of the order of knighthood'*]

In fact, he should never speak ill of women, whether they deserve it or not:

“Vouz ne devez en nul endroit  
Des dames a tort ne a droit  
Mesdire, c'a vouz n'afiert mie.” (11966-68)

[*'You should never speak ill of noble ladies, whether they deserve it or not, for it is not your business.'*]

Dinadan is taken aback at this unexpected lecture and ironically comments that she and Kay would make a good couple! He adds that Kay is currently without an *amie*, having just learnt how he has been served by his beloved in Northumberland! Dinadan claims that the way she has reportedly treated him is typical of female behaviour. All this is, of course, news to Andrivete, who cautiously enquires what precisely Kay's *amie* is supposed to have done, and Dinadan proceeds to explain in detail and with a note of contempt that Kay was preparing to rescue her from Aiglin when he heard that she had married another, of low birth. Andrivete is stung at this misrepresentation of her good name, but her immediate response, born of shock at the effectiveness of her uncle's

tactic, is to deny the allegations on Andrivete's behalf, claiming that she is her cousin and therefore that she knows the truth, adding that there are many honourable knights who would defend her honour. At this juncture Hector arrives and challenges Espinogre and Dinadan to the ritual joust. Dinadan refuses, but Espinogre accepts and is promptly unhorsed and wounded. This obliges Dinadan to fight to avenge his companion, but he does so unwillingly, criticising the custom of jousting, which he regards as stupid and potentially wasteful of life. Seizing on his voiced reluctance Andrivete avenges herself on him for his comments on women and on herself (though he did not know, of course, that she was Andrivete), covering him with sarcasm:

“Sire vassauz, qui de mesdire  
 Servez et de blasmer les dames,  
 Mout vouz doit estre granz diffames  
 Que ne vengiez vo compaignon!  
 Mais vouz resamblez le gaingnon  
 Qui abaie a l'uis par dedens  
 Et mengüe les genz as denz,  
 Et puis par defors issir n'ose...” (12370-77)

[*'My lord vassal, you who sepak ill of noble ladies and defame them, it harms your reputation greatly that you won't avenge your companion! But you're like the mastiff that barks at the door from inside, and bites people with its teeth, yet dares not go outside'*]

Dinadan is immediately unhorsed by Hector, and as he laments his fate Andrivete returns to the verbal attack at some length (12479-516 and 12545-90). She now mocks his chivalric prowess and continues to berate him for his general attitude to women, but with no further specific reference to Andrivete:

“Mais pour ce c'onques ne connui [chevalier]  
 Si vilain ne si mesdisant,  
 Vous vois je sor toz despisant  
 Et vouz hé, et si doit Dix faire!  
 Car chevaliers qui veut deffaïre  
 Les dames ne les damoiseles,  
 Les meschines ne les puceles  
 Doit bien Dix et li monz haïr.” (12556-63)

[*'But as I have never come across a knight so villainous or so insulting, and I see you despising everyone, I hate you, and so should*



*God! A knight who defames noble ladies and damsels, noble daughters and maidens, God and the world should both hate. ]*

She also threatens to accompany him to ensure that he suffers more trouble! The whole scene is essentially comic, as Dinadan does not understand why she is attacking him ("Damoisele contralieuse ... C'a il a partir entre nouz?" [*Quarrelsome lady, what disupte is there between us?*], 12527-30), but he eventually decides that silence is the best defence and simply rides away.

This scene also marks the end of Andrivete's unpleasantness. Immediately following it some sympathy for her is injected into the text as she falls ill, distressed at the bad reputation her name will have earned her at court and particularly at what she has been told concerning Kay's reaction (12611-28). Ironically at the same time Kay receives reassurance via the messenger he sent to Bamburgh that the news concerning Andrivete is false, and that her loyalty to him is in no doubt. However he is in turn anxious lest she hear what he said about her, so a subtle readjustment of the image of Andrivete is offered to the reader when Kay now says that she has been 'diffamee' [*defamed*] through his remarks (12793). This comment tends to efface any adverse impression that the preceding scene may have given and prepares for a more favourable projection in the remainder of the text. Kay is particularly worried, though, that Andrivete's reaction, if she did learn of what he had said, would be hostile to himself, and might cause her to return to Bamburgh rather than, as had been reported, continue in her attempt to reach Arthur's court:

Et c'est ce dont se va doutant  
 Que de lui n'ait tel chose aprise  
 Qu'ele ait en felonoie prise,  
 Dont par corroz fust retornee:  
 Car fenme est de peu bestornee  
 Quant dite li est tel parole. (12800-05)

*[And he fears that she might hear something about him that she might consider villainous behaviour, and return (to Bamburgh) in anger; for a woman is easily upset when such things are said to her]*

Meanwhile he sends his messenger off again to try to discover any news of her possible whereabouts.

As the narrative now moves on to the second main strand, Andrivete plays a softer and more helpful role. This part of the poem concerns

Gauvain's quest to clear his name and involves more immediately the hunt by him, together with Arthur and a group of knights, for Gifflet, who has been abducted by Escanor le Grand (uncle of Escanor le Bel) as a lure for Gauvain. On the eve of their departure Andrivete arrives at court, and without revealing her identity, because she does not know whether Kay still thinks that she has betrayed him, she informs Arthur that Gifflet is in fact safe. This she knows because she happened to see him with his captors on her way to court. She tells Arthur partly out of kindness, to lessen his and the court's anxiety:

Et pour ce qu'ele estoit doutanz  
 Que li rois n'en fust a mesaise,  
 Vint envers lui por metre a aise,  
 Car bien savoit ceste novele  
 Seroit a lui et as sienz bele. (14466-70)

*[And so feared that the king might be worried about him, she came to him to reassure him, for she knew that the news would be welcome to him and to the court]*

At the same time she seeks out Gauvain and makes a pact with him: if he will help her regain her lands, she promises to find out within a fortnight where Gifflet is. She discovers that he is being held prisoner by La Reine des Traverses, at the request of her brother, Escanor le Bel. Andrivete goes to Traverses and is well received by La Reine, who is in fact a young cousin of hers, but the queen does not tell Andrivete that she is holding Gifflet. However, another damsel there, who is conveniently a friend of Andrivete, does so, and Andrivete urges her to ensure that La Reine treats her prisoner well. She then leaves to return to Gauvain as she had promised, and secretly informs him of Gifflet's whereabouts, assuring him of his safekeeping. Gauvain in turn expresses his debt to her and promises to assist her in any way she may need. He informs Arthur of the news he has received concerning Gifflet and an attack on Traverses is planned, while Andrivete returns to Traverses to keep an eye on events and reassure Gifflet. She still has not revealed her identity to Gauvain, and is privately troubled by her deep love for Kay. On her return to Traverses she informs La Reine of Arthur's proposed arrival and urges her to treat her prisoner well - a superfluous piece of advice, in fact, as the queen has already begun to fall in love with Gifflet! Andrivete discreetly does not show that she has perceived her cousin's feelings, but proceeds to reassure Gifflet concerning the moves to rescue him.

With the arrival of Arthur's forces at Traverses, Andrivete continues to stay with La Reine and keep the king and Gauvain informed. In this way she plays a vital, helpful, if not totally disinterested role, which at the same time allows the narrative to progress. At one point she also warns La Reine of plans to move Gifflet into the keeping of a count who hates him, and is thus able to thwart the plan and keep Gifflet at Traverses (18075). She later perceives the reciprocal love of Gifflet and La Reine and discreetly reassures Gauvain that Gifflet is not unhappy in his imprisonment (18524 ff.)! Girart now projects her as a woman able to mediate and hold her own counsel.

With the end of the conflict and release of Gifflet Andrivete reveals her identity to Gauvain, who promises to help her regain her lands by pleading her cause to Arthur. This he does, explaining the whole situation to him as well as the debt owed to Andrivete for helping them find Gifflet. Gauvain also proposes that a double marriage be arranged between Gifflet and La Reine and Kay and Andrivete. The marriage duly takes place and she eventually regains her lands, which she then leaves in the capable hands of Yonet, returning to Arthur's court with Kay.

Once her cause has been placed in Gauvain's hands, Andrivete passes into the background narratively, while attention turns to others or action is taken by them on her behalf; but it is implicit throughout this latter section that her cause is just, and that she is thoroughly deserving of the personal happiness that she eventually achieves.

Tied into her fate is that of La Reine des Traverses, as already hinted, and much detail concerning this character's role has already been touched on. She is widowed at the start of the tale when her husband is slain in the Northumberland tournament, and as the sister of Escanor le Bel her castle is chosen by his uncle Escanor le Grand as a convenient place of imprisonment for Gifflet, in the hope of drawing Gauvain there and engaging him in one-to-one combat. Her courtliness and beauty are much admired (17935 ff.); she welcomes her cousin Andrivete warmly to her castle, and is said to be always kind to strangers. She is, of course, very rich and much desired, but refuses any pressure to take another husband. From the time Gifflet arrives at her castle La Reine guards her prisoner honorably, as befits his status and her own reputation (14564-80). He is well fed and looked after. She is kind to him and often keeps him company, before eventually falling in love with him. Afraid of losing him she refuses to let him be sent on to be imprisoned by a count who hates Gifflet. She is worried about her brother Escanor's reaction to her feelings, and also what might happen after the conflict, as Gifflet might simply return to Arthur's court, though she hopes that her love is

reciprocated. Overall she is projected as an attractive, helpful, and deserving person, and fortunately Gifflet returns her love with equal fervour. His reflections on her (18267-488) serve to emphasize her beauty and good character. When after the conflict she invites Arthur to Traverses, the king declares that he has never met a lady who is 'pluz noble ne pluz sage / Ne pluz tres bele a son avis' [*nobler or wiser, nor more beautiful in his opinion*] (21680-81). La Reine eventually gets her reward, with the marriage between her and Gifflet, but not before an endearing moment of jealousy, when she mistakenly imagines that Andrivete is also in love with Gifflet, because they are often seen discussing matters together!

Another beautiful image of womanhood is provided by the wife of Escanor le Bel, La Reine de la Blanche Montaigne. She appears early in the poem at the joust in Northumberland, where she is said to be beautiful, with no vices:

Que nuz cuers ne seüst coment  
 Peüst souhaider en ce monde  
 Dame pluz bele ne pluz monde  
 De touz vices ne miex aprise. (3266-69)

[*For no-one knew how to wish in this world for a lady more beautiful, more free or all vices, or better mannered*]

Her husband is also mentioned on the same occasion, and they are referred to as a perfect, recently married young couple. They then both appear later in the procession making for Arthur's court, and the wife's surpassing beauty and the fact that they form an ideal couple is again alluded to by one of the singing damsels in her retinue (8036-41 and 8049-58), while their perfection is reinforced by the perfection and rich attire of the troupes of young men, damsels and accompanying ladies who precede their arrival. When Galentinet then meets them he thinks that he is in fairy land (8146)! The lady who addresses Galentinet makes further reference to the unity in perfection of the couple that the damsels serve (8207) and to their mistress's surpassing beauty. Escanor and his queen proceed on their way hand in hand, singing together (8215-6), and these details are noted again when Galentinet sees them arrive (8339 and 8347). The queen's physical beauty is described in detail (8403-64), and with her beauty goes a good temperament:

Et s'ele ert bele, .iiij. tanz  
 Estoit et franche et amiable,

Douce et plaisanz et honerable. (8394-96)

[*And if she was beautiful, four times more was she noble-spirited and welcoming, sweet, delightful, and worthy of honour*]

Despite all the description and adulation the character never actually comes alive by action or speech, and towards the end of the romance it is a question simply of her illness and death. Her illness delays Escanor's departure to help Arthur fight against Aiglin in Northumberland, but she knows that his duty obliges him to go, and merely requests that he return as soon as possible (23480-86, her only speech in the poem). When she dies there is a further reference to the total devotion of the couple and a panegyric of her good qualities (24458-82), and when Escanor learns of her death, after the conflict in Northumberland has been resolved, he withdraws from the world and devotes the rest of his life to prayer and meditation. At one moment, just before his own death, a vision of his dead wife appears to him to thank him for his intercessions, which have enabled her to be rescued from purgatory and placed in paradise (25145-56).

The final 'good woman' to be examined is Felinete, a cousin of Escanor le Bel. She appears during the combat at Traverses. Without asking his permission Escanor le Grand has borrowed his nephew's horse, Gringalet, in order to attack Gauvain, but he is unhorsed by him, so that Gauvain acquires Gringalet as a trophy. However, this very special horse was given to Escanor le Bel by the fairy Esclarmonde, and when it is captured it refuses to eat or drink. Gauvain is in despair until a damsel appears (Felinete) to reveal the secret and get Gringalet to eat. She is described, of course, as very pretty (20073-83), and she offers to help Gauvain out of the goodness of her heart, because of his worthiness and status, and also because of his reputation for kindness to damsels who ask for help. In return she asks him to promise to grant her a boon whenever she may request it in the future. She does not ask for the return of the horse, but acknowledges that it now belongs to Gauvain by reason of his victory over Escanor le Grand. When Gauvain agrees to her offer, she removes a small sachet of powder from the horse's left ear, placed there by Escanor le Bel to prevent others from owning the horse. Although her attitude might seem to be calculating ("Mais je vous ai pour ce servi / Que j'espere que porfis m'en viegne" [*But I have helped you because I hope that I might benefit from it*], 20276-77), it is really no more than an expression of courtly mutual respect and service. She adds:

"D'ore en avant vous serviroie

Par touz liex ou je quideroie  
Vo preu ne vostre avancement.” (20281-83)

[*‘I would henceforth help you wherever I thought it to your honour and advantage’*]

She has also risked her life in coming to help her cousin’s enemy, and naturally asks that her visit be kept a secret:

“Et si vouz pri que nulement,  
Biauz sire chiers, de ma venue  
Ne soit ja parole tenue,  
Car j’en seroie diffamee  
De ceuz de qui je sui amee.” (20284-88)

[*‘And I beginning you, fair sir, that not a word of my coming to you be spoken, for I would be insulted by those who love me’*]

The sequel to her visit and the calling in of the promised boon occur during the single combat between Gauvain and her cousin Escanor, when she dramatically intervenes to ask Gauvain to cease fighting, lest one or other of the worthy combatants be killed. Gauvain is at first reluctant, as he is winning, and eventually she courageously stands between the two combatants to take the blows herself first if they insist on renewing the fight. It takes pressure in fact from Arthur and Escanor le Grand to bring about reconciliation and an end to the conflict. Because of her active intervention in the story on two occasions Felinete is a more interesting female ‘good’ character than either La Reine des Traverses or La Reine de la Blanche Montaigne. In her dealings with Gauvain she is in one respect an echo of Andrivete, since both of them help him partly out of the goodness of their hearts and partly with an eye to a future returned favour.

The picture emerging from the above survey of the principal female characters in *Escanor* is a dual one. They either give way to seemingly inexplicable hostility – inexplicable, that is, to the knights they encounter – or are conceived as objects of beauty and devotion. Mordred’s damsel is the only one of them whose role is circumscribed to the extent that she is never seen in any mood other than one of tiresome, verbal aggression, born of wounded vanity. Both the Pucelle de Nantes and Andrivete are allowed to redeem themselves, and both have some excuse for their antagonistic behaviour: the Pucelle de Nantes acts admittedly on hearsay but out of fear for her own property, while Andrivete is unintentionally provoked and defends both herself and the reputation of women in

general. Nevertheless she does allow her reaction to become extreme, and in the scene with Dinadan she carries it to unattractive lengths. Once she gets her claws into her victim it seems that she does not readily let go! The other three female characters are all surpassingly beautiful, and are graced with courtly virtues. La Reine des Traverses and La Reine de la Blanche Montaigne are practically indistinguishable in this respect, though La Reine des Traverses is the more active character, while Escanor's wife is little more than an image. La Reine des Traverses is also helpful, as indeed is Felinete.

The dual aspect of the portrayal of these women represents a kind of manichaeian dualism, consisting not of the conventional image of womanhood on the axis whore-saint, but rather demon-angel. This perception is moreover an essentially asexual one, since there is no hint of eroticism anywhere in the poem. It is really that of a pre-adolescent, though in this case it is very much a sanitised, clerical view. The scolding that is not understood by the recipient is akin to a mother's scolding of her child, and alongside it is the deep wish to worship an ideal (mother) figure who can in return dispense unqualified love. Underlying this attitude is a deep fear of women, born of incomprehension but coupled with a yearning to adore. There may be much of the writer himself in the complaints of Dinadan, summed up when this character proclaims:

“Pour coi Diu pri qu'il me deffende  
 Que mes cuers cele part n'entende,  
 C'est qu'en lor dangier ne me mete.” (11821-23)

[*'Wherefore I pray to God that He protect my heart from yearning for them, and putting myself in their power'*]

Indeed, the lengthy speeches of both Dinadan and Kay prolong and reinforce what could be seen as a negative view of women. Nevertheless the writer's idealized picture of them perhaps crystallises in the portrayal of Esclarmonde, fairy and *amie* of Brian des Illes: she is incredibly beautiful, creatively clever and knowledgeable, and Brian loves but also fears her (15749 ff.). She symbolizes woman's mystery and power; woman is a different species, dangerous and beautiful, and best kept at a distance.

We have already noted that the perceived antagonistic aspect of women occurs in the first half of the poem, and that in the second half they are invariably beautiful and good. In this regard Andrivete, as the poem's heroine, bridges the change, turning from scold to helpfulness

through her superior knowledge and charm. Because of this linear development there is an overall redemptive, optimistic portrayal of womankind, first glimpsed in the portrayal of the Pucelle de Nantes, who abandons her wicked ways when impressed by Gauvain. This clerical optimism culminates in the last thousand or so lines of the poem, which are decidedly pious in tone, covering the death of Escanor's wife, her burial in a remote abbey, Escanor's withdrawal from the world, his contemplative life and eventual death, and finally the death of his sister La Reine des Traverses in similar circumstances. One could almost say that the idealization and worship of courtly love has in the end been transformed in this poem into a spiritual idealization of women, fuelled by a fervent wish to conceive them in that way. It is notable that it is Escanor's wife, a rather sterile image of silent beauty and courtly perfection for most of the poem, who ultimately through her piety serves as an inspiration to both her husband and sister-in-law to follow her example of withdrawal from the world and holy death.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are taken from Girart d'Amiens, *Escanor: roman arthurien en vers de la fin du XIIIe siècle*, ed. Richard Trachsler, 2 vols, Geneva, Droz, 1994 (TLF 449).

<sup>2</sup> The role and character of Dinadan are fully examined in my forthcoming article, 'A knight with reservations: the role of Dinadan in *Escanor*'.