

Reflections on a Foxy Trick

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Why does the unnamed lady in Jean Renart's *Lai de l'ombre* finally submit to the blandishments of the knight and grant him her love? She has, after all, already sent him firmly on his way until she sees that he has slipped his ring on her finger and is obliged to summon him back. Does his ruse of then throwing the offending ring into the well justify her capitulation?

The possible explanations for her conduct vary according to her perceived status as either a willing participant or a victim. If she is a willing participant in her capitulation and seduction, there are three reasons why the knight is successful, according to antecedents in the courtly literature of the twelfth century. The *Lai de l'ombre* itself has been dated to the first quarter of the thirteenth century and its author was obviously familiar with the conventions of the narrative genre of the *lai*, the *roman courtois*, and the *fabliau*.

The first explanation of her conduct may depend on the tradition of the perceived mutability of female fidelity. This is the explanation given by John Orr in the introduction to his edition of the text in 1947:

The *Lai de l'ombre* has been well compared to a Musset *Proverbe* or a play by Marivaux: it is of slender dimensions, has little incident, and its interest is almost exclusively psychological, residing as it does in the give and take, the thrust and parry of two opponents, one intent to conquer, the other fighting a losing battle, as she has a traitor in her camp, her own faltering womanly heart.¹

Let us put aside the issue of whether a ‘faltering heart’ is a matter of the psychology of women in 1947: was it a literary issue in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries?

The most obvious example occurs in the *Le Chevalier au lion*, in the lines spoken by Yvain who despairs on seeing the grief of Laudine and hearing the hatred she expresses towards her husband’s killer:

D’or en droit ai ge dit que sages,
 que fame a plus de cent corages.
 Celui corage qu’ele a ore,
 Espoir, changera ele ancore;
 Ainz le changera sanz espoir;
 Molt sui fos quant je m’an despoir, 1439 – 44 ²

This is a translation of the Virgilian epigramme, ‘*semper mutabile femina est*’. Is this sentiment restricted to this romance? No-one who is familiar with the poetry of the troubadours and trouvères can doubt the trepidation felt by each poet/lover when considering the constancy of the object of his desire, perhaps best expressed in the first four lines of the third stanza of Gace Brulé’s *Li consirriers de mon païs*:

Par cuer legier de feme avient
 Que li amant doutent souvent,
 Maiz ma loiautez me soustient,
 Donce fusse je mors autrement! ³

The *cuer legier*, feared by the poets, could then be a reason for the lady’s submission.

But her actual words, after he has thrown the ring into the well and delivered his speech about giving the ring to his other *amie* are thus:

‘Biaus douz amis,
 Tot vostre cuer ont el mien mis
 Cil doz mot et cil plesant fet,...(931-33)

Now the *plesant fet* obviously involves the actions of throwing the ring into the well. What, however, are the *doz mot*, and how do they differ from the arguments put by the knight earlier? His arguments at his second appearance are no different

from those at his first; they still protest his devotion and his likely demise if she does not take pity on his plight. The difference lies in the cumulative effect of them; he is, in fact, nagging her into submission. It is quantity which wins rather than the quality.

It is precisely this quantity of argument which is advised in the *De arte honesti amandi* of Andreas Capellanus. In the sample dialogues of book one, various conversational models are set forth; the fifth dialogue relates the model conversation between a nobleman and a noblewoman who does not want to be dependent on love. The suitor then relates the twelve precepts of love, at the end of which she professes herself convinced by his arguments but still refuses him an immediate reward. The seventh dialogue is between a suitor and a lady of slightly lower social standing than he, and it is here that the discussion is based on the question of whether love can exist within marriage. The authority of the Countess of Champagne is sought, and the reply is that:

Dicimus enim et stabilito tenore firmamus amorem non posse suas inter duos iugales extendere vires. [...] Sed et alia istud ratione asserimus, quiapraeceptum tradit amoris quod nulla etiam coniugata Regis poterit amoris praemio coronari nisi extra coniugii foedera ipsius amoris militiae cernatur adiuncta.⁴

We state and affirm unambiguously that love cannot extend its sway over a married couple. [...] This judgment we also maintain on the grounds that the precept of love further declares that no married woman will qualify to be crowned with the reward of the king of love unless she is seen to be joined to love's army outside the pact of marriage.⁵

The final dialogue is the longest, at just over 9,000 words, and takes place between a couple of the highest nobility. From the example set by Andreas, the higher the status, the longer the argument.

It is precisely the argument quoted above about the nature of love within marriage which affords another explanation for the lady's capitulation in the *Lai*. The heroine is abiding by the precepts set in the treatise and cannot use the excuse of her marriage to stave off the knight's demands. Her protests of her virtue and her appeals to the solidarity of her regard for her husband are insufficient to withstand the requirements of Amors. If this is the explanation, then neither the knight nor the lady

has any choice; together they must abide by the commands of love, a stance which makes them equal victims of a superior power.

But what if they are not equally victims; what if the lady is the victim in this tale? What has overpowered her alone? There are three possible explanations, the first one of which has been alluded to above. The misogyny which caused the poets to feel alarm at the fickleness of women also permitted them to write of situations where a woman's 'no' should be totally ignored or interpreted as 'yes'. The genre of the *pastourelle*, as its name implies, had as its main female figure a shepherdess, who is found temporarily alone by the errant narrator/knight.

In her book, *Ravishing Maidens. Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*, Kathryn Gravdal opens her chapter on the *pastourelle* by calling those that feature the rape of the shepherdess, a:

medieval innovation ... radically discontinuous with the pastoral tradition. [...] This type repeatedly narrates the same event; a knight is riding down the road when he sees a comely shepherdess alone in a meadow. The bucolic mode is interrupted by the spectre of a potential act of violence: rape. In approximately 18 percent of the extant Old French pastourelles (thirty-eight of the one hundred and sixty texts included in my count), the shepherdess is raped by the medieval knight.⁶

Further, in a discussion of the polarization of class structures inherent in the *pastourelle*, she concludes that most critics are convinced that

the principal or real subject of the *pastourelle* is social politics and that the genre is a form of social satire or political allegory. [...] Such readings enable the critic-reader to ignore the sexual violence that motivates the rape sequences.⁷

In a footnote to the figures she quotes, she elaborates on the number and location of the texts concerned:

According to my count, rape or attempted rape is represented in Bartsch 2:1, 4, 6, 17, 28, 32, 34, 62, 67, 69, 76, 79; 3:5, 6, 9, 12, 28, 42, 48, 49; Rivière, *Chansonnier de Montpellier*, 84, 85, 86, 88, and *Chansonnier LC 115*, of which the sole text represents a rape. In 'Rape in the

Pastourelle', *Romanic Review* 80 (May 1989): 331-49, William D. Paden presents a different set of figures. The discrepancy is in itself meaningful; the songs are sufficiently ambiguous that one cannot always tell but must surmise whether or not a rape was depicted. Thus Paden counts 18 percent 'Rape' and 7 percent 'Can't tell.' The latter figure seems at least as important as the former: it cannot be an accident that a category of texts exists in which it is difficult (or impossible) to decide whether a rape occurs. Paden also lowers the total percentage of rapes by including pastourelles of all languages, bringing the number to 13 percent. To do so is to erase a key question: why are the texts of northern France more devoted to the representation of rape than those of any other country or language? ⁸

The *pastourelle* rape scenes frequently depict a girl who decides that though she has initially said 'no' to sexual intercourse, either because of, or despite the violence of the encounter, she is willing to entertain the experience for a second time. Thus the initial 'no' is further diluted into the voice of coy indecision rather than the expression of firm prohibition.

Is it possible to interpret the 'no' of the lady in the *Lai de l'ombre* in such a way? Is her earlier reluctance mere courtly posturing? How does she differ from the girl in the *pastourelle*? There are a few obvious differences. Her social position as the wife of a castellan sets her apart, yet she is as powerless as the shepherdess. In her setting, she has her ladies present, but the dictates of courtly manners render her as isolated as her counterpart in the *pastourelle*; like the shepherdess, she is alone, apart from her ladies; that is to say, she has no male authority figure present.

Is she violated? How does one define 'violation'? The shepherdess is physically violated, in the name of what her rapist frequently calls 'un jeu' or 'le jeu,' continuing the gaming imagery in the sexual vocabulary of the troubadours, and the trouvères. In the *Lai de l'ombre*, however, the imagery is that of warfare, echoing that of Andreas Capellanus, who wrote his treatise to his friend Walter whom he addresses as 'novum amoris militem' (a new recruit of Love).⁹ Martial imagery dominates the *Lai de l'ombre*. Love, as is usual in courtly literature, has shot an arrow at the knight: 'Ele li a sajete traite/ Parmi le cors dusqu'au panon' (129-30) When he sets out with his companions, disingenuously out for an impromptu airing, he calls

upon them to admire the situation of the lady's castle. They demand that he should instead admire the charms of the *chastelaine* within, and when that is the agreed aim, they spur on towards the gate as if they are pursuing a military mission:

Atant guenchissent vers la porte
 Chascuns la teste du destrier,
 Criant: 'As dames, chevalier!'
 A tel voyage, tel tençon! (268- 71)

When he is summoned back to the castle by the lady on whose finger he has placed his ring, the text is suitably and ironically ambiguous:

La joie du retor li cuevre
 Le penser don't il ert en doute.
 Il est venuz a tant de route
 Conme it ot vers la forterece. (672- 75)

The 'forterece' is not only the physical dwelling of the lady, but the lady herself. His attack on the fortress of her virtue and marital fidelity can be renewed because he has imposed upon her something which he represents as having an intimate value, but it is something which he has imposed upon her against her will.

Slipping his ring upon her finger while she is unaware of his actions is an act of symbolic violation. In the courtly setting of the enclosed courtyard, he has raped her virtue by his actions just as thoroughly as the randy knight with the shepherdess in the meadow. He has overthrown her scruples by the insistence and length of his rhetoric and by the imposition not only of his physical presence but also of a symbol of intimacy which she then has to reject. The ring as a sexual symbol has been used in Chrétien's *Perceval*, in the incident of the maiden in the tent. In his naïve ignorance, Perceval sees an elaborate tent which he misinterprets as a church; when he enters it he finds a damsel asleep. He greets her, and misinterpreting his mother's instructions, he kisses her seven times, wrenches a ring from her finger and eats the supper destined for her lover. After Perceval's departure and the return of her lover, the ire and disgust of the latter is aroused not so much by her frightened account of the arrival of a mad Welsh youth and the loss of his supper, as by the theft of a ring and the forced kisses, which her lover chooses to interpret as representing the loss of the maiden's chastity.¹⁰

There is also a coda to this possibility of veiled rape in the *Lai de l'ombre*. Has the author of the *lai* manipulated his identity as Jehan Renart? (vs.953) So popular was the satiric *Roman de Renart* in the twelfth century that the word *renart* replaced the existing word for 'fox,' *le goupil*. The author makes a reference to the character Renart in the section where the knight and the lady are still arguing over the return of the ring. To her:

'ausi bien porriez hurter
A ce perron le vostre chief
Que vos en venriez a chief;
Si lou que vos le repreingniez,'

He replies:

'Il m'est vis que vos m'apreingniez,
[...] a chanter de Renart'. (810- 15)

He is referring here to the branch of the *Roman de Renard* where Renard disguises himself as a minstrel, and by implication, tells tales of make-believe and fabrication. But there is another tale of Renard: the Branches labeled in Roques's edition VIIa, VIIb, I and VIII have as their contents the account of Renard's rape of a married woman and its legal consequences, namely his summons, his trial, his escape, his retrial, the sentencing and then his pardon.¹¹ Could it be that the author who named himself as Jehan Renart wanted to remind his audience of these episodes?

Finally, let us consider the closing words in Gradval's chapter on the *pastourelle*, drawn from an article by James Brundage, entitled 'Rape and seduction in the medieval canon law':

The same century that saw the birth and popularity of the old French *pastourelle* witnessed a judicial struggle with the legal notion of seduction. In the *pastourelle* we recognize the rehearsal of a cultural question debated among thirteenth-century jurists: when do arts and blandishments constitute illegal form of force in sexual seduction? [...] [I]n the thirteenth century, canon lawyers feel the need to address the question of sexual corruption achieved by flattery or false promises. According to

Cardinal Hostiensis, in his thirteenth-century *Lectura*, seduction is an illegal offense because it makes a mockery of the victim's free choice through the use of deception. The statutes against seduction show that medieval jurists were capable of nice distinctions in the intersection of power and sexuality.¹²

Is the *Lai de l'ombre* a cynical exposure of the fickleness of women, demonstrating that even the most chaste of married women can be seduced by charm and flattery? Is it an adjunct to Andreas Capellanus's treatise for the supposed amusement of the jaded courtly society of northern France? Or is it a foxy demonstration of the legal debate in the thirteenth century about the status of seduction? If it is the last, then the villain of the piece is Amors, who has impelled the knight to make his protestations of love to the lady; the knight is the victim of Amors, and the lady is the victim of them both.

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Notes

- 1 Jehan Renart, *Le Lai de l'ombre*, edited by John Orr. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1948, p. xi. The textual references in the argument are taken from this edition.
- 2 Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier au lion (Yvain)*, publié par Mario Roques. Paris: Champion, 1970. (CFMA n. 89).
- 3 *Lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouvères. An Anthology and a History*. Original Texts with Translations and Introductions, by Frederick Goldin. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973.
- 4 *Andreas Capellanus on Love*, edited with an English translation by P.G. Walsh. London: Duckworth, 1982, p. 156.

- 5 *ibid.*, p.157.
- 6 *Ravishing Maidens. Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*, by Kathryn Gravdal. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991, p. 105.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 106.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 166.
- 9 Walsh, p. 30.
- 10 Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Roman de Perceval ou Le Conte du graal*), publié par William Roach. Geneva: Droz, 1959. (TLF n. 71). See especially the explanation given by Orgueilleus at vss 3863-64: 'Feme qui se bouche abandone / le surplus molt de legier done.'
- 11 *Le Roman de Renart*, éd. d'après le ms. de Cangé (BnF. fr. 371), par Mario Roques, 5 vol. Paris: Champion, 1948-60 (CFMA, nos 78,79,81, 85, 88). See also a comment on Jean Renart as author of the *Roman de Guillaume de Dole*, renamed as the *Roman de la Rose*, in Helen Solterer, 'At the Bottom of Mirage, a Woman's Body: *Le Roman de la rose* of Jean Renart', in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, edited by Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993, pp. 213-33.
- 12 Gravdal, pp. 120, 121.