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THOUGHTS ON RENAUT'S USE OF MARIE'S *FRESNE* IN *GALERAN DE BRETAGNE**

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In 1928 Maurice Wilmotte accused Renaut, whom he accepted as the author of *Galeran de Bretagne*, of plagiarism. He expresses his regret: "Car c'est un gros mot que celui de plagiat, et il faut tourner sept fois sa plume dans l'encrier avant de se résoudre à l'employer. L'accusation est toujours grave" (Wilmotte 3).[1] Today we know that what Wilmotte called plagiarism was more encouraged than looked down upon by Renaut and his contemporaries. Writers delighted in creating variations on known themes, concepts, and words, to compare themselves favourably with, or express their respect for, an admired master. In this case, according to Wilmotte, the authors emulated were primarily Chrétien and Marie but perhaps Jean Renart as well (Wilmotte 6).

In 1987, Roger Dragonetti placed Renaut's role in a far more positive light. In his opinion, Renaut's *Galeran*, itself a Breton tale, was intended as a form of *hommage* to Marie de France, not only for *Fresne* but also for her entire collection of Breton *lais*. Dragonetti suggests that Renaut used the name "Mahaut," which his heroine adopts after her departure from the abbey, to unite both his name and that of Marie: *Ma* for *Ma*rie and *aut* for Ren*aut*: Ma(h)aut (257). The argument is tempting, not least because it

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would resolve our uncertainty as to whether Renaut, as I will continue to call him, might have been Jean Renart.[2] However, Renaut in fact took little from Marie except the general plot at the beginning and the end of the *lai*. Further, with regard to the details, he departs radically from Marie's tale, altogether replacing what Marie, as a woman writer, brought to her text. Renaut's misogynistic *Galeran* is thus rightly considered by Erik Kooper to be the "male" version of *Fresne* (Kooper 261). The purpose of my present discussion is to examine what Renaut took from Marie and how he used her material.

It should be said at the outset that Marie and Renaut differ in their purpose and their audience. Marie wrote, I believe, primarily for women, and her tone and content are often cautionary. Renaut's *Galeran*, on the contrary, indicates a desire to entertain the men in his audience and impress his fellow writers. To that end he expanded Marie's tale to some eight thousand highly digressive lines of what might be considered an outrageous literary romp.

Marie's tale, the *lai del Freisne* (*Fresne* 517), as she calls it, is short, even for her, at 518 lines, and sobering in its examples of difficulties that might face women who had no family or could not rely upon their family to help them. Her starting point is an exploration of the effect on two families of a medieval adage according to which twins are invariably conceived by two men.[3] As the *lai* begins, a knight has joyfully sent word to a man who is both neighbour and friend that his wife has just given birth to twin boys. The neighbour rejoices on hearing the news; his wife does not. She declares that where there are twins there are two fathers. Her husband reproaches her and defends the neighbouring woman's good reputation. Nonetheless, the wife's words are repeated far and wide. As a result, the mother of the twins is mistreated by her husband and the woman who uttered the slanderous words incurs the hatred of all the women of Brittany (*Fresne* 52–64). There is a secondary aspect to the adage, to the effect that a woman who invokes it in order to disparage the mother of twins will herself bear twins. Thus, as the malicious woman had fearfully anticipated, she, too, gives birth to twins. She refuses, however, to accept her punishment. One of the children must be killed. The malicious mother is determined to murder the child herself, and make amends to God at some later date:

> "Pur mei defendre de hunir,
> Un des enfanz m'estuet murdrir;
> Mieuz le voil vers Deu amender
> Que mei hunir e vergunder." (*Fresne* 91–94)

Although Emily Coleman tells us, with reference to *Fresne* and other sources, that "the idea of infanticide did not shock the sensibilities of the laity" (58), it should be noted that Renaut chose not to follow Marie's model in this regard, perhaps on the basis that a woman who seriously contemplated infanticide could not without difficulty be redeemed.[4]

Although the malicious mother in both stories sends away one of the children for fear of her husband, in Marie it is made explicit that the mother fears not only her husband but his family as well, even though her husband, like the husband in Renaut's work, does not believe in the adage:

> "Mis sire e tuz sis parentez
> Certes jamés ne me crerrunt
> Des que ceste aventure orrunt;" (*Fresne* 76–78)

We may have no sympathy for Fresne's mother, but we are nonetheless invited by Marie to see her as alone, vulnerable, and surrounded by hostility.

At this point of apparent stalemate, Marie abruptly moves into what one might call a romanesque or fairy-tale mode in order to resolve the problems she has raised. The malicious woman is suddenly and inexplicably surrounded by loving and caring women, one of whom offers to take away the unwanted daughter. The information that the child will take with her a ring and a cloth by which she may later be identified assures the reader of a happy ending. However, further difficulties arise.

The child is left outside an abbey and taken in by the abbess who names her *le Fresne* after the ash tree in which she was found. Here she is brought up, only to be seduced, within the abbey itself, by a local lord, Gurun. He persuades the girl to live with him by pointing out that should she become pregnant, it would be ill-viewed by the abbess. The mention of pregnancy makes us aware that Marie has abruptly abandoned the romanesque for a harsher reality: Fresne is not leaving the abbey as a bride-to-be, but as a concubine.

Fresne's situation at Gurun's castle loses its relative stability when her lover is obliged by his vassals to marry. We are led to believe that Fresne would have been acceptable as a wife had she borne children by Gurun, but she is barren. The vassals propose Codre, Fresne's twin, a woman whose fecundity has not been tested, but who will at least bring land into the marriage. To make matters worse for Fresne, the mother plans to get rid of her a second time, on the grounds that as concubine, she would create difficulties between Codre and Gurun. She plans to ask Gurun to find a *prodome* for Fresne to marry. At this juncture, Marie's medieval audience

would quickly recognize the difficulty inherent in arranging a good marriage for a woman who has no property to bring to the marriage and is known to be barren.

By elaborating the caculated manner in which Gurun bought his way into the abbey (*Fresne* 251–74) and by raising the issue of pregnancy, Marie would seem to be critical not only of Gurun but also of the abbess. In the only other version of *Fresne* (MsS, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, nouv. acq. fr. 1104), the abbess's role is expanded. She is portrayed at first as loving and concerned about her charge's education:

> Quant ele avoit passé .VII. anz
> De son aé fu bele et granz
> Des qu'ele pot reson entendre
> La baesse la fet aprendre
> Car molt l'amoit et chierissoit
> Et molt richement la vestoit. (ed. Rychner 208)

Further lines in Ms.S depict the abbess allowing Fresne to be visited by wealthy men, presumably in the hope of finding a match for her, whereas in the Rychner edition, if the abbess is trying to marry off her charge, it is not so obvious.

Both versions allow the interpretation that Marie, having placed the baby safely in the abbey, deliberately proceeds to destabilize her heroine's adult environment, first at the abbey itself, with the mention of a possible pregnancy, and later when she is to be displaced by Codre and likely to be evicted (*Fresne* 365–72). In both versions, from the time the mother first wished to see the child dead, Marie continues to draw our attention to the *invraisemblance* of a happily-ever-after ending for the unwanted child.

At the conclusion of the story, the fairy-tale mode returns to make the happy ending possible. However, it is not until after Codre and Gurun are married that the mother sees and recognizes the cloth and ring she had sent away with the child. To further encumber what in *Galeran* is a smooth and rapid recognition scene, the annulment and the second wedding are put off to the following day, a decision made by the archbishop. Fresne is now recognized as an equal heir to her father's lands. Yet she is still barren, which means that the vassals' legitimate demand for an heir has been conveniently forgotten. Codre's second marriage elsewhere is mentioned in the final lines.

Renaut's story offers substantial changes. For those unfamiliar with Marie's *Fresne* or Renaut's *Galeran*, the former is full of silences, of things not explained. *Galeran*, on the other hand, overflows with explanations and digressions. The romance is named after the hero, Galeran, the son of

the Duke of Brittany. The adage concerning the birth of twins is retained, but Renaut eliminates the hatred that surrounds the mother as well as her anguished anticipation of her punishment. There is no suggestion of infanticide. Nor does Gente, as Renaut calls the malicious mother, anticipate that she will bear twins. On the contrary, she is shocked, and promptly takes action. Her love for the child she proposes to send away is evident even as she persuades Galet, a trusted manservant, to take away one of the girls (*Galeran* 366–96). As well, her grief at the loss of her child plunges her into a prolonged illness (*Galeran* 672–83). She sees herself as justly punished: *Or est la honte renversee/Sur moy, quar bien l'ay desservie* (*Galeran* 352–53) notwithstanding the fact that her ill-considered remarks caused no harm whatsoever to the saintly woman she maligned. Renaut has transformed the malicious mother in *Fresne* into a woman clearly eligible for pardon.

From the time Fresne is taken in by the abbess, Renaut makes radical changes. Fresne and Galeran grow up together in the abbey from infancy on. They fall in love, chastely, and Galeran promises Fresne that he will marry her. After Galeran has left the abbey to become a knight, the abbess makes it clear that Fresne cannot be considered a suitable match for him. When the abbess intercepts the couple's communication by letter, she and Fresne have one final falling out, as a result of which Fresne leaves the abbey and disappears. Where Marie's abbess takes the child in, with no display of emotion, and then fades from the scene, Renaut's creation undergoes a violent change of character in mid-story, to account for Fresne's departure from the abbey.

In *Galeran* the twins are identical, so that the hero, persuaded that he must marry, ultimately chooses Fleurie, as Codre is named in Renaut's work, because she so resembles the woman he loves but cannot find. Renaut's hero is a suitably sentimental fellow, whereas Marie's Gurun responds unemotionally to his vassals' legitimate demand that he marry, leaving it up to them to find him a suitable bride.

As well, Renaut's Fresne is anything but the Griselda-like heroine of Marie's tale. A thoroughly independent and resourceful woman, she is determined to be present at Galeran's wedding, disguised as a *jongleur* and veiled. She wears a robe she has made for herself from the material embroidered by her mother and sent with her to the abbey. The mother recognizes first the embroidered cloth and, when the girl's veil is lifted, the face of Fleurie's double. The mother joyfully tells her story to her husband, who then goes to ask Galeran which of the sisters he wishes to marry, much as if the whole thing were a joke. Fleurie is not informed of these events.

Essentially Renaut exploits no more than the minimal structure of Marie's story: the adage as the cause of the separation of mother and child, the use of the abbey as a place where the child matures into a beautiful young woman, and the ultimate reunion of the child with her family and her husband-to-be. His treatment of Marie's material erases her thoughtful juxtapositions of what an orphaned child might expect of life and the magical solutions of romance.

In keeping with the period in which he wrote, many of Renaut's transformations are openly misogynistic. I have previously mentioned that both the mother and the abbess in Marie's version are contradictory figures, caring on one hand, harsh, or in the case of the abbess, perhaps merely neglectful, on the other. These contradictions are exploited at great length in the first part of *Galeran*. Gente is used not only to reflect the changeability of all women, she is portrayed as unreasoning changeability personified, a personality divided, beautiful on the outside, vicious on the inside:

> Elle avoit non madame Gente,
> Si ressembloit le nom le corps,
> De tant com en en voit dehors;
> Mais ne pouoit entrer dedans:
> N'avoit fors ou vis et es dens
> Et ou parant li nons sa force.
> Gente se fist nommer l'escorce,
> Et gente et belle est a devise;
> Mais le cuer ot sans gentillise. (*Galeran* 26–34)

Renaut's version creates the greatest contrast possible between Gente and the saintly woman she maligns (*Galeran* 64–77). Hearing the woman praised, Gente is devoured by envy (*Galeran* 78–89). Knowing his audience, Renaut confides that while all people suffer from envy, women alone cannot defend themselves from it (*Galeran* 96–105). As is traditional in medieval lore, Gente's fundamental flaw is deemed to be her unbridled tongue (*Galeran* 35–53) although Renaut had earlier praised her as *senee* and *bien parlant* (*Galeran* 24–25).

Even as Gente nurses her child before she sends it away, the suggestion, elaborated at length, is that her milk will be bitter, since she is an unnatural mother:

> L'enfant demande aprés la mere
> Qui plaine est de doulceur amere
> Et qui porte let en fiole;
> En plourant le baise et acolle,

Et met sa memelle en sa bouche:
Si ressemble l'arbre et l'escorche
Qui dehors verdoie et flourist
Et par dedens meurt et pourrist,
Que la mouele est seiche et vaine:
Ou cuer n'a mie la fontaine
Le let que li enfans alecte,
Puis que pitié en est hors traicte
Et que nature entierement.
Donc puis je dire vraiement
Qu'elle porte let en fiole,
Puis que pitié n'a tendre et mole;
Nuls ne la doit mere clamer,
Puis qu'elle porte let amer. (*Galeran* 559–76)

Renaut then takes it all back, saying that the way in which the mother has prepared the child for its voyage denies such a suggestion. He now claims that the milk will be sweet, only to return immediately to his original position:

— Ce est mençonge, quar la chiere
n'est mie du cuer qu'elle moustre;
Dont la doit l'en appeller monstre
Car elle pert le non de mere
Quant el porte mamelle amere
Et devient marrastre et estrie.[5] (*Galeran* 582–87)

The rhetorical attack on Gente abruptly yields to the need to get on with the story, for we are told that the mother feeds the crying child and places her in a crib for departure. There is no suggestion that the child either rejects the milk or is not satisfied:

Elle allette l'enfant qui crie;
Aprés le fait ou bers couchier
Et puis lïer du lïen cher;
Comme pour porter est atournés. (*Galeran* 588–91)

Gente's manservant Galet had previously expressed his fears that if he were to accept to take away one of the children, Gente might change her mind and have him killed upon his return. Her changeability is further exploited when he nonetheless accepts the task: he is repeatedly given the child only to be called back by the mother at the last moment. Gente has become the battleground in a long struggle between *Honte* and *Nature* with *Honte* foreseeably the winner (*Galeran* 603–41).

The change in the abbess is no less dramatic. Initially almost motherly, she comes to oppose the love between Fresne and Galeran on the basis that

Fresne is socially inferior to Galeran, although she is aware that the embroidered cloth, the priceless pillow, and the money Fresne brought with her unquestionably establish the girl's rank in society. Indeed, upon recognizing the baby's nobility, the abbess had found a noblewoman to nurse her. However, the transformation of the abbess is such that she uses language more appropriate to the proverbial fishwife when she accuses Fresne of *lecherie* and *deverie*.

"Vieus garce, chïoche[6] covee,
Qui fustes la dehors trouvee
Sur le fresne davant ma porte,
Com par vous surmonte et tresporte
Mauvés orgueil et lecherie,
Quand de si haulte deverie
Vous estes davant moy vantee!" (*Galeran* 3919–25)

The issue of chastity recalls Marie's *Fresne*, in which the possibility of pregnancy was the rationale behind Fresne's voluntary departure from the abbey. However, while there was reason to believe that Fresne, seduced within the abbey walls by Gurun, might be pregnant, there is no doubt in *Galeran* that the charge is false. Renaut insists upon the good conduct of both hero and heroine. Nonetheless, from the time Fresne and Galeran made their love known, the abbess refused to believe that Fresne was not responsible for luring the innocent Galeran into an unchaste love. Since this allows the abbess to condemn Fresne and throw her out, while remaining totally devoted to Galeran, it is simply one of Renaut's manipulations to advance the plot at the expense of yet another "changeable" woman.

Fleurie is dealt with equally ruthlessly, for Renaut does not pass up the chance to portray her grief at losing Galeran on her wedding day. Marie's Codre is no more than a silent shadow of Fresne, for she has no speaking role, and her feelings are never mentioned. All we know is that she subsequently marries well (*richement* 513). Fleurie, unlike Codre, is devastated, deciding to enter a convent when her wedding dress is suddenly given to a hitherto unknown sister. She receives no advice or comfort from any of the main protagonists (*Galeran* 7686–87; 7716–21). To sum up, women do not fare well under Renaut's direction, with the notable exception of Fresne and, ultimately, the mother, rehabilitated for her final act and no longer the butt of Renaut's jokes. Even the abbess is finally forgiven by the married couple.

Notwithstanding the above, one must be grateful to Renaut for making a contribution to our understanding of Marie. He clarifies a curious passage in

which Marie describes with what seems undue emphasis the forest through which the young woman travels with the baby in her arms:

> La nuit, quant tut fu aseri,
> Fors de la vile s'en eissi.
> En un grant chemin est entree,
> Ki en la forest l'ad menee.
> Parmi le bois sa veie tint;
> Od tut l'enfant utre s'en vint.
> Unques del grant chemin n'eissi. (*Fresne* 137–43)

We are told that the young woman took a *grant chemin*, a wide or a well-travelled path, into the forest, that she did not deviate from the path, and that she emerged from the forest still holding the child. The final line of this passage tells us that at no time did the young woman leave the path, as if to give us final reassurance that the child was not left in the forest to die.

This is such an extraordinary amplification given the brevity of the lai, that one may assume Marie's deliberate evocation of what might have happened to the child, had the mother had her way. There is in Renaut's work a similar passage in which Gente, having asked Galet to take the child away, fears for its life.[7]

> Galet, garde le de perir,
> qu'il ne voise a mal par tes mains;
> Laisse le a plain ou boys au mains
> ou gens voisent par aventure . . .
> . . . . . .
> Galet, escheve le de beste,
> de villain lieu et perilleux,
> Que lyon ne l'occie ou leux,
> Tigre ou ours ou liepars ou chiens;
> Met le en lieu qui soit prochiens
> D'aucun recet ou l'en le truisse,
> Si que par deffaulte ne puisse
> De gens perir ne de besoigne. (*Galeran* 380–83, 388–95)

Gente wants Galet to make certain that the child will survive by leaving it where people will be passing by, where there are no wild animals, or near a dwelling. Her fear is that the child will perish because there is no one around to find it. Gente is obviously concerned that Galet might simply abandon the child in some isolated place. Galet then promises, as does the young woman in Marie's lai, what is essential to the mother: that the child will be taken away, that it will survive, and that it will never be heard of again (*Fresne* 110–16; *Galeran* 397–405). This passage in *Galeran* would seem

to be a fleshing out of Marie's discreet allusion to the fact that the young woman might well not emerge from the forest still holding the baby, that she might not steadfastly follow the well-trodden path. The lines Renaut gives to Gente are much more explicit regarding the dangers of handing over a child to someone whose instructions are, essentially, to get rid of it.

It is through the contradictory and much-maligned Gente that Renaut reveals a literary source other than Marie. The cloth embroidered by Gente and which she sent away with her infant daughter, tells two love stories: the story of Paris and Helen and *Floire et Blanchefleur*, the latter most likely Renaut's model for the education, upbringing, and separation of Fresne and Galeran. Fresne then makes this cloth into a robe without destroying the mother's "narratives" so that the mother looks at the dress "right and left" as if reading its script (cf. Dragonetti 258, *Galeran* 7115–21).

There is in *Floire et Blanchefleur* an extraordinary golden cup which is passed from person to person during the second half of the romance, as Blanchefleur is sold into slavery and ultimately rescued by Floire. The cup, like Gente's cloth, depicts important moments in the story of Paris and Helen. Further, Renaut's Fleurie was named after her godmother, who had been born on Palm Sunday, just as Floire and Blanchefleur were named after the Palm Sunday on which they had both been born. Renaut thus draws attention to source material other than *Fresne*, in which young lovers, brought up together from infancy, are subsequently separated and reunited. He draws attention as well to his deliberate change of name from Codre to Fleurie, whether or not *Floire et Blanchefleur* inspired the change.

The two stories woven into Fresne's cloth tell us that Renaut is embellishing his art when he points out what he borrows and how he uses it, desirous above all of outdoing the masters he so openly imitates. As far as Marie was concerned, it is most likely that Renaut, not understanding the purpose of the contradictions in her work, recognized it in its broadest outlines as good source material badly in need of revision. The opening lines of *Galeran* are missing, so we shall never know whether he mentioned her name or not.

Marie's purpose in *Fresne*, perhaps more than in any other of her *lais*, was to juxtapose art and life so as to demonstrate the difference between the everyday lives of women and the roles given them in romance. The result is a sequence of stable and unstable periods in the lives of the girl and her mother. Since the thirteenth century was in general even less kind than the twelfth to literary heroines and women in general, one cannot fault Renaut for sharing the attitudes of his contemporaries. His interests, financial as well

as literary, depended upon his writing a romance that would be altogether unproblematic for his patrons.

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NOTES

[1] The plagiarisms Wilmotte lists in regard to *Fresne* (11–13) are little more than words necessitated by the plot; for example Renaut makes reference to the abbey, the abbess, and the nuns in the abbey, but over a much greater number of lines than are found in Marie's reference (*Fresne* 151–54; *Galeran* 836–51).

[2] Since Wilmotte's time, desultory discussion has continued as to whether Renaut, deemed to have signed *Galeran de Bretagne* by means of an acrostic, is Jean Renart, accepted as the author of *Le Lai de l'ombre*, *L'Escoufle*, and *Guillaume de Dole*. The fallback position, for want of any proof to the contrary, has been to accept Renaut as the author of *Galeran*. See Rita Lejeune-Dehousse 17–34, for a history of the discussion. See also Paul V. Rockwell 488 n. 3.

[3] That the adage was widely known in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is amply documented by Kooper's study. He points out, however, that the birth of twins in literature did not always reflect badly upon the mother. He gives *Aiol* as an example (256). Another would be *Guillaume d'Angleterre*.

[4] See also Herlihy 117.

[5] Foulet glosses *estrie* as: "strige, oiseau de nuit qui passait pour déchirer les petits enfants pendant la nuit."

[6] Foulet lists *chīoche* in his glossary as a pejorative word of which there are no other known examples.

[7] Wilmotte (13), in support of his accusation of plagiarism, cites a mention of the *forest* in *Galeran* (780–85). However, the context is completely different, for Renaut is discussing Galet's preference for travelling at night and by the less frequented routes through forests. Galet's voyage with the child lasts for some seven days, during which he travels by night and sleeps by day while the child is cared for by a serendipidously available wet-nurse at every stop.

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