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English 306

4 May 2006

A Comparison of Four Fair-Unnamed Females

in Chrétien de Troyes' *Knight of the Cart* and the *Vulgate Cycle* Cart Story

Women have many functions in Arthurian legend; some of them wield considerable power over people and events giving swords, healing people, and soliciting promises for future favors. In the 12th century, the nature and role of women was changing and wealthy, aristocratic women were able to commission authors to write stories they wanted to read. Consequently, female characters in Arthurian tales written for these women were often powerful figures used to direct the storyline. On the instructions of a female patroness, Chrétien wrote *The Knight of the Cart* which employs powerful, aggressive women who boss and bargain with knights to accomplish their personal goals while simultaneously pushing the story along. The anonymous author of the *Vulgate Cycle* cart story is assumed to be male and working from a different agenda, radically altering the roles of these same women by lumping some together, naming them and identifying their corresponding function then quickly moving on. In Chrétien's *Knight of the Cart*, four anonymous women are powerful and further the storyline, while in the *Vulgate Cycle* cart story, the role of these fair-unnamed females is greatly reduced and they are relied upon much less to advance the plot. **[This paper illustrates effective organization, excellent incorporation of primary and secondary material, proper documentation, as well as an**

analytical style and grammatical cleanness. The paper received a grade of 95/A; it could have been a paragraph longer.]

In her book *To the Glory of her Sex* Joan Ferrante writes, “Romances composed for women present educated and intelligent women” (107), and females in these stories are often, “able to manipulate the hero’s actions and the events of the story” (108), which is certainly the case in Chrétien’s piece. Ferrante also notes that, “In romances written for male patrons . . . the woman’s role is far less striking” (108), which is clearly illustrated by the *Vulgate* version where women have very little control or effect on the story. According to Susan Murray, medieval women were typically confined to the grounds of their home and in her article *Women and Castles in Geoffrey of Monmouth and Malory*, she writes, “the women’s adventures and liaisons nearly always take place at home” (22). As a result of these restrictions, the idea of powerful women having adventures away from home may have appealed to Chrétien’s patroness, who perhaps incorporated this notion of mobile and powerful feminine characters into the story in response to her own circumstances. On the opposite end of the spectrum in the spirit of demoting the female role, the *Vulgate* author pulls these women out of the woods and back into the castle.

The rules of courtly love which directed knights in, “Being obedient in all things to the commands of ladies” (Capellanus 2), gave power to women in Arthurian legend. Chrétien used this theme repeatedly in *The Knight of the Cart* as many women, both identified and anonymous, instructed knights according to this privilege. In Chrétien’s story, “a courtly knight could be diverted from a major undertaking by the whim of a woman” (Noble 102) solidifying not only the potential power of women but pointing out the tremendous power of the chivalric code. The *Vulgate* author handled this situation much differently subscribing more to the strategy of, “the

negotiation of male/female relationships as part of male chivalric behaviour honor” (Fulton 12), but neglecting to give much credence to the part women played in cultivating this male honor and downplaying their roles in the story.

The first of Chrétien’s fair-unnamed females is, “a girl encountered at a crossroads,” who has considerable power and strikes a deal with Lancelot and Gawain who are on a quest to rescue the Queen. This random girl out wandering the woods possesses the power to direct the next leg of the two knights’ journey and yet she remains unnamed. In Chrétien’s story, she plays her trump card right away telling the knights, “If you promise me enough, I can show you the right road” (130). At this point Chrétien changes her identity through the words of Gawain from just some girl to, “my lady . . . Dear Lady” (130) and pledges to fulfill her wishes at the appropriate time in exchange for the knowledge she possesses. Lancelot subsequently swears his loyalty in a similar fashion. After obtaining the desired information, the knights part with this girl-at-the-crossroads. As they are leaving, Chrétien’s fair-unnamed female reaffirms the bargain she struck with the knights saying, “Each of you must grant me a favor at my choosing, whenever I ask” (131), and she further cements her power with the directive, “Take care not to forget that” (131). These are strong words for some random girl away from home yet Chrétien has both knights bow to her power calling her, “fair friend” (131) as they bid her farewell and continue on to the next leg of their quest.

Chrétien’s girl-at-the-crossroads is much less powerful in the *Vulgate* version as the unknown author splits her job between two characters, the “elder maiden,” (189) and the, “young woman riding on a mule” (190). The strongest action the old woman takes is mounting her horse and leaving the compound for a while to guide Gawain and Lancelot toward the path leading to the Queen. She does not demand any favors or strike any bargains in exchange for her

information; she just goes back home. The young mule-riding woman of the *Vulgate* version is only slightly more assertive than the old woman saying to the knights, “I could certainly tell you news if I wanted to . . . What will you give me?” (190). Gawain vows to be her knight forever and Lancelot promises her whatever she wants so she tells them what she knows of the Queen’s abduction. Similar to the girl-at-the-crossroads, the mule-riding woman reiterates her agreement with the knights before she rides off; however, she is much less aggressive in both manner and speech as she infers their superiority by calling them lords. In the *Vulgate* version, the mule-riding woman gives the knights’ a reminder saying, “each of you owes me whatever gift I request” (190). The *Vulgate* author dilutes Chrétien’s bold and powerful girl-at-the-crossroads into two less potent females who do the same job and remain unnamed.

Chrétien’s second fair-unnamed female is, “the girl whom the knight of the ford had brought with him” (133). Her appearance is short and sweet as Chrétien gives her just one role which is to strike this bargain with Lancelot, “If you free him for me, I swear to repay you in due course whatever . . . is within my power to grant” (133). This knight-of-the-ford-girl calls attention to her own power in negotiating with the knight; she knows she can accomplish her own agenda by promising to assist the knight with his goals at a later date. Chrétien indicates that Lancelot knew the identity of this girl, “by the words she spoke” (134); the reader, however, is kept in suspense as she remains a fair-unnamed female. In the *Vulgate* version, this woman seems to be either left out completely or synthesized into the character of Meleagant’s sister who plays a greater role later in the story.

The third of Chrétien’s fair-unnamed females is the “comely and attractive girl” (134), who is the second to house Lancelot. Chrétien’s comely girl barter with Lancelot offering him a place to stay if he sleeps with her saying, “...on no other condition will I lodge you” (134). She

exercises a tremendous amount of control over Lancelot who is forced to acknowledge that he is powerless as Chrétien writes, “The knight, when he saw he had no other choice, granted her what she wished” (134). The comely girl orders Lancelot around, telling him to wash, sit, eat, drink, go outside, come inside, and ultimately forces him to rescue her from a farcical rape. Chrétien emphasizes the comely girl’s power over Lancelot who says, “And still I hear this poor girl constantly begging me for help, reminding me of my promise” (136). Chrétien also labels the comely girl, “hostess” (136), yet he portrays her more like a slave master. She ultimately releases Lancelot from his obligation and Chrétien converts her status to, “dear lady” (137), but never reveals her identity.

This comely girl exercises her power once again and joins Lancelot on his journey, since according to custom he could not dishonor a girl who was alone. Chrétien has her assert power once again laughing because she knows something Lancelot does not and saying, “I’ll tell you nothing for the moment . . . Because I don’t want to” (138). Chrétien modifies her identity once when Lancelot calls her, “miss” (138), and begs her to tell him whose comb they have found. They continue on the journey finally reaching the situation that reveals the true favor desired by the fair-unnamed female: the destruction of the knight who wants to kidnap her. The comely girl challenges Lancelot’s ability as a knight in order to fulfill her own goal as Chrétien writes, “I’ll see if you are bold and if your escort can bring me safely through” (140). Lancelot does away with the knight and her problem at the same time; the comely girl got what she wanted so she went back home. Although this female character really pushes the plot along in the Chrétien story, she is not named; even the knight that so desperately loves her (and she wants to be rid of) calls her “the girl whom I most desire” (140).

The comely girl seems to be absent from the *Vulgate* version, or at least the solicitation for sex is gone. The *Vulgate* author does send a much wimpier fair-unnamed female with Lancelot to King Bademagu's castle and she, "wept softly and cursed the day that a cart was ever made" (191). She is hardly comparable to the sex-seeking, favor-demanding girl that runs the show in Chrétien's version. In the *Vulgate* she is just, "a young woman who had subjected Lancelot to a test and had been rescued by him" (190) with no mention whatsoever of any reciprocal favors. This fair-unnamed female does not have any bargaining power since she is in a much weaker position than Lancelot. The young woman travels with Lancelot on his journey mainly so she can cry and curse the cart on his behalf, seemingly giving rise to feelings that perhaps he would like to express but cannot. Lancelot engages in battle to protect her thus adding to his reputation; other than that, her character does not add much to the *Vulgate* story and certainly does not display any power. She continues to be part of Lancelot's entourage until she is replaced by the next fair-unnamed female in the *Vulgate*.

Chrétien's fourth fair-unnamed female comes out of nowhere, "riding across the heath" (153) to ask Lancelot for a favor; she bargains with him for yet another future unnamed reward. Chrétien portrays the heath girl as confident; she is certain Lancelot will need her help in the future as she says, "I demand the head of this knight you have just defeated" (153). Lancelot is bound by the chivalric code and Chrétien answers for him, "Yet will she who desires the head not have it? She will, if possible" (154). Chrétien's heath girl is a bold, fair-unnamed female who, "shouted" (154) at Lancelot reiterating her end of the bargain, "that day will come when I shall reward you for it" (154). This girl gets her way (and the head) riding off into the sunset, for now still a fair-unnamed female.

In the *Vulgate* version, the heath girl is now, “a young woman [who] arrived at great speed on a black palfrey” (199). Contrary to previous incidental fair-unnamed females in the *Vulgate*, this young woman has some oomph as she, “leapt from her palfrey to the ground,” (199) and entreated Lancelot to give her the gift she desired in exchange for, “greater honor and profit than ever . . . for a service rendered,” (199). The palfrey girl is a departure from the Chrétien character as she introduces the concept of profit and suggests a change in motivation for Lancelot. In the Chrétien version, the knights always conducted themselves in a manner conducive to the chivalric code and personal gain was never an issue. The *Vulgate* palfrey girl is still less powerful than Chrétien’s heath girl who shouts demands, rather than purchases the head. While Chrétien waits until the end of the story, the *Vulgate* author spits out the identity of this formerly fair-unnamed female immediately after she receives the severed head writing: “This young lady was Meleagant’s sister, the daughter of King Bademagus” (200). Hence, the palfrey girl has lost her fair-unnamed female status and become a full-fledged character with an identity in the *Vulgate*.

As seen in the comparison of four fair-unnamed female characters in the Chrétien story and the *Vulgate* version, both authors gave women varying degrees of power over knights under the chivalric code, even if it was merely rhetorical existing solely for the purpose of advancing the plot line in order to accomplish goals for the overall story. The first fair-unnamed female was bold and powerful in the Chrétien story, trading information in exchange for a future favor and giving directives to the knights. The equivalent character in the *Vulgate* is split in half, one older woman who is more like a tour guide and one younger woman who asks what the knights will give her for the information, as opposed to stating her demands.

The second fair-unnamed female has a small role in Chrétien, appearing only long enough to acknowledge her own power to grant favors and save an incidental knight's life. This character does not appear to have an equivalent in the *Vulgate* version but may have become part of another character in the story. The third fair-unnamed female tries to barter sexual favors for lodging Lancelot in the Chrétien story then turns into a weepy, wimpy, knight-groupie who is in no position to solicit favors or advance anything in the *Vulgate* version. The fourth and final fair-unnamed female examined shouts her demands for a knight's head in the Chrétien story while the equivalent character in the *Vulgate* seems to purchase it instead.

The fair-unnamed females of Chrétien's story were in power positions which allowed them to further their own agenda by bargaining with the knights to exchange favors for information. Not all of these favors were, or needed to be returned; however, the knights were bound by the chivalric code to enter into these agreements regardless of the fair-unnamed females' ability to make good on their promise. Conversely, the *Vulgate* author did not give women much power or credence and the fair-unnamed females in that version did not have their own agenda serving at the pleasure of the men, playing minimal parts in the story. Both authors used fair-unnamed females as rhetorical tools to either highlight or downplay feminine power and consequently advance the plot of their story, even if it was just as a testament to Lancelot's character. In both stories the majority of fair-unnamed females remains anonymous; these girls or women simply fulfill their role and are never seen or heard from again.

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