

THE ROLE OF VIOLENCE IN THE ROMANCES OF CHRÉTIEN DE TROYES¹

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Abstract

Chrétien de Troyes, the most famous of the French 12th-century authors of chivalric romances, comes to a very personal view of violence towards the end of his writing career, in his *Perceval or the grail story*. While in his previous works, the first of which was *Erec and Enid*, the object of the present article, he abided by the commonly accepted norms concerning the description of »violence«: there's no »abstract violence«, and it should never befall and idea or a tradition while the violence against the individual is a common occurrence considered "creative" and legitimate, if not indispensable, for the making of social hierarchy and order, violence ceases to be a topic of interest in his last, unfinished text.

Violence is not a central topic in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, who rather focuses on psychological and moral issues, as well as, towards the end of his writing career, on spiritual ones. However, violence was an inseparable part of chivalric life and Chrétien, together with his audience, probably took it for granted (Ménard 75). Which is no longer the case for a modern reader of medieval literature, who is shocked by (even a reported) act of violence and cannot help noticing it. Such "critical distance" is missing in the literary texts from Chrétien's period. Does the absence or, indeed, the supposed inconceivability of this critical distance imply that violence had some vital function in the life of medieval men and women, on the individual as well as on the social level? To this question, I shall suggest an answer with reference to Chrétien's romance of *Erec et Enide*.

1. THE IDEA

Violence is abundantly present in *Erec et Enide*. The form in which it appears varies according to circumstances. However, there is at least one typical situation in which violence should always be refused, regardless of its particular setting. In such cases, though, "violence" should be understood metaphorically: it is an *idea*

¹ I would like to thank Dr Toby Garfitt for his friendly help when I was writing this article.

that is never supposed to be “violated”. For example:

D'Erec, le fil Lac, est li contes,
Que devant rois et devant contes
Depecier et corrompre suelent
Cil qui de conter vivre vuelent.

(*Erec et Enide* vv. 19-23)

*This is the tale of Erec, son of Lac,
which, before kings and before counts,
those who try to live by storytelling
customarily mangle and corrupt.*

(vv. 19-23)²

These four lines clearly bring out the tension between the (perfect) “idea” of a story and individuals who violate it for their private purposes. The literature of Chrétien’s time almost inevitably pronounces itself in favour of the “idea”, not in favour of the individual human being. In his days, it was impossible to violate “intellectual property” because the concept itself did not exist, while on the other hand, and certainly according to Chrétien, it was unacceptable to violate the “idea of a story”: a story was an *aspect* of Truth, one, indivisible and all-embracing. Today, on the contrary, many individuals would claim to possess their own truths, of which there are almost as many instances as there were “aspects” of Truth in the Middle Ages. Chrétien’s modern descendants experience truth as something fragmented and only inviolable because of its absolute malleability; on the other hand, considered as something “sacred”, they protect intellectual property against violence, as well as protecting the individual human being against it, at least in theory.

Another example of the Idea as an inviolable entity is provided in the passages concerning the hunting of the white hart (*Erec et Enide* vv. 36-62, 288-310, 1793-1820). In the Arthurian context, this hunting is an ancient custom which provides the cohesive force and authority of an idealised past, highly honoured by medieval traditionalism. The custom consists in the privilege, for the knight who kills the white hart, of giving a kiss to the lady whom he considers as the most beautiful at the court. An important dilemma is therefore raised for King Arthur. If he continues to abide by this custom, the risk will be high of his knights falling out with each other, protesting against the winner’s choice, which might lead to combat and possible killing; if he abolishes the custom, he will not honour the tradition established by his forefathers, which would be a serious error to the medieval way of thinking. In spite of this tricky situation, Arthur does not hesitate a single moment: the custom has to be honoured, even at the risk of his knights harming or killing each other.

De ce vos devoit il peser,
Se je [or] voloie eslever
Autres costumes, autres lois,
Que ne tint mes peres li rois.

(*Erec et Enide* vv. 1804-7)

*It should rightly grieve you
if I sought to impose upon you
another tradition and other laws
than those held by my father the king.*

(vv. 1771-4)

All the knights, however, do not agree with their king. Gauvain, for instance, disapproves of his intention and advises him not to stick to the tradition when there is no need for it. Nevertheless, Gauvain’s thinking is too “modern” for Arthur, who will not tolerate it:

² Translations by C. W. Carroll, Garland, NY & London, 1987, except for the last two, which are by W. W. Kibler.

Car ne doit ester contredite...
Parole puis que rois l'a dite.
(*Erec et Enide* vv. 60-1)

for the word of a king
must not be opposed.
(vv. 60-1)

The word of a king, the earthly equivalent of the *verbum*, is an *idea* which obtains an independent existence as soon as it is uttered and, as such, exerts its tyranny over the individual human being. In addition to this, every individual is supposed to abide by his own "idea", i. e. his ideal self, at the cost of bringing violence into his relations with other people, and sometimes also into his relationship with his own self.

2. THE INDIVIDUAL

The violence which is a function of a principle superior to the individual human being is considered as the only "good" form of violence. Only those following an *idea*, persistently and regardless of the circumstances, are recognised as moral people and, therefore, possess an identity (*mos, moris* – habit, therefore, "identity"). For medieval man, violence is not bad in itself. It is bad when it is a sign of a "fragmented self", whose reactions depend on the circumstances and are not the consequence of decisions taken in accordance with a higher principle. Instead of conceiving a high idea of himself, in accordance with the ideas of honour and justice, instead of trying subsequently to bring such an idea into being, an amoral individual never raises above the world of *phenomena*, in which he cannot but "disperse" himself. Some typical instances of badly applied violence are those of the bandits (*Erec et Enide* v. 2792 ss) and of the two counts (*Erec et Enide* v. 3314 ss and v. 4688 ss) who cannot control their desire and persist in imposing themselves on Enide. Such serious straying away from ideal behaviour is punished by death, with the exception of the count who repents of his misbehaviour and is spared. The terrible Mabonagrain is not, after all, considered as evil, for his atrocious exploits are the consequence of his promise which he intends to honour as long as he objectively can. His promise has become the set standard for his ideal self and Mabonagrain is putting all his efforts into bringing his real self as close as possible to its ideal image. Every victory is another "creative" step on the way towards this ideal, which is of a moral nature, but also has a social function (which may appear destructive but is, in fact, reassuring and eventually confirms the established order: one could indeed send an entire army against Mabonagrain and easily get rid of him – however, the very principles of social order, the "rules of the game", the Idea, would thus be threatened, exposing the community to a far greater risk than Mabonagrain himself). The *prix*, the public recognition of socially acceptable achievements as resulting from an inner *decorum*, consecrates, in principle, the unification of what *appears* with what *is*. And violence is precisely the means by which this creativity is paradoxically realised: action is required, not so much in order to transform the world (which would be an all too modern attitude), but to bring about the moral growth of the hero and, at the same time, to let him enjoy the splendour emanating from his godlike self and mirrored by his "entourage". The perfection of such a hero is realised in a dynamic fashion, for it depends on his willpower whether ideal and reality coincide or not. When and as long as they perfectly coincide,

the hero's self seems static. His actual dynamic character is only revealed in retrospect and *per negationem*, when flawed and arrested by a defeat or by neglect of duty as in the case of Erec's *recreantise*, which splits apart ideal and reality.

"Creativity" in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes therefore appears paradoxical: material destruction allows for the structuring of the moral and, in *Perceval*, spiritual world. The very fact that violence is a function of an ideal makes it a creative and praiseworthy pursuit (surely medieval knights, even the *literati*, often perverted this idea and pushed it beyond all conceivable limits – Bertran de Born was a living proof of that). The material world has little worth in itself, almost none. The victorious hero does indeed take the defeated opponent's belongings (horse, arms, armour), but without the intention of keeping them. One takes things not to pile them up for oneself but to give them away or squander them as soon as the opportunity arises. Such was at least the "ideal" attitude. In this idealised world, where the material dimension has no importance and where gold and silver are outweighed by generosity of spirit, woman rules over man and indeed, in a metaphorical way, she behaves violently towards him. Mabonagrain, for instance, is but his beloved's puppet, his will is entirely committed to fulfilling her wishes. As such, Mabonagrain is an inverted picture of Erec *recreanz* while both heroes are dominated, consciously or not, by their respective women. However, Mabonagrain finds himself in a situation which is even worse than Erec's, worse because contradictory: if he keeps defeating his opponents and chopping their heads off, he loses, for reluctant as he may be, he continues his terrible vocation of champion-executioner; if he is himself defeated, he is a loser because he has lost his *prix* – his actual self is separated from its ideal image, which is equivalent to its obliteration. One must not forget, however, that Mabonagrain's idealised world is surrounded by a wall of air and thus separated from the "real" world (in the literary sense), in which man behaves violently towards woman. Who would know this better than Enide? But in the real as well as in an ideal world, violence is by and large the prevailing means of communication between human beings.

3. THE SOCIETY

This last statement already applied in epic poetry. Yet epic poetry and the romances of Chrétien de Troyes are worlds apart. This truism will make it easier to analyse the distinctive features which distinguish the use of violence in romances from that in epic poetry. Epic violence, exceeding every limit, is mad and absolute. In the *Song of Roland*, the Saracens who refuse to convert to the Christian religion are simply slaughtered. The heroes of romances, on the other hand, do not kill women, children or, generally, the defeated who beg for mercy (Haidu 163). Roland the epic hero will not blow his horn, even at the risk of jeopardising the very cause for which he is sacrificing his life. If Erec was an epic hero, he would engage in fighting against the haughty knight Yder right away, to get his revenge for the shameful treatment inflicted on him. But Erec, the hero of Chrétien's romance, is no less wise than he is courageous. He follows Yder, waiting for an opportunity to borrow the arms required for an even combat. In Chrétien's romances, violence is not absolute but controlled by reason. It is "reasonable", even

though only in order to be more efficient. Erec's sense and patience are finally rewarded as he defeats Yder, sending him to report to Queen Guenièvre and to let her know that he has been duly thrashed.

Toi et ta pucele et ton nain
Li delivreras en sa main
Por faire son commandemant.

(*Erec et Enide* vv. 1035-7)

*Into her hands you will deliver
yourself and your maiden and your dwarf,
to do her bidding...*

(vv. 1035-7)

In the world of romances, every feat, every victory has to be reported, by the defeated knight, either to the winner's lady, or King Arthur or to Queen Guenièvre. A victory has to be widely known, so that the winner's reputation grows and his "prix" increases:

Car por neant fet la bonté
Qui ne viaut qu'ele soit seüe
(*Yvain* vv. 4280-1)

*Whoever does a good thing without its being known,
has done it in vain...*

(my transl. after Foerster, 1913, vv. 4280-1)

The society pictured in romances is a "shame-culture" (as opposed to a "guilt-culture", Akehurst 126): its hierarchy is based on every individual's *prix*, the feedback image of the individual's value mirrored by society and increased by properly applied violence. This is why the result of every single combat has to be made known to the largest number of people possible. Just as modern tennis players are classified by the ATP, there was a somewhat similar classification of knights in the medieval romance as perceived by the cultivated medieval audience. Every knight is "classified" according to his *prix*, and defined in relation to the *prix* of other competitors. *Joie de la Cour*, for instance, is the "Grand Prix" won by Erec, the proof of his superiority over his rivals. But there is also something like the "Grand Slam", made up of all the important prizes together, won respectively by the main hero of every particular romance. Such a "classification" of knights, generally accepted and recognised, is not fixed once and for all, though: there are champions, yes, but there are also their challengers; there are seniors who are overthrown, and there are juniors who take their places. E. Köhler tried to trace the very origins of courtly literature to the social and historical reality of such "junior knights". Sticking to what is more certain, one can claim that this hierarchy, challenged over and over again by "young" knights, might at least have been the socio-historical context underlying courtly literature, whatever the reasons that gave rise to it. Chivalric romances indeed stage "juniors" whose youth is not necessarily equivalent to their social status (the lower nobility, according to Köhler). The opposite is rather true, for most of this bunch of young Turks are members of royal families. Their "youth" comes from the fact that at the beginning of their adventures reported by the story, they have no reputation at all and no social identity or, in some instances, no "name" – if this is not exactly the case of Erec, it will be that of Cligés and, later, that of Perceval. But Erec, no less than any other of Chrétien's heroes,

...estoit beax et prouz et genz,
Se n'avoit pas .XXV. anz.

(*Erec et Enide* vv. 89-90)

*He was very handsome and valiant and noble,
and he was not yet twenty-five years old...*

(vv. 89-90)

The question of identity is obviously not reducible to the knight's "youth". A knight will rarely reveal his name in advance to someone he is about to begin fighting with. This rule applies to those with an excellent reputation as well as to those without it, who stand at the beginning of their knightly career. First comes the combat, and only then the disclosing of respective identities, provided both parties are still alive. The element of surprise is as old as warfare itself. If one's identity was known before combat, the opponent, knowing whom he will be fighting with, could prepare accordingly and render his performance more effective. In the Arthurian world, mystery generally plays a very important part, and the *unknown* has a more determining function than in a context where everything matches the human scale. Ignorance increases anxiety. One's identity will therefore be hidden away from the rival knight in order to frighten him and make him uncertain about the outcome of the combat. If the two fighters do not recognise each other, their clash will indeed be an opportunity to re-evaluate their reciprocal hierarchical status, which should in principle not be challenged after it has been defined by the outcome of a (previous) combat. The defeated knight should forever remain the liege-man of the winner. However, if the two knights do not recognise each other, their encounter is always an opportunity to challenge such acquired status, and, in the case of a possibly "inferior" knight, to acquire a greater *prix* at the expense of a hierarchically "superior" one who may be hidden beneath the armour at the other end of the lance (unlike in epic poetry, the *quiproquo* as to identity of characters is one of the fundamental narrative devices in Arthurian literature – Ménard 388 ss). And even the best of knights, of which Erec is an excellent example, has to prove himself constantly if he does not wish to be seen as *recreanz*. Above all, he has to confront the knights with whom he has not yet fought, in order to establish their respective "value". The adversary is far from being always intrinsically hostile to him. When Erec has defeated Guivret le Petit, the latter tells him that meeting him was the greatest joy of his life (*Erec et Enide* v. 3885 ss). The two fighters are not at all essentially hostile to each other, they see their combat as a kind of game. Could not the "adventure", then, be redefined as the quest for circumstances which make violence necessary? Ironically, violence is a kind of game, and even when the stakes are raised to the highest point in a life-or-death combat, the ludic aspect is not missing. Is this not why, when there was no need for the application of violence out of either necessity (protection) or moral obligation (revenge), medieval man resorted to the creation of "artificial" circumstances requiring violence, in the form of tournaments? This would certainly point to the fact that in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes as well as generally in his time, violence is not a vital necessity on the concrete, material level, at least not essentially, but rather on the psychological, moral, and social levels. What matters is to assert and prove oneself, to realise one's potential through competing with other members of the same cast in order to create and improve one's *prix* or "symbolic capital", namely the mixture of intrinsic and "market" values established on a relational basis among all those who have the desire and the right to participate in the general "classification" of chivalry (*Erec et Enide* v. 2207 ss). A peaceful knight is something quite inconceivable, let alone a pacifist one (Ménard 387-9); such an individual would have no existence, no *being*, for such *recreantise*, or, in other words, shameful conduct, is socially equivalent to non-being. Violence often appears, especially in a modern context, to be a socially destructive principle introducing

anarchy into the community. It is therefore ironic that, from the medieval perspective, violence is an extremely powerful means of social integration (this conviction was at least passively endorsed even by the Church – Kaeuper): whoever declines to resort to it when it is considered as necessary, isolates himself from the chivalric and aristocratic community. If the Idea, as I have suggested, is the most powerful cohesive principle in medieval society, it is precisely violence which is the means *par excellence* to achieve the application of this principle. Violence as a way of living and a way of surviving has turned out to be, on another level, a ludic activity with its inevitable psychological and social function.

Today, sport is rigorously separated from warfare, which may explain why, under normal circumstances, the aesthetics of sport is superficial. An athlete never commits himself totally, that is, his very life is never really at stake. On the other hand, the aesthetics of violence is one of the crucial aspects of what was considered as “beautiful” in the Middle Ages, not only in epic poetry, the aesthetics of which is almost exclusively based on violence, but also in romance. Chrétien himself offers long descriptions of combat, arms and armour. In his view, all this is beautiful. Only as late as in his *Perceval* will he adopt a different aesthetic criterion:

Assez vos deïsse commant,
 Se je m'en vosisse antremetre,
 Mais por ce n'i voil paine metre
 Q'autant vaut uns moz comme .XX.
 (*Le Conte du Graal* vv. 2618-21)

*I could tell you all about it
 if I set myself to do so,
 but I do not want to waste my efforts
 since one word is as good as twenty.*

Such is his “non-description” of the duel between Perceval and Clamadeu des Iles, followed by another, between the main hero and Orgueilleux de la Lande:

La bataille fu fiere et dure,
 De plus deviser n'ai je cure,
 Que paine gastee ma samble...
 (*Le Conte du Graal* vv. 3861-3)

*The battle was long and hard
 but it seems to me a waste of effort
 to tell more about it...*

Far from suggesting any anachronistic “modernity” of the author, these lines simply testify to the fact that violence devoid of its ludic aspect (Perceval understands neither play nor joke) can no longer be regarded as “beautiful”; on the other hand, its aesthetic potential remains unrealised if violence is not pushed to the very limit, namely the final defeat of one party, which may end the latter’s life. Violence is therefore only beautiful in so far as it is absolute, total play, for the “ultimate play” is all-absorbing. Today, violence has lost not only its aesthetic potential, but also its ethical justification. The hierarchy of the Idea having been done away with, violence can no longer be “good”, for there is no universally recognised *aim* which could justify violence as its function. The state has won the monopoly of “licit violence” (Kaeuper 304), the aim of which is to establish and to preserve social order. Such an aim is based on convention rather than on belief, which makes state violence too impersonal to let it acquire any “ethical” or “aesthetic” dimensions. Today, violence is ugly, bad and serious. Playing is neither really beautiful, nor good, nor serious. In the Middle Ages, ludic violence was good and beautiful, serious because violent and ludic because playful. Violence was an organic tie

relating play to life and securing social cohesion in terms of a dynamic hierarchy which was sustained by the dominating and all-pervasive force of the Idea.

The *Joie de la Cour* episode is not exactly the epilogue to Chrétien's story but it epitomises all that has been said on violence so far. This adventure is the chivalric "Grand Prix", the most demanding and perilous task which the hero has to come to grips with, in order to be elevated, if he wins, to a quasi-divinity, or, if he loses, in order for just his head to be elevated on a stick. *Joie de la Cour* may call to mind the Celtic "other world", the judeo-christian Garden of Eden (after the Fall) or some other *locus* (more or less) *amoenus*: in the present context, for Mabonagrain as well as finally for Erec, it is a *locus communis* conveying the pseudo-eternity and self-sufficiency typical of the champion, particularly when he is being considered from the perspective of those who themselves covet his laurels. Were the Olympic champions not regarded by the Greeks as demigods?

Joie de la Cour is therefore the ultimate proof of the fact that violence constitutes the very principle of social dynamics, the basic means for settling human relations and organising life in common. Its ludic dimension, however, at least in Chrétien's romances, imposes rules on violence, preventing it from degenerating into savagery: it has already been pointed out that a knight does not kill women and children, as did the barbarians of a pre-chivalric era and as the barbarians of the post-chivalric era are still very keen on doing. Inside the rules and regulations of the game, the violence in Chrétien's romances nevertheless keeps its brutal and absolute character. It would perhaps be oversimplifying to say that play is the civilising principle of any given society (Huizinga). Very likely, violence precedes the ludic aspect of human existence. However, it seems that the brutal drive to "possess", and violence as its means, could not in themselves satisfy human beings, who needed obstacles to their desire: they needed *play*. Before springing up as a social reality, play existed as a need. It can be said, technically, that the function created its vehicle, but what really matters is to realise that man sets himself apart from beasts the very moment he becomes aware of the need to put obstacles between desire and its fulfilment, thus limiting *cupiditas* and violence as its function. Insofar as man remains violent, he will remain an animal. Insofar as he accepts that he cannot be fulfilled by mere violence but needs to restrain it by play, he will be human. And the day he renounces violence completely, he will become an angel.

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