Summary: *The Power of Love*. Essays about Love in the Arthurian Romance *Die Riddere metter Mouwen*

1. Introduction

In the second half of the thirteenth century, an otherwise unknown Flemish poet wrote an Arthurian romance in Dutch, nowadays called *The Romance of the Knight with the Sleeve* (*Roman van den Riddere metter Mouwen*). Of this text in rhyming couplets, only a fragment of 320 partly damaged lines from a fourteenth century copy remains. Fortunately, the story has been preserved in the *Lancelot Compilation*, composed in Brabant around 1325, in which a modified, abridged version of 4020 lines has been inserted. Adapting the story to his narrative cycle, the compiler divided the text in chapters, probably added several episodes, and maybe even changed the storyline. Still, we can imagine what the original narrative may have looked like. *The Knight with the Sleeve* is conceived as a love romance in Arthurian style, known to the audience of a fourteenth century poem where the hero is mentioned as a famous lover. The story combines two themes: the quest for identity and the relationship between chivalry and love, thus enabling the protagonist to prove and show *n noblesse de sang* and *noblesse de coeur*. Visiting Arthur’s court as a Fair Unknown, the nameless young man is knighted by the queen and meets Clarette, Guinevere’s lady-in-waiting, who instructs him in knighthood and gives him her sleeve as an all-inspiring symbol of love to be gained. Subsequently, the power of love ennobles the new knight’s chivalry, which in turn nourishes Clarette’s love. As exemplary lovers, Miraudijs (as the hero’s baptismal name turns out to be) and his prospective bride show that true courtly love requires endurance and perseverance. In this respect, the love couple differs from *exemple ex negativo* in the story, contrast figures chasing love in a rash or obtrusive way. The poet may have wished to edify his audience, as suggested by Clarette’s instructions in the ethics of knighthood, a maxim on noble birth, and proverbs. But most of all the romance was meant to entertain, as allusions to stories *d’armes et d’amour*, application of a ‘poetics of surprise’, and comical elements demonstrate. The author used other texts, like *Richars li Biaus* (a romance of adventure), for source material, but more importantly: works of Chrétien de Troyes, especially *Cligis* and *Le Conte du Graal*, served as backcloth for his Arthurian narrative. Obviously, the author was confident that *connaisseurs* among his audience would recognize intertextual subtleties. For instance, expert listeners could notice that Miraudijs settles a score with seneschal Kay in much the same way Perceval did. Afterwards, the hero, like Perceval, enters a phase of piety. Unlike his predecessor, however, the Knight with the Sleeve finally opts for a secular life. This turn of events reveals what the author intended: to correct the religious implications of Chrétien’s last romance, promote worldly chivalry and earthly love, and set himself up as a champion of profane literature, putting entertainment above moral edification such as grail stories offered. The poet was probably a clerk, knowing Latin (one character’s name, Cephalus, may be borrowed from Ovidius’ *Metamorphoses*), and familiar with Old French romance. French narratives, fashionable in highest circles, seem to have provoked reactions in texts for audiences whose preferred language was Dutch. Some or more of the aristocratic listeners who enjoyed *The Knight with the Sleeve* must nonetheless have had knowledge of literature in French, enabling them to appreciate the Flemish poet’s attempt at *aemulatio*. 263
2. The First Episode

In the first episode of *The Knight with the Sleeve*, a protagonist more civilized than predecessors like Perceval and Fergus makes his appearance. The newcomer will excel as a knight in the service of love. The opening episode, designed in true Arthurian fashion, contains elements that will guide the interpretation of the romance, hinting at a story in which Love will be pivotal. Alluding to other romances, like *Le Conte du Graal*, the prose *Lancelot*, and *Walewein*, the author presents his hero as a superior knight and lover, the references indicating that the story was aimed at an audience familiar with Arthurian romance. The love theme fades away in the background in the second part of the story, which (apart from a short fragment) only has been preserved in the *Lancelot Compilation*. Since the compiler adapted the narrative for insertion in his cycle, he may have changed the storyline. In the Flemish romance, love culminating in marriage presumably was the Alpha and Omega.

3. The Power of Love

In *The Knight with the Sleeve*, chivalry and love are closely interwoven. Intertextual references to Chrétien's *Le Conte du Graal* contribute to the love theme, central to the first part of the story as it is preserved in the *Lancelot Compilation*. A striking difference between the hero’s of the two romances concerns their knightly careers. Perceval starts a savage, becomes a worldly knight of renown, but in the end changes course on behalf of spiritual knighthood in the service of God. Miraudijs, on the other hand, is from the start a civilized member of society, who suddenly interrupts his glorious knightly career for a long stay in a monastery, but finally decides for a secular way of life, as husband and king. Obviously, the poet is no advocate of religious ideals of chivalry, promoting instead courtly knighthood inspired by earthly love.

4. An Entertaining Story

Humour is a seriously complex topic for research, especially in the context of historical literature. Yet, an attempt is made to trace comical ingredients in *The Knight with the Sleeve*. The fact that the story has been preserved in an abridged adaptation poses an additional problem, since it is not always clear whether supposedly humorous elements must be ascribed to the author of the poem or to the compiler of the manuscript. Still, examination of the romance yields promising results, justifying the conclusion that the narrative contains many examples of fine Arthurian comedy. Humour can be shown to present itself in connection with intertextual references, and appears to be related with the dominant love theme in *The Knight with the Sleeve*.

5. False Lover, True Lover

*The Knight with the Sleeve* is an Arthurian love story, advocating an ideal of mutual and enduring love culminating in marriage. The love theme is mainly developed in the
quest of the protagonist, whose efforts to prove himself worthy of Clarette, Gawain's niece and heiress of Spain, are rewarded when he overcomes his rivals in a tournament, winning his beloved as his bride. Several other characters throw light on love's ordeals as well, performing roles as contrasting characters in the story. Miraudijs's parents, for instance, only get married after many years of hardship, chasing love in their younger years far too soon. The most remarkable exemplum ex negativo in the romance is offered by the ugly king of Cornwall, who attempts to take the hero's mother and her lands by force, trying to conceal his usurpation by passing himself off as a true lover. Losing a duel against Miraudijs's father, whose love for the lady is genuine, the malicious king's actions show that false imitations are no match for sincere love.

6. Miraudijs, Tristan, and Lancelot

The theme of love in ‘The Knight with the Sleeve’ is expressed in a chivalric quest for adventure by the protagonist, Miraudijs, eager to prove himself worthy of Clarette, the object of his love. But characters other than the hero and the heroine contribute to the love theme as well, reminding the audience that love can also be pursued in improper ways. Recalling the adultery of two controversial lovers in Arthurian literature, Tristan (lover of Iseut) and Lancelot (lover of Guinevere), the author advocates proper, courtly love as a socially valid relationship that must be crowned by marriage.

7. Venus, Remarkable Goddess of Love

In Arthurian romances, heroes usually fall in love after looking at an attractive lady or damsel and being shot on the spot by Love's, Cupid's, or Venus's arrow, symbolizing the woman's overwhelming beauty. In ‘The Knight with the Sleeve’, by contrast, the heroine's beauty is barely mentioned, and it is only after the protagonist has fallen in love that Lady Venus makes her entrance in the story. What is more, this new version of Venus acts in a remarkably peaceful way, and bears no resemblance to the familiar goddess with her arrows. By enriching the hero's heart with an allegorical Tree of Love (a symbol of the peculiarities and trials of True Love), Venus in the Flemish romance supports fin’amor or courtly love, avoiding associations with cupiditas or lecherous love, thus contributing to the poet's aspiration to unveil sincere love's subtleties.

8. Guinevere: Honorable Queen or Adulterous Wife?

Old French Arthurian romances other than Chrétien’s Le Chevalier de la Charrette and the prose cycles rarely show Lancelot and Guinevere as lovers. In Middle Dutch literature, however, things are different. Lines added to several narratives inserted in the Lancelot Compilation refer to the couple's adulterous love affair, and a short story, ‘Lancelot and the Stag with the White Foot’, even makes fun of Lancelot as a lover. In ‘The Knight with the Sleeve’, Guinevere and Lancelot are secondary characters, whose performance, by way of contrast, contributes to a celebration of love. An idealized, non-controversial courtly love, exemplified by the hero and the heroine, Miraudijs and Clarette.
9. Epilogue

Many Old French Arthurian romances in the thirteenth century followed the example of Chrétien’s *Cligés*, granting their heroes a happy end with marital bliss and powerful lordship. In *The Knight with the Sleeve*, too, the story presumably ended this way, but the storyline appears to have been altered by the composer of the *Lancelot Compilation*. Nonetheless, love is the main theme in the narrative. The poet emphatically shows that courtly love can exist in accordance with social standards. Some lovers may transgress contemporary norms, as demonstrated in *exempla ex negativo*. The hero and the heroine, on the other hand, deliver the ultimate answer to a cardinal *quaestio amoris*: ‘what defines True Love?’ True (meaning courtly) love requires patience and persistence, as Miraudijs and Clarette reveal in an enduring love relationship, which (as it should) culminates in marriage. Where Chrétien in his romances exposed tension between *amour* and *chevalerie* (the story of Alexander and Soredamor in *Cligés* being a notable exception), love in *The Knight with the Sleeve* goes hand in hand with chivalry, in fruitful symbiosis. New and original, the love theme typically takes shape in the tournament episode. Proclaimed by King Arthur and Queen Guinevere, the ultimate purpose of this knightly event is to join in matrimony Miraudijs and Clarette. Since the heroine, a lady-in-waiting and Gawain’s niece, is a member of the court, and since Arthur willingly consents to her marriage, the love couple no doubt exemplifies proper love. The poet’s attitude towards affairs of the Church is somewhat ambivalent, though. Clerical disapproval of tournaments is ridiculed in the story, the protagonist terminates his *moniage*, and by marrying his beloved Clarette, assuming lordship over her land, he decidedly corrects Perceval’s turn to religion. But, on the other hand, Miraudijs is on good terms with the clergy, he behaves like a devout knight, and his love for Clarette is in keeping with canonical rules. *The Knight with the Sleeve* is certainly not a problem romance! Showing what love should be, the story is even overly virtuous at times. But a critical view on both *fals’amor* and religious ideals of chivalry compensates for thematic straightforwardness. ‘An original romance with its own thematic content’,1 and ‘firmly embedded in the European Arthurian tradition’,2 the Flemish narrative deserves appreciation and further study. Many aspects of the story remain to be examined, for instance the role and development of the hero, features of other characters (proper names, the modest part of Gawain), and the lack of marvelous events after the main adventure in the Forest without Mercy. Sources of proverbs used in the romance may shed light on the poet’s literacy, and didactic elements may or may not suggest a (partially) young audience. More research should clarify whether *Joncker Jan wt den Vergiere*, a Flemish story of adventure, shows influence from *The Knight with the Sleeve*. And *pièce de résistance* in the study of our romance: has the narrative indeed been radically adapted by the composer of the *Lancelot Compilation*, as can be argued?

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1 Besamusca 2003: 108.
2 Johnson & Claassens e.a. 2003: 27.