

SUPRESS OR UNDERLINE? *LANÇAROTE DE LAGO AND THE IMAGE OF CHIVALRY*

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It is well known that the *Lancelot en Prose*¹ has had many readings and rewritings. According to Elspeth Kennedy², it began as the biography of Lancelot, that is to say, an account of the life and deeds of the splendid *chevalier* from his birth to the death of his noble companion, Galehot. Subsequently, around 1220-25, Kennedy argues, this romance was rewritten to make it part of a cycle of Grail narratives – the *Lancelot-Graal* to use Lot's designation, which consisted of the *Estoire del Saint Graal*, the *Livre de Merlin* (with a *Suite*), the *Lancelot*, the *Queste del Saint Graal* and the *Mort Artu*³.

In Michas's view, it has never existed as a romance centred only on *Lancelot* but developed as shorter and longer versions of the same Grail material⁴. Micha and Kennedy disagree over the composition of the book of Lancelot, but both admit that this romance was often rewritten and adapted according to the scribe's motivations and strategies⁵. That is, probably, the main

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¹ For the *Lancelot en prose* we use the following edition: Alexandre MICHA (ed. 1978-1982), *Lancelot. Roman du XIII^{ème} siècle*, 9 vols., Genève, Droz. Hereafter referred to as LM.

² Elspeth KENNEDY, *Lancelot and the Grail. A Study of the Prose Lancelot*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986.

³ Ferdinand LOT, *Étude sur le Lancelot en Prose*, Paris, Librairie Honoré Champion, 1954.

⁴ Alexandre MICHA, *Essais sur le cycle du Lancelot-Graal*, Genève, Genève, Droz, 1987.

⁵ The composition of the *Lancelot en Prose* has been recently re-open by Annie Combes who argues that the non-cyclic version introduces the grail quest. For further details see Annie COMBES, "From Quest to Quest: Perceval and Galahad in the Prose Lancelot", *Arthuriana*,

reason why almost one hundred manuscripts from the XIIIth to the XVIth centuries have come down to our days with several versions that are sometimes hard to classify in stable groups or families.

One of those versions is preserved in a sixteenth century manuscript in the Spanish National Library. It is written in Castilian and in the colophon it is stated:

Aquí se acaba el segundo e tercero libros de Don Lançarote de Lago y á se comenzar el Libro de don Tristan, y acabóse en miércoles veinte y quarto de octubre año del nacimiento de nuestro salvador Jesu cristo de mill e quatroçientos e catorze años. (ms. 9611 BNE, f. 352V)⁶.

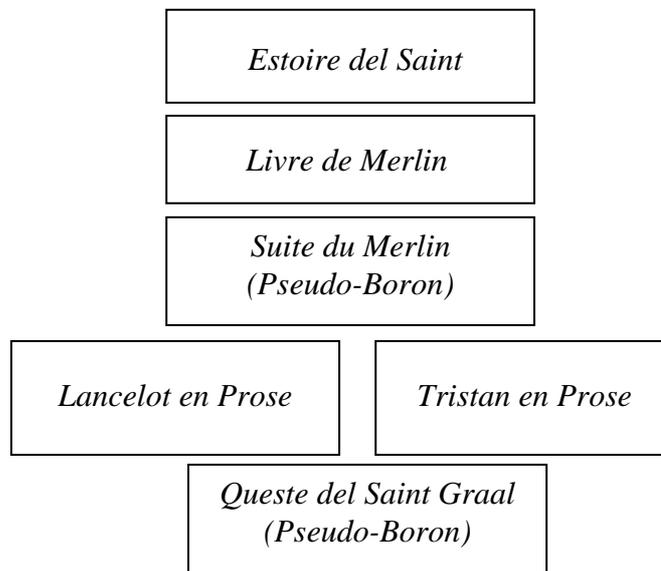
As becomes apparent from this quotation, this volume only contains the second and third book of “Don Lançarote de Lago”. Unfortunately, no first book of a Spanish *Lancelot* survives, so the part of the story that can be read in the Spanish manuscript begins with the second voyage of Lancelot and Galehot to Sorelois and ends, as far the *Lancelot* plot is concerned, at the moment when the knight, long absent from court, returns after winning a battle between Arthur’s knights and Baudemagus and manages to play the magic chess successfully. So, the *Lançarote* contains the narrative which corresponds to Micha’s vols I (at the end), II, IV, V and VI (the beginning). But the three hundred and fifty five folio manuscript does not end at that point. Arthur commands the knights to tell their adventures to his sages clerks so that all their prowess can be written down. After that, when all the knights are together eating, a damsel sent by Tristan comes to the court to seek Arthur’s advice, and from this point onwards the Spanish *Lançarote de Lago* moves away from the French versions of the *Lancelot en Prose*. It continues with Lancelot’s

12.3 (Winter 2002), pp. 7-31. On the Book of Lancelot’s composition see also Carol DOVER, “The Book of Lancelot”, Carol DOVER (ed), *A Companion to Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2010, pp. 86-93. There’s also a study by Frank Brandsma that we didn’t have the opportunity to consult yet on the Third Part of Lancelot, Frank BRANDSMA, *The Interlace Structure of the Third Part of the Prose Lancelot*, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2010.

⁶ The manuscript has 355 folios, but some of them are not written.

enthusiastic answer to Tristan's damsel encouraging the knight to persevere in his love for Iseu, la Blonde, after which Lancelot declares he wishes to meet Tristan and leaves Arthur's court. The adventures that Lancelot faced on the "Isla de Merlin" are then recounted, from the moment that he passed an iron bridge and obtained a sword that lay next to a grave, ended the enchantments of the magic bed, the "Lecho de Merlin", and got on a boat with twelve damsels to the island where Pelinor was buried.

All of these deeds are related, not with the *Lancelot-Graal* romances mentioned above, but they are connected with the *Tristan en Prose* and the *Suite du Merlin*. These books are related with another cycle of romances composed around 1230, the so called Pseudo-Boron Cycle. As José Carlos Miranda⁷ and Ana Sofia Laranjinha⁸ have demonstrated, this cycle was constituted not only by the the *Estoire del Saint Graal*, *the Livre de Merlin* (and its *Suite*) and the *Queste del Saint Graal* followed by the *Mort Artu*, but also by the *Prose Lancelot* and the *Prose Tristan*, as we can see on the schema bellow:



⁷ José Carlos Ribeiro MIRANDA, *A Demanda do Santo Graal e o Ciclo Arturiano da Vulgata*. Porto, Granito, 1998.

⁸ Ana Sofia LARANJINHA, *Artur, Tristão e o Graal. A Escrita Romanesca do Ciclo do Pseudo-Boron*, Porto, Estratégias Criativas, 2010.

In fact, in spite of these references, which seem unfamiliar to the *Lancelot*, the *Lançarote* is very close to the French version preserved on the 751BNF manuscript.

Given that it is a substantial and close knit romance, one of the first of *Lancelot-Graal Cycle* to be written, it is not surprising that it has suffered only slight modifications. As we know, bigger or smaller interventions depend upon the redactor's strategies and writing habits, and the amount of interpolations, or other alterations, that we trace in *Lançarote* are not exclusive occurrences. In the case of *Lançarote* what is important to retain is the fact that these differences, among others, prove that ms. 751BNF was not the original French source of the Spanish translation. Thus, we may say that the Spanish romance is a fairly faithful translation of a French version close to 751BNF manuscript⁹.

Recent research has brought us to the realization that the *Lançarote* is also connected with other manuscripts, mainly from the group of short versions – Micha's *versions courtes* –, in a few options such as cutting some passages or furnishing some readings in specific points of the romance. It is about part of those suppressions that we are going to speak¹⁰.

The Castilian version, in its *tercero libro*, does not include the episodes that tell the story of Gauvain's brothers, nor does it contain the passage in which Arthur sends Boors to fight for the Dame of Galvoie or tell of Guinevere's

⁹ Antonio Contreras Martín had also reached to a similar conclusion in his thesis. Vide Antonio CONTRERAS MARTÍN, *La Imagen de la Caballería en el Lanzarote del Lago Castellano*, Barcelona, Universitat de Barcelona. We've compared the Spanish version with Micha's edition, with 751BNF manuscript and with other manuscripts from the *versions courtes*, like 339 BNF. Vide Isabel CORREIA, *Do Lancelot ao Lançarote de Lago: Tradição Textual e Difusão Ibérica da versão do ms. 9611BNE*, Porto, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, 2010.

¹⁰ As we've referred previously, we compared the Spanish manuscript with 751BNF, with 110 BNF and, using Micha's edition, to 865Gr. The first is considered to be a mixed version, while the others are short versions (*versions courtes*).

dream related to Lancelot's treason¹¹. This Iberian romance also suppresses some adventures in which Boors and Yvain are the main characters¹². All of these passages correspond to the so called "Agrevain" section in French versions. All these omissions are coherent and self-contained episodes, so the basic organic structure of the romance is preserved. Only in the case of Yvain's adventures does the suppression present us with an interrupted and incomplete narrative.

However, the suppression of one of these episodes is not exclusive to this version, since neither the 339BNF nor the Douce 99 mss narrate Boor's adventures. According to Micha¹³, the first testimony (339BNF) we've mentioned belongs, as far as the "Agrevain" section that we are discussing is concerned, to the 751BNF family of manuscripts. Thus, knowing that there are at least two French versions¹⁴ that do not contain these episodes, may lead us to suppose that the French text that came to the Iberian Peninsula did not have all the suppressed passages. Further, one of the suppressions has to do with Boor's first visit to Corberic, which, according to Micha, is fundamental since it prepares for the knight's second visit to the Grail castle. However, *Lançarote de Lago* includes none of those visits. As we have pointed out, the Castilian book announces a *Libro de Don Tristán*, and since Tristan's adventures were to be included before the beginning of the *Queste*, there was no point in narrating the episodes that prepared the Grail quest. It seems very likely that all these cuts have a specific goal and they must have been ingeniously made during the French redaction that originated the Spanish translation. But what did the scribe

¹¹ The episodes that are not in the Castilian manuscript correspond to §§ LXIX-LXXIV, volume IV from Micha's edition and to folios 259vI-270vII in 751BNFms.

¹² *Lançarote* summarizes the adventures of Yvain and Maudit the Giant (LM, LXXX; ms. 751BNF, ff. 258-260) and suppresses Boors' visit to Corberic (LM, §LXXXI; ms. 751BNF, ff. 268-270).

¹³ Vide Alexandre MICHA, "La Tradition Manuscrite du *Lancelot en Prose*", *Romania*, LXXXVI, 1965, pp.330-359.

¹⁴ The 339BNF and Douce 99 manuscripts.

want to underline? To reveal precisely that is our purpose in the following sentences of this brief reflection.

As we have seen, one of the suppressions has to do with Gawain's brothers. The *Lançarote* omits their portrait which opens the French section traditionally called "Agrevain", and offers no account of their individual actions.

In the *Prose Lancelot*, Agrevain, Gherres and Mordered, Gawain's brothers, are not courtly knights, they are defeated and imprisoned or captured. Mordered not only seduces a damsel but he is also presented as one of those chiefly responsible for the destruction of the Arthurian kingdom. Agrevain, the eldest, kills Druas, but is arrested by his brother. Gherres tries, in vain, to obtain the favours of a damsel, then sleeps with a dame and kills her husband. The dame has to seek for a refuge in a nunnery or escape the knight, while Gherres is arrested and ends up in the same prison as Agrevain. They are saved by Gariet, the only one of Gawain's kin that is courtly and courageous¹⁵.

The Castilian version¹⁶ preserves one adventure in which they participate¹⁷, but with a secondary role since they are surpassed by Lancelot. This happens when Lancelot, misled by the old damsel, supports the five sons of the Duke of Gavelas, who are traitors. When he realizes that they have imprisoned or captured Gawain's brothers, he demands their freedom as his reward. Now we can see, the only time these knights have a role, they don't act, they are saved by Lancelot, that is to say, they do not perform chivalrously. By omitting the other chivalric adventures, present in the French versions, the scribe has woven the plot around Lancelot, erased bad chivalry from the romance and underlined the good. However, it is not only Lancelot that he wished to underline.

¹⁵ LM, tV, §§LXX-LLXXIII.

¹⁶ We use Antonio CONTRERAS MARTIN and Harvey SHARRER's edition: *Lanzarote del Lago*, Madrid, CEC, 2006. Hereafter referred to as LL. Bold is used to emphasize some passages and characters.

¹⁷ LL, CCXXXII-CCXXXIII.

What about Gawain, Arthur's eldest and favourite nephew? The Castilian version has made subtle modifications in his portrait as a knight. There are several moments in the romance where he is depicted as feeble and even as a traitor. Two characteristics that do not fit a noble knight.

One example of this can be found when Gawain, after being at Corberic, is taken out of the castle and tied to a chariot. When he wakes up he is described in a very different way in the Castilian romance, as we can see below:

LL (CCV, p. 289)	Lancelot (ms. 751BNF ff 256 rI/rII)	LM (t.II, §LXVI p.386)
Desperto don Galvan e fallose en la carreta que estava atado, e viose magro e cautivo, que no valia quatro sueldos.	Si s'esveilla messires Gauvain si trova en la charreste la plus laide vielle del monde et vit son escut lie as limons devant et son cheval atachie a la rene de la charreste, mais es limons avoit I cheval si maigre et si chaitis que il valoit a painne III deniers.	S'esveilla mesire Gauvain, si se trova en la charete la plus laide del mont et vit son escu lie as limons de la charete; mais es limons devant avoit I cheval si maigre et si chaitif qu'il valoit a paines par samblant III deniers.

In the *Lancelot en Prose*, the chariot is not only object of scorn, since when used by Lancelot to save the queen it stands as a major proof of love and chivalry. This important detail underlines Gawain as a failed double of Lancelot, in fact, he seems to be the rival who never succeeds.

As we can see by the chart above, in the French texts it is the horse that is thin and weak, not the knight. In our view, this condensing of the narrative and the transposition of the feebleness to Gawain in the Spanish version contributes to the knight's enfeeblement. Not only is he not allowed to see the wonders of the Grail, but his physical condition, so important for a *preux chevalier*, is

despicable after being vilely tied to a chariot. Let us now examine another example of his failure.

When the Camelot tournament is being prepared, King Idor, knowing that the Knights of the Round Table must face those from Baudemagu's court, regrets Lancelot's absence fearing that it will lead to defeat. King Arthur and the Queen agree with Idor and the other knights are offended by this consensus regarding Lancelot's preponderant role in court. So, they agree with Gawain, that if Lancelot returns to Camelot, none of them will participate in the tournament. Gawain's attitude is very interesting in the Castilian version:

LL (CCXCVIII, p. 363)	Lancelot (ms. 751BNF, 303rll)	LM, (t.IV, §LXXXIV, p. 350)
Y desto que el rey y la reina dixeron de don Lançarote, peso mucho a los de la Tabla Redonda e fueronse a don Galvan e fablaron ende muchas cosas.	De ceste parole que li rois et la roine ont dit furent tuit cil de la table reonde correcie mais a celui ne pesa pas.	De cele parole que li rois et la roine orent dites furent dolant et vergondeux tuit cil de la Table reonde fors mom signor Gauvain; a celui n'am pesa pas.

In the French texts, Gawain doesn't support the other knights, he stands by Lancelot, his best friend and companion. But in the Castilian book, he remains silent, that is to say, he is also looking for revenge and not honouring friendship, another important value in courtly chivalry.

Although he still has some good performances in *Lançarote de Lago*, it is his physical and moral failures, his lack of vigour and his attitude towards friendship that are highlighted. It is perfectly possible that this strategy has to do with the insertion of the Castilian romance into the Pseudo-Boron Cycle, where, as Fanni Bogdanow¹⁸, and, more recently, Ana Sofia Laranjinha has

¹⁸ Fanni BOGDANOW, "The Character of Gauvain in the Thirteenth-Century Prose Romances, *Medium Aevum*, XXVII, 1958, PP.154-161.

demonstrated, Gawain is bad and vile, only seeking revenge and killing indiscriminately. We are definitely very far away from *messires* Gauvain, Chretien's gentle chevalier. Gawain and Lancelot's adventures – the chariot, the Grail vision, the tournament at Camelot, among others – are always a failure for the first and a success for the second. Gawain is clearly inferior. By suppressing other episodes, the Spanish narrative emphasizes this contrast. It seems that the scribe wanted to write as if he was sculpting a diptych: the two knights facing the same challenges, the same adventures: one wins and the other loses.

Besides that, at the end of the romance, Lancelot successfully concludes some of the adventures in which Gawain did not succeed. For instance, he brings to an end the isle de Merlin's enchantments. Again Gawain is a loser, as we can see through the comparison between the two characters summarized below:

<i>Galban</i> (LL, CXCVIICCVII, pp. 284-290)	<i>Lançarote</i> (LL, CCLI-CCLV, pp. 327-331)
After being in Corberic, he wakes up in a chariot and everybody around insults him;	Gets in the chariot for the second time in order to get in Corberic
He sees the damsel in a vat of boiling water, but he fails to rescue her	He saves the damsel from the vat of boiling water
He doesn't understand the meaning of the serpent and its baby animals, and so fails to act	He kills the serpent and its baby animals.
He sees the damsel and the Holy Grail, but he gazes at her beauty and fails to notice the Holy Grail	He sees the damsel and the Holy Grail and he prays.
He is the only knight that doesn't taste the exquisite food provided by the Grail	He tastes the exquisite food provided by the Grail

When he lies down on the Venturous Bed he is wounded by the lance	He doesn't lie down the Venturous Bed
He is defeated by Lancelot at the King of Norgales' tournament. His brother, Gariet, is defeated by Boors de Gaunes	He wins the King of Norgales' tournament, defeating Galban, and he defeats all the knights that stood for King Arthur.

This “diptych” is already in the French versions, but by suppressing the adventures we’ve mention above, the Spanish text emphasizes the bad chivalry of Gawain and the prowess of Lancelot. Thus, the plot underlines Lancelot’s deeds and performance and presents us with an anti-hero, the same kind of narrative technique used by Chrétien in *Le Conte du Graal* and *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, “where Gawain stands as a «faire-valoir» of Lancelot and Perceval”¹⁹. However, while Chrétien opposed two individual knights, Gawain representing Arthur’s court and Lancelot/Perceval the new heroes, here the knights stand for their lineage, and while Gawain’s brothers are suppressed from the romance, Lancelot has Boors and will have Galahad. Who stands for Gawain? Or better to say, who stands for Arthur? Even Gariet, the only brother not completely erased and who performs well, is defeated by Boors de Gaunes.

At a first sight, we could think that the suppression of Gawain’s brother’s adventures could have the purpose of saving Arthur and Gawain from the stain of bad chivalry, so that the king and his nephew are not connected with vile knights who kill innocent people and rape dames and damsels. However, by focusing the narrative on Gawain/Lancelot, the scribe underlines two of the most important qualities of a good knight, vigour and friendship, stating that true chivalry doesn’t belong either to the feeble or to the ones who do not honour their companions. Besides that, he also stresses that the kingdom is walking to an end since Arthur’s *miles* is far from being the ideal knight.

¹⁹ Bernard de RIBÉMONT, «Stoyan Atanassov, *L'idole inconnue. Le Personnage de Gauvain dans quelques romans du XIII^e siècle*», *Cahiers de Recherche Médiévales et Humanistes* [on line], 2000, on line the 30th june, 2008, accessed on the 17th february, 2011.

Considering that the Spanish text is the biography of a hero, here Gawain, as in the *Prose Tristan* – romance that also has strong connections with the *Lançarote* and the Pseudo-Boron –, is a “villan for the benefit of the title hero”²⁰. So, we may conclude that this writing strategy aims to connect the Spanish version of *Lançarote de Lago* with the Pseudo-Boron Cycle, since here Gawain is beginning to be “hated by many and frequently humiliated and discomfited”²¹, characteristics that he has in the Pseudo-Boron romances.

²⁰ Fanni BOGDADOW..., p. 160

²¹ Fanni BOGDANOW..., p. 156. The author is referring to the character of Gawain in the *Prose Tristan*.