

## The Function of the Magic Fountain

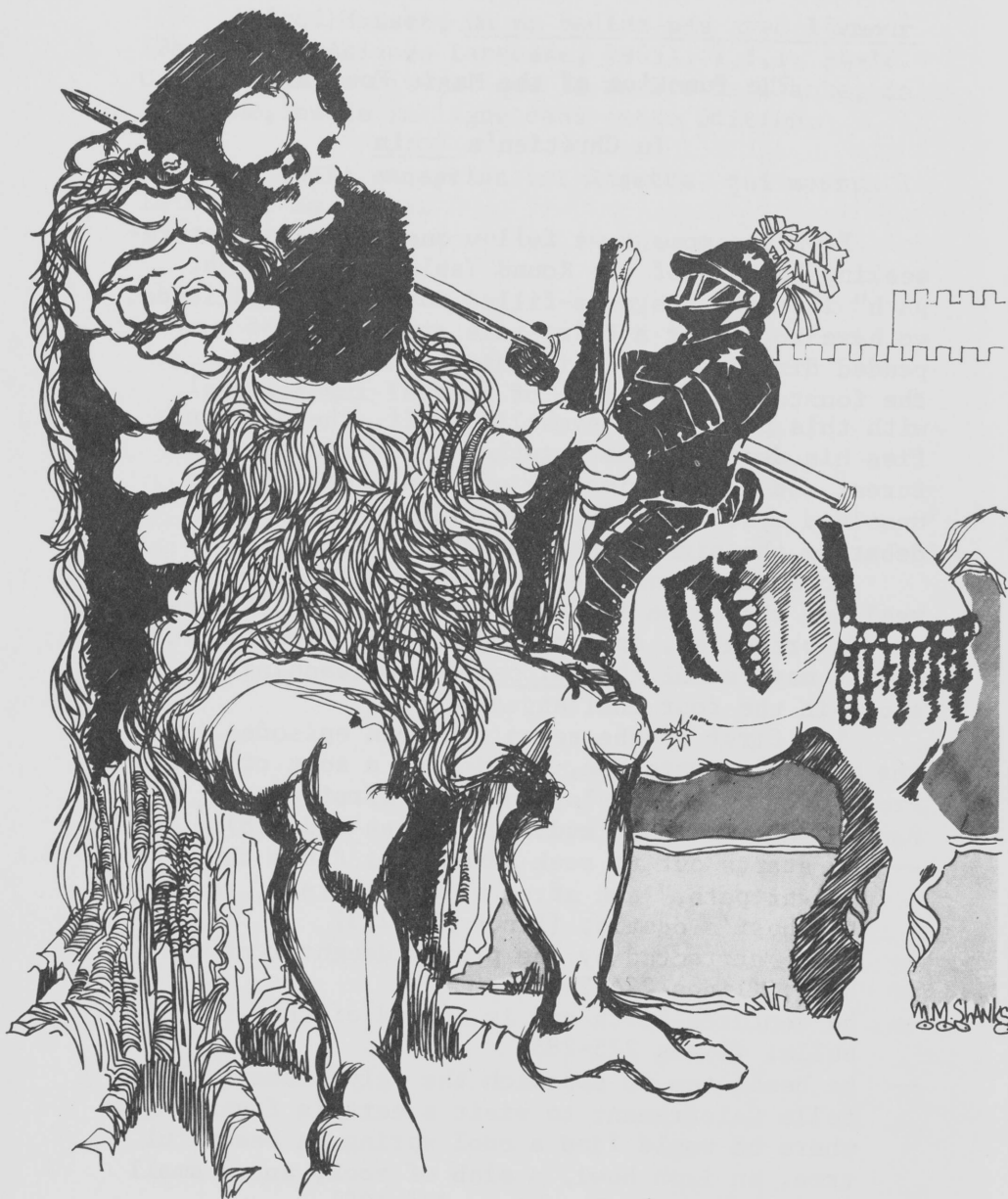
### In Chrétien's Yvain

From the moment we follow one of the adventure-seeking knights of the Round Table on the "right path" into the obstacle-filled woods of Brocéliande, we have to accept a fairy-tale atmosphere of suspended disbelief. Within this enchanted forest, the fountain seems to be of central importance:<sup>1</sup> with this poetic and symbolic motif, the poet unifies his design, ties together the various adventures, and creates imagery of visual delight and unsolved mysteries. But the critics are still debating the significance of this fountain.

An analysis of the literal narration will reveal how the seven fountain episodes vary, how each one is presented, and how and why the focus shifts, and it may reveal the purpose for unleashing the storm in the four challenges.

The first of the seven fountain episodes is the most elaborate one, serving as a sort of Prologue,<sup>2</sup> told by Calogrenant in first-person narration to a court audience (lines 173-578):<sup>3</sup>

- he starts out to seek adventure, finds the "right path," and after a hard journey, reaches the host's castle; (lines 173-223)
- he is attracted by the pretty daughter of the host; (lines 224-253)
- he ventures forth and is afraid of the wild bulls; (lines 275-285)
- he hesitates to approach the ugly peasant who tells Calogrenant to visit a certain fountain, where he would find a cool spring, a beautiful tree, an iron bowl, a slab of rock, and a small but lovely chapel; (lines 286-405)
- at noon, Calogrenant finds the place: he sees



- a mighty pine, a gold (not iron) basin, a bubbly spring, a huge emerald pierced with four rubies, but he ignores the chapel; (lines 408-429)
- despite the villain's warning, the pours water on the rock and is frightened by the storm it causes; (lines 430-448)
  - he listens with delight to birds in the pine; (lines 457-475)
  - he imagines ten knights galloping towards him, but only one fierce knight appears to challenge him for trespassing on his domain; (lines 476-535)
  - Calogrenant is defeated and loses his horse to the departing knight; (lines 536-543)
  - he returns to the friendly host and learns that he is the first to return alive from this adventure (lines 552-574)
  - thus after seven years, he admits his shame at King Arthur's court, which provides Yvain with a reason to avenge the honor of his family name.

The second episode begins in an elliptical manner. It is told by the poet-narrator in futur tense to indicate Yvain's firm intention to challenge the knight at the fountain (lines 695-715). This résumé of twenty lines shows not only an amazing contrast to epic narration where repetitions are only slightly varied, but in addition to its artistic economy, it provides psychological insight as well. Four lines are needed to reach the friendly host, seven lines are devoted to the lovely daughter, six to the villain and four to the storm. Emphasis is clearly on aspects that Yvain can readily imagine before his journey, rather than on the more mysterious elements of his quest. As Yvain finds the entrance to Brocéliande, he ponders (again in future tense) about the fountain (lines 771-774). Then,

- he is welcomed by the host and dazzled by the daughter's beauty (15 lines);

- he reflects upon nature's ability to create such ugly monsters as the villain (7 lines);
- he reaches the fountain and, without paying attention to any other detail, he unleashes the storm (7 lines);
- the birds sing on the pine tree (4 lines);
- the Red Knight appears and, without exchange of names or challenge, a battle ensues in which Yvain is the winner (66 lines);
- the wounded knight flees.

Thus, more than half of this third episode describes the battle. The changed focus indicates that the marvellous quality of the fountain no longer is the vital point, but merely a means to an end to set off the magic ritual of storm and challenging knight. For Calogrenant the fountain had been a blind adventure, but for Yvain, who has foreknowledge about the ritual, it is the battle that counts. He can thus reclaim the full honor of his name. His fight is presented in heroic proportions, told in lively and concrete terms, far less stylized than in epic confrontations. Yvain, with a Roland-like blow, splits his opponent's helmet and head. And with an epic disregard for this mortal blow, the defeated knight returns to his castle to die. Yvain, who needs proof of his victory, pursues Esclados to the castle where he falls in love with the slain's widow, Laudine. She needs a new defender of the fountain (see lines 1626, 1739, 1850 and 2036) and Yvain wins her for his wife with Lunete's help.

When King Arthur and his court arrive at the fountain (episode 4), there is no longer any mention of the host or the ugly villain. After a lengthy argument with Ké (44 lines) concerning Yvain, the King who has eyes only for the spring and the rock, pours water on the emerald (4 lines, including storm). What matters here is clearly the confrontation between Yvain and the slander-mouthed Ké. Yvain, unrecognized, defeats Ké, takes away

his horse, which, in a ritualistic gesture, he offers to King Arthur, as a parallel to Calogrenant's defeat which KÉ had mocked at court. Yvain then reveals his identity and invites everyone to Laudine's castle. Thus, in this central fountain episode, the fountain serves to call Yvain so that he may punish KÉ's slander and restore his family honor, name and reputation. The story up to this point represents the initial half of Yvain's double-quest<sup>4</sup> which fulfills the classic pattern of courtly love in Chrétien's romances, an easy victory followed by the greatest adventure.

When the fountain motif occurs for the fifth time, it helps to advance the plot as in the preceding episodes. However, this time the mood is elegiac. Yvain arrives at the fountain by pure chance. His eyes wander from the emerald to the chapel. He faints and falls, recovering just in time to prevent the lion's suicide. It is well known that fainting in medieval romances often implies death and resurrection to a new life, in courtly or Christian terms. Yvain's fall from grace because of his broken promise to Laudine must be expiated in a triple pattern of contrapasso.<sup>5</sup> While the fountain represents a melancholic reminder of his lost paradise, it is also the bridge to the next incident. In the Chapel, Yvain discovers Lunete who is imprisoned there because of him. He promises to be her champion the following day. There is obviously no point in challenging the fountain since Yvain does not feel that he has expiated his fault towards Laudine and the shame brought upon his own name.

The sixth episode still focuses on the Chapel which, this time, is being used for prayers by Lunete. A girl who seeks Yvain on behalf of the younger of two feuding sisters, finds Lunete at this point and is being helped by her to locate the "champion of extreme cases." We can see that Yvain, under a new name, has already established a great

reputation for his valor, equal to his former fame. The battle with Gawain must repair his reputation on a higher level than that at the time of his marriage, because the "adventures" on behalf of others in need have ameliorated both his concept of himself and his reputation in the service of humanity. Yvain contemplates a challenge of the fountain (lines 6523-30) and secretly returns to where he can communicate with Laudine who had forbidden him ever to appear before her again. Challenging the fountain (episode 7) Laudine will realize her need for help from the famous "Chevalier au lion," unaware that it is her husband. In this manner Yvain can respect her command and leave it to Lunete to arrange the details. The girl tricks Laudine into swearing that she would help to reconcile the knight with his lady and, although caught by this ruse, she must keep her promise, and the two lovers are reunited.

After this final episode, the fountain is no longer needed. All the seven fountain incidents concerned Yvain, either directly (four of them) or indirectly but closely linked to him. It is apparent with what amazing skill Chrétien has used each episode. The four challenges of the fountain not only helped the narrative progression, but also provided a moral reason connected with the reestablishment of Yvain's good name.

Chrétien's clever manipulation of the fountain motif contributes to avoid monotony and advances the story, suggesting levels of symbolic and allegorical nature. However, there remain questions for which there are no easy answers. For example, what does the fountain signify in relation to Laudine's castle? Beyond the communication aspect, e.g. to announce intruders to the property, we have no clue why this fateful spring burdens Laudine's domain. Normally in myths and fairy-tales, springs are benevolent symbols. Yet paradoxically, this fountain can ruin the countryside. Whenever it is



challenged, a storm devastates the land. The defending knight has no power to prevent or stop the storm, once unleashed. All he can and must do is to attack and kill the intruder who has learned the secret of the fountain. The well-being of the territory and its subjects depends upon his valor. The attacks seem like unlawful acts of undeclared war (see Esclados' sorrowful speech to Calogrenant); however, Chrétien presents these challenges as justifiable and even heroic deeds worthy of praise. To be sure, in contrast to Yvain's purposeful attack for restoring his name and honor, Calogrenant's challenge had been aimless and without concern for its consequences. He had followed the instructions of the villain who, although supposedly ignorant of what constitutes an "adventure," knew about the storm producing quality of the fountain. At first, his monosyllabic speech suggested a low-born peasant, unfamiliar with aristocratic life-style. He identified the objects at the fountain as common objects (iron cup instead of gold bowl, rock instead of emerald). However, his exquisite and detailed description of the clearing in the forest, and his insistence that Calogrenant not get lost, surpass the expressive possibilities of a mere peasant. In addition, he seems too eager for Calogrenant to reach the fountain. Would an ordinary peasant have revealed the secret of the fountain which destroys, as he says himself, all the animals in the forest, including presumably his bulls?

Such an ambiguous figure, within the fairy-tale atmosphere, is often part of a prevailing supernatural, if not demonic power.<sup>6</sup> Calogrenant was so eager for excitement that he never even questioned the wisdom of the ugly man's suggestions. Who then is this villain? Could it be that he is one and the same as the defending knight, in a dual role of the mysterious defender of the fountain? Both men are said to be endowed with unusual



strength. While the peasant is described as black as a moor, with a face that suggests an assortment of grotesque animals, Esclados is simply called "the red knight." Both black and red can be demonic colors.<sup>7</sup> This mysterious double identity may be confirmed by the fact that Yvain was the last one to see the villain and that after Esclados' death, there is no further mention of this peasant, or his bulls. The fountain may, therefore, be the symbol of ritualistic purification and of regeneration through which a new king of great valor will assume power. All the episodes served to eliminate unsuitable contenders. Even Yvain, whose valor was uncontested, had to undergo the second, and more difficult, trial to attain a higher moral consciousness.

Whatever interpretation one may want to give to Yvain as a whole, it seems clear that the fountain motif fulfills structural, artistic, and symbolic functions. The shifting focus in each of the seven episodes is more than mere poetic economy to avoid repetition.<sup>8</sup> It guides the audience to pay attention to what counts most in each incident. While the fountain is part of the magic world of make-believe (matière de Bretagne), it also serves as the necessary link of plot development by giving psychological motivation to the various adventures and by pointing to Yvain's moral evolution. This moral ascent, in which both the knight and his lady attain a higher level of courtly love, is ultimately the most essential aspect of true knighthood.

NELLY H. SEVERIN  
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, AUSTIN

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Jean Frappier, Chrétien de Troyes: homme et oeuvre (Paris, 1957), pp. 155-156, see in it "une sorte d'unité de lieu dans la variante du décor," as well as "un arrière-plan de féerie."

<sup>2</sup>Tony Hunt, "The Rhetorical Background to the Arthurian Prologue," Forum for Modern Language Studies VI (January, 1970), pp. 10-15, elaborates on the rhetorical skill and purpose of this unusual introduction section.

<sup>3</sup>Chrétien de Troyes, Yvain, ou le chevalier au lion (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968): all references to the text will be from this edition.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Z. P. Zaddy, "The Structure of Chrétien's Yvain," MLR 65 (July, 1970), pp. 523-537, who sees the structure as a combination of bi-partite and tri-partite forms.

<sup>5</sup>Norris J. Lacy, "Organic Structure of Yvain's Expiation," Romanic Review 61 (1970), pp. 79-84, explains the triple pattern of contrapasso as the meaningful expiation that leads to the hero's moral ascent: three times he promises to save someone in distress and each time another adventure intervenes which must be brought to a satisfactory conclusion before the deadline of the other promise expires.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Joseph Campbell, The Hero of a Thousand Faces (New York, 1949), passim, where "old man figures" confront the hero early in his quest to give good or bad advice, which the hero can follow or ignore.

<sup>7</sup>J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols (London,

1962), pp. 50-57 on color symbolism. Cf. Edmund Reiss, "Symbolic Detail in Medieval Narrative: Floris and Blancheflour," Papers on Language and Literature IV (Fall, 1971), p. 341.

<sup>8</sup>Daniel M. Murtaugh, "Oïr et entendre: Figuralism and Narrative Structure in Chrétien's Yvain," Romanic Review 64 (1973), pp. 161-174, sees in the repeated narrative patterns "prefigurations and acted-out metaphors of the mystery of love."