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IRONY AS COURTLY POETIC TRUTH IN
LA CHATELAINE DE VERGY

It is the contention of this article that irony is the informing literary technical device of *La Châtelaine de Vergy* and that, through the hidden polemics of its irony, this tragic courtly romance covertly expresses controversial and significant sociological and literary views which constitute its poetic truth. Therefore, this paper will offer in brief the first analysis of the abundant irony in *La Châtelaine*, with the aims of advancing critical understanding and appreciation of the literary nature of this courtly text and providing one further example of the presence and importance of irony in thirteenth-century French courtly narrative poetry. Our investigation will proceed in the following manner: first, a survey of the diverse forms of irony in *La Châtelaine* — namely, dramatic irony, verbal irony, structural irony, and irony of values —, with selective examples, will demonstrate their presence and their workings in the text; second, exploration of the probable reasons for the choice of irony as literary vehicle in such a courtly romance will suggest a hypothesis regarding the discrepancy between our story's explicit moral of secrecy expressed in the epilogue and the narrative's meaning as revealed in its plot and tragic resolution; and, finally, discussion of the concealed ironic message will explain how it not only relativizes contemporary courtly values and rules, but also how that message subtly vindicates both courtly poetic diction as a powerful mode of verbal expression and verse fiction as a purveyor of the truth.

As we begin our survey, I must acknowledge, in matter of technical theory, a substantial debt to D. H. Green's book, *Irony in the Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, 1979), a landmark work, which, while it concentrates in its examples on medieval German texts (Green being a Germanist), nonetheless maintains a comparative perspective and invites application of its views to the other vernacular traditions¹ and to texts such as *La Châtelaine*, of which Green himself makes no mention.

The first type of irony we shall consider, dramatic irony, is "the sense of discrepancy felt by an audience in [the] face of a character acting in ignorance of his situation," and it is comprised of three factors: first, a tension within the narrative between one character and another, or between one character and circumstances; second, at least one character's ignorance of his real situation; and, lastly, the reader's awareness of

1. D. H. Green, *Irony in the Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 11-12.

the real situation and of the character's ignorance.² It does not surprise us to find this essentially theatrical form of irony in *La Châtelaine*, a romance characterized by strong dramaturgical elements, from its sensational plot of adultery, betrayal, vengeance, heartbreak, and murder, to the enclosed settings of court, garden, and boudoir, to the successive dialogues and the pathetic tirade of the chastelaine's closing monologue.

La Châtelaine is predisposed toward dramatic irony by its theme of illicit love which "governs almost the whole narrative in such cases," making dramatic irony "coterminous with most of the plot."³ It provides the vital element of tension in the story, which constitutes the first step toward placing the reader in a position of superiority, since the deceitful lovers are at odds, not only with the deceived husband and with society, but with each other. For, as Whitehead has suggested, the very need for and existence of a pledge implies a latent tension between the parties.⁴ Besides this overall tension, the strain is localized episodically in the pitting of duchess against knight, knight against duke, duke against duchess, and duchess against chastelaine, as — in the manner typical of thirteenth-century courtly romance — the combat is psychological and verbal, though it degenerates in *La Châtelaine* into physical violence when the duke slays his wife. The characters find themselves at variance with a power as well, which appears as forceful as destiny itself: namely, the constraints of their social milieu. Finally, there is the tension of individual characters at loggerheads with circumstance: for example, the knight finding himself first in the nasty position of being pursued by his lord's lady (wherein he must either betray his lord or insult the lady), then in the equally unenviable dilemma of either perjury and banishment or breaking his vow of secrecy.

The fundamental ignorance (so to speak) in *La Châtelaine* is not only that of everyone except the lovers and the reader about the love affair, but also that of the lovers themselves about the impending betrayals and disaster, as they share their idyllic trysts, whereas the reader has been informed since the prologue. Beyond this, dramatic irony is achieved throughout the text by a variety of means which point up a character's benightedness and ensure the reader's knowledge.⁵ First, the chain of private conversations, or "*scènes à deux*," as Whitehead calls them,⁶ constantly reveals the discrepancy between information and events divulged to us in the past and what is claimed and done in the present. Thus, the chain begins with a scene of mutual ignorance between the duchess and the knight: the duchess makes an overture to him, not knowing that he

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 250-1.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 253.

4. F. Whitehead, ed., *La Chastelaine de Vergi* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), pp. xxv ff.

5. For Green's discussion of the means to be discussed, see *op. cit.*, pp. 263, 272-3, 277.

6. F. Whitehead, *op. cit.*, p. xxxi.

has a lover, and the knight has long been ignorant of the duchess' feelings, despite her liberal shows of interest, because his heart and attention have been elsewhere. The duke is ignorant of his wife's vengeful lies about the knight's conduct because, unlike us, he was not privy to the preceding scene, so he gives heed to her story and unjustly accuses the knight; and so on.

This technique of the dramatically ironic chain of scenes which reveal discrepancies between characters' ideas and transpired events and facts obviously depends for its realization upon structural irony, which we shall soon examine further. It is also strengthened by explicative narration, which acts almost as commentary, by acquainting us with essential facts, such as the duchess' intent to pretend anger at the duke so that he will tell her the secret: "en son cuer engin porpense . . ." (v. 558; all quotes will be from the Whitehead edition). Interlace of narrative strands conveying simultaneous threads of action may also show up dramatic irony, as when the action switches from the *garderobe*, where the chastelaine has just expired of a broken heart, to the dance scene, where the knight is having a fine time, but is beginning to wonder where she is. Irony of events emphasizes dramatic irony: for example, the lyrical depiction of the lovers' joy heightens the irony of their ignorance of the impending doom, and the duchess' protests against the duke's lack of faith in her double the outrage of her duplicity. Finally, repeated use of the verbs *croire*, *savoir*, and *cuidier* articulate the discrepancies between characters' beliefs and reality. This device is first introduced in the prologue to express dramatic irony augmented by irony of events:

quar, tant com l'amor est plus grant, 11
sont plus mari li fin amant
quant li uns d'aus de l'autre *croit*⁷
qu'il ait dit ce que celer doit;

And it recurs in the narration, *e.g.*:

car bien *cuidoit* por voir savoir 213
que sa fame li *deïst* voir, . . .

Abundant use of the imperfect subjunctive also signals the frequently contrary-to-fact nature of personages' beliefs about circumstances, their speculative approach to reality, and the continual thwarting of their expectations. The chastelaine repines:

Je *cuidoie* que plus loiaus 758
me *fussiez*, se Dieus me conseut,
que ne *fust* Tristans a Yseut; . . .

This also serves to illustrate how closely interwoven are the effects of dramatic irony with those of verbal irony, our next category of discussion.

7. Italics are mine throughout.

Although "all literary irony may be said to be verbal," let us, with Green, understand verbal irony to be small-scale cases of discrepancy between a statement and its context, owing to word choice, and let us consider such instances in *La Châtelaine* as exemplify the categories of ambiguity, inversion, and ironic word order or juxtaposition.⁸

Ambiguity is the most prevalent form of verbal irony in *La Châtelaine*, as it may well be in all of courtly literature, since it constitutes an evasion of committed speech, by semantic ambivalence, which fulfills the demands of courtly etiquette. Courtly diction is the means and social convention the incentive for this fundamentally indirect mode of speech, which does not always result in irony, but provides abundant opportunities for it. A prime example is the dialogue between the duchess and the knight, where the dictates of guile, discretion, etiquette, and pride are all at work. The duchess keeps her remarks prudently hypothetical and only subtly coercive, as she propositions the knight:

-Par foi, dist ele, longue atente 68
vous porroit nuire, ce m'est vis:
si lo que vous soiez amis
en un haut leu, se vous veez
que vous i soiez bien amez . . .
 Dites moi se vous savez ore 84
se je vous ai m'amor donee, . . .

And the knight is careful to *interpret* her words hypothetically and to deny any such knowledge, so that he can imply disapproval by merely expressing his own honorable intentions, which contrast sharply, as he intends them to, with her own scheme:

"Ma dame, *je ne le sai pas;* 88
mes je voudroie vostre amor
avoir par bien et par honor.

Thus, both have reserved themselves a retreat: she can feign indignation and deny the veiled charge:

-Fi! fet cele qui fu marie, 99
dans musars, et qui vous en prie?

And he can deny that he made it:

-Ha! ma dame, por Dieu merci, 101
bien la sai, mes tant vous en di." [sic]

Inversion will find the speaker expressing a view or feeling opposed to the real state of affairs, either consciously or unconsciously. Thus, conscious inversion is well represented by the wily duchess claiming, in introduction to her own fabrication of the knight's importunity:

"Certes, dist ele, j'ai duel grant 114

8. D. H. Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 171-3, 184-5, 199-200.

de ce que ne set nus houz hom
 qui foi li porte ne qui non,
 mes plus de bien et d'onor font
 a ceus qui lor trahitor sont,
 et si ne s'en aperçoit nus.

The duke's reply is a fine specimen of unconscious inversion:

-Par foi, dame, fet soi li dus, 120
je ne sai por quoi vous le dites;
mes de tel chose sui je quites,
 qu'a nul fuer je ne norriroie
 trahitor, *se je le savoie.*

The duchess' retort exemplifies irony of juxtaposition and word order:

-*Haez donc*, dist ele, celui 125
 (sel nomma) qui ne fina hui
 de moi proier au lonc du jor . . .

The brazen invitation, "Hate then," underscores what he does not know: namely, that the real traitor is before him, but it is quickly concealed by the shocking revelation of the knight's alleged misconduct.

We shall close our selective look at verbal irony in *La Châtelaine* with what is possibly its most poignant instance of unconscious inversion. At the dance, when the knight, unaware of the chastelaine's demise, inquires of the duke as to her whereabouts, he intends levity with the words:

"Sire, qu'est ce que vostre niece 847
 est demoree si grant piece
 que n'est aus caroles venue?
Ne sai se l'avez mise en mue."

Of course, the cruel, macabre joke is on him, because he unwittingly speaks the truth: his lover is in the eternal prison of death.

Unlike verbal irony's contrast of a statement and its context, structural irony is revealed in the contrast between an ironic statement and another context, informing the relationship between two characters or two scenes, or both. Thus, a scene presented as an entity, with its own apparent meaning, may take on retrospectively a very different coloration or at least added implications by association with another scene, either juxtaposed to it or separated in the narration. Scenes may be strung together "so that one produces the material of the next, but with an ironic relationship between each pair of scenes in that the second shows an unsuspected aspect of its predecessor, turns it around and calls earlier assumptions into question."⁹ We have already discussed the effect of dramatic irony produced by this type of chain of *scènes à deux* in

9. *Ibid.*; pp. 326, 348, 350.

La Châtelaine. To recognize the chain reaction of structural irony in these juxtaposed dialogues, we have only to note that the duchess talking to the knight claims to love him, but in the very next scene of the spurned duchess lying to the duke, she betrays the knight, and she prepares the next scene by emphasizing the knight's apparently not loving elsewhere. The duke talking to the knight discovers that the knight *does* claim to love elsewhere; thus, the knight is not unfaithful to the duke, but he is to his lady. And, for that reason, we feel the irony of the idyllic love tryst both because of the preceding scene and because of our knowledge that the duke is hiding and spying. The duke, in the very next scene, tells the duchess he knows something, and, in the scene following that, tells her the secret, though he had sworn not to on his feudal oath to the knight (v. 332-9) and under penalty of having all his teeth pulled out (v. 321-2). . . . And so it goes, each scene in turn revealing the pathetic inevitability of lies told and oaths broken, in a way which equally ineluctably illuminates the relativity of the values underlying those oaths. Particularly enlightening in this manner are the separate, mirror-image scenes of the knight betraying his lady (his love) by telling the duke (his feudal lord), and the duke betraying the knight (his vassal) in order to tell the duchess (his love).

While irony of values can be connected with structural irony, as we have just seen, in *La Châtelaine*, as in most texts, it is most often associated with verbal irony. And it is through irony of values in verbal irony, the final category of our survey, that we shall begin to see most clearly what the anonymous *Châtelaine* poet's intention really was. For irony of values in this text questions not only the dubious nature of courtly reputation and externals, but also the antinomies of the courtly system, and the very concept of courtesy itself.¹⁰

From the outset, the narration subtly places in question any positive relationship between social standing and real goodness or happiness. In the dialogue between the duchess and the knight, she maintains that he deserves an eminent lady friend and would thus gain honor and advantage. Yet she adds that delay could *harm* him, a remark which slyly intimates the real reason he should do it: because this lady of eminence has power, and can as easily harm him if he does not cooperate. We recall as well the knight's covert criticism, when the duchess says, "Tell me if you know if I, a great and honored lady, have given you my love" (vv. 84-6), and he replies that he would like to have her love with merit and honor, but would never engage in an affair that would disgrace his lord and hers (vv. 89-93). The repetition of the words *honoree* and *honor* expose ironically the fact that this honored lady is proposing something quite dishonorable.

The pendant to this episode, much later, is found in the dialogue

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 287, 291, 301-2.

between the duchess and the chastelaine, and it is ironic on several levels. A close look at these verses reveals the significance of the placement of this message in the scene of the ladies' elaborate toilet in preparation for the dance. When the duchess tells the chastelaine to be very elegant, since she has a handsome and worthy gentleman friend, the chastelaine responds:

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“Je ne sai quel acointement
vous pensez, madame, por voir,
que talent n'ai d'ami avoir
qui ne soit del tout *a l'onor*
et de moi et de mon signor.

To which the duchess sweetly retorts:

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-Je l'otroi bien, dist la duchesse,
mais vous estes *bone mestresse*,
qui avez apris le mestier
du petit chienet afetier.”

First, the duchess, we know, feels that the knight should love someone more distinguished: namely, herself; thus, she means considerable veiled sarcasm when she advises the chastelaine to beautify herself for her worthy friend. Second, the chastelaine, as the knight did, protests that she has only honorable friendships, yet we know this to be untrue. This also underscores, thirdly, the deceptive nature of physical beauty, as well as the vanity of a society that attaches so much importance to elegance of outward appearance; for, however elegant the chastelaine may make herself, she is an adulteress. Moreover, the barbed *double entendre* on the word *mestresse* further suggests that whatever mental faculties the chastelaine possesses are also used for cheating — a criticism which is doubly ironic, coming from the duchess.

Irony relativizing courtesy itself is best illustrated by the quandary between courtesy and loyalty faced by the knight in his conversation with the duchess. He must be both discourteous and uncourtly to her, in order to be faithful to his lord. Exemplifying ironization of the antinomies of the system are the mirror-image scenes: the knight must betray his lover to be true to his lord, and the duke must betray his vassal and friend to be true to his wife. The characters constantly prevaricate, make vows, break them, and accuse each other of improper behavior, but no one is innocent. And beyond doubt, the most exquisite turn of the screw is the last: that the only promise kept in the entire romance is the duke's vow to slay the duchess, which (or whom) he faithfully executes in the presence of the entire court.

This brings us to the crux of the knight's dilemma and the moral of the story. For the knight's dilemma would *not* have been successfully resolved with secrecy, by keeping his vow: that would have meant ban-

ishment and separation from his lover. Yet the moral in the epilogue reads as follows:

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Et par cest exemple doit l'en
 s'amor *celer* par si grant sen
 c'on ait toz jors en remembrance
 que li *descouvris* riens n'avance
 et li *celers* en toz poins vaut.
 Qui si le fet ne crient assaut
 des faus felons enqueereors
 qui enquierent autrui amors.

It is this apparent discrepancy between the story's explicit moral and its plot which has led critics to state that the story implies a tension in the courtly system, in Whitehead's words, "contrary to the author's real intentions," and to discuss "what the poet was obviously trying to do": namely, "to find a concrete embodiment for the theme of courtly loyalty, treated along idealistic lines," in contrast with what *La Châtelaine* turned out to be: "The poem is, in fact, simply the tale of a great love followed by a great betrayal. . . . The narrative is of course handled in such a way as to conceal the radical contradiction in the theme . . ." ¹¹ Similarly, Pál Lakits, in his monograph, *La Châtelaine de Vergi et l'évolution de la nouvelle courtoise*, asserts the following:

L'auteur de la *Châtelaine* ne paraît pas être conscient de la signification historique du conflit qui forme le sujet principal de son conte. . . .

. . . la moralité exprimée et le sens authentique se contredisent. C'est un moment capital de l'évolution: la nouvelle déborde les cadres d'une structure déterminée par le "réalisme" médiéval.

. . . Ainsi l'interprétation morale donnée par l'auteur se complète d'une "sénéfiance" involontaire. . . . sur le récit de la violation d'une règle de la courtoisie, se projette l'ombre d'une tragédie historique. ¹²

In the light of our survey of irony in this text, it seems unlikely that a poem evidencing such an accumulation of ironic forms, arranged with such mathematical precision, could have been an accident. Rather than suggesting that the poet somehow allowed his story to "get away from him," this data demonstrates a high degree of narrative craftsmanship, refinement, and a firmly directed intent. Thus, accepting *La Châtelaine* as purposefully ironic, we must seek the probable reasons for the choice of irony as literary vehicle in our romance, in order to find an alternative hypothesis regarding its seemingly incongruous moral.

We recall *La Châtelaine's* approximative dating between 1203 and 1288, ¹³ which situates this poem squarely in the period of social and

11. F. Whitehead, *op. cit.*, pp. xxv, xlii.

12. Pál Lakits, *La Châtelaine de Vergi et l'évolution de la nouvelle courtoise*, *Studia Romanica*, Series Litteraria, fasc. II (Debrecen: Kossuth Lajos Tudományegyetem, 1966), pp. 58, 62-3, 67.

13. F. Whitehead, *op. cit.*, pp. ix ff.

intellectual flux in France, associated with the triumph of Scholasticism, the rise of the university, the establishment of the mendicant orders, and the defense of the Church against the Cathar heresy. In this climate of philosophical and theological concern for the truth in telling, the writer of vernacular courtly verse romances found the value of his art constantly called into question, and the tensions and demands he faced a threat to survival. He was neither a knight nor an ecclesiastic, but a *cleric*, and, thus, an intellectual outsider to both court and Church. The courtly poet nonetheless depended upon court patronage as well as Church approval, and, therefore, while he stood at the proper distance for critical scrutiny of court life, and felt resentment ample to inspire a negative view, yet for the sake of material security, he prudently restrained his self-expression. The successful courtly romance must be entertaining, arresting, and true-to-life; but, to parry the attacks of the Church, it must offer the truth value of a serious moral message. It must not trespass against the dictates of courtly life; yet, to please the poet himself, it must not be unfaithful to his own perspective and must accentuate the misappreciated worth of fictional literature. If these historic exigencies supplied the incentive for irony, then courtly expression provided the manner. For the obliqueness of the ironic mode is eminently compatible with the gracious indirection and ambiguous niceties of polite discourse.¹⁴

We can now return to the epilogue of *La Châtelaine* and read its moral aright. Let us understand *amor* metaphorically as that which one values most highly. Thus, "from this example, one should conceal one's love so shrewdly that one remembers *always* that disclosure advances *nothing* and keeping a secret is worthwhile *at all times*. He who does so doesn't fear any attack from cruel and treacherous snoopers who pry into the loves of others." Working in the same way as irony does throughout the text, this statement, vis-à-vis the story's resolution, presents a discrepancy which the reader can only accept as unintentional if he accepts an obvious untruth: that the author does not know what he is doing. The alternative is the ironic message: that the one doing the concealing, through the subtleties of irony, is none other than the author, and that he does so to guard against the attacks of detractors and the censure of patrons upon whom he depends.

So Lakits actually pays a great compliment to the *Châtelaine* poet when he says that the poem overflows its bounds to take on a life of its own. This is what an artful job of concealment its author did: the criticism of courtly life he offers is so plain as to be unmistakable, yet so subtle as to allow the reader to "catch on" to it as something which appears to be an emanation of the narrative which the poet himself missed — were it not

14. D. H. Green, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

for the moral. The reader is discreetly urged to see that there is sometimes more than meets the eye in poetry, as in life.

Such use of irony in thirteenth-century courtly narrative was endemic, and it bids us read with care. But the special feature of *La Châtelaine* is its exploitation of tragic irony to tell — through the examples of both its plot and its own composition — the truth about the inconsistencies and artificiality, about *the fiction* (if you will) of courtly life; the truth about courtly diction: namely, its perennial charm and power to influence thought and action; and, finally, the truth about courtly verse fiction: that its poetry sometimes furtively betrays its patrons to tell its own truth.