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The Structure of Interlace in Chrétien's *Cligès*

Katie Greenock

It has been said that genre is a sprawling literary inclusion that defies definition. Although there are no hard and fast rules for categorization, it is possible to find conventions shared by a group of works, and while these are generally subjective, this is commonly how a work finds its generic "affiliation" (Fowler 265). Within the genre of romance, there are multiple examples of narratives that use interpolated or interwoven tales to create a cohesive narrative by their insertion in a larger plot or their connection to a series of shorter tales. The relation of disparate tales to one another, with a particular focus on the central inserted tale, serves to create a narrative that presents itself more in terms of its layered nuances than its homogenous unity. Not all authors of romances had the same aim in mind when adopting this convention of a seemingly fractured narrative, but the examination of structure can be a useful tool in analyzing the genre of romance; particularly in terms of how structure developed within the genre, especially the earliest medieval romances, and the ways in which critics later categorized these methods of insertion as structural devices and narrative impetuses.

According to Eugène Vinaver in *The Rise of Romance*, Chrétien de Troyes' poetry illustrates that "the purpose of poetic composition as he saw it was to give meaning and coherence to amorphous matter" (68). This method of cohesive construction that eventually became integral to the Arthurian cycle of romances is called the Poetry of Interlace, which Vinaver defines as "the device of interweaving a number of separate themes" in such a way that "amplification was a horizontal rather than a vertical extension – an expansion or an unrolling of a number of interlocked themes" (71, 75). The interlaced text can be looked at as a whole, like a tapestry or weaving, but it also contains endless interrelated parts and can be expanded upon in all directions.

In this way, Vinaver's theory serves to explain the presence of "digressions" and "diversions" in medieval texts, but it also can be seen as a mode of structuring a poem in order to allow for disparate elements to relate in a significant manner while maintaining a unity of narrative (75). In other words, the reason

that poems like *Cligès* can contain everything from battle scenes to a multiplicity of love stories is because of this concept of interlace proper [which] consists of threads superimposed upon one another in such a way as to make it impossible to separate them . . . the onlooker's eye does not . . . travel along each thread, but moves either horizontally or vertically – or both – embracing all the threads as they come within the field of vision. (78)

Vinaver, by this theory, suggests that the components of a romance like *Cligès* are inextricable, but work in this relationship to create a text that allows the reader to see the linear structure of the narrative as one complicated by its extension infinitely in all directions. What's more, the disparate parts of the narrative stand in relation to one another in a way that paradoxically clarifies the overall structure of the piece by its implicit complications. According to Vinaver, it is debatable whether or not the idea of the poetry of interlace makes a narrative more like Nature, with its infinite reach in all directions. He does suggest that Aristotle's notion of a template text with a beginning, middle, and end must surely not be the only way for an author to compose a narrative of merit that readers can decipher (73). He resolves this debate in a sense by saying, "[art] is different from nature in that potentially it still is whatever it has been" (98). This applies particularly to the poetry of interlace, in that it extends a seemingly chronological narrative while retaining perceptible links between plots of the past, present, and future.

Chrétien's *Cligès* can be seen as an example of the poetry of interlace. The poem begins by relating the tale of Alexander and Sordamour, the parents of the titular character. In fact, the first 2,367 lines of the poem concentrate on the laborious courtship that led to *Cligès*' conception. Beginning the poem in this way leads the reader to some obvious questions, the least of which is why Chrétien saw the courtship of *Cligès*' parents as such an integral part of *Cligès*' tale. If *Cligès* exemplifies Vinaver's interlace theory as presented in *The Rise of Romance*, Chrétien intentionally placed the two parts of the tale in relation to one another, which makes the parallels between them an act of construction meant to suggest the interconnected nature of a more boundless sense of linear structure and an overarching narrative theme.

The opening of the poem is a narrowing, in a sense. Chrétien begins by outlining the other poems he has written, placing *Cligès* in a bibliographical context. He then tells the tale of how he “found [the story] on the shelves / Of the Holy Church of Saint Peter / At Beauvais, written in a book,” which puts the story in the context of all literary history while simultaneously singling it out as worthy of retelling (19-21). In order to establish the relevance of the tale to his French contemporaries, Chrétien elaborates on how

Ancient learning, like knighthood,
Passed from Greece to Rome,
And has reappeared, now,
In France. (33 – 36)

There is a purpose to this movement besides Chrétien’s desire to emphasize the *translatio studii*, or movement of culture and learning from Greece and Rome to France (Haidu 63). This is a quick move to specificity, and it is clear that Chrétien has a narrative destination in mind. He mentions “the powerful ruler / Of both Greece and Constantinople” and his family, only to discount them that much more quickly:

I’ve nothing much to say
Of Empress Tantalus,
Or her husband, or her younger son.
It’s Alexander I’ll deal with. (48-49, 61-64)

This move effectively narrows the scope from all of intellectual history and cultural lore to the tale of one specific member of the Greek royal family, and indicates that Chrétien’s focus on Alexander is intentional and significant. This, in turn, leads the reader to be cognizant of a focus on Alexander, and to question the significance of this character in a narrative titled *Cligès*.

Set in relationship with each other, the lives of Alexander and Cligès have some surface-level parallels. Going back to Vinaver’s theory, it would seem that these parallels are a way of distinguishing the text’s construction as more interrelated than just a template of a prologue and story proper. Although Alexander’s story precedes Cligès’ both chronologically and textually, the similarities between the two tales link them across the boundaries of linear progression. According to Peter Haidu, although *Cligès* is a tale of parallels, the most important parallel is that of the generations that provides the narrative with “the structure of the

work, which separates into the stories of Alexander and his son Cligès" (64). Yet it is most significant that Chrétien did not necessarily set up the story as a parallel from the outset, leaving the reader to deduce the connection of parallels between Alexander and his son as the narrative progresses.

Chrétien introduces Alexander as "A man so brave and bold / He had no interest in becoming / A knight in his own country," which was presumably an unusual stance for a son of royalty in a time when knighthood was a significant position in the monarchical order (Chrétien 65-67). When Alexander tells his father, the emperor Alexander, about his intentions to pledge his services to King Arthur's court, his father tells Alexander that

I'll have you crowned tomorrow,
And tomorrow you'll be a knight.
The whole of Greece will lie
In your hand, and all our barons,
As in duty they must, will vow
To serve and obey you. (126-33)

Alexander's father does not want him to leave home or, presumably, to serve another king. After Alexander asserts that "No one can dissuade me," his father relents in his persuasions (147). This is significant not just in that Alexander has realized his intentions to fight under King Arthur, it also establishes an example for Cligès to follow. Although Alexander does not live to see his son reach the age of knighthood, he tells him

My dear Cligès, you'll never
Know how much you're worth –
In strength or courage or virtue –
until you've tested yourself
At King Arthur's court. (2586-90)

Cligès does in fact "decide to seek his uncle's permission to leave / Constantinople and Alis's / Court and travel to Britain," which further emphasizes the parallel between his life and his father's, particularly because his uncle Alis at first plays the role of the elder emperor Alexander and refuses to let Cligès go (4201-03). The fact that both Alexander and Cligès "leave their home and regent to gain knighthood" is perhaps their most basic similarity (Haidu 64). It is also perhaps the one that most clearly indicates to the reader that the two men represent parallel threads in the tapestry of the narrative.

Before Alexander departs from Constantinople, his father advises him to “always be open- / Handed, nobly generous, / And always be pleasant” (Chrétien 184-86). Throughout both the tales of Alexander and Cligès, Chrétien is careful to “remark that they do observe the proper rule of etiquette” (Haidu 65). Although the reader might not notice the theme of etiquette and propriety running through Alexander’s portion of the lyric, Cligès is described in his first introduction as “lovely / And prudent, generous and strong,” language that echoes the emperor’s description of how Alexander should behave as the representation of a noble, or in this case monarchical, knight (Chrétien 2767-68). This archetype of what a knight should be, coupled with the idealized physical description of each man, places them in the same heroic role within their particular tale. If Alexander and Cligès are effectively the same archetype in their respective section of the narrative, then they are parallel characters within the tradition of medieval narratives as well as parallel characters within the poem.

While Cligès and his father are firmly established as parallel characters, the purpose of the structure of their tales is still unclear, even to readers who make the connection of father-son similarities. To understand why Chrétien sets the two parts of the poem in relation to one another, the reader must understand the context and aim of the two tales. The first part of the narrative outlines the painfully prolonged courtship of Alexander and Sordamour, while the second part of the narrative exposits the trouble-rife and forbidden love between Cligès and Fenice, the young bride of his uncle, the emperor Alis. In setting up the character of Alexander and Cligès as parallel, Chrétien lays the foundation for the comparison of the two sets of lovers, whose tormented pangs of desire and respective courtships make up the crux of both Alexander and Cligès’ narratives.

There has been much critical debate about whether or not Chrétien intended to portray a specific message about romantic love in his depiction of the two courtships in *Cligès*. While some believe that Alexander and Sordamour’s union is an example of the perfect marriage that their son fails to achieve, others think that Chrétien wanted to portray Cligès and Fenice as ideal lovers who could have had a seamless pairing in the right circumstances (Discenza 23). Still others feel that the juxtaposition of the two

romances, especially since they differ circumstantially, serves primarily to emphasize the importance of natural love in a successful marriage. In Chrétien's time, this would have directly contradicted existing sentiments about the idea of a romantic love, as opposed to the commonly accepted chivalric arranged marriage. Nicole Guenther Discenza thinks that Chrétien meant for readers to "compare each aspect of the two couples, note how each succeeds and fails, and take from the romance not a single model but a more nuanced appreciation of excellence and flaws" (21).

Therefore, to even begin to approach the reasons Chrétien might have had for setting the two couples in relation to one another, a reader must investigate the similarities between the lovers and their respective courtships. If *Cligès* is to be read as an example of the poetry of interlace, it would follow that the two love stories it contains are a major element of structure. However, if both stories were working to achieve the same thematic or moralistic aim, the element of interlace would be strengthened, as the stories would have to be taken out of their chronological context in the narrative and analyzed together.

When Sordamour first sees Alexander,
She accused her eyes of treason,
Saying, "Sight, you've betrayed me,
Escorting enemy invaders
To my heart." (Chrétien 471-74)

Her immediate relation of love to sight is a significant one, for in late medieval literature . . . [Cupid's] arrow does not always proceed directly to the heart, but strikes the lover first in the eyes. This bizarre trajectory becomes more comprehensible when we realize that the poets have associated the arrow of Love with either the glance of the image of the beloved, which enters through the lover's eyes but pierces deep within. (Stewart 13)

Inasmuch as the idea of love attacking the eyes is a conventional move, it places Chrétien's tale in the context of its contemporary works and forms a poetry of interlace web. In fact, *Cligès'* notoriously subjective narrator goes on to explain Sordamour's pangs, saying "But all lovers are forever / Feeding love with their eyes, / When they can't do more than look" (Chrétien 589-591). Thus, the link between sight and love is firmly established as a

literary and textual convention within both the genre and the text itself.

Just as Sordamour attempts to “foil Love’s efforts by simply refusing to look at Alexander,” Alexander meditates on the “paradox that of the arrow that reached his heart without leaving a visible sign . . . by proposing an even more difficult paradox: ‘the arrow pierced his eyes!’” (Stewart 35-36, Haidu 60). Alexander’s monologue makes explicit the link between Cupid’s arrow, the eyes, and the heart where Sordamour’s claims of optical treason only implicitly linked a wound to her sorrows. In this lengthy discourse, Alexander questions the logic of his assumptions while reasoning out the “pain or sickness he feels within” (Stewart 36). Alexander wonders

“Where are you wounded?” In the eye.

“In the eye? And you’re still alive?”

It’s not the eye that was hurt,

But the heart: that’s where it went. (Chrétien 695-99)

Alexander then formulates a series of similes to explain his sufferings, since the idea of Cupid’s arrow no longer seems to be serviceable. First, he equates his heart to a candle and his body to a lantern, in that “as long as the candle / Burns, the lantern keeps off / The dark” (717-19). Finding this comparison unsatisfactory, since his heart does not feel as though it were giving off light, Alexander moves to a comparison of light and mirrors, saying

. . . Glass

Is exactly the same: no matter

How strong it may be, the sun’s

Rays can always pierce it. (721-24)

He finds this figurative example more to his liking, since he can account for the fact that

But whatever shines in the mirror

And pleases it most can also

Betray it, unless it’s careful

My eyes have been deceived,

For what my heart saw

In their mirror was a light that brought me

Darkness, and now it’s inside me,

And it’s making my heart fail me. (739-46)

This unifies Sordamour’s idea of bodily treason with Alexander’s literalized metaphor of the arrow of love, in that he builds upon

this idea of an arrow piercing his eyes in order to explain more scientifically how his sight could have made him vulnerable to love's attack.

Dana Stewart suggests that Alexander's literal acceptance of the arrow of love piercing his eyes is a source of humor in this portion of the poem (37). Yet, she questions then the serious inquiry brought up by his scientific analysis of the function of sight and the sickness he believes to be plaguing his heart (38-40). This may suggest that these metaphors are included to lend validity to the otherwise slightly ridiculous claim that an arrow could pierce the eyes without harming them and proceed straight through the body to the heart. If the reader does not accept the medieval or traditional perceptions of Cupid and his arrows, they can at least appreciate and validate the sufferings of Alexander and Sordamour that lead them to formulate elaborate explanations for their amorous wasting-disease.

Another observation of apparent significance in the relationship of Alexander and Sordamour is the fact that although both condemn their eyes and hearts as traitors and tormentors, the move to anger at their sight seems to be a sensory misappropriation. The real problem is that neither of the lovers can speak to the other. When Sordamour sees Alexander wearing the shirt she sewed, she longs to tell him, but "couldn't / Find the first words" (1382-83). Later, when the queen calls Sordamour and Alexander into her presence because she has sensed their love, Alexander "breathed but could not speak" in such proximity to his love (1581). Although their love might have been fueled by glimpses of each other, their torment was prolonged more by the sensory block that kept them silent.

Since sight and the concept of Cupid's optically wounding arrows were so stressed in the prolonged courtship of Alexander and Sordamour, it follows that any mention of sight in the later love narrative of Cligès and Fenice would be both noticeable and significant. Yet while "Alexander and Sordamour are each afraid to acknowledge love and keep it completely secret from each other to their own detriment . . . Cligès and Fenice hide the relationship from everyone but themselves" (Discenza 23). Thus, it follows that the role of sight in the latter courtship will also fulfill a different function, as it will likely not be blamed for the pangs that the lack of communication incurs.

When Cligès first encounters Fenice, he is struck by her beauty in much the same way that his father was struck by his mother's. However, Cligès and Fenice were instantly aware of their mutual attraction, and "[t]heir hearts followed their eyes / In a silent exchange of vows" (Chrétien 2798-99). This is in direct contrast to Cupid's arrow, which traveled from the eyes to the heart, according to Alexander and Sordamour. From their meeting, Cligès and Fenice were, at least on a visual level, aware of their secret and forbidden passions and communed using the same lines of sight that prolonged and intensified the torment of Cligès' parents. Later, after defeating the Saxons and winning Fenice as his uncle's bride, Cligès turns to Fenice, and at first the couple is afraid to speak to one another because "Their eyes admitted everything" (3815). In the case of Cligès and Fenice, their reluctance to speak was not a fear of rejection, but a fear of actualizing their forbidden love and being compared to Tristan and Iseult (5296). Thus, their eyes are not channels for a tormenting love waiting to be discovered in the other, but for a shameful love that they almost dread to find mirrored.

Another direct departure from the characterization of love and sight established in Alexander and Sordamour's narrative comes when Fenice is trying to decipher Cligès' feelings for her after he has departed for Britain and King Arthur's court. She is fairly convinced that he loves her, because "[she] saw / Those tears fall from his eyes, / And eyes are never deceitful" (4432-34). After Alexander and Sordamour both decried their eyes as traitors, it is striking both that Cligès and Fenice regard eyes as the truest mode of communication between lovers and that they put such total faith in any love that would be expressed by the means of eyes. Once they reveal their love, it is no longer entirely regarded as a source of shame, and the lovers, to an extent, rejoice in their mutual adoration. After their love is consummated, Cligès and Fenice are able to fully communicate only with one another, but it is also significant that they could communicate optically before they ever spoke of love. This sets them in stark contrast to Alexander and Sordamour, who not only concealed their love from one another, but blamed their sight for these pains without ever considering that they might express their affections with visual cues.

The importance of the parallels between Cligès and Alexander are not as obvious as the parallels themselves, but as seen in light

of Eugène Vinaver's theory of the poetry of interlace, these parallels gain pertinence. Vinaver applies the description of a cyclic pattern to the poetry of interlace by acknowledging that sometimes the patterns of interlace become so complicated and non-chronological that they circle back upon themselves, even within the metaphorical poetic tapestry (71-72). Thus, a poem can be both an example of the poetry of interlace and have commonalities with "a cyclic romance [in which] each element . . . is fashioned and controlled by the pattern of the cycle as a whole" (96). Although a cyclic romance is typically much longer and more complicated than *Cligès*, this comparison of the poetry of interlace to cyclical romance allows the reader to place the stories of Alexander and *Cligès* side by side despite their chronological ordering. In the poetry of interlace, it becomes insignificant that *Cligès*' story could not have taken place until after his parents' tumultuous courtship was resolved and consummated, because narratives extend in all directions, unbound by the strictures of linear time. They move in patterns and cycles that repeat and echo themselves throughout the structure of each individual narrative, and even through all narratives that adopt their conventions of structure and depiction.

Thus, with Alexander and *Cligès* placed firmly in the same role of knight, hero, and male ideal within their respective parallel narratives, the next logical extension is to place these same narratives side by side. Since the narratives obviously mirror each other thematically in their depiction of courtship, the reader can compare how the conventions of courtship are portrayed in each narrative in order to reach some definitive conclusion about what Chrétien might have been trying to express with this combination of overarching similarities and more subtle, nuanced parallels. Both narratives depict a set of lovers who choose their beloved. In the case of *Cligès* and Fenice, they pursue a love affair despite the fact that Fenice is married to another; in fact, she is married to the emperor Alis, who approached her in a traditional, chivalric manner. In light of the marriages of Arthur and Guinevere, King Mark and Iseult, and Alis and Fenice that are all referenced or observed within *Cligès*, the romantic loves of Alexander and Sordamour and *Cligès* and Fenice seem even more unusual. This begs the question: What was Chrétien trying to accomplish in

depicting two sets of lovers joined by free will, and why does he set them in relation to one another this way?

Returning to the idea of the sensory relations between the two sets of couples, Alexander and Sordamour were tormented by their sight, which allowed them glimpses of the beloved one they could not approach or speak to. Cligès and Fenice, on the other hand, only dread the sight of one another until they are able to reveal their true affections. Even in their earliest meetings, they, even if unconsciously, exchange vows of love through their eyes. Contrasting the misery of Alexander and Sordamour's courtship with both their eventual joy and their son's ultimately successful love union, Chrétien seems to be privileging a concept of love that involves choosing a preferred mate, communing with them freely and often, and then marrying. Both Alexander and Cligès "made [their] beloved [their] wife, / and called her 'wife' and 'beloved,' / And neither title hurt her" (6735-37). If *Cligès* can indeed be viewed as an example of the poetry of interlace, then the strands of parallel and recurring themes, while allowing the narrative to encompass multiple generations, narratives, and plots, also create an expansive tapestry endorsing natural love and romantic marriage.

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