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# Bonds in a Selection of Middle English Breton Lays

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For the Middle Ages, bond is a key notion, a notion which is fundamental in the proper sense. Indeed medieval society is fashioned according to a series of bonds. In a feudal society everyone is bound. Peasants are bound to the land, which is bound to a lord; lords themselves are then bound to a more powerful lord or a prince or a sovereign (the one who actually gives lands to his/her subjects) who is himself or herself bound to God. This creates a kind of pyramidal chain that binds everyone, from top to bottom, in a society ordered according to God's will.

Jacques Le Goff provides a relevant definition of this system:

“La féodalité c'est d'abord l'ensemble des liens personnels qui unissent entre eux dans une hiérarchie les membres des couches dominantes de la société. Ces liens s'appuient sur une base « réelle » : le bénéfice que le seigneur octroie à son vassal en échange d'un certain nombre de services et d'un serment de fidélité.”<sup>1</sup>

This definition stresses the personal nature of these bonds and the fact they essentially concern the dominant classes of society. The lays<sup>2</sup>, we shall see, give a perfect illustration of this, as they seem to exclusively deal with the noblest individuals and with the bonds that bind them together. Yet they seldom evoke the material benefits that could be at stake, which is significant in itself.

The lays naturally represent bonds in a social perspective. They also explore the various threats to these bonds in their different aspects: bonds of duty, which are socially motivated but also take on a moral dimension, as well as bonds of love, something particularly relevant when dealing with Breton lays. This exploration will disclose an obvious fact: that bonds are most of the time associated with speech. The linguistic dimension is indeed essential. In the world of the lays, one is bound by one's promise, by the word given as well as by one's

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *La civilisation de l'occident médiéval*, Paris, B. Arthaud, 1964. Réédition : Paris, Flammarion, 1982, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> This essay essentially concentrates on the works edited by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (*The Middle English Breton Lays*, Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (ed.), Kalamazoo, TEAMS, 2001) and on Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale* (*The Riverside Chaucer*, F.N. Robinson (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987).

situation in society. But this also implies the poet who is himself or herself bound by a tradition.

It seems proper to begin with considering social bonds, as they prove of paramount importance, in many different ways. The first bond is obviously and logically that of blood. Its importance appears particularly clear in *Lay le Freine* and in *Sir Degaré* in which the eponymous characters can only achieve themselves fully with finding their biological parents. The mothers who abandon their children want them, in spite of all, to be recognized, if not for who they are, at least for their rank: which means they never completely give up their children. Orphans are therefore provided with valuables that symbolize their status:

“Sche toke a riche baudekine  
That hir lord brought from Costentine  
And lapped the litel maiden therin,  
And toke a ring of gold fin,  
And on hir right arm it knitt,  
With a lace of silke therin plit;  
And whoso hir founde schuld have in mende  
That it were comen of riche kende.”

*Lay Le Freine* (137-44)

A similar token is used in *Sir Degaré*:

“Four pound she tok of gold,  
And ten of selver also;  
Under his fote she laid hit tho...”

*Sir Degaré* (190-2)

These riches are provided together with a letter which states the child’s noble nature: ‘For hit is comen of gentil blod’ (209).

This shows that these mothers are in fact unable, and probably unwilling to abandon their children completely. Indeed blood ties cannot be broken for both moral and spiritual reasons. ‘Kin’ is here a key word with deep resonance if one considers the polysemy hidden in these three letters. The word comes from the Old English *cym* which stands for family, race, kind, rank, nature, gender or sex. We can trace it in the word ‘kindred’ in modern

English or in *Kind*, the child, in German. The Latin equivalent would be *genus* from which derive the French *gène*, *génétique* or *genre*, which has taken on a literary connotation particularly appropriate for us.

In the lays, the noble nature of a character is expressed with different words. ‘Gentil’ is one of them, another avatar of the Latin *genus*. ‘Fre’ is a frequently used Germanic equivalent that basically means free, i. e. not bound to the land. Yet, to be ‘fre’ does not imply absolute freedom since nobility comes with duties towards one’s people and family: Guroun is bound to comply with his knights and marry a lady of rank, as Le Freine is yet of unknown origin:

“His knightes com and to him speke,

[...]

Sum lordes douhter for to take

[...]

And seyð him were wel more feir

In wedlok to geten him an air

Than lede his liif with swiche on

Of was kin he knewe non.”

*Lay Le Freine* (311-18)

An obvious conclusion is that everyone is bound to some extent. Lord though he be, Guroun must act according to what is expected from a man of his rank.

The great importance of social bonds in the lays is also perfectly demonstrated in *Emaré*, another poem from the collection by Laskaya and Salisbury. The eponymous heroine twice experiences unfair ostracism. She is twice exiled, first by her own father, then on account of her mother-in-law’s hatred, a highly symbolical rejection from society which leads her to change her name into Egaré, which is very telling for a French ear. The formulation used for her second exile is remarkable. Emaré is to be led ‘out of that kyth’ (594). The polysemy of the word *kyth*, which means at the same time one’s country, one’s native land and also one’s family, relatives and friends, makes it clear that the young woman is not just sent away physically but socially rejected.

When Emaré becomes aware of her condemnation, which she supposes comes from her lord and husband, she complies with it as she acknowledges her being rankless:

“... do my lordes commaundement,

God forbede thou spare.  
For he weddede so porely  
On me, a sympull lady,  
He ys ashamed sore.”

*Emaré*, 629-33

These social bonds are closely related with bonds of love, as love is usually, and quite logically, associated with begetting children. In *Sir Degaré*, Sir Degaré's father, though he rapes his future wife, announces at once that he loves her and that she will be pregnant. Having children is also the main argument produced by the knights for the marriage of their lord in *Le Freine*. *The Franklin's Tale* and *Sir Orfeo* are two counter-examples since the bonds of love are clearly dissociated from the need to have children. In *Sir Orfeo*, what binds Orfeo to his wife is definitely essential. Heurodis' abduction leaves Orfeo incomplete and therefore unable to remain and assume his functions as king, which motivates his exile. Love takes here an ontological dimension: it is part of the essence of the character. This is almost a neo-Platonic vision of love as a union that allows one to become whole again.

In *The Franklin's Tale*, love is also perceived as a most essential bond: Arveragus agrees to let Dorigen keep her promise out of love for her, which may seem paradoxical, and this proves an act of love, a sacrifice that asserts his noble attitude and compels Aurelius and the clerk, who has helped him, to emulate the knight. This adventure incidentally illustrates the virtue of example. It also demonstrates that a squire can be as noble, as 'fre' as a knight, which is part of the Franklin's aim in telling his tale. He actually wants to honour the squire who has just said, but not finished, his tale.

This, in turn, shows how the social bonds work within the world of romance. Aurelius is actually to do the same as Arveragus, to imitate him from the beginning: he loves the same woman as the knight, then proves equally capable of self-denial. A similar emulation occurs in *Sir Orfeo*, as the steward, who is to eventually succeed his lord, honours harpers the same way his lord used to. Social bonds thus imply that one should take example on those who are higher on the social ladder, that one should look upward. This hierarchical perception is quite clear when the mirage-making clerk of *The Franklin's Tale* renounces his payment. This is as much as to say that the commercial bond established between him and Aurelius is nothing in comparison with love and honour which frame Arveragus and Dorigen's course of action. "La

société féodale était une société d'ordres”,<sup>3</sup> wrote Gourevitch and this seems particularly true in the world of medieval romance.

Aurelius' final awareness provides a very positive perspective, but this idealistic vision is often confronted with threats at different levels. As any romance, lays rely on chivalric and courtly ideals, yet these ideals are not always respected as they should. A most striking example of this is to be found in *Sir Degaré* with the 'sterne knight' who wants to ravish the helpless lady. A knight is supposed to protect the weak and show particular respect for women. His failure to act properly means his logical defeat by Sir Degaré according to poetic justice and divine order.

This sense of justice might seem surprising considering the fact Sir Degaré's father has behaved in a rather uncourtly way with his future wife. He has indeed done what the 'sterne knight' intends to do with the lonely lady in her castle. This 'sterne knight' could thus be construed as a kind of double of the fairy knight and his defeat by Sir Degaré sounds like the son's atonement for the father's sin. Similarly, when Aurelius frees Dorigen of her promise, one might construe the deed as Aurelius suddenly realizing that he is about to act against chivalric and courtly values. That would mean his failure to achieve knighthood, losing oneself as well as his love.

Another threat to the values of the chivalric world of romance is the repeated use of lying and slandering. The worst example of such a threat is Guenevere's efforts at taking revenge from Sir Launfal. Her action is not just a threat to a single knight but to their social order as a whole. This is true from the very beginning as she is said to have many lovers, which explains why Arthur's knights do not like her:

“For the lady bar los of swych word  
That sche hadde lemmanys under her lord,  
So fele ther was noon ende.”

*Sir Launfal* (46-8)

This means, if one formulates this differently, that she does not respect the bond of marriage, the seriousness of this breach of faith being much aggravated by the high rank of the lady. She is obviously no example for other ladies, who cannot look upward as Aurelius did with Arveragus.

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<sup>3</sup> Aaron J. Gourévitch, *Les catégories de la culture médiévale*, Paris, Gallimard, 1983, p. 175.

Guenevere's destructive action becomes even greater when she accuses Sir Launfal falsely. Her slander makes it clear that she respects neither truth nor troth. Sir Launfal's answer to her accusation is quite revealing when he tells her she is not worthy of her rank. He mentions his lover, Dame Tryamour, and describes her thus:

“Hyr lothlokest mayde, wythoute wene,  
Myghte bet be a Quene  
Than thou, yn all thy lyve!”

*Sir Launfal (697-99)*

Sir Launfal's judges precisely dismiss the veracity of Guenevere's accusation, only to retain the knight's criticism of his queen's beauty, there being an equation between beauty and rank. Sir Launfal's own reaction is particularly telling: when Guenevere asks him to be her lover, he labels it as treason: “I nell be traytour day ne nyght...” (683).

Guenevere's behaviour is all the more condemnable as, according to her position and status, she should set the example for other ladies to follow. She strikingly contrasts with the ideal traditional feminine figure who, like Beauliybon in the *Erle of Tolous*, embodies a moral standard by maintaining an exemplary conduct at all costs.

Le Freine's mother proves as destructive as Arthur's wife, when she slanders her neighbour, suggesting that twins imply two different fathers. The slander is cause for all the disruption. It is perceived as such by everyone and by the poet to begin with who describes the lady as “hokerfulliche misegging” (61), for which the suggested translation is ‘maliciously slandering’. Her speech is further styled as “wordes of felonie” (64). Strangely enough, but quite in keeping with the expected poetic justice of the genre, these “wordes of felonie” turn against her at once. No one believes her and her own husband feels ashamed for his wife's unwise claim. The lady even gets cursed for the unreasonable accusation she has voiced:

“The messanger was sore aschamed;  
The knight himself was sore agramed,  
And rebouked his levedy  
To speke ani woman vilaynie.  
And ich woman therof might here  
Curssed hir alle yfere,  
And bisought God in heven

For His holy name seven  
That yif hye ever ani child schuld abide  
A wers aventour hir schuld bitide.”

*Lay le Freine (73-82)*

Cursing occurs here as a linguistic means of action. The curse proves effective when the slandering lady herself gives birth to twin girls. We may feel — this is implicitly suggested — that God has heard the women’s curse and sent a “wers aventour” to the slanderer.

In *Emaré*, the mother of the king of Galys is yet another woman slanderer. Like Guroun’s knights, she does not realize that the heroine’s beauty actually marks her as a woman of rank, though nothing is known of her ascendance. On the contrary, this extreme beauty is seen as a means of beguiling men, motivating the unfair mother-in-law’s judgement:

“The olde qwene spakke wordus unhende  
And sayde, ‘Sone, thys ys a fende,  
In thys wordy wede!  
As thou lovest my blessynge,  
Make thou nevir thys weddyng,  
Cryst hyt the forbede!’”

*Emaré (445-50)*

The old queen’s refusal to bless her son’s marriage with her unwanted daughter-in-law amounts to curse the union. Here again, poetic justice is perfectly respected as the slanderer is to experience the same punishment she has inflicted upon *Emaré*. She has unfairly broken the bond of love between the young woman and her son. She has disrupted natural and divine order, just as *Emaré*’s father nearly does when he purposes to marry his daughter, and quite logically is herself cast out of society, suffering exile too.

A similarly proportional punishment is inflicted on the eponymous main character of *Sir Gowther*. As he acts with complete disregard for any sense of humanity, raping and killing away, his retribution is the very loss of his humanity when the Pope deprives him of speech and only allows him to eat what he may snatch from dogs. Social bonds are utterly broken with those of humanity, and redemption can then only come from God. *Sir Gowther*, this should be added, is saved thanks to love and the intervention of his beloved, the dumb daughter of the emperor of Germany.



In *Sir Launfal*, the eponymous hero is not faultless, even if his guilt is far from being as serious as Guenevere's. The generous knight jeopardizes the bond that has been established between him and Dame Tryamour. Sir Launfal is expressly asked not to mention her, but he forgets about it. Once again, the result is a disruption: the harmony between the two worlds, ours and the fairies', is broken. As a consequence the passage from one world to another becomes impossible, at least for a while. In the same way, the bond between the lovers has been broken and is only restored thanks to Dame Tryamour's capacity to forgive her knight, a typical and traditional quality required from a lady.

The bond between Sir Launfal and Dame Tryamour definitely evokes the Irish *geis* or Welsh *tynged*, which are taboos, interdictions imposed on a specific individual. The *geis* has to do with one's coming of age and is often placed by a woman or a goddess. It is often ambivalent as it can be considered as a gift, which seems to be the case for Sir Launfal, or as a curse, which might well be the case for Le Freine's mother.

In the lays, this type of bond is obviously linguistic in nature. In *Sir Launfal*, Dame Tryamour's own words are given to the audience as the poet resorts to direct speech:

“But of a thyng, Syr Knyght, I warne the,  
That thou make no bost of me  
For no kennes mede!  
And yf thou doost, I warny the before,  
All my love thou hast forlore!”

*Sir Launfal* (361-5)

The bond is also the result of a debt in Sir Launfal's case. Dame Tryamour gives him her love and provides her knight with riches, which implies that Sir Launfal is to remain faithful to her and act according to her requirements.

Just as Sir Launfal becomes indebted for the recovery of his rank, since Dame Tryamour's financial help allows him to get back into society, the earl saved by Sir Degaré has a debt with the young knight. As in *Sir Launfal*, the bond created by the indebtedness of the earl leads to the integration of the character in society: Sir Degaré acquires the title which is due to his rank. Though the indebtedness is reversed, the bond is, in both cases, the means of the restoration of a social status.

In both instances, bonds rely on truth and the promise that one should respect. *The Franklin's Tale* offers a most precious example of the utmost importance of truth. This is

what Arveragus claims when he sacrifices his honour by sending Dorigen to Aurelius so that she can remain true to her word. But the first demonstration of respect for truth is made by Dorigen herself when she discloses her rash promise to Arveragus, so that the whole lay might be construed as a celebration of truth (and of love of course).

Similarly, in *Sir Orfeo*, the motif of the rash promise shows the importance of one's word once it is given. Even the almighty fairy king must keep his word. When he first refuses Orfeo's claim, the minstrel king points at the indignant nature of such a refusal:

“O sir!’ he seyð, ‘gentil king,  
Yete were it a wele fouler thing  
To here a lesing of thi mouthe!  
So, sir, as ye seyð nouthe,  
What ich wold aski, have y schold,  
And nedes thou most thi word hold.’”

*Sir Orfeo* (463-8)

Indeed, words bind even the mightiest, which is true for a king as well as for a poet. The voice of past poets, the ancient speech that has recorded the great deeds and adventures of the knights and ladies of old, these have to be respected, even if this not always the case<sup>4</sup>. This should be particularly true for these Middle English Breton lays which are indebted to French lays. Translation is seldom referred to though it could appear as quite a binding relation. The most direct allusion to translation is to be found in *Le Freine*, when the poet feels the need to explain the meaning of the protagonists' names. Guroun's guests congratulate him for the choice of his wife, which calls for a clarification:

“Fairer maiden nas never seen,  
Better than Ash is Hazle y ween!  
(For in Romaunce *Le Frain* ‘ash’ is,  
And *Le Codre* ‘hazle’, y-wis.”

*Le Freine* (345-8)

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<sup>4</sup> Cf Agnès Blandeau, “Loyalty and Treason in Some Middle English Breton Lays”, in *Études Épistémé*, 25, 2014. “Gode is the lay, swete is the note” : Résonances dans les lais bretons moyen-anglais – Echoes in the Middle English Breton Lays , <http://revue.etudes-episteme.org/?-25-2014-gode-is-the-lay-swete-is->

The poet has to account for his source from a linguistic point of view and this comes together with assessing the fact that we are dealing with the world of *Romaunce*.

Indeed, the notion of genre, of which we are recurrently reminded in the lays, is a similar bond as that which binds the king of the Fairies in *Sir Orfeo* and here again a linguistic bond. The prologues to *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine* explicitly remind their audiences of what they should expect from a lay, essentially love and adventures involving fairies. As soon as we are warned that we enter the world of lays, we feel that the poet is bound to produce a specific kind of stories. This bond also involves the poet's duty to preserve men and women from oblivion. The reference to a usually ancient past is recurrent. The lay is thus presented as a bond, a linguistic bond between past and present; between the ideal world of romance, literary in nature, and the real world of the audience; between our world and the world of fairies; between England and Brittany, this kind of fringe that sometimes seems to be confused with Fairyland itself...

From a literary point of view too, truth remains a key notion as we are recurrently invited to believe what we are told. This is conveyed by the numerous and conventional formulas used by the poets: "for sothe it is" (*Lay le Freine*, 26), "now sykyrly" (*Sir Degaré*, 1090), "I you plyght" (*Sir Launfal*, 33) or "if I sooth seyen shal" (*The Franklin's Tale*, 770). These recurrent invitations necessarily create a distance and a perspective since we know this is romance, what a modern mind would label as 'fiction'.

Bonds obviously play an essential part in medieval society, but this proves also true from a literary point of view. Bonds provide coherence and order, which means they have both a moral and a spiritual dimension. Bonds are, most of the time, established verbally and even orally. They need to be expressed and uttered, and this linguistic nature is particularly noticeable in the lays. The linguistic bond staged in *Sir Orfeo* is representative of an ideal that gives shape to the poetical process: a binding relation is established between the performer and his or her audience. Both have duties. The performer has to comply with the genre, to have form and matter match, while the audience is to consider and acknowledge their debt.