

FAIRE LADIES RE-IMAGINED: FEMALE CHARACTERS IN GUY GAVRIEL KAY'S *A SONG FOR ARBONNE*

In her article on George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* Shiloh R. Caroll observes that medievalist fantasy tends to "conform to traditional gender roles and favor masculine activities over feminine ones" because "proponents of these gender roles within fantasy literature argue that women in the Middle Ages were restricted to certain activities and life choices, and thus the same must be true of women in fantasy"¹. This attitude has been forsaken by some authors who produced feminist-oriented versions of medieval narratives, a prime example being Marion Bradley Zimmer, with her *The Mists of Avalon*, which offers a famous retelling of the Arthurian legend from the perspective of marginalized female characters, and presents Morgaine (Morgan le Fay) as a priestess trying to preserve the matriarchal Celtic cult². Frequently, however, medievalist fantasy authors still struggle to maintain a balance between preserving the appearance of medieval authenticity and creating active female characters that contemporary readers might relate to. One strategy, examined by

¹ Sh. R. Caroll, "You Ought to be in Skirts and Me in Mail": *Gender and History in George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*, in: "A Song of Ice and Fire" and the Medieval Literary Tradition, ed. B. Błaszkiwicz, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2014, p. 247.

² The strategy employed by Zimmer and several other female writers, coined by Crosby "magical storytelling", can be seen as a form of writing against patriarchal narratives in an attempt to produce a change in the reader's perception of both past and present. For a more detailed analysis, see Janice C. Crosby, *Cauldron of Change. Feminist Spirituality in Fantastic Fiction*, Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1962, pp. 30-70.

Jane Tolmie, is tracking the narrative paths of medieval texts in search of strong female Brynhildr-type protagonists to transfer them into contemporary fantasy novels that perpetuate the myth of an exceptional woman who overcomes universal obstacles of female disenfranchisement:

In many contemporary fantasy novels, much as in many medieval sagas and romances, literary heroines remain at their best when rising above external conditions that are against them in gender-based ways. They dress up as men to escape restraints on their freedom, run away from abusive fathers, escape unwanted marriages, avoid, avert or survive rape, or take up arms³.

These strong women achieve their goals and manage to forge their destinies as they wish, but they operate within an existing patriarchal system unfavourable to female activity in general, and while they can be seen as extraordinary exceptions to the rule, the dominant ideology remains unchanged by their daring exploits.

Guy Gavriel Kay's tactics in *A Song for Arbonne* is to pick a more female-centred period of the Middle Ages as his starting point and to weave the story from cultural threads different from those appropriated by most fantasy writers. Thus, in this particular novel Kay is less interested in the tradition of heroic epic and *chanson de geste* favouring masculine military heroism, and more into the culture of twelfth-century Provence, with its troubadour poetry and the discourse of courtly love, which results in *A Song for Arbonne* featuring a whole range of re-imagined medieval 'faire ladies', who actively participate in the action and yet do not assume typically male roles.

The concept of courtly love seems to be well-established in the popular imagination, and evokes a number of connotations even in readers who are not acquainted with medieval troubadour poetry or chivalric romance. It is, however, necessary to note that the term *amour courtois* practically does not feature in the twelfth century, the period it is usually linked with, when it was usually referred to as "honest love" (Latin: *amour honestus*) or "refined love" (Langue d'Oc: *fin amour*). In fact, the phrase "courtly love" was used for the first time six hundred years later, in 1833 to be precise, by Gaston Paris⁴ to

³ J. Tolmie, *Medievalism and the Fantasy Heroine*, "Journal of Gender Studies" 2006, (15.02), p. 148.

⁴ Lacking access to the original article, I have decided to follow two scholars of different critical backgrounds, both of whom frequently refer to Paris's text and provide a strikingly similar account of his ideas. See: J. C. Moore, "Courtly Love": *A Problem of Terminology*, "Journal of

describe the love relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere on the basis of a single tale by Chrétien de Troyes, titled *Lancelot ou le chevalier de la charrete* (*Lancelot or the Knight of the Cart*, ca. 1178-80). Referring to this text only, Paris provided a highly influential definition of courtly love, which he sees as an illegitimate and furtive extramarital relationship, in which a male lover, inferior and insecure, often showing physical symptoms of suffering for love, must serve and gain the affection of his lady, a superior, idealised and whimsical one, by undergoing many tests to prove his courage and dedication to her. Love in this definition is a sort of science and art, subject to highly codified rules of proper behaviour, like chivalry in general. This paradigm of tentatively reversed gender hierarchy, often placing a woman in the position of a feudal lord, whose wishes and caprices must be fulfilled to win 'deserved recompense' or 'sweet reward' (usually understood as reciprocated affection, sexual favour or social advancement/reown), informs a variety of narratives, mainly troubadour love songs (*canso*), courtly romances, and Andreas Capellanus's *De Amore* or *De arte honeste amandi*, the twelfth-century text which has been seen for a long time as a serious treatise with practical advice for lovers, but is now more often viewed as an ironic and humorous scholarly exercise in medieval argumentation.

Nevertheless, there are two major problems with this model. Firstly, it assumes the presence of one global concept of courtly love which was developed by all authors in all possible genres, which perspective is challenged by W.T.H. Jackson, who writes:

The mood of love in the *canzon* is quite different from that in the *alba* and the love of Parzival for Condwiramurs has no resemblance to that of Tristan for Isolde. Married love is important and indeed sacred in *Erec*, as it is in *Parzival* and *Willehalm*. No one conception of love will cover all the relations between the sexes in medieval lyric and epic, and it is unprofitable to seek for such a definition, especially if we regard this love as a spiritual or even an intellectual phenomenon⁵.

Secondly, the question of origins and factors influencing the concept of courtly love has been hotly debated, and as a result the term, as some claim, may mean virtually anything, the list of such possible interpretations including:

the History of Ideas" 1979, (4), pp. 621-632 and E. Jane Burns, *Courtly Love: Who Needs It? Recent Feminist Work in the Medieval French Tradition*, "Signs" 2001, (27.1), pp. 23-57.

⁵ W.T.H. Jackson, *The Challenge of the Medieval Text: Studies in Genre and Interpretation*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, p. 4.

“infantile, sophisticated, narcissistic, chivalrous, playful, genuine, fictional, carnal, spiritual, Ovidian, Arabist, Catharist, “Fontevraultian”, blasphemous, natural, unnatural, adulterous, and chaste”⁶. As for the role of women in the discourse of courtly love, some see their elevation to the position of feudal lord as resulting from social change that put a growing number of noble ladies in charge of aristocratic households when their husbands embarked on crusades; others claim that a woman “disappears” from the texts as a subject and becomes merely an object of male competition for social advancement and domination. More recent feminist studies focus on the voice of *troibaritz* (female troubadours) and examine the heroines of *chanson de toile* (sewing songs), who frequently “forge successful love scenarios that feature mutual and shared pleasure”⁷. Such resourcefulness is also attributed to the heroines of *The Lais of Marie de France*, a collection of late twelfth-century narrative poems written by a female poet, whose lays represent both unfulfilled and fulfilled, adulterous and conjugal relationships.

In *A Song for Arbonne* Kay reconstructs the concept of courtly love as an underlying principle of the socio-political make-up of Arbonne, a wealthy and tolerant country ruled by a woman, in which Riann, the female goddess, is worshipped as equal to Corannos, the male god. The country is under threat of invasion from its neighbour, Gorhaut, operating on not only patriarchal but openly misogynist principles. In short, Arbonne is to be destroyed because of its religion, its values, and its women, whose presence in political and social life is perceived as an intolerable aberration to the traditionally sanctioned order of things. Importantly, the danger comes not from some evil, supernatural, or otherworldly power, as is the case in most secondary world fantasy novels, but from a militant, warrior culture and irrational fear of women⁸. To complicate the plot further, Arbonne is plagued by an internal conflict between its two most powerful dukes, whose mutual hatred started some twenty years before over a woman, when one of them fell in love with and seduced the wife of the other.

⁶ Th. Tinkle, *Medieval Venuses and Cupids: Sexuality, Hermeneutics, and English Poetry*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 10.

⁷ E. Jane Burns, *Courtly Love...*, p. 47.

⁸ Although the scope of this article does not allow us to examine this issue in detail, the conflict has been interpreted as the crusade against the Cathar cult, even if it needs to be acknowledged that the particulars of the Cathar heresy show little resemblance to the principles of Arbonne. See: N. Labrousse-Marchau, *A Song for Arbonne: de-romantisized fantasy*, Bright Weavings: the Worlds of G. Gavriel Kay. The Authorized Website. http://www.brightweavings.com/scholarship/nath_arbonne.htm [30.11.2015]

The story, delineated in the prologue, roughly follows Paris's model but reveals a few alterations important for Kay's text. The heroine is Aelis, an heiress to Arbonne, given through a political marriage like a reward to Duke Utre, a man of power she does not love. Her marital state does not prevent her from falling for Bertran, a younger son of a powerful lord and a troubadour in one, who sings of his love for her. Rather than allowing herself to be praised at a distance, as a troubadour's *donna* should, Aelis co-operates in planning and acting out a fake kidnapping to consummate her relationship with Bertran in a wood cabin. A troubadour song as an aphrodisiac, a pastoral setting for the romance, a male lover who verbally puts himself at the mercy of his beloved, uncertain if he will receive his 'sweet reward' – so far the narrative has been quite safely anchored within the context of troubadour lyrics and courtly romances. There is a twist to the story, however, as it continues beyond the point medieval narratives typically go. Aelis conceives an out-of-wedlock child and dies in childbirth, but just before her death, out of revenge, she reveals the identity of her son. The child does not survive, but it is unclear whether it died a natural death or was murdered by Utre. It is also unknown at this point that a twin baby girl was born and hidden. Aelis herself is depicted quite ambiguously: as a woman who follows her passion, fully aware of its consequences for herself, Utre, and Bertran; and yet not concerned at all with the future political implications of her personal revenge for Arbonne. Torn between love and hatred, "she was not a woman to accept her fate, or work within walls built to house her"⁹ and thus occupies a paradoxical position of both the mistress of her own fate and a victim of the society in which aristocratic women are a valuable currency on the marriage market.

The prologue has been summarised here as it performs a few important functions. Firstly, it introduces the primary re-imagined medieval lady, Aelis, who diverges from the romance model of ideal woman and serves as an absent foil character to all other females in the novel. Secondly, it reworks the courtly love paradigm to include woman's desire and active pursuit of sexual fulfilment. Thirdly, it heralds several themes and motifs (e.g. an extramarital relationship, a kidnapping, an out-of-wedlock child) that will reappear in the main narrative made up of a few subplots that are intricately interlaced with one another in a manner once more reminiscent of medieval narrative techniques¹⁰,

⁹ G. Gavriel Kay, *A Song for Arbonne*, London: Harper Voyager, 2011, p. 258.

¹⁰ The compositional device of interlacement, associated with medieval chivalric romance, relies on narrating the adventures of a number of characters as if simultaneously, with the narrator

but enriched with the more contemporary practice of shifting character-focalisation. Consequently, *A Song for Arbonne* is a structurally complex narrative with different voices and perspectives carefully orchestrated to produce meaning.

Most generally, the women of Arbonne seem to be equipped with only one of the medieval female virtues, i.e. beauty – chastity, obedience, and silence being clearly considered of lesser importance. In fact, to emphasise this divergence from the medieval ideal of femininity, they are repeatedly referred to as “impossible”. Far from remaining passive, they are not merely objects of desire and male rivalry. In terms of the structure of the novel they are much more than narrative points around which the action revolves, and yet all of them are defined through their relationship with the male protagonist, Blaise de Garsenc, a politically important sellsword from Gorhaut, paradoxically needed to save Arbonne from his own homeland. Serving as a paragon of the masculine values of honour and chivalry, Blaise becomes a pivotal point in changing constellations of women around him. On the one hand, therefore, female characters bear an important function in the development of both the protagonist and the plot, but on the other, they are equipped with enough psychological motivation to be appealing to contemporary tastes.

Arbonne’s ruler and chief political player, partly modelled on the historical figure of Eleanor of Aquitaine, is Signe, a mother-figure and a widow now, who “defined and shaped both the purpose and the art”¹¹ of courtly love. Being the only woman in the story to enjoy a marriage in which love, sex and politics went together, she saw the model of courtly love as a safe vent for male desire, having a pragmatic purpose of binding love-stricken knights to herself, her husband and Arbonne, and thus allowing the society to function properly. With the new queen of the Court of Love, Ariane, who happens to be Signe’s niece with different personal experiences, the paradigm has been redefined, with

seemingly discarding one subplot in favour of another, only to come back to it later in the narrative. However, the goal here is not simply to create suspense, but also to build meaningful links between different sections in terms of themes, motifs, etc. that are dealt with at different levels of the narrative. Thus the beginning of the romance often foreshadows its outcome, while particular adventures of the hero must be seen through his other adventures. Commenting upon this narrative technique, Eugène Vinaver observes that in medieval chivalric romance “character has no existence outside destiny, and destiny means the convergence of simultaneously developed themes, now separated, now coming together, varied, yet synchronized, so that every moment of this carefully planned design remains charged with echoes of the past and premonitions of the future” (*The Rise of Romance*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1971, p. 92).

¹¹G. Gavriel Kay, *A Song...*, p. 67.

troubadours “writing and saying now that it was ill-bred, in bad taste if not actually impossible, for a wife to love her husband. That true love had to run freely from choices made willingly, and marriage could never be a matter of such free choice for men or women in the society they knew”¹². Similarly to Aelis, Ariane, whose husband is gay, cannot find satisfaction in marriage; unlike Aelis, however, she understands the political implications of an aristocratic marriage. For Ariane, who actively pursues the man she desires and yet understands her social and political role, the key feature of courtly love is discretion, as it allows her to find love and satisfaction in a world in which men and women are not free to choose their partners. Her understanding of love and sex is very contemporary, based on freedom of choice, the equality of partners, mutual respect, and giving and taking. Her relationship with Blaise, informed with all these values, is set as an ideal impossible to achieve in the present circumstances, when women are “coinage in a game of castles and nations”¹³.

Such idealization is evidently absent from Blaise’s liaison with Lucianna Delonghi, a fictionalized Lucrezia Borgia, whose memory haunts the protagonist until he meets Ariane. Lucianna is presented as an archetypal seducer, a sexual predator, impossible for a man to resist even if he knows he will be wounded. Her actions are shown as extreme: she is not only active in relationships, but dominant, selfish, and manipulative. Using her physical attractiveness and sexual allure as tools in the game for power, and frequently compared to a glittery jewel, she tantalizes and teases, but as one of the troubadours observes, “she is not for having”, as she destroys those who fall in love with her, becoming the embodiment of “the dark side of the goddess”¹⁴. Whereas Lucianna, exercising absolute control over their relationship, is Blaise’s unhealthy obsession, Rosala, his brother’s wife back in Gorhaut, is downgraded to the position of a woman of no importance. Their one-night stand on a stormy night is an instrumental act of revenge for both of them: he takes what ‘belongs’ to his brother, and she gives herself to him to ‘get payback’ for being treated as a chattel in misogynist Gorhaut. Apart from a temporary release of sexual tension, neither of them can really derive any satisfaction from this exchange. And yet, once again the story from the prologue is re-worked as Rosala conceives a child. This variation initially appears as a crippled and downgraded version of the original account—there are no lofty ideals, no emotional involvement

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 231.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 237.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 228.

whatsoever, only instrumental sex. Still, Rosala proves to be underestimated by Blaise, who knows nothing about women at this point, when she demonstrates personal courage, acute intelligence and political insightfulness. Having fled Gorhaut to seek refuge in Arbonne, she refuses to play the role of passive victim and takes action to protect herself and her son on her own instead of waiting to be rescued by a knight who would never arrive. As Rosala forges her own destiny, she proves that female resourcefulness itself, with no assistance on the part of a man, might provide a way out of the tragic pattern of the prologue.

All the women Blaise meets throughout the narrative, whether erotically or not, he meets for a reason. As a knight inherited from chivalric romance and reworked to fit a surprisingly woman-centred quest fantasy, he must accomplish a mission, i.e. save Arbonne from danger. In *A Song for Arbonne*, however, Kay plays not only with the conventions of medieval narratives, but also with those of portal-quest fantasies, in which the protagonists are taken from one world and thrown into another. In narratives underpinned with these principles,

the reader enters the secondary world in the intimate company of a protagonist to whom it is equally unfamiliar; as the character learns about the secondary world, the reader learns too, sharing the character's astonishment, inquisitiveness, and gradually increasing ability to feel at home¹⁵.

The portal here is not a wardrobe through which one can travel from a realistic world to Narnia, but the culture of Gorhaut and Arbonne are rendered as two completely different worlds. Consequently, Blaise, a stranger raised in the warrior tradition of Gorhaut, appears as alien to Arbonne as protagonists who are transported from our world to the world of the fairies. While the secondary world of the tale is not inhabited by supernatural creatures, and the magic connected with the cult of Riann is of minor importance, its quasi-medieval system of courtly love is introduced to readers through the eyes of an outsider. No wonder then that our protagonist initially sees the customs of Arbonne as a "patently silly culture" with "the utterly irrational customs of courtly love" and can actually imagine nothing as "impractical as the women-driven culture"¹⁶. This shallow perception of Arbonne's intricate culture mirrors his original low opinion of women; after all, he is a knight from Gorhaut, where

¹⁵ B. Stableford, *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature*, Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press Inc, 2005, p. iii.

¹⁶ G. Gavriel Kay, *A Song...*, p. 23.

women are considered men's property; lustful, corrupted creatures over whom power needs to be asserted by controlling their sexuality.

As the narrative progresses, though, Blaise's experience of and behaviour towards women evolves: from an instrumental treatment of Rosala, through an obsessive infatuation with Lucianna, to a mutual and balanced love relationship with Ariane. Meanwhile, from Beatriz, the High Priestess of Riann and female equivalent of the wise man figure, he learns that what is considered in Gorhaut the feared magic of darkness and "the blood-stained rites of women" aimed to "cripple", "wound", and most importantly "unman"¹⁷ Corannos is, in fact, "confined to small things, the coinage of hearth and heart"¹⁸, i.e. the typically domestic sphere of women pertaining to the control of conception, foreknowledge of a child's sex, intuition, some healing power, etc. Then again, in Signe he finds the protective, understanding, and forgiving mother-figure he lacked in childhood. Blaise's emotional and spiritual growth, which makes him a pretender worthy of the throne of Gorhaut, epitomising true masculinity, is conceptualised here as the change in his attitude towards women, which leads to his awareness and final acceptance of the fact that masculine and feminine values are of equal importance. His major quest turns out to be his personal and intimate discovery of women, each of them representing a different aspect of womanhood. Only then is he ready to bring about a eucatastrophic ending and "heal" the world by entering a marriage with Rinette, a rediscovered daughter of Aelis and Bertran and an heiress to Arbonne, which symbolically unites Gorhaut and Arbonne, Corannos and Rian, masculine and feminine elements.

Kay's *A Song for Arbonne*, an atypical medievalist fantasy, is much more about relationships between men and women than it is about male heroism and valour shown in combat, while gender inequality is a threat as deadly as an otherworldly evil power. Even though in the final battle at Lake Dierne men engage in a primordial bloody fight with swords and axes, its outcome is determined by cunning stratagems devised by Signe and Beatriz, and peace is eventually restored through marriage. The setting of the battle is also symbolic, the narrative, meandering through its interlaced subplots, makes a full circle to where it started – the world is healed in exactly the same place it was torn. A careless relationship with tragic consequences between Bertran and Aelis has been replaced with a conscious decision made by Blaise and Rinette, who are not forced to marry yet they do because no other option is available, and

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 108.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 497.

personal happiness must be sacrificed for the greater good. Kay is not so naive as to delineate medieval women as having absolute freedom of choice; they are still pawns to be dealt with through marriage to form political allegiances. So are men as a matter of fact. This message seems to be consistent with Kay's overall interest in the problems of an individual trapped in a historically significant moment, whose choices are not predetermined, as in Tolkien, by fate or prophesy, but still heavily influenced by historical necessity, the pressure of which cannot be simply escaped.

Kay's *A Song for Arbonne* proves to be a well-researched enterprise, and the effect is a believable, though re-imagined, version of the Middle Ages. Still, the author refuses to write a typical historical novel, stubbornly mixing the history, culture, and literature of the Middle Ages with apparently insignificant fantastic elements (e.g. two moons, the magic of Riann) to situate his prose at the fluid border between fantasy and historical fiction, which is also indicative of his other novels. In doing so, he deliberately exposes the fictionality of his prose and questions the validity of historical narratives as such, implying that perhaps they are merely a matter of interpretation, just as literature is. This flexible treatment of the inherited material shows considerable potential for invigorating the genre of fantasy literature, and draws our attention to less Anglo-Germanic-centred directions for its development.

A Song for Arbonne in particular can be seen as an expression of a nostalgic desire for the past and literature that 'could have been' had women been given a chance to speak in their own voice. This longing informs the whole narrative and illuminates a possible interpretation of the title of the novel itself. Breaking away with the enduring tradition of *chanson de geste*, i.e. a song OF heroic deeds, seen as long-established, sanctioned, closed and monologic narrative, Kay writes a refreshingly dialogic love-song FOR Arbonne. In this sense, the novel can be viewed as a tribute to the lost, or simply forgotten and ignored female voice, represented here by Lisseut, the first *troibaritz* in the world of Arbonne. Re-imagining his medieval 'faire ladies' as neither passive damsels in distress nor female warrior types assuming masculine roles, Kay proves his strategy to be fruitful. Avoiding Brynhildr types that need to prove their worth in a man's world, and refraining from the practice of Marion Bradley Zimmer, who has retold a formative Western legend changing the narrative perspective but not the basic story line, he manages to create fiction that is ingenious in terms of plot yet favourable to women. His blended history-fantasy novels seem to be an optimal vehicle for the literary re-interpretation of

historical, cultural, and literary heritage from a different perspective, offering his readers not only an escapist adventure, but also providing a contemporary comment upon the situation in their own world. Perhaps, a hazardous and destructive gender split spreading from medieval literature and deeply rooted in its culture, which seems to be perpetually reconstructed by numerous fantasy authors in their works, may finally be healed, intentionally or not, through fiction written from a slightly different perspective and offering a more dialogic vision of the Middle Ages.

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza konstrukcji postaci kobiecych w *Pieśni dla Arbonne* Guya Gavriela Kaya, powieści *fantasy* osadzonej w realiach średniowiecznych. Sytuując utwór w kontekście koncepcji miłości dworskiej, romansu rycerskiego oraz *fantasy* typu *portal-quest*, autorka bada sposób, w jaki elementy dziedzictwa średniowiecza, jak również konwencje rządzące powieścią *fantasy* zostały przetworzone na potrzeby tej kobieco-centricznej powieści, w której bohaterki nie są ani wojowniczkami w typie Brunhildy ani biernymi damami, wokół których skonstruowana jest fabuła. Z przeprowadzonej analizy wynika, że *Pieśń dla Arbonne* staje się swoistym narzędziem reinterpretacji materiału historycznego, kulturowego i literackiego z innej, bardziej dialogicznej perspektywy i może być postrzegana jako hołd dla zapomnianego, bądź ignorowanego głosu kobiet z przeszłości.