A Medieval Robinsonade : Segurant or the Knight of the Dragon

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CHAPTER 2

A MEDIEVAL ROBINSONADE:
SEGURANT OR THE KNIGHT OF THE DRAGON

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Long before *Robinson Crusoe*, the desert island myth had been explored by a thirteenth-century Arthurian romance: *Segurant or the Knight of the Dragon* (*Ségurant ou le Chevalier au Dragon*), a work that was a great success in its time and circulated from Italy to England and from France to Spain before mysteriously disappearing from the history of literature as its manuscript parts were scattered throughout Europe.[1] Recently I have recomposed it from all the remaining fragments and episodes. Its longest and oldest version, which I have called "cardinal", was written in French in Northern Italy—probably in Venice—between 1240 and 1279. Its extensions and rewritings range from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century.[2]

The romance takes place in the fictional universe of the legend of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table and the Grail. More precisely, its main models are two anonymous romances from the first half of the thirteenth century: the *Prose Lancelot* and the *Prose Tristan*. *Segurant or the Knight of the Dragon* can be defined as a "paraquel" of these two texts, *i.e.* a work that takes place in the same chronological framework, but which

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[1] An allusion to its protagonist, under the name of Severause, appears in the English work *Le Morte Darthur* by Thomas Malory (1485). Other allusions to Segurant can be found in the Spanish *libros de caballerías*—*Tristán de Leonís* (1501) and *Amadis de Gaule* (1508) —as well as in some chivalrous poems of the Italian Renaissance (*Girone il Cortese* and *Avarchide* by Luigi Alamanni, *I Quattro primi canti del Lancilotto* by Erasmo da Valvasone). See Arioli 2016 and 2019.

[2] This Arthurian romance was published in the collection "Classiques français du Moyen Âge": *Ségurant ou le Chevalier au Dragon : version cardinale (tome 1)* (Arioli ed 2019); *Ségurant ou le Chevalier au Dragon : versions complémentaires et alternatives (tome 2).* (Arioli ed 2019)

tells other stories.[3] Its originality lies above all in the invention of a totally new plot whose protagonist is Segurant, a naive and voracious knight who goes to King Arthur's court full of hope, until two naughty fairies force him to pursue an illusory dragon.

The work begins with the story of a shipwreck on a desert island, "Non Sachant Island". Like Robinson Crusoe, the castaways try to rebuild a civilized life by using the means at their disposal. I propose to read this proto-Robinsonade by analyzing its rewriting of the topos of the desert island, by observing how the material lives of the castaways and the process of colonization of the island are described, and finally by showing how the invention of this island structures the entire work.

1. The shipwreck on a "not knowing" island

In the first episode of *Segurant or the Knight of the Dragon*, the ancestors of the protagonist—Galehaut and Hector—embark with four sailors to escape King Vortigern, the usurper of the throne. A storm causes them to be stranded on an island that "estoit moult loing des autres isles et si ne la savoit nuli" ("was very far from the other islands and was unknown to anyone").[4] This unknown and totally virgin island is not hostile like most of the islands in Arthurian literature (*Prose Tristan, History of the Holy Grail, Quest for the Holy Grail*). Non Sachant Island is pleasant because of its woods, rivers and mountains and is destined to evolve towards civilization and become a harmonious city.[5]

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[3] See Genette 1982, 243-244. By using many characters and chronotopes from these two works, the narrator recounts adventures that are supposedly forgotten in his models. He promises to tell "maintes belles aventures et maint grant fait de Tristan et de Palamedes qui es autres livres ne furent translatez" ("many beautiful adventures and exploits of Tristan and Palamedes that have not been translated into other books", ep. XVII of the "cardinal version", ms. Arsenal 5229, fol. 99ra) or "d'autres aventures qui ne sont pas es autres livres devisees" ("other adventures that are not told in other books", ep. XXXIV, fol. 136va), since "maint comptes de lui [de Lancelot] furent lessiez a translater de latin en françoys" ("several stories about him [Lancelot] haven't been translated from Latin into French", ep. XVI, fol. 96vb).

[4] "Cardinal version", episode I, ms. Arsenal 5229, fol. 22rb.

[5] "Se ceste ysle feust sceue d'aucune gent, il ne pourroit en aucune maniere estre qu'elle ne feust habitee, elle est a merveilles delictable de boiz et de riviere, de plains et de montaignes et de toutes autres choses plenierement que a bonne ville appartient" ("If this island had been known, it would surely have been colonised, because it is wonderfully rich in woods, rivers, plains and mountains and in everything that is suitable for a good city", "cardinal version", episode I, ms. Arsenal 5229, fol. 23ra).

When the castaways explore the island, they discover a natural port which they call Port Trouvé (Port Discovered); a sailor then also chooses the name for the island.[6] The toponym "Non Sachant Island" may suggest its unreal, wonderful and utopian aspects. It is similar to other Arthurian place names—such as Lointaines Îles (Faraway Islands) or Île Perdue (Lost Island[7])—that emphasize the remoteness of the islands[8], except that Non Sachant refers to the idea of knowledge rather than the spatial dimension. Old French allows a double interpretation of "non sachant", which can have both an active and a passive meaning. Non Sachant Island is "ignorant" (naive), since it does not know the civilization of the mainland, and "ignored", as a land still unexplored. It is both "in a state of nature" and "unknown". Paradoxically, the imposition of this name removes the island from the wilderness, marking its conquest by the man who tamed the nature. It is a crucial step in the civilization process of the island, which will no longer be "not knowing", if not by name.[9]

This account of the colonization of a desert island is probably the result of the intersection of two narrative schemas, that of the storm and the shipwreck, common in Arthurian literature, and that of the foundation of a city after a journey. In the Middle Ages, the most obvious models of the latter motif were Virgil's *Aeneid* and Brutus's conquest of England (*Historia regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth and *Roman de Brut*

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[6] "Et aprés cerchierent l'isle de totes pars, et le bois et la marine troverent ilz auques bon et cloz tout environ de bon murs, dont li mariniers le cerchierent bien de toutes pars et trouverent qu'il avoit a merveilles bonne entree et bonne yssue, dont il dist li uns a l'autre que a merveilles estoit biaux et bons cestui port ; et li uns des mariniers dist que celle ysle pouoit estre appellee l'Isle Non Sachant et li port pouoit estre appellez li Port Trouvez, dont ainsi furent puis appellez" ("And then they searched all over the island and found that the coast was good and surrounded by high cliffs. Looking hard on all sides, they discovered that the shore offered a good place to access and leave from there. One told the other that it was an extremely beautiful and good port. One of the sailors said that this island could be called Non Sachant Island and that the port could be called Port Discovered. Since then, that's how they've been called", "cardinal version", episode I, ms. Arsenal 5229, fol. 23ra).
[7] The Faraway Islands are the homeland of Galehaut, both in the *Prose Lancelot* and in the *Prose Tristan*, while the Lost Island is the place where Galehaut stays with his friend Lancelot in the former.
[8] See also Roger Lathuillère 1966, § 257, 484-486.
[9] As Emmanuèle Baumgartner writes about the *Roman de Brut*, "civiliser [...] c'est essentiellement nommer. C'est imposer à un univers informe, sans repères, sans ancrages temporels ou spatiaux, des noms qui tout à la fois relient l'homme à son passé et qui signifient par eux-mêmes le cours du temps et le sens de l'histoire." (Baumgartner, 141)

by Wace[10]). Unlike Aeneas who fights the Rutuli or Brutus who fights giants, Segurant's ancestors must not wage war. The new place is uninhabited: it is not conquered, but it is discovered thanks to a shipwreck. On the other hand, compared to the other Arthurian novels (*The History of the Holy Grail* and to a lesser extent *The Quest for the Holy Grail* and the *Prose Tristan*), where the islands are only stages in a challenging journey, in *Segurant*, the ancestors of the eponymous hero settle on Non Sachant Island and build a city there. This narrative invention of the colonization of a desert island probably embodies the dreams of Mediterranean cultures at the time of the Crusades. It could reveal a sort of medieval "colonial ideology", that of the maritime republics with their ambitions on the Mediterranean Sea and in particular of Venice in the thirteenth century with its hegemony over the Greek islands.

2. The colonization process

This medieval Robinsonade describes the material life of the castaways and their return to civilization on a wild island in a way that, although far from the precision and profusion of details of *Robinson Crusoe*, is unique in medieval literature. As soon as they set foot on land, the castaways think that they would stay there for the rest of their lives. Encouraged by Galehaut,[11] they build a shelter with the wood and nails they have been able to recover from the wrecked boat. The two knights make bows and arrows, building the arrowheads from recovered nails; then they

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[10] As Francine Mora-Lebrun shows, Brutus's story is a rewriting of Aeneas's. (Mora-Lebrun, 56-71)

[11] Galehaut speaks out to encourage his companions to organize their lives together in the most effective way: "Quant la barge fery, elle se debrisa toute ; et cilz dedens, qui presque mort estoient, yssirent hors a seiche terre. Et quant li jours fu venuz clers et biaux et li airs fut acoisiez, ilz eschapperent tout leur harnoiz a seiche terre. Et lors parolle Galehot et dit : 'Seignours, yci nous [22va] estuet mourir et estre en vie tout nostre aage. Or le faison bien au miex que nous pourron. Prenons les fust de ceste barge et les cloz et faison un retret ou nous puissons herbergier les nuiz.' Et ils s'accordent a ce tuit, si furent li dui bons chevaliers charpentiers et firent un recet ou ilz se hebergerent tuit .VI." ("When the boat hit the coast, it completely broke. And those who were inside—who were almost dead—went out on the dry shore. And when the day came bright and clear and the wind had calmed down, they carried their equipment on the dry shore. Galehaut spoke up and said: 'Sirs, we must stay here for the rest of our lives and die. Let's do this as best we can. Let's take the wood from this boat and the nails: let's build a shelter where we can spend the nights.' They all agreed on this; the knights carpentered and built a refuge where all six of them stayed", "cardinal version", episode I, ms. Arsenal 5229, fol. 22rb-22va).

shape containers to cook their food. They return to a more civilized diet, despite the absence of bread, so essential to the table in the Western world in the Middle Ages.[12]

The castaways also organize their lives on the island, recreating a micro-society that continues to be governed by the standards of their homeland. Contact with the island's savagery does not cause social upheaval in their small group. By maintaining the social hierarchy, the knights—members of the aristocracy—impose their social domination on their companions. The castaways share their tasks with a hierarchical division; the two knights hunt while the four sailors pick fruits.[13]

The main activity on the island is hunting. Birds and wildlife are so abundant—explains the narrator—that the knights become so overweight that nobody could recognize them! A hunting experience symbolically marks the meeting between the wilderness and civilization. On a small mountain, the castaways see a beast of a marvelous size; Galehaut shoots an arrow at it; it begins to flee, but, near the water, it lets itself be reached and

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[12] See Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Vidal-Naquet 1999a, 581-614 and 1999b, 615-634.

[13] "Or saichiez, seignours, que li quatre mariniers furent tant debonnaires qu'ilz servoient et honoroient les deux bons chevaliers ainsi comme s'ilz feussent leur lige seignour. Li duy bons chevaliers freres firent chascun un arc et pourchacerent d'avoir saietes et y firent les fers des clouz de la barge, dont je vous di appertement qu'ilz commencerent a prendre oyseaux et bestes a grant plenté. Tot ce fu leur viande, tant qu'ilz furent en celle isle. Assés avoient a mengier char et pomes sauvages, mez de pain n'avoient ilz point. Ilz firent vaissiaux et les sçorent bien cuire, et puis firent dedens cervoises de pometes sauvages que li quatre [22vb] aloient cueillant parmy le boiz de l'isle, dont je vous di appertement que li duy chevaliers devindrent si gras et si membrus en si pou de temps qu'ilz ne fussent congneuz de leur voisins qui adonc les veissent par aucune maniere du monde. Li duy bons chevaliers aloient en chace chascun jour et prenoient les grans oyseaux et les grans bestes, et li .IIII. mariniers aloient cerchant pommettes et appareilloient leurs mengier aux deux chevaliers et les servoient de tout leur pouoir" ("Now, may I say, gentlemen, that the four sailors were so good that they served the two valiant knights as if they were their lords. The two brother knights made a bow and arrows for themselves, building the arrowheads with the nails of the boat. And I tell you openly that they began to catch birds and wild animals in large numbers. As long as they stayed on the island, this was their food. They had enough to eat of the wild meat and the apples that the four sailors would pick from the island's woods, and I tell you clearly that the two knights became so big and strong in a short time that their relatives would not have known them if they had seen them. Every day, the two knights went hunting and took large birds and big animals, and the four sailors picked apples, prepared food for the knights and served them as best they could", "cardinal version", episode I, ms. Arsenal 5229, fol. 22va-22vb).

killed.[14] This beast plays the role of a *genius loci*, a primitive and supernatural presence that, in popular traditions and literary narratives, haunts the virgin lands.[15] Its killing coincides with an appropriation of the place: by its ritual value, it signals—with the imposition of the name of the island—the beginning of the colonization process.

After the first episode, which tells of the shipwreck and the organization of the life on Non Sachant Island, the story is incomplete. My codicological analysis revealed that the Arsenal 5229 manuscript—the only witness to this part of the story—had lost a folio. Thus, without transition, the reader finds the castaways in the middle of a tournament in Salisbury, without being able to deduce how they left Non Sachant Island. Did the lost folio reveal how the castaways left their island? It is possible to think so, but it is also conceivable that the author created a temporal ellipsis to avoid having to solve this narrative difficulty. It is also possible that the gap is more extensive: this manuscript dates from more than a century after the original narrative.[16] Other intermediate episodes—now lost—could have existed.

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[14] "Un jour avint qu'ilz aloient tuit .VI. ensemble parmy l'isle, si trouverent une beste qui de grant corps estoit a merveilles, qui estoit dessus une petite montaigne. Et quant ilz la virent, ilz se vindrent tuit .VI. celle part, mes la beste estoit tant orguilleuse qu'elle ne deigna fouir, ains attendi tant que messire Galehot, qui aloit devant les autres, la fery d'une saiete parmy le pis. Et quant la beste senti adonc le cop, elle se mist en fuie ; et messire Hector, qui tres devant se mist, la fery d'une saiette. Si s'enfuioit la beste, et li chevaliers l'ataignent auques pres de l'eaue et illec [23ra] la pristrent et l'occistrent, et li quatre mariniers l'enporterent a leur recet" ("One day, it happened that when all six of them crossed the island together, they found a beast of a wonderful size standing at the top of a small mountain. As soon as they saw it, all six of them went to it, but the beast was so proud that it did not deign to flee. On the contrary, it waited for Sir Galehaut, who preceded the others, to wound it with an arrow in the middle of its chest. And when the beast felt the blow, it started to run away. Hector was following it closely, wounding it with another arrow. Thus, the beast fled, and the knights caught it by the water and killed it there. Then the four sailors brought it to their shelter", "cardinal version", episode I, ms. Arsenal 5229, fol. 22vb-23ra).

[15] According to the examples analyzed by Claude Lecouteux, *genii loci* sometimes appear in the form of animals in literary texts. As Jacques Le Goff showed with the example of Saint Marcel of Paris, the triumph of man over a *genius* of the land has also been transposed into hagiography in a Christianized form: the saint—often an evangelizing bishop—triumphs over a devil dragon (like the Grand'Goule, the Gargoyle or the Graouilly). See Lecouteux, 229-268.

[16] Some fragments and incomplete manuscripts of the "cardinal version" date from the thirteenth century.

In any case, the story returns to Non Sachant Island a few episodes later to tell the story of Segurant's youth: Non Sachant Island is no longer a desert island, but a civilized city with palaces, houses and even a church. Still without transition, the primordial micro-society has been transformed into an urban and Christian society. My research in archives and libraries, which led me to find other fragments, unfortunately did not bring me to find the missing folio. The end of this medieval Robinsonade on "Not Knowing" Island remains unknown.

3. Segurant or the fatality of an island

Thanks to the initial Robinsonade and the invention of Non Sachant Island, we can suggest that the anonymous author wanted to give the protagonist an education away from the Arthurian court, probably on the model of Lancelot, who grew up under the waters of an enchanted lake, or Perceval, who was raised by his mother in the middle of a forest. (Cosman 1966) Like *Perceval* by Chrétien de Troyes and the *Prose Lancelot*, *Segurant or the Knight of the Dragon* tells the story of the protagonist's training in chivalry, and his progressive discovery of the Arthurian world with its customs and its rules.

At the beginning of the story, the island is the mirror of the hero: the first meaning of "nonsachant" is "ingenuous", "naive", "ignorant". His initiatory journey is marked by several stages, as in a *Bildungsroman*. After his knighting ceremony, Segurant leaves home without his father's knowledge, who would have prevented him from doing so.[17] Through this transgression, the young hero escapes paternal authority and discovers the world alone. If the island's enclosed space represents childhood, the mainland—with the open and unlimited spaces of forests and moors—can represent the world of adults and adventure. When the hero has proved his worth on land, through the victorious joust against his uncle, he can return to his native island and be accepted into the adult community.

By moving away from his island, the hero loses his initial recklessness and acquires an excessive self-confidence. He thus leaves his island for the second time to prove his worth to King Arthur's court. At the Winchester tournament, he stands out for his admirable exploits, but two naughty fairies, Morgan and Sibyl, use their magic to keep away this hero, who could be a formidable ally of King Arthur. They summon a devil who takes the appearance of a dragon and spreads terror on the tournament site:

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[17] This happens both in the "cardinal version" and in the "alternative versions" that rewrite the hero's first exploits. Disobedience of the father's will is of course a feature of Robinson Crusoe and many Robinsonades.

Segurant crosses a wall of fire and pursues the monster, succumbing to the spell of the two nasty fairies. He directs all the efforts of his body and mind towards this ghost that he will not be able to reach: as the narrator explains, the devil dragon is "chose esperituele"[18] ("a spiritual thing") and cannot be killed. Without news of Segurant, his countrymen set out to find him, while the Arthurian court, deceived by Morgan, wonders whether this knight really existed or whether it was only a mirage.

Segurant's destiny is undoubtedly marked by the fatality of the islander. In medieval literary texts, the island is not only the place of origin of wonderful objects (swords, armors, magic rings), but also of extraordinary beings, as if this enclosed space was conducive to the preservation of a fabulous genealogy. (Dubost, 293-294) With wonderful stature and great ambition,[19] Segurant seems to be the best knight of his generation, but, because of the enchantment that forces him to follow a mirage, he ends up being forgotten by the knighthood.

At the end of the oldest version, probably unfinished, the hero still pursues his illusory dragon. Thereafter various copyists and continuators wanted to compensate for the imperfections of this unfulfilled hero. In the other versions, Segurant goes on a crusade, becomes a king of the Holy Land or dies after his victorious battles against the Saracens. His pursuit of the dragon, which traverses many manuscripts, would be bound to remain unfinished, if a continuator had not decided to finish off the monster by killing it.[20] More than the Knight of the Dragon, Segurant is ultimately a knight without a dragon.

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[18] "Mez sa pensee li failly, car ce dragon ne pourroit il occire en nulle maniere du monde, car il estoit chose esperituele. Et li esperiz, bon ou mauvez qu'i soit, ne muert jamez : la char meurt seulement, ainsi com Merlin le tesmoigne appertement ça en arriere, quant il dist que, combien que sa char fust morte et pourrie, son esperit estoit vif..." ("But this thought was misleading, because in no way in the world could he kill the dragon that was a spiritual thing. And the spirit, good or bad, never dies: only the flesh dies, as Merlin openly attests when he says that, although his flesh was dead and rotten, his spirit was alive", "cardinal version", episode XXX, ms. Arsenal 5229, fol. 126va).

[19] Segurant can remind another islander of the Arthurian legend who reaches glory before falling apart: Galehaut, the lord of the Faraway Islands. After having submitted thirty kingdoms, Galehaut gives up the conquest of Logres, sees all his fortresses collapse in a single night, then dies of sorrow because of his passion for Lancelot. See *Lancelot, roman en prose du XIIIe siècle*, Micha ed. § II, 17-27; XXXV, 1-3 (t. I, 10-17, 388) and Frappier, 137-147.

[20] The death of the dragon is narrated in the first episode of the "alternative version" of London-Turin, preserved by the ms. London, British Library, Add. 36673 and by

Conclusion

The story of the shipwreck and the material life on the desert island, which will form the heart of Robinson Crusoe's adventures, constitutes the matrix of the work. This proto-Robinsonade, which opens the story, also has the function of introducing a new space, a new hero and a new text into the archipelago of Arthurian literature.

The invention of Non Sachant Island allowed the anonymous author to tell the story of a hero's youth on the edge of Arthurian lands, based on the model of Perceval's and Lancelot's childhoods. The toponym of this new island evokes its original wilderness—a virgin land where the life of a new hero can be inscribed as if on a blank page—and the initial naivety of the character whose training in chivalry is described. But it undoubtedly also announces the isolation and oblivion to which Segurant is destined: leaving an unknown island, he disappears as mysteriously as he appeared and is therefore considered by his fictional companions as a fictional being, a mirage produced by an enchantment.

The choice of an insular hero gave the author greater autonomy and freedom compared to previous works from which *Segurant or the Knight of the Dragon* borrowed the fictional world. This initial Robinsonade was probably suggested by the project to add a new text to the corpus of Arthurian literature without contradicting previous works that were set in the same chronological framework. Thanks to this matrix, the author introduced the best knight into King Arthur's world, while ensuring the coherence of his work with earlier accounts that ignored this newcomer. Such games of illusions have undoubtedly favored Segurant's destiny of oblivion and marked indelibly this forgotten Arthurian Romance.

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