

The public and private images of 'Cligès' Fenice

Article

Published Version

Nelson, D. (1981) The public and private images of 'Cligès' Fenice. Reading Medieval Studies, VII. pp. 81-88. ISSN 0950-3129 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/84793/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Publisher: University of Reading

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

The Public and Private Images of *Cligès*' Fénice

Recent critics have rendered obsolete the widespread misconception of the medieval poet as a mere teller of quaint tales that present a clouded composite of disparate literary traditions and that, at the same time, reflect courtly sentiment.¹ In fact, scholars have in many instances shown medieval poets to be conscious artists who weave together complex religious and secular traditions to create absorbing and meaningful plots.² Analyses of the context in which medieval audiences received these poetic endeavours have revealed an acute ability to appreciate significance on multiple levels.³

In the prologues to his romances, Chrétien de Troyes, like many other twelfth-century authors, demonstrates his awareness of his artistry when he admonishes his audience to be alert for the presence of meanings not readily obvious.⁴ In *Cligès*, especially, Chrétien exhibits a delight in playing with multiplicity of meaning. He carefully creates ambiguous situations which lend themselves to more than one interpretation. In addition, he offers various views of characters, so that their true nature is not immediately apparent. Fénice, most strikingly, presents different faces to different readers. With this seemingly superficial heroine, Chrétien manipulates the reaction of the audience to her and to the episodes in which she is involved. Rendering this romance even more complex in structure, Fénice, within the framework of the plot, manipulates the behaviour and the opinions of the other characters.

Particularly telling in this double manipulation is Fénice's refusal to give her heart to one man and her body to two. Since she is unwilling to ignore her strong love for her husband's nephew and similarly unwilling to sleep with her husband, she lives in ambiguity and, in fact, creates for herself a double reality. For her husband, her subjects, and even Cligès, her image is that of the virtuous empress of Constantinople and the beautiful wife of Alis. At the same time, only Fénice herself and Thessala, her confidant, know her to be the duplicitous but virginal admirer of Cligès.

It is to her confidant that Fénice first voices her reservations about her impending marriage. She loves Cligès, not Alis, but is powerless to avoid the arranged marriage. Remembering the slanderous stories about Iseult's adulterous love, Fénice determines to escape such infamy by assuring that her heart and her body be possessed by the same man.

Ne de mon cors ne de mon cuer
N'iert faite partie a nul fuer.
Ja voir mes cors n'iert garceniers,
Ja n'i avra deux parceniers.
Qui a le cuer, si et le cors. ⁵

Fénice believes that if she saves her body for Cligès, she cannot be accused of adultery even though legally married to Alis.

To achieve this deceitful goal, Fénice appeals to Thessala, whose total and unquestioning devotion to her mistress dominates her every decision. Thessala uses her extensive magical skills, with no thought whatsoever to her own safety or moral scruples, in order to enable Fénice to appear to the world to be a virtuous wife while avoiding sexual contact with her husband. To effect this end, Thessala sends an unsuspecting Cligès to Alis, the bridegroom, at his marriage banquet, with a potion which will cause the emperor to believe his marriage consummated when he actually possesses his wife only in his dreams. As soon as the potion is swallowed, the first stage of the public manifestation of Fénice's double reality begins. Only Thessala and Fénice know that Fénice remains a virgin while Alis, Cligès, and the court are manipulated into seeing her as the wife of the emperor.

Fénice's firm stand against committing adultery seems admirable only until it becomes obvious that her primary goal is not a moral one. She merely wishes to preserve her public image while she manoeuvres to satisfy her personal desires. In contrast with Fénice, Cligès projects a most moral image. He deals with his overpowering attraction to his uncle's wife by leaving the court for Britain to escape temptation. Even after his return, though, he does not seek Fénice's company, and it is she who initiates the conversation which leads to the mutual revelation of their feelings. Eagerly, Fénice relates to Cligès that she remains a virgin and that 'Vostre est mes cuers, vostre est mes cors'.⁶ After this tantalising statement, she declares that he will have no physical pleasure with her until he thinks of a way to separate her from Alis. However, she highhandedly rejects his suggestion that they elope together to Britain because she would then be branded an adulteress. Encouraged by the success of her first ruse, Fénice proposes a much more ambitious plan, which will allow her to enjoy Cligès' attentions while she maintains her public image. Once again, she turns to the talented Thessala, who implements the scheme for the feigned illness and death. Incredibly, though, Fénice reveals to Cligès only his role in the plan with no consideration for his feelings. When he rescues her 'lifeless' body, cruelly tortured by the doctors from Salerno, from the tomb, he thinks her truly dead after such treatment and suffers horribly, overlooking the effect of the potion.

Once resurrected from the grave and hidden from the world, Fénice seems to have scored a brilliant triumph, albeit not without intense physical suffering, for she and Cligès enjoy the delights of love in luxurious, exotic surroundings while not far away, her public image intact, she is bitterly mourned as an exemplary wife and empress by her husband and her subjects. Only Cligès and his servant Jehan have been admitted to the closely guarded audience of her private image.

Upon the hunter's discovery of the naked lovers in the secret garden, Fénice's carefully constructed public image abruptly shatters. Alis's death soon afterwards from shame and dishonour completes the total reversal of her public and private images. She finally becomes in truth the loving and virtuous wife of the emperor (Cligès, this time) but is significantly perceived by her subjects and remembered by subsequent rulers as an adulteress who went to any extreme to satisfy her passion.

Throughout, Chrétien takes pains to show that Fénice, although obsessed with adultery, is never concerned with morality. Her insistence on giving 'corps et coeur' to the same man is based totally on her desire to maintain a virtuous public image and not on a moral aversion to adultery. Even though she finally succeeds in marrying the man she loves, she fails miserably in achieving her primary goal, which is to avoid Iseut's reputation. In fact, within the framework of the plot, Fénice's deeds receive even more attention than those of Iseut by the world at large because of the spectacular ruse of the false death. The technical difference between the two women - that Fénice's and Alis's marriage was never consummated - made absolutely no difference to posterity.

In contrast with Fénice who manipulates the behaviour and feelings of Thessala, Alis and Cligès, with ultimately unsuccessful results, Chrétien de Troyes manipulates quite successfully the reaction of his audience to the romance by creating for it a double reality. By telling one story straightforwardly and implying another, he creates situations in which the audience wishes for the success of Cligès and Fénice even though it must question their behaviour. For example, Chrétien's early description of Fénice as

une pucele sole crient,
foible et coarde, simple et coie⁷

depicts her appearance to the other characters and explains the success of the double image she so industriously projects even though it cannot fool an alert reader for very long since her actions immediately contradict the author's words.

Even the choice of the name Fénice is deceptive since it leads the audience to expect in this young woman virtue which equals her beauty. Since the phoenix bird was most renowned for its ability to be resurrected from a fiery death, it came to be associated with the resurrected Christ and with the Christian martyrs who, after their heinous tortures, could look forward to everlasting life in paradise.⁸ Although Fénice's beauty and her escape from the tomb into an idyllic garden are undeniable, this woman who cheated her husband of his marital rights, evaded him with a lover, ridiculed him in the eyes of the world, and eventually caused his death, possesses no redeeming qualities whatsoever which could relate her to the risen Christ or the Christian martyrs. Thus, it is highly ironic that Chrétien declares his heroine appropriately named since, as he says,

Fenice ot la pucele a non,
Et ne fu mie sanz reison;
Car si con Fenix, li oisiaux,
Est sor toz autres li plus biaux,
N'estre n'an puet qu'uns ansamble. 9

It appears, at first, that the uniqueness of Fénice lies in her beauty and virtue, but as her story and intrigues unfold, her uniqueness begins to carry a negative rather than a positive force. 10

In another overt attempt to mislead the reader as to his heroine's true nature, Chrétien, without comment, permits Fénice to cite incorrectly Saint Paul on the subject of marriage as support for her plan to carry on an affair with Cligès while still married to Alis. Fénice's memory of Paul's words to the Corinthians provide a justification for discreet adultery as well as reinforcement for a positive conception of Fénice's character on the part of the audience.

Mes le comandement saint Pol
Fet buen garder et retenir:
Qui chastes ne se viaut tenir,
Sainz Pos a feire li ansaingne
si sagemant, qu'il n'an praigne
Ne cri ne blasme ne reproche. 11

Only an accurate reference to this biblical passage can prevent this sly deception. Paul actually admonished:

To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well
for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot
exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is
better to marry than to be aflame with passion. 12

Paul's words apply in no way to Fénice's situation since she has chosen continence within marriage and sexual satisfaction only outside of marriage. 13

Because Chrétien succeeds in his sympathetic surface presentation of Cligès and Fénice, the reader wants to disregard Fénice's reprehensible deception of her credulous husband, who, in fact, partially merits his fate because he violates his oath to the father of Cligès by taking a wife. Thus, the reader heartily approves when the three doctors, portrayed as intelligent, honest and persevering, are rewarded for their efforts to undeceive the emperor by being thrown to their deaths from a palace window. The extensive and detailed description of the torture of Fénice at the hands of these doctors

and her subsequent suffering from the wounds provide a kind of atonement for the sins of deceit and adultery that she so willfully commits, but atonement not only for the heroine but also for those who have been cheering for this amoral creature. In fact, Chrétien plays with the religious significance of the torture, burial and resurrection elements of this episode even to the point of referring to Fénice as 'martire' (v. 6025) and 'mout sainte chose' (v. 6096). He cleverly presents the possibility of interpreting Fénice's exit from the tomb as a new person, no longer empress of Constantinople or wife of Alis and free to live and love as she chooses.¹⁴ But, in truth, this freedom is as false as the death itself. She did not die; she is still married to Alis; and she is committing adultery with Cligès. Any sense of religious purification or martyrdom on her part results only from the double reality created by Chrétien. Fénice's sudden lack of concern about adultery after her resurrection is best explained by her belief that she has covered her tracks and that she now can be Cligès's mistress without risk of discovery.

Chrétien continues to mix religious and secular elements in the secret tower and garden episode. While the reader vicariously enjoys illicit sex in voluptuous surroundings, conflicting clues make the moral tone of the situation ambiguous. The unavoidable comparison of this idyllic spot with the Garden of Eden brings to mind the original 'ruse féminine' and its dreadful consequences while at the same time it recalls the eternal paradise earned so courageously by the suffering martyrs. Chrétien also sends a double signal when he chooses to have a falling pear strike the sleeping Fénice on the ear to alert her that the love nest has been accidentally discovered. On the one hand, the pear supports her virtuous image since in Christian tradition this fruit is sometimes associated with the Virgin Mary and also with the love of the Incarnate Christ for mankind.¹⁵ On the other hand, however, the incident recalls a well-known twelfth-century fabliau about a lady who also deceives her credulous husband under a pear tree,¹⁶ thus removing any aura of innocence from Fénice's relationship with Cligès. The humour of this scene which simultaneously recalls the virtuous Virgin Mary and a scandalous lusty bourgeois wife reveals great sophistication on the part of both the author and the audience.

Chrétien's attitude towards Fénice must be inferred by the reader since he never overtly criticises her behaviour. But when he relates in the conclusion to the romance that every empress of Constantinople after her lived as a prisoner because of her misdeeds, his opinion becomes obvious. Despite her best efforts, Fénice is remembered as the woman who deceived her husband and because of whom all future empresses were locked up in the gynaeceum not as the woman who admirably refused to give her heart and her body to different men. It is likely that the twelfth-century audience of this romance experienced

no difficulty whatsoever in appreciating the playful duality inherent in the character of Fénice and her adventures as well as the essentially moral stance of the author. 17

DEBORAH NELSON,
RICE UNIVERSITY,
HOUSTON, TEXAS.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Roger Sherman Loomis, Arthurian Tradition and Chrétien de Troyes, New York 1949, p.38, and Arthur C.L. Brown, Iwain: A Study in the Origins of Arthurian Romance Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature, 8 Boston 1903, 133.
2. Tom Artin, The Allegory of Adventure, Lewisburg 1974, p.17.
3. Artin, op.cit., p.31.
4. In his prologue to Erec et Enide, Chrétien states:

Li vilains dit an son respit
 Que tel chose a l'an an despit,
 Qui molt valt mialz que l'an ne cuide.

 vv. 1-3, ed., Mario Roques, Paris 1955.
5. Kristian von Troyes, Cliges, Halle 1921, vv.3159-3163.
6. v.5250.
7. vv.3846-47.
8. Jean-Paul Clébert, Bestiaire fabuleux, Paris 1971, pp.298-302.
9. vv.2725-29.
10. Curiously, the twelfth-century troubadour Rigaut de Barbezieux states in one of his songs: 'tel le phénix qui se brûle et ressuscite, ainsi j'aimerais faire comme lui pour pouvoir ressusciter auprès de mon aimée'. There would seem to be some connection between these lines and Chrétien's Fénice. Rigaut de Barbezieux was once thought to have written between 1175 and 1215 and to have spent some time at the Court of Champagne. However, recent scholarship places his activity between 1140 and 1157 and casts serious doubt on his presence in any northern court. See John F. Benton, 'The Court of Champagne as a Literary Center', Speculum 36, 1961, 84-85.

For a discussion of the phoenix bird in Provençal lyric, see Odette Cadart-Ricard, 'Le Thème de l'oiseau dans les comparaisons et les dictons chez onze troubadours, de Guillaume IX à Cerveri de Girone', Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale 21, 1978, 205-230.

11. vv. 5324-29.
12. I Corinthians 7, 8-9.
13. The Wife of Bath uses the same scriptural quotation to justify her five marriages. F.N. Robinson, ed., The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, New York 1933, pp.91-92, vv.51ff.
14. Z.P. Zaddy, in fact, defends the behaviour of Fénice and Cligès without reservation and declares that 'Cligès is the story of a man who eventually gains possession of the kingdom and the wife that his uncle has usurped and that should by rights be his'. Problems of Form and Meaning in Erec, Yvain, Cligès and the Charrete, Glasgow 1973, p.171.
15. George Ferguson, Signs and Symbols in Christian Art, New York 1961, p.36, figs. III and XI.
16. Boccaccio uses this plot in the Decameron, Book 7, Tale 8, and Chaucer, also, in The Merchant's Tale. See L. Polak's comments on Chrétien's use of this fabliau in 'Cligès, Fenice et l'arbre d'amour', Romania 93, 1972, 303-16.
17. This is a revised version of a paper given at the Third International Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society held at Liverpool in August 1980.