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Published Version

Brook, L. C. (1988) The notion of adventure in Guingamor. Reading Medieval Studies, XIV. pp. 3-16. ISSN 0950-3129 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/85211/>

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Publisher: University of Reading

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# The notion of adventure in *Guingamor*

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*Guingamor* has long been recognized as being an intriguing and complex *lai*, and critical attention has tended to centre round overall interpretation, stylistic comparison with the *Lais* of Marie de France, or an examination of the way in which, in comparison with other texts, the anonymous author used a range of traditional or legendary themes; for within its 678 lines *Guingamor* contains the relatively common themes of the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, the hunt of the white creature, the fairy mistress, the fountain, the fairy castle and the Otherworld, and comparison has thus been made particularly with the *lais* of *Désiré*, *Graelent*, and *Lanval*, and also with *La Chastelaine de Vergi*.<sup>1</sup>

A consideration of the notion of adventure clearly involves taking a closer look at the role and portrayal of Guingamor himself, for the notion is virtually inseparable from the concept of the hero. Some of Chrétien's heroes, notably Erec, Yvain and Perceval, deliberately seek adventures in the shape of the chivalric exploit, in order to prove themselves and enhance their standing. This attitude is well summed up by Calogrenant who, when asked by the ugly herdsman at the beginning of *Yvain* what he is seeking, replies:

'Avantures por esprover  
Ma proesce et mon hardement'. (362-63)<sup>2</sup>

Viewed in the light of this attitude, Guingamor appears unadventurous when he is first introduced to us:

.I. sien neveu avoit li rois,  
qui molt fu sages et cortois;  
Guingamor estoit apelez,

chevalier ert, preuz et senez.  
 Por sa valor, por sa biauté  
 li rois le tint en grant chierté;  
 de lui voloit fere son oir,  
 car ne pooit enfant avoir.  
 Et il fesoit molt a amer,  
 biau sot promestre, et bien doner,  
 molt ennoroit les chevaliers,  
 les serjanz et les escuiers;  
 par toute la terre ert proisiez  
 car molt ert franz et enseigniez. (9-22)<sup>3</sup>

He is endowed with all the courtly social graces, and is something of a mix of Gauvain, since he is the king's nephew, and Guigemar, for like Guigemar he possesses all the requisite qualities, and shares with him an initial indifference to love. When the queen approaches him in the first episode of the *lai*, Guingamor's reply to her is: 'ne quier ouan d'amor ovrer' (86). On the other hand unlike Guigemar there is no mention in this introduction of any military prowess. In social terms, though, his relationship to the king marks him out as special from the outset, and as the story begins he finds himself isolated from the action which involves the king and some of his entourage. Having that day been bled, he is indisposed, and so unable to accompany his uncle when he goes hunting. Far from being a loner, however, he shows himself to be gregarious, enjoying the company of his companions, and then a game of chess with the seneschal:

pluseurs des compaignons le roi  
 a retenuz ensemble o soi.  
 A primes de jor se leva,  
 por deduire el chastel ala.  
 Le seneschal l'a encontreé,  
 ses braz li a au col gité;  
 tant ont parlé q'a .I. tablier  
 se sont alé esbanoier. (29-36)

This social involvement and the pursuit of pleasure is the antithesis of the search for adventure, which is a socially separating experience. Later on, too, he will delight in the company assembled at the fairy's castle, and especially that of the ten lost knights.

It is while he is innocently absorbed in his game of chess that the queen, on her way to chapel, happens to notice in passing Guingamor's handsomeness, enhanced at that moment by the poetic touch of the sunlight falling upon his face. Instead of proceeding to her devotions she realizes for the first time how much she felt attracted to her nephew. This leads to the Potiphar's wife episode, comparable with, yet different (both in detail and significance) from the same *motif* as it appears in *Graelent*, *Lanval*, or *La Chastelaine de Vergi*. Nevertheless one characteristic common to all of these texts must, of course, be the unresponsiveness and refusal of the knight. A further point in common, apart from in *Lanval*, is that the lady is forced to declare her passion openly, because the knight fails to understand the true import of the discussion up to that point. This is not so much a question of obtuseness on the knight's part, rather it is that since he has no passionate feeling for the lady, the preliminary discussion on love is for him purely theoretical up to the moment at which the lady has to make her specific declaration.<sup>4</sup> As soon as he realizes the nature of the lady's offer, the knight invariably displays horror and a chilling firmness in reply. In all cases the lady's offer is undignified, itself a cause for embarrassment to the knight, and in *Guingamor* and *Lanval* at least her action is the result of an impulsive lasciviousness, whereas in *Graelent* and *La Chastelaine de Vergi* her passion seems to have grown over a period of time. *Guingamor*, though, is the only text in which the lady matches action to words: 'Vers lui le tret, si l'a besié' (106), and nowhere else is the departure of the knight more dramatic, for he flees without realizing that the queen is still clutching his cloak, the fastenings having snapped as he rushes away, a reminiscence of the original story in Genesis 39. 12. *Guingamor* is the only text too in which the lady's passion is not overtly turned to hatred, for the emphasis is on the queen's apprehension lest Guingamor should denounce her to her husband. Meanwhile it is perhaps not without significance that after the fateful encounter Guingamor immediately returns to the game of chess, to the *status quo ante*, just as later he will attempt to go back to his own world after his visit to the Otherworld. His action also allows for the surreptitious return of his cloak by the queen's handmaiden, as he sits totally absorbed in his game and his troubled thoughts.

The way in which the queen discreetly proposes to get rid of him grows naturally from the sequence of events. On returning from their successful hunt the king and his companions indulge in the after-

dinner relation of their various exploits. Guingamor remains silent, partly through shock at the day's events and partly because he did not go with them. The queen, hearing the turn of the conversation, is then able to tease them all with the challenge of the white boar, while actually intending it for Guingamor, 'por lui grever et corroucier' (149):

'Molt vos oi, fet ele, vanter  
 et vos aventures conter.  
 Mes n'a ceanz nul si hardi  
 de toz iceus que je voi ci,  
 qui en la forest ci defors,  
 la ou converse li blans pors,  
 osast chacier ne soner cor,  
 qui li donroit mil livrès d'or.  
 En merveilleus los se metroit,  
 qui le senglier prendre porroit.' (153-62)

This has the effect of sobering up the assembled knights, whose male boastfulness is silenced by a queen playing a role akin to that of Kay in *Yvain*. The significance of this proposed quest and its daunting mystery is obligingly explained by the king:

'Dame, sovent avez oï  
 l'aventure de la forest.  
 Ce sachiez vos, molt me desplest  
 qant en nul leu en oi parler.  
 Onques nus hon n'i pot aler  
 qui puis em peüst reperier  
 por qoi le porc peüst chacier;  
 la lande i est aventureuse  
 et la riviere perilleuse.  
 Molt grant dommage i ai eü,  
 .X. chevaliers i ai perdu,  
 toz les meilleurs de ceste terre  
 que le senglier alerent querre.' (70-82)

The reactions of the court and of Guingamor show a difference of response from that of a Chrétien romance. In *Yvain*, for instance, Calogrenant's story of an unconquered adventure stimulates Arthur and

his court, as well as Yvain, to take up the challenge immediately. In *Guingamor* the prospect of such an adventure is paralysing, the king discourages it, and Guingamor takes it up only because he understands that the challenge is directed at him:

Guingamor a bien entendu  
qu'elle a por lui cest plet meü. (165-66)

Not for him, though, the instinctive, eager, and mystical response to the call of the supreme challenge that took Yvain into the Pesme Aventure, or Erec into the château de Brandigan. For Guingamor it is more a question of feudal or perhaps family duty, since the wife of his uncle and overlord is obliquely telling him to do it. Even so he does not respond immediately, and the scene ends inconclusively with no-one taking up the challenge, as the assembly breaks up.

The manner in which Guingamor requests the adventure has almost an element of the parodic. It is only on reflection that he goes to the king's quarters and uses the courtly cliché of the 'don contraignant', requesting the king's best hunting animals to assist him, recognising as he does the special nature of the undertaking. His intention, clearly, is to succeed. There is, then, a conflict of expectations, since the queen, while pretending to tempt the knights with the prospect of success, actually expects and hopes that Guingamor will not succeed, but disappear permanently; and Guingamor, in obedience to her wish that he should leave court, hopes to be successful and eventually return, otherwise he would not ask to borrow the king's hunting animals. It is the king's gloomy view that he will not return which will be proved right, and his attitude of discouragement is quite the opposite of that of Arthur who initiates the hunt of the white stag in *Erec et Enide*; it is more like that of Arthur when his knights set out on the Grail quest in *La Queste del Saint Graal*, though his concern, when he learns the nature of Guingamor's request, is more for the potential loss of his hunting dogs than for his nephew.

Guingamor accepts the 'aventure de la forest' ungrudgingly, and while his attitude cannot be seen as a sacrifice of self to an inevitable doom, he is nevertheless a victim of what could be termed the forced adventure. Depending on how this concept is defined, it could be found elsewhere in a variety of forms: for example, Maboagrain, forced to fight in the sterile situation in which he finds himself as a victim of love-tyranny; or Gauvain, made to set off to vindicate

himself in *Perceval*, and obliged to participate against his original intention in the fight to champion the Pucelle aux petites manches. In other *lais*, too, enforced departure arising from differing circumstances and inevitably leading to adventures occurs in *Guigemar* and *Eliduc*, as well as in *Graelent*, where the situation is closer to *Guingamor*.

Such is Guingamor's determination to undertake the adventure that he tells the king that if he is unwilling to lend him his best animals, he will make do with his own inferior ones. The queen's intervention in favour of Guingamor at this point is rather puzzling. She urges the king to let him have the dogs, which would presumably improve his chances of success, though she is secretly convinced that he will not return:

delivree en cuide estre atant,  
nel verra mes en son vivant. (241-42)

Guingamor's joy at the king's eventual agreement is such that he spends a sleepless night in anticipation of the hunt:

a son ostel liez s'en ala;  
onques ne pot la nuit dormir. (246-47)

It is no longer, it seems, a matter of simple obedience to the queen's bidding; he is excited by the prospect of the challenge, the more so, perhaps, for having missed the earlier expedition with his uncle.

The hunt itself is given considerable prominence within the story as we follow its lively progress from the moment the boar is raised in a thicket near to the town to the discovery by Guingamor of the bathing fairy. The huntsmen knew exactly where to find the boar in the first place, because the adventure, far from being unique to Guingamor, had already been attempted by the ten lost knights. At one moment as the hunt proceeds Guingamor becomes worried, because he has lost sight of his uncle's *brachet*, as it eagerly chases after the boar:

cuide q'ait le brachet perdu,  
onques mes si dolent ne fu  
por son oncle, qui tant l'ama. (327-29)

Yet as soon as he sees it again, he is fairly confident of success, and anticipates the considerable fame that this would bring him:

et a soi meïsmes disoit  
que, s'il puet prandre le sengler  
et sainz ariere retorer,  
parlé en ert mes a toz dis,  
et molt en acuidra grant pris. (346-50)

He seems, in fact, to be on the point of catching the boar when he is distracted by the wondrous palace, which he lingers to admire with some complacency, thinking that the creature would soon weary and could easily be taken:

A son porc cuide recoverer  
ainz que gueres soit esloingnié,  
por ce que molt ert traveillié. (382-84)

Regretting only the apparent absence of any inhabitants, he sees the splendour of the palace as an adventure in itself, which he would be able to relate on his return:

De ce li a semblé le pis:  
home ne fame n'i trova,  
mes autre part se rehetta  
que tele aventure a trovee  
por raconter en sa contree. (392-96)

However, on leaving the palace he is surprised that both *brachet* and quarry have disappeared again, and in a moment of despair swears never to return and admit failure:

'Se n'ai mon chien et au porc fail,  
ja mes joie ne bien n'avrai,  
n'en mon país ne tornerai.' (406-08)

The distant sound of the *brachet* sets him off on the hunt once more, but he is almost immediately distracted again, this time by the damsel, or fairy, bathing in the fountain, though his seemingly puerile act of hiding her clothes is a device to keep her there until he

can return after completing the hunt:

Quant il avra le sengler pris,  
 ariere vorra retourner  
 et a la pucele parler. (440-42)

She therefore takes second place to his commitment to the hunt, and there is even some half-heartedness in the taking of her clothes, since he immediately returns them when she protests on the grounds of the ungentlemanliness of his behaviour:

'Guingamor, lessiez ma despoille.  
 Ja Deu ne place ne ne voille  
 qu'entre chevaliers soit retret  
 que vos faciez si grant mesfet  
 d'emblem les dras d'une meschine  
 en l'espoisse de la gaudine.' (447-52)

It does not occur to him to wonder how she knows his name, and he accepts her invitation to lodge with her only when she tells him, in an echo of the story of Jason and Medea, that she alone can help him succeed in his quest. She promises to present him with the boar and the lost *brachet* 'a porter en vostre pais' (473), if he will stay but three days. Success, then, will not really be his, certainly not unaided.

It is only as they are riding towards her palace that, impressed by her beauty, he requests her love, to which she agrees in a way which appears a little casual:

Cele fu sage et bien aprise,  
 Guingamor respont en tel guise  
 qu'ele l'amera volentiers'. (497-99)

This situation stands in contrast to that of Lanval, to whom the fairy offers love, having singled him out in advance ('Pur vus vienc jeo fors de ma tere', 111), and who responds immediately to her offer. Guingamor can hardly be regarded as special in the same way. He has not shown outstanding merit deserving of love, and even in the hunt, to which Guingamor seems to attach the greatest importance, he seems undistinguished, and hardly even single-minded, having allowed himself to be distracted twice. Nor does the fairy treat him as

someone really special, granting her love in a way which makes it appear routine, although for Guingamor love is, it is stated, a fresh experience:

Onques mes n'ot le cuer destroit  
por nule fame qu'il veïst. (494-95)

Guingamor is impressed, too, by the world into which she introduces him, a reflection of his own world, and full now of good company, with the addition of the ten lost knights, who had also presumably been lured there by love of the fairy, since unlike the rest of the gathering they do not appear to have separate *amies*. It is his firm intention, nevertheless, to return to his uncle after a couple of days, but when he requests the promised boar and *brachet* he is warned of the lapse of 300 years; so really the fairy has tricked him with her earlier promise to let him go after three days, by not explaining that one day in her world is one hundred years in his. As for his success, empty as it will prove, that is possible only because he has been the lover of the fairy. By keeping one foot in the real world, and by wishing to return to it to tell his tale, he could be regarded as less deserving of this perfect world than the other ten knights, who seem happily integrated. A kind of fallen angel, he literally wants the best of both worlds. Refusing to believe what the fairy now tells him about the lapse of time, and hence of the disappearance long since of all who knew him, he nevertheless needs to find out for himself, promising - and even presuming - to return to the perfect, timeless world if it turns out to be true.

Warned not to eat or drink whilst back in his own world, Guingamor is allowed to go by the rather unpassionate fairy, and on verifying the lapse of time indicated by her, he is able to relate the story of his adventure to the woodman, and hence to posterity, before giving in to the pangs of hunger and eating three apples, an infraction reminiscent of the story of Adam and Eve. His succumbing is akin to that of Lancelot who, once he has left the protection of the Grail quest, returns to the real world in *La Mort Artu*, and soon lapses into sin with Guinevere. The dramatic aging of Guingamor's body is the direct result of compromising the agelessness of the Otherworld by his inability to heed the warning, for the *brachet* and horse survive intact. Yet the 'conmandement trespassé' (661) is immediately forgiven with the arrival of the two damsels and their brief reproach

('Molt blamerent le chevalier', 659). There is an element of the perfunctory about this, and he is not punished further, but removed 'belement et souëf' (663) by the damsels. Is the implication that he will be taken away and be rejuvenated in the Otherworld, or will he now always remain with his changed appearance, and look as old as King Mordrain in *La Queste del Saint Graal*?

The purpose of the injunction seems to have been less a test of obedience than a demonstration that one cannot truly be of two worlds, as Suard has pointed out.<sup>5</sup> The eating represents a symbolic act of belonging, and the rapid ageing makes him momentarily at one with the ugly and decrepit world to which he has returned. To look at it another way, this decayed state of both self and surroundings strikingly illustrates the folly of attempting to return to a *status quo ante*, once a powerful experience has moved a life on; the old life is no more, and cannot be. The ageing of Guingamor is also, of course, a narrative device, interesting and spectacular in its own right, and a means of impressing the events on the world via the witness of the woodman. Guingamor's reintegration into the Otherworld shows perhaps the virtue of forgiveness and understanding, but the fact remains that the hero appears very worldly and overall rather colourless.

In the introduction to their recent translation of Marie de France's *Lais*, Glyn Burgess and Keith Busby make some penetrating remarks concerning the nature of *aventure* in the *lai* as distinct from romance. They point out that *aventure* tends to happen to heroes unsought, changing the lives of those affected fundamentally, and occurring without benefit to society at large.<sup>6</sup> These observations are true, too, for the *lai* of *Guingamor*, in which the word *aventure* occurs more frequently than in any other of the anonymous *lais* (apart from the *lai de l'Espine*) or those of Marie de France, and far more frequently than in those *lais* with which *Guingamor* is usually compared in respect of content and treatment, namely *Désiré*, *Graelent*, *Lanval*, or the later short story, *La Chastelaine de Vergi*. The most common use of the term in the *lais* is in the sense of 'story' ('dire' or 'conter l'aventure'), and this is to be found principally at the beginning or end. Thus in *Guingamor*: 'D'un lay vos dirai l'aventure' (1), and 'Por l'aventure reconter, en fist le rois. I. lai trover' (675-76). The story is a personal one: addressing the woodman, Guingamor says:

'Entent a moi, ce que dirai,

*m'aventure reconterai*'; (613-14)

and it is Guingamor's story that the woodman will spread abroad: 'Par trestout conte l'*aventure*' (671).

In itself the word *aventure* is really neutral, something that happens, which in theory could be either good or bad. In practice, though, in the various *lais* the word normally implies something good and exciting or interesting rather than the opposite. This connotation is reinforced by the addition of an adjective when the queen first addresses Guingamor:

'Guingamor, molt estes vaillans,  
preuz et cortois et avenans,  
riche aventure vos atent'. (71-73)

The essentially neutral sense of the word can, however, be seen when, after the hunt initiated by the king at the beginning, the courtiers, cheered by a successful day and a good meal, talk and joke with each other, and relate personal experiences:

Aprés mengier joënt et rient,  
lor *aventures* s'entredient,  
chascuns parole de son fet,  
qui ot failli, qui ot bien tret. (141-44)

This same sense is referred to a few lines further on in the queen's intervention:

'Molt vos oi, fet ele, vanter  
et vos *aventures* conter'. (153-54)

That the word can have a favourable or adverse sense is perhaps best shown in Marie de France. Towards the end of *Guigemar* the hero finds his love again at Meriaduc's court, and utters a cry of joy:

'Bele, fet il, queile *aventure*  
Que jo vus ai issi trovee!' (822-23)<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand in *Eliduc*, when the hero in exile receives a letter summoning him back to Brittany, he is obliged to break the sad news

to the king in Exeter:

Al rei veit prendre le cungié.  
L'*aventure* li cunte et dit. (620-21)

Even so the phrase 'par aventure' expresses good fortune or opportunity (*Guigemar*, 676), and is the opposite of 'par mesaventure' (*Espine*, 410).

When in *Guingamor* the king expresses his fears for anyone who hunts the white boar, he uses the word *aventure* more in the sense of 'challenge':

'Dame, sovant avez oï  
l'*aventure* de la forest'. (170-71)

This sense is reflected a little later when *Guingamor* sets out 'par mi la lande *aventureuse*' (357). A further *nuance* to the word occurs when the hero admires the fairy's place, for *aventure* here has the sense of 'discovery':

mes autre part se rehta  
que tele *aventure* a trovee  
por raconter en sa contree; (394-96)

and after he has stayed there with the fairy and the numerous company the term is further enriched, having the sense of 'splendour' or 'mystery':

son chien et son porc volt avoir  
et son oncle fere savoir  
l'*aventure* qu'il ot veüe. (535-37)

There is no question in *Guingamor* of the hero using adventure to prove his worth, either by the chivalric exploit, for military prowess plays no part in the text at all, or even by notable skill in hunting, for in the hunt of the white boar, which he could have actually undertaken at any time, he proves no more than adequate. In a text tinged with irony he is an unexceptional hero, despite his royal rank, and has to be forced into adventure by circumstance. Moreover he is hardly an ardent and devoted lover, wishing to depart from his

mistress after only three days. His colourlessness, however, helps to give emphasis to the dynamism, splendour, and mystery of the adventures themselves, whether or not they have any overall allegorical or symbolic significance, as Sturm or Moritz thought, or whether they serve merely to feed the imagination of the reader or listener with the optimistic thought or hope that even into the most routine existence an unexpected challenge or adventure can come to lift the recipient to realms of undreamed of and undeserved delight, after which he should not expect to be the same ever again.<sup>8</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The most recent studies are: S. Sturm, *The Lay of Guingamor: a study*, University of North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, 76 (Chapel Hill, 1968); W.E. Moritz, *Guingamor, Guigemar, Graeentmor, Lanval, and Désiré; a comparative study of five Breton lays*, Dissertation Abstracts 29 (1968-9), 3582A-3583A (Thesis, University of South California, 1968); R. Weingartner, 'Stylistic analysis of an anonymous work: the Old French lai of *Guingamor*', *Modern Philology*, 69 (1971-2), 1-9; R.N. Illingworth, 'The Composition of *Graeent* and *Guingamor*', *Medium Aevum*, 44 (1975), 31-50; P. Tobin, *Les Lais anonymes des xii<sup>e</sup> et xiii<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Publications romanes et françaises, 143 (Geneva 1976); F. Suard, 'Le projet narratif dans *Lanval*, *Graeent*, et *Guingamor*', in *Etudes de langue et de littérature françaises offertes à André Lanly* (Nancy, 1980), pp. 357-69; and L. Harf-Lancner, *Les fées au moyen âge: Morgane et Mélusine, La naissance des fées* (Geneva, 1984), pp.244-50. For comparison with *La Chastelaine de Vergi*, see F. Whitehead, *La Chastelaine de Vergi* (Manchester, 1944), Introduction, pp.ix-xix, and P. Lakits, *La Chastelaine de Vergi et l'évolution de la nouvelle courtoise*, *Studia Romanica Universitatis Debreceniensis*, 2 (Debrecen, 1966), pp.16-8.

<sup>2</sup> Chrestien de Troyes, *Yvain (Le Chevalier au lion)*, edited by T.B.W. Reid (Manchester, 1942).

<sup>3</sup> All quotations from *Guingamor* are taken from the text published by Tobin, op. cit., pp.137-53.

<sup>4</sup> See *Graeent*, 70-114 (in Tobin, op. cit.), *Guingamor*, 71-86, and *La Chastelaine de Vergi*, 60-83.

<sup>5</sup> Suard, p.367.

<sup>6</sup> *The Lais of Marie de France*, translated with an introduction by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby, Penguin Books (Harmondsworth, 1986), Introduction, pp.31-2.

<sup>7</sup> Quotations from Marie are taken from Marie de France, *Lais*, edited by A. Ewert (Oxford, 1944).

<sup>8</sup> With minor modifications this article was first read as a paper at the meeting of the International Arthurian Society at Leuven in August, 1987.