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## THE UNKNOWN KNIGHT AS A CATALYST OF PSYCHOLOGICAL GROWTH IN *KAREL ENDE ELEGAST* AND *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

The article presents a comparative analysis of two chivalric epics, the Middle Dutch *Karel ende Elegast* and the Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, concentrating on the similarities and differences in the presentation of the figure of a mysterious knight (the Green Knight and the Black Knight – Elegast) who appears in the plot primarily as a challenger, but who also acts as an unexpected facilitator, provoking through his actions the psychological change of the main protagonist.

KEYWORDS: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Karel ende Elegast*, conflict, change, medieval chivalric epic, comparative literature

### INTRODUCTION

The Middle Dutch chivalric epic *Karel ende Elegast* is very well known to readers in the Netherlands and Flanders, but it remains largely unfamiliar outside the Low Countries, with the possible exception of the German-speaking area. That it should be so is unfortunate not only because this literary work holds an important position in the literary canon of the Dutch-speaking area (which lies, after all, geographically very close to the British Isles), but also because this text, interestingly enough, has some noteworthy similarities to one of the most important chivalric epics in the canon of Middle English literature – *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

*Karel ende Elegast* has appeared until now twice in an English translation, the first of which (Colledge/ Barnouw 1967) is, however, no longer readily accessible to today's readers. Recently, a new translation by Thea Summerfield has appeared along with a scholarly edition by Bart Besamusca and Hans van Dijk (Besamusca *et al.* 2011), to which we will refer in this article. As a rule, the title of this chivalric epic is rendered in English as *Charles and Elegast* (cf. Hermans 2009: 22-23), although a more accurate translation should be *Charlemagne and Elegast*

(van Oostrom 2007: 125). However, to avoid possible confusion, by analogy to Besamusca *et al.* (2011) only the Dutch title will be used below.

A striking feature of both *Karel ende Elegast* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (hereafter: *Sir Gawain*) is an encounter between the main protagonist – respectively Charles (Charlemagne) or Gawain – and an otherworldly, awe-inspiring opponent. This knight, who refuses to reveal his identity, is either entirely green (*Sir Gawain*) or clad entirely in black (*Karel ende Elegast*). In both of these stories the main protagonist's life is at first struck off-balance by a disturbing, inexplicable incident (the challenge in *Sir Gawain*, and the message conveyed by an angel in *Karel ende Elegast*), then it takes on a different turn as the hero is forced, out of necessity, to interact with the knight who confronts him, and whose identity is, initially at least, a mystery. Both plots share distinctly supernatural or 'fairy-tale' elements. In the Middle Dutch romance the foil to the main protagonist, Charles, is the black-clad Elegast, a knight and burglar who carries about him a suggestion of the otherworldly (he knows spells, is able to make things vanish, etc.). Although Elegast's supernatural abilities come (as we will see) nowhere near those of the Green Knight, the name 'Elegast' has close ties to the world of myth and folk legend, being related to the Middle Dutch 'Alve-gast', meaning "lord of the elves" (van Oostrom 2006: 237).

Both narratives have been interpreted by critics as implying an affirmation of chivalric values and order (for the Dutch text, cf. Claassens 2002: 7-8; Besamusca *et al.* 2011: 57). In neither case, however, is this process an effortless one. On the contrary, it requires courage and determination on the part of the protagonist: the knight Gawain or the king Charlemagne. Every one of them in a unique way undergoes a trial which entails not only physical bravery, but which also centres around that character's own psychological growth and self-awareness. In the course of this trial each protagonist arrives at a more profound, mature, and responsible understanding of himself and others, as well as of courtly society and its norms.

In this article I will start out from the rather straightforward assumption that in each case the catalyst of this change is the figure of a mysterious knight. This knight is a challenger, a dangerous opponent who provokes the protagonist to take action (or to continue on his mission), but in the course of the plot this very same adversary is revealed as a paradoxical helper, and ultimately as an instrument of psychological growth. His role, in contrast to what it appeared to be in the beginning, turns out to be a positive one, and therefore it has to be eventually re-evaluated by the main protagonist (as well as by the reader).

Besides the thematic analogies between the two chivalric epics, mentioned above, we may find a few other similarities. For one, neither text is very long: *Karel ende Elegast* comprises 1,414 verses in double rhyme, whereas *Sir Gawain*, being the longer of the two, has 2,530 lines. Both narratives have a unified plot, which has been praised for its compactness and for the deliberate, systematic way in which its author achieves a maximum of dramatic tension (cf. de Bruijn

2008: 4). *Karel ende Elegast* has been designated (e.g. by van Oostrom 1992: 101, but also by other scholars of Middle Dutch literature, e.g. van der Have 2005: 88) as a ‘small-scale epic’ (“kleinschalige epiek”) of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, an aspect that sets it apart from *chansons de geste* which have much longer and loosely-structured, episodic plots.

*Karel ende Elegast* is largely known through the earliest printed edition (Delft: Jacob Jacobszoon van der Meer or Christiaen Snellaert, 1486-1488; The Hague, National Library of the Netherlands, shelfmark 169 G 63), and through surviving fragments of earlier Middle Dutch manuscript sources. Most modern scholarly diplomatic editions are based on a number of extant manuscripts, including the *Karlmeinet* compilation in the Ripuarian dialect of Middle German from the early 14<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Besamusca *et al.* 2011: 51-53). The dating of *Karel ende Elegast* is uncertain, with most Dutch authors placing its origins in the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Besamusca *et al.* 2011: 54-55), but in each case the attested circulation of the text has to be situated, somewhat similarly to *Sir Gawain*, during the late 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The motif of a knight-challenger in disguise, who proves to be a friend and helper to the main protagonist, is not limited to these two romances but appears in many other chivalric epics.<sup>1</sup> Of course, it has to be made clear that *Karel ende Elegast* and *Sir Gawain* are in many other respects dissimilar. The two epics are unconnected in a genetic way, and for this reason the similarity of plot elements has attracted little attention from scholars, although Colledge & Barnouw (1967: 8) pointed out the existence of parallels between the two texts. Researchers investigating the medieval chivalric epic have focused, instead, on the relations between *Sir Gawain* and *Walewein (Gawain)*, a Middle Dutch Arthurian romance (cf. Riddy 1996: 18-29; Veldhoen 2000: 35-43). The question of the ethics of courtly love, for instance, is conspicuously absent from *Karel ende Elegast*. Its main theme (similarly as in other Frankish chivalric epics) is not love, but the loyalty of a vassal to his sovereign, with the problem of justice and truth or falsehood (including deceptive appearances) also playing a major part. In the Middle Dutch epic, the protagonist Charles gradually comes to realize that he has wronged his vassal Elegast, thereby arriving at a better understanding of his role as king and judge, and meanwhile discovering that another vassal, the seemingly loyal Eggeric of Eggermonde, has been plotting his death. Finally, a marked difference is the poetic form of both poems, which in the case of the Middle English narrative, with its complex bob-and-wheel stanzas, is much more refined than the simple paired rhyme of the Middle Dutch text.

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<sup>1</sup> For the motif of the knight-challenger in the context of the Arthurian tradition most relevant to *Sir Gawain*, see Thompson 1976: 201-208.

## THE UNKNOWN KNIGHT AS A CHALLENGER AND ADVERSARY

The Middle Dutch *Karel ende Elegast* begins rather unconventionally, and quite unlike *Sir Gawain*, not on the day when the king is holding court, but on the eve thereof, and the action takes place during the night and on the following day. Charles (Charlemagne) is fast asleep in his chambers in the castle at Ingelheim on the Rhine when he is disturbed by a strange dream. His peace of mind is upset by a startling message. An angel orders Charles to (literally) “go out stealing”. Understandably, Charles is mistrustful of the angel’s words. It is only after this vision has repeated itself three times, and after the angel has admitted that this request is the will of God, that Charles grudgingly accepts it:

So vaecte hi een luttelkijn  
 so datti looc die oghen sijn.  
 Doe seide dingel van te voren:  
 “Wildi gods ghebot verhoren,  
 heer coninc, so sidi ontdaen.  
 Het sel u an u leuen gaen.”  
 Dengel vanden paradise  
 sprac: “Coninc, doet als die wise,  
 vaert stelen ende wert dief.  
 Al hebdijs nu groot ongerief,  
 het sal u namaels wesen lief.”  
*Met deser talen voer dengel dan*  
 ende Karel hem tseyne began  
 vanden wonder dat hi hoorde:  
 “Gods ghebot, sine woerde,  
 en wil ic niet laten achter.”

(Besamusca *et al.* 2011: 67-68, vv. 85-100).

[He dozed off for a while,  
 so that his eyes fell shut.  
 Then the same angel said as before:  
 “If you do intend to disregard God’s command,  
 lord King, you are lost.  
 It will cost you your life”.  
 The angel from paradise  
 said: “King, be sensible,  
 go out stealing and become a thief.  
 Although it now causes you great misery,  
 later you will be glad of it”.  
 After these words the angel disappeared  
 and Charles made the sign of the cross  
 because of the wonder he had heard.  
 “God’s command, his words,  
 I do not wish to disobey”].

(Besamusca *et al.* 2011: 110-111, vv. 85-100).

The angel, deliberately, does not disclose what is to be stolen nor does he instruct the king in the way he is to perform this unusual task. It is up to Charles, in other words, to improvise as best he can to bring this mission to a successful end.

Both in the Middle English and in the Middle Dutch chivalric epic the hero accepts his mission hesitatingly and with misgivings. Charles, understandably, is baffled by what he regards as the illogic of the angel's request – how can a king steal from himself? (vv. 53-76). He is, after all, the lord of all the lands “between the Danube in the east, and the raging sea in the west” (vv. 68-69). Moreover, the king is even more disturbed by the thought of the dire consequences that might await him were he to be caught red-handed. Theft is not only a sin, and thus contrary to the will of God, but, as he perfectly knows, it is a dishonourable crime unbefitting a knight (vv. 101-103) so that not simply his life but also his honour is at stake.

Sir Gawain initially does not harbour serious doubts when deciding to stand in for King Arthur after the Green Knight proclaims his challenge, but he certainly has some misgivings when the time comes for him to keep his appointment with the Green Knight in the Green Chapel. Quite obviously, Gawain doubts that he will come out alive from a reprise of the beheading game with the Green Knight, whose supernatural powers have been proven for all to see. A sense of deep sorrow pervades the reactions of the knights and ladies at court, but Gawain overcomes their fear (and presumably his own) with the thought that one should accept one's destiny (“Quat schuld I wonde / Of destinés derf and dere / What may mon do bot fonde?” (vv. 563-565).

By turning into a thief Charles, in the Middle Dutch epic, adopts the very role which he finds the most repugnant and humiliating. His acceptance of the angel's command means that he now has to take on a type of behaviour and corresponding social position which are a polar opposite of his own character and place in society. It is, of course, ultimately a lesson in humility and obedience which will bear fruit later on. Gawain, too, is presented as undergoing a struggle with himself when he accepts the Green Knight's challenge, but this conflict is resolved quite readily, with much less inner wrangling. The principal reason for this is that the beheading game, while surely odd and disturbing, does not essentially deviate from the norms of chivalric conduct, whereas Charles' mission (as it presents itself to this protagonist), radically departs from it in every respect. Gawain 'merely' needs to face his fear of the unknown and of the fate that he expects to find at the end of his adventure (including very probably, death), while Charles is additionally forced to overcome his inner resistance against engaging in actions which he correctly perceives to be shameful and dishonourable.

The decisive factor which allows Charles to overcome his misgivings and to embark on his mission is his faith. The opening scenes of the narrative show Charles as the paragon of a Christian sovereign and knight, who turns to God and implores His assistance in times of danger and crisis. His prayer is exemplary in this respect. Gawain too, prays to God for courage before taking King Arthur's

place in the beheading game, and more importantly, during his journey, he asks God for a place where he may listen to the Mass. Both Charles and Gawain are presented as devout Christian knights, whose faith, far from being a mere nod to convention, informs their thoughts and accompanies their actions at each important turning-point in their lives.

The reader does not become aware, unlike in certain other chivalric romances such as for instance the Middle Dutch *Walewein*, of the existence of a discrepancy between the hero's professed faith and his actual conduct. Neither Charles nor Gawain are, however, men without a chink in their moral armour. We will refer in greater detail to Charles' more vulnerable, human side (presented not without humour and sympathy by the narrator) later on in this article.

### A KNIGHT WITH SUPERNATURAL POWERS

Charles' most obvious weak spot, which is revealed in the course of his adventure, lies in his inability to fairly judge his vassals and those who had been entrusted to his care. Instead, as Charles himself becomes aware, he has been often too harsh on his subjects, exacting on them a severe punishment out of all proportion to their crimes. When Charles ventures out on his quest, commanded to do so by the angel, he turns his thoughts to the situation of criminals whom he has banished and who, as the king imagines, share the same hardships and face the same risks as he does in his new role as a thief. One such criminal whom Charles – as he belatedly comes to realize – has unjustly banished for “a minor offence” (“Ic hebbe [...] *verdreven* / om cleyne sake uut minen lande” (vv. 214-216) is a knight called Elegast.

While Charles, thus sunk in thought, rides through the forest, he encounters a knight clad entirely in black. Neither Charles nor this knight initially reveal their identity: Charles covered his shield with a cloth before embarking on his escapade (vv. 380-383). The Black Knight is described in a way which evokes the presence of supernatural forces. He crosses Charles' path like an apparition, unusually springing out of nowhere, straight out of the forest (vv. 283-284), in a way which strikes terror into the king's heart:

Die coninc, ende heeft verhoort  
 hoe een ridder quam ghevaren  
 inder selver ghebaren.  
 als die riden wil verholen,  
 met wapenen swart als colen.  
 Swart was helm ende schilt,  
 die hi aenden hals hilt.  
 Sinen halsberch mochtmen loven.  
 Swart was den wapenroc daer boven.  
 Swart was dors daer hi op sat

ende quam enen sonderlingen pat  
 dwers riden doer den woude.  
 Alsen die coninc ghemoeten soude,  
 segende *hi* hem *ende* was in vare  
 ende waende dat die duvel ware,  
 Om dat hi was so swart al.  
 Den riken God hi hem beual.

(Besamusca *et al.* 2011: 73, vv. 273-289)

[The king [...] heard  
 that a knight approached,  
 who acted like someone  
 who wished to ride in secret,  
 with armour as black as coal.  
 Black were his helmet and his shield  
 that he had hanging round his neck.  
 His coat of mail deserved to be praised.  
 Black was his surcoat over it.  
 Black was the horse he sat on  
 and he followed an untrodden path  
 cutting straight across the wood.  
 As the king was about to meet him,  
 he crossed himself and was afraid  
 and thought it must be the devil,  
 as everything about him was so black.  
 He prayed the Almighty God for help].

(Besamusca *et al.* 2011: 115-116, vv. 273-289)

Although the Black Knight does not manifest supernatural powers during the duel that soon takes place between him and Charles, an atmosphere of the uncanny does in fact hang over this encounter. Charles is strongly convinced that his adversary might prove to be the devil. He expresses this fear, besides the above-mentioned passage, on at least two other occasions: “[...] it is the devil and no one else / If he were on God’s side, he would not be so black” (vv. 295-297; cf. also vv. 304-305 and 398-399). This repetition is telling – clearly, the narrator wanted to make sure that Charles’ perception of the Black Knight as a supernatural, uncanny and evil being did not escape the listeners. Fortunately, no actual devilry occurs, and Charles wins the encounter. This victory, however, does not have anything to do with Charles being a stronger or more skilful warrior, but rather has to be credited to the protection of God. As a matter of fact, the Black Knight is shown as more than equal to Charles with regard to physical strength and agility, but because the former breaks his sword he is unable to continue fighting.

The description of the Black Knight in *Karel ende Elegast* may be contrasted with passages in *Sir Gawain* invoking the appearance of Gawain’s opponent. These parts of the text are considerably richer in detail, which is a realistic device considering that the encounter with the Green Knight takes place in daytime before

a group of knights and ladies who have ample time to study the strange challenger's appearance – this in contrast to Charles, who meets his adversary in a wood at night. Yet the Green Knight too presents himself to onlookers as evidently a fearsome supernatural being: “fantoum and fayryze” (v. 240) or an “aluisch mon” (v. 681). Likewise, the sight of the Green Chapel is suggestive to Gawain of darkness and devilry: “Here myzt aboute mydnyzt / þe dele his matynnes telle!” (vv. 2187-2188) – a factor that compounds his fear of what is about to happen. Like the Black Knight to Charles, similarly the Green Knight and his lodgings in the Green Chapel evoke in Gawain a sense of the hellish and the demonic.

The type of combat which the two protagonists, Gawain and the Green Knight, engage in is of a different order, of course, than the duel on horseback fought by Charles and the Black Knight. It is an impossible contest in which the chances are wholly uneven. Its purpose, however, is both similar and dissimilar to that in *Karel ende Elegast*. The function of the two conflicts is different because the contest between Charles and the Black Knight (Elegast) is not the culmination of the plot of *Karel ende Elegast*, unlike the resolution of the beheading game in the Green Chapel in the Middle English narrative. The conflicts are different also because in *Karel ende Elegast* Charles wins the struggle not just in a physical but also in a moral sense, by not letting his bloodlust take the better of his humanity. But Gawain's victory, if one may call it so, in the contest with the Green Knight is ambiguous, and his fortunate escape is disfigured by a sense of moral unease. The reason for this lies in the fear and cowardice that motivated him to conceal the gift of the green girdle and therefore, to break the terms of the contract of exchange that he had agreed upon with his host. The two confrontations, however, are similar because both are essentially about knowing and revealing the truth: Charles and Elegast fight because neither of the two agreed to reveal to the other his true identity, whereas Gawain submits to the ordeal because he understands it as a form of “fair exchange” based on being true to one's word.

#### THE BLACK KNIGHT AS A BURGLAR

In a practical exemplification of the chivalric code Charles decides to spare his adversary's life. It is a moral choice which will produce positive results. Soon afterwards it turns out that the defeated Black Knight, who has revealed himself to be Elegast, is a master thief and burglar, and in this capacity he will assist Charles (who still conceals his identity under the invented name of “Adelbrecht”) to successfully perform his quest.

Stealing and burglary is where Elegast truly comes into his element. At first there is some discussion as to where to break in: Charles pointedly suggests “the king's”, that is, his own castle. Elegast vigorously rejects this proposition and it

is at this point that Charles realizes that the vassal whom he had treated unfairly is still loyal to him. The two then decide to secretly enter the castle of Eggeric van Eggermonde, a vassal who is married to the king's sister.

In a fine instance of the narrator's use of irony Charles is revealed as a bungling thief who does not know the tricks of the trade, and who by his ineptitude might pose a danger to Elegast. Elegast at first pretends to defer to "Adelbrecht": "Adelbrecht, / what do you think can best be done? / I shall act on your advice. / I would be sorry if you were harmed, / And that people would then say: 'It was all this man's fault'" (vv. 698-703). However, in the course of events he tacitly assumes the position of a mentor to his ineffectual companion (e.g. "He was unwilling to allow / the king to come inside; that was how much he feared a disaster. / He did not think him a skilful thief" (vv. 755-758). This is a temporary exchange of roles (as compared to their true places in the feudal hierarchy) that Charles gratefully acknowledges and accepts. This reversal of roles may be briefly compared to the stay in the castle in *Sir Gawain*, when Gawain, a renowned and yet in reality, very inexperienced knight, implicitly takes second place to his older, more canny host Lord Bertilak.

The break-in also represents the moment when the resourceful Elegast displays his supernatural abilities. Elegast has a unique herb with magical properties, which enables him to understand the speech of animals:

Hi trac een cruyt vut eenen vate  
 ende deet binnen sinen monde.  
 Die sulc een hadde, hi verstonde  
 Wat hanen craeyen ende honden bilen.  
 Doen verstont hi ter wilen  
 an enen hane, an enen hont,  
 ende seide dat die coninc stont  
 buten den hove in haer Latijn.  
 Elegast sprac: "Hoe mach dit sijn?  
 Soude die coninc sijn hier voren?  
 Ic duchte dat mi naket toren.  
 Ic ben verraden na mijn ghedochte,  
 Oft mi verleyt alfs gedrochte."

(Besamusca *et al.* 2011: 87-88, vv. 765-777)

[He pulled a herb from a bag  
 and put it in his mouth.  
 Whoever had one of these, understood  
 what cocks crow and dogs bark.  
 Then he heard at once  
 a cock and a dog,  
 that said in their Latin  
 that the king was standing outside the courtyard.  
 Elegast said: "How can this be?  
 Could the king be near here?"

I feel that great trouble is in store for me.  
 I have been betrayed, it seems to me,  
 or I am led astray by a delusion].

(Besamusca *et al.* 2011: 131, vv. 765-777)

Elegast is alarmed, but when he gives the herb to Charles, the latter dismisses his concerns, even though he too had heard the animals saying: “the king is nearby”. At this point Elegast is aware that “Adelbrecht” is lying; he does not reveal his suspicions outright, however, but exposes his companion as an impostor by a magic trick. He makes the herb disappear from Charles’ mouth, making him look very foolish (a scene that, like the previous ones, introduces comic relief into this narrative). Elegast’s action may either be attributable to his extraordinary deftness as a thief (therefore, it may be only a sleight of hand), or it may be once again an example of his supernatural abilities:

Elegast eyste sijn cruyt weder.  
 Die coninc sochte op ende neder,  
 Weder ende *voort* in sinen monde,  
 Mer hi verlost ter stonde  
 Hi en mochs vinden niet.  
 Die coninc sprac: “Wats mi gesciet?  
 Mi dunct, ic heb mijn cruut verloren  
 dat ic had hier te voren  
 beloken tusschen minen tanden.  
 Bi mijnre *wet*, dat mach mi anden”  
*Doe* loech Elegast echt  
 Ende seide: “Steeldi ouer recht?  
 Hoe coemt datmen v niet en vaet,  
 telken als ghi stelen gaet?  
 Dat ghi leeft is wonder groot,  
 Ghi en waert langhe wile doot.  
 Gheselle,” seit hi onverholen,  
 “ic heb v cruyt ghestolen.  
 Ghi en weet van stelen niet *een* hare.”  
 Die coninc peynsde: “Ghi segt ware.”

(Besamusca *et al.* 2011: 89-90, vv. 814-833)

[Elegast asked for his herb back.  
 The king searched for it up and down,  
 and from one side to the other in his mouth,  
 but that very moment he lost it.  
 The king said: “What has happened to me?  
 I fear that I have lost my herb  
 that I had earlier here  
 tight between my teeth.  
 By my faith, that annoys me!”  
 Then Elegast laughed again  
 and said, “Are you really a thief?

How come you are not caught  
 every time you go out stealing?  
 It is a major miracle that you're alive  
 and have not been dead a long while.  
 "Friend", he said openly,  
 "I've stolen your herb.  
 You don't know the first thing about stealing".  
 The king thought: "You speak the truth"].  
 (Besamusca *et al.* 2011: 132-133, vv. 814-833)

The second time when Elegast reveals his supernatural powers comes when he and "Adelbrecht" (i.e. Charles) enter Eggeric's castle. Elegast knows a trick or spell ("beheyndicheyde") to make all the men in the main hall of the castle fall asleep (vv. 838-839). Using a different spell, he is able to open all the locks. The same procedure repeats itself at the end of the adventure, when Elegast casts a spell over Eggeric and his spouse, sending them back into slumber which enables the two thieves to make good their escape.

Elegast's supernatural powers seem insignificant next to the spectacular abilities displayed by the Green Knight whose unusual appearance and extraordinary manner of surviving the first duel are finally revealed to be all the result of magic. Yet whereas the Middle English narrative makes explicit mention of magic and sorcery by reference to the figures of Morgan le Faye and Merlin, no such elements are present in the plot of *Karel ende Elegast*. According to Besamusca *et al.* (2011: 156), the narrator makes an effort to prove that the magic used by Elegast (e.g. in v. 764) was "harmless and simple". It is a "natural magic" proper to folk-tales. On the whole, however, magic is not uniquely essential to the denouement of the plot of *Karel ende Elegast*. For instance, Charles learns the truth about Eggeric of Eggermonde's plan to murder him on the court day because Elegast, hiding under a bed, happens to overhear the treacherous vassal's conversation with his wife; none of this is the effect of the powerful magic like the kind described in *Sir Gawain*. Nor does Elegast, in his ordeal by combat with Eggeric which ends the narrative, resort to magic to vanquish his opponent.

## CONCLUSION.

### TWO CHIVALRIC EPICS ABOUT SELF-KNOWLEDGE, PSYCHOLOGICAL GROWTH AND THE RESTORATION OF VALUES

Next to the obvious problem of justice and loyalty, the central theme of *Karel ende Elegast* is the question of truth versus falsehood, an all-important issue to medieval authors (cf. e.g. Claassens 2000: 179-191). The significance of Charles' adventure is ultimately revealed to lie in his discovery of the truth about two men,

one of whom contrary to expectations proves to be loyal (Elegast) whereas the other (Eggeric), no less unexpectedly, turns out to be a traitor.

By embarking on this adventure (which is equally a quest for the truth and a mission in search of self-knowledge) Charles saves his life and his empire. The eventual discovery of the truth, facilitated by the unexpected assistance of Elegast, justifies the paradoxical command of the angel that the king should “go out and steal” (vv. 973-976). Successfully performing this task, which Charles finds morally obnoxious, allows him in the end to reap a reward in the form of greater moral and intellectual maturity which comes from learning to distinguish the truth from false appearances. Charles’ increased self-criticism and more profound understanding of himself and others, are crucial to his development as a king and sovereign. In the course of this process of maturation he recognizes in Elegast a true friend and helper (e.g. “The king thought: ‘This is my friend, / although I have hardly deserved it from him. I will make amends, if I stay alive. He will overcome all his misery’”, vv. 1008-1011).

Nevertheless, for all these noble feelings of friendship, the success of Charles’ adventure rests in no small degree on his ability to conceal the truth and even to lie to his vassal. The king withholds from Elegast his true identity. He invents an alias and tells a tall tale about being a *Raubritter*. As “Adelbrecht”, Charles also tries to trick Elegast into thinking that his intention is to break into the king’s castle. Charles-Adelbrecht tells a lie, moreover, when he claims not to have heard that the animals in the castle courtyard had recognized the king’s presence. Elegast, however, is consistently truthful and courteous towards the stranger (and his recent adversary), even though he soon begins to suspect that in reality “Adelbrecht” might not be the expert thief that he pretends to be. Speaking the truth as opposed to prevaricating is also crucial to the climax of the narrative. Eggeric confesses to his wife that he has been planning to assassinate Charles the following day. The truth that he tells her is revealed in this way to the eavesdropping burglar Elegast. When Eggeric is apprehended, he in turn lies about his intentions, so the truth of his guilt has to be revealed in a trial by combat between him and Elegast, which is won by the latter.

The question of truth and falsehood is also intrinsic to *Sir Gawain*. The “exchange of winnings” that Gawain undergoes in the castle of Bertilak de Hautdesert is a test of his Christian virtue, chastity or chivalric behaviour but it is also a test of his “truth to the pledged word” (Tolkien 1966 : xiv). For most of his stay in the castle Gawain carefully avoids telling his host a falsehood; in this way, he keeps his promise to return every gift he had been given on each day. He only fails to do so on the last day, when he conceals the gift which he had received from Lady Bertilak; this act of breaking a promise (which is synonymous with withholding the truth) earns Gawain a cut in his neck but is excusable on the premise that it was motivated by the knight’s fear for his life.

In *Sir Gawain*, the protagonist learns at the conclusion of his adventure that it had been a test devised by the sorceress Morgan; the quest proves to be a trick played on him and ultimately on King Arthur. The fact that the chain of events is

triggered, on the one hand, essentially by the forces of the occult (in *Sir Gawain*), and on the other hand, by divine intervention (*Karel ende Elegast*), constitutes, in my opinion, the most profound difference between the world-views advanced in these two epics. This ‘magical’ premise differs from what we know about the reasons for the hero’s quest in *Karel ende Elegast*, where Charles’ adventure is essentially the fulfilment of a divine plan to deliver him from the throes of his would-be assassin Eggeric. In this perspective *Elegast*, all appearances to the contrary, is an unwitting instrument in God’s hands, who non-coincidentally finds himself in the right place at the right time to help his sovereign.

The meeting with *Elegast* changes Charles just like the second encounter with the Green Knight changes Sir Gawain. Yet we may argue that Charles is ripe for this transformation even before the meeting with *Elegast* had taken place; this is supported by his soliloquy on the fate of thieves and miscreants whom he had judged too harshly. Charles’ psychological development (and his richness as a literary character) has very much to do, just like in the case of Gawain, with undergoing a humiliation which eventually proves to be a lesson in profound (and psychologically purifying) humility. This path to self-understanding through humility ties in neatly with the Christian elements in both narratives. When coupled to a consistent system of values, and specifically to the ethos of a Christian knight or sovereign (minutely described in *Sir Gawain*, less explicit, but also present in *Karel ende Elegast*), the hero’s seeming act of failure or abjection does not lead to his psychological disintegration, but instead through the experience of humility it allows him to rise to a new stage of maturity and wisdom.

Both tests have to do with the power and authority of a sovereign, and in both cases failure would entail its disastrous collapse. Had Gawain behaved ignobly on his quest, then the reputation of the knights of the Round Table and by implication of Arthur himself, would have been irrevocably compromised. In Charles’ case, the consequence of not executing the angel’s command properly would have meant, quite literally, his own death and the termination of his rule. The successful realization of the quest means that, in both instances, the king is spared this fate; he and his vassals are given a chance to rebuild their courtly social microcosm on the foundation of a more profound self-knowledge stemming from the actual experience of weakness and failure.

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