The Footpath and the Straight Road in Yvain: the Knight of the Lion

Derek Brooks, 2012

My research project was an in depth analysis of the function of roads and footpaths in Chrétien de Troyes’s medieval Arthurian romance Yvain: the Knight of the Lion. I found that there is a parallel made by Chrétien de Troyes throughout the old-French romance between Yvain’s transformation from a haphazard purposeless knight to a goal-drive character and his transformation from one who uses the estroit santier to the droite voie.

While both these old-French words are denotations of “road,” the difference in connotation is commonly overlooked in English translation. Estroit santier is derived from the Latin semita meaning a “narrow way, a path, footpath, lane, [or] by-way [as opposed to] via, a highway” (Lewis and Short's Latin/English Lexicon). It is the road that meanders through bush and bramble, and leads one on unexpected journeys through the perilous and magical realm of Faërie, a place of fantasy that exists outside productive society. On the other hand, droite voie is the “straight road,” or the “highway,” that exists to facilitate commerce and contribute to a functioning and modern state. It is not until Yvain meets the lion in the Arthurian romance that his road is described as the droite voie. This newfound purposeful and deliberate nature of his travel closely corresponds to the development of his goal-driven character. Yvain is now taking the direct route with intention, rather than wandering waiting for something to happen. By taking the voie, Yvain exists in the greater society. He is no longer detached from the public and acts for the common good, rather than his own personal absurd and whimsical adventure.

After further research, however, I found Chrétien de Troyes’s seeming obsession with roads was not isolated to the Yvain romance. In fact such road differentiation was common among all his romances and appeared in many other works of romance tradition. With this in mind, I sought to ascertain if the use of roads in Chrétien’s romances was not simply a narrative technique but rather an actual depiction of real overland transportation realities in 12th century France.

Chretien intended for his romances to be recited out loud in the courts of Champaign with the purpose of affirming shared values and customs among the listeners. Though the romances take place in the fantastic realm of Faërie, they contain historiographic details that ground the customs and the geography of space in realistic terms, which would have been understood by the intended 12th century audience.

Inquiring into medieval public work law and French customary law, I found the legal distinction made between different roads was parallel to the distinctions made in Chrétien’s narrative. Furthermore I ascertained that the developmental history of each type of road informed its function. Thus santiers were holloways that mostly maintained themselves and were suitable for horse or foot traffic but unsuitable for carts and two-way traffic (perfect for a knight who would be ashamed to ride in a cart as shown in the Lancelot romance). This is opposed to other types of roads that are cart accessible like the droite voie or the King’s Road, serving merchants and traders. These roads routings would thus serve the interest of commerce and the newly formed towns rather than the superfluous interest of knights and kings.

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Funded by the Martha Reed Coles Fellowship