

THE "TALE OF GAMELYN" OF "THE CANTERBURY TALES": AN ANNOTATED EDITION

Nila Vázquez, ed.

Lampeter, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009.

(by Jordi Sánchez-Martí. Universidad de Alicante)

jordi.sanchez@ua.es

179

Gamelyn is a Middle English verse romance that recounts the adventures of the eponymous hero, who finds himself dispossessed by his eldest brother John of the property he had rightfully inherited after the death of his father Sir John of Boundys. Having broken his brother's back, Gamelyn decides to exile himself in a forest and is proclaimed an outlaw. Eventually he returns, recovers his inheritance, and gets married. Composed ca. 1350–1370 in the northeast Midlands (Severs 1967: 31), *Gamelyn* is the Middle English romance extant in more manuscripts, twenty-five in total, belittling other English popular romances, such as *Bevis of Hampton* and *Guy of Warwick*, which survive in eight and six medieval manuscripts respectively. The apparent success of *Gamelyn*, however, seems to be owing not to its literary merits but to its codicological association with Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, since in all the existing manuscripts *Gamelyn* appears in the context of Chaucer's masterpiece, usually as a tale assigned to the Cook. This connection between *Gamelyn* and *The Canterbury Tales* does not imply necessarily that the former was composed by Chaucer. Instead, it is believed that *Gamelyn* "must have been found amongst Chaucer's MSS. in some connection with his *Canterbury Tales*" (Skeat 1884: xiv) and some scribe, who "thought it worth preserving" (*loc. cit.*), decided to copy the text of *Gamelyn*. Although it is not exactly known how and why this early association of *Gamelyn* with *The Canterbury Tales* came to be, scholars agree in excluding this poem from Chaucer's canon on

stylistic grounds. In addition, the fact that *Gamelyn* is not to be found in half of the approximately fifty manuscripts that contain a complete version of *The Canterbury Tales* is, according to N.F. Blake (2004: 97), codicologically suggestive that “scribes had some indication in their exemplar that TG [i.e. *Tale of Gamelyn*] was not Chaucer’s composition”. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that all modern editions have presented this romance independently of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Vázquez approaches the text somewhat differently, since the title of the book under review seems to suggest that she considers *Gamelyn* in the context of Chaucer’s *magnum opus: The “Tale of Gamelyn” of “The Canterbury Tales”* (my emphasis). This is a bold choice that represents a departure from the aforementioned scholarly consensus. Vázquez states, “the different editors [of *Gamelyn*] dwell on giving reasons for keeping *Gamelyn* outside Chaucer’s canon. In my opinion, none of the reasons they allege constitutes conclusive proof that this is indeed the case” (30; see also 285-290); unfortunately she adds, “[t]he refutation of each of their [i.e. the previous editors’] arguments is beyond the scope of the present piece of work” (30) and simply casts doubt on Skeat’s contention that *Gamelyn* is not by Chaucer.¹ While Vázquez emphatically refutes arguments contrary to Chaucer’s authorship of *Gamelyn*, more positive evidence is needed if we are to believe that Chaucer had indeed a hand in the composition of the romance as we have it.²

180

Given Vázquez’s Chaucerian approach to *Gamelyn* it seems natural that the first chapter of the book should be devoted to studying the relation between *Gamelyn* and Chaucer’s *Tales* in the manuscripts that preserve the text of the romance (5-12). The chapter closes with a brief codicological overview of the twenty-five medieval manuscripts containing *Gamelyn* (12-23). The truly editorial work is included in the second chapter, which forms the core of the book (25-449). In the first section of this chapter Vázquez justifies the publication of a new edition of this romance and presents the editorial principles she follows. She then discusses the achievements of all previous editors of *Gamelyn* (25-29), from Skeat (1884) to Knight and Ohlgren (2000). While Skeat chose Harley MS 7334 as base text for his edition, Knight and Ohlgren preferred Petworth House MS 7. But Vázquez believes “that neither of these manuscripts should be used as base text for this particular tale” (30); and later she adds, “none of the examined editions of the *Tale of Gamelyn* is, from my point of view, completely exhaustive or reliable, and the most accurate one, Skeat’s version, is too focused on personal beliefs and decisions” (31). Therefore, one of Vázquez’s aims in producing this new edition is to correct the alleged deficiencies of the scholarly versions published to this day: “[i]n view of the obvious shortcomings of the existing versions of the tale, my goal is to attain a transparent edition that will treat *Gamelyn* as a separate piece of work” (31).

In order to achieve her stated goal, Vázquez makes two strategic decisions. First, she departs from previous editors in taking a different manuscript as base text, namely Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS 198. After collating the variant readings of this manuscript with those in the manuscripts selected by Skeat and Knight and Ohlgren, Vázquez concludes, “Cp [i.e. the Corpus manuscript] can be regarded as the most reliable manuscript containing *Gamelyn*” (36). In addition to the Corpus manuscript, Vázquez uses nine other relevant codices for collation and thus establishes the text of her edition.

Secondly, she strategically decides to present a synoptic edition of each individual version of *Gamelyn* contained in the ten selected codices. Considering that the purpose of a synoptic edition is to include “all variants within the critical text-page, rather than critically editing a copy-text, producing a clear text, and relegating rejected readings to the apparatus” (Greetham 1994: 354), the generosity of the decision becomes apparent: the entire second section of Chapter Two (37-270) is devoted to this end so that all textual evidence is made available to students of *Gamelyn*. As Vázquez explains, “[t]he reason for doing so [i.e. synoptically editing all ten manuscript copies] is that the editor is not to judge what is or is not important to show. The aim is to provide the reader with as much information as possible, for she/he is the one who will decide on what to concentrate” (37). This is undoubtedly the most important part of the book, because it enables us to better appreciate the paleographic, linguistic and literary features of each separate textual witness. The whole section is executed with academic rigour and in accordance with the synoptic apparatus described on pages 38 to 42.

The edition proper appears in the third section of Chapter Two following some introductory remarks. After summarizing the plot of the romance, Vázquez discusses some “internal and external features of the romance” (274-92) dealing with the following issues: the poem’s language, poetic technique, metre, alliteration, rhyme, date, dialect, authorship, and relation with the ballads of Robin Hood, Thomas Lodge’s *Rosalynde* and Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. While all these issues are accurately examined, in the case of the date and dialect of the poem (283-284) the readers are left without a clear sense of the editor’s position. One significant feature alluded to by Vázquez is that *Gamelyn* is an “oral-flavoured written romance” (270) and seems “as if it were to be read aloud in front of an audience” (275). This point is deserving of further attention, since *Gamelyn* may have undergone a stage of oral-memorial transmission before being recorded in writing, as was the case with a number of Middle English verse romances (cf. Putter 2000: 33 n. 22, and Reichl 2009: 132-149).

After the introductory discussion, the 902 lines forming the text of *Gamelyn* are edited with explanatory footnotes (294-332) and followed by an extremely detailed

apparatus criticus (332-379). What we find here is an authoritative edition of *Gamelyn*, which is the result of a painstaking collation of the most relevant textual witnesses of the romance. Since all punctuation is editorial (though cf. p. 379), I would like to suggest small changes that may facilitate the reading of the edited text: substitute commas for full stops in lines 74, 261; add commas at the end of lines 267, 351; insert a comma between *kayes* and *leese* (line 401); add a full stop at the end of line 300; delete the full stop at the end of line 149.

The second chapter of the book closes with a comprehensive glossary and a translation of the poem into present-day English whose purpose is to “render a correct grammatical translation of the poem without losing the medieval flavour a fourteenth-century romance should have” (379). Readers that fail to understand the Middle English original can therefore use this translation as an aid, since it makes the sense of the romance clear, although it does not replicate the rhyme and rhythm of the original. The final chapter is reserved for the editor’s “Final Remarks” (451-452), where Vázquez presents a personal assessment of the work accomplished and concludes by stating, “we are now closer to the original text created by its author” (452). The book ends with the list of references (453-461) and a general index (463-466).

In sum, this is a useful edition that should encourage other scholars to pay closer attention to one of the least studied Middle English verse romances, despite its having the largest extant manuscript support. While Vázquez allows that “[f]urther research is obviously needed concerning the connections of the *Tale of Gamelyn* with other poems dealing with similar topics, and its possible Chaucerian authorship” (452), her edition makes a notable contribution to the study of *Gamelyn* in particular and to a better understanding of the Middle English verse romances in general.³

Notes

1. As Vázquez states later, “[t]he conclusion to be drawn [...] on *Gamelyn*’s authorship is not that Geoffrey Chaucer wrote it but rather that none of the arguments given against this possibility has proved compelling” (289).

2. The conjectures Vázquez makes on pages 289 to 290 are not beyond the realms of possibility but do not represent a truly compelling argument. Note, however, that at the

end of the book she admits being “uncertain about who wrote it [i.e. *Gamelyn*] and about the reason why it can only be found in manuscripts related to the *Canterbury Tales*” (452).

3. Research for this review was conducted as part of a project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Education (ref. FFI2008–02165), whose financial support is herewith gratefully acknowledged.

Works cited

- BLAKE, N.F. 2004. "Chaucer, Gamelyn and the Cook's Tale". In Matsuda, T., R.A. Linenthal, and J. Scahill. (eds) *The Medieval Book and a Modern Collector: Essays in Honour of Toshiyuki Takamiya*. Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer: 87-97.
- GREETHAM, D.C. 1994. *Textual Scholarship: An Introduction*. New York: Garland.
- KNIGHT, Stephen and Thomas OHLGREN. (eds) 2000. *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*. Teams Middle English Texts Series, 2nd ed. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University.
- PUTTER, Ad. 2000. "A Historical Introduction". In Putter, Ad and Jane Gilbert. (eds) *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*. Harlow: Longman: 1-15, 31-34.
- REICHL, Karl. 2009. "Orality and Performance". In Radulescu, Raluca L. and Cory James Rushton. (eds) *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer: 132-149.
- SEVERS, J. Burke. 1967. *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500*. Vol. 1: Romances. New Haven: The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences.
- SKEAT, Walter W. (ed.) 1884. *The Tale of Gamelyn from the Harleian MS. no. 7334, Collated with Six Other MSS*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Received: 10 July 2010