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“To teach, to delight, and to change”: Didactic Narration in *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*

Abstract: Written in French towards the end of the fourteenth century and translated into English by William Caxton in 1484, *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry* is a conduct book for girls. It is composed of numerous short narratives through which the Knight of La Tour-Landry, after the loss of his wife, instructs his daughters on their duties. The purpose of this paper is to examine various pedagogic strategies used by the father-narrator to engage his young daughters, to hold their attention, and to make his lessons memorable. Attention will also be paid to the tone and formal markers of the work, which has been classified as an example of medieval children’s literature.

Keywords: medieval education, conduct books, narration

*To teach is a necessity, to please is a sweetness,
to persuade is a victory.*

Cicero

Since the central focus of this issue is narration, I will first recount a story which happened more than six hundred years ago in medieval France. In the feudal castle of La Tour-Landry, there lived a knight with his wife, their two sons and three daughters. Supposed to have been built in the twelfth century, the castle was located in the ancient province of Anjou, which lay between Poitou and Brittany (Wright, 1906, p. vii).

The Landry family lived happily until the lady died. Concerned with the welfare of his daughters, their father composed a book of instruction, for – as he states – it is the duty of every parent to teach their children “that thei shall kepe with hem som good ensauple forto flee euell and withholde the good” (Prologue, p. 4, ll. 9–10).¹

Written at the end of the fourteenth century in France, the book was translated into English in the fifteenth century, first by an anonymous writer and then in 1484 by William Caxton (Dronzek, 2001, p. 139). *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry* belongs to the genre of courtesy books, also known as conduct or deportment books, which is a distinct branch of didactic literature. The central focus of such books was “a dialogue between a more experienced, wiser (and therefore usually older) narrator and a less mature, less knowing (and therefore usually younger) audience” (Vitto, 2003, p. 93). Even though medieval manuals of behaviour were written almost as much for adults as they were for children, *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry* was clearly intended for a young adult audience “in need of an older generation’s wisdom” (Vitto, 2003, p. 94), for it not only addresses children directly,² but was supposed to serve as a reading aid for the knight’s daughters: the father-narrator explicitly states that the purpose of his book is “forto lerne hem to rede” (Prologue, p. 4, l. 8). In the Middle Ages, literacy was inextricably connected with immediate practical advantages, namely the instruction of boys and girls, as can be seen in *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*. Its author expresses concern for the educational well-being of both his sons and daughters, declaring that he also composed a book aimed at educating his sons, which unfortunately has not survived the test of time.

Writing about the differences in educating boys and girls in the Middle Ages, Shulamith Shahar lists certain traits praised in didactic literature

¹ Unless specified otherwise, I follow Caxton’s translation, reprinted in 1868 and revised in 1906 by T. Wright for the Early English Text Society, from a manuscript of Henry VI’s reign.

² I follow the definition of children’s literature suggested by Nicole Clifton, according to whom this category of literature refers to “any text that either appears to have addressed children or can be shown to have been read by them” (Clifton, 2003, p. 10).

in the context of female education. Instructed primarily to obey their husbands and religious observances, the girls were encouraged to practice "piety, obedience, submission, devotion, and sexual chastity" (Shahar, 1992, p. 221). In order to instil such traits in his daughters, the father-narrator employs certain pedagogical tactics, which reveal his self-contradictory position. In my examination of these narratorial tactics, I will draw upon the classical notion adopted by St Augustine in his educational philosophy, according to which an effective preacher should be able to meet the following three goals: to teach (*docere*), to delight (*delectare*), and to move (*movere*). My intention is to show the means by which the father-narrator tries to engage his young daughters, to hold their attention, and to make his lessons memorable.

Commenting on the three aims of effective preaching, as underlined by Cicero, St Augustine writes: "To teach is a necessity, to delight is a beauty, to persuade is a triumph" (Augustine 83). The primary aim of an orator, i.e. to teach, depends on the subject matter, whereas the secondary aims, i.e. to delight and move, depend on the manner of delivery. Teaching is most essential for two reasons. First of all, the hearers must be instructed before they are moved, and secondly, if the truth is clearly pointed out, it can become a source of pleasure itself and no further recourse to pleasing and persuasive discourse will be needed (Augustine 84). Therefore, an effective orator should always begin with teaching, and the vehicle of instruction that St Augustine recommends is narration. "If the hearers need teaching, the matter treated of must be made fully known by means of narrative," he says (Augustine 75). The narrative should be short and clear, and the language perspicuous. "He, therefore, who teaches will avoid all words that do not teach; and if instead of them he can find words which are at once pure and intelligible, he will take these by preference," he advises (Augustine 82). This is particularly important when the listeners can neither ask questions nor show by means of gestures that they have understood, which is exactly the situation that the Knight of La Tour-Landry and his daughters find themselves in. Casting himself in the role of a writer, the father makes sure that his words are understood by his daughters.

In order to make his instructions more palatable to the young adult audience, the knight uses prose narration, which – he hopes – will facilitate comprehension, and illustrates his teaching with about 140 examples. Explaining the method of composing his book, the knight states: “But y wolde not sette it in ryme, but in prose, forto abregge it, and that it might be beter and more plainly to be understood” (Prologue, p. 3, ll. 32–34). His intention to write prose is in line with the common procedure adopted by French writers in the thirteenth century, when verse was abandoned in favour of prose because of its association with “factual accuracy and instructional value” (Robertson, 2015, p. 159). The instructional value of *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry* is communicated through the many *exempla* which are aimed at inculcating certain truths and virtues to the knight’s daughters.

The subject matter of the stories the father tells is directly correlated with his central concern, which is to protect his daughters against evil men. Recalling the days of his youth, the father-narrator remembers how his companions used to deceive women by swearing false oaths (Prologue, pp. 2–3), which leads him to the main purpose of his work, explained as follows:

Therefore I concluded that I would cause to be made a little book wherein I would have written the good manners and good deeds of good ladies and women and of their lives, so that for their virtues and bounties they be honored, and after their death renowned and praised, and shall be to the end of the world, to take of them good example and countenance. And also by the contrary I shall cause to be written and set in a book the mishap and vices of evil women, who have used their life and now have blame, to the end that the evil might be eschewed by which they might err, who yet are blamed, shamed, and defamed. (Vitto, 2003, p.102)³

³ In some instances I use the translation included in Daniel T. Kline’s anthology and quoted by Vitto (Vitto, 2003, pp. 101–111).

To make himself more persuasive, the father-narrator refers to the authority of his own experience, which was one of the markers of medieval exemplary narration. Defined as "a brief narrative presented as truthful (that is, historical) and used in discourse (usually a sermon) to convince listeners by offering them a salutary lesson" (le Goff, 1992, p. 78), the *exempla* were based on biblical and historical stories. It was not an uncommon practice, however, to supplement the stories by a dose of personal anecdotes, which is what the Knight of La Tour-Landry does, by referring to people he has known. In fact, his confessional assertions, such as "Y knew another lady that...", "I haue herde of a knight and of a lady" or "y will tell you a tale that was tolde me of a lady that y knewe", are among the greatest strengths of his narration, for they bring the meaning closer to the young readers by placing an emphasis on "the recent past, on the time of the narrator, who insists on the contemporary character of his stories by situating them in 'nostris temporibus'" (le Goff, 1992, p. 79). According to Jacques le Goff, it is from their recent origin that the medieval *exempla* derive their persuasive power, for while the time of ancient history was not directly accessible to the eyes and ears of the contemporary man, recent history could be grasped directly and tangibly, without recourse to retrospection (le Goff, 1992, p. 79).

Another distinguishing feature of exemplary narration is the fact that it is less complex than the allegorical mode, and thus more accessible to a medieval audience, but less appealing to a modern one (Burrow, 1992, p. 108). Since the aim of an *exemplum* is to reveal some general truth by means of illustration, the story may be presented in short rather than in its entirety. Always bound with the speaker's intent, which is to demonstrate a particular aspect of a given phenomenon, the exemplary mode is based on a selection of the most relevant elements of meaning. In *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry* selection is closely bound up with repetition, for the tales – even though each forms a self-contained unit – are presented in groups of three or four narratives, inculcating and reinforcing the same or substantially the same wisdom. Describing the method of compiling the stories, the Knight of La Tour-Landry reveals that he was assisted by two priests and two clerks; he stresses the point that the stories his daughters

are presented with are illustrative of both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour so that “thei might vnderstand how thei shulde gouerne hem, and knowe good from euell” (Prologue, p. 3, ll. 24–26).

For instance, to underline the power of prayer and the dangers of premarital sex, the father-narrator tells the story of two sisters, the younger of whom was a very pious person, which exposed her to the mockery and ridicule of her elder sister, but prevented her from shame and death. When two young knights enter their chamber at night, the one in love with the younger sister soon withdraws, having seen “a thousand dede bodies about her in shetis” (Chapter III, p. 6, ll. 6–7). The knight who visits the elder daughter begets a child upon her and in this way endangers three lives, for the girl’s father casts his pregnant daughter into a river and scorches her suitor. In a similar vein, the following story tells of a knight who would have a lady by force, but – similarly to the previous tale – when he follows her into a bush, he sees ten thousand dead bodies, i.e. the bodies of the Christian souls she has been praying for, who save her honour. In yet another tale on the power of prayer, similarly to the first tale, two patterns of behaviour are contrasted. The author tells the story of a knight who had two daughters: the elder always prayed fasting, whereas the younger was willful and fond of eating. The elder daughter marries a rich knight and lives happily with him; her younger sister also marries a knight, but she fails to correct her behaviour and suffers grave consequences. One night, her husband wakes from his sleep to find his wife among the company of men and women, singing and playing. When he sees one of the men holding his hand under his wife’s clothes, the husband hits the man with a staff, which breaks, and the splinter blinds his wife. Having lost one eye and the love of her husband, the young lady learns about the importance of leading a temperate and moderate life in accordance with God’s will. The stories evoked above show that the lessons that the Knight of La Tour-Landry imparts to his daughters are reinforced through repetition, which is one of the main strategies used by the father-narrator in his attempt to teach his daughters.

From the present-day perspective, the intensity of the actions taken against the disobedient girls may seem incommensurate with their deeds.

Such blood-curdling acts of violence, however, were not unusual in *exempla*, which relied on stories "of an extreme kind, illustrating a vice or virtue with a conspicuous and out-of-the-ordinary instance" (Burrow, 1992, p. 114). By medieval standards, extreme disobedience called for extreme punishment, often corporal, which resulted in either death or physical disfigurement. It was imposed on fictional, and probably not only fictional, women by male authority figures – either by God, as in the story about a woman who was so attached to her fine clothes that she was carried down to hell after she died; by their husbands, as in the story about a lady who berated her husband in front of others and was knocked to the ground and kicked in the face by her furious spouse, who broke her nose and left her disfigured forever; or by their fathers, as in one of the stories about the two sisters, which were quoted above. Examples of such severe punishment "serve[d] as an important pedagogical technique, indirectly conforming to the theory that physical correction led a student to learn better" (Dronzek, 2001, p. 146).

Domestic violence was conceived as being especially instructive in the case of girls, whose experience was rooted in the domestic realm. The punishment of boys, as depicted in texts intended for a young male audience, did not tend to take a physical form, for men's honour was not located in the domestic, but rather in the social and public spheres. And yet violent and bloody action was generally typical of medieval romances edited for a young audience, as Mary E. Shaner argues, others being: simple piety, a preference for direct over indirect speech, the focus on domestic values, the motif of sin and repentance, as well as a simplification of morality. While these features "are not those which the modern critic associates with the best in children's literature", they may have accounted for the success of medieval texts intended for children (Shaner, 1992, p. 9).

The element of violence must have been particularly attractive to young boys and may have served as a deterrent to both sexes, but the Knight of La Tour-Landry also seems aware of the specifically female tastes and it is probably for this reason that he introduces elements of romance into his narration, based on the assumption that "the hearer must

be pleased in order to secure his attention" (Augustine 84). In his attempt to make his book not only instructive, but also appealing, the father-narrator reveals his self-contradictory tactics, for – on the one hand – he tries to protect his daughters from those who speak of love and dismisses "loue fables" and "other wordely vanitees" as unworthy of study (Chapter XC, p. 118, l. 24), recommending reading the lives of saints instead, and – on the other hand – he himself assumes the role of a courtly lover in order to lure his young female readers into the text. In this way, he satisfies his parental obligations, but also lets his authority be replaced by the authority of a courtly lover. In other words, he distances himself from poetry, claiming that prose is a more suitable vehicle for moral instruction, and yet he opens his book with a scene taken out of a medieval romance, composed originally in verse.⁴ The knight finds himself in a spring garden, listening to the songs of wild birds and musing on his youth, love and marriage:

In the year of our Lord 1371 as I was in a garden under a shadow,
as it were, in the end of April, all mourning and pensive, I re-
joiced just a little in the sound and song of the wild fowls, which
sang in their language, as the blackbird, the redwing, the thrush,
and the nightingale, which were gay and lusty. This sweet song
enlivened me and made my heart enjoy all, so that then I went
remembering the time passed in my youth, how love had held
me during that time in service by great distress, in which I was
many a year glad and joyful, and many another time sorrowful,
as it does to many a lover. (Vitto, 2003, p. 101)

In this passage, the father-narrator identifies himself with courtly lovers and recalls both the joys and pains of love. His confession bears a striking resemblance to the description of the garden of pleasure, which

⁴ The fact that verse was more suitable for talking about love is expressed in medieval poetry. In *The Romance of the Rose*, for instance, the poet describes his intention in the following way: "Now I should like to recount that dream in verse, the better to delight your hearts, for Love begs and commands me to do so" (De Lorris & De Meun, p. 3, ll. 25–27).

opens *The Romance of the Rose*, a work "in which the whole art of love is contained" (De Lorris & De Meun, 1994, p. 3, l. 40):

I dreamed that it was May, the season of love and joy, when everything rejoices, for one sees neither bush nor hedge that would not deck itself for May in a covering of new leaves... The birds, silent during the cold, harsh, and bitter weather, are so happy in the mild May weather, and their singing shows the joy in their hearts to be so great that they cannot help but sing. It is then that the nightingale strives to sing and make his noise, and the parrot and the lark are glad and joyful; it is then that the young men must seek love and merriment in the fair, mild weather. The man who does not love in May, when he hears the birds on the branches singing their sweet and touching songs, is hard of heart indeed. (De Lorris & De Meun, pp. 3–4, ll. 46–92)

Similarly to the French lover depicted by Guillaume de Lorris, the Knight of La Tour-Landry recalls the pain he suffered in the service of love. Unlike his literary model, however, the father's service was rewarded with a wife who was "bothe faire and good" (Prologue, p. 1, ll. 12–13). Even though death did them apart, "a true loveris hert forgetith neuer the woman that enis he hath truli loued," the knight declares (Prologue, p. 2, ll. 2–3). In doing so, he shows that love is not incompatible with marriage, a point which he will later try to reinforce in the debate with his wife.

The debate, which is narrated towards the end of his book and constitutes one of the most interesting parts of the entire work, provides an opportunity for the knight to ingratiate himself with his daughters. This is to say that before he warns his daughters about the dangers inherent in reading romances, he wants to have their full attention and therefore takes the side of a young lover. In fact, the father seems to represent the voice of Love, whereas the girls' mother represents the voice of Reason. His central argument is that "a lady or damsel might love paramours in certain cases, for in love is good worship unless any evil be thought in it" (Vitto, 2003, p. 106). A man in love, he says, is "the more encouraged to

exercise himself more often in arms" (Vitto, 2003, p. 106). The girls' mother does not appear to trust in the lovers' true intentions, for she claims they perform daring feats of arms "only to enhance themselves and to draw to them the grace and vainglory of the world" (Vitto, 2003, p. 106). Her response is decidedly against love mainly for two reasons, the first being that earthly love turns the lady away from God, and secondly, those who speak openly about love are deceivers, for – according to her – the mark of a true lover is bashfulness and perseverance. To illustrate her point, the girls' mother tells them the story of a knight whose advances she once rejected. His sin was twofold, as he was not only bold enough to openly confess his feeling – a true lover would never dare to confront the lady – but also thoughtless enough to reveal that merely two years had passed since he first felt the pangs of love. For a lack of any redeeming features, the lover was dismissed by the lady, who advised him "that he should go to the church to cast holy water upon himself and say his Ave Maria, and his temptation should soon after go from him, for the love was new" (Vitto, 2003, p. 110). The length of time that has to pass for temptation to turn into true love is seven and half years, the lady's daughters learn.

Cindy Vitto notes that the domestic debate between the husband and wife serves as a transition point and marks the beginning of more personal instructions that the parents give to their daughters (Vitto, 2003, p. 111, n. 9). It seems to me, however, that this part of the book offers very general advice and its merit lies elsewhere, namely in promoting a discussion on love by giving voice to two different perspectives, even though the arguments presented are very conventional. In fact, the debate appears to be closely based on a medieval social practice which was believed to have flourished in twelfth-century France, namely the courts of love, during which issues connected with amorous behaviour were raised by knights and settled by a panel of ladies.

Examples of the questions discussed are recorded in Andreas Capellanus's treatise entitled *The Art of Courtly Love*. Instigated by Countess Marie, the daughter of Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, and aimed at presenting the customs of Eleanor's court at Poitiers, Capellanus's book contains

eight dialogues between men and women, who debate on the issues of love. One of the central questions raised is whether love can exist between spouses. The judgement on this question is provided by Marie, the Countess of Champagne, and is as follows: "We declare and hold as firmly established that love cannot exert its powers between two people who are married to each other. For lovers give each other everything freely, under no compulsion of necessity, but married people are in duty bound to give in to each other's desires and deny themselves to each other in nothing" (Capellanus, 1969, pp. 106–107). It comes as no surprise that this verdict, as well as the remaining reasons provided to justify it, finds no equivalent in *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*.

In other respects, the debate between the Knight of La Tour-Landry and his wife corresponds to the last dialogue reported by Capellanus, i.e. one in which a man of higher nobility speaks with a woman of the same class. Indeed, this dialogue seems to contain all the main ideas expressed by the girls' parents in *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, starting with the man's conviction that the lady's favour is "the cause and origin of everything good" (Capellanus, 1969, p. 108) and the lady's response that "to show love is gravely to offend God and to prepare for many the perils of death" (Capellanus, 1969, pp. 109–110), through the thought that love "seems quite contrary to maidenly modesty", for lovers "may be deceitful and may be plotting to disgrace the service of Love" (Capellanus, 1969, p. 119), to the strong suggestion that the lady "ought not assent immediately to the desire of a suitor", but should place him on a "long-continued probation" (Capellanus, 1969, p. 120). Similarly, the advice that the knight's wife gives to their daughters is not to disclose their feelings too readily, but rather to "behave simply and cleanly", for "many a one who shows herself too amorous and too open in beholding and in giving fair countenance loses her marriage" (Vitto, 2003, p. 109). Therefore, it is most prudent to test the purity of the knight's intentions first.

By instructing the young girls on how to behave in the company of men, especially their potential suitors, and by failing to address one of the central precepts of courtly love, namely the belief that love cannot exist between the spouses, the girls' parents strive to reconcile the two

concepts that were seen as mutually exclusive in medieval culture, namely those of courtly love and marriage. Pointing their daughters towards “worship and honor” in love (Vitto, 2003, p. 110), the knight and his wife simultaneously underline the existence of two kinds of love: honourable love within the bounds of wedlock, and evil love, which is outside such bounds. They may, in fact, be drawing upon the distinction between pure and mixed love, which finds its expression in Capellanus’s treatise. The former “binds together the hearts of two lovers with every feeling of delight”, without imperilling the lady’s reputation (Capellanus, 1969, p. 122). In the words of Capellanus, “[t]his love is distinguished by being of such virtue that from it arises all excellence of character, and no injury comes from it, and God sees very little offense in it. No maiden can be corrupted by such love, nor can a widow or a wife receive any harm or suffer any injury to her reputation” (Capellanus, 1969, p. 122). Mixed love, on the other hand, “gets its effect from every delight of the flesh and culminates in the final act of Venus” (Capellanus, 1969, p. 122). Importantly, Capellanus does not condemn mixed love; on the contrary, he states that this kind of love is also praiseworthy and can be seen as “the source of all good things” (Capellanus, 1969, p. 123), thereby leaving the choice to the reader’s own discretion.

By establishing a dialogic relation in his discussion of love and marriage, the knight also seems to promote interpretative freedom, encouraging a personal response from his daughters and complicating it by assuming different guises or personalities. Having introduced his book as a romance, the father-narrator suggests that its true milieu is not the contemporary world but an imaginary garden of pleasure with a fountain of love, from which the lovers drink. Soon, however, he goes beyond the trappings of romance and back to reality, condemning those who speak of love in the hope of seducing innocent girls, even though he himself uses a seductive technique, trying to win his daughters over to his argument by assuming the role of a courtly lover and poet. As soon as his role of love’s advocate is finished, however, he turns into a strict moraliser who speaks decidedly against amorous fiction, warning his daughters of the danger of reading romances. It seems that the Knight of La Tour-Landry

uses a self-contradictory tactic so as not to appear biased and one-sided to his young audience. In promoting interpretative freedom, he also seems to promote the freedom to experience all kinds of behaviour, including the freedom to taste the flavour of what is prohibited.

This brings us to the third stage in the process of education, as outlined by St Augustine, which is to trigger the movement from knowledge to action. To *know* how to behave in the full sense of the word means to behave in accordance with this knowledge, for, according to St Augustine: "Knowledge and action are inextricably linked, and to say that someone knows something means that this knowledge informs the way she or he acts" (Williams, 2014, p. 53). How then does the father-narrator try to persuade his daughters to act on his advice? First of all, by evoking his favourite proverb – "He that hunteth and taketh not is like him that heareth and understandeth not" (Chapter XII, p. 17, ll. 31–33) – and secondly by telling another *exemplum*, the story of Cato, a Roman philosopher. Lying on his deathbed, he calls his son to his side and gives him three teachings. Young Catonet learns that he should never hold office at the emperor's court if he has enough money to live on, that he should spare no one justly condemned to death and that he should test his wife to see if she can keep his secrets. Soon after his father's death, Catonet agrees to serve in the emperor's court and decides to save a thief from the gallows. Having ignored the first two teachings of his father, he decides to obey the third and invents a test for his wife. In a fake confession, he reveals his evil deed to her and asks her to keep it secret. Appalled by the outrageous nature of the deed – Catonet claims to have killed the emperor's son, torn away his heart from his body, preserved it in jelly and served it to his parents – the lady soon reveals her husband's secret, imperilling his life. Consequently, Catonet is conveyed to the gallows, but since the hangman is nowhere to be found, the man whom Catonet had saved from death offers to hang him instead. Because his charge was based on a false confession, aimed at testing his wife, Catonet escapes death by arranging for the return of the emperor's son, safe and sound.

Even though the central purpose of this *exemplum* is to enjoin obedience to parental authority, the story of Cato and his son in fact serves

a twofold purpose, for it also alerts parents to the importance of listening to their children's advice. In the story evoked by the knight, the young prince speaks against the dangers of hasty judgement, addressing his father, the emperor, who condemned Catonet to death without a formal trial and pre-trial investigation. In this way, the father-narrator reverses the traditional teacher-learner roles, giving credit to children's wise judgement and undermining parental authority in the hope that his daughters will be encouraged to place confidence in the power of their own minds rather than blindly follow the dictates of others, including authority figures.

This attitude is the final manifestation of the father-narrator's self-contradictory pedagogical technique, for it opens a gap between theory and practice, a gap which seems characteristic of the medieval as much as the modern educational reality. Quoting the example of Catonet, who failed to listen to his father's advice, the Knight of La Tour-Landry appears to give silent consent to his daughters' misbehaviour and disobedience. Thus, the very last words that the knight addresses to his daughters, which contain an incitement to obedience and which were most certainly prompted by the father's hope for his daughters' commonsensical response, may also be seen as an acknowledgement of the fact that making mistakes is inscribed in the decision-making processes and is a normative part of the learning experience. For, as Cindy Vitto observes, "[i]f medieval women were indeed as obedient as the knight urges them to be, there would be no need for such detailed instruction" (Vitto, 2003, p. 99).

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