
THE ENIGMAS OF THE GRAIL. ON THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE UNITY OF *LI CONTES DEL GRAAL* OF CHRÉTIEN DE TROYES**Victoria Cirlot**

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Resum

Relectura de la polémica acerca de la unidad del último roman de Chrétien de Troyes, *Li Contes del Graal* que tuvo lugar a finales de los años cincuenta entre Martín de Riquer, Jean Frappier y Erich Köhler. Más de cincuenta años después se trata de valorar las aportaciones que dicha polémica supuso para la filología románica y, en concreto, para la valoración de la última obra del escritor de la Champaña.

Paraules clau:**Abstract**

This paper presents a review of the controversy about the unity of the last *roman* of Chrétien de Troyes, *Li Contes del Graal* which took place in the late fifties between Martí de Riquer, Jean Frappier and Erich Köhler. More than fifty years later, this paper will appraise the contributions that this controversy made to Romance philology, and, in particular, to the assessment of the last work of the Champenian writer.

Key words:

In 1957 Martín de Riquer published an article in *Filologia romanza* in which he put forward a daring and provocative hypothesis that brought about a passionate controversy. Jean Frappier and Erich Koehler were among his main opponents (RIQUER 1957a). Despite manifesting their disapproval, their voices always recognized the constructive brilliance of the article, and were grateful because it forced scholars to confront the state of their art. With a clearly positivistic method and focusing on a single issue, the timeline of the novel, Martín de Riquer effectively required the critics to consider once again the enigmas of the last *roman* of the great Champenian. These enigmas of the Grail were different from those that had drawn attention to the object itself and the procession it belonged to. The goal in this case was to understand the duality of the *roman* as an action distributed between two leading characters, Perceval and Gawain. Riquer took such duality to its extreme by presenting it as two separate works, one on Perceval and one on Gawain, against the bulk of philological criticism that defended the unity of *Li Contes*. Behind the work—or the works—stood the phantasmic figure of the writer, his ways, and his intentions; an unattainable figure with an unknown biography, who, according to one of his continuators, Gerbert de Montreuil, had also left his *roman* unfinished upon his death. Riquer’s proposal shook the foundations of Romance philology and forced a discussion, which entailed an intense reflection on the narrative art of who may be considered the first modern novelist. In one of the most recent and brilliant studies on Chrétien and his continuators, Mathilde Tomaryn Bruckner recalls this controversy as a clear symptom of the unrest of scholars about what at first seemed to be two fictional universes, that of Perceval and that of Gawain (BRUCKNER 2009). It is certainly useful to call to mind the controversy about the unity of *Li Contes del Graal* because it unveils all those things that still remain concealed to us.

Martín de Riquer had already delivered his 1957 article at the conference of the Arthurian society of Bangor (Wales) in August of that same year, and Jean Frappier had already expressed there his complete disagreement. The text published in issue IV of *Filologia romanza* was entitled “Perceval en *Li Contes del Graal*”, there Riquer revealed what he deemed as “very clumsy mistakes”, “obvious incongruencies”, and “huge contradictions” (RIQUER 1957a: 119). All of this was manifest in the discrepancy between Perceval’s and Gawain’s timelines. Riquer noted two “incongruencias narrativas” [narrative inconsistencies] to use his own expression: first, the two Sundays of Pentecost stand twelve days apart, the first one is the thirteenth day of the adventures of Perceval and the second one corresponds to the sixth day of Gawain’s story; second, that the adventures of Perceval take place twelve years after the death of Uther Pendragon, whereas Gawain’s exploits happen sixty years after the death of the king. From these inconsistencies, Riquer deduced that a copyist-editor had merged the wax tablets that originally contained two different works, a **Perceval* and a **Gawain*, in which Chrétien was working at the time of his death. The hypothesis that *Li Contes del Graal* were originally two works was not new. It had been suggested by Gustave Gröber in 1902, but only in an intuitive way, without offering evidence, and Ernst Höppfner recovered it twenty-nine years later. On the other hand, the different tone

and atmosphere of the adventures of Perceval and Gawain had also led to think that the latter could be the work of another author, as Ph. A. Becker and S. Hofer proposed (RIQUER 1957a: 133-136). Without ever accepting that the adventures of Gawain could be attributed to another author, Riquer also alluded to inconsistencies in the speech of the Ugly Maiden, who rode a mule, before the Court of King Arthur, which he blamed on the copyist-editor. He also emphasized how strange it was that Gawain was entrusted with finding the bleeding lance, which was Perceval's quest (RIQUER 1957a: 143).

The answer of Jean Frappier appeared a year later, in issue sixty-four of *Le Moyen Age*, in an article entitled "Sur la composition du *Conte du Graal*" (FRAPPIER 1958). He added modifications to Martín de Riquer's timing of the adventures of Perceval and Gauvain, such as the reference to Pentecost, for the text does not allow to determine that Perceval reached the castle of the Grail on this festivity. In addition, Frappier focused his defence of the unity of Chrétien's *roman* on three arguments: first, he maintained the idea of a loose chronology, that is, that the information found in the text did not enable the reconstruction of a timeline, which Riquer had carried out, and that, in fact, Chrétien cared little about timelines; second, he resorted to the unfinished nature of the work to explain some of the inconsistencies identified by Riquer and, third, he pointed out that the entire manuscript tradition was against the hypothesis of the two works, since there was no manuscript attesting to it (FRAPPIER 1958: 69-89). A new article by Martín de Riquer published in issue twenty-seven of the *Boletín de la Real Academia de Buenas Letras* in 1957/58, and entitled "La composición de *Li Contes del Graal* y el *Guiromelant*" acknowledged the criticism of Frappier and accepted several modifications only to insist on the thesis of the two works (RIQUER 1957-8b). The new fundamental contribution of the article lay in the approach to the first section of the first Continuation, *Guiromelant*, as the end of **Gawain* concluding that:

Pero en todo este complicado y apasionante problema queda en pie un enigma: el del "editor" que tuvo la desacertada y funesta idea de mezclar los romans de Perceval y de Gauvain, que Chrétien dejó inacabados al morir, y los soldó entre sí interpolando elementos de su propia cosecha en el episodio de la Doncella de la mula e inventó la absurda "queste" de la lanza por parte de Gauvain. (RIQUER 1957-8b: 314)

In this article, Martín de Riquer cited the review that Felix Lecoy had devoted to his previous paper claiming that the thesis was interesting and deserved to be taken into consideration, even though it was not possible to prove or disprove it. But Lecoy was much more critical with this second article. Frappier's response was equally swift. He wrote "Note sur la composition complémentaire *Li Contes del Graal*", which was published in issue eighty-one of *Romania* (FRAPPIER 1960). He argued again the gratuitousness of Riquer's thesis in a more or less similar way as he had done before, and at the end of the article he included the joke Riquer himself had made "I confess that all of this could be almost as fantastic as the hypothetical Celtic sources of Chrétien de Troyes"—obviously directed against him, a known supporter of the Celtic thesis—to replicate:

Ne nous inquiétons pas de l'épigramme lancée contra les origines bretonnes du roman breton; mais ne repoussons pas tout à fait la qualification de "fantastique", s'il s'agit de caractériser cet éditeur-remanieur qui, dans l'état présent du débat, ne reste à nos yeux qu'un fantôme.

An extreme courtesy and kindness dominated the whole controversy. Frappier continued to praise the brilliance with which Riquer had built his thesis and Riquer meanwhile only spoke of his "excellent colleague and friend." But this did not prevent both of them from defending their theses with passion and conviction, drawing all their weapons in what was actually presented as a real combat. However, a certain hesitation can also be perceived, which would explain the emotion that pervades the final note of the article by Jean Frappier when he learnt that Erich Koehler had just entered the controversy and that he deemed Riquer's thesis incorrect.¹

Indeed, in 1959 Erich Koehler published in issue seventy-five of the *Zeitschrift für Philologie romanische* the article "Zur Diskussion über die Einheit von Chrestiens *Li Contes del Graal*" (KOEHLER 1959). He begins by saying that when a scholar of the category of Martín de Riquer proposes a hypothesis, it is necessary to pay the utmost attention (KOEHLER 1959: 524):

Wenn ein Gelehrter vom Range Martin de Riquers eine Frage aufgreift, deren Bedeutung und mögliche Konsequenzen jedem Kenner der mittelalterlichen Literatur sogleich einsichtig sind, so verdient dieses Unternehmen die grösste Aufmerksamkeit.

As regards the timeline proposed by Riquer, Koehler considered that between the Pentecost mentioned in the adventures of Perceval and the Pentecost of the exploits of Gawain, a year could have gone by (KOEHLER 1959: 527). As for the discrepancy between the five years since Perceval left Arthur's Court and the day he met the hermit, and the six days that go by in the adventures of Gawain after Perceval leaves the court, Koehler argues that the incomplete nature of the work is being overlooked, and that Chrétien, as any writer ever—and he compares him to Robert Musil—probably had a series of chapters yet to order, or did not even know whether or not he would include them in the final work (KOEHLER 1959: 529). Finally, as for the difference between Arthurian time spans in the adventures of Perceval and Gawain—twelve years after the death of Uther in the case of Perceval and sixty years in the case of Gawain—he drew attention to the implausibility of the age attributed to King Arthur himself, 100 years old, and to his mother, Queen Ygraine, who is 120 years old in the *roman*. After refuting several specific aspects on which the thesis of the two works was based, Koehler moved to another type of arguments, focused on the understanding of the structure and style of Chrétien de Troyes. The dualism of *Li Contes* was but a literary reflection of the experience of a dualistic world, and from his first *roman*, *Erec*, Chrétien had only gone deeper into that dual structure on the basis of contrasting characters, actions and worlds (KOEHLER 1959: 539).

¹ FRAPPIER 1960: 337. «Au momento où j'allais rédiger ce dernier paragraphe, j'ai pris connaissance avec le plus vif intérêt de l'article important que M. Erich Koehler, professeur à l'Université de Heidelberg, vient de consacrer à la présente discussion...»

Our purpose here is not to take sides in this controversy. Research has provided new ways to address some of the issues discussed in this paper: for example, Philippe Walter has thoroughly studied temporal indeterminacy in Chrétien's *romans*, and it does not seem possible or even useful to question the manuscript tradition, all of which would support the unity of the work (WALTER 1989); on the contrary, the figure of an editor-copyist seems increasingly less phantasmic—for example, after the works by Elspeth Kennedy—and his intervention in the manuscripts is becoming increasingly perceptible (KENNEDY 1986). In my opinion, what is most decisive for this controversy is what Martín de Riquer himself commented thirty years later in the “Introduction” to his new annotated translation of *Li Contes del Graal*:

Tan apasionante y tan sugestivo es *Li contes del graal* en el estado en que se nos ha transmitido, que la labor de imaginar cómo lo hubiera rematado el escritor y la de interpretar lo que puede parecer enigmático ha sido un fecundo estímulo para el ingenio, la imaginación y las lucubraciones de los modernos exegetas (RIQUER 1985)

Many works have been devoted to understand the unity or duality of *Li Contes del Graal*, the relationship between Gawain and Perceval, between the Arthurian company and the world of the Grail, between Chrétien's *roman* and its Continuations, on the basis of this controversy.² Fortunately enough, the enigma remains, and with it, the imagination of those who strive to solve it.

² Martín de Riquer himself, in the book he published ten years later (RIQUER 1968: 34) recalled the controversy in a footnote and concluded by saying: “Trabajos de índole diversa me apartaron por unos años del estudio de Chrétien y no tuve ocasión de volver a mi tesis, en la que sigo creyendo; pero ha aparecido el libro de Leo Pollmann, *Chrétien de Troyes und der Conte del Graal*, Tübingen 1965, en el que también se sostiene que las aventuras de Perceval son cosa distinta de las de Gauvain, pero que éstas no se deben a la pluma de Chrétien, sino a la de un primer continuador. Algún día volveré sobre este tema, que dista mucho de estar resuelto.”

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