



Forget the Grail:  
Quests for Insignificant Objects  
with No Earthly Value

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**H**very Fall, all around the world, teachers of medieval literature face new eighteen-year-old minds eager to be informed about The Grail. As they walk back to their offices, they meet new colleagues, tell them that they are teachers of medieval literature, and hear “You know, I’ve always been fascinated by The Grail.” They open a new theoretical work on narrative structure and find that the author has “covered” the Middle Ages by including a few paragraphs on The Grail: they know that they would be considered hopeless empiricists if they asked “Which text about which quest for which grail?”

I have no axe to grind with the Grail, with Grail-narratives or with Grail-scholars. The impetus for my choice of the “Forget the Grail” rhetorical strategy was a consideration of the First Continuation of Chrétien’s *Perceval*, which does just that. Although its ostensible purpose is to complete the Grail-narrative, it forgets the Grail for thousands and thousands of lines, telling us stories of characters who have nothing to do with the Grail. Other roughly contemporary texts show a similar lack of concern with the goals of their central quests. The eponymous hero of *Jaufre* spends thousands of lines trying to find and punish the villain Taulat, but when he finds him the battle is over in a few short lines, and the poem carries on for thousands more: the really interesting things happen in the subsidiary episodes.

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Sometimes it is the character who is forgetful: Gawain sets out to avenge Raguidel without the lance he knows must accompany the successful avenger. In *La Demoiselle à la Mule*, the goal is rather silly: the maiden wants to recover a bridle for her mule. Scholars soon renamed the text *La Mule sans frain* to make the bridle seem important. But why does the damsel need a bridle for her mule, when it seems quite rideable without one? How did she happen to lose it in the first place? Why does Gawain receive no reward for returning it to her, although she promised a kiss “and the other thing” to the man who got it back for her? A skilled poet—or a skilled critic—might produce a poem which answered all these questions, on the basis of this poem’s fragmentary hints about rivalry between sisters, spells cast on the ancestral castle, and possible sexual puns: but this poet did not.

The bridle and the Grail—for the First Continuator if not for Chrétien—are what Alfred Hitchcock calls “McGuffins.” The McGuffin, in a Hitchcock film, is the code book, the key, the secret spy papers, the bomb, the missing old lady that everyone wants to find, or to keep hidden, for the next ninety-five minutes. The bridle, the stag’s foot, the villain, or the abducted queen holds the audience’s attention and focusses the protagonist’s aspirations for four hundred or four thousand rhyming octosyllabic couplets. The poet’s interest was, and the critic’s focus therefore should be, in the process, not on the goal. Let us deflect the critical gaze and privilege sections of the text which have been called “preliminary

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episodes” and details which have been overlooked or called “minor.” Let us also forget criteria based on “individual poetic excellence” and “literary influence,” and attend indiscriminately to *Caradoc* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, short romances such as *La Mule sans frain* and *Le Chevalier à l’Épée*, Breton lais such as *Tyolet* and *Desiré*, longer adventure romances such as *Meraugis*, *Raguidel*, *Yvain*, *L’Âtre Perilleux*, *Erec*, *Jaufre*, *Lancelot* and *Lanzelet*, and longer and shorter romantic romances such as *Amadas et Ydoine* and *Gliglois*. This corpus is far too large for a proper literary study, and much of it lies outside the realm of mainstream literary analysis: but for a mythic analysis—and by “mythic” I mean an analysis of the sort of narrative patterns which Levi-Strauss called “machines for the suppression of thought”—the body of texts available is barely sufficient.

These texts form a group because, whether the protagonist is on a “quest” for a particular McGuffin or not, whether the object in question is inherently valuable or not, whether its possession is a prerequisite to the possession of something desirable or not, the narrative itinerary includes at least one stopover for the hero in a moment of total disempowerment. The reflexes of this disempowerment are metaphoric or metonymic death or castration. At some point or points in his career, prior to his becoming an active, empowered, individualized dominant male, the hero must become passive, impotent, nameless, mad, emasculated and/or dead. Successful fulfillment of this obligation leads to the acquisition or

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re-acquisition of dominating power, but through a kind of post hoc ergo propter hoc “logic” whose precise functioning we are not invited to examine. Like any society’s version of “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do,” the mystifications in this pattern point to a hegemonic lie.

In both *Caradoc* and *Mule*, the hero takes part in what has come to be known as a “beheading game.” An enchanter arrives at Arthur’s court and challenges one of the knights to exchanges *colees*, blows to the neck. Caradoc accepts, and beheads the intruder, who picks up his head and demands a return engagement next year. The fateful day arrives, Caradoc stretches out his neck, and the enchanter does not behead him. In *Mule*, after Gawain has entered a strange revolving castle, he is similarly challenged by a giant churl, who allows his own head to be cut off but then does not cut off Gawain’s head the next day. In each case, after this non-event, the protagonist is changed. Before the test, Caradoc is considered a perfect young knight, but only because he is expert at hunting with hawks and hounds and bows and arrows, at playing chess, at wearing fur-lined cloaks and at speaking eloquently. After the first half of the game, the poet tells us that Caradoc had an adventure-filled year and performed many deeds of prowess, although he shows us none of them. When the second part of the game is complete, neither the poet nor the enchanter explains why such a game was devised. Rather, our interest is deflected toward his reason for not striking Caradoc: he reveals that he is

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Caradoc's natural father. On one level, all the events which follow this event could just as easily have followed a simple revelation of paternity, with no beheading test at all; but shortly afterward, Caradoc initiates the process of becoming his own man, not beholden to any father for his status, by punishing both the enchanter and his adulterous mother. For the three nights following the marriage of Caradoc's legal parents, the enchanter had lain with Caradoc's mother and enchanted her husband so that he slept with a greyhound, a mare and a sow; now Caradoc walls up his mother in a tower and forces the enchanter to have sex with a greyhound, a mare and a sow. By submitting to the threat of decapitation, Caradoc has been granted the power to dominate, and that power is expressed in the ability to dominate his parents' sexuality. Later, his sphere of domination is enlarged, as he rescues the woman who will become his wife from a would-be rapist and then wins everyone's respect in a lengthy Round Table tournament.

In *La Mule sans fraire*, the beheading game is similarly unmotivated and gets rather lost in a series of other tests. While Gawain is in the world beyond the court, he actively proves himself on numerous occasions. He perseveres, follows the path set for him through a forest filled with lions, tigers and leopards and then through a stinking pit filled with serpents, scorpions and other unnamed fire-breathing animals; he makes his way across a fearsome river on a bridge made of a single narrow iron plank, and then he dares to enter

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a revolving castle, spurring his mule at just the right moment so that he will arrive at the wall when the door is in front of him: Kay was man enough for the first part of this trip, but turned back at the bridge. Gawain also dominates: he vanquishes two lions, which he kills, and one huge churl, whom he spares. The important thing about the beheading game is its placement, between the tests which he passes by simply enduring and the tests he passes by dominating. After he has submitted willingly to the threat of certain death, he is allowed to move to a higher level of knightly activity, to display his martial talents in battles against others: only after he has been disempowered can he be empowered. Incidentally, he gets the bridle, taking it back to court rather than accept the offer to remain as lord of the castle and its thirty-nine maidens.

*Le Chevalier à l'Épée* has been paired with *Mule* as a “source” of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but segregated from it as a source to a different section, the bedroom temptation. It makes rather fuller use of the possible reflexes of submission, including disarming, loss of social control, namelessness and feminization as well as synecdochic decapitation. Gawain is wandering aimlessly in the wilderness—no grail, no quest, no McGuffin at all—so out of touch with his current situation that he becomes hopelessly lost at nightfall. He spends the night with an Imperious Host, forewarned that disobedience means death. The Host commands him to go to bed with his daughter, naked so that they may enjoy each other more, and Gawain nervously obeys. In

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the morning, when Gawain leaves the bedroom, he is acknowledged as the best knight who ever lived, he boldly defies his host, he is betrothed to the daughter, he is offered the lordship of the castle, and people arrive from miles around to rejoice because he has come to their land. This is what has happened in between: Gawain has surrendered his right to speak his mind and to make his own choices, as he agrees with everything his host says and does all he commands. He has removed all the external signs of his knighthood, with his spurs singled out for special mention. He has not really lost his name—though no one at the castle knows who he is at first—but he has lost his honorific title: while he is in the bedroom, the poet calls him “Gauvains,” not “Messire Gauvains.” He has been struck twice by an enchanted sword when he has tried to have his way with the daughter, first in the side—which causes him to lose all desire—and then on the right shoulder, when he tries again, motivated more by fear of scorn from other knights than by desire. He has then lain all night with the maiden, chaste in body if not in mind—and mind doesn’t seem to matter much. In the morning, the girl’s father sees the blood on the sheets and knows what has happened—a marvelously ambiguous moment. He has learned that Gawain is not dead and that he is Gawain, the best knight from here to Mallorca. Because of one of these things, or perhaps just because Gawain has not had sex with the girl—she warned him, as she had not warned any of the previous candidates—the father performs the marriage. The logic and the motivation



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behind all this is unclear, but the result is not: having submitted to the power of the sword—or, rather, having passively experienced it, since willingness is not at issue, Gawain has acquired the power of the sword, which he soon proceeds to exercise, first over the daughter in bed and later over a perfidious knight in the wilderness.

When similar elements in this pattern of disempowerment occur in more than one text, the critic analyzing them frequently treats them as “borrowings” from a better-known text, usually one of Chrétien’s romances. When the seneschal Kay, who always starts the process but never completes it, has his arm broken, it is seen as a borrowing from Chrétien’s *Perceval*. When Jaufre, in his first battle after being knighted by King Arthur, has his spur sliced off, or when the mule Gawain is riding in *La Mule sans frain* has its tail cut off by the gate of the revolving castle, it is considered a borrowing from *Yvain*, where the hero loses his spurs and the back half of his horse as he rides past the guillotine gate in Laudine’s castle. An orthopedic surgeon, however, considering the number of times Kay breaks his right arm between the elbow and the shoulder would be astonished that he could lift a cup, much less wield a sword: yet each individual literary critic considering each individual text explains this away as a borrowing rather than seeking out the significance for the culture of expressing the theme of “failure to pass the initiation” through such a motif. A forensic pathologist examining all the romance knights with wounds in the neck or shoulder would send the Chief

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Inspector in search of a single psychopath—possibly left-handed, given the number of times the wound is to the right side—only to learn that the wounds were inflicted by a host of different assailants, ranging from the dwarf who strikes Erec in the woods (incidentally beginning his transformation from disinterested spectator at an ersatz Arthurian adventure into the conqueror of a previously undefeated knight), to the Green Knight, to the magic sword in *Le Chevalier à l'Épée*, to the knife-wielding outraged father in *Lanzelet*, to the sword which “accidentally” wounds Yvain’s right shoulder when he swoons as he returns to the magic fountain. When we discover such repetition, or when we find the same sequence of events in Chrétien’s *Lancelot* as in *Le Chevalier à l'Épée*—hero lies in a bed, hero is wounded in the side, hero is wounded in the neck, hero lies in bed with a beautiful woman and does not have sex, then hero does have sex—then even though, or rather precisely because there are different beds, different women, different assailants, different circumstances and motivations, we seem to be confronting not purely individual poetic choices in the sphere of literature, but varying transformations of a ritual pattern of *dromena*, the “things done” to effect a transition in a “candidate” rather than events experienced by a hero, elements in a process which is efficacious *ex opere operato*, as a motiveless combination of dwarves, churls, women, fathers and renegade knights conspire to “make a man out of him.”

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The set of texts I am presenting today are about initiation and education. By “education,” I do not mean the sorts of things meant by, for example, Madeleine Pelner Cosman in her *The Education of the Hero in Arthurlan Romance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), p. 139–140:

Born the son of a ruler, the hero possesses inherited potential excellence which can be and is developed by education. His education consists of two or three separate periods. During the first period, the youth is cared for by a woman—his real or foster mother, or a nurse—who provides the necessary rudiments, to make the infant a marvelous boy. He is next entrusted to a male tutor for a second educational period. Instructed in endeavors which cultivate both mind and body, he is given preparation for the world in which his later adventures will take place. The curriculum of this second period consists of “liberal arts,” reading, instrumental and vocal music, law, hunting, exercise in sports, and tutelage in chivalry.... Upon leaving this second period of education and having a childhood adventure in which his learning is displayed, the hero arrives at court. Here, prior to the ceremony of his knighting, he either receives further education—his third period, under the tutelage of a courtier—or displays brilliant expertise which demonstrates his

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precocious refinement and readiness for knighthood.

Rather, I mean something more like what we mean when we say, “that boy needs to be taught a good lesson.”

By “initiation,” I do not mean the sorts of things meant by Pierre Gallais in his *Perceval et l’Initiation: Essais sur le dernier roman de Chrétien de Troyes, ses correspondences “orientales” et sa signification anthropologique* (Paris: L’Agrafe d’Or, 1972), p. 28:

Un héros de roman (aussi bien persan que médiéval) est “de bonne orine”, “de bon eire” (= de bonne origine, souche, nature), et toute son “éducation” ne consiste qu’à le montrer, à le faire savoir et à le savoir soi-même (dans le cas, justement, de Perceval)—et il ne peut le savoir qu’en le faisant savoir, car un héros de roman (aussi bien médiéval qu’oriental) n’*existe* pas en dehors de la société.

The hero of a romance, whether Persian or medieval, is “of good origin, stock, or nature,” and all his “education” consists in showing it, in making it known and in knowing it himself (as in the case of Perceval); and he cannot know it except by making it known, for the hero of a romance, whether medieval or oriental, does not *exist* apart from society.

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Rather, I mean something more like the initiations which take place each Fall in the fraternity houses on university campuses or, *mutatis mutandis*, in the thesis defenses and tenure committee deliberations taking place in adjacent offices.

The candidate in a romance is shown taking on the mission of his own free will, frequently after some other candidate has failed. Once it has begun, that mission leads to apparently subsidiary, preliminary adventures; since success in the major quest follows successful completion of these minor tests, they come to be seen as causal. The audience begins to believe that he has earned the right to the major adventure by demonstrating that he has the right stuff in each of the separate preliminary encounters with danger and temptation, but the links between the “causes” and the “effects” are kept vague. The obligation to perform the task, avoid the temptation and survive the challenge may be revealed by another character, through a “Not so fast, first you must...” kind of speech, but it is presented less as a result of any human decision than as something natural and necessary. In the real world of the young knights in the audience, however, warriors did not choose their own tasks but followed the marching orders of their lords. Their companions who failed on their missions came back dead, not merely shamed like Calogrenant or with a broken arm like Kay. When they survived their missions, even when they captured or successfully defended today’s McGuffin, they were no closer to the promised prize, marriage to an heiress with

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a castle. And so the poet in the hall, in order to maintain the social balance and retain his position and his audience, was forced to exercise his talents yet again, devising a new fantasy in which a knight's adherence to duty in the face of mortal peril produces an enviable reward, in which setbacks are all merely temporary and defeats are all part of a larger plan leading to success.

The reflexes of final domination for the successful candidate are continual possession of the desirable woman, otherwise known as "marriage," and unchallenged control over castle and vassals, otherwise known as "lordship." Yvain has Laudine and her castle, Jaufre has Brunissen and all her castles, Amadas has Ydoine and her duchy, Tyolet has the Princess of Logres and her kingdom, Desiré has his fairy mistress and her realm, and Erec—aberrantly—has Enide and his own kingdom. Such rewards are so far beyond the experience of the audience that most romances stop there, as if incapable of imagining what comes next. Other texts, more insidiously, I think, promise only one night with the lady in question, or, like dozens of Gawain-romances, show the hero winning the reward or half of the reward and then losing it, not, of course, through any fault of his own. These latter texts say to their audiences, "Yes, you have endured and submitted and you have not been rewarded: but the same thing happened to the best knight who ever lived, and he didn't stop submitting and enduring."

So far, this analysis, by homogenizing a host of texts and reducing them to their abstract shared pattern, has

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replicated only the first part of the romances themselves, in which the protagonist is reduced from individual knighthood to degree-zero common physical humanity; the obvious next step is the re-individuation of each text as unique reflex of the base pattern. This process should not happen too quickly: we must take note of smaller groupings first. In *Meraugis de Portlesguez*, the hero sets out on a quest to find his companion Gawain. He finds him, stranded on an island of Ladies and compelled to engage in a fight to the death with any man who arrives. Rather than kill Meraugis, Gawain pretends to decapitate him, rips off his helmet and throws it into the sea, so that the ladies watching from the castle will think that he has won the battle. Meraugis, now “dead,” enters the castle as a ghost, frightens the ladies, and locks them up. Now both men are stranded on the island, for the people with the boat on the mainland will only come over if summoned by the Lady. So Meraugis dresses himself in women’s clothing and calls them over. As he and Gawain enter the boat, the boatmen become suspicious that he is not in fact their Lady. Meraugis reaches under his dress, pulls out his sword, and says “*This* is your ‘Lady’” (“Vostre dame est venue!/. . . Vez la ci en ma main!/ . . . Ceste espee, c’est vostre dame/ Dont vos avrez dampnation.” [3366–71]). Individualizing criticism can only see this as a burlesque scene, local comic relief, or, at best, as an indication of this poem’s erasure of the feminine: but this pattern of metonymic decapitation, metaphoric death and visual feminization followed by phallic display

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is echoed in *Le Chevalier à l'Épée*. It has links to *Trubert*, where the protagonist disguises himself as a woman with a phallic name and impregnates the Duke's daughter, or, further afield, with the *Mahabhārata* tale of Arjuna disguised as a eunuch or Statius's tale of Achilles, disguised as a woman but revealing his masculinity through his interest in sex and weapons. In *La Vengeance de Raguidel*, Gawain does not exactly lie about his name, but he allows everyone in a castle to believe that he is Kay. At one point, the Lady says to him, "Put your head through this window and smell my beautiful garden," and then reveals that there is a blade at the top prepared to slice off Gawain's head if he ever comes to the castle. Questions of "literary influence" are irrelevant: these are reflexes of an underlying social fear. Analysis on a less concrete level connects all these works to *Yvain* and *Jaufre*, where the heroine has, for a moment, life and death power over the hero, or to *Desiré*, *Amadas and Ydoine*, *Gliglois* and *Gautier d'Aupais*, where the hero must wait, serve, languish and—in the case of *Amadas*—go mad, run naked through the streets pursued by ruffians who pelt him with dung and be bitten in the right shoulder by a mastiff, before the heroine can grant him dominion. In order to capture the stag's foot and therefore the Princess of Logres, Tyolet—who for a time re-names himself "Chevalier-Beste"—is willing to ride through the perilous river and be mauled by seven lions—they wound his horse's right shoulder—and be stabbed and left for dead by a dishonest knight; when it is all over,



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however, he is the lord. At the end of the day, the message is one: feminine empowerment is temporary, but masculine disempowerment is temporary.

Social, moral and spiritual romances gain when they are seen as socialization, moralizations and spiritualizations of the common raw pattern, again often in small inter-related groups. Authors made social statements in their choices regarding the agents of rescue: Yvain is resurrected by an unknown woman, Tyolet by his companion Gawain, and Amadas by his *amie* Ydoine. After the beheading test, Caradoc goes through the curriculum again. His mother and his natural father conspire to have a snake wrap itself around his right arm and slowly squeeze the life out of him; after a lengthy period of disempowerment, he is rescued by his *amie* Guinier, who undergoes a feminized version of the testing pattern. They are placed naked in adjacent tubs, his full of vinegar and hers full of milk. She pleads seductively with the serpent to leave her lover, and it is decapitated as it leaps to her breast. She emerges from this trial with a wound to her right breast, and this wound—or rather the magical gold nipple prosthesis which she is later given by her former assailant—becomes the sign of her successful candidacy, just as the traces of the assault on Caradoc's arm give him his new name, Caradoc Briesbras: his companion's first concern is to re-clothe him in vestments suitable to his rank. Desiré's lengthy period of subservience is ended by fatherhood, as is appropriate in a story which begins with his parents travelling to the shrine of St.

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Giles to pray for his birth. Erec and Jaufre reactivate themselves, in response to cries for help. In *Le Chevalier à l'Épée*, Gawain is incited to carry on with the process which leads to his empowering neck-wound by his fear of scorn from his male companions. Lanzelet sleeps with the daughter first, at her urging; then he gets the knife-wound to the neck, from her father; then he kills the father. This confusion of the proper order of events requires that he go through the process again, with other women, before he can settle down as an established senior. Each narrative choice implies its own view of desirable social organization.

The moral progression from reactive vengeance to altruism in *Yvain*, *Jaufre* and *Erec* is basically an “add-on” to the pattern of transformation, deriving much of its persuasive energy for the original audience by being an accompaniment to increased military power and, of course, an improved economic position. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which spiritualizes the stages of the quest but not the goal, as soon as Gawain has been wounded in the neck he leaps up and confronts his opponent man to man, as if he were a typical re-empowered romance knight: his success is actually a failure, the kind of failure which for a penitentially-minded author is paradoxically a success, a success which Gawain himself soon transforms into a failure. Each of the elements in the pattern deserves to be the focus of a sub-group, with special studies of the “Loss and Regaining of Name,” the “Nick in the Neck,” the

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“Crossing the Perilous Water,” and, for that matter, “Whose is that Blood on the Sheets?”

Structuralist studies of this sort frequently include a neutral, schematic summary of the underlying pattern they have discovered, and this often becomes the best-known part of the work, the only part ever quoted; this is unfortunate, since of course such a summary is the part of the work which owes most to the mind and society of the critic. In the case of this study, neo- or quasi-structuralist as it is, we are fortunate in having a medieval “summary” of the poems in a “text” of a different sort, the ritual through which young men became knights. The candidate for dubbing keeps a night-long vigil, comparable to the hero’s wakefulness in the *Lai de Doon* or *Jaufre*. He is given instruction in perfect knighthood by a surrogate for the mothers, the kings and the honest older knights and vavassors of the romances. He passes through water, taking a ritual bath comparable to the perilous rivers of the Arthurian wilderness or the vinegar and milk baths of Caradoc and Guinier. He puts aside his old clothing, and receives new garments and defensive and offensive weapons, meticulously allegorized by the spiritualizing revisionist commentators: romance authors usually focus more on problems with the identity of the giver. He is warned that if he fails in his calling, his spurs will be sheared off, like those of Yvain and Jaufre, and even, in some cases, that he will be mocked by the cooks as so many romance heroes are mocked by Kay. All of this, however, is just elaborate stage business to distract

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attention from the truly efficacious part of the ritual, the one event which was never given a stable allegorical meaning, which was singled out in the *Ordene de Chevalerie* as properly performable only by a dominant on a subordinate: the *colee*, the blow to the shoulder with the hand or, more frequently, with the flat of the sword. As Sir Edmund Leach, the best structuralist anthropologist ever to be knighted, pointed out, “They tell you that she will touch your shoulder with the flat of the sword; they do not point out that the flat of the sword vis-à-vis the shoulder is the edge of the sword vis-à-vis the neck.” At the key moment in his transformation from subservient squire to empowered knight, the young man is told by an unequivocal gesture, “I could cut off your head... but I won’t.”