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Le Lai de l'Ombre

The Phantom Ring

I [Jean Renart] have no intention of giving up my practice of composing stories of high quality. Indeed, I would prefer to keep my brain active rather than while away my time doing nothing in particular. Neither would I like to be one of those novice writers who dash off some incompetent piece of work, seeing that I am talented enough myself to write something that is not only useful to others, but also expressed with elegance — something of superior taste, entertaining and free of offensive vulgarity, something that only an uncouth yokel could find fault with. Only a fool would refuse the opportunity of re-telling a good story because of some facetious remark he once heard made about himself. Should some boorish wretch or other pull a face behind his back, he is quite within his rights simply to ignore him, for I firmly believe today that it is no more possible to teach someone like that good manners than it is for me to make my little finger as long as the one next to it. (19)

As the old saying goes, there is much more to be gained by being born under a lucky star than there is by being a member of the nobility. What happened to that character called Guillaume [in my *Roman de l'Escoufle*] who dismembered the kite and burned the bird piece by piece proves the point: I am perfectly right to claim that chance can be of more benefit to people than wealth or friends. A friend can easily die, and wealth, unless you take good care of it, can quickly disappear. Anyone who entrusts his money to a fool soon finds it being squandered and his treasure chest emptied. His own stupidity becomes plain for all to see, and he stands charged with having irresponsibly frittered his wealth away. If, however, he were to stop being so frivolous, if he were to moderate his behaviour, his misfortune would melt away, and good luck soon smile on him again. (37)

The reason I am undertaking to tell this story is in order to show just how talented I am in composing narrative poems of exceptional quality. It is also a means of paying my respects to bishop elect [Miles de Nanteuil]. I am delighted that his grace should have been willing to choose me to do what I like doing best, that is composing verse accounts of unusual and notable events. “Steer well, rhyme well”, they say. A helmsman skilful enough to bring a boat from the high seas into port would be foolish not to respect the waves. In the same way it needs a skilful poet to embark on telling a story and bring it to a successful conclusion. Someone of that calibre can only earn yet greater praise from counts and kings. So listen now — and no interruptions, please! — to how I re-tell *The Phantom Ring* in the version that follows here. (52)

Once upon a time, so the story goes, there was a knight who lived somewhere in the Empire, in the borderlands between Lorraine and Germany. I doubt whether there was anyone else in the whole of the kingdom of France, from Châlons to Le Perche, who could, like him, rightly claim to possess all the knightly skills and each and every chivalric virtue. Many of his qualities were reminiscent of the son of Lot, Gauvain as we now call him, but I never learnt what our knight's name was, or even whether or not he had one. He had been handpicked by valour and courtliness to be their kinsman. Everyone who knew him was amazed at how lavishly he spent his money. Despite his reputation as a fierce fighter, you would have found him neither conceited nor boastful. He was not a man of great wealth, but he knew how to provide for himself. He was skilled at taking money from one place and putting it where there was none. No young lady or married woman who heard tell of him failed to form an extremely high opinion of him, and there was not a single woman he approached who did not welcome his attention, so open-hearted, refined and well mannered was he. (79)

In domestic settings he was the most amenable and co-operative of men, but when it came to fighting, he could be described as very much the opposite. Once he had strapped his helmet on his head, he would become audacious, aggressive, and hot-tempered, impatiently riding up and down the line of knights in search of an opponent to joust with. So obsessed did he become that he turned into the sort of knight who wished there were two Mondays in every week so that he could spend all his time jousting. Never did God create a knight more committed to the tournament. (93)

He was not the sort of man, either, who would wear summer clothes in winter. He would generously distribute to his men more costly furs and miniver than someone with ten times the fortune he possessed. He also enjoyed having at least five or six companions around him, and never did he refuse to give anything he had to anyone who asked for it. He enjoyed falconry whenever he found an opportunity, something I myself entirely approve of. More even than Tristan, he excelled at fencing, playing chess and other games. For a long time he led a life of leisure and became an extremely popular figure. Physically he was a good-looking man with a fine figure, fit, distinguished and confident in bearing. Handsome he certainly was, but what made him an even more admirable individual was his physical courage. He was, in a word, everything a knight should be. (111)

Love is man's mistress as well as his master. Suddenly, at precisely the time we are writing, it declared war on him. The aim was to subjugate him and to exact a tribute from him for all the pleasure he had so far enjoyed from the many women in his life. He had never before paid homage to love, and had avoided, for as long as it had suited him, performing the service he owed it. Because he had never declared himself love's vassal, nor paid the necessary dues, love judged the time and place were now right to make him feel the full force of its power. Even Tristan, who for Yseut's sake had his hair cropped and his head shaved like a madman, suffered less than a fraction of the punishment our knight had to endure before he finally made his peace with love. So now love looses its arrow into the knight's chest. It plunges in right up to its feathers, inscribing deep into his heart the sweet name of the beautiful lady he is now destined to love. (131)

All his other women had now to be discarded and rejected in favour of this one. Up until then there had been many of them, and he had divided his heart between this one and the next without ever falling in love with any of them. But now he understood clearly that he had to arrange things in such a way that he could concentrate solely on serving one person — the one who seemed to him to be the gem of all jewels, whose intelligence, whose breeding, and whose beautiful, radiant face he could picture, every day and every night, constantly passing before his eyes. The one source of joy he could never tire of was thinking of her. So insistently did love batter and bruise the knight that he all too soon grew familiar with how much power it wielded. Never, he declared, in all his life had he seen any living creature as attractive as this particular lady, and he called on his own eyes to guarantee the truth of what he said. (151)

‘Ah’, he cried, ‘how I have been holding back my emotions and how unforthcoming I have been! God is now using this lady, I can see, to take revenge on behalf of all those who have seen their love for me go unrequited. How wrong I have been to spurn those who were the innocent victims of love! Love has now got me firmly in its grips to let me know just how powerful it is. No base wretch having his teeth pulled by a surgeon barber ever suffered such agony as I do now.’ (161)

This is what he thinks and how he talks to himself when he is alone. He would not have it otherwise, even if he has the choice, for no man alive has ever been treated so cruelly by love as he has. ‘Alas’, he says, ‘what will happen if she is not as keen to be my mistress as I am to be her lover? I do not know, except I cannot see how I could possibly carry on living for a single day more. Neither the pleasure of being a knight errant nor that of living at court could bring relief to the pain I would suffer. All I can do is follow the example of those knights who go to visit their lady where she lives, for this is how many men have found happiness and success in love. (175)

Would that my lady tie her two arms, like a rope, around my neck! All night long I dream that mine are embracing her, and just as tightly. I wake at what would be the climax of my pleasure when our arms untwine. I grope around my bed, searching out that splendid body that burns and sets me on fire. But alas! “You cannot have what you cannot find.” That is what has happened to me, and what happens to many a man many a time. All I can do now, my only option, is either go to her myself or send someone to beg for mercy on my behalf. May she, in God’s name, take pity on my suffering before I die, and in her infinite kindness save my sanity and my life! Should she let me die, she would lose one of her loyal vassals, and under these circumstances it would only be right for her to show some pity at the present moment and look kindly on me. (197)

I am convinced that it would be better for me to go and see her myself rather than send someone. As the proverb puts it, “a man is his own best friend”. Besides, no one would be keener to go than I am. People have always said that necessity is the mother of invention, and by the same token so are absence and lack as well. Seeing, then, that I have a proverb to back me up, all that remains for me to do now is go and tell her that she holds my heart captive as her willing prisoner. However much it may suffer, my heart will not

seek to escape until it can answer to the name of lover. Kindness, pity and generosity should surely move her to agree to that.’ (211)

The knight prepares to set out, taking no more than two companions with him. What more need I tell you? With six young servants in attendance, he happily rides off, turning over in his mind what his feelings are and what it is he is setting out to achieve. He keeps his thoughts to himself and, so as to prevent his companions from knowing where they are going and why, reveals nothing to them. He is, he says, simply going to have an exciting day out riding. (222)

He kept them guessing until they came within sight of the motte of the castle where the lady lived. ‘See what an attractive, well proportioned castle this is’, he exclaimed, turning to his men. He was not, of course, saying there was anything remarkable about the castle’s walls and ditches. What he wanted to know was whether he would be lucky enough to hear his men praise the outstanding qualities of the lady he was about to see. (233)

His men replied: ‘Shame on you! It was very wrong of you to praise this castle before even mentioning the beauty of the lady who is its mistress. It is common knowledge that, in the whole of the kingdom, there is no woman more beautiful or better endowed with courtly refinement than she is. Hold your tongue — they continued — for if she were to learn how offensive you have been to her, it would be better for you to be kidnapped by the pagan Turks and dragged off to Cairo.’ (243)

At this the knight smiled and replied: ‘Come now, my lords, gently does it! Do not be so hard on me! I haven’t murdered anyone, after all. There is only one castle I would love to get my hands on, and that is this one here. I would gladly spend five or six years of my life in Saladin’s dungeon provided that it was designated as mine alone, with me safely occupying it, just as it stands and together with everything there is within its walls.’ To which his men reply: ‘Then you really would be lord and master!’ They are failing, however, to understand the play on words he is making. Our good knight said what he did simply in order to see how his men would react. (259)

So next he suggested they might like to take a look inside. ‘What do you expect us to do?’ they asked. ‘No knight errant should ever come across a beautiful lady without stopping to pay her a visit.’ ‘As you wish,’ he replied. ‘I happen to be of the same opinion. It is only reasonable for us to stop, and this is what I propose we do.’ At this all wheel their horses round and head for the castle entrance, crying: ‘Come on, you knights. Next stop the ladies! It’s journey’s end; let the race begin!’ (271)

Off they go, riding at a brisk pace up to the castle, past the outer bailey protected by ditches and a palisade. The knight had flung back his cloak over his shoulder to reveal his finely embroidered tunic of dyed scarlet silk with its ermine and squirrel fur trim. His companions were all dressed in the same way, each one wearing a white pleated shirt with a cap garlanded with purple-blue flowers on his head and sporting red-gold decorated spurs. I cannot imagine how they could have been better dressed for a summer’s day. They did not slow down until they reached the mounting block in front of the great hall. There each of the knight’s squires dismounted to hold each of the riders’ stirrups, as was the proper procedure. Seeing them dismount in the courtyard, the castle’s steward came

running down from where he had been stationed to announce to his lady that she had a visitor. It was a man she felt she knew already, having heard so much about him from other people. She did not actually show any emotion on her face, but the news nevertheless came as a great surprise to her. (297)

This most beautiful of ladies had been sitting on a bright red cushion having her hair plaited, but now she quickly stood up. Her ladies-in-waiting threw a silk cloak around her shoulders, accentuating still further the outstanding beauty which nature had, by common consent, bestowed on her. Her intention was to go and greet her visitors, but before she could leave her chamber, the men, in their haste to catch a glimpse of her, had already come bursting in. She gave every sign of being pleased to see them, while they were overjoyed at what they imagined was the speed with which she had come to greet them. (313)

This outstandingly elegant lady was wearing a delicately woven white gown with a metre-long train that swept the rush-strewn floor behind her. 'My lord, you are most welcome, and your two companions likewise,' she said. (And a good day to her also, as she so clearly deserves!) The knight's men had certainly been right when they told him that she was not the sort of lady whom they could come across without stopping to pay a visit to. All three men stood there stunned by her beauty as they returned her greeting. (325)

With a smile she takes our knight by the hand and invites him to sit with her. On finding himself sitting by her side, he feels he has accomplished the first stage of his mission. His two companions know exactly how to behave: they sit there unobtrusively on a chest decorated with fastenings of copper in the company of the lady's two attendants. Our good lord does not give them a second thought as they make pleasant conversation with the girls and chat about one thing and another. He is concentrating on the business in hand. (337)

As for the high-born and well-bred lady, such were her intelligence and refined manners that she had no difficulty in finding an appropriate response to every subject the knight broached with her. And he could not help staring all the time at her face in contemplation of her beauty. His heart, which he had already surrendered to her, told him that his eyes had not deceived him: indeed everything they had promised now proved to be correct. Her face and all her features he finds amazingly attractive. (349)

'Fair lady, dearest and sweetest friend,' he says, 'my love for you is such that I must now forsake all other women and erase them from my mind. I have come to offer you everything I possess, all the power and all the influence I have. May joy be my reward, for there is nothing in this world — so help me God and may he on judgement day forgive me for saying so — that I love as much as I do you. The reason I have come here today is to make this declaration in the hope that you might look kindly on me, and take pity on me as I so sorely need. Anyone whose habit is to pray in church would do well to offer up a prayer for those of us whose only wish in life is to be true and faithful lovers.' (367)

'Upon my soul, my lord,' the lady cries, 'what exactly are you saying? I am absolutely amazed! What makes you talk like this?' 'My lady,' he replies, 'of all the women in the world, you, and you alone, I truly swear, have absolute power over me.' On hearing him say that he is hers and hers alone, the blood rushes to her face, and her cheeks flush with emotion. Her reply is perceptive and very much to the point: 'Indeed? I find it hard to believe, my lord, that a man as handsome as you cannot already have a mistress. No one would believe it possible. Your reputation would suffer, and your standing as a knight too — you, such a fine figure of a man, so good-looking, such strong arms and delicate hands,

and all the rest. You're exactly the sort of person who would be skilled in hoodwinking me with sweet talk and getting me to do things I certainly have no business doing.' (387)

The lady's rejoinder succeeded in stopping the knight in his tracks. In the words of the person who taught me this story, it quite put him off his stroke. She had reined him in, and he had willingly complied. Nothing indeed would have given him greater pleasure. Had anyone else rejected his advances, he would not have hesitated to retaliate. As it was, he was so much under the lady's control that he dared not contradict anything she said. (397)

He nevertheless continued: 'For pity's sake, my lady, show me some mercy! My genuine love for you is what compels me to reveal the suffering I am going through. What you have just said is at odds with the much more favourable welcome your eyes gave me just now when I arrived. At that moment, I can assure you, they showed all the kindness and courtliness I would have expected. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that, from the moment you were first capable of seeing with them, your eyes could never have encountered anyone who desired more sincerely than I do to become your vassal and your man. (411)

Sweet lady, show your magnanimity and, please, put me to the test. Take me on as one of your household knights, and, when you so choose, take me as your lover! Within a year and a half, you will have made such a man of me, as both a jousting knight and a courtier, and inspired such good qualities in me, that, so please God, no one will think of denying me the name of lover.' (421)

'Much good may these flights of fancy do you!' the lady replies. 'The look I gave you was dictated by nothing more than politeness and good manners. You interpreted it differently and, I am sorry to say, quite wrongly. If I were less refined a person than I am, I would have taken grave offense. But it quite often happens that, when a lady of breeding pays some knight or other a friendly compliment, her admirer imagines that he is advancing his own, very different interests. Your behaviour is a good example of this: you entirely misinterpreted what you saw. Your time would be better spent out in the fields trying to catch pigeons in a net rather than serving me at court! Even if you give yourself three whole years instead one and a half, nothing you could do, however hard you try, would earn you a warmer welcome than the one I gave you just now. It is not wise for anyone to brag about their chickens before they hatch.' (447)

The knight has no idea what to say or what to do next, or what might possibly happen to him now. 'At least, my lady, I cannot be worse off than I have been up until now,' he replies. 'I am quite convinced that you have within you both kindness and compassion, and no true lover ever failed to earn his lady's love in the end. For a long time now I have been master of my own fate and, as such, just as Tristan did, I have put to sea in a sail-less boat despite knowing that I might well drown. Here is the situation I now find myself in: unless I am shown some mercy before this evening is out, I fear it will be the last sunset I will ever see. My heart has put me in the extremely difficult position of taking up residence in you without your permission.' (465)

The lady gave a faint smile. 'I've never heard such nonsense!' she said. 'We had better stop there, as I see you are clearly not joking. I swear by St Nicholas, I thought you were making fun of me.' 'I can assure you, my lady,' the knight replied, 'that even if you were a poor, homeless wench, and not the beautiful and sweet-natured lady you are, I would never be capable of doing such a thing.' (475)

Whatever he might say, whatever promises he might make, nothing would be of any use in helping him find favour in her eyes. He could think of nothing else he could possibly do. At which point the blood came rushing to his face, tears welled up from deep within his heart, and soon streaks of white came flowing down his crimson cheeks. It is at this moment that it becomes all too clear to the lady that there is no mistaking her own feelings towards the knight: she acknowledges that she often finds herself thinking about him at other times than now, and in other places too. It would certainly be a source of great comfort to her now if she were to show him how much she shares his grief. She would never have thought him capable of the sort of distress she could see him suffering. (491)

'My lord,' she said, 'it is wrong of me to grant my love to you or to any other man. I have a good and worthy husband who treats me well and shows me great respect.' 'I am pleased to hear that,' the knight replies. 'He must be a very happy man. If, however, you were to be kind enough and generous enough to show me some compassion, no one among all those who write or read of love would think any the worse of you. Far from it, for if you were to grant me your love, it would be seen everywhere as a mark of esteem for you, an act of pious charity comparable to a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.' (505)

'Now that's even more outrageous,' the lady says. 'The time has come for you to leave. My feelings for you do not allow me in any way to agree to what you say. You are therefore wasting your breath, and I ask you to desist.' 'Ah, my lady,' the knight replies, 'there you strike me a mortal blow. Take care never to say such words again! Do what is right and what courtesy demands: admit me into your service by means of some precious stone, a ring, say, or a belt, or accept a token of mine instead. I swear to you that, so help me God, I will carry out any request a lady could ever make of a knight, even if it should be at the peril of my soul. Your sweet face and radiant features will be all the wages I require for my service to you. With whatever power and influence I have, I place myself entirely at your disposal.' (525)

In reply the lady says: 'I want no praise that I do not merit or have not earned. I am well aware that, by common consent, you are held in high regard, and have been for many years. It would be most dishonest of me to in any way encourage your love for me unless my feelings for you were sincere. Only a low-born person would act in that way. To be above reproach whenever possible is a sign of true courtly refinement.' (535)

'You must, my lady, speak in different terms,' says the knight, 'if you are to cure me of the illness I am suffering. To let me die unloved, to let your beautiful, innocent looking face be instrumental in my death, would be reprehensible. In one way or other, some solution must be found. Lady of beauty and refinement, source of all good, for God's sake see what you can do, I beg of you!' (545)

Such fine words, so polished and so pleasurable to hear, set her thinking about, perhaps, taking his protestations of love seriously. She is beginning to feel sorry for him. The sighs he heaved, the tears he shed were no pretence, she tells herself, but the effects of the overpowering love he feels for her. Should she decide not to accept his advances, she will never have, she thinks, a more refined lover than him. What she finds surprising, however, is that he has never spoken of the love he feels for her until now. Another thing that worries her is the danger of her acting irrationally and doing something she might later come to regret. (561)

The knight, meanwhile, is anxiously waiting to hear the result of her deliberations. Love, always so skilled at finding a way, so versatile and so ingenious, has set in train a way

for him to make a grand gesture of courtly elegance and refinement. With the noble lady sitting there deeply absorbed in her thoughts, he hastily pulls his ring off his finger and slips it on to hers. He then contrives, more adroitly still, to gently jog her from her thoughts before she has time to see the ring on her finger. To further distract her and when she least expects it, he immediately adds: 'With your permission, my lady, I take my leave of you. My person and my authority remain at your command.' (579)

He and his two companions immediately departed. No one knew why they acted as they did except the knight himself. Dejected and sadly sighing, he mounted his horse. The lady, who more than anyone else can make him happy again, says to herself: 'Can he really be leaving? What is the meaning of this? I've never heard of a knight acting in this way. I would have thought that being with me for a single day would have been for him like a whole year spent in my company. Fancy him abandoning me so soon! Alas! Just to think I could have believed everything he told me and let him do everything he wanted to! After the charade he put on to deceive me, no one anywhere should ever trust a man again. If I had been taken in by his bogus sighs and tears, I swear — may the Holy Spirit help me — he would not have ended up the loser. Never would there have been a finer, more successful piece of trickery. That's the least one can say.' (603)

At that very moment she glanced down at her hands and caught sight of the ring. All the blood drained from her face, right down to her little toe. She had never been so shocked or so stunned in all her life. Her cheeks, once so rosy, turned as pale as ash. 'God help me!' she cries, 'what is this? Unless I'm losing my mind, it's the ring he was wearing, the one I saw just a moment ago on his finger. I'm sure I did, mere minutes ago. Why has he put it on my finger? It's certainly not because he's my lover. It must, no doubt, be because he has hopes of being so. My God, what a past master of seduction this man is! I can't picture where he learned the art. God, how did he contrive to get it on my finger? Clearly I wasn't concentrating enough to notice what he was doing. Now he'll claim that he's my lover. That is what he'll say; I'm certain. But will it be true? Am I in love with him? Absolutely not. He would be wasting his time if he were to claim that I am. What I'll do is immediately send word and ask him to come and talk with me. We will discuss his insistence that I consider him a special friend and would-be lover, and I'll tell him to take his ring back. He will not, I believe, risk offending me and incurring my severe displeasure.' (635)

Without wasting a moment, she gave her ladies-in-waiting orders to fetch one of the young servants she employed to be continually on hand to deliver her messages. They so chivvied one of them that when he appeared before the lady, he was already on horseback and ready to leave. 'Friend, 'she said, 'off you go as fast as your horse will carry you and catch up with the knight! Tell him to stop, for love of me, turn round and come back here immediately. We need to talk over some business that concerns him.' 'My lady,' the messenger replied, 'I intend to carry out your request to the letter.' (647)

He dug in his spurs and galloped off in pursuit. Our knight, meanwhile, was suffering the torments of love on account of someone who was attempting, at that very moment, to get him to come back and talk to her. Within a couple of miles or so, the messenger caught up with the knight and had him turn back. What a lucky person he was, the knight thought, to find himself recalled to court like this. He did not ask the messenger why he had been asked to come back. The reason, of course, was not only the ring that the lady was now wearing on her finger, but also her impatience to see the knight again. (661)

As they rode back together, the knight and the messenger struck up a conversation. My God, how happy he would be to see her again, were it not for his strong

suspicion that she wanted to return his ring to him. He would rather, he said, become a monk at Cîteaux than take the ring back. 'I don't believe she would be so harsh on me for doing what I did.' The joy he felt at the prospect of seeing her again far outweighed all his apprehension, and the time it took to reach the castle passed very quickly. (675)

The lady, greatly perturbed and struggling against her feelings, came out of the great hall and down the staircase. She walked slowly, step by step and with great deliberation into the courtyard where it was her custom to take her leisure. Glancing down, she saw the gleaming ring which it was her intention to give back to the knight. 'What if he were to prove reluctant and refuse to take it?' she wondered. 'I certainly won't go as far as ruffle his curly hair! If I can, I'll take him over to this well here where we can sit and talk some more. If he does not agree to take the ring back without further fuss, I'll simply break off the conversation. But what then? (692)

I won't be silly enough to throw the ring down on the ground. Where else to throw it, then? Somewhere no one will ever see it again. That would be down the well itself, and that's no joke! That would put an end to any gossip about me and consign this whole business to the realm of fiction. Have I not stayed faithful to my husband and above reproach for so long? For me to let this knight, on our very first meeting, talk me round, by sighs and his refined courtly manners, to accepting him as my lover, I would need a great deal more proof of his merit before agreeing.' (705)

Unaware of any of this, the knight had by now come into the castle's living quarters and was able, much to his delight, to see the lady walking around the courtyard. He immediately came running up to greet her as a knight does when meeting the lady he loves. Neither his two companions nor any of her attendants were there to get in their way. 'May good fortune,' he says, 'this day follow the lady whose vassal I am and will always be!' He gives her ears no more of a battering than this for now; in the course of the day, she had already heard him speak similar words, and they had gone straight to her heart. 'My lord,' she replied, 'let us go over there to the well where we can sit and have a leisurely conversation.' (721)

Nothing can possibly go wrong, the knight says to himself, now that she has made me feel so welcome. He is firmly convinced that giving her his ring had earned him her love and her favours. He will still have a long way to go, however, before he can enjoy the fruits of his success. No sooner has he the time to sit down beside her than he is hearing something that is definitely not to his liking. (729)

'My lord,' the lady says, 'if you were to be so kind, pray tell me if this ring I have here belongs to you and why you gave it to me just now.' 'Dear lady,' he replies, 'the ring will still be yours when I take my leave of you. Believe me, I am not exaggerating when I say its value has increased by half as much again since it has been on your finger. Subject to your approval, my jousting rivals this summer will have an even higher opinion of me if they know you have taken me as your lover and I have enjoyed your love.' (743)

'Good heavens!' the lady replies. 'That is entirely out the question. Quite the contrary, in fact. I would sooner never again emerge from this house alive, so help me God, than let it be known, under any circumstances, that you have been my lover. You are completely on the wrong track, and have veered badly off course. Here! I want you to take this ring back. I have absolutely no interest in it. Don't you dare think of me as your lover just because it's been in my possession!' (755)

The knight, who but a moment ago thought that he had won the prize, is now plunged into unhappiness and despair. 'If what I hear is true,' he says, 'my prestige is much diminished. Never before have I seen my joy so quickly turn to sorrow.' To this the lady replies: 'How, my lord, could I have brought shame on you or given you offense? I have no particular family ties with you and owe no debt of friendship. My wanting to give you your ring back is no insult to you, and you have no option but to take it. I have no right to keep it, being unwilling to take you as a lover, something that, in any event, would be morally wrong of me.' (771)

'God!' the knight replies, 'plunging a knife straight into my loins would be less painful than the words you have just uttered. It is wrong for anyone to destroy or ruin someone under their power. The strength of the passion I feel for you relentlessly assaults me and causes me agony, and to force me to take my ring back is something that no woman in the whole world should seek to do. Never, I swear, even at the risk of God excluding me from Heaven, will I take the ring back. No, you will keep it, and along with it I shall leave my heart in your service, for there is nothing that can better serve your needs than my heart and the ring working in concert.' (788)

'Say no more,' is her reply, 'otherwise you will be excluded from my company and lose my trust if, contrary to my wishes, you deliberately incur my displeasure. The right thing to do is take the ring back.' 'No, it isn't!' 'Yes, it is! No more quibbling! You will be abusing your position as lord and master if you persist and force me to keep it even though I do not want to. Here, take it!' 'I will never touch it again.' 'Oh yes you will!' 'Oh no I won't!' 'Do you really want to force it on me?' 'No. Indeed not, my love. I'm fully aware I don't have any such right, and that is something I very much regret, so help me God. But I firmly believe that I would be spared any disgrace or suffering if you were to give me some glimmer of hope to console me.' (809)

'You might just as well go knocking your head against this stone surround as hope to be successful there. My advice is that you simply take the ring back.' 'It seems to me,' he replies, 'that you are encouraging me to keep repeating myself like Bernard [in the *Roman de Renart*]. But I would rather have a noose placed around my neck and be hanged than take the ring back. There's no point in my keep repeating the same thing, because there is absolutely no question of me taking it back.' (819)

The lady replies: 'My lord, since nothing I say can convince you to take it, I can only conclude that you are acting out of stubbornness. So I am now beseeching you by all the faith you owe me, begging and entreating you, by as much as you value your love for me, to take the ring back.' (827)

So now, by the grace of God, there are no two ways about it: either he has to take it back, or she will consider him to be dishonest and deceitful. 'God!' he thinks, 'which of these alternatives is the least harmful for me? I can clearly see that if I leave the ring with her, she will say that I do not love her. To squeeze the loaf so hard as to make the soft part of the bread come out of the crust would be to use excessive force. Swearing never to take the ring back has landed me in such a tight corner that leaving it with her is of no advantage to me. It would, on the other hand, be more profitable, I think, and redound to my honour were I to take it back. Otherwise I would be showing great disrespect to my noble and revered lady after she had beseeched me by my love for her and all the faith I owe her. Even when I have put the ring back on my own finger, it will remain hers, irrespective of where it is. If I do what she asks of me, it can only be to my honour. Someone who fails to do everything in his power to comply with his lady's wishes is not a

true lover, that is what I firmly believe. I must therefore behave in such a way as to follow her orders to the letter. There is no choice: what she wants is all that counts.’ (857)

Taking care to avoid any informality, the knight made the following declaration: ‘Madam, I will take back the ring on one condition, namely that, after carrying out your instructions, I do with it as I please, in view of its having adorned a finger as beautiful, in my eyes, as yours.’ ‘In that case, I hereby return your ring on the understanding that you may do with it what you will.’ Our valiant knight’s brain had not addled in any way or lost its edge, and his heart still burned with passion. So he took back the ring with all due deliberation, gazing on it with the tenderest of thoughts. As he took it, he said: ‘I thank you from the bottom of my heart! Thanks to being on a finger as beautiful as yours, the gold shines every bit as brightly as before.’ (873)

The lady smiled, thinking he would slip it back on to his finger. He did, however, something far more subtle, and this was soon to bring him even greater joy. He bent over the well which was no more than a few feet deep, so that he had no difficulty in seeing, on the surface of the clear and shimmering water, the reflection of the one woman he loved more than anything else in the whole world. ‘Rest assured,’ says the knight, ‘once and for all, that I will never ever wear this ring again. It will go to my favourite, dearest mistress, the person I love most after you.’ ‘Good God!’ she cries, ‘we two are the only people here. How can you have come up with her so quickly?’ ‘I swear to God, you will see her this very minute, this wonderful, noble lady who will have the ring.’ ‘Where is she, then?’ ‘Here she is, in God’s name, look! Your reflection here in the well, just waiting to receive it.’ He takes the ring and holds it out to her. ‘Here,’ he says, ‘my own sweet love. My lady wants nothing to do with it, so you can take it without further ado.’ There is a gentle ripple on the water as he drops the ring in. The reflection quivers, breaks up and dissolves. (900)

‘Look, madam, she has taken it! My reputation as a knight is much enhanced by her having taken what belongs to you. Would that there were some opening or a door down there! She could have come up here, and I could thank her for the honour she has done me.’ Oh God! How inspired it was of him to come up with a gesture of such refinement! Of everything he contrived to do to advance his cause, nothing gave the lady such pleasure as this. Her eyes lit up, gleamed and turned to gaze on his. A generous reward awaits a man clever enough to make such an elegant gesture just when it is needed. (915)

‘How far this man was from my love just a short time ago, and now how close he is! Never since Adam tasted the apple has any man ever made such an exquisite courtly gesture. I cannot imagine how he thought of it. I cannot, I should not, withhold the gift of my love from someone who throws his ring at my reflection in the well to show how much he loves me. I cannot understand why I am keeping him waiting. Never did any man make so overwhelming and so delicate a conquest in love by use of a ring. And never did someone like that more richly deserve to have a mistress.’ (929)

What she said next could not possibly have caused him grief: ‘My sweet, fair friend, all your kind words, all the proofs of love that you have given me, the generous gift with which you honoured my reflection — all this has brought our two hearts into unison. Now take this my ring and place it on your finger; it is a token that I am yours. I venture to think you will not value it any less than your own, less worthy though it is.’ ‘I could not be happier or more honoured,’ the knight replied, ‘if I were the emperor himself.’ (941)

There and then, by the well, both took their pleasure as far as it was seemly. The sweet kisses they exchanged set their hearts racing, and their eyes glinted with the joy to

come. As for their hands, knight and lady each played such lovers' sport as lies within the rules of taste. The rest they would reserve for later. (951)

The time has come for Jean Renart to dismiss this couple from his mind and let them get on doing whatever they will. He is free now to direct his attention elsewhere, if he has other things to do. Now that love and quick thinking have made their hearts as one, I have no doubt that the lady and the knight will manage on their own to finish off the game that they began. But enough of this for now!

Here ends *The Phantom Ring*. Let those of you who can count the cost continue recounting this tale ! (962)

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