

# WOULD I LIE TO YOU?

## A MISTAKE AND A FAKE MISTAKE IN WOLFRAM'S WILLEHALM

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**Resumo:** Este artigo analisa a forma como o poeta alemão medieval Wolfram von Eschenbach reage a um erro na matéria da fonte francesa do seu poema *Willehalm*. Wolfram nota um erro flagrante na canção de gesta *La Bataille d'Aliscans* e faz uma observação: no entanto, ao fazê-lo, ele criou o seu próprio erro, já que ele deliberadamente cita mal o nome do poeta francês da fonte, como *Chrétien de Troyes*. Com toda a probabilidade, Wolfram fez essa citação errada com o objetivo de tecer considerações sobre a natureza da ficção narrativa.

**Palavras-chave:** Wolfram von Eschenbach; *Willehalm*; *La Bataille d'Aliscans*; Erro.

**Abstract:** This article analyses the way in which the medieval German poet Wolfram von Eschenbach reacts to an error in the Old French source material of his *Willehalm*. Wolfram notices a flagrant mistake in the *chanson de geste* *La Bataille d'Aliscans* and remarks on it: however, in doing so he creates his own error since he deliberately misnames the French poet of the source as *Chrétien de Troyes*. Wolfram has, in all probability, done this with a view to making an observation on the nature of narrative fiction.

**Keywords:** Wolfram von Eschenbach; *Willehalm*; *La Bataille d'Aliscans*; Error.

Daniel Defoe's early 18th century novel, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, tells the story of the sole survivor of a shipwreck who has been stranded on a remote Caribbean island. The day after the catastrophe, the protagonist — Robinson Crusoe — attempted to swim to the remains of the wreckage which was lying in the sea just off the coast, in the hope of saving some essentials. The first-person narrator explains: «I resolved, if possible, to get to the ship; so I pulled off my clothes, for the weather was hot to extremity, and took the water»<sup>1</sup>. Crusoe swam — naked — to the ship and managed (not without some difficulty) to climb aboard the wreckage. Since he was very hungry, he immediately looked for food. He soon found some and was happy as it had not been ruined by the seawater: «I found that all the ship's provisions were dry and untouched by the water; and being very well disposed to eat, I went to the bread-room and filled my pockets with biscuits»<sup>2</sup>. The narrator does not, however, explain how the unclothed Robinson Crusoe could have filled the pockets of his non-existent trousers...

For Defoe's contemporary readers, it was clear that a mistake had been made by the author: in fact, this error became known as a «famous blunder»<sup>3</sup>. It is well known that similar mistakes occur in many works of literature: the literary historian John Sutherland has, in several studies, pointed to errors and contradictions which he has found in numerous texts by well-known nineteenth-century British writers<sup>4</sup>. With few exceptions, these short-

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<sup>1</sup> DEFOE, 1996: 35.

<sup>2</sup> DEFOE, 1996: 35.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. LOVEMAN, 2008: 141.

<sup>4</sup> SUTHERLAND, 1996.

comings do not bother the readers, because they are usually forgiving of such minor blemishes, unless, of course, they are particularly pedantic.

Five hundred years before Daniel Defoe, the German courtly poet Wolfram von Eschenbach was confronted with a similar mistake in a (French) narrative poem he was translating into German. While adapting this work for his German audience, Wolfram noted an error in the description of the protagonist's clothes, and he took this «weakness» of the source as a reason to complain about the erroneous nature of the Old French narrative. I will be using Wolfram's criticism here as the basis for my analysis of how, in this instance, a medieval poet deals with a mistake he has perceived in his source material.

In an insightful study on the role played by such «errors» and «contradictions» in the Anglo-Norman, Old French and Occitan genres of lyric love poetry, hagiography and romance, the British Romanist Sarah Kay has demonstrated the extent to which medieval texts seem to promote these «inconsistencies»: Kay argues that these mistakes, which create contradictions, were vital to the development of medieval courtly literature. Through the interaction and mutual contamination of divergent literary genres, these «errors» created a productive potential which was essential for the formation of courtly literature<sup>5</sup>. It should be remembered that this is particularly the case in the literary traditions of the medieval period given the importance played, in this context, by literary cycles, i.e. groups of stories loosely focused on (quasi-) historical or mythical figures. Once an «error» had been introduced at a given stage in the trans-cultural expansion of a literary cycle (thus creating a contradiction), this would — in turn — often lead to the dynamic development of the literary matter.

In order to be able to demonstrate the extent to which such «errors» were to play a vital role in the development of courtly texts, I would like to analyse just one example of the way in which the German courtly poet Wolfram von Eschenbach dealt with a mistake he had noted in the source material of his narrative poem *Willehalm*: how he corrected the «error» and how, in correcting it, he himself made a further mistake, thus creating another contradiction! Thus, he seems to have been stimulated by the error of the source in order to generate a further error...

Before discussing this mistake, I would like to explain briefly Wolfram von Eschenbach's significance in the context of medieval German literature: Wolfram is arguably the most important poet of the German Middle Ages. He is the author of significant lyric love poems and of three major works of narrative poetry: the 25,000-line Arthurian and Grail romance *Parzival* (which is part of the Arthurian cycle, an adaptation of Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*), the fragmentary *Titarel*, which is a spin-off of *Parzival* and the 14,000-line, fragmentary *Willehalm* epos. The latter is part of the wider — European — literary cycle which described the adventures of the epic William of Orange (Guillaume d'Orange): it is a courtly *opus mixtum*, a combination of different genres, part heroic *chanson de geste* (which is the genre of the source material), part courtly romance (of which Wolfram was the recognized master in Germany) and part hagiography (the poem also deals with the life of the future Saint Guillaume).

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. KAY, 2001: 305-9.

As I have noted above, in my discussion I will be concentrating on an episode in Wolfram's enigmatic *Willehalm*. This poem, which is based on one of the central works of the Old French Monglane Cycle — *La Bataille d'Aliscans*, tells the story of the protagonist's struggle against the Saracens in the South of France at the time of the *reconquista*: Willehalm abducts a Saracen queen, the beautiful Arabel; she falls in love with him, deserts her heathen husband Tybalt and converts to Christianity, taking the name of Gyburg: Tybalt and Arabel's father, the heathen overlord, Terramer, wish to take revenge and they gather together a massive Saracen army and invade the South of France: two violent battles ensue, the first of which ends in a devastating Christian defeat, the second in a resounding Christian victory. After this victory, the action is broken off with an unusual episode, since — at the end of the fragment — Willehalm commissions the heathen King Matribleiz to leave the South of France, taking the Saracen dead with him — and to bury them in Arabia, according to the heathen rite; he also commands Matribleiz to deliver a message of peace to the leader of the heathens, Terramer. The events of the final scene of the poem demonstrate the extent to which Wolfram had distanced himself from his source material: such an episode would be unthinkable in the *Bataille d'Aliscans*, as the Old French *chanson de geste* follows a rather «primitive» crusade ideology, according to which killing heathens is not considered to be murder. In the source material, the defeated heathens are either baptized — or (as is most often the case) killed and then their bodies are dismembered<sup>6</sup>. There is no mention of an honourable funeral for the dead of other faiths in the *Bataille d'Aliscans*...

As we can see, Wolfram distanced himself from his *chanson de geste* source material when the action of the *Bataille d'Aliscans* contradicted his aesthetic-literary or ethical-religious viewpoints. And those narrative elements which he clearly perceives as being erroneous seem to provoke the German poet, leading the narrator to make explicit comments about these «errors»: I would now like to turn my attention to the instance mentioned above, when Wolfram criticises his source's mistake.

In Wolfram's poem (as in the source material), after losing the first battle, the protagonist must make his way to the court of the French King Louis, in Laon, in order to request help for his continued struggle against the Saracen enemy. On that journey from his castle in Orange in the South of France to the court at Laon in the North, the Christian leader spends a night in a monastery. And it is here that Wolfram detects the error in *Bataille d'Aliscans*. During the monastery scene, Wolfram notes how the protagonist's clothing is incorrectly described in the French text. In his source material, the narrator explains what sort of coat the Christian leader, Guillelme, was wearing on his way to the French court: *Si a vestu un malvés cinglaton / E par desore un armi[n] piliçon*<sup>7</sup> [He had put on a shabby coat and over that a stoat-fur]. However, prior to this, the French poem had stated that the Christian leader was very richly — and exotically — dressed, since, at the end of the first battle (that is, before starting his journey to Laon), he had killed a Persian king (Ariofle) and had taken the latter's magnificent armour and had put it on<sup>8</sup>: thus, as Wolfram noted, it was impossi-

<sup>6</sup> HOLTUS, 1985: v. 6390.

<sup>7</sup> HOLTUS, 1985: v. 2566-7.

<sup>8</sup> HOLTUS, 1985: v. 1529.

ble for the Christian leader to be wearing a shabby coat (much in the same way that it would have been impossible for Robinson Crusoe to put bread into the pockets of his non-existent trousers). Wolfram notices this error in the Old French poem and his narrator points it out. It is probable that he did this since it was important for Wolfram to draw attention to Willehalm's exotic «Persian» appearance at the French court, and he thus felt obliged to comment on this «mistake» in the original. He does this, however, in a very strange way:

*Kristjâns einen alten timît  
im hât ze Munlêûn an geleget:  
dâ mit er sîne tumpheit reget,  
swer sprichet sô nâch wâne.  
er nam dem Persâne,  
Arofel, der vor im lac tôt,  
daz vriundîn vriunde nie gebôt  
sô spaeher zimierde vlîz,  
wan die der kûnec Feirefiz  
von Sekundillen durh minne enpfie:  
diu kost vür alle koste gie<sup>9</sup>.*

[Kristjans dressed him in old dimity cloth at Laon, but whoever speaks thus as in a fable is only showing his ignorance: Willehalm had taken from Arofel, the Persian, (who had lain dead before him) a more expensively and skilfully made outfit than had ever been offered by a lady to her knight (except for the one that King Feirefiz received from Secundille. That exceeded all others in sumptuousness)].

These verses show that Wolfram had noticed that there was an error in the French original: this provided the German poet with an opportunity to criticize his source. This criticism is directed towards the *tumpheit* (i.e. the lack of knowledge or the ignorance) of the *Bataille d'Aliscans* poet, because he is telling his story *nâch wâne*, i.e. in the style of a fable or perhaps in a nonsensical way. This objection to the inaccuracy of the source is then commented on by the narrator through reference to the portrayal of King Feirafiz in the *Parzival* romance (as we recall, King Feirefiz was Parzival's half brother and Wolfram probably mentioned him here since he was claiming that there were no such erroneous descriptions in his Arthurian and Grail romance).

However, the way in which this criticism is expressed here is really strange, because the narrator calls the poet of the *Bataille d'Aliscans* Kristjâns: Kristjâns is doubtless meant to be Chrétien de Troyes — the author of *Perceval* — Wolfram's source text for his *Parzival*; the great French poet of the Arthurian romance. But Chrétien never composed any *chansons de geste* and he was certainly not the author of the *Willehalm* source text. The fact that the narrator states that Kristjâns is the poet who had composed the *Bataille d'Aliscans* is, of course, a mistake, and without any shadow of a doubt it represented a deliberate mistake by Wolfram since he knew full well exactly which works Chrétien had composed — and he

<sup>9</sup> *Willehalm*, 125, 20-30.

also knew that the *Bataille d'Aliscans* was not among these works. In other words, this is a hoax, Wolfram's fake lie. The German poet seems to be playing some sort of game here, lying about the poet of his source. This lie reminds us of the fictional source Wolfram had invented when he was working on his *Parzival* romance: in the Arthurian and Grail romance, he had told the audience that he had been provided with the history of the Grail by a Provence poet called Kyot<sup>10</sup>. We know that Kyot was a fake source and it is clear that Wolfram — in that instance — had needed to lie about his source in *Parzival* as he required corroboration for the fiction of the Grail history which he had invented himself. That may have been the case in *Parzival*, but it does not help us to explain why Wolfram is inventing a fake source in his *Willehalm*. And it is not just any fake source, since the name he is using for the source has not been invented by him, but it is that of a real person, the famous poet Chrétien de Troyes.

I suspect that in this strange comment by the narrator here we can identify a narrative strategy used, to an extent, elsewhere by Wolfram when he was adapting the *chanson de geste* in order to deal with the errors, contradictory descriptions or inconsistent actions he has come across in his source material<sup>11</sup>. Wolfram's narrator responds to the *tumpheit* (ignorance) of the original with his own fake ignorance, since he «mistakenly» calls the poet of the source Kristjans. In other words, he reacts to an error in the *chanson* with an error he has made up himself. By exaggerating his own fake «mistake», he is emphasizing the mistake of the source. At the same time, Wolfram is shifting this error from the level of the action to the level of the narrator — and thus this becomes a problem of fictionality (since it is about a nonsensical «fable»).

This commentary on the monastery episode in Wolfram's *Willehalm* seems to represent a hyperbolic re-functionalization of a mistake which had been noted in the source material. By creating a fake error here, this strategy allows Wolfram to comment on and explicitly to criticize the representation in the *chanson de geste* on a different reflective level. In other words, to emphasize that this reference in the source material is wrong, and to identify the *Willehalm* narrator as an instance that corrects this mistake, but then goes on to make its own false statement.

In conclusion: by using as a starting point the considerations by the British Romanist Sarah Kay, I hope to have demonstrated through this example from Wolfram's *Willehalm*, that the German poet has reacted to an «error» in the source material by criticising what he considers to be a false narration; in so doing, the narrator (who presents himself as the corrective authority) makes his own fake mistake by presenting his audience with a fact which is objectively false. Thus, Wolfram shifts the focus from the text internal to the text external level and thereby opens up a space for reflection on illogical or false narration, on narratological problems, on literary fiction and on nonsensical «fable». In allowing the narrator purposefully to lie his audience (since he knows full well that Chrétien is not the author of his source material), Wolfram produces an error, thereby creating a *Leerstelle* (an empty space) on the question of fictionality — a *Leerstelle* which his audience must fill...

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Parzival*, 416, 20-30; 453, 1-455, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. BUMKE, 2004: 292; HEINZLE, 1991: 927-8; KIENING, 1989: 74 and KNAPP, 2011: 680.

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