

Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Sire de Malétoit's Door" and Its Intertexts

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Abstract

"The Sire de Malétoit's Door" is an early story by Robert Louis Stevenson that has been neglected by literary critics. The present essay makes a case for this tale and its complexity by interpreting it as a rewriting of two other texts. The first is Stevenson's own short story "A Lodging for the Night." What Stevenson takes from this story is the situation of a young man exposed to life-threatening danger in the dark streets of a nocturnal town, and a debate between this young man and an old man in whose house he seeks shelter. There is, however, a significant change. In "A Lodging for the Night," the young man voices cynical views, while the old man upholds honour and morality; in "The Sire de Malétoit's Door," these roles are reversed. The second source is Théodore de Banville's history play *Gringoire*. What Stevenson takes from this play is the situation of a young man and a young woman unknown to each other who are left alone for a very short time to make up their minds to marry; if they fail to do so, the man will be hanged. Here, too, Stevenson changes his source, rendering the characters and the motives of the young people, who are entirely selfless and noble in *Gringoire*, more questionable. Compared with "A Lodging for the Night," "The Sire de Malétoit's Door" is idealistic; compared with *Gringoire*, it is sceptical.

(1) Introduction

Compared with other short stories and novellas by Robert Louis Stevenson, “The Sire de Malétoit’s Door” has found little recognition. This is already evident in its initial reviews. The story was published in *New Arabian Nights* in 1882 after having previously appeared in the magazine *Temple Bar* in 1878. *New Arabian Nights* is a two-volume collection; the first volume features seven connected crime narratives centred around the royal detective Prince Florizel of Bohemia, while the second contains four unrelated tales including “The Sire de Malétoit’s Door.” The lion’s share of the reviewers’ attention was given to the Prince-Florizel stories in the first volume; among the four tales in the second volume, the other three attracted either praise or blame, while “The Sire de Malétoit’s Door” elicited only lukewarm responses. George Saintsbury describes it as “another mediaeval French story with pretty passages and a pleasant ending” in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on 4 August 1882; H. C. Bunner similarly refers to “another mediaeval French theme [...] in the pure romantic style” in the *Century Magazine* in February 1883. Two anonymous reviewers find it “romantic and pleasing as need be” (*The Overland Mail*, 3 November 1882) and “sufficiently remarkable” (*Bradford Observer*, 14 March 1883).¹

This pattern of neglect has continued in later criticism. In studies of Stevenson’s fiction, the story is mentioned not at all or merely in passing, e.g. by Edwin Eigner who includes the eponymous Sire de Malétoit in a list of evil fathers-in-law or guardians-in-law (213). Critics who say more about the story often dismiss it. T. C. Livingstone thinks that “‘The Sire de Malétoit’s Door’ is perhaps the least successful [of the four stories in the second volume of *New Arabian Nights*], a costume piece in which the power of Stevenson’s style is hampered by the nudgings of historicity” (16). Frank McLynn writes that, “[a]s an allegory of human existence, ‘The Sire of Malétoit’s Door’ [sic] is a feeble follow-up to ‘Will’ [‘Will o’ the Mill’] and although there are some fine cameos and intriguing themes—the ‘safeconduct’ which provides no safety against the watch, the choice between marriage or death—it

fails to convince in its wider ambitions" (139-40)—what these "wider ambitions" are, McLynn's readers are left to guess. The most disparaging comment comes from Frank Swinnerton, made in his generally hostile study of Stevenson. He considers "The Sire de Malétoit's Door" a "sickly and cloying tale" for which he has the "greatest distaste" (122-23).

Only two academic articles have, to the best of my knowledge, been published on "The Sire de Malétoit's Door," both very short. Eric LaGuardia gives a Freudian reading, treating the story as a sexual fantasy of the protagonist in which his desire is confronted with the repressive energies embodied in the father figure of the Sire de Malétoit. The problem with this highly schematic reading is that, unpleasant as he may be, the Sire de Malétoit does not stand in the way of the protagonist but wants him to marry the woman he desires. It is the young man who objects to the union, at least initially. Moreover, there is no need to hunt for sexual symbolism in the story as LaGuardia does; by Victorian standards, the eroticism is quite overt, witness the repeated references to Blanche's "fresh," "plump" and "supple" body (252, 259, 264).²

The second academic article is by Maria Gottwald, who argues that the source of the story is a historical event:

Stevenson, an ardent Scottish patriot, was likely to have been familiar with a Border incident which happened in the reign of James VI, as recorded by Sir Walter Scott's *History of Scotland*, or with its metrical version by James Hogg. In Chapter 3 of the *History of Scotland* there is a story of a young Border raider who, when defeated by the lord he had wronged, was given the choice of either being punished by hanging or marrying the lord's unattractive youngest daughter. The raider was said to be resigned to the gallows yet finally he prevailed upon to marry the ugly girl. (65)

Gottwald's suggestion seems plausible enough, but, to my mind, there is a much more likely source: the history play *Gringoire* (1866) by Théodore de Banville, whom Stevenson had been studying in the mid-seventies.³ Stevenson's story resembles de Banville's play not only in the choice between marriage and the noose but also in many other respects,

as I will show below. Another intertext that should be taken into consideration is Stevenson's own story "A Lodging for the Night." In the present essay, I will analyse "The Sire de Malétroit's Door" as a rewriting of these two texts that echoes them in its setting and plot but introduces considerable changes in psychology and attitude. Through this comparative analysis, I hope to make a case for the merits of the story. It would appear that the critics have dismissed it as a pleasing (or cloying) costume piece precisely because they have seen it as a companion piece to "A Lodging for the Night," which preceded it in the *New Arabian Nights*. After this grim narrative with its cynical protagonist, "The Sire de Malétroit's Door" strikes a more upbeat and romantic note. However, compared with *Gringoire*, its principal source, "The Sire de Malétroit's Door" appears in a different light, as a story that persistently questions the noble motives and chivalrous values of its principal characters. It thus has greater depth and complexity than it has been given credit for.

To begin with a brief introduction to "The Sire de Malétroit's Door," it is set in Château-Landon, a French town south of Paris. The year is 1429, which places the story in the final decades of the Hundred Years' War when an alliance formed by the English King and the Duke of Burgundy was opposed to the French Dauphin, the future Charles VII, and his supporters. The protagonist is Denis de Beaulieu, a twenty-one-year-old nobleman who belongs to the party of the Dauphin and is travelling in enemy territory with a safe-conduct. After visiting a friend, he wants to return to his inn but loses his way in the dark alleys of the nocturnal town. By chance, he ends up in the house of the Sire de Malétroit, an old man who welcomes the intruder as if he had been waiting for him, and presents him to his niece, Blanche de Malétroit, whom he wants Denis to marry. He then leaves Denis alone with Blanche, who tells him her story: As an orphan and ward of her uncle, she has led a lonely and unhappy life. A few months earlier, a young captain began to stand near her in church. He passed letters to her and made an assignation for the present night, asking her to leave the door open for him. However, this letter was intercepted by her uncle, who

believes Denis to be the suitor. Denis informs the Sire de Malétroit that he has to refuse the offer of marriage because he cannot force himself on the young lady against her wishes. The old man, however, insists on the marriage for the sake of the family's reputation and tells Denis that he will be hanged if he persists in his refusal. He then gives the young people until daybreak to make up their minds. In the two hours left to them, Blanche and Denis develop and confess their love for each other so that the marriage can take place.

(2) "The Sire de Malétroit's Door" and "A Lodging for the Night"

In the early summer of 1877, Stevenson wrote an essay titled "François Villon, Student, Poet, and Housebreaker," in which he takes an extremely critical view of Villon. He acknowledges his towering genius as a poet but condemns him on ethical grounds: "Certainly the sorriest figure on the rolls of fame" (27: 145), is the final verdict. Writing to his friend Sidney Colvin about the completion of the essay, Stevenson adds: "And look here, while I was full of Villon, I wrote a little story, ten or twelve pages, about him" (*Letters* 2: 211).⁴ This "little story" is "A Lodging for the Night," which is set in Paris in 1456, when the poet was in his mid-twenties. The story begins with a memorable description of a November night, with a heavy snowfall descending on the nocturnal city. Villon is drinking with some companions when the convivial gathering is abruptly ended by a murder. Villon leaves in haste, afraid that his footprints in the freshly fallen snow will connect him to the crime. He knocks on several doors to find shelter but is turned away because he has made enemies of his friends and relatives. Eventually, he is admitted to a stranger's house, where he has seen a light. He is offered a meal by his host, an old nobleman who introduces himself as "Enguerrand de la Feuillée, seigneur de Brisetout, bailly du Patatrac" and tells Villon that he used to be a soldier (1: 234). The talk between the two turns into a debate in which the host and his guest state their

principles and question those of the interlocutor. Disgusted with Villon's views, the host leads the poet to the door, and Villon leaves the house at daybreak.

"The Sire de Malétoit's Door" was written very soon after "A Lodging for the Night"⁵ and resembles it in setting and plot. Both are set in fifteenth-century France, against the background of the Hundred Years' War (which was over by 1456 but is still present in "A Lodging for the Night" in the references to the host's earlier life as a soldier and in the final debate, where the ethics of war are discussed). In both stories, a young man tries to find "a lodging for the night" in the darkness of a nocturnal town; he is in a situation of life-threatening danger and avoids the encounter with a nightwatch (1: 226; 245); eventually he seeks refuge in a stranger's house, where he negotiates or debates with an old man; in their exchange, one man endorses conventional ideas of honour and morality, while the other takes a sceptical or cynical attitude. This is, however, where the parallels end. In "A Lodging for the Night," the young man is the cynic and the old man the orthodox moralist, while in "The Sire de Malétoit's Door" the roles are reversed: the old man plays the part of the cynic, the young man upholds the codes of honour and chivalry.⁶

This change in the constellation of characters is evident from the start; it shows in the introductory descriptions of Villon and the Sire de Malétoit:

The poet was a rag of a man, dark, little, and lean, with hollow cheeks and thin black locks. He carried his four-and-twenty years with feverish animation. Greed had made folds about his eyes, evil smiles had puckered his mouth. The wolf and pig struggled together in his face. It was an eloquent, sharp, ugly, earthly countenance. (1: 221)

On a high chair beside the chimney, and directly facing Denis as he entered, sat a little old gentleman in a fur tippet. [...] His countenance had a strongly masculine cast; not properly human, but such as we see in the bull, the goat, or the domestic boar; something equivocal and wheedling, something greedy, brutal, and dangerous. The upper lip was inordinately full, as though swollen by a blow or a toothache; and the smile, the peaked eyebrows, and the small, strong eyes were quaintly and almost comically evil in expression. (248)

Like Villon, the Sire de Malétroit is small; his evil and greedy nature is expressed in his facial features, which are described with animal similes and metaphors, the pig or boar being present in both countenances. In his introductory descriptions of the two men, Stevenson also focuses on their hands. These are not similar—Villon's fingers appear "knotted like a cord" (1: 221), while the Sire de Malétroit's are beautiful and feminine (249)—but the mere focus on the hand is not a good sign in Stevenson; witness his descriptions of the hands of Edward Hyde (5: 64), Dr Jekyll's destructive double, or of Bernard Huddlestone, the villain in the "Pavilion on the Links" (1: 196). By contrast, the introductory description of Denis does not dwell on his appearance, perhaps because the story is told, for the most part, from his point of view. De Brisetout is described from the outside, but unlike Villon and the Sire de Malétroit, he is tall and has a "fine face" (1: 232), described in some detail and with a notable absence of animal metaphors.

When his host asks him questions about himself, Villon mentions that the only money in his possession is a small coin that he took from a prostitute whom he found dead in a porch. De Brisetout suggests that this is "a kind of theft" (1: 235), turning their talk into a debate. Their first disagreement is about their respective occupations. De Brisetout takes pride in having been a soldier. In his view, "the wars are the field of honour," where a man "fights in the name of his lord the king, his Lord God, and all their lordships the holy saints and angels" (1:235). Villon replies that soldiers are no better than thieves—in fact, they are worse because of the cruelty with which they requisition food and money from civilians:

"I steal a couple of mutton chops, without so much as disturbing people's sleep; the farmer grumbles a bit, but sups none the less wholesomely on what remains. You come up blowing gloriously on a trumpet, take away the whole sheep, and beat the farmer pitifully into the bargain. [...] I am a rogue and a dog, and hanging's too good for me—with all my heart; but just you ask the farmer which of us he prefers, just find out which of us he lies awake to curse on cold nights." (1: 236)

Villon then justifies his occupation with an argument that is more reminiscent of the nineteenth-century debates about naturalism and determinism than late-medieval thought. He argues that he is a product of his “circumstances” (1: 237), just like his host:

“But if I had been born lord of Brisetout, and you had been the poor scholar Frances, would the difference have been any the less? Should not I have been warming my knees at this charcoal pan, and would not you have been groping for farthings in the snow? Should not I have been the soldier, and you the thief?” (1: 236)

De Brisetout is offended by the idea that he might have become a thief. When Villon claims that he would change if his circumstances changed, he retorts that true change begins in the “heart” (1: 237). In other words, a man’s life is determined not by his circumstances but by his own will. The final, most fundamental disagreement between the two men concerns the ultimate values or motives that guide us in our lives. Villon argues that he steals because he needs food, drink, and women, which elicits the following reply from his host:

“You speak of food and wine, and I know very well that hunger is a difficult trial to endure; but you do not speak of other wants; you say nothing of honour, of faith to God and other men, of courtesy, of love without reproach. [...] You are attending to the little wants, and you have totally forgotten the great and only real ones, like a man who should be doctoring a toothache on the Judgment Day. For such things as honour and love and faith are not only nobler than food and drink, but indeed I think that we desire them more, and suffer more sharply for their absence.” (1: 238-39)

These noble words are wasted on Villon. He is not moved but “nettled under all this sermonising” (1: 239) and retorts angrily that he has proved his honour by not killing and robbing his host. This is the last straw that breaks his host’s commitment to the codes of hospitality; he calls Villon a “black-hearted rogue” (1: 239) and shows him the door.

In “The Sire de Malétroit’s Door,” the part of the cynic is taken by the eponymous nobleman. Blanche describes him as hard, shrewd and perceptive, “a great person at court, and much trusted by Queen Isabeau

in old days" (255). This description of a man thoroughly at home in diplomacy and court intrigue fits in with a comparison that the Sire de Malétoit makes between himself and Blanche's father: "If your father had been alive, he would have spat on you and turned you out of doors. His was the hand of iron. You may bless your God you have only to deal with the hand of velvet, mademoiselle" (254). The "hand of velvet" describes the demeanour of the Sire de Malétoit extremely well. For the most part, he treats his visitor in a polite and affable manner, with courteous phrases and frequent smiles. Denis, however, reacts with a "shudder of disgust" to his host, who has an irritating habit of making "little noises like a bird or a mouse, which seemed to indicate a high degree of satisfaction" (250). It would appear that he takes pride in his own cunning and a sadistic pleasure in the predicament of the young people.

The Sire de Malétoit uses the term "honour" just as often as Denis, but for him this merely means the reputation of his family, which has been put in jeopardy by his niece's entanglement with a stranger. Beneath his silken politeness, he is as inexorable as his brother, and he takes a cynical and reductive view of the two young people. In the few moments in which he drops his mask, he refers to Blanche as a "jade" (251) and to Denis as a "likely stripling" (251); at one point, he also addresses him as a "rogue" (251). More importantly, he does not trust them, taking it for granted that they are lying to him, despite their repeated and credible assertions that they have never seen each other. Ultimately, however, the Sire de Malétoit does not care whether they are lovers or strangers. When his niece admonishes him, "God forbid such marriages" (253) and asks him whether he still thinks that Denis is the man who courted her, he answers:

"Frankly, [...] I do. [...] Out of pure goodwill, I have tried to find your own gallant for you. And I believe I have succeeded. But before God and all the holy angels, Blanche de Malétoit, if I have not, I care not one jack-straw. So let me recommend you to be polite to our young friend; for upon my word, your next groom may be less appetising." (254)

To Denis, likewise, he asserts, "I believe you to be the guilty person; at least you are now in the secret; and you can hardly wonder if I request you to wipe out the stain" (257). He then gives the young people two hours with each other to consider their position. He evidently thinks that, given some time, the basic human motives will prevail over the more noble ones: two hours of imagining death by hanging should be enough to break the young man's resolve, especially if the alternative is to take an attractive young woman into his arms and into his bed.

Denis tries to deal with his opponent throughout in an honourable and gentlemanly way. While he is "now boiling with anger, now chilled with apprehension" (251), he keeps his emotions under control and maintains a dignified manner. Having realized that he will not be suffered to leave the house, he asks, "Do you mean I am a prisoner?" (251), attempting to impose an orthodox category on his extraordinary situation. When he first realizes that he is expected to enter into a forced marriage, he nevertheless maintains a gallant manner to the woman involved. After Blanche's explanation, he addresses her uncle with the following speech that respects her wishes while also paying her a chivalrous compliment:

"Sir, [...] I believe that I am to have some say in the matter of this marriage; and let me tell you at once, I will be no party to forcing the inclination of this young lady. Had it been freely offered to me, I should have been proud to accept her hand, for I perceive she is as good as she is beautiful; but as things are, I have now the honour, messire, of refusing." (256)

He later suggests to the Sire de Malétroit that they settle their disagreement by resorting to the gentlemanly method of the duel, which his opponent declines because of his age, and he finally gives his word of honour that he will stay two hours with Blanche, while the Sire and his men will withdraw and leave the two young people alone.

As pointed out above, Stevenson takes an extremely critical view of Villon in his essay on the poet. It would be misleading to claim that the Villon of "A Lodging for the Night" is a different person, but the form of the story creates a bias in favour of the poet, at least in comparison with the essay. The point of view is, for the most part, that of Villon.

We follow him in his dangerous odyssey through the nocturnal city and share, to some degree, his fear of hanging for a murder he did not commit and of freezing to death in the cold of a winter night. In the final debate, the narrator does not take sides; description and narrative are kept to a minimum and superseded by direct speech. Both Villon and his host are allowed to state their respective viewpoints, and both do so in an eloquent manner. The final word is, significantly, given to Villon: "A very dull old gentleman,' he thought. 'I wonder what his goblets may be worth'" (1: 240). While this may not prejudice us in his favour, suggesting as it does a theft from his host, it creates a different impression from "the sorriest figure on the rolls of fame." The story ends in a more open-ended manner than the essay, giving greater emphasis to Villon's voice and his views.

When Stevenson restages the debate in "The Sire de Malétroit's Door," he moves back towards the ethical stance of the essay on Villon, endorsing the representative of honour and morality in his confrontation with the cynic. This is not to say that Denis is clearly superior to the Sire de Malétroit. In terms of power, he is not, lacking the posse of armed men commanded by his opponent. There is also something immature about his display of honour and chivalry (as I will show more fully below). However, there can be little doubt that we are on the side of Denis in his confrontation with the old nobleman. We have followed him in his nocturnal wanderings around Château-Landon, experiencing events from his point of view. We know that the Sire de Malétroit, despite his shrewdness, is wrong in his assessment of the situation and in his view that Denis and Blanche are lying to him. The year of the story may also be relevant in the present context. In 1429, Joan of Arc entered the Hundred Years' War, helping the Dauphin to raise the siege of Orléans and to conquer Reims, where he was crowned as King of France. In his essay on Villon, Stevenson writes that Joan "had led one of the highest and noblest lives in the whole story of mankind" (27: 141), and there may be an implicit parallel between her idealism and the values of Denis and Blanche in the story. Finally, and most importantly, the romance plot connecting these two generates an emotional dynamic that clearly biases us in their favour. The Sire de

Malétoit may be revelling in his cunning and in his power over the young people, but ultimately he appears as an unwitting pawn that brings about the happiness of two young lovers.

(3) "The Sire de Malétoit's Door" and *Gringoire*

Théodore de Banville's history play *Gringoire* is set at the house of Simon Fourniez, a merchant in Tours, in the year 1469. Fourniez and his sister Nicole Andry, a young widow, are entertaining an illustrious guest. This is Louis XI, the King of France, who is a friend of Fourniez and the godfather of his daughter, named Loyse after the king. There is talk about her marriage, but Loyse, who is child-like and virginal at the age of 17, states that she has no wish to marry. She admits, however, that she sometimes thinks or dreams of a man who is tender as a woman but also brave as a captain and capable of heroic deeds. After this exchange, she leaves the room, and a new sequence of scenes is initiated by a commotion outside. The latter is caused by the arrival of Pierre Gringoire, a penniless and popular poet (known to de Banville's audience from Victor Hugo's novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*⁷). Gringoire is invited into the house and made to recite one of his poems. Unaware that he is in the presence of the king, he chooses a ballad about the hanging of poor people which contains the phrase "le verger du roi Louis" (29), 'the orchard of King Louis,' an ironical metaphor for the trees from which the people are dangling. The king, however, is in a lenient mood and unwilling to punish the poet. He even suggests that he should attempt to win Loyse's love. Gringoire adores her, having seen her repeatedly at the window of Fourniez's house, and the King has a hunch that the poet might be more to Loyse's taste than the bourgeois youth of Tours. Gringoire, however, believes that he is too ugly to be loved. He tells the king about two women whom he courted: one burst out laughing when she saw his face, the other shed tears of pity. Then the genial atmosphere is disrupted by unwelcome political news: the king has been betrayed by a clergyman sent on an embassy, and his

plans for the distribution of land and power in France are in jeopardy. In his rage, the king adopts a different attitude to Gringoire and gives him an ultimatum. He has one hour alone with Loyse to win her love; if he fails, he will be hanged.

Now follows the crucial final scene between Gringoire and Loyse, carefully prepared for by de Banville in terms of discrepant awareness to show the selflessness of the two characters.⁸ Loyse, who left the stage before Gringoire's entrance, does not know about the king's ultimatum. The easiest way for Gringoire to save himself would be to tell her about his predicament, hoping that she would take pity on him and save him from the gallows. But the poet is too selfless to put pressure on Loyse. He merely informs her that the king would like her to get married. When she wishes to know whom the king has in mind, Gringoire describes the man in the third person: ugly, penniless and entirely unlikely to win Loyse's love. Asked how this man has attracted the king's notice, Gringoire replies: by making verses (a reminder of his ballad and the unfortunate metaphor of the king's orchard). Warming to his subject, he praises the poet's office with great eloquence as a selfless task: the poet feels the sufferings of the common people and expresses them in verses that no sword and no punishment can stop from spreading throughout the country and conquering minds and hearts. Gringoire then recites one of his ballads about the hardships endured by the poor and their exploitation by the powerful. Now it is Loyse's turn to prove her selflessness in the way she responds to Gringoire's description of the poet and his recital of a ballad. She is strongly moved by his rendering of the sufferings of the poor, begins to love him despite his plain looks and guesses that he must be the unknown suitor chosen by the king. Gringoire has successfully courted her by attempting not to do so. When the king returns with the other characters after one hour and Loyse hears about the ultimatum, she realizes that Gringoire is the man she has imagined in her dreams: capable of heroic action (in not telling her about his predicament) and tender as a woman (in his empathy with the sufferings of the poor).

It is evident that *Gringoire* is a much more likely source for "The Sire de Malétroit's Door" than the Border story told by Scott and Hogg.⁹ In

the latter, the young woman is ugly, and her consent is taken for granted; she is thus not given any time alone with the young man to become acquainted with him. Loyse and Blanche, by contrast, are beautiful; their consent to the marriage is crucial; and there is a long and important scene in which they are left alone with their future husbands. In the Border story, moreover, the situation is simple and comically crude. In order to survive, the young man has to reconcile himself to the plain looks of his future wife. In de Banville's play and Stevenson's story, the obstacle is not an ugly face but the noble view that the young people take of marriage; they believe that it should be based on mutual love, which makes a forced union between strangers unthinkable. The young men, in addition, find it incompatible with their honour to marry out of fear and with their code of chivalry to put pressure on a woman to participate in such an ignoble marriage. The situation is thus more complex and difficult than in the Border story. The survival of the young man requires that both he and the young woman develop their mutual love in one or two hours.

There are also significant differences, however, between *Gringoire* and "The Sire de Malétroit's Door." Stevenson introduces changes that render his story much less romantic and optimistic than de Banville's play. This is evident, for instance, in the authority figures who give the order to marry and enforce it with an ultimatum. Louis XI is a genial and benign ruler. The ultimatum results from a momentary rage, and when he returns to the scene an hour later, he is again in a lenient mood and ready to pardon the poet. The Sire de Malétroit, by contrast, is a malicious and cold-blooded cynic who would feel no compunction whatsoever about having Denis hanged if he refused to marry Blanche. The young couples also differ from each other. Gringoire and Loyse pass the moral test of the penultimate scene with flying colours, leaving not a single doubt about their essential nobility of soul. This cannot be said about Denis and Blanche, who are much more human and fallible. This becomes evident in the very beginning of the story, which introduces the protagonist:

Denis de Beaulieu was not yet two-and-twenty, but he counted himself a grown man, and a very accomplished cavalier into the bargain. Lads were early formed in that rough, warfaring epoch; and when one has been in a pitched battle and a dozen raids, has killed one's man in an honourable fashion, and knows a thing or two of strategy and mankind, a certain swagger in the gait is surely to be pardoned. (243)

It is evident that the narrator does not quite share Denis's high opinion of himself. Later we hear about Denis's beautiful feet, "of which he was justly vain, be it remarked, and wore in the most elegant accoutrement even while travelling" (253). When he tells the Sire de Malétroit that he will not marry Blanche against her will, he is "strutting and ruffling in the consciousness of a mission, and the boyish certainty of accomplishing it with honour," and he addresses the Sire "with the grandest possible air" (256). There is something immature and pretentious about Denis's chivalrous demeanour. Blanche is not perfect either. We know little about the captain who has been courting her, but it seems that she has fallen for a womanizer. His wish to meet her secretly at night is suspicious, and his name, "Florimond de Champdivers" ('different fields'), suggests a lack of constancy,¹⁰ especially in contrast with Denis's surname "Beaulieu" ('beautiful place'). Both Blanche and Denis are to some degree responsible for their predicament; she because of her entanglement with the dubious captain, he because of losing his way in the nocturnal streets when he should have stayed at the inn or returned much earlier from his visit (243-44).

Stevenson also changes the preconditions of the final scene. In de Banville's play, only Loyse's consent has to be won; Gringoire is already in love with her. In Stevenson's story, both of the young people have to develop and confess their love for each other. Moreover, there is no discrepant awareness. Blanche knows just as well as Denis that he will be hanged if they do not get married. This knowledge makes it impossible for Blanche and Denis to act as nobly as Loyse and Gringoire. There can be no doubt about the motives of the latter. They marry out of pure, selfless love, and the threat of the gallows does not play a part simply because Gringoire is silent about it. Blanche and Denis, by con-

trast, know that whatever they say about their feelings and their principles is subject to doubt. It may be interpreted as a rationalization of fear on his part or guilt on hers. This doubt casts a shadow over their exchange that makes it difficult for them to communicate. Developing feelings of love within two hours is only one half of their problem. The other half is to confess their love in a convincing manner and to believe in each other's confessions.

The difficulty of communication is evident in the first exchanges of the final scene after Denis and Blanche have been left alone by her uncle:

No sooner were they alone than Blanche advanced towards Denis with her hands extended. Her face was flushed and excited, and her eyes shone with tears.

"You shall not die!" she cried, "you shall marry me after all."

"You seem to think, madam," replied Denis, "that I stand much in fear of death." (258)

It is difficult to say what precisely Blanche's feelings are at this point. She will later claim that she began to love him when he took her part against her uncle (262-63), i.e. when he made the speech cited above in which he refuses to marry her against her will, while at the same time describing her as good and beautiful (256). Denis, however, thinks that her statement is not an offer of marriage but an attempt to save him from being hanged; he will later make this explicit by saying she was motivated by pity (262). As a man of honour, he cannot accept Blanche's offer; he does not require her pity because he does not fear death. In her reply, Blanche acknowledges this and claims that she is acting out of self-interest rather than for his sake: "Oh, no, no [...] I see you are no poltroon. It is for my own sake—I could not bear to have you slain for such a scruple" (259).

Denis now introduces another consideration. So far, he has not held her involvement with the captain against her in any way, but now he mentions it as an obstacle to their union:

"I am afraid," returned Denis, "that you underrate the difficulty, madam. What you may be too generous to refuse, I may be too proud to accept. In a moment of noble feeling towards me, you forgot what you perhaps owe to others."

He had the decency to keep his eyes upon the floor as he said this, and after he had finished, so as not to spy upon her confusion. She stood silent for a moment, then walked suddenly away, and falling on her uncle's chair, fairly burst out sobbing. (259)

Denis's statement is ambiguous. It could mean that he respects her prior commitment to another man. It could also mean, however, that her involvement with this man has caused a stain on her reputation and disqualified her from becoming Denis's bride. This is evidently how Blanche understands Denis's words, judging by her strong reaction.

Blanche's first attempt to find a way out of the impasse has failed completely. She feels shame and despair and continues to sob, while Denis is highly embarrassed. They do not talk and even avoid looking at each other, wasting precious time. It seems that Denis is headed for the noose, and Blanche for the next groom, less appetising and also less scrupulous about marrying a woman against her will. One reason this outcome is averted is that Denis begins to look at Blanche, noticing that even convulsive sobs cannot hide her beauty; he "felt that no man could have the courage to leave a world which continued so beautiful a creature," and "he would have given forty minutes of his last hour to have unsaid his cruel speech" (260).

Another reason for the happy ending is that Blanche reopens and sustains the talk. In the world of Denis and Blanche, it is usually the man who takes the active part in courtship. Blanche, however, is aware that the conventional rules of courtship do not apply to their situation; Denis's sense of honour and the imputation of fear prevent him from taking the initiative. She has to play the role usually taken by the man. "Alas, can I do nothing to help you?" (260), she asks, after recovering from her sobbing fits. She thus shows that she is not offended by his words, seeking the responsibility for the situation primarily in herself, and she expresses her continuing goodwill towards him. Denis on his

part seizes the opportunity to apologise for his “cruel speech” and returns to his former chivalrous stance, saying that every gentleman in France would be glad to die in her service (260). They continue to talk about this service, which gives them the opportunity to show their appreciation of each other, she by saying how much she values his service, he by saying how much she deserves it.

When Blanche reiterates her offer to help him in some way, for instance by sending a message to his relatives, Denis realizes that his relatives will not greatly care about his death, which is the starting point for a more general speech about the vanity of human life:

“Life is a little vapour that passeth away, as we are told by those in holy orders. When a man is in a fair way and sees all life open in front of him, he seems to himself to make a very important figure in the world. His horse whinnies to him; the trumpets blow and the girls look out of window as he rides into town before his company [...]. It is not wonderful if his head is turned for a time. But once he is dead, were he as brave as Hercules or as wise as Solomon, he is soon forgotten. It is not ten years since my father fell, with many other knights around him, in a very fierce encounter, and I do not think that any one of them, nor so much as the name of the fight, is now remembered. No, no, madam, the nearer you come to it, you see that death is a dark and dusty corner, where a man gets into his tomb and has the door shut after him till the judgment day. I have few friends just now, and once I am dead I shall have none.” (261)

This speech may not be very original, inspired as it is by the teachings “of those in holy orders.” Even so, it adds a new dimension to this twenty-one-year-old, showing that there is more to him than his elegant footwear, a gift for chivalrous compliment, and a high opinion of himself. Denis is capable of suspending this opinion; he can transcend his own concerns and view himself from a critical distance. Whether or not this is necessary to raise him in Blanche’s eyes, it certainly raises him in the eyes of the reader. It also gives Blanche a chance to assert her appreciation of his courage, saying that one friend will remain after his death: Blanche de Malétroit.

Eventually, Denis makes explicit why he rejected her initial offer: ““You are very good, [...] but you cannot make me forget that I was

asked in pity and not in love'" (262). This provides Blanche with the cue to take the final step. After having asked him to marry her, she again deviates from the gender rules by being the first to confess her love. She concludes this confession with a puzzling assertion:

"And now," she went on, hurriedly checking him with her hand, "although I have laid aside all reserve and told you so much, remember that I know your sentiments towards me already. I would not, believe me, being nobly born, weary you with importunities into consent. I too have a pride of my own: and I declare before the holy mother of God, if you should now go back from your word already given, I would no more marry you than I would marry my uncle's groom." (263)

It is hard to believe that Blanche really means what she is saying here; she has shown very little pride throughout the night and introduced her confession of love with the statement that she is "'too poor a creature to occupy one thought of [Denis's] mind'" (262). The most likely explanation is that she shows Denis a mirror image of his own pride, judging from his reaction to the speech just quoted:

Denis smiled a little bitterly.

"It is a small love," he said, "that shies at a little pride."

She made no answer, although she probably had her own thoughts. (263)

Blanche gives Denis time to understand that his bitter comment applies most of all to himself. She now leaves the completion of the courtship scene to him, merely asking what they shall tell her uncle, and after a few minutes of standing at an open window, watching the dawn and holding her hand, Denis is ready to make his own confession of love and offer of marriage: "'[T]hough I will die for you blithely, it would be like all the joys of Paradise to live on and spend my life in your service'" (264).

I have stated above that "The Sire de Malétroit's Door" emerges as the more romantic and less cynical tale if we compare it with "A Lodging for the Night," focusing on the confrontation between a young and an old man in these stories. If we compare "The Sire de Malétroit's Door" with its other principal source, *Gringoire*, focusing on the final

scene between a young man and young woman, the story appears in a different and less romantic light. Denis and Blanche are more human and fallible than Gringoire and Loyse, and the preconditions of the final scene make it difficult for them to behave as nobly as their predecessors in de Banville's play. In his letters, Stevenson originally referred to the story as "The Sire de Malétoit's Mousetrap," a metaphor that undercuts the idea that Denis and Blanche have a choice to make. He later replaced "mousetrap" with "door," an image that suggests openness and freedom, the new life that Denis and Blanche are entering. But the original metaphor of the mousetrap is still present in the story, used by Denis to describe his situation (262). It is also worth noting that the last word is given to the Sire de Malétoit (just as the last word is given to Villon in "A Lodging for the Night"): "A melodious chirping was audible behind, followed by a beautiful chuckle, and the voice of Messire de Malétoit wished his new nephew a good morning" (264). It is possible to see the Sire de Malétoit as an unwitting pawn that has brought about the happiness of Denis and Blanche, but it is also possible to see these two as pawns in her uncle's game, despite their chivalrous protestations of honour, chivalry, and love. The final comment on the marriage of true minds is the Sire de Malétoit's cynical chuckle.

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NOTES

¹All of these reviews can be found in the scrapbook in which Stevenson's mother compiled the published responses to her son's fiction. The reviews by Saintsbury and Bunner are also collected in Maixner's volume in the *Critical Heritage* series; for the phrases quoted, see Maixner 108 and 122. For more information on the early reception of "The Sire de Malétoit's Door" and the other stories collected in the second volume of *New Arabian Nights*, see my *The Pavilion on the Links and Other Early Stories*, forthcoming at Edinburgh University Press as a volume in the critical and annotated *New Edinburgh Edition of the Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*.

²References to Stevenson's works are to the Tusitala Edition edited by his wife and his stepson Lloyd Osbourne, with page number for "The Sire de Malétoit's Door" (printed in volume 1) and with volume and page number for other texts.

³He contemplated writing an essay on de Banville (*Letters* 2: 107) and praises him in his essay on Charles of Orleans (27: 177).

⁴The essay and the story about Villon and "The Sire de Malétoit" belong to a group of four texts that Stevenson wrote about fifteenth-century France in 1876 and 1877; the fourth is an essay about another fifteenth-century poet, Charles of Orleans.

⁵"A Lodging for the Night" was written in June 1877; "The Sire de Malétoit's Door" had been begun or conceived by 2 August. See the references in Stevenson's *Letters* (2: 211, 217, 218 and 225) as well as Swearingen 27 and 29.

⁶Irving S. Saposnik states that there are parallels between "The Sire de Malétoit's Door" and a "A Lodging for the Night," and that the former should be read as a "complement to Villon's experience" (64), but instead of analysing the story along these lines, he dismisses it as "a cameo etched so exquisitely that each intricate detail becomes more attractive than the whole" (64). Douglas Gifford notes the reversal in the constellation of characters: "Villon is the demonic adolescent who spares the kindly father figure; Denis is the innocent adolescent who is coerced into marriage by the devilish aristocrat Malatroit [sic]. Two youngsters, two father-figures; and their crossover of positions represents what happens in all of Stevenson's fiction" (72). Like Saposnik, however, he does not elaborate on this insight and sees the reversal merely as an instance of the deplorable confusion of values on Stevenson's part.

⁷For a succinct account of the sources of the play, see Schaffer; another important source, alluded to at the beginning of the play, is Honoré de Balzac's "Les joyeusetés du roy Loys Le Unziesme," one of his *Contes drolatiques* set in the late Middle Ages.

⁸"Discrepant awareness" means that characters know less or more than the audience, or that some characters know more than others; on the use of these differences in the distribution of information, for instance through dramatic irony, see the classic study by Bertrand Evans.

⁹The debt to *Gringoire* was noted by two of Stevenson's contemporaries; Robert Buchanan points it out in an unpublished letter to Stevenson located at the Beinecke Library in New Haven, CT (Beinecke GM 664 10, 259), and H. C. Bunner mentions it in a review (Maixner 122). To the best of my knowledge, this intertextual connection has not been explored in later criticism.

¹⁰In Stevenson's late, unfinished novel *St. Ives*, the eponymous protagonist, uses "Champdivers" as an alias. The name is thus also associated with deception.

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