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COLINE BLAIZEAU

Battered and Bruised: A Translation of the 'Fish-Knights' Episode from *Perceforest*

This paper offers a translation (from Old French to modern English) of an excerpt from the late-medieval romance *Perceforest*, in which the protagonist, Béthidès, finds himself on an island populated by what appear to be four-legged, chivalric fish. While this particular episode has (perhaps understandably) elicited a significant degree of scholarly interest, it is yet to receive an unabridged translation. The excerpt in question encompasses the entirety of the 'fish-knights' episode, from the protagonist's arrival to the island to the moment of his escape. The translation is preceded by a brief discussion offering some context both for the chosen passage and the text as a whole, as well as providing some insight into the translator's motivations and commenting on how issues encountered during the translating process were resolved.

Still relatively unknown despite its outstanding potential, the *Roman de Perceforest* is a late-medieval text in French exploiting the concept of a pre-Arthurian time as it recounts the adventures of the heroic knights who founded civilisation, chivalry, and monotheistic faith on the British islands, before they fathered a long line of descendants resulting in the births of such iconic figures as Tristan, Merlin, and Arthur himself. Perhaps debilitated by its own monumental size in the process of transmission, *Perceforest* only survives in four known manuscripts: *A* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, français 345-348), *B* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, français 106-109), *C* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Arsenal 3483-3494), and *D* (London, British Library, Royal 15 E V, 19 E III, and 19 E II), of which only *C* is complete with all six parts of the whole work. Dating back to the second half of the fifteenth century, the texts contained in those manuscripts are considered to be the amended versions of an earlier narrative which was likely composed in Hainaut between 1330 and 1350 and is now lost.¹

Eclectic and ambitious by nature, *Perceforest* is composed of several storylines; this gives its author the opportunity to try his hand at a great variety of genres and tones, alternating prose with verse as the text switches from lyrical lays to comical, *fabliau*-like episodes, epic battle scenes, or wonderful quests of supernatural essence. The chosen extract below relates the adventures of Béthidès, son of king Perceforest, after he is abducted by a flock of devilish spirits and released by Zephyr the imp on what appears to be a desert island. Béthidès, also known as the White Knight, is left there to fend for himself and soon meets the inhabitants

¹ *Le Roman de Perceforest, Première partie*, ed. by Jane Taylor (Geneva: Droz, 1979), pp. 26-9; *Le Roman de Perceforest, Quatrième partie, vol. 1*, ed. by Gilles Roussineau (Geneva: Droz, 1987), pp. ix-xiv.

of this not-so-desert island, a people of fish-knights and their king, with whom he socialises in the most chivalrous way possible – gaining their respect in battle. This allows the author to expand on the meaning of chivalry, as he gives in to a slight touch of didacticism while also indulging in the exploration of a theme which he particularly favours: the marvellous.²

With the recent completion of Gilles Roussineau's edition of the *Roman de Perceforest* (2015) and the rapid growth of *Perceforest*-focused studies, it seems both timely and appropriate to give a broader audience access to the riches of such a literary masterpiece. A translation into Modern English is already available in Nigel Bryant's excellent book, *Perceforest: The Prehistory of King Arthur's Britain*, but it was abridged.³ If the choice made by Bryant to translate some passages and summarise the rest is perfectly justified by his aim to offer an overview of a text which is otherwise 5500 pages long, it also means that his work is severely limited in how much of the original writing it actually reflects. His translation of the fish-knights episode, for example, alternates translated sentences with paraphrases, failing to provide an accurate rendition of the text's continuity and style. The purpose of the present translation, on the contrary, is to convey a more authentic 'flavour' by preserving its linguistic subtleties, rhythm and logic, even when they seem flawed. In doing so, I hope to present the reader with a more detailed approach to the text which should suitably complement the general perspective adopted by Bryant in his own translation.

Perceforest's overwhelming tendency to repeat itself illustrates that point well: where Bryant tends to erase repetitions in the interest of brevity, I have endeavoured to maintain as many of them as possible, except where they did not contribute to any stylistic and / or narrative effect. What could at first be perceived as a clumsy habit is arguably one of the literary tools most skilfully used by the author, as Noémie Chardonnes's work admirably demonstrates.⁴ In this particular excerpt, the constant reference to verbs of sight may appear monotonous, especially the verb 'to see' which occurs no less than 37 times. Such is the case in the following sentence, for instance: 'As he was cutting through he saw four fish come onto him, as tall as hunting dogs.' It seems almost natural to remove 'he saw' and write instead: 'As he was cutting through four fish came onto him, as tall as hunting dogs.' Yet, here, I have chosen to keep it, and again every time it made sense to do so throughout the passage, simply because *Perceforest* is a text which plays with points of views and the subjectivity of characters to a meaningful extent. The fact that the narrative voice insists on the scene being perceived through the eyes of its protagonist, the White Knight, is an element I wanted to save despite its consequential ponderousness. It is actually doubly important, since verbs of sight hold particular significance in episodes involving the marvellous such as this one, as Christine Ferlampin-Acher contends in her study of late medieval romances, where she explains that marvels are rarely presented objectively and thus always retain some level of ambiguity.⁵

² The original Middle French version of this episode, on which this translation is based, is located in the third Book of *Perceforest*, and is edited in *Le Roman de Perceforest, Troisième partie, vol. 2*, ed. by Gilles Roussineau (Geneva: Droz, 1991), pp. 273-84. For an in-depth analysis of this particular episode, see: Cécile Le Cornec-Rochelois, 'Des poissons mythiques à l'ichtus divin dans *Perceforest*', in *'Perceforest': Un roman arthurien et sa réception*, ed. by Christine Ferlampin-Acher (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012), pp. 133-48, and Karl Steel and Peggy McCracken, 'The Animal Turn: Into the Sea with the Fish-Knights of *Perceforest*', *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, 1.2 (2011), 88-100.

³ Nigel Bryant, *'Perceforest': The Prehistory of King Arthur's Britain* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2011), pp. 362-65.

⁴ Noémie Chardonnes, *L'autre du même : emprunts et répétitions dans le Roman de Perceforest* (Geneva: Droz, 2015).

⁵ Christine Ferlampin-Acher, *Merveilles et topique merveilleuse dans les romans médiévaux* (Paris: Champion, 2003), p. 122.

This is not to say that all manner of idiosyncrasies were kept in the present translation, especially when it was deemed they would excessively disrupt the reader. Some sentences were split that would otherwise go on to lengths that hinder the text's legibility. Connecting words such as *et*, *adont*, and *mais* were cut out when they did not bring sufficient meaning or style to the sentence. Tenses were harmonised. Personal pronouns that did not refer to a subject clearly enough were replaced by the actual noun, and modern principles of punctuation and capitalisation were adopted. All changes were nonetheless made with a mind to impact as little as possible on the original wording. More often than not, the passage from one language to another necessarily implies losing some of the source's subtleties. Sometimes, however, the exercise of translation allows the text to reveal a new aspect of itself. Here, the fact that the English language can translate with two words – 'he' and 'it' – what French expresses with one – 'il' – allows for the introduction of an interesting nuance. So I chose to designate fish-knights with the neutral pronoun 'it' at first, before switching to 'he' in a second time in order to underline the gradual humanisation of the fish-people. Given that the main theme of this episode is the parallel between the fish-knights and the White Knight, it seems interesting that this should find an echo in grammar.

Translation

The true story of old tells that, when the spirit named Zephyr parted from the White Knight – as you have heard previously – the unfortunate knight remained there weary and sore until the sun had risen and he had collected himself to some degree. Then he stood up and looked around searching for a city, town, castle or dwelling that he could walk to. It was in vain though, as he did not see any abode or building. Indeed, he climbed up to the highest spot that he could make out and did not discern any town or castle. There was not a trace of civilisation. So, he came down and walked towards the sea. It was almost winter. As soon as the knight reached the shore, he saw marvellous fish jumping out of the water onto the dry land. Among them was a fish whose head was as that of an ox with one long horn, and it was covered in hair. It had four feet, and four legs which were no more than two feet high; yet it had a body as large as an ox's, as well as a tail. There were several fish resembling horned sheep which were also covered in hair but for their fish-like tails. Other fish resembled stags, and there were many in the shape of bears, yet they only had short legs. All these fish came out of the sea and, in the White Knight's presence, went on to eat grass, roots and tree leaves, each according to their nature. Once they were satiated, they thrust themselves back into the sea to the young knight's great astonishment. When they had thus returned to the sea, he started searching along the shore for a living soul. It was all for nothing though, as he did not find any man, woman, or beast, whether wild or tamed.

When the young knight saw that he was alone and that there was nothing to eat but roots, grass, and tree leaves as it was not the season for fruit, he became very worried, and not without cause, as he felt extremely hungry. Still, he fasted until the next day, when he became so assailed by hunger that he no longer knew what to do or say. Had he had a raw leg of venison, he thought, he would eat it to his heart's content. At that point he saw a great many fish coming out of the sea, just as he had done the day before, some so terrifying to look upon that he was afraid of them. However, hunger gripped him so that he was forced to draw his sword and pounce on the fish, putting several of them to death. As he was cutting through, he saw four fish come onto him,

as tall as hunting dogs although they only had two feet. On their wide and sturdy torsos sat helmets like heads, each topped with a nine-foot-long, pointed horn, similar to a sword. On their backs, a sort of shield covered their whole spine from their heads to their fish-like tails. When the White Knight saw that these four fish were coming at him as boldly and fast as their way allowed, he was filled with wonder. When they got closer, one of them stood on its legs and gave the knight such a blow with its horn that he lost his balance. The knight marvelled at how the fish could have given him such a blow. Then he raised his sword and went to strike the fish on its head. He barely did it any harm though, as the fish stooped down causing the sword to hit the thick of its back shield, which was so hard that the sword could do it no damage. The fish lifted its head up slightly and struck the knight with its sword in such a way that it would have cut through half of the shield had the sword been sharp. Still the knight was so overwhelmed that he had to bend a knee. Realising he would have to apply himself, he held his shield tight and gave such a blow of his sword on the fish's head that the fish fell down. Then he struck again and, in another blow, cut the fish's feet off. No sooner had he struck this blow than one of the other three fish came closer to meet him in combat and brought its sword down onto the top of his helmet, stunning the knight greatly. However, the fish was unfortunate enough that its sword broke off where it joined to its head. When the fish felt that its sword was broken it retreated to the sea, whilst the knight seized his shield again. The third fish was soon upon him, attacking him vigorously and striking his shield with a blow from its sword. The knight struck the fish on its head with his sword, splitting it over three inches before the fish dropped onto the sand.

When the fourth fish saw its companions dealt with in such a manner, it hit the knight off guard in a blow that would have sliced the knight's thigh had it not been for his hauberk. The knight was so overwhelmed that he had to put a hand on the ground. He stood back up as fast as he could, and dealt a furious side-blow to the fish with such strength that its head fell to the ground. Once he was rid of those four fish, he looked around and saw no living fish remained at all. Hunger started tormenting him again, so he used his sword to lift the shield from the fish's back and found that it was whiter than snow underneath. He sliced a piece off along its spine, ate some, and found it so delicate and appetising that he thought he had never eaten such good meat. Once he had eaten from the fish as much as he cared to, he took enough flesh to sustain him for three days and put it on the fish's shield, which he placed on a rock where a clear fountain sprang. That done, he sat down worried and wondered what would become of him, given that no one lived on the island. Indeed, no one would settle there for fear of the fish that the White Knight had killed, for they, or others like them, were always around.

The valiant knight thought hard about ways to escape the island, and he thought for a long time about the fish that had attacked him so boldly, whose nature was so noble that they had not deigned to assail him all at the same time. He ended up spending both day and night there, until the sun rose the next day. At that moment, he saw the fish coming out of the sea in the distance, as they had done the day before. Among them, he discerned a great many fish looking similar to the ones which had attacked him and which he had slain. Now you must know that they were coming in such orderly ranks that they looked like a column of soldiers heading towards the fountain where the knight stood. The knight feared that they might attack all at once, and therefore equipped himself with his sword and shield, and turned his back against the rock so

they would not attack him from behind. Leaning against the rock, the knight looked around and saw that a battalion of fish was parting from the column whilst the others stopped advancing. The battalion ran towards the knight and charged at him, hitting his shield violently with their swords. Blocking their assaults with his shield, the knight swung his sword left and right so powerfully that he killed plenty of them in a short amount of time. He slew so many that he found himself surrounded by bodies, to the point that the fish which were still alive could no longer reach him. When the fish which had previously stayed behind saw that their fighters could not reach the knight, another battalion parted from the column in tight rows. Soon, those which had fought at length drew back while the fresh and newly-arrived fish started to drag away their dead companions with their teeth in order to ease their way to the knight. When the White Knight saw that these fish had the sense to pull away their dead with their teeth in order to reach him, he hit them with his sword while they were busy dragging, and hit them on the very uncovered spot where he thought it would hurt them most. Doing so he put many to death. They did not mind as they aspired only to kill the knight, but when they realised that dragging the dead away was greatly detrimental to their goal, they gave ground and stood motionless all round him. However, they were unable to stay out of the water for more than two hours. When this battalion felt the need to return to the sea, another one appeared. Thus, one battalion after another came and attacked the knight, who was so hard pressed that he did not dare leave his ground. As soon as he saw the ways of those fish-knights, who pressed him so hard that he dared not leave his position, for he could see that there were many and that some were so strong that they would kill him if they could breach his defence, however good it was, indeed you can understand that he became very worried and feared he should die there. In the end, the fish kept the knight so well pinned down that he could not leave his ground for three days. In the early morning of the fourth day, the valiant knight sat on a boulder, his back still against the rock, wondering what could be done as he saw the fish all around, bold and determined to harm him if they could get a hold of him. The knight felt himself dying of thirst. He hesitated over whether he should expose himself to the fish by going to the fountain for a drink. However, his thirst was too strong and he chose to go quench it, searching for a side where the fish looked the weakest. Once he had found the way he would escape, he grabbed his shield and drew his sword, then jumped swiftly over the dead and pushed through the fish where they had less power, striking left and right and slaying a great many. Even so, he received over a hundred blows before he could get through and was fortunate not to be attacked from behind. He passed beyond them and ran towards the fountain. The fish followed him immediately. They could not go as fast as the knight though, because their legs were short and their feet were like those of a swan.

When the fish saw that the knight was making his way to the fountain, they felt great grief. Before the knight had drunk his fill, the quickest fish had caught up with him and twenty of them leapt into the fountain, splashing about and blowing water out of their nostrils in spurts taller than men. When the knight saw this, he stood up swiftly and found himself already surrounded by fish coming closer to hit him. So he raised his sword and struck them, and they him, with such mighty blows that it often seemed as if they would drive him to the ground. As he himself later related, they would have killed him had he not repeatedly thrust his blade at them, as they did not know how to parry that move. Thus, the knight soon found himself enclosed by dead fish, but it had taken such a toll on him that he could scarcely make another movement. When he saw

himself surrounded, he sat on a fish, tired and tremendously battered. He stayed there and rested until the next day when he looked at the sea and saw coming a countless number of those fish which are called sea-knights. They were even taller and stronger than those he had seen thus far. Then he knew in his heart that he was lost beyond doubt, for they were extraordinarily big. Once the sea-knights had exited the water, they arranged themselves into tidy rows, as soldiers would have done, and headed towards their companions in an orderly fashion. When they were within bowshot of the knight, the king of the sea-knights called a halt and walked alone towards the fish who had been besieging the White Knight. He uttered a marvellous cry. All the fish who were there immediately lifted siege and returned to the sea. The king went out to meet the White Knight and uttered a new cry.

The White Knight gazed at the fish with astonishment, as he was taller and bigger than any other and wore on his helmet a skilfully-made crown which instantly made him think that he was the king of the fish. He saw in his cries and behaviour a request to duel. Once he had heard it all, he came closer to the king and indicated that he wished to drink before the fight. The fish king had a noble heart and lowered his head to show that he was content, before sitting on his tail. The White Knight drank at the fountain. When he was as refreshed as he wished to be, he came back to the fish king, grabbed his shield, and drew his sword. All the other fish sat on their tails in the back. The king stood on his feet and held before him a long stake made of bone whiter than ivory which had rested on his back, and placed it as a unicorn's. The sword was six feet long and stood straight on top of his helmet. When the knight saw the king thus armed, he feared his stake greatly. Seeing him come onto him vigorously, he protected himself with his shield. The king hit him with such strength that he pierced through it as well as his hauberk, and the knight was lucky this time around that it did not pierce his flesh. With that, the king pulled out his stake faster than any knight in the whole of Great Britain would, and hit again with such power that his stake pierced both shield and hauberk to enter the thigh so deep that blood ran down in profusion. When the knight felt himself wounded so, he realised he was not dealing with the same kind of combatant he had previously fought against, and went to strike the king on his head with all his might. However, the king stooped down and the sword hit the thick of the shield which covered his back. I must tell you the blow made as much noise as if it had hit a slab, yet the shield remained unscathed, although the king did have to lean on his tail with the violence of the blow. The king, who was soon back on his feet since he did not have long legs, swung his sword at the upper half of the knight's shield in such a powerful blow that the knight had to bend a knee. Even so the noble knight sprung back up at once and, with the sharp edge of his sword, slashed the king across his right side near his shield, cutting through three inches deep of flesh, blood jetting out.

When the king felt himself wounded so, he was upset, though not downcast, and engaged in battle once more against the knight, who did not back away from the fight, and they hit each other fiercely until they could no longer. They had kept this first pass going for so long that even the healthier of the two was wounded in several places, and they had lost so much blood that they were in more need of resting than fighting. In the end, let me tell you, they were so tired that each withdrew to his own corner to take some rest, and the knight felt sorely sorry that the king could not speak. Once they had rested a little, the king stood up and attacked the knight, striking him with his sword so badly that he pierced his shield. However, the knight was deft and agile, and he turned

his shield so suddenly that he snapped the stake in its middle, causing the king to fall down on his right side involuntarily. The king stood back up nimbly and hit the knight with his sword, and the knight defended himself bravely. Then started such a terrible combat that the whole place resounded with it. Be aware that the king was so tall and strong, and struck such mighty blows to the knight that, had his sword been as sharp as his enemy's, he would have killed him several times. Still, the knight received so many blows on his helmet that he felt quite dazed, and his arms and shoulders were bruised all over. The two champions fought so much that even the stronger was unable to harm his enemy, for all strength had gone from them. Lacking strength and compelled by necessity, the king lay down, and the White Knight, who could not go on either, sat next to him. At that point, all the fish-knights, who had been watching the fight, set themselves in motion as if to come and slay the White Knight. Upon seeing their behaviour, the knight resolved to defend himself to death and stood up with great difficulty due to his wounds. When the fish king saw that they were ready to attack the knight, he raised his head high up and made various wonderful sounds. Then all but two fish left and returned to the sea.

When the White Knight saw that the fish had gone back, he regained hope and sat back down as he was so exhausted and weak that he could scarcely support himself. The fish king began to make strange faces and gestures as a sign of humility and peace, and the knight, eventually recognising his intention, sheathed his sword once more. The king placed his stake back onto his back in friendship and approached the knight in an obliging manner. There they rested for a long while, until the king could no longer stay out of the water. He stood up with effort, went to a pit full of sea water close to the fountain, and drank. The knight, who was also in need, followed him. Once he had drunk, he started eating one of the fish that he had killed. While the king and the knight were at the fountain in peace, one of the two sea-knights who had stayed behind with the king went into the sea and came back shortly afterwards. He found the king sitting on the edge of the fountain, and brought him a small fish the size of a tortoise and as bright red as blood. The king snapped it with his teeth and ate some. All his wounds were immediately healed. He presented it to the White Knight and signalled him to eat some. When the valiant knight saw that the king was healed thanks to the fish he had eaten, and understood that the king was presenting it to him to restore his own health, he decided to eat some. He took the fish and, as soon as he had eaten some, he felt as well and healthy as he had been before the fight, which amazed him greatly and made him say that the fish was of great efficiency and value. Once the king was healed and saw that the White Knight was in good shape, he gave him another sign of humility and returned to the sea. You should know that the White Knight accompanied him to the shore's edge, and I assure you that the king walked alongside him as courteously as if he had had the intelligence and behaviour of a man. Thus, should the Sovereign God be praised for his works, for it pleased him to gift these creatures and he showed his powers in doing so. Indeed, when the fish-king reached the sea-shore, he stopped by the knight's side and invited him to acknowledge his qualities, an assent which the knight gladly gave.

Once the noble knight had understood the signs of the king, he looked at the sea and saw countless fish-knights whose sword-topped heads were out of the water, and whose bodies protruded enough that their shields could distinctly be seen. They formed tight ranks and occupied at least half a league. It was an extraordinarily beautiful thing

to behold, for their swords held upright were like a forest over the water. As soon as the young knight saw those fish, the king gave a sign of humility and went back to the sea, where all his subjects immediately made way for him. He swam away, faster than a crossbow bolt, and his knights followed him with such power that they looked like a tempest. The knight did not see them until the next day, around the same time they would usually emerge from the sea. They came back to the White Knight, who still did not know how to leave the island. Once the king was on dry land, he walked to the White Knight, bowed, and ordered that one of his fish-knights had his head cut off. Then he approached the knight and signalled him to eat some of the fish, but the noble knight would not. Regardless, the king and his knights began to graze on the grass, which was so good to them that they would not allow anyone to stay on the island. When they had had their fill, they split into two parties and began one of the most formidable and fierce tournaments ever seen. You will now hear marvellous things, for the fish king took the valiant knight in his teeth and pulled whilst signalling him to take part. He pulled so much that the knight eventually understood what he wanted, but this was so outlandish to him that he did not know how to go about it. Yet the king pulled so much that the knight grabbed his shield, drew his sword, and thrust himself into the fray in company of the king. He began to hit the fish-knights, and they him; and they responded so well to his attacks that he had to work just as hard to demonstrate his prowess over them as he had done at the noble king of Cornwall's tournament. The marine knights preferred to fight against him rather than each other, as they thought they should not be considered brave unless they had fought against him.

Great was the tournament, and wonderful to behold. The valiant knight gladly took part. You must understand that the battle lasted over an hour, before the fish ceased to fight and withdrew to the sea. Then, the king of the knights took his leave of the young man and went back into the water, as his nature could no longer cope with air. From this day on, as long as the knight was there, he came to visit him in this way.

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