

Brehus or Brun: a bear-like warrior in the Arthurian world¹

Abstract

Cet article se propose d'examiner le personnage de Brun sans pitié pour trouver des continuités dans sa caractérisation entre roman en vers et roman en prose. Brun (nommé aussi Brehus), le chevalier criminel par excellence, porte un nom et manifeste des comportements qui ramènent au modèle folklorique de l'ours ravisseur.

Arthurian forests are inhabited by all sorts of beings, natural and supernatural, human and animal, good and evil, and this is what makes these forests such a crucial place: different storylines interact with each other, characters meet or split up, enemies and friends are made; indeed, the forest is an essential agent for the construction of Arthurian interlace. There is one character, however, who seems to be a particularly fearsome encounter in these haunted forests: Bruns sans pitié. This character is, according to Richard Trachsler's definition, «le portrait-robot du criminel arthurien».² Brun wanders through the forests where, driven by an unjustified rage, he engages in fights with many Arthurian heroes, by whom he is constantly defeated. What has puzzled students, however, is Brun's peculiar behaviour, which seems either to ignore the rules that shape Arthurian chivalric ethos or to reverse those rules systematically; indeed, he is mostly considered «le plus desloyaux chevalier du monde et le plus felon», as the *Tristan en Prose* defines him. Moreover, the most disturbing feature of Brun's behaviour is his obsession with torturing or killing women: while *Guiron le Courtois* attempts to rationalise this conduct, the earlier texts do not explain his obsession, but present it simply as a fact.

The appalling unchivalric behaviour shown by Brun has made this character somewhat resistant to attempts at interpretation by scholars so far. Nonetheless, I think this case could benefit from a new approach, bringing together the study of human-animal interactions in medieval imagination, and the role of animals in the construction of chivalric – or rather unchivalric – identity in romance. The aim of this paper will be to reconstruct a concise morphology of Brun's character, as shifting as it is throughout Arthurian texts. Therefore, I shall try to explain Brun's cruel and mysterious behaviour by linking him with a character from European folklore whose name he shares: the bear.

'Le portrait-robot du criminel arthurien'

Brun sans pitié receives a slightly different characterisation in each of the various texts featuring him. Seemingly, the main divide in the representation occurs between verse and prose romance. Verse romances call this character Brun, and mostly paint him as a danger of the Arthurian forests; prose romances, instead, call him Brehus, and rather stress the character's transgressions of the chivalric code, highlighting his cowardice and his *félonie*. Once we turn to a more detailed observation, it appears that every text prefers to point towards a particular aspect of this character, the result being a sort of cross-textual mosaic, a nebula of variable elements from which every text selects a set of traits.³

¹ I thank Professor Philip E. Bennett for helping me revising this article; any residual inaccuracies must be blamed exclusively on the author.

² Richard Trachsler, «Brehus sans pitié: portrait-robot du criminel arthurien», *La violence dans le monde médiéval*, Aix-en-Provence, CUERMA (*Senefiance*, 36), 1994, p. 527-42.

³ I am referring to the definition of the character as a nebula of equally indifferent traits, elaborated by D'Arco Silvio Avalle («Dai sistemi di segni alle nebulose di elementi», *Strumenti critici*, 19/1972, p. 229-42; p. 239). This theorisation has proved extremely helpful in the interpretation of medieval literary characters, which appear in cycles of texts elaborated in different moments.

The first appearance of *Brun sans pitié* is in the *Continuations de Perceval*. While in the *Première Continuation* he is simply named among other knights, without being described, in the *Deuxième Continuation* his connection with women is already sketched, although it does not seem to be conflictual yet. Perceval meets a young lady who claims to have promised her love to a knight who «ert clamez/ am bautesme Bruns sans Pitiez»:⁴ the bleak name, therefore, does not seem to correspond to despicable acts of any sort, but it is significant that the only glimpse of the character in this romance comes from his love relationship with a woman.

Brun/Brehus starts acquiring the traits of the criminal we all know in the *Lancelot en Prose*, whose redaction traces back to 1215-1235. I shall begin my analysis with the first part of the romance, contained in the ms. BN fr. 768, which, according to Elspeth Kennedy, had to form an independent text, for style and content, from the rest of the Lancelot-Graal cycle.⁵ Here the same character, now called Brehus, is portrayed as a deceiver and a coward: he has a particularly sneaky way of fighting, he tends to withdraw from confrontations where he can lose and attacks unhorsed knights. Brehus tries to escape the judgement on his crimes by trading information with Gauvain, whom he follows for a while, but does not help when the need comes.⁶ Moreover, after separating from Gauvain, Brehus continues to disguise himself in order to hide his identity; he manipulates the knights he meets by making them swear blind oaths and exploiting their chivalric behaviour to his own advantage.⁷ Most importantly, it is in the *Lancelot en Prose* that Brehus reveals himself as a serial killer of women. The first time he is described in this romance, Brehus is busy in his favourite activity, which is waiting in a pavilion along the road for a woman to pass by, in order to kidnap her and eventually kill the knight who rides with her. For this reason, a *recluse* in a chapel along the road tries to warn Gauvain that, if he wants to protect the woman he is escorting, he should better choose a different route, because «si pres a un chevalier qui la vos toudra, et bien tost vos ocirra il».⁸ The text does not tell us what is Brehus' drive against women, but it confirms that the character's only mission in the romance is capturing them. Thus, when Brehus encounters Gauvain, even after being defeated by him, he still argues to have rights on the young lady following Gauvain; again, when he meets Arthur's knight later in the romance, he brings up the same claim.⁹

The earlier redaction of the *Roman de Tristan en Prose* unveils some more details on the subject.¹⁰ Here Brehus' obsession for women is stressed in the same way as in *Lancelot*, since Brehus fights with the knights whom he comes across, in order to conquest by force their ladies: for instance, in book IV, Brehus «mist main a une damoisele qe li chevaliers avoit en sa compaignie, et dist q'i l'avoit conquese».¹¹ Moreover, on this occasion we find a new element, since the young woman under attack recognises Brehus' identity by his behaviour and starts screaming and asking for help: «quant la demoiselle, qu bien conoissoit qe c'estoit Breüz en cui mains ele estoit venue, vit q'ele estoit prise, elle commença a mener le greignor doel del monde».¹² Brehus, therefore, has a reputation for assaulting women: if there is someone who tries to abduct a woman in the forest, it must be Brehus. Another interesting aspect that comes through in the *Tristan en prose* is the physicality of the character. In this

⁴ *The Continuations of the Old French Perceval of Chrétien de Troyes. The Second Continuation* (vol. IV), ed. by W. Roach, Philadelphia, The American Philosophical Society, 1971, ll. 25766-7.

⁵ *Lancelot du Lac*, éd. par E. Kennedy, trad. par F. Mosès, Paris, LGF, 1991-3, 2 voll ; I, p. 29-32.

⁶ *Lancelot...*, ed. cit, ch. XXXVI, p. 642-50.

⁷ *Lancelot...*, ed. cit, ch. XXXVIII, p. 654.

⁸ *Lancelot...*, ed. cit, ch. XXXIV, p. 630. This dialogue seems to refer to a practice similar to the *Coutume de Logres* from Chrétien's *Chevalier de la charrette*: cf. *infra*, my conclusion paragraph.

⁹ *Lancelot...*, éd. cit, ch. XXXVI, p. 642 and ch. XL, p. 672.

¹⁰ *Tristan en prose*, éd. dir. par Ph. Ménard, Paris, Champion, 1995-2008, 5 voll.

¹¹ "He took hold of a young woman whom the knight was escorting, and declared to have conquered her" (*Tristan...*, ed. cit, vol. IV, § 258, p. 244.

¹² "When the lady, having realised that she had ended up in the hands of Brehus, saw that she had been captured, she started to express the greatest grief in the world" (*ibidem*).

romance, Brehus is represented as physically big and particularly strong: while regularly defeated in an armed joust, he is unbeatable when fighting with bare hands. For instance, in the duel with Gauvain, where the two knights end up fighting without swords, Brehus is clearly on the point of killing his opponent, when a knight steps in and saves Gauvain.¹³

Judging from this first textual analysis, it seems that Arthurian romances steadily characterise Brun/Brehus by means of his obsession with harming women, by either abducting, torturing or killing them. In *L'Atre Perilleux*, a verse romance belonging to the middle of the 13th century, the character – who is called Brun again – appears only briefly, in an episode in which, wearing red armour, he keeps a young woman in a fountain, in order to punish her for doubting his warrior valour, and threatens to kill anyone who will try to interfere.¹⁴ Therefore, although apparently this *Brun sans pitié* differs from the character as described in prose romances, with him he shares the characterisation as a mysterious abuser of young women and a killer of the knights who oppose to his 'mission'. Around the end of the 13th century, in the octosyllabic verse romance *Escanor*, Brun is portrayed more clearly as a serial killer of women. Whenever he meets a young lady, he kills her *ami* and assaults her, possibly trying to kill her, too; it is by this behaviour that the other characters in the romance identify him.¹⁵ However, even here nobody knows why Brun is so obsessed with harming women.

The only explanation of this behaviour comes in the last of the texts I am taking into consideration, *Guiron le Courtois*, a prose romance from around 1235-1240: here, the first action of our character (called indifferently Brun or Brehus)¹⁶ is to come out of the forest and cold-bloodedly kill the lady travelling with Yvain. After the murder, Brun explains to Yvain that he hates all women because the betrayal of a woman has caused the death of his father.¹⁷ This argument, relying as it does on the misogynous stereotype of the unfaithfulness of women, must have sounded sufficiently reasonable to the audience of this text. However, this is an isolated rationalisation of Brun's behaviour, which was clearly perceived as otherwise inexplicable within the frame of chivalric ethos. I believe that, in order to shed some light on the reasons of Brun's characterisation, it may be useful to look somewhere else – possibly starting from his name.

'What's in a name?'

Brun, a name of Germanic origin, was a widespread personal name in epics and romance. In particular, in epic texts the meaning of darkness conveyed by this word made it the perfect anthroponym for Saracen characters; moreover, at least on one occasion, Brun is the name of a Saracen hairy giant.¹⁸ This last occurrence sheds a different light on the name itself and the meaning that it possibly retained in French onomastics: as a matter of fact, in Germanic languages *brun* was the *noa* word for the bear, whose real name was often covered by taboo.¹⁹ This type of metonymic shift of name is quite typical in popular culture: in this case, the real name of the bear is considered magic and therefore dangerous, and thus substituted by a word that refers to an element of the animal, as the colour of its fur (brown,

¹³ *Tristan* ..., ed. cit., vol. V, § 75-8, p. 275-83.

¹⁴ *L'Atre Perilleux*, éd. par B. Woledge, Paris, Champion, 1936, ll. 97-206.

¹⁵ Girart d'Amiens, *Escanor. Roman arthurien en vers de la fin du XIII^e siècle*, éd. par R. Trachsler, Genève, Droz, 1994, ll. 721-63.

¹⁶ In particular, the Parisian manuscripts, like Ar(2), 355, 357(2) have *Brun sans pitié*, while the manuscripts of the British Museum (such as L2 and L4) have *Breuz sans pitié* (Roger Lathuillère, *Guiron le Courtois. Étude de la tradition manuscrite et analyse critique*, Genève, Droz, 1966, p. 367).

¹⁷ Because of the vastness of this prose romance and its innumerable manuscripts, *Guiron le Courtois* has not been published yet in its integrity (although Professor Richard Trachsler and his team is currently working on this edition); therefore, I have used the detailed analysis of *Guiron* compiled by Roger Lathuillère (op. cit.). For the episode to which I refer here, see *ibidem*, § 16, p. 199: «*par eles perdi mis peres la teste et hui en ai ge perdu un mien charnel ami*».

¹⁸ *Aliscans. Rédaction A*, éd. par C. Régner, Paris, Champion, 1990, l. 234. For a list of the occurrences of the name Brun attributed to a Saracen warrior, cf. the entry «Brun» in Ernest Langlois, *Table des noms propres de toute nature compris dans les chansons de geste imprimées*, Paris, Librairie Bouillon, 1904.

¹⁹ Michel Praneuf, *L'ours et les hommes*, Paris, Imago, 1989, p. 29.

brun).²⁰ Although several studies in the last decades have focused on the continuity of ancient meanings in present-day onomastics and on the *longue durée* of cultural contents of linguistic elements,²¹ I must admit that, on the basis of the textual evidence I have collected, it is hard to evaluate how much of this animal meaning could still be perceived in French onomastics. However, it is worth pointing out that a link between *brun* and bear survived in French medieval literary tradition through the *Roman de Renart*. In this animal epic, every animal character is attributed a personal name, which sometimes is drawn from the *noa* name of the animal, as in the case of the bear, whom is given the name *Brun*.²² In order to verify whether this connection between the name of *Brun sans pitié* and the bear is viable, I will now give an overview of the characterisation of the bear in the popular culture at the time in which Arthurian texts were produced and acknowledged.

In medieval imagery, the bear was considered the animal closest to humans: 13th-century bestiaries stressed his upright position, which distinguished the bear from other animals, and reported the belief that this animal had intercourse in a human-like fashion and even shared human «*pudor*».²³ Perhaps for these particles of humanity, the bear was also characterised with two negative features that, although regarded as beastly, could be easily acknowledged in human males, too: aggressiveness and sexual excess.

For what concerns the first one, in medieval imagery the bear possesses a savage aggressiveness, which is externalised in the sturdiness and the strength of the animal. Since bears fight in an upright position, men who intended to fight with them were supposedly forced to tackle the animals in a similar fashion, as in unarmed combat. Literature gives examples of this belief concerning combat with bears: as a matter of fact, this is the traditional way in which heroes fight against bears in romance. For instance, in the *Roman d'Yder*, a bear breaks into the queen's rooms and, while the other knights run to fetch their weapons, the knight Yder tackles the animal unarmed, wrestling with him until he pushes him out of a window: «*Ensement se sont pris andui,/ Yder enbrace e il lui/ com feissent dui luteur;/ cil quil voient en ont freor*».²⁴ This is, contingently, also the way in which Gauvain is forced to fight with Brehus in the *Tristan en Prose*:

Lors giete son escu a terre et se lance a Breüz mult asprement. Quant cil le voit vers lui venir, il giete son escu en voie et n'atent pas qe monseignor Gauvain le puisse sorprendre, ainz s'apareille de lui saisir as bras puis q'il voit qe a fere li convient. Mes s'espee retient il totes voies o lui. Ensint s'entreviennent

²⁰ Similarly, in other languages the wolf is called with the word meaning grey. *Noa* names are often used to designate dangerous animals in popular culture: cf. Richard Riegler, «Zoonimia popolare», *Quaderni di Semantica*, 2/1981, p. 325-61 (transl. of «Tiernamen», *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, hrsg. von E. Hoffmann-Krayer und H. Bächtold-Stäubli, Berlin – Leipzig, De Gruyter, 1927-42, vol. 8, p. 864-901), p. 341.

²¹ I am referring mostly to the Italian trend of studies that developed around the journal *Quaderni di semantica*: cf., for instance, Mario Alinei, *Dal totemismo al cristianesimo popolare*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell'Orso, 1984, and Rita Caprini, *Nomi propri*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell'Orso, 2001.

²² The case of Brun the bear in the *Roman de Renart* opens up two interpretative paths: although *brun* is the Germanic *noa* name of the bear, it is also a widespread medieval personal name. Indeed, in the *Roman de Renart*, the names of the animal characters frequently mirror human personal names (Massimo Bonafin, *Le malizie della volpe. Parola letteraria e motivi etnici nel Roman de Renart*, Roma, Carocci, 2006, p. 216-7). This is a mechanism well attested in folkloric culture, according to which, for various reasons, animals significant for the community are called by human names or family titles (see Riegler, «Zoonimia...», art. cit., p. 343-5, and Alinei, *Dal totemismo...*, op. cit., p. 1-18). On the other hand, some scholars have interpreted animals' personal names in the *Renart* as a reference to 11th-century political conflicts: for instance, according to this reading, the name of Brun the bear is supposed to evoke the homonymous archbishop of Cologne (Karl Ferdinand Werner, «Reineke Fuchs. Burgundischer Ursprung eines europäischen Tierepos», *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 124/1995, p. 375-435; p. 386). However, as Bonafin correctly notices, there are not enough elements in the texts in support of this interpretation, and reading a stratified literary work like *Renart* as an historical document is misleading (Bonafin, *Le malizie...*, op. cit., p. 22).

²³ Michel Salvat, «L'ours dans la symbolique médiévale», *L'animalité. Hommes et animaux dans la littérature française*, éd. par A. Niderst, Tübingen, Gunter Narr Verlag, 1994, p. 55-66; p. 56-9.

²⁴ «The two grabbed each other, [the bear] hugs Yder and Yder does the same with him, as if they were two wrestlers; those who look at them are frightened» (*Romance of Yder*, ed. by A. Adams, Cambridge, Brewer, 1983, ll. 3356-62).

li chevalier. Torne li uns, torne li autres, et tant se torment en tel guise qe monseignor Gauvain de son tor meesmes vient desoz Breüz sans Pitié et chiet a terre.²⁵

Concerning the bear-like strength, some superhuman physical quality of Brun/Brehus is suggested by the frequent appearance of giants in his lineage. Information on this subject, though, is provided only by *Guiron le Courtois*, which lists many male members of the lineage of Brun – who, obviously, have all names containing the word «*brun*» (several Brun, but also *Segurant le Brun*, *Hector le Brun*, *Ellain le Brun*, and so on). The first Brun of the lineage is a giant defeated by Uther Pendragon; another Brun is son of Albrun and a she-giant; *Hector le brun* is the son of an earlier Brun and another she-giant.²⁶

Finally, it is worth observing that both the bear and Brun/Brehus are creatures belonging to the wilderness rather than to the civilised space of the court. Both the animal and the Arthurian villain wander in the forest, making it unsafe by their mere presence. Brun generally appears in the texts when dwelling in a pavilion in a strategic place along the route, and most of the times he seems to be suspicious of courtly spaces: for instance, in the Vulgate *Lancelot*, Brun deliberately stays outside of the castles where Gauvain and the young lady spend the night.²⁷ In most of the cycle, the character does not seem to belong to a court, but when he does, the text indicates this place by means of toponyms denoting wildness, like the *Royaume Sauvage* in *Guiron*.²⁸

One may argue that savage aggressiveness and other animal-like features that suggest the non-human nature of the character are rather stereotypical in the representation of the villain in both epic and romance, and are not sufficient to prove the connection with the bear. However, the second feature of the bear in medieval folklore, sexual excess, seems to be peculiar to the representation of this animal and, at the same time, fits well with the obsession of *Brun sans pitié* for assaulting women. The folk-tale model usually called *Jean de l'Ours*, spread in various mountain areas of Europe, tells the story of a young woman who is abducted and raped by a bear, and conceives with the animal a hybrid bear-man.²⁹ The same pattern is present in several folkloric rituals of the Carpathian area and the Pyrenees, mostly celebrated at Candlemas but analogous to Carnival celebrations: they featured the staged abduction of a young woman by a man masked as a bear and the following hunt and killing of the bear by the men of the community.³⁰ The same folk-tale model appears in several popular legends across Europe until modern time, as it is demonstrated by the 1869 novella *Lokis* by Prosper Mérimée. In this novella, a bear rapes a Lithuanian countess; the man born from this bestial mating, although human in appearance, cannot restrain his bear-like nature and, on the first night of marriage, he finally attacks and kills his bride.³¹

²⁵ “Then he threw his shield to the ground and runs vigorously against Brehus. When he saw him coming, he threw his shield away, and did not wait for sir Gauvain to catch him unaware, but rather prepares himself to assault him with his arms, since it seemed the most convenient way. However, he keeps his sword with him. Thus, the knights run against each other. One turns around, the other turns around, and they both roll around in such a way that sir Gauvain, after his own twist, found himself under *Brehus sans pitié* and fell on the ground” (*Tristan*..., ed. cit., vol. V, § 77, p. 279-80).

²⁶ *Guiron*..., ed. cit., §§ 256, 259, p. 482-9.

²⁷ *Lancelot. Roman en prose du XIII^e siècle*, éd. par A. Micha, Genève, Droz, 1978-83, 9 voll., ch. XXXVIIa, §§ 1-10, p. 398-403.

²⁸ *Guiron*..., ed. cit., § 256, p. 482. This romance, however, clearly does not recognise (or consciously tries to eradicate) the savagery that marks the lineage of the Brun, and goes as far as to create a new etymology for the place name *Sauvaige*, coming from the fusion of the name of Albrun's wife (*Vagés*) and the name of his tower (*Sauf*) (*ibidem*).

²⁹ Praneuf, *L'ours*..., op. cit., p. 49-53. This tale-type is usually classified as part of the Aarne-Thompson tale 301 B (cf. H.-J. Uther, *The types of international folktales: a classification and bibliography based on the system of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson*, Helsinki, Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 3 voll.; vol. I, p. 177-9).

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 57-64; Cf. S. Ja. Serov, «L'orso consorte. Variazioni del rito e della fiaba presso i popoli dell'Europa e dell'America Ispanica», *L'immagine riflessa*, 10/2001, p. 113-40 (transl. of «Medived'suprug: variacii abrajada i skazki u narodov Evropy i ispanskoj Ameriki», *Fol'klor i istoričeskaja etnografija*, Moskva, Nauka, 1983, p. 170-90), p. 121-3; Michel Pastoureau, *L'ours. Histoire d'un roi déchu*, Paris, Seuil, 2007, p. 83-9.

³¹ Prosper Mérimée, *La Guzla et dernières nouvelles*, Paris, Le Divan, 1928, p. 201-79.

I am not trying to infer here that *Brun sans pitié* follows the folk-tale pattern; however, it seems to me that Brun's mysterious behaviour shares some aspects with that bestowed to the bear in medieval folklore. *Brun sans pitié*, as I have illustrated above, spends his life looking for maidens to assault, to the point that every woman of the Arthurian world fears him, and when he is defeated at a tournament all the women rejoice;³² this is because, as everybody knows, if Brun catches a lady

de ju sauvage
li eüst, je croi, jué Brunz
car n'en estort ne blanz ne brunz
pucele ne dame, tant vaille,
soit en murdre ou en repostaille,
il n'i gardera ja raison
que nes ocie en traÿson.³³

The aggressiveness of Brun towards women, almost intrinsic to his nature, is portrayed in the texts as something inevitable, that does not need explanations.

Conclusion

The behaviour of *Brun sans pitié*, so different from that of any other Arthurian knight, seems at first almost devilish: there are friends and foes wandering around Arthurian forests, but Brun seems to be the most dangerous of them. Indeed, the *Tristan en prose* goes as far as to say that the presence of this knight wandering in the forest is the reason why everybody is compelled to go around fully armoured.³⁴ This devilish quality of Brun/Brehus has justly led Richard Trachsler to define him as an outsider in the Arthurian system of ethics.³⁵

Nonetheless, I think that we should not overestimate the otherness of his behaviour: Brun is a full knight, however wicked, and he seems to be well aware of chivalric ethos, so much so that, rather than opposing to it from the outside, he seems to take advantage of its flaws. Therefore, he deceives his opponents by leading them to make blind promises,³⁶ or using their chivalric honour to cajole them into fighting other knights in his stead,³⁷ and he accuses valiant knights of cowardice in the attempt to manipulate them.³⁸ Even his obsession with killing women seems to inscribe itself in the absurd "Coutume de Logres" described by Chrétien de Troyes in *Chevalier de la Charrette*. According to this

³² *Escanor...*, ed. cit., ll. 4068-71.

³³ "Brun would have made her play a wild 'sport', because there is not blonde or brunette, maiden or married woman, no matter how old, either secretly or publicly, whom he will not restrain himself from killing treacherously" (*Escanor...*, ed. cit., ll. 1012-8).

³⁴ *Roman de Tristan...*, 1987-97, ed. cit., ch. VI, § 23.

³⁵ Trachsler, «Brehus...», art.cit., p. 33-5.

³⁶ Cf., for instance, *Lancelot du lac...*, ed. cit: in exchange of information, Gauvain promises to give to Brehus anything he wants, but is then forced to withdraw the promise once the knight asks to obtain the lady escorted by Gauvain (ch. XXXVI, pp. 640-2; also in *Lancelot...*, 1978-83, ed.cit., ch. XXXVIIa, §10, p. 403). Soon after, Brehus accompanies Gauvain, but then calumniates him to the lord who is hosting him, so that the day after the host and his men attack Gauvain (without knowing his identity) and Brehus takes the chance to escape (ch. XXXVIII, p. 648-50).

³⁷ Cf. *Roman de Tristan...* 1987-97, ed. cit: in order to escape a duel, he persuades three knights that his opponent is in fact himself, Brehus, i.e. «*le plus desloial cevalier ki orendroit soit en cest monde*» (vol. V, § 17, p. 87). This episode is particularly intriguing because Brehus exploits his own bad reputation – of which he is perfectly aware – against honest knights.

³⁸ Cf. *Tristan...*, ed. cit: Galaad, attracted by the screams of the lady assaulted by Brehus, attacks and unhorses him, to which Brehus reacts accusing Galaad of having dishonoured him (vol. IV, § 258, p. 244-5). Later, Brehus is duelling with Gauvain when Merengis steps in to save the latter, and thus Brehus feels entitled to accuse him and Gauvain of great «*outrage*» and insists that if the mission of the «*chevaliers erranz*» is to maintain the justice, they should have not interfered in the duel (vol. V, § 78, p. 280-3). Like in this case, Brehus is never completely wrong, and his ability is exactly that of exposing the contradictions of chivalric code: justice is a universal value, Tristan admits, but in order to preserve Gauvain's life an exception needs to be made (ivi, p. 282).

custom, women wondering alone cannot be attacked, but women accompanied by a knight can be assaulted, if the assaulter kills the knight first:

Les costumes et les franchises
estoient tex, a cel termine,
que dameisele ne meschine,
se chevaliers la trovast sole,
ne plus qu'il se tranchast la gole
ne feïst se tote enor non,
s'estre volsist de boen renon;
et, s'il l'esforçast, a toz jorz
an fust honiz an totes corz.
Mes, se ele conduit eüst
uns autres, se tant li pleüst
qu'a celui bataille an feïst
et par armes la conqueïst
sa volonte an poïst faire
sanz honte et sanz blasme retraire.³⁹

This custom is clearly a device used by Chrétien to satirize the absurdity and the flaws in chivalric ethical system,⁴⁰ and indeed Brun exploits it in the same way.

For all of these reasons, I think that Brun embodies not the complete "other", but rather a «*mythe de félonie*», as Anne Barthelot calls him, a character used by the texts to exorcise the negative inclinations inside chivalric system.⁴¹ Brun functions as an inner enemy of chivalry, the ever-pressing possibility of turning chivalric ethos and ideology into its own contradiction, by forcing its rules and exploiting its gaps.

In order to give substance to this ambiguous villain, the texts recycle some aspects of a ready-made model in folkloric imagination, that of the bear. In fact, the bear-like nature of Brun marks him as a villain, but this peculiar animality make him also a familiar enemy, uncannily close to a regular knight. Brun's bear-like name and his partially bear-like behaviour contribute to conveying this meaning: just as the bear is the other side of man in folklore, so Brun is the other side – literally, the dark side – of the Arthurian knight. I do not know how much this link between Brun and the bear would still be visible to the medieval audience of Arthurian romance, how much was intended to be acknowledged and how much was some sort of fossil, or a pun that slowly lost its meaning. Nonetheless, from what I have illustrated so far, I think it is reasonable to infer that a certain extent of bear-like quality survives in the name of Brun as much as in his behaviour, and that the two are in a silent dialogue with each other, contributing to found and confound the identity of this extraordinary Arthurian villain.

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³⁹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot ou le Chevalier de la charrette*, éd. et trad. par D. Poirion, in Id., *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, ll. 1308-22.

⁴⁰ Chrétien could also be aiming against the supposed code of the *Pax Dei*, in which only women, merchants and clerics without an armed escort would be safe from attack.

⁴¹ Anne Barthelot, «Brehus sans Pitié, ou le traître de la pièce», *Félonie, trahison, reniements au Moyen Âge*, Montpellier, Université Paul-Valéry, 1997, p. 385-95; p. 393-4.