

Juhani Härmä – Elina Suomela-Härmä
(University of Helsinki)

*A medieval literary figure defined by his verbal violence: Keu
the seneschal*



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eu in Arthurian literature I

Seneschal Keu is one of the legendary King Arthur's (ca. 500) knights of the Round Table. The knights are several dozen and some emerge as having a character which distinguishes them from the others; Keu is a case in point. Keu (Engl. Kay) appears in more than twenty medieval French romances, both verse and prose. A seneschal was the intendant in charge of a nobleman's household in the Middle Ages. In Arthurian novels, Keu is in practice Arthur's butler, who waits on him at table. Arthur and Keu are foster brothers, who know each other since childhood.

Keu in Arthurian literature II

Keu is usually boasting, envious and sarcastic and regularly launches quarrels with those whom he meets. His poisonous tongue is proverbial and he always seems to be in a bad mood. Nowadays, he would probably be defined as having a personality disorder or a disturbed character.



Keu in Arthurian literature III

Keu is almost never one of the main characters of the entire novel, but he can play a central role in one or two episodes. Our corpus covers a time span of 350 years, and it is no wonder if the character changes somewhat during that long period. We have examined a dozen novels, both in verse and in prose; half are anonymous.

Keu in Arthurian literature IV

Keu typically appears in one episode or in one of the "story lines" of the novels, where his caustic words and his subsequent behaviour give rise to an unexpected and usually alarming or harmful situation. Typically this also happens at the beginning of the novel at Arthur's court, at Pentecost or at Ascension, when an unknown knight or an unknown young woman arrives at the court, presenting an odd request.

Keu in Arthurian literature V

Meeting an unknown person seems to be one of the situations that trigger Keu's verbal violence; other triggering motives include jealousy. Our examples will illustrate these, but sometimes it just seems, as the narrator or another character says, that Keu's abusive language is without a cause and that he "has to let the venom out of himself".



Keu the seneschal in medieval French literature

(ca. 1170 – ca. 1520)

Some representative texts:

- Chrétien de Troyes (four novels, from ca. 1170)
(Old French)
- Froissart: *Méliador* (ca. 1380) (Middle French)
- Pierre Sala: *Le Chevalier au lion* (ca. 1520)
(Renaissance French)

Goals:

- 1) characterize Keu's language by classifying his lines into categories of speech acts
- 2) examine the reactions provoked by Keu's speech in those present and the comments of the narrators of the stories



Speech acts

(approximate order of frequency)

- 1) Mockery, irony
- 2) Abuse, slander
- 3) Challenge
- 4) Threat, provocation
- 5) Boasting, bragging
- 6) Lying, felony



(1) Mockery or irony

- Bien pert que c'est après mangier, (590)

fet Kex, qui teire ne se pot : (...)

Après mangier, sanz remüer,

vet chascuns Loradin tüer,

Et vos [Yvain] iroiz vengier Forré !

Sont vostre panel aborré

et vos chaues de fer froiees

et voz banieres desploiees ?

Or tost, por Deu, mes sire Yvain,

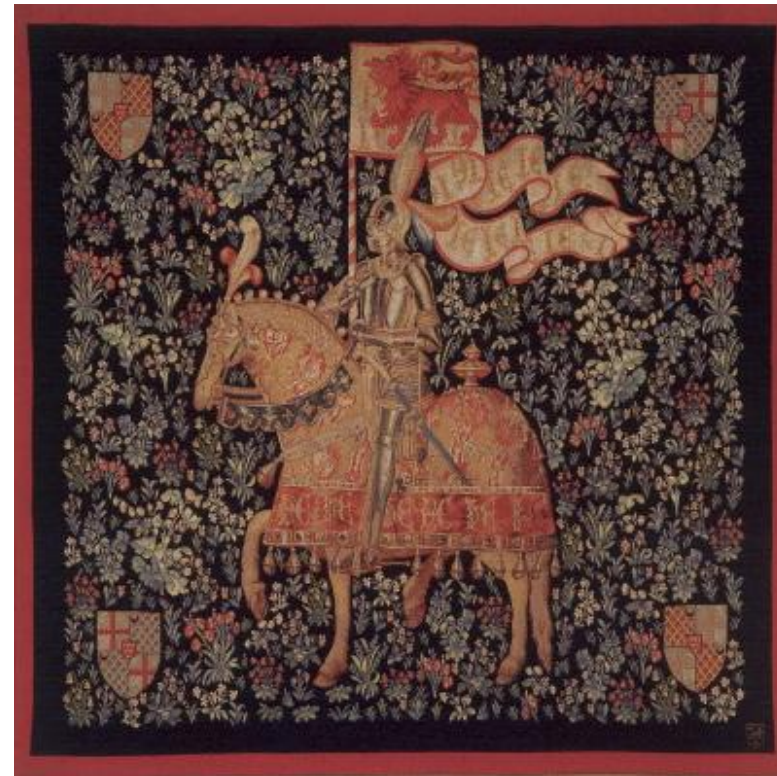
movroiz vos enuit ou demain ?

Feites le nos savoir, biax sire,

quant vos iroiz an cest martire,

que nos vos voldrons convoier ;

(Chrétien, *Yvain* 590-)



Mockery, irony: Yvain

Keu mocks the young knight Yvain who is eager to leave for an adventure; Keu “cannot hold his tongue” but tells Yvain that after a meal, everybody is ready to go and kill pagan kings; he asks Yvain if his horse is ready, if his banner is fluttering in the wind, if he’s leaving tonight or tomorrow, etc.

(2)



buse, slander

– A la feste ? fet Kex, et que feroiz vous la ? Commant vous osseroiz vous metre en la compaignie des meilleurs chevaliers qui ore soient el monde, qui estes tant coart qui n’avez hardement d’atendre la joste de si povre chevalier con je sui, qui sui touz li pires de .c. et .1. chevaliers qui sont compaignon de la Table Roonde ? Certes je ai ci tant veu en vos que je vous i puis cognoistre a celui jour, ja sanz honte ne vous en partiroiz.

(Tristan en prose, Les deux captivités de Tristan p. 111)



buse: Tristan

Lancelot and Keu have met by chance, and Keu does not recognize Lancelot. Lancelot tells him that he is going to the feast Arthur is organizing at Pentecost. Keu reacts:

- To the feast? How would you dare join the best knights in the world, you who were so cowardly that you didn't even want to fight me, a lousy knight...

(3) Challenge

Misire Keu, tout maintenant qu'il vit monseigneur Lancelot vers lui venir, il s'arreste et s'apareille de joste et li crie quanqu'il puet : « Sire chevalier, gardez vous de moi ! A joster vous estuet ! »

(Tristan en prose, Les deux captivités de Tristan
p. 111)



Challenge: Tristan

- When Keu sees Lancelot coming towards him, he stops and gets ready for battle and shouts loud : Sir knight ! Beware of me! You will have to fight!



(4) Threat or provocation

Lors s'en vet a la damoisele et la prent au frain et li dit :
« Damoiselle, je vous pran par la coustume del reaume de Logres, car la coustume est tele des chevaliers aventureus que se li uns encontre l'autre qui enmaint dame ou damoiselle, s'il li puet tolir et gaaignier la par prouesce d'armes, il la doit avoir franchement. (*Tristan en prose, Les deux captivités de Tristan* p. 118-119)



Threat, provocation: Tristan

Keu announces to an unknown young lady that according to the custom of the kingdom of King Arthur, he has the right to take her along, if he manages to beat her accompanying knight; which is indeed what he does in this instance.



(5) Boasting or bragging



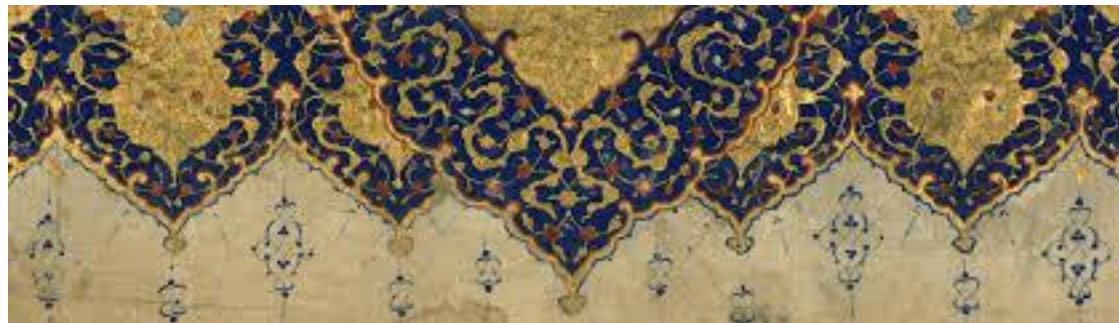
Sire, par mon chief, fait Keus, vos ne me deüssiés mie oblier, kar aussi bons chevaliers sui jo d'autretel valor comme li autre, et vos ne me deüssiez pas avoir delaié a mander ! Vos avez tos les autres semons et nient moi, et autresi poissanz doi je estre del coffre ovrir comme il sont, kar envers autretant chevaliers me sui ge desfendus conme els et autretant en ai ge ocis sor mon cors desfendant conme nus d'aux.

(*Perlesvaus* p. 702)

Boasting: Perlesvaus

The other knights have been allowed to demonstrate their strength, but Keu was forgotten by the king.

- Sire, you shouldn't have forgotten me, since I am as good a knight as the others (...) I am as strong and capable as they are, and I've killed as many knights as they have.



(6) Lying, felony

et Kex, qui enuieus estoit,
et est ancor et toz jorz iert
ne ja nul bien dire ne quiert,
li dist : « Frere, li rois vos done
les armes et vos abandone. »
Cil cuida que voir li deïst,
s'ala après et si l'ocist
d'un javelot que il lança.
(Chrétien, *Perceval* 4096-)





elony: Perceval

King Arthur is telling Gauvain how Keu, who is “always unpleasant and who never says anything good”, misleads young and naïve Perceval into killing a knight, by letting him (P.) understand that the king has promised him the knight’s armour, if he (P.) just takes the trouble of seizing it; which is what he does.

Reactions to Keu's language 1

- Certes, Kex, ja fussiez crevez,
fet la reïne, au mien cuidier,
se ne vos poïssiez vuidier
del venin don vos estes plains.
Enuieus estes, et vilains,
de tancier a vos conpaignons.
(Chrétien, *Yvain* 91-)

The Queen says: Keu, you would certainly be dead if you couldn't empty yourself from the venom you are full of. You are nasty and unpleasant when you mock your companions.

Reactions to Keu's language 2

-Kex, fet li rois, por Deu merci,
trop dites volantiers enui,
si ne vos chaut onques a cui.
A prodome est ce mout lez vices.
(...) Vilenie est d'autrui gaber
et de prometre sanz doner.
(Chrétien, *Perceval* 1006-)

Keu, says the king, you say easily unpleasant things to everyone. A gentleman can't behave like that. It is vile to mock others and to promise without giving anything.

Reactions to Keu's language 3

Et Kex, qui molt fu *ranponeus*,
fel et poignanz et venimeus,
li dist : [li = knight Calogrenant]
(Chrétien, *Yvain* 69)

And Keu, who was outrageous, felonious and caustic, said to him
[knight Calogrenant]:

