'A beter knyght, ne more profetabull, with Arthur at the Rownd Tabull, herd I never of rede': Teaching Lybeaus Desconus in the undergraduate and graduate classrooms

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'A beter knyght, ne more profetabull, with Arthur at the Rownd Tabull, herd I never of rede': Teaching *Lybeaus Desconus* in the undergraduate and graduate classrooms

by Drew Danielle Maxwell

*Lybeaus Desconus* is a Middle English Arthurian romance that was composed in the middle of the fourteenth century, and could have possibly been written by Thomas Chestre. *Sir Launfal* (another Middle English Arthurian romance), was assuredly composed by Chestre, but the attribution of *Lybeaus Desconus* to him can only be made on the basis of formal and lexical similarities (Shuffelton 471). For the purposes of this short article, I will hereafter refer to Thomas Chestre as the author of *Lybeaus Desconus*. While *Lybeaus Desconus* has not received much critical attention or favor from modern scholars, it does seem to have been well liked amongst its audiences in the Middle Ages. Maldwyn Mills has suggested that if the number of surviving manuscripts of a medieval text is a dependable guide to its popularity, then *Lybeaus Desconus* was quite possibly one of the most popular Middle English Arthurian Romances. It survives in six copies; five medieval and one from the seventeenth century (Mills 134). The sheer fact alone that *Lybeaus Desconus* appears to have been quite popular in the late Middle Ages should warrant it a more prominent place within the study of medieval romance at the
undergraduate and graduate levels; however, I will highlight some additional reasons as to why it should not be over-looked.

Many Middle English romance texts are not readily available in student-friendly anthologies, and one of the only anthologies is the Norton Critical Edition *Middle English Romances*, selected and edited by Stephen H. A. Shepherd.[1] This edition is a fantastic resource for both undergraduate and graduate students studying Middle English romances. Unfortunately, *Lybeaus Desconus* is not one of the texts included in this anthology and until recently, *Lybeaus Desconus* was not available in many printed editions, which made teaching it more difficult. However, in 2008, the TEAMS Middle English text series published *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse* which included *Lybeaus Desconus*. This edition is affordable and is available for students to purchase in print but is also available for individual use online through the University of Rochester’s Robins Library Digital Project.[2] The fact that it is now more readily available online and in print should help promote the study of *Lybeaus Desconus* in the undergraduate and graduate classrooms. This edition is also an excellent teaching resource for other Middle English verses such as Sir Orfeo, Sir Isumbras, and Sir Cleges.

*Lybeaus Desconus* is not a very long romance and can be easily read in its original Middle English by an upper year undergraduate class that is familiar, or just becoming familiar, with Middle English. This romance would be an excellent addition to a survey course of medieval literature, a course that focuses solely on Middle English romances,
or a course on the legends of Arthur. While *Lybeaus Desconus* is an excellent Middle
English Arthurian romance to be studied on its own, it can also be discussed in relation
to other Middle English romances as well as texts outside of the Middle English
romance genre. *Lybeaus Desconus* even appears to have influenced the story of Una and
the Red Cross Knight in Book 1 of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (Broadus 202-
204).

One aspect of *Lybeaus Desconus* that makes it appealing to students (especially in
an undergraduate classroom) is the fact that it is fast-paced and includes many exciting
battles with knights, giants and magicians. The majority of the plot is made up of
Lybeaus proving himself as a worthy knight through his victorious battles. In this short
romance, Lybeaus battles a knight called William Dolebraunche, fights with three of
William's nephews (all four men pledge an oath to Lybeaus to go to King Arthur to
surrender and be in his power), kills a black giant and a red giant in order to save a
maiden, fights a knight called Gefferon le Froudeus, battles Sir Otys and his knights (Sir
Otys swears a pledge to yield himself unto King Arthur), kills Magus a black giant,
mistakenly battles Sir Lambert (who at first thinks he is protecting the Lady of Synadon
before realizing that Lybeaus is the one who has come to save her) and at the end of the
tale he finally defeats the magicians Irain and Mabon who were keeping the Lady of
Synadon imprisoned. The fact that Lybeaus is victorious in all of his battles helps to
forge his knightly identity and reputation. The abundance and variety of battles within
this text would make for interesting classroom discussions. An excellent way to begin a class discussion of how male characters in Middle English Arthurian romances develop their identities would be to discuss the portrayal of knights in their battles. Students could compare and contrast the portrayals of the heroes and their battles within Thomas Chestre’s *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Sir Launfal*.

Topics regarding gender can also be examined within *Lybeaus Desconus*. Middle English Romance opens up a space in which female power, agency and desire can be explored. Elizabeth Archibald argues that the romance form provides an exception to the anti-feminist medieval literary tradition (154). Middle English romance offers possibilities for women to attain some social agency and *Lybeaus Desconus* provides some examples of feminine agency. There are several female characters within *Lybeaus Desconus*: Lybeaus’ mother, the maiden Elyn (who comes to Arthur’s court in search of a knight to save the Lady of Synadon), Denamowre[3], and the Lady of Synadon. *Lybeaus Desconus* is an excellent text in which to examine feminine agency within the characters of Elyn, Denamowre and the Lady of Synadon. Elyn is described as very beautiful, and the author says that “Ther was never cowntas ne qwene / That was so sembly on to sene / Bot sche myght ben hyr pere” (lines 124-126). Her agency is exhibited through her speech and she has no reservations about proclaiming her dismay at being given such a young and inexperienced knight to save her lady. She even goes so far as to rebuke King Arthur for his decision and she says:
Alas that tyde
That I hether was sende!
This wyll spryng wyde
And lorne is, kynge, thi pride,
And all thy lordys is shent
That thou wold send a chyld
That is wytteles and wyld
To dele mannes dynte,
And hast knyghtys of mayn,
Persyvall and Ser Gawayn,
Full wyse in tournament (lines 182-192).

While she chides Lybeaus at first, he eventually earns her respect through his triumphant battles with giants and other knights. However, when Denamowre uses magic to make Lybeaus fall in love with her, Elyn again uses her words to voice her opinion. She reminds Lybeaus of his pledge to King Arthur and tells him that if he does not save the Lady of Synadon, she will remain in prison for a long time. Her words spur Lybeaus to leave Denamowre and continue on his way to save the Lady of Synadon and fulfill his oath. While Elyn is unable to bear arms herself to save her lady, she displays her agency through her voice which invokes Lybeaus to knightly action. Denamowre is a powerful sorceress who exhibits agency through her knowledge and use of magic. While her use of magic is antagonistic to Lybeaus and his quest, she is still a powerful female figure within the text because she acts on her desire to have Lybeaus and his love and uses her magic to obtain her desire. As mentioned above, Elyn is the one who, through her words, is able to break the magic love spell which is binding Lybeaus to Denamowre. In this sense, it is women who control and spur the actions and feelings of
the hero. The Lady of Synadon also displays a great deal of agency. Two male
necromancers, Irain and Mabon, cast an enchantment over her so that she has her own
face but has the body of a dragon/serpent. In this enchanted form she approaches
Lybeaus (who is sweating with fear) and kisses him. She then transforms back to her
human form but “sche was all nakyd” (line 2077). While standing in front of Lybeaus
completely nude she explains everything to him and says,

    Throught ther conjurment
    To a worme thei had me schent,
    Ever in wo to wende
    Tyll I had kyssed Gaweyn
    That is full doughty, serteyn,
    Or some of hys kyne.
    For that thow hast savyd my lyfe,
    Castellus fyfty and fyve
    Take I wyll thee tylle,
    And myselwe to wyfe,
    Styll withoutyn stryffe,
    Yiff that it be your wyll (lines 2090- 2101).

The lady’s speech would make an excellent classroom discussion of the
representations of men and women in this romance. In her one and only speech within
this text, the Lady of Synadon offers herself in marriage to Lybeaus and also reveals to
him that he is one of Gawain’s kin. James Weldon notes that the Lady of Synadon
speaks directly to Lybeaus, while he remains quite passive (78). This scene would be
interesting for students to compare to the earlier work Le Bel Inconnu by Renaut de
Beaujeu. Chestre refashioned this scene and appears to have redirected the story.
towards medieval cultural concerns regarding women, marriage and female consent (Weldon 69). Under canon law, female consent was necessary for a marriage to be legitimate and the lady’s language which she uses to offer herself in marriage to Lybeaus appeals to the language of consent in medieval marriage contracts (Weldon 91). In addition to themes of marriage consent, this scene addresses the nature of women and the relationship between men and women. The Lady of Synadon has agency in this tale because she is the sole heiress and she alone has the authority to offer herself to Lybeaus in marriage. She asserts her desire for marriage and once she is finished her speech Lybeaus is “glad and blythe” (line 2102) and accepts her proposal. Due to the fact that Lybeaus Desconus has female characters which exhibit forms of agency, it is an ideal text in which to discuss gender in medieval romance.

Another interesting theme that can be explored when teaching Lybeaus Desconus is “The Fair Unknown” motif, which is a large part of the plot of Lybeaus Desconus. It was Perceval of Chretien’s Conte du Graal that set the fashion for this motif; however, the character who gives his name to the motif- le bel inconnu (the fair unknown)- first makes his appearance in Renaut de Beaujeu’s Le Bel Inconnu (Cooper 332). This motif can also be seen in many other Middle English romance texts such as Sir Perceval of Galles, Sir Degaré, and it was used by Sir Thomas Malory for several of his knights in Le Morte Darthur (For example, Sir Gareth, Sir Percival and Sir Breunor). “The Fair Unknown” motif centers on conceptions and examinations of identity. In this motif, an
unknown male hero arrives at a cultured court (such as King Arthur’s court) and asks to be knighted. In the case of *Lybeaus Desconus*, he is the son of Sir Gawain and an anonymous woman who is simply referred to as Lybeaus’ mother. His mother raises him ignorant of his parentage and his real name which is Gyngeleyne. As a young man Gyngeleyne (still ignorant as to his real name) finds a dead knight, dons his armor and goes to Arthur’s court to be knighted. King Arthur sees the boy, knights him and gives him the nickname Sir Lybeaus Desconus. The hero sets out on a series of adventures, eventually discovers who his father is, and marries a powerful and beautiful lady. An interesting way to discuss this theme would be to compare and contrast the motif within *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Le Morte Darthur*. This is a good way to introduce the students to Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, which is an important work in the medieval literary canon and has been influential to many writers for almost 600 years. For example, “The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkeney”, which is one of the tales within *Le Morte Darthur*, is comparable to *Lybeaus Desconus* in many respects. Unlike Gyngeleyne in *Lybeaus Desconus*, Gareth knows his true name and parentage (he is King Arthur’s nephew and Gawain’s brother), but goes to Arthur’s court as an unknown young man in order to gain a reputation on his own without his family’s influence. Like Gyngeleyne, Gareth is also given a nickname, Beaumains. Other similarities include the fact that both young knights ask King Arthur to grant them a favor which is to be given the next adventure that appears at court. In both tales, the adventure involves a
captured lady who needs rescuing and a maiden who will lead the knight to her. In both texts, the maidens are at first unhappy with the knight they are given to save their lady and they chide the young man. In the case of Lybeaus Desconus, the maiden and her dwarf chide the young man for three days until he proves himself in battle. There are also magical ladies in both tales. The eventual outcome to both tales is similar; Gareth reveals his identity as Gawain's brother and marries the lady he saved, Lybeaus finds out that he is Gawain's son and his real name is Gyngeleyne and also marries the lady he set out to save. This motif of “The Fair Unknown” would make for an interesting discussion in the classroom and would be a good overarching theme for essay topics for students. The students can discuss this theme within Lybeaus Desconus on its own or in relation to some of the other romance texts that I have mentioned which also examine this motif and conceptions of identity.

In this short article, I have attempted to make a very strong case as to why Lybeaus Desconus should not be overlooked and why it should be taught more readily in both the undergraduate and graduate classrooms. Lybeaus Desconus is an interesting text which can be taught alongside, and discussed in relation to, many other medieval romance texts. There has been limited scholarly work done on this romance text, as the majority of medieval scholars have viewed it rather unfavorably; however, a few scholars have recently been more generous to this text and Renée Ward has suggested that a re-examination of Chestre and his work shows a writer who redefines the
romance genre (119). This article has provided some suggestions for ways to examine and study *Lybeaus Desconus* in both the undergraduate and graduate classrooms and this will hopefully open up further studies of this text and other marginalized medieval popular romances.

**Endnotes**


[3] George Shuffleton notes that the manuscript (Codex Ashmole 61) is most likely copied by a scribe who identifies himself/herself as “Rate”. Shuffleton says that the lady’s name in other texts is “La Dame d’Amoure”, thus Rates form loses the erotic power of the lady’s name (Shuffleton 479).

[4] George Shuffleton states that the maiden in *Lybeaus Desconus* embodies the motif of the demoisele mesdisante, which he says is “a sharp-tongued maid who never hesitates to voice severe criticism, particularly, when the hero engages in something foolhardy” (Shuffleton 476).

**Works Cited**


