

# **“C’est bien costume que soit pris chevaliers”: A Consideration of Captivity in the Guillaume Cycle**

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The role of captivity in medieval warfare has received renewed attention from historians over the past several years. In the first part of this study I summarize what these historians have found concerning the possible ends to captivity. In the second part, I analyze how closely the chansons de geste of the Guillaume Cycle follow the historical model. The analysis shows that the songs rarely follow the historical evidence, probably due to ideological reasons. In the concluding sections, this study of the literary value of the captivity motif finds that it contributes on a variety of levels to the literary qualities of the genre.

In the verse quoted in the title of this study, taken from the *Prise de Cordres et de Seville* (l. 154), the elder Aymeri seeks to comfort Agaiete, his daughter-in-law, concerning the captivity of her husband and his son, Guibert. The terms in which he tries to do so underscore two facets of captivity for the medieval warrior: that captivity was to be expected, and, as revealed later in the same passage, that there was hope for the release of such captives. These two themes will structure much of what is covered in this essay. It would seem inevitable that a genre so given to the representation of all the facets of medieval warfare would include a number of scenes and episodes dealing with captives. What is surprising is how little scholarly attention has been given to the motif of captivity in the chansons de geste.<sup>1</sup>

In this study, I would like to summarize what some recent historical research has found concerning medieval captivity, then apply that to the epics of the Guillaume cycle, and then finally, suggest what these prison episodes have to offer in terms of the literary makeup of the Old French epic. There is not space here to cover with much detail the conditions of captivity that often are part of these episodes in their literary form, nor to pursue the regional and temporal variations of the many legal codes from the history of the High Middle Ages. Additionally, for the sake of a coherent corpus, I will limit the objects of this study to the poems of the Guillaume Cycle, although there are fine and relevant examples to be found in the wider collection of chansons de geste.

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<sup>1</sup> One remarkable exception to this is Paul Bancourt’s 1982 study.

## What historiography tells us about medieval practices of captivity

A survey of almost any five pages of the work of a chronicler such as Orderic Vitalis provides numerous examples of medieval imprisonment. As revealing as such texts are, it is likely that the historical record concerning captivity does not tell the whole story. In his study of the records of captivity in Spain of the twelfth century, James Brodman argues that the practice of capturing one's opponents was so common that it was often unmentioned in most chronicles and other legal documents (*Ransoming Captives*, p. 1). From what we do know about the demanding costs and effort required to maintain captives, the justification for keeping prisoners was fairly complex and would move us beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>2</sup> Although many historians have been studying the conditions leading up to and during captivity,<sup>3</sup> here we will limit our focus to the possible conclusions to captivity for the medieval knight.

Once captured, the defeated knight could face a number of possible outcomes. First, historiography tells us that the death of the captured warrior would be the most likely. Not only do medieval chroniclers frequently mention the immediate massacre of captives, but death could come at a variety of later points along the process of handling the prisoner. Yvonne Friedman claims that "Life or death in captivity was determined at three central junctures: 1) the moment of submission, 2) the captor's initial reaction which usually set the tone for the rest of the period, and 3) the daily conditions of the captive" (*Encounter between Enemies*, p. 105).

Second, captivity could give way to slavery. Brodman finds that in the Spain of the *Reconquista* most captives did end their days as slaves (*Ransoming Captives*, p. 6). Enslavement was not partial to any one side, however. Yacoff Lev reminds us that forced labor was a reality for a number of Muslims captured by crusader forces as well (*Prisoners of War*, pp. 16-17).

Third, a number of medieval texts suggest conversion to the enemy's religion as a fast route to freedom. Yvonne Friedman speaks for most historians, however, when she cautions that conversion

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<sup>2</sup> On the costs of maintaining prisoners and prisons, see Dunabin (*Captivity and Imprisonment*, p. 29). John France submits that medieval armies had enough trouble trying to supply their own forces, let alone a second "army" of captives, (*Western Warfare*, p. 138). He goes on to base this in regional economic structures, "[Prisoners] were [...] worthless in the literal sense of the word: in Western Europe slavery was not an economic institution, so there was little profit in keeping them alive. In the Middle East and Spain, economic conditions were different and slavery was a viable alternative" (p. 138). Historians point to three reasons for the practice of captivity. Prisoners came to be seen as assets: they offered the possibility of monetary wealth (Brodman, *Ransoming Captives*, pp. 2-3), of political gain, and of an enhanced social rank. As Jean Dunbabin notes, by the thirteenth century the possession of a prison became a symbol of one's social rank (*Captivity and Imprisonment*, p. 47). From a legal perspective, the purpose behind medieval incarceration was coercive. Historians largely agree that the purpose of holding captives up until the early fourteenth century was to force some concession from one's enemies or rivals.

<sup>3</sup> On such matters see the classic work by Pugh.

could be seen as treason and did not always bring about the promised results (*Encounter between Enemies*, p. 137).

Fourth, escape would never be far from the mind of any captive, and there are many instances in annals of the eleventh through thirteenth centuries of prisoners who found a way to escape. To counteract this temptation, medieval authorities often threatened mutilation or death for anyone caught during or after an attempt at evasion. It is believed that this had a limiting effect on the number of planned prison escapes (Brodman, *Ransoming Captives*, p. 6). By contrast, rescue appears to have been comparatively fairly rare.

Fifth, captivity could end with the complete, unconditional release of the prisoner. In his careful study of this phenomenon, Lev concludes that such decisions “[...]reflected] a mixture of religious and humanitarian as well as political and propagandistic motives” (*Prisoners of War*, p. 27). One does not need to be reminded, of course, that this outcome was not to be expected.

The political economy of border areas or spheres of long-term conflict, for example in Spain and the Crusader lands, fostered the development of formal systems of prisoner exchange, and thus a sixth possible end to captivity.<sup>4</sup>

But if the prisoner is to walk out of his or her captivity, historians are almost unanimous about what is by far the most likely resolution—ransom.<sup>5</sup> The importance of this practice merits an investigation of its details.

The obvious value of ransoming captives to the captor was the significant revenue generated by the exchange. The potential financial gain could fund additional martial efforts and, at the same time, financially weaken one’s opponent. Of course, the value of one’s prisoner could also be traded for lands or cities, often the goal of the feudal conflicts during the High Middle Ages. Such advantages, according to David Nicolle, began to dissuade captors from killing and mistreating their prisoners (*Medieval Warfare*, vol. 2, p. 248). After all, why squander such an asset? Releasing prisoners for a fee was also an asset in another sense: a number of historians find evidence that it could be perceived as a precedent, a sort of insurance policy, for a possible outcome to a future conflict in which the roles of captor and captive might be reversed (Keen, *Medieval Warfare*). On the side of those captured, historians note that the act of ransoming a captured family member or political ally carried intangible rewards as well. Throughout the twelfth century the redemption of captives acquired increasingly spiritual overtones. It was seen as a work of charity, and a number of religious houses were established whose primary work

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<sup>4</sup> Lev finds that truce agreements usually included some form of prisoner release (*Prisoners of War*, p. 24); David Nicolle notes that the treatment of prisoners was also part of such deals (*Medieval Warfare*, p. 242).

<sup>5</sup> In fact, anecdotes, examples and even codes for practices of ransom fill the studies of this practice. See Nicolle (*Medieval Warfare*, vol. 2, p. 242); Dunbabin (*Captivity and Imprisonment*, p. 9); and Brodman (*Ransoming Captives*, p. 6). Friedman even includes a number of tables detailing the amounts exacted and paid for certain well-known prisoners (*Encounter between Enemies*, pp. 48-52, 158-61).

was the purchasing of freedom for captives (Brodman, *Ransoming Captives*, p. 10). In a more earthly sense, ransoming also seems to have been a way of saving face in the eyes of one's contemporaries: being able to pay for the freedom of a family member is proof of one's largesse and establishes an identity within a certain social stratum (Dunbabin, *Captivity and Imprisonment*, p. 84).

To sum up the historical record, death or ransom would be the most likely outcomes for the medieval knight imprisoned following a defeat.

### How well do the chansons de geste reflect these historical trends?

Consideration of the literary corpus of the Guillaume Cycle finds a consistent dissonance with the historical record concerning captivity. If historically most of those captured and held by enemies died while still under the control of their captors, then the chansons of the Guillaume Cycle examined here do not follow history. The only time this happens is when the character in question is of secondary or lesser importance; no major French or Saracen personage dies in prison in the poems of the Guillaume Cycle.<sup>6</sup> Of course, there are a number of references to the killing of captives on the battlefield, too numerous to follow here.

The other great fear of captives in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries was enslavement and service under forced labor. Again, this mode of existence is unknown to the prisoners of the Guillaume Cycle, although one could reasonably ask if there are other reasons why the captured Franks are so often being loaded into Saracen ships than a mere removal from the scene of battle.

Conversion as a means of release from prison does occur, of course, but only in the instance of good Saracens adopting the Christian faith. In the *Couronnement* we find a typical example in Galafre, who represents those captives who will not cooperate with the French until they have completed all rites of conversion (ll. 1278ff). A far more revealing case is found in *Les Narbonnais*. In this poem, the talented physician Forré seeks to exchange healing the wounded Guibelin for freedom for fellow captive Clargis and himself (ll. 5278ff). The "offer" enrages Aymeri, who threatens him with death if he does not heal the young man on the spot. Much later, Clargis says he and the other captives have considered it ("Et a ces autres en ai ge mout parlé"), and that they really would like to convert after all.<sup>7</sup> Those who accept conversion as an option were released from the *chartre*, while those who refused the offer were not (ll. 7879ff).

Escape would seem to offer a far more heroic choice, and these poems do not fail to include such instances. The remarkable thing is how rare escapes are in contrast to rescues. Only three escapes occur in all of the Cycle: Guillaume in the *Moniage Guillaume* (ll. 4579ff), Gillebert in the *Prise d'Orange* (ll. 112ff), and Prodigon in the much later *Hernaut de Beaulande* (ll. 1888ff).

<sup>6</sup> The only figure who dies in prison is Richard de Normandie, in the *Couronnement de Louis* (ll. 2219-22).

<sup>7</sup> Proving again, perhaps, that the liberty of Clargis "vaut bien une messe."

Rescue seems to provide the greatest opportunity for heroic action, according to our poets, as one can find many more instances of warriors freeing captured friends or family in the poems of the cycle. In *Aliscans*, it takes the brute strength and approach of Rainouart to free the captive nephews of Guillaume (ll. 5570ff); in *Hernaut de Beaulande*, Robastre and Prodigon each make use of their special skills to free people from the stronghold of Aquitaine (ll. 1375ff and 1899ff); Guillaume and Rainouart team up again in the *Moniage Rainouart* to free some 200 prisoners (ll. 1928ff); in *Les Narbonnais* Aymeri's band manages to free Guibert from the Saracens' cross (ll. 5200ff); in the *Prise de Cordres et de Seville*, the rescue of the three brothers Guillaume, Bertrand et Hernaut from Cordres provides enough encouragement for them to try to spring Guielin from Seville (ll. 2126-28); and, finally, Aymeri is rescued by Guibert in the *Mort Aymeri de Narbonne* during transport back to Spain where a long imprisonment awaited him (ll. 1793-830). Thus, the poetic tradition leads to the conclusion that rescue is one of the defining skills of the epic hero.

In conformity to what historians tell us was true for this time period, ransom plays a significant role in the brokering of prisoner release in the chansons de geste, but some specialization appears.

First, the poems exhibit an unequal distribution when money is the means of ransoming prisoners. In no instance does a noble Frank actually ransom a captive for money. In *Aymeri de Narbonne*, Aymeri's rival in love and war, Savaris, is defeated, captured, and ultimately, held for a ransom. However, Savaris had been handed off by Hugues as a *prix de guerre* to an unnamed *vavasor* who enacts the ransom demand (ll. 3229-36). In fact, the text insists upon the social differentiation in case it was not clear:

Molt en fist Hugues que preuz et que gentis,  
Que n'en vost prendre vaillant .ii. parisis;  
Ainz le dona au vavasor de pris [...]. (ll. 3239-41)

Any offer of monetary ransom for freedom by or for the Franks also fails. Garin tries to buy his way out of Cador's prison in the *Enfances Vivien*, but the deal is refused since apparently the knight's value cannot be measured in money (ll. 20ff).<sup>8</sup> In every other case, the avarice or self-interest of ignoble French characters or Saracen figures is determinate: in *Girart de Vienne* a roving band of thieves plans to get rich off of the future ransoming of Aymeri (ll. 1710ff), and in the *Prise d'Orange*, Orquanaïs puts his prisoner Guillaume up for sale, just to see what he might be offered (ll. 1143-50). In contrast, the narrator of the *Bataille Loquifer* reminds us that the value of the capturing of Rainouart would far outweigh any possible ransom (ll. 91ff). The French knights cannot buy their freedom. It seems likely

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<sup>8</sup> A similar episode in the *Prise de Cordres et de Seville* seems to confirm this instance (ll. 538ff).

that ideology is coloring the literary picture of the knightly world here: only the bad guys trade for money.

In the twelfth through thirteenth centuries, where much of the strife was over possession of land, prisoners could be exchanged for control of cities or realms, and the songs of the Guillaume Cycle demonstrate this: the freedom of the Saracen Baudus is exchanged for control of the city of Balagué (*Guibert d'Andrenas*, ll. 904-85), whereas the French knights Guibert and Aymeri are given in exchange in different poems for the city of Narbonne (*Les Narbonnais*, ll. 4949ff and the *Mort Aymeri de Narbonne*, ll. 1526ff), and Guielin is offered in exchange for Barbastre (the *Siège de Barbastre*, ll. 3256-57). This is small stuff in comparison to Synagon's high aims in the *Moniage Guillaume*: he seeks to exchange Guillaume for a chance to fight the armies of France and maybe to gain control of the whole country (ll. 3608ff).

While there are no examples of any kind of formalized prisoner exchange in these poems, on a couple of occasions, the possession of one prisoner opens the possibility for trading for another. Thus, in the *Couronnement de Louis*, Galafre offers to get the release of more Christian prisoners if his life is spared (ll. 1254ff), and in the *Prise de Cordres et de Seville*, there is only one possible ransom for the Saracen king Butor: the safe return of Guibert (ll. 582ff). Finally, in the *Enfances Vivien*, only the child prodigy Vivien can be swapped for the freedom of the imprisoned Garin (ll. 20ff). Thus, any prisoner exchange emphasizes the value of the French knight. The poets do not seek to represent an equitable arrangement between opposing forces.

The intent to set up a precedent or insurance policy to secure a release from captivity does not have any direct echo in the epic, unless it is the instance of the reciprocated release in *Guibert d'Andrenas*. In line 904 Baudus is allowed to go free in exchange for handing over the city; in return, in lines 1980 and following, Aymeri has been captured and is released by Baudus; but, again, the deal is caught up in the exchange of the life of Baudus and his family for the city Balagué, and, in any case, the later dialogue between the two men suggests that there was no assurance of a recompense, thus Baudus: “‘Or le vos vueil ici guerredoner’ / Dis Aymeris: ‘Porrai m’i je fiër?’” (ll. 1984-85).

The overwhelming evidence is that the epics depart from the documented historical models of practices related to release from captivity, and in each case, the departure seems to mark an ideological boundary for the warrior: they may engineer an escape, rescue others or exchange prisoners for land, but they will not die in prison, default on their faith, seek money in ransom, or let the future rest on a quid pro quo.

## What literature tells us about history

It's time to turn the lens around and use the chansons de geste as literary evidence about the historical practice of imprisonment. The question now is, “what does the literature tell us that history cannot?”

First, consider the pathos associated with those in captivity. Nowhere does this come through better than in the dense passage in laisses 109-10 of the *Narbonnais*. In these laisses the audience follows Aymeri as he climbs the walls to look out over the Saracen armies besieging his city of Narbonne. He hears a cry lifted from below where he sees a number of captives being beaten and calling out for his help. Then, as he watches, one of them is brought before the gate, stripped and beaten as he calls again for Aymeri's help. At this, Hermanjart falls at his feet and begs him to intervene on their behalf. (ll. 3841-910). Two features stand out: the apostrophic quality of the scene (Aymeri, while absent, is addressed by the captives' voices) and the call is for heroic action. It is worthwhile to note how such a rendering fits the oral nature of the genre.

A second example of an appeal to sympathies on behalf of captives would be the depiction of the pathetic state of those stuck in the prison. If not a formal part of this analysis, one cannot ignore the pathetic value of such scenes as the insufferable situation of the women in the *Mort Aymeri de Narbonne* who are forced to remain standing as the water in the prison rises as high as their breasts (ll. 2931ff), or the miserable existence of Guillaume in Synagon's dark *chartre*. These episodes call for some affective response by the jongleur's public.

A third thing we can take away from these epic scenes is a sense of how being imprisoned or having those for whom one is responsible taken into captivity colors the image of the knight-warrior. One can find concise statements concerning this from the epic characters themselves, such as when Louis in the *Moniage Guillaume* demands that Synagon return his knight: "'Trop par feïs grant honte et grant damage / Qui l'osas mettre en prison ne en chartre'" (ll. 4178-79). His response emphasizes the affront that has been committed. But by far the most important text in this regard is *Aliscans*. In his article on the aspects of the hero in *Aliscans*, Jean-Claude Vallecalle explores a number of issues related to the tone of the poem and the portrayal of its young hero in light of the wider legend. Vallecalle argues that part of the literary value of this poem is located in the struggles of Guillaume. We can go a step further, however, and note that throughout this text it is primarily Guillaume's challenge to resolve the multiple captivities that arise that the narrator underscores:

Tuit sont si home ocis et decopez,  
Et si neveu toz .VII. emprisonnez;  
Ja n'en istront nul jor de lor aez  
Jusquë il erent par Renoart gitez [...]. (ll. 1857-60)

In what is probably one of the best-known episodes of the poem, Guibourc refuses Guillaume entry to Orange when he is pursued by his enemies. Why? Because she sees Christians being led off into captivity and she knows that the real Guillaume would never allow that (ll. 2002ff). But consider how this theme informs this chanson from beginning to end. Guillaume first hears this rebuke from a foe he defeats early in the action, Aarofles (ll. 1651-55), but as the poem moves towards its conclusion,

Guillaume is reminded again and again of the prisoners and his duty to protect and rescue them: for example, he meets Hernaut, his brother, and Aymeri, his father, and has to explain to them that his nephews are still held by the Saracens (ll. 2636ff and 3060ff). As his other brother, Beuves de Commarchis, arrives but is still at a distance, Guillaume has to tell Guibourc that he sees Beuves, whose two sons, he wistfully notes, are both still in captivity (ll. 4321ff). Finally, when Aÿmer, the last family member to join the campaign arrives, the narrator points out that he brings with him 100 captives that *he* was able to liberate (“Et .C. chaitis, qu’il fit desprisoner,” l. 4398). We should not forget that while Guillaume plays a key role in the final battle that brings victory to the Franks, it is not Guillaume who rescues the imprisoned nephews, but Rainouart (ll. 5571ff). Throughout the entire poem, Guillaume is made to face his failure to release the prisoners, and the knight’s struggle with captivity contributes to the rich texture we get in this poem.

The epics of the Guillaume Cycle also reveal how medieval individuals might have responded to captivity. In the *Moniage Guillaume*, once freed, the eponymic hero reveals his intent to vent his frustration on his former captives (ll. 4800-05). In the *Mort Aymeri de Narbonne*, both Louis and Guillaume react to the news of the capture of Aymeri with vows of vengeance (ll. 2170-79 and 2259-70, respectively). In a very different set of circumstances, in *Girart de Vienne*, Louis chides Roland for having allowed some of their men to be killed and captured while he conversed with Aude (ll. 4720-29). A last example of this is found in the form of an amplification in the *Mort Aymeri de Narbonne*. The messenger Louis has sent to Aymeri requesting the latter’s support in combating the rebellion of Hugues Capet, Gautier de Termes, follows his orders with one minor but significant deviation. When he seeks to convince Hermanjart of the imperative nature of this campaign, he appends to the authorized message the detail that, in addition to all that he has done to Louis, Hugues has captured Gautier’s two sons, “Et mes .II. filz en sa prison jetez” (l. 200). Earlier in the same *laisse* we learned that Gautier de Termes was a nephew of Aymeri, and known to the family: “Dame Hermanjarz lo reconut assez” (l. 166). It is possible that the messenger and the poet are playing upon epic traditions: who else would be so sensitive to the need to rescue captured sons as Hermanjart? What better strategy to enlist Hermanjart among those trying to get Aymeri involved in this cause than to raise the issue of family members in captivity? In each of these instances, we find medieval figures reacting to captivity with emotion and action.

### The literary value of the prison episodes

All of the textual evidence points to the conclusion that the prison episodes and scenes have become fully integrated into epic matter through the process of cyclification, and the contention here is that they add to the literary qualities of the genre.

First, on the formal plane, there is clear evidence from the epic formulae in these poems that the captivity motif relied upon and, perhaps, supplied a number of stock expressions. Consider, for example



the large number of the *prières du plus grand péril* that end in a supplication from the knight to “Garis mon corps de mort et de prison.”<sup>9</sup> Likewise, we find innumerable lines of similar structure referring to those who were “killed or captured,” to the extent that this might be seen as one of several standard formulae for concluding a battle account.<sup>10</sup>

Obviously, in terms of defining epic characters, these episodes function as a type of foil: the hero’s valor and role is exalted by successful completion of a personal escape, the rescue of friends and family, or the capture of his (or her) enemies. Episodes of captivity reveal the heroic character, in the same way that episodes of disguise do (Suard, “Le motif du déguisement ; Bard, “From Aymeri to Amazon”).

On a larger scale, prison episodes or captivity experiences can sometimes provide the dominant structure for certain chansons de geste of the Guillaume Cycle. We have already seen how prominent it is in *Aliscans*, but the same argument can be made for the *Enfances Vivien* in which the central plot revolves around the demand, realization and the consequences of the captivity of both father and son, Garin and Vivien. Much of the plotting in the *Moniage Rainouart* is also dedicated to faulty attempts to capture Rainouart: monks, abbots, and Saracens all participate in the action. The *Siege de Barbastre* would also fit this model: there are foreshadowing remarks by the narrator, descriptions of captivity throughout, and then at the end a bit of a boasting match between brothers to see who could do a better job of delivering a prison of unwanted guests.<sup>11</sup> However, no text makes the captivity experience of its protagonist as critical as the *Moniage Guillaume*. At multiple points in this text there are proleptic announcements of Guillaume’s imprisonment at the hands of Synagon that build anticipation into the text, and that is not to mention the number of brief references to this episode that take place earlier in other poems of the cycle (e.g., *Aliscans*, l.358). Add to this the amount of textual space given to the depictions of Guillaume’s suffering (*martire*) in the Saracen prison—which lasts seven years, and we have a text almost consumed by this motif.

These episodes of imprisonment also support cyclical traditions. In the *Enfances Guillaume* there is a scene where the Saracen Acereis threatens to hand the young Guillaume over to Orable, who will throw him into her prison (ll. 1088-99). It’s hard to imagine this scene without seeing a wink to the larger epic tradition linking Guillaume and Guibourc, particularly since it is by prison experiences that they meet and ultimately take over Orange. Likewise, the imprisonment of the seven nephews in *Aliscans* and, as mentioned earlier, the captivity of Guillaume are evoked at key points of the trouvères’ *rappels* to the audience throughout the cycle (e.g., *Enfances Guillaume*, l. 2216). Stories of captivity serve as one of the threads that link the poems together.

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<sup>9</sup> A quick canvassing of this motif finds the *Couronnement de Louis*, l. 1023; the *Prise d’Orange*, l. 804; *Aliscans*, l. 7229; etc.

<sup>10</sup> See similar patterns noted in the foundational work done on formulaic structures by Jean Rychner.

<sup>11</sup> It involves ridding a prison of a monster in the *Siège de Barbastre* (ll. 5545ff).

### A striking case: the virtual captivity account

Finally, there is a fascinating use of a string of epic prison motifs that merits comment. I refer to these as “virtual” prison episodes because each reference to the prison is first and foremost a verbal construction. That is, they function as a kind of speech act by which a captivity experience is invoked where it is not actually present. These following instances are all found in the *Prise d’Orange*, but there are other examples from the cycle as well. The poem begins with Guillaume complaining that the lack of noble pleasures in his life is like being in prison, “comme li hom qui est enprisonné” (l. 69). Thus he uses a mere simile to create the first prison experience. The next prison encountered in the poem is described by Gillebert, who recounts how he has spent the last three years. This prison existed in the past, but not in the present, yet it is described on three separate occasions (ll. 111ff, 118ff, and 215ff). Soon afterwards, both Bernard and Guillaume will exchange fears about being imprisoned for what they are trying to do, and the *si*-clauses demonstrate the theoretical nature of their captivity: “‘S’estiez ore el palés de la ville [...]’” (ll. 336 and 514). Disguised, Guillaume later gains entrance to Orange and an audience with Arragon by pretending to have been a prisoner of himself back at Nîmes (ll. 418ff). Again, this prison experience does not exist—it is pure verbal fabrication. Then as the *quid pro quo* continues, Arragon threatens a prison (“‘Se je tenoie Guillelme en ma prison [...]’,” if only he had Guillaume within the walls of Orange—he does, but does not know it, so the proposed imprisonment remains conjectural [ll. 535]). The unreality continues when Arragon asks Guillaume what it is like to be a prisoner in Guillaume’s prison—something Guillaume knows everything and nothing about (ll. 569ff). Finally, the string ends when Guillaume prays for protection against a prison that is not yet a reality (l. 540 and again in ll. 804ff). Eventually, of course, the epic disguise cannot be maintained and what was hypothesis becomes unfortunate reality for the French knights. My suspicion here is that all this verbal construction may be related to the likely parodic nature of this text (Lachet, *La Prise d’Orange*). The layers of textual construction in play here could possibly support imaginary prisons as well as real ones.

In conclusion, we find that while recent historical work on the nature of captivity in the High Middle Ages can shed light on epic contexts, it is informative to consider how and why the poems deviate from these findings. Whether they deviate or not from actual practice, the songs reveal important, if intangible, aspects of medieval imprisonment. Finally, I submit that the prison episodes contribute to the literary value of the *chanson de geste* as a genre and to the integrity of the Guillaume Cycle.

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