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Sacred Union and Sacred Violence in

Tournier's *Gilles et Jeanne*

David Drake

A selected project submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Sacred union and Sacred Violence Tournier's *Gilles et Jeanne*

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Written in 1983, the novella *Gilles et Jeanne* seems to be one of Michel Tournier's simpler works at first glance. Yet, for all of its simplicity, Tournier does not repress his desire to lace the tale with metaphoric and metaphysical symbolism. It is through a symbolic marriage on the battlefield that Tournier links the two characters in a sort of mystical union.

All of the crimes following this ritual that precipitated Gilles' descent into depravity were in fact an attempt to reunite with the departed spirit of his 'spouse', either by mimetically recreating the circumstances of her death, or by metaphysically recreating the location of her eternal resting place. Joan of Arc was not canonized as a saint until 1920. Because she was burned at the stake for crimes against the church, Joan's place in Gilles' mind was in hell.

This article focuses on the symbolism of catastrophic marriage in the novel. It traces the literary allusions to marriage that follow and prelude this central moment, and examines Gilles' subsequent deviant behavior through this lens. Once it has been established that this symbolic marriage was present in Tournier's work, this leads to the next important question: If Tournier deliberately employed marriage imagery in describing Gilles de Rais' relationship to Joan of Arc, what was his purpose in doing so?

The article then uses the Tournier's own philosophy, the literary theory of Girard and Bataille, and examines the significance of the marriage allegory in a post-revolutionary, secularized France. The trauma of the rupture with the old regime is reflected in the violence and turmoil that is born of the titular characters' failed attempt at sacred union.

Keywords: Tournier, marriage, union, *Gilles et Jeanne*, secularization, Gilles de Rais

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Preface

In accordance with thesis option two, I co-authored the article “Sacred Union and Sacred Violence in Tournier’s *Gilles et Jeanne*” with Dr. Scott Sprenger, and prepared the annotated bibliography of our sources and the explanation of our work that follows. Our article will be submitted to academic journals for publication within the next few weeks.

For me, the genesis of this project can be traced to my first exposure to the legend of *Barbe bleu* in one of Dr. Corry Cropper’s literature classes. Like many fairy tales from that period, I was fascinated with the violence and brutality in what was essentially a children’s tale, far different from the squeaky, polished Disney tales we feed our children in this age. I resolved to write my thesis on things that go bump in the night of the French psyche. I was going to focus on local folk tales, especially the prevalent legends of monstrous wolves, werewolves, and the rise in the 19th century of vampire stories in novels and local legends. While teaching in France as a Master’s student, I began doing interviews with the locals to find out what sort of tales were so ingrained in the cultural memory that they were still told today.

Though I found traces of wolves in their children’s games, I was surprised by the amount of people who still spoke about Bluebeard the ogre, as well as the prevalence of Joan of Arc. In doing some research, I discovered that the inspiration for Bluebeard was a man named Gilles de Rais, and that he was not only a contemporary of Joan of Arc, but that he fought under her banner. This man’s crimes were so heinous that he managed to eclipse in brutality the fairy tale that he inspired. Upon my return from France, I met with Dr. Scott Sprenger, who informed me that he had been wanting for some time to write an article about this relationship as it is portrayed in Michel Tournier’s novel *Gilles et Jeanne*. He had some interesting ideas that tied it

to his overall project of sacred union in literature, and simply had lacked the time until now to do the necessary research. It seemed quite providential, and so we joined forces.

Dr. Sprenger provided a framework of theory and ideas to pursue, as well as pointing me in the direction of useful references. The entire concept of metaphoric and catastrophic union in the text comes from him, and from that we were able to build the base of the article. For my part, I did the actual research and writing of the article. We started talking about different directions to take the paper in September of 2010. From there, I began reading the primary sources so I could be familiar with the text. I started to prepare a preliminary bibliography shortly thereafter, using online databases as well as the books available at BYU's library. By mid-October, I had begun writing. During this process, I would meet with Dr. Sprenger periodically, telling him what obstacles I had encountered in the writing and getting new directions to take the paper, as well as suggestions for research. By January of 2011, this had become a weekly tradition. At the beginning of February, I had a working rough draft that I sent to him for review. He helped me to polish it into the final product through his suggestions. This draft went through a couple more revisions, as he showed me which parts were unclear in the timeline I presented. Finally, he helped go through it one final time, rephrasing, erasing, and adding sentences as needed for clarity, until we were both pleased with the results.

Introduction

Michel Tournier, acclaimed recipient of the *Grand Prix du roman de l'Academie francaise* and the *Prix Goncourt* is one of the most celebrated French authors of the 20th century. His formal training was in philosophy, and though he won literary immortality through his novels, he always considered himself first and foremost a philosopher. As such, his goal is to weave layers of meaning and metaphysical as well as social insight into his works.

Just as his novel *Vendredi* is a retelling of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Tournier's novel *Gilles et Jeanne* is largely based on the historical documents of the trial of Gilles de Rais compiled by Georges Bataille. He strives to fill in the blanks left by history, providing a story told largely from the point of view of the Gilles de Rais. Through his eyes, we see Joan of Arc appear as an androgynous, angelic being of a spiritual world. This contrasts sharply with his contemporaries, who see her as a useful pawn to be sacrificed when political expediencies call for it. His devotion to Joan of Arc leads to his downfall, as he plunges himself into the most gruesome depravities imaginable, torturing, raping, and murdering children before offering their burnt ashes to demons. Tournier describes his descent, arrest, and theatrical trial, ending the novel with a near apotheosis as Gilles is burnt alive, following the path set out for him by Joan of Arc's own martyrdom.

The crucial metaphor that is repeated throughout this novel is one of marriage. Several times throughout the short tale we see Gilles and Jeanne being bound together in an attempt at some sort of mystic or sacred union. This marriage, like so many attempts of its kind throughout French literature, is doomed to fail and leads to catastrophe. It is symptomatic of a tenuous stress between the modern and the old regime. In a secularized France, the instinctive yearning for the sacred or the eternal is joined with the knowledge that such things are done away. Any

attempts to revive them are as inauthentic and short-lived as the July Monarchy. When all the priests who will not swear an oath to the state are put to the guillotine, religion loses its authenticity to those sensitive to history.

This period of psychic trauma was well documented by 19th century authors such as Balzac. Dr. Sprenger has already written extensively on Balzac's use of this metaphor of catastrophic marriage as a way to explain the social upheavals and almost schizophrenic spiritual and modernist impulses following the rupture with Catholicism after the revolution. For Balzac and his contemporaries, the marriage metaphor became useful for explaining these tensions indirectly and through the safety of allegory. What is interesting in Tournier's situation is that he is writing from the perspective of the 20th century, which had seen its share of trauma through two world wars and the Cold War. The fact that he returns to marriage imagery in *Gilles et Jeanne* shows that, for Tournier, this old conflict has yet to be completely resolved in the French psyche.

As our article demonstrates, the symbols of sacred union are both explicit and intentional. Their presence is in harmony with Michel Tournier's own stated goals as a writer and philosopher, and is to be expected in the context of the 19th century writers he sought to emulate. This symbolism serves several functions, not only as a commentary on the social dissonance of a post-revolutionary France, but also as a vehicle to illustrate Girardian principles of mimetic and sacred violence. This article seeks to explore these and other avenues, reaching deep within the text to pull out the meanings Tournier has entwined in his short 'historical' novella.

To further explore other aspects of Michel Tournier's philosophy, his style of writing, and the historical facts surrounding the trial of Gilles de Rais himself, an annotated bibliography of the sources used in my and Dr. Sprenger's research follows. It contains many of the most

important contributions to literary theory surrounding Tournier, as well as the theory Tournier himself was exposed to during his research before writing the book itself.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Tournier, Michele. *Gilles et Jeanne*. Ed. Gallimard, Paris: Société Nouvelle Firmin-Didot 1983.

This book constitutes the heart of the article, as the body of text being analyzed. At scarcely 150 pages, this novel is more *récit* than *roman*, and though it lacks the length of most of the rest of Tournier's body of work, the economy of symbolism and meaning in each page is dense. As the preface to the book informs us, it is a "récit hagiographique...écrit dans les blancs laissés par les textes sacres et historiques".

Tournier clearly did his research, being careful never to contradict the historical evidence of the actual trial of Gilles de Rais. What sets this book apart from simple historical fiction is that Tournier not only seeks to retell the horrific events, but to understand them. Rather than dismissing Gilles de Rais as a madman or a monster, he tries to portray the changing world through his eyes, eyes that refuse to adapt and conform. When the clamor of Joan of Arc's miraculous appearance at court, Gilles remains transfixed on her sacred calling. When the world shifts from one of brute force and violence to one of political maneuverings, Gille remains in the mode of violence and savagery. Through his portrayal of the fallen *maréchal*, Tournier is seeking to explain the inexplicable, a character so monstrous that our modern sensibilities recoil from all but the most superficial acknowledgement of his existence as a historical character. This book weaves a tale of the failed attempt at union with the divine, which, without justifying the crimes of de Rais, at least renders them comprehensible. It forces the reader to face what is easier to dismiss, and to understand the nature of evil.

Secondary Sources

Bataille, Georges. *The Trial of Gilles de Rais*. Los Angeles: Amok Books, 1991.

English translation of *Le Procès de Gilles de Rais*, this book was invaluable to the article.

It is one of the primary source documents that Tournier studied as he was preparing to write *Gilles de Rais*. It consists of two parts. The first part is an essay Bataille wrote about the tragedy of Gilles de Rais, followed by his analysis of the historical facts. The second part is the actual documents and records from the trial. With this book, we were able to read the historical facts that Tournier was using as a basis for his story. More importantly, we were able to read Bataille's view of the whole ordeal, which naturally had an influence on Tournier as he wrote. It was a simple matter to see reflected in the text of Tournier's novel echoes of Bataille's sentiments from his essay.

Levy, Karen D. "Tournier's Ultimate Perversion : The Historical Manipulation of *Gilles et Jeanne*." *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature*, (1992): 28, 1, 72-88.

One of the few articles specifically targeting *Gilles et Jeanne*, Levy is focusing on the purposeful distortion of the tale of Gilles and Jeanne for narrative and literary purposes. She does comment quite a bit on the relationship between the two characters, which is the major focus of our article, though she differs from our article in saying that Gilles's commitment to Joan was short-lived. Though Tournier claims to stay faithful to the historical documents, Levy finds that many of the characters endure a revision. This of course, was done with a purpose in mind: to tell a different story and present the reader with different dilemmas than the historical documents do.

Maclean, Mairi. *Michel Tournier: Exploring Human Relations*. Bristol, UK: Bristol Academic Press, 2003

Rather than focusing on the more commonly speculated roles of Tournier as an author, that of philosopher and of mythographer, Maclean is analyzing Tournier as he deals with human relationships and human couples. This supports our theory of a symbolic, catastrophic marriage, as she sees Tournier as being fascinated with one-sided, ultimately dysfunctional human couplings. The brief space she devotes specifically to *Gilles et Jeanne*, does little to analyze their relationship as anything but one of cause and effect (her death leading to his crimes). However, she does pick up on the elements of Girard's theory in the novel without explicitly naming it as such.

Perella, Nicolas James. *The Kiss Sacred and Profane*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969.

Perella traces the religious and ritualistic importance of the kiss throughout history. This historical overview shows the kiss was used as a sacred, unifying rite between saints, especially in the context of marriage. Because the central event of the union of Gilles de Rais and Joan of Arc is based on a kiss, this book gave a very solid historical background underlining the significance of an act that we take for granted in our modern context. Our argument for mystic union rests largely on this moment, and the fact that there is a long, established tradition of the kiss symbolizing union and marriage lends great weight to the article. New Testament, early Christian, and medieval mystical tradition is used to give the context of the traditions Gilles de Rais would have been operating under during his time.

Petit, Susan. *Michel Tournier's Metaphysical Fictions*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins B.V., 1991.

Petit is actually somewhat dismissive of *Gilles et Jeanne*, finding his treatment of idea “less satisfactory” than in his other works (113). She points out that it was received coolly by French critics and gives a general overview of the plot. What was far more useful for the purposes of this article was the interview Petit had with Tournier on July 11, 1987, included at the end of the book. This was able to reveal insight into the author’s own views, especially as they relate to the role of the reader in finding meaning in his books. It can basically be summed up by the quote from Tournier that she used to preface the book: “A book does not have one author, but an indefinite number of authors. For to the writer must be added, as part of the creative act, all those who have read it, are reading it, or will read it.” This viewpoint, expressed here and in countless other interviews and writings, not only justifies the purpose of our article, but also challenges readers to take up a similar task of teasing out their own truths from his stories.

Petit. “*Gilles et Jeanne*: Tournier’s *Le Roi des Aulnes* Revisited.” *Romantic Review* (1985): 76, 3, 307-315.

This article makes the case that *Gilles et Jeanne* is a simpler, more childish version of *Le Roi des aulnes*. A great deal of the article is spent comparing the two works. However, it proved very useful in teasing out Tournier’s views of himself as a writer, placing himself in the company of 19th century writers rather than his contemporaries. Discovering that Tournier viewed himself as a naturalist and felt more at home in that literary era gave weight to our idea that he was using the same literary conventions, namely catastrophic

marriage, that the authors of that time would rely on, to provide veiled social commentary.

Platten, David. *Michel Tournier and the Metaphor of Fiction*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Platten's book focuses on the use of metaphor in Tournier's fiction, a subject intricately linked to our article. He explores the literary theory behind metaphor and its role in fiction and in literature in today's society. Like most authors who study Tournier, he does not spend any time with *Gilles de Rais*, preferring to focus on better known works like *Vendredi* or *Le Roi des aulnes*. However, what proved very interesting in the light of our article was the fact that Tournier did indeed place deliberate and substantial metaphors through his literary body of works. It stands to reason, then, that *Gilles et Jeanne*, while shorter than Tournier's other books, would be equally charged with metaphor and allegory. It is no surprise that the marriage allegory shows up so clearly.

Roberts, Martin. *Michel Tournier: Bricolage and Cultural Mythology*. Saratoga: ANMA Libri and Standford, 1994.

Roberts looks at Tournier as a *bricoleur*, someone who must improvise, making something new or innovative out of the left over parts of older projects. In making his argument, he emphasizes Tournier's reliance on myth and history, as well as his ability to blend philosophy with literary fiction. The short amount of attention he gives to *Gilles et Jeanne* is largely in making the natural comparison with *Le Roi des aulnes*. He does lay an emphasis on the battlefield scene in which Gilles kisses Joan's wound. This is one of the momentous moments we have identified as a sacrament in our article. While Roberts

focuses on the vampirism and the eroticism of the scene, he does agree that this gives their bond “the force of a sacred oath” (128).

Sprenger, Scott. “Death by Marriage in Balzac’s *La Peau de chagrin*.” *Dix-neuf* 11 (2008): 59-75.

Sprenger’s previous work on the subject of marriage in French literature was an invaluable resource and provided the framework of one of our article’s central arguments. The presence and significance of catastrophic marriage is clearly laid out in Balzac’s *La Peau de chagrin*. Equally useful was the historical context and timeline given, outlining briefly and efficiently the timeline of France’s secularization following the Revolution. Sprenger argues that the symbolism of failed, sacred union points to a larger problem as the French find themselves thrust into a world without rituals that hold any meaning. Because of Tournier’s affinity for 19th century writers, it was an easy leap to see a similar sort of message in the marriage imagery of *Gilles et Jeanne*.

Stivale, Charles J. “Nomad Love and the War-Machine : Michel Tournier’s *Gilles et Jeanne* .” *SubStance*, Vol 20, No. 2, Issue 65 (1991): 44-59.

Stivale reads the character of Gilles de Rais as a “war machine” under the dominion of the State and sees the story as documenting his transformation through nomadization and deterritorialization until the State can no longer control him (45). This reading is quite different from our own, but he does see in the relationship between Joan and Gilles a sort of “nomad love” that finds ritual expression again at that pivotal moment of his kissing of her wound.

Tournier, Michel. *The Mirror of Ideas*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998.

This book is a translation of *Le miroir des idées*. It is a non-fiction book written by Tournier in order to lay forth his philosophy of contrasting opposing ideas. He makes clear that his “opposites” are synthetic, rather than antithetic, and finds more of interest in their fusion than their opposition. This explicitly stated philosophy finds its expression in *Gilles de Rais* (as well as *Le Roi des aulnes* and others) in the concept of benign inversion, and the idea that Satan is the creature closest to God. These ideas and others presented by the character of Prelati fit nicely within the realm of the mirror of ideas. Because of our article’s focus on marriage (a fusion of souls), this idea that opposing polarities are best studied when united fits perfectly with our interpretation of the saint Joan and the sinner Gilles’s metaphoric union. Because the book is written by Tournier, we can see that these ideas were important to him and the presence of the marriage allegory in the novel was deliberate. Though Tournier makes it clear that the responsibility for meaning falls on the heads of the readers as much as the author, it is useful to have such insight into the author’s own philosophy.

Tournier. *The Wind Spirit*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1988.

This book is a translation of Michel Tournier’s autobiography, *Le Vent Paraclet*. As an autobiography, it is atypical, tending to meander off into private musings as he tells the story of his life. This renders the book especially valuable to our article, as these musings provide great insight into how Tournier views himself both as an author and as a philosopher. Through this book, we learned that Tournier considered himself a disciple of Leibniz, Spinoza, and Sartre, as well as Plato, who provided for him the groundwork for his own philosophy. This book also made clear his thoughts on myth, the novel as a

multi-storied structure, and the responsibility of the reader to grasp his own meaning from the author's work. The idea that he considers himself a philosopher first, and a novelist second, gives us justification in claiming that there is a great deal more going on in *Gilles et Jeanne* than a fable like retelling of *Le Roi des aulnes*, as other authors have suggested.

Vray, Jean-Bernard. *Michel Tournier et l'écriture seconde*. Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1997.

Again, Vray joins other authors in examining Tournier's habit of borrowing and changing the works of other authors, myths, legends, or holy texts. His discussion of *Gilles et Jeanne* is more pertinent to our article, however. He examines the significance of the emphasis on the proximity to God and Satan, a theme Tournier himself explores in *Le miroir des idées*. This union of good and evil is of course mirrored by the union of Joan of Arc with Gilles de Rais. Our article's emphasis on this union through the ritual of marriage goes in line with his thoughts here. Vray is astute to note the complementary and contradictory relationship of these two characters in light of Tournier's stated philosophical project.

Wimmer, Norma. "La Sainte et le monstre : Une lecture de *Gilles et Jeanne* de Michel Tournier." *Lettres Françaises*, no. 6 (2005): 125-130.

Wimmer gives a reading of *Gilles et Jeanne* that focuses largely on the origins of the tale, both historical, mythological, and biblical. Like most scholars, she seems focused on Tournier's borrowing of other works. She does, however, link the philosophy presented in *Le miroir des idées* to the gospel of the character Prelati, a theme that our article develops in greater depth.

Retrospective

This process was certainly a learning experience. Though I had been published before, as an undergraduate at BYU, the article was in political science and international relations, a completely different field. Rather than studying demographics, surveys, political theorists, and current events, my research for this article required an entirely new subset of academic skills.

In the beginning, I saw myself as a sort of ethnographer, a sort of lone brother Grimm who travelled the French countryside gathering tales and fables in order to better understand the cultural, almost genetic memory of the French people. While the interviews I conducted ended up leading me in a completely different direction than I had planned, the act of taking part in this sort of oral tradition as a foreign scholar was something in which I had no previous experience.

After returning to BYU, I discovered I still had more to learn about research. Though Michel Tournier is one of the most widely read French authors of our time, the novel *Gilles et Jeanne* is not by any stretch of the imagination the most popular. The critics' cool reception of the novel was echoed by the scant attention scholars have paid to it, and while many have written about Tournier as an author, few spared more than a few paragraphs for this *récit*. The articles I did find tended to focus on comparing the book to the more popular *Le Roi des aulnes*, a book Tournier wrote that explored similar themes. This relative scarcity forced me to learn to navigate online databases, both through BYU's library and Google Scholar, to find whatever articles I could get my hands on. I also learned how the Interlibrary Loan process worked, a service I had never been forced to avail myself of when researching papers on broader topics such as warfare in 14th century France. Beyond these high tech options, I also found myself using more primitive techniques, such as searching the printed databases of French literature available in book form. I even ended up browsing shelves, going from topic to related topic like a primitive Wikipedia (or

an advanced version of d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*). Professor Sprenger would often suggest authors or titles to me that would send me off in new directions and lead to unexpected discoveries. These are research skills I had never needed to possess as an undergraduate, unsurprising considering this paper was on a topic far more specific and obscure than any I had confronted previously.

Through my meetings with Dr. Sprenger, I also learned that the scope of the research was not as narrow as I was making it. Rather than focusing exclusively on what other people have said about *Gilles et Jeanne*, I could explore the philosophical foundations the novel, and I could read Tournier's own words to get an idea of what his goal was in writing. It was Dr. Sprenger who came up with the idea of comparing Bataille's interpretation of the Gilles de Rais story with Tournier's. He pointed out that Bataille's influence on French thought was so powerful that it would be highly unlikely that something he said about Gilles de Rais would not influence Tournier. It was then that I remembered Dr. Hudson had generously given me the book Bataille wrote about the trial, when he learned the subject of my thesis project. I had read it previously, but merely to get familiar with the historical timeline of the events of the novel. I had completely overlooked the more useful application of the book: Bataille's essay, "The Tragedy of Gilles de Rais". I felt a little foolish at overlooking such a resource, and found the essay incredibly useful as it helped develop the connection that we had suspected existed between the two writers.

It was Dr. Sprenger who also pointed out the significance of Tournier's admiration for Spinoza. Though we did not develop Spinozan thought in the novel, it did lead me to find traces of other philosophies in it. I found a very strong strain of Girard, and was able to develop the thread of sacred violence through the novel.

I gave the rough draft to Dr. Sprenger at the beginning of February and he went over it and provided some notes. While a good beginning, the overall argument lacked organizational clarity. For someone unfamiliar with the plot of the novel, it would be difficult to understand. He boiled the argument down into three main points I was trying to make, which helped clarify it in my mind. He also suggested the addition of section titles to help keep the thread of the argument formulated for the reader. He also helped me get in contact with one of my committee members, Dr. Anca Sprenger, who was able to suggest a book that would be useful regarding the notion of the ‘sacred kiss’, a topic she had done her dissertation on. Using this information, I was able to add a lot of strength to my argument about the tradition and meaning behind the pivotal scene of the kiss in the novel.

The article went through a couple more revisions as I expanded on certain arguments and erased points that were not relevant, as well as added sub titles to help clarify to the reader where the argument was going. Dr. Sprenger went through it one final time, making editorial alterations in order to clarify the article for the reader. This outside point of view was extremely useful, as it is not always easy to know that what is clear in your own mind may not come across clearly to the reader.

Conclusion

There are several different paths that further research could be taken. One of the interesting discoveries we made in the research of this article was the fact that the marriage allegory was alive and well in French literature as late as 1983. While Dr. Sprenger had already traced its prevalence through the 19th century, the fact that it persisted a century later makes me wonder if the underlying tensions between the old regime and the modern age were ever completely resolved in the minds of French authors. A paper documenting the prevalence of symbolic and failed marriage in 20th century French literature would be useful in finding out if this phenomenon persisted into the modern day, or if this is simply symptomatic of Tournier's self-identification with the authors of the 19th century.

Another article that would be interesting would be one that further explores the occurrence of mimetic desire in *Gilles et Jeanne* and Tournier's other works. The argument could be made that Gilles's desire for sainthood and a connection to the supernatural was nothing more than a mimetic desire that began with his desire for Joan herself. Could similar patterns exist in *Le Roi des aulnes* and the similar character of Tiffauges? Could there be elements of mimetic desire in *Vendredi*, transposed into the context of man's desire for union with nature? Does the act of sacred violence against a scapegoat, made manifest in the martyrdom of Joan and the execution of Gilles, repeat itself in other works by Tournier? I am not familiar with his entire *œuvre*, but it would be interesting to discover if similar patterns emerged.

Though Tournier enjoys quite a bit of attention, the novel *Gilles et Jeanne* is one of the most neglected in his work. An article detailing its value as a *conte* as well as the role the *conte* plays within Tournier's typology would prove interesting, especially comparing it to its *roman* counterpart, *Le Roi des aulnes*

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