



---

Exorcising Exclusion: The Figure of Merlin in Hersart de la Villemarqué's "Barzaz Breiz"

Author(s): FRANÇOISE H. M. LE SAUX

Source: *Arthuriana*, Vol. 10, No. 1, ESSAYS ON MERLIN (SPRING 2000), pp. 43-54

Published by: [Scriptorium Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869520>

Accessed: 09/06/2014 19:08

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*Scriptorium Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Arthuriana*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Exorcising Exclusion: The Figure of Merlin in Hersart de la Villemarqué's *Barzaz Breiz*

FRANÇOISE H. M. LE SAUX

The Breton Merlin cycle maps out the social and psychological causes of the prophet's marginal status, which leads to his being dehumanized. Resolution depends on Merlin's explicit recognition of vulnerability. (F.H.M.LeS.)

The nineteenth-century collection of ballads published by Théodore Hersart de la Villemarqué under the title of *Barzaz Breiz* [Poetry of Brittany], contains five 'arthurian' pieces: the short, non-narrative 'Bale Arzur' [Arthur's March Song]; and the four components of the section entitled 'Marzin' [Merlin], which in conjunction provide us with a biography of Merlin, from his conception to his conversion by St. Kado at the end of his life. This 'Merlin' corpus is not explicitly connected to Arthur: the focus remains firmly on the seer himself.

Though of considerable interest to students of the Arthurian legend, this material has tended to be neglected due to doubts voiced about its authenticity during what has been termed the 'Quarrel of the *Barzaz Breiz*.' Intrigued by the unusual nature of some of the ballads (including 'Marzin-barz' [Merlin the Bard]) contained in the *Barzaz*, a younger, more scientifically-minded generation of collectors challenged La Villemarqué to show proof that these pieces were genuine. Nettled by accusations that he might be a Breton Macpherson, La Villemarqué refused to justify his methodology or show his notebooks. A nobleman of the old school, he felt that the very suggestion that he could have falsified (or indeed fabricated) the material in his *Barzaz Breiz* was a slur on his honor, beneath contempt and unworthy of a response. His silence was understood as an admission of guilt, and the *Barzaz Breiz* came to be widely regarded as a forgery.<sup>1</sup> Attempts to gain access to La Villemarqué's papers met with the stubborn indignation of his heirs at the way he had been treated, until a young scholar, Donatien Laurent, was allowed to study the family archives. There, he found that, even though much had

ARTHURIANA 10.1 (2000)

been destroyed, a few of La Villemarqué's notebooks had survived, with the notes taken during his fieldwork. Laurent's first results (published in 1989) proved beyond doubt that, while La Villemarqué had felt free to emend or 'improve' the occasional word or phrase, the pieces themselves were genuine.<sup>2</sup> The notebook version of the Merlin ballad in particular, subjected to philological and dialectological analysis, showed a number of archaic and rare words, attested in Middle Breton, but which had been thought to have long disappeared. Interestingly, La Villemarqué occasionally 'corrects' these obscure archaic forms: which leads Laurent to conclude that, far from being forgeries, the Breton Merlin-ballads may have their origins in a medieval Armorican cycle.<sup>3</sup> This is therefore material to take seriously.

The Breton ballads chart Merlin's development from wonder-child to powerful enchanter to marginalized victim, culminating in his reconciliation with both God and the social group that had never truly adopted him. The first ballad,<sup>4</sup> 'Marzin enn he gavel' [Merlin in his cradle] is a lullaby sung by Merlin's mother to her infant son. It narrates the supernatural conception of the child, and ends with the new-born Marzin blessing his other-worldly father and affirming the providential nature of his own birth. In the second piece, 'Marzin-divinour' [Merlin the seer], the prophet, gathering herbs in the company of his black dog, is addressed by an unknown speaker who urges him to turn away from magic and convert to God. The third, 'Marzin-barz' [Merlin the Bard] is an adventure narrative in nine parts. A youth competes in a horserace, which has as prize the hand of the king's daughter. He wins, but the king attempts to renege on his word by setting apparently impossible tasks to the young man. These tasks, suggested to the king by his druid-like counselor, all involve Marzin: the suitor has to return to court with Marzin's harp, his ring, and finally with Marzin himself. The youth manages to do so, with the help of his grandmother<sup>5</sup>; but after the wedding, Marzin disappears, much to the chagrin of the king. In the fourth ballad, Marzin has become a wild man of the woods. He encounters St. Kado, and contrasts his present circumstances with his past prestige and power. Urged to convert, Marzin asserts his faith in God, and vows to sing the praises of Christ forever.

These ballads, as presented by La Villemarqué, form a cycle recounting the development—social, professional, spiritual and personal—of a Marzin who from the beginning is branded as 'other,' yet who feels a strong sense of belonging to the very group which views him with such mistrust. The hiatus between Marzin's perception of Self and the image of him perceived by those around him is crucial to an understanding of the character. He is genuinely

different, through his father; but this father is absent, and Marzin's self-image is shaped entirely in reference to the world of his mother. To the end of the cycle, Marzin refuses to acknowledge his otherness. He perceives it through the discourse of the people he encounters—his mother, the unknown speaker of 'Marzin-divinour,' the social group of 'Marzin-barz,' and finally St. Kado—but he rejects it, thus unwittingly reinforcing the aura of evil and threat which surrounds him.

The reasons for Marzin's marginalisation are spelled out in 'Marzin enn he gavel.' His conception is unnatural—his mother never even saw his father in human form—and he himself is the fusion of two extremes. His unnamed mother is a king's daughter who wishes no husband other than the King of Heaven. His father is a *duzig*, a spirit, who in the shape of a bird entices the young princess into a forest with his sweet song, and impregnates her by pecking at her ear. The *duzig* is implicitly characterized as both non-Christian and non-human; moreover he represents sensuality and seduction, as opposed to the severe chastity of the young nun. This is apparent from the outset of the ballad:

Kleviz o kana eul lapous,  
 Kane ken flour, kane ken dous  
 [Refrain]  
 Kane ken dous, kane ken flour,  
 Flouroc'h eget iboud ann dour  
 [Refrain]  
 Kement ma'z-iz d'he heul, dibred,  
 Touellet gant-han va spered. ('Marzin enn he gavel,' st. 2–4)

[I heard a bird singing  
 It sang so sweetly, it sang so softly  
 (Refrain)  
 It sang so softly, it sang so sweetly  
 More sweetly than the flowing of water  
 (Refrain)  
 So much so that I followed it, without thinking,  
 My mind deceived by it.]

The seductive discourse of the supernatural bird is permeated with courtly imagery, with a clear invitation to sexuality:

Merc'hik roue, e lavare,  
 Kaer out evel gliz ar beure  
 [Refrain]  
 Ar goulou-deiz 'zo souezet  
 Pa zell ouz it, na ouzez ket.

[Refrain]

Pa bar ann heol, souezet e.  
Na piou a vo da bried-te? (st. 6–8)

[King's daughter, he said,  
You are as beautiful as the morning dew. (Refrain)  
Dawn itself is surprised  
When it looks upon you, don't you know? (Refrain)  
When the sun rises, it is astounded.  
Who then is to be your husband?]

The bird's voice of temptation is resisted verbally by the young woman, rebuking it for having too libertine a little beak and stating her indifference to worldly admiration and her total commitment to the King of heaven; but she nevertheless responds to it physically, following the bird's beguiling song deep into the forest until she falls asleep with exhaustion.

The theme of sleep is of particular importance in this ballad, in that it is both the necessary precondition for the successful seduction of the maiden, and is indicative of the surreal nature of her adventure. It is closely connected with the theme of innocence; the opening stanza of the lullaby may thus be read as a disclaimer of responsibility on the part of the young mother: 'Brema trizek miz ha teir teir zun / E oann dindan ar c'hoad e hun' [Thirteen months and three weeks ago / I fell asleep in the forest]. The way she sees it is that her son is literally a dream made flesh: she fell asleep under an oak tree,

Hag eno am boe eunn hunvre  
Am sapeduaz beteg re. (stanza 15)

[And there I had a dream  
That astounded me beyond belief.]

This dream is a typical other-worldly vision:

E oann ebarz ti eunn Duzik;  
A dro-war-dro eur feutennik  
[Refrain]  
He vein ker boull! he vein ker skler!  
He vein ker splann evel d'ar gwer!  
[Refrain]  
Eur gwiskad man war al leur-zi  
Bleuniou nevez street war-n-ezhi. (st. 16–18)

[I was in the house of a Duzig  
Surrounded by a little fountain  
(Refrain)  
Its stones were so transparent! Its stones were so clear!  
Its stones were as bright as glass!

(Refrain)

A carpet of moss on the floor  
With freshly-strewn flowers over it.]

Here again the narrator emphasizes her innocence: the other-worldly being to whom this dwelling belonged was not at home, so she was unaware of any danger: 'Ha me diogel ha seder' [And I felt safe and calm] (st. 19).

The seduction scene is likewise described as unthreatening and almost asexual. A dove pecks at the wall of the glass house, the young woman lets it in:

Hag hi ebarz, ha da rodal  
Tro-war-dro d'ann ti, o nijal  
[Refrain]  
Gwech war va skoaz, gwech war va fenn  
Gwech e nije war ve c'herc'henn.  
[Refrain]  
Teir gwech ouz va skoarn a bokaz  
Ha kuit dreo hi enn-dro d'ar c'hoat glaz (stanzas 23–25)

[And once it was indoors, it started to  
fly around the house

(Refrain)

Sometimes it flew against my shoulder,  
Sometimes against my head, sometimes against my breast

(Refrain)

Three times it kissed my ear  
Then it merrily went back to the green forest.]

The overriding feeling expressed by Marzin's mother is shame mingled with anger; shame at having given birth to the child at all, and anger at his father. 'A-ioul vefe gaou va hunvre! Na ouife den diouz va douare!' [If only my dream had been an illusion! If only no one knew about my condition!], she laments (st. 29). This implicit rejection of her infant son is a direct consequence of her belief that the seductive Duzig who sired him can only have been an evil spirit prompted by a devilish desire to soil her purity:

A-ioul vefe enn ifern skorn  
Ann Duarded kig hag askorn! (st. 28)

[If only evil spirits were in icy hell,  
Flesh and bones!]

The nature of the offspring of such an 'evil spirit' can at best only be ambiguous, and the suggestion is that from the very beginning of his life, Marzin is considered by his mother not only as just 'other' but as truly alien.

However, it is also clear that Marzin's perception of things is radically different to that of his mother. The baby, who has inherited some of his father's supernatural powers, hastens to set the record straight: his father is no *duard*, no evil spirit:

Etre an nenv hag ann douar  
 Va zad zo ker kaen hag al loar;  
 [Refrain]  
 Va zad a gar ann dudou kez,  
 Ha pa gav ann tu ho gwarez.  
 [Refrain]  
 Ra viro Doue da vikenn  
 Va zad diouz puns an ifern yen! (st. 33–35)

[Between the sky and the earth  
 My father is as resplendant as the moon;  
 (Refrain)  
 My father loves poor people  
 And when he can he helps them.  
 (Refrain)  
 May God eternally preserve  
 My father from the icy pit of hell!]

There is a purpose to his birth: 'Oenn ganet evid eur va bro' [I was born for the good of my country] (st. 37); from his point of view, there is no devilish streak through him, and his mother has no cause for worry.

Marzin's consolation of his mother is representative of his attitude towards rejection in the other ballads of the cycle. In his efforts to make the members of his society accept that his powers are entirely positive and God-given, he remains blind to the fact that he is nevertheless different, by virtue of those same powers, and that he therefore needs to give added reassurance as to his own essential nature. The end of the ballad shows that baby Marzin's words have an effect ('Ar vamm a oe souezet bras: "Heman zo Marz mar boe biskoaz"' [His mother was very surprised: 'Here's a wonder if ever there was one']), but it is double-edged. His mother recognizes him as a wonder-child, but does not take back the curse on his father, and in proclaiming him a *marz*, a marvel, she further emblazons his otherness.<sup>6</sup>

The key feature which makes Marzin conspicuous is his supernatural gift of poetic prophecy, which arouses fear and mistrust around him, as well as giving him prestige and power. This is the theme of 'Marzin-divinour.' The refrain, 'iou iou ou,' 'hurrah,' suggests that Marzin is here being acclaimed by the crowd; he is at the pinnacle of his popularity, and seemingly totally accepted by his society. The voice that addresses him may therefore be seen as isolated; and what he has to say remains unanswered. Marzin is in the

process of gathering medicinal herbs and—less reassuringly, because of its connotations of black magic—is hunting for the red egg of a sea-serpent. The ultimate use to which these ingredients will be made is unknown, but the nameless voice connects it with Marzin’s divinatory powers, which are thus aligned with witchcraft, and therefore sinful. The appeal made to Marzin: ‘distroet endrou: Ne deuz divinour nemed Dou’ [Convert: there is no seer except God] is in effect asking him to give up that part of his identity which comes from his father in order to espouse completely the values of his mother. Marzin apparently gives no answer, but it is clear from the lullaby ballad that such an appeal would not have been understood by him, inasmuch as the conflation Other/evil is not recognized by him when relating to his own powers and activities. And his failure to do so brings about his downfall, as recounted in ‘Marzin-barz’.

Superficially, ‘Marzin-barz’ is just a variant of a familiar folk-tale theme,<sup>7</sup> but it also shows how Marzin’s excentric status in society, together with his desirability for the social group that has the privilege of redefining its identity through his presence, ultimately leads to his being objectified. Time has passed; Marzin is now an old man, and to some extent this text reads as a myth of transmission of bardic powers. The young man who wins the race which gives him the right to the princess’s hand is rejected by the king because he suspects him of sorcery:

Ne ket kelc’herien a fell d’e  
Da rei da bried d’am merc’h-me. (‘Marzin-barz,’ II, st. 15)

[I have no wish to give sorcerers  
As husband to my daughter.]

The tasks set by the white-bearded man seated at the right of the king, however, all involve the outwitting of the greatest sorcerer of all, Marzin himself. The objects the youth has to bring back to court are highly symbolic: Marzin’s harp, representative of poetical skill and inspiration, and his ring, which can be seen as an emblem of authority and identity.<sup>8</sup> But the third task does not involve a mere possession, however symbolic: the king demands Merlin’s person, without regard for his own wishes, to make him officiate at the wedding.

These tasks are fulfilled thanks to the youth’s grandmother, who gives him magical objects to assist him, and eventually drugs the prophet for him. The way in which this happens is noteworthy for the absence of respect or compassion shown for the aging Marzin. The old woman lures him into her house under the pretense of consoling the distraught seer after the loss of his harp and his ring, and makes him eat three magic apples under cover of



concern for him.<sup>9</sup> That the king himself sees Marzin mainly as a prestigious acquisition is also indicated by his displeasure when his prey disappears after the wedding-feast: the Other is perceived as so alien that his humanity is ignored.

Yet this Other is crucial to the self-definition of the society that is victimizing him. The point of the three tasks set to the youth is that his ability to fulfill them should have indicated him as Marzin's successor, either by overcoming him, or as his chosen heir. In that respect, the king and his counselor may be said to have been swindled. Marzin's powers have not been handed down. As in 'Marzin-divinour,' the seer makes no comment at the end of the ballad; but the fine balance between his sense of belonging to the world of his mother and his pride in the qualities inherited from his father is now compromised. The loss of his harp, in particular, must challenge the prophet's sense of identity, as the harp is the privileged medium for those poetic and vaticinary powers from which Marzin derives the ultimate justification for his existence.

The violent destruction of Marzin's self-image leads to the dissolution of his personality. When we encounter him in 'Distro Marzin,' he is described as 'eunn rasman' [a ghost]; he lives in the deepest woods [ar c'hoat don], avoiding human society, and displaying all the marks of madness:

Glaz he varo evel d-ar man;

Hag he zaou-lagad o tevi,  
'Vel dour ar c'haoter o firvi. (st. 2-3)

[His beard was as grey as moss  
And his eyes were burning (?)  
Like water boiling in the pan.]

Enjoined in the name of God to say who he is, the madman gives an account of his life that stresses his loss of a place in society, opposing the time of his greatness, typified by social valorization, to his present state as pariah. As Marzin sees it, the loss of his powers marked the end of a golden age:

—Enn amzer ma oann barz er bed,  
Ma oa gand ann holl enoret;

Dioc'htu ma'z-enn 'barz ar zall,  
E klevet ann holl o iouc'hal.

Dioc'htu ma kane va delen,  
Koueze diouz ar gwez aour melen. (st. 6-8)

[—In the days when I was a bard  
I was honoured by all;

As soon as I entered the hall  
 You would hear everyone cheering.  
 As soon as my harp started to sing,  
 Yellow gold would fall from the trees.]

Breman er c'hoajou e vevann,  
 Den na ra stad ouz in breman.

Bleizi, ha moc'h gwez, kreiz ma hent,  
 Tre ma'z-ann biou, a skrign ho dent,

Kollet eo gan-in va delen,  
 Pilet eo gwez ann aour melen. (st. 12–14)

[Now I live in the woods  
 No one cares about me now.  
 Wolves and wild boars, when I come  
 across them on my path, grind their teeth  
 I have lost my harp  
 The trees that gave yellow gold have been felled.]

His downfall is seen by him as a national as well as a personal disaster, which indicates how closely connected in Marzin's mind is his social group and his own self:

Roucou ar vro am c'hare  
 Roucou all holl am douje. (st. 9)

[The kings of this land loved me  
 All the other kings feared me.]

Roucou Breiz a zo maro.  
 Roucou all a wash ar vro. (st. 15)

[The kings of Brittany are dead.  
 Other kings are devastating the land.]

The prophet's sense of loss and confusion is compounded by the fickleness of the very people he had striven to protect:

Ann dudigou paour lavare:  
 —“Kan, Marzin e peb mare”

Laret eure ar Vretoned:  
 “Kan, Marzin, ann traou da zonet.” (st. 10–11)

[The poor folk would say:  
 —“Sing, Marzin, always.”  
 The Bretons would say:  
 “Sing, Marzin, of the things to come.”]

Na lavar ken ar Vretoned:  
 “Kan, Marzin, ann traou da zonet.”

Hi a ra ouz-in *Marzin-fol*,  
A daoliou mein am c'hasont holl (st. 16–17)

[The Bretons no longer say:  
“Sing, Marzin, of the things to come.”  
They call me *Mad Marzin*  
And they all throw stones at me.]

Marzin's response to Kado's enjoiner to convert and find peace in God's mercy, though positive, remains ambiguous inasmuch as his profession of faith is also a disclaimer that this is truly a conversion in the strict sense:

—Enn ha fiziz, c'hoaz e fiziann,  
Out-han truez a c'houlennann. (st. 20)

[I have put my faith in Him, my faith is in Him still  
I beg Him His pity.]

In effect, the disempowered Merlin is stating here in words that which he had not thought worthwhile expressing to the anonymous voice that had addressed him in his heyday: that he did not need to convert, because he already was a good Christian. His act is one of humility, made because of his acute emotional distress; but it also is a conscious turning away from that which made him 'Other' (i.e., his paternal inheritance) to fully embrace the values both of his mother and of the society that had so cruelly rejected him. This new-found identity leads to a renewal of his bardic skills, but in a different register:

Me a losko eur iouc'haden  
D'am Roue, gwir Zoue ha den!

Me gano he vadelezou,  
A oad da oad dreist ann oajou. (st. 22–23)

[I shall let out a cry of joy  
To my King, true God and man!  
I shall sing His acts of goodness  
From age to age throughout the ages.]

Marzin has moved away from the political agenda imposed on him by his other-worldly father, to commit himself to the spiritual agenda espoused by his mother; and in so doing, he finds inner peace and social approval, expressed by St Kado's blessing.

However, the wording used by Marzin is significant. His focussing on the figure of Christ indicates that this is not merely a rejection of the father in favor of the mother. The benevolent and powerful 'duzig' is replaced by a role model with whom Marzin can more truly relate: himself the son of a

non-earthly father, with a mission of salvation to his people, and eventually betrayed by them, Marzin is appealing to a transcendent alter ego to renew his creativity, his sanity and his identity. And with this act of humility, whereby for the first time Marzin declares himself in need of help, comes the embrace that had eluded him throughout his life.

## UNIVERSITY OF READING

Françoise H.M. Le Saux is a lecturer at the University of Reading (UK), where she teaches medieval French language and literature.

## NOTES

- 1 Ernst Brügger thus excludes this material from his study on Merlin (1906) on the grounds that the Breton ballads are 'Fabrikaten.'
- 2 See Laurent (1989), chapter 2: 'Les textes remarquables.'
- 3 Laurent (1989, p. 296). The paucity of medieval Breton texts still extant precludes any definite statement on the subject—to date, at least. In other respects, the Merlin ballads follow the idiom of the Breton *gwerz*: for a discussion of the text of 'Merlin-Barde' as a ballad, see Mary Ann Constantine (1996), 74–80.
- 4 All quotes made from the 1959 reprint of the 1867 edition of the *Barzaz-Breiz*, 56–78. English translations are my own.
- 5 *Mamm-goz*, literally 'old mother,' is the usual Breton term for 'grandmother'; however, the hero also addresses her as *mammig* [mummy]. There is therefore a possibility that the young man is helped by his aged mother.
- 6 The first element in 'Marzin' is moreover homophonous with 'marz'. However, this connection would not necessarily have been made by the singer. Laurent (1989, p. 292) notes that Breton oral tradition usually refers to Merlin as Melin (i.e., the French version of the name); 'Melin/Merlin' is also the form in which the name appears in La Villemarqué's notebook version of 'Marzin Barz.' In the 1839 edition of the *Barzaz Breiz*, the prophet is referred to as 'Merlin'; the name is replaced by 'Marzin' (deemed to be more authentically Celtic) in the 1845 edition.
- 7 The ballad contains such motifs as the race as a suitor contest (Motif index H 331.5) and impossible quests assigned in order to get rid of the hero (Type 650).
- 8 We know from medieval Welsh sources that the harp is one of the three possessions of which no free man may be deprived, whilst the ring is a bardic attribute. If this ballad does indeed have its origins in a medieval Breton work, one would expect such cultural symbolism to be underlying the text.
- 9 This may be read as a variation of the 'Tasks performed with help of an old woman' motif (Motif Index H 971); the medievalist may equally discern an echo of the Merlin/Viviane relationship, where the deceived Merlin is also made to fall into a magic sleep.

## WORKS CITED

- Ernst Brugger, "L'Enserrement Merlin'. Studien zur Merlinsage', *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur* 29 (1906): 56–140 and 30 (1906): 169–237.
- Mary Ann Constantine, *Breton Ballads*, Aberystwyth, CMCS Publications, 1996.
- Donatien Laurent, *Aux sources du Barzaz-Breiz: la mémoire d'un peuple*, Dournenez, Ar Men, 1989.
- Stith Thompson, *Motif Index of Folk Literature*, Helsinki, Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1932–36. *Folklore Fellows Communications* 93–42, 46, 47.
- Hersart de la Villemarqué, *Barzaz-Breiz. Chants populaires de la Bretagne*. Paris, Perrin, 1959; repr. of 1867 edition.

## Camelot 2000

A Millennial Conference on the Arthurian Legends  
To be held at  
The University of Rochester



October 26-28, 2000

Plenary Speaker:  
Norris Lacy

Featuring also a major exhibit of Arthurian books  
and other materials  
and  
Arthurian entertainments

For more information and to submit a proposal contact:

Alan Lupack, Director  
The Robbins Library  
Rush Rhees Library  
University of Rochester  
Rochester, New York 14627-0055  
e-mail: [alupack@rcl.lib.rochester.edu](mailto:alupack@rcl.lib.rochester.edu)  
Phone: (716) 275-0110