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Author(s): ANNE BERTHELOT

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Merlin and the Ladies of the Lake

ANNE BERTHELOT

The figure of Merlin has in most texts a close relationship with a feminine character, either Morgue or the Lady of the Lake. While Morgue is often depicted as a negative figure, the Lady of the Lake is described as a positive force in the Arthurian world. Technically, however, both characters tend to replace Merlin as the embodiment of magic and wisdom in the 13th century romances. (AB)

Merlin first appears on the narrative scene as a child: the *puer senex* who reveals to Vortigernus what causes his tower to fall, and then prophesies the future of Great Britain, with the fighting dragons as a starting point. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, for instance, as well as in the French prose *Merlin* or the Middle-English *Of Arthour and of Merlyn*, he is the fatherless child, born of the devil according to some versions, of a special kind of 'demon' according to others, but basically he acts as a revealing device, a prophet whose defining characteristic is his youth. The 'merveille' of Merlin is, precisely, that he is a child with the wisdom of an old man, and the various texts insist on the discrepancy between Merlin's high level of competence and his apparent youth. Merlin is the one character related to the Arthurian legend who seems to have the least chance of getting involved in any kind of romantic relationship, or any relationship with a woman, his mother excepted.

But, things are not so simple. From the very beginning, the motives associated with Merlin suggest a difficult relationship between his character and any feminine figure whose identity is not better established than his own. Indeed, Merlin is frequently given the rôle of the more or less supernatural creature which can only be imprisoned by a woman, preferably a virgin. This pattern underlies the unicorn story, and it is not superfluous to mention the resemblance between Merlin, the devil's son, and the strange animal haunting Arthur's kingdom, the Beste Glatissant. At least one manuscript of the prose *Tristan* depicts the circumstances leading to the Beste Glatissant's birth, and this episode justifies the claim made a few years ago,¹ that Merlin is the Beste's (half-)brother—since both are born of the devil. In most texts of the twelfth and thirteenth-centuries, however, this

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analogy is not so explicit; but, whenever Merlin appears in his capacity as 'Wild Man' there is also a 'prophecy' about him, foretelling that he will never be captured unless by a woman.

We possess four versions of this episode: the most complete rendition takes place in the *Suite-Vulgate*, rather late in Merlin's career. Interrupting his activities as counselor to Arthur, prophet dictating past and future events to Blaise, and 'ami' to Niniane of Brittany, Merlin departs for Rome, where he intends to interpret the emperor's dream and to reveal the empress's villainy. He first manifests himself in the form of a white stag, and as such predicts that the emperor's dream will only be explained by a Wild Man living in the forest. All the knights enter the quest for this elusive Wild Man, but the only one to succeed is the young Grisandole, who is in fact the maiden Avenable, obliged to disguise herself to escape her family's enemies. Brought to the emperor, Merlin² explains why he laughed several times on the way, and tells the truth about Avenable-Grisandole. He then disappears, leaving behind an inscription bearing testimony to his presence. Quite clearly, this episode has nothing to do with the main *corpus* of Arthurian tales; this impression is confirmed by the fact that the same story, sometimes *verbatim*, is told as the final episode of the verse thirteenth-century *Roman de Silence*. In *Silence*, the eponymous heroine has been raised as a boy by her rich parents, because women were prohibited by the king from inheriting. She becomes a knight and a fine warrior, but she spurns the queen's proposals, and consequently the queen accuses Silence of attempting to rape her. Since the king (who is definitely *not* Arthur³) is loath to have the bright young knight put to death, he imposes on Silence an impossible quest: he must find and capture Merlin. This is impossible because, as the queen explains, nobody but a woman will ever be able to accomplish this feat:

Merlins ert petis enfes donques;
 il fist la tor al roi ester,
 et donc n'i volt plus arester.
 Mais il dist donc, ains qu'en alast
 et que la tor adev alast,
 qu'il seroit encor si salvages
 et si fuitils par ces boscages,
 ja n'estroit pris, n'ensi n'ensi
 — c'est verité que jo vos di—
 se ne fust par engien de feme. (Roche-Mahdi, vv. 5794–5802)

[Merlin was a little child then; he arranged for the king's tower to stand, but did not want to remain. But he said, before he went and the tower fell down, that he would be so wild and so elusive through the woods that nobody would

ever take him, in any manner,—I am telling you the truth—if it was not through a woman's wiles.^{4]}

Since, of course, Silence *is* a woman, Merlin is captured easily, and his revelations pave the way to a happy ending.

The *Roman de Silence* and the Grisandole episode offer a rather developed version of the 'capture of Merlin' motive. Not so the Middle English romance *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, where the story belongs to the series of three *exempla* demonstrating the child Merlin's powers to Vertigier's messengers. Even less so the Middle-High German *Rheinische Merlin*, a fragment then presents Merlin's story as a kind of hagiographic narrative. There the motive is so much changed as to be almost impossible to recognize. It has baffled critics for a long time, but it shows the pattern we have noticed in other texts: Merlin's death, or capture, is brought about by a woman. If there is a merlinesque tradition encompassing this motive, it is carefully repressed in the first works connecting the 'Merlin matter' with the Arthurian legend: e.g., Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* or the prose *Merlin*. In this last text, the 'demonstrations' of Merlin's talents to the royal messengers contains only two such episodes, instead of the expected three; the missing one is precisely the one about 'the woman dressed as a man who is able to capture Merlin.'

In the *Vita Merlini*,⁵ on the other hand, Merlin, a warrior-king who went mad after seeing his men killed in battle and fled to the forests, to live there like an animal, is once again involved with women, having left behind him a wife and a sister. Their names—Ganieda and Guendoloena—are similar. The second vanishes from the narrative after one episode only, while the former one plays a regularly increasing role until the end of the story. Some critics suggest that these two women are one feminine character, the mythical consort of Merlin as *homo sylvestris*, or Wild Man. Both women manifest a deep sorrow because of Merlin's departure from the court—the human, average, world. While Guendoloena cries and laments, Ganieda, Merlin's sister points out to her brother how unfair he is to *his* wife: he obliges her to live as a widow, although he is still alive, and she has no hope of ever getting another husband. Merlin then agrees to let Guendoloena marry again if she wishes it—as long as he does not see her new husband. He even promises to bring her a wedding gift, as if to demonstrate his perfect good will. Guendoloena enters indeed another engagement, which Merlin learns about by looking in the stars. However, when he arrives at Guendoloena's house, riding a wild stag and driving a herd of wild animals, the husband-to-be attracts the madman's attention by his laugh. In so doing, apparently, he

places himself under the *geas* earlier mentioned by Merlin, and Merlin, once again raving mad, kills him by hurtling the stag's antlers at him and smashing his skull. Nothing more is said about Guendoloena, left doubly a widow.

On the other hand, Merlin's sister, Ganieda, remains on the scene. Indeed, she becomes more and more important as the story unrolls, and in the end, she is not only the companion, the *parèdre* of Merlin, as seen in old religious systems where gods and goddesses together constitute a bisexual force working through sexual energy. She is also a prophetess; she replaces her brother when he regains his sanity and consequently loses his prophetic gift. Ganieda/Guendoloena⁶ cannot of course be considered as a variant of the Lady of the Lake, but she is the prototype of the feminine figure whose presence runs parallel to Merlin's story, belying the current image of the *puer senex* free from any such entanglement. Actually, there are many women, named or not, in the *Vita Merlini*: Maelduinus, the madman who drinks of Merlin's newly discovered healing fountain, has a woman, an ex-lover intent on revenge, to thank for his years of madness and for the death of his companions who were poisoned by a traitorous gift of apples. Just before that, Taliesin and Merlin indulge in reminiscences about Avalon, the 'Insula Pomorum' of old, where nine sisters deal in life and death and will bring Arthur back to health. One of these is called Morgen, according to tradition, but her sisters' names are exercises in doubling, variations on this one and only figure, whom one can trace back to the enigmatic Welsh poems attributed to Merlin himself: the 'Swan maiden' lingering under an apple-tree which seems to be her totem in *Yr Afallenau*, or the 'Gwendydd' of *Yr Oianau*.

Myrddyn, indeed, is not a solitary character, for all his exile in the deepest woods. The *Vita Merlini* features a singularly inhabited forest, where Taliesin, Maelduin, and Ganieda join Merlin to build the kern of some strange community devoted to science. They study the moves of stars in a very sophisticated observatory, where each window is manned by an astrologer or a scribe. The prose *Merlin*, struggling to transform a polymorphic figure⁷ into a christian prophet of the Grail, imbues its character with the same resistance, to put it mildly, to femininity demonstrated by Alain le Gros. (Alain is heir to the Grail at the end of the *Joseph*, and the only one among twelve brothers to refuse marriage and paternity.) But soon the old pattern comes back. If the child Merlin is apparently sexless, his conception and birth happen according to a recurring structure: the devil's son is born thanks to the same kind of masquerade as Arthur, or as Mordret. The astonishing resemblance between these three episodes casts doubts on Uter's love for Ygerne, and it suggests that the young Arthur is at best no better than an old

'lecheor' playing a nasty trick on his vassal's wife, and at worst a 'demon equipedes,' a devil.⁸

As if these scenes were not enough, the *Merlin* proper and the beginning of the *Suite-Vulgate* are saturated with stories of seduction, adultery, and bastard children. They inform the *exempla* Merlin tells to his various audiences. They taint the purest relationship, when the whore who is Merlin's aunt suggests that Merlin is Blaise's child, that there is 'fole amor' between a fair penitent and his confessor. They tax credulity when the 'conte' tells us that both King Leodegan of Carmelide and King Nantres each have taken their 'seneschal's' wife as mistress and have fathered children on them, and then compounded their sin with a lack of delicacy in giving the legitimate offspring the same name as the bastard one (Guenievre and the False Guenievre, Yvain and Yvain l'Avoutre, or the Bastard). In fact, considering how bluntly the text's 'refoule' expresses the truth behind Merlin and Arthur's less than virginal conceptions, it is not surprising that the later romances renounce edifying and virtuous visions of Merlin—as does the prose *Perceval*, for instance—and allow old patterns to come back under new accouterments. In such cases as the *Suite-Vulgate*, the *Suite-Post-Vulgate*, and the *Prophesies de Merlin*, two feminine characters are more or less constantly associated with Merlin, although under various guises.

Morgue, or Morgan, is the first character to be consistently related to Merlin in most thirteenth-century romances, although circumstances may vary considerably. It may be that a lustful Merlin seduces an (almost) innocent Morgue, thus pushing her to her decheance. Or Morgue may appear as an ambitious and unscrupulous bitch ready to seduce an old tottering Merlin in order to gain the wisdom he alone can dispense. Both characters get involved in other relationships. Apart from her numerous unnamed lovers, Morgue has at least two serious affairs, with Accolon in the *Suite Post-Vulgate*, and with Guiomar in the *Suite-Vulgate*.⁹ As for Merlin, of course, his involvement with Morgue is just a dress rehearsal for his true love, for the Lady of the Lake, Niviène, Niniane, Viviane, Nimüe. It is easy to suggest that both characters were but one at the beginning, when the Myrddyn tradition merged with other motives: the fairy lover, who more often than not embodies the link of a seer, or prophet, with the Other World of gods and goddesses.¹⁰ When christian tenets enter the scene and mix with old patterns, it may have been expedient to split this figure in two: the *good* fairy, and the bad, or the devilish, magician. However, the direct heir to Gwendydd or Ganiada seems to have been Morgue, and there remains indisputably a deep bond between her and Merlin. In the *Suite-Post-Vulgate* for instance,

Merlin rushes in to warn Morgue of Arthur's wrath, even though their affair is long since finished. Morgue then begs Merlin's help without doubting that she will get it: is it because he still loves her, as the text states, or because they are 'natural allies' at a deeper level?

On the other hand, the late *Prophesies de Merlin* insist on the symmetry of both relationships, first between Morgue and Merlin, then between the Lady of the Lake and Merlin. Morgue's behavior may be interpreted as the attitude of a jealous woman, who tries to exact revenge on her rival, and to create misunderstandings between her ex-lover and her rival, and who constantly complains about being betrayed. Of course, in the *Prophesies de Merlin*, Morgue is not the only one who is complaining about that: her three 'colleagues', who have also slept with Merlin to obtain his teachings, feel betrayed because he did not give them all his secrets. Their resentment focuses on the Lady of the Lake, who *did* get everything she bargained for, and *did not* even pay the price for it:

'Cest art ne vous aprist pas Mierlins (the Lady of Avalon says), car il le me jura sour sains la nuit qu'il en porta mon pucelage.—Adont en sui jou deceüe, fait Morghe. Car ançois que mes cors li fust abandounes, il me proumist que il m'aprendroit tout çou qu'il savoit.—A la Dame del Lac vous en poes piercevoir se vous iestes deceüe ou non. (Berthelot, p. 343, fol. 170R)

[‘Merlin did not teach you this enchantment, for he swore to me [he would only teach it to me] during the night when he took my virginity.—Well then, I have been deceived, Morgue said. For before I gave my body to him, he promised me that he would teach me everything he knew.—When you consider the Lady of the Lake, you can see, indeed, how much you have been deceived!]¹¹

Morgue, through her bonds with Avalon, is or should be *the* Lady of the Lake. Niniane-Niviène is nothing but an upstart magician related not to the Celtic goddess of the sea, youth and immortality, but to Diana the Huntress, another type of goddess who looks a little like an intruder. Diana looks like a displaced piece of mythology imported from Brittany together with a number of other motives and characters that is close enough to the original pattern to fit in, but still that does not belong. Niniane-Niviène displaces Morgue, and forces her to assume a negative role, while she confiscates to her profit the notion of a 'good fairy' euhemerized as a beneficent magician. Accordingly, the Morgue and Niniane-Niviène characters do fluctuate together: when the latter is perceived as a model of 'sagesse, bonté, beauté,'¹¹ Morgue is blackened to the point where she is compared to a devil, being 'black' and hideous as are the devils.¹²

On the whole, Morgue is a more stable character, especially in her relationship with Merlin, than is the Lady of the Lake. This does not mean, however, that her case is not complex. When she is first mentioned in the prose *Merlin*, she has nothing to do with Merlin as a character: she is just one of the daughters of the Duke of Cornwall, the youngest and a 'bastard,' though the text does not say by whom—the duke, or Ygerne/Ygraine. Since she is too young to be married off to some king to ensure a global peace when Uterpendragon marries the widowed Duchess, she is put to school, where she supposedly learns the arcane art of 'nigremance.' In fact, Morgue owes her name of 'la fee,' 'the fairy,'¹³ to her special knowledge—since, as everybody knows and as both the *Merlin* and the *Lancelot* insist on repeating, fairies are just the name poor naive people give to women who know more than most. Some versions give a few more details concerning Morgue: she is very beautiful, at least when she is young. Later, however, when she has commerce with the devil(s), she loses all her beauty, and from then on must use illusions in order to seduce her numerous lovers.¹⁴ This information is not quite coherent: on one hand, her 'arts' are presented as perfectly natural, the result of a superior education, but on the other hand, she is apparently dabbling in black magic (although medieval texts do not differentiate clearly black and white magic). However, unless if one decides that dealing with the devil(s) refers to Morgue's relationship with Merlin, as 'son of the devil,' this vision of Morgue goes along very nicely without referring to the prophet-magician.

Nothing, in fact, prepares the reader for the sudden attraction that develops between Merlin and Morgue in the *Premiers Faits du roi Arthur*, or *Vulgate Suite-Merlin*. Indeed, Arthur's half-sister enters the narrative rather suddenly, and Merlin becomes immediately interested in her. Very little is said about this affair: she is willing to learn, and he agrees to teach her; the depth of their involvement is not alluded to, and eventually they each go their own way apparently without bad feelings. Morgue then engages in an affair with a young handsome knight, related to Queen Guenevere, who angrily puts an end to the whole thing, so earning Morgue's hatred. Meanwhile, Merlin meets Niniane, and forgets Morgue completely. The version of the *Suite-Vulgate* offered by the *Livre d'Artus* depicts much later a *reprise* of this 'affair,' when Merlin finds in Morgue's arms some comfort for his 'amie's' betrayal.¹⁵ In both versions, however, Morgue's depiction is not really negative: in the *Livre d'Artus* she even appears as a much more pleasant character than Niniane, whose behavior toward Merlin has not, in this text, the excuse of his being thoroughly evil. Whenever Niniane, or the Lady of

the Lake, has an 'ami' whom she prefers to Merlin, her 'moral' position, is rather weakened, since her disgust for the enchanter does not stem from her virtue, but from her love for another: *humain, trop humain*... In any case, Morgue does not matter very much in the *Suite-Vulgate*, and her relationship with Merlin is neither very lasting nor very important.

Things are somewhat different in the *Suite-Post-Vulgate*, once called *Suite-Huth* from the name of the manuscript's owner. This dark and pessimistic text takes a very negative view of Merlin, especially in his dealings with women, and also of Morgue, shown from the beginning as an evil sorceress conversing with all kinds of devils in order to acquire a forbidden knowledge of the black arts. According to this perspective, Morgue's relationship to Merlin is just a way among others to win some more power, as she does customarily with 'authentic' demons. It is stated that, while Merlin is 'in love' with Morgue, she just tolerates him and is interested only in his teachings:

Et quant Morgain sot que Merlins avoit che fait par enchantement, elle s'apensa que elle s'acoiteroit de lui et apreneroit tant de son sens que elle porroit faire par tout ou elle vaurroit partie de sa volenté.

Lors s'acointa de Merlin et li pria que il li apresist de che qu'il savoit par couvent que elle feroit pour lui canques il li oseroit requerre. Et quant il le voit de si grant biauté, il l'enama moult durement...[...] Quant elle ot tant appris d'art d'ingromanchie comme il li plot, elle cacha d'entour lui Merlin pour chou que elle s'aperchut bien que il l'amoit de fole amour... (Roussineau, §§ 156–57)

[And when Morgue discovered that Merlin had done that by enchantment, she decided to get acquainted with him and to learn so much from his wisdom that she would always be able to accomplish most of her will in any situation.

She then became acquainted with Merlin and begged him to teach her what he knew, under the condition that she would do for him anything he would dare to ask. And when he saw her great beauty, he started to love her greatly... [...] When she had learnt as much black magic as she wanted, she cast off Merlin from her company, for she knew quite well that he loved her dishonestly.]

Although the *Suite-Post-Vulgate* shows no compunction in blackening Morgue's character, it remains unclear whether or not Merlin succeeds in sleeping with Morgue. At this point, indeed, the connection between magical teachings and physical possession is not explicit: Merlin deals naturally in 'black magic,' because he is a devil's son, and Morgue is ready to pay any price for the knowledge she craves. The tacit understanding is that Merlin, an evil 'lecheor' who wants to rob every woman he happens to meet of her

virginity, has no other chance of seducing his would-be victims than by offering to teach them magic.¹⁶ Contrary to the *Suite-Vulgate*, the *Suite-Post-Vulgate* does not take into account Merlin's gift to change his own appearance at will: this trick allows the *Suite-Vulgate* character to introduce himself to Niniane as an elegant and handsome youth, but one of the many objections Niviène harbours against her unwelcome suitor is his age and unprepossessing looks. Morgue does not seem to be put out by such details; in any case, her own beauty is entirely artificial, since she has lost it while consorting with the devil: it is understandable she does not demand from Merlin what she herself does not possess.

The 'affair' between Arthur's sister and Merlin comes to an early end, before Morgue decides to have Arthur killed and replaced by her lover Accalon. From Morgue's point of view, her affair with Merlin is only a prerequisite allowing her to attain her goal—revenge against Arthur. It may seem somehow fitting, from a structural point of view, that the only other magician at Merlin's level of expertise tries to destroy the king he has 'created.'¹⁷ And yet, even here things are more complex than they seem: although Merlin has repeatedly interfered with the normal course of events to protect the young king, the prophet-magician does not even try to prevent Morgue's treachery.¹⁸ More than that: he actually helps Morgue to escape when Arthur, who has been told that Morgue has taken for herself—and her lover—the precious scabbard of his sword, rides angrily to court, intent on killing his sister. At first, he only means to warn her of what he has foreseen thanks to his gifts:

Mais Merlins, qui par ses agais et par son enchantement savoit canques li rois avoit dit au chevalier, quant il vit que li rois venoit si aïrés au chastiel, il sot qu'il ochirroit erramment Morgain se elle ne s'estoit erramment destornee. Il amoit moult Morgain, tout fust il ensi que elle l'en eüst cachié d'entour li. Si vint a li grant oïrre et li dist: 'Vous estes morte et hounie!' (Roussineau, § 162)

[But Merlin, who knew everything the king had told the knight thanks to his enchantment and his wiles, understood, when he saw how the king was coming to the castle, that he would kill Morgue if she did not get out of his way immediately. He loved Morgue very much, although she had driven him away from her. So, he made haste and came to her, saying: 'You are dead and ruined!']

And yet, after Morgue has humiliated herself before him (she kneels in front of him and begs for mercy), he agrees to play an instrumental part in deflecting Arthur's anger. Far from being the master of the game, he plays the role Morgue designs for him, as if she were the more powerful of the two. He tells Arthur the pretty tale imagined by Morgue, and the king

reconciles himself with his sister, whom he believes innocent. Merlin states unequivocally why he is ready to act in such a way, although his main goal remains Arthur's protection:

Et Merlin dist que tout chou fera il bien pour l'amour de li. (Roussineau, *ibid.*)

[And Merlin said that he would do all that for her love.]

It is the last time that Merlin manifests such feelings for Morgue. Soon, the Damsel Huntress comes to Camaalot, and the prophet-magician becomes so passionately enamored with her that he accepts the cruelest fate at her hands. This episode is important because it reveals inconsistencies in the treatment of both Merlin and Morgue. It suggests that perhaps Merlin is evil in the *Suite-Post-Vulgate* at least in part because he does not love wisely, while Morgue is evil, from the beginning, and corrupts the prophet more than she is corrupted by him. In fact, all these fluctuations show how complex the relationship between Morgue and Merlin is in its different versions: *a fortiori*, the case of Niniane, or the Lady of the Lake, is still more complicated.

The first text to associate Merlin with this manifold character, the Lady of the Lake, is probably the *Lancelot*. Let us not try at this point to determine whether the non-cyclic version, as was edited by E. Kennedy, has preceded the cyclic version as it appears in A. Micha's edition. The 'hero' Lancelot is supposed to be raised by a supernatural creature, linked in one way or another with water, and especially a lake: in other words, a mermaid.¹⁹ But the 'chronicles' of King Arthur's court must not be confused with 'fairy tales,' or with the Breton 'lais' as retold by Marie de France. Consequently, one has to euhemerize as much as possible the ambiguous characters of 'faes,' among them of course Morgue, but also to some extent the Lady of the Lake. We have seen already what happens to Morgue; the same solution may be used with respect to the Lady of the Lake: her lake is not a lake, but a mirage that conveniently hides her manor from King Claudas's curiosity. And this enchantment has been produced by means of magic, that is to say, a quite respectable 'art,' almost bordering on 'science' and a very rational explanation of nature's wonders. Whereas Morgue has learnt this science in a monastery (of all places the most improbable), the Lady of the Lake has had a master. In both cases, this science puts some distance between the dark side of magic dealings and supernatural phenomena and the characters who get to practice them. Magical science displaces responsibility—from the lady's nature to her education, from Nature to Nourreture.

Morgue has enjoyed a mixed reputation in past texts: respected, but feared as a rather ominous figure; she is not one of the foremost characters in the story, even though her role as the enemy of all Arthur and his knights stand for grows larger towards the end of the *Vulgate-Cycle*. The Lady of the Lake does not have such an important part to play either, but she acts as substitute mother and protector to Lancelot, she must be above any suspicion. Accordingly, if she has learned magic, it has to be 'white' magic. The easiest way to ensure this positive vision of the Lady would be to make her master as innocent as herself, but two obstacles arise. On the one hand, Merlin, the only available figure of a magician inside the Arthurian *corpus*, is known as the devil's son; besides, his story contains a number of allusions to a conflict between himself and a feminine character. On the other hand, Merlin is not around during King Arthur's reign: according to Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and everyone else, he disappears after engineering Arthur's conception. In the oldest texts, this is due to the fact that he has outlived his utility: Arthur being considered the legitimate son of Uter and Ygerne. But the prose *Merlin*, possibly conceived of as part of a greater cycle in which the *Lancelot* also takes place, offers a different image. Merlin is alive and very much involved in the kingdom's business as late as a few weeks before Arthur's election through the means of the sword in the stone. Since he is no longer around at the beginning of the *Lancelot*, a few words of explanation are required. The Lady of the Lake acts as his successor, so she is the best candidate to dispose of him. This has the double advantage of eliminating a character prone to claim too much attention,²⁰ and of cutting off the Lady's acquaintance with a dubious figure.

Accordingly, Merlin's role in the Lady of the Lake's life and 'professional' education is summarized at the beginning of the *Lancelot* in a way which underlines the complete innocence and worthiness of the young damsel and blackens as much as possible her mentor. The *Lancelot* must introduce considerable changes to the canonical story of Merlin's birth; most manuscripts substitute a wanton and vain young lady to the faithful and obedient mother of the future prophet. This lady is not seduced by the devil; it is in fact her own desire and her refusal to accept the common law for women, which gives the devil an opportunity to come to her and ultimately to make her pregnant:

Après che ne demoura mie grantment que uns deables de tel maniere comme je vous ai dit vint a la damoisele en son lit par nuit. Si li commencha a proier moult durement et li promist que ja ne le verroit a nul jour. Ele li demanda qui il estoit. 'Je sui, fait il, uns homs d'estraigne terre, et pour chou que vous

n'aves cure d'omme que vous puissies veoir, pour che vieng je a vous, car autresi ne poroie je veoir nule feme a qui je jeüse.' La damoisele le tasta, si senti que il avoit le cors moult gent et moult bien fait par samblant [...]; si l'enama et fist outreement sa volentei et mout le chela bien a sa meire et a autrui. Quant ele ot ceste vie menee dusques a .V. mois, si engrossa... (Micha, vol. VII, Ch. 6)

[It did not last long after this event that a devil, of the kind I told you about, came to the damsel in her bed during the night. He began to ask her for her love and promised her that she would never see him. She asked who he was: 'I am a foreigner, he said, and because you do not care for a man whom you can see, I have come to you: indeed, I could not stand to see a woman to whom I would make love.' The damsel felt him and found he had apparently a handsome body; then she started loving him, and did whatever he wanted, all the while hiding it very well from her mother and from anybody else. When she had behaved so for five months, she became pregnant...]

Not only is the child not baptized in this version, but his name is chosen by the devil; moreover, there is no connection between this Merlin and the Grail, no sense of a mission imparted to a 'prophet.' Merlin is a very gifted sorcerer, and through him Uter the *bad* king tricks unfairly the duchess of Cornwall and causes the death of her *good* husband. Once this is accomplished, Merlin is apparently free to indulge his every whim, and he comes to the virtuous future Lady of the Lake in the hope of seducing her. The text does not suggest any deep 'feeling' in this relationship. There are a few details that may bear testimony to another, older or different, version of the story. When the girl, with a prudence which could be read as slyness, asks her suitor who he is, Merlin tells her the truth—a characteristic not usually demonstrated by devils, more prone to lies and deceptions.²¹ And when she demands to be taught a charm, the use of which is quite obviously contrary to Merlin's interests, the text admits that he complies because of his great *love* for her:

Et chil qui tant l'amoit comme cors morteus puet chose amer li otria a aprendre quanques ele deviseroit de bouche. (Micha, *ibid.*)

[And he, who loved her as much as anybody mortal can love, accepted to teach her all that she would ask from him.]

The Lady of the Lake eventually 'puts Merlin to sleep'; it is not clear whether he is dead, or just sleeping until Doomsday, as Arthur is supposed to do. Nevertheless, the Lady's success is not the victory of good over evil. Rather, it is due to the one redeeming defect of Merlin's, the detail that shows he is but a devil's son, not a devil himself: he can sleep.²² Since Merlin's story is not important here, one does not linger on this troubling discrepancy

between 'facts' and their representation. Then this rather long *excursus*, intended to account for the magical proficiency of Niniene, comes to its end, and the story returns to the Lady of the Lake and her protégé Lancelot.

The *Lancelot* has need of a 'white' and innocent, if also wise and talented, Lady of the Lake—even if that means blackening Merlin. The depiction of the Lady as a good Christian woman who just happens to know more than most people²³ cannot show her as a bloodthirsty hellion, coldly murdering a man because he wants to take her virginity. On the contrary, the *Suite-Post-Vulgate* of the *Merlin*, as an element of a partly lost *Post-Vulgate Cycle*, had probably no use for the Lady of the Lake as a foster-mother of Lancelot and protector to Arthur's court. Consequently, it can offer a much cruder version of the story, one which still contains a number of archaic elements suggesting that the Merlin-Niviene contest has its roots in a mythological pattern of gendered oppositions. Niviène, the Damsel Huntress, who is cast as Merlin's victim and eventual killer in this dark retelling of the story, is clearly related to a goddess Diana-archetype. Indeed, the place where Niviène has her would-be lover build her a manor is called 'Lac Diane,' and the story of a drastically euhemerized Diana first gives the Damsel an inkling of the manner in which to get rid of Merlin.

Niviène's genealogy is given with more precision than the Lady of the Lake's in the *Lancelot*.²⁴ Still, her connection to the numerous Ladies of the Lake in this version of the legend is not quite clear. Above all, she is a huntress and a fierce maiden who does not wish to be conquered by a man. Her reaction when faced with the very concrete reality of Merlin's desire is pure panic and aversion:

La damoisele estoit moult sage de son aage, si s'aperchut bien que cil l'amoit.
Si en fu molt espoentee, car elle avoit paour que cil ne la honesist par son
enchantement ou que cil ne geüst a li en son dormant...

Quant elle oï qu'il venroit avec li, elle en fu trop dolante, car elle ne haoit
riens autant coume lui...

Ne il n'estoit riens el monde que elle haïst si mortelment que elle faisoit Merlin
pour chou que elle savoit bien que il baoit a son pucelage... (Roussineau, §§
315, 319, 329)

[The damsel was very wise for such a young woman, she perceived very well that he
loved her. She was terrified by it, because she feared he would dishonour her by
enchantment, or he would make love to her while she was asleep...

When she heard that he would accompany her, she was very sorry about it, because
there was nothing she hated so much as she did him...

And there was nothing in the world that she hated as much as Merlin, for she knew quite well that he wanted to rob her of her virginity...]

The fact that Merlin is a devil's son and the fact that he wants to sleep with her are equally important or rather equivalent: it is because he wants to sleep with her that Merlin is a devil's son. The whole idea of sexual intercourse is devilish in the eyes of this virgin who, contrary to other 'Ladies of the Lake' involved with Merlin, has no 'ami' of her own. Her analogue, the fallen Diana who first conceived of the stone 'bath-tub' in which to put a soon-to-be discarded lover, has indeed an 'ami,' Faunus; and she is killed by the new one, Felix, horrified to see how the lady commits cold-blooded murder against his rival. Nivienne demonstrates no such weakness; in fact, her attraction to the baby Lancelot, which precedes her abduction of the child in the *Lancelot*, suggests that she renounces sex in favor of motherly love, and thus will get herself a baby without having to endure the normal preliminaries.²⁵

Even in this text, however, Merlin is not univocally presented as a wicked devil: he refuses to tell Arthur where his incestuous child will be born, preferring to save his own soul rather than the kingdom, and his love for Nivienne, although tainted, is nevertheless sincere.²⁶ On the other hand, Diana, Nivienne's prototype, is judged severely, and ultimately condemned for her cruelty by the very person who should benefit from it. This ambiguity is understandable: Merlin seems to have become quickly a very popular character—at least as a prophet. For the next several centuries, he associates with every current prophecy, especially those of a political nature. All would-be prophets will start defining themselves with regard to Merlin.²⁷ When quoting Merlin's authority, or when masquerading as a 'new Merlin,' people do not wish to quote or to impersonate an evil 'devil's son' condemned for his 'lecherie' and put to death by the woman he had been trying to seduce. Moreover, the 'samildanach'²⁸ character of the 'two Merlins,' as Giraldus Cambrensis so lightly puts it, is difficult to reconcile with the narrowness of an unequivocal status as 'devil's son.' Originally, it is quite probable that Merlinus Ambrosius and Merlinus Caledonius are unrelated figures. They have, however, one thing in common: they are very flexible, indeterminate enough to attract easily any number of older motifs from other tales. A very orthodox 'devil's son' cannot evince such flexibility: his interventions have to be negative, or at least suspicious. Consequently, as a narrative device, his usefulness is necessarily limited.

Besides, in order to insure a pleasant image of the Lady of the Lake, the story of her relationship to Merlin must be rearranged, somewhat softened,

and made more 'courtly correct.' Which most manuscripts of the *Suite-Vulgate* try to do. In these, as we have seen, the meeting with Morgue is quickly glossed over, as if nothing untoward happened. There is no enduring hatred between Arthur's half-sister and Arthur's counselor, and certainly no allusion to Merlin's distasteful proclivities. On the other hand, the story of Guinebaut, a 'clerc' who is also a 'brother' to Bohort de Gaunes²⁹ offers a kind of idyllic dress rehearsal, to the tale of Merlin's entanglement with Niniane. This deceptively simple story tells the tale of a young magician who happens to meet a radiant fairy in the forest. After a few questions and reciprocal promises, he agrees to stay with her in her enchanted clearing, renouncing the human world for her sake. This story has no narrative function in the general economy of the *Suite-Vulgate*; Guinebaut appears at first as a foil to Merlin. While the three kings (Arthur, Ban, and Bohort) may just stand in awe of the prophet-magician, Guinebaut is able to *speak* with him, even to discuss 'professional' matters. Apart from this minor role—and indeed Guinebaut is summarily dismissed from the story after a pleasant evening of conversation—, there is no basis for his later reappearance in the episode of the lady in the forest, entirely organized in his favor. One may just read this episode as an introduction to the story of Merlin and Niniane, a variant which receives a happy ending,³⁰ that unfolds in accordance with the rules of this type of tales.

For, after all, what *is* the Merlin-Niniane story, but a retelling of the old 'fairy tale' in which a mortal man meets a fairy, falls in love with her, and departs with her to 'Avalon,' either immediately or after some time spent between worlds? It is only because Merlin is not an ordinary man, but another kind of supernatural creature, a 'fae' in his own right, that this pattern is somewhat disrupted, and the story undergoes wide-ranging and utterly disturbing changes. The future Lady of the Lake in the *Suite-Vulgate* is almost as clearly a euhemerized goddess as the Damsel Huntress Niviène in the *Suite-Post-Vulgate*: her father is the goddess Diana's godson.³¹ This strange godmother gives her beloved Dionas a strange birthday gift: she announces the moderately happy father that his daughter will be loved by the wisest man in the world.³² Nevertheless raised as a courtly damsel, Niniane is still very young when she first meets Merlin, 'disguised' as a young minstrel whose master has taught him a few magic charms. She agrees to give him his love 'sauve s'onour' in exchange for his teaching her his marvelous secrets. Admittedly, there is a brief foreshadowing of disaster, when Niniane asks Merlin about his talents, and he answers he knows the future:

'Et de celes choses qui sont a avenir, fait la pucele, en saves vous riens?— Certes, oil, ma douce amie, fait il, une grant partie.—Dieu merci, fait la pucele. Que ales vous donc querant? Certes, bien vous em porries atant sousfrir se vostre plaisirs i estoit.' (*Premiers faits du roi Arthur*, Bonn Ms., fol. 218a)

[And about the things which are to come, asks the girl, do you know anything?—Yes, my sweet lady, he answers; most of it.—God's mercy, said the girl, then what are you looking for? Certainly, you could keep yourself out of it if you wanted it!]

Niniane's answer seems to suggest she already knows she will deceive the prophet-enchanter before the end and is surprised Merlin does not choose to avoid a fate he clearly foresees. But on the whole, the magician and the fairy seem to get along rather well; the texts do not refer again to any disguise on Merlin's side, while faithfully mentioning every visit of his to his lady, whenever he acts as a messenger between Britain and Brittany or detours to inform Blaise of recent events. It is often suggested that Niniane is indeed very intent on learning everything, and grows very impatient when Merlin delays too long between two visits, but contrary to the *Suite-Post-Vulgate*, these manuscripts do not comment on the damsel's hatred towards Merlin. With the notable exception of the *Livre d'Artus* the various versions of the *Suite-Vulgate* do nothing, to blacken the future Lady of the Lake or to foretell a tragic ending to the Merlin-Niniane story.

In fact, the relationship develops peacefully, until the time when Merlin rather abruptly declares to both Arthur and Blaise that 'it is the last time,' and he will not come back from his next visit to his 'amie.' The king and the scribe are somewhat upset, but more out of egoism than out of care for Merlin. The 'last enchantment' is depicted in a soft manner, especially compared with the tale of violence and deep cruelty told by the *Suite-Post-Vulgate*. We are given to see a pretty, courtly scene, Merlin asleep on Niniane's lap in a meadow under a blooming hawthorn; but for the warnings of Merlin himself, this idyll would look quite peaceful. Even these warnings are gentler, imbued with a kind of melancholy feeling. After finishing her enchantment, the results of which are not immediately apparent, Niniane comes back to Merlin, and again puts his head on her lap, instead of flying off as Niviène does, only too happy to be at long last rid of the devil's son:

Et quant la damoisele senti qu'il dormoit, si se leva tout belement et fist un cerne de sa guimple tot entor le buisson et tout entour Merlin, si commença sez enchantemens; et puis s'ala seoir deles lui, et li mist son chief en son giron et le tint illuec tant qu'il s'esvilla. (Sommer, p. 484)

[And when the damsel felt that he was asleep, she got up softly and made a circle with her veil around the shrub and around Merlin, and she started her enchantments; then

she went and sat down near him, and put his head on her lap; and she held him so until he woke up.]

Merlin's reaction, when he wakes up and finds himself a prisoner in a beautiful and comfortable castle, which he alone, apparently, can see, is quite in accordance with his previous melancholy:

Et il regarda entour lui et li fust avis qu'il fust en la plus bele tour del monde, et se trouva couchié en la plus bele couche ou il eust onques geü. Et lors dist a la damoisele. 'Dame, deceü m'aves se vous ne demoures avec moi quar nus n'en a pooir, fors vous, de ceste tour desfaire.' Et elle li dist: 'Biaus dous amis, jou y serai souvent et m'i tendres entre vos bras et jou vous. Si feres desoremais tout a vostre plaisir.' Et elle li tint moult bien convent, quar poi fu de jours ne de nuis que elle ne fust avec lui... (Sommer, *ibid.*)

[He looked around: it seemed to him that he was in the most beautiful tower in the world, lying on the most beautiful bed that he had ever used. Then he said to the damsel: 'Lady, you have deceived me, if you do not remain here with me; for nobody, except yourself, has the power to destroy this tower.' And she answered: 'Sweet friend, I shall be here often, and you will hold me in your arms, and I will hold you in mine. From now on, indeed, you will do with me as you please.' And she kept her word very well, for there were few nights or days when she was not with him...]

The conclusion of the episode is as near a happy ending as one could imagine, given both the necessity of shutting Merlin out of the narrative, and the old patterns of conflict between the prophet-magician and a feminine figure. True enough, Merlin explains to Gauvain that nobody will ever see him again, and that he will not even be heard by anyone after Gauvain himself. This, however, is what happens in the prose *Perceval*, with the curious device of the so-called 'esplumeoir Merlin.' The same pattern is even present, to a lesser extent, in the *Vita Merlini*, where Merlin, although he has recovered his sanity, renounces life among mankind and loses his prophetic voice in his sister Ganieda's favor. In any case, Merlin is not dead, and Niniane's 'amie' goes on spending most of her time with him in the privacy of their castle. One may see her *cavalier* treatment of her lover as just a precautionary measure, since she gives herself without any reservation to Merlin—once she is sure he will not escape her, and maybe, as his *avatar* in the *Prophesies Merlin*, run away to seduce another woman.

This anxiety is understandable if one follows the lead of later texts, bearing testimony to a tradition according to which Merlin is none other than a 'séducteur à toutes mains,' to reuse Molière's formula concerning Don Juan. It seems for instance a well established fact in the *Prophesies de Merlin* that every damsel who wishes to learn some magic has but to come and offer

herself to Merlin. Supposedly, in this narrative, the 'wisest man in the world' has gathered around himself a kind of school in supernatural arts, mainly prophecy and (black) magic. All the clerics interested in these matters have come to live near Merlin and his privileged scribe, Master Antoine, who has succeeded Blaise. Of course, this unorthodox 'school' is in any case open only to men. In fact, it is original and subversive on Merlin's part to teach women—even if the salary he requires for that has nothing to recommend itself! Indeed, even in the *Prophesies* things are not so clear-cut as they would seem at first.

One may place in opposition, two secondary characters who figure briefly in this romance. The first is the beautiful and virtuous 'damsel of Wales' who, wishing to learn magic, comes to visit Merlin, ready to give herself to him as payment for his teachings and is sent back home by the prophet after he told her she would marry the king of Ireland in two weeks and bear his son. She is a virgin, of course, and she has a rather high opinion of herself: after thinking about it, she comes to the conclusion that her beauty will be best used to acquire some knowledge, rather than marrying some lord. However, Merlin refuses her, because his prophetic gift has shown him her glorious fate; the text insists that Merlin could have slept with the young woman if he had wished it before telling her of this marriage with the king of Ireland. The fact that he does not do so is a decisive proof of his own virtue: he is not a 'lecheor,' but an honourable prophet, respecting moral and social hierarchies.

On the other hand, the second damsel is seen partly as a victim, partly as a vile seductress: she, too, comes to Merlin, offering her body in exchange for his teachings. He agrees to the bargain. She has learned much. Merlin foresees that upon her return home she will use her new science to meddle in politics, and will get herself killed. When she bids him farewell; he warns her to be prudent, but as soon as she has left, he tells Master Antoine what will happen. Antoine is upset; he chides Merlin for being a wicked and luxurious man, who seduces innocent virgins. However, he also deplors the fact that this weakness of Merlin's is so well known that numerous maidens seek out the prophet precisely with this intention, willingly exchanging sex for forbidden science. In the first case, Merlin's restraint is proclaimed by the narrative voice, in the second it is only the character of Antoine who casts aspersions on the prophet's behavior. Merlin himself meekly accepts this harsh judgment. He does not try to reject the accusation; on the contrary, he admits his faults and he even announces that his own death will be a direct consequence of them. One of these women whom he cannot resist

seducing will cause his destruction, and he is unable to save himself despite his foreknowledge of his fate.

This is a very moral conclusion: sin brings its own punishment. Whatever power belongs to Merlin, his propensities will cause him to be lost. There is something missing in this equation, however: Merlin is conscious of his destiny, but he does not feel any remorse for his sins. He is not penitent: he tries to use his prophetic gift to avoid his fate, instead of repenting his faults and changing his ways. Although he does not attempt to defend himself against Antoine's chastising, his reasoning appears strangely corrupt: since he has seen that a 'blanche serpente' (in other words, a virgin) will put him to death, he takes great care to teach magic only to women with whom he has first slept, so that he is sure they are not 'blanches' anymore. Instead of avoiding a recurrence of sin in the hope of saving his life, he compounds his previous error by deliberately engaging in more sin. From a Christian point of view, Merlin's reasoning is extraordinary: the only way of atoning for lust is to renounce it entirely. Merlin, on the contrary, decides to seek safety in numbers and to avoid the perils of lust by becoming more and more lustful.

There is another perspective in which Merlin's responsibility is reduced, since he sleeps with women in order to protect himself before teaching them the magic that will make them potentially dangerous rivals. When, for any reason, he is not going to teach a would-be pupil, he then renounces sex with her. Merlin never goes out of his way to seduce women: they come willingly to him, and they do not seem to object to the tacit agreement of exchanging magic for maidenhood. Even the Lady of the Lake, who, in this romance, decides to 'entomb' Merlin because he is ruining her reputation by claiming everywhere he has lain with her, admits the good qualities of Merlin and regrets the necessity of 'killing' him. In fact, it seems that she is still vacillating and could forget her plans, if the 'desloiaus' Morgue did not place additional pressure on her, by pretending, as she does, that Merlin indeed has seduced the Lady, as he had seduced Morgue herself.

This version allows the Lady of the Lake to retain a positive character, although she puts an end to Merlin's career, thanks to the figure of Morgue, deliberately blackened in the *Prophesies*. Merlin's soul is—probably—saved,³³ and his 'amie,' despite her deception of the best prophet in the world, remains herself not only the best but also the most honourable magician in Arthur's kingdom. In a sense, the *Prophesies* accomplish a real 'tour-de-force': integrating to the 'modern' Arthurian story the oldest motives linked to the Merlin figure, and depicting both Merlin and his feminine counterpart as rather positive characters. However, the *Suite-Vulgate* goes one step further

still, by removing Merlin from the narrative without ruining his reputation or really killing him. Besides, Morgue as depicted in the common version of the *Suite-Vulgate* is also a quite *nuancé* character, beautiful and intelligent, but maybe too 'luxurious,' and not overscrupulous about the way she acquires knowledge.

And yet, this compromise of trying to represent all three protagonists as positive characters remains fragile, as becomes apparent through the distortion inflicted on this scenario by the *Livre d'Artus*.³⁴ In this text, Morgue is certainly a victim, at least to some extent: conversely, Niniane is depicted as a rather negative figure. Merlin, who has already had an affair with Morgue, falls in love with the future Lady of the Lake, as told in the first part of the *Suite-Vulgate*; but this Niniane is closer to the Niviène of the *Suite-Post-Vulgate* or to Malory's Nimue. Contrary to Niviène, however, she is not very close to the goddess Diana prototype. She loathes her suitor, not because he is a devil's son or because she is afraid of sex and wants to keep her virginity, but because she has an 'ami' whom she loves better than Merlin. The prophet-magician knows the truth, although he is unable to escape his 'amie's' influence. However, after the disastrous end of her affair with Guiomar, Morgue takes refuge in an isolated manor, and from the midst of her solitude, hopes for her former lover Merlin to return. He indeed comes, and they both find comfort in each other's company.³⁵ From this point on, Merlin starts distancing himself from Niniane:

Et Merlins qui sot tot son corage et qui par maintes foiz li avoit son service pramis vint a lui et la reconforta; et ele en fist molt grant joie et demora o lui lonc tans. Et au sejour que il fist avec lui li aprist tant de ce que ele li demanda qu'il n'estoit femme nee que plus en seüst; neis Niniane s'amie ne sot gaires plus. Et par le solaz que il trova en Morgant comença il auques a esloingner Niniane, car ja nule foiz n'i alast des puis que il ot acointee Morgant fors lors que force d'amors li faisoit venir, et quant Niniane le conjuroit quant il demeroit. (Sommer, pp. 135–36)

[And Merlins who knew all her thoughts and had often promised to serve her came to her and comforted her; and she was very happy, and remained with him a long time. During his stay, he taught her so much from what she asked him that no mortal woman knew more than her: even Niniane, his love, did not know much more. In fact, because of the comfort he found in Morgue, he started distancing himself from Niniane: he never went to see her after becoming acquainted with Morgue except when love forced him to go; and then when Niniane enchanted him, he stayed.]

Since the *Livre d'Artus* does not contain the story of Merlin's eventual vanishing, one does not know what version it chooses. The main thing, however, is this: the *Livre d'Artus* takes into account the unpalatable fact

that the feminine figure supposed to relate to Merlin is not, originally, a positive one. More precisely, it acknowledges that the fight for power which can be read in Morgue's displacement as a powerful magician and protector of Britain (let alone Arthur) is peculiarly emblazoned by the disastrous ending of most renditions of Merlin-and-the Lady of the Lake story. It is interesting to notice that Niniane, Niviène, and the others are *not yet* Ladies of the Lake when they know Merlin; only the *Lancelot* states unequivocally that both characters are the same. On the other hand, there seems to be a certain amount of confusion between the Lady of the Lake—a usually unnamed character—and the Lady of Avalon, equally nameless. Technically, one may argue that Morgue, or Morgen, has the greater right to the later title.³⁶ In any case, this confusion may be the ground for the sudden proliferation of Merlin's discarded mistresses in the *Prophesies*.

Indeed, if Morgue, the Lady of Avalon, and even the Queen of Norgales are in fact but one character, we are once again presented with the evidence of only two love affairs of Merlin's: one with Morgue, and one with Niniane. Whether these two are different figures, or variations upon one prototype is maybe not so important. One might suggest that originally there was just one feminine consort of Merlin-Myrddin's, as alluded to in *Yr Afallenau*. The texts separates into two distinct characters, Ganieda and Guendoloena in the *Vita Merlini*, Morgan and somebody else, generically speaking 'the Lady of the Lake,' in most romance versions. Even if in some cases a balance may be reached, and the relationship does not always mean Merlin's doom, the gap between feminine and masculine principles does remain rather wide. In fact, it shows in a somewhat dilatory manner how a 'scientific,' masculine conception of magic and the supernatural is repressed in favor of a feminine one.

Modern French tends to associate 'magiciens et sorcières,' without being overly conscious of the gendered bias implied by this selective vocabulary. When one looks closely at medieval French literature, one discovers quickly that Merlin is the only male magician who figures prominently. There are a few others, like Eliavres in the *First Continuation to the Tale of the Grail*, or the unnamed court-enchanter who arranges for 'adventures' to happen at Arthur's court in the *Roman de Jaufré*.³⁷ Merlin, however, is the only one given an important function in the various narratives; he actually outlives his utility as first conceived of in the *Historia regum Britanniae*, where Geoffrey has him disappearing from the story after he has helped Arthur's conception. Even the prose *Merlin*, has been tried to 'reform' the hybrid figure inherited from another tradition by suppressing his feminine involvements and limiting

him to his role as prophet of the Grail. In the *Suites*, however, the battle between two opposite conceptions rages: on one hand, a relatively open world, albeit officially Christian, which tolerates the presence of the supernatural, the Other-World mostly represented by the 'faes.' On the other hand, a rigorously Christian world, where the Word of God is spoken only through male voices. The 'faes' embody a number of anomalies with regard to the rational, orthodox world of men; they are, more often than not, feminine figures,³⁸ and they do possess a kind of monopoly on magic, or in other words, on anything resembling the satisfaction of natural desires through unnatural means. Opposing these creatures with a man, or at least a male character, means jeopardizing the only area of female power in the romances. It justifies the hostility between Merlin and his various 'amies' and disciples.

Feminine magic versus masculine 'art de nigremance' is not the only thing at stake in the Merlin texts. There is also an opposition between a classical idea of 'magic,' channeled mainly through prophecies, as featured by the Old Testament, and a 'modern,' *pagan*, magic, which relies upon acts instead of words. Merlin's way of influencing the world around him has generally to do with his prophetic gift. What makes him different is that he knows the future, and is ready to share this knowledge with a few privileged characters whose decisions have a considerable impact. Merlin does not practice magic very often. He is, more than anything else, a prophet, and his deepest and most constant worry is to ensure that his predictions, or his teachings, are written down. He does not write himself (contrary to Niniane, for instance); but he dictates, generally to Blaise, sometimes to other scribes, a number of books: the Book of the Grail, the Book of Arthur, the Book of Prophecies, etc.... In the *Suite-Post-Vulgate*, he is the one who arranges the future transmission of the adventures, by appointing a college of scribes. This is his great talent, his real specificity; he may play the role of a counselor, or even of a strategist, to King Uter or King Arthur. However, as the Lady of the Lake admits in the *Prophesies* after 'intombing' him, Merlin's loss entails a drastic reduction of the amount of wisdom in the world—as well as a great damage for herself:

'...Mais bien voel que un et autre le sacent ke jou aurai un grant damage en chou ke Mierlins est pierdus. Car de tout ce que jou ne pooie savoir par mes ars, il m'en faisoit sage...'³⁹ (Berthelot, p. 99, fol. 34R)

['Indeed, I want that everybody knows it: the fact of Merlin's loss will cause me a great damage. For he explained to me all that I could not learn through my own arts.']

And yet, while Merlin eventually transmits his magic to his *women* students, and first of all to the Lady of the Lake, he never passes on his prophetic gift or his scriptural abilities. Blaise, Antoine, and a few others, are but scribes; they write only what the prophet-magician tells them. Conversely, while Ganieda in the *Vita Merlini* inherits her brother's prophetic gift when he, back to sanity, stops *ipso facto* being a prophet, no disciple of Merlin's, neither Morgue (anywhere), nor Niniane (in the *Suite-Vulgate*), nor Niviène (in the *Suite-Post-Vulgate*), nor the Lady of the Lake (in the *Lancelot* or the *Prophesies*) acquires anything like their master's ability in foretelling future events. They are able to interpret dreams and visions, at least in some versions, but they are not granted any prophetic trances. In other words, the Merlin *corpus* of romances eventually eliminates a very embarrassing character, whose very versatility threatens the on-going narrative, and at the same time tailors the feminine power of magic in order to render it subservient to the dominant ideology. The Lady of the Lake, incarnation of an old Nemesis for the merlinesque prototype of the wise Wild Man, is used to undermine Merlin's importance in the romances. At the same time, she provides the stories with an alternate solution, far less dangerous and far easier to handle: a tame magician, an euhemerized figure whose knowledge and wisdom have been acquired through quite normal means. The Lady of the Lake, like Morgue, is a 'femme savante,' mistakenly considered as a fairy by naive people—or readers? The age of magic is coming to an end, the age of science is beginning: that is quite meekly admitted by the Lady herself, when she confesses to her foster-son Bohort she does not understand a 'merveille' built by a 'clerc':

Et quant la Dame del Lac voit cele mierveille, ele fu moult durement esbahie. Car bien s'apierchiut erramment ke *illuec n'avoit point d'encantement*, ains estoit fait par soutillité et par engien. Et quant Boors i fust venus, il s'apareille de la bataille. Mais la Dame del Lac le saisi erramment au frain et l'aresta illuec, et li dist: 'Biax fius, se vous vous metes entr'iaus, vous estes mors; *car vous ne saves pas ke çou est*.⁴⁰ (Berthelot, p. 318, fol 155V)

[And when the Lady of the Lake saw this wonder, she was very much astonished. For she understood quite well that there was no enchantment in it, but it was done through the agency of a clever technique. And when arrived, he prepared himself for a fight. But the Lady of the Lake took his reins and stopped him immediately: 'My son, she said, if you try to attack them, you are dead; for you have no idea about what it is.]

UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

An alumna of the French École Normale Supérieure, Anne Berthelot got her Doctorat d'Etat at the Sorbonne (Paris IV) and is now a Professor of French at

the University of Connecticut. She has published several books and a number of articles about Arthurian prose romances; she is currently part of the *Pleiade* Gallimard team who prepares a complete edition–translation of the Vulgate Cycle (from the *Estoire dou Graal* to the *Mort le roi Artu*).

NOTES

- 1 By Anne Desarménien-Labia, in her unpublished 'Thèse de Troisième Cycle' (Paris-IV Sorbonne, 1983).
- 2 Who seems to have completely forgotten his original *persona* and gives a very creditable account of his birth as an authentic Wild Man's son.
- 3 The Silence story takes place a long time after King Arthur's reign: Silence declares she wants to exact revenge on Merlin because he has helped to dishonour his/her ancestor, the Duke of Cornwall, when, through Merlin's ingenuity, Uterpendragon managed to sleep with the Duchess.
- 4 My translation unless otherwise noted.
- 5 Admittedly this text does not seem to be talking about the same character as the *Historia regum Britanniae*; indeed, the *Vita Merlini* takes place inside a different time-frame, just remotely Arthurian.
- 6 These names, obviously a doublet of the same one, can probably be traced to the Welsh 'gwen,' meaning 'white' or 'whiteness,' and routinely employed to describe somebody or something linked to the Otherworld.
- 7 Literally so: Merlin, inheriting a wealth of traditions that show him under various aspects, can only solve this apparent contradiction by being able to assume different appearances at will.
- 8 Ulrich Füetler, eventually, says what all texts have alluded to during three centuries: he makes Merlin Uter's father (that explains, at least, the prophet-enchanter's unaccountable fondness for the young king, so apparent in the episode of the Duchess's seduction), and consequently Arthur is quite officially Merlin's grandson, and the devil's great-grandson.
- 9 Also called *Les Premiers faits du roi Arthur*, according to the title given by the Bonn manuscript.
- 10 See Dumézil and his analysis about Numa Pompilius and the nymph Egeria in Ancient Rome.
- 11 As stated repetitively in the *Prophesies de Merlin*.
- 12 This vision of Morgue, paradoxically, does not redeem Merlin; on the contrary, if she is used to deal with demons since her early youth, her association with Merlin is but another confirmation that Merlin is indeed a demon among devils. The *Prophesies de Merlin* almost constantly call Morgue 'la desloiaus Morghe,' while Niniane-Niviène is 'la bone Dame dou Lac.'
- 13 'Morgue le Fey,' as English texts use to say.
- 14 Several texts mention this fact quite casually, although the exact chronology of this transformation is not so clear: for instance in the *Suite-Post-Vulgate*, it is said that '[c]e jour... emporta le pris et l'ounour de biauté Morgue, la fille Ygerne. Et sans faille elle fu bele damoisiele jusques a celui terme que elle commencha

apprendre des enchantemens et des charroies. Mais puis que li anemis fu dedens li mis et elle fu aspiree et de luxure et de dyable, elle pierdi si otreement sa biauté que trop devient laide, ne puis ne fu nus qui a bele le tenist, s'il ne fu enchantes.' (Roussineau, § 27; ['This day, Morgue, Ygerne's daughter, won the prize for her beauty. She was indeed a very beautiful damsel, as long as she did not practice enchantments and conjurations. But, as soon as the devil entered her and she was filled with luxury and the demons, she lost so completely her beauty that she became very ugly, and from then on nobody could ever find her beautiful, without being enchanted.'])

- 15 Morgue herself has left her brother's court because of her anger at Guinever on the account of Guiomar.
- 16 Which also suggests that every woman wants to learn magic, an interesting assumption *per se*. The problem, of course, as illustrated by the Lady of the Lake's quandary in the *Prophesies de Merlin*, is that a woman *must* be a virgin to perform magic. According to this undeniable law of magic, Merlin may only be perceived as deliberately attempting to deceive his 'amies,' since the payment he wishes to exact from them will automatically prevent them from putting his teachings to work.
- 17 Niviène's magic, either learned from Merlin or inborn, is eventually revealed as much superior to Morgana's, when it comes to a power match between them.
- 18 He is dead, of course, when Accolon tells Arthur the truth about his sister. But he could have done something *before* his own death, especially if one remembers that he is the one who taught Morgue most of what she knows...
- 19 This is indeed a constant in all stories about Lancelot, and almost the only common point between the 'French' character and his analogue in Ulrich von Zazikhoven's *Lanzelet*.
- 20 And very difficult to handle: as the example of the *Suite-Post-Vulgate* shows to some extent, dealing with a prophet in the course of a romance is not easy, because it requires a very fine balance between the events told according to the '*ordo naturalis*,' and the prolepses of the fortune-teller predictions.
- 21 Especially in this case: Merlin has much to lose and nothing to gain in telling Niniene who he is, as the following events clearly show.
- 22 The anonymous *Lai of Tydorel* tells the story of a 'devil's son' whose father is not *officially* a devil, but a merman who slept with a mortal woman asleep near his lake. While at the time of the child's conception there does not seem to be any suspicion of black arts or devilry in this low-key seduction, a generation later, when the child Tydorel is grown up, he is branded a devil because of his inability to sleep.
- 23 In the *Lancelot*, the word 'ingremance' and others of its kind are almost never used about the Lady of the Lake.
- 24 She is, according to Merlin, a 'king's daughter,' and she tells Queen Guinever that she is 'the daughter of a noble man from Brittany.'
- 25 There is some confusion in the *Suite-Post-Vulgate* about the identity, or the title, or the Lady(ies?) of the Lake. The Damsel of the Lake who allows Arthur to get

- Excalibur as a boon granted to Merlin, is not Morgue, nor apparently the Damsel Huntress; conversely, and although Merlin does know her well enough to lead Arthur to the Lake and to know the value of the sword she has to give, there is no romantic entanglement between them: nothing even suggests that Merlin has ever taught her anything, or tried to seduce her. (However, if one hypothesizes that this unnamed character is in fact the Queen or Lady of Avalon, whom the dying Arthur will return to after returning his sword to the lake as a signal for her to come and take him back to her kingdom, then the Lady of Avalon figure *is* indeed one of Merlin's discarded mistresses in the *Prophesies de Merlin*.) Nevertheless, the romance introduces Niviène by stating unequivocally that she will later be known as the Lady of the Lake who abducts and raises Lancelot.
- 26 In fact, the text seems to be of two minds about it: every sentence stating the sincerity of Merlin's love is followed by another one repeating that the only thing he is interested in is sleeping with the Damsel Huntress.
- 27 In France at least, this will last until the sixteenth-century, when Michel de Nostre-Dame will offer a new kind of prophet, and Merlin will progressively be forgotten or reduced to a minor character in a few folk-tales, like *Merlin-Merlot*.
- 28 'Samildanach' is an epithet of the Irish god Lugh, and means more or less 'with the multiple gifts, or talents.' Like Hermes or Ulysses, Merlin is such a character, a polymorphous figure who can adapt to a number of various roles inside the same story or in different stories.
- 29 Curiously enough, he does not seem to be also Ban de Benoïc's brother, as if Bohort and Ban had not the same parents; this mystery, if it is one, is never explicit, and never solved.
- 30 More or less: if Guinebaut remains quite happily with his lady, it is suggested that he will die not so long after that, and that she will remain in possession of the 'enchantments' he builds for her after his death. No more details are provided, but it still sounds a little ominous.
- 31 It is told, without much conviction, that of course she was no goddess, but was named so by the people, in awe of her wisdom. This is the common excuse for using the old words of 'goddess' or 'fairy,' all the time pretending not to believe such creatures exist.
- 32 'Et quant ele s'en parti si li donna un don qui molt bien li avera, et li dist: þDyonas, [...] li dix de la Lune et des Estoiles si face que li premiers enfes que tu auras femele soit tant couvoitie del plus sage home terrien apres ma mort qui au tans Vertigier de la Bloie Bretagne comencera a regner, et qu'il li ensaint la greignor partie de son sens par force d'yngrance, en tel maniere qu'il soit si sougis a li, des qu'il l'aura veue, qu'il n'ait sor li pooir de faire riens en contre sa volente. Et toutes les choses qu'ele li enquera, que il li ensaint.Þ' (*Premiers faits du roi Arthur*, Bonn Ms., folio 216c.): ['And when she left, she gave him a valuable gift, and said: þDyonas, may the god of the Moon and the Stars give that your first girl-child be so coveted by the wisest man in the world, who will start reigning during Vertigier's time in the Blue Britain, after my death, that he teaches her the best part of his knowledge in black magic, in such a manner that he be

- completely her subject, up to the point where he would be unable to do anything against her will.']; actually, the father seems to think this gift a rather mixed blessing.
- 33 At least, his father the devil confesses that his child's soul is out of reach for the demons...
- 34 An unique manuscript presenting an 'alternate' version of King Arthur's first years of reign.
- 35 Informed probably the same way the bird-knight in Marie de France's *Yonec* can come to his lady as soon as she has formulated her wish in her heart.
- 36 As *per* the *Vita Merlini*, or the final scene of the *Mort Artu*, featuring a queen Morgue coming from Avalon to bring her dying brother there in order to heal him.
- 37 Which is, strictly speaking, hardly a French romance, since it is the only remaining example of an 'occitan' Arthurian romance.
- 38 There are a few male 'faes' in the romances; but, after the ambiguous twelfth-century period, where Tydorel's father, in the eponymous *Lai*, is not quite made into a demon (see note 16), the thirteenth-century prose romances do not hesitate to assign to Hell their black knights riding out of a tomb at night to fight whoever happens to defy them.
- 39 Actually, Morgue shares these feelings, almost in the same words: 'De l'autre part quant Morghe en oï conter la nouviele, ele en fu lie et courouchie. [...] Et dolante et courouchie, por çou ke s'ele eüst aucun besoins de lui ele en seroit hounie par defaute de lui.' (Berthelot, p. 98, fol. 133V.): ['On the other hand, when Morgue heard the news, she was at the same time glad and sorry. [...] And sorry and worried, because if she were to have need of Merlin, she would be ruined for default of him.']
- 40 Emphasis mine. My translation insists also on the 'technical' character of the 'merveille,' which is dealt upon more precisely in the whole scene: the scientific description of the automats would be too long to quote.