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# MERLIN IN MEDIEVAL FRENCH LYRIC POETRY

SAMUEL N. ROSENBERG

Arthurian figures do not abound in medieval French lyric poetry, whose field of allusion, even in the heyday of prose romance, barely acknowledged the Adventurous Kingdom. Largely devoted to the theme of love, the *trouvère* corpus of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries nevertheless found little space for the great Arthurian lovers. In the approximately 2200 lyric texts, Tristan, a musician as well as hero and lover, is the object of as many as twenty references, and, in his wake, Iseut is the object of seven. Lancelot and Guenevere, however, at the heart of the Arthurian legend, share only a single appearance. No wonder, then, if the allusions to King Arthur, while five in number, are insignificant and undeveloped, much like the few references to Gawain and Yvain.<sup>1</sup>

The lyric texts of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries are similarly reticent in regard to Arthurian personages—all the more strikingly so as, unlike the earlier works, they incorporate numerous allusions to other legendary figures, classical above all. Thus, the entire lyric corpus of Guillaume de Machaut (about 350 compositions) reveals one poem which names Tristan and Iseut and Lancelot and Guenevere among the great lovers of history and one other which speaks of Yvain and his lion; a third poem mentions Lancelot again, but the name seems to designate a hunting dog in this instance. Froissart mentions Tristan and Iseut a few times and Guenevere once, while the 300-odd pieces in Willi Apel's collection of fourteenth-century songs yield only four evoking Arthurian figures: Tristan, Arthur, Lancelot, and Guenevere—and, for the first and only time, but very much in passing, Galahad. Perceval is mentioned nowhere by anyone; Alain Chartier recognizes no Arthurian character at all; and Charles d'Orléans, in over 400 poems, names Iseut one time. In this context, the authors of the *Cent Ballades* and the book's responses stand out for their awareness of some version of the *Prose Tristan*, mentioning not only the two lovers but also Kaherdin, Palamedes, and Gawain.

The only poet of the fourteenth century to give considerable attention to Arthurian personages is Eustache Deschamps, who evokes (and in some cases over half-a-dozen times) not only Tristan and Iseut, Lancelot and Guenevere, and, above all, King Arthur (twenty times), but also Gawain and even Galehaut, the exemplary friend of Lancelot, who is named nowhere else. It is true, of course, that such occurrences in Deschamps,

while numerous, need to be seen in the perspective of the poet's entire lyric output—which does, after all, number well over 1400 poems.

Against that background of meager interest in the characters of Arthurian narrative, Merlin occupies an almost privileged position. He appears in thirteen or fourteen texts ranging from the early thirteenth century to the late fourteenth, appears in several lyric types, with various degrees of elaboration, and in more than one role.

One of the early songs, an anonymous *ballette* (RS 464, Gennrich 133-35), develops the theme of disappointment in love, resulting specifically from the disloyalty of the beloved lady. From the particulars of his own experience, the speaker eventually shifts to the observation that women's wiles have, after all, ensnared men wiser than he; and in his next and final stanza, he fleshes out this consoling thought by naming three such men, who clearly represent—as is not infrequently the case—the biblical, pagan, and medieval worlds: Samson, Hippocrates, and “wise/learnèd Merlin” (“*li saiges Merlins*”); all three were trapped and deceived by women. This evocation of Merlin looks past the ironic situation of the enchanter enchanted to dwell on the no less ironic, but more readily applicable, case of the wise man fooled.

Merlin as victim occurs again in two anonymous *pastourelles* of the fourteenth century (#9 and #10, Kibler-Wimsatt 61-66), most likely composed by the same poet. In the manner of Jean Froissart's *pastourelles*, these two compositions make use of a rustic setting to treat an issue which has no inherent connection with pastoral life, for the theme is men betrayed in love, and both texts are replete with famous examples. One of them (#10) enumerates no fewer than seventeen in a single stanza: Apollo, Adam, Noah, Joseph, Pharaoh, Hector, David, Aristotle, Samson, Virgil, Hippocrates, Arthur, “master” Merlin, King Mark, Argus, Holofernes, Nebuchadnezzar. Along with “King Mark” (“*le roy Marc*”), only Merlin receives a modicum of identification: “master Merlin” (“*maistre Merlin*”), which identifies him, like the earlier adjective “wise/learnèd” (“*saige*”), in terms of intellectual power.

The other *pastourelle* (#9), citing only half as many examples through the entire text, has room to comment on the individuals named. Merlin is thus presented not with a mere title or adjective flagging his intellect but with a narrative reminder of his sad end: “And then there was Merlin, entombed forever by the excellent lady called the Lady of the Lake; Lancelot was her son” (“*Et puis Merlin fu perpetuelment/ Mis en crouste par la dame excellent/ Qu'on dit du Lac; Lancelot fu ses fieux*”). It is interesting to note, incidentally, that in this poem the presentation of

victimized men does not necessarily imply virtue in the victims or reprehensibility in their female undoers; Holofernes losing his head thus shares the fate of Samson losing his hair, and the same suspension of customary moral distinctions in favor of strict gender alignments obviously applies to Judith and Delilah as well. Given such a context, we cannot be too disconcerted to find Merlin betrayed by a woman said to be “excellent” and further valorized by the announcement that she was the mother of Lancelot. The weight of sympathy that both tradition and the general cast of the poem give to the old magician is not reduced by the favor with which his victimizer is treated.

There is no such evenhandedness or ambiguity in the final poem in which Merlin appears as Niniane’s victim. It is a ballade by Deschamps (#213), which in the plainest, most insistent terms develops the theme that woman destroys and no man is safe. The text is largely a litany of treacheries, from the ruin of Adam and all mankind to the betrayal of Solomon, Samson, Hercules, King David, and, just before Virgil, Merlin: “By a woman was Merlin imprisoned in his grave” (“Par femme fut mis . . . Merlins soubz le tombel en caige”). And the long reach of the refrain—“There is nothing that woman does not consume” (“Il n’est chose que femme ne consomme”)—sweeps away any possible indulgence for Lancelot’s mother.

But Merlin appears in medieval French lyric poetry in another, more broadly represented, role. In nine poems spanning the better part of two centuries, he is invoked for the power of his mind and his strength as a seer. This is not Merlin the victim but Merlin the sage and prophet.

In the thirteenth century, the image occurs fleetingly, but with telling effect, in an anonymous devotional song which celebrates the Virgin Mary (RS 1366, Järnström 28-30). The ineffable virtue of Mary, according to the poet, lies beyond the descriptive power of even the most lettered and multilingual writer, even if he had a world of ink and parchment at his disposal—and even if he had the “mind/mental power” of Merlin (“le sens Merlin”). There is no development or extension of this allusion, but that is in itself quite interesting. It means that the figure of Merlin enjoyed immediate recognition, at least in the clerkly, writerly milieu in which the song obviously originated; it means that Merlin could represent wisdom and mental acuity all by himself, unflanked by other authorities; and it suggests that he was regarded as sufficiently free of demonic ties to be associated with the very exemplar of purity.

A second song of the thirteenth century also refers to the “mind/mental power” of Merlin (“le sens Merlin”). This is a *serventois* by Thibaut de

Champagne (RS 273, 194-99), probably composed shortly before the year 1240. The poem is concerned with a religious and political conflict so persistent that only an extraordinary force could bring it to an end. Thibaut likens it to the historic battle between the two dragons in the “book of the Britons” (“le livre des Bretons”), which could be ended only through the intervention of Merlin. We should recall that battle, he tells us, which caused castles to collapse just as the present conflict is undermining the whole world; in this conflict, only God can show the way to resolution, just as in the earlier case it took the wisdom of Merlin to divine what the future held. (“Bien devrions en l'estoire voir/ La bataille qui fu des deus dragons/ Si com l'en trueve el livre des Bretons/ Dont il couvint les chastiaus jus cheoir/ C'est cist siecles, qui il couvient verser/ Se Deus ne fet la bataille finer./ Le sens Mellin en couvint fors issir/ Por deviner qu'estoit a avenir.”) For Thibaut, Merlin was clearly not only a seer but a seer who was familiar in a particular literary context—though we cannot be sure whether the phrase “the book of the Britons” refers to Geoffrey of Monmouth or his French adaptor Wace or both. Of course, the poet might also have found the episode of the dragons in the Merlin romance attributed to Robert de Boron.

It should be mentioned in passing that Thibaut de Champagne has another poem (RS 1383, 148-52) in which some readers have detected an allusion to Merlin or, more precisely, Merlin's mother, but the allusion is extremely problematic and the mysterious reference is in all likelihood to a quite different personage. If we discount this text, there are thirteen, rather than fourteen, medieval French lyrics incorporating some evocation of Merlin.

To return to the image of Merlin the seer, we find it again in the following century, occurring once in a ballade by Jean Froissart (#31) and then a number of times in compositions by Eustache Deschamps. This group, composed during the vicissitudes of the Hundred Years' War, often brings out, along with Merlin's divinatory nature, a previously invisible aspect of his identity: the fact that he was English. This is significant, albeit only implied, in the Froissart poem, for example, which was written in honor of Richard II of England either upon his birth, at Bordeaux, in 1367 or upon his accession to the throne ten years later. The ballade celebrates the good fortune of the royal house of England as the fulfillment of Diana's ancient promise to Brutus, great-grandson of Aeneas and legendary founder of the British dynasty. It is at the same time the fulfillment of convergent prophecies made by the Greek seer Calchas, the Trojan Helenus, and, in particular, Merlin. It is in fact only of Merlin that the poet explicitly says his “predictions have now come true” (“averi sont maintenant li

sort”)—and he goes on, incidentally, as one familiar with his written sources, to identify the predictions as having been communicated to “master Blaise” (“Que Merlins a son mestre Blaise dist”).

While Froissart paid tribute to Richard II at the beginning of the king’s career, Deschamps composed a ballade in 1400 to deplore its end (#1200). Rather than a lament on Richard’s death, however, the poem is a condemnation of the man who usurped his throne and caused him to die—Henry IV—and a foretelling of the dire consequences of that overthrow for the entire English nation. The poet supports his own prediction with an appeal to the authority of “your prophet Merlin” (“vo prophete Merlin”).<sup>2</sup>

In a lyric lay (#308) treating the decline of chivalric valor, Deschamps at one point makes a passing reference to Merlin as a way of dating a bygone era with which the present age shares a disturbing social disarray: “no such time has been seen since the time of Merlin” (“puis le temps de Merlin/ Ne pot nul tel temps veoir”). The long poem nowhere contains any elaboration of this allusion, but that alone may be taken as a gauge of the familiarity of Merlin, no doubt in his role as seer, and of the echoes that his mere name could have. It also, of course, suggests the difficult social and political conditions in Merlin’s age readily found in narrative but of which there is no hint in any other song.

Deschamps’s four remaining texts, all ballades, bring the prophet Merlin very clearly into the arena of contemporary Anglo-French hostilities. One of them (ballade “attribuable” #8) opens with the statement that the time of fulfillment of prophecies has come, and then goes on to name various prophets: “the great Sibyl, Jeremiah, Solomon, Docrius (?) the Greek, Merlin, and Apollo” (“La grant Sebille, Jeremie, Salemons/ Dogrie le grec, Merlin et Appollons”). No further reference is made to any of them by name, but the second stanza opens with a specific prophecy which, despite Deschamps’s ascription of it to the whole group, can be traced to Merlin alone: “Alas! They have said that the wild boar will force his way through the entry to Gaul and its pasture” (“Las! ilz ont dit que le sanglier sauvage/ Rompra de Gaule l’entree et la pasture”). This prediction coincides with one attributed to Merlin by Geoffrey of Monmouth: “the warlike boar shall issue forth that will try the sharpness of his tusks in the forests/pastures [*nemora*] of Gaul”<sup>3</sup>—and the “wild boar” was clearly taken by Deschamps (as by Froissart in his *Chronicles* [17: 216]) to represent England.

While this ballade dwells on the conditions in France which made it vulnerable to invasion, the last three poems concentrate on the enemy country itself. The first of them (#93) is apparently an appeal for peace, in which Deschamps calls upon the Nine Worthies and Nine Heroines to

mediate between the parties in conflict, but it finally turns into a rather bellicose ultimatum to the foe. Against the English, the poet quotes their own prophet—as reported in the *Brut* (“li Bruths”)—warning that pride is the downfall of the world and that they risk perdition if they do not agree to peace.

In the other two ballades, Deschamps speaks only of war and the coming destruction of England. One of them (#26) bears the date 1385, and the other (#211), remarkably similar, must have been written at about the same time. The first (#26) foretells the doom and devastation of England—together with the “redemption” of Gaul—and cites Merlin, Bede, the Sibyl, and the *Brut* as his authorities. No further reference is made to any of them, partly, no doubt, so that in the rest of the ballade Deschamps can cast himself in the vatic role, announcing apocalyptic events in the very language—of animal symbolism, for example—that Merlin would use: “The eagle, with his young, shall come down upon Northumbria from the outer reaches of the North; from elsewhere shall appear the lion and his cubs, filled with fury” (“L’aigle venrra des marches d’Aquilon,/ O ses poucins, seoir en Nothumbrie;/ D’un autre lés passera le lion/ O ses cheaulx, plains de forsenerie”).

The final ballade (#211), rather exceptionally, bears a title in the manuscript: “Merlin’s Prophecy of the Imminent Destruction of England” (“De la prophecie Merlin sur la destruction d’Angleterre qui doit brief advenir”). And indeed, in this most bitter denunciation of England, the voice of Merlin is given greater prominence than anywhere else: “An accursèd people,” writes Deschamps. “Their pride is leading them to the terrible day of their woeful end, as their prophet Merlin predicted when he wrote, ‘You shall lose life and land, and strangers and neighbors will point and say, In olden times there was an England here.’” (“Peuple maudit . . ./ Par leur orgueil vient la dure journee/ Dont leur prophete Merlin/ Prenostica leur dolereuse fin./ Quant il escripst: ‘Vie perdrez et terre,/ Lors monstrent estrangier et voisin:/ Ou temps jadis estoit cy Angleterre.’”) The seer of England thus becomes an instrument of French imprecation against his own people.

There are, then, just over a dozen allusions to Merlin in medieval French lyric poetry—not many, but in the context of Arthurian allusions generally, a not insignificant number. The image of Merlin there is especially striking as it could hardly enjoy natural priority in love songs, which, after all, constitute the overwhelming bulk of the lyric corpus. In connection with love, Merlin appears only as the victim of Niniane in a few anti-feminine poems. Otherwise, the Merlin we find is the sage, the learnèd

authority, the great prophet of the medieval world, a figure that tends to serve as a standard of intellectual power or as an instrument of castigation.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Data on names in twelfth- and thirteenth-century lyrics come from Petersen Dyggve.

<sup>2</sup>The allusion occurs in the final lines of the second (and last!) stanza before the envoy: "Destruis serez; vo prophete Merlin./Bodes concluez pour vo mort et haire/ Qui faussement a esté mis a fin." The exact meaning of the sentence is unclear, the middle line being corrupt.

<sup>3</sup>Translation adapted from Evans-Dunn 142-43.

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