



---

"L'Estoire de Merlin" and the Mirage of the Patrilineage

Author(s): JENNIFER E. LOOPER

Source: *Arthuriana*, Vol. 12, No. 3, Essays on the "Lancelot—Grail Cycle" (FALL 2002), pp. 63-85

Published by: [Scriptorium Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27870448>

Accessed: 09/06/2014 19:11

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

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



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

<http://www.jstor.org>

# *L'Estoire de Merlin* and the Mirage of the Patrilineage

JENNIFER E. LOOPER

The *Merlin* contains the *Lancelot-Grail* Cycle's most extensive re-evaluation of father figures in both the aristocratic family and literary lineages. The author's simultaneous acceptance and dismissal of male hegemony as a stabilizing force in these two domains reveals his ambivalent attitude toward the subject. (JEL)

At the end of the *Lancelot-Grail* Cycle's 'prequel,' the *Estoire del Saint Graal*, the author notes that the next segment of the story, the *Estoire de Merlin*, is closely linked to the earlier text, essentially forming its offshoot:

Si se test ore a itant li contes de totes les lingniees Celydoine qui de lui oissent et retourne a une autre branche que l'en apele *L'Estoire de Merlin*, que il covient ajoster a fine force avec *L'Estoire del Graal*, por ce que branche en est et i appartient. Et comence messires Roberz de Borron cele branche en tele maniere.<sup>1</sup>

[Now the story is silent about all the lineages that issued from Celidoine and returns to another branch that is called the *Story of Merlin*, which should be joined carefully to the *History of the Grail* because it is a branch of it and belongs to it. And my lord Robert de Boron begins this branch in the following manner.]

This note encapsulates three important genealogical motifs that shape the Cycle's *Merlin*. First, it states that the matter of the *Estoire del Saint Graal*, the lineages stemming from Celidoine, is different from the matter of the *Merlin*. Second, the reader is told that the two are related by filiation, since the *Merlin* material is to be 'skillfully grafted' [*ajouster a fine force*] onto its 'parent' text, the *Estoire del Saint Graal*, just as new growth can be grafted onto the parent tree.<sup>2</sup> Finally, a textual authority is posited for this new text: the romancer Robert de Boron. Given this preamble to the *Merlin*, the reader expects a change of subject matter. The *Merlin*, although it is a branch of the *Estoire*, may still contain the story of lineages other than Celidoine's. Also important is the problem of textual genealogy, the idea of piecing together textual fragments to create a new book. And the authorial source for these

ARTHURIANA 12.3 (2002)

branches, the father of this new text through his engendering of a new book from older fragments, appears to be Robert de Boron.<sup>3</sup>

This segue to the *Merlin* heralds the dream that haunts this text: the desire to establish a new textual and sexual genealogy, complete with a father figure from whose loins or pen descend, respectively, a lineage and a story line. Indeed, in much medieval literature, this dual quest for linguistic and family origins forms a central theme:

‘The will for union between speaker and voice, sign and meaning, is, at bottom, linked to the dream of neutralizing the linguistic dispersion that characterizes the degenerative evolution of mankind. The desire for association between Father and Son represents a nostalgia for origins tied to the hope of undoing genealogical dispersion...’<sup>4</sup>

In the *Merlin*, the character for which the romance is named is portrayed as the master engineer of Arthurian genealogies, and as Howard Bloch calls him, the ‘patron saint of letters.’<sup>5</sup> As such, he orchestrates the production of family trees as well as the narratives recounting their origins. In this romance, more clearly than in any of the other *Lancelot-Grail* texts, the production of a tale is closely linked to the production of a family, and the source of these productions always leads to a paternal figure, whether he be Blaise, Robert de Boron, or the curiously undefinable Merlin himself. In the *Merlin*, a key problematic is thus the reconsideration of the status and role of the male in society, as author, authority, and father figure.

When reading this work, however, the reader is struck by the disjunction between the story of the origins of the *Estoire de Merlin*, as told at the end of the *Estoire del Saint Graal*, and the story that unfolds in the *Merlin* itself. It is Merlin, and not Robert de Boron, who positions himself as the founding father of his text. As such, he plays the role of founding father of Arthurian society itself through a series of matchmaking exploits that work to obscure, rather than clarify, the ‘facts’ of paternity. Quite unlike the obsessively clarified lineages of the *Estoire*, the purified lineage of Celidoine is effectively displaced in the *Merlin* by a genealogical matrix that is characterized by incest, illegitimacy, and a generalized confusion of family ties. The instability of the Arthurian patrilineage reflects Merlin’s own authorial trickery: the tale of the generation of the *Merlin* is as jumbled as the history and structure of its family trees. Merlin’s trickery, then, provides a framework for the author of the *Merlin* to comment on the status of fathers in general, fathers of texts and families. The roles that women play vis-à-vis these father figures further illustrate the author’s ambivalence towards the idea of male hegemony in the family.

THE NARRATIVE OF GENEALOGY  
AND THE GENEALOGY OF THE NARRATIVE

In an often-quoted passage, Merlin, while still a young child, gives his mother's confessor, Blaise, directions for beginning a book that Merlin will dictate to him:

Et merlins li dist ore quier encre et parchemin ades que iou te dirai moult de choses ce que tu quideroies que nus hons ne te peust dire. Lorsquist blaysez ce que mestier li fu et quant il lot quis et assamble si li commencha a conter les amors de ihesu crist et ioseph darimathie tot ausi com eles auoient este et tout l'oeuvre si com ele auoit este de nascien et de ses compaignons, et comment ioseph morut et se fu desaisis de son uaisel. Apres li dist des diables comment il orent parlement de ce quil avoient perdu lor pooir quil soloient auoir sor les hommes et si li conte comment li prophete lor auoient mal fait, et por ce avoient porparole quil feroient .i. homme... Ensi deuisa Merlins cest oeuvre et le fist faire a blayse, et moult sesmeruella blaysez des meruelles que merlins disoit. ... Si t'en iras es parties doccident, si sera li livres ioseph adiouste au tien, et quant tu auras ta paine achieuee et tu seras tels com tu dois estre en la compaignie del graal, lors sera tes liures aiains al liure ioseph, si sera la chose bien esprouee de ma paine et de la toie, si en aura diex merci sil li plaist, et cil quil lorront proieront nostre seignor por nous. Et quant li doi livre seront ensamble si iaura .i. biau livre et li doi seront .i. misme chose fors tant que ne puis pas dire ne retraire les priuees paroles de ihesu crist et de ioseph. (2:19-20)<sup>6</sup>

[And Merlin said to him, 'Now run and get ink and parchment quickly, for I will tell you many things that you would not think anyone could tell you.' Then Blaise went to get what he needed. And after he had looked for it and found it, Merlin began to recount the love between Jesus Christ and Joseph of Arimathea, just as it had been, and to tell about the deeds of Nascien and his companions, and of how Joseph disposed of his vessel, and how he died. Afterward he told him about the devils, how they had gathered together because they had lost the power they had enjoyed over humanity before, and he told him how the prophets had done them harm and how, for this reason, they had conspired to make a man ... Thus did Merlin set out the plan for the work that he ordered Blaise to undertake... 'You will go to the Western region, and the book of Joseph will be put together with yours. And when you have fulfilled your task, and when you are, as you should be, in the company of the Grail, then your book will be joined to Joseph's book, and everything will have been proved true concerning my labors and yours, and God will bless it if it pleases Him. And those who hear it will pray to Our Lord on our behalf. And when the two books are put together, there will be one beautiful book, and the two will be one and the same thing, except that I cannot say or recount the intimate words of Jesus Christ and Joseph.' (1:176)]

In this passage, an explicit link is made between the engendering of a lineage, as recounted in a book, and the conception and production of the book itself. Both are couched in a discourse of pure patrilineage: successive generations of men descend from each other, echoing the generations of authors who share creative kinship. This is to be a book that recounts both the lineage of Joseph of Arimathea and Merlin's own devilish origins. Women and their roles are absent from this family narrative and enumeration of lineage.<sup>7</sup> Merlin's depiction of the genesis and transmission of his book echoes this type of magical, male-based reproduction already seen in the *Estoire*.<sup>8</sup> He predicts that Blaise's book will 'merge' with Joseph's own narrative, using the term *ajouster*, which can refer to a marriage as well as to a more generic alliance.<sup>9</sup> From this 'joining' of two texts will be produced the 'beautiful book' in which the best of both the Grail material and Blaise's narrative combine to make a cohesive whole. Merlin's planned union of Joseph's book and Blaise's book, however, constitutes the first revision of the statement made at the end of the *Estoire del Saint Graal*, quoted above. There the *Merlin* material is seen as a 'child' or branch of the *Estoire*. However, in the *Merlin* a new genealogy is predicated in which male authors combine their efforts to produce a new textual offspring. The exact nature of these productive efforts, however, is far from straightforward. There are many obscurities and contradictions between Merlin's and other versions of this narrative found elsewhere in the text. Such vagueness signals a deep-seated *trouble* in the positing of a clear patrilineal sexual and textual genealogy. Prestigious, easily-identified father figures are all but absent.

This new version of the generation of the *Estoire de Merlin* contradicts other givens of composition found in the text. Although the reader is assured throughout the *Merlin* that the events in the text are known to us only because Merlin made periodic trips to Northumberland to recount them to Blaise, Robert de Boron is repeatedly credited with the transposition of the text. His name appears at least twice in the *Merlin*: once just after the passage quoted above, 'Einsi dist mes sires Roberz de Borron qui cest conte retrait que il se redouble, et einsi le dita Mellins, que il ne pot savoir le conte dou Graal...' <sup>10</sup> [Thus says Sir Robert de Boron who recounts this story so that it is reproduced here, and thus Merlin dictated it, because he (Merlin) could not know the story of the Grail...] and again, "'Et je, Robert de Borron, qui cest livre retrais par l'enseignement dou Livre dou Graal..." <sup>11</sup> [And I, Robert de Boron, who write this book according to the teachings of the Book of the Grail...]. The inclusion of a curious note about Robert's handiwork at the end of the most important passage concerning the romance's composition is

important. He seems to portray himself as yet another descendant of 'Merlin's literary line,' helping to 'reproduce the text.' On the other hand, Robert seems to be a more gifted author than Merlin in that he was able to write a 'Story of the Grail,' whereas Merlin was not. In yet another version of the text's composition, however, the reader is informed that Nascien the hermit, a character in the *Estoire*, wrote the 'Story of the Grail' himself after a visit to heaven, and later added it to Blaise's book:

...et cestui nascien rai puis li saint espris et len porta ou tierch ciel ou il uit apertement le peire et le fil et le saint esprit i cil ot puis la sainte estoire en sa baillie et escrit de sa main propre par le commandement del saint maistre, et tant en escrist quil aiousta al liure blaise qui par merlin en fist ce quil en fist. (1:222)

[...then the Holy Ghost took this Nascien and brought him away to the Third Heaven, where he openly beheld the father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Afterwards he was entrusted with the Holy Story, and he wrote it down at the behest of the Holy Master. And he wrote until he fit it to the book of Blaise, who did what he did for Merlin's sake. (1:288-89)]

Confusion, in the end, governs the right to claim original authorship of this text. While Merlin insists that the text is his, and that it records his deeds and prophecies within the context of the evolution of Arthur's court, there are others who claim authorship with differing accounts of their composition of the text and its relation to the *Estoire del Saint Graal*. In a text that takes the establishment of patrilineages as its main subject, the seemingly simple act of discovering a definitive paternal figure for the text is not easy.

Merlin's project is characterized by the deceptively difficult task of unearthing the author of a text that treats in detail the founding of the Arthurian family tree. It parallels a similar *trouble* in the structure of these genealogies themselves: Merlin's lineage, of course, is as shifty and unstable as he is. He is fathered by an incubus on a woman who falters, with devastating results, in her religious practices. The story of his conception is preceded by the tale of the destruction of his grandparents, uncle, and aunts. A group of devils infiltrates this family through a woman who is sympathetic to their temptations and who gives the devils the 'key' to making her husband lose his faith and thus be susceptible to them: loss of his earthly possessions. The destruction of this wealthy family, one of whose daughters is to be Merlin's mother, is the result of the devils' plan to create discord among family members and disintegration of the family unit: the mother enables the devils to tempt the father and then hangs herself, the youngest son is killed, a sister commits adultery and is executed for it, yet another sister prostitutes herself.

These characters not only lose their family, but also the connection between themselves and their heavenly Father. Only the eldest sister, destined to be Merlin's mother, preserves this tie, retaining her link to the spiritual community by clinging to her confessor, Blaise. Thus the tale begins with the dramatic recounting of the destruction of one family and the construction of a new one. This story-pattern is noticeable throughout the *Merlin*. Founding new family trees by fragmenting others is the hallmark of Merlin's matchmaking activities; it echoes the story of his own conception.

Merlin creates lineages that share traits of his own conception and birth. He begins with the conception of children out of wedlock, like that of Arthur which takes place when Merlin helps Uther Pendragon to disguise himself as the Duke of Cornwall so as to seduce the duke's wife, Ygerne, without her knowledge. Arthur, of course, is born of this union, and the stain of illegitimacy haunts his efforts to establish himself as king:

'Quant li menus pueples vit que la clergie se tenoit deuers le roy artu si distrent qu'il si tenroient, et li baron distrent que ce n'estoit se couurture non, et dient que se dieu plaist quil ne feront ia seignor domme qui ne soit loiaument engendres, ne ia a bastart se dieu plaist ne lairont terre tenir ne si haut roialme comme celui de logres est.' (2:91)

[When the common folk saw that the clergy were taking Arthur's side, they said that they would, too. But the barons said that it was nothing but a cover. They also said that, God willing, they would never have as their overlord a man who was not lawfully conceived; never would there be a bastard whom, God willing, they would allow to hold a land or so high a kingdom as the kingdom of Logres (1:217)].

This type of union also brings about the birth of Hector, the illegitimate son of King Ban and Agravadain's daughter, the Lady of the Fens. Merlin arranges this match by causing the two to fall in love with each other—a more arbitrary union than that of Uther and Ygerne. Like Merlin's family history, both of these matches are framed by the dissolution of the original family unit. In Uther's case, Ygerne's marriage is destroyed, while Agravadain's daughter refuses marriage with anyone else after her liaison with Hector. Interestingly, the one marriage whose legitimacy and coherence Merlin works to protect, the union of Arthur and Guinevere, remains childless. Merlin foils a treacherous plot to replace the true Guinevere with her stepsister, a 'false' Guinevere (borrowing and elaborating on the story found in the *Lancelot*). This marriage, however, whose legitimacy is so carefully preserved, is famously barren. The lineages that are produced through Merlin's direct efforts are not characterized by the seamless integrity of a family tree built on marriage

and familial cohesion. Rather they are, like the text in which their history is recounted, built on unstable ground. They are particularly notable for the substitution of family members for outsiders, the instability of the marriage tie, and the birth of children outside of marriage whose paternity is questionable, and who are thus integrated into the kin group with difficulty. At the heart of this instability is Merlin, who works to engender both a text and kin groupings which reflect his unbalanced and irregular character and family history.

Several critics have pointed to the *Merlin's* conflicting stories of textual genealogy and the convoluted family trees that Merlin helps to create as crucial motifs of this text. E. Jane Burns finds a radical incoherence in the roles variously assigned to the writers of the *Merlin*, and states that, given the conflicting versions of textual generation recounted, 'We are left wondering how to reconcile the roles of two authors, Merlin and Robert de Boron, and how to weld together two fragments of a textual genealogy that do not fit together logically.'<sup>12</sup> Larry Crist sees the confusion as 'a way of undermining the text and emphasizing its fictional character' [une façon de miner le texte et de souligner son caractère de fiction.]<sup>13</sup> Leupin, seeing the authorial procedure of the *Merlin* as a carefully composed response to that of the *Estoire*, notes that Merlin acts as a 'usurper' of the power to tell stories, appropriating the power of the Voice that governs the text of the *Estoire* and substituting his own eyewitness account of events. All the other imputed authors, including Robert de Boron, Blaise, and even Viviane, are reduced to 'scriptors' in a dramatic reversal of the narrative rules outlined in the *Estoire*, a text that claims to have its origins in the voice of God.<sup>14</sup> Leupin also pays careful attention to the bizarre shape of the Arthurian genealogies as they are formed in the *Merlin*, describing their departure from a clear vertical shape in which paternity is clearly established, to a structure troubled by horizontal links, in which adultery and incest stem from confusing mother, sister, and wife.<sup>15</sup> It is Kate Cooper who links the two problematics in her interesting article: she studies the confusion inherent in Merlin's projects, finding another kind of logic in the authorial disunity. She links it to an equally complex procedure governing the establishment of paternity, showing how these processes are connected to the paradoxical desire to privilege origins while at the same time undercutting their value.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, the *Merlin's* sexual and textual genealogies echo each other in their desire to establish paternity. Alternate models which depart from the vertical pattern of the agnatic patrilineage, appear to erode this desire. The exact nature and source of the undermining of paternity in the *Merlin* merits

a closer look. Merlin's efforts to establish his eyewitness text are met by the claims of an authority, stemming from other authors in a way that echoes the challenges he faced in his efforts to establish patrilineages. These alternate voices, however, are quickly silenced by Merlin as he shapes both text and society in his own image. By establishing a text and a genealogy in his own somewhat bent image, Merlin appears to privilege this quest for alternate origins, to both establish and sap family trees and the narratives that recount their history. This subversive undercutting impulse is not monopolized by Merlin, however: the women of the *Merlin* also claim authority in the establishment of paternity and in the histories that record it. If Merlin's attempts to establish his authority are inherently flawed, his dealings with women in the text paradoxically reflect a patriarchal need to assert masculine authority within the family and within a text.

#### WOMEN'S GENEALOGICAL STORIES VS. PATRILINEAL PRIVILEGE

In the early pages of the romance, even when Merlin is still a young child, he is depicted as the arbiter of both the authoritative version of a birth story and the proofs of paternity that structure a patrilineage. However, he is paradoxically portrayed as father of both a flawed text and a flawed genealogical matrix. The natural ability that women possess to recount the 'true' narrative of conception and birth and the identity of the father of their children is countermanded by Merlin's usurpatory efforts, which rely on written testimony to refute these mothers' oral claims. In at least three instances, Merlin plays the role of the familial authority who is able to decipher the facts of birth-narratives, refute lies, and uncover half-truths that these women tell about their sexual liaisons. He thus returns authority to the biological father on the basis of written proof. In the first case, Merlin's own paternity is thrown into doubt. For fear of punishment and ostracism, his mother, when questioned by a judge, conceals the identity of the incubus who impregnated her. According to her own observation, however, she realized instantly, after the episode in which she fails to cross herself before going to sleep, that she had been violated by a devil:

Icis diables avoit pooir de concevoir et de gisir o feme. Lors fu tous aparellies et jut o lui en son dormant carnement si conchut, et quant ce fu fait si s'esvella la damoisele...Lors se lieve et quiert celui qui ce li ot fait qu'ele le quidoit trover. Si court al huis de la chambre si le troeve fremie, si a chercie toute sa chambre mais ele ni trova nului. Lors sot ele bien que ele estoit engignie d'anemi. Si se dolousa et reclama moult doucement nostre signor et li prie qu'il ne seuffre ce que on le hounie en cest siecle. (2:9).

[This devil had the power to lie with a woman and get her with child. Then he was all ready, and he lay with her carnally as she slept, and she conceived. After this had been done, the young woman awoke... Then she got up and began looking for the one who had done this thing to her, for she thought she could find him. She ran to the door of the room, but found it locked; she looked everywhere in her room, but found no one. It was then that she understood that she had been tricked by a devil. And she began wailing, softly calling out to Our Lord and entreating him not to allow anyone to shame her in this world. (1:170)]

In this episode, the woman seems to understand that a devil has impregnated her, yet she repeatedly states that she neither saw nor knew who the person or thing was that had violated her: ‘*Si deuint si grosse que les autres femes sen aperchurent et le regarderent par les flans et li demanderent sele fu grosse et qui cis est qui la engrosie, et ele dist que “asi me puist diex deliurer a joie que ie ne sai ne onques a mon essient.”*’ (2:10-11) [She grew so big that the other women noticed it and stared at her belly. They asked her if she was with child and who the man was that had done it to her. She answered, ‘May God bring me into joy, but I don’t know and I never knew’ (1:171)].

Again, to the judge who has been summoned to clarify the matter, she denies knowledge of the real identity of her ravisher. Merlin’s mother’s reluctance to state clearly what she does know of Merlin’s real father’s identity underlines a woman’s ability to conceal, reveal, or tell half-truths about the identity of the father(s) of her children. In this and other instances, however, the woman’s intentional deception about the father of her son is revealed by Merlin who steps forward to denounce her stories and unveil the truth of her children’s paternity by evoking written testimony. In the case of his mother’s trial, for example, he refers to Blaise’s documentation of his mother’s devilish liaison:

*Lors apelerent li juge le preudome et li demanderent se cest uoirs quele vous disoit que en tel maniere li estoit avenus, et il respont quele nauoit riens mesfait al siecle, et ele mismes ma conte comment ele fu engignie et la mervelle de cest enfant quele enchargea si li vint en dormant sans nul autre delit, ne ele ne set qui en lui le conchut si en fu confesse et repentans, mais tant i ot que ce ne li puet nuire se sa consiense est voire ne enuers dieu ne enuers le siecle par droit, et li enfes uint auant et dist al preudome, vous aves leuvre et la nuit en escrit que ie fui engennes et poes bien sauoir quant iou nasqui et a quel eure et par ce poes prouer grant partie de l’eure ma mere. Et li preudons li dist, ie ne sai dont ce uient que tu ses plus que nous tout. (2:15)*

[The judges then called the wise priest and asked him whether it was true ‘that she told you that it had happened to her in such a way.’ He answered that she

had done nothing in the world wrong: 'She herself told me how she was tricked, and she told me about the wonder of this child with whom she became pregnant. It happened to her while she was asleep and with no feelings of pleasure, nor does she know by whom the child was fathered, and she confessed everything and has been repentant for so long; it cannot by rights harm her, if her conscience is clear, before God or before the world.' The child then went forward and said to the good man, 'You have written down the hour and the night when I was conceived, and you can reckon when I was born and at what time. By this you can prove most of the things my mother has done.' And the good priest said to him, 'I don't know how you happen to know more than all of us together.' (1:174)]

In addition, Merlin reveals that the judge, who is about to condemn Merlin's mother to be burned for her improbable story, is unaware of his own set of family secrets hidden by his mother. As Merlin says, 'Je connois miex mon pere que vous ne facies le vostre et vo meire set miex qui vos engendra que la moie ne set' (2:15) ['I know my father better than you know yours, and your mother knows better who sired you than mine knows who fathered me' (1:174)]. In an echo of Merlin's mother's denial of wrongdoing (although in a more deceptive fashion), the judge's mother protests her innocence, giving her own version of her son's conception. Merlin, however, gives the authoritative version of the story, referring for proof to the fact that the judge's mother's lover, a priest, had written down the dates of their rendezvous, just as Merlin's mother's confessor had written down the date of Merlin's conception. In yet another well-known example of the masculine appropriation of a birth-story, Merlin actively works to enable Uther Pendragon to seduce Ygerne, wife of the Duke of Tintagel; this liaison, of course, results in Arthur's birth. Ygerne is distressed by the King's advances, and informs her husband about them. Merlin, however, uses his magic to disguise the King as the Duke, and enables him to lie with Ygerne, at which time Arthur is conceived. Uther later plots with Merlin to confuse Ygerne about the father of her child and so keep this knowledge to himself in order to sever the baby's tie with his mother:

'Sire, vous m'aves en couvent que vous me donres a vostre pooir l'oir que vos aves engendre si aves l'eure et la nuit en escrit qu'il fu engendres. Et vous saves bien que vous l'aves engendre par moi. Si seroit miens li pechies se jou ne li aideie. Car espoir encore poroit avoir sa mere grant honte de lui. Car ele n'a point de sens qu'ele puet celer au siecle. Si voeil que Ulfins en face les lettres et qu'il oie ja ci le terme et l'eure et la nuit qu'il fu engendres. Ne vous ne me verres devant l'eure et le jor qu'il naistra...' Ensi retint Ulfins l'engnement del enfant. Et Merlins trait le roy a conseil si li dist, 'Sire, tu prenderas garde de Ygerne et que ele ne sace que tu aies a lui geu ne que tu aies a lui engendre et

c'est la riens que plus la tenra en ta merci. Car se tu li demandes de sa grossece et de qui ele est grosse ele ne saura trouver le pere si en aura grant honte vers toi. Et ce ert la cose par coi tu t'en poras miex aidier que jai le fruit qu'ele porte.' (2:70)

['Sir, you have sworn to me that you will give me, insofar as you can, the heir you have begotten, and you have written the hour and the date he was conceived. You know for a fact that you fathered him, thanks to me. So the sin would fall on me if I did not help him, for his mother may yet be shamed because of him: she has no way to hide from the world. So I want Ulfin to write out the documents, and he should put there the time, the hour and the night, when he was conceived. You will not see me before the hour and day he is born...'] So Ulfin recorded the child's conception. And Merlin took the king aside by himself and said to him, 'Sir, you will take care of Ygerne, being careful not to let her know that you have lain with her or that she is with child by you. It is with respect to this that you will most have her at your mercy, for if you ask her about her pregnancy and try to find out by whom she is with child, she will be unable to name the father, and she will feel ashamed toward you. This is how you can best help me have the fruit she is bearing.' (1:205-6)]

Following Merlin's counsel, Uther conceals his deception from Ygerne, and later offers to marry her to comfort her after the death of the Duke, which had occurred just before their liaison.

Like the other men, Uther has each of his sexual encounters with Ygerne recorded in written form. Yet when he discovers that Ygerne is pregnant, he accuses her of double infidelity to him and the late Duke. Ygerne expresses confusion over the real father of her son, saying, as Merlin's mother did, that she does not know the man who lay with her in the semblance of her husband. As Merlin notes: '...iou aidai la dame a dechevoir del engendrement quele a en son ventre et si ne seit qui il est' (2:74) ['...I helped deceive the lady about the child fathered in her womb and she does not know by whom' (1:208)]. Uther, who knows, through Merlin, that he is the father of this child, still informs Ygerne that he will not acknowledge a child who is neither his nor the Duke's, and thus forces her to agree to let the child go into safekeeping with a foster family, as promised to Merlin. Uther's personal knowledge of the truth behind the child's paternity stems from written testimony and Merlin's assurances. He uses the knowledge to inform Ygerne of the date on which her baby will be born, a prediction that proves accurate to the hour. Thus Merlin, aided by his counsel, Uther, again appropriates knowledge usually regulated by midwives and pregnant women. He then uses it to remove the child from its mother's sphere of influence and so take control of its fate.

A clear opposition is constructed between the nebulous, deceitful, and half-true oral testimonies of these women and the men's written proofs of paternity upheld by Merlin. In Ygerne's case, she is completely confused by Merlin and Uther's machinations and is obliged to give up her baby in the face of written proofs and Uther's knowledge of her sexual history and of her child. Merlin acts as the decoder of the varying degrees of truth of the stories, aligning himself with the written document, and thus works to demystify and even create new genealogies. Merlin comes to champion, in fact, a man's prerogative to ensure the purity of his family tree by establishing the kind of certainty formerly enjoyed only by women who preserve the knowledge of the identity of their children's father (s). In the process, Merlin dismisses the women's oral stories, focusing on the male-generated written proofs of paternity which enable the men to claim paternity. Merlin's emphasis on a pure patrilineage echoes the process of his initiation of a new book: he establishes himself as an authoritative author who directs and controls a written history of his times.

But how authoritative is Merlin as an author of written texts, and how solid are the patrilineages that rely on his divinatory powers to establish their legitimacy? With the establishment of authoritative birth narratives and new family trees as Merlin's primary tasks, it is strange to observe how structurally flawed they are and the manner in which he sabotages his efforts to construct both narratives and genealogies. As we saw above, in the case of Arthur's birth, Merlin draws on written documents chronicling Arthur's conception, in order to silence Ygerne and appropriate her baby.

'Sire, vous m'aves en couvent que vous me donres a vostre pooir l'oir que vos aves engendre si aves l'eure et la nuit en escrit qu'il fu engendres. Et vous saves bien que vous l'aves engendre par moi. Si seroit miens li pechies se jou ne li aidioie. Car espoir encore poroit avoir sa mere grant honte de lui. Car ele n'a point de sens qu'ele puet celer au siecle. Si voeil que Ulfins en face les lettres et qu'il oie ja ci le terme et l'eure et la nuit qu'il fu engendres. Ne vous ne me verres devant l'eure et le jor qu'il naistra...' Ensi retint Ulfins l'engnement del enfant. Et Merlins trait le roy a conseil si li dist, 'Sire, tu prenderas garde de Ygerne et que ele ne sace que tu aies a lui geu ne que tu aies a lui engendre et c'est la riens que plus la tenra en ta merci. Car se tu li demandes de sa grossece et de qui ele est grosse ele ne saura trouver le pere si en aura grant honte vers toi. Et ce ert la cose par coi tu t'en poras miex aidier que jaie le fruit qu'ele porte.' (2:70)

['Sir, you have sworn to me that you will give me, insofar as you can, the heir you have begotten, and you have written the hour and the date he was conceived. You know for a fact that you fathered him, thanks to me. So the sin

would fall on me if I did not help him, for his mother may yet be shamed because of him: she has no way to hide from the world. So I want Ulfin to write out the documents, and he should put there the time, the hour and the night, when he was conceived. You will not see me before the hour and day he is born...' So Ulfin recorded the child's conception. And Merlin took the king aside by himself and said to him, 'Sir, you will take care of Ygerne, being careful not to let her know that you have lain with her or that she is with child by you. It is with respect to this that you will most have her at your mercy, for if you ask her about her pregnancy and try to find out by whom she is with child, she will be unable to name the father, and she will feel ashamed toward you. This is how you can best help me have the fruit she is bearing.' (1:205-6)]

Paradoxically, although Merlin relies on the authoritative, male-generated, written version of birth narratives to establish indisputable proof of paternity, he also mimics the women he works to silence, providing an alternate oral version of his own history. In a deviant recital of the facts surrounding his own birth, he tells Caesar that he is the son of a wildman who surprised his mother in the woods:<sup>17</sup>

'...voirs fu ke ma mere vint .j. iour del marchiet dune vile et fu tart, si entra en la forest de brocheliande si foruoia fors de son chemin si qu'il li conuint cele nuit gesir en la forest. Et quant ele se vit seule et esgaree si se coucha desous .j. arbre et s'endormi. Et lors vint a li vns hons saluages de la forest si s'assist dencoste li et quant il la uit seule si iut a li que onques ne sen osa desfendre et cele nuit fui ie engendres en ma mere...et si tost comme ie me poi consirer de li men alai conuerser es grans fores par le nature de mon pere mi conuint repairier. Et por chou quil fu soluages le sui iou.' (2:286)

['...the truth is that my mother was coming back one day from the market in a town and it was getting late. She went into the Forest of Broceliande but strayed from her path, so that she had to spend the night in the forest. And when she saw that she was all alone and lost, she lay down under a tree and went to sleep. Then a wildman of the forest came along and sat down beside her. And when he saw that she was alone, he lay with her, and she did not dare defend herself, and that night I was fathered in my mother...and as soon as I could get along without her, I went away to live in the deep forests. Because of my father's nature I had to go back there, and it is because he was wild that I am.' (1:326)]

In this strange fable, which appropriately takes place in the breeding-grounds of romance fiction, the forest of Broceliande, Merlin recounts a fictitious oral story of his conception—just as the women do in the cases he works to remedy. The tale seems to be constructed so as to bolster the idea that he resembles his father, and thus that his own patrilineage is not mysterious. We know however, that the actual story of Merlin's conception

helps to distance him from his real father, the incubus, in that he inherits only part of his wisdom from his father, the devil, and the rest from God, who recuperated his mother after the incident. Merlin's augmenting of patrilineal resemblance conflicts with the well-known version of his conception that he established at the beginning of the *Estoire de Merlin*. He generates confusion about the circumstances of his birth. In a gesture that strengthens his original efforts to dismiss the oral via the written, he contradicts his fiction in one last gesture at Caesar's court by writing the truth of his identity in black letters above a door. This act follows the pattern Merlin has established earlier which involved recording the 'facts' of genealogy, paternity, and identity in written form, promoting the factual written over the fictional oral. This time, however, the letters, once read, disappear. In this episode, Merlin's system of genealogical truth-telling is disturbed when he tells fictional oral birth narratives about his own history, then contradicts them with a written record that is just as ephemeral.

We have already seen how the generation and reproduction of Merlin's book is shrouded in ambiguity. The relation between Merlin, Blaise, and Robert de Boron remains unclear, as author and scribe share equal credit for composition. Similarly, Merlin's hand in the conception and paternal claiming of many children is surrounded in vagueness. The royal courts portrayed in the *Merlin* at times appear as a fantasy-land for men: Merlin helps a series of men obtain the women they desire, through strategies of trickery and deceit, and then provides their extramarital liaisons and resultant progeny with a patina of legitimacy. This apparent solidarity among men, however, is riddled with contradiction, evidenced when Merlin dismantles his strategy of refuting female oral testimony with male-generated written proofs by providing equally ephemeral written testimony of his own history. There are two examples of Merlin's successful matchmaking activities, resulting in two particularly important births, which illustrate the problems inherent in his system.

While Merlin's machinations favor male hegemony and the strength of patrilineage over feminine knowledge, the appropriation of the child born of a liaison orchestrated by Merlin often confuses the question of paternity instead of clarifying it. For example, to separate mother and child as requested by Merlin, Uther is obliged to disown the baby temporarily and to hint that it was not fathered by the Duke either. Arthur, although removed from the company of women represented by his mother, has become a fatherless child like Merlin, able to be claimed as a son by the late Duke, by Uther, or even by Antor, Arthur's foster-father. Ironically, Merlin's efforts support a

patrilineage while obscuring the facts of paternity as repeated in the case of Arthur himself, when the King fathers a son with his sister before his marriage to Guinevere. In a repetition of the circumstances surrounding his own conception, Arthur falls in love with the wife of King Lot without realizing that she is his half-sister. Like Ygerne, the faithful lady ignores his advances. Arthur, however, takes advantage of Lot's temporary absence to make love to the wife without her consent:

...et artus qui bien se estoit prins garde que li rois sen estoit ales, se leua et sen ala au lit de la dame et se coucha auoec lui...et il auint chose que la dame sesueilla et se tourna deuers lui comme feme endormie si quida ueralement que ce fust ses sires si l'enbracha, et quant cil voit quele la enbrachie si pense bien qu'ele ne se prenoit garde de lui, si lenbracha et iut o lui tout plainement si li fist la dame mout grant ioie et bien li fist, car ele quida que ce fust ses sires, et en tel maniere fu mordres engendres. (2:129)

[...Arthur, who had noticed that the king had left, got up and went to the lady's bed and lay down with her...And it happened that the lady awoke and, still half asleep, turned toward him, for she truly thought that he was her husband, and she put her arms around him. When Arthur saw that she had embraced him, he understood that she had not noticed who he was, so he put his arms around her and lay with her fully, and the lady gave him much pleasure, and she did it willingly, for she thought that he was her husband. And this is how Mordred was conceived. (1:237)]

It is important to note that this episode occurs in the absence of Merlin's direct supervision, perhaps in an allusion to the future disastrous consequences of the affair. The similarities between the circumstances surrounding Arthur's birth and that of his son, however, demonstrate how Merlin's contradictory system has begun to permeate Arthurian society.

In this passage, the man's trickery of the woman is made clear: Lot's wife would not have slept with Arthur of her own volition. Once again, however, the man's deceptive, transgressive actions result in antithetical consequences. Arthur is rewarded for his exploit by earning the lady's love and, through her influence, the loyalty of Lot's sons. Indeed, Arthur gains not only a biological son from the sexual liaison, but also the love of several nephews; the community of chivalric males related by blood expands. The negative effects of Arthur's incestuous exploit, however, return to haunt him in the *Mort Artu*, where his son Mordred plays a major part in the king's downfall. Arthur's act of engendering corrupts his vertical kin line because nephew and son are one and the same. Merlin's arbitration over his own book of origins, Arthurian birth narratives, and conceptions is likewise riddled with contradictions;

most importantly, Merlin undermines his own efforts and produces a corrupted sexual and textual family tree.

While the *Book of Merlin* seems initially to posit the magician as the engineer of both Arthurian genealogies and the stories that recount their generation, in the end Merlin represents the element that most effectively impairs them. Merlin establishes flawed genealogies and rejects the women's oral testimonies in favor of written ones. This weakening of paternity as a tool to govern the familial balance of power is not surprising in a text that credits at least three 'fathers' with its inception and transmission. Recognizing Merlin as the primary source of subversion enables the author to comment on the idea that it is women who are the main source of social sedition. Writing a text that is connected to the vehemently anti-feminist *Estoire* as its 'branch,' the author of the *Merlin* implies that women are not, after all, such inherently dangerous and subversive elements of society that they are best repressed in the name of social stability. Their attempts to shape social structures, the author demonstrates, are of small importance compared to Merlin's. In a final about-face however, the author's reduction of the influence that women enjoy in the construction of society, is newly problematized when, at the end of his romance, he returns to antifeminist warnings about the danger women pose to male hegemony within the family. The treatment of three important women—Grisandole, Caesar's queen, and Viviane—signals the text's return to the antifeminist theme prevalent in the *Merlin's* other main sources, the *Estoire* and the *Queste*. These women each challenge the stability of paternity in a different way, and eventually contribute to Merlin's demise. Woman's ability to undermine male hegemony is perhaps best represented by Viviane's appropriation of Merlin's powers when she becomes his female counterpart.

#### GRISANDOLE, VIVIANE, AND THE RETURN TO ANTIFEMINISM

Although the *Merlin* author has consistently pointed to the title character as the source of both the shape of Arthurian society and the subversion that continually undermines it, at the end of his text he returns to antifeminist narratives to account for the demise of Merlin. The recourse to strategies that pinpoint women as potentially inimical to social stability is encapsulated in the text's maxim, 'women have one more art than the devil.' In the early part of the text, women cause Merlin trouble in his establishment of new genealogies, but are effectively silenced; by the end of the romance, however, a woman harnesses his magical power and secret knowledge for herself and thereby ends his manipulation of the Arthurian realm. The depiction of women as alternately powerless and subversive is seen in a comparison of

two episodes. In the first, Merlin faces two women who represent a real threat to the integrity of their families through, respectively, cross-dressing (thus avoiding feminine familial duty by becoming 'a man') and adultery (thus risking corrupting the family tree through the production of illegitimate offspring). The first, a lady named Grisandole, has been driven from her home because her father has been stripped of his lands and has disappeared. She disguises herself as a man, and is accepted into Caesar's court as his seneschal. This court harbors several cross-dressing individuals, not only Grisandole but also twelve youths who have been disguised as ladies by Caesar's queen so that she can enjoy their sexual favors. Merlin comes to the court disguised as a stag and then as a wildman,<sup>18</sup> and Grisandole sets out to catch either one, eventually doing so by attracting the wildman with food cooked in the forest. When Grisandole takes him back to Caesar, Merlin explains that not only is the emperor's seneschal a woman but the empress is sheltering twelve men dressed as women. Caesar has his wife and her minions burned and marries Grisandole, who resumes her feminine identity and her original name, Avenable.

This bizarre tale links several themes that are central to the *Merlin*. One is a crisis of paternity. Grisandole, unlike her other romance counterparts, does not decide to dress as a man because her parents teach her to (as Silence would be taught in the *Roman de Silence*), or because she is at risk within the family (as was Yde, who is threatened by an incestuous father in *Yde et Olive*, or Blanchandine, whose father constantly threatens to marry her off to gain political alliances in *Tristan de Nanteuil*). Rather, it is because her father vanishes (victim of another man's actions) that his daughter must succeed in life without his support.<sup>19</sup> Without a male figure to uphold and guarantee her status in society, the lady Avenable changes her name and clothes and performs the role herself with no little success. The idea that a woman could indeed 'be just like a man' and provide for herself in the absence of her father is a theme tailor-made to be addressed in this tale. The fact that Merlin upholds male hegemony within the family by short-circuiting women's attempts to lie about the fathers of their children ties in perfectly with this idea. The *Merlin* author uses the story of Grisandole to demonstrate Merlin's control over these subversive women, and thereby resorts to antifeminism to justify Merlin's forcible reintegration of a woman into her expected role within the family.

The adulterous escapades of Caesar's wife with her transvestite lovers trigger a more direct questioning of paternity—that of her own daughter. In a series of dramatic truth-telling performances, Merlin reconfirms the integrity of

paternity almost as an institution, assuring the emperor that his daughter is definitely his and will not be like her mother (2:290). He also tells the emperor where to find Grisandole's father and how to re-establish him as a landholding lord. At the same time, he instructs the emperor to take Grisandole/Avenable as his new wife after sending the empress to be burned, and he extends the royal family tree by arranging for Avenable's brother to marry Caesar's daughter. These actions all serve to neutralize the offending females who challenged the integrity of the aristocratic family. Grisandole is re-educated, effectively restored to her rightful place within her own family and given a new family; the offending queen, whose sexual escapades had threatened the purity of the emperor's lineage, is destroyed. In demonstrating Merlin's revelation of the truths behind the perverse gender performances of Grisandole and Caesar's wife, the author's goal is to showcase, through Merlin's efforts, the restoration of the strength of patrilineage as a cohesive social structure.

In the tale of Grisandole, the character of Caesar's wife is a threat to Merlin and the idea of purified patrilineage, and she is swiftly dispatched. Her presence, however, offers a particular problem for Merlin: she is presented as his near-counterpart in her skill at controlling both sexual identity (through dubious disguises) and the narrative that reveals it. She performs a startling transformation of her twelve minions, disguising them as damsels by using a vicious mix of potions—yellow arsenic, stale urine, and lime to keep the men's beards from growing—in the manner of a magician or doctor. Like Merlin, she proves herself a master of disguise. In this way she masters, or rather suppresses, the narrative of truth that could reveal her secret, enabling these youths to consort with her for a long time without detection. In addition, she seems to control the fortune of the emperor's family tree because she has no children other than the emperor's daughter, despite her sexual activity. Her promiscuity and lack of sons present a special challenge to the future of the emperor's family tree. Although she is denounced by Merlin and burned by Caesar, along with her paramours, she haunts the episode as a woman who seems to exhibit some of the characteristics of Merlin himself. Indeed, the text turns directly from mention of Viviane (Merlin's love, in the process of discovering his magical secrets) to the story of Grisandole. Within this episode a reminder of Viviane's threat to Merlin is thus embedded, and is reinforced when Merlin laughs because '*...feme mauoit pris par sa poissance & par son engin che que nus homs ne pooit faire de tout uostre pooir*' (2:289) [*...a woman has tricked me by her power and by her skill, a deed that no man could do even with all the power you [the Emperor] have*']

(1:327)]. Merlin's handling of Grisandole is a clear-cut demonstration of his re-ordering of society into a patriarchy free of feminine subversion. His repression and re-education of Caesar's queen Grisandole contrasts with his loss of control over the social structure, emblemized by the narrative surrounding his downfall. The challenge that Viviane represents to Merlin, prefigured in the story of Grisandole by the queen's chemical know-how, soon comes to the forefront.

The damsel Viviane ensures Merlin's undoing. She manages to coerce her lover, through promises of amorous encounters, to teach her enough of his magical knowledge for her to eventually imprison him in a magical tower of air.<sup>20</sup> Although her importance has often been underestimated,<sup>21</sup> she is a crucial figure in the romance because she is presented as a female version of Merlin, able to imprison him by appropriating his own skills. Her besting of Merlin demonstrates the successful contravention by a woman of his program to place the engendering of a narrative and of a family tree exclusively in male hands. Merlin's defeat, imprisonment, and eventual silencing are represented as Viviane's doing, and she does this in such a way as to destroy the cultural program which Merlin himself has already helped to undermine through his habit of presenting multiple conflicting narratives of engendering and flawed family trees. As Merlin's female counterpart, Viviane shares some of his own traits. She belongs to a female-oriented genealogy that seems to be a mirror image of Merlin's own lineage. Whereas Merlin is the son of a human woman and a devil, Viviane is the daughter of humans but her birth is predicted by a goddess, the huntress Diana. The goddess's godson is Dyonas, a vavassor. Diana grants him the gift of fathering a daughter, Viviane, who will be coveted by a wise man, a prediction that is soon realized. Viviane is thus endowed with a lineage that is marked by the intervention of a divine woman who predicts and influences the engenderment of a female, whereas Merlin's birth was influenced by a line of divine—or at least otherworldly—male entities and he himself arranges the engendering of several more males.

Viviane, like Merlin, is also a skilled cleric—a *clergiesse*. This trait seems unusual in a text that, except for this episode, presents writing in general and the authorship of a book in particular as an exclusively male privilege, as books are commissioned by Arthur and written by (male) scribes, or dictated by Merlin to Blaise. Viviane, however, uses her knowledge to liberate herself from male control; as she says, she wants to learn Merlin's spells to escape the surveillance of her family, and in particular her father, whom she names as an influence she especially wants to evade:

Et quant ele uit quil lauoit cuelli en si grant amor si li pria quil li ensegnast a faire

dormir .j. homme sans esueillier tant comme ele uoldroit. Et merlin sot bien toute sa pensee si li demanda por coi ele uoloit chou savoir, por chou, fait ele, que toutes les fois que iou uoldroie parler a vous iou endormiroie mon pere ki a a non dyonas & ma mere si que ia ne sapercheuroient de moi ne de vous, car sacies quil mochiroient sil saperchusent de riens de nos asfares.' (2:280)

[And when she saw that he had welcomed her with such great love, she begged him to teach her how to put a man to sleep as deeply as she would like without his waking up. Merlin knew very well what she was thinking, so he asked her why she wanted to know this. 'Because,' she said, 'every time I wanted to talk to you, I would put my father—his name is Dyonas—and my mother to sleep so that they might never take note of you and me. You can be sure that they would kill me if they found out anything about what we're doing.' (1:322)]

Here, Viviane not only appropriates male knowledge and escapes male control but also composes her own written text about her history: 'et tout ades li enquist elle grant parties de ses affaires et il l'en dist tant et enseigna quil en fu puis tenus pour fol, et est encore. Et cele le retint bien, et le mist tout en escrit, comme cele qui moult estoit boine clergiesse des .vii. ars' (2:450) ['And right away she asked him about a great many things he knew how to do, and he taught her so much that he was later taken for a fool—and still is. And she remembered everything and put it down in writing, for she was good at clerkly learning and knew the seven arts' (1:416)].

Like Blaise, Viviane writes down Merlin's utterances when he comes to visit her, but Viviane's book not only allows her to imprison him by abrogating his magical skill, it also coincides with the interruption of Merlin's progressive dictation to Blaise. The text connects the reassertion of female agency in sexual liaisons and in her own family with the emergence of a woman as an author and an authority, for Viviane learns to use Merlin's own knowledge against him:

...tant sauoit ele de ses affaires quant ele sauoit quil auoit uolente de iesir od lui ele avoit enchante et coniuere .j. orellier quele li metoit entre ses bras et lors sendormoit Merlins...si seiourna auoec lui lonc tans et tos iors li enquerroit ele de sen sens et de sa maistrie si len aprinst moult et ele metoit tout en escrit quanquil disoit comme chele qui bien estoit endoctrinee de clergie, si retenoit asses plus legierement ce que merlins disoit. (2:421)

[...she knew enough about his doings so that, when she understood that he wished to lie with her, she knew how to cast a spell and bring forth a pillow, which she put in his arms, and then Merlin went to sleep...and he tarried with her for a long time, and she kept asking him about his knowledge and craft, so that he taught her a great deal. And she put down in writing everything he said to her, for she was well steeped in clerkly learning, so she remembered all the more easily what Merlin told her. (1:399-400)]

In addition, the link between the control over sexuality and writing—and the feminine appropriation of both—is made clear when Viviane learns and writes down three magical words that confound Merlin’s ardor for her:

...et se li aprinst .iij. nons quele escrist, et toutes les fois que il uoldroit a lui gesir, si estoient de si grant force ke ia tant ke ele les eust sor li ni peust nus homs habiter carnement. Et desiluec en auant atornoit ele tel merlin que toutes les fois quil voloit parler a lui il navoit pooir de iesir a li, et por cou dist on que li feme a .j. art plus que li diables. (2:280)

[...and he taught her three names that she wrote down, and every time he wanted to lie with her, they would have such great power that, for as long as she had them on her person, no man could know her carnally. And from that time on, she worked on Merlin in such a way that every time he wanted to speak with her he did not have the power to lie with her. And this is why they say that women have one more wile than the devil. (1:322)]

Up to this point, all the potentially subversive women of this text have been silenced by Merlin, who dismisses their oral birth narratives and refutes them with written proofs. He accomplishes all of this while scheming with men in nefarious matchmaking activities. Viviane however, manages to beat her lover at his own game. Merlin’s project to ‘father’ a book and to arrange and help engender Arthurian patrilineages, is thwarted by his lover Viviane, who seduces and entraps him before he can ensure the union of Blaise’s book and the Grail material, and thereby create a new *Book of Merlin*. She has likewise put an end to his manipulation of Arthurian family trees and the narratives that record their inception. The author’s return to antifeminist discourse to explain Viviane’s destruction of his protagonist signals his ambivalent attitude toward his character and the cultural program that he represents. Literary concerns also dictate the treatment of the *Merlin*. In effect the author adopts Viviane’s strategy by usurping Merlin’s role, undermining the narrative throughout the text by showing ‘the father of Arthurian genealogies’ to be at once invincible, subversive and, at the same time, fallible. Borrowing from folkloric traditions in which Merlin is the unparalleled master engineer of Arthurian society, and linking his text to the antifeminist *Estoire* and *Queste*, the author inserts himself and his text into a conflicting literary genealogy. He finds himself unable to reconcile the two literary traditions to make a *bele conjointure*; his status as an *enfes* with too many literary ‘fathers,’ like all the Lancelot-Grail authors, causes him to create a paradoxical and ambiguous text.

The author’s dilemma thus dramatizes that of the anonymous *Lancelot-Grail* authors who, confronting a myriad of sources, attempt to perform a

merlinesque alchemy of creating new from old. The idea of positing oneself as an author in a literary lineage is explored in detail in the *Merlin*. The concept of paternity of all kinds—father figures within a family, patriarchs in history, authors within a continuum—is also explored and, as we have seen, is heavily problematized. In the end, the author reaches an impasse through his inability to condone wholly or condemn any single aspect of society or writing represented by Merlin, just as he finds it difficult to situate himself within his inherited literary family tree. His inability to endorse neither uncontested male hegemony within the family, nor antifeminist discourse decrying feminine agency, reflects an unwillingness to accept simple answers for the ‘correction’ of society—a conclusion also seen in the *Queste* and the *Lancelot*. Just as difficult, apparently, is the positing of clear models for rewriting and reproducing the sources of these texts. The author thus considers the problems inherent in the idea of privileging a clear sexual and textual patrilineage, addressing concerns that haunt the entire *Lancelot-Grail* Cycle.

WELLESLEY, MA.

Jennifer Looper (j\_looper@hotmail.com) completed her dissertation at the University of California at Berkeley in 1998. She has taught at Wellesley College and currently does web development for an internet startup in Wellesley.

#### NOTES

- 1 *L'Estoire del Saint Graal*, ed. Jean-Paul Ponceau, 2 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1997), 2:577.
- 2 For an interpretation of the entire *Lancelot-Grail* Cycle as a tree with diverse branches constructed like genealogical family trees, see Alexandre Leupin, *Le Graal et la Littérature: Etude sur la Vulgate arthurienne en prose* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 1982), pp. 57–63.
- 3 As is mentioned four times in the case of the *Estoire*: see Ponceau, *Estoire* 2:391, 478, 519, and 546.
- 4 R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 61–62.
- 5 Bloch, *Etymologies*, p. 1.
- 6 Textual references are primarily to *L'Estoire de Merlin*, vol. 2 of *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, ed. H. Oskar Sommer (Washington: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1908). I also refer when necessary to Alexandre Micha's edition of the text, *Etude sur le 'Merlin' de Robert de Boron: roman du XIIIe siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 1980), which is much shorter than Sommer's text. I use Rupert Pickens' English translation, vol. 1 of *Lancelot-Grail: the Old French Arthurian Vulgate and post-Vulgate in Translation*, ed. Norris J. Lacy et al. (New York: Garland,

- 1993), and modify it occasionally.
- 7 The curious phrase *les amors de Ihesu Crist et Ioseph d'Arimathie*, followed by Merlin's caveat that he is unable to relate 'the intimate words of Jesus and Joseph,' may even hint at a subversive homosocial *surplus* underlying these patrilineages.
  - 8 For a discussion of male-based reproduction, see Chapter 2 of my dissertation, 'Gender and Genealogy in the Old French Vulgate Cycle,' diss. University of Berkeley, 1998.
  - 9 According to Tobler and Lommatzsch's *Wörterbuch* (1:270–71), *ajoster* can mean 'to add on,' 'unite,' 'assemble,' 'convene,' or 'cluster;' it also can refer to the uniting of a man and woman in marriage or simply a sexual union.
  - 10 Micha, *Etude Merlin*, p. 76.
  - 11 Micha, *Etude Merlin*, p. 290.
  - 12 In her introduction to Lacy, *The Vulgate in Translation* 1:xxiii.
  - 13 'Les livres de Merlin,' *Senefiance* 7 (1979): 207 [197–210].
  - 14 Leupin, *Le Graal*, pp. 35–43.
  - 15 Leupin, *Le Graal*, pp. 55–60.
  - 16 Kate Cooper, 'Merlin Romancier: Paternity, Prophecy and Poetics in the Huth *Merlin*,' *Romanic Review* 77.1 (1986): 18–24 [1–24].
  - 17 Merlin's 'wild' ancestry may reflect the character's ties to a folkloric type unearthed, for example, by J. Douglas Bruce, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance from the Beginnings down to the Year 1300*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1928) 1:129–51; Paul Zumthor is more interested in Merlin as a literary creation, and particularly as a prophet, but he notes that the wildman motif is found in Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini*, and he refuses to speculate on Merlin's folkloric roots (*Merlin le prophète* [Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1973], pp. 37–45).
  - 18 The author employs the story of Grisandole to again problematize the idea of origins; here Merlin is given a lineage within folklore tradition at the very moment when his control over the society he has helped to orchestrate, falters through Viviane's machinations. The author, by referring to Merlin's savage, nonliterary origins and by placing the reference within a deviant narrative of Merlin's family history, underscores his interest in the sources of institutions as well as an interest in unearthing those elements that undermine them.
  - 19 Michèle Perret, 'Travesties et transsexuelles: Yde, Silence, Grisandole, Blanchandine,' *Romance Notes* 25 (1985): 328–40, notes this difference in her comparison of four transvestite heroines.
  - 20 Viviane is apparently an invention of the authors of the *Lancelot-Grail* Cycle, although Merlin has a wife in the *Vita Merlini* (see Zumthor, *Merlin le prophète*, pp. 39–40 and 242–44 for a discussion of Viviane). In the *Lancelot*, Viviane is the Lady of the Lake, the same fairy who raises Lancelot and who has learned her magic from Merlin; see *Lancelot: roman en prose du XIIIe siècle*, ed. Alexandre Micha, 9 vols. (Geneva: Droz, 1979–83) 7:38–43. The author of the *Lancelot-Grail* Cycle's *Merlin* does not specifically connect the perfidious Viviane with the benevolent Lady of the Lake, but the shadow of feminine domination over men's lives dominates the description of both women.
  - 21 See, however, Leupin's discussion of Viviane and her control over *commerce charnel* with Merlin: *Le Graal*, pp. 107–14.