

HEIRS OF THE ROUND TABLE:
FRENCH ARTHURIAN FICTION FROM 1977 TO THE PRESENT

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Anne N. Bornschein

for my godmother, Vickie Kendell (1955–2013)

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ABSTRACT

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While the English-speaking tradition has dominated the production of Arthurian-themed materials since the nineteenth-century Arthurian Revival, there is evidence that the publication of modern Arthurian fiction in French has enjoyed a major upswing over the past few decades. Notable contributions include Michel Rio's *Merlin-Morgane-Arthur* trilogy, Jacques Roubaud and Florence Delay's ten-volume cycle *Graal théâtre*, a half-dozen fantasy novels about the origins of the Arthurian world by Jean-Louis Fetjaine, and medievalist Michel Zink's young adult novel *Déodat, ou la transparence*. Such texts are deeply anchored in the medieval tradition, invested in co-opting the flavor of medieval source texts at the level of narration as well as plot. Textual genealogies are frequently thematized in modern French Arthuriana by authors who credit a medieval parentage, whether through a narratorial intervention or paratextual references. As modern texts seek their own ground—whether as parodies, pastiches, entirely new adventures, or retellings of familiar stories from new perspectives—they continually draw upon the dozens of Arthurian works produced centuries before, presenting themselves as heirs to a literary tradition. With this implicit authorization, they continue its evolution. This

paradigm replicates that which is already found in the medieval source material, whether in the Vulgate Cycle's transformation of the Grail Quest from the romance conceived by Chrétien de Troyes into a Christian work exhorting scriptural exegesis, or in Wace's appropriation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Modern authors engage with the same process in ways that reflect a canny understanding of Arthurian literature, both its early iterations and its ongoing trajectory. Intertwined threads of genealogy, authority, legacy, and tradition in modern French Arthurian texts reveal an affinity between medieval and postmodern literary practice. As authors of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries appropriate Arthurian material, they adopt techniques and textual strategies closely associated with medieval literature, recycling them to advance postmodern agendas.

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INTRODUCTION¹:

A CALL TO *ARMOR*

Although Arthurian legends originated more than a millennium ago, they remain vivid in the contemporary imagination. One need look no further than Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Avalon* bestsellers (1979–2009) or the recently concluded British television series *Merlin* (2008–2012) to confirm that the stories of Arthur and his court are alive and well. Generations of children have grown up on either T.H. White's series *The Once and Future King* (1958) or the animated Disney adaptation, *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), and films ranging from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) to *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) have made the Arthurian Grail a familiar term on both sides of the Atlantic.

While the Anglophone tradition has dominated the production of Arthurian-themed materials since the beginning of the Arthurian Revival in the early nineteenth century, the French-language claim on the *matière de Bretagne* is far from insignificant. Dozens of works in French have appeared in the past three decades. Some of their authors, such as René Barjavel and Jean-Louis Fetjaine, are firmly ensconced in the niche of speculative fiction.² Others, including Michel Zink, author of *Déodat, ou La*

¹ Since the orthography of Arthurian names varies widely, I strive to remain faithful to the texts while avoiding confusion. When referring to an Arthurian character or place name outside the context of a particular book, I follow a standard modern French spelling (e.g., Gauvain, Guenièvre, Galaad, Bohort). In analyses specific to a text, I use the spelling favored by its author. For characters whose provenance lies outside of the Arthurian canon (primarily Biblical figures such as Joseph of Arimathea), I use the standard English spelling.

² By this term, I mean works that come under the heading of science fiction, fantasy, supernatural horror, or any such genre positing a setting that runs counter to known reality, and thus requiring the reader to suspend disbelief in order to enter the fictional reality. My research generally falls under the rubric of

Transparence: un roman du Graal, have well-established scholarly and literary careers outside of genre markets. There is evidence that the publication of modern Arthurian fiction in French has enjoyed a modest upswing over the past few decades.³ Notable contributions include the final installments of Michel Rio's *Merlin-Morgane-Arthur* trilogy, Jacques Roubaud and Florence Delay's ten-volume cycle of *Graal théâtre*, a half-dozen fantasy novels about the origins of the Arthurian world by Jean-Louis Fetjaine, and the *Ménopause des fées* trilogy, penned by the Belgian author Anne Duguël under the name of Gudule.⁴

Scholarship in French Studies has yet to catch up with this increased interest in Arthur. In 2000, Norris J. Lacy observed that insufficient scholarly attention has been accorded to what he labels "postmodern" Arthurian production.⁵ Since then, to my knowledge, no monograph has been devoted to the Arthurian works of any of the above-mentioned authors, although this omission may be explained in part by the relative newness of some texts, and by the fact that until recently several of the older works, billed as cycles, had been considered unfinished. Modern French fiction tends to appear, if at all, as an afterthought in reference works dedicated chiefly to medieval Arthuriana.

The *Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend* neglects French production almost

fantasy, which involves the use of magic or the supernatural. However, works that do not incorporate the supernatural may be considered speculative fiction if they purport to be historical fiction set in a period with little or no historical record.

³ My efforts to compile a listing of all such works place the uptick around 1985, although several notable texts appeared in the late seventies. Quantitatively, the most substantial production appears after 1998.

⁴ This is the name under which she writes books for children, but also a number of novels intended for adults, among which I count the *Ménopause* trilogy.

⁵ Lacy, Norris J. "From Medieval to Post-Modern: The Arthurian Quest in France." *South Atlantic Review*. Vol. 65, No. 2 (Spring, 2000), pp. 114-33. Lacy states in a footnote that he has undertaken a book on the subject of the modern French Arthurian novel, but it is to deal largely with nineteenth-century literature and does not address anything written beyond 2000. As of this writing, such a book has not been published.

entirely in favor of extended treatment of Anglophone texts but does, for instance, mention Edgar Quinet's nineteenth-century work *Merlin l'enchanteur*.⁶ *The Arthurian Handbook* offers a more comprehensive treatment of recent French material but, given the nature of the reference work, largely limits itself to synopses.⁷ As recently as 2006, Joan Tasker Grimbert and Norris J. Lacy supplied the final chapter to the comprehensive reference volume *The Arthur of the French*, entitled "Arthur in Modern French Fiction and Film." While comprehensive in its collection of materials and its longitudinal scope (it begins with the nineteenth century), the article primarily cites the existence of each work and highlights a few plot points or other distinctive textual attributes. Within the chapter, there is no attempt to interrogate the modern texts' engagement with their medieval antecedents. On a macro level, the very relegation of the modern French corpus to its own discrete chapter betrays an underlying assumption that recent Arthurian fiction can be neatly partitioned from medieval Arthuriana, ignoring the potentially fruitful strategy of placing the two side by side to show the former's engagement with the latter.

Even in France and Francophone Europe, studies of modern Arthuriana focus almost exclusively on Anglophone material, relegating French fiction to stray chapters or even footnotes. I am thinking in particular of Marc Rolland's *Le Roi Arthur: un mythe héroïque au XXe siècle* (2004), Sandra Gorgievski's *Le Mythe d'Arthur: de l'imaginaire médiéval à la culture de masse* (2002), and *Le Moyen Âge en jeu* (2009), edited by Séverine Abiner, Anne Besson, and Florence Plet-Nicolas. Even the excellent collection

⁶ Lupack, Alan. *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 315.

⁷ Lacy, Norris J. and Geoffrey Ashe. *The Arthurian Handbook*. New York: Garland, 1997.

of articles *Le Roi Arthur au miroir du temps* (2007), edited by Anne Besson, focuses primarily on British and American novels and films in tracing Arthur's path from Celtic warrior/medieval ruler to popular contemporary icon. Thematic studies devoted to the breadth of specific Arthurian myths, such as Robert Baudry's books on Merlin (*Le Mythe de Merlin*, 2007) and the Grail quest (*Graal et littératures d'aujourd'hui*, 1998), offer slightly more elaborate commentary, but given the scope of these projects, they nod to the existence of the modern corpus rather than offer developed analyses of it. On the other end of the spectrum, a modest number of recent articles by Fabienne Pomel, Anne Besson, and Florence Marsal engage with some of the modern works as case studies without foregrounding their place in modern Arthuriana as a greater movement of literary production.

The overall dearth of scholarship on modern French Arthuriana relative to the quantity and caliber of its associated corpus signals the need for substantial work in the emerging field. It is certainly worth noting, however, that recent years have given rise to a surge of interest in the area of Arthurian *réécriture*. In particular, the past dozen years have witnessed a number of colloquia taking a wide historical view on the iterations of various Arthurian topics such as the Grail Quest and the figure of Lancelot, thereby allowing for the recuperation of recent French fiction into the Arthurian canon as a source of scholarly inquiry.⁸ Moreover, the amount of Arthurian fiction published since 2000 suggests that the genre is flourishing and will invite numerous avenues of study for years

⁸ See *Graal et Modernité: Colloque de Cerisy-la-Salle*, Paris: Dervy, 1996; see also *L'œuvre de Chrétien de Troyes dans la littérature française, Réminiscences, résurgences et réécritures: Actes du colloque de Lyon, 23-24 mai 1997*, Ed. Claude Lachet, Lyon: 1997.

to come. It seems probable that the scholarly community will become increasingly engaged with this field that speaks to both medieval and post-modern literary preoccupations.

Within this context, my dissertation analyzes French Arthurian fiction published between 1977 and 2007.⁹ Its purpose is to collect such works into a single corpus and to assert that, while it may be dwarfed in quantity by English-language Arthuriana, it is worthy of study in its own right, rather than simply as a footnote to Anglophone writings or the medieval tradition. My rationale for beginning in 1977 is two-fold. First, in a broad context, it falls after the events of 1968, a date that marks better than any the rupture between the values of mid-century France and those found in contemporary French society. The texts in question are by no means homogenous in their values or style, but situating my starting point after the intellectual and cultural revolts of the late sixties yields a corpus that coheres in its socio-historical anchoring. This has particular ramifications for the texts' widespread preoccupation with narrative fracture, digression, and postures of authority and authenticity that simultaneously undermine the very notions of authority and authenticity—all features of medieval romance that have been appropriated and repurposed as postmodern textual strategies. More specifically, 1977 marks the publication of the first Arthurian fiction by Jacques Roubaud, whose work forms a substantial portion of my corpus. Arthurian production in the early 1970s was

⁹ The most recent major work in my corpus, *La nuit des porcs vivants*, was published in 2007. I do briefly discuss some peripheral materials published subsequently, particularly in my conclusion. These largely consist of less conventional media, including comic books, screenplays, and a game instruction manual.

sparse at best, so few major works in French are artificially culled from my study by this methodology.¹⁰

What follows is a brief description of the principal works comprising my modern corpus. With one exception, all authors in this study are still alive and writing. All are based either in France or French-speaking Europe. Some have a single notable work of Arthurian fiction to their credit; others have a half-dozen. Most of the texts fall into the generic category of novels, and several are components of multi-novel cycles. One major work is broadly theatrical. Poetry does not figure, except within novelistic or theatrical production. I have limited myself to explicit Arthurian fiction while excluding, for instance, transpositions of Arthurian motifs and storylines into other contexts. In other words, I am not interested in quests that might be interpreted as Grail quests, or in analogues to Merlin and Arthur, but rather in texts that directly invoke the Arthurian world in a substantial capacity.¹¹ Additionally, in the four chapters that follow, I do not include cinematic representations of these legends, film analysis being in many ways a different discipline from literary analysis. There is moreover a real paucity of French Arthurian films, and though a few classics exist (for instance, Robert Bresson's 1974 *Lancelot du lac* and Éric Rohmer's 1978 *Perceval*) they are not recent by cinematic

¹⁰ I have excluded at least two noteworthy texts that appeared shortly prior to my time frame: Théophile Briant's *Le Testament de Merlin* and Robert Pinget's *Graal Flibuste*. The former was first published by Bellanger in 1975 but was in fact composed between 1938 and 1950, situating it well outside of the more recent crop of French Arthuriana. The latter text, published in 1966, is often categorized as Arthurian fiction, but lacks sufficient medieval anchoring to merit treatment in this study.

¹¹ Although its Arthurian resonance is unmistakable, I have elected to exclude Georges Perec's *La Vie mode d'emploi* (1978) from my corpus on the grounds that it is not comparable to the rest of the texts under consideration in its engagement with Arthurian figures and motifs.

reckoning.¹² Finally, I have excluded works primarily associated with the Tristan and Iseut tradition, on the grounds that they are only tangentially linked to the Arthurian world in most cases and are often considered a distinct corpus within Arthurian Studies. To extend my corpus to all Tristan materials would have made an already extensive project impractically unwieldy. However, I do address occasional Tristan references appearing in modern works that are robustly Arthurian.

My entry point into this project is through the work of Jacques Roubaud, whose Arthurian production—much of it written with longtime collaborator Florence Delay—spans two and a half decades. Their elaborate, jointly composed *Graal théâtre* is a series of ten plays published between 1977 and 2005 that, taken as a whole, constitutes a cycle beginning with Joseph of Arimathea and ending with the downfall of the Arthurian world.¹³ The first six plays were published between 1977 and 1981, with the final four not appearing until 2005, when all ten plays were collected into a single volume, some of the earlier texts having been revised or rewritten for the new edition. Three of them were first performed in 1979 at the Nouveau Théâtre de Marseille with what Ulrich Miller calls “un franc succès.”¹⁴ In 2011, directors Julie Brochen and Christian Schiarretti undertook staging the entire cycle, play by play, with the Théâtre national populaire de Villeurbanne

¹² I do briefly discuss both films in my conclusion, which provides an overview French Arthuriana belonging to less traditional media.

¹³ I have opted to make exclusive use of the 2005 edition, as, according to an interview with Florence Delay by Gallimard, “[c]e *Graal théâtre* de 2005 constitue [...] la version intégrale, ultime et définitive du projet.” “Rencontre avec Florence Delay et Jacques Roubaud, à l’occasion de la parution de *Graal théâtre*,” Gallimard 2005. Accessed Oct. 1, 2008.

¹⁴ Miller, Ulrich. “Lancelot 1960-1984: Le personnage de Lancelot dans le roman, le drame, le film, le « musical », et la musique « pop »,” *Lancelot : actes du colloque des 14 et 15 janvier 1984*, Université de Picardie, Centre d’études médiévales, p. 137.

and the Théâtre national de Strasbourg.¹⁵ In May, 2012, the dual troupe performed *Merlin l'enchanteur*, and Brochen's intention is to complete the project by 2015.¹⁶ The plays have a humorous bent predicated upon anachronism—for instance, in depicting Galaad as a robot—and exploit self-conscious narration throughout. They can be read independently but function best when approached as a cycle; through an accretion of plot threads that are often abandoned or revisited over the course of the ten plays, the text exposes strategies of narrative dissimulation and obfuscation that likewise constitute structural features of medieval romance.

Roubaud's solo works of Arthuriana are *Graal fiction* (1978), *Le Chevalier Silence: une aventure des temps aventureux* (1997), and *Le roi Arthur au temps des chevaliers et des enchanteurs* (1983).¹⁷ *Graal fiction* is a generically hybrid text blending fiction with self-referential commentary. An amalgam of parody, pastiche, and scholarship, the text consists of five sections: *conte*, *récit*, *who's who*, *géographie*, and *fictions théoriques*.¹⁸ Its contents include rewritings of notable Arthurian interludes, including a dryly humorous version of Robert de Boron's account of Merlin's birth and an epistolary rendering of Malory's demoiselle d'Escalot. The text is also notable for its engagement with genealogies, both of Arthurian characters such as Perceval and the

¹⁵ "Graal Théâtre–Merlin l'Enchanteur," Théâtre-Contemporain.net. <https://www.theatre-contemporain.net/spectacles/Graal-Theatre-Merlin-l-Enchanteur> Accessed 24 July 2013.

¹⁶ "Graal Théâtre–Merlin l'enchanteur F. Delay/ J. Roubaud - J.Brochen / C. Schiarette," video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8G4FwEmYLhA> Accessed 24 July 2013.

¹⁷ Roubaud is almost certainly the author in my corpus who has received most scholarly attention, and whose work is most widely considered "literary" rather than popular. However, the most substantial academic attention paid to his literary production centers on his five-branch cycle *Le Grand Incendie de Londres*. See, for example, Florence Marsal's *Jacques Roubaud: Prose de la mémoire et errance chevaleresque* (2010).

¹⁸ A sixth section, "quincaillerie," is postponed, ostensibly indefinitely. Indeed, the text designates itself merely the first of twenty-six anticipated volumes of *Graal fiction*.

Fisher King, and of texts and motifs. *Graal fiction* provides some of the theoretical and interpretive underpinning for Roubaud's other Arthurian fiction. *Le Chevalier Silence*, a young adult novel published in Gallimard's Haute Enfance collection, styles itself as a translation of Heldris de Cornouilles' loosely Arthurian thirteenth-century romance *Le Roman de Silence*. Although the medieval tale of a damsel disguised as a boy is a point of departure for Roubaud's adventure, *Le Chevalier Silence* integrates numerous strands of the Arthurian tradition including Gauvain, the Guivre of *Eric and Énide*, Morgane, and Tristan and Iseut. *Le roi Arthur* is a relatively straight-forward account of the rise and early exploits of the king; its ingenuity lies chiefly in its narrator figure, who slyly withholds details nearly as often as he provides them.

Whereas Roubaud and Delay were the only notable authors to take up Arthuriana in the 1970s, the mid-1980s witnessed an increase of other significant Arthurian rewritings, the most celebrated of which is science fiction and fantasy novelist René Barjavel's *L'Enchanteur*. This hefty novel was published by Denoël in 1984, a year prior to the author's death, and centers on the parallels between the unconsummated love of Merlin and Viviane and the quest for the Grail against the backdrop of Arthur's court. The book is notable for world-building that enables the coexistence of Christianity and magic in Logres. It features some elements of science fiction, including a nod to time travel and the potential introduction of future technologies to the Arthurian world. The narratorial tone alternates between earnest and playful, at times treating *L'Enchanteur* as epic and at other times letting the text meander into broadly humorous territory, as when

depicting the devil as distraught over his torture devices going unused because Jesus has redeemed the sinners and thus Hell lies empty.

The mid-1980s also produced “Les Grands Mythes fondateurs de l’occident,” a multi-author series directed by Michel Cazenave aimed at updating Arthurian legend to make it accessible to modern readers. The series includes, among others, retellings of *Tristan et Iseut* and Chrétien’s *Chevalier de la charrette*, but by far the most original work among them is Jean-Pierre Le Dantec’s *Graal-Romance* (1985), which relates the fictional medieval clerk Gautier de Bath’s attempts, following Arthur’s death, to reconcile conflicting accounts of the king’s reign. In it, Guenièvre, Lancelot, Viviane, and Galehaut all relate first-person testimony of key incidents leading to the eventual downfall of the king. Lancelot serves as the anchor for the story; indeed, according to Cazenave, Le Dantec was initially engaged to adapt the story of the celebrated knight, ostensibly from the thirteenth-century *Lancelot en Prose*.¹⁹ *Graal-Romance* is distinctive in that it makes no attempt to temporally isolate the events of Arthur’s reign from the period in the 1100s when medieval writers began to set down his knights’ adventures, so that the legends and the textual composition are presented as nearly coterminous. Indeed, the novel is constructed so as to provide a backstory to account for the transmission of the story from its principals to the authorial figure most closely associated with the birth of the Arthurian romance tradition in French: Chrétien de Troyes. The other noteworthy Arthurian text in the Grands Mythes fondateurs series is Romain Weingarten’s 1983 *Le Roman de la Table Ronde: Le Livre de Blaise*, which collapses most of the canonical

¹⁹ *Graal-Romance*, p. 7.

threads of Arthurian romance into a single text with an episodic structure. Blaise serves as the first-person narrator to the epic.

The Arthurian work of Michel Rio spans a decade and a half and follows a single narrative arc from the perspective of three eponymous protagonists in the trilogy of *Merlin* (1989), *Morgane* (1999), and *Arthur* (2001). This epic evacuated of magic focuses upon the social projects of Man, with Merlin championing utopia, Morgane revolt, and Arthur occupying a mediating position between the two as king.²⁰ The three novels were subsequently published together as an interlaced, chronologically linear narrative under the title of *Merlin, le faiseur de rois* (2006). Although these works are situated in a credibly rendered post-Roman Britain and the texts provide anchoring for this setting in the form of maps and chronologies, the novels are more preoccupied with exploring moral and ethical questions than with the trappings and tropes of the Arthurian world. Indeed, the texts function as extended narrative dialogues (or, at times, monologues), indicating that the Arthurian setting is principally a pretext for the exploration of questions pertaining to man's creative and destructive impulses. Rio is also author to *La Terre Gaste* (2003), a loosely Arthurian philosophical dialogue between a Merlin-figure (Moi) and an artificial intelligence (Mémoire).

Other works published in the first decade of the twenty-first century have garnered less attention but are nonetheless worthy of study. Eminent medievalist Michel Zink's 2002 young adult novel *Déodat, ou la transparence* takes as its point of departure

²⁰ Rio makes this dynamic explicit in his afterward to *Arthur*: "Arthur englué dans le réel et fasciné par ces deux splendides figures de la liberté de l'esprit, évadées dans le savoir, le créateur et la destructrice, le père et la sœur-amante, Merlin et Morgane" (p. 168).

a passage in *Perlesvaus*, inventing for the slain squire Cahus a younger brother whose quest to solve the murder converges with and in some ways redefines the Grail quest of Arthur's knights. In the process, the work reconfigures traditional Arthurian networks of kinship and hierarchy while privileging the possibility of self-valorization in the face of neglect and obscurity. Zink has written two other creative works of medieval inspiration, *Le Tiers d'amour: un roman des troubadours* (1998) and *Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame: Contes chrétiens du Moyen Âge* (1999), but *Déodat* is his only Arthurian work.

Jean-Louis Fetjaine, who holds a degree in medieval history, has penned a number of fantasy novels linked to the Arthurian world, with an emphasis on its supernatural origins (*La Trilogie des elfes*, 1998–2000) and on the figure of Merlin (*Le Pas de Merlin*, 2002, and *Brocéliande*, 2004). The *Trilogie des elfes* (*Le Crépuscule des elfes*, 1998; *La Nuit des elfes*, 1999; *L'Heure des elfes*, 2000) tells the story of a dying elf race, whose leader, Lliane, plays a pivotal role facilitating the rise of Uter in a land populated by four races under the protection of the goddess Dana. The series culminates with the advent of a new generation: Arthur, his half-sister Morgane, Lancelot, and the human-elf hybrid Merlin. It combines elements of Celtic and Norse mythology with Tolkienesque high fantasy world-building and key Arthurian props such as the Grail and Excalibur.²¹ The Merlin duology (*Le Pas de Merlin*, 2002, and *Brocéliande*, 2004) follows an entirely different narrative arc, foregrounding a Merlin figure distinct from that appearing in the elf trilogy. Here, Fetjaine reimagines Merlin, whom he believes to

²¹ Fetjaine subsequently returned to this Arthurian backstory and penned an additional trilogy of prequels: *Lliane* (2008), *L'Elfe des terres noires* (2009), and *Le Sang des elfes* (2010). This series establishes the origins of the characters appearing in the first elf trilogy. As such, its links to the Arthurian canon are more attenuated, and I do not include it in this study.

be anchored in one or more actual figures, into a historically and culturally plausible—though fantasy-influenced—sixth-century Britain. The first volume won the 2003 Prix Imaginale for fantasy, whereas the latter installment was poorly received.²²

Belgian writer Gudule (alias Anne Duguël, née Anne Liger-Belair) is the author of the final major set of Arthurian texts I study. Gudule is the sole non-French author in my modern corpus. However, her Arthurian works are printed through French publishing house Bragelonne and she is well-known to French readers of young adult fiction and fantasy. Her *Ménopause des fées* trilogy consists of three chronologically sequenced novels set in modern France: *Le Crépuscule des dieux* (2005), *Crimes et chatouillements* (2006), and *La Nuit des porcs vivants* (2007). The pseudonym Gudule, which is associated with children's fiction, and the trilogy's comic book-like covers indicate misleadingly that the works are intended for younger readers. They are in fact both gleefully crass and extremely adult, offering up an unlikely Arthurian cast of whose members include a pedophile fairy, an aging graffiti artist, various drug addicts, and a hair dresser turned prostitute. The trilogy operates not only as a provocative vision of how modern readers relate to the Arthurian world, but conversely, what it might make (out) of us.

My scholarship is largely predicated upon the relationship these texts have with their medieval antecedents. In penning works devoted to Arthur and his vassals, modern authors engage with the twelfth-, thirteenth-, fourteenth-, and fifteenth-century texts that

²² This prize, which recognizes the best works of fantasy both from France and abroad, was inaugurated in 2002, attesting to the emerging status of the genre within French literary culture.

brought the principal Arthurian characters and legends into the world. Without the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, Robert de Boron, Chrétien de Troyes, Thomas Malory, and the anonymous authors of the Vulgate Cycle and *Perlesvaus* (to name the most widely used source texts), contemporary Arthuriana quite simply would not exist. what's The modern texts demonstrate awareness of their debt to these antecedents. For this reason, any productive reading of the recent texts will inevitably be a double reading, one that looks back on the medieval to elucidate the formal mechanisms, thematic preoccupations, and innovations that characterize the newer work. As a conceptual framework for my research, I consider relationships between and among Arthurian texts through the prism of genealogies. The theme of genealogies is certainly not new, but it is apt for a study rooted in medieval romance, as the Arthurian canon demonstrates a preoccupation with lines of familial and textual descent; the interlacing and even conflation of Biblical and Arthurian lines is an integral component of the Grail quest in its multiple textual incarnations, to cite just one example.²³ This preoccupation carries over to modern Arthurian fiction, manifesting itself in a variety of ways, ranging from source accreditation (or fabrication) to the invention of new Arthurian family trees. With networks of both kin and text in mind, I consider modern French authors as heirs—albeit, sometimes rebellious ones—to a literary tradition that can be traced as a genealogy. This paradigm allows for the exploration of the interwoven concepts of tradition, legacy, kinship, and heritage. Accordingly, my chapters consider strategies and fictions of

²³ See Roubaud, Jacques. "Généalogie morale des Rois-Pêcheurs." *Change*, vol. 17, 1973. Roubaud's analysis was subsequently included in *Graal Fiction* (1978).

authority, the portrayal of families and non-reproductive unions, and the treatment of legend and historicity in imagining Camelot.

The first chapter, *A Millennium of Questing for Arthur*, undertakes a selective overview of medieval Arthuriana across five key figures or narrative strands (Merlin, Arthur, the Round Table and its Knights, the Grail Quest, and Arthurian women), in each case tying the medieval tradition to more recent French fiction. For each thread, I highlight general tendencies in modern French Arthuriana, both facets that have largely been preserved or recycled from medieval antecedents and also points of innovation, subversion, and appropriation. The second chapter, *Arthur's Scribes-Errant*, analyzes how modern French authors—particularly Jacques Roubaud, Florence Delay, René Barjavel, and Jean-Pierre Le Dantec—have co-opted not only medieval characters, plots, and settings, but also distinctive features of medieval literary practice on both a structural and stylistic level. I demonstrate that these authors deploy numerous literary devices to “medievalize” their Arthurian production, primarily by drawing on medieval strategies of authorization and conjointure. The third chapter, *The Once and Future Camelot*, treats a nexus of inter-related areas pertaining to setting: time and historicity, legend and the supernatural, and genre. I consider a number of case studies that represent the breadth of approaches to setting in modern French Arthuriana, arguing that rather than organizing Arthuriana merely by when or where it is set, it is also useful to consider the extent to which a setting is delineated at all. The fourth and final chapter, *Arthur's Twisted Family Trees*, addresses Arthurian lines of descent and family structures, privileging the fault lines in traditional (patrilineal) transmission. I focus upon absent fathers and paternity

quests; transgressive same-sex desires that are written out of genealogies, both familial and textual; and relationships predicated upon the taboo of incest, either literal or displaced. In my conclusion, *Beyond Blaise and the Esplumoir*, I extend the discussion to less traditional media—television, comic books, and games—to highlight the changing face of French Arthurian production and to argue that in light of its dynamism and proliferation, it deserves substantial, ongoing attention from the scholarly community as it continues to expand to new media and platforms.

Modern French Arthuriana makes for an extremely heterogeneous collection of texts, one that is far too diverse to permit many conclusions that apply to all or even most of its constituent texts. Rather than attempting to reconcile them all with one another or to assert a commonality that unites them as a distinctly French corpus (as opposed to Anglophone or German), I wish to call attention to their emergent critical mass and to contend that they merit a greater place within the fields of medievalism and twentieth- and twenty-first-century French studies. This dissertation does not attempt in-depth analysis of each work; the breadth of the (dual) corpus precludes a great level of detail. I seek rather to make the case that modern French Arthuriana deserves further scholarly attention both because its texts demonstrate savvy awareness of the stakes and practices of its medieval antecedents, and because of the innovations it deploys to reinvigorate the material in ways that variously uphold traditions or subvert them. This dissertation thus seeks to tease out some of the modern writers' own readerly practices with regard to medieval literature, and to demonstrate that in appropriating and renewing many of the

textual strategies that marked early romance and chronicles, they in turn enrich our own reading of medieval Arthuriana.

CHAPTER 1

A MILLENNIUM OF QUESTING FOR ARTHUR

Introduction

It is well established that modern writers of Arthuriana place their own stamp on Arthurian legend. Whether we are reading the feminist counter-histories of Marion Zimmer Bradley, the satirical medieval-modern mash-up of Mark Twain, or the fanciful, meandering adventures of T.H. White, we must recognize that to resurrect the Arthurian world in the postmodern era is to exert creative agency upon it. Even the most basic form of Arthurian rewriting, the modernized translation, requires that the author continually interpret and recast the older text to meet the needs of a new generation of readers. In this way, innovation lies at the heart of modern Arthuriana, even as many of its texts express either nostalgia for a bygone time or a desire to import medieval values, practices, and aesthetics into the modern world.

At the same time, many modern Arthurian texts remain anchored in the medieval tradition, invested in imitating or co-opting the flavor of medieval source texts at the level of narration as well as plot. Textual genealogies are frequently thematized in modern French Arthuriana by authors who explicitly credit a medieval parentage, whether through a narratorial intervention or a paratextual reference. Relationships between writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and their medieval antecedents constitute genealogies in and of themselves. As modern texts seek their own ground—

whether as parodies, pastiches, entirely new adventures, or retellings of familiar stories from new perspectives—they continually draw upon the dozens of Arthurian works produced centuries before, presenting themselves as heirs to a literary tradition. With this implicit authorization, they continue its evolution. This paradigm replicates that which is already found in the medieval source material, whether in the Vulgate Cycle's transformation of the Grail Quest from the romance conceived by Chrétien de Troyes into a Christian work exhorting scriptural exegesis, or in Wace and eventually Robert de Boron's vernacular French elaborations of Merlin's birth and childhood from the account found in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*. Modern authors engage with the same process in ways that reflect a canny understanding of Arthurian literature, both its early iterations and its ongoing trajectory.

This first chapter establishes the cornerstone texts of the major Arthurian narrative arcs and figures, highlighting five strands of Arthurian legend: the mage Merlin, King Arthur, the Round Table, the Grail quest, and Arthurian women. It places emphasis on works in the medieval canon that have most directly influenced modern French Arthurian fiction, in particularly the Latin *chroniques*, the early French romances, and subsequent English romances.²⁴ The chapter delineates the relevant trajectories of major, intertwined threads of Arthuriana, tracing their development from medieval genesis to modern French versions in order to explore ways in which authors of modern Arthurian fiction do not

²⁴ A few works, those belonging to Jacques Roubaud and Louis Fétjaine in particular, rely also on the Scandinavian, Welsh, Italian, and German Arthurian traditions. However, since the influence of these traditions is restricted to a few works of modern French Arthuriana, they receive limited treatment in this chapter dedicated to broad trends in textual genealogies and literary recycling. For a more comprehensive survey of medieval Arthurian literature, see Loomis, R.S., *The Development of Arthurian Romance*, London: Hutchinson & co., 1963.

merely rewrite fixed narratives, but rather add to an already complex matrix of source texts.

What follows is not a strict argument of textual parentage with one-to-one correspondence; apart from instances in which modern writers specifically cite a prior text as a source, I do not assume a direct hypotext-hypertext relationship between medieval and modern material.²⁵ Moreover, I do not assume the absence of an intermediary text even when a medieval (French) source may be credited. As Norris J. Lacy has argued, “[U]ntil very recently, medieval French Arthurian literature has been a *tertiary* source of inspiration for modern French writers. In the late nineteenth century and through most of the first half of the twentieth, Wagner came first, Tennyson was second, and then came medieval French literature, refracted through the prism of the Bibliothèque Universelle and other, similar sources.”²⁶ It may be impossible in some cases to ascertain whether a modern author claims direct acquaintance with the medieval Vulgate Cycle, or instead with, for instance, early twentieth-century writer Jacques Boulenger’s modernized telling. Likewise, John Marino points to the insufficiency of privileging the vertical axis of textual genealogy while ignoring the relationships between and among texts of roughly the same period, in particular those that have generated multiple iterations in the form of variant manuscripts, insertions, and continuations. “The problem with the quest for origins,” Marino rightly acknowledges with regard to medieval literature, “is that it tends to assume a neat line of descent which does not allow

²⁵ I borrow Genette’s terminology here. See Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré*. Editions du Seuil, Paris: 1982.

²⁶ “Medieval to Post-Modern: The Arthurian Quest in France,” *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Spring, 2000), p. 124.

for mutual cross-influence between texts.”²⁷ This premise holds equally true when modern literary production is taken into consideration. Attempting to credit direct textual parentage is, at times, particularly unrealistic in bridging the gap between the medieval and the postmodern. Sources are manifold, motifs are appropriated and altered with impunity, and contemporary texts are in constant dialogue, not only with medieval works, but with other modern works. Thus, what I trace in this chapter is oftentimes a series of correspondences, emphasizing the ways in which modern French authors have laid claim to the same literary topoi as their medieval antecedents and some of the key turning points and markers that differentiate them.

Merlin

Merlin is one of the most frequently adapted figures in Arthurian literature. The malleability that makes him ripe for constant reinterpretation, however, also renders him difficult to pin down. Changeability and inscrutability are his calling cards. In his various medieval depictions, he appears as a young child or an old woodcutter, a shape-shifter and master of disguise, a seer or magician, a king-maker, a war counselor, a hermit, the son of the devil, the instrument of God, and the architect of the Grail quest. Contemporary French fiction stretches the figure’s potential even further, as he appears variously as a heretical adherent of Simon Magus’s first-century proto-gnosticism, a hobo subsisting among trash bins in a Parisian subway station, or a human-elf hybrid living in

²⁷ Marino, John. *The Grail Legend in Modern Literature*. Cambridge; Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 2004, p. 34.

a Middle Earth-like version of sixth-century Wales. This range verging on the absurd appears to be a built-in function of Merlin, due at least in part to the fact that his earliest representations drew upon multiple sources, yielding two contemporaneous but largely distinctive avatars of the figure: the prophetic court counselor and the mad bard of the woodlands.

The earliest portrayal of Merlin recognizable to modern readers appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth's prose Latin chronicle of Britain, the *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Composed between 1136 and 1138, the *Historia* creates a largely fictitious genealogy of the rulers of Britain, beginning with the Trojan-descended leader Brutus, first king of Britian, and continuing through the reign of Arthur. Roughly two thirds of the way through this chronicle, Merlin appears as a fatherless youth who prophesies the downfall of the usurper, facilitates the transportation of Stonehenge from Ireland, and aids Uther Pendragon in consummating his desire for the wedded Igera, thereby enabling the conception of the future King Arthur. A substantial amount of the Merlin section consists of a lengthy series of highly cryptic political prophesies; they were inserted into the *Historia* but were composed by Geoffrey at least three years earlier as a stand-alone work called the *Prophetiae Merlini* (not to be confused with the poem of the same name composed several decades later by Johannes Cornubiensis). Geoffrey composed a third work featuring Merlin, the *Vita Merlini*, around 1150. The *Vita*, written in Latin hexameter, recounts Merlin's madness and life as a hermit following the death of his lord Rydderch at the Welsh battle of Arfderydd.

Geoffrey's Merlin is probably derived from two figures. The first is the sixth-century bard Myrddin, who was likely a historical figure. He is said to have gone mad following the bloody battle of Arfderydd and to have lived in the forests of Caledonia thereafter. Myrddin is linked to the Welsh tradition of a prophesying Merlin-figure living in exile. This tradition includes the prophetic poem "Apple-Trees" narrated in the voice of Merlin, which Geoffrey may have read.²⁸ The other major literary antecedent, this one far more legendary than historical, is a youth in the fifth century known in Nennius's *Historia Brittonum* as Ambrosius. It is from Nennius's account that Geoffrey drew the story of Vortigern's collapsing tower, in which the youth predicts the downfall of the king. Geoffrey added his own embellishments to the tale, which he sets in Carmarthen, Wales. While Nennius's Ambrosius eventually reveals himself to be the son of a Roman consul, Geoffrey's Merlin is the result of the impregnation of a king's daughter by an incubus. In his *Historia*, Geoffrey changed the name from Ambrosius to Merlin to recall the Welsh Myrddin. Nineteenth-century scholar Gaston Paris popularized the theory that Geoffrey Latinized the name as Merlinus rather than Merdinus to avoid the vulgar association of the Anglo-Norman *merde*; this interpretation continues to hold sway.²⁹ The conflation of the figures of Ambrosius and Myrddin was likely a blunder on Geoffrey's part; it seems that while composing the *Prophetiae Merlini* and the *Historia*, he mistakenly transported the sixth-century bard Myrddin into the fifth-century context of

²⁸ "Apple Trees" (Afallennau), trans. Michael A. Faletra, in *The History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. Michael A. Faletra, Broadview Editions, Ontario: 2008, pp. 239–41. Modern authors including Barjavel and Fetjaine make frequent allusion to the legend of apple trees, linking *le pommier* to both the island of Avalon and the Tree of Knowledge in Eden.

²⁹ See, for instance, William W. Kibler's entry on Merlin in *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, ed. Norris J. Lacy, New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996, pp. 319–20.

Vortigern's reign.³⁰ It would also seem that Geoffrey later realized his mistake, as the *Vita* attempts to reconcile the apparent anachronism when Merlin explains that the events involving Vortigern, Uther, and the conception of Arthur had taken place many years prior. To accept this explanation, however, one must imagine the *Vita's* Merlin to be a centenarian fit for participation in military campaigns. In the Welsh tradition, the discrepancies are resolved by the notion that there were, in fact, two distinct individuals known as Merlin.³¹ The figure of Merlin was shaped by textual traces and discrepancies from his earliest iterations, a fact that has had substantial bearing on subsequent treatment of his character.

Of the two avatars composed by Geoffrey, Merlin as portrayed in the *Historia* proved vastly more influential for subsequent medieval romancers. The accounts of Merlin's conception via incubus, Vortigern's downfall, the transportation of Stonehenge, and Uther's impregnation of Ygerna constituted the matrix from which most subsequent Merlin adaptations were derived in the coming decades. However, it is certainly possible to identify the influence of the *Vita* in later works. In particular, Merlin's sinister laugh is a major trope, signaling the prophet's uncanny knowledge. He tends to laugh especially when confronted with a man ignorant of either his true parentage or his impending death.

³⁰ Lacy, Norris J. and Geoffrey Ashe. *The Arthurian Handbook*. New York: Garland, 1997, p. 335.

³¹ We see this assertion in Giraldus Cambrensis' *Itinerarium Cambriae*: "There were actually two Merlins. This one was also called Ambrosius, and thus had two names, and he prophesied when Vortigern was king. He was sired by an incubus and was discovered at Carmarthen, which, in fact, means 'Merlin's town,' deriving its name from the fact that he was discovered there. The other Merlin hailed from Scotland and is surnamed Celidonus because he made his prophesies in the Forest of Celidon. He is also called Merlin Silvester because he once looked up into the air in the middle of a battle and beheld a horrible monster there. This drove him mad and he fled into the forest, passing the rest of his life as a wild man of the woods. This second Merlin was alive during the days of King Arthur and it is said that he made far clearer and more numerous prophesies than the other Merlin." *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera, Vol. VI: Itinerarium Cambriae et Descriptio Cambriae*, ed. James F. Dimock, trans. Michael Faletra, London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1868, p. 133.

Merlin laughs and otherwise emotes in the *Historia* as well, but the phenomenon is far more prominent in the *Vita*. The other major contribution of the *Vita* is the story of the thrice-killed man. In the *Vita*, Merlin's sister attempts to trick Merlin by disguising a boy several times and asking him to predict the boy's death. Merlin first predicts that the boy will fall off a rock, then that he will die a violent death in a tree, and finally that he will die in a river; the boy's eventual death manages to combine all three fates, thereby vindicating Merlin's prophetic powers. Both the portentous laugh and the story of the thrice-killed man make multiple appearances in subsequent Arthurian romance.

Merlin debuted in the French vernacular tradition via the Anglo-Norman poet Wace, of Jersey. His fifteen thousand-line *Roman de Brut*, composed between 1150 and 1155, survives in approximately thirty manuscripts or manuscript fragments; it is a liberal translation of Geoffrey's *Historia*, full of embellishments, deletions, and editorial asides. Wace specifically omits the *Prophetiae* portion of the *Historia*, casting doubt on the credibility of Merlin's ambiguous prognostications:

Dont dist Merlins les profésies,
 Que vous avés sovent oïes,
 Des rois qui à venir estoient,
 Qui la tère tenir devoient.
 Ne voil son livre tranlater,
 Quant jo n'el' sai entepreter :
 Nule rien dire ne vólroie
 Qu'issi ne fu com jo diroie.

[*Roman de Brut*, section 7523]³²

³² "Then Merlin made the prophesies which I believe you have heard, of the kings who were to come and who were to hold the land. I do not wish to translate his book, since I do not know how to interpret it; I would not like to say anything, in case what I say does not happen" (Wace and Layamon's *The Life of King Arthur*, Trans. Judith Weiss, Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1997, p. 19).

The only exception to this deletion is found in the *Roman de Brut*'s Lincoln Cathedral MS 104; its scribe, named as Willelme, reinserted the prophesies.³³ Wace, in turn, was the source for Layamon (or Lawman)'s alliterative Middle English translation of the Arthurian material, the *Brut*, which survives in numerous manuscripts.

A major expansion of the Merlin material in the French tradition came with Robert de Boron's *Merlin*, composed around 1200 as a continuation to the poet's *Joseph of Arimathea*. Robert's composition has survived in a fragment of about five hundred lines of verse, but a prose redaction exists in several manuscript copies; two of the most important manuscripts are the E.39 in Modena and the Didot manuscript (D) at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. The prose version, sometimes referred to as pseudo-Robert, contains a number of significant narrative innovations. Merlin's genealogy is elaborated, with a backstory asserting that the devil wished to create an Antichrist and schemed to create Merlin as this incarnation of evil. Because his mother repented after impregnation by an incubus, however, God endows Merlin with the gift of foresight. This endowment facilitates Merlin's role as both kingmaker and author of Arthur's reign. In Robert's account, Merlin is described as extremely hairy at birth and capable of intelligent speech as a baby. While still a toddler, he successfully argues before a judge to reverse his mother's death sentence. Later, he is able to assume any appearance he chooses, often conversing with those who seek him while in the guise of a beggar or young boy.

³³ *Ibid.*

Whereas in Geoffrey's *Historia* Merlin disappears from the narration with Uther's impregnation of Igraine, in Robert's version, Merlin takes charge of baby Arthur to ensure the future king is fostered. He is also responsible for orchestrating the episode of the sword in the stone. The prose *Merlin* marks a shift in linking Merlin explicitly to Arthur's reign, not simply his conception. Also of particular interest is Robert's treatment of the Holy Grail. Robert did not invent the Grail, but he did mythologize it, linking the Arthurian court to Joseph of Arimathea. In this account, Merlin as narrator is the glue that holds the Biblical and Arthurian elements together. Because he has knowledge of the past from his father the Devil, he can dictate Biblical and Grail history to his confessor and scribe, Blaise, who takes down the account in Northumberland, and thanks to his knowledge of the future, he can orchestrate the Grail quest. Indeed, the mage appears in a third work often attributed to Robert (via a prose reworking), the Didot or Modena *Perceval*. In this text, Merlin serves as a guide and counselor for the knight on the Grail quest, outlives Arthur and Mordred in their final battle, and retires in solitude:

Et lors vint Merlins a Perceval et a Blayse son maistre, et prist congié a els et lor dist que nostre Sir ne voloit que il se demonstrast au peule, ne il ne poroit morir devant le finement del siecle ; "mais adon tarai jou la joie parmentable, et je volrai faire defors te maison un abitacle, et je la volrai converser, et si profetiserai çoi que nostre Sire me commandera. Et tot cil qui men abitacle verront, si le clameront l'esplumoir Merlin." Atant s'en torna Merlins et fist son esplumoir, et entra dedans, ne onques puis au siecle ne fu veüs. [pseudo-Robert's *Perceval*, Didot MS (Modena)]³⁴

³⁴ "Then Merlin came to Perceval and to his master Blaise and took his leave of them. He said that Our Lord did not want him to appear to people again, but he would not die until the end of the world. 'But then I shall live in eternal joy. Meanwhile I shall make my dwelling-place outside your house, where I shall live and prophesy as Our Lord shall instruct me. And all who see my dwelling-place will call it Merlin's *esplumoir*.' With that, Merlin departed; and he made his *esplumoir* and entered in, and was never seen again in this world." (*Merlin and the Grail: The Trilogy of Prose Romances Attributed to Robert de Boron*, trans. Nigel Bryant, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001, p. 172.)

The term “esplumoir,” designating the space of Merlin’s retreat, is untranslatable and was almost certainly a neologism. The evocation of feathers in the name can be associated with both nesting and composition. Another connotation of *plumes* might be that of molting, highlighting once again Merlin’s malleable nature and hinting at yet another metamorphosis. This ending stands as the model for modern writings that portray Merlin as a survivor of Camelot, the sole figure capable of composing its history retrospectively.

Subsequent medieval Arthurian production effected an explosion of accounts of Merlin’s fate. Important for post-medieval Arthurian production were the Vulgate and post-Vulgate cycles, which in turn influenced the depiction of Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*. Most of these depict his downfall or entrapment because of his carnal relationship with a huntress or sorceress known as Niviane, Nimue, Niniane, Nyneue, or Viviane. Merlin’s death is recounted differently in various versions of the narrative, as he is confined within an enchanted prison described as a cave (in the Vulgate Cycle), a large rock (in *Le Morte Darthur*), an invisible tower, or a tree. In the *Prophetiae Merlini*, Niviane confines him in the forest of Brocéliande by means of walls of air. Merlin’s death cry is a recurring motif, notably recounted in the thirteenth-century *Suite du Merlin* when the enchanter discovers his imprisonment in the cave. The *Suite* is also notable for emphasizing the mage’s foreknowledge of his own demise, as he informs the newly installed king that he will be “tous vis mis en terre, et c’est bien honteuse mort.”³⁵ Confinement, transformation, and solitude are the hallmarks of Merlin’s demise,

³⁵ “... buried alive, and this is truly a shameful death.” *La Suite du Roman de Merlin*, ed. Gilles Roussineau, Tome 1, Droz, 1996, §42. (Translation my own.)

although, interestingly, some texts imply a continued presence in which Merlin is robbed of all agency. He is left to observe the world he helped build, no longer able to influence it. He exits Logres at the height of Arthur's reign and does not play a role in its eventual collapse.

In twentieth- and twenty-first century French Arthuriana, Merlin remains by far the most popular character for adaptation. As has been noted by Anne Berthelot, with the exception of a few works devoted entirely to the Grail Quest, Merlin is omnipresent in French *réécriture*.³⁶ He is the central figure in Apollinaire's *L'Enchanteur pourrissant*, Michel Rio's *Merlin*, René Barjavel's *L'Enchanteur*, Jean-Louis Fetjaine's *Le Pas de Merlin* and *Brocéliande*, and Gudule's *Ménopause des fées* trilogy. He also appears prominently in Jacques Roubaud's *Graal fiction*, Roubaud and Florence Delay's *Graal théâtre*, and Jean-Pierre Le Dantec's *Graal-Romance*. While Anglophone Arthuriana places most of its emphasis on King Arthur himself, French-language production overwhelmingly hews to Merlin. Indeed, in more than one text, he seems to supplant the king in key ways. The opening passage of *L'Enchanteur* places Merlin, not Arthur, at the center of Camaalot's attention and loyalty: "Quand il quitta le monde des hommes, il laissa un regret qui n'a jamais guéri. Nous ne savons plus qui est celui qui nous manque et que nous attendons sans cesse, mais nous savons bien qu'il y a une place vide dans notre cœur."³⁷ This evocation of the awaited return recycles the *rex quondam rexque*

³⁶ "Merlin's Reconversion, or, How the Enchanter Comes to Outstage the King," paper delivered at the 2011 Studies in Medievalism Conference, Albuquerque.

³⁷ *L'Enchanteur*, p. 10.

futurus formula made famous by Malory, except that it refers to Merlin as the beloved, absent figure who is eagerly awaited.³⁸

A small number of recent portrayals of Merlin engage directly with a particular medieval work in a readily identifiable way. Two of Jean-Louis Fetjaine's fantasy novels draw directly on the Welsh Merlin tradition. Situated in sixth-century Wales, *Le Pas de Merlin* and *Brocéliande* depict a young bard called Myrddin who comes into his powers (the result, in this version, of rare elf ancestry) amid the backdrop of the warfare embroiling Guendoleu, king of Cumbria, and Ryderc, a tribal leader just north of Hadrian's Wall. These figures, along with the bard Talisien, feature prominently in Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini*, although the plot of Fetjaine's novels follows a different course. Fetjaine demonstrates ample understanding of the origins of the Arthur and Merlin legends, including Geoffrey's apparent anachronism in situating the Myrddin story in the fifth century, as illustrated by his introduction to *Le Pas de Merlin*:

Selon la légende, le roi Arthur serait né entre 470 et 500 et aurait péri vers 542 à la bataille de Camlann, contre une coalition de Pictes, de Gaëls et de Saxons menée par son neveu incestueux Mordred. Merlin, pour sa part, est mentionné lors de la bataille d'Ardeydd en 573, soit quelque soixante-dix ans plus tard. Il est donc plus que probable qu'Arthur ait été mort et enterré depuis longtemps quand Merlin vit le jour, ce qui remet sérieusement en question l'image traditionnelle d'un vieil enchanteur éduquant le jeune roi Arthur. Au regard de l'histoire, il ne peut y avoir que deux explications à cet anachronisme : soit les auteurs des premiers textes arthuriens ont volontairement ou involontairement mélangé les dates, soit l'un des deux personnages n'a en réalité pas existé. ... Or, si l'existence de

³⁸ "Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place... many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse: Hic jacet Arthurus, Rex quondam, Rexque futurus." Malory, Thomas. *Le Morte Darthur*, New York: Norton, 2004. p. 689.

Merlin—Myrddin en gallois—, barde du roi de Cumbrie Gwenddoleu, semble avérée historiquement, ce n'est pas le cas d'Arthur.³⁹

Fetjaine thus chooses to pursue the avenue of Merlin as a plausibly historical figure, albeit conceived in a vein of high fantasy that allows him to be an elf. Fetjaine is the only modern French author of whom I am aware who portrays an explicitly Welsh Merlin resonating with the *Vita Merlini* rather than the *Historia Regum Britanniae*; he also does so in the sequel *Brocéliande* and in his *Trilogie des Elfes*.

Jacques Roubaud's portrayal of Merlin in "Conte: La Naissance de Merlin" (*Graal fiction*) also corresponds closely to a medieval antecedent. In this case, the echoed text is the Huth-*Merlin*, the prose version of Robert de Boron's *Merlin*.⁴⁰ The medieval and modern stories follow nearly identical trajectories, up to a point; while the Huth-*Merlin* follows the character into adulthood, Roubaud's *conte* ends with the trial of Merlin's mother and its successful outcome. Sentence by sentence, Roubaud rewrites (pseudo)Robert, amplifying the humor already present in the medieval text. Roubaud's version is a clear parody of the earlier *Merlin*, but one that playfully highlights the comedic potential already embedded within it.

Most other texts are not so readily identifiable in terms of tracing a textual genealogy, primarily because they are inspired by a wealth of sources or filtered through a modern intermediary, such as Jacques Boulenger's early twentieth-century adaptation

³⁹ *Le Pas de Merlin*, pp. 12–13.

⁴⁰ While Roubaud may have drawn on the extant verse text of Robert's *Merlin*, his knowledge of the prose Huth-*Merlin* is more firmly attested, as he and Delay cite it in their bibliography for *Graal théâtre*, which was begun within two years of the publication of *Graal fiction*.

of the Arthurian cycle, or even modern Anglophone sources such as T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*.⁴¹ Both seem to serve as sources of inspiration for Barjavel's *L'Enchanteur*. Barjavel also draws on the Huth-Merlin story of the devil impregnating a virgin to account for Merlin's peculiar powers, adapting key passages to suit his world-building and theology. Of particular interest is Barjavel's implication that Merlin is capable of reincarnation, as evidenced by the introduction to his origins story: "Il est temps d'expliquer comment Merlin naquit. Du moins cette fois."⁴² This wording may serve as a nod to the existence of such divergent accounts of Merlin's origins and identity, resolving them in part by implying that each story may be valid, but not the whole of the tale. This approach allows Merlin to encompass the various storylines attributed to him without apparent discrepancy needing resolution. It also plays into the conceit of Merlin serving as an alternative *rex quondam rexque futurus* who may be endowed with multiple advents.

A number of authors of modern Arthuriana have taken such liberties with the figure (whose malleable nature surely encourages it) that he bears little resemblance to most of his medieval antecedents. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the works of Anne Liger-Belair, a young adult-crossover writer from Belgium who penned her *Ménopause des Fées* trilogy under the name of Gudule. In this trilogy, a severely degraded and even unhinged Merlin ekes out an existence in contemporary Paris among

⁴¹ Other works of modern Arthuriana in English that have influenced modern French writers include Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (1983). French Arthuriana since the mid-nineties has increasingly demonstrated awareness of this last text, although it has never produced a strain of feminist counter-history in any way comparable to Zimmer Bradley's writings.

⁴² *L'Enchanteur*, p. 39.

the garbage bins in the (fictitious) Brocéliande Métro station of the eighteenth arrondissement. This vagrant-Merlin obsessively recalls the glory of bygone Arthurian times and seeks to restore it by initiating a new Grail quest with the help of his fairy companions, who consist of a pun enthusiast, a neo-Nazi, and a pedophile. He is a diminished figure made ridiculous by gastric complaints and no longer capable of inspiring fear and awe. The trilogy is somewhat anomalous, however; most modern French Arthuriana adheres to a more canonically derived vision of Merlin, whether he is merely a sage counselor and kingmaker (*Merlin, Morgane, Arthur*), a supernatural agent (*L'Enchanteur*), or a heretical mage (*Graal-Romance*). The diminishment of Merlin in this series does echo his ignoble end in various medieval texts at the hands of Niniane/Viviane.

One striking commonality among recent representations of Merlin stands in contrast to predominant medieval narratives: in modern French Arthuriana, Merlin is seldom captured and held in perpetuity or killed outright.⁴³ This trend is in part because his imprisonment would entail his premature exit from a stage he has come to dominate; in modern French Arthuriana, the story can scarcely continue without impetus from the enchanter. As he is the narrative anchor for most French rewriting, he cannot be conveniently shunted to the side, as in Malory or the Vulgate Cycle. Indeed, modern novels focused on Merlin are sometimes narrated in limited third-person perspective (*Le Pas de Merlin, Brocéliande*) or even the first person (*Merlin*), making his perspective and interiority central to the work. Another explanation may be the desire to make of Viviane

⁴³ The one exception is in Roubaud and Delay's *Graal théâtre*, but even here, Merlin finds work-arounds to his ostensible imprisonment and takes great care to put his affairs in order before leaving Arthur's court.

a robustly valorized female protagonist, requiring both agency in the heroine and a more complicit or collaborative Merlin. While several modern texts treat the Merlin-Viviane relationship in great depth, it is typically portrayed as a partnership predicated on trust and affection. Deceit and entrapment are absent in these texts, and if Merlin forsakes Arthur for Viviane, it is always voluntarily. In nearly all iterations, he outlives Arthur's reign, either seeking solitary reflection on his failures (*Merlin*), or finding post-Camelot fulfillment and happiness with his beloved Viviane (*Graal-Romance*, *L'Enchanteur*).

Another common thread in various texts is Merlin's apparent lack of temporal anchoring. This tendency owes in large measure to T.H. White's series, in which Merlin lives time backwards relative to the rest of humanity. Barjavel engages with this motif by allowing Merlin to exert control over time in *L'Enchanteur*. He is thus able to "borrow" modern-day technologies and amenities, importing them into the Arthurian present. Elsewhere, however, the lack of anchoring causes difficulties for a Merlin who is far from adept at navigating space-time. Asked in *Le Chevalier Silence* to foretell the future of the king, Merlin obliges, but clearly struggles to match his own temporal perception to that of his interlocutor: "Ce qui a dû arriver arrivera, je veux dire est arrivé. Ce que doit arriver est arrivé, je veux dire arrivera."⁴⁴ Modern writers of French Arthuriana commonly treat Merlin as detached from the rest of humanity, whether through the chronology motif or a supernatural preoccupation.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 19.

⁴⁵ I analyze Merlin's relationship to time extensively in my third chapter, on treatment of time, setting, and anachronism in modern Arthuriana.

King Arthur

The name “King Arthur” operates metonymically with regard to the *matière de Bretagne*, gathering together adventures set in Wales, Cornwall, Armorica, and north of Hadrian’s Wall. Even stories that, in their earliest incarnations, held little overt connection to King Arthur or his court were recuperated into this literary matrix. *Tristan et Yseut* is an example of a work whose Arthurian links are peripheral to the story; *Le Roman de Silence* features an even more attenuated relationship to Arthuriana, largely based on the presence of a Merlin-figure.⁴⁶ The narrative absence of the King need not prevent a text’s designation as Arthurian, however, because Arthur’s own exploits are seldom the focal point of *any* romance. Less a character-as-agent and more a center of discourse, King Arthur sits on his throne, whether at Camelot or Carduel, configuring the adventures that burgeon around him, in a certain sense providing them with both regal and narrative authorization. As such, he is in many ways defined by his proximity to props (the Sword in the Stone, Excalibur, and the Round Table) and to story lines to which he is merely a third party, such as Lancelot and Guenièvre’s forbidden love, the Quest for the Holy Grail, and the Green Knight’s beheading game.

Arthur’s textual origins are murky; the figure was gradually constituted over a period of centuries through an accretion of Welsh legend, largely invented chronicles of Britain, and romance.⁴⁷ First attested by the ninth-century poet Nennius in his *Historia*

⁴⁶ This is an on-going process. See, for instance, Michel Zink’s *Déodat*, which integrates the Breton *lai* of *Yonec* into the Arthurian fold.

⁴⁷ I am leaving aside, as much as possible, the question of Arthur’s origins as a historical figure (or the composite of several) and treat him here as a purely literary creation. See Chapter 3 for discussion of the ways in which two modern French authors address the search for a historical Arthur.

Brittonum as a *dux bellorum*, or war chief, he is credited with twelve military victories, among them a decisive win at Mount Badon. Geoffrey of Monmouth is responsible for integrating Arthur into the genealogy of Britain's rulers in his *Historia regum Britanniae*. This account establishes Arthur as the son of Uther Pendragon and Ygraine, wife of Gorlois at the time of Arthur's conception. Geoffrey's version is seminal because it contains a full biographic treatment of Arthur and establishes or plants the seeds of many canonical motifs and narrative threads associated with the king. It contains an early cast of vassals, among them Kay (Ké), Bedivere (a prototype for Lancelot), and Gawain (Gauvain). It endows the king with a sword called Caliburnus; this was an early iteration of the blade Excalibur (or Escalibour). It delineates the broad outline of Arthur's reign, including various successful military campaigns against the Saxons to consolidate his power over much of Britain. It also details his conquest over Gaul and his triumph over the Romans, who demanded monetary tribute of him. Already present in Geoffrey's account, too, is the mechanism accounting for the downfall of Arthur: his wife Guinevere's relationship with his nephew Modred (Mordret), which halts Arthur's military campaign against Rome. In the ensuing battle, he is wounded and transported to Avalon for healing, his fate left unclear. This narrative line laid the groundwork for future iterations depicting the adulterous love of Guinevere and Lancelot. Geoffrey's chronicles were frequently translated and adapted throughout the Middle Ages, contributing greatly to the coalescence of an "Arthur myth." Wace's loose translation and adaptation of Geoffrey's text into French yielded a number of important variations and innovations

regarding Arthur, among them the invention of the Round Table.⁴⁸ This work served as a bridge-text between the chronicle tradition and that of the subsequent romances.

Arthur appears largely as a peripheral figure in several notable French romances. As the moral center of Logres, he provides the authority for the quests and adventures of his various knights but is seldom an active participant. In Chrétien de Troyes's romances, the king remains at court while knights such as Yvain, Lancelot, Perceval, Gauvain, and Érec leave to accomplish great exploits, thereby winning acclaim for themselves and, by extension, for their king. Chrétien's works do not contribute substantially to the "biographical" portrait of Arthur established by Geoffrey. Instead, they advance the king as a center of discourse, whereby he and his court function as a magnet that draws fledgling or would-be knights (such as Perceval) and continues to exert a pull on those knights who leave on quests. Here, Arthur's superlative valor is largely treated as a given and reinforced through textual assurances, for instance that the king "fu de tel tesmoing/C'on en parole pres et loing."⁴⁹ These claims lack detailed narratives of feats, battles, or adventures to support them, however. Indeed, Chrétien's Arthur is marked by fits of fatigue (*Le Chevalier au lion*), caprice (hunting the white stag in defiance of custom in *Érec*), and ineffectual leadership (leading to Guenièvre's kidnapping in *Le Chevalier de la charrette*). Critique of the king is unfailingly implicit in Chrétien's works, but the sporadically unflattering portrait is developed more explicitly in subsequent works.

⁴⁸ See below for a separate discussion of the Round Table and its members.

⁴⁹ "...was of such renown that he is still spoken of far and wide." *Yvain*, ll. 35–36. (Translation my own.)

Arthur's establishment as king and his early adventures are given elaborate treatment in two thirteenth-century prose French narratives: the Vulgate *Estoire de Merlin*, and the *Suite du Merlin*. While Robert's *Merlin* itself is chiefly important for the development of the mage figure, the continuations falsely ascribed to him contain the most substantive portraits of Arthur. Moreover, they were to remain highly influential as the French source material for the early books in Malory's work. The *Suite* is particularly significant for thematizing personal responsibility and consequences for pivotal Arthurian figures, even at the outset of the text. Whereas the prior *Mort Artu* casts Lancelot and Guenièvre's ill-fated love affair as responsible for the downfall of Arthur's realm, the *Suite du Merlin* instead emphasizes a key misstep at the outset of the king's reign: his incestuous coupling with his half-sister, the queen of Orkanie. This union produces Mordret, to whom the text attributes the devastation of Logres: "Adont conut li freres carneument sa serour et porta la dame chelui qui puissemi le traist a mort et mist a destruction et a martyre la terre."⁵⁰ The advent of Mordret is a source of anxiety and regret within the text, giving rise to prophetic nightmares that plague the king. Indeed, Arthur returns to the subject of his unknown son again and again, first imploring Merlin to reveal his identity, then scheming on the basis of a few hints to eliminate any threat by imprisoning all newborns. In the *Suite*, and later, in Malory, Arthur is fearful and ruthless enough to order the children exiled, uncaring that they may perish at sea. These portraits of an Arthur who sows his own destruction through unwitting incest recur in modern fiction, particularly in Barjavel and in Rio. However, neither author includes the

⁵⁰ "King Arthur knew his own sister carnally, and the lady carried the child who, later, caused his death and brought the kingdom to destruction and suffering." *La Suite du Roman de Merlin*, ed. Gilles Roussineau, Tome I, Droz, 1996, §42. (Translation my own.)

troubling accounts of the king's attempts to eliminate his son, opting for a softer portrait of the king than those found in the French source material.

The *Mort Artu*, which is generally grouped into the Vulgate Cycle, recounts the end of Arthur's reign and the deaths of most of the members of the Round Table. It portrays an ineffectual king who generally shows very little emotion when ostensibly under duress. In this story, the blame for the internecine war that lays to waste Logres falls upon Lancelot and Guenièvre, who have renewed their forbidden love following Lancelot's return from the Grail quest as recounted in the *Queste del Saint-Graal*. Their discovery leads to Guenièvre's death sentence and Lancelot's exile. The chain of events that ensues includes a Roman invasion and Mordred's coup, culminating in Arthur's death in battle at Winchester. Malory's *Morte Darthur* largely follows the *Mort Artu* in its treatment of Arthur's end, particularly in depicting the events that set his downfall in motion. However, in the *Morte Darthur*, Arthur's fate is left open to greater speculation. Malory recounts that the mortally wounded king was taken away in a ship by his sister Morgan le Fay, along with the queens of North Galis and the Waste Londis. He admits skepticism of Arthur's survival but reports "som men say in many partys of Inglonde that Kynge Arthure ys nat dede, but had by the wyll of Oure Lorde Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall com agayne, and he shall wynne the Holy Crosse."⁵¹ Malory's account thus infuses Arthur with a Christ-like potential for resurrection, strengthened by the purported inscription upon his Glastonbury tomb: "*Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam*

⁵¹ Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, Ed. Stephen H.A. Shepherd. New York: Norton, 2004, p. 689.

rexque futurus.”⁵² This hopeful posture has had widespread influence on modern Arthuriana, even if most French authors temper the potential for return with skepticism.

In an outgrowth of his medieval role of byword rather than agent, Arthur is likewise an absent figure in much of the modern French material. Whereas the later Anglophone tradition places him at the heart of numerous texts (e.g., T.H. White’s *Once and Future King* series, Rosemary Sutcliff’s *Sword at Sunset*, Stephen R. Lawhead’s *Arthur*, to say nothing of the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*), modern French Arthuriana tends to accord him relatively little attention, focusing far more heavily on Merlin and on the Grail quest, in which Arthur did not himself participate. While the king receives far less treatment than the celebrated enchanter or even knights Perceval and Lancelot, his presence (and, at times, conspicuous absence) in modern French Arthuriana is nonetheless noteworthy. Arthur’s characterization and the quality of his reign provides insight into a given text’s attitude toward the Arthurian world, serving synecdochally as the touchstone of its ethos.

The king and champion of Logres does appear at the center of Michel Rio’s *Arthur*, the final volume in his Arthurian trilogy. This novel roughly follows the same narrative arc established by the first two volumes, *Merlin* and *Morgane*, but from the king’s limited third-person perspective. This retelling harkens back to the earliest chronicles in its portrayal of Arthur as the embodiment of valor and idealism, in spite of his human failings and their interference with his utopian designs. Above all, he is identified with moderation: “Ainsi Arthur, dans la construction concrète du monde de la

⁵² “Here lies Arthur, past and future king.”

Table avec le matériau de la loi, exprimait-il, par ce mélange de pouvoir consensuel et de pouvoir absolu, de liberté et de contrainte, d'égalité et de hiérarchie, d'initiative et de contrôle multiple, de fraternité et de terreur, une conception de l'homme tiraillée entre celle de Merlin qui le voulait libre, solidaire et intelligent, et celle de Morgane qui le voyait à jamais esclave, prédateur et stupide.”⁵³ While Rio's Arthur is guilty of immoral conduct (principally, his sexual union with his half-sister Morgane), the trilogy celebrates his will to put the good of his kingdom before any personal interest. In particular, his ready pardon of Guenièvre and Lancelot's adultery to preserve the stability of the Round Table recalls the resignation of the king as recounted in the Vulgate *Mort Artu* and subsequently in Malory's *Morte Darthur*. With Arthur as the moral center of Logres, the kingdom's downfall is thus portrayed as the failure of an ideal and as a tragedy on both human and societal levels.

Rio's treatment of Arthur is anomalous, however. Most authors of contemporary French Arthuriana, perhaps due to a postmodern skepticism of authority and perfectibility, portray the king as all too human in his flaws and vices. They take their cue from the Arthur of Chrétien de Troyes, who falls asleep in the midst of holding court and who appears both too feeble to protect his queen and too dim to notice she has been seduced. In Jacques Roubaud and Florence Delay's *Graal théâtre*, we meet an impotent king who laments the absence of his knights, all of whom seem to have left court for adventure's sake. This Arthur also falls prey to the melancholia described in the *Perlesvaus*; when left to his own devices, he lapses into lonely reverie: “Je pense que les

⁵³ Rio, Michel. *Arthur*, Paris: Seuil, 2001, p. 68.

meilleurs m'abandonnent que personne n'essaie de les retenir et que je serai bientôt seul."⁵⁴ As a leader, he is ineffectual, whiny, and slow on the uptake. After the appearance of the Grail in *Galaad ou la Quête*, for instance, he petulantly demands a gloss on the events from his fellow knights, expecting that they will have a better understanding of divine matters than he: "Si personne ne veut rien me dire comment voulez-vous que je comprenne tout seul ce que demande le Saint-Esprit? Je suis un roi terrien moi je n'entends pas les choses célestes."⁵⁵ This uncritical Arthur thus stands in comic contrast to Merlin, who in Roubaud and Delay's world remains undisputed master of language, *senifiance*, and hermeneutics.

Arthur is likewise a flawed figure in Barjavel's *L'Enchanteur*, albeit, one whose imperfections are less grossly comical. Although Merlin initially attempts to groom him to be the worthy Grail champion, Arthur disqualifies himself from the quest almost immediately by sleeping with his half-sister, queen of the Orkneys, outside of wedlock. This treatment is similar to that found in the medieval *Suite du Merlin*, which opens with the same incident and casts it in similar terms. Barjavel's text is quite explicit that this action irrevocably knocks Arthur from the pedestal he had occupied, likening it to the fall from Eden: "...plus qu'une faute, c'était une chute."⁵⁶ In this text, Arthur is no more than the first of several failed candidates put forth by Merlin as a potential Grail champion. Upon rendering himself ineligible for the role, he loses prominence in the story and is subsequently supplanted by other heroes in turn: Perceval, Lancelot, and finally Galaad.

⁵⁴ Roubaud and Delay, "L'Enlèvement de la Reine," *Graal théâtre*, p. 343.

⁵⁵ *Graal théâtre*, p. 505.

⁵⁶ *L'Enchanteur*, p. 73–4. For more detailed treatment of Arthur's relationship with Morgane, see Chapter 4, devoted to Arthurian families.

He does, however, engage in adventures, such as the voyage led by Merlin to the land of the giant race, where he treats with la Belle Géant. Although he serves as a nominal leader for the sake of negotiations, Arthur has been effectively demoted, virtually indistinguishable from his knights.

In other works, Arthur is conspicuous in his absence or his decidedly peripheral role. In Le Dantec's *Graal-Romance*, Arthur has been dead for fully a decade at the time of the elaborate frame narrative. Already the memory of his reign has begun to fade, but what remains is far from flattering: in his final years, Arthur had degenerated into a drunken tyrant. Absent from this portrait is the political vision seen in Rio's portrayal of Arthur. In a similar vein, Michel Zink's Arthur in *Déodat* is remote, both in terms of the story's narrative arc and as demonstrated by his lack of investment in governing his kingdom. While his chapel pilgrimage sets in motion the driving inquiry of the story (namely, the mystery of squire Cahus's death, as described in the medieval *Perlesvaus*), Arthur remains off-stage for nearly all of *Déodat*. This near-absence of the king is of thematic importance for the novel, which takes up the stories of overlooked characters such as serving maids and squires who exist alongside great knights in medieval Arthuriana but who pass mostly unnoticed by protagonists and readers alike. Arthur's displacement from a role of prominence thus underscores the novel's contention that greatness is not contingent upon social status.

In modern French Arthuriana, one of the most frequently depicted sequences is the story of Arthur's conception as orchestrated by Merlin. Arthur is almost invariably the son of Uther (variously styled Uter, Uther-pendragon, and Uter Pandragon) and

Ygerne (occasionally called Ygraine or Igerne) and typically conceived out of wedlock during the siege of Tintagel, in accordance with Geoffrey's account. Barjavel's version in *L'Enchanteur* gives the story only cursory treatment but does firmly establish Arthur as the son of Uther Pandragon, vanquisher of Vortigern. In Rio's *Merlin*, Uther-Pendragon turns his attention to Ygerne, wife of the king of Dumnonia (Cornwall), only after she is pointed out to him by Merlin, who desires a union between the two. This leads to war, wherein Uther-Pendragon seizes Ygerne, impregnates her, and slays the king in the final assault on Tintagel; there is no recourse to magic or subterfuge to gain the cooperation of Ygerne. In Roubaud's *Le Roi Arthur*, as well as Roubaud and Delay's *Graal théâtre*, Ygerne is not the wife of Gorlois (Duke of Cornwall in Geoffrey, the Vulgate Cycle, and Malory) but of the Cornish king Marc; this small switch helps integrate the Arthurian world with that of Tristan. Jean-Louis Fetjaine's *Trilogie des Elfes* tells the story of the war that erupts among the various races (elves, dwarves, humans, monsters) in the months prior to Arthur's birth, foregrounding the relationship between Uther and Ygraine that leads to the conception of Arthur. The second novel of the trilogy, *La Nuit des Elfes*, concludes with a single sentence in Old French, the sole such occurrence in the book: "Ensi jurent li rois et Ygraine cele nuit, et en cele nuit engendrait il le boin roi qui fu apielés Artus."⁵⁷ The trilogy ends with Merlin contemplating the child who will one day be able to draw the Épée de Nudd from the Pierre de Fal, thereby separating the magical talismans linked to the strength of the dwarves and humans, respectively. Thus Arthur is cast as the culmination of three volumes firmly anchored in Celtic mythology that also

⁵⁷ Fetjaine, Jean-Louis. *La Trilogie des Elfes*, Belfond, p. 645.

witness the dying out of marvelous races and their magic; by the time Arthur has reached adulthood, the old order of the trilogy will have all but died out, creating the opening for a heroic king who can save the world from its bellicose paroxysms.

The “once and future” potential for Arthur’s glorious return following the devastation of Camlann receives occasional treatment in modern French writings, although more often than not any hope is buried along with the king. In Rio’s trilogy, Merlin transports Arthur’s corpse to Avalon for interment alongside his sister Morgane; the king’s death is here definitive. In Le Dantec’s *Graal-Romance*, Morgane carries off Arthur’s body to Avalon, convinced of her ability to heal him: “N’aie pas crainte, mon amour! gémissait-elle dans son délire. Je saurai te soigner ... Composer tous les philtres Te veiller le temps qu’il faudra ... Tu revivras, petit frère qui n’avais pas peur de Morgane ! ... Tu renaitras, toi qui applaudissais à mes tours de magie...”⁵⁸ Lancelot, recounting this scene, dismisses Morgane’s plan as symptomatic of her grief and denial; he is convinced of the finality of Arthur’s death. However, in Barjavel’s *L’Enchanteur*, the mortally wounded Arthur’s future is more promising. Merlin approaches the king’s corpse and is able to communicate with the cadaver: “Tu vas te lever et monter dans la nef blanche, qui t’attend sur la rivière. Elle te conduira à l’île d’Avalon, sous ta couronne de pierres. Apprends le vrai nom de celle-ci : c’est Stonehinge : charnière de pierre. Tu attendras, couché dans ton château de fer, que vienne le moment où tu seras appelé. Alors la charnière jouera, la porte s’ouvrira, l’île d’Avalon montera au milieu de la plaine de Salisbury, et le roi aux deux épées sortira de son château pour délivrer les royaumes ...

⁵⁸ Le Dantec, Jean-Pierre. *Graal-Romance*, p. 224.

Va !”⁵⁹ This poignant ending at once exploits the prophetic powers of Merlin and signals the cyclical nature of the Arthurian realm; leaders are born and die, and return is not only possible but inevitable.⁶⁰

The Round Table and its Knights

A key motif associated with Arthur’s knights is the Round Table. It is first attested in Wace’s *Roman de Brut*, described as a means of curtailing rivalry among Arthur’s knights:

Por les nobles barons qu’il ot
 Dont cascuns meildre ester quidot;
 Cascuns s’en tenoit al millor,
 Ne nus n’en savoit le pior,
 Fist Artus la Roonde Table
 Dont Breton dient mainte fable :
 Illoc séoient li vassal
 Tot chievalment et tot ingal ;
 A la table ingalment séoient
 Et ingalment servi estoient. [ll. 9994–10003]⁶¹

Thus, the first iteration of the table is political in nature, a practical means of bringing a host of great lords into Arthur’s service while avoiding internecine conflict (at least provisionally). The table is a testament to the prowess of its members, many of whom are

⁵⁹ Barjavel, *L’Enchanteur*, p. 466.

⁶⁰ This premise extends to Merlin, who, it is implied, has had multiple births, and to the Grail, which appears at critical moments in human history.

⁶¹ “On account of his noble barons—each felt he was superior, each considered himself the best, and no one could say who was the worst—Arthur had the Round Table made, about which the British tell many a tale. There sat the vassals, all equal, all leaders; they were placed equally around the table, and equally served.” (Wace and Lawman’s *The Life of King Arthur*, trans. Judith Weiss, Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1997). Weiss’s translation has the passage as beginning at line 9747.

lords in their own right. It simultaneously reinforces Arthur's capacity to harness the skill and wisdom of so many fine leaders in relative harmony. The Round Table is thus a motif intrinsically identified with egalitarianism among its members while serving as a locus (literal and metaphorical) for the centralization of Arthur's power.

Robert de Boron assimilates the Round Table into a Christian lineage of similarly lofty tables. In the extant early thirteenth-century prose redaction of his *Merlin*, he aligns the Round Table with two other tables of Biblical importance. Firstly, there is the Last Supper Table at which Jesus celebrated Passover on the evening before his arrest and crucifixion. The second table in the lineage belongs to Joseph of Arimathea, who inaugurated the Grail Table. The Round Table, then, serves as heir to and fulfillment of the other two; it is made by Merlin at Uther Pendragon's request to seat fifty knights. In keeping with the first two tables, one seat must remain empty in commemoration of Judas's betrayal. The motif of this *Siège Périlleux* appears several times in the medieval French tradition. In the *Didot-Perceval*, Perceval attempts to sit in the seat, bringing the wrath of God upon Arthur for allowing it. In the *Queste del Saint Graal*, Galaad is revealed as the chosen knight for whom the seat was intended; by occupying this chair, he confirms his identity as a worthy Grail knight.

Nowhere in modern French Arthuriana does the Round Table hold such a place of prominence as in Rio's trilogy. In an Arthurian setting otherwise devoid of the marvelous, the table is as close as Rio comes to infusing an entity with mystical properties. The table stands metonymically for world-builder Merlin's utopian dream: a civilized kingdom built on the rule of law rather than sheer brutality. Merlin himself is

the first architect of the Round Table in the series' initial volume. When he takes his leave in voluntary exile, Arthur must repopulate the table with his vassals, creating a second generation of valorous knights and lords to rival the glory of those who came before.⁶² In Rio's trilogy, Arthur and the Round Table are often conflated. Arthur becomes the human mechanism through which the principles of justice, progress, and ethical integrity are implemented throughout Logres. Upon their initial meeting, the adolescent Mordred explicitly equates his father with the Table, to which Arthur replies, "Je ne suis pas la Table, Mordred. Je ne suis pas une idée. Tout au plus son mauvais serviteur, mais d'abord une chair..."⁶³ In spite of this protestation, the text returns often to the premise that Arthur is the incarnation of an idea of governance conceived by Merlin and symbolized by the table. Even Arthur admits, while ruminating on the destructive potential of his half-sister Morgane, that the demise of the table would entail the death of his soul.⁶⁴

In Roubaud's *Le Roi Arthur*, the Round Table is ordered by Merlin, kept by Léodegan, then gifted to Arthur; it is described as the third table in the familiar lineage (after the Last Supper table and Joseph of Arimathea's Grail table). However, its creation is thoroughly demystified. Its name, according to the narrator, comes from the fact that "la Table Ronde fut d'ailleurs la première table à être ronde, car auparavant les tables étaient toutes carrées ou rectangulaires."⁶⁵ This explanation casts aside the nobility and idealism that modern readers associate with the establishment of this "egalitarian" table,

⁶² Rio, *Arthur*, p. 66.

⁶³ Rio, *Arthur*, p. 11.

⁶⁴ Rio, *Arthur*, p. 100.

⁶⁵ Roubaud, *Le Roi Arthur*, p. 57.

along with the knightly rivalry that prompted it. Indeed, the dry humor of the narrator undercuts any readerly expectations of fine ideals, making the table an altogether banal object whose only noteworthy characteristic is its unconventional form.

The table also appears in Barjavel's *L'Enchanteur*, with a form and investment more closely aligned with its medieval antecedents. Merlin conjures it before the eyes of the assembled knights: "Au milieu de la salle naquit un anneau de lumière qui se mit à tourner en grandissant, s'immobilisa, et devint une table de marbre rouge foncé en forme de couronne, posée sur cent cinquante courtes colonnes et entourée de cent cinquante sièges dont cent quarante-neuf étaient de bois de chêne, et le cent cinquantième d'un bois inconnu de couleur jaune."⁶⁶ Merlin explains the table's links to the Last Supper Table, designates the egalitarian nature of the furniture, and notes that the forthcoming knight who may sit at the Siège Périlleux "sera le meilleur chevalier du monde. Par lui sera découvert le Graal et mis fin aux temps aventureux."⁶⁷ Barjavel's iteration of the Table is thus linked to the marvelous legacy of the Grail and to the larger fate of Logres. This multi-tiered signification most closely echoes the depiction of the table established by Robert de Boron and in the *Queste del Saint Graal*.

In addition to its symbolic identification with the Arthurian realm and its link to the Biblical tradition, the Round Table has come to stand metonymically for those knights and vassals variously aligned with Arthur during his reign. Chief among this cast in the medieval French canon are Gauvain, Lancelot, Perceval, Galaad, Bohort, Ké,

⁶⁶ Barjavel, *L'Enchanteur*, p. 122.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Yvain, and Mordred. Some of these knights are present as early as Geoffrey, with analogues in the Welsh tradition; others were inventions of Chrétien; still others were developed later in Robert de Boron or as late as Malory.⁶⁸ Some are relatively stable in their textual representation, which is to say that they are depicted with similar character traits in different texts, even across linguistic boundaries and from century to century. Lancelot and Ké are representative of this stability of narrative persona. Other knights, such as Perceval and Gauvain, are subject to far more variation, particularly in different linguistic traditions.

In medieval Arthuriana, knights were frequently introduced or substantially developed in dedicated romances: Chrétien's *Érec*, *Lancelot*, *Yvain*, and *Perceval*; multiple accounts of *Tristan et Iseut*; the alliterative *Sir Gawain*; the *Didot-Perceval*. The "stand-alone" format seems to have been most popular in the late twelfth century; by the early to mid-thirteenth century, a number of foundational stories had been established, allowing the stories of individual knights to coalesce in longer works such as the Vulgate Cycle. As interlacing became a more prevalent textual strategy, an ever-larger cohort of knights came to share space in the same text. This latter paradigm has almost uniformly been adopted in modern French Arthuriana, where knights feature as a supporting cast in larger stories, sometimes figuring in dedicated subplots or sections of the texts, without dominating an entire novel. This holds true in the works of Michel Rio, René Barjavel, Michel Zink, and the non-collaborative texts of Jacques Roubaud. There are a few key exceptions in the modern French corpus. The *Grands Mythes Fondateurs de l'Occident*

⁶⁸ See, for instance, the tale of Sir Gareth, which may be the only portion of Malory's *Morte* not based upon French source material.

series from the early 1980s aimed specifically to reinterpret famous legends for a modern audience. This series published works including Michel Cazenave's 1985 *Tristan et Iseut*, as well as Monique Baile and Claude Duneton's *Le chevalier à la charrette (d'après Chrétien de Troyes)*, published the same year. Jacques Roubaud and Florence Delay likewise make a nod to the dedicated romance, with branches of their *Graal théâtre* carrying titles such as *Perceval le Gallois*, *Gauvain et le Chevalier Vert*, *Lancelot du Lac*, and *Galaad ou la Quête*. These branches do largely treat the eponymous knights but are substantially more interwoven with other narrative strands than the corresponding medieval romances.

Lancelot's first appearance comes in Chrétien de Troyes' *Chevalier de la Charrette*, although he has an antecedent in the knight Bedivere as far back as Geoffrey. In Chrétien's romance, he comes to the rescue of the kidnapped Guenièvre, in the process freeing Logres's hostages from the enchanted kingdom of Gorre. It is in this Otherworldly space, where Arthur's authority does not hold sway, that Lancelot and Guenièvre consummate their love. This adulterous and treasonous relationship echoes the story of Tristan and Iseut in several key particulars, including the discovery of the lovers and the eventual trial by test. Two iconic moments figure in this initial Lancelot story. In the first, Lancelot must overcome his pride and step into a cart reserved for felons, the only available means of transportation; he hesitates briefly but his heart, which belongs to the kidnapped queen, triumphs over his vanity. In the second moment, Lancelot must cross the treacherous Pont de l'Épée, so named because the bridge takes the form of a

naked blade suspended across an expanse: this is the path the knight must take to reach Guenièvre in Gorre.

Regarding Lancelot's origins, Chrétien says only that he was raised by a fairy. In the Vulgate Cycle, the story is considerably more developed. Lancelot is raised by the Dame du Lac, alongside his cousins Bohort and Lionel, following the death of his father at the hands of Claudas. His true, baptismal name is Galaad, which helps establish the Grail genealogy that begins with Joseph of Arimathea's son (also named Galaad) and ends with Lancelot's son, the Grail knight, who likewise bears that name. It is also in the Vulgate Cycle that Lancelot befriends the giant Galehaut, who becomes his companion and intermediary during an early encounter with Guenièvre. As in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, he must rescue the kidnapped queen from Méléagant. Subsequently, tricked by sorcery into believing he is in the company of Guenièvre, he impregnates the daughter of King Pelles, thereby fathering Galaad. He also figures extensively in the Grail Quest. In the *Queste*, the paternal-filial relationship features prominently, as Lancelot is portrayed as the human, erring father of the ideal knight. Lancelot is unable to complete the Grail Quest, thwarted by his passion for the queen, which he is ultimately unable to renounce. The adulterous relationship and its consequences become the focal point of the final installment of the Vulgate Cycle, the *Mort Artu*. In it, Guenièvre is accused of poisoning a knight at court, and Lancelot, coming to the queen's defense, inadvertently slays Gaheriet, brother to Gauvain and nephew to Arthur. This leads to a rift between king and vassal, and ultimately to war between their opposing camps. Malory's version of Lancelot's love with Guenever is largely based on an amalgam of French sources, most

particularly the Vulgate Cycle. In the account of the queen's kidnapping, he omits the passage, critical in Chrétien, in which Lancelot hesitates briefly before stepping into the cart to further his pursuit of the missing queen. In Malory's version, Launcelot ultimately survives Arthur, only to be rebuffed by a penitent Guenever; when she subsequently dies, Malory writes, Launcelot mourns continually: "Ever was he lying groveling on the tombe of Kyng Arthur and Quene Guenever, and there was no comforte that the Bysshop, nor Syr Bors, nor none of his felowes coude make hym—it avaylled not."⁶⁹

Lancelot is ubiquitous in modern French Arthuriana, and two key points of contiguity with his medieval portrayals run through many of the recent adaptations. First, his adulterous love for Guenièvre is a fulcrum on which the fate of Logres balances. This is the case in the works of Rio, Le Dantec, Roubaud and Delay, and Barjavel, making it one of the most commonly represented plot threads in the modern French corpus. The knight must come to the queen's rescue after her kidnapping in three texts (*Graal théâtre*, *Graal-Romance*, and *L'Enchanteur*); this is described as a turning point in their romantic attachment. The second common thread is Lancelot's devoted friendship with the giant Galehaut, which features in all three abovementioned works.⁷⁰ For all that Lancelot is a frequently recurring character in modern Arthuriana, he is relatively stable in his character traits and behavior. Two exceptional portraits merit a brief mention.

First, Lancelot is the focal point of Jean-Pierre Le Dantec's *Graal-Romance*, which was written, according to its narrator Gautier, as a monument to the best of all

⁶⁹ Malory, Thomas, *Le morte Darthur*, Ed. Stephen H.A. Shepherd. New York: Norton, 2004, p. 695.

⁷⁰ In Chapter 4, I discuss the transgressive treatment of same-sex desire in this dynamic, which multiple modern authors develop.

knights. In this unconventional retelling of Lancelot's story, intended by its intradiegetic scribe as a corrective to earlier versions, we find Lancelot to be a polyglot philosopher who delights in abstraction and plays the slightly condescending Holmes to Gautier's Watson in the early chapters of the novel. A proponent of moral and theological relativism and Nietzschean philosophy, he asserts that truth and knowledge do not function as immutable laws, but rather are always susceptible to revision:

“[Merlin] avait coutume de m'expliquer, tandis qu'il m'enseignait, que le Dieu de la Bible était l'aboutissement d'une longue lignée d'approximations dans la pensée des hommes. Une manière d'éclaircissement, ultime peut-être, mais plus vraisemblablement provisoire, qui avait été révélé aux Hébreux afin qu'ils s'en fassent les gardiens et le transmettent aux peuples gentils ... Mais il y a fort à parier [...] que rien n'est achevé. Les vérités ne se détruisent pas, elles s'emboîtent les unes dans les autres...”⁷¹

This Lancelot is capable of sophisticated abstraction that is typically the purview of the enchanter and others of his magical ilk. In this telling, Lancelot and Guenièvre are granted a joyful reunion ten years after Arthur's death; the now-elderly couple, still resplendent, will remain together in Viviane's Otherworldly domain inside Brocéliande Forest.

Lancelot is also a prominent figure in Rio's trilogy. As in other accounts, he is the catalyst for the ultimate unhinging of Arthur's kingdom and the downfall of the Round Table. Lancelot is less noble in this trilogy than in other modern portrayals, moved to treasonous love with Guenièvre in spite of his better judgment. This Lancelot can see quite clearly the inevitable consequences of his behavior, for both himself and the kingdom he is sworn to protect. However, like all of Rio's characters, he is endowed with

⁷¹ Le Dantec, Jean-Pierre. *Graal Romance*, p. 29.

complete introspection, as demonstrated when he contemplates the morally untenable nature of his adulterous and treasonous affair: “Lancelot pleura, car il savait que, tout en voulant donner sa vie pour le roi, jamais il ne renoncerait à sa passion pour Guenièvre et au plaisir sublime et abject qu’elle lui apporterait, qu’il était pris dans les rets d’une obsession dont il ne pourrait plus se délivrer.”⁷² In this respect, Lancelot tends to transcend pathos, becoming a tragic figure in the grips of emotions he cannot conquer, in spite of his loyalty and good intentions. Rio’s psychological portrayal may come closest among modern texts to reproducing the knight’s repentant and then resigned postures of the exemplary knight in the Vulgate *Queste* and *Mort Artu*.

Yvain (Owein) derives from the Welsh tradition but was also greatly developed by Chrétien. In *Le Chevalier au lion*, Yvain encounters and defeats a knight guarding the fountain of Barenton before successfully wooing the knight’s widow, Laudine. Called back to court by Gauvain, he promises to return to her within an allotted year, but the year expires, causing Yvain to lose his wife’s regard. Thereafter, he wanders Britain seeking adventures as atonement and to gain renown sufficient to win back her lost love; in the course of these adventures, he meets a lion that becomes his companion, earning him the moniker of the romance’s title. Only with the aid of Laudine’s attendant, Lunete, who acts as a sort of retroactive *entremetteuse*, does Yvain eventually receive his pardon. *Le Chevalier au lion* is the seminal romance devoted to Yvain, and it remains by far the most influential account of the knight for modern interpretations. Yvain also receives favorable treatment in the subsequent French romance tradition. In the Vulgate *Mort le*

⁷² Rio, *Arthur*, p. 95.

roi Artu, he is slain in battle by Mordret while coming to Arthur's aid; the king witnesses his fall and cries out, "Ha! Diez, quel dolour ci a quant tels prodom est mis a terre si vilment!"⁷³ This is the final narrated death among the principal knights, aside from Arthur and Mordret themselves, indicating by its position his place of particular importance and worth.

Yvain is not typically a colorful character in modern French Arthuriana, unlike Perceval, Ké, or Gauvain. However, he reliably receives favorable treatment in these novels. In Rio's *Arthur*, he is among the few knights who can claim strong rapport with all of the other members of the Round Table, even Ké and Mordred. He features prominently in Zink's *Déodat* as a defeated knight, unable to regain the regard of his wife Laudine. He is also among the least haughty and self-absorbed of the knights in a novel that otherwise lays bare the numerous defects of the questing knights, proving willing to spare attention to those beneath his status. *Déodat* is the only work of modern French Arthuriana that accords greater emphasis to Yvain than to any other Knight of the Round Table. This is due at least in part, I believe, to the canonical doubling of the name "Yvain." The existence of both an Yvain and an illegitimate half-brother, Yvain l'Avoûtre (who appears in the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Cycles, as well as the *Suite du Merlin*), allows for the exploration of intradiegetic doppelgangers and doubled existence as a leitmotif throughout *Déodat*. Through this fraternal doubling, Yvain encapsulates the exemplary and the imitation, the noble and the vile, the celebrated and the obscure.

⁷³ *Le Livre du Graal (Le Lancelot en Prose)*, Tomes I-III. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2001, p. 1461.

Ké (also Keu, Kay, Qex, or Cai) appears in Chrétien's romances as a typical foil to the hero of each tale. Qex appears in the prose version of Robert de Boron's *Merlin* as the son of Antor, who was charged by Merlin with raising Arthur outside of Uther's court. As Arthur's foster-brother, he plays a secondary role in the episode of the sword and the stone that marks Arthur as heir to the crown. Upon confirmation of his ascendancy, Arthur duly names Qex his seneschal. Brash and scornful, he does not lack for courage or loyalty to Arthur, but typically falls short of the mark of valor, as he can be outsmarted or overpowered. In *Le Chevalier de la charrette*, he champions Guenièvre, to the king's dismay. Arthur's fears are realized when Keu is summarily defeated by the outsider who delivered the challenge, which enables the kidnapping of the queen around which the romance revolves. In *Le Chevalier au lion* and *Le Conte du Graal*, he heaps scorn on newcomer knights, who go on to surpass his expectations. In this way, he establishes a chivalric or courtly bar that romance audiences can expect to be exceeded. Malory recycles these tendencies toward disdain in Sir Kay, especially in the tale of Sir Gareth.⁷⁴

Ké in the modern corpus is still typically a boor, but often seems endowed with wit more typically associated with other knights. This is particularly the case in Roubaud and Delay's *Graal théâtre*, which presents Ké as a sardonic seneschal with a ready quip, especially when provoked. This holds true even during ostensibly grave circumstances, such as the funeral rites for Gauvain, during which he observes, "Il y a tant de pleurs ici

⁷⁴ "Sir Launcelot bade Sir Kay leve his mockyng—'for I dare ley my hede he [Sir Gareth] shall preve a man of grete worship.'" "Lette be," seyde Sir Kay, "hit may not be by reson, for as he is, so he hath asked." Malory, Thomas, *Le morte Darthur*, Ed. Stephen H.A. Shepherd. New York: Norton, 2004, p. 179.

qu'on n'entendrait pas le tonnerre."⁷⁵ Ké, perhaps due to his privileged position as Arthur's foster-brother, dares to say what others will not, thus offering both comic relief and moments of biting clarity to the plays that comprise the cycle. In this respect, he takes on the role typically associated with the court fool, speaking truth to power in asides and quips, although his remarks are generally ignored.

Gauvain (also Gawain, Gwalchmei, Walewein) appears in Geoffrey and Wace as Arthur's nephew, the son of Lot of Orkney. As maternal nephew to the childless king, his status as potential heir to the throne means that his conduct must be beyond reproach to allay any threat of treason. Gauvain does not have a canonical romance of his own in the French tradition but frequently plays a supporting role in the quests of his fellow knights. In Chrétien's later works, he provides a foil to the romance's true hero, falling short of the mark but never seduced into wicked conduct. In *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, he is memorable as the hapless knight who nearly drowns while attempting to cross le Pont sous l'Eau. This semi-comical treatment is by no means representative of Gauvain's role in medieval Arthuriana, however. Gauvain is among the most variable of Arthur's knights, at times an earnest hero and at others capable of true villainy. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain is depicted as the epitome of all chivalric attributes at the outset of the romance. Although his adventure with Bertilak at the Green Chapel teaches him a lesson in humility, his portrayal is overwhelmingly positive throughout this text. He likewise receives favorable treatment in the German *Parzival*. In the Vulgate *Queste*, however, he becomes mired in his own sinful ways. A lover of women and hero on the

⁷⁵ Roubaud and Delay, *La tragédie du roi Arthur*, in *Graal théâtre*, p. 585.

battlefield, he demonstrates no desire to repent his sins to make himself worthy of the Grail. The *Mort Artu* section of the Vulgate favorably portrays his desire for discretion as the scandal of Lancelot's treasonous relationship with Guenièvre threatens to break; when Lancelot kills his brothers during the ensuing revolt, however, he is moved to seek retribution against his friend, which leads to his death.

On the modern end of the spectrum, Gauvain features prominently in Rio's *Arthur* as a wise-cracking check on Arthur's high-mindedness. Early in the novel, it is the sound of Gauvain's laughter that draws Arthur into a brothel, where he seeks out companionship from the knight. Whereas the king is given to philosophical ruminations about political science and subsuming the individual in the service of State and Ideal, Gauvain is far more grounded, even as he plays the fool; he confesses to Guenièvre that this attitude is a means of self-preservation, explaining that "la sagesse, pour être sage, doit se teinter d'un peu de folie, sous peine d'être folle."⁷⁶ He remains nonetheless a steadfast ally of Arthur through the culminating battle of Camlann. In the *Gauvain et le Chevalier Vert* branch of Roubaud and Delay's *Graal théâtre*, he is sometimes called Sir Gawain, a nod to the alliterative Middle English tale. Roubaud and Delay's version adheres to the essentials of the famous beheading game and subsequent journey to Bercilak's domain, where the knight makes a pact with his host to share the spoils of his day's adventures. This version accentuates the homoerotic potential of the premise, noting in the *didascalie* that "Lord Bercilak est habillé mais Gauvain esquisse sur ses vêtements le même parcours amoureux que sur le corps nu de sa femme"—which is to

⁷⁶ Rio, *Arthur*, p. 112.

say, on the chest, belly, and legs.⁷⁷ The play ends with Gauvain sent as an ersatz hero to the Grail Castle, where he is unable to mend the Fisher King's broken sword (a task typically assigned to Perceval in the medieval tradition). This failure marks Gauvain as an unworthy knight, and he proceeds to fall asleep in the midst of the Fisher King's explanation of the significance of the bleeding lance and other Grail wonders. Roubaud's *Le Chevalier Silence* is another text that deploys the figure of Gauvain, albeit with some major modifications. Protagonist Walllwein (whose name does contain three 'l's) refers back to the Middle Dutch *Roman van Walewein*, the name being the Flemish iteration of Gauvain.⁷⁸ In *Le Chevalier Silence*, Walllwein is revealed to be Gauvain's illegitimate son, abandoned to the river by his noble mother and then recognized by his father upon journeying to Kamaalot. The medieval tradition does occasionally credit Gauvain with a son, though typically one conceived in wedlock. Walllwein's encounter with a *guivre* during his adventures loosely parallels the account of Gauvain's son Guinglain liberating a young lady trapped in the body of a dragon in Renaut de Bâgé's *Le Bel Inconnu* (ca. 1175).⁷⁹

Perceval le Gallois appeared in Chrétien de Troyes' unfinished *Conte du Graal* as the Grail Hero.⁸⁰ As his name indicates, he is of Welsh heritage, a fact that both medieval and modern texts exploit to humorous effect by casting him, at least initially, as a bumpkin and an ignoramus. Upon his first encounter with knights of renown in the *Conte*

⁷⁷ Roubaud & Delay, *Graal théâtre*, p. 205.

⁷⁸ *Dutch Romances III: Five Interpolated Romances from the Lancelot Compilation*. Ed. David F. Johnson and Geert H.M. Claassens. Arthurian Archives XII. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003, p. 5.

⁷⁹ Lacy, Norris J. and Geoffrey Ashe. *The Arthurian Handbook*. New York: Garland, 1997, p. 93.

⁸⁰ The figure was also developed in the thirteenth-century Welsh romance *Peredur*. For more detail on Perceval's role as Grail Knight, see the Holy Grail section of this chapter below.

du Graal, he confuses them with demons, then angels, then God—all in the span of only a few lines. He is also a quintessential mama's boy, invoking his mother's teachings no fewer than three times during this same passage and noting with satisfaction that her lessons have held true with regard to knights: "Ne me dist pas ma mere fable" (l. 136).⁸¹ Chrétien's text lays the groundwork for the knight's genealogical integration into the Grail lineage through his mother's brother, the Fisher King, a detail that undergoes significant development among medieval French texts. In Robert de Boron's *Perceval*, le Riche Pecheur, Bron, becomes Perceval's paternal grandfather, who is in turn related to Joseph of Arimathea and responsible for bringing the Grail to Britain; Robert's *Perceval* and the related prose *Didot-Perceval* are the two primary texts that link Perceval to a Grail lineage through the paternal line. The *Perlesvaus* develops the genealogy further, once again linking Perceval to Joseph of Arimathea through his mother Yglais, and to the disciple Nicodemus through his father, Alain le Gros, the youngest of twelve sons. Perceval is the designated Grail Hero of the abovementioned texts, including the various continuations of Robert's *Perceval*, as well as the German *Parzifal*.⁸² He is displaced from this role by Galaad in the Vulgate Cycle.

Modern French Arthuriana features Perceval fairly consistently. He is a prominent character in Roubaud and Delay's *Graal théâtre* (particularly in the branch *Perceval le Gallois*), in Zink's *Déodat*, in Barjavel's *L'Enchanteur*, and in Gudule's *Le Crépuscule des dieux*. His childlike naiveté is the most prominent trait developed in the modern

⁸¹ "My mother did not lie to me," *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William W. Kibler, New York: Penguin Books, 2004, p. 382.

⁸² For further discussion of Perceval's role in the Grail quest, see below.

works, showing discernible filiation from Chrétien and Robert's accounts. He is commonly associated with bouts of madness in the modern French material; when gripped by grief, he shows potential for great savagery. In Barjavel's *L'Enchanteur*, Perceval is associated with an unusual adventure: he meets a peasant girl named Bénie (likely linked to Blancheflor, Perceval's bride in Chrétien's *Perceval*). The two are equals in innocence and become childlike, platonic lovers. When Perceval returns after a prolonged absence, he discovers that Bénie sickened and died while awaiting his return. He thereupon rushes home to the Vallée de la Forêt Gastée, only to learn that his mother, too, died just as he left home to become a knight. Lost in his guilt and despair, "il est devenu fou. Il ne reconnaît plus personne, il attaque tous ceux qu'il rencontre, armés ou non armés, et il tue. Il injure le nom de Dieu et clame qu'il veut détruire toute chevalerie."⁸³ This madness is framed as a loss of identity that threatens to become permanent. Likewise, in Zink's *Déodat*, Perceval is driven to bloody vengeance after his mother is attacked during his absence on the Quest. Young Déodat witnesses the aftermath of Perceval's mayhem: "Devant la porte, des corps étaient entassés, les corps de chevaliers, de sergents et même d'enfants. Tous avaient été égorgés. Au centre de la grange, un grand cuveau était rempli de leur sang et recevait encore celui des dernières victimes qu'on y trainait, silencieuses ou hurlantes. Un homme était pendu par les pieds à une poutre de la charpente. Sa tête congestionnée pendait juste au dessus du baquet."⁸⁴ Both of these accounts—Barjavel's and Zink's—are derived at least in part from the sequence of the *Perlesvaus* in which the eponymous knight takes revenge upon the

⁸³ Barjavel, *L'Enchanteur*, p. 235.

⁸⁴ Zink, Michel. *Déodat, ou la transparence*, p. 102.

Seigneur des Mores for the attack upon his mother; the Déodat passage in particular reproduces the carnage inflicted by Perceval in the *Perlesvaus*:

Il fait aprestre une grant cuve en mi la cort et amener les .xi. chevaliers; il lor fait les chiés couper en la cuve et tant sainier con il peurent rendre de sanc et les cors oster ariere et les chiés, si que il ne n'ot que le sanc tot pur en la cuve; après fait disarmer le Segnor des Mores et amener devant la cuve ou il avoit grant fusion de sanc. Il li fait les mains lier et les piez molt estroit [...] Il le fait pendre en la cuve par les piés, si que la teste fu el sanc dusque as espaulles, puis le fait tant tenir que il fu noez et estainz.⁸⁵

In other representations, Perceval much more closely and consistently resembles the untutored *naïf* attested in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*. In Roubaud and Delay's *Perceval le Gallois*, Perceval's extreme ignorance of knights and typical weaponry lead Ké to observe with disdain, "Les Gallois sont tous fous de naissance. Celui-ci n'a pas plus d'esprit qu'une asperge."⁸⁶ Indeed, this account hardly exaggerates the already ridiculous figure as he appears in Chrétien, a literalist unable to calibrate advice he receives to a given situation.

Galaad overtook Perceval as the Grail knight from the thirteenth century onward. In both the Vulgate Cycle and in Malory, Galaad appears as the son of Lancelot and Elaine of Corbenic; in the Vulgate, he is conceived in the *Lancelot Propre* section, when Lancelot is tricked into believing he is with coupling Guenièvre. On Galaad's mother's

⁸⁵ "He bade that a great vat be made ready and brought into the middle of the court; then he called for the eleven knights to be led forward, and had them beheaded in the vat and left to bleed as much blood as they could. Then he had their heads and bodies thrown out so that only the pure blood remained in the vat. Then he called for the Lord of the Fens to be disarmed and led before the vat with its great fill of blood. He had him bound tightly, hand and foot [...] He bade him be hung in the vat by his feet so that his head was plunged in the blood up to the shoulders; he had him held there until he drowned to death." *The High Book of the Grail*, trans. Nigel Bryant, Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 1996, pp. 151–52.

⁸⁶ *Graal théâtre*, p. 219.

side, he is part of a Grail lineage extending back to the family of Joseph of Arimathea. Galaad himself appears in the *Queste* as the knight who can successfully achieve the Grail Quest and thereby put an end to the undesirable *merveilles* marking Logres. Galaad is chaste, both in body and in spirit, which sets him apart from his fellow knights and thus makes him eligible to enter into full communion with the Grail's mysteries. Upon reaching the Grail Castle at Corbenic and attending the Grail Mass, he experiences an ecstatic vision of the Grail and his soul ascends to heaven along with the holy vessel. Malory reproduces this portrait and outcome with very little modification.

In contrast to this near-veneration within the medieval canon, Galaad receives extremely negative treatment in at least two modern French works: Zink's *Déodat* and Roubaud and Delay's *Graal théâtre*. In the former, he is depicted as supercilious and sanctimonious, pontificating to the novel's young protagonist about the mysteries of the Grail in response to the boy's purely practical questions. While *Déodat* initially hopes that their shared illegitimacy might prove a point of commonality between them, he soon realizes that Galaad's bloodlines are holy, such that the knight can see the glory of the heavens better than the world in front of him.⁸⁷ In the latter text, Galaad is portrayed as a literal robot, a form that emblemizes his lack of emotional attachment and human appetites. Elsewhere in *Graal théâtre*, he is shown as a young boy being brought to Camelot for training, and Blaise narrates Galaad's silence: "L'enfant Galaad quant à lui ne sent rien. Il pense que les mots sont inutiles et futile qui ne servent pas la cause de

⁸⁷ *Déodat*, p. 92.

Dieu.”⁸⁸ This portrait of Galaad reflects the utilitarian spirituality of the medieval figure, magnifying it to humorous effect. Moreover, it mocks the extent to which the figure may be evacuated of personal motivation or psychology, becoming an automaton in the service of an ideal. Both texts take as their point of departure the medieval Galaad’s lack of worldly attachment, asserting that this character trait is more of a liability than an asset for those around him.

Mordred (also Modred or Mordret) comes into the Arthurian world through varying genealogies.⁸⁹ He is most typically Arthur’s illegitimate son, conceived before the king’s marriage to Guenièvre; his mother is generally presented as Arthur’s full or maternal half-sister. As noted earlier, Mordred is a source of ominous anxiety in medieval Arthurian production. His conception is the opening event of the *Suite du Merlin*, and Merlin’s prophesy that Arthur’s son will bring ruination upon Logres guides much of the romance. On instruction from Merlin, who warns of the advent of “he that sholde destroy hym [Arthur] and all the londe,” the king attempts to rid himself of the baby who will cause his undoing, and so has all May Day-born babies “putte in a shyppe to the se.”⁹⁰ This uncharacteristically barbaric act on Arthur’s part is futile, however, as the ship crashes into a castle and all lives are lost, “save that Mordred was cast up; and a good man founde hym and fostird him tyll he was fortene yere of age.”⁹¹ Grown to manhood, he arrives at Arthur’s court and is recuperated into the fold of the Knights of

⁸⁸ Roubaud & Delay, *Fin des Temps Aventureux*, in *Graal théâtre*, p. 491.

⁸⁹ A survey of Mordred’s parentage can be found in the outset of my third chapter, devoted to Arthurian family structures.

⁹⁰ Malory, Thomas, *Le morte Darthur*. Stephen H.A. Shepherd. New York: Norton, 2004, p. 39.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

the Round Table. It is in the context of Lancelot's treason and the ensuing internecine strife that Mordred claims the throne for himself, invoking an appeal to the good of the realm. In both the *Mort Artu* and Malory, it is Mordred who ultimately delivers the blow that kills Arthur in battle.

Mordred does not figure widely in modern French Arthuriana, but his role is relatively stable: illegitimate son of Arthur, he is the agent of destruction of the Arthurian world. This may occur as much because of the knight's virtues as his vices. In Rio's trilogy, Mordred is a zealot. His idealistic worship of the Round Table paradoxically ensures its downfall, as he finds himself utterly inflexible in his need to uphold the ideals it represents, even when doing so will surely lead to war that will divide its members irrevocably. This rigid adherence to principle is the result of indoctrination by Morgane during his early years; unlike in the *Mort Artu* and Malory, Mordred is raised by his biological mother in exile from Logres. Rio's Mordred is conceived and reared expressly as an instrument of destruction to be wielded against Arthur and his kingdom. In the decades he spends serving his father, he is unable to temper this vision with the compromise necessary to hold a kingdom together. By contrast, Mordret is a petulant, sulking adolescent in *Graal théâtre*. The *Morgane contre Guenièvre* branch opens with Mordret bemoaning his overwhelming boredom on Avalon. After his departure, the voice of Merlin derides him as a "voyou."⁹² Roubaud and Delay's Mordret matures into a calculating villain who covets Guenièvre sexually and, mistakenly believing Arthur dead, seizes her along with the crown. Whether Mordred is portrayed as a selfish scoundrel or

⁹² Roubaud & Delay, *Morgane contre Guenièvre*, in *Graal théâtre*, p. 390.

as a righteous crusader, modern French Arthuriana preserves his role as patricide and regicide. In Barjavel, Mordet plunges his sword Marmiadoise into the king's chest just before Arthur takes off his head with Escalibur.⁹³ In *Graal théâtre*, Blaise narrates the battle of Salesbières in alexandrin:

Plus prompt que l'éclair Escalibour flamboie
 Jusqu'au coeur de Mordret se fraye sa droite voie.
 D'un seul coup de l'épée Arthur perce son fils.
 Le coup est si violent qu'il crève la poitrine
 En traversant. [...]
 Mordret se sait tué, il reconnaît sa mort,
 Il soulève son bras dans un dernier effort
 Il frappe, le roi tombe, il chute sur Mordret.
 L'un mort, l'autre mourant, ils gisent emmêlés.⁹⁴

Mordred and Arthur's death in tandem is used to effect narrative closure in Rio's *Merlin* trilogy as well. He may be operating at the periphery of the text for much of the story, but he unfailingly arrives on cue to put an end to both Arthur and the *conte* itself.

The Grail Quest

The highest and greatest *aventure* undertaken by Arthur's knights was, of course, the quest for the Grail. The Grail motif initially appeared as an ill-defined but sacred object in Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval*, also known as *Le Conte du Graal*, composed in

⁹³ *L'Enchanteur*, p. 457.

⁹⁴ *Graal théâtre*, pp. 597-98. According to Delay, this is the only section of *Graal théâtre* that was composed on paper rather than orally, and which Roubaud drafted alone. See Delay, Florence, "Composition de Graal théâtre," in Jacques Roubaud, "compositeur de mathématique et de poésie," Ed. Agnès Disson and Véronique Montémont. Paris: CNRS-Éditions, 2007, p. 208.

verse sometime between 1180 and 1190. Chrétien claims to be working from source material handed to him by his patron, Philippe de Flandre:

Dont aura bien sauve sa poine
 Crestiens qui entant et poine
 Par lo commandement lo comte
 A arimer lo meillor conte
 Qui soit contez en cort reial.
 Ce est li contes do greal
 Don li cuens li bailla lo livre. [ll. 59-66]⁹⁵

In the text, the young Perceval arrives at the Grail Castle, home of the Fisher King, and witnesses a procession involving a bleeding lance, a candelabra, and

Un graal entre ses dues mains
 Une damoisele tenoit,
 Qui avec les vallés venoit,
 Bele et gente et bien acesmee ...
 Li graaus, qui aloit devant,
 De fin or esmeré estoit ;
 Prescieuses pierres avoit
 El graal de maintes manieres,
 Des plus riches et des plus chieres
 Qui en mer ne en terre soient;

Totes autres pierres passoient
 Celes del graal sanz dotance. [ll. 3220-3239]⁹⁶

⁹⁵“Therefore Chrétien’s efforts will not be in vain, since he aims and strives by command of the count to put into rhyme the greatest story that has ever been told in royal court: it is the Story of the Grail, the book of which was given to him by the count,” *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William Kibler, New York: Penguin Books, 2004, pp. 381-82.

⁹⁶ “After her came another maiden, carrying a silver carving platter. The grail, which was introduced first, was of fine pure gold. Set in the grail were precious stones of many kinds, the best and costliest to be found in earth or sea: the grail’s stones were finer than any others in the world, without any doubt” (Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William W. Kibler, New York: Penguin Books, 2004, pp. 420-21).

The grail (note that the object appears as a common noun and has not yet accrued holy or sacred designation) is a shallow platter or dish holding a single communion wafer. In this earliest iteration, Perceval, who has been trained to circumspection, does not ask the meaning of what he has witnessed, thereby failing the tacit test and proving himself unworthy. The unfinished work, which breaks off in the middle of Gauvain's adventures, does not recount Perceval's ultimate redemption with a second grail encounter, although that is the seeming narrative trajectory of the *Conte du Graal*. Chrétien's work was the inspiration for no fewer than four continuations, which collectively more than quadruple the initial length of Chrétien's *conte*. In the *First Continuation*, also sometimes called the *Pseudo-Wauchier* after its putative composer, Gauvain returns to the Grail Castle, duly asks the necessary question, but is put off by the Fisher King and required to perform a number of tasks, including mending a broken sword. The *Second Continuation*, conceivably composed by Wauchier de Dinian, picks up the Perceval thread, allowing him to return to the Grail Castle, where the sword remains imperfectly mended. Gerbert de Montreuil's *Continuation*, composed around 1230, includes an elaboration on the link between the grail and the land, as Perceval learns that by asking the critical questions about the grail and lance, he has effected the healing of the "terre gaste" or Wasteland. The final continuation, likely composed at the same time as Gerbert's, is Manessier's *Continuation*, in which the quest is finally brought to an end. It reveals the theological "backstory" of the lance of the initial sequence, as Perceval learns it is the lance that was used by Longinus to pierce the side of Christ. It also explains the grail as the vessel used by Joseph of Arimathea to catch Christ's blood and that it was subsequently transported

to England. At the conclusion of this final continuation, Perceval comes to rule the Fisher King's lands for a term of seven years before retiring to a hermitage. Upon Perceval's death, he ascends to heaven, accompanied by both the grail and the lance.⁹⁷

The later continuations bear the mark of another strain of the Grail story. Simultaneous to the composition of the early Perceval continuations, the legend was undergoing radical Christianization at the hands of Robert de Boron and the composers of the Vulgate Cycle. Robert was the first to provide the Grail with an overtly Christianized provenance, through both his *Joseph d'Arimathie* and his *Perceval*. The two stories are preserved in prose form in the Didot and Modena manuscripts. Robert transformed the already-sacred grail into the more familiar Holy Grail, the chalice used at the Last Supper. In the *Joseph* portion of the cycle, the eponymous protagonist is given the cup by Pontius Pilate, along with permission to bury Jesus. Joseph uses the vessel to catch the blood dripping from Jesus' wounds, whereupon it is sanctified and becomes the Holy Grail. This is also the source of the lance's link to Longinus. Other contributions include the recuperation of the Round Table into a lineage that includes the Last Supper table and the Grail Table instituted by Joseph; the introduction of the *Siège Périlleux*, which must remain empty until the ordained Grail knight arrives; and the textual link between the Grail story and Christian lapsarian theology. The *Perceval* portion of the cycle incorporates elements of both Chrétien and the *Second Continuation*, requiring Perceval to make two trips to the Grail Castle in order to properly ask the necessary questions. In Robert's telling, Perceval quests for seven years between his two encounters with the

⁹⁷ For an extended overview of the Perceval Continuations, see Lupack, Alan. *Oxford Guide to Arthurian Legend*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 218-221.

castle, and only upon his recognition of Christian piety (which he neglected during the quest) is he granted the second chance. The story does not end with Perceval's achieving the Grail Quest, however; it continues through the end of Arthur's reign and the downfall of his kingdom.

Numerous others took up the story of the Grail in the coming decades and centuries across linguistic borders. The Welsh romance *Peredur* and especially Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* had tremendous influence within the network of Grail texts. One notable difference between the latter text and most other portrayals of the Grail is that in Wolfram's text, the sacred object is not a chalice or platter, but rather a magic stone called "lapsit exillis," capable of supplying food and drink. However, two remaining French-language prose texts had the most substantial influence on modern French Arthuriana's treatment of the Grail and its mysteries. The first of these is the *Perlesvaus*, also sometimes called *Le Haut Livre du Graal*. The author of the *Perlesvaus* demonstrates knowledge of Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* and follows the Christianization of the Grail found in Robert de Boron. The second is the Vulgate *Queste del saint Graal*. This telling casts Galaad as the chalice's true champion. Unlike in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, the quest is brought to successful conclusion upon Galaad's admittance to the Grail Castle, alongside Perceval and Boorz (likewise worthy Grail knights, but neither the true Elect). The text also accords ample attention to the failures of the other hundred forty-seven knights who set forth on the quest, with special detail given to Gauvain and Lancelot. The former, once considered the pinnacle of knighthood, cannot succeed in his quest for the Grail, because he is trapped in a paradigm of earthly chivalry, defined by

slaying foes and seducing damsels. He is unprepared for a quest predicated upon a pure heart and the ability to read God's will in a given situation. Lancelot finds himself in a similar predicament, albeit with greater self-awareness. Although he strives toward worthiness and is granted a partial vision of the Grail, he is ultimately defeated by his own transgressive desire for the queen, which he is unable to set aside or sublimate. The *Queste* is notable for its structuring: it follows a pattern of interlaced adventures whereby the knights are called upon to decide between two paths or courses of action. Following the choice, a hermit or abbess appears to evaluate the knight's decision and to interpret events for him according to principles of Christian exegesis. As such, the *Queste* is typically read as Christian allegory; to be a worthy Grail knight in this text is to excel in reading the true meaning or *senefiance* of a situation in scriptural terms.

The Grail story is co-opted by most of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors who take up Arthurian motifs. With the exception of Michel Rio (who eschews the supernatural entirely in his Arthurian works), all such authors at least address the storyline in passing, and most accord it significant attention. When it appears, it unfailingly carries religious, mystical, or supernatural properties, although Christianity is not always implicated. Indeed, at points it can be explicitly aligned with heretical beliefs, as in Jean-Pierre Le Dantec's *Graal-Romance*, or appear as a Celtic-inflected talisman, as in Jean-Louis Fetjaine's *Trilogies des Elfes*.

Michel Zink's *Déodat, ou La Transparence* is an explicit rewriting of the Grail quest, appropriately subtitled "un conte du graal" and derived largely from the Perceval storylines, in particular the *Perlesvaus*. In it, Déodat, younger brother to the squire Cahus,

seeks an explanation to the latter's mysterious death. The premise is laid out in a scene of the *Perlesvaus*, in which Arthur's squire suffers a seemingly supernatural death from a wound incurred during a dream. Déodat, a character invented by Zink, wanders the Arthurian forest landscape, encountering familiar knights of the Round Table, including Yvain (in the aftermath of events portrayed in Chrétien's *Le Chevalier au lion*), Perceval (as a grief-crazed figure, corresponding to his depiction in the *Perlesvaus*), and a lofty, distant Galaad. Ultimately, the novel's alternative "grail"—knowledge of how Cahus met his end—leads Déodat on an epistemological and ontological quest concurrent with the one pursued by Arthur's knights. The Grail itself is significant primarily in function of its absence, as an impetus for chivalric feats and gestures. The *telos* of the novel veers away from the chalice such that *Déodat* achieves narrative closure without the eventual discovery of the conventional Grail.

Jacques Roubaud and Florence Delay accord extensive attention to the Grail in their *Graal théâtre*. The motif features prominently in three of the cycle's ten branches: *Joseph d'Arimathie*, inspired by Robert de Boron's version of the Grail's migration from the Holy Land to the realm of Logres; *Perceval le Gallois*, a close analogue to Chrétien's account in the *Conte du Graal* which portrays the untried young knight's failure to ask the critical questions that would heal the Roi Pecheur and cure the land of its blight; and *Galaad ou la Quête*, which closely follows material from the Vulgate *Queste*, beginning with the Pentecost marvels associated with Galaad's ascendancy as Grail Elect. The inclusion of both Perceval and Galaad's stories allows for the coexistence in one cycle of the two Grail knights. This is not the only Grail matter in which Roubaud and Delay's

text serves as a compendium. After the banquet vision of the Grail, the various knights compare notes and establish that each saw something different during the apparition. Ké saw a cauldron, while Gauvain saw a jewel-encrusted pentacle. Girflet attempts to resolve the discrepancy with recourse to an external authority, citing “un chevalier teuton qui se nommait Wolfram Wolfram von Eschen von Eschenbach [*sic*],” who had a vision more in line with Gauvain’s and who named it “lapis exilis[:] la pierre d’exil.”⁹⁸ Later, the Grail’s ambiguity as signifier is further exaggerated when Dinadan objects to participating in the impending quest, highlighting the absurdity of seeking an object that can be neither described nor named definitively by calling the Grail “[d]es pierres précieuses des bougies un vase une écuelle un je-ne-sais-quoi qui n’a pas de nom en aucune langue.”⁹⁹ Aside from its physical attributes, its provenance and meaning are likewise opaque to those who witnessed its appearance. Arthur asks plaintively, “S’agit-il d’une aventure?”, to which Girflet replies authoritatively, “Non sire c’est un miracle”; the “temps aventureux” characterized by inexplicable phenomena that do not originate from God has already come to a close.¹⁰⁰ In spite of this pronouncement, Mordret refers to the Grail as “un simple objet volant non identifié,” dismissing any divine properties and saying he sees similar things quite frequently on Avalon. The UFO reference, however, leaves open the question of the object’s provenance: it might be earthly or otherworldly. The assortment of perceptions of and reactions to the Grail both condenses the catalogue of medieval Grail avatars into one scene and highlights the inconsistency of the source material(s). In so doing, it collapses the variation of Arthuriana into a narrative thread.

⁹⁸ *Graal théâtre*, p. 503.

⁹⁹ *Graal théâtre*, p. 508.

¹⁰⁰ *Graal théâtre*, p. 506.

Roubaud and Delay's text accomplishes a sort of fusion, gathering disparate accounts and forcing them into incongruous juxtaposition. This practice reveals the fault lines of medieval Arthuriana, but also asserts that they are of little importance. No single avatar of the Grail is granted supremacy in *Graal théâtre*; if no version is deemed "authoritative" (either by the Arthurian cast or the text itself), all are equally good (or lacking).

The Grail is also a guiding thread in Barjavel's *L'Enchanteur*, as all of Merlin's decisions and actions favor the quest. The origins story of the Grail is intimately linked with the creation and fall of man; Eve fashions a cup to catch the blood of the wounded Adam, in the process healing him. The Grail is made of the same earth from which God created Adam. Thus, the Grail is connected with the land and with healing in its first reference. "Cette coupe est celle du Graal. Ève, bienheureusement ignorante, l'utilisa comme écuelle, pour puiser l'eau de la source fraîche ou récolter les cerises et les amandes, les framboises et les pissenlits. Et les pommes, bien sûr."¹⁰¹ This reference to apples signals the impending fall from Eden, when the two humans eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It can be no coincidence that the novel ends with a description of the island of Avalon, a site associated with mystical knowledge and the divine realm: "Au centre de l'île a poussé un pommier."¹⁰² The apple tree is also doubtless a nod to the Welsh "Afallennau" tradition associated with the earliest textual incarnations of Merlin.¹⁰³ The book also establishes through Merlin the Grail as a means

¹⁰¹ *L'Enchanteur*, p. 21.

¹⁰² *L'Enchanteur*, p. 471.

¹⁰³ See note above on "The Apple Trees."

of restoring balance to a disordered world: “Le Graal, même dissimulé dans son château introuvable, sert à l’équilibre du monde. Et [...] il est nécessaire que de temps en temps, quand cet équilibre est menacé, un homme pur, courageux, chaste, juste et servant Dieu, le cherche, le trouve et regarde l’ineffable vérité contenue dans la Coupe. Alors l’ensemble des hommes retrouve des forces pour continuer son chemin difficile ...”¹⁰⁴

This representation is of particular interest because it casts the Grail’s appearance as cyclical, entering into the same system of repeated advent ascribed elsewhere in the text to Arthur and Merlin.

Even in contemporary Arthuriana that strays from typical representations of Logres in favor of new settings and plotlines, the Grail makes an appearance, albeit, in unconventional ways. In Gudule’s *Ménopause des fées* trilogy, Merlin embarks on a quest for a young woman called Linda Graal in order to restore his lost glory and bring about a second Arthurian age. This new Graal is a hairdresser and a promiscuous junkie, details that do not deter Merlin from his quest, which must culminate in her impregnation by a modern avatar of the Grail knight: le Père Cheval (Perceval), an aging graffiti artist. In Jean-Louis Fetjaine’s *Trilogie des Elfes*, Grail-like talismans belonging to the various races of the land drive much of the plot; this treatment is traceable to theories that situate the Grail within a Celtic tradition of sacred objects, including the cauldron of the Dagda, “le Graal de la connaissance divine.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ *L’Enchanteur*, p. 121.

¹⁰⁵ Fetjaine, Jean-Louis. *Le Crépuscule des elfes* in *La Trilogie des Elfes*, p. 18.

There are a small number of modern French Arthurian works that eschew the Grail altogether. Most notable is Rio's Merlin trilogy, whose strict historical setting precludes all manifestations of the marvelous or supernatural. (The knights Perceval and Galaad are likewise absent from Rio's cycle, which comports with the exclusion of the Grail from this historically oriented version of Logres.) Rio's Arthurian production is anomalous in this way, however; as Robert Baudry, among others, has observed, the Grail story is integral to continuing French Arthuriana.¹⁰⁶

Heroines of the Arthurian world

Arthuriana's female characters seldom occupy a principal position within a given text. This holds true for both the medieval canon and in modern French fiction, which lacks the wave of feminist revisionism that *The Mists of Avalon* ushered in for the Anglophone tradition.¹⁰⁷ There are, however, four fictional women who play an important role in modern texts: Viviane, Morgane, Guenièvre, Silence. Their stories typically serve as satellites to those of other protagonists, namely Merlin, Arthur, and Lancelot.

Viviane is doubtless the most malleable female character, both in medieval Arthuriana and particularly in modern French texts. Variations on her name are many: Nymue or Nyneve (Malory), Niniane (the Vulgate *Estoire de Merlin* and the Post-

¹⁰⁶ For extended analysis of Rio's treatment of time and setting, see Chapter 3.

¹⁰⁷ Alan Lupack's *Oxford Guide* provides a condensed listing of more than two dozen such texts published primarily in the 1980s and '90s. The trend in fiction centered on Arthurian women has not since abated.

Vulgate Cycle), Niviane (*Prophetiae Merlini*), and Nivienne (*La Suite du Merlin*). In some texts, she doubles as the Lady of the Lake. She is typically identified with three key actions in the medieval tradition: 1) gifting Arthur with his sword Excalibur, 2) raising Lancelot in the domain of the Lake following his father Ban of Benoic's death, and 3) ensorcelling and then imprisoning the enamored Merlin. She is often depicted as a seductress who uses Merlin to gain knowledge of enchantments and magic, which she then uses against the mage. In *La Suite du Merlin*, a particularly unsavory version of the story, Merlin loves Nivienne only because he wishes to take her virginity, whether or not she acquiesces. She in turn feigns devotion but secretly scorns the enchanter as an inherently despicable "fiex de dyable" and plots to rid herself of her objectionable suitor by trapping him in a cave.¹⁰⁸ Malory condenses the account, but still stresses that Merlyon "allwayes ... lay aboute to have hir maydynhode, and she was ever passynge wery of hym and wolde have been delyverde of hym."¹⁰⁹ Thus Viviane is associated with the pursuit and acquisition of learning, which is in turn the source of her agency, but is also associated with betrayal, underscoring the danger in permitting women access to esoteric knowledge.

Viviane figures widely in modern French Arthuriana, and although her guises rival Merlin's in their variation, a fair number of her attributes and adventures overlap across texts. She is closely associated with Merlin in Le Dantec, Rio, Barjavel, Fetjaine, and Gudule; in all of them except Fetjaine the two characters enjoy a sexual or romantic relationship. Her virginity, linked in the *Suite du Merlin* to the huntress Diane, is

¹⁰⁸ *La Suite du Merlin*, § 385.

¹⁰⁹ *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 79.

highlighted in both Rio and Barjavel.¹¹⁰ Both Le Dantec and Fetjaine place her home in the Lake, situated within Brocéliande forest, and they, along with Barjavel, include her role as Lancelot's surrogate mother. She is also associated with enchantment across multiple texts, whether as Merlin's protégée (Barjavel, Le Dantec) or as a supernatural creature in her own right (Fetjaine, Gudule).

Some attributes are particular to a single text or author and merit mention. Rio is unique among the modern French authors in depicting a Viviane who is utterly divorced from magic, as his Arthurian world lacks any supernatural element. Instead, Viviane is closely associated with Merlin's own mother, who dies during his childhood of sword-rape. While taking Viviane's virginity many years later, he sees blood on her thighs and forcibly relives the trauma of his mother's violent death.¹¹¹ Fetjaine emphasizes the character's "fée" element, reimagining her as Lliane, the High Queen of a moribund race of elves. Associated with the traditional roles of caring for the orphaned Lancelot and ruling Brocéliande's Lake (which doubles as home to Avalon), she also plays a critical role not found in medieval Arthuriana: by conjoining her soul to Uter's, she becomes the ferocious Pendragon within him, endowing him with superhuman strength and healing and thereby allowing him to seize Tintagel. In the *Ménopause des fées* trilogy, Gudule splits the character of Viviane into two distinct figures, neither of them hewing closely to medieval models. The first, Elaine, is described as Merlin's medieval lover, who asks that

¹¹⁰ Likewise, Rio's *Merlin* refers to Viviane, menaced by a boar, as "une Diane en difficulté." *Merlin*, p. 112.

¹¹¹ *Merlin*, p. 115. The association between the huntress Viviane and Merlin's mother is not limited to Rio. In Weingarten's *Le Roman de la Table Ronde*, Merlin's mother is named Viviane, "comme la fée, ou plutôt devrais-je dire que la fée s'appelait comme elle." *Le Roman de la Table Ronde*, p. 9.

upon her death he consume her flesh in ritual commemoration. When he follows the letter of her request but not its spirit, she wreaks eternal vengeance on him in the form of indigestion and flatulence, which contributes to his loss of prestige in the centuries that follow. The other avatar is Viviane, one of Merlin's tiny fairy companions; the least offensive of the three fairies (the others are a Neonazi and a pedophile), she is characterized as a wordsmith and punster. Finally, Le Dantec's Viviane, while conventional in most respects, is singular in one regard: like Merlin, she is a zealot, a disciple of Simon Magus who believes herself part of a chain of reincarnated figures eternally linked to the apparition of the Grail. An additional distinction is that in a section of the novel, she serves as a first-person narrator; to counter the claim that she maliciously kidnapped Lancelot, she recounts her version of the events, averring that she rescued the baby from his murderous pursuers. Le Dantec is the only author of modern French Arthuriana to write a female character in the first person.¹¹²

Like Viviane, Morgane (also Morgan le Fay and Morgana) is a character whose avatars overlap in various medieval texts. She first appears in Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini* as an inhabitant of the Island of Apples (linked to Avalon) and endowed with shape-shifting and healing powers. Chrétien de Troyes establishes her as Arthur's sister, although in this role she is sometimes replaced by (or renamed) Morgause or Anna. In the French prose tradition, she becomes a malevolent force, seeking in the Vulgate Cycle to either supplant Guenièvre as Lancelot's lover or to reveal their affair to Arthur. However, she conducts the fallen king away on a boat after the battle of Camlann. The English tradition likewise

¹¹² He also does so for Guenièvre, to similar effect.

casts her as a negative figure: promiscuous, vain, and petty. Malory portrays her as a schemer whose plots generally backfire. She is also the driving force behind the Green Knight's arrival in Camelot to propose the beheading game in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Morgane's role in modern French Arthuriana is invariably as antagonist to Arthur and Logres, although a few texts treat her either sympathetically or with ambivalence. She is nearly always Arthur's half-sister (in Fetjaine, Rio, Barjavel, Roubaud and Delay), and sometimes replaces Morgause, Anna, or the unnamed queen of Orcanie as his incestuous lover and mother to Mordret (Rio, Roubaud and Delay). Rio is the only French author to place Morgane at the center of a novel.¹¹³ In *Morgane*, the heroine is traumatized early in life by the realization of her own mortality, causing her to revolt against creative forces and to champion destruction as an intellection stance against the finitude of her existence. As Merlin's protégée, she learns the science of the world, and upon leaving Arthur's court for exile on the island of Avalon, she sets up a fortress to house her scientific experimentation and debauchery, becoming her kingdom's despot and an object of zealous homage by its inhabitants. Rio portrays her as a warrior-queen who, aided by Viviane, defeats the army of the enemy Claudas and thereby takes on a mythic dimension, earning the reverent sobriquets "Déesse-Mère," "Cybèle," "déesse d'Avalon," "Artémis," and "Némésis."¹¹⁴ Although she dedicates her life to undermining her brother and his reign, she also functions as his mirror, with their respective fates linked symbiotically. Other works portray Morgane in a far less flattering light. In

¹¹³ In English, Marion Zimmer Bradley does so in *The Mists of Avalon*.

¹¹⁴ *Morgane*, p. 164. The villagers likewise bestow some of these names upon Viviane.

Barjavel's text, she makes the classic pact with the Devil to gain her extraordinary powers in exchange for her soul. However, the Devil is ultimately cheated, for when her castle collapses upon her and he swoops in to collect her tarnished soul, he burns himself on the cement blessed with holy water in which she is entombed. She persists to the present day, a horror to herself:

Elle est devenue telle que Merlin lui avait permis de se voir, et pire encore. Des siècles et des siècles d'âge et de fureur en ont fait un vieux chicot ratatiné et tordu. Elle a gardé, malheureusement pour elle, des yeux intacts. Et les murs sont des miroirs ... Elle s'y voit, dans toutes les directions, reflétée mille fois jusqu'au fond de la lumière. Elle hurle d'horreur et de rage ... ¹¹⁵

The narrator explains that she can only escape her prison by ceasing to hate the world, and herself. Impotent, self-defeating rage is likewise Morgane's impetus and weakness in Rio's trilogy and in Roubaud and Delay's *Graal théâtre*.

Morgane plays peripheral but important roles in Fetjaine's *Trilogie des elfes* and in Roubaud's *Le Chevalier Silence*. In the former, she is daughter to Lliane (rather than Ygerne) and Uter, a human-elf hybrid whose name is Rhiannon, meaning "Great High Goddess."¹¹⁶ She serves as the partial fulfillment of prophecies of a ruler over all of the tribes of the Tuatha Dé Danann, but is ultimately eclipsed by Argur as the non-human races die out and are subsumed by man. In Roubaud's novel, Morgane is strictly a villain, whose theft of a magic ring sets in motion the chain of events that leads to the protagonists' voyage to the Antipodes.¹¹⁷ She also displays shape-shifting abilities,

¹¹⁵ *L'Enchanteur*, p. 467.

¹¹⁶ Dixon-Kennedy, Mike. *Celtic Myth and Legend*, p. 295.

¹¹⁷ I discuss this journey in detail in Chapter 3.

appearing to the hero Wallwein as the monstrous Guivre in an earlier incident. She likewise serves as a catch-all villain in Roubaud and Delay's *Graal théâtre*, where she notably uses artifice to play the role of the queen's doppelganger, known as la Fausse Guenièvre.

Guenièvre (also Guinevere) first appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth as Leodagrance's daughter and Arthur's dutiful but childless wife. In the early chronicle tradition, she is not a particularly differentiated character, although her alignment with Mordred in his bid to usurp Arthur figures in Geoffrey, Wace, and Layamon's texts. Among the earliest true portraits of the queen is Marie de France's lai *Lanval*, in which she appears as a seductress to Lanval, whose affections are engaged elsewhere; her jealousy and possessiveness drive the plot of the *lai* in testing the knight's devotion to his true lady. These same character traits can be seen in Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, the first text to depict the love affair between Guenièvre and Lancelot. Chrétien frames her as the courtly ideal of the high-born lady, an object of devotion whose heart (but not hand) may be won by the worthiest knight of Logres. While her devotion to Lancelot is clear, she also demonstrates clear pique at the knight's earlier hesitation to enter a cart on his quest to rescue her from her kidnapper Méléagant of Gorre. The adulterous relationship between Lancelot and the queen is substantially developed in the *Lancelot Propre* section of the Vulgate Cycle, which creates a backstory for the beginnings of their affair, relating that it was orchestrated through the intermediary efforts of the giant Galehaut. In the *Mort Artu* and later the *Morte Darthur*, she is wrongfully accused of poisoning one of the Round Table knights, put on trial, and

sentenced to execution, from which Lancelot must rescue her. This sets in motion the chain of events that leads to the king's discovery of their love affair (which Arthur had worked hard to deny or dismiss). In the Vulgate Cycle, fearing that Mordret will prevail in the final battle against Arthur, she takes refuge in a convent with the plan of becoming a nun should her husband die. Malory follows the same narrative thread but extends the story further: she survives her husband and repents her sin, taking holy orders and refusing any further relationship with Lancelot until her death.

She plays a less robust role in much of modern French Arthuriana, typically relegated to a secondary plot thread and seldom granted much discernible interiority. In Barjavel, she makes for a lackluster heroine alongside the much more elaborately developed Viviane and Morgane. Several texts take pains to describe her as surpassingly beautiful but lacking in either intellectual acumen or empathy. Typical of this tendency is Rio's portrait in *Morgane*, which describes Guenièvre on her wedding day and thereby damns her with faint praise: "Elle se satisfaisait, sans avoir la bassesse ou la candeur de le laisser paraître, d'être le centre de l'attention ou du désir. Elle affectionnait la puissance, le faste et les riches parures. Et lorsqu'elle vit Arthur, qui représentait tout cela et était en outre l'homme le plus beau de l'Occident, elle l'aima autant qu'elle était capable d'aimer."¹¹⁸ A striking exception to this trend comes in Le Dantec's *Graal-Romance*, in which Guenièvre is reunited with Lancelot following Arthur's death and provides an account of the early days of their affair, beginning with his arrival at Camaaloth to be dubbed and ending with her rescue from Gorre and the *nuit d'amour* that follows. This

¹¹⁸ *Morgane*, p. 112.

narrative takes the form of first-person journal entries, offered to the clerkly narrator as proof of her depth of feeling for Lancelot and acting as a corrective to previous accounts that had cast her as merely vain and self-interested. The other noteworthy modern avatar of Guenièvre occurs in Gudule's *La Crépuscule des fées*, in which she appears as the buxom bar owner Geneviève, alias Dame Guenièvre, who pines in vain for the oblivious patron of *Le Celtic*, Arthur Lancelot, and attempts suicide in the wake of rejection.

Silence is a marginal Arthurian figure, only assimilated into the medieval Arthurian world through a minor appearance of Merlin in her one romance, *Le Roman de Silence*. She merits discussion here, however, because she features as the feisty heroine of Roubaud's *Le Chevalier Silence*, which is far more recognizably Arthurian than its medieval antecedent. The thirteenth-century romance portrays a female protagonist called Silence who must masquerade as a man in order to inherit land (per royal decree), performing the traditionally male roles of *jongleur* and *chevalier*. The romance famously depicts a debate between the allegorical forces of *Nature* and *Nourreture*, which govern Silence's development. The gender-bending protagonist is ultimately restored to public womanhood, and the romance concludes with a marriage and with gender norms reestablished. Roubaud's Silence is an intrepid hero(ine), unself-conscious in both masculine and feminine roles. Her predominant character trait is curiosity, particularly concerning the nature of the world and its inhabitants. Hers is a coming-of-age story that addresses the physical and emotional transformations associated with adolescence; in many respects, the text's portrayal of her brash heroism is an ode to the fearlessness of youth. Silence's gender indeterminacy goes a step further in *Le Chevalier Silence* than in

Le Roman de Silence, opening the work to overt queering. This is highlighted by Heldris' vacillation between the terms "frère" and "sœur" to describe Silence's relationship with her foster-sibling Walllwein, as well as a moment in which a rescued damsel, Evangeline, kisses her two rescuers on the mouth (thinking them both to be male); the narrator then reveals that the girl felt a slight preference for Silence "à la bouche si douce."¹¹⁹ Indeed, throughout the novel, maleness and femaleness are treated as potentially interchangeable, although not identical. Speculating upon their eventual shared parenthood, Wallllwein proposes to Silence that "tu seras mère [...] et moi père," to which she replies, "ou le contraire," a matter-of-fact rejoinder that privileges potential over limitation and choice over biological determinism.¹²⁰

As noted earlier, the women of Logres do not dominate most famous medieval romances. This is not to say that there is a dearth of them; indeed, damsels in distress appear like clockwork throughout much of the Vulgate Cycle, and Chrétien likewise introduces a host of virgins, sisters, and chatelaines with whom the knights-errant must interact. These women are very often undifferentiated and even nameless. Once they have fulfilled their ordained narrative function, whether attempting a seduction or imparting a lesson, the text generally abandons them. It is clear that modern French Arthuriana has made some attempt to accord women a greater role in at least some texts, as the examples of Viviane, Morgane, Guenièvre, and Silence have shown. Roubaud's *Le Chevalier Silence* and Rio's *Morgane* are works that focus primarily upon a single female protagonist, and several other texts, such as Roubaud and Delay's *Morgane contre*

¹¹⁹ *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 44.

¹²⁰ *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 39.

Guenièvre in *Graal théâtre* and Le Dantec's *Graal-Romance*, highlight multiple female perspectives. In spite of these robust portrayals of femininity in its various guises, the modern French material simply has not yet made Arthuriana a vehicle for promoting female agency or problematizing patriarchal structures in the way that popular English-language fiction has done.¹²¹ This may be due in part to the availability of French translations for the iconic works of feminist Arthurian fiction in English. Another component at work may be the conservatism often associated with the genre of fantasy (particularly the high medieval variety), which tends to romanticize the past and may thereby serve to validate (perhaps unwittingly) hierarchical power structures including class and sex. Of course, this latter theory does not adequately explain why feminist Arthuriana has proliferated in English but not in French, but the size of the respective corpora may play a role as well. Ultimately, it seems that France may still be awaiting its own Marion Zimmer Bradley to compose an Arthurian cycle built on the deeds of its heroines.

Conclusion

In the introduction to her novel *The Grail of Hearts*, Susan Schwartz asserts that “[u]ltimately, although some versions of each Arthurian story contain more authoritative text or display more clearly traceable roots to other versions, it’s probably best to regard the Matter of Britain as a matrix, in which all versions of a story exist simultaneously in

¹²¹ For analysis of feminist Arthurian fiction in English, see Ann F. Howley’s *Rewriting the Women of Camelot: Arthurian Popular Fiction and Feminism* (2001), which discusses the works of Marion Zimmer Bradley, Mary Stewart, Gillian Bradshaw, and Fay Sampson.

our thoughts, fusing into one composite.”¹²² The heart of this sentiment is astute; since its inception, Arthuriana has functioned as a network of texts, with no single narrative more intrinsically authoritative than versions that may have preceded or followed. This principle extends into the present day, as established and emerging authors alike contribute to the existing body of Arthuriana with variations on well known stories, atypical treatment of characters, new adventures, novel settings, and unanticipated uses of typical medieval literary devices. However, I take issue with Schwartz’s notion that Arthuriana can be “fus[ed] into one composite,” which requires a process of homogenization. Smoothing over differences and inconsistencies in the name of a greater whole undermines the very heart of Arthurian literature: its staggering capacity to encompass multiple continuities and permutations across linguistic and national borders, without sacrificing those textual variations. It is precisely this sprawling, legion dimension that makes Arthuriana a vibrant and provocative area of continued study.

By juxtaposing the newer works with their medieval antecedents, I have attempted to reflect both the correspondences between the two corpora and places in which they diverge. This extended overview in turn scaffolds further observations about the means through which modern French authors have co-opted—with varying aims and success—the *matière de Bretagne* by situating newer works in a lineage already built upon variance and appropriation. It is not an uninterrupted textual chain; by the sixteenth century, Arthurian production on both sides of the English Channel had all but died out.

¹²² Cited in Marino, John, *The Grail Legend in Modern Literature*. Cambridge; Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 2004, p. 35.

Montaigne viewed the genre as marginal and fit only for children, professing to have eschewed romances even as a boy in favor of more substantive Latin texts.¹²³ Jacques Roubaud refers to Don Quichotte as the last great Arthurian hero.¹²⁴ It wasn't until the nineteenth-century Arthurian Revival of the British that such works returned to public awareness, and thus reentered French literary consciousness through this English-language intermediary. This meandering trajectory contributed materially to the idiosyncrasies of modern-day French Arthuriana.

¹²³ “Car des Lancelots du Lac, des Amadis, des Huons de Bordeaux, et tel fatras de livres à quoy l'enfance s'amuse, je n'en connoissois pas seulement le nom, ny ne fais encore le corps, tant exacte estoit ma discipline.” “De l'institution des enfants,” *Les Essais*, Livre I, p. 175.

¹²⁴ Roubaud, Jacques. *Graal Fiction*, p. 13. *Don Quixote* also figures briefly in Roubaud and Delay's *Graal théâtre* in a chorus sequence discussed in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 2

ARTHUR'S SCRIBES-ERRANT

Introduction

Apart from appropriating and recycling particular characters, settings, and story lines, modern-day authors of French Arthuriana establish their link to medieval traditions through a variety of textual strategies. Rather than, for instance, merely retelling the story of Merlin's conception in language more recognizable to the modern reader, they often make use of literary devices that echo medieval literary craft or signal medieval sources of inspiration. Some of these devices imitate features of medieval textuality, such as the inclusion of marginalia. Others channel generic tendencies closely associated with French romance. Still others reflect correspondence to an individual medieval text or passage, echoing both content and style.

This chapter elucidates the ways in which modern French Arthurian fiction self-consciously "legitimizes" itself (albeit, generally with a healthy dose of irony) in deploying textual strategies that both privilege continuity and creatively co-opt medieval literary traditions, particularly those engaged with questions of authority and textual transmission. It begins with an overview of salient medieval literary practices, emphasizing the French romance tradition. It then discusses medieval posturing, by which I mean practices that self-consciously emulate medieval antecedents in narration,

style, or structure. I separate such practices into four broad groupings. The first category consists of paratexts such as dedications, explicits, and prefaces that openly inscribe a given text into a preexisting literary matrix. The second category comprises narrative and stylistic tactics by which modern authors medievalize their literary production: the use of marginalia to gloss a text, deliberate narrative lacunae, unorthodox punctuation, and lexical choices that mimic medieval prose or verse. The third category consists of aspects of and, in some instances, explicit statements on formal elements such as genre and structure that imitate or editorialize aspects of the romance such as textual recycling and recourse to external and internal sources of authority. Finally, the chapter analyses accounts of textual genesis—which is to say, stories fabricated to account for the existence of the text in question. They are often attributed to a scribal or clerical figure, whether canonical in the medieval tradition (such as Blaise of Northumberland) or not (e.g., Rubaut the troubadour, “ancestor” to Jacques Roubaud). All of these methods employed by contemporary authors of Arthuriana serve to “medievalize” their literary production and thereby graft it into the greater Arthurian tradition. Naturally, the approaches do not operate discretely; a paratextual strategy may contribute to an account of textual genesis, or an analysis of a text’s structural underpinnings may require frequent reference to a narrator figure. Their artificial separation to organize this chapter is intended to highlight each method, but they often function in concert.

To assess the dynamics present in these medieval-postmodern correspondences, I adopt some of the terminology employed by Michael Riffaterre and Gérard Genette in discussions of literary appropriation, particularly medieval. When speaking about

intertextuality, however, I mean what Genette more precisely designates as hypertextuality: “toute relation unissant un texte B (que j’appellerai *hypertexte*) à un texte antérieur A (que j’appellerai, bien sûr, *hypotexte*) sur lequel il se griffe d’une manière qui n’est pas celle du commentaire.”¹²⁵

The postures of medievalism I highlight in this chapter are by no means evenly distributed among texts or authors. Many of these literary strategies are based primarily upon the romance tradition, and authors who engage with the so-called historical Arthur in a fifth-century Welsh or Cornish vein do not pass through the textual intermediary of medieval romance and thus do not often co-opt its narrative and stylistic hallmarks. This is particularly true of Michel Rio’s works, and they accordingly receive minimal treatment in this chapter. Unsurprisingly, texts whose authors cite or otherwise claim firsthand knowledge of medieval Arthuriana tend to bear its stamp in a far more pronounced fashion. This chapter accordingly places emphasis upon the works of Jacques Roubaud and Florence Delay, René Barjavel, and Michel Zink, which best exemplify the tendency to deploy medieval literary strategies and tropes.

Two general elements of medieval romance composition are of particular significance to this chapter.

The first is that of medieval authorship and its various guises. As Douglas Kelly has noted, in medieval romance there exists a nontrivial degree of conflation among the

¹²⁵ Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsestes*. Éditions du Seuil, 1982, p. 13

various voices associated with a text's creation: author, narrator, scribe.¹²⁶ Although the roles of these three figures are ostensibly discrete, it can be difficult or even impossible to delineate their respective contributions to a particular text. To work around this ambiguity, Douglas refers to "auctorial" interventions, where the authority in question may derive from any of the three abovementioned sources. This broad designation is useful for the purposes of identifying such interventions that might provide commentary on the literary process itself, but it does smooth over, to some extent, the inconsistencies, ruptures, and even playfulness that may characterize the author-scribe-narrator dynamic of a medieval text. It is precisely the indeterminacy already present in the medieval manuscript tradition that modern French authors of Arthuriana exploit. They treat the conundrum of multiple authorial roles as one that need not be solved, but rather co-opted to creatively blur the traditional limits of the modern authorial role.¹²⁷ In particular, several modern authors have demonstrated investment in mimicking the medieval practice of generating elaborate "fictions of authority," to use E. Jane Burns's term. Burns's *Arthurian Fictions* highlights the blurring of sources and voices within the Vulgate Cycle, contending that their multiplicity and inconsistencies serve to undermine the premise of a sole (divine) authority whence the text originates. Thus, attribution of authorship of the Vulgate Cycle to Gautier Map is an intricately layered fiction whereby "Merlin and other author-heroes of King Arthur's court, the bogus author-translator Walter Map, the vernacular *scriptor* Blaise, and the richly ambiguous voice of *li contes*"

¹²⁶ *The Art of Medieval French Romance*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1992, p. 5.

¹²⁷ This practice is not limited to the two periods in question. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, frame narratives to account for the text's composition and publication were extremely popular.

are variously presented as the source of the text.¹²⁸ Ploys to establish, then problematize and subvert a single authorial figure are prominent throughout the Vulgate Cycle, and, because this text has been particularly influential for modern writers (particularly Roubaud, Delay, Le Dantec, and Barjavel), similar narrative strategies can be identified in their works.

The second key element is the medieval attitude toward invention, textual credentials, and the work of grafting and recasting older work in the process known as *conjointure*. Textual claims to legitimacy in the medieval scholastic tradition derived not strictly from originality but from a credible link to a prior, authoritative source—or several, when possible. When such a source could not be ascertained, or where none existed, one might be fabricated. The premise for the creation of romance as a literary genre, then, was the artful combination of various incomplete or heterogeneous source materials into a more pleasing whole. An extension of this notion of *conjointure* is the interlacing of disparate narrative strands throughout the *conte*. A prime example of this notion of interlacing occurs throughout the *Queste*, which follows the adventures of the Grail knights as strands of the same story, each one picked up and then abandoned in turn, with clearly marked transitions such as when the narrative announces that it will leave Lancelot for the time being and follow Gauvain: “Mes a tant lesse ore li contes a parler de lui et retorne a monseignor Gauvain.”¹²⁹ The language here is formulaic,

¹²⁸ Burns, E. Jane. *Arthurian Fictions: Rereading the Vulgate Cycle*. Columbus: State University Press for Miami University, 1985, p. 41, 18.

¹²⁹ *La Queste del Saint Graal : roman du XIIIe siècle*. Ed. Albert Pauphilet, p. 146.

repeated at the end of nearly every interlaced section of the *Queste*. At times, however, the principles of *conjointure* are subverted by the romances themselves. The narrator might skip over an account of an *aventure*, promising to recount it later; when he next refers to the incident, however, he treats it as already told and thus familiar to the reader. This creates a narrative loop that constantly refers forward and backward without ever relating the promised adventures. Other textual strategies that promote disunity include lengthy digressions, appeals to fictitious authority, and rehashing the generic elements of an adventure so frequently that the narrative shape of the *conte* becomes cyclical rather than linear. This veneer of *conjointure* is replicated in the modern French corpus as well, creating an illusion of narrative unity that is subverted almost continuously.

The four sections of this chapter highlight how textual authority and *conjointure* are appropriated by modern authors in playfully subversive gestures that often dovetail with medieval preoccupations.

Paratexts

Much of the work the modern French texts perform to situate themselves relative to medieval antecedents takes place beyond the borders of the story itself, in spaces that Genette refers to as paratexts.¹³⁰ These may include dedications, prefaces, appendices, jacket blurbs, author biographies, epigraphs, or pagination—all areas encountered by the reader that orient them to the text's purpose, style, methodology, or tone. Paratexts may

¹³⁰ Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsestes*, Seuil, 1982, p. 13.

result from authorial intervention; editorial teams also often contribute some of this material. The ambiguity in determining the source of paratexts may be likened to the inextricability of the medieval narrator, clerk, patron, and scribe—all potentially present in a given manuscript.

Bibliographies

The most direct paratextual intervention featured in modern French Arthuriana consists of a bibliography following the work to indicate the sources of inspiration, a modern form of attribution not wholly removed from medieval intratextual formulae such as Chrétien's acknowledgement that "ce est li contes do greal/ don li cuens [Felipes de Flandres] li bailla lo livre."¹³¹ I have observed two veins of bibliographies in French Arthuriana. Those written by authors with background as medievalists contain a listing of medieval texts used as inspiration, advertising direct knowledge of those texts. By contrast, authors who come to Arthurian rewriting through a background in fantasy (or other speculative fiction) tend to cite intermediaries: Arthurian romance in modern French translation, general interest works on aspects of the Middle Ages, and occasional scholarly or pseudo-scholarly works pertaining to Arthuriana. Bibliographies are not a typical feature of modern-day French fiction, and the concentration of such lists of references within the corpus (five authors, eight texts) suggests wide-reaching preoccupation with questions of sources, authority, and textual lineage. In acknowledging

¹³¹ Chrétien de Troyes. *Le Conte du Graal ou le roman de Perceval*, Ed. Charles Méla, Lettres Gothiques, 1990.

their various sources, modern French Arthuriana replicates and lays bare the workings of *conjointure*. The gesture of crediting sources highlights the common medieval and modern interest in highlighting intertextuality.

Some bibliographies are couched in author's notes or afterwards. Michel Zink relies upon his readers to recognize allusions to outside works throughout *Déodat*, but in an afterward does provide a short listing of references, noting that "[l]e lecteur quelque peu familier de la littérature médiévale aura relevé de lui-même dans le récit [...] les allusions aux romans de Chrétien de Troyes, aux lais Bretons, aux romans arthuriens en prose, et particulièrement au *Haut Livre du Graal* ou *Perlesvaus*, auquel sont empruntées la langueur du roi Arthur et la mort de Cahus..."¹³² The wording of this bibliographic note purports to assume readerly acquaintance with the major works of medieval Arthuriana; the very existence of such a note indicates, however, a desire to direct readers toward source material, should they have failed to perceive intertextual resonances themselves.

Florence Delay and Jacques Roubaud provide an especially lengthy bibliography for their *Graal Théâtre*, drawing from numerous linguistic traditions. It consists of the Welsh *Mabinogion*; Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*, *Lancelot*, and *Perceval*; the Wauchier and pseudo-Wauchier *Continuations* of *Perceval*; the *Didot-Perceval*; Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*; Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*; the Vulgate Cycle; *The Merlin-Huth*; *Perlesvaus*; *El Baladro del Sabio Merlin*; *La demanda del Sancto Grial*; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; and the *Works* of Thomas Malory. The bibliography is

¹³² Zink, Michel, *Déodat, ou la transparence*, p. 153.

something of a greatest hits of medieval Arthuriana, although it is worth noting that while Gottfried's German *Tristan* is cited, the French versions by Béroul and Thomas are not. The "scribes" do not indicate that their bibliography is exhaustive, however; indeed, the listing is prefaced by the caveat that it consists of only the *principal* works used. It would thus be difficult to definitively exclude any medieval text from consideration as a hypotext. The bibliography omits non-medieval sources and intertexts, scholarly or otherwise, although such materials appear in the text quite frequently. To cite just one literary example highlighted by the authors, during the first kiss between Guenièvre and Lancelot, the Laure de Carduel sings a half-dozen lines from Apollinaire's "Voie Lactée II" ("Quand vacillent les lucioles/Mouches dorées de la Saint-Jean...") to signal the feast day of Saint Jean.¹³³ Apollinaire was himself the author of a work of Arthuriana devoted to Merlin, *L'Enchanteur pourrissant* (1909).

Jean-Louis Fetjaine, who holds a degree in medieval history, provides a particularly developed and wide-ranging bibliography for his *Trilogy des Elfes*. It includes medieval source material (some of it in *Lettres Gothiques* translation) such as Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* and the Vulgate *Lancelot en Prose*. It also contains scholarly work on the medieval marvelous landscape, such as Claude Lecouteux's *Les Nains et les elfes au Moyen Age*, alongside scholarship on runes, druidism, and Brocéliande Forest. His bibliography for the Merlin duology is even more heavily saturated in scholarly works on Celtic history, culture, and mythology. Fetjaine is the only author in this corpus to cite Internet sources, including the peer-reviewed online journal *The Heroic Age* but

¹³³ *Lancelot du Lac* pp. 309-10. For further analysis of non-medieval literary allusions and points of reference in *Graal théâtre*, see Chapter 3's section on Roubaud and Delay's use of anachronism.

also personal websites pertaining to the putative historicity of Arthur and a hagiographic account of St. Kentigern.

René Barjavel's bibliography for *L'Enchanteur* is in much the same vein as Fetjaine's, consisting largely of works of fiction penned in the early part of the twentieth century, including those by Jacques Boulenger, Xavier de Langlais, and Jean Markale, along with works of scholarship such as Paul Zumthor's doctoral thesis *Merlin le Prophète* and Françoise Le Roux and Christian-J. Guyonvarc'h's *Les Druides*. (Fetjaine likewise relies on both Markale and Guyonvarc'h.) His textual "genealogy" thus passes through a modern creative and scholarly intermediary, although this might not be readily apparent without the author's own acknowledgment. Indeed, the bibliography is not present in all editions of *L'Enchanteur*; while it appears at the end of the initial 1984 Denoël edition, the Folio edition omits the listing. There is good reason to believe that the bibliography *ought* to be included, however. Like that of *Graal théâtre*, the bibliography for *L'Echanteur* indicates that the provided list of references is not exhaustive; following the final bibliographical entry in the Denoël edition, on its own line, appears the term "Etc." This notation signaling *non-attribution*, so incongruous in a bibliography, hints at an ironic sense of humor not unlike that found in the body of *L'Enchanteur*. Given this evidence of authorial intervention, it is reasonable to infer that the reader is meant to have access to the bibliography.

Prefatory matter

Several paratextual medievalisms, though disparate, can be loosely grouped together as prefatory matter. Their respective formats – dedications, subtitles, and *dramatis personae* – are not medievalisms in and of themselves. However, the content of each serves to orient the reader to the text’s engagement with medieval literary practice, either by replicating it or more explicitly invoking ties of literary kinship.

Jacques Roubaud makes use of what can only be termed a particularly elaborate subtitle to his *Graal fiction*. Following the title page, the name “Gaal Fiction” appears again, and under it a characterization of the work:

Texte Original en Prose Française contenant : du *Conte*, du *Récit*, de la
Θéorie, des *Révélation*s inédites sur:¹³⁴

La Signification Profonde et les circonstances Véritables de la
Composition des Romans traitant de :

*Merlin et Viviane, Lancelot et Guenièvre, Tristan et Iseut, Gauvain, Yvain,
le Lion, Arthur, Morgane, Avalon, Bran, Galaad, Escalibour, Joseph d’Arimathie,*
ainsi que de la Naissance, Grandeur, Enchevêtrement et Destruction du Royaume
Aventureux

par

JACQUES ROUBAUD¹³⁵

This extended subtitle signals several key components of the text and its engagement with the medieval Arthurian tradition. Notably, the term “véritable,” evokes the medieval

¹³⁴ Roubaud uses the Greek *theta* (*Θ*) on multiple occasions in spelling “théorie.”

¹³⁵ Roubaud, Jacques, *Graal fiction*, p. 7.

preoccupation with authenticity and verifiable truth. The subtitle also presents one of the most collapsed narratives of the Arthurian narrative arc, condensing it to its birth, glory, and downfall: a totalizing *abbreviatio* of the medieval material. Finally, the term “enchevêtrement” alludes to the dominant medieval technique of interlacing multiple narrative threads across romances, such that several story lines might be pursued within a given text. *Graal Fiction* also contains a prologue introduced by a three-word configuration:

armor

arma amor

“Armor” refers to the term “Armorica,” once used for the region of France now known as Bretagne, home to several notable Arthurian heroes. In an interview with Gallimard upon the publication of *Graal théâtre*, Roubaud elaborated upon the intersection of the three terms: “Disons pour simplifier qu’une équation résume tout : *arma* + *amor* = Armor, les armes, plus l’amour égale la Bretagne” (in this case signifying both Britain and Bretagne) and by extension, *la matière de Bretagne*: Arthurian legend.¹³⁶ The configuration also appears within the *Enlèvement de la reine* branch of Roubaud and Florence Delay’s *Graal théâtre* cycle, wherein Lancelot draws magical strength from the image of Guenièvre inside his helmet and thereby defeats Méléagant, which the character Blaise

¹³⁶ Delay, Florence and Roubaud, Jacques. “Rencontre avec Florence Delay et Jacques Roubaud, à l’occasion de la parution de *Graal théâtre*,” Gallimard, <http://www.gallimard.fr/catalog/entretiens/01057096.HTM>, 2005, last consulted 19 February, 2012.

posits as the “preuve indiscutable de la supériorité de l’amour sur les armes et d’*Amor* sur *Arma* dans le pays d’*Armor*.”¹³⁷

René Barjavel prefaces *L’Enchanteur* with a lengthy dedication that places his own work in an artistic genealogy:

aux bardes, conteurs, troubadours, trouvères, poètes, écrivains, qui depuis deux mille ans ont chanté, raconté, écrit l’histoire des grands guerriers brutaux et naïfs et de leurs Dames qui étaient les plus belles du monde, et célèbre les exploits, les amours et les sortilèges

aux écrivains, chanteurs, poètes, chercheurs d’aujourd’hui qui ont ressuscité les héros de l’Aventure,

à tous, morts et vivants, avec admiration et gratitude je dédie ce livre qui leur doit son existence,

et je les prie de m’accueillir parmi eux.¹³⁸

Barjavel’s rhapsodic dedication is among the most earnest paratextual authorization strategies deployed in modern Arthuriana. Stressing his debt to the medieval and modern artists who came before him, he privileges textual and creative interdependence. While this genealogy lacks the specificity of accredited authors or works, it nonetheless situates *L’Enchanteur* as the heir to a tradition to which it is intimately connected. Interestingly, it also alludes to the notion that the heroes of Arthurian romance (perhaps even the texts themselves) somehow died and were in need of being “réssuscités” by modern scholars and artists. This ostensibly refers to the Arthurian Revival originating in the nineteenth century and continuing through the twentieth, which in turn hints at a *lack* of continuity, or at least of contiguity; indeed, it implies a gap between the medieval and the modern,

¹³⁷ Roubaud & Delay, *L’Enlèvement de la reine*, in *Graal théâtre*, p. 383.

¹³⁸ Barjavel, René, *L’Enchanteur*, p. 7.

even if there is a direct relationship between the two. It is also perhaps an allusion to the prophesied return of Arthur, conflating the intradiegetic with the extradiegetic to situate Arthur's second coming.

By downplaying author Barjavel's creative agency, this dedication finds literary precedent in medieval acknowledgements of external sources of inspiration. Chrétien, for instance, famously credits patroness Marie de Champagne with providing both the *matiere* and the *san* for his *Chevalier de la charrette*.¹³⁹ According to Chrétien's opening verses, his role was to generate the language necessary to relate a story whose content and meaning were dictated to him by Marie. Similarly, Barjavel's dedication speaks to the process of taking up a story whose *matiere* is not strictly his own. He asks to be placed among "bardes, conteurs, troubadours, trouvères, poètes, écrivains," an inclusive list not limited to analogues of modern-day authors.

Editor's note/Afterward

Roubaud's *Le Chevalier Silence* provides an authorization technique hinging upon an elaborate account of the text's origins and genealogy. The work presents itself as a translation based on a (nonexistent) Manuscript B of the medieval *Roman de Silence*, although the actual contents of the story bear little resemblance to the source material (which in fact exists in a single Manuscript A with no extant variants).¹⁴⁰ The "note de

¹³⁹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, Lettres Gothiques, p. 46.

¹⁴⁰ The text also employs a second layer in its account of its own composition. For extended treatment of its narratorial persona Heldris, see the final section of this chapter.

l'éditeur moderne du conte" following the novel is itself a short work of fiction operating under the guise of historical elucidation:

Il existe deux versions en vieux français du *Roman de Silence*, attribué à Heldris de Cornouailles. L'une, le manuscrit A, en vers, a été éditée à deux reprises ces dernières années, et fait l'objet d'une traduction américaine ; la seconde, le manuscrit B, en prose, est inédite. L'auteur du manuscrit B a connu le manuscrit A; et tous les deux se sont inspirés d'un originel gallois perdu. Les allusions polémiques (transparentes) du second à Chrétien de Troyes, ses emprunts à Jean Renart, au *Lancelot en prose* (et même au *Tristan en prose* et au *Guiron le Courtois*) amènent à placer la date de la composition de B au plus tôt au troisième quart du treizième siècle.

Le présent texte s'inspire assez librement des deux versions. Il suit néanmoins plus largement le manuscrit B, qui évite les incidents assez ordinaires de la première version, et sa conclusion misogyne. La langue a été généralement modernisée.¹⁴¹

While a few assertions contain a kernel of truth, the majority of this note is pure fabrication. *Le Roman de Silence* exists in a single known manuscript (WLC/LM/6), rendering the "manuscrit B" explanation a playful fiction intended to legitimize the author's narrative innovation. Indeed, the better part of *Le Chevalier Silence* bears little, if any, resemblance to the existing medieval hypotext; only through recourse to a fictive variant manuscript can many of the events recounted in *Le Chevalier Silence* be recuperated into the Arthurian matrix. The editorial account of the text's composition also parallels the medieval device of referring to itself as a mere translation of an anterior work, minimizing any claim to originality. On the contemporary front, it engages modern

¹⁴¹ Roubaud, Jacques. *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 148.

scholarly concerns, cleverly parodying the academic preoccupation with variant manuscripts and origins.¹⁴² The final remark regarding the modernized language is a tongue-in-cheek appropriation of academic note boilerplate.

This pseudo-scholarly posture also appears sporadically through the body of the novel at the level of narration. Toward the end of the adventure, the narrator Heldris acknowledges the reader's horizon of expectations will be subverted if he or she has encountered another version of the story. Referring explicitly to "la version tronquée et déformée du scribe troyen Chr., celle qui est connue sous le nom de manuscrit A," he disabuses the reader of any false expectation of a happy ending comparable to the marriage that marks the end of *Le Roman de Silence*.¹⁴³ In an interesting turn of events, Heldris, who also figures as preceptor to the young protagonists of the novel at the level of plot, has stepped out of the story and revealed knowledge about the eventual manuscript history of the *Roman de Silence* as perceived from the vantage of a twentieth-century scholar. This should, of course, be impossible for the narrator, who does not profess to live outside of time as Merlin does. There is thus an intriguing slippage between the fictive account of textual genesis figuring in the paratextual editor's note and the limits established by the ostensibly non-omniscient narrator.

¹⁴² For treatment of the progression of scholarly interest in the search for definitive Arthurian sources, see Marino, John. *The Grail Legend in Modern Literature*. Cambridge [England] ; Rochester, NY : D. S. Brewer, 2004, pp. 28-81.

¹⁴³ *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 139.

Stylistic techniques (micro-medievalisms)

Stylistic techniques fall under the rubric of what I term “micro-medievalisms,” typically one-off devices, usually rhetorical, that replicate medieval literary craft on a small scale or in a highly specific capacity. They might take the form of replication of stock medieval language such as “selon le conte,” or they might imitate an aspect of medieval textuality and its legacy, such as marginal glossing, in-text translation, or a noteworthy rhetorical figure such as alliteration. They serve to create the illusion, usually of brief duration, that the reader is encountering a medieval text rather than a modern one. The medieval posturing is almost never earnest, however; it tends to figure in humorous contexts and serves largely as a wink to the reader familiar with medieval literary practice. Oftentimes, these devices call no attention to themselves and might pass unnoticed by a reader who lacks familiarity with medieval romance, its tropes, and its generic hallmarks.

Marginalia

One strategy unique to Roubaud’s *Graal fiction* is the use of marginal glosses. The work, a generically heterogeneous amalgam of story, criticism, and theory, contains three short segments (all located in either the *conte* or the *récit* sections) that make use of this medieval practice: “L’Enserrement Merlin,” “La Demoiselle d’Escalot,” and “Joseph d’A..” The last of the three is also the most straightforward. In “Joseph d’A.,” glosses

serve to identify major points of plot and setting but do not enhance the meaning of the primary text. When the main text states that Joseph's company "bâtit un fort château dans la forêt" and "[o]n l'appelait Corbenic," the accompanying piece of marginalia reads simply "Corbenic."¹⁴⁴ This type of gloss functions as an identifier for a reader thumbing through the text in search of a particular passage. Glossing in "L'Enserrement Merlin" is comparable, though slightly more elaborate in that it notes motifs ("l'écho," "la fumée") and summarizes main points. This marginalia evokes both glossing found in medieval manuscripts and the sorts of notes made by reluctant readers—such as students—up to the present day.

The glossing of "La Demoiselle d'Escalot" is considerably more complex, as it translates and interprets letters from the "demoiselle" written in English and Italian. For example, the second letter, written to "my lorde sir Launcelot," reads "Moste noble Knyght, my lorde sir Launcelot, now hath death made us two at debate for youre love. And i was youre lover that men will call the Fayre Mayden of Escalott. Therefore unto all ladyes i make my moan, that for my soule ye pray and bury me and offer me my mass-penny. Thys ys my laste requeste. And a clean maydyn i died i take to god to wynesse. And pray for my soule, sir Launcelot, as thou arte peerless."¹⁴⁵ This letter is lifted wholesale, with only minor changes in spelling, from Malory's *Morte Darthur* in the section generally labeled "The Tale of Sir Launcelot and Quene Gwenyvere," which

¹⁴⁴ *Graal fiction*, p. 45.

¹⁴⁵ *Graal fiction*, p. 38.

treats the love of Elayne, Lady of Ascalot.¹⁴⁶ The gloss translates, condenses, and to an extent interprets these sentiments thusly: “Lancelot, la mort nous a fait deux/j’ai été ton amante/je prie toutes les dames de me donner mon penny pour mes messes/je meurs pure.”¹⁴⁷ By the same token, the sections in Italian are borrowed from the fourteenth-century Italian romance *La Donna di Scalotta*. The glosser seems to have been not quite up to the task of translation, or perhaps seeks to retain the flavor of the originals, as the marginalia variously preserves the English and Italian terms “penny,” “per lo migliore cavaliere,” and “crudelissime.”¹⁴⁸ Aside from the apparent function of mimicking the appearance of marginal glosses in the manuscript tradition, the translation effects a linguistic reappropriation of Arthurian material. Malory in particular recast a number of French tales into English, and both his Lady of Ascalot and the Italian iteration drew on a pre-existing tradition, first attested in the *Mort Artu* branch of the Vulgate cycle. By translating key elements of the English and Italian texts back into French, Roubaud playfully reclaims the Escalot story on behalf of the French and thereby asserts that transmission across linguistic borders is integral to Arthurian literature, even in its modern iterations.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Malory, Thomas. *Le Morte Darthur*, Ed. Stephen H.A. Shepherd, New York: Norton and Co., 2005, p. 615. It is most likely that Roubaud transposed the text from the Vinaver edition, per the bibliographic mention in *Graal théâtre* to Malory’s *Works*, the title under which Vinaver published the *Morte*.

¹⁴⁷ Roubaud, Jacques. *Graal fiction*, p. 38.

¹⁴⁸ *Graal fiction*, p. 38-40.

¹⁴⁹ Norris J. Lacy has noted the integrality of translation and cross-linguistic pollination in French Arthuriana. “The modern French material, quantitatively limited as it is, is no less appealing than its medieval predecessors. Indeed, the curious tripartite ancestry -- descending through the German of Wagner and therefore of his source Wolfram von Eschenbach, the English of Tennyson and of his source Sir Thomas Malory, and finally from French sources directly -- this ancestry imparts to the texts in modern French a particular tone and texture unlike those of similar texts in any other language. Ultimately, of course, much of it goes back to French: after all, Wolfram adapted and extended Chrétien’s *Perceval*, and of course Malory drew heavily from French sources. Yet, the double cross-cultural and cross-language

Other instances of translation

René Barjavel, too, demonstrates a predilection for glossing, although his glosses occur within the body of his novel. In *L'Enchanteur* he provides (typically fictitious) etymologies and translations for character and place names, among them Merlin ("tu es mortel"), Perceval ("celui qui a perdu son domaine"), Galaad ("le plus fort"), Bérenger ("l'ours et la lance"), Stonehenge ("enclose de pierres"), and Mehaigné ("châtié, blessé"). The narrator also explains that Lancelot was named for his "sexe enfantin" and that a village called Folle Pensée owed its name to "une deformation de *Fol Pansé*, c'est à dire 'fou guéri.'"¹⁵⁰ In a technique reminiscent of Marie de France's double-titled *lais*, the narrator provides multiple names for a given flower : "Le sentier était d'herbe courte qui perçaient les yeux blancs des pâquerettes et les fleurs jaunes de la salade sauvage qu'on nomme dans la Grande Bretagne 'dendelion' et au pays de Loire 'pissenlit.'"¹⁵¹ However, the narrator also occasionally admits that some words escape translation; he asserts that although the villagers all referred to Merlin's refuge as his *espluméor*, no one knew the meaning of the word, "et personne ne la connaît encore aujourd'hui," an allusion to the probable neologism occurring in Robert de Boron's account of the mage.¹⁵² When Merlin teaches Viviane an enchantment, the narrator runs up against the even more

translation (from Old French to German to French, and from Old French to English to French) combines with the curious fate of medieval French literature in France itself to produce a hybrid version of the Arthurian legend and legacy that we have not yet begun to assess and understand." "Medieval to Post-Modern: The Arthurian Quest in France," *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Spring, 2000), p. 130.

¹⁵⁰ Barjavel, René. *L'Enchanteur*, p. 67.

¹⁵¹ Barjavel, René. *L'Enchanteur*, p. 29.

¹⁵² Barjavel, René. *L'Enchanteur*, p. 67.

problematic inability to render the performative utterance: “Il prononça un mot d’une langue ancienne et le lui fit répéter pendant plusieurs minutes. Il était difficile à articuler. Il fallait à la fois le dire, le souffler, et le siffler un peu. Cela ressemblait à ‘sfulsfsuli...’ Mais ça ne peut pas s’écrire...”¹⁵³ This episode implicitly invokes the transition from orality to textual culture, demonstrating the absurdity of attempting to communicate certain sounds, such as the spoken-sighed-whistled spell, through a strictly textual format. The written word is inadequate, where perhaps a story-teller might be able to do the verbal production justice. At the same time, the nonsensical transcription *sfulsfsuli* is noteworthy at the level of narration in that it cannot be perfectly reproduced by the reader, and thus loses the power of enchantment that it holds intradiegetically.

Roubaud and Delay make occasional use of Old French, inserting it directly into the speech of characters and thereby interrupting the flow of modern French. One early example of this technique comes in *Merlin l’Enchanteur*, the second play in the *Graal théâtre* cycle. When Vortiger asks young Merlin to explain why his tower cannot stand, Merlin replies:

Vels tu savoir por coi ta tor ne puet tenir et qui labat. Se tu veux faire ce que ie te dirai ie te le monstrei apertement. Ses tu qui lia desous ceste tor. Il ia une grant aigue. & desous cele grant aigue a ij grans dragons qui ne voent goute. Si est li uns rous & li autres blans et si sont desous. Ij grans pieres & seit bien li uns del autre si sont moult grant. Et quant il sentent qui liaue sorpoise sor aus et loerre si se tournent & liaue demaine si grande bruit que quaque sous lui est fait couient chaooir. Ensi chiet ta tor por les dragons si i faites garder. Et se vous nel troues ensi com iai dit si me faites ardoir.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Barjavel, René. *L’Enchanteur*, p. 35.

¹⁵⁴ Roubaud & Delay, *Merlin l’Enchanteur*, in *Graal théâtre*, p. 74.

This is the wording of Merlin's explanation found in the *Estoire de Merlin* section of the Vulgate Cycle. It becomes clear immediately, however, that Vortiger has not understood Merlin's explanation. The child-mage notes this lack of comprehension: "Tu me suis? non apparement. Le roi Constant m'aurait bien compris enfin les temps changent. Traduisons en moyen français."¹⁵⁵ Merlin proceeds to rehash his explanation in modern French (not Middle), though without strict fidelity to his earlier discourse. For instance, "Ensi chiet ta tor por les dragons si i faites garder. Et se vous nel troues ensi com iai dit si me faites ardoir" becomes simply "Si tu ne me crois pas fais creuser. Tu verras bien."¹⁵⁶ Apparently Merlin no longer wishes to stake his life on the veracity of his explanation. Merlin's difficulty communicating in the idiom of a given period is in keeping with the notion that he lives outside of time, a commonplace device in texts that have followed T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*.

Lacunae

Both Barjavel and Roubaud reference the famous "nuit d'amour" in Chrétien's *Chevalier de la charrette* and its tongue-in-cheek modesty. In the medieval text, Lancelot and Guenièvre, united in the kingdom of Gorre following the heroine's abduction, share a night of passion that the narrator overtly censors:

Tant li est ses jeux dolz et buens
Et del beisier et del santir
Que il lor avint sanz mantir

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Une joie et une mervolle
 Tel c'onques ancor sa paroille
 Ne fu oïe ne seüe,
 Mes toz jorz iert par moi teüe,
 Qu'en conte ne doit estre dite.
 Des joies fu la plus eslite
 Et la plus delitable cele
 Que li contes nos test et cele. [4674-84]¹⁵⁷

Chrétien's text calls attention to the narrative lacuna precisely in its explicit refusal to provide details; his assertion that the account "toz jorz iert par moi teüe" is undermined by his very insistence upon silence. Both Roubaud and Barjavel exaggerate this protestation of modesty, rendering it comical. In Roubaud's *Le Chevalier Silence*, the love scene between adolescent protagonists Silence and Walllwein [sic] begins with preliminaries reported in dialogue: " 'Et tu aimes ma langue? Hum, hum, voyons un peu ça,' dit Silence en donnant un leste coup de sa langue à elle dans sa bouche à lui. 'Oh oh, dit Walllwein, voilà un nouveau jeu. Il te plaît? – Oui; à moi!'"¹⁵⁸ At this point, the narrator breaks away, continuing the scene with the words "Et cetera/Et cetera/Et cetera. Ce qui devait arriver arriva."¹⁵⁹ The text demonstrates a pseudo-modesty that echoes Chrétien's gesture while subtly mocking it. Barjavel takes the game one step further. As Lancelot and Guenièvre make love, the narrator echoes Chrétien's tactic of backing away from the lovers' intimacy: "Alors, laissons Guenièvre and Lancelot murmurer, balbutier, chanter leur amour, leur folie, leur éblouissement. La porte s'est refermée. Éloignons-

¹⁵⁷ "Her love-play seemed so gentle and good to him, both her kisses and caresses, that in truth the two of them felt a joy and wonder of which has never been heard or known. But I shall let it remain a secret forever, since it should not be written of: the most delightful and choicest pleasure is that which is hinted at, but never told," (Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William W. Kibler, New York: Penguin Books, 2004, pp. 264-65).

¹⁵⁸ Roubaud, Jacques. *Le Chevalier Silence*, pp. 47-8.

¹⁵⁹ Roubaud, Jacques. *Le Chevalier Silence* p. 48.

nous, en silence...”¹⁶⁰ At this point, Barjavel seems to have followed Chrétien’s approach to the letter, concretizing the distance through the metaphor of the closed door. The following page, however, consists of a nearly blank space bearing only the words “A L’INTÉRIEUR DE CETTE PAGE BLANCHE, GUENIÈVRE ET LANCELOT S’AIMENT.”¹⁶¹ This exaggeration of the narrative lacuna paradoxically draws more attention than an explicit description would have.

Roubaud’s *Le Chevalier Silence* presents an additional lacuna that echoes not medieval narrative elements, but rather gaps in the textual record of damaged manuscripts. Midway through Roubaud’s adventure, and without any warning, the text marks two lacunae in the course of a short passage: “Une vieille et honorable pauvresse, toute cassée, qui ramassait du petit bois pour faire chauffer la soupe de son vieil époux impotent leur apprit qu’elle avait vu partir [Bréhus sans Pitié] à toute allure une heure auparavant après une conversation avec un Il emmenait avec lui, emprisonnés et enchaînés dans son carosse entraîné par douze centaures, une renarde et six renardeaux. Et elle l’avait entendu dire à : ‘rendez-vous à Kamaalot.’”¹⁶² At the level of narration, the holes in the text indicate the presence of a character that the narrator does not yet wish to reveal to readers; in this case, Heldris is withholding Morgane’s identity. However, the absent words also mimic modern treatment of medieval texts whose manuscripts have been damaged enough to render portions of the texts illegible. Modern editions generally indicate missing portions of source text with

¹⁶⁰ Barjavel, René. *L’Enchanteur* p. 342.

¹⁶¹ Barjavel, René. *L’Enchanteur*, p. 343.

¹⁶² Roubaud, Jacques. *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 91.

similar ellipses. The lacunae in *Silence* recall these narrative gaps, sources of frustration and labor for scholars, although their deliberate insertion serves a more calculated narrative function within the novel.

Punctuation

Delay and Roubaud weave a medieval sensibility into the very mechanics of their *Graal théâtre*; apart from the second explicit (in the voice of the modern “scribes” themselves), there are almost no commas throughout the six-hundred-page cycle.¹⁶³ Accordingly, Merlin’s roll call of the knights of the Round Table during the second play of the cycle reads as follows:

Je vois Auctor père de Ké qui fut je veux dire qui sera un illustre sénéchal
je vois Do père de Girflet Nu père d’Yder Nabur l’Impétueux père de
Sagremor le Dérégulé qui naîtra dans trois mois et sera orphelin. Je vois
celui qu’on ne voit pas ceux que vous n’avez pas vus encore ceux que je
ne verrai plus Balaain Balaan Gadrasolain Gogalian Agloval Alibon de la
Cité Déserte Fortuné de la Vermeille Lande Méralis du Pré du Palais
Hector des Mares Mador de la Porte Tor fils d’Arès Perceval fils de ...
mais silence.¹⁶⁴

This sparse punctuation reflects medieval practice, as, for instance, the comma in its present form and usage did not appear before the early sixteenth century. Also absent from the entirety of the text are dashes, semicolons, and quotation marks. Thus, *Graal*

¹⁶³ A striking departure from this practice falls at the end of the cycle, in the section *La tragédie du roi Arthur*. Scribe Blaise recounts the final battle of Salesbières in eight pages of uninterrupted, fully punctuated alexandrin. The abrupt shift in mechanics renders the tone more portentous and elegiac, in keeping with the solemnity of Arthur’s final battle and death at the hand of his son Mordret.

¹⁶⁴ *Merlin L’Enchanteur* in *Graal théâtre*, p. 51.

théâtre approximates in a limited but distinctive way the experience of reading a medieval manuscript. The strategy does not aim for immersion into medieval textuality, but does succeed in rendering the reading experience faintly foreign for the modern audience, imparting a flavor of the medieval manuscript. It might be compared with the Norton critical edition of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, which uses distinctive type-setting for all proper names appearing in the text, calling attention to them in a way that echoes the red lettering that occurs in the Winchester manuscript. It is also worth noting that the "list effect" of the roll call occurs in several medieval texts; the phenomenon is particularly pronounced in Malory's episode involving Sir Urré, which accounts for every member of the Round Table.¹⁶⁵

A similar device can be found in the "Who's Who" portion of Roubaud's *Graal fiction*, as most pauses and shifts in subject are signaled by elongated blank spaces, and the somewhat capricious capitalization is largely reserved for proper names and the beginning of a new section: "Le soleil s'est élevé a depeçé la nublece la chaleur a

¹⁶⁵ Although the listing of the Round Table knights occurs more than once in the *Morte*, the most extended sequence comes when Sir Urré enlists in the aid of Arthur's knights, who all attempt in vain to cure his wounds: "[Sir Barraunte] assayed and fayled. So ded Kyng Uryence of the londe of Gore; so ded Kyng Angwysh of Irelande, and so ded Kyng Nentrys of Garloth; so ded Kyng Carydos of Scotlonde; so ded the duke Sir Galahalt, the Haute Prynce; so ded Sir Constantyne that was Kyng Cadors son of Cornwayle. So did duke Chalaunce of Claraunce. [...] So came in the knyghtes of Sir Launcelottis kyn (but sir Launcelot was nat that tyme in the courte, for he was that tyme upon hys adventures), than Sir Lyonell, Sir Ector de Marys, Sir Bors de Ganys, Sir Glamoure de Ganys, Sir Bleoberys de Ganys, Sir Gahalantyne, Sir Galyhodyn, Sir Menaduke, Sir Vyllars the Valyaunte, Sir Hebes le Renowné—all these were of Sir Launcelottis kynne—and all they failed. Then cam in Sir Sagramour le Desyrus, Sir Sodynas le Saveage, Sir Dynadan, Sir Brewne le Noyre (that Sir Kay named La Cote Male Taylé), and Sir Kay le Senesciall, Sir Kay d'Estraunges, Sir Mellyot de Logris, Sir Petipace of Wynchylsé, Sir Galleron of Galway, Sir Melyon of the Mountayne, Sir Cardoke, Sir Uwayne les Avoutres, and Sir Ozanna le Cure Hardy." Malory, Thomas. *Le Morte Darthur*, Ed. Stephen H.A. Shepherd, New York: Norton and Co., 2005, p. 640. The roll call continues in this vein for another page, accounting for all of the knights of the Round Table, even those who have died by this point in the *Morte*.

commencé et l'air s'est illuminé Gauvain erre dans le jour il entend les
oiseaux qui chantent en leur latin tout en chantant ils racontent leurs amours.”¹⁶⁶

Verse and Alliteration

Le Chevalier Silence thematizes generic format in a way that echoes medieval preoccupation. In justifying his choice of prose in place of verse, the narrator offers up the argument, popular during the thirteenth-century, that rhymed verse cannot be utterly truthful, “[c]ar les exigencies du nombre et de l’echo obligent à tordre le sens, à déformer les faits, à inventer, à mentir.”¹⁶⁷ This vilification was most explicitly articulated in Nicolas de Senlis’ medieval translation from Latin into French of the *Chroniques du Pseudo-Turpin*, in which he contends that stories told in verse cannot readily be told with perfect truth and precision.¹⁶⁸ Tantalizingly, *Le Chevalier Silence* bears some hallmarks of the verse tradition in its text. In particular, the text makes sporadic use of the alliterative mode. This reflects the tendency of Middle English romances to deploy alliteration—rather than end-rhyme—to effect poetic cohesion. The alliterative romance popular in the fourteenth century was itself a revival of a much earlier practice in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Canonical examples in Arthuriana include *Sir Gawain and the Greene Knight* and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. The most typical structure of alliteration followed the scheme aa//ab, in which the alliterative head-sound appears twice before the

¹⁶⁶ Roubaud, Jacques, *Graal fiction*, p. 107.

¹⁶⁷ Roubaud, Jacques, *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 10.

¹⁶⁸ “Issi vos an feré le conte/Non pas rimé .../ Si con li livres Lancelot/ Ou il n’a de rime un reul mot,/Pour mielz dire la verité/Et pour tretier sans fauseté;/Quar anviz puet estre rimee/Estoire ou n’ait ajostee/Mançonge por fere la rime.” Quoted in Kelly, Douglas, *Medieval French Romance*, 1993, p. 120.

caesura, and once after. The alliterative sounds could appear four or even five times in a given line. The opening of *Sir Gawain* follows this pattern:

Sithen the sege and the assault // was sesed at Troye,
The borgh brittened and brent // to brondes and askes,
The tulk that the trammes // of tresoun ther wrought
Was tried for his tricherie, // the trewest on erthe. [ll. 1-4]¹⁶⁹

Several passages of *Le Chevalier Silence* carry the alliteration through the prose equivalent of two or three verses. In particular, as Silence's pregnant mother worries over the unborn child's fate, she switches into the alliterative mode, which the narrator continues: "“oh! ma pauvre petite, mon pauvre bébé aimé,” sanglotait la duchesse Gortensja silencieusement secouée de ces sanglots dans la nudité noire de la nuit brycheiniogienne.”¹⁷⁰ In two of the three alliterative periods, the structure of aa//ab is followed, echoing the pattern associated with the medieval alliterative mode. Recourse to alliteration is particularly fitting for Roubaud as a member of OuLiPo, which espouses precisely this sort of wordplay, although his work as a whole seldom employs such conceits.¹⁷¹ On the level of narration, it would appear that the narrator cannot quite rid himself of the stylistic trappings of prose romance's origins in verse.

¹⁶⁹ “Once the siege and assault of Troy had ceased,/ with the city a smoke-heap of cinders and ash,/ the traitor who contrived such betrayal there/ was tried for his treachery, the truest on earth” (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, trans. Simon Armitage, New York: WW Norton and Company, 2007, pp. 20-21). Armitage's poetic translation approximates the alliterative effect. The emphasis of alliteration and caesura in the original Middle English is my own.

¹⁷⁰ Roubaud, Jacques. *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 25.

¹⁷¹ Roubaud also holds credentials as a medievalist, including a work of scholarship on the poetics of troubadour lyric, *La fleur inverse*.

Genre, Structure, and Outside Works

This section examines authorization strategies that deal with questions of the work's structure, genre, and anchoring in outside works. Modern French Arthuriana is preoccupied by *what* it is and how it functions textually; statements, either from a narrator or from characters at the level of plot reveal this concern with addressing the works' nature(s). Roubaud (along with Delay) demonstrates this preoccupation the most often, but Barjavel and Rio likewise reveal investment in it.

Genre and structure

Some texts demonstrate awareness of generic conventions, constraints, or valuation. In *Le Chevalier Silence*, Heldris refers obliquely to the three "matters" (of France, Rome, and Bretagne) in describing his composition: "Une telle scansion [the division and ordering of his chapters] n'est pas artificielle. Elle m'est imposé par la 'matière' de mon œuvre qui n'est pas vaine (tout en étant parfois, je l'espère, plaisante) mais chargée de graves vérités."¹⁷² The use of the adjectives "vaines" and "plaisantes" is a clear nod to Jean Bodel's characterization of the three branches of epic or legend, in which *la matière de Bretagne* is described as fantastical and diverting, rather than as a source of truth or edification: "Li conte de Bretaigne si sont vain et plaisant/ E cil de Ronme sage et de sens apendant/ Cil de France sont voir chascun jour aparant."¹⁷³ Jean Bodel here conceives of three subgenres within the framework of epic: the matters of

¹⁷² *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 54.

¹⁷³ Bodel, Jean. *La chanson des Saxons*. Trans. Annette Brasseur. *Chanson des Saisnes*. Paris: H. Champion, 1992.

Britain, of Rome, and of France, each with its own narrative territory, but also its own literary status judged in terms of its value in imparting moral or historical truth. While the *matière de Bretagne* is deemed diverting, it is also seemingly the least weighty of the three based on this metric. Heldris's allusion is an acknowledgement of the literary tradition of Arthurian production and the generic framework into which *Le Chevalier Silence* ostensibly fits. At the same time, it resists the designation of "vain," denying the charge of frivolity and implicitly claiming the same truth status as the other two branches.

Roubaud's various Arthurian works contain passages that recall motifs raised in numerous medieval Arthurian works and simultaneously serve as sign-posting for the generic conventions that structure medieval romance. This is typically done to comic effect, exaggerating a commonplace in the romance. For instance, in *La Queste* (and elsewhere), tradition holds that on feast days, an *aventure* must take place or be recounted before those at court—including Arthur—are allowed to eat. This detail is rendered humorous in *Le Chevalier Silence*: "Le roi ne peut pas se mettre à table (pour le dîner) si aucune aventure n'est survenue. Or aucune aventure ne s'est encore présentée ce jour-là: pas un défi, pas une demande d'aide d'une demoiselle persécutée; pas un monstre à réduire à des meilleurs sentiments, pas une pierre précieuse magique à retrouver. Rien, rien, rien. Ils ont faim."¹⁷⁴ The narrator highlights the tradition's reliance upon the continual presence of danger and crisis to (literally) fuel Arthur's court. Likewise, at the outset of Roubaud and Delay's *L'Enlèvement de la reine* in *Graal théâtre*, when a fellow knight suggests that it's time to serve the roast, Ké replies sardonically with an allusion to

¹⁷⁴ Roubaud, Jacques. *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 75.

the story of Sir Gawain: “Il [le roi Arthur] a décidé une fois pour toutes de nous empêcher de manger les jours de fête tant qu’une aventure n’est pas arrivée. Je ne peux quand même pas me déguiser en Chevalier Vert et me couper la tête pour que le sanglier soit servi.”¹⁷⁵ Even at the level of plot the Arthurian cast is largely aware of the absurdity of the rules and rituals that govern everyday life in Logres. It is a moment in which the character seems to break the “fourth wall,” signaling some understanding that he is acting out a narrative and has a limited role to play; unlike the superhuman Green Knight from another story, he cannot offer decapitation, as it would defeat the purpose of allowing him to enjoy dinner.

The narrative structure of the *conte* is laid bare entirely in a chapter of *Le Chevalier Silence* in which Heldris provides a numbered summary of the components of a typical adventure undertaken by Wallwein and Silence, as exemplified by the kidnapping of Evangéline. He explains that “la partie épisodique de l’aventure est simple, traditionnelle”—and that it consists of fifteen parts.¹⁷⁶ He then takes the reader through each successive element of the adventure, from the set-up in an anonymous castle, to the plea for aid from the distraught parents of a kidnapped demoiselle, to the first encounter with the villainous Bréhus sans Pitié, to the combat between Bréhus and Wallwein. Here, the text notes a circumvention of medieval convention (both combat and generic), as Wallwein triumphs over Bréhus only because Silence sneaks up behind the villain and bashes him on the head with a tile. Heldris glosses the unconventional outcome with Machiavellian equanimity: “Les règles du combat chevaleresque ne sont pas tout à fait

¹⁷⁵ *L’Enlèvement de la reine* in *Graal théâtre*, p. 343.

¹⁷⁶ Roubaud, Jacques. *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 42.

respectées. Mais le résultat est là. C'est l'essentiel."¹⁷⁷ The account then passes to the scenes of rescue, familial reunion, and reward to the young heroes. Taken as a whole, this chapter provides an acerbic break-down of the structure of a romance and its narrative *telos*.

Intradiegetic reference to other texts (whether or not they exist)

Roubaud places prominent emphasis on stories that will not be told, or that (he claims) can be found elsewhere. In *Le Roi Arthur*, after spending a paragraph on the hostile encounter between Brutus, newly arrived in England, and the already-present Picts, the narrator offers a wry disclaimer: "Mais je ne vous raconterai pas l'histoire des Pictes, car ils n'ont rien à voir avec Arthur."¹⁷⁸ The disclaimer is belied, however, by the narrator's description of the Picts' life in Scotland following their defeat by Brutus, indicating that their story (or history) is at least pertinent to the story being recounted, which in turn is ostensibly devoted to Arthur. At another point, the unnamed narrator assumes that the reader will have familiarity with the Fisher King's castle: "en lisant l'*histoire du Graal* et l'*histoire de Perceval le Gallois*, qui sont d'autres parties de cette grande histoire que je vous raconte."¹⁷⁹ On multiple occasions, the narrator also withholds information, on the grounds that it can be obtained elsewhere. Even the character Merlin participates in this practice, informing his interlocutors that he will not divulge his parentage, because "cela appartient à une autre histoire, qui est l'*histoire de*

¹⁷⁷ Roubaud, Jacques. *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 43.

¹⁷⁸ Roubaud, Jacques. *Le Roi Arthur*, p. 10.

¹⁷⁹ Roubaud, Jacques, *Le Roi Arthur*, p. 57.

Merlin et qui sera racontée ailleurs.”¹⁸⁰ Indeed, the identity of Merlin’s father is taken up and revealed elsewhere in Roubaud’s work, although not under that title; in *Graal théâtre*, the relevant branch is called *Merlin l’enchanteur*, and in *Graal fiction*, the section is entitled “Rapport sur la naissance de Merlin.” It remains ambiguous whether the passage in *Le Roi Arthur* alludes to an existing modern text, to a medieval text such as Robert de Boron’s *Merlin*, or to an entirely fictitious work.

Perhaps most suggestively, the narrator of *Le Roi Arthur* also stresses the complexity of the network of Arthurian stories. Noting that he is working from an extremely old text called *le roman du Graal*, he adds that as the tale was “racontée par beaucoup de contours, copies par beaucoup de scribes dans les châteaux et les monastères, il y a de nombreuses manières de la raconter, qui souvent ne sont pas tout à fait en accord les unes avec les autres.”¹⁸¹ Thus, the narrator and reader must both contend with a certain amount of narrative uncertainty, as illustrated by the question of whether Ygerne ever learned of Utherpandragon’s disguise as Marc to seduce her. While the narrator notes that “[d]ans une de ces versions de l’histoire, on nous dit qu’Ygerne devint très amie avec Merlin, que Merlin lui révéla beaucoup de choses,” he also makes clear that the source material, *le roman du Graal*, “ne dit rien à ce sujet.”¹⁸² The narrator goes on to list several possibilities regarding whether Arthur’s mother Ygerne ever learned the true identity of the man who impregnated her.¹⁸³ This passage, like others in Roubaud’s various works, points to the lack of continuity in extant

¹⁸⁰ Roubaud, Jacques, *Le Roi Arthur*, p. 20.

¹⁸¹ Roubaud, Jacques, *Le Roi Arthur*, p. 28.

¹⁸² *Le Roi Arthur*, pp. 28-9.

¹⁸³ As discussed earlier in the chapter; see above.

Arthuriana, exposing the lacunae and the embedded contradictions to comment upon the *matière de Bretagne* as a body whose limits accommodate even disparate accounts that should be irreconcilable. All of the the narrative choices moreover highlight the plasticity of the medieval Arthurian tradition, seemingly authorizing Roubaud's own creative agency as he adds new twists, anachronisms, and perspectives on existing material.

In Roubaud and Delay's *Graal théâtre*, the text assumes access to extra-textual sources in order for outside parties to stage the branches as theater. At the end of the *Morgane contre Guenièvre* branch, as Galehaut is wasting away from love-sickness, his physicians attempt to ascertain his life-expectancy by channeling a demon. The stage directions indicate that Pétroine unfurls a parchment as part of the ritual and reads magic spells taken from the *Corpus hermeticum*.¹⁸⁴ *Graal théâtre* does not supply the language of the purported incantations, although a reader wishing to stage the branch with fidelity to this indication would find excerpts of the *Corpus* readily available. Less accessible, however, is a text alluded to in the *Merlin* branch. During the transition between the old and new permutations of the Round Table, Girflet calls roll in alphabetical order. Exchanges between Girflet and the various knights carry through the 'A's and into the 'B's, at which point another narrative thread takes over. The stage notes indicate that "[o]n peut continuer l'appel en bruit de fond. La liste est disponible chez les scribes," meaning that Roubaud and Delay themselves are the only source of the requisite text.¹⁸⁵

In Roubaud's *Le Chevalier Silence*, narrator Heldris tells the reader that protagonists Walllwein and Silence met with sixty-five adventures during their year of

¹⁸⁴ This refers to the fifteenth-century Latin translation by Italian humanist Marsilio Ficino of the Egyptian-Greek *Hermetica*, which dates to the second or third century CE.

¹⁸⁵ Roubaud & Delay, *Merlin l'Enchanteur* in *Graal théâtre*, p. 130.

chivalric training, of which, he says, all are worth telling: “J’en ai consigné moi-meme, après leur retour vingt-trois (quatorze communes, six de Silence seule, et trois de Walllwein seul); je vous invite à lire ces récits (qui circulent en manuscrit; en langues celtes seulement).”¹⁸⁶ Heldris thereby offers and withholds the adventures in a single gesture; presumably, most of the French reading public for the novel is not versed in Welsh, Cornish, Gaelic, or even Breton, and would thus find the text impenetrable even if it *did* exist and could be obtained in manuscript form.

A small number of texts find medieval anchoring in extra-Arthurian points of reference, such as religious, philosophical, and literary works. In Michel Zink’s *Déodat, ou la transparence*, a prominent example is the insertion of Marie de France’s *lai* “Yonec” into the events of the novel. Although Marie, a rough contemporary of Chrétien de Troyes, did compose two known Arthurian *lais*—“Lanval” and “Chevrefeuille”—“Yonec” has no explicit Arthurian connections. In Zink’s novel, however, the young eponymous protagonist, the younger brother of a squire at Arthur’s court, hears from the woman he believes to be his grandmother (we later learn that she is his mother) the story of the woman who falls in love with a shape-shifting knight and bears the fruit of their adulterous union:

La jeune femme tenue enfermée au sommet d’une tour par son vieux jaloux de mari. Le grand oiseau qui entre par la fenêtre et se transforme en chevalier. Le piège du jaloux, le meurtre de l’oiseau. Et comment, tout jeune encore, Yonec, le fils des amours interdites, a su venger sa mère. Mais cette nuit-là, dans le délire de sa grand-mère, dans ses mots haletants et décousus (et il lui semblait si seulement il savait une chose, une seule

¹⁸⁶ Roubaud, Jacques. *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 42.

chose qu'il ignorait, ces mots prendraient leur vrai sens), c'était à la fois le même conte et un autre. Ou alors ce n'était pas un conte.¹⁸⁷

By the end of the novel, Déodat has learned that his grandmother/mother was the heroine of “Yonec” and that his family is playing out the aftermath of this tale. *Déodat* thus effects the integration of an Arthurian “conte du Graal” and an ostensibly unrelated text, linking the work to the literary production of the High Middle Ages. In this way, Zink takes the reader out of the closed-universe approach to Arthuriana while expanding the medieval anchoring of the novel.¹⁸⁸

The conte as internal source of authorization

While modern French writers of Arthuriana often evoke or even explicitly name other texts, such as the medieval works upon which the newer books are based, they are not entirely beholden to the medieval practice of relying upon an external source of authority as a guarantee of their own work. Indeed, some texts, such as Roubaud and Delay's *Graal théâtre*, thematize the question of narrative veracity, asserting textual self-sufficiency. In one scene pertaining to the composition of an account of Arthur's deeds, Merlin provides to Blaise an explanation of the Arthurian story's pretention to truth. “Le conte dit toujours vrai. Ce que dit le conte est vrai parce que le conte le dit. Certains disent que le conte dit vrai parce que ce que dit le conte est vrai. D'autres que le conte ne dit pas vrai parce que le vrai n'est pas un conte. Mais en réalité ce que dit le conte est vrai

¹⁸⁷ Zink, Michel. *Déodat ou la transparence*, pp. 28-9.

¹⁸⁸ Michel Rio and Jean-Pierre Le Dantec expand this world of literary referents even further, beyond romance into the realms of medieval theology, philosophy, astronomy, and medicine. This is less of an intertextual engagement and more on the order of world-building that anchors their respective texts in a particular setting: fifth-century Britain and twelfth-century France, respectively. I address these points of reference more fully in my third chapter, devoted to setting and historicity.

de ce que le conte dit que ce que dit le conte est vrai. Voilà pourquoi le conte dit vrai.”¹⁸⁹

This rationale is more meaningful than its circuitous articulation and apparent tautology might at first imply. It counters the notion that the *matière de Bretagne* is merely fanciful falsehood. More importantly, it establishes an authority internal to the story being told. The *conte* speaks true because, within the framework of constraints it has constructed, truth is its function – but that truth only functions (or needs to function) within the constraints of the *conte*. This eliminates the need for an external source of authority (e.g., God, or a source closer to the events described) to verify the truth value of the story recounted. This is because, logically, the particular *conte* is a hermetically sealed entity imbued with the power to enforce its own system of truth value.¹⁹⁰ This attitude toward the text circumvents the typical medieval authorization strategies, indicating that extra-diegetic truth and meaning are irrelevant to the story.

Other texts associated with Roubaud attest to a textual preoccupation with composition, such that characters narrate the writing process and lay bare the narrative outline of events recounted within the book itself. This self-conscious gesture means that *conte* becomes meta-*conte* and composition likewise becomes meta-composition. The voice of Blaise explains that the *conte* branches into two versions at one interval: “A cet endroit il existe deux versions du conte. L’une dit que Lancelot s’endort l’autre que Lancelot ne s’endort pas. Que Lancelot s’endorme ou ne s’endorme pas Galehaut parle et dit soit ceci soit cela que moi Blaise de Northombrelande je mets à la suite pour ne priver

¹⁸⁹ Roubaud & Delay, *Merlin l’Enchanteur* in *Graal théâtre*, p. 90.

¹⁹⁰ Michel Zink notes that “le roman se définit dès le début comme un genre réflexif, préoccupé par ses propres démarches, et donc comme un genre intellectualisé.” See *Introduction à la littérature française du Moyen Age*, Nancy: Livre de Poche, 1990, p. 61.

d'aucunes paroles celui qui écoute.”¹⁹¹ Blaise as narrator wishes for the reader to hold both versions of the *conte* in mind simultaneously and to consider both as viable. He nonetheless expresses a sense of ownership of his writings, dreading their misappropriation and above all the incursion of false meaning into the text. He scorns “ce Gautier Map qui publie des romans du Graal entièrement copiés sur moi et avec des contresens inimaginables.”¹⁹² Septime de Lorette commiserates: “C’est ce qui arrive à tous les grands esprits mais les continuations apocryphes permettent pour rétablir la vérité des secondes parties encore plus belles que les premières.”¹⁹³ Even the rest of the Arthurian cast in this cycle seems aware of the relationship between their acts and the (re)writing of such deeds. Arthur tells his knights that Blaise graciously steps out of retirement each time he is summoned to serve as court scribe, “afin que les historiens futurs de notre règne disposent de sources sûrs et fiables et de récits éclairs aux vives couleurs de la vérité.”¹⁹⁴ Textuality thus enters Arthur’s court at the level of plot. The Arthurian cast of this cycle demonstrates awareness that their deeds as living agents find their legacy in their textual representation. Not quite aware that they are fictional characters, they are nonetheless self-conscious of their destiny as eventual textual constructs.

¹⁹¹ Roubaud & Delay, *Lancelot du Lac*, in *Graal théâtre*, p. 309.

¹⁹² Roubaud & Delay, *Lancelot du Lac*, in *Graal théâtre*, p. 326.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Interlaced narrative (Conjointure)

Jacques Roubaud is adept at interlacing various adventures within his texts. This technique of alternating among the stories of various heroes is prominent throughout the Vulgate Cycle, and Roubaud replicates it precisely in *Le Roi Arthur*, picking up threads and letting them fall with occasionally humorous juxtapositions at the ends of chapters: “Balaain et Balaan s’embrassèrent et moururent dans les bras l’un de l’autre. Mais revenons au roi Arthur.”¹⁹⁵ This abrupt transition plays on the practices of *conjointure* and *entrelacement*, exaggerating the effect of alternating between (or among) narrative threads to tell a story with multiple components. Roubaud and Florence Delay effect even more elaborate interlacing in their vast *Graal théâtre*, whose plays are sub-divided into scenes that allow for precisely such interwoven narrative threads. Blaise the scribe explains to Arthur that he is developing a new narrative mode “qu’on pourrait appeler méthode générative ou technique d’enchevêtrement qui consiste—en quelques mots compréhensibles par tous—à ne pas suivre bêtement une histoire jusqu’à sa fin mais à construire avec toutes une chose comme une tapisserie où tous les fils se mêleraient savamment afin de faire apparaître les motifs et les motivations.”¹⁹⁶ For instance, Perceval’s first appearance, as the thoroughly naïve lad who encounters a host of questing knights, comes well in advance of his dedicated branch. The meeting first takes place in the prior *Merlin l’enchanteur* branch—although in fact, the scene in question is repeated word for word at the outset of the *Perceval le Gallois* branch. This section in turn ends with the “fausse arrivée” of Galaad, as the robotic Grail Elect intrudes upon Perceval’s

¹⁹⁵ Roubaud, Jacques, *Le Roi Arthur*, p. 87.

¹⁹⁶ Roubaud & Delay, *Lancelot du Lac*, in *Graal théâtre*, p. 327.

storyline. Blaise explains: “Galaad avait raté son entrée. Mais n’ayez nulle inquiétude pour lui on le reverra et quand on le reverra il la réussira son entrée. Aujourd’hui les temps n’étaient pas venus.”¹⁹⁷ This interlacing conflates the two canonical Grail knights to humorous effect.

René Barjavel likewise adopts the technique of interlacing narrative strands throughout *L’Enchanteur*. The novel’s narrator describes la matière de Bretagne as “un fleuve qui rassemble les eaux d’une quantité d’affluents,” whereby the various tributaries are knights of differing temperament and caliber, “tous venant s’ajouter à son courant pour suivre la pente unique de la Quete.”¹⁹⁸ The water metaphor demonstrates the ways in which individual streams/knights/narrative threads may converge and separate, even as all are bound by one *telos*. This interlacing technique appears with a particularly pronounced and moving effect toward the end of the novel. The narrator cuts back and forth among protagonists with cinematic precision, noting the transition with section breaks and the name of the character followed by a full stop. The chapter begins with Galaad doggedly seeking the Grail before shifting to Lancelot’s arrival to rescue Guinièvre, imprisoned and sentenced to death. Next a shift to Perceval, isolated in the wilderness. Then the standing stones, Viviane, and Merlin. This allows a brief panorama to account for the principal characters before the novel’s tragic denouement. The effect is tightened even further in the following chapter, as the desperate Lancelot’s cries (“Guenièvre! J’arrive!”) alternate with the chiming of the bell to herald the queen’s

¹⁹⁷ Roubaud & Delay, *Perceval le Gallois*, in *Graal théâtre*, p. 262.

¹⁹⁸ Barjavel, René, *L’Enchanteur*, p. 70

imminent execution by burning.¹⁹⁹ The section culminates with a final pivot to Galaad, who “vient de soulever le voile du Graal.”²⁰⁰

Rewriting and the Cycle

Medieval Arthurian literature emerged through an organic process of accretion over the course of centuries, with many chroniclers, *trouvères*, scribes, and authors contributing to an ever-more unwieldy corpus. At least two modern writers of French Arthuriana have taken this process one step further, revisiting stories they have already told in separate texts, such that their *réécriture* could be seen as meta-*réécriture*—a recycling of their own material, already appropriated from external sources. Michel Rio achieves this end twice over. First, over the course of his trilogy, he folds several pages’ worth of material from the first novel (*Merlin*) into the subsequent novels (*Morgane* and *Arthur*) which recount identical events but from different perspectives. He recycles this process by integrating all three volumes to create a full Merlin cycle: *Merlin, le faiseur de roi* (2006). In this cycle, the portions that had been narrated in Merlin’s first person voice are converted to limited third-person.

Roubaud likewise rehashes several sequences in his various Arthurian writings. In particular, accounts of Merlin’s birth, “death,” and relationship with the scribe Blaise all figure in *Graal fiction* and subsequently in *Graal fiction* (cowritten with Florence Delay).

¹⁹⁹ Barjavel, René, *L’Enchanteur*, pp. 454-57.

²⁰⁰ Barjavel, René. *L’Enchanteur*, p. 458.

In Roubaud and Delay's *Graal théâtre*, Merlin critiques Blaise's initial draft of Arthur's adventures, telling him, "Eh bien tu vas recommencer. Avec les modifications cela fera une autre version. Je prédis qu'elle sera encore plus vraie que la première."²⁰¹ This passage acknowledges the multiplicity at the origins of Arthurian composition, the notion that the same material was worked and reworked by dozens of hands over decades, each version attempting to correct the defects perceived in previous iterations while simultaneously protesting its own immutability. It also mimics the extensive, seemingly deliberate repetition that E. Jane Burns has identified throughout the Vulgate Cycle.²⁰²

Authorial personae

Choices in layout, punctuation, and word choice reflect micro-medievalisms, whereby a medieval stylistic practice is carried out one or more times within the text. By contrast, the macro level of medievalism typically appears in the context of a narratorial persona who acts as an intermediary between the reader and the medieval world. This persona most frequently self-identifies as a scribe, clerk, or troubadour and often employs familiar medieval strategies to account for the existence of the text he narrates.

The scribal or clerical guise is elaborately developed in two works: *Le Chevalier Silence* and *Graal théâtre*. *Le Chevalier Silence* opens with a lengthy prologue in which the narrator establishes his identity and project. "Mon nom est Heldris de Cornouailles. Je ne suis pas de Cornouailles et mon nom vrai n'est pas Heldris" begins the brash and

²⁰¹ Roubaud & Delay, *Merlin l'Enchanteur*, in *Graal théâtre*, p. 91.

²⁰² Burns, E. Jane, *Arthurian Fictions*, pp. 3-4.

indignant narrator, who goes on to condemn and vilify “un scribe français” designated by the letters “Chr.” for having stolen, translated, and muddled Heldris’ original Welsh work: “Son manuscrit a été répandu ensuite à travers toute l’Europe en innombrables exemplaires (une centaine au moins), chargé de tous les contresens, embellissements, fantaisies et inventions dont sont capables les copistes du continent... Ce faussaire médiocre a déformé mon nom en ‘Heldris’ (sous prétexte qu’en raison de la présence de nombreuses consonnes il serait imprononçable par les gosiers francs ou germains), m’a attribué la Cornouailles pour patrie et fait en sorte que mon récit, si scrupuleusement conforme aux faits réels apparaisse aux yeux de tous comme une fiction.”²⁰³ The “Chr.” referenced is ostensibly Chrétien de Troyes, a reading confirmed by subsequent references in the prologue to octosyllable, Chrétien’s preferred meter, and by a “note de l’éditeur moderne du conte.”²⁰⁴ The prominence of the narrator’s attack upon Chrétien is intriguing in the context of *Silence*, given that the historical medieval author had no credible link to this romance and, indeed, predated its only extant manuscript by more than half a century. Heldris goes then assures the reader of the trustworthiness of his “véritable version” of the story, alleging that all of his material was either the result of eyewitness testimony or credible deposition from others who are “dignes de foi.”²⁰⁵

The device of the first-person narratorial persona contains an additional layer within *Le Chevalier Silence*’s paratext, as the back matter of the book, signed by Jacques Roubaud, contains an account of the present work’s composition and transmission:

²⁰³ Roubaud, Jacques, *Le Chevalier Silence*, pp. 9-10.

²⁰⁴ See above for discussion of the editor’s note and its alternative account of textual genesis.

²⁰⁵ Roubaud, Jacques, *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 10

“[Silence] est l’héroïne de ces aventures véridiques, *Le Chevalier Silence*, qu’Heldris de Cornouailles a écrites en gallois, que mon ancêtre le troubadour Rubaut traduisit autrefois en provençal et que j’ai, à mon tour, à l’approche du troisième millénaire, mises en langue française, en les adaptant légèrement.” Here, Roubaud invents not only a textual genealogy, but a biological one to support it; by crediting himself with an ancestor associated with the medieval romance, he explicitly enters a lineage of literary production, thereby authorizing his appropriation of the text. *Le Roman de Silence* becomes a concrete legacy or inheritance to be used by the dead troubadour’s heir as he likes, legitimizing the alterations he might make in this “new” publication.

The collaborative Grail cycle of *Graal théâtre* likewise offers an account of scribal transmission through paratextual devices. Delay and Roubaud offer an *explicit* in the voice of Blaise de Northombrelande: “Ici en écrivant le mot fin Blaise de Northombrelande achève le Grand Livre du Graal tel qu’il l’a composé selon les vœux de Merlin et qui contient le récit véridique de l’aube du zénith et du crépuscule du Royaume Aventureux.”²⁰⁶ This fictional account of the text’s genesis echoes formulae found in numerous medieval texts that, preoccupied with establishing their own authenticity, construct a textual genealogy of sorts (also often fictive). Typical of this phenomenon is the account of *La Queste del Saint-Graal*’s composition, offered by the text itself in its final lines: “Et quant Boorz ot contees les aventures del Seint Graal telles come il les avoit veues, si furent mises en escrit et gardees en l’almiere de Salebieres, dont Mestre Gautier Map les trest a fere son libre del Seint Graal por l’amor del roi Henri son seignor,

²⁰⁶ Roubaud & Delay, *Graal théâtre*, p. 601.

qui fist l'estoire translater de latin en françois.”²⁰⁷ Delay and Roubaud's account of their text's genesis is only marginally more fictitious than the one provided by the *Queste*. Even setting aside the problem of the intradiegetic Bohort as the segue into the explanation of the *Queste*'s composition, the 'Mestre Gautier Map' referenced by the medieval text, a historical figure, had likely been dead for several decades by the writing of the *Queste* (ca. 1225); it is extremely improbable that he was involved in the composition of the medieval text. The mention of Gautier is likely intended to legitimize the *Queste*, as he was a known historian whose mention lends credibility, enhancing the text's claim to extradiegetic truth.

Delay and Roubaud's explicit may not be read as parody at first glance, given that it is a relatively straightforward deployment of the medieval practice. The wrinkle appears when the authors provide a second, italicized *explicit* in their own voice: “*Ici, en écrivant que Blaise a écrit le mot fin, aujourd'hui 19 mars de l'an 2004, nous Florence Delay et Jacques Roubaud, scribes de langue française, achevons notre livre Graal théâtre. Il contient tout ce qu'il doit contenir et nul après nous ne pourra y ajouter ou retrancher sans mentir.*”²⁰⁸ Three playful aspects of this second explicit demonstrate the work's engagement with its medieval antecedents while signaling that such “medievalizing” tendencies are not to be read too seriously. First, the initial *explicit*'s claim to “the final word” is undermined by the simple existence of still another final word, implying that the medieval is subject to upstaging by the modern. Second, the authors Delay and Roubaud adopt the medieval designation of “scribes,” indicating an

²⁰⁷ *La Queste del Saint Graal*, Ed. Albert Pauphilet, Paris : Editions Champion, 2003, p. 280.

²⁰⁸ Roubaud & Delay, *Graal théâtre*, p. 601.

abdication of genetic ownership of their book. Their claim to be mere translators into “the French language” of an original work is belied by the abundant innovations and twists upon the source material throughout *Graal théâtre*; rather than merely copying source material, they have actively engaged and interpreted it. Indeed, this reference may serve to suggest that medieval scribal activity was necessarily an interpretive task, an intimation backed up by manuscript variation and marginalia. The last sentence casts the tome as a *summa* of Arthuriana, parodying the notion of a text that is utterly complete and true. This pretention to prescriptive immutability (in other words, the contention that the text *cannot* be altered without compromising its integrity and therefore *must* not be altered) has antecedents in medieval Arthuriana, notably at the end of Chrétien de Troyes’s *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, as Godefroi de Leigni takes credit for the final third of the romance and insists upon the definitive nature of his work:

Godefroiz de Leigni, li clers,
 A parfinee la charrete
 Mes nus hom blasme ne l’an mete
 Se sor Crestien a ovré,
 Car ç’a il fet par le boen gré
 Crestien qui le comança.
 Tant en a fet des lors an ça
 Ou Lanceloz fu anmurez,
 Tant con li contes est durez.
 Tant en a fet, n’i vialt plus metre
 Ne moins, por le conte malmetre. [7102-12]²⁰⁹

²⁰⁹ “The clerk Godefroi de Lagny has put the final touches on The Knight of the Cart; let no one blame him for completing Chrétien’s work, since he did it with approval of Chrétien, who began it. He worked on the story from the point at which Lancelot was walled into the tower until the end. He has done only this much. He wishes to add nothing, nor to omit anything, for this would harm the story” (Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William W. Kibler, New York: Penguin Books, 2004, p. 294). *Le Chevalier au lion* contains a similar prescription against alteration.

Delay and Roubaud are well aware that Chrétien/Godefroi's work was not to enjoy the word-perfect fidelity ordained by the romance's conclusion. The eight known manuscripts of *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* contain numerous variations due to scribal error and conscious innovation.²¹⁰ Moreover, the account of Guenièvre's kidnapping and rescue was to be recast in prose several decades later in the *Lancelot Propre* portion of the *Vulgate Cycle*, as well as by Malory in a truncated, smoothed-over version that leaves out critical moments in the narrative such as Lancelot's infamous hesitation to climb into the cart. The co-opting of this impractical sentiment by the modern scribes both pokes fun at the notion of textual immutability and acknowledges – perhaps even invites – the possibility of a future author adding or subtracting to good effect. *Graal théâtre* in its 2005 incarnation is the authoritative version of the work, per remarks made by Delay in an interview with French publisher Gallimard: “Nous avons entrepris voici une trentaine d'années, Jacques Roubaud et moi, un cycle de dix pièces intitulé *Graal théâtre*. Un premier volume est paru en 1977, un deuxième en 1981. Maintenant, avec les quatre dernières pièces inédites, qui mènent à l'effondrement du royaume arthurien, le cycle est complet. Les livres précédemment publiés ont été entièrement revus, souvent modifiés. Ce *Graal théâtre* de 2005 constitue donc la version intégrale, ultime et définitive du projet.”²¹¹ Given the authors' apparent awareness of the cycle's open-endedness, however, even this assertion of completion may be regarded with some healthy skepticism. In a parallel gesture, Roubaud's *Graal fiction* styles itself the first in a

²¹⁰ *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, Lettres Gothiques, p. 31.

²¹¹ Delay, Florence and Roubaud, Jacques. “Rencontre avec Florence Delay et Jacques Roubaud, à l'occasion de la parution de *Graal théâtre*,” Gallimard.
<http://www.gallimard.fr/catalog/entretiens/01057096.HTM>, 2005, consulted 19 February, 2012.

twenty-six volume magnum opus designed to exhaust Arthurian inquiry; although no additional volume has been forthcoming since its 1976 publication, Roubaud's text seems to wish to leave open the possibility of yet another final word on the Arthurian matter.

Jean-Pierre Le Dantec's *Graal-Romance* contains a seamless transition between the plot and the account of the text's composition. The first person narrator, Gautier de Bath, had been in his youth a scribe at Arthur's court, and at the time of composition, he seeks to unknot the mysteries of the Grail from his position as head of Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuys monastery. By writing up an account of his visit with Merlin, Viviane, Lancelot, and Guenièvre in Brocéliande Forest, he hopes to come to a clearer understanding: "Demain," he write upon reaching a dead-end in his intellectual quest, "faute d'une direction meilleure, je reprendrai mon récit: en narrant mon séjour au domaine de Viviane, peut-être adviendra-t-il, de cette nuit que je ne sais pas lire, quelque lumière."²¹² Through this process, the intradiegetic level of *Graal Romance* becomes nearly coterminous with that of its narration; Arthur's reign is described by one who knew it from the inside, even as the act of writing becomes a means of elucidating its *aventures*.

In fact, *Graal-Romance* goes one step further in linking the events of the novel to the composition of the *medieval* texts about Lancelot. At the novel's end, one of the principal characters, Samuel d'Alexandrie, having learned of the knights of the Round Table from Gautier, vows to tell his future son of Lancelot's exploits; in the next breath, he reveals his intention to visit Troyes and to name his son Chrétien. Readers familiar with medieval Arthurian literature will recognize that Samuel is presented by the text as

²¹² Le Dantec, Jean-Pierre, *Graal-Romance*, p. 103.

the future father of Chrétien de Troyes, who is credited with the first account of Lancelot and Guinièvre's love in *Le Chevalier de la charrette*. Through this allusion to the father-son transmission, the medieval *Chevalier de la charrette* is provided with a (retroactive) textual genealogy that blends fiction and literary history. Thus, the medieval Chrétien's corpus is implicated in Le Dantec's novel, establishing a literary lineage that legitimizes the modern work, even as *Graal-Romance* seeks to transform the reader's understanding of the Arthurian canon through narrative innovation. At the level of plot, the novel claims kinship with the extradiegetic medieval canon, not as a descendent, but as an ancestor.²¹³

Gautier de Bath also places himself in the line of Arthurian scribes, referring to Blaise, Robert de Boron, and Gautier Map as his "prédécesseurs."²¹⁴ The double occurrence of the name "Gautier" is highly suggestive. It introduces the possibility that the fictional Gautier de Bath is the author of a lost Anglo-French romance devoted to Lancelot (upon which the subsequent *Lancelot en Prose* would have been based) that some scholars have attributed to the historical Gautier Map.²¹⁵ Thus, Gautier de Bath's account (*Graal-Romance*) would be the unacknowledged source text behind both Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette* and the later Lancelot tales found in the Vulgate Cycle. This would in turn provide an explanation for the presence of Map's name at the end of the *Queste* account, a component of the Vulgate; due to some mix-up, possibly clerical, the wrong Gautier has been credited with involvement in the stories of Lancelot

²¹³As I demonstrate in Chapter 4, this counter-intuitive genealogical order is consistent with the text's thematic preoccupations with inversion.

²¹⁴ Le Dantec, Jean-Pierre, *Graal-Romance*, p. 102.

²¹⁵See, for instance, K.G.T. Webster's article "Walter Map's French Things," *Speculum*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Jul., 1940), pp. 272-279.

and the Grail all this time. With this recourse to extradietic materials, *Graal-Romance* effects one of the most elaborate fictions of authority in modern French Arthuriana.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a sampling of the various techniques by which modern authors of French Arthurian fiction echo medieval literary concerns and practices. By assuming the techniques or even the guise of a medieval poet or scribe, they recreate for the modern reader the experience of encountering a medieval text. The sly tongue-in-cheek manner in which they carry out this medievalizing process demonstrates textual self-awareness of medieval appropriation and legitimizes post-medieval Arthuriana through the implicit claim that no text is sacred, that all medieval production is open to critique and even reinvention at the hands of those who have come after. Moreover, it casts light on a dynamic already present in medieval Arthurian literature. By *inventing* an “original” source, a text simultaneously undermines the value of authorization itself. This paradoxically opens the authorized text to alteration, casting it as part of a diffuse matrix wherein no single work can claim true primacy. The works of Jacques Roubaud and other authors of French Arthuriana thus serve as a critique of the modern tendency to idealize the “original” or “authoritative” and thereby cannily highlight the affinity between medieval romance and postmodern approaches to narrative.

CHAPTER 3

THE ONCE AND FUTURE CAMELOT

Medieval romance is a literature of ahistoricity and anachronism. From the courtly ideal of *fin'amors* to military technologies, elements of the High Middle Ages were transposed into storylines set in fifth- and sixth-century Britain. The paucity of historical records during that period no doubt facilitated the medieval authors' artistic license in depicting a society that more closely resembled that of feudal Europe than the bands of Celts and Saxons that occupied England following the collapse of the Roman Empire.²¹⁶ This is not to say that medieval romance faithfully reflects the lived realities of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europeans. Instead, it conjures an imagined, utopic space that combines a pseudo-historical heritage with ideals ranging from courtly love (*Tristan et Iseut*) to Christian piety (*La Queste del Saint-Graal*). Rather than attempting to accurately portray Britain as it had once been, or even holding up a mirror to medieval Europe, it serves as a distant, lofty goal to which one might aspire. Simultaneously, it is a place imbued with a sense of the supernatural. In Arthur's world, we encounter giants and fairies (*Lancelot en Prose*), shape-shifting sorcerers and dragons (*Merlin*), dwarves who demonstrate supernatural knowledge (*Tristan et Iseut*), and knights who can walk away from a beheading (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*). The Arthurian world's various *aventures* are typically linked to the paranormal, whether via fulfilled prophesy, magic

²¹⁶ For a summary of the political status of Britain during this period and of the transmission of Arthurian legend through the eleventh century, see Geoffrey Ashe's chapter in *The Arthurian Handbook*.

objects, or acts of superhuman strength and endurance. Often they are the result of celestial or diabolical intervention, as the boundaries between the human and the divine/demonic can be highly permeable.

Modern French Arthuriana is marked by an amalgam of approaches toward historicity, a natural outgrowth of the temporal complexity in medieval source material. Novels that are otherwise historically entrenched may feature elves and monsters. Texts seemingly set in a romance-inflected Middle Ages intersect, through marvelous encounters, with modern-day technology. The Arthurian era may be dated in some works with surprising specificity, becoming almost contemporaneous with the known composition dates for French romance, or, in the alternative, laid out year by year in the power vacuum caused by the fall of Rome. Two strategies dominate French Arthurian production, with many variations possible in either case. The majority of French Arthuriana follows the tradition of French romance and is thereby marked by ahistoricity and the prevalence of marvels. Such works tend to make use of sources drawn from a wide variety of medieval European literary sources and practice; they occupy a pan-medieval space, with occasional references that might otherwise date them more precisely contradicting one another. A minority of authors, whose works nonetheless have contributed substantially to the volume of modern French Arthuriana, opt toward a historicized Arthur, placing him in a specific fifth- or sixth-century Britain, which can be done with or without the incorporation of fantastical elements.

Given the vast and heterogeneous nature of modern Arthurian fiction, its attitude toward setting has become one of the most useful organizing principles.²¹⁷ There exist, however, divergent theoretical approaches to make sense of this range in setting, which is even greater when Anglophone production is taken into account. Most scholars of Arthuriana accordingly do not treat French production separately but alongside the much more ample English-language Arthurian tradition. On the one hand, scholars such as Robert Baudry have divided and subdivided the *matière de Bretagne* into dozens of precise and minute categories—in Baudry’s case, with an eye toward evaluating a given text’s preservation or undermining of the mythic quality of Arthurian legend. Baudry’s taxonomy of modern Grail literature takes as its starting point the medieval myth and considers possible permutations based on the intertextual functions introduced by the newer work. His fifteen permutations are grouped into three classes of “laws”: “les lois de permanence du mythe, celles de son évolution, et celles qui annoncent enfin son déclin.”²¹⁸ These laws take into account the posture and tone of a given text as well as its genre and setting. As a theoretical approach to classification, Baudry’s work effectively accounts for many variations within Arthuriana, although it reveals a serious bias toward texts that, in his estimation, best preserve its mythic qualities.

²¹⁷ By setting, I mean textual elements that localize the story in both time and space. While historical era figures frequently in scholarly discussions of settings in modern Arthuriana, the geographic dimension is sometimes neglected. I aim to remedy this oversight in the analysis that follows.

²¹⁸ Baudry, Robert. *Graal et littératures d’aujourd’hui*. Rennes: Terre de Brume Éditions, 1998, p. 368. By “lois,” Baudry does mean to assert a sort of super-structure of Arthurian réécriture governing creative possibilities: “On penserait volontiers que ce domaine d’imagination mythique permet toute fantaisie, que l’évolution se fait au hasard, selon un pur arbitraire. On l’a cru. Je ne le crois pas” (353). He adds that the categories were developed based on extant texts, rather than from *a priori* assumptions, but the resulting chart appears symmetrical and inorganic. I discuss the drawbacks of such prescriptive assessments later in this chapter.

Of more practical use is Raymond H. Thompson's classification of modern Arthurian fiction, consisting of five generic categories based on a text's "attitude towards setting": 1) retellings or modernizations, 2) historical fiction, 3) "realistic" fiction, 4) science fiction, and 5) fantasy.²¹⁹ The first category consists of ostensibly faithful translations or renderings of familiar legends for an audience, often consisting of younger readers, that lacks the language skills necessary to read the original medieval works. Examples in French include the early twentieth-century retellings of Jacques Boulenger, as well as the majority of the tomes in the more recent *Grands Mythes Fondateurs de l'Occident* series. Historical fiction features strict attention to historical detail; works are typically set in either post-Roman Britain or the High Middle Ages. Thompson notes that mood and approach in this category may tend toward either gritty realism or romanticism. The third category, "realistic" fiction, has a contemporary, real-world setting, in which Arthurian legend factors either as a backdrop (for instance, via an archeological site or artifact) or as a familiar plot pattern being reenacted by a new cast of characters. Science fictional Arthuriana proposes scientific and technological explanations for marvelous occurrences (such as the Lake or the Grail), rationalizing them into the realm of the possible; alternately, it can portray Arthurian motifs and narratives set in the distant future. And finally, fantasy allows for the intervention of the supernatural with no attempt at rationalization. Thompson's classification is logically delineated and encompasses the vast majority of recent Arthurian production in French but presents certain difficulties. The breakdown is not wholly adequate for a French corpus including texts of ambiguous

²¹⁹ Thompson, Raymond H. *The Return from Avalon: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in Modern Fiction*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985.

setting, such as *Graal théâtre*. Perhaps more importantly, a number of French texts contain elements of multiple categories, creating amalgams of fantasy and historical fiction (*Le Pas de Merlin* and *Brocéliande*), of the classic retelling inflected with science fiction (*L'Enchanteur*), and of “realistic” fiction melded with fantasy (*La Ménopause des fées*).

Another approach, far less taxonomically elaborate and more flexible, evaluates novelistic works of Arthuriana based on their relative conformity to one of two overarching categories: historical fiction and fantasy. Anne Besson has maintained that “l’ambivalence générique, autour de deux pôles de la contrainte et de l’initiative, qui prennent alternativement pour noms rationalité et merveilleux, déterminisme et libre-arbitre, roman historique et fantasy, nourrit également le jeu des possibles, et se nourrit à son tour de la succession des équilibres proposés. L’importante production romanesque de la seconde moitié du XX^e siècle [...] peut ainsi se décrire par son ‘mouvement perpétuel’ entre ‘histoire’ et ‘légende.’”²²⁰ Besson is careful to caution that by theorizing these two poles and characterizing works of Arthurian fiction as occupying an intermediary position between them, we may mask the radical variation in approaches adopted by different authors. It is certainly reasonable, however, to posit a continuum to support various approaches to genre and setting, which allows for greater nuance than distinct categories.

²²⁰ Besson, Anne, *Le roi Arthur au miroir du temps: La légende dans l’histoire et ses réécritures contemporaines*, introduction, Dinan: Terre De Brume, octobre 2007, p. 16.

Marc Rolland adds two designations to the primary setting-based categories of “traditional” (medieval) and “historical” (fifth-century); in the latter category, he identifies *romans inclusifs*, which reconcile legendary elements with the historical setting, as opposed to *romans sélectifs*, which only preserve those elements that fit the period under strict historical scrutiny.²²¹ In the former category, for instance, Merlin might transport Stonehenge from Ireland, whereas in the latter category such an event would not be recounted due to its historical impossibility. Claire Jardillier has noted that the majority of recent fiction tends toward historical realism, with magical or marvelous elements tucked into novels that otherwise strive for authentic portrayals of sixth-century Britain.²²² Emblematic of this trend is Jean-Louis Fetjaine’s Merlin duology, with its scrupulous attention to historical accuracy with regard to post-Roman Britain operating alongside treatment of a race of elves endowed with supernatural powers.

This chapter contains five case studies of the use of time and setting in modern French Arthuriana, with particular attention paid to the ways in which the typical flow of Arthurian time may be subverted or otherwise co-opted toward playful ends. In it, I highlight a range of approaches to temporal anchoring, historicization, and related world-building.²²³ The sections treat Barjavel’s *L’Enchanteur*, Roubaud and Delay’s *Graal*

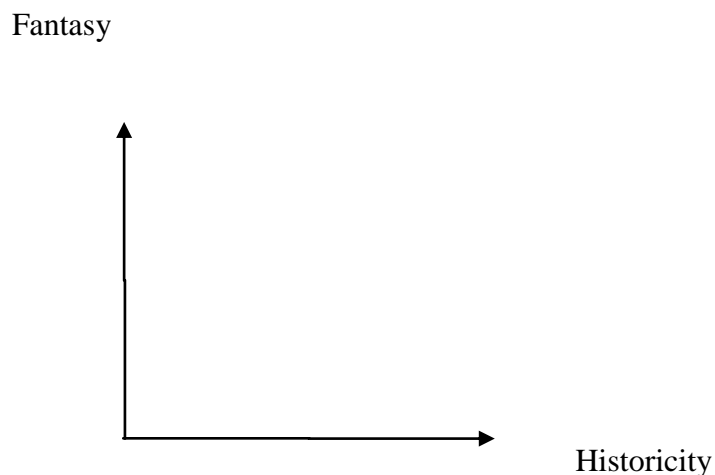
²²¹ Rolland, Marc. “Un Prince du Ve siècle: Arthur et le roman historique au XXe siècle,” *Le roi Arthur au miroir du temps: La légende dans l’histoire et ses réécritures contemporaines*, Dinan: Terre De Brume, 2007, p. 108.

²²² Jardillier, Claire, « Les enfants de Merlin : le merveilleux médiéval revisité », in *Le roi Arthur au miroir du temps: La légende dans l’histoire et ses réécritures contemporaines*, introduction, Dinan: Terre De Brume, octobre 2007, p. 135.

²²³ This last refers to the process of constructing a fictional world or universe in speculative fiction. It is particularly germane to discussions of fantastical landscapes such as those found in Fetjaine’s books but might also be applied to pseudo-historical works such as Rio’s trilogy that take place in a time about which we know very little.

théâtre, Rio's *Merlin* trilogy, Gudule's *Menopause des fées* trilogy, and five novels by Fetjaine. The chapter concludes with an analysis of three works that take up the pervasive medieval *topos* of the Otherworld: Roubaud's *Le Chevalier Silence*, Le Dantec's *Graal-Romance*, and Barjavel's *L'Enchanteur*.

In discussing these works and their approaches to time and setting, some discussion of genre is entailed, as categories such as theater, the historical novel, and speculative fiction have inescapable bearing on the range of choices for setting. I would ultimately like to suggest that generic partitioning of modern Arthuriana, especially as pertains to recent French material, is at once too prescriptive and too exclusive. Novels readily straddle the major categories (such as historical novel, contemporary fiction, and fantasy), and an effort to accommodate all possible variations risks subdividing *la matière de Bretagne ad absurdum*. At the same time, a simple continuum between historical and legendary tendencies may not be sufficient to capture some of the key variations in setting, namely those that may emerge in an incongruous juxtaposition of legendary *topos* (especially associated with the marvelous or magical) with elaborately inscribed postures of historicity. Moreover, it is too easy in this latter paradigm to conflate "legendary" with the supernatural, which may not, in fact, stand in opposition to these postures of historicity. Instead, I propose that novels might be situated based on two separate axes evaluating historicity and fantastical value (whether in the medieval marvelous vein or more modern conceptions of magic and fantasy).



By the former attribute, I mean the degree to which a text is overtly anchored in a historical setting (assessed both temporally and spatially), with a zero-value pertaining to texts with no parameters to gauge historical setting, and a high value accorded to texts with elaborately constructed historicism (whether congruent with real-world historical settings or not). By the latter attribute, I mean the relative prominence of the supernatural in a text, such that a zero-value would indicate the absence of any such phenomenon, a mid-range value would indicate a substantial presence, and a high value would indicate saturation. The French canon of Arthuriana presents examples in the four basic permutations this conceptualization yields: high historicity-high fantasy (Fetjaine's Merlin duology, Le Dantec's *Graal-Romance*); high historicity-low fantasy (Rio's Merlin trilogy); low historicity-high fantasy (Barjavel's *L'Enchanteur*; Roubaud and Delay's *Graal théâtre*); and low historicity-low fantasy (Zink's *Déodat*). These are, of course, subjective determinations not intended to be quantified; my goal is not to plot texts on a grid, merely to account for existing variations and consider texts relative to one another.

But reframing the criteria for evaluation may alleviate some of the difficulty that arises from pigeonholing texts in mutually exclusive categories on the one hand, and from suggesting false binaries on the other. This approach takes away some of the emphasis in Thompson's proposed categories upon *when* a story is set by redirecting it toward *the extent to which* a text is set temporally—that is, how elaborately a text is situated in any given period, whether post-Roman, medieval, present-day, a distant future, or an alternate time-scape. It also allows for greater consideration of the spatial element of a setting. The first two sections of this chapter (on Barjavel's *L'Enchanteur* and Roubaud and Delay's *Graal théâtre*, respectively) deal with texts that tend toward minimal setting; my analysis focuses on how the apparent timelessness of such works gives way to elaborate tinkering with the flow of time. The three following sections (on Gudule's *Ménopause des fées*, Rio's Merlin cycle, and Fetjaine's *Trilogie des elfes* and Merlin duology) address works that are inscribed in a more fully delineated setting, both temporally and spatially.

Bulldozers and Canned Goods:

Marvelous Anachronism in Barjavel's *L'Enchanteur*

In 1984, science fiction and fantasy novelist René Barjavel released his penultimate work, *L'Enchanteur*. This hefty novel takes place in a fantastical landscape with few coherent historical anchors, following Merlin from his birth through the fall of the Round Table, with plot threads devoted to Perceval, Morgane, and the Grail Quest. The text features numerous marvelous elements, including enchanted lands, fantastical

races from Celtic mythology, and a journey to the Otherworld.²²⁴ Its high fantasy ahistoricity closely resembles the marvelous setting typically found in medieval romances, situating its adventures in a distant past that little resembles either post-Roman Britain or the High Middle Ages. The post-Roman context is hinted at in various passages, such as the narrator's offhand remark that Arthur "fut le plus grand roi d'Occident jusqu'à Charles empereur," meaning that Arthur must have ruled before the birth of the Holy Roman Empire.²²⁵ That is the extent of the temporal anchoring, however. Dates and other historical specifics are decidedly in short supply. Nonetheless, some elements of *L'Enchanteur*'s plot are discernibly at odds with its ostensible "romance" setting, tenuous though the latter may be. In particular, the novel witnesses the sporadic transplanting of modern-day (that is to say, twentieth-century) technology into the realm of Logres, generally in episodes on the periphery of the story. This section highlights the marvels of anachronism that mark *L'Enchanteur*, asserting that they facilitate an unusual shift from fantasy to science fiction, even as they self-consciously imitate medieval literary practice.²²⁶

L'Enchanteur largely adheres to the generic expectations of a fantasy retelling of Arthurian legend. Inspired by the stories of the Vulgate cycle, filtered through modern intermediaries such as Jacques Boulenger, the novel treats the supernatural

²²⁴ I analyze the trip to the Otherworld in the final section of this chapter.

²²⁵ *L'Enchanteur*, p. 202.

²²⁶ Although I use the terms "fantasy" and "science fiction" here, both subsets of the broader category of speculative fiction, Robert Baudry makes the case that "fantasy" is often misused, and that for works that describe "la pénétration dans un autre monde, enchanté ou hanté, ou l'intrusion d'un tel monde au milieu du nôtre," the term "merveilleux" is more fitting. I reserve the latter term for medieval works and consider fantasy as the modern-day analogue. Baudry, Robert. *Graal et littératures d'aujourd'hui*. Rennes: Terre de Brume Éditions, 1998, p. 233.

conventionally in most respects.²²⁷ Viviane is mistress of the Otherworld of the Lake and has conjuring powers over the natural world. Galehaut belongs to a race of giants. Merlin, the enchanter, can endow a peasant girl with beauty and the ability to fly, and various knights find themselves spellbound, whether by the Grail or by Morgane's meddlesome powers. Barjavel adds to the familiar host of marvels a variation that hinges on temporality and the ability of certain figures to transcend the limitations of the Arthurian era. To address this phenomenon, I use the term anachronism, albeit with some reservations about employing it in cases where an author of speculative fiction has, through world-building, departed from the standard, real-world delineation of historical periods and their associated technologies. Moreover, it should not be inferred that Barjavel was unaware of his contravention of the received historical order; when one speaks of anachronism, it is very often in the context of a lapse or oversight in continuity. Barjavel's meddling with the fabric of time is very carefully crafted and threaded through a select few plot lines and narratorial channels. The implications of destabilizing the flow of time and history were a clear source of preoccupation for the author over the course of his long career. He is credited with inventing the grandfather paradox, whereby a backwards time traveler who kills his grandfather before his father's conception will create a reality loop, such that the traveler would never have been born, would never have traveled back in time, and thus could not have killed his grandfather in the first place.²²⁸

²²⁷ Barjavel cites his sources in a bibliography that also includes the work of medievalist Paul Zumthor. (Denoel edition, p. 351). For additional commentary on Barjavel's engagement with bibliographic sources, see Chapter 2.

²²⁸ In *Le Voyageur Imprudent* (1943).

For want of a more satisfactory term, however, I do use the term “anachronism” as shorthand for the disruption of readerly expectation with regard to the scope and flow of time in the Arthurian world. That may manifest itself in a character or narrator figure who reveals knowledge one would not expect an Arthurian character to have—for instance, of late modern urban landmarks or pop culture icons. Or it may come in the form of what I call an *incursion*, the arrival into the Arthurian world of an artifact or practice that seems out of place for the ostensible historical setting. Given *L’Enchanteur*’s lack of historical anchoring, very wide parameters must be drawn. Nonetheless, it is possible to categorize traditional Arthurian time as post-Roman and pre-modern. Incursions have provenance beyond this time frame—almost invariably after it. In *L’Enchanteur*, there are just a handful of episodes or passages that disrupt the continuity of the familiar Arthurian world. As such, anachronism in Barjavel’s work is all the more striking when it does appear. We witness its effects only upon secondary characters, and it tends to be closely affiliated with the supernatural, whether in the form of Merlin’s magic or a satanic intervention. The limits of Arthurian time are transcended both on the level of narration and the level of plot.

Diegetically, the narrator reveals a frame of reference greater in scope than that of the Arthurian cast. In describing the dilemma of the Devil, whose subterranean abode is under-populated due to Christ’s redemptive power, he paints a portrait of vacant torture chambers that relies upon modern points of reference: “Sa longue Avenue des Tortures, qui allait des Champs-Élysées à Broadway, était absolument vide. Pas une âme! Vides les tours de béton, les usines de fer! Inutiles les marteaux à défoncer les oreilles, les roues à

écraser, les musiques à désosser, les plages à rôtir, les mers empoisonnées, les piscines de chlore, les entonnoirs à pétrole, les abattoirs [...] tout fonctionnait à merveille mais à vide, vide, vide!”²²⁹ The abrupt appearance of iconic modern street names into the traditional Arthurian landscape comes forty pages into the novel and is the first moment in which its pure fantasy expectations are subverted; the Champs Elysées and Broadway are, of course, streets that only came into existence centuries after Arthur’s putative reign. Other elements of this passage evoke the modern landscape—chlorinated pools (or rather, pools *of* chlorine), iron foundaries, and concrete towers all suggest the impersonal machinery associated with industrialized life. The narrator makes other occasional remarks that mark him as a modern storyteller, rather than a medieval bard or *jongleur*. Most notably, in bringing the story to a close, he shifts for the space of a few sentences to the present day, depicting Morgane, who has been literally petrified by her own venomous character, as a fixture of the British landscape and sightseeing destination. “Des tourists y viennent,” we learn, “des Japonais, des Allemands surtout, quelques Français aussi.”²³⁰ In this brief space, the narrator pulls the reader from “Arthurian times” into the modern world. When the narrator demonstrates his temporal range, it is with very little fanfare; the text slips into the twentieth-century seamlessly and returns to Arthurian times without comment. The narrator makes no effort to situate his frame of reference and account for any temporal slippage.

Narratorial interventions aside, it is the Devil who is the principal origin of anachronistic meddling at the level of plot, whether through his own agency or through

²²⁹ *L’Enchanteur*, p. 42.

²³⁰ *L’Enchanteur*, p. 467.

the channel of the benignly motivated Merlin. Rather than simply betraying knowledge of the future through cultural references, however, the Devil imports anachronistic artifacts, namely mechanical tools, into the Arthurian world. The strong association between the Devil and technology reflects Barjavel's well known skepticism of the latter; technological downfall through hubris is a recurrent theme in his work. Midway through *L'Enchanteur*, Morgane seeks the devil's aid in solidifying her power base through the construction of a castle. Their pact concluded, an army of demons unleashes a barrage of construction equipment to clear the forest and build the edifice: "Derrière les lance-flammes arrivèrent les missiles qui pulvérisèrent le rochers. Derrière les missiles vinrent les bulldozers, les arracheurs, les excavateurs, les compresseurs, les aplanisseurs, les vibreurs, les bétonneurs, les fondeurs, les pileurs, les cracheurs de moellons et de poutres d'acier."²³¹ Even if we admit Greek fire as a version of the flame thrower, these items clearly belong to the modern industrial world, and the litany of machines is a flagrant and gleeful nod to the destructive capability of such technology. Indeed, the demon horde is able to demolish and rebuild the site in under a week. Morgane's new castle, shaped like a squat compound, comes equipped with an intercom, through which she can speak to the Devil, and a sort of glass elevator, allowing her to descend an infinite number of levels.²³² This too seems to be a jab at the utility and even morality of technology, as the reader can see the direction it is sending Morgane: toward the Devil's own domain. At the end of the chapter, the novel reinforces the infernal providence of the anachronistic technology as the narrator explains that the Devil is "comme un marteau-pilon de mille tonnes qui

²³¹ *L'Enchanteur*, p. 308.

²³² *L'Enchanteur*, p. 309

s'abat sur une noix. A cette époque il n'y avait pas de vrais marteaux-pilons sur terre. Ils étaient encore tous en enfer.”²³³ This aside has the interesting effect of insinuating that technology such as the steam hammer preexists its own invention and is always at the ready in a Platonic form; it simply needs to be conjured or summoned. Moreover, it confirms the narrator's place as a modern story teller looking back upon a bygone era.

Even when the Devil is not directly implicated in technological intervention, the text demonstrates skepticism and dismay at its use. The other character in *L'Enchanteur* capable of wielding power over the tools and trapping of other eras is, of course, Merlin. Endowed with supernatural gifts from both his diabolic progenitor and his divine Father, he can shape-shift, conjure objects out of thin air, and confer powers such as flight and the language of animals upon others. Most importantly, perhaps, he is unencumbered by chronology. The narrator comments during Merlin's adolescent battle against the temptations of the devil that “[i]l put certainement se libérer très vite de l'esclavage du temps, car c'est de cette époque que date le souvenir de sa folie, dont l'image le représente comme un vieil homme tordu, alors que d'après le temps banal il était encore un enfant.”²³⁴ This may serve as a nod to T.H. White's *Once and Future King*, which depicts Merlin as aging backwards—gradually growing younger over the series. It is also an acknowledgment of the contradictions embedded in the earliest canonical accounts of Merlin's life.

²³³ *L'Enchanteur*, p. 310.

²³⁴ *L'Enchanteur*, p. 47.

Power over time and space does not mean that Merlin is infallible, however—far from it. Moved to pity for an elderly woman, he meddles with the natural order of human progress, and in so doing causes complications and heartache. In a subplot that veers from the traditional Arthurian source material, Merlin undertakes to ease the burdens of Bénigne, an elderly widow who complains to him that the labor of collecting firewood and tending her garden for subsistence is overwhelming. Acting on a whim, he magically installs a gas fireplace in her cottage and shows her how to use the valve to control the strength of the blaze. The amazed widow comments that this fire which can die down and light back up, and which uses a single (artificial) branch that stays the same instead of becoming a heap of cinders, must come from Hell. To which Merlin replies, “Où il y a du feu, il y a toujours un peu du Diable,” confirming that Merlin owes to his infernal father his ability to subvert the normal progression of time and import anachronistic artifacts.²³⁵ Merlin’s aid doesn’t end with the fireplace, however. To relieve the monotony of fava beans—Bénigne’s principal source of nutrition—and to ease her daily burden of gathering and preparing her food, Merlin stocks her cupboards with sparkling cans, all labeled with words and images of foods. For the widow, the cans are a marvelous apparition. Merlin explains that the food is premade; all she must do is lift the pull-tab, and if she ever runs out of cans, she only need say the word and more will appear.

Upon returning to her village sometime later, however, Merlin discovers his gifts have had unintended consequences. Bénigne has fallen into a state of apathy, and the marvels around her have lost their veneer. She has nonetheless become utterly dependent

²³⁵ *L’Enchanteur*, p. 184.

upon them, sitting by the fire all day long and getting up only for canned goods, which she tosses out to litter her lawn. Meanwhile, the other villagers are mortally envious of her monopoly on the commodities. The priest Blaise counsels Merlin to undo the damage by getting rid of the cabinet of canned goods. Merlin, however, reasons that the villagers would not covet if they did not face a terrible lack; his solution is to conjure a building that will raise the villagers' standard of living. The narrator describes this building in detail: "Son mur du devant était remplacé par une grande vitre toute transparente qui laissait voir à l'intérieur, contre les murs, des rangées de casiers pleins de boîtes, de boîtes, de boîtes ... Et, près de la porte, une pile de paniers en fil de fer, pour se server et *emporter*."²³⁶ Merlin has, of course, created the modern-day grocery store, complete with a glass storefront window, which would not come into use in Britain until the seventeenth century. The episode ends well, but with a sense that Pandora's Box has been opened, and that villagers' hunger for novelty and convenience, once awakened, will never be sated. Merlin must continue to import new conveniences to fix problems that are themselves indirect consequences of his meddling.

Other occurrences of anachronism in the novel are limited. Their very scarcity, however, increases the generic complexity of *L'Enchanteur*. The work unquestionably tends toward fantasy rather than the historical novel, but within this matrix, some further observations are in order. It may be useful to think of the text as a sort of retroactive *roman d'anticipation*, wherein the future is always and already assimilated into the past. Within the rubric of speculative fiction, we may also label this thread of anachronism

²³⁶ *L'Enchanteur*, p. 279.

“science fiction.” In *The Return from Avalon*, Raymond Thompson notes that, proportionally speaking, works of Arthurian science fiction are extremely rare; this holds true today for the French tradition as well as the Anglophone.²³⁷ Thompson does call attention to the existence of a generic hybrid, science fantasy, wherein magic and other fantastical elements of Arthurian story lines are rationalized in a cursory way with recourse to science, for instance a parallel universe in which magic can exist, or a time travel premise allowing for technological advances to be brought to the Arthurian kingdom.²³⁸ Barjavel’s novel, however, inverts the paradigm; rather than providing a scientific or pseudo-scientific rationale for magic, he provides a marvelous explanation for the science fictional elements of the plot. In other words, he treats technology and the incursion of the modern as an integral facet of the marvelous. In turn, magic in *L’Enchanteur* owes its existence to the divine forces of good and evil, and the novel’s somewhat detailed theology-building underpins its deployment of the modern-day machines and commodities running through it.

There remains the question of why Barjavel would choose to incorporate these anachronistic elements in the novel. His ingrained mistrust of reliance upon technology is certainly at work in *L’Enchanteur*, but anachronism also acts as a self-conscious medievalizing gesture on Barjavel’s part. In the dedication to the novel, he warmly acknowledges the two millennia of “bardes, conteurs, troubadours, trouvères, poètes, [et]

²³⁷ Thompson, Raymond H. *The Return from Avalon: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in Modern Fiction*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985.

²³⁸ For a study of the poetics of the science fiction genre, see Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Yale University Press, 1979. A key component of Suvin’s definition of science fiction is that it must exclude all recourse to magic to explain the marvels, advances, and phenomena that do not occur in the known world.

écrivains” who preceded him.²³⁹ His dedication, as noted in Chapter 2, is among the most earnest strategies of textual authorization to appear in modern Arthuriana. Given his evident preoccupation with medieval literary tradition and practice, it is reasonable to consider the precedent for anachronism set in medieval Arthuriana as a source of inspiration. Twelfth- and thirteenth-century composers of canonical Arthurian romance transported to an ostensible post-Roman context all manner of things that did not yet exist, attributing to it modes of dress, social practices, and political systems that would not be witnessed in Britain until hundreds of years after “Arthur’s reign.” Barjavel reproduces the effect of medieval literature’s anachronism by imitating it in a way that will be recognizable to the modern reader. The elevators, bulldozers, and canned goods might be considered analogous to the appearance of great helms and jousting (fixtures in medieval romance but non-existent in post-Roman Britain) in canonical Arthuriana.

Moreover, some of the earliest Arthurian texts rely on the blurring of dates, whether deliberate or accidental. It is widely accepted that Geoffrey of Monmouth mistook his sources while writing the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, conflating two quasi-historical figures and inadvertently sending Merlin back in time a century—a discrepancy he attempted to smooth over in his later *Vita Merlini*. Indeed, the mention in *L’Enchanteur* of Merlin’s ability to escape the bonds of time as an explanation for why he looks like an old man at some points and a youth on subsequent occasions is a clear nod to the temporal confusion in Geoffroy’s works. And finally, it is worth remembering that, like Barjavel, the medieval composers of Arthurian romance knew where the story

²³⁹ *L’Enchanteur*, p. 7.

would ultimately end. The broad outline of the Arthurian narrative arc was set in place very early, so that the collapse of Arthur's court was to some extent pre-written for twelfth- and thirteenth-century romancers. By the early 1200s, scribes were expanding the story, inserting vast amounts of material into the narrative middle, but always aware of the impending downfall, which could be stalled but not denied. In this light, the presence of bulldozers and canned goods in the world of Arthur enhance the authenticity of the author's homage to the medieval source material. They, like the canonical romances, look forward into a known, troubling future.

Arthur's Back in the USSR:

Jacques Roubaud and Florence Delay's temps aventureux

Graal théâtre is particularly unusual in its treatment of temporality, given its lack of historical anchoring. There is scant evidence to place the work either in the post-Roman period or in the High Middle Ages. Neither is it immediately clear whether the reader (or audience) is in the realm of fantasy or science fiction. Roubaud and Delay's Arthurian space defies pigeon-holing within traditional generic breakdowns. This is due in large part to its format. Composed either as a series of plays, or as "romans dialogués," very little is specified about the setting. This is the case for both the spatial parameters and any historical setting. Indeed, all scenes are prefaced by a space designation, not typically by name (Château de la Douleuse Garde, L'île d'Avalon, Carduel, for instance), but rather by category. The main exception to this trend pertains to Grail

locations. The setting designations for each scene appear as “lieu 2” or “lieu 6” with no further comment. The key to the ten categories appears only at the beginning of the volume, such that the reader must refer back to the key at the outset of each new scene to discover where it is set. This economical strategy achieves maximum attenuation of setting relative to action. The “lieu” designations are likely intended primarily as indications of set or backdrop for staging the plays, rather than for readers. The ten categories of “lieu” are

1. Lieu de paroles profanes
2. Lieu d’eau (lacs, mers, rivières, fontaines)
3. Foret (carrefours, chemins, clairières)
4. Prairie (pavillons solitaires, tournois, assemblés)
5. Château fort (intérieur, extérieur)
6. Chambre d’amour
7. Cour du roi Arthur
8. Château du Graal (aile gauche, à dominante rouge)
9. Château du Graal (aile droite, à dominante blanche)
10. Lieu de paroles sacrées²⁴⁰

Nor does the text offer much in the way of earnest historical setting. The work flirts occasionally with such indications, although they never resolve into coherency. Among Merlin’s predictions in *La Fin des temps aventureux* is that “ce sera 1 441 années avant que le tunnel soit creusé sous la manche de Joseph d’Arimathie,” an apparent reference to the Channel Tunnel linking Britain and France, whose construction began in 1988.²⁴¹ Counting back 1,441 years from that point yields a date of 547 CE—ten years after the battle of Camlann, as attested in the *Annales Cambriae*. This seemingly places Roubaud

²⁴⁰ *Graal théâtre*, p.9.

²⁴¹ *La Fin des temps aventureux*, *Graal théâtre*, p. 456.

and Delay's Grail cycle in a post-Roman (as opposed to High Middle Ages) Britain. The most exact dating offered by the cycle corresponds to the date that figures in the Vulgate *Queste*. In the *Queste*, Galaad's appearance occurs in 487 CE—four hundred fifty four years after Christ's Passion. The header "Pentecôte 487" likewise appears in an early scene of Roubaud and Delay's *Galaad ou la Quête*, and the story reproduces the synchronicity between the markings on the Siège Périlleux and the intradiegetically announced date as a harbinger of the coming Grail Elect. However, *Graal théâtre* is anchored by this dating only to the extent the Vulgate Cycle is so anchored. The modern-day cycle is inconsistent with the geo-political situation in fifth-century England as one might expect from modern historical fiction, nor is it limited (on the level of narration or within the plot) to the reference points of the fifth or sixth century. Literary, scientific, and historical allusions appear frequently in the text and are often of medieval provenance. Many of them stretch well beyond the ostensible boundaries of medieval Arthuriana: Kepler, Newton, Marilyn Monroe, and Don Quixote all figure in Roubaud and Delay's Arthurian realm.

Cladie De-Min points out the ludic aspect of Roubaud and Delay's anachronism: "Les anachronismes sont là pour amuser et faire réagir le lecteur/spectateur. Les textes médiévaux utilisés sont parsemés de notes humoristiques qui donnent à *Graal théâtre* un goût de fantaisie."²⁴² Robert Baudry takes a far dimmer view of them, asserting with derision that "en farcissant d'anachronismes et d'allusions modernes son *Graal théâtre*,

²⁴² De-Min, Cladie, « Graal théâtre », *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes*, 11 spécial | 2004, [Uploaded 18 October, 2007. <http://crm.revues.org/index2062.html>. Consulted 22 octobre, 2010.

[Roubaud] sape par cette ironie la crédibilité intemporelle de la légende.”²⁴³ In an interview with Gallimard, the two “scribes” themselves downplay the significance of their use of anachronism. According to Roubaud, “Nous ne parlons pas “médiéval,” nous ne faisons pas du Viollet-le-Duc littéraire. Lorsqu’on parle de la beauté d’une femme, on la dit plus belle qu’Iseut, et même que Marilyn!”²⁴⁴ This remark is somewhat misleading, however, in minimizing the pair’s medievalist credentials. While it is true that Roubaud and Delay do not attempt strict period fidelity, they do have a vast array of reference points at their disposal, medieval as well as contemporary. Both the comedic value (or detraction) of the anachronisms and the authors’ stated aim of accessibility mask the more significant ramifications of this preponderance of modern-day incursions into the Arthurian realm.

As in Barjavel’s *L’Enchanteur*, Merlin’s relationship to time is elastic in *Graal théâtre*. He demonstrates a postmodern sensibility that he contrasts with strict dichotomies: “Je n’ai pas vu le combat [des dragons de Vortiger] du blanc et du noir du jour et de la nuit du Bien contre le Mal. Laissons ce manichéisme simplet à d’autres siècles.”²⁴⁵ He leaves ambiguous the question of whether those other centuries are past or future; the Manicheans themselves were established in the third century, but the snide remark could be applicable to many subsequent eras. In a subsequent scene, he adds,

²⁴³ Baudry, Robert. *Graal et littératures d’aujourd’hui*. Rennes Terre de Brume Éditions, 1998, p. 363. Baudry does not include Delay in his criticism.

²⁴⁴ Delay, Florence and Roubaud, Jacques. “Rencontre avec Florence Delay et Jacques Roubaud, à l’occasion de la parution de *Graal théâtre*”, Gallimard 2005. <http://www.gallimard.fr/catalog/Entretiens/01057096.HTM> Consulted Oct. 1, 2008.

²⁴⁵ *Merlin l’enchanteur, Graal théâtre*, pp. 75-76.

“Nous sommes à l’époque de la Table Ronde nous entrons dans les temps modernes.”²⁴⁶

He has access to a greater frame of reference than the rest of the Arthurian cast. When, for instance, during a feast, he engages the feasters in a riddle about adulterous women in Baghdad, Lot asserts with confidence that “Bagdad” is merely a name invented by Merlin for the sake of his story.²⁴⁷ Many of the most overt anachronisms involve his meddling. His remarkable interactions with time take several forms: 1) predictions and allusions to the future 2) use of anachronistic inventions 3) confusion or subversion of space and time.

Merlin makes numerous predictions over the course of the cycle, revealing super-human knowledge of the future and its technological accoutrements. For example, during the appearance of the Grail, he evokes the mystery of transubstantiation, adding, “Je prédis que protestants et catholiques dans quelques siècles s’étriperont là-dessus.”²⁴⁸ Like Barjavel, Roubaud and Delay assimilate the future Arthurian tourist industry into their story. Before erecting Stonehenge, Merlin explains to Uterpendragon the eventual destiny of Salisbury Plains, casting them as a popular tourist destination: “ [J]e vais te faire une prophétie. Au temps des fils des fils des fils des fils de ton fils et pour être exact je devrais prononcer soixante fois le mot fils je prédis que les pierres de Salesbières recevront chaque année un million sept cent soixante-deux mille six cent vingt-quatre visiteurs du monde entier. Qu’on y vendra des sandwiches et des cartes postales et que

²⁴⁶ *Merlin l’enchanteur, Graal théâtre*, p. 117.

²⁴⁷ Baghdad was founded in the eighth century; by the time of medieval romance, its population had swelled to more than a million residents, making it one of the most populous cities of the High Middle Ages.

²⁴⁸ *Galaad ou la Quête*, *Graal théâtre*, p.506.

seuls les chiens bien élevés seront admis en leur présence.”²⁴⁹ A potential time loop difficulty arises, however, as Merlin proceeds to situate the various stones of Stonehenge according to the configuration on a postcard.²⁵⁰ In this version, then, Merlin cedes a key bit of creative control with which medieval Arthuriana often credits him; a modern photograph on a postcard is responsible for the layout of the site, and Merlin is merely the executor of a vision of (still) unknown origin.

Merlin is also quite the inventor, seemingly exploiting his knowledge of the future to retroactively propose “new” concepts, such as the theory of the story. He typically proclaims his own inventions in the hearing of other Arthurian figures, none of whom are in on the joke: “En l’honneur du mariage d’Arthur j’invente le pique-nique. Tu vas donc faire apporter les nappes et les couverts et les disposer sur l’herbe.”²⁵¹ Even when he does not claim to invent an item, he serves as the source of the incursion of modern-day technology (and even some marvels that remain for the modern reader relegated to the realm of science fiction) into the Arthurian world on more than one occasion. He offers to Morgane the use of radar to help protect her island fortress of Avalon from unwanted intrusions. “C’est un procédé de mon invention qui fera qu’aucun navire ne pourra voir ton île avant que ton île n’ait aperçu le navire. Si la visite des marins t’apparaît indésirable la conductrice de l’île fera tomber un écran d’invisibilité moléculaire.”²⁵² In

²⁴⁹ *Merlin l’enchanteur, Graal théâtre*, p. 79. The comically precise accounting of visits to Stonehenge substantially outstrips current rates, according to English Heritage, which places the number just over one million visitors annually. <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/education/resources/stonehenge/business-management/visitor-profile/>. Accessed 2 July, 2013.

²⁵⁰ The word “carte” could be read as map rather than postcard, but in either case Merlin erects Stonehenge with the help of an artifact on which the standing stones already figure.

²⁵¹ *Merlin l’enchanteur, Graal théâtre*, p. 123.

²⁵² *Merlin l’enchanteur, Graal théâtre*, p. 139.

addition to technology, Merlin claims acquaintance with the Arthurian canon—both modern and medieval—as is demonstrated in his literary allusions. Rejecting the notion of giving Ygerne a potion to ensure her cooperation with Uterpendragon’s seduction, Merlin says, “Laissons cela aux enchanteurs pourrissants.”²⁵³ This throw-away line is an explicit reference to Apollinaire’s 1904 prose Arthurian text, *L’Enchanteur pourrissant*—also about Merlin. Thus, it seems that Roubaud and Delay’s Merlin has access to knowledge of future Arthurian literary production.

As in other accounts of Merlin, the mage sometimes struggles to navigate time because his relationship to it runs inversely to everyone else’s. Accordingly, he announces his impending arrival to Morgane, although he has already appeared to her: “Dès que je recevrai votre message je viendrai immédiatement.”²⁵⁴ When Morgane points out the absurdity of this statement, he backtracks: “Ou plutôt ayant reçu votre message je suis venu immédiatement. Veuillez m’excuser j’avais inversé la course du temps. Cela m’arrive quelquefois. J’ai du mal à débrouiller ce qui va arriver de ce qui est advenu et ce qui est en train de survenir.”²⁵⁵ Despite the apparent disorder in his sense of chronology, he at other times demonstrates mastery over space-time, traveling between the real and the imaginary in a spatial paradigm that only exists as an abstraction. When leaving Camaalot to pursue his love for Viviane, he explains to Blaise his impending “death”: “Je

²⁵³ *Merlin l’enchanteur, Graal théâtre*, p. 87.

²⁵⁴ *Merlin l’enchanteur, Graal théâtre*, p. 103.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.* This temporal confusion also arises in Roubaud’s *Le Chevalier Silence*, in which Myrddin occasionally conflates predictions and events of the past, as when interpreting a dream for the story’s wicked king. He consoles the king, who has just had his death foretold, that “[ce] qui a dû arriver arrivera, je veux dire est arrivé. Ce qui doit arriver est arrivé, je veux dire arrivera” (*Le Chevalier Silence* 19).

serai en suspens ou si tu veux en interruption de temps sur une surface de Riemann.”²⁵⁶

He adds that it would be too difficult to explain the Riemann surface to Blaise, so he had better just imagine Merlin in suspension. A Riemann surface, first identified by nineteenth-century mathematician Bernhard Riemann, is an unorthodox explanation for Merlin’s “imprisonment” or “death”; it consists of a complex surface in an abstract space having both real and imaginary components and marked by a singular, arbitrary threshold of non-linear continuity. It would appear that this threshold, uncrossable for others, may function seamlessly for Merlin, allowing him to interact with what lies on the other side of it, although no one can readily access him.

Merlin’s relationship to time also figures prominently in his interactions with Blaise. In this vein, the text *Graal théâtre* is at times autoreferential, especially in passages between Merlin and Blaise concerning the composition of the *conte*. When Merlin announces his imminent departure from Logres to pursue his ill-fated love of Viviane, Blaise objects that the story cannot continue without Merlin to dictate it: “Et si tu m’abandonnes que deviendront les Graal fictions et le Graal théâtre?”²⁵⁷ Merlin likewise refers to the structure of *Graal théâtre*, mentioning to Blaise “la bataille de Salesbière que tu écriras dans la branche dix du cycle”—the battle does indeed appear in *Graal théâtre*’s final play, *La tragédie du roi Arthur*. Because of his interactions with Merlin, Blaise can occasionally taken on the role of seer for third parties, not because he has direct knowledge of the future, but because Merlin has confided in him: “Tout est dans le livre que Merlin m’a dicté. Mais il m’a recommandé de bien veiller à ce que les

²⁵⁶ *Merlin l’enchanteur, Graal théâtre*, p. 142.

²⁵⁷ *Merlin l’enchanteur, Graal théâtre*, p. 141.

droits d'adaptation théâtrale radiophonique cinématographique et télévisuelle pour tous les pays y compris l'ancienne Union soviétique et la Provence soient garantis par une extrême lenteur dans le dévoilement des mystères du grand cycle arthurien.”²⁵⁸ Blaise's understanding of this little speech and its contents passes uninterrogated in the text. His last sentence briefly shifts the temporal context to a post-Soviet Union world, shooting so far forward as to be able to look back upon a defunct state even though it did not yet exist in medieval Europe. Blaise can also cite future works that will be based upon his own composition, namely those featuring characters in the chivalric vein. He describes Merlin's cry as an oneiric sound that echoes through the centuries, perceived only by epic figures with great hearts:

Nombreux sont les héros qui ont entendu et entendront le cri d'amour. La liste en est trop longue pour que je fasse autre chose aujourd'hui que commencer en évoquant l'un des plus grands chevaliers d'après la Table Ronde un chevalier espagnol l'ingénieux hidalgo don Quichotte de la Manche. Le voilà dans la Sierra Morena nu de la tête aux pieds faisant des cabrioles et récitant des vers à la señora Dulcinée du Toboso. C'est parce qu'il est fou d'amour qu'il entend le cri.²⁵⁹

In this scribal mode, Blaise acquires something of the seer's portentous language, ostensibly borrowed from Merlin himself.

Less frequent are anachronistic references pertaining to the Knights of the Round Table, although they do occur occasionally. Yvain, describing Perceval upon their first encounter, alludes to Kipling's *Just So Stories* as a point of comparison: “Il répond

²⁵⁸ *Perceval le gallois, Graal théâtre*, p. 263.

²⁵⁹ *Merlin l'enchanteur, Graal théâtre*, p. 147.

toujours à côté il est comme l'enfant d'éléphant plein d'une insatiable curiosité."²⁶⁰ The reference is striking even for readers who do not recognize the literary allusion of the Elephant's Child, as the animal in question could have no possible place in the mental bestiary of an Arthurian knight. In an earlier branch, Ké complains about being invaded by foreign lords, including those from the Far East: "Il en vient d'Isselande d'Allemagne de Rome il ne manque plus que des samourais."²⁶¹ Samurai are not strictly anachronistic to the period(s) typically associated with the Arthurian romance, given that the earliest textual references to the warrior caste date from the tenth century; by the twelfth century, they were well established. For Ké to have knowledge of them is incredible, but their evocation is nonetheless fitting, as samurai have been posited as Japanese analogues to the European-style model of knighthood exemplified by the knights of the Round Table. Later, Ké again demonstrates improbable range of experience, this time highlighting the Knights of the Round Table's reputation as accomplished lovers "qui ont connu toutes les dames et les demoiselles basse-brètes et béarnaises tartaresques et tarasconnaises iroquoises et irlandaises palaisiennes et polonaises."²⁶² The alliterative list, like the allusion to samurai, surpasses the Arthurian domain, both temporally and spatially, indicating that the knights-errant have wandered far indeed on their quests.

Most of the diction in *Graal théâtre* fails to stand out as particularly anachronistic—at least, no more so than any work of Arthuriana written in modern French. There are, however, noteworthy exceptions. In one instance, Ké, failing to

²⁶⁰ *Merlin l'enchanteur, Graal théâtre*, p. 144.

²⁶¹ *Merlin l'enchanteur, Graal théâtre*, p. 114.

²⁶² *Morgane contre Guenièvre, Graal théâtre*, p. 446.

understand a comment by Girflet, asks incredulously, “Kexkséksa?”²⁶³ The neologism inserts the Welsh form of Ké’s name (Kex) into the slang formula ‘keskséksa’—“Qu’est-ce que c’est que ça?” This mode of abbreviated, phonetic writing is closely associated with modern-day technological communications platforms, such as texting and Internet chat. Within the parameters of the text, it may also be a nod to the overall plasticity of medieval spelling convention as well as to the running joke in *Graal théâtre* that Ké is illiterate and thus uninvested in “proper” orthographic conventions. Elsewhere, Merlin sets up his *esplumoir* as a message receptacle for Blaise, one whose platform is based on modern-day email. When Blaise arrives at the *esplumoir* to retrieve messages, according to the disembodied demoiselle de l’*esplumoir*, “C’est un courrier rapide venu sans chevaux. [...] Adressé à Blaise de Northombrelande scribe @ Logres point com.”²⁶⁴ The message takes the form of a telegram: “Gauvain en danger point. Chevalier Vert en route pour Camaalot point. Texte non veuillez m’excuser tête démontable point. Signé Merlin.”²⁶⁵ These incursions of anachronistic language based upon technological advances of the twentieth century blur the lines between the Arthurian present and the modern present of the reader or spectator, seemingly blending them into a composite time that can encompass both.

Several members of the Arthurian cast are endowed with access to mathematics, physics, astronomy, and medicine that exceed traditional medieval parameters. In one of the most entertaining passages of *Graal théâtre*, the lovesick Galehaut is plagued by

²⁶³ *Morgane contre Guenièvre, Graal théâtre*, p. 407.

²⁶⁴ *Merlin l’enchanteur, Graal théâtre*, p. 150.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

disturbing dreams and seeks the advice of three professionals: Pétroine d'Oxford, Hélié de Toulouse, and Blaise de Northombrelande. The first diagnoses Galehaut as an “hystérique hypocondriaque en proie d'un dédoublement de la personnalité” and launches into a lengthy psychoanalysis based on the symbolism of the snake and leopard figuring in a dream sequence.²⁶⁶ According to Pétroine, Galehaut is obsessed with his mother la Belle Géante and of ambiguous gender identity, “ni homme ni femme;” he prescribes several sessions of hypnosis as a cure for the fragmentation in the knight's personality.²⁶⁷ Hélié, however, objects to this diagnosis, informing Pétroine that Galehaut is not “un névrosé moderne malade de civilisation mais un chevalier de la matière de Bretagne un héros fait d'aventures et de prosodie.”²⁶⁸ Hélié does not abandon the realm of twentieth-century psychology, however; he merely applies it with an eye toward the knight as an epic figure, in slightly more Jungian than Freudian terms. This second dream interpretation rests on Galehaut's purported Oedipal complex and on wish fulfillment. Hélié recommends the talking cure for “un héros fabulateur.”²⁶⁹ Finally, Blaise offers his medical opinion in the form of a prophetic story, explaining at the end that “[s]on maitre Merlin le grand docteur [lui] a donné ces précisions. Il parlait selon son habitude du futur ou peut-être du passé.”²⁷⁰ The rampant pontificating by the three purported professionals does not, however, mean that they necessarily understand the references they make; indeed, the text paints their jargon-laden analyses as ridiculous. In an earlier branch, it indicates through Merlin that learned men tend to spout gibberish because the theories

²⁶⁶ *L'Enlèvement de la reine, Graal théâtre*, pp. 340-41.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ *L'Enlèvement de la reine, Graal théâtre*, p. 343.

they espouse do not yet exist. For example, the Sextine de Lorette attempts to explain Vortiger's faulty tower with recourse to "l'accélération de Coriolis," referring to a principle of a moving object's perceived deflection based on the rotation of its base or platform.²⁷¹ Merlin accordingly reproaches the Sextine, pointing out that "[v]ous ne savez même pas le sens des mots que vous employez parce que tant que Newton n'est pas né tout ceci n'a aucun sens."²⁷² The text raises the question, without ever resolving it: Can incursions of anachronism ever be meaningful, and if so, for whom?

Even on a narrative and structural level, *Graal théâtre* embraces the subversion of strict linear narrative order. Minor characters appear in the stage directions as "baron Futur Mort"—signifying an imminent demise that is already narratively (and perhaps even divinely) predetermined. Moreover, the repetition of a half-dozen scenes or exchanges throughout the text, along with sporadic observations on the part of knights that they seem to be rehashing a familiar narrative terrain, indicates that, as Cladie De-Min has noted, "[l]e temps est à la fois chronologique et cyclique."²⁷³ There does appear to be a *telos* to the Arthurian world and the *temps aventureux*, as the arrival of characters and key events are frequently foretold, awaited, and then finally realized. At the same time, resurgence of characters and tropes contributes to the impression that "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." Time and again, the cycle returns to the feast day of St. Jean, for instance.

²⁷¹ *Merlin l'enchanteur, Graal théâtre*, p. 72.

²⁷² *Merlin l'enchanteur, Graal théâtre*, p. 74.

²⁷³ De-Min, Cladie, « Graal théâtre », *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes*, 11 spécial | 2004, [En ligne], mis en ligne le 18 octobre 2007. URL : <http://crm.revues.org/index2062.html>. Consulted 22 octobre 2010.

Instances of anachronistic reference throughout *Graal théâtre* tend to be tucked into longer passages, appearing one-off or as asides, with occasional exceptions in scenes dominated by Merlin and Blaise. However, in the *Morgane Contre Guenièvre* branch of the cycle, there appears a litany of literary references, ranging from antiquity to the twentieth century and from France to Japan. Viviane finds Lancelot in the grip of a frenetic “carole” marked by song and dance and pulls him from it. Blaise narrates the sequence, explaining “voilà que j’entends des paroles des cris des soupirs dont je ne sais s’ils sont d’aujourd’hui d’hier ou de demain.”²⁷⁴ The snatches of speech are not attributed in the text, as Blaise is unable to identify them either by speaker or by source. Although they appear in one paragraph as though pronounced by a single speaker (“voix”), the stage notes indicate that the fragments overlap, necessitating multiple speakers. I have broken down the litany into a list and supplied identifying information for the references.

- *Nel mezzo del camin [sic] della nostra vita* (opening lines to Dante’s *Inferno*)
- *To be or not to be that is the question* (Hamlet’s soliloquy)
- *Connais-toi toi-même* (Socrates)
- *Ô saisons ô châteaux* (title of Rimbaud poem)
- *À moi comte deux mots* (Corneille’s *Le Cid*)
- *Farai un vers de dreyt nien* (first line of Guilhelm d’Aquitania poem)
- *Un spectre hante le monde* (similar to the opening to the *Communist Manifesto*)
- *Grau teurer freund ist alle theorie* (Goethe, *Faust*)
- *Le temps s’en va le temps s’en va ma dame* (Ronsard, “Sonnet à Marie”)
- *Per amica silentia lunae* (title of Yeats poem, originally from *Aeneid*)
- *Come come come come come*²⁷⁵
- *Comme un aveugle qui s’en va vers les frontières* (Desnos, “Le poème à Florence,” slight alteration to original)

²⁷⁴ *Morgane contre Guenièvre, Graal théâtre*, p. 417.

²⁷⁵ This passage, seemingly in English, has not proved readily identifiable, although it appears in an otherwise unbroken string of highly canonical passages. Rather than a literary allusion, it may be a simple invitation or exhortation on the part of the enchantment.

- *En la marche de Gaule et de Petite Bretagne* (opening line of *Lancelot en Prose*)
- *Kotoba furuku kokoro atarashi* (“old diction, new treatment,” Japanese court poets Shunzei and Teika)
- *Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure* (Proust, *Du Côté de chez Swann*)
- *Albricia Alvar Fáñez ca echados somos de tierra ! Mas a gran ondra tornaremos a Castiella* (medieval Spanish poem *El Cid*)
- *Je me disais Guillaume il est temps que tu viennes* (Apollinaire, “Cortège”)
- *Mon Dieu mon Dieu je vais être en retard au goûter chez la reine* (similar to the French translation of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*)

Viviane explains to Galehaut that they are hearing an enchantment “aussi vieux que le monde. Lilith la première femme du premier homme l’a institué. Mélusine l’a fait quand il était tombé en désuétude et Morgane aujourd’hui votre ennemie et la mienne s’en est servie pour vous emprisonner.”²⁷⁶ Several of the excerpts have apparent Arthurian connections, the most germane being the opening line of the *Lancelot Propre* section of the Vulgate Cycle. The two texts about the Cid are in keeping with the chivalric mode of heroism. Apollinaire, too, is an obvious choice, as he authored a twentieth-century Arthurian text, *L’enchanteur pourrissant* and is alluded to on several other occasions throughout *Graal théâtre*. The Japanese aphorism “kotoba furuku, kokoro atarashi” seems to emblemize Roubaud and Delay’s literary project of renewing Arthurian tradition, and Guilhelm d’Aquitania’s line (“I have made a verse that is lacking in sense”) could likewise be assimilated into this project. Several other passages invoke thematized time (Proust, Dante, Carroll, Ronsard), which is of particular importance given Blaise’s

²⁷⁶ *Morgane contre Guenièvre, Graal théâtre*, pp. 417-18.

explicit inability to offer temporal anchoring for the words he transcribes. Rather, they exist together in an ecstatic muddle.

While anomalous in Roubaud and Delay's Grail cycle, the list reveals several important elements of the "scribal" approach to Arthurian time. It can be seen as a convergence of past, present, and future, each indistinguishable from the others. The referents of any century may penetrate the Arthurian realm, because Arthurian time is not strictly linear. Elsewhere, I have described Roubaud and Delay's conception of the Arthurian *conte* as a hermetically sealed entity, and for the purpose of truth value and authority, this holds true.²⁷⁷ However, Arthurian time and space are highly permeable, with realities coexisting simultaneously, events subject to repetition or even retraction, and the frequent incursion of past and future referents into the present. Roubaud and Delay conceive of the Arthurian setting as the *temps aventureux*, a loose constellation of figures, postures, narrative practices, and tropes.²⁷⁸ This network is not governed by temporal parameters, but rather by a shared mode celebrating adventure, mystery, and the implausible. Thus, reference points from the twentieth century may be just as fitting as allusions to the Bible or Celtic folklore. In pushing at the traditional boundaries of Arthurian times, the text asserts that Arthuriana is a well that is continually replenished as new sources are added.

²⁷⁷ See Chapter 2, on authorization strategies and postures of medievalism.

²⁷⁸ The term "temps aventureux" appears both within *Graal théâtre* and elsewhere in the authors' writings. Delay used it in an interview with Gallimard: "... c'est du croisement de ces deux chevaleries que naissent ce que nous appelons les temps aventureux." Additionally, the subtitle of Roubaud's *Le Chevalier Silence* is the playfully redundant *une aventure des temps aventureux*.

The Hobo of Brocéliande Station:

Gudule and the Modern-day Merlin

Belgian fantasy writer Gudule's highly bizarre *Ménopause des fées* trilogy (*Le Crépuscule des dieux*, *Crime et chatouillement*, and *La nuit des porcs vivants*), presents itself as a self-conscious importation of Arthurian motifs and storylines into contemporary France. This is not, however, a modern-day France in which the Arthurian tradition never figured. The inhabitants of Gudule's Paris, however poorly educated, are familiar with the names of Arthur and his knights. Unemployed sometime-drug dealer Arthur Lancelot, the unwitting antagonist of *Le Crépuscule des dieux*, owes his name to the fact that his pregnant mother (Madame Lancelot) was captivated by Mel Ferrer's portrayal of Arthur in the 1953 film *The Knights of the Round Table* but unable to persuade the town notary to allow the name Mel for a boy, and so fell back on Arthur as a substitute.²⁷⁹ Likewise, the barkeep Geneviève accepts the nickname Dame Guenièvre, owing to her Breton origins in Lorient and her attraction to the aforementioned character Arthur Lancelot, who patronizes her bar.

The series also lays bare some of the inadequacies of traditional categories of Arthurian fiction. The trilogy does not take place in a modern-day setting in the sense laid out by Thompson, in which Arthuriana exists only in distant historical artifacts or relics, or in which contemporary Arthurian analogues play out canonical plotlines with no recourse to the medieval world. In fact, in this continuity, the Arthurian world, complete

²⁷⁹ *Le Crépuscule des dieux*, p. 40.

with its magical elements, exists in the literal past, although everyone seems to have forgotten about it. Brocéliande Forest has been cut down, and to commemorate it, officials have installed a Parisian Métro station bearing its name, off a grimy, humble street likewise named Brocéliande. The Brocéliande Métro station is where the magician Merlin, now a vagrant afflicted by flatulence (the legacy of ritual cannibalism gone awry), ekes out his existence. Time in this trilogy certainly rests on some degree of continuity, as Merlin endures in his diminished state for a millennium alongside his faithful fairy companions. It also hinges on the cyclical nature of Arthuriana. Literary *recyclage* is thematized on the level of plot as the inspired protagonist Merlin embarks in the series's first novel upon a quest to renew the Arthurian world. "La légende va renaître, tel le Phénix en rut, pour féconder ce siècle impie," he asserts.²⁸⁰ The enchanter accordingly seeks out modern-day analogues to medieval Arthurian antecedents and assigns them roles corresponding to his goal. Merlin's plan to precipitate the birth of a new Elect hinges upon the impregnation of a hairdresser called Linda Graal ("la Graal") by "le grand vainqueur de la quête": Perceval. The novel supplies two candidates for this function, neither of them quite fitting the ideal to which Merlin aspires: an elderly graffiti artist who goes by the name Père Cheval and a black Parisian nurse named Adrien-Henri de Perce-Val.

In this context, the *Ménopause* trilogy serves as an encounter between two eras, that of the immortal Merlin and his fairy companions, and that of contemporary France. The narrative threads run concurrently, with infrequent intersections that typically go

²⁸⁰ *Le Crépuscule des dieux*, p. 25.

unperceived by one party. In the supernatural plot thread, Merlin and his three fairy surrogates, Viviane, Moorgen, and Clochette, are executing the Grail scheme, occasionally with recourse to magical intervention. Meanwhile, Linda Graal, Arthur Lancelot, Dame Guenièvre, and le Père Cheval carry out their own projects (occasionally at odds with each other, as well as Merlin), entirely unaware that the mage and his helpers are occasionally meddling in their lives. The otherwise banal doings of Linda Graal and her seedy entourage take on quasi-divine importance for the inhabitants of Brocéliande Station, who watch everything unfold on enchanted television monitors. The dissonance between the marvelous Arthurian past and the everyday French present is emphasized from the opening line of dialogue in the trilogy's first volume. "Enchanté!" exclaims the laughable Merlin with a belch to no one in particular.²⁸¹ Here, the association of *enchanté* with *enchanteur* (and perforce Merlin) is reduced to the banality of a pleasantry, itself treated by the text as a weak joke that has become the mage's catchphrase, repeated so often that his fairy companions no longer heed it.

Thus, in a reversal of Barjavel's paradigm of modern incursion into the Arthurian world, Gudule effects the incursion of the Arthurian world into the modern. This is qualitatively distinct from typical anachronism, however, as there is no rupture between the two periods. Unlike time-travelers, Merlin and his companions are not whisked into modern-day France to accomplish their goals. Rather, they are like fossils or relics from a bygone era, themselves serving as the bridge between the medieval and the modern. They have adapted somewhat over the intervening millennium. When Vivi the fairy thinks of

²⁸¹ *Le Crépuscule des dieux*, p. 9.

the long-dead Elaine with loathing, she characterizes her as “cette foutue chatelaine,” and the text hastens to alert readers that the fairies’ diction has updated over the centuries to assimilate newer vulgarities.²⁸² Meanwhile, Moorgen (née Morgane) has discovered neo-Nazism from pamphlets left in a Métro trash bin and allowed herself to be converted to ideals of Aryan superiority. These she professes, at times *non sequitur*, and with little reflection and no effort to reconcile her fairy identity with her credo. For the world at large, meanwhile, Merlin has been the victim of “[d]e nouvelles théories, comme le cartésianisme, le rationalisme, le matérialisme et le scepticisme,” which have all but destroyed the prestige and awe he once commanded.²⁸³ Thus, the old Arthurian world of marvels and adventures lives on in the meanest margins of society, the characters embodying the diminished role of the Arthurian cultural heritage in modern Europe.

Given the prominence of the (ostensibly) non-Arthurian cast in Gudule’s work, one might reasonably ask whether the *Ménopause des fées* trilogy should be counted among works of modern Arthuriana. And indeed, the juxtaposition of the characters Linda Graal, Arthur Lancelot, Dame Guenièvre with their medieval namesakes highlights an absurdity of contrast. The modern-day bearers of these names are largely self-serving, ignoble, and anti-heroic. They engage in drug-trafficking and prostitution; they get busted in police raids; they have few aspirations in keeping with courtly or chivalric values systems. Nor does the surrounding narrative support any such pretensions to nobility. Present-day Arthurian Paris is both gritty and pedestrian, even in its details. For instance,

²⁸² *Le Crépuscule des dieux*, p.10.

²⁸³ *Le Crépuscule des dieux*, p. 12. This recalls the fate of Merlin in Mark Twain’s *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, wherein the mage cannot compete with the modern narrator’s introduction of nineteenth-century technology and socio-political systems.

the sexual encounter between Linda and Adrien-Henri de Perce-Val that Merlin and his cohort hope will lead to the creation of the Grail Elect is broadcast on Métro television monitors so that the schemers can witness the moment of chivalric conception. However, at the key moment, conception is thwarted, not by a timely intervention of faith (as with Perceval in the medieval *Queste del Saint-Graal*), but by a condom that prevents insemination.

This unsavory setting thematizes the question of the place of Arthuriana in modern-day France (and, more broadly, Europe). The series opens with an account of Merlin's decline, culminating when he is kicked out of the newly deforested Brocéliande Forest and forced to relocate to Paris proper. In Paris, Merlin is a marginal figure, scrounging in the Metro station; he has not seen the sun in years. He is subject to police sweeps that target him as a vagrant. Upon inaugurating the new Grail quest, he cobbles together his would-be Arthurian avatars, unable to admit even to himself that they are unlikely heroes. When le Père Chevel is pointed out to him, he is initially troubled by the graffiti artist's advanced age, and the exasperated Clochette snaps, "J'ai pris ce que j'ai trouvé."²⁸⁴ Merlin must talk himself into accepting the possessor of "ce visage ruiné, ce dos vouté, ces mains arthritiques" as a viable Grail patriarch.²⁸⁵ Modern Paris, it would seem, is inhospitable to epic quests; its contemporary inhabitants do not meet the glorious standards established during Arthur's reign. In the final installment of the trilogy, Merlin

²⁸⁴ *Le Crépuscule des dieux*, p. 78.

²⁸⁵ *Le Crépuscule des dieux*, p. 79.

attempts to move back to Brocéliande Forest and thereby find solace in the relic of his bygone world, only to discover the forest has been converted into a shopping mall.²⁸⁶

Merlin's apparent fool's errand of a "Gaal" quest echoes the Vulgate *Queste* in its cast of improbable heroes. Most of King Arthur's knights, ill equipped to deal with the hermeneutic quest for the Grail, are doomed to failure. Unbeknownst to its participants, the rules for chevalric comportment have been changed, and once-certain hierarchies and values systems no longer apply. The battles and seductions that had once marked them as heroes now disqualify them from achieving their quest. Merlin and his cohort flail about modern Paris in a similar way, unable to adapt to modern life enough to embrace it on its own terms, looking back to a golden age in which they occupied places of power and prestige.

In transporting key Arthurian tropes and plots to a contemporary France devoid of any pretention to chivalry or glory, the trilogy reaches for the limits of the Arthurian hero. To what extent are the key Arthurian knights mere blank slates, infinitely malleable? Is it truly possible to build a valiant knight from the unlikely matrix of a drunkard or a vagrant? And if so, what are the standards for heroism when applied to this newer context? Can it be reconciled with former ideals of bygone eras? And if not, must the incongruity be cast as comical? While the trilogy may flirt with answers to these

²⁸⁶ This premise may not seem altogether farfetched in light of recent protests against the proposed dumping of hazardous materials in the real-life Brocéliande Forest. As of August 2013, a petition to halt these plans had more than 35,000 signatures; the petition specifically points out Brocéliande's place in Arthurian mythos and its associated cultural heritage as reasons the forest should be protected from commercial waste disposal.

https://secure.avaaz.org/fr/petition/Pas_Decharge_en_Broceliande/?fpla Accessed 13 August, 2013.

questions, it is clear the reader is not meant to take them very seriously, but rather to simply enjoy the outlandishness of this new Arthurian landscape.

Le degré zéro du mythe? :

Michel Rio and the historicized Arthur

The medieval Arthurian tradition was built upon an idealized conception of the past, featuring rulers and warriors who likely never existed. Drawing upon sparse historical records and the works of chroniclers, medieval romancers embellished Arthurian material as an inspirational antecedent for English and French identity. Arthur may never have lived, but, beginning with Geoffrey of Monmouth, he was posited as a real, historical figure with a traceable genealogy and attested biography. It is relatively rare for modern-day authors of Arthurian fiction, most of whom incorporate the supernatural to some degree, to base their novels on an internally consistent historical setting.²⁸⁷ Taking their cues from the ahistoricity of medieval romances, rather than the specificity of chronicles, they tend to place their works in an unanchored, undated past, as we have seen with Barjavel and Roubaud and Delay.

A noteworthy exception is Michel Rio, author of three Arthurian novels—*Merlin* (1989), *Morgane* (1999), and *Arthur* (2001). Distinctive in this trilogy are Rio's

²⁸⁷ Marc Rolland locates an uptick in Arthurian historical fiction at the midpoint of the twentieth century and attributes it at least partially to a modernist identification with a world threatened by war and invasion. This observation pertains primarily to Anglophone Arthuriana, however. See his article "Un Prince du Ve siècle: Arthur et le roman historique au XXe siècle" in *Le roi Arthur au miroir du temps : La légende dans l'histoire et ses réécritures contemporaines*, introduction, Dinan : Terre De Brume, octobre 2007.

(pseudo)historicizing gestures: chronologies of tribal leaders and their reigns and political maps of Britain and France, all of them internally consistent and plausible, though (per the author's admission) fictional. These paratextual insertions nod toward the scholarly preoccupation with support for factual claims. More importantly, however, they reinforce a fictitious past that continues to loom large in the French psyche.

The setting for this cycle is the century and a half immediately following the departure of the Romans from Britain, from 406 to 545 CE. It builds upon the scant available information from that period, in particular the few medieval sources that attest to an Arthur-figure as a war chief. This is a Britain dominated by skirmishes among Celtic chieftains, for whom “il n’y a que la guerre.”²⁸⁸ At the outset of the trilogy, Merlin's grandfather, chief of the Demetae in Wales (“Galles”), is bloodily consolidating power over Britain to fill the power vacuum left by the departed Roman legions, who have been called back to deal with the incursion of “des barbares” on the continent. The unification takes a generation to complete, with the Brigantes region just south of Hadrian's Wall and the Orkneys among the final regions to come under the power of the Welsh. The final conquest is of Cornwall (“Dumnonia”), home to the fortress of Tintagel and to Ygerne, the wife of the Dumnonae lord. Here, Rio follows Geoffrey of Monmouth's account closely, converging with the British chronicle tradition. The series provides precise dates for important turning points in the narrative and demonstrates awareness of their coincidence with key events in Western civilization. Arthur's coronation, Merlin observes, took place on the first day of 476 CE, the year in which the

²⁸⁸ *Merlin*, p. 17.

Herulic leader Odoacre took control of Rome as the first barbarian *rex Italiae* and thereby sounded the death-knell of the Roman Empire in the West: “C’est ainsi qu’Arthur apparut pour la première fois aux yeux du monde, au moment où Rome s’effaçait.”²⁸⁹ The novels also accord substantial attention to the battle of Mont Badon, the only battle linked by name in the early chronicle record to an Arthur figure.²⁹⁰ The trilogy’s characters have at their disposal a Greco-Roman frame of reference, along with some exposure to Christianity. When Merlin begins Morgane’s education, he lays out the breadth of late-antiquity knowledge before her:

Les mathématiques sont pour les Grecs une branche majeure de la connaissance, et nous aurons à étudier les sommes que constituent les *Éléments* d’Euclide et l’*Arithmetica* de Diophante, tous deux d’Alexandrie, ainsi que l’*Arénaire* d’Archimède de Syracuse et ses traités sur le cercle, la sphère et le cylindre, le traité *Des coniques* d’Apollonios de Perga, pour ne citer que les ouvrages majeurs. En ce qui regarde les fondements de la science, leurs débats ont été non seulement animés par Platon et Aristote d’Athènes, mais aussi par les pythagoriciens et par Héraclite d’Éphèse, Parménide d’Élée, Empédocle d’Agrigente ou Anaxagore de Clazomène.²⁹¹

The passage continues in this vein for several pages, moving on to astronomy, physics, geography, theology, and philosophy. Unlike in the works of Roubaud and Delay, Rio never indulges in anachronistic references. Merlin and Morgane may occasionally demonstrate access to a classical scope of knowledge and texts which, as a matter of

²⁸⁹ *Merlin*, p. 79.

²⁹⁰ Nennius refers to Arthur as a *dux bellorum* and recounts his twelve battles to subdue the Saxons; this account attributes nine hundred sixty enemy deaths to Arthur. Gildas’s centuries-earlier account of the same battle cites Ambrosius Aurelianus, a Roman-British nobleman, as the leader. See Lupack, Alan. *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

²⁹¹ *Morgane*, p. 26.

practical application, should not have been available in fifth-century Britain, but such passages always work within the constraints of the possible, if not the probable. The text accounts for Merlin's extensive library by stating that Merlin's grandfather, a warrior also versed in letters, sent minions across the faltering Roman empire to buy—and if need be, steal—as many manuscripts as possible. As a result, Merlin and Morgane represent the apex of early medieval learning, before the loss of many scholarly resources that eventually followed the crumbling of Rome.

Throughout the cycle, Rio provides natural accounts of phenomena that other versions of Arthurian literature, whether medieval or modern, rely upon magic to explain. He resolves the apparent inconsistencies regarding Merlin's age by writing the cycle to span Merlin's life; the novel devoted to him opens and closes with the words “J'ai cent ans.”²⁹² The kingmaker comes into power extremely young. By the age of eight, he is already a trusted advisor to Uther. This is not due to preternatural abilities, or to demonic origins, but rather to the combination of a keen intellect, intensive training by his grandfather, and the intervention of tragic violence that pulls him out of childhood concerns and into the adult world very early. Like Merlin, Viviane and Morgane are depicted as purely mortal. The latter's reputation for sorcery derives from her practice of experimental medicine, based in part upon dissection and vivisection. When Merlin takes his leave of Arthur, his is a voluntary exile enjoyed with Viviane, who exercises no magic over the novels' protagonist beyond personal charm. Indeed, Merlin behaves

²⁹² *Merlin*, pp. 9, 151.

something like the Enlightenment Clock Maker, building the utopian kingdom of Logres, setting it in motion with Arthur's ascendance, and leaving it to its own devices.

The novels nonetheless demonstrate sensitivity toward the legendary value associated with various motifs and storylines; this awareness extends to its protagonists, especially Merlin, the only first-person narrator among the three. Stonehenge, called Stanhenges in the trilogy, occupies a place of importance as the burial site for Merlin's grandfather and mother, and later the warrior Pendragon. However, unlike Geoffrey's attribution of the stones' erection to Merlin, the text presents the standing stones as pre-existing relics of "des âges obscures," reflecting the modern-day archeological consensus that the stones date at least as far back as 2200 BCE and thus could not be the work of a sixth-century architect.²⁹³ In another instance of providing natural explanations for canonically supernatural events, the text supplies the back-story of Merlin's birth. Even as a young boy, he is aware of his reputation as the "fils du Diable" and exploits it when possible, but the text makes clear the origins of this appellation. Merlin's mother, who had declared her intention to remain unwed, was nonetheless impregnated one night while drugged, and the rumor spread among the tribe that a demon was responsible for Merlin's paternity. This account parallels Merlin's origins as recounted by Robert de Boron. However, Rio's Merlin discovers that the "demon" in question was his mother's own father, the leader of the Demetae, whose enemies dub him "le Diable."²⁹⁴ Thus, Merlin's diabolical origins are relegated to the realm of incestuous but earthly.²⁹⁵ The text

²⁹³ *Merlin*, p. 48.

²⁹⁴ *Merlin*, p. 16.

²⁹⁵ I discuss Merlin's family origins in greater detail in Chapter 4, on transgressive family structures.

also highlights his reputation for controlling animals in a scene in which he comes to Viviane's rescue by chasing off a boar. In the passage, he reasons with the boar about the advantages of abandoning its attack, telling it, "Tu es fort et puissant, et la vertu principale du fort est de montrer ce mélange de dédain et de mansuétude à l'égard du faible" -- scarcely a typical strategy for confronting a wild beast.²⁹⁶ The narrating Merlin makes clear, however, that the boar is only reacting to "les modulations de [s]a voix" when it changes course and departs.²⁹⁷ This passage engages with the portrait of Merlin in the *Vita Merlini*, an untamed woodsman in communion with nature. Geoffrey's Merlin is depicted riding a stag and herding a host of deer. However, Rio's works dispel the mystique of his relationship to animals.

Rio presents his work with an eye toward modern sensibilities regarding historical authenticity and scholarly preoccupations with accuracy. To this end, he proposes in the appendix to his three Arthurian novels a chronology and two maps, all designed by the author. The timeline begins in 406 CE with the departure of the Roman legions, coinciding with the reigns of Merlin's grandfather in Wales and of King Constant in Logres. It goes on to list approximately forty key events in the cycle through the burial of Arthur and Morgane in Merlin's handmade mausoleum in 544. It also charts the birth and death of all characters, along with their ages at each event. The first map shows the land corresponding to present-day Great Britain and Bretagne and designates the territories belonging to Logres during the reigns of Constant, Vortigern, and Pendragon (406-455), as well as those acquired by Uther (455-476) and Arthur (476-539). The second map,

²⁹⁶ *Merlin*, p. 113.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

more detailed, locates regions and kingdoms (Orcanie, Galles, Armorica), the capitals of Logres (Londinium, Carduel, Camelot), and key battles (Badon, Camlann), as well as various castles, forests, and tribes in each kingdom. One fascinating detail is the inclusion of Gorre, located in Rio's map to the immediate north of Hadrian's Wall, situating it behind a concrete barrier that physically isolates it from Arthur's holdings. This is particularly apt, given that Gorre appears as early as Chrétien as an Otherworldly space, never located precisely on a map, and which falls outside of Arthur's realm.

Map taken from Rio's *Arthur*:



Aside from minor stylistic changes, the maps and chronology are identical across the three novels; they also appear at the end of the compiled cycle *Merlin le faiseur de rois*. Rio makes no attempt to disguise the nature of these efforts, calling them in an afterward “un exercice logique sur la fiction et l’histoire.”²⁹⁸ He points to the “caractère peu abondant et aléatoire des informations et des repères” concerning the period as a justification for the creation of his own internally consistent maps and chronology for Logres and its key inhabitants.²⁹⁹ This world-building helps situate the trilogy as speculative fiction rather than strictly historical fiction.

In spite of the acknowledged fictitiousness of the appended materials, Rio uses them as his own form of legitimization. The *appearance* of scholarly rigor, as demonstrated by the inclusion of “supporting materials” such as maps and timelines, reveals Rio’s preoccupation with credibility from the perspective of a modern reader who expects such documents to demonstrate the internal logic of the writer’s invention. From the reception angle, it also acknowledges that a reader who sees a site evoked in a text (such as Camelot) will wish to be able to locate it on a map; this holds true even when those sites are made-up. (I am thinking in particular of Tolkien’s maps of Middle Earth.) In order to preserve what Coleridge called the “willing suspension of disbelief,” the author must provide realistic trappings that embellish the proposed (fictional) reality. The appendices thus straddle the practices of both scholarship and speculative fiction.

²⁹⁸ *Merlin*, p. 115.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Among the authors of modern Arthuriana I have studied, Michel Rio is the object of the most polemical attack. Robert Baudry is scathing in his assessment of Rio's project, largely due to the absence of myth-making and its trappings throughout the trilogy. Baudry's orientation toward Arthuriana presupposes the primal place of the marvelous oneric, exemplified by the spells of Merlin and Morgane, the Otherworldly adventures of the various knights, and especially the privileged position of the Grail quest. For an author to evacuate his Arthurian production of all such enchantment, as Rio has done, strikes Baudry as an unpardonable betrayal of the Myth:

Michel Rio, bien que né en Bretagne, livre en 1989, avec son *Merlin* le plus parfait exemple de la réduction d'un Mythe à son degré zéro : [...] l'auteur évacue de l'intrigue tout ce que la tradition lui attribue de magique : plus de dons magiques ni d'ascendance surnaturelle pour Merlin, ni d'invisible enfermement. Ni Morgane ni Viviane magiciennes ni fées. Ni Avalon, ni Lac comme sites merveilleux. Ni naissance extraordinaire d'Arthur, ni existence d'un graal. Que reste-t-il ? Rien. Qu'un style séduisant. Séducteur. Reste que l'auteur détourne le mythe pour l'araser au goût d'une idéologie réductrice. Certes, tout écrivain tend naturellement à infléchir le Mythe au gré de ses préoccupations personnelles, philosophiques ou autres. Pourvu que ces innovations restent dans la ligne de la pensée mythique. Ce n'est point le cas ici. Et alors joue une autre loi: « le mythe se venge ». Que d'attentats à la fabuleuse légende! Un parti pris s'applique à vider d'aventures cette vaine vie de Merlin, devenue veuve de merveilles. Les forces obscures jadis convoquées par l'Enchanteur l'ont cédé à des 'Lumières' trop crues. Un rationalisme ravageur s'acharne à ravalier l'émerveillement celtique à un réalisme rampant. Y contribuent jusqu'aux annexes. Ce qui devait rester dans l'intemporalité du Mythe, l'auteur prétend s'inscrire sur la topographie d'une carte, dans la chronologie des siècles, à des dates précises. Peut-on rêver pire méconnaissance de la pensée mythique?³⁰⁰

³⁰⁰ Baudry, Robert. *Le Mythe de Merlin*. Rennes: Edition Terre de Brume, 2007, p. 293.

Rio understanding of the locus of interest in the Arthurian *matière* differs greatly from Baudry's. In the afterward to the cycle's concluding volume *Arthur*, first published in *Le Magazine littéraire*, Rio writes that the true interest of the Arthurian world is the scope of socio-political and moral vision of its protagonists. "J'ai été fidèle aux potentialités du cycle qui s'y inscrivent dès ses commencements, fidèle à l'idée en germe, du moins celle que j'ai cru y lire, celle d'un monde qui se pense et qui en fin de compte ne se fait pas, et aux seuls vrais personnages liés à cette idée : Merlin ou l'utopie, Morgane ou la révolte, Arthur ou l'exercice du pouvoir, c'est-à-dire du compromis."³⁰¹ Whereas Baudry considers the Arthurian material the firm, indubitable property of the mythic landscape, Rio conceives of his project at the intersection of two facets of the same dialectic: legend and history. "[I]l s'agissait bien pour moi," he explains, "... de montrer comment une histoire sans magie aucune sert de terreau à la légende opérant une interprétation merveilleuse des faits."³⁰² Indeed, the trilogy demonstrates precisely the potential for the legendary to inhabit the mortal without recourse to magic. Each of the three title characters becomes associated with superhuman powers, inspiring both dread and devotion in the imagination of Logres' inhabitants. This holds true particularly in the case of Morgane, whose despotic power of life and death over the people of Avalon, combined with her thorough knowledge of surgery and pharmacology (the result of dissection and extensive experimentation upon prisoners), yields a "sentiment d'idolâtrie" due to the popular perception that she is "une déesse avec les apparences de l'humanité."³⁰³ In the same book, when Arthur and Morgane reunite for their second sexual union, the text

³⁰¹ *Arthur*, p. 168.

³⁰² *Arthur*, p. 169.

³⁰³ *Morgane*, p. 162.

recounts Morgane's observation that the older, hardened king has earned a reputation for invincibility on the battlefield and that "il était, vivant et jeune encore, une légende."³⁰⁴ The trilogy never presents the three protagonists as anything more than the apex of human potential but attests to the process by which a living individual might, as Tennyson's Ulysses says, "become a name."

Nowhere is this transition from the historical to legendary mode more apparent than at the end of *Merlin*. Arthur and Mordred have undertaken their final, mortal combat, and the remnants of Logres are under attack from external forces. In an attempt to intimidate these "vultures," Merlin orders the cadavers of Arthur's fallen knights lined up in formation to simulate a living army: "A certains il manquait un membre, et d'autres n'avaient plus de visage. Mais tous, liés au bois, se tenaient fermement, comme prêts au combat, animés par je ne savais quelle horrible détermination, invincibles."³⁰⁵ Merlin then cries out to the enemy chiefs that he has returned from the land of death to resurrect the fallen knights: "Ils sont là, debout, à nouveau frères. ... Logres et la Table Ronde ne mourront jamais."³⁰⁶ In the analogous scene of *Arthur*, the mortally wounded king leaves his tent and sees this spectacle before him: "l'image de Logres sans fin, de Merlin éternel, de la loi de la Table à jamais."³⁰⁷ To Arthur, as well as the enemy soldiers, the spectacle looks like a supernatural occurrence, the rebirth of slain knights that signifies the assured immortality of Arthur and his reign. With this final vision, the king succumbs to his wound. The scene lays bare the myth-making process, demonstrating how a natural

³⁰⁴ *Morgane*, p. 117.

³⁰⁵ *Merlin*, p. 141.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁷ *Arthur*, p. 156.

phenomenon could come to take on a mythic dimension. The paroxysm of Logres's death (Merlin describes it as a "monde moribond") also marks the birth of its legend, thereby ensuring its immortality. It is also in this scene that Merlin earns his reputation as a necromancer. As such, the attacks leveled by Baudry against Rio's approach to Arthuriana seem not just overly dismissive, but also unwarranted. Rather than a "degré zéro" treatment of myth, as Baudry contends, Rio gives the myth historicized grounding, allowing the reader to fill in the gaps between an imagined history and the resultant legend.³⁰⁸

The Logres of Elves and Dwarfs:

Jean-Louis Fetjaine's Celtic historical-fantasy hybrid

Jean-Louis Fetjaine is the author of two distinct Arthurian series, both of them broadly categorized as fantasy in the mass market genre sense of the term. The first is the *Trilogie des Elfes*, a three-volume cycle set in the generation before Arthur's rise to power. At the beginning of the trilogy, Pellehun sits on the throne of Loth, aided by his seneschal Gorlois, and Uter is a low-ranking, adolescent knight infatuated with the king's child-bride, Ygraine. Merlin (called Myrddin by the elves) has been born but not yet introduced to the protagonists. The *Trilogie* takes place over a span of approximately three years. It recounts the events leading to the conception of Morgane (Rhiannon

³⁰⁸ This approach to rewriting Arthuriana as historical fiction is far more widespread and accepted in modern Anglophone fiction. Rosemary Sutcliff's *Sword at Sunset* (1963) is an early example of this phenomenon. A more recent installment in this vein is the 2004 Antoine Fuqua film *King Arthur*.

among the elves) and Arthur, and setting up the origins of key Arthurian tropes such as Excalibur, the Grail, and the Sword in the Stone, accounting for how these marvelous objects came into the world of men. Fetjaine's other Arthurian series, the Merlin cycle, is set in an altogether different continuity. The duology follows the adolescent Merlin, an apprentice Welsh bard, in his quest for paternity and identity. Over the course of the cycle, he matures in his skills and powers, becoming the mage of legend. While both series contain undeniably fantastic elements, they adopt quite different postures toward setting and historicity. In so doing, they demonstrate the inadequacy of designations that contrast fantasy and historical fiction as the two poles governing contemporary Arthuriana, suggesting not only that the elements may work in concert, but that there is ample room for variation in their levels of saturation within the text. Ultimately, both series use the fantasy format as a vehicle for the highly ambitious integration of source materials from a variety of textual traditions, ranging from Biblical to folkloric, thereby making Fetjaine's work among the most elaborate recreations of the medieval art of *conjointure*.

Readers of Fetjaine's *Trilogie des elfes* could be forgiven for initially wondering whether they have stumbled into Tolkien's Middle Earth rather than King Arthur's Logres. The prologue to the opening volume describes three principal races known as "les Peuples libres"—the woodland elves, the mountain dwarves, and the coast-dwelling men—uniting to defeat the Dark Lord and his army of goblins who have invaded from a blighted land. The victorious Peuples libres then maintain an uneasy peace that is threatened by the loss of a magical object, which results in a cohort of dwarves, elves,

and men being sent on a perilous quest to salvage the peace. If it proves impossible for the modern reader to encounter the “Seigneur noir” without calling to mind Sauron, or the Terre Gaste without imagining Mordor, the comparison is all but inevitable. Tolkien’s Middle Earth is, after all, the generic standard-bearer that overlays most high fantasy for the reading public of the twenty-first century in English. This is particularly true in light of Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, which brought Middle Earth into the mainstream for a worldwide audience. Its first installment, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, was released in 2001, a year after the final installment in Fetjaine’s series was published, meaning that readers who discovered Fetjaine’s work a few years after its publication would have been saturated with references to elves, dwarves, and wizards in contemporary culture.

Although Fetjaine’s work strongly recalls Tolkien’s, this is not simply because *La Trilogie des Elfes* is a derivative series, but rather, because both medievalist authors drew from the same source material—namely, Celtic, Germanic, and Scandinavian folkloric traditions, many of which have long been recognized as early source material for Arthurian legend.³⁰⁹ Of these, the most pronounced influence upon Fetjaine’s texts are Welsh and Irish mythology. *La Trilogie des Elfes* recounts an elaborate Arthurian origins story, that of a Logres populated by fantastical tribes who are giving way to the race of man. The old ways and the old gods are dying out, while Christianity is gaining a foothold. The trilogy attests to the cultural shift by integrating the religious and textual

³⁰⁹ For a study of Tolkien’s engagement with these traditions, see Burns, Marjorie. *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien’s Middle Earth*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005.

traditions associated with Arthurian origins. The Celtic marvelous facilitates twofold return to Arthurian origins: it both provides a narrative backstory culminating in the new Arthurian age and resituates many Arthurian tropes in the Celtic legend that gave rise to them. The prologue to each novel in the trilogy sets out a mythology of four races under the protection of the goddess Dana. These four tribes, the Tuatha Dé Danann, have each received from their goddess a talisman to protect their survival:

Les hommes reçurent le Fal Lia, la Pierre de Fal, principe même de la souveraineté, qui gémissait dès qu'un roi légitime s'en approchait. [...] Aux elfes échut le Chaudron du Dagda, le Graal de la connaissance divine. Aux monstres la lance de Lug, le dieu que les moines appelèrent Lucifer, arme terrible qui ne pouvait étancher sa furie meurtrière qu'en étant plongée dans un chaudron rempli de sang. Et les nains reçurent l'Épée de Nudd, qu'il nommaient Caledfwch dans leur langue rocailleuse et qui devint, dans la bouche des hommes, Excalibur.³¹⁰

The characters and objects in this premise are taken directly from Irish mythology, where the Tuatha Dé Danann figure as a group of deities or supernhuman creatures gifted with four magical items: a stone from the wizard Morfessa in Falia, the invincible spear of Lug (also Lugh), the inescapable sword of Nuadha, and the inexhaustible cauldron of Dagda, king of the Tuatha Dé Danann.³¹¹ These objects are considered antecedents to the most famous Arthurian objects. Caledfwch (also Caladvwch), the sword carried by the heroes of the early Welsh story of *Culhwch and Olwen*, became known as Caliburnus in Geoffrey of Monmouth and later as Excalibur. Dagda's magical cauldron was capable of providing physical and spiritual sustenance, as well as healing the injured and even resurrecting the dead; it is seen as a source for the healing properties of the Christianized

³¹⁰ *Crépuscule des Elfes*, p. 18.

³¹¹ Dixon-Kennedy, Mike. *Celtic Myth and Legend*, p. 281.

Holy Grail, and the heroes of *Culhwch and Olwen* embark on an analogous quest for the cauldron. Fetjaine further melds the Celtic legends to Arthurian paraphernalia. In the trilogy's final volume, Excalibur is lodged in the Pierre de Fal, creating the Sword in the Stone, while Lug's lance is taken from its monstrous custodians and becomes part of Lancelot's heritage. The legendary Tuatha Dé Danann were allegedly defeated by newer deities, in particular, those of Christianity and "retreated into the *síd* or mounds, where they lived as a kind of fairy race with many of their older divine aspects."³¹² In Fetjaine's series, the elves, dwarves, and monsters are gradually subsumed by men; once deprived of their talismans, they die out, and men start to show physical and moral characteristics of the lost race.³¹³ It is largely through the Celtic tradition that Fetjaine accounts for the "fée" element of the Arthurian world. As a prominent example, in the trilogy Morgane is a half-blood elf born to the elf queen Lliane and the human knight Uter. Her link to her non-human side is designated by her elfin name, Rhiannon, meaning "great high queen," an allusion to a Welsh goddess associated with death and rebirth.³¹⁴

Other sources of mythology beyond the Celtic contributed to Fetjaine's world-building. Norse legend figures in the trilogy through the barbarian Freïhr -- likely derived from the Norse god Freyr--who becomes father to Galaad/Lancelot. It also inflects some of the dwarf characters' names, such as Miolnir (in Norse mythology, the hammer of Thor, crafted by dwarves). The Germanic tradition is present in a passage in which a caged goblin escapes and exacts vengeance upon the creature who had been tormenting

³¹² MacColloch, J.A. *Celtic and Scandinavian Religions*, p. 39.

³¹³ The Tuatha Dé Danann also figure in Barjavel's *L'Enchanteur* as the dying race of giants in Ireland. Galehaut is among their dwindling population and charged with continuing the legacy of his exiled people.

³¹⁴ Dixon-Kennedy, Mike. *Celtic Myth and Legend*, p. 255.

it; the text refers to the retribution as “wergeld: le prix du sang,” alluding to the Salic code of the early Middle Ages (also written as *weregild*) that governed restitution for injury or loss of life.³¹⁵ More broadly, Scandinavian and Germanic folklore are the source for much of the medieval literature on dwarfs and elves.³¹⁶

Medieval French romance and the Biblical tradition that serves as romance intertext figure in the three novels as well. The trilogy gradually integrates passages from the *Lancelot du Lac* section of the Vulgate Cycle as the elfin origins story converges with traditional Arthurian legend. This incorporation of medieval Arthurian texts becomes most pronounced in the trilogy’s final volume, *L’Heure des elfes*, continuing for more than a page in a passage relating the constitution of the Round Table by Uter and his knights. As the trilogy becomes increasingly saturated with quotes from the Vulgate Cycle, Fetjaine begins to footnote more frequently, explaining terminology associated with druidic worship, medieval garments, and aspects of Celtic folklore. Biblical passages are likewise identified toward the end of the cycle.

The setting for the trilogy is rich in Arthurian markers. Gorlois’s stronghold is located at Tintagel.³¹⁷ The elves dwell in the ever-shrinking forest of Éliande (Brocéliande).³¹⁸ The exiled elf queen Lliane makes her new home with Morgane on Avalon, the island of the gods, on which stands the famous apple tree, “l’arbre de la

³¹⁵ *Crépuscule des Elfes*, p. 127.

³¹⁶ While dwarfs exist in medieval French literature (for instance, in Chrétien’s *Chevalier de la charrette*), they are seldom differentiated characters imbued with attributes beyond short stature; elves do not figure at all. See Lecouteux, Claude. *Les Nains et les elfes au moyen âge*. Éditions Imago, 1988. Lecouteux’s book figures among Fetjaine’s reference materials for the series.

³¹⁷ *Crépuscule des Elfes*, p. 37.

³¹⁸ *La Nuit des elfes*, p. 409.

connaissance,” to which the island owes its name.³¹⁹ The text also replicates the medieval model of situating Logres in opposition to the bordering land of Gorre. In this Arthurian world, Gorre doubles as the blighted Wasteland: “[L]es Marches constituaient la frontière floue entre le royaume de Logres et le pays de Gorre, le domaine de l’Innommable, que les hommes appelaient Terre gaste, Terres noires, ou Terres foraines.”³²⁰ These names serve to anchor the narrative as an Arthurian story, even though, at least in the initial volume, most of the plot threads are not derived from the medieval canon. At the same time, this Arthurian world is not mapped out clearly, nor is it dated with any historical specificity. Allusions to the advent of Christianity and various medieval traditions indicate that the setting is roughly parallel to fifth- or sixth-century Europe, but the text does not allow for greater specificity. The geography of Logres is particularly vague. While certain settings, such as the mosquito-infested swamp and the goblin mercenary camp that the protagonists encounter during their initial quest, are depicted in evocative detail, a birds-eye view of Logres never takes shape. This may be in part because, for the characters, the land is not entirely charted. They must rely upon guides to conduct them through uncertain terrain and into unknown regions. As such, the setting for *La Trilogie des elfes* is highly detailed in snapshots but misty in its overall spatial delineation.

By contrast, Fetjaine’s Merlin duology, which was published in the two years following the completion of the elf trilogy, relies heavily upon maps and real-world chronology. As in the other series, Merlin is a human-elf hybrid, but his world is fully recognizable as late sixth-century Britain (on both sides of the Channel). Paratextual

³¹⁹ *La Nuit des elfes*, p. 504.

³²⁰ *Crépuscule des Elfes*, p. 58.

materials for *Le Pas de Merlin* include a map of the island, charting the protagonist's travels between Strathclyde (in present-day southern Scotland) and Dyfed (in present-day Wales). *Brocéliande* includes a larger map stretching to western France, although it does not label the titular forest, to which Merlin travels in search of his elfin origins.³²¹

Fetjaine's map of "les deux Bretagne," taken from *Brocéliande*:



³²¹On a side note, one fascinating common point between Fetjaine's map and Rio's is the inclusion of the city of Rennes, situated near Brocéliande Forest, as in the real, modern world. Although Rennes was a notable city in Roman times and into the sixth century, it does not figure in any of the books in the two series, even by allusion. Its presence on both maps may be a nod to the city's role as the de facto epicenter of French Arthurian studies.

There is also a lengthy preface to the first volume, *Le Pas de Merlin*, in which Fetjaine lays out a well researched overview of the theories surrounding a historical Arthur figure, their various shortcomings, and the greater likelihood of Merlin's historical existence as a bard who lived more than a century after the putative Arthur's death. To supplement this *avertissement*, he includes a chronology beginning with the Roman General Magnus Maximus's attempts to seize Britain in 380 CE and ending with Nennius's composition of the *Historia Brittonum* around 830. These materials set up an Arthurian landscape that is distinguished by its highly developed postures of faithful history, even as the author acknowledges his Merlin story to be "une fiction [...] où se mêlent le fantastique et le légendaire médiéval."³²² Evidence of the author's attempt to respect present-day knowledge of the period can also be found in the extensive scholarly bibliography that follows each volume.

One final prefatory technique found almost nowhere else in modern Arthuriana is the inclusion of a *dramatis personae* before each novel in the duology to identify key characters.³²³ Fetjaine's character lists are noteworthy primarily because they highlight the Welshness of the story. Throughout the novels, French versions of Arthurian names are used—Merlin rather than Myrddin, Ambroise Aurélien rather than Ambrosius Aurelianus, Ryderc rather than Rhydderch, and so on. However, in the initial listing, many names are accompanied by alternate Welsh or Latin versions, reminding the reader that although the author has "simplifié l'orthographe des noms gallois, souvent

³²² *Le Pas de Merlin*, pp. 11-12.

³²³ Roubaud and Delay supply a similar character list, but in a different format, and certainly without the intent to provide historical context.

imprononçables pour des continentaux,” he privileges the (pseudo)historical context of his story.³²⁴ In this way, the *dramatis personae* attests to the early trajectory of medieval Arthurian production and replicates its transition from Welsh romance and Latin chronicle to the romance vernacular tradition.

The plot of the duology hinges on Merlin’s quest for paternal origins, which are complicated by the rumor that the young bard is a literal “fils du diable.” The cycle gradually reveals his true identity as the son of an elf king, and with this heritage come supernatural powers, among them the ability to communicate with the dead.³²⁵ The plot is thus firmly anchored fantasy, some of it comparable to the paradigms set out in Fetjaine’s other Arthurian series.³²⁶ At the same time, by Fetjaine’s reckoning, the works should be considered legitimate works of historical fiction; indeed, as he said in an interview, fantastical elements might be considered a requirement for a novel set during this period: “Ce sont tout à fait des romans historiques. Tous les faits, tous les personnages ou presque sont authentiques. Bien sûr, on glisse progressivement dans le Merveilleux, mais pour être fidèle à l’esprit du Moyen Age, il faut traiter de Merveilleux. C’est une époque qui croit profondément à la magie, qu’elle soit chrétienne (miracles, saints...) ou païenne.”³²⁷ The cycle accordingly integrates Christian magic and druidic magic with a context that presents itself as faithful to the scholarship surrounding the period.

³²⁴ *Le Pas de Merlin*, p. 29.

³²⁵ I discuss Merlin’s paternity quest further in Chapter 4.

³²⁶ It is worth noting that the texts accept the generic label of “fantasy,” as the publishing series “Pocket Fantasy” is marked clearly on the front cover and the spine of each.

³²⁷ Fetjaine, Jean-Louis. Entretien: <http://www.yozone.fr/spip.php?article1530>. Accessed 22 May, 2013. In the interview, Fetjaine was referring to both *Le Pas de Merlin* and *Brocéliande*.

In spite of their different approaches toward setting and historicity, the *Trilogie des Elfes* and the Merlin cycle function similarly in one key respect: they both accomplish a highly elaborate reintegration of the various sources for Arthurian literature—literary, historical, folkloric, and religious. By placing elves alongside druids and the newly arrived Catholic bishops, Fetjaine represents the panoply of traditions that have been present in Arthuriana since its inception. In this regard both settings are integral to the collection of source materials, enabling a cannily modern adaptation of the medieval practice of *conjointure*.

To the Antipodes and Beyond:

Otherworldly Voyages in Roubaud, Barjavel, and Le Dantec

As Denis Hüe has observed, the Arthurian universe is inflected by its proximity to what scholars have labeled the *Otherworld*.³²⁸ Depicted or alluded to in French texts ranging from Marie de France's *Lais* to the *Perlesvaus* and the *Prose Lancelot*, the term may refer to lands inhabited by fairies, spaces shrouded in magic or illusion, mirror-worlds, underworlds peopled by extinguished or diminished races, or realms in which the laws of the natural world as conceived by Arthur's court no longer apply. For all of the topos's apparent heterogeneity, scholarship has delineated some of its key commonalities, which include geographical features such as bodies of water, a sense of permeability vis-

³²⁸ "C'est l'ensemble de l'univers arthurien, de la matière de Bretagne qui est ainsi concerné par cette proximité, par cette familiarité tantôt fécondante tantôt inquiétante." Hüe, Denis, "Avant-propos," *Le Monde et l'Autre Monde : Actes du colloque arthurien de Rennes (8-9 mars 2001)*, dir. Denis Hue and Christine Ferlampin-Acher, Orléans : Paradigme, 2002, p. 12.

à-vis the everyday world, and an experience of alterity on the part of the knight who enters into the marvelous realm.³²⁹ Understudied, however, is the extent to which journeys to the Otherworld in recent French Arthurian fiction correspond to paradigms established with reference to medieval literary production.

This chapter's final section examines marvelous voyages undertaken by the protagonists of three twentieth-century Arthurian novels: Jean Pierre Le Dantec's *Graal-Romance*, René Barjavel's *L'Enchanteur*, and Jacques Roubaud's *Le Chevalier Silence*. It evaluates the texts against criteria described by Stoyan Atanassov in his article "L'Autre Monde comme une scène de quiproquo." My aim is to assess the extent to which their treatment of journeys to Otherworlds departs from medieval representation of such spaces, and whether they portray a postmodern Otherworld that is truly distinct from their antecedents.

Atanassov's model for conceiving of the Otherworld includes three relevant points. First, the Otherworld is situated geographically beyond the borders of the familiar world of Arthur's court. The errant knight may not immediately recognize the threshold of the new realm, but tropes such as mountains, forests, and perilous river-crossings signal a shift to the reader. Second, the radical alterity of the Otherworld is somewhat attenuated by its permeability and "visitability." Far from being a point of no return, it is a land from which one always returns, due in some cases to pacts or constraints placed on the hero. Third, the Otherworld is invariably a socialized space; whether populated by fairies, giants, monsters, or sorcerers, it is inhabited by individuals whose agency may be

³²⁹ See articles by Anne Berthelot, Tom Klonski, and Jacques Ribard, in *Le Monde et l'Autre Monde*.

imposed upon Arthurian heroes. As Atanassov himself explains, this rubric is neither exhaustive, nor prescriptive. However, it does provide useful markers by which one may gauge the relative adherence of a given text to the typical exigencies of the Otherworld.

Le Dantec's *Graal-Romance* invents a frame narrative set ten years after the fall of Camelot in which an abbot called Gautier de Bath collects first-hand accounts of Arthur's reign from Lancelot, Guenièvre, Viviane, and Merlin during a stay at Viviane's Lake in Brocéliande Forest. In Le Dantec's depiction of the palace beneath the Lake, Viviane's realm is a mirror of the normal world. "Ainsi, les oiseaux nagent et les poissons volent, tandis que les arbres prennent racine au ciel," the reader learns.³³⁰ When Gautier first arrives in this Otherworld, Lancelot must explain that although what he sees there may run counter to the natural world, this topsy-turvy land is not the work of the Devil, but rather an allegorical illustration " [destiné] à représenter à l'esprit de ceux qui vivent à l'envers de nous l'inextricable mixité du beau et de l'horrible, du Mal et du Bien. Ce qui revient à dire, comme l'expliquait Merlin, que la relativité n'est pas seulement restreinte, mais générale."³³¹ In Barjavel's *L'Enchanteur*, Merlin, Arthur, Kay, and Lancelot travel via Ireland to the underground land of the Tuatha Dé Danann to request from the Belle Géante a stone structure that the text will later designate as Stonehinge. Once in the Belle Géante's domain, Merlin is able to baptize one of her infant sons, causing him to shrink so that he can find a wife in the Arthurian world and return with her to repopulate the dying race of the Tuatha Dé Danann. The newly Christian and humanized Galehaut leaves the subterranean world in the care of Merlin and Lancelot.

³³⁰ *Graal-Romance*, p. 32.

³³¹ *Ibid.*

Finally, in Jacques Roubaud's *Le Chevalier*, the adolescent knight Silence and her animal companions must travel to the Antipodes, where her lover Wallwein [sic], the son of Gauvain, is being held hostage by Morgane. Wallwein's route via Mount Etna is blocked off, forcing the heroes to journey to the ends of a disc-shaped Earth and pass over to the other side. After traversing the Antipodean Ocean in search of their comrade, the company finally arrives at Morgane's domain, the island of Avalon. There, they find Wallwein waiting on the deserted docks, having been ejected by the sexually frustrated Morgane, a strangely anticlimactic outcome given the lengthy, perilous quest.

The three journeys in these novels take their protagonists to spaces that are recognizable as various avatars of the Otherworld: an underwater mirror-world, a subterranean realm, and an enchanted island. In at least one instance, the marvelous space is designated by the text specifically as an Otherworld; *Graal-Romance*'s Lancelot describes this precise nature of Viviane's domain to Gautier, using the French term "l'Autre Monde." In *L'Enchanteur*, the analogous term "l'autre pays" occurs at least once, as Lancelot describes his origins to King Arthur as being in "the other country."³³² This usage, which echoes the language found in the medieval *Prose Lancelot* in a similar scene, hints at the duality of realms, as Tom Klonski has astutely suggested.³³³ Lancelot is not from merely another country, but *the* other country. Both medieval and twentieth-century texts signal an awareness of a world distinct from Arthur's universe. Meanwhile,

³³² "Où est ton fief ?

-Dans l'autre pays ..." Barjavel, *L'Enchanteur*, p. 244.

³³³ "Dans cette phrase, Lancelot dit peut-être à son interlocuteur, au lecteur, mais aussi à soi-même qu'il a bien compris que le domaine de la Dame du Lac, que l'espace où lui-même a grandi, appartient à un domaine 'autre.'" Klonski, Tom, « Réflexions sur la notion d'Autre Monde, » in *Le Monde et l'Autre Monde*, p. 222.

Le Chevalier Silence does not use the expression akin to “Otherworld,” but seems to use the Antipodes as a stand-in for the same notion, describing them as the domain of “Pwyll, roi de la Basse Gent (petites fées, petits gnomes, petits lutins, petits trolls...).”³³⁴ The narrator goes on to introduce the land of Avalon as a distinctly marvelous space, playfully offering up a pseudo-citation of Gerald of Wales on the climate and agricultural production of the island. Somewhat paradoxically, of course, to designate these spaces as Otherworlds is to de-medievalize them to a certain degree, since the term Otherworld appears nowhere in medieval Arthuriana and seems not to have been coined until the nineteenth century.³³⁵ Even as the twentieth-century texts self-consciously model their marvelous spaces on the medieval Otherworld, there is a rupture; in calling a medieval *topos* by a name invented by modern scholarship, the texts implicitly reveal discontinuity with the source material. This holds true especially in the case of *Graal-Romance*, the only one of the three to explicitly declare a space an Otherworld. The tendency is present to a lesser extent in the other two cases.

Aside from nomenclature, just how well do these spaces conform to our understanding of medieval Otherworlds? Let us first turn to Atanassov’s criteria concerning the socialization and accessibility of the Otherworld. In these key areas, the newer representations of Otherworlds correspond well to the paradigms present in medieval romance, particularly in the cases of *Graal-Romance* and *L’Enchanteur*. In both cases, we find populated worlds. *Graal-Romance*’s Lake realm is peopled not only by Viviane but by an assortment of Lake-dwellers who live in idyllic bliss, feasting, dancing,

³³⁴ Roubaud, *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 136.

³³⁵ Klonski, p. 213.

and copulating before the bemused narrator. In *L'Enchanteur*, the subterranean land initially seems deserted, until a hill the knights are climbing rolls over, revealing itself to be a sleeping infant giant. The queen of the land, the Belle Géante, is by contrast a formidable presence capable of crushing the knights with a stray swipe of the hand. She is nonetheless regarded by the text and the characters as a sovereign to be treated with. The permeability of the border is apparent in both texts. In *Graal-Romance*, Gautier eventually leaves Brocéliande to become abbot of a monastery, with the understanding that he is welcome back to Viviane's domain at any time. In *L'Enchanteur*, not only do the questing knights leave, but so does one of the Tuatha, a parallelism that emphasizes the potential for incursion by members of both worlds. Moreover, the newly-baptized giant is fated to return to his homeland with a bride, in keeping with the medieval premise that all who journey into an Otherworld are destined to find their way home.

Le Chevalier Silence alone does not conform well to either of these criteria set out by Atanassov: Avalon appears utterly deserted, and Silence, sucked up in a whirlpool, never makes it back to the Arthurian world. Nevertheless, the text seems to respect the treatment of Avalon in at least one medieval text, Marie de France's *Lanval*. The *lai* ends with the knight riding off with his fairy queen to Avalon, at which point Marie abruptly cuts off the story with the explanation that she can say no more. Jacques Ribard has noted the inaccessibility of this island which is by definition totally cut off from the world around it and about which nothing can be said.³³⁶ *Lanval*, it seems, belongs in the

³³⁶ "...par définition totalement coupée du monde qui l'entoure et dont rien ne peut être dit: 'Ne jeo n'en sai avant cunter,' comme le declare Marie de France." Ribard, Jacques. « Pour une lecture allégorique et

Otherworld; the character constitutes one of the few exceptions to the premise that visiting the Otherworld entails a necessary return. Likewise, *Le Chevalier Silence* seems to respect the interdiction against revealing too much about Avalon. Heldris the narrator supplies outside, academic information about Avalon, but when Silence arrives on its shores, the text refuses to admit any access. The Otherworld remains a *terra incognita* for readers; if it has inhabitants, we never see them. And the heroine who boldly pursues the land of the unknown? Swept up in the whirlpool during her attempt to return to her homeland, Silence seems to be as lost to Avalon as the medieval Lanval, making good on the promise of her name to remain silent on the mysteries of the island.

Although by and large the marvelous spaces under consideration today resemble and function similarly to their medieval antecedents, the heroes' relationship to them seems to have undergone a major transformation. One point of disparity between the medieval and twentieth-century texts is the degree of continuity between the worlds, as perceived by those belonging to Arthur's world. As Atanassov suggests, medieval Arthurian knights are often unable to discern the boundary between Logres, or Camelot, and the Otherworld into which they are passing. Representative of this tendency are Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* and the alliterative *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In the former case, it is impossible to identify the precise moment Lancelot passes into Bademagu's kingdom of Gorre; even before he crosses the ostensible threshold, the Bridge of the Sword, he has encountered the marvelous cemetery that situates the hero squarely in the Otherworld. Likewise, in the second case, Gawain seeks

chrétienne de l'Autre Monde dans les romans arthuriens du XIIe siècle , » *Le Monde et l'Autre Monde : Actes du colloque arthurien de Rennes (8-9 mars 2001)*, p. 322.

the Green Chapel but has no indication he has reached Bertilak de Hautdesert's kingdom. Indeed, it only becomes clear that he has entered a marvelous space long after the fact. With no clear geographical anchors for the magical realms, it seems that Arthurian knights risk entering Otherworlds at any moment; there is no telling when or where such a crossing over may occur. Spatial instability reinforces the apparent permeability of the boundary between worlds.

By contrast, in the twentieth-century works, the boundaries between the everyday world and the Otherworld are far more clearly marked, not only for the reader but also for the Arthurian characters at the level of plot. In *Graal-Romance*, the narrator Gautier watches as Lancelot, who was raised by Viviane and thus knows the way in, makes signs of the Kabala in the air, upon which the water of Brocéliande's Lake parts to reveal a pathway allowing them access to the underwater realm. Lancelot goes on to explain to the flabbergasted monk the precise modes of access to and mechanisms of the Otherworld, even explicitly designating Viviane's domain as such:

Nos anciens, qui avaient faculté de l'atteindre de façon naturelle, en laissant leurs esprits libres s'abandonner à des rêveries sans malice, appelaient cette contrée magique Autre Monde. Ils prétendaient, à ce que m'a rapporté Merlin, que ses portes pouvaient se dissimuler sous le plus petit tertre, la fontaine la plus minuscule, ou la simple caverne béant à flanc de falaise. En quoi ils se trompaient, ou plutôt, péchaient par excès de confiance. Seules existent en effet trois entrées (à moins que d'autres, depuis ces époques reculées, se soient trouvées comblées) : celle-ci, que tu vois ouverte devant toi ; une seconde, au sommet du mont Sinaï, que découvrit Moïse ; une troisième enfin, située sur une terre si lointaine au-

delà des mers que nul mortel ne l'a pour l'instant reconnue, mais que la tradition nomme : ile d'Avalon.³³⁷

In *L'Enchanteur*, Lancelot likewise plays a pivotal and deliberate role in opening a door to the Otherworld of the giant race. Merlin guides the troupe of knights to Ireland via a white ship. Once they have arrived at the seaside mountain that is to be their point of access, they must transfer to a black ship, the precise double of the other. The active move to the black ship signals the shift from one world to the other and presages the diminishment of the subterranean kingdom, whose gods have abandoned them. To gain access to the world of somnolent giants, Lancelot must then forge a schism in the mountain by slicing through the air with a broken sword. The mountain cracks wide open and water rushes in, carrying with it the ship and the knights. Both novels show knights who enter the Otherworld knowingly and actively.

Only in *Le Chevalier Silence* is the border between the Arthurian world and the Antipodes less than obvious. The narrator describes the topography of the world's edge: "Le bord de la Terre est une montagne d'une lieue galloise de hauteur. L'Océan se précipite vers elle, mais ne s'y brise pas. Un détroit s'ouvre, large de cent pieds à peine. L'eau franchit la passe et tombe, verticale, vers l'autre côté de la Terre."³³⁸ Echoing the classical paradigm of Charon, who ferried the dead across the River Styx to the underworld, Silence must pay a ferryman to be carried beyond this threshold. The boat goes over the edge, but continues downward for about a league at a normal rowing speed

³³⁷ *Graal-Romance*, pp. 31-32.

³³⁸ *Le Chevalier Silence*, p.133.

so that nothing feels different to the passengers. Only afterwards does the ferryman explain what has taken place: “La rivière où nous sommes, messieurs, est la rivière du Temps.”³³⁹ He explains that it can only be crossed once, downstream; there is no way to return to the Arthurian world by this route. Although this explanation comes slightly after the fact, it nonetheless compartmentalizes the two worlds quite neatly with a topographical boundary.

Equally important in situating the modern journeys relative to the medieval is the knights’ attitude toward Otherworlds. In particular, our twentieth-century knights tend to exhibit a purposefulness that seldom appears in canonical Arthuriana. Medieval Arthurian knights quest toward objects or outcomes, rather than destinations. In the *Charrette*, Lancelot seeks the kidnapped Guenièvre and follows her trail without regard for the geographic end-point of the quest. Likewise, the Grail Knights in the *Queste del Saint-Graal* seek the Grail without the slightest indication of where or when it may appear. Even in the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the hero seeks the Green Chapel by its name only, with no information as to its location or description. The knights do not pursue magical realms qua Otherworlds. In other words, theirs is never a quest for a space marked expressly by alterity. But this is precisely what the young heroine Silence seeks. During her education by tutor and narrator Héldris de Cornouailles, the two discuss theories concerning the flatness of the earth and what may be on the other side. After hypothesizing that the Earth is shaped as a “big thick

³³⁹ *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 135.

pancake,” the conversation turns to the potential inhabitants of the underside.³⁴⁰ Heldris explains that, by Isidore of Seville’s reckoning, the Antipodeans are their doubles: for every member of the Arthurian world, there would be a corresponding Antipodean with his feet planted in a symmetrically perfect position on the other side. To which the adolescent Silence sighs, “Oh, comme j’aimerais aller là-bas.”³⁴¹ Her journey to the Otherworld is framed by the text primarily as an epistemological quest, to penetrate the realm of the unknown and perhaps even the unknowable. This is likewise the case for Gautier, the narrator of *Graal-Romance*, whose journey to the Mirror World of Viviane’s Lake is spurred by a quest for understanding: What magical or natural system rules the Otherworld? What events gave rise to the fall of Arthur’s kingdom? What was the Grail quest, and what, if anything, did it achieve? Only in the privileged space of Brocéliande might he seek these answers and thereby construct a new understanding of the past.³⁴² The journey to the Otherworld in *L’Enchanteur* is not epistemologically motivated, but is nonetheless explicitly purposeful. The band of knights, under Merlin’s guidance, has sought out the realm of the giants so that they might gain access to the marvelously endowed rocks of Stonehenge and transport them back to Logres.

The Otherworld as depicted in the twentieth-century texts under consideration is structurally comparable its medieval antecedents, but the ways in which the Arthurian knights approach it are strikingly altered. Unlike their medieval counterparts, they

³⁴⁰ *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 36.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

³⁴² Norris Lacy has given more extended treatment to the topic of epistemological quests in twentieth-century French Arthuriana in his 2000 article, “From Medieval to Post-Modern: The Arthurian Quest in France.”

perceive thresholds between their own world and magical realms in terms of liminality. They also tend to have privileged knowledge about the mechanisms governing these spaces, such as the methods of gaining access to the Otherworlds in *Graal-Romance* and *L'Enchanteur*. Moreover, unlike their medieval counterparts, they seek out encounters with the Otherworld, often masterfully manipulating its codes and social structures. The marvelous spaces may be unchanged from those found in medieval romance, but the new Arthurian heroes are vastly better equipped to face them. Armed with arcane skills, insatiable curiosity, and an intrepid spirit, they quest in pursuit of not just *aventure* in the traditional medieval sense of the term, but of new understanding, and above all, an experience of alterity that makes them truly worthy visitors to the elusive Otherworld.

Conclusion

As this sprawling chapter has shown, modern French Arthuriana's myriad approaches to setting expose deficiencies in the formal categories scholars have devised to organize them. Even with a relatively small corpus in comparison to English-language fiction, the French material adopts a broad range of postures toward historicity, geography, timelessness, and the supernatural, at times creating unexpected marriages between genres that are normally considered distinct. This makes setting an ideal lens through which to consider the diversity and malleability of Arthuriana, which can be adapted to operate within contexts as dissimilar as a barbaric, post-Roman Britain and the seediest streets of modern Paris. It is not much of a stretch to conclude that authors of

modern French Arthuriana will continue to invent new contexts to house its famous stories, and unforeseen ways of bringing together the constituent elements of setting.

CHAPTER 4

ARTHUR'S TWISTED FAMILY TREES

Scholars from R. Howard Bloch to Jacques Roubaud have identified genealogy as a key organizing principle of medieval society, one that pervaded language, family dynamics, theology, and cultural production.³⁴³ This paradigm is primarily expressed through patrilineal channels, whereby wealth and titles are transferred from father to son. It is not an inherently reliable system, however, as biological paternity is often difficult or impossible to ascertain. Given the frequency with which doubt is cast upon filiation, medieval romance's preoccupation with transgressive sexual desires and behaviors—namely adultery and incest—can be read as the result of the grave ramifications they have for the transmission of power, privilege, wealth, land, and moral status. In multiple texts, Arthur's incestuous relationship with his half-sister results in Mordret, a would-be heir whose arrival and usurpation sets in motion the downfall of the king and the collapse of Logres. Merlin, the architect of Arthur's kingdom, is portrayed as the son of an incubus or the Devil himself, and even Galahad, Christ-figure and hero of the Grail quest, is the product of fornication between Lancelot and the Fisher King's daughter. Although illicit connections do not always produce progeny that must then be incorporated into the family tree, the threat—or potential—of such an outcome remains a source of anxiety and obsession, for both the implicated characters and the text itself.

³⁴³Bloch, R. Howard. *Etymologies and genealogies: a literary anthropology of the French Middle Ages*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983; Roubaud, Jacques. "Généalogie morale des rois pecheurs," *Graal fiction*, pp. 186-205.

On a narrative and structural level, broader Arthurian genealogy itself is highly unstable, due to its numerous permutations of key Arthurian family trees in the works spanning from Geoffrey's *Historia* to Malory's *Morte*. An overview of Arthur's siblings and their associated parentage, spouses, and offspring will illustrate the extent of variation across medieval Arthuriana. In the *Historia*, Arthur has only one sibling, a full sister named Anna born to Uther and Igerna, who marries King Loth and gives birth to Arthur's two nephews, Gawain and Mordred.³⁴⁴ In Chrétien's romances, Arthur has two full sisters, again born to Uther and Igerne, one of whom is Morgan le Fay. The other, who appears in *Le Conte du Graal*, is unnamed in Chrétien but appears subsequently as Morgause or Norcadet; in this version, she is wife of Loth and mother to Gauvain, Agravain, Gaheris, Gareth, Clarissant, and Soredamors. The Vulgate Cycle is not itself internally consistent. In it, Arthur has up to five half-sisters, born to Ygerne and Hoel: Morgause, Morgane, Brimesent, Blasine, and an unnamed daughter. Morgause is again wife to Loth; her brood consists of Gauvain, Agravain, Guerrehet, and Gaheriet, as well as Mordred, who is fathered by Arthur. Brimesent weds Urien and gives birth to Yvain. In the Post-Vulgate Cycle, however, Morgane replaces Brimesent as wife to Urien and mother to Yvain. Finally, in Malory's *Morte*, Arthur has three half-sisters. Morgause conceives Mordred with Arthur, and as Lot's wife has sons Gawain, Gaheris, Agravain, and Gareth. Elaine is wife to Nentres and mother of Galeshin. And Morgan le Fay is wife to Urien and mother to Yvain. While there are several general areas of consistency in Arthur's family, including the presence of sisters born to a common mother and Gauvain

³⁴⁴ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*. Trans. Michael A. Faletra, Ontario: Broadview Editions, 2008, pp. 160, 170.

as a nephew, most elements are subject to alteration. Sisters and half-sisters are added and suppressed; spouses are substituted; and Arthur may or may not father a child with his sister.

Because of the variability of genealogies in medieval source material, modern authors of Arthuriana have a great many canonical choices for configuring their own Arthurian families. They tend to make some of the same genealogical decisions, however, and some generalizations about “typical” Arthurian family trees can be made. Merlin’s birth generally follows some variation of the prose adaptation of Robert de Boron’s *Merlin*, in which his unwed mother is impregnated by an incubus, or a figure purported to be an incubus (*Graal théâtre*, *Graal Fiction*, *Merlin*, *L’Enchanteur*). Arthur is universally born to Uther and Ygerne. Several iterations preserve Arthur’s incestuous relationship with a half-sister, leading to the conception of Mordred; this sister is often Morgane (*Merlin*, *Morgane*, *Arthur*, *Graal-théâtre*, *Graal-Romance*), but occasionally she passes unnamed (*L’Enchanteur*). Galaad is all-but ubiquitous as the perfect son of the imperfect Lancelot (*Graal-Romance*, *L’Enchanteur*, *Déodat*). Unlike the Anglophone tradition, very little emphasis is placed upon matrilineal descent; there is no true equivalent to *The Mists of Avalon*, with its lines of priestesses.³⁴⁵ The closest French analogue is that of Jean-Louis Fetjaine’s *Trilogie des Elfes*, which accords significant attention to the Elf Queen Lliane, lover to Uther and eventual mother to the half-elf

³⁴⁵ It should be mentioned, however, that Marion Zimmer Bradley’s Arthurian works have been translated into French and are well known in France; the series’s popularity in France may help explain why there has not been an analogous work in French.

Rhiannon/Morgane.³⁴⁶ The matrilineal line of elves is only one component of the trilogy, however, and most of the work is dominated by the patriarchal (indeed, nearly exclusively male) realm of men, dwarves, and goblins. A common characteristic of modern French Arthuriana, as in the medieval tradition, is the unreliability of genealogical knowledge. Characters who believe they know their family origins must often come to grips with new information that substantially revises the family tree.

This chapter analyzes some of the key themes and narrative threads linked to genealogies in modern French Arthuriana: quests for paternity and heritage, same-sex desires and unions, and the taboo of incest. All three of these themes are already present in the medieval tradition, although at times their evocation is either implicit or glossed over. The modern material accords them particular attention, however, demonstrating a preoccupation with the most twisted and fragile branches in Arthur's family tree(s). This emphasis in turn illuminates the unreliability of family-based identity and the integrality of sexual transgression at the heart of Arthuriana. In rewriting Arthurian genealogies, the modern French authors bear witness to family histories that have been erased or obfuscated.

Arthurian Heritage: A Lost and Found

Gaps in genealogy are a marked feature of medieval Arthurian romance; Perceval and Lancelot are two prominent examples of knights who are at times ignorant of their

³⁴⁶ Fetjaine's trilogy is also the only set of modern French texts of which I am aware that links Arthur and Morgane biologically through the paternal line rather than maternal.

family origins in Chrétien or the Vulgate. Meanwhile, in the *Queste*, although Galaad is aware of his father's identity, Lancelot is unaware he has fathered a son. Zrinka Stahuljak highlights the potential disconnect between biological and social paradigms of paternity as portrayed in romance, arguing that it is only with the linguistic act of recognizing offspring as such that a genitor takes on the distinct role of father: "The Arthurian romance severs the two links in the genealogical chain, the moment of conception, or blood fatherhood, and the moment of recognition, or legitimation of paternity. It shows that procreation and paternity are distinct."³⁴⁷ Stahuljak further claims that romance privileges "the act of linguistic alliance" over biology in establishing paternity and uses the metaphor of blood to obfuscate the very "bloodlessness" of the system of recognition: "Hence the condemnation of 'perversions' of genealogy as unnatural, because they reveal the bloodlessness of genealogy at work."³⁴⁸ Even in these cases paternity can be *claimed* and *acknowledged* without evidence of a blood link between father and child.

I would argue, however, that linguistic alliance is critical precisely because it serves as a guarantor of blood genealogy. If it did not purport to guarantee a biological filiation, it would be irrelevant. Moreover, the act of verbally claiming paternal kinship may temporarily supersede biological procreation, but medieval romance is careful to maintain accounting of blood genealogy so that paternity and maternity can be reasserted in cases when filiation has been lost or displaced. In the *Suite du Merlin*, for instance, Arthur's identity as Uther and Ygerne's son must be established to legitimate his claim to

³⁴⁷ Stahuljak, Zrinka. *Bloodless genealogies of the French Middle Ages: translatio, kinship, and metaphor*. Gainesville : University Press of Florida, 2005, p. 91.

³⁴⁸ *Bloodless genealogies of the French Middle Ages*, p. 2.

the throne and quash opposition to his coronation. In the scene of his reunion with his mother, it is not enough for Merlin to simply pronounce Arthur's heritage; a mere verbal claim is inadequate to assuage doubts, and Ygerne lacks sufficient information to identify and thus claim her son. Instead, Merlin must gather testimony from Ygerne and Auctor to prove that Arthur, now a young adult, was once the child delivered from Ygerne's body. Only when the chain of events has been firmly established through double-blind testimony is Ygerne able to recognize her son. Although established through deposition (that is to say, by words), the genealogy is ultimately legitimated because it is rooted in bodily connection. Moreover, we as readers can be confident of Arthur's filiation because the text itself never forgot his identity as Uther's son; the blood relationship had already been guaranteed by an omniscient narrator even before the child's birth, meaning that his claim to the throne had been legitimated by the narration in advance of any deposition.

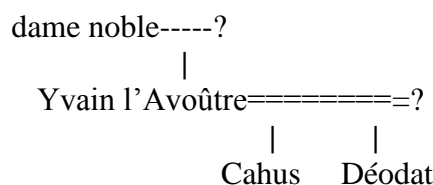
In works featuring complex, often muddled genealogies, it is unsurprising that Arthurian stories should be dominated by quests for one's heritage. Referring specifically to Le Dantec's *Graal-Romance* and Roubaud's *Le Roi Arthur*, Norris Lacy has noted the tendency for recent Arthurian fiction to take the form of an inquest that aims at reconstructing the past, an endeavor that typically fails to arrive at coherent answers.³⁴⁹ Medieval antecedents offer similarly mysterious or misleading genealogies, although they can generally be reconstituted. Bloch equates the Arthurian Grail quest with the quest for paternity, proffering the example of Chrétien's Perceval, an Arthurian knight ignorant of

³⁴⁹ Lacy, Norris J. "From Roubaud to Griffiths: Arthurian Text as Inquest," *Bibliographical Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society*, 47 (1996), pp. 311-19.

his familial lines and even his own name.³⁵⁰ Perceval's quest, according to Bloch, is as much to reconstitute his lost lineage as to regain access to the elusive Grail Castle.

The same quest for a missing lineage is laced throughout Michel Zink's *Déodat*, the story of a boy who, in investigating the circumstances of his brother's violent death, must renegotiate his relationship to his family and his own past. Déodat is not purposefully seeking the identity of his father; he believes he knows it. Nonetheless, successful completion of his quest entails solving the ontological and genealogical puzzles of the identity of Déodat and his slain brother Cahus. At the outset of the novel, Déodat's family tree (as he then understands it) is small and lacking in renown. He and Cahus are the sole sons of Yvain l'Avoûtre, who is in turn—as his name indicates—the illegitimate son of a noble lady, unnamed in the novel. Initially, no mention is made of Déodat's mother or her family; rather, it is the noble lady who raises her two grandsons, with Yvain l'Avoûtre, a knight at Arthur's court, paying occasional visits to the boys. Beyond Cahus, Déodat thus has just two family members, who are seemingly isolated from the extensive kinship networks that govern most of the Arthurian world:

Déodat's Family Tree A:³⁵¹



³⁵⁰ Bloch, R. Howard. *Etymologies and genealogies : a literary anthropology of the French Middle Ages*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 206.

³⁵¹ Genealogical charts in this section are my own. Marriages are represented by the double broken horizontal lines; unions outside of marriage are indicated by the single broken lines.

Déodat receives scant benefit from his assured paternity, however. Yvain l'Avoûtre is emotionally distant and pays little attention to the two young boys. Following Cahus's death, Yvain lays the blame for it at Arthur's feet and storms out, failing even to notice Déodat is the room, witness to the outburst. This is the closest the two come to an interaction in the novel. More important than Yvain's attention or affection, however, is the family lineage, of which Yvain has none to offer his sons. Being illegitimate, he is not attached to his own family, and thus lacks the distinction that would otherwise be his due among the knights of the Round Table. The stigma of illegitimacy extends to Déodat and Cahus, who receive assurances of their own nobility, but derive no benefit from it: "Ils avaient une famille, puisqu'ils avaient un père, mais ils n'avaient pas de lignage. Ils étaient nobles. La mère de leur père l'était et celui dont leur père était né, on le savait bien, l'était aussi. Mais ils étaient nobles sans reconnaissance de leur noblesse."³⁵² Their heritage consists of only two generations, and the earliest is stained with extramarital fornication, which leaves the boy with no role models to emulate. In particular, Déodat feels the absence of family memory that would normally be passed down through stories. This missing family anchoring contributes to his perception of insignificance and invisibility to those around him; "la transparence" is a prominent leitmotif in the novel. Because Déodat lacks the renown of a family associated with great deeds, he passes mostly unnoticed by the various knights of the Round Table. By the Arthurian world's reckoning, to be without a family name is to be no one at all.

³⁵² *Déodat*, pp. 22-23.

To fill the vacuum caused by Yvain l'Avoûtre's apparent abandonment after Cahus's death, Déodat embarks upon his own haphazard quest to solve the mystery of his brother's death. This is simultaneously a quest for identity, as he no longer benefits from any familial ties to guarantee his lowly place at Arthur's court. A fledgling would-be squire, he pursues passing knights of the Round Table with as little sense of destination as the Grail Questers themselves. He is drawn in particular to Yvain, le chevalier au lion. Because of their shared names, Yvain and Yvain l'Avoûtre are portrayed as potential doubles, or perhaps as original and counterfeit. When Déodat first recognizes the illustrious Yvain, he identifies him immediately as "le chevalier au lion," later recognizing an unwillingness to conflate his given name with that of his father. This indicates a subconscious tendency to merge the two, one that Déodat chooses to resist. He nonetheless cleaves to the knight, asking to become his squire. Yvain perceives Déodat's attachment and considers it an opportunity for redemption (after breaking his word to his wife and falling into disgrace): "L'innocence de ce jeune Déodat pouvait devenir la sienne, il pouvait renaitre en lui, comme s'il avait été ce père avec lequel, il le voyait bien, l'enfant cherchait à le confondre."³⁵³ The young would-be squire does not succeed in attaching any knight-errant, due in part to the itinerant lifestyle they practice; this means that throughout the novel, Déodat is bereft of both father and the father figures he haphazardly attempts to attach. Indeed, although he refuses Déodat's request, Yvain is the most personable of the knights the boy encounters. Galaad, by contrast, is cold and

³⁵³ *Déodat*, p. 53.

callous in his dogma, and Perceval appears in the midst of a homicidal rage against his mother's aggressors, butchering them ruthlessly while Déodat hides.³⁵⁴

In dogging Yvain and the other knights, Déodat is unconsciously seeking a surrogate father who can impose order on his upended life and, more broadly, upon the chaotic land. Father figures are lacking in this Camelot, however. It is a kingdom of orphans and dispossessed knights, where leadership is lacking. This especially holds true for the kingdom's ultimate authority, the king. If the father is representative of the law on a symbolic level, then Arthur's melancholy and lassitude are at the crux of a lawless land, one that lacks the strength of a paternal figure to take charge of it.³⁵⁵ Arthur's depressive, ineffectual demeanor, with which the novel opens, is an early indication that Déodat's efforts to situate himself in a paternal-filial relationship cannot succeed.

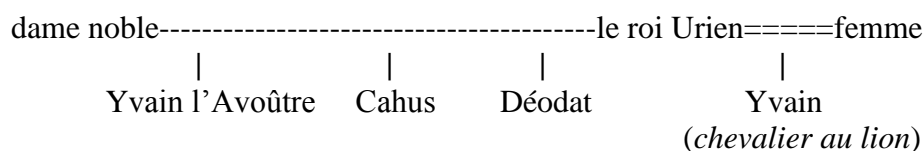
The typical genealogical dispute in medieval Arthuriana involves paternal identity rather than maternal. This is due primarily to a temporal disjuncture between the biological act of fathering a child and the child's eventual birth; this introduces uncertainty of filiation in a way that the childbearing role of a woman does not. While the act of giving birth confers maternity upon a woman, a man may be departed or deceased by the time of his offspring's delivery. It is probable that a child will know his biological

³⁵⁴ Déodat initially attempts to identify with Galaad due to their shared illegitimacy, in order to bolster his self-worth, but ultimately concludes that the knight descended from the Grail line can have nothing in common with him.

³⁵⁵ This portrait of Arthur derives largely from the *Perlesvaus*, in which the king falls victim to a particularly severe malaise, although this is merely an extension of character traits present as far back as Chrétien.

mother's identity, even if his paternal lineage is unknown or erroneously reported.³⁵⁶ In *Déodat*, however, maternal identity is also in question, and when Déodat encounters the truth of his birth, both sides of his short family tree must be redrawn. The boy eventually learns from Yvain, le chevalier au lion, that Yvain l'Avoûtre, the man he thought to be his father, is actually his elder brother, and the woman he thought his grandmother, his mother. This makes Yvain, le chevalier au lion, half-brother to both Déodat and to Yvain l'Avoûtre through their mutual father, King Urien.³⁵⁷ The revelation is presaged by numerous passages, among them a moment of vertigo experienced by Déodat, which the text describes as “comme l'enfant soudain convaincu que ceux qui se donnent pour ses parents ne sont pas son père et sa mère.”³⁵⁸ Yvain l'Avoûtre is the elder son, and Urien gives *le chevalier au lion*, his second-born, the same name in memory of his love for the *dame noble* (who is at that point locked away and inaccessible). This paradoxically makes the illustrious Yvain the double of his more obscure brother, instead of the reverse.

Déodat's Family Tree B:



However, among the four “fils de roi,” only *le chevalier au lion* benefits from legitimacy and the nobility of his royal lineage. The difference in birth status explains why one

³⁵⁶ Certainly, there are other possible avenues for introducing genealogical uncertainty on the mother's side, the most prominent in the Arthurian canon being Arthur's separation from both parents to be raised by Antor/Auctor at Merlin's behest, as discussed above.

³⁵⁷ This closely resembles the genealogy found in the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Cycles, wherein Urien is father to both Yvain (le chevalier au lion) and Yvain l'Avoutre (by the wife of his seneschal).

³⁵⁸ *Déodat*, p. 109.

Yvain is synonymous with renown and the other is associated only with mediocrity and shame, in spite of their shared family line. Another implication of this genealogical reconfiguration is that Déodat is no longer simply “fils de l’Avoûtre,” but “Avoûtre” himself, the youngest illegitimate child of King Urien’s noble lover. The latter (the woman he called his grandmother) turns out to be the heroine of Marie de France’s *lai* “Yonec,” which the dame recounts to Déodat on her deathbed. At the time of the telling, Déodat lacks sufficient information to identify the story as pertinent to his own family, but nonetheless has the impression that “si seulement il savait une chose, une seule chose qu’il ignorait, ces mots prendraient leur vrai sens.”³⁵⁹ Although he has heard this story before, it rings differently during the deathbed telling, leading Déodat to conclude that it is somehow a different tale, or that, poetically, his (putative) grandmother has passed through “les portes du conte” in her mortal fever, conflating her own life with that of the story. It is only later that he discovers the literal truth of his impression—the characters in her story are analogues to those in her own life. By the time Déodat learns the truth of his maternal origins, his mother is long dead.

In the end, no father steps in to fill the place of the slain Yvain l’Avoûtre. King Urien may not even be alive to take on this role. Moreover, the honor of his family is now more stained than it was previously. Rather than being the son of a bastard, he is the son of an adulteress and a king who never acknowledged him. This is not the gravest family crime, however, as by the end of the novel Déodat is brother to *two* fratricides. The first of these is Yvain l’Avoûtre, revealed as the party responsible for Cahus’s murder; the

³⁵⁹ *Déodat*, p. 28.

second is Yvain, *le chevalier au lion*, who slays his double in combat in front of their youngest brother. It is only at this point that Déodat learns the truth (at least, what *le chevalier au lion* professes to be the truth) about his family's heritage. He thus loses and gains a brother almost simultaneously, with one Yvain exchanged for the other. He ultimately rejects Yvain's offer to recognize him as a brother, realizing that his only true family had been Cahus; amidst all of his muddled and rearranged family, this brother was the only constant, and the only person to identify with his "transparence." In this way, although Déodat's quest yields a cache of genealogy and a more complete understanding of his own place in a complex network of alliances, the novel situates his new equilibrium in solitude. Heritage does not equate to family, and the latter does not owe its existence only to biological affiliation.

Déodat is far from the only modern French text to thematize the vagaries of paternity and its pursuit. *Le Chevalier Silence* is one text that adopts a more positive attitude toward the quest for family origins, allowing it a happy outcome in the story of Walllwein, a foundling who must eventually seek out his father at Arthur's court. When Gortensja and Morgannww, Silence's unconventionally named parents, find Walllwein in a cradle on the edge of a river, he is accompanied by a note identifying him as the offspring of one of Arthur's noblest knights and of an adolescent girl who gave the knight her virginity. Having provided assurances of the boy's good bloodlines, the note further stipulates that upon attaining the age of fifteen, Walllwein must journey "à la cour d'Arthur réclamer [s]on héritage."³⁶⁰ The success of this undertaking is treated as a given

³⁶⁰ *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 28.

by both the note and the narratorial persona, in part because Merlin has prophesized on the subject. Walllwein is thus endowed with a past even though he has been abandoned by his mother, and he has every expectation of being recognized and accepted by his biological father at Kamaalot. Indeed, upon the boy's eventual arrival, he is instantly recognized by all of the castle's inhabitants, who marvel at his physical resemblance to one of the knights: "C'est extraordinaire! c'est inoui! ... quelle ressemblance! ... c'est un double!"³⁶¹ And the father immediately acknowledges his progeny: "'Bonjour, mon fils,' dit monseigneur Gauvain."³⁶² Here, filiation can be instantly ascertained by physical traits; Walllwein and Gauvain are so alike that there can be no doubt as to the former's parentage.³⁶³ In *Le Chevalier Silence*, the quest for "héritage" is accomplished with a simple journey to the capital, and none of the doubt or marginalization that plagues Déodat impinges upon Wallllwein.

Other reunions are marked by futility or even absurdity. In *Graal-Romance*, Mordret has heard rumors that Arthur is his father, but this information has never been confirmed. When they meet as enemies on the battlefield at Salesbières, the relationship is still unacknowledged. Le Dantec uses the episode to depict an abortive gesture toward reconciliation: Mordret learns of his paternity even as he inflicts upon his father the fatal blow. The mortally wounded Arthur addresses Mordret in rage as his "fils maudit," the first instance of paternal recognition the son has ever received. In this moment, all of

³⁶¹ *Le Chevalier Silence*, p. 76.

³⁶² *Ibid.*

³⁶³ The implicit joke, of course, is that Walllwein (with only two 'l's) is the Dutch form of the name Gauvain, indicating that father and son are merely two avatars of the same Arthurian character. It also follows precedent for Arthurian naming practice, with examples such as Bohort son of Bohort and Galaad son of Lancelot né Galaad in the medieval canon.

Mordret's lifelong hopes for a familial relationship surge within him, and he undergoes a rapid progression of emotions, from the shock of having his origins confirmed, to horror at delivering the killing blow to his own father, to overwhelming tenderness and regret. He steps toward his father, hoping to convey "combien il l'aime, combien il l'a toujours aimé," but in so doing inadvertently impales himself upon Escalibur. Arthur in turn realizes Mordet's regret and longing for a father-son relationship, but "c'est trop tard, le destin a déjà fait son oeuvre mortelle," and the king can only watch his son exsanguinate.³⁶⁴ Thus the parental recognition that might have led to reconciliation instead leads to death. This psychological angle of filial abandonment and reunion distinguishes Le Dantec's Mordret from his medieval French antecedents.

In several works, such as Rio's trilogy, the loss or erasure of paternity is complicated by the taboo of incest, as I discuss in this chapter's final section. In Fetjaine's Merlin cycle, the taboo associated with the protagonist's heritage is less conventional and intersects with questions of race and religion. The cycle tells the story of an adolescent Welsh crown prince named Emrys Myrddin (or Merlin), who serves as bard to King Guendoleu of Cumbrie. As in *Déodat*, the protagonist begins with a faulty understanding of his family heritage—in particular, his paternity. He has been raised to believe himself the son of the queen Aldan of Dyfed (Wales) and of Ambrosius Aurélianus (Ambroise Aurélien), *riothamus*, or high king, of the Bretons who defeated the Saxons at Mont Badon. The *riothamus*, already years dead at the story's outset, is the cycle's Arthur-figure, the leader who united Britain's tribes and maintained peace for

³⁶⁴ *Graal-Romance*, p. 220.

decades, thereby earning the sobriquet *Artus*, “l’Ours de Bretagne.”³⁶⁵ Merlin aspires to equal his father’s glorious legacy, but has been kept away from his mother and court amidst whispers he does not understand. The rumors begin while Merlin is still a child, sometimes attributing to him the exploits of Ambrosius Aurélianus or endowing him with supernatural abilities: “On racontait toutes sortes d’histoires à son sujet, qui parfois le confondaient avec son père. Certains disaient qu’il avait prédit la chute de Vortigern, alors que ce dernier était mort bien des années avant que Merlin voie le jour, d’autres qu’il pouvait invoquer des dragons ou parler le langage des oiseaux.”³⁶⁶ The stories make no sense to the adolescent Merlin, since he does not see himself as others see him: pale, lithe, and puny—an Otherworldly creature who conceals his fundamental alterity just enough to avoid ostracism. The text itself intimates that by adolescence Merlin can no longer “dissimul[er] ... sa véritable nature,” but this nature is unknown even to him.³⁶⁷ His alterity is cast in religious terms by an increasingly Christian population, who label him either “sans-père” or “fils du diable.” His mentor Taliesin encourages him not to interpret the epithets too literally: “Le diable est une belle trouvaille, qui recouvre tellement de choses ... Tout ce qui fait peur, tout ce qui est inconnu, tout ce qui est étrange.”³⁶⁸ This attempt at reassurance only feeds Merlin’s anxiety, as it seems to confirm his extraordinary condition without offering any clear answers as to the nature or origin of his alterity.

³⁶⁵ *Le Pas de Merlin*, p. 55.

³⁶⁶ *Le Pas de Merlin*, p. 52.

³⁶⁷ *Le Pas de Merlin*, p. 49.

³⁶⁸ *Le Pas de Merlin*, p. 67

Midway through *Le Pas de Merlin*, the young bard discovers his illegitimacy, which recasts his isolated childhood: “tout s’expliquait à présent qu’il n’était plus le fils d’Ambrosius.”³⁶⁹ The construction “ne ... plus” implies that the paternity did once exist in spite of the lack of blood connection between Ambrosius and Merlin, but that the link has been severed by the Merlin’s recognition of his illegitimacy: paternity here resides not only upon acknowledgement by the father, but also upon acceptance by the son. Merlin is *no longer* Ambrosius’s son precisely because he ceases to claim the family tie. The identity of his father, as yet unrevealed, becomes the locus of his ontological inquiry. “Pour qui te prends-tu?” asks his mother Aldan, to which he replies, “Justement, c’est ce qui j’aimerais savoir... Je suis Merlin, le barde. De ça je suis sûr. Mais je suis aussi le fils d’Arthur et prince héritier de Dyfed, ou du moins c’est que j’ai toujours cru...”³⁷⁰ His sense of self has not been obliterated by the knowledge of his illegitimacy, but an important component has been called into question. Moreover, Aldan unwilling to divulge the identity of Merlin’s absent father, although when the bard’s supernatural abilities begin to manifest, the confessor Blaise begins to express his growing conviction that Merlin’s origins are elfin. This theory is confirmed when a vision on Samhain allows Merlin to communicate with and assimilate the dead, enabling him access to their memories and knowledge. In communion with his mother (who has since died), Merlin learns that his father is Morvryn, an elf-king of Brocéliande, who impregnated Aldan while she was in exile and separated from Ambrosius. Merlin is thus defined by his liminality—a product of two races and cultures but belonging in neither. When his

³⁶⁹ *Le Pas de Merlin*, p. 107.

³⁷⁰ *Le Pas de Merlin*, p. 103.

allegiance shifts to his biological father's people, he must reckon with the cognitive dissonance of identifying with his acknowledged father's enemy: "Ma lignée est celle qu'Aurélien [Ambrosius Aurélianus] a combattue ici!" he tells a member of the clergy. "Ma lignée est ce que tu nommes le dragon, l'impie, le diable."³⁷¹

Merlin's genealogy contains an additional generation. In a plot thread beginning in *Le Pas de Merlin* and culminating in *Brocéliande*, Merlin fathers a child with Guendoloena, sister to the king of Strathclyde. Although the two are separated soon after the tryst that leads to Guendoloena's pregnancy, Merlin is able to perceive through his telepathic elf powers that she has given birth, exclaiming, "Mon fils est né!"³⁷² The son is Arthur mac Aedan, also legal son of Aedan mac Gabran, king of the Dál Riada (in present-day Northern Ireland and Scotland). Arthur mac Aedan is the other historical figure, aside from Ambrosius Aurélianus, whom Fetjaine believes to be tied to the accretion of the legend of Arthur. Fetjaine notes in the historical "avertissement" for *Le Pas de Merlin* that even if a historical "Arthur" warrior or chief did exist, the legend is likely based on a composite of multiple figures. For instance, while the medieval scholar Gildas credits victory in the battle of Mont Badon to Ambrosius Aurélianus, while other sources link Arthur mac Aedan to four of the twelve Arthurian victories reported in Nennius's *Historia Brittonum*. Fetjaine's Merlin project thus makes the elfin protagonist an intermediary between two Arthur-figures who lived more than a generation apart. This redresses some of the chronological difficulties in situating Merlin and Arthur historically vis-à-vis one another based on medieval accounts.

³⁷¹ *Brocéliande*, p. 54.

³⁷² *Brocéliande*, p. 35.

Fetjaine's is the only avatar of Merlin in the modern French corpus who procreates, in Rio and Barjavel's novels he serves as a surrogate father but does not have biological offspring. This genealogy places Merlin at the intersection of two Arthurian lineages—one through legal descent and the other through biological. At the end of the second volume, the narrator concludes the story of Merlin, “fils et père d'Arthur, ni vraiment fils ni vraiment père.”³⁷³ In this Arthurian world, biological fathers do not raise their sons, and legal fathers' legacies must be disavowed. The roles are complementary but do not overlap.

Queering Camelot:

Same-Sex Desire and Sublimation in Le Dantec's *Graal Romance*

Jean-Pierre Le Dantec's novel *Graal-Romance*, published in 1985, belongs to “Les Grands Mythes fondateurs de l'occident,” a multi-author series intended to make Arthurian legend accessible to modern readers. This section first outlines the novel's treatment of transgressive sexuality, analyzing how it dovetails with the work's thematic preoccupation with multiple discourses and inverting established societal paradigms. It then explains how the work channels same-sex desire into a literary transaction that ultimately erases all evidence of that desire. I argue that in so doing, *Graal-Romance* becomes both a testimony to transgressive sexuality and an account of its effacement by authoritative narratives of history. The section concludes by qualifying this evaluation

³⁷³ *Brocéliande*, p. 329.

with an explanation of how the text's account of its own genesis provides an alternative genealogy that retroactively grafts queer sexualities into medieval Arthurian romance.

Graal-Romance depicts Lancelot's key adventures, including his fostering with Viviane, the Lady of the Lake, his battle with Méléagant, his affair with Guenièvre, his deep friendship with the giant Galehaut, his impregnation of the Fisher King's daughter, Arthur's discovery of the famous adultery, and the internecine battles that lead to the downfall of the kingdom. Le Dantec's novel is singular, however, in that rather than merely retelling the exploits of Lancelot in modern French, it invents a frame narrative set ten years after the fall of Camelot. In this frame narrative, an abbot called Gautier de Bath collects first-hand accounts of Arthur's reign from Lancelot, Guenièvre, Viviane, and Merlin during a stay at Viviane's Lake in Brocéliande Forest, and subsequently seeks to unravel the mystery behind the Grail Quest with the help of a novice at his monastery. Set in the High Middle Ages, probably around 1140, *Graal-Romance* is also distinctive in that it makes no attempt to historically isolate the events of Arthur's court from the period when writers such as Wace and Chrétien de Troyes began to set down these adventures. The text thus presents the legends and their textual composition as nearly contemporaneous.

Apart from various intercalated accounts, Gautier narrates the story, and it becomes clear in the earliest pages that the monk struggles with sexual desires in conflict with Christian teachings. He describes Lancelot in glowing terms, referring to the knight as "l'homme que j'ai le plus aimé," then hastens to assure the reader—in particular "les lubriques qui font leurs délices de l'étalage de la déprivation"—that there was never even

the slightest trace of “désir impudique” between the two.³⁷⁴ This fervent denial only serves as an admission of guilt. Elsewhere, however, he is more forthcoming about his desires, noting that “l’âge n’avait pas levé en moi une vocation tardive d’ermite. Ma chair fut toujours faible, et mon esprit trop raisonneur.”³⁷⁵ His weak flesh is a source of evident shame for the monk, whose every mention of his desire for men entails either a qualification or an expression of remorse. *Graal-Romance*’s historical setting precludes stable identity-based labels for Gautier; he has no vocabulary to designate himself as gay or queer, only to describe his “inclinations” as perverse and shameful and to call himself a sinner.

His sexual preferences do make him sympathetic toward a novice at his monastery who shares them, Samuel d’Alexandrie. The novice first comes to Gautier’s attention when he is caught in bed with another monk. The monastery’s reaction is immediate and violent. “Qu’on coupe les couilles de ces deux sodomites et qu’on les fasse griller!” proposes one indignant monk, while another suggests that the guilty parties instead be raped then whipped to death.³⁷⁶ Gautier must intercede to have the trysting couple’s sentence reduced to solitary confinement and fasting. On subsequent encounters, Samuel admits that as a boy he was dismissed from an academic institution in Alexandria after his implication in a love triangle involving two male pupils. He has sought refuge at the monastery, where he hopes to be able to conquer his lust through self-denial: “Puisse ma

³⁷⁴ *Graal-Romance*, p. 17.

³⁷⁵ *Graal-Romance*, p. 16.

³⁷⁶ *Graal-Romance*, p. 36.

chair ne jamais retrouver l'ardeur qui la brûlait !" he says to the abbot.³⁷⁷ As a friendship blossoms between the two, it is evident that Gautier is seduced both by the novice's brilliant intellect and by his attractive body. First he admits to allowing his eye to linger on a bit of exposed skin through a tear in Samuel's habit. Later, upon the novice's departure from the monastery on a research mission from Gautier, the abbot mourns the loss of his companion, in so doing demonstrating both his depth of feeling for and his attraction to the younger man: "Oui, Samuel me manque," he writes in his journal. "En quelques semaines il était devenu mon ami, le meilleur peut-être que j'aie jamais eu ... Un ami chaste s'entend, même si je confesse avoir eu quelquefois l'envie de porter ma main sous sa bure, là où le ventre se mêle doucement aux cuisses... Gentil Samuel!"³⁷⁸ This passage slips from the platonic to the carnal in a matter of phrases, as Samuel is unable to repress his sinful fantasy. To conjure the thought of Samuel is, for Gautier, to elicit sexual feelings that are unsanctioned (both by the Church and the narrator himself) but ultimately ungovernable.

Same-sex desire is not to be found exclusively in the novel's frame narrative; it is most prominent in an intercalated letter revealing the close relationship between Lancelot and Galehaut. The medieval romances, in particular the *Prose Lancelot*, clearly articulate the love the two bear for each other, while never quite allowing the relationship to cross the line from friendship to a bond; their link remains homosocial rather than homosexual. *Graal-Romance* makes the relationship explicitly romantic, although it is not made clear whether Galehaut's passion for the knight is requited. As in the medieval text, the giant

³⁷⁷ *Graal-Romance*, p. 143.

³⁷⁸ *Graal-Romance*, p. 156.

serves as a facilitator for Lancelot's trysts with Guenièvre, but the novel allows Galehaut a first-person account of their rapport. Writing on his deathbed to Lancelot, whom he also believes to be dead, Galehaut explains that his role was not that of enabling mere go-between but rather that of an unacknowledged suitor resigned to playing second-string: "Ah! Lancelot, Lancelot du Lac, si jamais il t'arrive de lire ces lignes que je griffonne à la requête de Merlin, sache que tu m'as fait beaucoup souffrir! Mais sache aussi que cette souffrance fut ma joie la plus grande, puisque je l'endurai à tes côtés."³⁷⁹ The text thus accords serious attention to sexuality that falls outside of procreative heteronormativity. Moreover, it is often highly sympathetic attention; while Gautier may recoil before his own desires, he cherishes his friend Samuel and joins his companions in Brocéliande as they weep over the sincerity of Galehaut's avowal of love for Lancelot.

Since *Le Dantec* was essentially commissioned by Michel Cazenave to write an Arthurian novel, the question we must ask is not why he chose an Arthurian setting for an exploration of homosexual desire, but rather, what makes the motif a good fit for the novel given its setting. One point of thematic dovetailing between the queer motif and the Arthurian world is the setting of Viviane's underwater palace, a magical *Autre Monde* operating outside the laws of society and nature. In particular, the Lac's structure as a mirror to the normal world foregrounds inversion, both literal and metaphorical. In a land where birds swim and fish fly, same-sex desire (which also has historically been described as sexual "inversion") finds a hospitable environment, one in which reversal of gender and sexual norms can be met with approbation.

³⁷⁹ *Graal-Romance*, pp. 170-71.

The novel is also preoccupied with questions of narrative and historical complements or correctives. Gautier, as it happens, was in his youth the scribe at Arthur's court and hence charged with recording the adventures of the king's knights. His account of events was considered authoritative during Arthur's reign, but during his visit to the Lake, his companions find it entertaining but inaccurate. Lacking firsthand testimony, Gautier has mischaracterized numerous events, and the others must disabuse him of his false notions. The intercalated accounts they provide are thus intended to complement and in some cases correct the inaccuracies and omissions made by the abbot. When Gautier sets them down on parchment, he produces a sort of counter-history that can be set alongside the existing "official" version. In this vein, bringing to light a sexual discourse that exceeds the boundaries of traditional heteronormativity parallels the thematization of alternate narratives and histories. That Gautier should set down details of his own life, including his romantic feelings toward Samuel, alongside the romance of Lancelot, indicates that the two must, to an extent, be equated.

A final thematic tie-in is more esoteric. As a result of his stay at the Lake, Gautier becomes convinced that Merlin is the originator of the Grail Quest and enlist Samuel's help to unravel the philosophical or theological principle behind it. Using some manuscript fragments left by Merlin as hints, the two eventually ascertain Merlin, Lancelot, and Viviane to be adherents of Simon Magus' first-century proto-gnosticism. This belief system, founded upon dualism, reincarnation, and the notion of the universe as the imperfect creation of a flawed god, was considered heretical and linked to charges of libertinism in the second century by St. Irenaeus, a charge that today has been widely

refuted but was considered credible during the events of *Graal-Romance*. Both dualism and rejection of asceticism feature prominently in the text, providing a hospitable setting, for the treatment of same-sex desire, even though none of the characters experiencing such desires actually adheres to the faith.

What, then, is the effect of this profusion of homosexual desire throughout *Graal-Fiction*? I have called this section “Queering Camelot,” but this title may seem unintuitive, given the outcome of the romantic relationships set up by the narrative and its politically ambiguous ending. None of the feelings or attractions developed over the course of the novel results in an overt declaration of love or consummation. Galehaut, as in the *Prose Lancelot*, pines away and dies of a broken heart four years after the disappearance of his beloved Lancelot. Gautier, we are given to understand, is unlikely to see the departed Samuel again, although they do occasionally correspond. As for the young novice, he tells the abbot in a final letter that he considers himself cured of the sexual preferences that have caused him so much trouble: “J’ai gardé cette bonne nouvelle pour la fin de manière à vous rassurer quelque peu de l’état de mon âme,” he writes. “Apprenez que j’ai définitivement renoncé à mes anciennes inclinations.”³⁸⁰ Intradiegetically, this outcome hardly seems the radical reconfiguring of sexual normativity that is typically associated with the term “queering.”

In fact, *Graal-Romance* seems to indicate that the most viable vehicle for the same-sex attraction is textual. Galehaut and Gautier are both able to leave written records of their feelings, indicating that such desires can be communicated, if not acted upon.

³⁸⁰ *Graal-Romance*, p. 232.

Gautier's journal may be full of equivocation and self-defenses, but he is far more forthcoming about his sexuality on paper than he is in any encounter with another character. Verbal transmission occurs once, but in a highly indirect manner. At the monastery, Gautier gives Samuel a full account of Lancelot's greatness, omitting any explicit reference to his feelings for the knight but nonetheless transmitting a loving portrait. This shared story links the three characters, acting as a surrogate for and perhaps sublimation of the abbot's desire for both knight and novice.

Neither does the story end there. At the conclusion of the novel, Samuel leaves behind monastic life, determined to wed and to pass along Lancelot's story, as recounted by Gautier, to a son. As it turns out, Samuel plans to settle in the city of Troyes, and to counteract the stigma of his Jewish heritage by naming his son Chrétien. Readers familiar with medieval Arthurian literature will at this point recognize that Samuel is presented by the text as the future father of Chrétien de Troyes, who is credited with the first account of Lancelot and Guinièvre's love in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*. Through this allusion to the father-son transmission, the medieval *Chevalier de la charrette* is provided with a (retroactive) textual genealogy that blends fiction and literary history. This is a problematic resolution to the questions of transgressive sexuality raised by the text. From an extradiegetic perspective, we know that Chrétien's version will efface the character of Gautier even as it preserves the favorable portrait stemming from the narrator's strong feelings for Lancelot. *Graal-Romance* presents itself as a backstory whose most transgressive aspects never find their way into the canonical accounts of Arthur's court. In this way, the novel exposes a taboo and subsequently permits its eventual

concealment.³⁸¹ This double-gesture does not signal a politically heteronormative stance, however. While several of the characters of *Graal-Romance* hold what we might anachronistically call “regressive” views on sexuality, the text, composed in the early 1980s, does not. It bears witness to the concealment of transgressive desires that has persisted to the present day, but it does not endorse such practice. Rather, it documents the cover-up in contrast to its own valorized counter-history, one that privileges what cannot be expressed or consummated.

To return to the question of genealogy and its link to the sexual Other, *Graal-Romance*’s chief innovation is the contribution of a genesis story for the legends of Lancelot and the Grail. This intradiegetic genesis story emphasizes homosexual desires, both on the part of its authors and its agents. The love of Galehaut and Gautier for Lancelot may be written out of Arthurian legend when Chrétien de Troyes sets down his version of events, but Gautier’s own writing serves as testimony and legacy. It contributes to a textual genealogy in lieu of one based on blood relationships or family trees. In a sense, it is the product of Gautier’s union with Samuel, a literary rather than biological offspring that in turn becomes the unacknowledged parent of Arthurian legend. At the level of plot, the novel claims kinship with the extradiegetic medieval canon, not as a descendent, but as an ancestor. The inverted genealogical claim parallels both the Arthurian *Autre Monde*’s practice of reversing biological and societal norms, and the novel’s attempts to turn the tables on heteronormativity. Gautier and his text seem to ask the reader to go back to medieval romance with the idea that the stories are incomplete,

³⁸¹ Samuel’s Jewish heritage and its erasure function similarly to Gautier’s transgressive sexuality in this regard.

this time inserting the missing first-person accounts of Galehaut's passion, along with Camelot's scribe and his transgressive desires. The plausibility and results of such an exhortation must remain an open question, albeit a provocative one. After *Graal-Romance*, do we go back to *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* and *The Prose Lancelot* and read them any differently? If so, then Le Dantec's novel has succeeded in grafting its alternative genealogy into the medieval Arthurian canon and perhaps, in some small way, in queering Camelot.

L'Enchanteur's Ersatz Parents and Arthurian Bromance

Florence Delay has identified incest as the major "secret" that unites *Graal théâtre*'s two key families: one belonging to Joseph of Arimathea, the Fisher King, and celestial chivalry, and the other belonging to Merlin, Arthur, and the earthly knights of the Round Table.³⁸² This foundational premise for *Graal théâtre* builds in part on Roubaud's alternative genealogy of Perceval and le Roi Pêcheur, which resolves the problem of conflicting moments in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* that place Perceval in the Grail lineage either through the maternal line or the paternal. Roubaud designs a fictional genealogy that allows Perceval to claim kinship to the Roi Pêcheur through both lines, with recourse to incestuous unions over a span of generations. Meanwhile, the sexual union between Arthur and his half-sister is one of the most familiar plot threads in Arthuriana, both medieval and modern. The last two sections of this chapter analyze

³⁸² "Composition de *Graal théâtre*," Jacques Roubaud, *compositeur de mathématique et de poésie*, p. 207.

depictions of incest and sexual relationships between parent-figures and their adopted offspring and the ways in which their desires are at times displaced.

In Barjavel's novel *L'Enchanteur*, there is a marked conflation of the roles associated with the two axes of genealogy: the horizontal axis consisting of lovers and the vertical axis linking parents and their offspring. Maternal and paternal feelings of love border on the romantic, and love affairs are inflected generationally in terms of family ties.

Literal incest appears infrequently in *L'Enchanteur*; indeed, its sole *depicted* occurrence is between the newly crowned Arthur and his half-sister, the unnamed queen of Orcanie (she is called Morgause in Malory, whose Arthurian genealogy most closely matches Barjavel's). The narrator makes it clear that the two are aware of their blood relationship, although he hastens to add that they don't feel like siblings, as they had no contact prior to Arthur's coronation and the king's recent discovery of his parentage. The queen, in particular, finds herself attracted to Arthur and willing to overlook the problem of their kinship: "Le fait qu'il fût son demi-frère ne lui apparaissait pas comme une évidence. Il avait surgi dans sa vie comme un inconnu."³⁸³ As Arthur visits Orcanie and the two share adjoining rooms, the king makes the fatal decision to follow the queen back into her room, where the Devil facilitates matters by making the two forget "qui ils étaient et quels liens de sang les unissaient."³⁸⁴ The text seems to indicate, however, that the siblings needed very little demonic intervention to act upon their desire, pointing out

³⁸³ *L'Enchanteur*, p. 71.

³⁸⁴ *L'Enchanteur*, p. 72.

that “l’habitude de coucher nu facilite les rapports humains.”³⁸⁵ While the relationship between the two is portrayed as highly problematic within the text, it is not the incestuous nature of the union, but rather the simple loss of Arthur’s virginity that throws a wrench in Merlin’s carefully orchestrated plans. Arthur, at first inclined to dismiss the event’s gravity because he “n’avait causé tort à personne,” comes to see his actions differently: “...plus qu’une faute, c’était une chute.”³⁸⁶ Effectively, Arthur has just disqualified himself from the Grail Quest by sacrificing his sexual purity in an extra-marital affair. Given the gravity of this consequence, the incest is merely an aggravating element and has no concrete repercussions until near the end of the text. During the final battle, as Arthur is burning Guenièvre for infidelity and Lancelot is leading a treasonous Breton army to rescue her, Mordret le Maudit arrives with an army of Saxons. The text explains for the first time that Mordret is Gauvain d’Orkanie’s younger brother and Arthur’s unacknowledged “fils incestueux.”³⁸⁷ The consequences of Arthur and Morgause’s incestuous union thus lie dormant for decades, shunted to the narrative margins of Barjavel’s story.

More frequently than literal incest appears a sort of surrogate parenthood that comes to achieve a status akin to romantic or sexual awareness. This dual status is most pronounced in the relationship between Viviane and Lancelot. Following the Vulgate account, Viviane, la Dame du Lac, rescues Lancelot as an infant and raises him to knighthood. One of her first acts as an adoptive mother is to nurse the hungry baby;

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁶ *L’Enchanteur*, pp. 73-4.

³⁸⁷ *L’Enchanteur*, p. 445. Mordret is mentioned earlier in the text as Gauvain’s only remaining brother during the dedication of Stonehenge, but he is not identified in relation to Arthur (p. 413).

Merlin works an enchantment enabling the virginal Viviane to lactate, and thus to fulfill the maternal role in a biological capacity. The heroine, unable to consummate her relationship with Merlin under penalty of losing her powers, transfers her feelings for the magician to the young Lancelot: “Cet enfant remplacerait celui qu’il lui était interdit d’avoir avec Merlin. Il serait *leur* enfant.”³⁸⁸ Thereafter, she calls the boy “beau fils trouvé” while he calls her “mère.”³⁸⁹

Her feelings for Lancelot do not seem to remain strictly maternal however. From the beginning, the text signals awareness on her part of the boy’s masculinity, as is evidenced by her nickname for him: Lancelot, “à cause de son sexe enfantin qui parfois [...] pointait en avant comme une menue lance.”³⁹⁰ This awareness is heightened when Lancelot reaches adolescence, as Viviane intervenes on his behalf to rescue him from Morgane’s machinations. When the villainess asks the Dame du Lac’s identity, the latter replies simply: “Sache seulement que Lancelot m’est cher comme un fils et comme un époux que je ne puis avoir.”³⁹¹ The assertion is particularly revelatory given that throughout the novel it is Merlin, rather than Lancelot, who is presented as Viviane’s forbidden husband. The two roles, son and lover, are equivalent in Viviane’s mind. The blurring of the two continues when Viviane comes to her adult son as he awakens after having lost consciousness; he moves to embrace his mother, but she observes that the knight is fully nude: “Crois-tu que ce soit une tenue pour se présenter à sa mère?”³⁹²

³⁸⁸ *L’Enchanteur*, p. 134.

³⁸⁹ Viviane’s name for Lancelot echoes the language found in the Vulgate, but the medieval antecedent identifies Lancelot as “fils du roi.” By contrast, Barjavel’s Viviane claims Lancelot as *her* adoptive son.

³⁹⁰ *L’Enchanteur*, p. 154.

³⁹¹ *L’Enchanteur*, p. 316.

³⁹² *Ibid.*

Viviane is careful to keep the relationship platonic (after all, she must remain virginal to retain her magical powers), but the text nonetheless evokes the potential for a different sort of relationship between the adoptive mother and son.

The maternal-filial dynamic is not entirely stable, at least physically. Lancelot ages, whereas Viviane remains in the first bloom of youth throughout the novel as a result of her magical powers. Near the end of the work, when she and Viviane appear to the knight following his amnesiac stay in Morgane's palace, she is shocked to see him not as the adolescent in her memory, but as "un homme mûr, achevé, marquée par le temps."³⁹³ Meanwhile, she retains the look of a sixteen-year-old and "eût pu passer pour la fille de Lancelot, au lieu de celle qu'il appelait [mère]."³⁹⁴ The text thus documents a certain fluidity in human relationships. Mother, lover, daughter: Viviane might be able to fulfill any of these roles for Lancelot.

The knight is involved in an additional relationship involving both romantic and maternal-filial components. In keeping with the medieval tradition, Arthur's wife Guenièvre is nearly twenty years her lover's senior, although the text emphasizes that the passing years make the queen only more resplendent. After Lancelot's success at the Douloureuse Garde, where he learns his true name, he reveals to Guenièvre his identity as the son of the dead Ban de Bénoïc. The queen finds herself overwhelmed by the news, as the name is far from unknown to her: "*Ban de Bénoïc! Comme il lui ressemble. Pourquoi ne m'en suis-je pas aperçue plus tôt? J'avais quinze ans... Il était le plus beaux des*

³⁹³ L'Enchanteur, p. 439.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.* In the text, "mère" is cried out by Lancelot.

quarante et un [chevaliers] ... Si mon père ne m'avait pas donné à Arthur, c'est lui peut-être que j'aurais épousé... Et voici son fils! ... Qui pourrait être le mien..."³⁹⁵ There is a moment of recognition on the part of Guenièvre, who is childless, when she realizes a capacity for maternity that had hitherto been unexploited. She thus conceives of Lancelot as a "fils raté," emblematic of her motherly potential.

This maternal feeling does not douse her ardor for the adolescent knight, however; she loses no time in instigating their first kiss: "[E]lle dut se soulever un peu sur la pointe de ses pieds pour poser ses lèvres contre ses lèvres, qui étaient fraîches, douces, brûlantes, pulpeuses, qu'elle eut envie de mordre..."³⁹⁶ The adjectives "brûlantes" and "pulpeuses," with their highly sexualized register, mark a distinct shift away from the maternal-filial reaction Guenièvre initially experiences. At the same time, the text provides no indication that the maternal feelings have been erased. Rather, they must be sublimated or rechanneled; the fledgling adult Lancelot is no longer in need of a mother figure, and so she offers him a relationship more appropriate for his stage in life.

The conflation of genealogical axes runs in the opposite direction in an additional relationship centering on Lancelot and his friend Galehaut the giant. Traditionally, Galehaut as portrayed in medieval Arthuriana is seen as Lancelot's companion, an exemplary figure for "bromance" studies. In the *Lancelot* section of the Vulgate Cycle, the giant's love of the knight is so intense that when Lancelot, "cui il avoit tote s'amor donee," is reported dead of beheading in the Forest des Aventures, he pines away and

³⁹⁵ *L'Enchanteur*, p. 336. Italics in original.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

dies of grief within two days.³⁹⁷ Into this already fraught dynamic, Barjavel inserts a paternal-filial element not found in medieval Arthuriana. In *L'Enchanteur*, Lancelot makes a journey to the subterranean Otherworld situated beneath Ireland, where he meets the baby Galehaut and carries him on horseback to Arthur's realm. Vestigial memories of this initial interaction color the giant's feelings toward Lancelot henceforth: "Il aimait beaucoup Lancelot, sans savoir pourquoi. Il ignorait que le chevalier blanc le tenait dans ses bras quand il était sorti dans le monde d'en haut et que cela avait créé entre eux presque des liens de père à fils, bien que Lancelot fût plus jeune que lui dans le temps du dessus."³⁹⁸ This father-son dynamic is borne out when Lancelot requests permission to dub Galehaut. The text indicates that although in extraordinary cases, any knight may perform this honor, it is typically the king's task, or an overlord's; the main exception is that "parfois aussi un père, chevalier lui-même, [donnait la chevalerie] à son fils."³⁹⁹ Even though Lancelot is not Galehaut's father, he performs a paternal function. Moreover, it is identical to Lancelot's role as *Galaad's* (biological) father, which the text makes explicit in a later scene: "L'épée dans sa main et sur l'épaule de Galaad fut le lien qui rassembla le père et le fils."⁴⁰⁰

Somewhat surprisingly, the romantic potential between Lancelot and Galehaut is not developed within *L'Enchanteur*. Rather than expiring of grief and unrequited love, the giant instead ultimately returns home to his subterranean kingdom, where his mother

³⁹⁷ *Lancelot du Lac*, Vol. II, Lettres Gothiques, p. 682.

³⁹⁸ *L'Enchanteur*, p. 283.

³⁹⁹ *L'Enchanteur*, p. 284.

⁴⁰⁰ *L'Enchanteur*, p. 437. The recognition of this familial link (which Galaad has just announced to Lancelot) is what restores Lancelot from his amnesia; by performing a fatherly duty, he recovers access to a lost identity.

awaits. The relationship between the two male protagonists is thus polyvalent only for readers already familiar with the medieval source, who will read the paternal-filial dynamic on top of an intuited, preexisting “bromantic” matrix. Within the modern text itself, Galehaut is instead tasked with repopulating the race of the Thuana (Barjavel’s name for the Tuatha Dé Danann of Celtic mythology), which has been deserted by the old gods and at present consists only of La Belle Géant and a multitude of sons. To accomplish his mission, Galehaut will have to impregnate his mother in the hopes of engendering daughters to help propagate the race.⁴⁰¹ It is the mother-son relationship, rather than that of foster-father and foster-son, that is imbued with a sexual dynamic—though it is framed as procreative rather than romantic or lustful. Unlike the Arthur-Morgane incest, however, this relationship is alluded to but not portrayed; the novel abandons the Galehaut plot thread before any consummation can occur.

L’Enchanteur ultimately alludes to a variety of transgressive desires and sexual relationships, often setting up the expectation that a taboo will be violated and occasionally depicting the act. There is a degree of modesty throughout the text, however, which serves to downplay the transgressive nature of most of the relationships depicted. They are sublimated or diverted into other outlets for romance. Some plot threads, as in the case of Galehaut’s, are dropped altogether. The final section of this chapter analyzes a trilogy in which, by contrast, sexual taboo occupies a central place in the narrative.

⁴⁰¹ In the end, it is hinted that such drastic measures may not prove necessary. During his time aboveground, Galehaut has wed and fathered eight daughters. When he is called back to his homeland, he elects to take those daughters with him; they will be baptized in water that will render them giantesses. They will then ostensibly be able to mate with La Belle Géant’s other offspring, their uncles, and thus continue the line of Thuana.

All in the Family:

Incest as Agent of Creation and Destruction in Michel Rio's Arthurian Trilogy

The work of Michel Rio might serve as a case study for the role of blood relationships at the level of plot in both acknowledging medieval textual “ancestry” and in altering the Arthurian family tree to suit. Family relationships dominated by incest are at the intradiegetic foreground: in his novel *Merlin*, the title character's origin is explained by the impregnation of his mother by her own father. A generation later, Merlin's protégée, Morgane, conceives Mordred with her half-brother, the adolescent Arthur. Neither of these proposed genealogies corresponds strictly to those recorded in the canonical French texts; Robert de Boron calls Merlin the literal son of the devil (with a nod toward the possibility that the mother's confessor may claim paternity), and the *Vulgate Lancelot* and subsequent texts deem Morgause, rather than Morgane, to be the mother of Mordred. Although the new story lines do not precisely replicate those found in (most of) the medieval tradition, they reveal intimate understanding of the transgressive forces that underlie many of the key Arthurian figures' origins.

More than any other work of modern French Arthuriana, Michel Rio's *Merlin* trilogy is a testament to the creative—and destructive—potential of incest. If Barjavel emphasizes surrogate parental relationships charged with sexual awareness, or inter-generational sexual relationships that evoke to its participants parental-filial love, it nonetheless avoids confronting the truly transgressive aspects of literal incest, mitigating its rare occurrence with extenuating circumstances—primarily, that Arthur and his sister

did not *feel* like siblings. By contrast, Rio places two incestuous relationships at the crux of Camelot's flowering and eventual destruction: between Merlin's parents, and between those of Mordred. The creative element is incarnated with the conception of Merlin; the destructive, that of Mordred. The trilogy confronts the taboo directly,

In *Merlin*, the young protagonist's family background is modeled on Geoffrey of Monmouth's origins story in the *Historia*, which states that Merlin's mother "had been the daughter of the king of Demetia and she now dwelt in that same city, among the holy sisters of the Church of Saint Peter."⁴⁰² When Rio's future king-maker begins to ask questions about his paternity at the age of five, he is taken by his preceptor, Blaise, to meet his mother for the first time, and she tells him the official story of his conception, to which everyone save Merlin is already privy. This story conforms closely in certain respects to Robert de Boron's account of Merlin's conception. Due to her education, Merlin's mother explains, she determined very early never to marry, but her son-less father needed a direct heir. Blaise told her that without the intervention of man, the only two possible progenitors were God and the Devil—and God's paternal capacity had already been fulfilled with the advent of Jesus, leaving a diabolical father the only viable option. She must therefore allow herself to be impregnated by a demon who would visit her that very night. Acceding to Blaise's plan although terrified by it, Merlin's mother was administered a sleeping potion and told to go to bed nude with the door open. Upon waking the next morning, she found herself bloody and soiled with semen and retained only a confused memory of crushing weight and of internal pain. Merlin's mother

⁴⁰² Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*. Trans. Michael A. Faletra, Ontario: Broadview Editions, 2008, p. 128.

interprets this as an incubus's visit, and the resultant pregnancy the Devil's progeny; this becomes the accepted narrative of Merlin's origins. However, as Merlin hears his mother's account, he has a vision of the dark "Satan" on top of his mother and recognizes its face: "celui du roi."⁴⁰³ Merlin is the son of his own grandfather, who has preserved his bloodline by impregnating his daughter. Upon piecing together the truth of his origins, the boy is immediately aware that the offspring of such a union must either be "élu ou damné" and that his destiny will make of him "le premier ou le dernier des hommes"; either way, his life will be one of isolation.⁴⁰⁴ The accuracy of Merlin's vision is later confirmed when the boy's father/grandfather is dying of battle wounds and Merlin directly addresses him as "père." The incest taboo thus replaces the incubus depicted by Robert de Boron as the transgressive source of Merlin's paternity, rendering for the modern reader an analogue to the horror with which diabolical origins would have been viewed in the Middle Ages.

Merlin's reaction to his extraordinary condition is to redouble his attachment to his mother. After she has confessed to him the story of his conception, he reassures her: "Je suis ton fils, mère, et je t'aime."⁴⁰⁵ Merlin's love for his mother carries highly oedipal overtones, attested in his first physical contact with her. When she takes him in her arms, his reaction is carnal, in spite of his extreme youth: "J'étais submerge par une passion qui atteignait son plein aussitôt que née, dont je savais qu'elle ne me quitterait plus et où je

⁴⁰³ *Merlin*, p. 27. Merlin's vision is not depicted as that of a seer, but rather as a visualization of his sudden insight into his own origins.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.* This passage sets up a dichotomy, which will be fulfilled by Mordred as the cursed complement to Merlin's creative destiny.

⁴⁰⁵ *Merlin*, p. 29.

voyais autant l'amour le plus pur qu'un désir violent me poussant à me fondre en elle, car mon esprit trop tôt muri dans un corps d'enfant pouvait comprendre la nature de ces choses.”⁴⁰⁶ Accordingly, he assumes a dual posture with regard to his mother, informing her that he intends to fulfill all male roles for her and to take her “pour mère et pour femme.”⁴⁰⁷ The two share a bed from this point until her death, compounding the incest already present in Merlin's family tree. Later, his adult sexuality is inflected with the legacy of his relationship with his mother, in particular her bloody death in a revolt during his childhood. During his first sexual encounter with Viviane, in which she loses her virginity, he notices blood staining her thigh. “Et cela me ramena brutalement à une autre chaire meurtrie qui palpitait en moi depuis l'enfance.”⁴⁰⁸ This reflection alludes to Merlin's memory of finding his mother slain with a sword lodged between her thighs, punishment for bringing an abomination into the world.

Largely because of the rumors of demonic origin surrounding his conception, Merlin removes himself from his grandfather's line of succession, transferring his inherited lands to Uther. Instead of engendering a child of the “Devil's son,” as his progeny would surely be labeled, he takes on the role of surrogate father to both Arthur and Morgane, although the former child is raised outside of Carduel and the latter has been formally adopted by Uther. This link to Merlin serves to redouble the sibling relationship of Arthur and Morgane; they are connected biologically through their mother Ygerne and intellectually through Merlin who, although not affiliated with either by

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁸ *Merlin*, p. 115.

blood, fulfills a paternal role as preceptor, counselor, and source of emotional support. Arthur and Morgane both variously acknowledge Merlin as their mutual father, a claim based on the king-maker's role in educating them and grooming them to accomplish great deeds in Logres.⁴⁰⁹ While Arthur merely labels Merlin "père," Morgane establishes a family among the three, telling the king Ban that she feels love for only two people in the world, "Merlin et Arthur, [s]on père et [s]on frère."⁴¹⁰ She adds that they are irrevocably united "par cette passion de l'âme et des sens en état d'amour et de l'esprit en état de guerre."⁴¹¹ Morgane and Arthur thus consider themselves the offspring of the same two parents, making them full siblings psychologically if not biologically. To complete the triangle, Merlin is the only person aside from Morgane and Arthur to be aware of the incestuous union between the king and his sister and, as Morgane tells her young son Mordred, the only one privy to Mordred's origins.

Mordred himself is the incestuous mirror to Merlin, the agent of destruction that undoes Merlin's decades of work building Logres. This is paradoxically because Mordred identifies so strongly with Logres' ideals that he cannot admit any flexibility in their administration. He is raised by Morgane to view himself as the incarnation of the Round Table, because he is the son of Arthur, who himself at times perceives the Round Table as an extension of himself. The son is thus metonymically linked to the destiny of Logres, according to Morgane: "Mordred, tu es plus que tout autre membre de ce corps, car tu viens de la chair même d'Arthur, et ta responsabilité vis-à-vis de la Table est aussi grande

⁴⁰⁹ *Morgane*, p. 76.

⁴¹⁰ *Morgane*, pp. 76, 89.

⁴¹¹ *Morgane*, p. 89.

que la sienne.”⁴¹² This heritage is a source of deep ambivalence for Mordred, which might serve as an intratextual analogue for the author’s attitude toward medieval romance source material: Fabienne Pomel has astutely observed a refusal of medieval parentage in Rio’s works, likening the author-hypotextual relationship torn between admiration and repulsion to the parricidal impulse of Mordred.⁴¹³

The text on multiple occasions highlights the parallel between the conception of Merlin and that of Mordred, both born of incestuous unions that must be kept secret. Merlin identifies with the baby Mordred, which prevents him from following his instinct to slay him immediately. It seems that he must master his own aversion to the product of incest, reassuring himself that Mordred does not pose a threat to the stability of Logres: “Il n’y a pas de fatalité. J’en suis la preuve vivante, et je me sens pareil à cet enfant par les origines.”⁴¹⁴ While there may be no “fatalité” in the sense of destiny, Mordred’s advent is clearly the mortal blow to both Arthur and Merlin’s dream of an enlightened, peaceful Logres.

Conclusion

There remains much more to say on the subject of families in modern French Arthuriana. Additional recurring or widespread motifs that deserve attention include

⁴¹² *Morgane*, p. 109.

⁴¹³ “M. Rio se place dans la rupture et l’irrespect. Son rapport aux hypotextes, jamais identifiés, est d’ailleurs ambivalent. [...] Une telle posture de l’écrivain n’est pas sans l’apparenter à certains égards à Mordred, le fils parricide, le traître.” Pomel, Fabienne, “Michel Rio et le statut du texte médiéval: filiation et paternité littéraires,” *Images du Moyen Age*, 2006.

⁴¹⁴ *Merlin*, p. 92.

sexual coercion (which is portrayed with particular frequency in *Rio* and in *Fetjaine*), depictions of childbirth, and treatment of adultery beyond that of *Lancelot* and *Guenièvre*.

In foregrounding transgressive sexual unions, reconstituted or blended families, and fraught relationships among relatives, modern French Arthuriana seems at times to be portraying the sort of outlandish clans associated with twenty-first century reality TV shows or racy cable dramas. What is striking is how little these iterations stray from their medieval counterparts, even in their most transgressive manifestations. In echoing the fraught relationships already present in the source material, modern French Arthurian families serve as a reminder that family matters have always been exceedingly complicated—and are not for the faint of heart.

CONCLUSION:

BEYOND BLAISE AND THE ESPLUMOIR

This dissertation has aimed to elucidate the ways in which modern French Arthuriana engages with prior Arthurian texts, and to demonstrate that the corpus has reached a critical mass sufficient to merit recognition within the field of twentieth and twenty-first-century French Studies. In the preceding chapters, I have limited my analysis to works of literature, both highbrow and popular. However, recent French Arthuriana is by no means limited to novelistic and theatrical texts; if anything, the past decade has witnessed a shift away from these forms as authors, illustrators, and screenwriters have expanded into other formats of cultural production to reach new audiences. By way of conclusion, I would like to attest to the ways in which French Arthuriana has expanded into newer media, and the avenues for further study that they present. Their creators tend to eschew the more traditional paradigm of a scribal figure such as Blaise composing an “authoritative” text in solitude, instead highlighting collaboration, community, and visual and material cultures.

Aside from traditional literary formats such as novels and theatre, the most common area of cultural production intersecting with French Studies is typically cinema. This medium has proved a surprisingly sparse source of French Arthuriana, however. As I noted in the introduction, there have been only a handful of French films devoted to explicitly Arthurian material, all of which are decades old. Two examples from the 1970s are noteworthy: Robert Bresson’s *Lancelot du Lac* (1974) and Éric Rohmer’s *Perceval le*

gallois (1978). Although realized just a few years apart, the two films are thoroughly different in cinematic style and tone. *Lancelot du Lac* is a gritty portrait of the end of Arthur's reign as the titular knight and Guenièvre renew their forbidden love. It closely follows the *Mort Artu* and Malory's final book of the *Morte Darthur*. One of the most striking elements of the film is the prominence of sound. The film is filled with everyday noises—chiming bells, clanking armor, braying horses—that emphasize the realism of the film and quash any epic tendencies. Bresson's film won the Grand prix de la semaine de la critique at the Cannes Film Festival in 1974. *Perceval le gallois*, starring Fabrice Luchini in the title role, is a retelling of Chrétien's *Perceval* in a highly stylized, theatrical setting marked by cardboard-like props and exaggerated costumes. Dialogue is delivered in rhymed couplets of modernized but still archaic French (frequently employing, for instance, words such as “moult” and “onques”) that correspond line-by-line to Chrétien's text. Characters deliver not only their own lines but third-person narration, assuming the role generally undertaken by an off-screen narrator. A chorus also adds a musical component to the narration. The film was nominated for two Césars in 1980 (best sound and photography) and won the 1979 Prix Méliès.¹ Both films have received scholarly attention from Jeff Rider, among others, but neither film has substantial bearing on today's Arthurian cinematic landscape, such as it is.² France may still be awaiting its flowering of Arthuriana film, although some cinematic undertakings may be on the horizon.

¹According to Luchini, Roland Barthes considered the film to be highly underrated. Luchini recounts winning Barthes' telephone number during a brief encounter with the critic based on his appearance in the film. “Le Phone de Barthes,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4ZwH2W9jl4>. Consulted 24 July 2013.

² See Rider's article, “The Arthurian Legend in French Cinema: Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac* and Eric Rohmer's *Perceval le Gallois*” in *Cinema Arthuriana*, Ed. Kevin Harty, 2002, pp. 149-162.

Alexandre Astier is responsible for a wealth of Arthurian materials in less conventional media, all of which derives from his six-season television series, *Kaamelott* (2005-2009). Astier not only served as screen-writer and director for the show, but also composed its musical score and played the lead role of Arthur. *Kaamelott* was conceived as a short-format program to fill the space left by another cancelled series and initially consisted of an episodic structure played out in three-minute installments, a hundred of which constituted a season (or *livre*). Its viewership eclipsed that of its predecessor within weeks, leading to a successful run on France's M6, averaging more than five million viewers at its height of popularity. In the later seasons, the episodes become longer, the narrative arc more sustained, and the tone more somber.

In a documentary treating the development of the series, Astier lists three principal sources of inspiration for the series, all of which are notably Anglophone: the works of Thomas Malory, John Boorman's *Excalibur*, and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.³ The last of these might seem like the closest analogue to *Kaamelott*, given the series's irreverent tone and frequent recourse to both wordplay and slapstick. Indeed, there exist a number of substantive parallels, including similarities in the motley cast of Arthurian knights, as well as a shared preoccupation with the comic discrepancy between Arthur's high-minded ideals and the reality he faces as a leader charged with achieving the Grail quest. Without minimizing this obvious resonance, I would like to argue that *Kaamelott*'s emphasis on narration and storytelling merits consideration alongside specifically French works that likewise thematize the *conte* and the way(s) in which it is

³ Astier is careful to note that he considers Monty Python a legitimate Arthurian source in its own right, comparable to medieval sources in its contribution to Arthurian legend. Chabert, Christophe, *Aux Sources de Kaamelott*. Published with *Kaamelott* Livre II, DVD, 2006.

told: *Graal théâtre*, *Le Chevalier Silence*, *Graal-Romance*. Two examples illustrate this point: Perceval, and Arthur himself.

Throughout the series, Blaise, as court scribe, takes the minutes of Round Table meetings and also sets down deposition of various knights' adventures. Arthur habitually interrupts proceedings to have Blaise either omit an exchange or redact it. However, one knight is unable to abide by the communally enforced rules for narration. Perceval's inability to recount his own adventures is a theme that receives ample treatment. Unable to calibrate his artistic embellishment to suit Arthur and his fellow knights, Perceval invents episodes entirely, gets bogged down in minutiae, and misses the point of his own stories. After one particularly disastrous narration, Arthur undertakes to give Perceval a remedial lesson in the art of story-telling, citing Aristotle's principle that stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and explaining the meaning of legend: "qui mérite d'être lu" (Livre III, Chapitre 12). While Perceval can, to Arthur's astonishment, identify Aristotle as the author of the *Poetics*, he has no notion of their contents, as he cannot read. It also seems that he has been fabricating his adventures entirely, on the grounds that quite literally nothing occurred and he has to tell *something*. An incredulous Arthur replies that while some embellishment is permitted, wholesale invention is inappropriate, an obvious nod to medieval romance concerns with veracity. In the third season episode "Les Clous de la Sainte Croix" (Chapitre 39), Perceval's fellow knights react with outspoken dismay that when is his turn to report on an adventure. Unable to derail Perceval, Blaise nonetheless attempt to keep the story on track with stern warnings: "Ecoutez-moi bien, vous allez raconter exactement ce qui s'est passé. Vous racontez

d'une traite, et vous changez pas d'avis au milieu"—otherwise, Blaise will bash the knight on the head with his record book. Perceval's tale of meeting an old man who barely spoke the language is frequently interrupted by the other knights and seems pointless, until Perceval remembers a minor detail: the old man had attempted to give him a heap of rusty old nails and said something to the effect that they were from the Holy Cross. To Perceval, this detail is trivial at best; to the other knights, of course, it becomes the focal point of the story as they learn that he simply discarded the nails and can't remember where. The episode itself exploits Perceval's inability to recount a story coherently, using this premise to withhold key details to comic effect. The final exchange of the episode has Perceval in discussion with Arthur, explaining that the nails probably rusted because they were wrapped in a ratty old cloth with a facial imprint on it. Arthur bellows: "Vous avez foutu en l'air le Saint Suaire ?!" as the musical credit indicates the closing punch line.

Mise-en-abyme occurs in a third-season episode entitled "Legenda," in which Arthur tells his own story with an animal cast as a bedtime story for his knight's son: "C'est l'histoire d'un petit ourson qui s'appelait Arthur" (Livre III, Chapitre 20). It is initially a highly self-conscious rendering of the story. Arthur stumbles and winces as he realizes he has used the word "magique" in successive sentences. He likewise editorializes his choice in depicting Lancelot as a stag: "Voilà, un cerf, parce que c'est majestueux." A moment later, he reflexively designates Guenièvre a trout, but immediately revises on the grounds that a trout cannot mate with a bear; Guenièvre must be a bear as well. The tale quickly descends into violence as Arthur-the-Narrator uses it

as a vehicle for wish fulfillment. Arthur-the-Bear is surrounded by idiots (“des nazes”) who impede the quest for the Grail, and he decides to have them all burned alive in a barn. When la Dame du Lac intervenes and exhorts him to behave nicely, Arthur-the-Bear slugs her in the face. Ultimately, the story bogs down much like the fruitless quest for the elusive Grail, both culminating in Arthur’s despair as he recounts falling into depression and contemplating suicide over his failure. The bedtime story ends on the refrain “il le trouve pas, le vase, il le trouve pas,” which might serve as an *abbreviatio* for the series as well as Arthur-narrator’s existential anguish.

Astier has stated that he intended the sixth season of *Kaamelott* to serve as a springboard for a trilogy of Arthurian feature-length films, although this project has not yet entered production. The series has generated several other affiliated materials, however. These include two volumes of published *Kaamelott* scripts, both released in 2009, which add several episodes from the first two seasons that were never filmed. As a bridge between the television series and the planned film trilogy, Astier has also written five *Kaamelott* graphic novels, which were illustrated by Stephen Dupré and released between 2006 and 2010: *L'Armée du Nécromant*, *Les Sièges de Transport*, *L'Enigme du Coffre*, *Perceval et le Dragon d'Airain*, and *Le Serpent Géant du Lac de l'Ombre*. In perhaps one of the most telling signs of the series’ widespread popularity, *Kaamelott* even produced four tie-in trinkets (a notebook, a calendar, a mug, and a medallion) that were served with the fast food chain Quick’s value meals in 2008-2009.⁴

⁴ The promotional poster is available on a *Kaamelott*-inspired blog, Astier&Co. <http://astierandco.fr/tag/Quick>. Consulted 14 June, 2013.

Kaamelott's graphic novels belong to what appears to be a burgeoning area of Arthurian literary production: the *bande dessinée*. Dozens of volumes have been published over the past decade and half, surpassing the number of traditional novelistic works cover a comparable period by a healthy margin. Aside from Astier's five books, other recent Arthurian series in French include David Chauvel and Jérôme Lereculey's nine-volume *Arthur* (1999-2006); Scotch Arleston's six-volume *Le Chant d'Excalibur* (1999-2010); and Jean-Luc Istin's ten-volume *Merlin* (2000-2009) and his ongoing series *Lancelot* (2008-2012). These works are generally published as discrete hardbound books of forty-eight pages apiece. The *bande dessinée* is a particularly apt format for postmodern engagement with medieval source material, given that the genre pairs text with images, just as illuminated manuscripts often did. These materials have received almost no scholarly attention but are worthy of study as a potential new face of French Arthurian literature. The Chauvel and Lereculey series stands out in paying particular attention to the Welsh origins of Arthurian tradition, for instance casting Perceval as Peredur and Yvain as Owein.

Arthur's place in the French popular imaginary is also evidenced by the publication of an elaborate Arthurian role playing game. "Quêtes Arthuriennes: Un jeu d'Imaginaire collaboratif" was created by Antoine Druart and Thomas Laborey and is hosted on the Expositions virtuelles section of the Bibliothèque nationale de France's website as a pedagogical activity to complement the BNF exhibit's devoted to Arthurian literature.⁵ The game consists of a seventy-nine-page instruction manual that supplies

⁵ "Quêtes Arthuriennes: Un jeu de rôle arthurien." <http://expositions.bnf.fr/arthur/pedago/jeu.htm>. Accessed 25 July 2013.

background information about Arthur's court and medieval life. It includes profiles of a panoply of Arthurian knights, designating their strengths, weaknesses, and virtues alongside key events in their stories and their eventual fate. It also sets out guidelines for interactive scenarios and provides worksheets to allow players to develop their Arthurian characters for role-play in the game. "Quêtes Arthuriennes" is illustrated with copies of manuscript illuminations, paintings, and rare-book engravings taken from the BNF's collections; it also includes authentic allusions to the canonical Arthurian tradition, creating an accessible entry-point for players to become readers of medieval works.

This assortment of cultural production attests to the vibrancy of modern French Arthuriana, particularly as a popular phenomenon. While it has still not achieved recognition as a high-profile area of literature and other media, it is becoming more visible, both to the French public and the academic community. The uptick in French Arthurian fiction and its increasing visibility signal the need for increased, sustained scholarly attention devoted to this often neglected area of *la matière de Bretagne*. It is truly time to account for all of the heirs of the Round Table, even those laboring across the Channel from Arthur's court.

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