

## Conflicting Presentations of the Same Character Within a Cycle

Consistency in "characterization" is not something to which great importance is attached in medieval epic or romance, where role tends to determine character and the same figure may be given more than one role and presented in more than one way within the individual text as well as within a cycle: the same king (Charlemagne or Arthur) may be presented as a strong or a weak figure. Often these variations in relation to a character arise through intertextuality: interplay with different literary traditions to be found outside the individual text. In relation to Arthur, for example, this may take the form of allusions outwards or brief episodes reminding us of the more active role the king may play in other works compared with the more passive role attributed to him in most Arthurian romances. As a cycle develops and a range of existing texts is incorporated within the same work or series of related works, these contrasts can become more disturbing in relation to the thematic structure and even in terms of factually contradictory accounts of the same event in a character's life. Efforts may then be made by some scribes or *remanieurs* to remove factual inconsistencies, but such attempts can give rise to other problems. An interesting example of such discrepancies is to be found in the varying treatments of the figure of Merlin in the course of the evolution of the *Lancelot-Graal* cycle.

### *Pre-cyclic Romance*

In the first non-cyclic or pre-cyclic prose *Lancelot*,<sup>1</sup> the figure of Merlin represents unchristianized magic as opposed to the Christian marvellous of the Grail. Both these strands of the marvellous are associated with themes or figures well known in the past literary tradition but which do not play a part in the narrative present of this tale of Lancelot. Yet the allusions to Merlin have an

<sup>1</sup> References are to the following texts:

PL: Elspeth Kennedy, ed., *Lancelot du Lac: The Non-cyclic Old French Prose Romance*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

LM: A. Micha, ed., *Lancelot: roman en prose du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 9 vols. (Paris-Genève: Droz, 1978-1983).

J. Frappier, ed., *La Mort Artu*, 3rd ed., Textes littéraires français (Genève-Paris: Droz, 1964). The references are to paragraph numbers.

S: H.O. Sommer, ed., *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, vol. 2 (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1909-1913).

important role to play within the work for they are used to give a rationalizing and reassuring explanation of the tradition, an essential element in the Lancelot story, that he was brought up in a lake by fairy. It is explained that the Lady of the Lake was a fairy only because she possessed a certain knowledge of enchantments and that she learned these from Merlin. Merlin had inherited this knowledge from his father as is explained in the account given of his birth, referring back to events before the beginning of the Lancelot story. He falls in love with the Lady of the Lake, she persuades him to teach her all he knows about magic, beginning with a spell which protected her virginity, and ending with one which imprisoned him for ever. Thus she acquires her magical powers without losing her purity so that she can use them for good and the dangerous element in the magic is neutralized with the imprisonment of Merlin. The account given of Merlin's birth, therefore, emphasises all the ambiguous elements in his legend and his diabolical ancestry, it is stated that he was never baptised and he is described as false and disloyal. The Lady of the Lake cannot therefore be reproached for imprisoning him. Two other allusions to Merlin in the text (*PL* 357.25, 365.10) also link up with a magical past without Christian connections.

### *First stage in cyclification*

However, once it was decided to extend the tale of Lancelot to include a Grail Quest and a *Mort Artu*, allusions to a very different kind of Merlin appear in the text, the virtuous Merlin of Robert de Boron, prophet of the Holy Grail. The first of these are to be found in the cyclic rewriting of the episode of the Journey to Sorelois, where a Merlin who never lies is cited as the authority for the prediction of the coming of a new Grailwinner, descended from Lancelot and destined to surpass him (*LM* IV 35, IV 38). These predictions were made, according to the text, before he met the Lady of the Lake (*LM* IV 42). In the *Mort Artu*, 178, there is an inscription foretelling the tragedy in Arthur's last battle written by the truth-telling Merlin himself, "ne en chose que il deïst onques n'ot se verité non". The besotted Merlin, teacher of magic, still plays a role within the text, for there is an allusion to him falling in love with Morgain, who persuades him to teach her magic, but Merlin is here shown as the victim of a lustful and vengeful woman, very different from the Lady of the Lake. Other references to Merlin also emphasise the magical element rather than the prophetic. There are, therefore, already tensions at this stage in the development of the cycle between a false and disloyal Merlin required to explain the Lady of the Lake and the truth-telling Merlin, linked with the Grail theme as in Robert de Boron.

### *Second stage in cyclification*

The most blatant, factual contradictions arise at the next stage, when a prose version of Robert de Boron's *Merlin* is introduced into the cycle and a continuation written to provide a bridge between this and the *Marche de Gaule*, the beginning of the original prose *Lancelot*. Robert de Boron's account of the birth

of Merlin is very different from that already contained within the text. A plot by the devils of Hell to create an Antichrist is thwarted, Merlin, while inheriting his father's magic powers, is redeemed, baptised and given the gift of seeing into the future by God. In the *Merlin* he plays a positive role as counsellor of kings, but in the Continuation his vulnerability to the wiles of women is emphasised, the story of his relations with the Lady of the Lake and of his imprisonment is retold in terms which tend to present him more sympathetically as the victim of a woman's cunning, a sage who foresees what will happen but is helpless. He never has carnal knowledge of the Lady of the Lake (or indeed of any other woman, according to the text (*S* p. 280 and 421)) and she gets what she wants from him "et por çou dist on que la feme a un art plus que li diables". There is therefore some attempt in the continuation to keep the christianized and more virtuous Merlin in play, while preparing the way for the more disturbing Merlin, expert in magic, of the original prose *Lancelot*. However, there remains the presence of two conflicting accounts of the birth of Merlin within the same cycle as is to be found in Additional 10292-4 of the British Library, Sommer's base manuscript.

#### *Attempts to remove contradictions within the cycle*

This contradiction between the accounts of Merlin's birth was observed by a number of scribes, and various attempts were made to remove it.<sup>2</sup> A reference to the *Estoire Merlin* was substituted for the original account given in the prose *Lancelot* in some manuscripts; in others a version of Robert de Boron's account, shortened in varying degrees, was substituted and the references to Merlin's lack of baptism and his falseness and disloyalty were also eliminated in some manuscripts. However, the introduction of a virtuous, christianized Merlin at this point in the text, while removing a factual discrepancy, introduced a thematic inconsistency, as it did not fit in with the role given to Merlin in rationalising the Lady of the Lake's magic powers in an acceptable way in relation to her responsibilities for Lancelot's education. The presentation of Merlin, therefore, provides a good illustration of the type of contradictions in the presentation of the same figure which may arise during the development of a cycle and of the difficulties encountered when later attempts are made to resolve such contradictions.

<sup>2</sup> See *PL* II pp. 12-20 for details.