

# Rebuilding the Tower of Babel in *Girart de Roussillon*

Catherine L'églu

*University of Reading*

Much has been written about medieval beliefs concerning languages, summarized here by George Steiner:

The tongue of Eden was like a flawless glass; a light of total understanding streamed through it. Thus Babel was a second Fall, in some regards as desolate as the first. Adam had been driven from the garden; now men were harried, like yelping dogs, out of the single family of man. And they were exiled from the assurance of being able to grasp and communicate reality.<sup>1</sup>

Christian intellectuals of the Middle Ages tended to focus on four Biblical events related to language. In addition to the Creation (the gift of language) and Babel (the 'confusion' of language) came the trilingual writing on the Cross, a sign that the three sacred languages, Hebrew, Greek and Latin, enjoyed a closer relationship between themselves than with any others. Fourth came Pentecost and the gift of tongues to the Apostles, who were able to preach in all vernaculars across many lands.<sup>2</sup> Pentecost did not resolve the disaster of Babel, but it provided one remedy for it. This was glossed typologically, citing the Pauline epistles that proclaimed the abolition of divisions between religions and peoples, but emphasising conversion. One of the most interesting artistic explorations of the links between Babel and Pentecost appears on the portal at the Burgundian abbey of Vézelay through which the laity entered the abbey church (built between 1120 and 1132).<sup>3</sup> This abbey also plays an important role in the final part of the *chanson de geste* of *Girart de Roussillon* (after c.1160), which is notable for its treatment of multilingualism.

The story-line of *Girart de Roussillon* runs as follows: The Frankish emperor Charles Martel and his vassal Count Girart de Roussillon

are betrothed by proxy to the two daughters of the emperor of Constantinople. But Charles prefers Elissent, Girart's intended wife. Girart is awarded his fief as an allod in compensation for agreeing to marry Berte. He and Elissent secretly swear to love each other. Charles later invades Girart's lands. This war ends when divine fire destroys the standards of both armies. The ensuing truce ends when a long-standing feud is reignited, and a more destructive war starts. Defeated, Girart and Berte hide in the forest of Ardenne, working as a charcoal-maker and a seamstress. Twenty-two years later, Elissent obtains a reconciliation in the cathedral of Orléans between the two rival lords. Later, Girart thinks about starting another war on behalf of his young son. One of his men kills the boy to protect the peace. Berte encourages Girart to penitence. Secretly, she builds a shrine to Mary Magdalene at Vézelay. She overcomes slander and attempted rape to promote peace and penance. A lasting peace is proclaimed by the pope at Vézelay.

The poet endows Berte with formidable linguistic skills:<sup>4</sup>

Premere ment Bertan o le vis clar,  
 O le gent cosier, au bel esgar,  
 Sos paire li a fait les ars parar;  
 Sat caudiu e gregeis e romencar,  
 E latin e ebriu tot declarar.  
 Entre sen e beltat e gen parlar,  
 Ne pout nus om el munt sa par trobar (ll. 235-41)

*First, Berte of the bright face, noble bearing and sweet gaze. Her father has taught her the arts. She knows Chaldean and Greek, and can translate into Romance, and she can discourse on both Latin and Hebrew. Between her good sense, her beauty and her lovely turn of phrase, no-one could find her equal on earth.*

Berte's ability to translate sacred languages into the vernacular, as well as her interpretative command of both Latin and Hebrew, denote her as someone who can overcome the confusion of tongues. Her skills are crucial to her peace-making role in the second part of the poem, where she enacts an extensive *translatio studii* by building the abbey of Vézelay with her own hands, on the model of the Hagia Sophia of Constantinople.<sup>5</sup> The representation of Berte as a linguist thus draws attention to the political and

sacred values of languages of conflict, as well as their salvation through languages of peace.<sup>6</sup>

According to Isidore of Seville, 'peoples come from languages, languages are not drawn from peoples' (*Etymologies*, book IX, chapter I, 14).<sup>7</sup> Spoken and written idioms identified their users in both geographical and political terms, as well as in terms of religion and learning, and only did so in a context where several languages co-existed. Isidore describes the standard history of language, as it remained until the early modern period. Hebrew was the universal language granted by God to Adam, but when men built the tower out of a prideful wish to get closer to Heaven, they brought their division upon themselves (*Etym.*, I, 1). These languages (most often numbered seventy-two) cause the descendants of the tower's construction teams to be eternally at odds with each other, unable to regroup forces in order to challenge divine power again.<sup>8</sup> Isidore notes that for his own time, some languages have retained a connection with divinity: 'There are three sacred languages, Hebrew, Greek and Latin, which shine over the whole world.' (I, 3) However Isidore's three sacred languages are not monolithic, and some are more authoritative than others. For example Latin has four varieties, each corresponding to a historical period: 'Priscam, Latinam, Romanam, Mixtam'. The 'mixed' Latin of the fourth, post-imperial, period is characterized by its corruption by solecisms and barbarisms (I, 3-7). Even sacred languages, it would seem, have their colloquial and demotic varieties. It is interesting that Isidore singles out the Latin of his own time (and of his text) as a corrupt, post-imperial, shadow of its predecessor, the expression of *romanitas*. His Latin is not a sacred hymn, nor is it Scripture. Rather, it is a corrupt writing idiom designed to allow the reader to begin work on any language with proper levels of distance and scepticism. Isidore points to his *Etymologies* as an attempt to build a vision of languages from corrupt fragments, sifting through the ruins rather than the archaeology of Babel.

Medieval multilingualism was an inevitable and complex cultural phenomenon as, contrary to Isidore's claims, peoples were only rarely drawn from languages.<sup>9</sup> Those universal claims that were made for Latin Christendom ran against the fact of regional linguistic diversity, one that meant that the vernaculars were an inescapable source of alleged corruption. Nor was it possible to assert that Latin could be combined smoothly with the other two sacred languages.

Intriguingly, the languages of the surviving manuscripts of *Girart de Roussillon* also draw attention to the conflicts and reconciliations that may be worked out between languages. Of the five surviving manuscripts of *Girart de Roussillon* (only two of which are complete or near-complete), one is written in a transitional dialect between Old French and Old Occitan that has been variously identified as Poitevin or Franco-Provençal (MS. O), another has been identified as a translation of this text into Old French (MS. L), and the third is a translation of the same text into Old Occitan (MS. P). Simon Gaunt has devoted a recent article to reassessing the issue of the language of *Girart de Roussillon*, especially the long dialogue on this subject between the linguist Max Pfister and the poem's editor, Mary Hackett.<sup>10</sup> Gaunt has rejected the label 'hybrid' for the language of O on the grounds that the Franco-Poitevin text is not an artificial literary language. Rather, he suggests it is an example of code-mixing between a dominant and subordinate language, in this case, epic French poetry (dominant in generic terms) and an Occitan idiom that seems to owe little to troubadour poetry of the time. The code-mixing imposed on Occitan aimed to, as he states, 'emphasize its irreducible foreignness' rather than acculturate it, with the result that the poem's language became 'a marker of difference' of considerable self-consciousness.<sup>11</sup> This hypothesis rests, as Max Pfister suggested, on the principle that what the author(s) of O attempted to do was to blend core elements of Occitan expression into the formulaic patterns of Old French epic poetry. Such a strategy would demand some explanation in terms of the intended audience, but none has as yet been suggested. Hackett favoured the view that the transitional dialect of O, like the simplified Occitan of P, was intended to make the tale comprehensible to a wider audience, and it would seem that the two 'translations' into French and Occitan reflect a desire to enlarge the poem's audience.

It is unlikely that the composer(s) of O would have sought to impress their audience with a poem composed in an obscure, challenging language, as had they wished to do so, they could simply have written in Latin. It should be pointed out that it is accepted that the author(s) of *Girart de Roussillon* was or were learned in monastic and clerical matters, although the poem's much discussed anti-clericalism imposes some caution in that respect.<sup>12</sup> It seems apposite to explore what the O-text says about language, and specifically

how multilingualism is associated with the typological opposition between Babel and Pentecost.

The poem opens with a court festival at Pentecost. Charles and Girart are called upon to assist the emperor of Constantinople against a Saracen invasion because they are already betrothed to his two daughters, Berte and Elissent. Subsequently Charles forces Girart to break his betrothal to Elissent and exchange her for his bride. Berte overhears the men's negotiations and runs away to weep:

Partit de lor plorant soz une aulivie,  
 E denant a ses piez magistre grive;  
 Non [a] tant saive ne melz escrive.  
 La donçele se claime sovent caitive:  
 "Maldite seit de Deu ca mars undive,  
 E li porz e la naus qui[m] mes à rive.  
 Mel vougre lai morir que cai fu[s] vive. (XXX/27, ll. 407-13)

*She left them to weep beneath an olive tree, and at her feet, before her, was a Greek governess: none is more wise or writes better than she. The girl repeatedly laments her wretched state, 'May God curse the waves of the sea, the harbour and the ship that brought me to these shores. I would prefer to have died there, than to be alive here.'*

Berte's learned governess makes her only appearance in the text in this comparatively short *laisse*, to support the rejected princess as she curses the ship, the sea and the harbour that brought her to her humiliating predicament. It may be a learned allusion to the abandoned heroines of Ovid's *Heroides* (the name of Berte's sister Elissent, moreover, is a transparent allusion to Ovid's abandoned Dido – Elissa).<sup>13</sup> In the O-text of *Girart*, the first figure, an equally fleeting one, to be found seated beneath an olive tree is its purported author:

Sestu, mongres corteiz, clerz de moster,  
 S'estaveit desos l'onbre d'un aulivier,  
 E fermat en son cuer un cosier. (III, ll. 24-26)

*Sextus, a courtly monk, a clerk of a church, sat in the shade of an olive tree and formed a desire in his heart [to compose a poem.]*

The silent *magistre grive* echoes the meditative *mongres corteiz*. One inaugurates the poem, and the other witnesses Berte's learned allusion, but neither figure has any further part to play in the poem. Berte's first independent speech is both implicitly Ovidian (by extension, pagan) and associated with her Greek learning. It affirms her literary and cultural dissociation from the feudal epic rationale that determines her rejection by Charles. Her fleeting display of pagan learning set aside, Berte's linguistic activity is almost exclusively sacred, unlike her sister Elissent, whose actions and words tend to be both erotic and political. The two women are, as Sarah Kay and Simon Gaunt have argued, treated in the narrative as gifts, and the gifts they embody are the learned cultures of Constantinople and Rome.<sup>14</sup> Berte's Greek literacy, symbolised by her nurse, is invoked at the poem's close when one of Girart's men recalls her telling him the story of a woman penitent at Constantinople (ll. 9678–700).

If Greek is relegated to literary allusion, Hebrew, the most sacred of the three sacred languages, is marginalised still more. Girart's nephew Folc has a Jewish vassal, Baufadu, who writes to him to warn him about Charles' treacherous plans, 'escris un breu / En ses letres cui sat, en lang'ebreu. / Tramet le dun Folcon per un corleu.' ('He wrote a letter in the letters he knew, in Hebrew. He sent it to Sir Folc via a messenger'; ll. 6467–69). However, Baufadu sends a verbal message with his written letter, and it is this spoken warning that Folc hears: 'E Folco, quan l'ouit, loet en Deu' ('And Folc, when he heard it, praised God'; line 6474). Baudafu's mastery of Hebrew script circulates as an unread guarantee of purely secular authenticity, as if it were Baudafu's seal or token. Furthermore, it is likely that his letter is written in Romance encoded in Hebrew letters.<sup>15</sup> In *Girart de Roussillon*, the original language shared by the builders at Babel subsists only as a visual code (a script) emptied of both its sacred and linguistic content. By way of contrast, Berte is noted for her skill in interpreting (explaining both form and sacred content) both Greek and Hebrew.

The troubled status of sacred languages in *Girart* may shed light on the way liturgical Latin is mixed into the poem. Charles' bastard brother, a bishop, has his head hacked off by Boson, who calls to him contemptuously to 'sing his *saeculas saeculorum*' (line 6034). Charles' men, their armour covered in blood, clamour for the 'Corpre Dome' (*corpus Domini*), the host (line 6037). Church Latin, the lowest-ranking of the three sacred languages, is jarringly placed

outside its usual context. However, in the closing sections of the poem, translations of Scripture are woven into the text (ll. 9930–31, 9981–84). The O-text closes as if it were a reading in the divine office with the words ‘Tu autem, Domine’.<sup>16</sup> Liturgical Latin is the object of corruption, translation and (finally) incorporation into a text that has by the end turned into a hagiography.

The war between the king and his rebel baron is peppered with allusions to the conflicts between languages after Babel. When Charles decides to reclaim his lands, he attacks Girart in two successive campaigns which culminate in the battle of Vaubeton, where God strikes both standards with lightning. Charles’ army is bilingual: its noblemen converse in both Romance and *Tiois*, a southern German dialect (line 1860), and they pitch sixty-two pavilions outside Girart’s palace (ll. 680–85), a number that echoes the seventy-two languages after Babel. Girart’s castle, the inanimate target of Charles’ lust, is dominated by a tower of cemented stones adorned with red marble, which boasts an outside gallery built by Saracens. This detail implies that there has been sufficient harmony between Christians and Saracens in the recent past to enable them to build a tower together (ll. 1015–17). Charles’ men capture Girart’s proud tower and plunder the treasures it contains. They also abduct and rape Girart’s kinswomen, illustrating more forcefully the connection between Charles’ political and sexual aggression against his vassal (ll. 1020–29).

Despite the emphasis on the territories of Aquitaine, Limousin and Burgundy, there is no clear geographical division between the two multilingual sides (*laisse* CCCLII/349). Girart’s army regroups noblemen from Catalan, Italian and southern French lands, who speak ‘in their language’ (ll. 2437, 4892–99), as well as Bavarians, *Allemani* and Burgundians (line 4707). We are told that about a French-speaking Breton lord, ‘uns romanz Bret’ (line 7101), but shared language does not guarantee loyalty: Gascons and Provençaux defect to Charles’ side, which also includes lords of the Limousin.

At the battle of Vaubeton, both sides are equals in strength and words, ‘Li Breton el Gascon sunt per egance’ (‘the Bretons and the Gascons are equals’; line 2505). This is partly because their battle-cries are drowned out by the thunderous noise of lances clashing against shields. The battle is ended when (wordless) divine fire strikes both standards. Charles’ standard decorated with letters of gold bursts into flames, and Girart’s crumbles to ashes (*laisse*

CLXXI-II/ 168–9). The armies scatter as their men exclaim, ‘Segles feniz’ (‘The world is ending!’; line 2888). These men are wrong, as Vaubeton marks the conclusion of only one kind of ‘world’, the one that was produced by the overweening pride of two men. One lord accuses his king: ‘Par Deu, Charles Martels, molt mar i fais, / Quan cuides tot un segle metre en pantais’ (‘By God, Charles Martel, you are doing harm by wishing to put one whole world into confusion’; ll. 2038–39). Vaubeton is presented as a battle that was prophesied a century earlier as one that would make martyrs of a fifth of the men that take part in it (laisse CLXIX/166), but their martyrdom is solely at the service of their masters’ pride (ll. 2840–43). Charles’ letters of gold are glittering but fallible signs, while Girart’s standard, which has no words ascribed to it, simply disintegrates. At another point, Girart’s standards are also said to be embroidered in gold (line 4950). Regardless of their inscriptions, moreover, neither battle standard can withstand wordless and unexplained fire.

As the feud progresses over the years from truce to broken truce, from one warring Maytime and Easter to the next, it becomes evident that the ‘world’ of Charles and Girart is one of confusion and vice, limited by an arrogant belief that their world is the only one that exists, and that their word, as it is only made of words, can easily be broken. Both sides are knowingly in a state of sin, as both have broken sacred oaths, stolen each other’s property, murdered kinsmen, and wreaked revenge.

The second stage of the campaign continues this depiction of two armies that map much of Europe. At the battle of Verdonnet, the narrator announces sonorously that ‘the Burgundians wage war on the French’, but Charles’ army draws troops from the Loire valley, Chartres, Brittany, the Vermandois and the Poitou (ll. 4926–43). His court comprises Lorrains, Germans, *Tiois*, Franks and Normans (ll. 3351–55).

When Saracens invade these territories, we are told that they are equipped with a *mappamundi* to guide their journey to the banks of the Gironde (ll. 3286–87). The Franks do not resort to maps, as their languages appear to localize them in terms of political and geographical alliances. Where the Saracens can depict the world pictorially in terms of boundaries and territories, the Franks are mired in a network of interpersonal connections and conflicts, dominated by the spoken word. Charles resents his reliance on Girart’s assistance in this short-lived crusade (ll. 3296–97), but it

illustrates that the disunity between the two sides can find common ground only against an enemy that is defined not by language or place, but by religion (*laissez* CXCVIII/195– CC/197).

In a secular world divided by speech, where even the three sacred languages have lost their power, the anti-Jewish content of the first and central parts of the poem is striking. Both Girart and Charles are criticised by other characters in terms that are borrowed from Christian polemical texts that accused Jews of refusing to see or hear Christian doctrine (ll. 4464–66).<sup>17</sup> What is striking is that this polemical attack is aimed at both sides. Charles' campaign is interpreted in these terms (ll. 1813–14), and Folc accuses Girart of the same failure to interpret events as Charles: 'Oz e vez e escoutes e non entenz' ('You can hear, see and listen, but you do not understand'; ll. 4216–17). He also states that Girart has 'lowered the worth of Christianity' through his inability to interpret events (line 5323). Each side also calls its opponents Jews, Saracens, Judas and Satan (ll. 4654–58, 5540–43), mixing different registers of invective and prejudice. Charles expresses his exasperation with the confused perceptions and loyalties that dominate the text:

'Ja non aurant tan dur car ne cuiram  
El ni Bos ni Folchers, li trei satam,  
Se pois de lor aicir, ne lor en dam.  
Per hoc soli' um dire parent eram;  
Nos hoc, quo m'es aviz, de linz Adam!  
S'en podie un tener en mon liam,  
Ferie la parer quant fort les am!' (ll. 5558–61)

*No matter how hard their flesh or hide might be (him, Folchier and Boson, the three Satans) if I get near them, I will do them harm. Nevertheless, it was once said we were kinsmen; well yes, I think we're all members of Adam's lineage! If I had one of them tied up before me, I'd show him how much I love him!*

Here, Charles' words pinpoint the tragedy of a human lineage that believes itself to be commonly descended from Adam but that is divided by arbitrary linguistic confusion to the point that love is a synonym for hatred, and 'the three Satans' can also be his kinsmen.

Fallible language is a source of political confusion at several points in the poem. The fabled council scenes in *Girart de Roussillon*

are key moments for confusing the protagonists with contradictory advice.<sup>18</sup> Human verbal encounters lead to misinterpretation, especially in the embassy of Pierre de Mont Rabei, which collapses into accusations that the interlocutors have childish or misguided minds (ll. 4363, 4420). Pierre's own account of his embassy draws attention to the importance of his opponents' misleading words (ll. 4600–04), but ends with his lies (ll. 4688–92). Yet again, neither side is shown to be different from the other in terms of its control, in this instance, over speech.

Other scenes show that language itself is drained of what symbolic content it may once have contained. Councillors appear to struggle to find appropriate terms for their rhetoric. In one scene, Andefrey inveighs against Girart's treachery, 'Deus confunde vaissel o taus vis plante' ('God confound the vessel in which such a vine grows!'; *laisse* CCCLXVI/363, line 5591). Girart's emissary Begon evidently does not grasp the sense of his enemy's words:

Beget ot Andefret k'eissi desruche,  
Que cubici Girart viel fole rusche,  
[Con s'el er]e vaisels plens de lanbruche.  
(*laisse* CCCLXVII/ 364, ll. 5593–5)

*Begon heard Andefrei grow so angry he called Girart a piece of dried-up old bark, a vessel filled with wild vine branches.*

The narrator reports the content as it is understood by Begon, who appears to miss the sense of the curse and focus only on the words. Andefrey is punished for a far more compromising word during the battle of Civaux. He challenges Fouchier by saying that Charles' army will prove Girart to have been a traitor ('Ui proveren Girart a trachor tot'; *laisse* CCCXCVII/394, line 5958). Fouchier takes suitable revenge for something he immediately calls a lie ('Mintez i glot!', 'You lie, glutton!'; line 5959):

Folchers fert Andefret en l'oberc blanc,  
Que tot li fest vermeil e teint de sanc ;  
Que li trencat lo cor, lo fege el flanc,  
E crabentet lo mort a denz el fanc.  
E dis : 'Querez proveire e queus estanc.  
Lo parlar del traïr mar vistes anc ;

Eu [en] defent Girart, lo conte franc.  
 (laisse CCCXCVIII/ 395, ll. 5962–68)

*Fouchier struck Andefrey on his white halberk and made it red and stained with blood; for he sliced through his heart, his liver and his sides, and threw him down dead into the mud. And he said: 'Look for a priest and someone to staunch your blood. Your speaking of treason brought you harm; I have defended Girart, the noble count.'*

Andefrey is now a vessel that leaks wine-red blood rather than words. It would seem that despite the verbal confusion of some of Girart's men, others are capable of glossing and avenging the sense of specific (and secular) words such as 'traitor'.

The 'hagiographical' closing sections of the poem stage a recuperation of some sacred dimension to speech, in preparation for the inauguration of the shrine of Vézelay. As an act of penance after the murder of their son, Berte builds a church at Vézelay to house the relics of the Magdalene. She does so in secret, by night, helped by an old man (*laisse* DCXLIII/640–DCXLIX/646). Her actions are misinterpreted by gossips. Only Berte's verbal interpretation of her actions can lead her husband into identifying and supporting her penitential activity. She is rebuilding the Hagia Sophia of Constantinople (the site of her betrothal to Charles) at the site of Vézelay, a *translatio* of one sacred building and sworn promise into another. Berte's action highlights the importance of her learning, as she is not rebuilding Jerusalem, the enterprise of many cathedrals and churches. Rather, her ambition is to translate her place of origin and her multilingual learning into Girart and Charles' realm. She refuses to have the miracles attending her work preserved in writing, on the grounds that this would draw crowds of pilgrims to the shrine that she wishes to preserve as a personal monument (ll. 9803–09).

Vézelay is also the commemoration of a disastrous betrayal, as Charles and Girart broke the betrothal oaths they swore at Constantinople. Elissent attempts to reconcile her public and secret husbands in the cathedral of Orléans without attempting to commemorate the betrothals. Berte's Vézelay on the other hand transforms her learning into a monument that alludes to the site of her betrothal and subsequent rejection. Elissent's Orléans is a location where ritual gestures cannot bring about a lasting peace. Elissent

acts through posture and gesture, but Berte acts through *translatio* and *interpretatio*: she transfers the Hagia Sophia to Burgundy, and recasts her personal humiliation as a spiritual triumph.

Above all, Berte's linguistic action is modelled on preaching, something that is particularly important in a *chanson de geste* composed in a transitional language. As a woman, she is not allowed to preach through sermons, but her actions are exemplary: first in her obedience to her two husbands' political manoeuvres, secondly in her loyalty to Girart, and thirdly in her secret construction of the abbey. She resorts to speech only in her long exile in the forest of Ardenne. Her first lengthy verbal action is her *consolatio* to Girart on their exile. She recites several verses from the Psalms, the story of Job, and a saint's writings to her husband (ll. 7667–69). From this point onwards, Berte's actions and words are combined in a mission of spiritual guidance that raises further questions. Girart is both *illiteratus* and a lay nobleman confronted by the *Pax Dei* preached by a secular noblewoman to whom he is married, and by whom he has a son. This is no spiritual or chaste marriage, yet Berte's multilingualism makes her a living example of the preacher's connection to Pentecost, the necessary 'abundance of language' that included *vulgaris loquutionis*.<sup>19</sup>

Berte's ability to work between sacred and vernacular languages also necessitates evidence of her exceptional virtue, as *Girart de Roussillon* is contemporary with the circulation in intellectual circles of the same period of such necromantic treatises as the *Ars notoria*. This treatise depicts itself as the translation and exposition into Latin by Solomon and Apollonius of tablets written and 'subtly distorted' in Greek, Chaldean and Hebrew ('*quae est ex Hebraeo, Graeco, et Chaldaeo sermone subtiliter distorta*'). It served to concretize the belief that translating sacred languages among themselves could unlock necromantic powers.<sup>20</sup> Berte's multilingual education in Constantinople is connected with her father the emperor's harmless necromancy, but once it is transferred to Frankish lands, her long silence and twenty-two years of penitential activity appear to prepare her re-emergence into rhetoric as a saintly noblewoman. In keeping with other scenes discussed above, this moment is depicted through a semi-allegorical scene. Berte's penitential activity is misinterpreted as an adulterous affair by her chamberlain Atain (*laisse* DCL/ 9598). Atain attempts to rape Berte as she lies asleep clad in a white linen nightshirt, her flesh as white as a hawthorn flower ('*Ot tan blanche*

la car cun flor d'espine', line 9620), but she fights him off with her nails, much as the hawthorn would repel its aggressor. Ataiñ takes revenge by telling Girart that Berte is committing adultery, but her reported actions are glossed by an uninvolved figure (Bedelon) in terms of an anecdote she has told him of a poor woman's exemplary actions in Constantinople (ll. 9678–700). Bedelon is rewarded for remembering her *exemplum* by a dream vision of Berte dressed in clothes that are as white as parchment and covered in more flowers than a hawthorn bush (*laisse* DCLVIII/9709, ll. 9710–16).<sup>21</sup> The descriptions of Berte's body shift from something that has been likened by a lustful observer to the hawthorn flower, to something that far exceeds that plant ('plus covert de flors d'un aube espin', line 9713). It represents, in that short description, both the power of the written word (*flores rhetorici* set on parchment) and the divine aspects of the transferral of materials from one state to another, a form of *translatio*. If Susan Eberly is correct in suggesting that the hawthorn symbolized carnal love in medieval love allegory, there is here a *translatio* (interpretation) in the proper sense, in that the flower is turned from an image of Ataiñ's lust into a metaphor for Berte's holy words.<sup>22</sup> Through two visual descriptions, Berte's body and words are transposed from a shameful object of lust to a dream vision of interpretative and linguistic authority.

*Girart de Roussillon* ends with the proclamation of peace by papal authority, despite the mocking comments of those poor knights who would rather continue their lucrative warring careers (*laisse* DCXXXVI/633). The peace also points to the poem's connection with the visual programme of the abbey of Vézelay, specifically the main narthex portal through which the laity entered the abbey. According to Peter Low, this portal's subject is Pentecost as a reversal of the confusion of Babel. Low has suggested, partly in reflection of the shared Pentecost theme between the portal and the Latin *vita* of Girart de Roussillon, that the Vézelay portal may depict the Pauline idea of building a new 'church' through conversion (Ephesians 2: 1–12), the coming-together of people from many lands to listen to multilingual preaching.

In the poem, Berte's multilingualism also reverses the confusion of Babel through spiritual conversion into a single language. Ironically, the poem that contains it is in two vernaculars combined, doomed by the historical accidents of language to remain firmly located in the margins of literary history. If *Girart de Roussillon* is

read as a poem that is multilingual in content as well as in language, it ceases to be an aberrant object of scholarly scrutiny, and becomes the site of a sophisticated exploration of communication, and of the pervasive medieval idea that vernacular and sacred languages were in equal measure the source both of harmony and of conflict in the secular world.

## Notes

My thanks to the Leverhulme Trust for their grant of a Research Fellowship in 2006–07, as well as to Marianne Ailes and Lindy Grant for their comments and suggestions. A first draft of this paper was given at the British branch conference of the *Société Rencesvals*, Bristol, 24–25 Monday, 2007.

- 1 George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, third edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 61.
- 2 Serge Lusignan, *Parler vulgairement: Les intellectuels et la langue française aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, Paris and Montreal, Vrin - Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1986.
- 3 Peter Low, 'You Who Once were Far Off: Enlivening Sculpture in the Main Portal at Vézelay,' *The Art Bulletin* 85 (2003): 469–89.
- 4 All quotations from *La Chanson de Girart de Roussillon*, ed. Winifred Mary Hackett, 3 vols, Paris, SATF, 1953–55. I use Hackett's parallel referencing of the *laissez* in the two extant complete texts. Roman numerals refer to the *laissez* in ms. O, Arabic numerals refer to ms. P.
- 5 For interpretations of Berte's role in the poem, see Simon Gaunt, 'Le Pouvoir d'achat des femmes dans *Girart de Roussillon*,' *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 33 (1990): 305–16. Sarah Kay, *The Old French Chansons de Geste in the Age of Romance: Political Fictions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- 6 There are strong parallels in the dynamics of translation between the Old French *Aliscans* and its German version, see Kathryn Starkey, 'Traversing the Boundaries of Language: Multilingualism and Linguistic Difference in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Willehalm*,' *The German Quarterly*, 75 (2002): 20–34.
- 7 Isidore of Seville, *Étymologies, livre IX: Les langues et les groupes sociaux*, ed., trans. and commentary by Marc Reydellet, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1984.
- 8 The topic has been exhaustively studied by Arno Borst, *Der Turmbau von Babel: Geschichte der Meinungen über Ursprung und Vielfalt der*

- Sprachen und Völker* 6 vols, Stuttgart, Hiersemann, 1957–1963. See also Pierre Swiggers, 'Babel and the Confusion of Tongues,' in *Mythos im alten Testament und seiner Umwelt: Festschrift für Hans-Peter Müller zum 65.*, ed. Armin Lange, Hermann Lichtenberg and Diethard Römhard, Berlin, W. de Gruyter, 1999, pp. 182–95.
- 9 On the anxieties of Carolingian writers on this matter, see Paul Kershaw, 'Laughter after Babel's Fall: Misunderstanding and Miscommunication in the early medieval West', in *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Guy Halsall, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 179–201. See also Jason O'Rourke, 'English and Latin Texts in Welsh Contexts: Reflections of a Multilingual Society in National Library of Wales MS Peniarth 12,' *Yearbook of English Studies* 33 (2003): 53–63.
- 10 Simon Gaunt, "'Desnaturat son li Frances": Language and Identity in the Twelfth-Century Occitan Epic', *Tenso: Bulletin of the Société Guilhem IX* 17.1 (2002): 10–31. Max Pfister, 'Observations sur la langue de *Girart de Roussillon*', *Revue de Linguistique Romane* 34 (1970): 315–25. W. Mary Hackett, 'Le manuscrit P de *Girart de Roussillon*', in *Mélanges de philologie et de littérature romanes offerts à Jeanne Wathelet-Willem*, ed. Jacques de Caluwé, Liège, Cahiers de l'ARU (*Marche Romane*), 1978, pp. 207–18; 'L'Auteur de *Girart de Roussillon*', in *Guillaume d'Orange and the chanson de geste*, ed. W. Van Emde, P. E. Bennett, A. Kerr, Reading, Société Rencesvals, 1984, pp. 43–53.
- 11 Gaunt, 'Desnaturat', pp. 16–17.
- 12 Peter Noble, 'Anti-Clericalism in the Feudal Epic', in *The Medieval Alexander Legend and Romance Epic: Essays in Honour of David J. A. Ross* ed. P. Noble, L. Polak, C. Isoz, Millwood, Kraus, 1982, pp. 149–58.
- 13 On the importance of this Ovidian text, see Suzanne C. Hagedorn, *Abandoned Women: Re-Writing the Classics in Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2004.
- 14 See footnote 5 supra.
- 15 Occitan texts written in Hebrew script reflect the decline of Hebrew as a spoken language around the beginning of the thirteenth century. See Crescas du Caylar, '*Roman de la Reine Esther*', in *Nouvelles Courtoises occitanes et francaises*, ed. Suzanne Thiolier-Mejean et Marie-Francoise Notz-Grob, Paris, Le Livre de Poche, 1997, pp. 124–57. Crescas points out that he composed his poem for unlearned women and children, pp. 43–6.
- 16 "Tu autem, Domine, miserere nobis" concluded readings taken from most parts of the Bible, Kathleen G. Cushing, *Ritual, Text, and Law: Studies in Medieval Canon Law and Liturgy*, London, Ashgate, 2004, pp. 79–80.

- 17 For an overview of such rhetoric, see Robert Chazan, *Daggers of Faith: Thirteenth-Century Christian Missionizing and Jewish Response*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989.
- 18 Dietmar Rieger, "E trait sos meilleurs omes ab un conseil": Emotion, mise-en-scène et *consilium* féodal dans *Girart de Roussillon*", *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 114 (1998): 628–50. See also André Labbé, *L'Architecture des palais et des jardins dans les chansons de geste: Essai sur le thème du roi en majesté*, Paris and Geneva, Champion and Slatkine, 1987, pp. 107–112, 223–8, 293–5.
- 19 Nicole Bériou, 'The Right of Women to give religious instruction in the thirteenth century', in *Women Preachers and Prophets Throughout Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. Beverly Maine Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1998, pp. 134–45, and Sara S. Poor, 'Mechthild von Magdeburg: Gender and the "Unlearned Tongue"', in *The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Postmedieval Vernacularity*, ed. Fiona Somerset and Nicholas Watson (Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), pp. 57–80.
- 20 Nicholas Watson, 'Introduction: King Solomon's Tablets', in *The Vulgar Tongue*, pp. 1–13.
- 21 Clare M. Waters, 'Talking the Talk: Access to the Vernacular in Medieval Preaching' in *The Vulgar Tongue*, pp.30–42 (p.34). See also the articles by Bériou and Poor.
- 22 Susan S. Eberly, 'A Thorn among the Lilies: The Hawthorn in Medieval Love Allegory,' *Folklore* 100 (1989): 41–52.