

Rewriting the Past: Women in Wace's *Roman de Brut*

Gemma Wheeler

University of Sheffield

Wace's work has received a mixed reception from scholars, and has often been the target of harsh criticism for his heavy reliance on source material and apparent lack of original input. Such criticisms, however, have missed the purpose of the Norman poet's efforts. Wace's translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*HRB*) was no mere linguistic shift, but, as with his twelfth-century peers, an opportunity to displace cultural elements of the original text and relocate them in a new environment, liberated by the possibilities of the vernacular. The sources Wace used for his translation have been much discussed, as he appears to have used both the apparent original, which I will refer to as the Vulgate, and a later redaction of it which seems to have been made by another author, the First Variant Version (*VV*).

Macrobius and Jerome had led the development of a cultural, rather than merely linguistic, method of translation – *translatio studii* – that embraced the filleting of source material for useful matter. The process of rewriting was at the heart of twelfth-century vernacular literature. Without an understanding of its significance, the full complexity of the cultural impulses motivating literary creation in the Middle Ages cannot be appreciated. Douglas Kelly's comment that this deeper understanding on our part is useful, in that it permits us to give due credit to authors whom 'we may admire, but whose full achievement has sometimes escaped our grasp',¹ is a necessary reminder of rewriting's pivotal importance. Far from offering little more than an unimaginative rehash of the great works of antiquity, medieval literature took an approach to its source material that appears bold in the extreme when viewed from the perspective of a modern age in which the literary canon is accorded considerable reverence, and in which attempts, by means of other popular media, to adapt the 'classics' are often viewed with suspicion by their self-appointed guardians. By contrast, twelfth-century writers actively engaged with classical and contemporary predecessors, weaving an intricate tapestry of allusions drawn from these earlier works into a rich and cohesive whole. From this, 'new' narratives were created.

At first sight, twelfth-century historiography could present a stumbling block in our search for evidence of a thriving culture of rewriting. How can historical figures and

situations, 'real' people and events, be open to such imaginative reworking? Medieval vernacular historiographers literally rewrote history as they remodelled their original sources and broke down the invisible barriers between the fictional and the historical. Rewriting, by its very nature, involves the appropriation and deployment of models. In 'pure' literature, such models could be drawn from contemporary and classical literary precursors, the Bible, or – crucially – history. Given the underlying similarities between methods of composition for different genres, it is logical to assume that such influences could be brought to bear upon history. Jean Blacker has reminded us of the 'medieval intellectual inheritance', as represented in historiography, that sanctioned the appearance of the supernatural and fictional alongside figures known to have existed.²

For those working within a relatively new genre, that of vernacular history writing, there were two opposing influences even on a purely historical level. One was the long-established tradition of Latin historiography, with which many, if not all, such writers would have been familiar. Another was that of vernacular literature in all its variety, from the *lais* to the *chansons de geste*. Historians writing in Old French may have been tailoring their work to a court audience, but the majority of these authors were erudite men of a clerical background. One such was Wace, an author best known for his histories, but with considerable experience in both hagiography and romance literature. His work offers especially fertile ground for further study of the process of rewriting, and its impact upon vernacular historiography. Working as he did at the very earliest stages of the development of historical rewriting in the vernacular, Wace was a leading light of that first wave, and in a position to establish conventions for this burgeoning field while developing initial strategies for tackling the issue of translating Latin sources. His work can be located squarely in the tradition of twelfth-century rewriting, as exemplified by the *romans d'antiquité* and the *contes ovidiens*; it is likely that the *Roman de Thèbes* was already in circulation when the *Brut* appeared. Although the *romans d'antiquité* were regarded as histories to some extent, their narratives unfolded in geographically remote settings, perhaps contributing to a sense that their characters and settings could be the target of substantial reworkings.³

I have chosen to focus on Wace's creation of female characters here, examining his expansion of Geoffrey of Monmouth's originals to incorporate new motifs drawn from other works. This may seem counterintuitive, given that women are rarely at the centre of events in the world of the *Brut*.⁴ However, the question is whether such a relatively peripheral position in the narrative might have made them even more obvious targets for a process of rewriting and remoulding. On the relatively blank canvases provided by Geoffrey's women, Wace had greater scope to subtly recast his work than he did in depicting these women's husbands, fathers or sons. The *Roman de Brut* charts the path of the British people on their long journey from their Trojan roots as they become rulers of the island of Britain, only to be displaced by Saxon invaders as they fall into disunity and moral degeneracy. It was written in 1155, shortly after the accession of Henry II to the English throne, with his glamorous consort, Eleanor of Aquitaine, by his side. After the political uncertainty of the brutal civil war between the rival claimants to the crown, Stephen and the Empress Matilda (Henry's mother), the 1150s must have seemed to be a time of

new hope, an opportunity for a fresh line of kings to revive the fortunes of the Anglo-Norman territories. Wace's translational techniques will be examined here in the context of this background to the work, in order to suggest some possible motivations for his decisions.

In describing his female characters, Wace, like Geoffrey, focuses on one major characteristic: beauty. This is particularly evident in his depictions of the wives and concubines of the earliest rulers of Britain.⁵ Wace allows beauty to take precedence over most traits, even when the queen has considerably more to offer a loving husband. One of the first 'romantic' episodes in the *Brut* is an excellent example of this. Locrin, son of Brutus, forsakes his lawful wife, Guendoliene, for the beautiful German princess, Hestrild, who has been brought to Britain as a captive. During the lifetime of Guendoliene's father, he keeps his mistress under lock and key in a secret underground chamber, but on his father-in-law's death, Locrin repudiates his wife and installs Estrildis and her daughter, Abren, in his court. Guendoliene does not accept her abrupt dismissal, and raises an army against her husband; he dies in battle, at which point his victorious queen has both her rival and the king's illegitimate daughter drowned, thus reclaiming the kingdom for her own son, Madan.

Wace retains the distinction maintained in both the Vulgate and the *VV* between the passive, beloved Estrildis and the dynamic, rejected Guendoloena, whose appearance is never described; all three writers seem to have assumed that any great beauty on her part would have won the faithless Locrin away from his foreign mistress. Instead, Locrin's wife is distinguished by her deeds, which, bloody though they may be, prove her to be a worthy opponent. Wace informs us that his Guendoliene:

... ad quinze ans regné;
 Dunc sout sis filz terre tenir
 Sil fist de Bretaine saisir.
 Quant ele li out tout guerpi
 En Cornoaille reverti;
 Tant ad de terre retenu
 Come sis peres out eü. (vv. 1444-50)

[... reigned for fifteen years. Then her son was able to hold sway and she put him in charge of Britain. When she had handed it all over to him, she returned to Cornwall, keeping as much land as her father had had.]

The *HRB* tells a broadly similar story:

Regnavit deinde Guendoloena .xv. annis, cum Locrinus antea secum .x. regnasset annis; et, cum vidisset Maddan filium suum etate adultum, sceptro regni insignivit eum contenta regione Cornubie dum reliquum vitae deduceret. (Vulgate, chap. 25)

[Guendoloena reigned for fifteen years after the death of Locrinus, who had himself ruled for ten; when she saw that her son Maddan was grown up, she had him crowned king, being herself content with the region of Cornwall for the rest of her days.]

Et cum vidisset Maddan filium suum etate adultum, sceptro regni insignivit illum contenta regione Cornubie dum reliquum vite duceret. (VV, chap. 25)

[And when she saw that her son Maddan was grown up, she had him crowned king and contented herself with the region of Cornwall for the rest of her days.]

While Wace retains the idea of Guendoliene's abdication in favour of her son, there is a slight shift in focus; she does not merely 'content herself' with retirement to Cornwall, but 'retains as much land as her father had had'. She is less a tyrant than a woman fighting for her son's rights - once she has achieved her aim, she returns in triumph to her father's lands to enjoy the same level of power as he once wielded. There is a sense that a balance has been restored. Geoffrey passes no comment on his Guendoloena's personality, although he notes with some asperity that 'perempto igitur illo cepit Guendoloena regni gubernaculum patria insania furens' [after his death Guendoloena took the throne, inheriting all the fury of her father] (Vulgate, chap. 25). Wace, however, is neutral on the subject of her cruelty in murdering the two women, and lauds her actions in fighting her former husband, Locrin, as those of 'feme fiere e seüre', [like a proud and resolute woman] (v. 1423). His Estrildis by contrast, is described as follows:

Fille a rei ert l'une pucele,
Estrild out non, qui mult fu bele;
Ne poeit hoem suz ciel trover
Plus bele de lui, ne de sa per. (vv. 1319-22)

[Estrildis, who was very beautiful, was a king's daughter. No-one could find under heaven anyone more beautiful than her, or even her equal.]⁶

Wace is evidently working from the VV's truncated description of its Estrildis's appearance, rather than the Vulgate's more extravagant praise:

Erat nomen illius Estrildis et erat tante pulchritudinis quod non leviter reperiebatur quae ei conferri posset. Candorem carnis eius nec Indicum ebur nec nix recenter candens nec lilia ulla vincebant. (Vulgate, chap. 24)

[Named Estrildis, she was so beautiful that it was difficult to find her like; neither Indian ivory, new fallen snow nor any lily could surpass her white skin.]⁷

Erat nomen illius Estrildis et tante pulcritudinis fuit quod nulla ei in pulcritudine comparari posset. (VV, chap. 24)

[Named Estrildis, her beauty was such that none could compare to her.]⁸

Wace's use of the lexis relating to female beauty quickly becomes repetitive and imprecise. The words 'gente' and 'bele' are used again and again in describing a female character's beauty, until they almost cease to make any impact upon the reader; in fact, their appearance is so frequent that Wace's occasional failure to use the terms, or decision to use them in a slightly different context, begins to appear more significant, and worthy of more detailed study.

Blacker notes Wace's tendency to employ certain adjectives consistently in a system she describes as 'reflex praise'.⁹ She cites his use of terms such as 'vaillanz' (valiant), 'savies/sage' (wise) and 'de grant chevalerie' (of great chivalry) as applied to male figures of importance such as Caesar. It is evident that, for Wace, the simple evocation of beauty is shorthand for a certain type of consort: one whose major purpose is to be the object of her partner's love.¹⁰ The use of these broad-brush, generic qualities may not offer us a particularly distinctive sketch of a given character, but their use does serve to highlight the category of female model within which each woman belongs. Wace's characterization of his female figures is no more and no less superficial than that of their male counterparts. To refer back to Blacker's thesis, these characters are not especially significant as individuals, but derive their importance from the light they shed upon desirable and undesirable stereotypes, and derive their shape from their position in differing stages of the larger narrative.

It is interesting to consider this alongside Zara's concept of 'placeholder kings'.¹¹ She states that 'kings are not, in fact, created equal' and that many of those found in the *Brut* are, as in the *HRB*, inserted purely to give a sense of progression and continuity as time passes. The situation is not entirely analogous: even though some of the kings are merely names, they are nonetheless indispensable to the smooth flow of the narrative, whereas the existence of some of their wives can only be inferred from the continuation of their bloodlines. However, the careful deployment of 'placeholder' queens in expanded roles within Wace's *Brut* allows the poet rather more room to manoeuvre than within the confines of equivalent male figures. The relatively peripheral nature of female characters in the *Brut* allowed their stories to be expanded without seriously diverting the course of Wace's narrative, while permitting the kind of subtle shading typical of his expansion of Geoffrey's work.

Some of these 'placeholder' figures seem to be included purely for literary rather than historical reasons. Wace's sources present us with a rather dry list of the many

daughters of King Ebrauc, in which we are given no information on the princesses other than their names, except in the case of Galaes, who, we are told by the Vulgate, was 'omnium quae tunc in Britannia siue in Gallia fuerant' (chap. 27), while the *VV* merely states that she was 'omnium pulcerrima', as compared with her sisters. Wace retains the *VV*'s depiction of Galaes, but expands on this almost biblical passage by assigning some of the other sisters a quality, some positive and others grotesque:

Galaes fu e bele e gente
 Plus que nule des autres trente;
 E Methael fu la plus laie
 E Guenlode fu la plus guaie;
 Ourar fu la meillor ovriere
 E Innogin la plus parlere,
 E Anor fu la plus corteise,
 Qui mielz sout demener richeise.
 Gloigin, cele fu l'ainnee
 E plus fu granz e plus senee. (vv. 1561-70)

[Galaes was fairer and more beautiful than any of the rest of the thirty; and Methael was the ugliest and Guenlode the liveliest. Ourar was the best worker, Innogin the most talkative, and Anor the best-mannered, who well knew how to spend wealth. Gloigin, the eldest, was the tallest and the wisest.]

Why would Wace choose to expand on the characteristics of the princesses? The addition of an extended roll call of rhyming female qualities introduces variety to the passage, and would no doubt have helped to retain the interest of a listening audience who would have lacked the opportunity to skip the passage as they would when perusing a written account. However, this raises the question of why Wace does not do the same for Ebrauc's many sons. The key to this puzzle may lie in the fact that the daughters are about to be given in marriage to the Trojans; one-dimensional their characterization may be, but it seems to be important to Wace to give each of them at least a semblance of a personality. Their role appears to warrant, in his eyes, a description of their relative worth: in the absence of any real action on their part, it proves the only way in which they can be measured. It is also interesting to note that - with the exception of the unfortunate Methael - the qualities of the named princesses correspond to those found in one courtly female role model. Viewed as a group, Ebrauc's daughters provide the ideal distillation of royal blood, fit to mingle with that of noble Trojans and to bring glory to the British line.

This type of expansion in Wace's writing suggests that certain female figures are roughly sketched for little more than the purpose of providing some appropriately courtly gloss on an otherwise excessively martial and masculine tale. The distinction made in the *Brut* consistently appears to be between women who 'do' and women who merely 'are'; the

active and the passive. Another example of the presentation of a passive female character is Penda's sister, a figure practically ignored by the *HRB* and who is not given the honour of a name by Wace, despite her status as a 'mult bele, | Gente et curteise damisele' [a most beautiful, noble and courteous girl] (vv. 14389-90) and her worth as a peacemaker bride, given by her Saxon brother to his British ally, Chadwalein. This approach to emphasizing the unbroken continuity of descent from Brutus, a dynasty in which a satisfactory number of stereotypically beautiful archetypes could be found on the distaff side, would no doubt further the idea of a glamorous origin for Britain/England's kings. Royal vanity could also be flattered, Wace might have hoped, by the presence of an almost unbroken sequence of beautiful female precursors to Eleanor of Aquitaine, the notoriously lovely real-life consort of Henry II.

Beauty takes on a surprising level of importance in Wace's account of Leir and his three daughters, whose love for him is tested and found wanting in all but the youngest, Cordeille. Wace relocates the *HRB*'s reference to Cordeille's beauty, implying a causal relationship between her appearance and her status as Leir's favourite child, a juxtaposition found in neither of his sources and which casts the paternal relationship in an altogether different light:

La plus bele fu la puis nee
E li peres l'ad plus amee. (vv. 1673-4)

[The most beautiful was the youngest and the father loved her best.]

Pater illas miro amore sed magis iuniorem, videlicet Cordeillam,
diligebat. (Vulgate, chap. 31)

[Their father loved them with wonderful affection, especially Cordeilla,
the youngest.]

Pater eas paterno amore sed magis iuniorem Cordeillam diligebat. (VV,
chap. 31)

[Their father loved them with a fatherly affection but he loved the
youngest, Cordeilla, best.]

This is in itself interesting, as it adds an extra dimension to Leir's strong affection for his youngest daughter. Wace's Leir loves his child for the same reason as her future husband: on account of her beauty. When he comes to believe that she loves him less than her less-favoured elder sisters, he reacts with all the fury and petty spite of a spurned lover, denying her a dowry and sending the daughter he once loved to keep close to him away to a foreign land, out of his sight. Incest, specifically between father and daughter, is evoked in two other texts composed within a decade or so of the *Brut*. It is hinted at in *Philomena* by King

Pandion's excess of grief at relinquishing the daughter he adores, whose kisses and embraces with her father arouse such envy in her abductor and rapist, Thereüs, and more explicitly in Marie de France's adaptation of a Breton *lai*, *Les Deux Amants*, where the obsession of a father with his daughter leads to tragedy. There is no suggestion of this in either the Vulgate or the *VV*, where Leir's actions are depicted more neutrally as merely the foolish selfishness of an elderly man. Neither version foregrounds Cordelia's beauty, only mentioning her appeal in the context of Aganippus's suit after learning of what the *VV* terms the 'pulcritudinis Cordeille' (l. 8, p. 25). As for the French king, his desire for the young woman is presented in a rather more obviously romantic light by Wace than by his sources:

Cil quida que l'aveit rovee
 Que pur chierté li fust vehee
 De tant l'ad il plus desirree,
 Kar merveilles li ert loee. (vv. 1815-18)

[He who had asked for her thought he was being denied her out of affection, and desired her all the more, for he had heard her greatly praised.]

Contigit deinde quod Aganippus rex Francorum audita fama pulchritudinis Cordeille continuos nuntios suos ad regem direxit, rogans ut ipsa sibi coniugali tuda copulanda traderetur. (Vulgate, chap. 31.)

[Afterwards Aganippus, the king of the French, happened to hear reports of Cordeilla's beauty. He instantly sent messengers to the king, requesting that she be sent to him to be joined in solemn matrimony.]

Contigit interea quod Aganippus rex Francorum uxore carens audita fama pulchritudinis Cordeille nuncios dirigit regi Britonum ut illam sibi coniugio copularet. (*VV*, chap. 31.)

[In the meantime, Aganippus, the king of the French, being without a wife and having heard reports of Cordeilla's beauty, sent messages to the king of the Britons for her to be joined to him in matrimony.]

The reference to the 'chiereté' (affection) responsible for the denial of Cordeille as a bride is, perhaps, an ironic comment on Wace's part on Leir's unseemly possessiveness. Aganippus's sole reason for falling in love with a woman unknown to him is that 'merveilles li ert loee' [she was greatly praised], placing him in the same romantic mindset as the eponymous heroes of various *romanz*. The 'happy ending' of the story of Leir and his daughters can only be achieved when Leir has accepted that his cherished daughter loves

him 'tant ... | Come jo mun pere amer dei' [as much as I should my father] (v. 1740) and no more.

A further note of possibly incestuous relations is hinted at later in the narrative, this time in a mother-son relationship; that of Ludon and her two sons, Ferreus and Porreus. The latter is murdered by his brother, an act that drives their mother to a state of insanity:

Ludon, leur mere, qui ert vive,
 Se tint a morte e a chaitive
 Del mal e de la cruelté
 Que sis fiz out l'autre tué.
 Ele aveit le mort plus amé
 Sin ad cueilli le vif en hé. (vv. 2163-8)

[Ludon, their mother, who was still alive, was mortally distraught at the evil and cruelty of one son killing the other. She had loved the dead man more and came to hate the living.]

Porro mater eorum, cui nomen erat Iudon, cum de nece filii certitudinem habuisset, ultra modum commota in odium alterius versa est. (Vulgate, chap. 33)

[Their mother, named Iudon, was greatly angered by the news of the death of one of her sons and came to hate the other, whom she had loved less.]

Porro mater eorum nomine Iudon de morte filii commota quia arcius eum diligebat in odium et iram adversus victorem fratrem incitata est. (VV, chap. 33)

[Their mother, named Iudon, was angered by the death of her son and burned with such fury and anger that she was turned against the victorious brother.]

Geoffrey has nothing more to say on the subject of the justice of her actions, but Wace injects a note of *grand guignol* hysteria to proceedings. He hints at an unmaternal emotion underlying the killing by highlighting the queen's preference for one son over the other, and adds a characteristic interjection on the hatefulness of her actions: 'Fud mes mere si enragiee! | Deus! ki vit mais si fait pecchié!' [Was there ever such a crazed mother? God! Who ever saw such a sin?] (vv. 2174-5). Chrétien de Troyes conjured up similar imagery in *Philomena*, a resemblance that firmly links this section of the *Brut* to the extreme and alienating violence of the *romans antiques* tradition. Wace follows Geoffrey in highlighting

the perceived cruelty of pagan civilization, while taking a more condemnatory stance on such acts. Although the Britons are, at this stage, still on the ascent, there are many false starts and deviations from the path along the way. These failures, dark hints at the instability and violent outbursts to which the ungodly are prone, act as a warning and a portent to the disaster that can strike when normal bonds of loyalty and love are tested. Peggy McCracken has highlighted the distinction made in Old French literature between the paternal 'sacrifice' of a child and the maternal murder, describing it as a conflict between 'the masculine blood of lineage and the female blood of parturition'.¹² For the most part, the two bloodlines converge in the *Brut*, but in this instance, a woman chooses to destroy hers out of revenge, cutting off her (and her deceased husband's) last hope of a direct heir at the root. Ludon's vengeance serves as an excellent pointer to the general, and ultimately fatal, tendency of the British rulers to 'self-mutilate' within their own line, indulging in fratricidal squabbles that bring prosperity to none but their waiting enemies.

Ludon is no template for queenship or motherhood, having been cast purely as a deranged murderess. She is given no characteristics other than madness and evil. However, where a queen is in the happier position of bearing a son of great renown, more familiar tropes come back into play. In the case of Eleine, Constantine's mother, the beauty attributed to her by Geoffrey is downplayed by Wace in favour of a greater emphasis upon her numerous other great qualities:

Eleine, une fille, out nurrie,
 Ki mult sout d'art e de clergie;
 Terre sun pere aveir deveit,
 Kar filz ne fille altre n'aveit.
 La meschine fu bien lettree
 E de belté assez loee ... (vv. 5605-10)

[He had brought up a daughter, Eleine, very skilled and learned; she was to inherit her father's kingdom, for he had no other son or daughter. The girl was well educated and celebrated for her beauty.]

Quo defuncto insignivit se Constantius regni diademate duxitque filiam
 Coel cui nomen erat Helena. Pulchritudo eius provinciales puellas
 superabat nec uspiam repperiebatur altera que in musicus instrumentis
 sive in liberalibus artibus doctior illa censeretur. (Vulgate, chap. 78.)

[On his death, Constantius was crowned king and married Coel's daughter, Helena. She was more beautiful than any girl in the country and was considered to have no equal in playing musical instruments and in the liberal arts.]

Constancius ergo regni dyademate potitus duxit filiam Coel Helenam nomine, pulcram valde ac formosam artibusque liberalibus edoctam. (VV, chap. 78.)

[Constantius was then crowned king and married Coel's daughter, Helena, of great beauty and highly educated in the liberal arts.]

Eleine's appearance is only mentioned in passing by Wace as part of a longer eulogy to her education and academic prowess. Compared to the Vulgate's description, Wace's statement seems to downplay her beauty, as if a queen with her talents - the mother, after all, of the ruler who introduces Christianity to the British - simply has to possess a countenance that reflects her good nature. Once again, however, we see the association between the terms 'belté' and 'loee'; regardless of her many fine qualities, it is her beauty that is spoken of outside the kingdom. The constant emphasis on beauty within the long line of British kings appears to imply a causal link between its presence in a consort and the maintenance of a strong, pure bloodline for the royal house.

Eleine is also the sole heiress to her father's kingdom, a point Wace emphasizes here by inserting it in the middle of an account of her good qualities. This elevated status as the only daughter of Coel and the mother of Constantine appears to warrant a lengthier description of her virtues. Once again, the VV's description is a more obvious source, although the Old French poet goes still further to enhance his Eleine's prestige. Here, Wace adheres more closely to the ideal of queenship propagated by monastic and clerical works, in which piety and goodness were of more significance (even though the benefits of female education may have been somewhat more controversial). That said, Wace foregrounds Eleine's 'clergie', and places it first in his list of attributes for her, unlike his sources, who give precedence to her beauty.

However, beauty in the *Brut's* consorts is not always to be admired or coveted. Ronwen is the exceedingly beautiful Saxon, daughter of the pagan Hengist, who lures the British king Vortigern into a match that will prove fatal to one of her stepsons and will eventually see the arrival of the last, and most devastating, of all the Britons' foes. A different kind of siren song it may be, but Ronwen's allure, while human rather than diabolical, results in similar disaster. A serpent has been introduced into the royal family, as quickly becomes clear, with the murder of one of her stepsons being born of her desire to remove all obstacles to the infiltration of her own Saxon clan and their negative influence. Wace informs us that:

La meschine ot le cors mult gent,
E de vis fu bele forment;
Bele fu mult e avenant,
De bele grosse e de bel grant. (vv. 6981-4)

[The girl had a fair body and a very beautiful face; she was fair and comely, handsome in shape and size.]

Her highly sexualized beauty is, however, portrayed as a sinister lure rather than the appropriate attribute of a consort. The implications are clear; a weak king can easily be swayed by lust for an unworthy wife, leading to his downfall. After, like Geoffrey, informing us that the Devil has motivated Vortigern to his immoderate passion, Wace introduces one of his customary interjections: 'Deus, quel hunte! Deus, quel pecchié!' [God, what shame! God, what sin!] (v. 6993). This is reminiscent of his exclamation at the murder of Ludon's son: 'Deus! ki vit mais si pecchié!' (v. 2175). Geoffrey links the love of Vortigern for Renwein to the entrance of Satan into his heart, an image that he employs again when explaining Renwein's own desire to kill her stepson, Vortimer. Wace attributes the pagan queen's actions to her own evil, although he retains the idea of Satan controlling the queen's actions; the implication is evidently that, like Diana's followers, she is already open to demonic influence by her unchristian beliefs. Unlike Geoffrey, he makes clear that Ronwen's loathing of Vortimer is motivated largely by her desire for vengeance on behalf of her kinsmen:

Quant la lei Deu fu restablie
E Bretaine reconvertie,
Oez cum faite deablie:
Par grant haenge et par envie
Ronwen, cume male marastre,
Fist envenimer sun fillastre
Vortimer, que ele haeit,
Pur Henguist, que chacié aveit. (vv. 7153-60)

[When God's law was re-established and Britain again converted, hear what devilry was perpetrated. Through great hate and envy Ronwen, like a wicked stepmother, had her stepson Vortimer, whom she hated, poisoned, because of Hengist whom he had exiled.]

Sed bonitati eius invidit ilico diabolus invidia dyaboli qui Ronwen novercam Vortimerii ad hoc nephas instigavit veneno periit Vortimerius. (Vulgate, chap. 102)

[But his good deeds stirred up the envy of the Devil, who entered his stepmother Ronwen and caused her to bring about his death by poison.]

Sed bonitati eius invidit ilico diabolus qui in corde Ronwen noverce sue ingressus incitavit eam ut neci ipsius immineret. (VV, chap. 102)

[But his good deeds stirred up the Devil's envy, who entered the heart of his stepmother Ronwen and moved her to plot his murder.]

It is evident that, after a long period in which the Britons' progressive advances in civilization and belief have been described, we have returned to the barbarism of the earlier sections of the *Brut*. The introduction of the Saxons has ushered in a new era, a fresh cycle of cultural 'improvement' from a state of barbarism to Christianization, a golden age, and, finally, dissolution and dispossession. The only change in the narrative is in the actors in the tale. As with the final stage in the loss of British control over the island, an act of treachery on the part of a female character paves the way to ruin. Ronwen is (apparently) sexually loyal to her husband, but she is treacherous in another way; her sexual allure drives the king towards an unholy alliance with a pagan enemy. We are told explicitly by Wace that the king, despite any personal doubts he may have had as to the Saxons' loyalty, held firm in his resolve to keep them in Britain 'pur amur sa muillier' (v. 7083). The fear of a foreign queen alienating the king from his own kith and kin by sowing discord and seeking to harm his 'rightful' heirs is set out very clearly in Wace's account of Vortigern and Ronwen's relationship.

The final major female figures of the *Brut* reflect the progression of Wace's female characters, while introducing further notes of doubt as to the desirability of their physical appeal. Ygerne, the great Arthur's mother, retains the status accorded her by Geoffrey of incomparable beauty:

Nen ot plus bele en tut le regne;
 Curteise esteit e bele e sage
 E mult esteit de grant parage. (vv. 8573-6)

[There was no fairer in all the land; she was courteous, beautiful and wise, and of very high rank.]

Aderat inter ceteros Gorlois dux Cornubie cum Ingerna coniuge sua,
 cuius pulchritudo omnes mulieres Britannie superabat. (Vulgate, chap.
 137)

[Among them was the duke of Cornwall, Gorlois, with his wife Igerma, the most beautiful woman in Britain.]

All this is, again, appropriate to the parent of a peerless king. Wace has, however, expanded the source material to lend her further virtues of wisdom and courtesy, as he does with Eleine. The mother of a powerful king of high repute is once more given character traits fitting to her status. Wace's Guenevere, by contrast, is given all the same characteristics, yet she is, notably, not described as the most beautiful among her peers. Here, Wace is closer to the *VV* in his description of the young queen:

Une cuinte e noble meschine;
 Bele esteit e curteise e gent,
 E as nobles Romains parente;
 Cadour la nurri richement
 En Cornoaille lungement,
 Come su cuisine prochainne;
 E sa mere resteit romaine.
 Mult fu de grant afaïtement
 E de noble cuntienement,
 Mult fu large e buene parliere,
 Artur l'ama mult e tint chiere;
 Mais entr'els dous n'orent nul eir
 Ne ne porent enfant avoir. (vv. 9645-58)

[... a graceful and noble girl. She was beautiful, courteous and well-born, of a noble Roman family. For a long while Cadour had had her brought up in Cornwall in excellent fashion, as befitted his close kinswoman; his mother had been Roman. Her manners were perfect, her behaviour noble, and she talked freely and well. Arthur loved her deeply and held her very dear; but the two of them produced no heir, nor could they have any children.]

Denique cum totius patrie statum in pristinam dignitatem reduxisset, duxit uxorem nomine Ganhumaram ex nobili genere Romanorum editam. Que in thalamo Cadouris ducis educata tocius insule mulieres pulchritudine superabat. (Vulgate, chap. 152)

[Then, when he had re-established the old institutions of the whole region, Arthur took as his wife Ganhumara, a woman of noble Roman ancestry brought up at the court of Duke Cadour, who was the most beautiful woman in the island.]

Denique cum in pristinam dignitatem reduxisset tocius regni statum, Arthurus ipse duxit uxorem nomine Guenhauerham ex nobili genere Romanorum ortam, pulcrum satis ac decoram, in thalamis Cadouris ducis Cornubie honeste educatam. (VV, chap. 152)

[Then, when he had re-established the old institutions of the whole region, Arthur took as his wife Guenhumara, a woman of noble Roman roots, sufficiently beautiful and graceful, and who had been properly brought up at the court of Duke Cadour.]

Wace's list of positive attributes for Guenevere is long. She has been carefully educated, is generous and well-spoken and of noble bearing, as well as being much loved by her husband. Yet, for all that, Wace closes his description with a note of unaccustomed sadness: 'Mais entr'els dous n'orent nul eir | Ne ne porent enfant avoir' [but the two of them produced no heir nor could they have any children].¹³ Wulf has noted the significance of Wace's explicit statement of Arthur's love:¹⁴ while he does generally follow the *VV*'s redactor in omitting some of Geoffrey's comments on a husband's affection for his wife through what we can assume to be a lack of detailed study of the Vulgate,¹⁵ it is interesting to note that he does not usually choose to add his own 'romantic' material unless the king's feelings are of particular importance to the narrative. Arthur's loss of his wife is thus made all the more devastating.

The betrayal of Arthur by his nearest and dearest also provides an interesting symmetry between his tale and that of his parents. Geoffrey softens his Ygerne's betrayal of her husband by the curious device of a spell, concocted by the sorcerer Merlin, that transforms her would-be lover into her husband for as long as it takes to consummate the adulterous union. She does not fall in love with the king until he has vanquished her lord, Gorlois, in battle, leaving them both free to marry. Wace follows this story by describing the deep love of Uther for Ygerne, but noticeably does not imply that his love is returned. Instead, he implicitly establishes a troubling undercurrent of tolerance for Uther's overwhelming desire, framed in a monologue reminiscent of the psychological traumas found in the *contes ovidiens*, combined with a surprisingly harsh critique, albeit projected through the device of Uther's friend, Ulfin, rather than the narrator's own voice. This is unique to Wace, and suggests a distaste for the breach of feudal loyalty that is not found in either the Vulgate or the *VV*, where the vassal's attempt at consolation consists in the former of purely practical strategic advice, and in the latter, an immediate recommendation to call upon the services of Merlin, without passing any judgement upon the king's feelings:

'Ore oi, ço dist Ulfin, merveilles.
 Le cunte avez grevé de guerre
 E a eissil metez sa terre,
 E lui cloéz en cel chastel.
 Quidez que sa femme en seit bel?
 Sa feme amez, lui guerriez,
 Ne sai conseil cum vus l'aiez ...' (vv. 8657-63)

['These are astonishing words,' said Ulfin. 'You have harassed the count with war, destroyed his lands and confined him to this castle. Do you think that pleases his wife? You love the wife and make war on the husband! I don't know what sort of help you need ...']

Ad hec Ulfin: 'Et quis tibi consiliari valuerit, cum nulla vis accedere queat qua eam infra oppidum Tintagol adeamus?' (Vulgate, chap. 137)

[Ulfin answered: 'What advice can there be, given that no power on earth can get us to her in the stronghold of Tintagel?']

Ad hec Ulfin: 'Nemo, mi domine, tibi melius consilium dare ualet ex omnibus qui terram tuam incolunt quam Merlinus uates; qui si operam dederit, poteris compos esse desiderii tui.' (VV, chap. 137)

[Ulfin answered: 'My lord, no-one resident in your lands can give you better advice than Merlin; if you give him this task, that which you desire will be yours.']

Both Uther's seeking of advice and the recounting of distracted longing call to mind the suffering of Narcisus and Dané as they probe the source of their misery; while Uther may understand the cause of his pain, his attempts to deal with it are as inadequate as any teenager's. The *contes ovidiens* appear to have been written after the *Brut*, and their authors may well have derived some inspiration from such monologues as writers of the period sought to develop a suitable language for the phrasing of romantic feelings.¹⁶

Uther has already been cast as a romantic hero, of sorts; like Aganippus with Cordeille, he loved Ygerne before he had ever met her, according to Wace, a desire accounted for once more by the association between 'belté' and 'loec':

Veire assez ainz qu'il la veïst
L'out il cuveitee e amee
Kar merveilles esteit loec. (vv. 8580-83)

[Even before seeing her, he had loved and desired her, for she was exceedingly celebrated.]

In response to the king's unsubtle attempts to court her at dinner, Wace adds a comment on Ygerne's behaviour: 'Ygerne issi se conteneit | Qu'el n'otriout ne desdiseit' [Ygerne behaved in such a way as to neither consent nor refuse] (vv. 8595-6). This noncommittal behaviour on the lady's part perhaps implies fear of the king more than any genuine desire to break her vows. While Gorlois goes on to install his wife in the impregnable castle of Tintagel, there is no sense in which she is the *mal mariée* of courtly literature. Her husband's actions are presented as eminently sensible and justified by his concerns over the king's disloyalty and willingness to break two bonds - Gorlois's marriage and the feudal contract - actions that make him no better than his predecessor, the weak Vortigern, in his unchristian love for the heathen, Ronwen.

The Vulgate's description of Uther's passion for Ygerne circumvents the darker side of the relationship, but the VV contains an additional note of criticism that Wace does not take up, in comparing Uther's passion for Ygerne to that of David for Bathsheba. Wace

appears to pass over the reference here, despite his frequent preference for the *VV*'s imagery. Could his expansion of Ulfin's negative response to his lord's confession, however, be another way of translating this sense of deep impropriety and betrayal, the damage done to a good king by his overwhelming lust for a woman? Wace appears to want to tone down Uther's treachery in order to avoid casting a shadow over the birth of his son, Arthur, through an explicit link to a biblical model of adulterous love and deception. At the same time, however, he retains an element of criticism by having Uther's actions condemned by one of his closest allies.

Although the conclusion of Uther's tale is, on the surface, a happy one, with a marriage blessed by two children and a sense that the couple were meant to come together to create Arthur, certain elements of the narrative – the betrayal by an honoured guest, the breach of sacred oaths, the use of slightly sinister magic and a rather dishonourable deceit of an apparently dutiful wife – contain unpleasant overtones. When Guenevere is subsequently appropriated by Arthur's wicked nephew, Mordret, the situation is remarkably similar. Mordret owes Arthur fealty, and his disloyal lust for the queen is made all the more despicable by his blood bond with his lord. Despite the reminder by Wace that this deed is 'cuntre cristiene lei' [against Christian law] (v. 13027), the main stress is on the breaking of an oath and the failure of allegiance, rather than on incest.

Guenevere's willingness to participate in this treachery is never specified by either the Vulgate or the *VV*. Wace follows his sources faithfully here by giving no explanation of Guenevere's behaviour, merely stating that Mordret took his uncle's wife. This occurs after Arthur has given Mordret the status of co-regent with Guenevere in his own absence from the land; as he fights to defend his country from outside attackers, so he is wounded by the trusted enemy within. Just as Gorlois is lured out to defend what is his by the threat of battle, only to be foiled by Uther's adoption of his own form, Mordret assumes his own disguise: that of a loyal nephew who is actually concealing a secret desire for his own aunt. He too adopts Arthur's 'outer form' – the governance of his kingdom and his powers – only to take his wife, the 'triple crime' described by Hans-Erich Keller.¹⁷ Arthur, the greatest of kings, is left childless and betrayed; unlike Gorlois, he may not die, but his steady decline is nonetheless assured. Guenevere almost appears to have been conflated with Britain itself; Mordret's burning desire for her appears to encompass his overweening ambition to possess everything that is Arthur's. The overriding impression left by Wace's depiction of romantic and marital relations is one of women as property; regardless of the romantic allusions and tales of royal passions, queens are in thrall to their lords, like all feudal vassals, bound by marriage ties as sacred as the feudal bond. Both Ygerne and Guenevere, strangely indistinct and unresponsive characters that they are, exist solely to provide conflict; they are, ultimately, possessions of their feudal lords, inevitably coveted by those who wish to possess their king's chattels. There is also, perhaps, some implicit criticism of both Gorlois and Arthur here. In allowing themselves to be distracted by outside forces, they leave themselves open to attack from enemies closer to home, with their wives and lands vulnerable to domestic predators.

A detailed study of all three texts directly involved in Wace's translation – The Vulgate, the *VV* and the *Brut* itself – reveals a noticeable shift in the depiction of the Britons during the course of the history, one that Wace makes even clearer than do his sources. The pre-Christian British of the first section of the *Brut* are, in effect, pagan 'savages'; while there are admirable individuals amongst them, the presence of such figures is a case of the exception confirming the rule. After the arrival of the Saxon invaders, the two opposing sides exchange roles as dominion passes from one race to another; at first pagan and brutal in their violence, the Saxons are gradually converted and acquire the qualities of piety and civilization, as the Britons had before them. The development of Wace's female characters seems to parallel this evolution in the cultural values of the Britons. Beauty and sexual desirability remain important attributes in a consort for the duration of the *Brut*, but they are gradually joined by the qualities of piety, learning, wisdom and gentleness more suited to the Christian, 'civilized' women of the history's later stages.

The earliest section of the *Brut* resembles the *romans d'antiquité* in its treatment of its characters, and, as with the *contes ovidiens*, the opportunity to depict the barbarous nature of the heathens by stressing the cultural distance between them and Wace's audience is taken regularly. The kings of the earliest, pagan phases of the British people's history take concubines, sequester their secret loves in underground chambers and repudiate their wives at will. After the conversion to Christianity, such behaviour, governed by lust, falls to the ungodly Saxon invaders. Later kings, such as Uther, may fall prey to desire, but are bound by the rules of courtly and Christian society to devote more thought to achieving their romantic goals; they are allowed a deeper introspection than their pagan predecessors. Nonetheless, they ride roughshod over any prior attachments or feelings of the ladies in question, which become practically irrelevant. In Wace's scheme, where Geoffrey's fixation with the decline and fall of the British is less important, the Saxons too can undergo the same transition between barbarism and civilization (before, of course, they too are overwhelmed by the next set of invaders God sees fit to send). Hence, Penda's sister can be a 'gente e curteise damisele' in Wace, despite being accorded no description in the Vulgate or the *VV*. Wace is keen to emphasize the shift in power and culture; the British are not 'chosen people' to him, merely one amongst several sets of rulers who are superseded by newer, better qualified successors. He and his peers created a tradition in which every story and every character was a fair target for rewriting, providing as they did yet more elements to be added to the stock of literary models. As these stories of love, marriage and motherhood have demonstrated, female figures and their stories were eminently suitable for this technique.

Notes

¹ Douglas Kelly, *The Conspiracy of Allusion: Description, Rewriting and Authorship from Macrobius to Medieval Romance* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. 11.

² Jean Blacker, *The Faces of Time: Portrayal of the Past in Old French and Latin Historical Narrative of the Anglo-Norman Regnum* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), p. xi. Blacker's thesis is of great relevance to this study, discussing as it does the construction of generic 'good' and 'bad' characters from a pool of stock characteristics. Further analysis of the techniques of medieval *translatio studii*, as opposed to modern conceptions of translation, can be found in Peter Damian-Grint's *The New Historians of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999).

³ For further discussion of the rewriting possibilities presented by the heroines of the *romans d'antiquité*, see Penny Eley, 'History and Romance in the *Chroniques des Ducs de Normandie*', *Medium Aevum*, 68 (1999), 81-95 (81).

⁴ An overview of all the women named in the *Brut* can be found in Glyn Burgess, 'Women in the Works of Wace', in *Maistre Wace: A Celebration* (St Helier: Société Jersiaise, 2006), pp. 91-104.

⁵ The female figures examined here are discussed for the most part in chronological order, so as to explore the development of Wace's characterization set against the larger theme of the Britons' cultural and spiritual evolution.

⁶ All quotations and translations from the *Brut* are taken from *Wace's Roman de Brut/A History of the British*, ed. and trans. Judith Weiss (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002).

⁷ All quotations and translations from the Vulgate are taken from *Geoffrey of Monmouth: The History of the Kings of Britain, An Edition and Translation of De gestis Britonum [Historia Regum Britanniae]*, ed. Michael D. Reeve and trans. Neil Wright (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007).

⁸ All quotations from the *VV* are taken from *Historia Regum Britanniae II: The First Variant Version, A Critical Edition*, ed. Neil Wright (Cambridge: Brewer, 1988). The translations are my own.

⁹ Blacker, p. 98.

¹⁰ I use this rather anachronistic term for the male half of a love relationship with some reluctance; nonetheless, it is helpful as a catch-all description, given that a number of the relationships in the pre-Christian section of the *Brut* do not culminate in marriage. The word 'lover' seems inadequate for use in a description of reasonably settled concubinage, from which children frequently result.

¹¹ Véronique Zara, 'The Historical Figure of Arthur in Wace's *Roman de Brut*', *Arthuriana*, 2 (2008), 17-30 (19).

¹² Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender and Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2003), p. 43.

¹³ For more discussion of the possible literary connections between barren queens and adultery, see Peggy McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery: Queenship and Sexual Transgression in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 12.

¹⁴ Charlotte A.T. Wulf, 'A Comparative Study of Wace's Guenevere in the Twelfth Century', in *Arthurian Romance and Gender: Selected Proceedings of the XVIIth International Arthurian Congress*, ed. Friedrich Wolfzettel (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 66-78 (p. 69).

¹⁵ Françoise H.M. Le Saux, *A Companion to Wace* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2005), p. 91.

¹⁶ Hans-Erich Keller, 'De l'amour dans le *Roman de Brut*', in *Continuations: Essays on Medieval French Language and Literature in Honour of John L. Grigsby*, eds Norris J. Lacy and Gloria Torrini-Roblin (Birmingham, AL: Summa Publications, 1989), pp. 63-79 (p. 74).

¹⁷ Keller, p. 67.