

# Arthur's Children in *Le Petit Bruit* and the Post-Vulgate Cycle<sup>1</sup>

Ad Putter

*University of Bristol*

The essay is about King Arthur's children. This might not seem a very promising topic, since by common agreement King Arthur did not have any apart from Mordred. But there are some unusual medieval sources that confound our familiar notions by crediting Arthur with natural heirs. We shall be looking at two such sources in particular, *Le Petit Bruit* and the Post-Vulgate Cycle, but their originality can be better appreciated if we begin with the earlier Arthurian traditions which lie behind them.

The basic outlines of the mainstream account in which Arthur dies childless were fixed by Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (c. 1137) on the one hand, and the Vulgate Cycle (c. 1215-1230) on the other. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, who first established Arthur's credentials as a great king of British history, Arthur has no son, and that fact contributes powerfully to the tragic shape he gave to Arthur's reign. There is good evidence to suggest that this tragic shape is Geoffrey's deliberate creation, and the curious detail of Arthur's dream on his voyage to France is especially suggestive here. Rocked by the waves as he crosses the Channel, Arthur dreams of a dragon who slays a huge bear. According to his advisers, the dream presages a fight between himself and *aliquem gigantem* (i.e. the Giant of Mont-Saint-Michel), but Arthur fondly imagines that the dream really foreshadows his imminent triumph over his archrival, the Roman Emperor (Leo).<sup>2</sup> The military successes that follow the dream allow Arthur to live his dream, but, just when he is about to enter Rome, news of Mordred's betrayal forces him to retreat. Arthur's own interpretation of

the dream is thus proved wrong, yet so close does he come to realising it that the story of his rise and fall cannot fail to leave us with a powerful sense of heroic failure.

Arthur's childlessness, and hence the absence of natural successors, are crucial factors in this tragedy, for it means that the Arthurian world dies with the king, and that any hope of its revival comes to rest on the impossible idea that Arthur will himself return from the dead as a messianic *rex quondam et futurus*. Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthur, mortally wounded, hands the crown over to Constantinus, a distant cousin, whom Geoffrey seems to have taken from Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae* (c. 548).<sup>3</sup> Significantly Constantinus features there as a petty tyrant (of Dumnonia, the West Country), and Gildas denounces him for his ineffectualness. Geoffrey's choice of successor thus represents the extinction of all reasonable hopes that Arthur's glorious reign can survive beyond the point of his death. Constantinus is the dead end of Arthurian history.

Arthur in Geoffrey, then, has no natural successor. This is such a basic given of the Arthurian legend that it is tempting to think it was inevitable that it should be so, but that is not the case. In early Welsh tradition, Arthur *does* have a son, or perhaps we should say sons in the plural. The *Historia Brittonum* (c. 830), attributed to Nennius and best known for its account of Arthur's twelve battles, also records some interesting Arthurian folklore in a section of the 'wonders of Britain' (chs. 67-74) which are mostly located in Wales. One such wonder consists of a mound that cannot be measured because it keeps changing shape. This mound, writes Nennius, contains the grave of Amr (or Anir), *filius Arthuri*.<sup>4</sup> The only other thing that Nennius tells us about Arthur's son is that he was killed by Arthur himself. Nennius' original readers presumably knew the story to which he alludes, but unfortunately that knowledge has now been lost.

Another son of King Arthur is Llachau. He is a less obscure Arthurian character. Like Amr he is associated with a premature death. In the poem 'Mi a wum' from the thirteenth-century Black Book of Carmarthen (Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Peniarth MS 1), the poet boasts:

Mi a wum lle llas llacheu  
 Mab Arthur uthir ig ker teu  
 Ban ryreint brein ar crev.

(I have been where Llachau was slain, the son of Arthur, awful in songs, when ravens croaked over blood.)<sup>5</sup>

Another poem ('Pa Gur') from the same manuscript tells us that he was the battle-companion of Kay.

If Geoffrey of Monmouth knew a tradition in which Arthur does have a son or sons, he dealt with it by disregarding it. Perhaps he rejected it as a genealogical complication that would spoil the beautifully simple formula on which his Arthurian tragedy is predicated and which we now take for granted: the formula of a great king who dies without heir and so leaves a nation bereft of the glorious future which he seemed to promise. However, it would be an exaggeration to say that Geoffrey's formula commanded universal assent. Some writers after Geoffrey kept the tradition of a royal son alive, though even they typically accepted the premise that Arthur's succession was doomed. Arthur's son Llachau was probably remembered by later French writers in the character of Loholt, who appears in a number of French romances.<sup>6</sup> In *Perlesvaus* (c. 1210), which may hark back to an earlier romance tradition, Loholt is the son of Arthur and Guinevere. Sadly, his narrative function is to go missing from the story: no-one, neither Guinevere nor Arthur, nor his knights, know where he is until his head turns up in a coffer with a letter confirming he has been treacherously murdered by Kay. In the *Suite Merlin* of the Vulgate Cycle, the story of the treacherous murder by Kay is repeated, though this time Loholt's mother is no longer Guinevere but Lisanor, a beautiful damsel with whom Arthur has a brief affair (with Merlin's approval and assistance) before he marries Guinevere. (In Malory's *Morte Darthur* the lady is called Lyonors, and the son fathered on her by Arthur is named Borre.<sup>7</sup>) Finally, in the *Livre d'Artus*, Loholt is one of a number of Round Table Knights who are taken hostage in the Dolorous Tower. We last hear of him from a lady who has been called in to aid the knights after some have fallen ill. Predictably, Loholt does not make it out of prison alive, for the single constant in these different accounts of Loholt is that he should die early – a death that is necessary, writes Keith Busby, because 'the absence of a strong legitimate heir is essential if the romances are to end in the unresolved and anarchic manner so central to the purposes of [the] authors'.<sup>8</sup>

Chrétien de Troyes's contribution to 'the enigma of Loholt' fits this paradigm. Chrétien mentions him *en passant* in his first romance, *Erec et Enide* (c. 1170), where he features in a roll call of famous Arthurian knights:

et un vassax de grant vertu,  
 Loholz, li filz le roi Artu  
 Et Sagremors li Desreez,  
 cil ne doit pas estre obliez,  
 ne Bedoiers li constables ... (*Erec*, 1699-1703)<sup>9</sup>

(and a vassal of great prowess, Loholt, son of King Arthur, and Sagremor the Impetuous, who should not be forgotten, nor should Bedivere the constable ...)

In the absence of any suggestion to the contrary, one assumes that this is Llacheu / Loholt of the earlier tradition. He, like Sagremor and Bedivere, is not the kind of knight to be forgotten; but in fact Chrétien went on to do just that. For whatever reason, Loholt is never mentioned again by name in any of his later Arthurian romances, unlike the fellows that keep him company in this passage: Sagremor and Bedivere. To my knowledge, the only allusion to a son in Chrétien's later works occurs in *Yvain* (lines 661-3), where Arthur is reported as swearing three oaths on 'the soul of Pendragon his father, and on that of his son and that of his mother, that he would go to see the fountain' ('L'ame de Pandragron son pere / Et la son fil, et la sa mere, / Qu'il iroit veoir la fontaine ...').<sup>10</sup> Apparently all three are deceased; perhaps the conclusion to be drawn from this is that Chrétien had some acquaintance with the legend of Loholt's untimely death.

In the chronicle tradition, then, Arthur has no son and no heir; and to the extent that an earlier Welsh tradition, in which he had offspring, was remembered at all in the earliest French romances, the son's role is to die young or to disappear down a narrative black hole. There is of course one important development in this master narrative, namely the change whereby Mordred, Arthur's sister's son in the chronicle tradition, morphs in romance into Arthur's own son, whom he begets on Morgause, his half-sister. Mordred's role in Arthur's downfall is well-known: Mordred rebels against his father, and is killed by him in the final battle at Camlann; however, Arthur, too, is fatally wounded and dies – again without any heir to whom he can bequeath his legacy.

Why was the incest motif introduced? Several explanations can be suggested. It is possible that the Welsh Arthurian material provided a hint. In Nennius, as we have seen, Arthur is said to have killed his own son (Amr or Anir). Another possibility is that the author or authors of the Vulgate Cycle were

influenced by the Charlemagne tradition.<sup>11</sup> In some versions of the Charlemagne legend, of which the earliest extant representative is the Old Icelandic *Karlamagnús saga* (c. 1240), the young Charlemagne impregnates his own sister (Gillem). He confesses his sin and is then ordered to give his sister, who is about to give birth, to Milo. Months later a son is born: his name is Roland. The Vulgate author may also have seen in the incest motif a way of enhancing the tragic horror of Arthur's fall from grace, of suggesting that Arthur's death, by his own son, is in some sense deserved. As Arthur himself puts in *La Mort le Roi Artu*, his downfall 'will come about because of my sin and my wrongdoing since I have a greater multitude of knights than Morded has' ('sera par mon pechié et par mon outrage, a ce que ge ai greigneur plenté de chevaliers que Mordrés n'a').<sup>12</sup>

The incest motif in the *Mort Artu* is thus the first tentative step towards portraying Arthur's downfall as the price he pays for inhabiting a moral universe, a world in which you reap what you sew. I say 'the first tentative step', since Arthur's incest is hardly presented in the Vulgate Cycle as the main factor in Arthur's fall, and Arthur's readiness to assume full responsibility should accordingly be seen as a measure of his magnanimity. A much more prominent factor in the chain of cause and effect in the Vulgate Cycle is the love of Lancelot and Guinevere. But there are other factors, and isolating one cause, and one guilty party, as some critics have done,<sup>13</sup> does not do justice to the complexity and entanglement of causes in the *Mort Artu*. Its tragic vision is one in which one thing leads to another, where events, precipitated by various moral agents (each culpable in some degree), acquire their own unstoppable momentum. Events are set in motion by Arthur, Mordred, Lancelot, Guinevere, and many others (e.g. Agravain and Gawain) who bear responsibility for the final catastrophe, but it is surely the sense of events running out of human control that triggers and justifies Arthur's dream of Lady Fortune on the night before the fatal battle at Salisbury.<sup>14</sup> *Inside* this dream vision (*Mort*, p. 227), Fortune appears as the person familiar from medieval iconography, as a grand lady who turns a wheel and cares little if the king falls off. But *outside* the dream, fortune makes herself known just as powerfully in non-allegorical terms, as a disastrous cocktail of multiple causes and multiple sins, each committed in ignorance of the snowball effect that will result from their fatal combination.<sup>15</sup>

These two Arthurian traditions – the Galdfridian tradition in which Arthur has no son and is betrayed by his nephew, Mordred, and the Vulgate tradition in which Mordred is Arthur's own incestuously begotten son – acquired

canonical status, and very few medieval authors contradicted these stories, and it is to these interesting exceptions that I now turn. The first author I want to consider called himself Rauf de Boun (i.e. Ralph de Bohun). In 1309 he wrote an eccentric Anglo-Norman chronicle known as *Le Petit Bruit* for his patron Henry de Lacy, Earl of Lincoln. The chronicle is preserved in a single manuscript from the sixteenth century (London, British Library, MS Harley 902). The author claims his work is a shorter version of a much longer *Brut*, and the brevity of *Le Petit Bruit* supports that claim. The unusual thing about *Le Petit Bruit* is that it presents a direct line of descent from the founder of Britain, the Trojan refugee Brutus, to Arthur, and from Arthur to the Anglo-Saxon kings, most notably Athelstan and Alfred, who appear in *Le Petit Bruit* in reverse chronological order.<sup>16</sup> There is thus no question of a rupture in the *translatio imperii* following Arthur's death. On the contrary, King Arthur is blessed with three sons in Ralph's chronicle.

The history that Ralph presents can be summarized as follows. Uther falls in love with Ygerne and with Merlin's help begets on her a son called Arthur. Arthur reigns for 23 years (or 27 years: the text contradicts itself on this point) and during this period chivalry flourishes: 'King Arthur in his day had a most renowned group of knights, including, for example, Sir Perceval, Sir Gawain, and many others who are named in the other *Brut* ('Cil roy Artour en son temps tint la graunt renomé chevalrie come de sir Perseval et de monseigneur Gawayne et de mult des aultres qi vous sont nomez en l'autre Bruit').<sup>17</sup> Arthur conquers the whole of the British Isles and is married, but the chronicler is not interested in the bride (whose name is not even mentioned), but only in the sons and heirs she produces. Ralph names no fewer than three; in this context he also mentions a tribute (*tru*), a detail to which we shall return later:

Et fait a savoir qu'il avoit .iii. feiz dount le ayné fitz a noun Adeluf, cely qi fuit apelé Adeluf le tiers, qi puis tient la regne auxi come heire, com il vous est sus dit. Ly miluayne fitz out a noun Morgain le Noir, a quy il dona la terre de Gales, perpetuelment tener sauns suit ou service a nuly vivant. Et par meyme le franchise tynt cely Morgan et mout de ses successours, jekis a temps un Adelstane le second, qi conquist la primer senorie Galis et les mist primis a lour certaine tru, par quel subjection il teinoit cel terre du roy d'Angleterre, si com vous le troverez desus

dit. Li tiers de ses fitz out a noun Patrikes le Rous, a quy li dona la terre d'Escoce heritablement, par quele estate luy es ses successours long temps puis la tindrout, jekis a temps Adelstane le primer, qui la senorie de la Scoce conquest tout outre si les mist auxi en nostre subjection a tous jours, com après vous dirroms. (*Petit Bruit*, p. 12)

(And it is to be noted that he had three sons of which the eldest had the name Adeluf, and he was named Adeluf the third, and he reigned subsequently as his heir, as is explained later below. His second son was called Morgan the Black, to whom he gave Wales, to hold it in perpetuity without suit or service to anyone living. And this Morgan himself held this privilege as did many of his successors until the time of Athelstan the second, who was the first to conquer the lordship of Wales, subjecting the Welsh for the first time to a certain tribute, under which subjection the land was held from the King of England, as you will see further on. His third son was Patrick the Red, to whom he gave the land of Scotland as a heritage, and in this manner he and his successors retained it for a long time, until the time of Athelstan the first, who conquered the whole of the lordship of Scotland and subjugated them under our rule for ever, as we shall explain to you later.)

Since it is male succession that matters to Ralph, no daughters are reported. Adeluf, we should note, is the first-born, which is why he inherits England. Some surprising revelations follow. In case we wonder why in the romances Arthur spends so much time in Wales, the answer is that he liked his second-born son Morgan best – so much so that he could not bear to be separated from him and spent most of his time in Wales which he had given to Morgan: 'Arthur dwelled with him for most of his life in the south of Wales where he had his son educated by Sir Gawain, who was his mentor at the time' ('ainz se tynt tout le plus de son vivaunt ou ly en South Galis, ou il y fit prendre de nurture de monseigneur Gawayne, qi feut son maistre a l'heure'). Given the prestige surrounding the figure of Gawain, it is perhaps not surprising that he should have set a new fashion in Wales:

de quel aprise, leva primis cel usage en Galis a leys, a mauntel et a cote rae, deschaucé et a garlaund deschevelé, quel usage parmy la terre de Galis jekis a jour present est communement tenuz; par quel genterie qe a cel heure entre eux leverount, si cleymount unquore tous lours successours de Galis estre le plus gentilis de nul autre nacion desa l'aindyz de Grece, et diunt unkore qe sont la progene le noble roy Artour avauntdit. (p. 13)

(this period of education led, for the first time, to the following custom of dress in Wales: a robe and a costume with stripes, without shoes and nothing on the head apart from a garland of flowers; this custom is still frequently found in Wales to this day. And because of the gallantry that emerged amongst them at that time, the descendants from Wales claim, even to this day, that they are more courteous than any other nation apart from the aforesaid Greeks, and they still say that they descend from the above-mentioned King Arthur.)

About Arthur's conquests in mainland Europe, Ralph is silent. First, he says, it would take too long, and, second, Arthur owed them to his love for the Fairy Queen, 'la dame de faerie', just as he did his prowess: 'et la virtue q'il avoit la vint auxi come chose faé' (p. 13). And fairy matters, says Ralph, should not be put into writing, since they are of uncertain authority, as Ralph's history self-evidently is not. When Arthur dies, he is buried in Glastonbury and his first-born son, Adeluf III, takes over the crown. The latter's greatest contribution to history is to institute the Rome penny. Ralph knows that some readers will be surprised to hear that; these he reassures by alleging 'the testimony of *Lancelot du Lac* which makes mention of this point and from which the author takes his authority' ('la tesmoynance Launcelet du Lake qi a cel article fait auquis de mencion dount ly autour print cel autorité') (p. 13).

Adeluf has four sons, who reign one after another; the third son, Athelstan, conquers Scotland, and so becomes 'the first English king who ever conquered the sovereign lordship of Scotland since the moment that King Arthur gave it as a fief to his third son Patrick' ('le primer roi engleis qi la souveraine senorie de Escoce unkes conquest depuis cel heure qe ly roy Arthour feffa son tiers fitz Patrikes' (p. 14). Adeluf's fourth son is Alfred, now buried in Winchester.

Considered as 'history' in the modern sense of the word, this is a shambles, as Diana Tyson has remarked,<sup>18</sup> but the impulse that drives this chronicle is not the reconstruction of the past but the explanation of the present. And on the present Ralph seems reasonably well informed. For example, he did not invent the idea that the Welsh reckoned themselves to be superior in descent to the English. According to Gerald of Wales in his *Description of Wales*, the Welsh cherish their freedom since they believe themselves to be the descendants of famous Greek heroes, 'the sons of Aeneas who fought for liberty'.<sup>19</sup> This sense of ethnic superiority required an explanation, and Ralph's history provides one. The reason why the Welsh think they are *le plus gentilis* is that there was a time, under Gawain and Arthur's son Morgan, when *gentillesse* reigned supreme in Wales.

What purpose was served by the author's bizarre theory that Arthur had three sons? The explanation, I believe, is that this theory helped Ralph to make comprehensible to himself and to his readers the complex geo-political situation following the wars of King Edward I, with a fragile united kingdom incorporating the countries of Wales and Scotland, which of course had historically claimed, and continued to seek, independence from the English crown. To take Scotland first, the situation inherited by Edward I was one in which the Scottish kings accepted the English king as overlord only for lands held outside England. This state of affairs was challenged in 1290, nineteen years before *Le Petit Bruit* was written, when Queen Margaret died and the succession was disputed. Edward I was called upon to adjudicate and supported Balliol, hoping to assert through him his claim to be the suzerain of Scotland. But Balliol, in Ralph's own words, 'began to betray his service and homage' ('commence son service et homage traverser', p. 23), leading Edward to assert his over-lordship through war. It is well known that in real life Edward I used Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History* to bolster claims of over-lordship, pointing out to the Pope that, since Arthur had conquered Scotland, the claims of the English crown had a sound historical basis.<sup>20</sup> Ralph de Bohun's patron, Henry de Lacy, Earl of Lincoln, campaigned actively in Edward's Scottish and Welsh wars.<sup>21</sup> The Scottish wars eventually ended with a temporary victory for Scottish independence: the English were defeated in the battle of Bannockburn (1314) by Robert de Bruce, the grandson of Balliol's rival claimant. However, in the year when *Le Petit Bruit* was written (1309), that battle still lay in the future, and Ralph's history faithfully registers the uncertainties of a time when periods of Scottish independence alternated with periods of political dependence. Geoffrey

of Monmouth may have got it right that Arthur was overlord, but Ralph is equally certain that Arthur gave Scotland away to his son Patrick, *heritablement*. As a result English lordship, *seigneurie*, had to be re-asserted by Athelstan I, who provides a model for Edward I, the monarch who was trying to conquer Scotland in Ralph's own day.

In Wales, the situation had by 1309 been settled to English advantage, but it is relevant to recall some of the details. The Welsh ruler Llywellyn ap Gruffydd had been recognized by Edward's predecessor, Henry III, as Prince of Wales and *de facto* ruler of Wales, though he remained officially a vassal of King Henry. In exchange Llywellyn promised to pay the king a tribute of 25,000 marks in ten annual instalments. But in 1276 a dispute arose between Llywellyn and Edward which led to war and ultimately to the conquest of Wales. The reason for the dispute was that Llywellyn had for some years ceased to make the payments and to pay homage to Edward.<sup>22</sup> Ralph de Bohun alludes to the tribute twice in his account of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. First the amount stipulated by Henry is said (inaccurately) to have been one thousand marks: 'the said Llywellyn bound himself to pay a rent of one thousand marks annually to the English crown for the principality of Wales' ('cely Lewlyn se obliga en mil marce d'anel rent a la coronne d'Engleterre pour la principalté de North Gales a toutz jour'). And then Ralph notes that Llewellyn failed to honour his promises: 'Llywellyn of Wales contradicted his homage and the rent to which he was bound' ('Lewlyn de Gales countredit son homage et sa rent a quel ly fuit obligez', pp. 20-21). This contentious tribute, too, finds itself transported back into Arthurian history. According to Ralph, Arthur bequeathed Wales to his second son, and again Athelstan had to fight to reclaim it: and it was this Athelstan, Arthur's grandson, who first imposed on the Welsh 'a certain tribute, under which subjection the land was held from the King of England' ('certeine tru, par quel subjection il teinoit cel terre du roy d'Engleterre'). The tribute imposed on Llewellyn by Henry III is thus given historical precedent.

And that, in essence, is the purpose that motivated Ralph *qua* historian. Like so many other histories from the period, Ralph's history was intended to hold up a mirror to the present. It was therefore the historian's job to discover the continuities (rather than the discontinuities) between the past and the present. The modern approach to history is altogether different, for it is based on acceptance of, and respect for, the 'pastness' of history, whence the modern idea that knowing history allows you to move beyond it, while ignorance of it

condemns you to repeat it. In George Santayana's words, 'those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'.<sup>23</sup> Looking at Ralph's *Petit Bruit*, that saying needs to be turned on its head: history (in Ralph's conception) is a backformation of the present, so we are all of us obliged to repeat it. The purpose of reading history is therefore not to liberate yourself from the past but to gain a better understanding of what it is that you are repeating, and to admire the foresight that led earlier generations to introduce 'old customs' (such as the imposition of tribute on the Welsh) which the present generation is able to revive. In Ralph's view and that of medieval historians more generally, the past 'differed from the present only by being better'.<sup>24</sup>

The second Arthurian work that boldly departs from official history is the Post-Vulgate Cycle. Also known as the *Roman du Graal*, this was written around the middle of the thirteenth century, shortly after the completion of the Vulgate. The textual history of the *Roman du Graal* is a complicated one, and several episodes from the romance have to be pieced together from Spanish and Portuguese translations.<sup>25</sup> One of the more startling innovations in the Post-Vulgate is that Arthur produces a male heir, who even survives the battle of Salisbury. I shall be looking at some of the finer details later, but this, in brief, is the story. One day, Arthur goes out hunting in the forest and loses his way; he comes upon a maiden, and has his will with her by force. The girl's father, Thanas, is aggrieved but soon cheers up when his daughter turns out to be pregnant with an heir to the kingdom. Announcing this happy news to Arthur, Thanas consults him about names: if it is a girl, Arthur decrees, the baby should be called Guinevere, if a boy Arthur le Petit. Arthur le Petit is brought up in ignorance of his identity but arrives at Arthur's court on the day the quest of the Holy Grail commences. A mysterious inscription, *Ci est le siege d'Artus le Petit*, appears on one of the seats of the Round Table. Arthur wonders whether the newcomer might be his son; he sends a messenger to Morgan le Fay, who confirms by return of messenger that the newcomer is indeed his son. The king tells Arthur le Petit of his parentage and knights him, but he also swears him to secrecy and warns him, finally, to avoid any quarrels with the clan of King Ban (i.e. Lancelot and his party), since they are good knights and would easily kill him. When King Arthur is killed in the battle of Salisbury, Arthur le Petit is one of the very few Round Table knights to survive. As Arthur's heir, he carries the hopes of succession on his shoulders. But one fateful day, he meets a knight errant, who reveals himself to be Blioberis. Arthur le Petit curses Blioberis for siding with King Ban's party:

because of their loyalty to Lancelot, he says, all the men of the kingdom of Logres are dead. The two knights fight to the death, and Arthur le Petit is mortally wounded. In an operatic last gasp he tells Blioberis that he was Arthur's son and heir. With that, darkness descends over the Kingdom of Logres. King Arthur is to have no successor, and King Mark, the traitor, invades with the aim of wiping out every last trace of the once and futureless king.

What is the function of Arthur le Petit? One way of answering that question is to see whether this episode fits in with other broader changes of emphasis. One such change, as other critics have already observed, is the far greater emphasis on Arthur's culpability in the Post-Vulgate Cycle. As I have already suggested, in the Vulgate Arthur's incestuous begetting of Mordred is only one of a number of cogs in Fortune's wheel; the Post-Vulgate, on the other hand, presents the final doom as the direct result of sin. Arthur's incestuous begetting of Mordred is thus immediately announced as the beginning of the end, and its dire consequences are expounded first by the author and then by Merlin. As Fanni Bogdanow has pointed out,<sup>26</sup> this theme of the king's original sin is closely connected in the Post-Vulgate Cycle with another theme, that of *aventure* and *mescheance*, hap and mishap. Arthur himself amplifies this theme when at the end of the battle of Salisbury he owns up to his sinfulness:

'Girflet, eu nom soo rey Artur, o que soyam chamar Rey Aventureoso polas boas andanças que avia. Mas quem m'agora chamar per meu direyto nome, chamar-m-a mal aventureado e mizquinho. Esto me fezz ventura, que xi me tornou madrasta e enmiga. E Nosso Senhor, a que praz que viva en doo e en tristeza esse pouco que ey de viver, e bem mo mostra: que asi como el quis e foy poderosso de me erguer per muy fremossas aventuras e sen meu merecimento, bem assi é poderoso de me dirribar per aventuras feas e mas, per meu mericimento e per meu pecado.'

(*Version Post-Vulgate*, III, p. 457-8)

('Girflet, I am not that King Arthur whom people called the fortunate king on account of the good fortune which he enjoyed. The only name which fits me now is that of the miserable and the ill-starred. Fortune brought this about: she has become my stepmother and my enemy. And Our Lord, who wishes that I use

up the little that is left of my life in grief and sadness, has shown that to me very clearly. For just as he formerly saw fit to elevate me by good fortune without my deserving it, so He now has the power to abase me by bad fortune because I deserve it and because I have sinned.')

The brief mention of Fortune might make this interest in *aventure* and *mescheance* look like an extension of *La Mort Artu*, where Arthur dreams of Fortune and her Wheel. But this is an illusion. 'Fortune' in *La Mort Artu* represents historical forces that obey their own logic and transcend human will, right and wrong; its Fortune is blind, not just to human misery but also to immanent justice. The author (or authors) of the Post-Vulgate modified this notion of 'Fortune'. Accordingly the dream of Fortune and her wheel are cut, as are Arthur's repeated complaints against Fortune. What *aventure* and *mescheance* signify instead are the inevitable, though unpredictable, God-decreed laws of a moral universe which is cleverer than we are, which holds us to account for sins in ways we could not have predicted; and which gives good fortune to the undeserving only in order to defer and conceal the moment and the means of retribution.

The birth of Arthur le Petit, Arthur's heir, is Arthur's *aventure* and *mescheance* in precisely this sense, and the author has created a life for him whose course exemplifies how sins come back to haunt us. In the case of King Arthur, his sinfulness is represented most obviously at the moment of his son's begetting, for Arthur le Petit is born when Arthur rapes an innocent girl:

Il la print et la fuist a force et jut sanz faille a luy, vouldist ou non, et la trouva pucelle. Celle, qui estoit enfes ne qui n'avoit aprins telle chose, commença a crier endementres que le roy gisoit a luy, mais tout ce ne luy vault riens, car toutes voies jut le roi a luy et engendra dedens luy hoir masle. (II, p. 473)

(He took her by force and lay with her, whether she liked it or not, and he found her a virgin. She, who was a child and knew nothing about such matters, began to cry out while the king lay with her, but it was of no use, because the king continued to lie with her, and he begot on her a male heir.)

Arthur le Petit is thus another son born in sin; he is 'Mordred's double', as Richard Trachsler has put it.<sup>27</sup>

It is a truism to say that, in a moral universe, nothing good can come of this rape, but the cruelty of *mescheance* and the writer's art lie in the ability to insinuate, for as long as possible, that things are working out splendidly for Arthur. So by good fortune, a male heir is born, whom Arthur hubristically names Arthur le Petit:

'ci c'estoit masle, je veuil qu'il ait nom Artus le Petit en remembrance de moy qui suis Artus le Grant, de pouoir et de toutes choses, que après moy ne vendra nul Artus qui petit ne doye ester appelés envers moy.' (II, p. 475)

('If he is male, I want him to have the name Arthur the Small in memory of me, since I am Arthur the Great, in power and in all things, so that after me no Arthur shall come who no should not be named small in comparison with me.')

And again by good fortune (or is this already *mescheance* in disguise?), Arthur le Petit grows into a great knight, who is in every respect just as good, if not better, than his father: 'For Arthur le Petit was a very good and doughty knight; and you should know that he was no less great than his father, nor less strong, nor less redoubtable at arms' ('car moult fut Artus le Petit bon chevalier et preux. Et sachés qu'il ne fut mie moins grans de son pere, ne main fors, ne main preus aux armes', II, p. 480). Arthur le Petit, so the author suggests, could have been a second 'Arthur the Great'. And so the tragedy of his death turns out to be, in a roundabout and unforeseen way, the fulfilment of Arthur's wish that 'that after me no Arthur shall come who should not be named small in comparison with me.' In a moral universe hubris eventually comes back to kick you in the teeth, and Arthur unexpectedly gets what he asked for.

The finest illustration of this law of unintended but deserved consequences is provided by King Arthur's wish to keep his son's identity secret. None of his Round Table knights are to know that Arthur le Petit is his son, because, says Arthur, this would damage his reputation:

'Filz Artus, pour ce, se je ne fas entendant au pueple que tu es mes filz, ne t'ayme je mie moins. Et se je lais a dire, ce est pour ce que je ne vueil mie que le pueple sache ma folie ne mon pechié, car puis que Dieu m'a esleu a si grant haultesse com il me mist, je doy celer a mon pouoir ma chetiveté, quel que pecherre que je soie.' (II, p. 479)

(*'Son Arthur, if therefore I do not let people know that you are my son, this is not because I love you the less. And if I refrain from revealing the truth, this is because I do not wish people to know my folly and my sin, for, since God has elevated me to the great height where I am now placed, it is necessary that I should conceal my wretchedness to the best of my ability, however great a sinner I am.'*)

Arthur's strategy of concealing his own baseness works successfully for a long time, but in the end truth will out. After Arthur le Petit has received his dying wound from Blioberis, he divulges the secret, and asks for it to be made public:

'Sabede que rey Artur era meu padre, e porem eu ey nome Artur o Pequeno. E esto, se vos prouguer, fazed e escrever sobre meu moymento.' Et tanto que esto dise, foy morte. (III, p. 464)

(*'Know that King Arthur was my father, and for that reason my name was Arthur le Petit. And I pray you that you have this written on my tombstone.'* And as soon as he said this, he died.)

In the moral universe of the Post-Vulgate Cycle, a knight's sin eventually comes back to haunt him, and guilty secrets must come to light: the monumental inscriptions that abound in the Post-Vulgate have a special place in setting the record straight. A more subtle point about the moral universe of the Post-Vulgate is that it delivers justice by harnessing the very powers that seek to circumvent it. For the tragic irony is that Arthur le Petit would not have died if Blioberis had known that he was indeed Arthur's heir. In other words, it is precisely the father's attempt to cover up his sin that contributes to the death of his son.

In conclusion, the authors of *Le Petit Bruit* and the Post-Vulgate Cycle took bold liberties with the influential traditions they inherited. In the case of Ralph de Bohun, this tradition was the chronicle tradition in which Arthur was childless. In the case of the composer(s) of the Post-Vulgate Cycle, the main influence was the Vulgate Cycle where Arthur does have a son, Mordred, begotten on his half-sister. I hope to have provided some possible explanations for the remarkable breaks with tradition in *Le Petit Bruit* and the Post-Vulgate. In *Le Petit Bruit*, the image of Arthur as the supreme head of a unified Britain who subsequently divides the country between his three sons – the eldest inheriting England, the second (and Arthur’s personal favourite) Wales, and the third Scotland – not only provides a retrospective justification for Edward I’s political ambitions for a (re-)United Kingdom but also an explanation for the perennial co-existence of unity and division in Great Britain: history repeats the present and vice versa. This backformation of history explains why in *Le Petit Bruit* Arthur and his three sons, too, do no more than repeat history, and in particular the history of the founder of Great Britain, Brutus, who similarly divides his kingdom between his three sons (*Petit Bruit*, p. 5). As in the case of Arthur’s sons, the eldest inherits England and becomes king of England, while the younger two inherit Wales and Scotland. Wales and Scotland thus become fiefs held under the suzerainty of the English crown. This is precisely the political situation which, in the author’s own day, King Edward I (aided by Ralph’s patron) was seeking to bring about. In the case of the Post-Vulgate the story of Arthur le Petit functions, quite differently, as a kind of moral fable. In this moral fable, efforts to dodge moral reckoning are not just futile but counter-productive, and Arthur’s attempts to subvert the operations of a moral universe thus become the very means through which its laws are enforced.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of an essay first published in French as ‘La famille d’Arthur dans *le Petit Bruit* et le Cycle Post-Vulgate’, in *L’Imaginaire de la parenté dans les romans arthuriens*, ed. Martin Aurell and Catalina Girbea (Turnhout, Brepols, 2010), pp. 85-96.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. Michael D. Reeve, trans. Neil Wright (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2007), Book X, p. 164.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey’s debt to Gildas has been thoroughly discussed by Neil Wright in two articles: ‘Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gildas’, *Arthurian Literature*, 2 (1982), 1-40, and ‘Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gildas Revisited’, *Arthurian Literature*, 6 (1986), 27-59.

- <sup>4</sup> Nennius, *British History and The Welsh Annals*, Arthurian Period Sources 8, ed. and trans. J. Morris, (Chichester, Phillimore, 1980), p. 42.
- <sup>5</sup> Cited from Rachel Bromwich (ed.), *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1978), p. 416. The translation is by Jon B. Coe and Simon Young, *The Celtic Sources for the Arthurian Legend* (Felinfach, Llanerch, 1995), p. 125.
- <sup>6</sup> See Keith Busby, 'The Enigma of Loholt', in *An Arthurian Tapestry: Essays in Memory of Lewis Thorpe*, ed. Kenneth Varty (Glasgow, French Department, University of Glasgow 1981), pp. 28-36, Peggy McCracken, 'Love and Adultery: Arthur's Affairs', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 188-200, and Alan Lupack, 'Arthur's children', in *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 432-3.
- <sup>7</sup> McCracken, p. 196.
- <sup>8</sup> Busby, p. 24.
- <sup>9</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec et Enide*, Classiques français du Moyen Age, ed. Mario Roques (Paris, Champion, 1981).
- <sup>10</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Le chevalier au lion*, Lettres gothiques, ed. David Hult (Paris, Lettres gothiques, 1994). English translations from this and all other Old French and Hispanic sources are my own.
- <sup>11</sup> See Elizabeth Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 200-209. The relevant episode from *Karlamagnús saga* is cited at pp. 200-201.
- <sup>12</sup> *La Mort le Roi Artu*, Classiques français du Moyen Age, ed. Jean Frappier (Paris, Champion, 1936), p. 203.
- <sup>13</sup> E.g., Fanni Bogdanow: 'Le vrai ressort de la tragédie arthurienne n'est ni le péché du roi Arthur, ni la révolte de Mordred, mais l'amour coupable de Lancelot et Guinièvre', *La version Post-Vulgate de la Queste del Saint Graal et de la Mort Artu*, 5 vols, Société des anciens textes français (Paris, Picard, 1991-2001), I, p. 49.
- <sup>14</sup> *Mort*, p. 227.
- <sup>15</sup> See Mark Lambert, *Style and Vision in Le Morte D'Arthur* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 162-76. (Lambert writes about Malory's English adaptation, but his comments apply equally to the French *Mort*).
- <sup>16</sup> In reality King Alfred (844-899) came before King Athlestan (c. 895-939).
- <sup>17</sup> Rauf de Boun, *Le Petit Bruit*, Anglo-Norman Text Society, Plain Text Series 4, ed. Diana B. Tyson (London, Birkbeck College, 1987), p. 12.
- <sup>18</sup> Diana B. Tyson, 'Problem People in the *Petit Bruit* by Rauf de Boun', *Journal of Medieval History*, 16 (1990), 351-61 (352). As Andrew Breeze has shown, some of the confusion is obviously due to scribal error, and can be cleared up by textual emendation: 'British Places and Rauf de Boun's *Bruit*', *The Journal of Literary Onomastics* 1 (2011), 6-8.
- <sup>19</sup> Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales and the Description of Wales*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1978), p. 233.
- <sup>20</sup> See James P. Carley, 'Arthur in English History', in *The Arthur of the English: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Life and Literature*, ed. W. R. J. Barron (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), pp. 47-58 (pp. 50-2).
- <sup>21</sup> Michael Prestwich, *Edward I* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 481, p. 485, p. 493.
- <sup>22</sup> A.D. Carr, *Medieval Wales* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1995), p. 65.
- <sup>23</sup> Santayana, *Life of Reason*, 5 vols (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), I, p. 284.

<sup>24</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 185

<sup>25</sup> Bodganow, *Version Post-Vulgate*, I, pp. 1-97.

<sup>26</sup> Bodganow, *Version Post-Vulgate*, I, p. 51.

<sup>27</sup> R. Trachsler, *Clôtures du cycle arthurien: étude et textes* (Geneva: Droz, 1996), p. 215.