

The Divided Text of *Eliduc*: Why Guildelüec Takes the Veil

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I first became aware that Marie's *Eliduc* had an interesting plot when I attended the Arthurian conference at Cardiff in September, 1988. A participant wound up our meeting with a paper which excited a lively interest, entitled 'Eliduc: why does Guildelüec take the veil?'¹ I made some notes on a scrap of paper during the discussion, and inserted it in my copy of Marie's lays, meaning to return to the text later.

But that opportunity never arose during the years of my investigation into problem plots, because I needed very detailed texts, and groups of texts using the same plot, for my analysis. *Eliduc* was a short text and it did not have 'sister' texts using the same plot (it shared story elements with other texts, but not – essentially – its plot). It was when I came to look for remaining texts relevant to my investigation that it was exciting to find *Eliduc*, with the questions asked by the Cardiff Arthurians still on their scrap of paper in my copy of Marie.

Yes, why does Eliduc's wife take the veil, making it possible for her husband to marry his princess? The Cardiff Arthurians found the compliance of the two female characters amazing, while also noting that it is the wife who steals the show. They found it astonishing, too, that Eliduc returns home with the princess, when he has a wife waiting there. They saw the lay as Tristan in reverse, and commented that the love potion is not used in this text: perhaps Marie's views on the importance of love in relation to marriage were the reason? We have a wronged Guildelüec rather than a wronged Mark, and Marie's mind would be particularly caught by the loving wife, free of jealousy. The Arthurians were also interested in the significance of the death and resurrection of the young woman and another question was, 'What about the murder of the sailor who spoke truth in the storm? Why is Eliduc never taken to task for this?'

The most interesting questions for me were those concerned with motivation – why does Guildelüec take the veil? And why does Eliduc take the princess home when he has a wife waiting there? I was also particularly interested in Marie's treatment of Eliduc, who is never taken to task for his behaviour: why was there this moral gap? Such problems as these can point to the presence of two entirely separate levels of narration in a text, the plot, which has its own amoral agenda unsuspected by the author, and the author's overlay, which would be her treatment of the plot material, adding such things as characterisation and moral themes.

The plot's own agenda would be entirely alien to the author's imaginative vision, knowing nothing of social and moral concerns, and it would be an intrusion from somewhere else in the mind. Yet the author must have been involved in it, unconsciously.

She could have become involved in it upon choosing a borrowed plot, or she could have created it as she contemplated her material at two separate levels of the mind. A narrative of this kind does not have characters as we understand them, but only figures in a narrative which is a sequence of mental rituals arranged to meet solipsistic inner needs. There would be no distance between the plot and those identified with it, and no concern with the world beyond the mind. I must add that these texts which I call divided are among the most powerful and popular we have, combining as they do deep forces in the mind with conscious art. Audiences enjoy the imperfect combination as a whole entity – it is evidently important to them – and there is really only a problem for the critic.

Returning to the murder of the sailor, the sailor asks the questions uppermost in our minds as we sail back to Eliduc's wife with the eloping couple.

Un des escipres hautement
S'est escriez: 'Quei faimes nus?
Sire, ça einz avez od vus
Cele par ki nus perissums.
Jamés a tere ne vendrums!
Femme leale espuse avez
E sus celë autre en menez
Cuntre Deu e cuntre la lei,
Cuntre dreiture e cuntre fei . . . vv. 830-38 ²

[Then one of the sailors cried aloud: 'What are we doing? Lord, you have with you the woman who will cause us to perish. We shall never make land! You have a loyal wife and now with this other woman you offend God and his law, righteousness and the faith . . .']

Burgess and Busby, p.121] ³

The sailor adds that the princess should be cast into the sea so that the rest of them might be saved, but he himself is to be the character cast into the sea.

I was interested that both Eliduc's deed and his impunity remain untouched by the warm treatment which Marie gives to the female characters in the chapel scene, so I began my analysis with the hypothesis that the murder of the sailor, and Eliduc's not being taken to task for it, would be details adopted unaltered from Marie's sources. Such material could not be altered if it played vital roles in one of the deep, ritual plots I have been investigating, because such material would be beyond the conscious control of any author. What Marie could do instead would be to develop the roles of the female characters, which would make both the plot and her overlay more powerful, and infuse the text with regret, forgiveness and love.

I was also interested in the fact that the sailor who speaks truth is actually wrong in saying that the storm is divine retribution for Eliduc's crime: after Eliduc has cast him into the sea, he himself takes over the helm and the ship arrives safely at its destination, where – to add another conundrum – the truth is going to become known anyway.

As for the problem of Guildelüec's motivation, whatever course of action she might decide to take, why does she not give Eliduc a piece of her mind first? A loving wife can also be an angry one. But, in one of my ritual plots, she would not have a mind of her own, being only a figure in a sequence of rituals. Meanwhile, her taking the veil might be important in these rituals: it could give permission for the marriage, and the monastic theme at the end of the plot could play a purification role.

More interesting than her taking the veil is her visit to the chapel, where she restores Guilliadun and hears her account of what has happened to her; in this scene the two women seem to take over the story. This part of the plot evidently caught Marie's mind, but it could also have been present in the form we have it in her original sources, playing an important ritual role in the plot. The princess utters the confession to Guildelüec which Eliduc should have made: she puts into words the wrong which Eliduc has done, in the form of a complaint about how it has affected *her*:

‘Mut ai amé un chevalier,
Eliduc le bon soudeer;
Ensemble od lui m'en amena.
Peché ad fet k'il m'enginna:
Femme ot espuse; nel me dist
Në unques semblant ne m'en fist.
Quant de sa femme oï parler,
De duel kë oi m'estuet paumer.
Vileinement descunseillee
M'ad en autre tere laisee;
Trahi[e] m'ad, ne sai quei deit . . .’

vv. 1073-83

[‘I deeply loved a knight, Eliduc, the good soldier, who took me away with him. He sinned when he tricked me, for he has a wife and never told me or even gave any indication of this, and so, when I heard about his wife, my grief caused me to faint. He has wickedly left me forlorn in another land and has betrayed me. I do not know what to think . . .’ Ibid, p.124]

Guildelüec receives what the princess says in total love for both the lovers, and without a hint of jealousy or resentment. Nor is she angry over Eliduc's squalid behaviour towards Guilliadun:

‘Bele,’ la dame li respunt,
‘N’ad rien vivant en tut le munt
Que joie li feïst aveir;
Ceo vus peot hum dire pur veir.
Il quide ke vus seez morte,
A merveille se descunforte.
Chescun jur vus ad regardee;
Bien quid qu’il vus trova pasmee.

Jo sui sa spuse vereiment,
Mut ai pur lui mun quor dolent;
Pur la dolur quë il menot
Saveir voleie u il alot:
Aprés lui vienc, si vus trovai.
Que vive estes grant joie en ai;
Ensemble od mei vus en merrai
E a vostre ami vus rendrai.
Del tut le voil quite clamer,
E si ferai mun chef veler.’

vv. 1085-1102

[‘Fair one,’ the lady replied, ‘nothing on earth could make him more joyful, you may be assured of that, for he thinks you are dead and is terribly distressed. He has come to look at you every day, but I assume he found you in a swoon. Truly, I am his wife and my heart grieves for him. Because of the grief he displayed, I wanted to know where he went, and came after him and found you. I am overjoyed that you are alive and shall take you with me and return you to your beloved. I shall set him free completely and take the veil.’ Ibid, p.125]

Guidelüec steals the show with her magnanimity, while I think the narrative loses in drama because its characters do not show the normal range of human feelings. Guilliadun might be expected to return to the kingdom she is heir to, at this point, while Eliduc receives no dressing down from either lady and shows no contrition. He seems to think his grief and his love for his princess are sufficient, and this is also the opinion of his wife.

The overlay in a divided text, where the plot ‘underneath’ has its own, unconscious concerns, is often anaemic in this way. The plot takes precedence, while the overlay is dependent, and the author’s treatment cannot radically change the plot.

The problems of motivation in *Eliduc* congregate around the events of the voyage home and Guidelüec’s reception of the couple, and in these scenes I can discern hidden detail, because I have come across similar material elsewhere in these strange plots. There is the accusation, a typical feature of these plots, which in this text is given to the sailor, and there is the scene of confession and absolution, another typical feature, which in this text is given to the two female characters.

In these plots, such devices as the accusation and the confession and absolution are statements of a crime which lies at the heart of the plot. The crime is typically referred to explicitly for what it is, with some kind of displacement, as in ‘Eliduc’, where it is the sailor who is called a traitor (‘fel traitre’, v. 844) and the princess who speaks the words of the confession, saying how Eliduc has betrayed her (‘Trahi[e] m’ad’, v.1083).

In these ritual plots, it does not matter which character utters the accusation or confession: the necessary words simply need to be spoken. In 'Eliduc', the confession is made by Guilliadun, an innocent character, while the wrongdoer makes no confession. A sailor is given the role of accuser, and is then, as a consequence, condemned as a traitor by the wrongdoer. The absolution, meanwhile, does not require a priest, but it does apparently require a particular character. In 'Eliduc' this is the first wife, who is the character with the power to give absolution in terms of the narrative. Hence the need for the eloping couple to sail straight to Eliduc's home, where he has a wife waiting there. In the Ywain texts (which include Chrétien's *Yvain*), I find that the most appropriate character, the Fountain Lady, makes the accusation, denouncing Ywain as a thief and a traitor, and that Ywain clears an assistant, rather than himself, of the charge of treason.⁴ In Marie's *Lanval*, I find that Arthur's queen makes the accusation and becomes a villain so that she can be used in rituals to remove a sense of treachery; her accusation is followed by a trial at which the Fairy Mistress refutes the accusation.⁵ In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I find a confession made by Sir Gawain himself, at the Green Chapel, and an absolution given by the Green Knight, the character with the power to give it in terms of the narrative.⁶ Every plot is different, while the principles by which these plots work emerge gradually as more and more examples are studied.

The crime concerned is no more than a state of mind to be dispelled, for the plot, with its apparent purpose of bringing about a sense of sovereignty, can be haunted by a sense of theft or treachery which the plot is organised to dispel (it appears to be the familiar situation of desire opposed by fear and irrational guilt). So the crime is named in the accusation (expressed in terms of the overlay, 'now with this other woman you offend God') and a sequence of rituals follows, designed to eliminate the accusation in one way or another. Among these may be the removal of the accuser or a performance of confession and absolution: both, in fact, appear in 'Eliduc'.

Only the wife can apparently give permission for the marriage and grant forgiveness for betrayal, but the plot is not chiefly concerned with the betrayal of the wife: the plot is concerned chiefly with the betrayal of the king in the earlier moves yet to be discussed. This king figure disappears from the plot in the scenes beginning with the elopement, and the lady takes over from him, it seems, appearing more as a queen figure. Yet, it is as a wife that she can direct attention away from the heinous nature of the crime, that the hero has stolen sovereignty from the king.

In my chart showing the ritual plot of 'Eliduc' as I see it, the material just discussed has been placed in the final moves, 5 and 6. In the all-important moves 1 to 4, the hero figure takes well-defended steps towards what appears to be sovereignty, using the two king figures and the princess. This hero is the saviour of kings from their enemies, and therefore much loved by them.

In his home kingdom, in Move 1, he is the trusted servant of the king, and guardian of the land in the king's absence, but he sets out for a second kingdom, leaving his wife behind. In the second kingdom (Move 2), he is in a new move, where there is a second king and lady, and he saves this king from an invader who is a rejected suitor trying to seize the

princess. While engaged in fighting the invader, and finally capturing him, the hero wins the princess unknown to the king.

The act of defeating the invader while also becoming an invader is a common type of manoeuvre in these plots: the idea of invasion is cancelled out by using the procedure of reversal; here the reversal and the winning take place simultaneously. The hero also returns the invader's stolen booty to the king, while he himself is engaged in theft, and this is another ritual reversal I have found in many texts.

In Move 3, the hero is about to return to the first kingdom, because he says the first king needs his help against his enemies, and he refuses the second king's offer of a large share of his possessions. He also refuses to take the princess away with him, because this would betray his faith to her father. After making these statements of loyalty, the hero asks the princess to name the day when he is to come and take her away.

In Move 4, the hero arrives back in the first kingdom to reconcile the king with his enemies, in preparation for the theft of the princess. It is now clear that the hero needs these kings more than they need him. He needs two kings for the construction of a sovereignty plot in which he can travel from one kingdom to the other strategically, saving these kings from threats to their kingdoms as a continuing cover for his steps towards sovereignty.

So I propose the 6-move plot I give in my chart for the text of 'Eliduc'. The plot resorts to urgent uses of ritual devices in Moves 5 and 6. In Move 5, the accusation and its elimination are used, and we have an explanation for the contradiction concerning the accusation, where divine retribution fails to materialise: the accusation is set up only to be ritually eliminated. The accuser is eliminated as a traitor, and the hero steers the ship safely home, proving the accuser wrong that God was punishing him.

In Moves 5 and 6, we have what the Arthurians rightly called the death and resurrection of the young woman. The princess's death at the moment of the accusation is one of the devices used to eliminate the accusation: her burial rites take the place of the theft, as do the hero's plans to glorify the chapel and take holy orders. The hero's wife is now set up by the plot to give permission for the marriage by restoring the princess and announcing that she will take the veil. The princess performs a confession to the wife, not in terms of the theft, which belongs to the plot, but in terms of the deception, which belongs to the overlay, although she refers to Eliduc's betrayal ('trahi[e] m'ad'). The wife gives absolution. This ritual is among the most powerful available to the ritual plots. The marriage then takes place, purified by the final promise of an eventual retirement to monastic life.

Chart for the Defended Sovereignty Plot of *Eliduc*

The Author's Overlay

The Plot

<p>1. Eliduc serves his king, the king of Brittany, loyally and the king's land is his to guard ('Il aveit la tere a garder', v. 34). He also loves his wife. But the envy of others causes him to cross the sea to Logres, and he leaves his wife behind. ll. 1-88</p>	<p>Move 1 <i>The hero leaves home, where he has loved his wife and loyally served the king.</i></p> <p>The first of four steps in which the hero seizes sovereignty under cover of saving the king from threats to his kingdom. He refuses to take anything from the king.</p>
<p>2. The king of Logres has an only child, a princess, and the kingdom is invaded by a suitor whom the king has turned down. Eliduc joins the war against this invader and captures men carrying away booty; everything is returned to the king. So the king loves Eliduc, but Eliduc and the princess, Guilliadun, fall in love secretly. She does not know he is married. Meanwhile, Eliduc captures the invader and frees the whole land. He is greatly valued for his prowess, wisdom and generosity. ll. 89-549</p>	<p>Move 2 <i>He arrives in another kingdom, where he saves its king from an invader who is trying to seize its princess. He returns all the stolen booty he captures to the king. He has freed the kingdom, stolen nothing and the king loves him.</i></p> <p><i>At the same time he wins the princess secretly.</i></p> <p>Step Two (in second kingdom).</p>
<p>3. Eliduc is sent for by the king of Brittany, who needs help against his enemies and has exiled the envious traitors. The king of Logres tries to get him to stay, offering a large share of his wealth, but Eliduc accepts very little and asks permission to see his daughter. Guilliadun begs him to take her with him, but he belongs by oath to her father for the time being. Guilliadun then fixes a day when he must return to take her away and they exchange rings. ll. 550-702</p>	<p>Move 3 <i>The hero says he has to return home, where the first king needs his help against his enemies. He refuses the second king's offer of a large share of his possessions. He also refuses to take the princess with him, because this would betray his faith to the king. At the same time, he has the princess fix a day when he must return and take her away.</i></p> <p>Step Three (in second kingdom).</p>
<p>4. Eliduc returns home and his king is joyful, but he tells them all that the king of Logres has great need of him. He is in a hurry to leave, but reconciles the king with all his enemies before he does so, and makes peace with his wife. Those travelling with him are sworn to secrecy. ll. 703-758</p>	<p>Move 4 <i>The business of this return to the first kingdom is to reconcile the king with his enemies, in preparation for the hero's theft of the princess .</i></p> <p><i>He then goes back in secret to the second kingdom to fetch the princess.</i></p> <p>Step Four (in first kingdom).</p>
<p>5. On his arrival in Logres, Eliduc contacts his princess and they secretly board ship. They are nearly shipwrecked in a storm and a sailor tells</p>	<p>Move 5 <i>An accusation that the hero has offended against God's law is set up and dealt with. He denounces</i></p>

<p>Eliduc that this is just retribution for his offence against God. Guilliadun overhears that he is married and swoons, appearing lifeless. Eliduc kills the sailor and steers the ship safely to land. He takes Guilliadun's body to a hermit's chapel for burial. He will take counsel as to how he can glorify the chapel as an abbey or church, and after he buries Guilliadun he will take holy orders. On his return to his wife, she sees only his sadness. ll. 759-978</p>	<p><i>the accuser as a traitor and eliminates him. Then, by steering the ship safely home, he proves the accuser wrong that God is punishing him. The princess's burial rites take the place of the theft, and so do the hero's plans to glorify the chapel and take holy orders.</i></p> <p>Step Five: the Accusation and its elimination.</p>
<p>6.</p> <p>Eliduc's wife, Guildelüec, has him followed to the chapel, when he visits it to pray, and learns of his lamentations there. She knows they cannot be for the hermit, who has died. When Eliduc leaves the hermitage to talk to the king, she visits the chapel herself, sees the maiden and understands. Observing a weasel's use of a herb, she revives the maiden. Guilliadun tells her that Eliduc had trickled her, and her grief on hearing he was married caused her to faint. Guildelüec takes the veil, and is given her own foundation by Eliduc. After a happy marriage, the second wife joins the first and Eliduc goes into a monastery to serve Almighty God. ll. 979-1184</p>	<p>Move 6</p> <p><i>The hero's wife gives permission for the marriage by restoring the princess and announcing that she will take the veil. The princess performs a confession to the wife (not of the theft but of the overlay's version of it, the deception) and the wife's acceptance of it is the hero's absolution. The marriage is also purified by its eventual termination in favour of the monastic life.</i></p> <p>Step Six: Confession and Absolution, and the marriage can take place.</p>

¹ Richard Spencer, 'Eliduc: why does Guildelüec take the veil?' a paper given to the International Arthurian Society in September, 1988. See also Richard Spencer, 'Some Thoughts on Marriage and Love in Marie de France's *Eliduc*', in *The Cardiff Experience: Essays in Honour of Richard Griffiths*, Cardiff: The University College, Department of French, 1986, pp. 1-8.

² I have used A. Ewert, ed., *Marie de France: Lais*, with introduction and bibliography by Glyn S. Burgess, Bristol Classical Press, 1995.

³ Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby, trans, *The Lais of Marie de France*, Penguin Books, 1986.

⁴ See Anne Wilson, *The Magical Quest*, Manchester University Press, 1988, Chapter 1, and *Plots and Powers*, University Press of Florida, pp. 19-21.

⁵ See Anne Wilson, *Plots and Powers*, pp. 47-50, 159-160.

⁶ See Anne Wilson, *The Magical Quest*, Chapter 6.

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