

# A Middle English Lyric Fragment in the Red Book of Ossory

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THE *Red Book of Ossory* is a MS containing a variety of 14th to 16th century material, chiefly official documents. Our interest here is the section containing sixty devotional poems in Latin, twelve of them accompanied by a line or two of contemporary popular songs in French and English. The vernacular fragments evidently indicated the tune to which the new lyrics were to be sung. The Latin composition (or most of it) was apparently the work of Richard Ledrede, an English-born Franciscan whose long episcopacy (1317—1360) must surely have been the most contentious in the history of this diocese. His purpose was to provide his clergy with suitable song material, “lest their throats and mouths, consecrated to God, be polluted by songs which are revelrous, filthy and secular” (*cantilensis teatralibus, turpibus et secularibus*), as his prefatory colophon puts it.

The Latin poems and snatches of vernacular songs, hitherto considered in a desultory way, have now been treated at length in two major studies, both published in 1974. They are *The Lyrics of the Red Book of Ossory* by Richard L. Greene, published in Oxford for the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, and *The Latin Poems of Richard Ledrede, O.F.M.* by Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., published in Toronto by the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies.

Greene concentrates on the literary aspect, referring only briefly to Ledrede as “a man of ability as well as of force and fanaticism,” adding: “It appears likely that before his death he became mentally deranged” (p. ix). Colledge presents not only the poems and translations, but also the career and personality of their author, placing the “chronicle of a troubled and unhappy life” (p. xxv) in its historical context. Attempting to make a balanced assessment of a man who “had a great propensity for making enemies” (p. xxxiv), and whom those enemies portrayed as “ambitious, scheming, avaricious and merciless,” he concludes that Ledrede, though “lacking dignity and moderation, [and] by turns crafty and

overbearing" (p. lviii), was a man "of considerable intellectual attainments and ability" (p. xvi), "had a deep devotion to the Christian mysteries, . . . was a patron of the arts, . . . and . . . was profoundly responsive to the Church's heritage of devotional verse" (p. lviii). The charge of insanity is dismissed as "tendentious and improbable" (p. xxv).

Of the twelve vernacular song-fragments, "mayde in the moore lay" is quite unique in two respects: 1. It is "the only instance in which another text of the English and French poem quoted is known to survive elsewhere."<sup>1</sup> 2. Interpretation of its text has made it a test-case in the criticism of medieval literature; "in particular [it] has become a *cause célèbre* in the continuing dispute over the value of patristic exegesis."<sup>2</sup>

Greene has called this little poem (four stanzas of which are found in MS Rawlinson D.913 at the Bodleian in Oxford) "one of the most haunting lyrics of all the Middle Ages."<sup>3</sup> It is also one of the most controversial, having been "singled out for analysis by those interested in understanding and demonstrating the symbolic nature of medieval literature and in seeing how an ostensibly secular work is essentially and actually religious."<sup>4</sup> The possibility of such an interpretation had however been rejected by Greene in 1952, because

in its own time it was . . . definitely and explicitly regarded as secular and indeed profane . . . The song of the maid in the moor . . . was popular enough in Kilkenny in the mid-fourteenth century to require an antidote in the view of the stern bishop who could write such singable Latin verses. It was no religious allegory; it was one of the *cantilenae teatrales, turpes et seculares* which would pollute the throats of the local clergy.<sup>5</sup>

This would seem to be a decisive blow to "allegorist" criticism. However, in 1971 Joseph Harris argued that Greene had misunderstood Ledrede's words in the colophon. The fragments of vernacular song, says Harris, "represent

<sup>1</sup>Colledge, *op.cit.*, p.xxxvi

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Harris, "'Maiden in the Moor Lay' and the Medieval Magdalene Tradition," *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, I (1974), 59—87: quot. p.60.

<sup>3</sup>*Op.cit.*, p.x

<sup>4</sup>Edmund Reiss, "The Art of the Middle English Lyric: Essays in Criticism" (Athens, Georgia, 1972), p.99.

<sup>5</sup>"The Maid of the Moor" in the Red Book of Ossory. "Speculum," XXVII, 504—06.

the effort of some clerk . . . to find *notae convenientes*"; and he argues convincingly that if Ledrede had thought of "mayde yn the moore lay" as one of the despised secular songs he wished his clergy to avoid he would hardly have included it in his manuscript.<sup>6</sup>

But what of Greene's view that *Peperit virgo*, the Latin nativity song which follows the English lyric fragment, "not only follows the line and stanza pattern of "The Maid of the Moor," but preserves much of its characteristic lilt"?<sup>7</sup> Harris is convinced that "the fragments . . . are not in any sense the "models" of the Latin poems"; he attempts to refute Greene's thesis by drawing on the evidence used to support it: "a reading of the vernacular lines and their Latin counterparts shows that in many cases the Latin metrical schemes are not particularly well-suited to render the tunes implied by the vernacular scraps — a situation that . . . [suggests] the vernacular lines were products of a desultory search for fitting tunes than if the Latin poems were written in intentional imitation of the meter and stanza of the vernacular poems . . . ."<sup>8</sup>

Readers of "Peperit virgo" and "Maiden in the mor lay" will have noticed that while the two stanza forms are similar, they are far from identical . . . , though it may be conceded that in this case the clerk supplying a tune has found one that appears likely to have been *convenientior* than some of the others. We must conclude that the juxtaposition of the first line of "Maiden in the mor lay" . . . with "Peperit virgo" in the *Red Book of Ossory* tells us only that a clerk thought the tune of the English song would be suitable for the new Latin poem. It tells us nothing more. It does not solve or even limit the question of the interpretation of the poem, and it does not make a "religious" reading, even an allegorical reading, impossible, or a "secular" reading necessary.

In his 1974 study cited above, Greene launched a vigorous counter-attack. Reiterating his view that the fragments were indeed intended as models, he again

<sup>6</sup>Op.cit., p.62.

<sup>7</sup>"Speculum," cit. supra., pp. 505-06. Illustrated in "Lyrics," p.x.

<sup>8</sup>Op.cit., pp.62-63.

illustrates the very close formal similarity of "Maiden in the Moor Lay" and *Peperit virgo*, insisting that "if only we knew the tune we should have no trouble at all in making it serve for both."<sup>10</sup> He rejects Harris's "attempt to force the Maid of the Moor into the patristic strait-jacket," and scoffs at his interpretation of the Maid herself as suggestive of Mary Magdalene: "if there was one thing Magdalene was not, it was a maiden."<sup>11</sup> As supplementary evidence "for the secular and popular character of the song," Greene draws on an article by Siegfried Wenzel, who found among the MSS of Worcester Cathedral Library a 14th century Latin sermon containing quotations from "The Maid of the Moor" and referring to it as *canticus* and *carole*, meaning probably "a dance song and . . . a secular song." Wenzel concluded that "we can be sure that he [the preacher] did not identify the puzzling maiden with the Blessed Virgin or with St. Mary Magdalene."<sup>12</sup> Colledge, however, dismisses Wenzel's discovery as inconclusive if not trite: "The quotation is garbled, and its context suggests little of the significance Wenzel seeks to attach to it."<sup>13</sup> The debate seems to end in stalemate.

Is any resolution or compromise possible? Two basic matters are in dispute, namely, the implications of Ledrede's preface and the relationship between "mayde yn the moore lay" and *Peperit virgo*,

Everyone agrees with Greene that the colophon "shows us that the [Latin] songs result from the widespread impulse of churchmen to replace irreligious songs with edifying ones,"<sup>14</sup> but in identifying the songs Ledrede considered indecent with the vernacular fragments preserved in RBO, Greene has gone further than the evidence warrants. As Harris points out, "The Nota does imply that the religious poems are to replace some secular songs";<sup>15</sup> but it does not say which ones. The words *provideant sibi de notis convenientibus* ("let them provide themselves with suitable tunes") suggest that the composition of the Latin was anterior to and independent of the choice of the vernacular songs as melodies. Thus Colledge's conclusion: "The old idea, that these lost poems were the very songs Ledrede objected to when

<sup>10</sup>"Lyrics," p.x.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.* p.xii.

<sup>12</sup>"The Moor Maiden — A Contemporary View," "Speculum," XLIX (1974), 69-74: quot. pp.72-73.

<sup>13</sup>*Op.cit.*, p.xxxviii.

<sup>14</sup>"Lyrics," p.iii.

<sup>15</sup>*Op.cit.*, pp.61-62.

sung by his clergy, is mere conjecture.”<sup>16</sup> We are not told that the clergy *were* singing these songs; the bishop simply wrote: *Episcopus Ossoriensis fecit istas cantilenas pro vicariis . . . sacerdotibus et clericis suis . . . ne guttura eorum . . . pollutantur . . .* The operative word here is *ne* “lest” implying that Ledrede’s action was prohibitive in a pre-emptive sense, that is, the Latin songs were a preventive rather than a remedial measure. Alternatively, we may take the *ne*-structure less literally and assume, as Colledge does,<sup>17</sup> that they *were* remedial or reformatory, i.e. replacements for songs already in use. In either circumstance we have to agree with Harris that “there is no reason to assume that . . . the vernacular fragments represent offensive songs,”<sup>18</sup> and reject Greene’s somewhat hasty conclusion to the contrary.

On the other hand, Greene’s argument about the formal relationship of “Maiden in the Moor Lay” to *Peperit virgo*, seems more tenable than that of Harris, who attributes close and consistent correspondences between the two to lucky chance. If Colledge (concurring for once with Greene) is correct in saying that “Previous editors have not utilized the stanza-structure of *Peperit virgo* . . . to interpret aright the abbreviated copy in the Rawlinson manuscript,”<sup>19</sup> then we must pre-suppose an intention on Ledrede’s part to model the Latin hymn on the English song (even though his words imply that he composed independently, without reference to any model: should we attempt to resolve this paradox by resort to a theory of “subliminal” influence?). This means that the bishop did not find “The Moor-Maiden” objectionable, and did not have it in mind when he spoke of “filthy and secular songs.” But what could these latter have been?

They were, I think, the kind of romantic love-songs (the product of high medieval court culture) which became commonplace after the 12th century, even in the practice of the liturgy:

The irreverance of daily religious services was almost abounded. Choristers, when chanting mass, did not scruple to sing the words of profane songs . . . : *baisez-moi, rouges nez* [“Kiss me,” “red noses”].<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Op.cit., p.xxxix.

<sup>17</sup>pp. xli, xxxix.

<sup>18</sup>Op.cit., p.63.

<sup>19</sup>p.26,n.

<sup>20</sup>Johan Huizinga, “The Waning of the Middle Ages” (New York, 1954), p.159.

"How common such a state of affairs was we do not know," says Colledge, "since the records never tell us about clerics who did not sing dirty songs."<sup>21</sup> Clerics incurred ecclesiastical strictures for engaging in "unseemly" dancing and singing; since "such happenings are associated with feasts of the Church"<sup>22</sup> it is significant that Ledrede's hymns were to be sung "on important feasts and celebrations" (*in magnis festis et solaciis*) — chiefly Christmas and Easter, to judge from their major themes.<sup>23</sup>

We must allow that the tunes to which Ledrede was writing words were probably associated . . . not only with profane verses but also with the dances for which such words and music served as accompaniment, and that it is not improbable that his clerics would, with perfect propriety, dance to the old melodies, sung with his Latin verses.<sup>24</sup>

The foregoing suggests that "there were those who reprehended Tänzer and Tänzerinnen; but theirs . . . was not the opinion of the majority."<sup>25</sup> By implication that liberal majority included Ledrede, a man whose historical "image" is one of extreme conservatism. We might well expect him to share the opinion of his English contemporary, Richard Rolle, that among "synness of the mouth" is to "syng seculere sanges and lufe them . . . [and] to syng mare for louyng of men that of God." On the other hand, we should not necessarily expect him to condemn the generality of popular music (and even the *carole* or ring-dance), or agree that by "mynstrælcie . . . a man is stired the more to delices of luxurie." Indeed, Colledge seems to imply that the Franciscan Ledrede had more in common with Chaucer's friar, who "had a mery note" and knew all the popular ballads, than with the censorious parson of the *Canterbury Tales*. Colledge sees him as a man who "delighted in the music of his times";<sup>26</sup> the vernacular fragments

tell us that Ledrede had the wide acquaintance with English and French songs, not all of them perhaps, over-decorous, which may be presumed in any man of his times.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup>p. xl.

<sup>22</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>Cf. Greene, "Lyrics," p.v; Colledge, p.xli.

<sup>24</sup>Colledge, p.liv.

<sup>25</sup>*ibid.*, p.lvi.

<sup>26</sup>*ibid.*, p.lviii.

<sup>27</sup>*ibid.*, p.xxxv.

It is well to remember, in this connection, that the Franciscans were closely associated with the "spiritualization" of worldly forms, with the effort to transmute the frivolous into Christian truth (*vanitatem ad veritatem reducere*)<sup>28</sup> In *Peperit virgo*, we appear to have a good example of such alchemy in the musical adaptation of a popular song to religious purposes.

What then of the critical controversy to which "The Maid" has given rise. Our conclusions imply that an "allegorist" interpretation is possible; objection to that approach must be an objection to its principle, i.e. the assumption that a medieval writer "must set forth somehow the Christian scheme of redemption with its concomitant view of charity as the supreme virtue" (Dorothy Betherum's somewhat sceptical summary); and the inflexibility of criticism which, in E. T. Donaldson's words, "imposes a categorical imperative upon the critic to operate in a certain way regardless of how the poem is telling him to [re-]act."

The problem, of course, is that the same poem "tells" different people to react in different ways. The enigmatic moor-maiden, upon whom so many different *personae* have been transposed, may be protean enough to assume another — that of Lorelei beckoning commentators onto the rocks. Our review of criticism tells us perhaps less about her than it does about Richard Ledrede. The historical material so thoroughly sifted by Colledge, together with the evidence of the songs and vernacular fragments of RBO, argues for a reappraisal of his character, and invites us to make a significant modification of the impression made by the Kyteler affair.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Colledge, pp.xxxiv-xxxv and passim.

## OLD KILKENNY REVIEW

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