

Translated by Nigel Bryant

CHRÉTIEN'S EQUAL

RAOUL DE HOUDENC
Complete Works



ARTHURIAN STUDIES XC

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RAOUL DE HOUDENC:
COMPLETE WORKS

Translated by
Nigel Bryant

D. S. BREWER

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Introduction

Raoul de Houdenc, composing his work in the opening decades of the thirteenth century, was viewed by at least one contemporary as a poet of the highest order. In his *Tournament of the Antichrist* (c. 1235) Huon de Méry, quoting repeatedly from Raoul's work, famously ranked him alongside Chrétien de Troyes, saying that 'no mouth in Christendom ever uttered such fine words as they'.¹ In the following decades references to Raoul's romances make it clear, too, that the compilers of the *Suite du Merlin* and the *Livre d'Artus* deemed his work 'worthy of memory on a par with the Prose *Lancelot* ... [and] placed Raoul de Houdenc and Chrétien de Troyes on the same level in terms of authority'.²

His surviving works are unusually varied. They are all in verse and in the same form (octosyllabic rhyming couplets), but their content could not be more diverse: they include an impassioned tract about the values of knighthood (*The Romance of the Wings*), two superbly crafted Arthurian romances (*Meraugis of Portlesgue* and *The Avenging of Raguidel*), a swingeing polemic against declining standards especially among the bourgeoisie (*The Burgess's Burgeoning Blight*), and a prototype of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in two allegories about journeys to Hell and Paradise.

His authorship of one of the romances, *The Avenging of Raguidel*, and of the second of the allegories, *The Path to Paradise*, has been much debated. In the case of *Raguidel*, as I shall discuss in due course, I think it overwhelmingly likely that the 'Raoul' who names himself as the author twice in the poem is Raoul de Houdenc; in the case of *Paradise*, however, it is most unlikely – bordering on impossible – that Raoul, although he may have been involved in its conception, was its composer.

But it might be said that the question of authorship matters little, as we know nothing for certain about him anyway. His social status is unclear: was he a cleric?; a wandering minstrel? A literal reading might suggest the latter when, in his dreamed visit to Hell, he tells Pilate and Beelzebub that 'I've been in Saxony, Champagne, Burgundy, Lombardy and England. I've roamed lands far and wide.'³ It soon becomes clear

¹ *Li Tornoimenz Antecrist*, ed. G. Wimmer (Marburg, 1888), vv. 3536–7.

² Nathalie Koble, 'À double détente: Raoul de Houdenc et la mémoire du roman', in *Raoul de Houdenc et les Routes Noveles de la Fiction 1200–1235*, ed. Sébastien Douchet (Aix-en-Provence, 2018), pp. 47, 54 (my translation).

³ Below, p. 210.

with Raoul, however, that what he says should often not be taken at face value, and that the 'I' in those phrases is not a literal 'I'. The multiple versions of the place-name 'Houdenc' in the manuscripts make it hard to be sure even where he was from. Most scholars, however, have accepted the suggestion, made in a detailed and persuasive article by Anthime Fourrier,⁴ that Raoul de Houdenc was the '*Radulfus de Hosdenc, miles*' cited in documents as the nephew of Pierre de Houdenc, otherwise known as Pierre le Chantre, the Cantor at Notre Dame in Paris and a celebrated teacher at the cathedral school. If that is so, then the documents would suggest that 'Houdenc' was Hodenc-en-Bray, just to the west of Beauvais, and that Raoul was a landless younger son and a poor knight ('*miles*').⁵

The connection with Pierre le Chantre makes good sense in relation to certain passages in Raoul's *Dream of Hell*, for 'uncle' Pierre's targets in his own works – the widely read *Verbum abbreviatum* (c. 1190) – had been precisely those attacked by Raoul: notably drunkenness, usurers and lawyers. And if Raoul was indeed a poor knight rather than a minstrel, it makes sense that he eulogises the order of knighthood in *The Romance of the Wings* and is upset that some knights have 'no respect for their name' (i.e. their title, 'knight'). On the other hand, it is striking that he then insists that the people he feels can put them straight are

heralds, story-tellers, fiddle-players. Raoul de Houdenc deems them proven touchstones for assessing chivalry... To put it simply, there's not the slightest doubt that they're the ones who know everything.⁶

Is this contradiction explained, perhaps, by Raoul having had a foot in both camps? Was he both knight and minstrel? As Keith Busby has argued, 'Fourrier's identification of Raoul as a *miles* is not necessarily a stumbling-block, as it is quite conceivable that a knight of slender means might be employed as a minstrel.'⁷ If he was indeed a 'poor knight', then his passionate insistence (throughout his works) on the crucial importance of Largesse might well be explained by the fact that he 'makes his living as a wordsmith',⁸ dependent therefore on the generosity of patrons and audiences who, as he laments in *The*

⁴ 'Raoul de Houdenc – est-ce lui?', in *Mélanges de linguistique romane et de philologie médiévale offerts à M. Maurice Delbouille*, vol. II, ed. M. Tyssens (Gembloux, 1964), pp. 165–93.

⁵ This is discussed in detail in Gilles Roussineau's introduction to his edition of *La Vengeance Raguidel* (Geneva, 2006), pp. 31–7.

⁶ Below, p. 38.

⁷ *Le Roman des Eles and L'Ordene de Chevalerie*, ed. K. Busby (Amsterdam / Philadelphia, 1983), p. 62.

⁸ p. 199.

Burgess's Burgeoning Blight, are becoming unwilling to give and are 'not interested in hearing any new stuff'.⁹

Then again, if this enigmatic figure was a minstrel-knight it may seem odd that he disparages the idea that 'Fortune, in the face of all reason, should ever make a knight both knight and minstrel'. If that ever happened, he says, then such a knight would bear a very strange shield. It would be

divided in two: one half knavery of a tincture vile, emblazoned with four mockers rampant and a tongue with five blades bordering the edges and the top; the other half is shame emblazoned with a lion composed of empty threats. Such a shield hangs from his neck wherever he goes... Everyone should set his heart against having such a shield... God save all knights from it.¹⁰

But it depends what he means by 'minstrel' here. He thoroughly disapproves of some kinds of entertainer, clearly feeling that some are discourteous and go too far:

It's a mark of courtesy in a knight to take pleasure in hearing songs and music and minstrels' various entertainments. At the same time, if he hears them say a word against a lady he should be sure to make them change their tune.¹¹

He is fond of using the word '*lecheors*' in relation to less refined, less reputable jongleurs and poetasters, as opposed perhaps to minstrels attached to a court or patron. And he doesn't care for composers of '*sirventes*', those

composers of parody and satire; I'll tell you what their stuff amounts to: nothing! Their work, their words, are valueless. Provocative contrarians like them never say what they truly think; if they've any real wisdom or genuine insight they keep it to themselves.¹²

What Raoul cares about is 'composing work on matter of lasting worth'.¹³ But if that sounds pious or po-faced, nothing could be further from Raoul. What characterises all of Raoul's work is a humour which sometimes borders on the outrageous, to the extent that one could certainly conjecture – so much about Raoul's character being ambiguous and elusive – that the grotesque shield destined for the knight-minstrel is a joke at his own expense, 'a piece

⁹ p. 199.

¹⁰ p. 43.

¹¹ p. 41.

¹² p. 47.

¹³ p. 47.

of self-irony, Raoul jesting to the audience about the impossibility of his own position'.¹⁴ In his often outspoken way Raoul is devoting his time and effort, he says, to composing 'fine verse and entertaining tales' – or, to translate the line more literally, 'fine words with which he tells things to make people laugh'.¹⁵ And most readers will probably agree that his work is richly entertaining. At the same time, the underlying intent is deep and serious.

The Dream of Hell

A reader might expect this to be especially the case in his *Dream of Hell*. Raoul has been long and widely recognised as a pioneer, the first author to compose allegorical works in the vernacular, his shorter poems being 'the earliest in Old French to be taken up entirely with allegory and personification';¹⁶ and he is seen as highly influential, his dream framework for *Le Songe d'Enfer* presaging, says Mireille Demaules, *The Romance of the Rose* and some hundred other works in the following centuries.¹⁷ But two points need to be stressed.

Firstly, as Mark Burde has discussed in detail, Raoul was drawing on several centuries of conventions of satire and moralistic commentary in Latin, both religious and profane.¹⁸ Raoul's depiction of the infernal feast and its grotesque dishes is a bravura piece and outrageously, blackly comic, but Burde points out that there was nothing new about the idea of such an assembly of demons: it was a long-standing inversion of the council of the gods in Virgil or Homer; and a diabolical marriage feast had been described in a Latin sermon by Étienne de Tournai, dating from around 1200, a decade or so before Raoul's *Dream*, in which Cruelty cuts the meat and the cooks of Hell create a sauce of pepper signifying wrath, garlic arrogance, green herbs envy and salt stupidity. Burde adds that this doesn't mean that Raoul had read that particular sermon, but 'that the *Dream* adopts a satirical style typical of certain clerical writings seems incontestable'.¹⁹

Secondly, 'satirical style' are key words, because *The Dream of Hell* is not really an allegory at all. Critical efforts to put this and the other works of this elusive poet into categories are ill-advised. Marylène Possamaï

¹⁴ Busby, *Le Roman des Eles and L'Ordene de Chevalerie*, p. 63.

¹⁵ p. 199.

¹⁶ Charles Livingston, 'Li Dis Raoul Hosdaing', *The Romanic Review*, vol. XIII (1922), p. 294.

¹⁷ Mireille Demaules, 'Construction et déconstruction de l'allégorie dans le *Songe d'Enfer* de Raoul de Houdenc', in Douchet (ed.), *Raoul de Houdenc et les Routes Noveles de la Fiction 1200–1235*, pp. 73–82.

¹⁸ Mark Burde, 'Le *Songe d'Enfer* et ses antécédents latins', in *ibid.*, pp. 23–32.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26 (my translation).

has well observed that Raoul has no edifying or didactic aim in his *Dream*: there is no '*hors texte*', no hidden, higher meaning.²⁰ She points out that, far from the narrator (and his audience) gaining knowledge and enlightenment from his 'pilgrimage' to Hell, it is he who repeatedly enlightens those he meets along the way, as he reports the state of the contemporary world to personifications such as Avarice and Trickery – much to their delight – and impresses Hazard, Sharp and Shaft by having twigged the truth about the gambling practices of a sect of heretics and the dishonesty of Parisian taverners. In fact the whole poem, far from recounting an otherworld journey, is about the here and now, the world surrounding Raoul: Hell, if it is anywhere, is in the present. In the words of Carine Giovénal,

Hell is not a geographical place that can be reached either by the flesh-and-blood traveller or by the soul of the dead... [but is] in us, in our actions and transgressions, not in an improbable subterranean location. Raoul's journey to Hell is therefore a purely imaginary one... and describes a path which, for the author, would quite simply not exist.²¹

In one respect he makes Hell an actual *improvement* on the world:

... because I tell you, I saw a custom in Hell which I think is rather fine: they have an open-door policy. Anyone who wants can eat in Hell – the door is shut to no one. It's a custom that's out of fashion in France, where everyone bars entry – no one gets in without greasing palms, as we all know all too well. But in Hell they eat with the door wide open – very commendable, I say!²²

The irony is plain, the satire blatant. Raoul has spent most of the poem in a similar vein, lambasting the grasping meanness and sordid dishonesty of the world. He's thoroughly dragged into the sordidness when he gets blind drunk in a fight in Vile-Tavern and then makes his inebriated way to 'Castle Brothel, where many others go and lodge. Shame, the daughter of Sin, came gleefully to welcome me, along with Thievery, Midnight's son, who dwells there in that house.'²³ He goes on to tell us that

²⁰ Marylène Possamai, '*Le Songe d'Enfer* de Raoul de Houdenc, un monde sens dessus-dessous', in *ibid.*, pp. 83–94.

²¹ Carine Giovénal, '*Le Songe d'Enfer* de Raoul de Houdenc: voie de l'au-delà ou chemin d'ici-bas?', *Questes* 22 (November 2011), pp. 65–77 (my translation).

²² Below, pp. 209–10.

²³ p. 209.

Thievery... took me aside and asked me how the brothers of his Order were faring in our land. I was straight with him and pulled no punches, telling him the king is dealing with them in no uncertain manner, exacting proper justice, so they're in a pretty bad way. That's what I told him, and I knew it to be true.²⁴

It is hard to hear this, especially the thick laying-on of 'I knew it to be true', as anything other than the grimmest irony – and the 'Raoul' who's saying it is drunk.

At the same time, when he describes his venturing to such seamy dives as Vile-Tavern and Castle Brothel, it might sound as if Raoul is a moralist flagellating himself for his own sins: is he confessing his own tendency to booze and fornicate? That would be too literal a reading of the first person. Being framed as a dream, the 'I' is not exactly 'I'; moreover, adopting the persona of a major transgressor – who is heartily welcomed in Hell and rewarded with forty devil-coins for his reading of a book in which are listed all the sins of 'foolish minstrels' – avoids any hint of sanctimony and frees him to point his satirical and critical finger wherever he likes.²⁵

And point it he does: what he rails against particularly is the demise of generosity in the world, as he tells Avarice that

Largesse is on her last legs, in such a wretched state that the rich won't give her house-room.²⁶

For unlike Dante in his more developed journey to Hell, Raoul is less concerned with referencing specific individuals than he is with satirising types. In so doing he gives some striking images of his time. It's a time when, as he makes clear in *The Burgess's Burgeoning Blight*, 'Honour and Shame have swapped places... Largesse has battled with Avarice but has given up the fight,'²⁷ and everyone is on the make. In *The Dream of Hell* he has a dig particularly at the treachery of the people of Poitou – 'in Poitou, Trickery is justiciar, lady and viscountess!'²⁸ – and at the keepers of Parisian taverns, even naming a few specific taverners notorious for their dishonesty. All around him he sees drunkenness (in a splendid passage involving Inebria and her son Knockemback, the English earn special mention), and the deception and rapacity of Fleece and his godchild Take. And Raoul goes

²⁴ p. 209.

²⁵ See Françoise Laurent, 'Point de vue et mise en récit dans le *Songe d'Enfer* et le *Dit de Raoul de Houdenc*', in Douchet (ed.), *Raoul de Houdenc et les Routes Noveles de la Fiction 1200–1235*, pp. 139–49.

²⁶ Below, p. 205.

²⁷ p. 200.

²⁸ p. 205.

especially to town in his treatment of usurers: they are cooked and devoured in Hell, cooking being the right thing for them because

they were dripping with the fat acquired from other people's assets... But I can assure you, in the Hell refectory they don't consider that dish a special treat: ... they're served with usurers constantly – it's a staple of Hell, winter and summer.²⁹

Also served to the devils in Hell are various dishes of heretics, never specifically named except for a thinly disguised reference to Amaury de Chartres (whose followers Raoul attacks specifically not for their heresy but for their dishonesty when gambling!). And most savage and blackly comic of all, perhaps, is Raoul's description of the culinary arts applied in Hell in the cooking of crooked lawyers:

the cooks made from them an entremets unheard-of in any court – it's not a dish that's caught on yet... They grabbed hold of the lawyers' tongues and tore them from their mouths, and then fried them in their seething abuse of justice ... Coated with a basketful of crumbled oaths and salted and peppered with lies, ... the tongues of crooked lawyers aren't despised in Hell: they're positively adored.³⁰

It is very noticeable that the episode in Hell itself is devoted almost entirely to this grotesque feast, and that the greater part of the poem is about Raoul's journey through the world to get there. One could indeed go further and say that even the scene in Hell has little or nothing to do with an otherworld at all, and is in fact an extension of his vision of the world about him. After all, those being devoured in the Hell-feast had previously been populating his world; so, adding to the tricksters, thieves and drunks he's met along the way, he's now referencing a nightmare world around him filled with burning heretics, crooked lawyers, shark-like usurers, looting mercenaries, and whores and dissolutes murdering their unwanted babies.

Allegory, personification, satire

During his journey to get to this feast in Hell, all Raoul's encounters are with personifications of dishonesty, avarice, drunkenness. Personification is central, too, to *The Romance of the Wings*, in which Largesse and Courtesy are referred to in the manner of demigods; and it comes especially to the fore in *The Burgess's Burgeoning Blight*, where it is hard not to use multiple capital letters in passages such as

²⁹ p. 211.

³⁰ p. 212.

Honour and Shame have swapped places... Malice waxes and Goodness wanes, Largesse is dying and Shame thrives, Treachery dances and Cunning laughs, Charity wails and Compassion weeps, Joy is cast down and Sorrow prevails...³¹

In this impassioned poem Raoul depicts the battle between Avarice and Largesse as a contest between two knights, in which

Largesse is now disarmed, while Avarice is armed forbiddingly, and charging faster than the wind! What's its horse's name? Its name is Treachery...³²

It's as if Raoul sees these personifications, all qualities and aspects of the human psyche, as being, like certain gods from the classical pantheon, abroad and functioning around him; it's as if he sees a battle raging for domination of the zeitgeist in a changing world. For it's a world, says Raoul, in which

everything's back to front. Fortune's turned Her wheel, and in the process the world's turned upside-down... [and] going to pot – everywhere you look it's full of those who've given up the battle! Even in the worst of times I've never seen such distress and dearth as the current dearth of largesse, which does nothing to enhance anyone's prowess. For the wealthy, as is all too plain, prowess is a problem! You'll never find it in any bishop or priest.³³

And the real problem may well be

the bourgeois! The townsfolk are always at it – working their wiles and bullying tricks as they go about their business. For in the townsman, the burges, is a burgeoning growth called Take...³⁴

At the heart of Raoul's work is a response to the rise of the bourgeoisie and the destabilisation of courtly culture and its values.³⁵ But there is nothing allegorical about Raoul's expression of his alarm: for all the personification, it is satire of the most overt and blatant kind.

³¹ p. 200.

³² pp. 201–2.

³³ p. 202.

³⁴ p. 200.

³⁵ Philippe Leblond has stressed the expansion of a cash economy as a factor in changing Raoul's contemporary world. 'The increased use of money as a means of exchange could aid the propagation of avarice.' Philippe Leblond, 'Le faux-semblant d'un discours élogieux: la largesse chez Raoul de Houdenc', in Douchet (ed.), *Raoul de Houdenc et les Routes Noveles de la Fiction 1200–1235*, pp. 173–83 (my translation of quote from p. 173).

Meraugis

Ironically, if any of his work could be deemed allegorical, it may well not be *The Romance of the Wings* or *The Dream of Hell* but his Arthurian romances. Keith Busby has eloquently argued that *The Romance of the Wings*, with its warning of declining standards in knighthood and its appeal to ‘all courteous men to be mindful of the wings of Courtesy and Largesse’ if they are to soar to the heights of prowess, is the key to the meaning of the Arthurian romance *Meraugis of Portlesgue*.³⁶ Busby points to the

widespread and frequent use of intertextuality, where the vocabulary, phrasing and imagery of one poem are reflected in the other ... The romance is full of characters, incidents and pronouncements that seem to illustrate the courtly and knightly dialectic around which the shorter poem is built... [The] characters in *Meraugis* are living examples of the virtues and vices detailed in *The Romance of the Wings*. In this respect at least, *Meraugis* is an allegorical romance with people instead of personifications, whilst from another point of view *The Romance of the Wings* is a codification of the courtly and knightly ethic which governs the behaviour of the characters in *Meraugis*.³⁷

This is especially the case, perhaps, in Raoul’s treatment of his central theme of love. In *The Romance of the Wings*, love is the seventh and last plume on the wing of Courtesy, and the most important of all, says Raoul, because

love makes a knight’s virtues blaze and shine: whatever qualities he’s endowed with, once love is added to them it will drive out any unworthy trait. And if Love finds him to be courteous, it makes him even more so than before; if generous, he’ll be generous more than ever; he becomes outstanding in all his qualities.³⁸

But crucially it’s

the plume that insists that all knights in their loving should love sincerely – for their love to be other than sincere is not courteous at all.³⁹

That being so, it’s significant that central to *Meraugis* is the rivalry between the two dear friends, Meraugis and Gervain, for the love of Lidoine, and the question of which love is more true and worthy: Meraugis’s love

³⁶ Keith Busby, ‘Le Roman des Eles as guide to the sens of *Meraugis de Portlesgue*’, in *The Spirit of the Court*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Robert A. Taylor (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 79–89.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 82, 89.

³⁸ Below, p. 45.

³⁹ p. 44.

for her courtesy and other noble qualities, or Gervais's love based exclusively on her beauty. It is no surprise that the decision favours the former; what may be surprising is that the decision is made by Queen Guinevere and her ladies, who clear the hall of the king and his knights and take over the court to pass their judgement:

Each of the barons spoke his mind in turn. They'd been deliberating for quite a while when the queen appeared and asked to take charge. The king told her to keep quiet but she wouldn't! She fiercely insisted, saying:

'My lord king, everyone knows that jurisdiction in matters of love is mine! It's no business of yours!'⁴⁰

This is much to the disgust of Gervais, who is scornful of female authority and of their decision, telling Guinevere:

'Our battle's not going to stop for a king who's handed authority to his queen! ... Everything's back to front around here... It's not good enough! I object, and rightly so: justice in this court is all cockeyed!'⁴¹

That power in *Meraugis* should be handed to the females is, however, less surprising given that the romance starts with its focus not on Meraugis but on Lidoine, and not only with a description of her outstanding beauty and courtesy but also of her wisdom and ability. Her very name is significant and turns her into a semi-allegorical figure – Lidoine sounds distinctly like '*l'idoine*', *idoine* implying competence as well as suitability – and on her father's death she rules alone. As Carine Giovinetti has noted, this makes her unlike other Arthurian women – and very unlike, for instance, her near-namesake Laudine in Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain* (and the nearness of name is surely not accidental on Raoul's part); for Chrétien's Laudine is urged by her counsellors to remarry the same day she is widowed, a woman being thought incapable of ruling and protecting her lands. Of Lidoine we are told instead that

maidens came from far and wide, from Cornwall and from England, specifically to see her and to hear her speak: everyone indeed made that delightful pilgrimage, for such was her acuity that all who conversed with her, no matter how courtly they might be, left with their courtliness enhanced if they took her words on board. She was deemed then to be the noblest of all damsels.⁴²

⁴⁰ p. 58.

⁴¹ p. 61.

⁴² p. 48.

Lidoine's wisdom, and her ability to instruct and to be a model for others, runs counter to the Church's notion that women should keep quiet. Giovénal has also observed that Lidoine is very different from two other women in Chrétien: unlike Guinevere in *Lancelot* she has no wish to see two knights fighting over her; and unlike Énide in *Erec and Enide* it is Lidoine who calls the shots in choosing to accompany a knight on his quest.⁴³ It is Lidoine, too, who sets the terms over how much love she will grant Meraugis, announcing before the court:

'This kiss will be the only consolation he'll receive from me till a year from today. Until a year has passed I'll give no more. But I'd have him understand that if in the meantime he does what a knight should do for his beloved, he may well have more affection from me a year from now.'⁴⁴

Crucially, however, neither she nor Meraugis – neither the woman nor the man – is in command when they take this first kiss: real power lies with and is wielded by Love, as first

that kiss suffused him – in the most delightful way – with all the qualities required of a good knight⁴⁵

and then

a dart of love was loosed from him and passed into Lidoine; at the moment of the kiss he sent it flying to her heart: her teeth were no shield against that love-shaft! – God! What was it baited with, that dart of love that shot within her? – I don't know, but her heart swallowed it as surely as a fish does the hook. And when the heart says 'I love!' there's nothing to be done: love you must!⁴⁶

Love is a mighty demigod indeed, and Meraugis's love for Lidoine makes her 'my strength, my banner, my lance, my treasure, my shield, my prowess, my standing and renown'.⁴⁷ In short, love, exactly as propounded by *The Romance of the Wings*, helps give him everything he requires to be a knight. And because of his love for her (and having been healed of his physical wounds by another lady – Odilis – notable for her 'courtesy'), he is able to rise from his bed at Easter having been gravely wounded on Palm Sunday. Quasi-religious overtones are apparent,

⁴³ Carine Giovénal, 'Héroïne ambiguë, personnage novateur – Lidoine dans *Meraugis de Portlesgues* de Raoul de Houdenc', in Douchet (ed.), *Raoul de Houdenc et les Routes Noveles de la Fiction 1200–1235*, pp. 121–35.

⁴⁴ Below, p. 61.

⁴⁵ p. 61.

⁴⁶ p. 62.

⁴⁷ p. 108.

too, when Meraugis and Gorvain, pre-battle, don't 'bow to the East to ask pardon for their sins; no, they bowed and offered prayers in the direction of Lidoine!';⁴⁸ and later, when Meraugis yearns for the mercy of Paradise it is because

'Lidoine would surely join me – otherwise it wouldn't be true that all who dwell in Paradise have all they desire! Isn't that so? Most certainly: God has no Paradise to offer me without her.'⁴⁹

It is notable, too, that in *Raguidel* the lady of Gaudestroit, obsessed with love for Gawain and bent on being entombed with him, arranges a guillotine-like contraption, designed to behead him, in a specially built and exquisitely beautiful chapel, complete with an altar and holy relics encased in gold. 'And the place that housed this altar was whiter than the lily: the damsel had created a little paradise.'⁵⁰ But it has nothing to do with God: it is a sacred place devoted to her love. And returning to *Meraugis*: when, near the story's end, the lovers are finally reunited, Lidoine is urged to cross herself before she sees him,

which she did, more than a hundred times straight off!

and then, when they see each other and their eyes meet,

they came to one another with arms outstretched, in the sight of all, and kissed each other a hundred times and then a hundred more, locked in their embrace, unable to speak. All she could say was 'My dear love' and his only reply was 'My beloved'.⁵¹

The hundred crosses are matched by the hundred kisses and then surpassed by the hundred more, and this, their final meeting in the romance, is sealed with the words 'my love' and 'my beloved' like 'Amens' in a religious rite.

Love being of such paramount and near-sacred importance, it is little wonder that when Meraugis at the court of King Amangon⁵² wins the right to marry off all the damsels exactly as he sees fit, he does so by defeating an arrogant knight who had previously 'lorded it over all, his overweening might so great that he kept marrying off the ladies exactly as he pleased – at any time, regardless of the king's wishes'.⁵³ Unlike

⁴⁸ p. 55.

⁴⁹ p. 93.

⁵⁰ p. 151.

⁵¹ pp. 119–20.

⁵² Significantly, perhaps, this is the name of the maiden-abuser in the *Elucidation* Prologue of *The Story of the Grail*.

⁵³ Below, p. 79.

him, Meraugis is most concerned to avoid any unsuitable match; and he proceeds to marry his companion dwarf to the girl he loves and who is especially suitable for him, as the dwarf says:

'She's unlike any other in the kingdom – no one else would have asked for her, and I'll tell you why: she's even flatter-nosed than I, and squatter, and she's hunch-backed! As a jester and his stick should always go together, so should she and I, I'd say! ... This lady is quite free of pride, and she's of noble lineage – and I'm from pretty good stock myself: my father was related to the king!'⁵⁴

Suitability is the key. This notion is established at the very start of *Meraugis* when, at the lady of Landemore's tournament, the prize of a swan and a kiss from the damsel are awarded to 'Caulas, a most valiant knight...', and it was appropriate that he [won] – not because there weren't better knights to choose from, but because the damsel loved him and he loved her'.⁵⁵ And if anyone is suited to Meraugis it is Lidoine. Just as Meraugis loved her for her courtesy rather than for her looks, so she is still stricken with love for him despite the fact that, lying sick and grievously wounded, he is 'such an ugly sight: he wasn't improved one bit by his shaven head!'⁵⁶ They are, in short, the perfect couple. Their true, honest and courteous love is the very antithesis of what is encountered by Sir Gawain and Meraugis on the Nameless Isle, where the lady of the island's partner is decided by strength alone (a male equivalent of female beauty?), one partner replacing the next in mortal combat and forced to live a trapped and 'wretched existence... without joy or purpose'⁵⁷ with this jealous and possessive woman. There on the Nameless Isle, love is an irrelevance.

If Lidoine, with her name (effectively an epithet, *l'idoine*) implying competence and suitability, is a semi-allegorical figure representing all positive attributes of courtesy, wisdom and fittingness in love, the arch-villain of *Meraugis* is likewise semi-allegorical. He is certainly given an epithet rather than a name: he is the Dread Knight, '*l'Outredouté*' ('the exceptionally feared'); and he is the embodiment of wickedness, the very opposite of all the qualities promoted in *The Romance of the Wings*. He is, significantly, 'a right good figure on the outside', just as, in *The Dream of Hell*, appearances are anything but reliable in the cases of Fleece, 'so polite and charming', of Take, 'a handsome figure ... strong

⁵⁴ p. 79.

⁵⁵ p. 51.

⁵⁶ p. 109.

⁵⁷ p. 88.

and strapping', and of Robbery who 'had a very pleasant manner'. But 'in his crazed way he [the Dread Knight] wants wrong to triumph over right' and uses his unquestionable prowess to that end; he is the epitome of pride and cruelty, and significantly dies unshriven.

Raoul's serious, semi-allegorical intent in this romance is clear from the very outset. His prologue to *Meraugis* is an invitation to the listener to consider the quality of the tale in terms of the value of the material. Keith Busby has importantly pointed to this prologue being a deliberate echo of Chrétien de Troyes' prologue to *Erec and Enide*, but having a very different emphasis: whereas for Chrétien 'the worth of the end result is dependent on the manner of treatment, ... Raoul underlines the importance of choosing a *conte* with the potential for adequately serving the poet's purposes'.⁵⁸ In a significantly titled study, *Les Jeux littéraires de Raoul de Houdenc*, Marc Loison has examined in detail the 'literary games' played by Raoul throughout his works, describing him as a parodist who constantly reworks and refashions the texts around him,⁵⁹ and in the case of *Meraugis* Busby discusses 'the heavy concentration of elements derived from Chrétien', the 'invited comparison between Lidoine and Enide', and the modification of images in Chrétien 'to fit his own context'.⁶⁰

That final phrase – 'to fit his own context' – is especially noteworthy. The influence of Chrétien de Troyes is everywhere apparent in Raoul's Arthurian romances, *Meraugis* and *The Avenging of Raguidel*, as is his respect for his forebear. He references *Yvain*, *Cligés* and *Erec*; he borrows motifs and narrative strands – the Sword of the Strange Belt from *Perceval*, for example, along with the dead knight on the boat, broken lance still embedded in his body, from the *First Continuation*. But Raoul does not imitate Chrétien or the continuator: he is not carrying on any kind of tradition.⁶¹ He has his own take on the Arthurian world and his own

⁵⁸ Keith Busby, 'Chrétien de Troyes and Raoul de Houdenc – "Romancing the *conte*"', *French Forum*, 16, 2 (May 1991), pp. 136, 137.

⁵⁹ Marc Loison, *Les Jeux littéraires de Raoul de Houdenc* (Paris, 2014).

⁶⁰ Busby, 'Romancing the *conte*', p. 139.

⁶¹ In his excellent foreword to the English edition of Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann's landmark study *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance*, Keith Busby stresses that Raoul, along with other post-Chrétien romancers, should not be thought of as less distinguished 'epigones' of the 'master'. 'Epigones,' he writes, 'work within the tradition of the master, aware of his role in determining the nature of that tradition... The Chrétien-epigones are generally neither slavish nor untalented imitators, as was assumed without justification by earlier scholars... [When they take up the challenge of following in his wake] it is as an act of creative reception, using and modifying the framework provided by Chrétien with a view to producing something to the taste of their particular audience.' B. Schmolke-Hasselmann, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance* (Cambridge, 1998), p. xii.

distinctive qualities. It might be argued, indeed, that he has all Chrétien's gift for verse, and has his colour and his wit, but actually surpasses him in pace and rhythm, avoiding Chrétien's sometimes excessive monologues and dubious structures: the structuring and pacing of both *Meraugis* and *Raguidel* are masterly. And Raoul has his own very distinct intent.⁶²

Raguidel

That intent, and his modification of elements found in Chrétien, are seen especially in his depiction of Sir Gawain in *The Avenging of Raguidel*. Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann has pointed out how Chrétien's Gawain was 'the incarnation of chivalric and courtly virtues, the first and the best, in short the very sun of chivalry' and quotes the passage in *Yvain* in which he is described as 'supreme among knights... He lends brilliance to chivalry just like the sun in the morning.' She then argues that 'a literary figure with exclusively exemplary characteristics is in danger of being boring' and that 'in subsequent generations both authors and their public began to react in some measure against the excessive and therefore rather tedious idealization of Gawain'.⁶³ It would be unfair to suggest that Chrétien himself had failed to be aware of the danger; indeed, in his last romance, *Perceval – the Story of the Grail*, he has the adventures and attitudes of the accomplished, supremely admired Gawain – especially his repeated susceptibility to a pretty face – lead him into endless difficulties and pointless strife and deflect him from

⁶² A notable example of Raoul deliberately echoing Chrétien but with his own intent is the passage shortly before *Meraugis* and *Gorvain* convene at Arthur's court to settle the dispute about their love of Lidoine. While they are waiting for the day to come, Raoul tells us that 'they roamed everywhere in search of adventures, and encountered many and responded vigorously... They suffered much toil and hardship far and wide, but always triumphed over all wherever they went. They vanquished and captured more than forty knights in this time' (p. 57). This bears a resonant resemblance to a watershed moment in Chrétien's *Story of the Grail*, where 'Perceval wanders for five whole years without setting foot in a church or worshipping God or His cross... That's not to say that he stopped seeking deeds of chivalry: he went in search of strange, daunting, gruelling adventures, and encountered so many that he tested himself well. In five years he sent sixty fine knights as prisoners to King Arthur's court' (*The Complete Story of the Grail*, trans. Bryant [Woodbridge, 2015], p. 54). A sharp listener would have heard the echo of Chrétien and understood that, just as the naïve and wayward Perceval was about to have a revelatory meeting with his hermit uncle and realise that he'd forgotten what mattered and was most sacred in life, so Raoul was about to have *Meraugis* and *Gorvain* offered enlightenment by the ladies in the Court of Love. Raoul might thus be seen as giving Love the same status in his romance as Chrétien had given God in his.

⁶³ Schmolke-Hasselmann, op. cit., pp. 104–5.

worthy missions. At every turn it's possible to see doubt and irony in Chrétien's view of the courtly knight. Strikingly, however, the first continuator of the unfinished *Perceval* was quite unaware of this. He failed to pick up the questioning tone of Chrétien's poem and eulogises Gawain without reservation.

Raoul most certainly does not. He had already, in *Meraugis*, given Gawain the soubriquet 'the Knight of the Damsels' with a clear implication that he is 'one for the ladies'. Given the importance of love in defining courtesy in *The Romance of the Wings*, with its demand that all knights in their loving should love sincerely, Raoul would clearly take a dim view of 'the courtly but uncommitted lover who seems incapable of *amors de cuer* (love from the heart) ... [and] could only ever flirt'.⁶⁴ In *Meraugis* Raoul ironically has him forced to spend a year of lonely misery on the Nameless Isle, a prisoner of a woman he doesn't love. In *Raguidel* he gives him even harsher treatment. Having won the heart of the lady of Gaudestrois by his performance at her tournament, Gawain rides away without so much as a word; he almost pays the price for this by losing his head, the love-crazed lady having devised the guillotine in her specially created chapel with which she plans to behead him and then herself,

'and when we were both dead we'd be placed together in that tomb, face to face, lips to lips. That way he'd be my partner in death when I cannot have him in life!'⁶⁵

This he manages to avoid by pretending to be the less-than-ideal knight Sir Kay (a painful pretence for Gawain who always makes a proud point of concealing his name from no one). But Raoul has more fitting punishment lined up for him, as 'Amor makes him fall head over heels in love with one of the most unworthy female characters in the whole Arthurian romance tradition',⁶⁶ the beautiful but utterly fickle and untrustworthy damsel Ydain. Not only is Gawain made to look clueless and ridiculous; his experience with Ydain turns him into a self-pitying misogynist as he agrees with Kay in abusing women, saying:

'Kay, you're right to doubt them! You cursed them all outright; it was well said: ill fortune to them all! I'm on your side now! I'm a fool, Kay, and you're not wrong: they bring disgrace on everyone!'⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 134–5.

⁶⁵ Below, p. 152.

⁶⁶ Schmolke-Hasselmann, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance*, p. 135.

⁶⁷ Below, p. 180.

Since *The Romance of the Wings* insists that sincere love is essential for knights wishing to excel in courtesy, it is significant that Gawain in *Raguidel* fails not only as a lover but also, in many ways, as a knight. Even more than in Chrétien's *Perceval* he repeatedly forgets his important mission, the avenging of Raguidel, even forgetting to take with him the stump of lance essential for exacting revenge, and endlessly gads about when, as Schmolke-Hasselmann has noted, 'it is part of the code of chivalry for a knight to complete without delay a task that he has been set or that he has taken up voluntarily'.⁶⁸ And when he finally comes to it, he almost makes a total hash of the avenging. Supremely over-confident in his greatness as a knight, when he at last comes face to face with the villain of the piece he decides to trust first in his own prowess, even though he knows the villain wears magic armour and can be beaten only with the broken lance recovered from Raguidel's body:

'What shall I do? It's said I can't harm Guengasoain except with the stump of lance. But God bless me, I'll not use that for the first joust! I'll strike him first with my own lance to see if his armour's as strong as they say!'⁶⁹

His chutzpah is amusingly disastrous. Nearly cloven in two by this magically armed knight, he strikes back with his sword with all his force, but

he was wasting his time – the harder he hit, the higher it bounced. He might as well have tried chopping down Trajan's Column!⁷⁰

And so it is that, with his horse killed beneath him, reduced to tramping after the villain on foot, he is spotted by his companion Yder who declares:

'The finest knight in the world has lost his reputation!'⁷¹

Gawain recovers it by the story's end, but not without then revealing his ability to be pompous. Given charge of disposing of the hand in marriage of the villain's daughter, the power goes to Gawain's head and, forgetting that she and his companion Yder are madly in love, he says with stuffy formality and condescension:

'Come now, Sir Yder! This is too much! Speak no more of this – honestly, it's a foolish and annoying request to make, when the damsel and her land have been given to me: she's wholly mine and

⁶⁸ Schmolke-Hasselmann, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance*, p. 130.

⁶⁹ Below, p. 190.

⁷⁰ p. 190.

⁷¹ p. 191.

it's wholly up to me to guard her honour and guide her future! You'll have to look elsewhere with your marriage plans!'⁷²

Gawain finally gives way and all ends in fine fashion, but Raoul has made his point.

Alienation

Or rather, it's a point, like many others, that he invites his listeners to make for themselves. This is always Raoul's way. The prologue to *Meraugis* is effectively an invitation to his audience to consider the quality of the tale, of the material. At regular intervals, too, the listener is placed in a critical frame of mind by being made constantly aware of the process of composition. Right at the start, as he sets out to describe Lidoine, Raoul says:

I'd like to describe her as beautifully as I can – but she was the loveliest scion that God ever had Nature bring forth, so I'm not sure I'll ever be able to convey her beauty fully.⁷³

And having made the attempt, he says

If she were here now before my eyes I couldn't describe her beauty more exactly.⁷⁴

We are made even more aware of the authorial presence and the creative process in Raoul's frequent self-questioning, such as at the first kiss between Lidoine and Meraugis, where he breaks up his own narration with:

She shot just one glance at him, and love flew into the net.

What net? Which net do you mean?

The eyes.

Can't you call them something better than a net?

No!⁷⁵

And we are not far away from the authorial games played five and a half centuries later in *Jacques le Fataliste* or *Tristram Shandy* when, as Meraugis and Gawain make their escape from the Nameless Island, Raoul interjects:

⁷² p. 196.

⁷³ pp. 47–8.

⁷⁴ p. 48.

⁷⁵ p. 62.