Béroul's Geography and Patronage

A stimulating article by E.M.R. Ditmas in the last number of Reading Medieval Studies discusses Béroul's allusions to Cornwall, in particular with reference to the Norman background in which Béroul's poem belongs.[1] The approach is most illuminating, and much the most fruitful one to take towards the poem, seeing it as the fictional work of a single author who might manipulate or otherwise alter details of the story to suit his own purposes. The following notes, while disagreeing with one or two details of her discussion, will not challenge her main hypothesis: indeed, in one respect, that of Béroul's topographical realism, her conclusions will actually be strengthened.

There are two main parts to her hypothesis: that Béroul, in his allusions to Cornwall, was being realistic and making reference to specific places in the county because he was writing for a local audience who would have understood the references and demanded realism in such matters; and, specifically, that Béroul was writing for the Cardinan family, based at the castle of Restormel, near Lostwithiel in mid-Cornwall. These two hypotheses have, in turn, led her to suggest that all of Béroul's geographical references are to the area near Restormel, within a six-mile radius, or less, of the castle. In particular, this has necessitated the re-location of Béroul's Blanche Lande 'white moor' and Mal Pas 'bad passage', near to Restormel: previous to that, the generally-accepted views had been either that the poet was not thinking of anywhere in particular, or (if one accepted his Cornish references) that he was thinking of the real Cornish places of those names either side of Truro. This re-location is made necessary, within the hypothesis of Béroul's realism, by two apparently unrealistic aspects of the story if one accepts the references as being to the real Cornish places called Malpas and Blanchelande (Ditmas, 55-58). These apparent lapses of realism will be examined shortly, but first it is necessary to note the major obstacle which confronts such a re-location: it is the existence of the real Cornish places with precisely the names that Béroul uses. Not only do they exist, but they are actually near to each other, with Blanchelande approached by the river-crossing there, just as in Béroul's poem (lines 3294-98; Ditmas, 57-58); not only that, but they are adjacent to and, in the case of Malpas, closely associated with, the manor of Moresk with its forest (Béroul's Morrois), a Cornish location which is not in dispute.

This threefold association of the actual Cornish places has to be dismissed as irrelevant if one wishes to say that Béroul was not thinking of the real Blanchelande and Malpas: it must be merely a triple coincidence. As Miss Ditmas says, the two names are known elsewhere. There are in total eight other known instances of the name Malpas in Britain and three or four of Blanchelande, with other instances of both in France; so that, although fairly 'common' as names to the onomast, they are certainly not common enough, in

absolute terms, to make the threefold coincidence easy to dismiss.[2] But there is more to the question than the mere existence of the names; that is their age. As Norman-French place-names in Britain, the probability is that they were given at some date before the year 1200. The manor of Blanchelande first appears in a deed of c.1250, while Malpas, being an unimportant hamlet, is not attested until 1383; but the names are naturally older than their earliest appearances in surviving records, and the general opinion among English place-name workers is that Norman-French names were not given much after the year 1200. Several of the places called Malpas and Blanchelande in Britain actually appear in documents of the twelfth century, while others, like the Cornish ones, are not attested until later. If Béroul was not referring to these Cornish places, are we to suppose that they existed when he wrote, or not? Since they probably belong to the twelfth century, it is likely that they did; but one could examine both possibilities. If they did not yet exist, the coincidence would consist merely in the fact that these two place-names arose, independently of one another but in the relationship that he suggests, adjacent to another of his Cornish locations. Alternatively, as an extremely long shot, one might suppose that the names actually arose in response to Béroul's poem: but that would indicate that local people who knew the poem ignored the poet's supposed locations near Lostwithiel and found the places near Truro plausible enough locations for Béroul's scenes. That would be very contorted however; and since it was the supposed implausibility of the actual Cornish locations that caused Miss Ditmas to look elsewhere, it would be incompatible with her whole approach and can safely be dismissed: in the unlikely event that the names were bestowed in response to the poem, it could be assumed to have happened at the locations, if any, intended by the poet. All in all, then, it is very difficult to envisage circumstances in which the names could have arisen after Béroul composed his poem, either by a remarkable group of coincidences, or as a result of his work, if he was in fact thinking of different locations.

In the more probable event that the real Malpas and Blanchelande already existed when Béroul wrote, one is faced with an even more unlikely hypothesis: if the suggested locations near to Lostwithiel were correct, one would have to suppose that Béroul used the forest of Moresk but ignored places called Malpas and Blanchelande located beside it, yet invented his own places of those names, placing them near to Lostwithiel instead; and that he expected his audience, in their imagination, to do likewise and understand what he intended. That, too, is an unacceptably improbable scheme. Alternatively, one might suppose that he was not thinking of anywhere in particular (either in the vicinity of Lostwithiel or elsewhere), and just used names out of his head, or perhaps because he had come across them in association with Moresk. But that would be at variance with his other, realistic, locations, and would presuppose that Miss Ditmas' primary thesis, of a realistic

and precise setting for his poem in the Cornwall of the twelfth century, was mistaken - which is unlikely to be the case. The only reason for suggesting it would be if there were really something implausible or unrealistic in the events narrated, if they are located at the actual Malpas and Blanchelande; and these supposed implausibilities must now be examined.

The difficulties in accepting the real Cornish places as those which Béroul had in mind are two: certain inconsistencies or improbabilities in the distances and travelling times between some of the places; and the scene of Tristan carrying Iseut across the Mal Pas, with no mention of a boat (Ditmas, 55-56). For the second difficulty, which is illusory, the present writer must take some of the blame, because of an incorrect statement made in an earlier article that 'the rivers at Malpas are not actually fordable, nor can they ever have been'.[3] This statement, based on the appearance of the place at high tide, is simply wrong, and the writer has atoned for it by crossing the river, twice, at low tide (though not with a lady on his back): it is most unpleasant, mainly because of the deep mud, a true mal pas, but perfectly possible. There have, of course, been changes at the site since the twelfth century - notably a slowly-rising sea-level and the deposition of silt (two changes which would work in contrary directions in their effect on the crossing). It is not possible to extrapolate back with certainty, to know the exact nature of the crossing at Béroul's time; but the name alone is sufficient to show that the place could be crossed, though with some unpleasantness, then as now. In addition, the plank bridge mentioned by Iseut (lines 3295-97) would have helped with the crossing.

This puts Béroul's scenes in lines 3563-3980 of the poem into a new light. Miss Ditmas' suggestion that the poet was thinking of some ford in the Luxulyan valley would make the scenes far less vivid or striking: as she says, muddy fords are very common, and were formerly more so, both in Cornwall and elsewhere. Any traveller would have been perfectly familiar with them, and they presented no hazard, especially to the traveller on horseback. A mal pas was something quite different, a serious obstacle on a route: that is exactly what Malpas near Truro would have been in the Middle Ages, and also what Béroul intended his audience to envisage. The exact meaning of Malpas as a place-name is not certain, but it is likely to have indicated a notably treacherous area on a recognised route, where a choice of passages was possible: local knowledge might suggest to the traveller the best way across the area, in the way that Tristan, in his leper's disguise, advises people where to cross. Seen in this light, Béroul's description of the two retinues crossing the mud becomes much more vivid and realistic: he strikingly depicts the nobles and their followers, brightly dressed, all picking their way across the mud-flats at different places, the horses sinking in up to their girths at times. To one who has experienced the crossing the whole passage makes far more sense than if the

poet were thinking of a mere ford on a small stream. The impression, though it cannot be proved, is that Béroul had seen the real Cornish Malpas, knew correctly its distinctive qualities, and had them specifically in mind in writing that section of the poem.

The other supposed difficulty with the real Cornish locations is that of the journeys between the two foci of interest of the poem, at the manors of Lantyan and Moresk. In fact this difficulty is less concerned with the locations of Malpas and Blanchelande than with that of the lovers' forest - an identification which Miss Ditmas rightly accepts without question. The journeys in question are those of the forester to fetch King Mark (from an unnamed residence) when he discovered the lovers asleep in the forest; and Tristan's two journeys from Ogrin's hermitage (implied to be in the forest) to Lantyan, in the exchange of letters which led to the return of Iseut to Mark. Before examining these, it is worth noting instances where Béroul is agreed to have used poetic licence in his geographical references: such as his references to Lantyan as a cité, with paved streets and four thousand people (Ditmas, 45), and in his description of the remarkable journey by Perinis to Snowdonia to fetch Arthur and his retinue, accomplished within two weeks (Ditmas, 62). Another instance of gross poetic exaggeration occurs if Miss Ditmas is right in thinking that Béroul's account of Tristan's leap from the chapel on the cliffs is to be located on the sloping, wooded banks of the River Fowey (this will be examined below); and yet another in the same episode of the attempted execution of the lovers, which is implied to be taking place both near Lantyan (line 1155) and near Tintagel (line 1040), a physical impossibility. It is clear, then, that although his scenes were firmly, and uniquely, set in the Cornish countryside, Béroul was capable of taking liberties with his geographical settings, particularly in the matter of implied relative locations and travelling times, to suit his own poetic purposes. As Miss Ditmas remarked (35), the fitting of a story into a particular local setting might leave loose ends or result in some inconsistencies.

The manor of Moresk is eighteen miles from Lantyan as the crow flies - a good twenty by road. Although it possessed the largest forest in West Cornwall in 1086, it was not a particularly large manor. It covered most of the later parish of St Clement, immediately east of Truro, and in 1086 may also have embraced parts of St Erme parish to the north, and also the small parishes of Merther, St Michael Penkevil and Lamorran just to the south: they are today well wooded, as they were in 1810 and 1600, and the woods that one sees at Malpas today may thus be the direct descendants of Béroul's Forest of Morrois. [4] The exact size of the medieval forest is not known: in 1086 it was described as '200 acres', and this has been interpreted as equivalent to 12,800 modern acres (Ditmas, 57), on the assumption of sixty-four English acres to the Cornish acre, but that is very doubtful. The size of the Cornish acre was not so

rigidly fixed, and in any case the most recent suggestion is that the woodland acreages in the Cornwall Domesday Survey are probably given in English, not Cornish, acres.[5] Whatever the size of the forest (and the additional lands mentioned above would be almost sufficient to accommodate the largest possible size as cited by Miss Ditmas), the manor cannot have extended significantly nearer to Lantyan or Lostwithiel than eighteen miles: there were already in 1086 upwards of a dozen other manors in between, each with its own particular arable, pasture and woodland. It is thus incorrect and misleading to say that Moresk was 'a rather indefinite term' (on the contrary, it was limited and precise), or that its forest 'could probably be seen in the far distance' from Lostwithiel (Ditmas, 57 and 55): it could not possibly have been so. The fact is that in describing the lovers' hide-out as 'two good leagues' from Mark's residence, if we assume that to have been at Lantyan in this episode, Béroul was taking the kind of liberty with the geography that has already been noted above. He covered himself by saying 'I think': Qui, deus bones liues (line 1854).

Similarly with Tristan's exchange of letters: a ride from Moresk to Lantyan and back, forty miles over all, would not be impossible within the course of a single night, particularly for Tristan who was capable of greater feats than ordinary men; but it does stretch the imagination slightly, though not as much as the journey of Perinis to Wales. Perhaps Béroul intended a local audience to gasp in astonishment at Tristan's epic ride. It is worth noting, incidentally, that travel in Cornwall was not as hard in the early middle ages as is often supposed. The spine road down the peninsula (the modern A30) was an ealdan straet, 'old paved way', in A.D. 960; a district as remote as the Meneage had a herepath, 'military road', in A.D. 967; and parishes as out of the way as St Buryan, St Kew and Altarnun possessed bridges by A.D. 939, 963 and 1066 respectively, while there was a grand pont, 'big bridge', at Grampound by the thirteenth century. In Tristan's second journey, Béroul also errs in suggesting that Tristan would have crossed the Blanchelande in riding between Moresk and Lantyan (lines 2652-53): assuming Ogrin's hermitage to be in the forest of Moresk, it would not have been on his route. This is another of the inexactitudes of the sort that occur elsewhere, as already noted. Béroul later, when specifying more exactly, showed that he knew its real location when he described Malpas as un poi deça de la Lande Blanche (line 3298), 'a little this side of Blanchelande', which is exactly correct as a description of their relative locations. The impression is thus that Béroul was aware of the actual geography but was not always concerned to incorporate it with rigid precision: he was probably more interested in the use he could make of the names for the purposes of his story.

Thus it appears that the apparent objections to the identifications of Béroul's Malpas and Blanchelande with the real Cornish places of those names

do not stand up, and that the slight inconsistencies entailed in the identifications are less than the complications involved in rejecting them. In one case, the episode of crossing the Mal Pas, the poem gains in realism and vividness when it is appreciated exactly what sort of place it was that he had in mind. It is worth noting that Blanchelande, at least, was probably not Béroul's own insertion into the story, for it also occurs in the early fragments (c.1170) of Eilhart's Tristrant.[6] There it is made out to be King Mark's hunting-ground, showing a knowledge of the real Cornish manor, which did indeed include an upland chace. It also shows a remarkable agreement with another, quite separate, Cornish folklore tradition, twice attested, that the evil King Teuder used it as a residence, while hunting in one case. In 1086 the administrative centre of the manor was at the farm now called Goodern, and if Cornish folklore thought of it as a royal possession in the distant past, that would explain why Béroul has the parties go there in order to hold the tournament at which Iseult swore her oath. At Goodern there is a Cornish 'round', or curvilinear earthwork, and it was evidently envisaged as the lodge of dark-age Cornish kings; Béroul would most likely have imagined the tournament as taking place on the open ground surrounding it, where the quartz stones gave it the name of Blanchelande, 'white moor'.

The other location which must be examined is that of Tristan's leap. As mentioned above, Béroul is inconsistent in his implications concerning the location of this episode, for immediately after his leap Tristan would have gone to rescue Iseut 'despite all the people of Tintagel' (line 1040), who are thus implied to be attending the proposed execution: yet the leper Ivain, to whom Iseut was given instead of being burnt, is introduced with the words Un malade out en Lancien, 'there was a leper at Lantyan' (line 1155). However, in his description of the spot where Tristan made his famous leap, Béroul is detailed and precise:

Une chapele sor un mont
U coin d'une roche est asise;
Sor mer ert faite, devers bise.
La part que l'en claime chancel
Fu asise sor un moncel;
Outre n'out rien fors la faloise.
Cil mont est plain de pierre atoise;
S'uns escureus de lui sausist,
Si fust il mort, ja n'en garist. (lines 916-924)

. . . . . .

Seignors, une grant pierre lee
Out u mileu de cel rocher; (lines 948-949)

. . . . . .

Tristan saut sus; l'araine ert moble. (line 956)

In other words, the chapel was built on the edge of a sheer slaty cliff which faced north, with the sea at its foot; below there was a large flat stone (called 'Tristan's Leap'), set in a sandy beach. Even a squirrel would have been killed in trying to descend the cliff, though a dog of exceptional ability was able later to repeat Tristan's descent, hurting itself in the process (Aval la roche est avalez, line 1516).

Miss Ditmas, in keeping with her theory that Béroul was locating everything within a few miles of Restormel, has suggested that the poet was thinking of the banks of the River Fowey, near Lantyan (47-48). If this is correct then her main thesis of Béroul's topographical realism is incorrect, for the site disagrees with every one of the precise details supplied by the poet; what is more, an audience near at hand, at Restormel, would have known that, and realised that he was talking nonsense. The passage in question, with its vivid topographical realism, reads like a description of the North Cornish coast around Tintagel, where the dizzy north-facing sea-cliffs, composed of slate, are extremely impressive. To someone of Norman extraction visiting Cornwall in the twelfth century (and Miss Ditmas suggests that Béroul did visit Tintagel), this scenery would have been among the most striking and distinctive things imaginable, and it is not surprising that he should have worked it into his narrative. It is a moot point whether he had an actual place in mind, or was simply using the impression gained on a visit. On the one hand the precision of the description and the citation of the name the Cornish still used for the place (which reads as if derived from Cornish folklore) suggest that he was thinking of a real place. There was probably a chapel on Tintagel headland itself, at the top of the cliff, at the time when Béroul would have visited, and he could even have had it in mind; but to think thus may be to be deceived in precisely the way the poet intended: he could have simply invented the scene in the light of the landscape he had viewed. The place-name detail would have been suggested to him by the fondness in Cornish folklore for place-name stories. We cannot know what place, if any, was in the poet's mind; all that can be said for certain is that the scene, as described, evokes the North Cornish cliffs.

The hypothesis of Béroul's topographical realism can be used in textual criticism: line 3088 reads, in the manuscript, En la lande, soz un larri, 'on the moor, at the foot of a slope'; among various emendations that have been suggested, Reid prefers soz un jarri, 'beneath a holm-oak', though he leaves it an open question.[7] If Béroul visited Cornwall, he might have noticed that there were no holm-oaks there, for they were not introduced until the seventeenth or eighteenth century; but he also mentions un vert jarri, 'a green holm-oak (cudgel)', at line 1260, so he may have thought that the tree could occur in Cornwall. Either way, however, he is unlikely to have thought of it as a moorland tree, for even in Béroul's homeland in Western France it is

hardly that. The reading larri is therefore to be preferred, either retaining soz (which makes perfectly good sense), or emending it to sor.

To sum up this part of the discussion, one could ask how certain it is that Béroul visited Cornwall. In this writer's opinion it is highly likely, though not conclusively proved: that is mainly because of his two most vivid topographical descriptions, of the North-Cornish cliffs and the nature of the crossing at Malpas. Many of his other descriptions of landscape are not necessarily of distinctively Cornish landscape. His knowledge of local conditions and Celtic folklore is also very much in favour of the idea, but theoretically that knowledge could have been obtained at second hand.

The other part of Miss Ditmas' hypothesis is that Béroul was in the patronage of the Cardinan family, influential Cornish land-owners in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. They are a good possibility by reason of their importance within the county, and of their having produced a member, Isolda de Cardinan, who must have been born at around the year 1200; but there are other possibilities, and one of the reasons for preferring that family, Béroul's geographical allusions, is largely illusory. Of the four Cornish places which occur in his poem and of which the identity is not in dispute, only one, Lantyan, is at all near the Cardinan headquarters at Restormel: the other three, Tintagel, Moresk and St Michael's Mount, show that Béroul was by no means restricted to the area near Restormel in his selection of locations. In any case, it is hard to see how the Cardinans would have felt complimented by the allusions to Lantyan, since it was not their manor. The family did, as it happens, hold the manor of Blanchelande, and had done so (under the name of Woderon or Goodern) since before 1086; their tenure of that place (though not as a demesne manor: it was sub-tenanted by another family) could be seen as an additional prop to the idea of their patronage of Béroul - though not, of course, if the identification of the two Blanchelandes, Béroul's and the real one, is denied.

There is another aspect of the question which should not be overlooked. In the second half of the twelfth century the manor of Lantyan itself was held by the most important man in the whole country after the king - Richard de Lucy, chief justiciar to King Henry II. Moreover, he held it in demesne, which meant that he had a special interest in it and would have been likely to reside there if he visited Cornwall.[8] Not only that, but he also had a close interest in the other main focus of interest in Béroul's poem, the area round Truro (Moresk, Malpas and Blanchelande), for it was in de Lucy's manor of Kenwyn that the Borough of Truro was founded during his lifetime.[9] (It could well have been as a direct result of the founding of the borough that its approach route, crossing the river at Malpas, and thus the place-name itself, arose.) This coincidence of two interests, occurring in both Béroul's poem

and de Lucy's Cornish holdings, is very striking, though not, of course, conclusive. In the opinion of the present writer, de Lucy is much the most likely candidate for a patron of Béroul, if one with Cornish connections is considered probable on other grounds. His patronage would, however, entail a fairly early date for the composition of the poem, since he died in 1179. (Thereafter his estate was held only briefly by successive heirs, or cared for by others during their minority, so that his heirs are not very likely candidates.) In fact, recent authorities seem content to contemplate such a date, or earlier, so that is no obstacle.[10] One or two apparent anachronisms in the text as it stands could either have been added later, or can be explained on other grounds.[11] However, there is no certainty in such questions, and even Richard de Lucy can only be suggested as a possible patron of the poet; as mentioned above, there are other potential candidates as well, including the Cardinan family favoured by Miss Ditmas. All in all, students of Béroul's poem have every reason to be grateful to her for her thoughtful study, and for raising such intriguing questions.

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NOTES

1. E.M.R. Ditmas, 'Béroul the minstrel', Reading Medieval Studies, 8, 1982, 34-74.

2. For the other British occurrences of the names, see O.J. Padel, 'The Cornish background of the Tristan stories', Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies, 1, 1981, 53-81 (60-61, notes 28, 29); for the French instances, see A. Vincent, Toponymie de la France, Brussels 1937, pp.212, 214, and J. Loth, in Revue celtique, 33, 1912, 276.

3. Padel, 61.

4. For the extent of the manor in 1337, including tenements mainly in St Clement and St Erme parishes, see P.L. Hull, The Caption of Seisin of the Duchy of Cornwall, 1337 (Devon and Cornwall Record Society, n.s. 17: Exeter 1971), pp.73-9.

5. I am grateful to Dr. O. Rackham for this information; there are several cogent reasons why it needs to be so.

6. Eilhart von Oberg: Tristrant, ed. Hadumond Bussman, Tübingen 1969, p.42a (Stargard fragment, line 7521). Of course if Eilhart is considered to be following Béroul, he could have obtained the name from him as well; but that would necessitate a date earlier than c.1170 for Béroul's poem (which is not impossible: see below).

7. T.B.W. Reid, The Tristran of Béroul: a Textual Commentary, Oxford 1972, pp.106-07.

8. On Richard de Lucy see Charles Henderson, Essays in Cornish History, Oxford 1935, pp.5-7; L.E. Elliott-Binns, Medieval Cornwall, London 1955, pp.77-78; J.H. Round, 'The Honour of Ongar', Essex Archaeological Transactions, n.s. 7, 1899, 142-152; and idem, 'The heirs of Richard de Lucy', The Genealogist, 15, 1899, 129-133.

9. Henderson, loc. cit.

10. Gweneth Whitteridge, 'The Tristan of Béroul', Medieval Miscellany presented to Eugène Vinaver, ed. by F. Whitehead et al., Manchester 1965, pp.337-356 (p.350), posits a date of 1160-1175 for the whole

poem; Dominica Legge, 'Place-names and the date of Béroul', Medium AEvum, 38, 1969, 171-4 (174), thinks a date of c.1160 reasonable; J.C. Payen, Tristan et Yseut: Les Tristan en vers, Paris 1974, p.i, suggests a date 'avant 1170?'.

11. Gweneth Whitteridge, op. cit.