The Bird's Three Truths in the *Lai de l'Oiselet*

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The *Lai de l'Oiselet* tells the story of a magic garden, which was originally created by a *chevalier*, but was sold by his son to a *riche vilain*. This garden, surrounded by water, was full of soothing visual and aromatic delights characteristic of the *locus amoenus* (herbs, spices, trees, fruits, fountain, shade), and was visited twice daily, in the morning and the evening, by a bird, whose wondrous song had the power to restore joy to the most sorrowing, to inspire feelings of love, and to make the old feel young and handsome again. Without this birdsong, the garden would in fact wither and the fountain dry up. Thus this composite symbol of the aristocratic, courtly world of poetry, love and song, becomes the property of a *parvenu*, whose pretention leads him to wish to share in this culture:

> Li vilains cui li estres fu
> Venoit chascun jor par costume
> Por oïr cele soautume
> A la fontainne souz le pin; (124-7)[1]

but the bird, whose song is the voice of courtly culture and thereby represents, as Charmaine Lee has stated,[2] the poet and his role in this élite world, shows nothing but contempt for the garden's new owner, as he sits and listens beneath the pine-tree. The *vilain*'s instinct is in any case to capture the bird, and either sell it for profit or imprison it so that henceforth it will sing on his terms: 'Or servirez a ma partie / Et ferez a ma commandie' (219-20). He traps the bird, which threatens not to sing in captivity, so the *vilain* in turn threatens to eat it. The bird, however, manages to trick the *vilain* into releasing it, on the promise to divulge three *sens*, or truths, 'Q'ains ne sot [hons] de vo lignage' (252). Eager for the power and prestige of such promised

knowledge, the *vilain* lets the bird go, and it delivers one by one the three truths, all of them teasing and confounding the *vilain*, before flying off for ever, leaving the garden to wither and the fountain to dry up. The text ends with the proverb: 'Cil qui tot covoite tout pert' (410).

The recent edition of the *Lai de l'Oiselet* by Lenora D. Wolfgang allows us for the first time to compare aspects of the poem as it appears in the five surviving manuscripts, all of the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries and in the Bibliothèque Nationale. She provides a critical edition of MS *B* (nouv. acq. fr. 1104), together with a diplomatic edition of *E* (fr. 1593), *C* (fr. 25545), *A* (fr. 837) and *D* (fr. 24432).[3] These manuscripts fall into two groups by reason of the order in which the three truths are given. The wording of them is not significantly different from one manuscript to another, and in *B* they are as follows:

(1)	Ne pleure ce c'onques n'eüs	(271)
(2)	Ne croire qanque tu oz dire	(301)
(3)	... ce que tu tiens en tes mains,	
	Ne le giete jus a tes piez	(326-7)

The third *sens* occurs last in all five manuscripts, but the order of the first two varies: MSS *ABD* have the order above, while in *CE* the order of the first two is reversed. Because of this and for ease of reference Wolfgang designates the two groups *pleurer croire* and *croire pleurer*, and shows that those in the first category relate to and possibly stem from versions of the *Barlaam and Josaphat* story, while those of the second group reflect the fact that in a relevant *exemplum* in the *Disciplina clericalis* of Petrus Alfonsi the first truth is 'ne credas omnibus dictis'.[4] The earliest editor of the *lai*, Gaston Paris, used MS *C* for his edition, stating: 'J'ai considéré l'ordre de *CE* comme l'original, parce qu'il concorde avec celui de Pierre Alphonse'.[5] Raymond Weeks, on the other hand, published the text of MS *A*,[6] but in Wolfgang's view *B* is the most suitable of those manuscripts that represent the *pleurer croire* tradition. This is in fact a good choice of manuscript, since *A* omits some 30 lines, while *D* contains, in Wolfgang's words, an 'eccentric addition of 116 lines'.[7] However, her reason for preferring a manuscript from this group is that all five manuscripts, whatever the order in which the truths occur, give more emphasis to the *pleurer* truth by devoting most lines to it.[8] This is actually a misleading and inaccurate assertion, as she is looking only at isolated lines which

allude directly to the respective truths, and this in itself does not necessarily indicate the prominence given to individual truths. If we look instead at the total number of lines in each manuscript devoted to each truth, including its introduction and any discussion directly related to it or resulting from it, the figures are as follows:

B	*pleurer*: 31 (268-98)	*croire*: 12 (299-310)
A	*pleurer*: 31 (258-88)	*croire*: 12 (289-300)
D	*pleurer*: 33 (352-84)	*croire*: 12 (385-96)
C	*pleurer*: 27 (283-309)	*croire*: 17 (266-82)
E	*pleurer*: 8 (263-70)	*croire*: 24 (239-62)

B	*ce que tu tiens*: 27 (311-37)
A	*ce que tu tiens*: 27 (301-27)
D	*ce que tu tiens*: 33 (397-429)
C	*ce que tu tiens*: 30 (310-39)
E	*ce que tu tiens:* 22 (271-92)

These figures relate only to the section of text concerning the initial exposition of the truths, and not to the subsequent section, which contains reference back to the truths as the bird proves that he is right. This proving phase, as will be seen, is a complex section, in which the three truths are to some extent intermixed. It can thus be seen that if the context of the exposition phase is examined in the way suggested, *pleurer*, placed second in *CE*, is not in fact given the most space. Moreover the reader is not aware, in any of the five manuscripts, of one truth being given particular emphasis at the expense of another in the exposition phase, though arguably it is the third truth which is crucial: it has the longest individual introductory build-up in all manuscripts, and it is central to the subsequent elaboration by the bird, forming a bridge between the exposition and proving phases. It is rather, then, to the arrangement of the truths in the exposition phase that we should look to examine the effectiveness of the bird's ruse, as it is conceived by the different authors or scribes.

Overall the episode of the three truths marks the climax of the poem, and it relies for its effectiveness on the tension created by the different level of awareness in the minds of the two participants in the dialogue. To the *vilain* the three truths seem arbitrary and uninformative when they are first stated; nor does the reader see any connection between them at this stage. Moreover there is the

successive dashing of expectation, as each time the *vilain* is hoping for some piece of secret wisdom to be imparted to him, only to discover that if the words are taken as general truths, as he interprets them - 'don't weep for what you never had', 'don't believe everything you hear' and 'don't throw away what you already have' - they are obvious bits of common sense that he and everyone knows already.

If the reader is also initially puzzled, he does nevertheless appreciate, unlike the *vilain*, that each truth uttered relates to the situation in hand. Thus, following the *B* version, when the bird delivers the first truth ('Ne pleure ce c'onques n'eüs'), he realises at least that what the *vilain* has never had is the bird, who has just managed to escape his clutches, and thereby access to the knowledge, depth of appreciation and sensitivity characteristic of the courtly world. The immediate response of the *vilain* is to feel cheated: 'Tu m'as ta fïance mentie: / Trois sens tu me deüs aprendre' (274-5). Instead of three revelations hitherto never revealed to 'hons de mon lignage' (277), he hears only one piece of advice which he dismisses as common knowledge: 'Mes de ce est toz li monz sage' (278); no-one would be foolish enough to weep for what he had never had. He takes the advice in simplistic, general terms, with an element of peasant contempt for useless weeping: 'Nus n'est si fox n'onques ne fu / Qui plorast ce que n'ot eü (279-80).

Slyly the bird offers to repeat the advice, afraid lest the *vilain*, so intent is he on arguing, might forget it:

> 'Volez vos que jel vos redie
> Si que vos ne l'oblïez mie?
> Vos entendez tant a pledier
> Que peor ai de l'oblïer'. (283-7)

Thus the bird underlines a piece of advice that the *vilain* insists on rejecting, and not realising that eventually he will be proved guilty of behaving precisely in the manner outlined in this *sens*; and the rest of the dialogue relating to the first truth consists of the *vilain* thinking that he knows best ('Je le sai miex que vos assez', 288), and arguing ironically along the lines: 'I'm not so stupid as you think I am (290-3); don't think you can mock me just because you have escaped (294-7)'. He will later be shown to be wrong on both counts.

This first truth and the ensuing discussion emphasise sharply the calm superiority of the bird, both on a cultural level and in respect of

knowledge of the drama which is unfolding; while the *vilain* shows himself to be hastily and unreflectingly dismissive, assertive, over-confident in his own wisdom, and curiously unsuspecting of the scope of his adversary's wiliness.

Against this background the second truth ('Ne croire qanque tu oz dire') may seem at first sight to be a retraction by the bird of his previous piece of advice, and the prompt reply by the *vilain* 'Je le savoie bien ' (303), using as he does the imperfect indicative, tends to reinforce this view. Yet it is clearly to be taken as a piece of advice in its own right, and therefore separate from the preceding one, for it is introduced by the bird with the words: 'Li autres est et bons et beaus' (300), and in his reply to the *vilain*'s 'Je le savoie bien!' the bird advises him to heed it and not to forget it: 'Biaus amis, donques le retien, / Gardez que vos ne l'oublïez!' (304-5), further underlining its separate identity and reinforcing the *vilain*'s tendency to interpret each *sens* as a self-contained, discrete aphorism. His reply expresses again, as in the dialogue following the first truth, the worthlessness of the advice in his view, and his robust rejection of it. This dismissiveness once more prepares the reader for the advice to be later used against him.

A further meaning could be inferred from the exchange which follows the telling of this second truth. When the bird says 'Biaus amis, donques le retien' in response to the peremptory 'Je le savoie bien!', he may also be hinting that real common sense lies in appreciating what you already know, and that the *vilain* should rely on such knowledge and awareness as he already possesses, rather than pretentiously seek to enter realms of knowledge which he can never understand. In any event, as with the first truth, it is the *vilain* who eventually ends the exchange through exasperation and invites the bird to deliver the third truth, which he ironically anticipates in the exclamation expressing disappointment at the close of the second exchange: 'Je te voudroie ja tenir!' (310).

Before delivering the third piece of advice the bird states that anyone who heeds it will never be poor: 'Li tierz est tiex, qui le saroit / Jamés povres hon ne seroit' (315-6). Predictably the *vilain* takes this to imply material riches, an attitude which is symbolically underlined by his expression of impatience to know it quickly, as it is now his meal-time: 'Il est, fet il, tens de mengier; / Aprenez le moi erroment' (322-3). The bird's reference to being poor, of course, anticipates the trick to be played later concerning the precious stone. The *sens* is then revealed

('... ce que tu tiens en tes mains, / Ne le giete jus a tes piez'); the *vilain* is angry, accusing the bird of telling only childish truths that even the poor are already aware of, and adding: 'Menti m'avez et engingnié' (335), a statement which he will come to see is only half-true, when the bird proceeds to demonstrate the appropriateness and relevance of the three truths in the proving phase of their discussion.

Proceeding now to this second phase and expanding on the truth he has just revealed, the bird first succeeds in shaking the negative attitude of the *vilain* by implying that this final truth is actually worth much more than the other two: 'Cist vaut les autres deus, / Et puis aprés des autres cent' (344-5). The *vilain*'s curiosity is roused, and he is told that it would in fact have been to his advantage had he killed the bird:

> 'Car se tu m'eüsses tüé,
> Si com tu eüs empensé,
> Jamés jor ne fust, par mes euz,
> Qu'il ne t'en fust durement mieuz'. (349-52).

This may seem initially to be a contradiction of the third truth, if 'tüé' is taken to imply disposing of something one has in one's possession, but it quickly becomes apparent that the *vilain*'s interests would have been better served had he kept the bird *and* killed it, because:

> 'Il a en mon cors une pierre
> Qui tant est precïeuse et chiere,
> Bien est de trois onces pesant'. (355-7)

The *vilain* has thus missed the chance of becoming rich, but the richness would have been achieved only indirectly, because of the alleged properties of this stone:

> 'La vertu de li est si grant
> Qui en son demainne l'aroit
> Ja chose ne demanderoit
> Que maintenant ne li fust preste'. (358-61).

It would function, therefore, as the key to all life's secrets, a kind of philosopher's stone, which by implication would make the *vilain* rich and powerful. However, the three ounces of its weight must surely

symbolise the three truths already imparted, so that there may be a hidden and deliberate irony in the fact that in reality this is all that the 'stone' would give, despite the promise of limitless response. Of course the whole reference to the stone is a teasing fabrication if taken not metaphorically, but literally, as the *vilain* does, and the bird has the satisfaction of witnessing the *vilain* tearing his clothes in anger and frustration:

> Si tort ses poinz, si ront ses dras,
> Si se claimme chaitis et las,
> A ses ongles son vis despiece.
> Li oiseaus en fet grant leesce (...) (363-6).

He coldly waits until the *vilain* has hurt himself before reasoning with him to point out that when he was in the *vilain*'s hands, his weight must have been less than half an ounce. The *vilain* has to agree that this was so ('Certes, vos dites voir', 377), and in this way the bird proves that he has lied: 'Vilains, or puez tu bien savoir / Que de la pierre t'ai menti' (378-9). He has thus trapped the *vilain* into being a victim of the second truth ('Ne croire...'). The defeated *vilain*'s reply is revealing: 'Or le sai ge, fet il, de fi; / Mes certes avant le cuidai' (380-1). These are the *vilain*'s last words in the poem, and can be taken to apply to all three pieces of wisdom. What the bird has taught him in fact is the essence of wisdom - never to presume to think one truly knows anything, as it is always possible to appreciate more fully or more deeply what one assumes one already knows. The bird then proceeds to show his complete triumph, reminding the *vilain* of his own earlier words in respect of the first truth: 'Nus n'est si fox, ne onc ne fu, / Qui plorast ce que n'ot eü (385-6), for now the *vilain* will do, he says, precisely that: 'Meintenant, ce m'est vis, ploras / Ce q'ains n'eüs, ne ja n'avras!' (387-8), as he has already witnessed in the discussion on the stone. He concludes with a short homily, which underlines the difference between superficial and true awareness, and hints at different levels of understanding, which were implicit in the exposition of the three truths and the attendant discussion:

> 'Et tex parole par grant sens
> Qui poi a en lui de porpens;
> Tex parole de cortoisie
> Qui ne la savroit fere mie;

Et tex cuide estre bien senez
Qui a folie est assenez'. (393-8)

In this way a circular pattern of reference is established, whereby in the section dealing with the application and explanation of the three truths the order in which they were first revealed is reversed. The third truth forms the central core of discussion (344-77), which leads back to the proving of the second truth (378-9), and then to the first truth (387-8); but the evidence for the proving of the first truth has already been witnessed by the bird in the *vilain*'s reaction to the reference to the stone, which formed part of the elaboration of the third truth.

The text of MSS *A* and *D* is substantially similar to that of *B* throughout the entire episode of the three *sens*, except that *A*, the manuscript used by Weeks, omits the closing homily. The *croire pleurer* MSS, *C* and *E*, have been neglected since Gaston Paris, though Wolfgang appears to incline to his view that the order in which the three truths occur in these manuscripts is probably the original one: 'If the source of the poem of the *Oiselet* is ultimately the exemplum in the *Disciplina clericalis*, then *E* preserves a primitive version of the *Oiselet*', and consequently 'The texts in *ABD* descend from a redaction that reversed the sens *croire pleurer* to *pleurer croire*'.[9]

Whether this is so or not, the order in which the first two truths are delivered makes no difference to the *vilain*, who treats each of them as unrelated. The reader, however, may be constantly looking beyond the limited interpretation of the *vilain* for some deeper meaning and planned deception, so that to begin, as MSS *CE* do, with an injunction not to believe everything he hears clearly signals to him a warning to beware the truths to be revealed. Thus 'Ne croire qanque tu oz dire' placed first inevitably functions as a kind of preliminary, or introduction to the other two truths, which will seem to form the essence of the revelations and deception; and when they are placed adjacent to each other, these two truths form a complement: 'don't weep for what you've never had, and don't throw away what you do have'. Theoretically, then, this arrangement forms an interesting and effective pattern of narration, though as the section dealing with the proving of the truths is practically the same in *CE* as in *BAD*, there is no longer the neat circularity noted in this latter group, the order of the truths being second, first, third, second, first, in place of first, second, third, second, first.

If the *croire* truth is to function in an introductory capacity, then arguably it should not figure too prominently at the expense of the other two truths. A glance back at the table indicating the number of lines devoted to each of the three truths when they are first stated shows that the proportions are not the same in *C* and *E*: *C* keeps roughly to the proportions of *BAD*, but *E* does not. If in *C* the *croire* truth is a little longer than in *BAD*, it is because the total included the general introduction to the bird's speech, which in *BAD* is counted under *pleurer*: but in *E* the *croire* truth is protracted, largely because it incorporates the bird's offer to repeat the truth just given, which in all the other manuscripts belongs to the *pleurer* truth (*E* 245-262, equivalent to *B* 283-98); and within this passage there is some elaboration of the frustration, disappointment and threatening attitude of the *vilain*:

> 'Pour ce que m'ettes eschapéz
> Et je n'ai mais sor vous pooir,
> Dites de moi tot vo voloir.
> Bien me tenez ore pour nice;
> Pleust Dieu je vous retenisse!
> Certes, quant vous m'eschaperiez,
> Jamais autre ne gaberiez!' (*E* 254-60)[10]

The result of this is to present us with a *vilain* who appears to over-react to the divulging of what to him would merely be an abstract truth. The reaction is more appropriate when it is attached to the *pleurer* truth, as in *BAD* and *C*, because although he would interpret it generally, that truth can at least be seen to have some relationship to his ambition to know and to have. Moreover the effectiveness of this discussion forming part of the *pleurer* truth is apparent in *C*, where it can be seen to be born of growing frustration, since it is the second truth told to him. On the other hand, if by beginning with the *croire* truth the poet wishes to emphasize the complementarity of the other two truths, then *E* has the advantage of having only 19 lines between the telling of the *pleurer* truth and the third one (*E* 263-283), whereas in *C* there is a gap of 42 lines between them (*C* 285-328), because *C* shares with *BAD* the discussion attached to the *pleurer* truth. However, in so far as the *croire* truth in *CE* seems more introductory, Gaston Paris was right to prefer *C* to *E* for his edition, as it deals more briefly

with this truth than *E*, and then concentrates the discussion on the other two truths. *E*, in contrast, is less well focused.

Two further small instances can be found in which the *croire pleurer* manuscripts are perhaps less effective than the others. Firstly, the *vilain*'s disgust at not being given his three promised truths ('Tu m'as ta fïance mentie: / Trois sens tu me deüs aprendre', *B* 274-5) forms part of the *pleurer* truth in all five manuscripts (*C* 288 and *E* 267). When, as in *BAD*, *pleurer* was the first truth enunciated, the *vilain*'s words had the effect of expressing immediate disappointment at being given only one truth instead of three. His remarks make less sense when *pleurer* is placed second, as by then the *vilain* would know that the truths were being delivered one at a time to allow for reflection on them. The second point applies only to MS *E*: the line giving the weight of the precious stone as three ounces is omitted.

It is impossible for us to know for certain whether or not the original order of the three truths is the one preserved in MSS *CE*, with MSS *BAD* representing a reworking of it, but if so, the rearrangement of the order displays considerable subtlety, and in itself amply justifies the choice of a *pleurer croire* manuscript for an edition of the poem. Nor can we know, in fact, whether inspiration for either version came from a desire to match the French versions to their respective analogous forbears, or, in the case of MSS *BAD*, through a wish to modify (improve?) the narrative effectiveness of the *lai*, irrespective of any awareness of a tradition.

In the *Lai de l'Oiselet* the episode of the three truths displays a robust condemnation of self-betterment, when the basic aim of it is material advantage, and an underlying belief in the impossibility or at least undesirability of crossing the class boundaries into which each individual is born. Of course this jealous exclusivity of an élite fearful for its privileges and of dilution, is not confined to this text, and while we may admire the purely narrative skill of this episode, in which the unsophisticated *vilain* is no match for the trained clerical mind of the bird, we may find it hard generally to share all of the bird's attitudes, however much he may have been provoked and maltreated.

NOTES

1 All quotations from the poem are taken from *Le Lai de l'Oiselet: An Old French Poem of the Thirteenth Century*, ed. Leonora D. Wolfgang, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, 80, Part 5 (Philadelphia, American Philosophical Society 1990), with occasional modification to conform to my own reading of the manuscript which she used for her edition, Bibliothèque Nationale nouv. acq. fr. 1104 (MS *B*).

2 Charmaine Lee, 'Il giardino rinsecchito: per una rilettura del *Lai de l'Oiselet*', *Medioevo Romanzo*, 5 (1978), 66-84.

3 A full account of these manuscripts is given in Wolfgang, Introduction, pp.23-32.

4 See Wolfgang, pp.7-10.

5 Gaston Paris, *Les Légendes du moyen âge* (Paris 1903), pp.225-291 (p.272).

6 Raymond Weeks, 'Le Lai de l'Oiseleť', in *Medieval Studies in memory of Gertrude Schoepperle Loomis* (Paris, Champion and New York 1927), pp.341-353. Of this manuscript Wolfgang comments: '*A* would make an excellent base manuscript for an edition of the *Oiselet*' (p.29).

7 Wolfgang, p.30.

8 *Ibid.*, p.14.

9 *Ibid.*, p.31.

10 To Wolfgang's diplomatic edition I have added some punctuation, and modified the spelling after checking the text against the original in the manuscript.