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In the Forest of Broceliande :

Merlin and Vivian in Burne-Jones and in Chausson

Toshiyuki Takamiya

Viviane, poème symphonique d'après la légende de la Table Ronde, Op. 5, is one of the few extant works by Ernest Chausson (1855–1899), French fin-de-siècle composer, who is otherwise better known for his *Symphonie en si bémol majeur*, Op.20 and *La Poème*, Op.25.⁽¹⁾ Finished 18 December 1882 as his first composition for orchestra and dedicated to his fiancée Jeanne Escudiet, whom the composer was soon to marry, this symphonic poem was first played 31 March of the following year under the direction of Édouard Colonne.⁽²⁾ As a disciple of Cesar Franck and passionate advocate of Richard Wagner, Chausson put an Arthurian programme into music, but the unfavorable reception of its first performance urged him to revise it repeatedly : it is still rarely performed.⁽³⁾

In *Viviane*, Chausson has given musical expression to the tale of Merlin the sorcerer beguiled by Viviane his mistress into sleep for ever, and the following programme outlined by the composer relates to the legend :

Viviane et Merlin dans la Forêt de Brocéliande

Scène d'Amour

Les envoyés du Roi Arthur parcourent la forêt à la
recherche de l'Enchanteur.

Il veut fuir et les rejoindre.

Viviane endort Merlin et l'entoure d'aubépines en fleurs.⁽⁴⁾

Despite a reference to *Viviane* in his admirable critical reappraisal of Chausson's unique opera *Le Roi Arthur*, where Merlin appears again, Tony Hunt does not clarify what made Chausson take up the legend in *Viviane*.⁽⁵⁾ Richard Langham Smith, on the other hand, argues in a liner note to a CD containing *Viviane* that 'The legend accords precisely with the subject of the painting *Merlin and Vivian* (also known as *The Beguiling of Merlin*) by the English painter Edward Burne-Jones: Burne-Jones was then highly fashionable in France, and the painting had been reproduced in a French book in the very year Chausson was working on his poem'.⁽⁶⁾ He does not identify the book, however. According to Martin Harrison and Bill Waters, *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1874-76, now at Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight), which caused fierce controversy at the Grovesner Gallery in 1877, was exhibited again, with a certain degree of success, in the following year at the Paris Exposition Universelle in the section of English art, making it the first of his works to be shown abroad,⁽⁷⁾ although Penelope Fitzgerald suggests that it did not receive wide acclaim.⁽⁸⁾

Various pieces of circumstantial evidence—a) Chausson's programme is compatible with the subject of Burne-Jones's painting that Vivian beguiles Merlin in the forest of Broceliande with hawthorn bushes full of blooms, b) the painting exhibited in Paris in 1878, even if it failed to create the sensation that was anticipated, and c) reproduced in a book published in France in 1882—may reasonably lead one to conclude that Chausson's *Viviane* was probably composed under the influence of Burne-Jones' *The Beguiling of Merlin*. It is also possible to surmise that the French composer, who was living in Paris, either saw the painting or read the text which accompanied the painting at the

Exposition or the text which explained it in 1882. There is a further possibility that the painting, which was once sensual and provocative, was reproduced in a popular magazine or book which Chausson had access to in the time of his attraction to the legend.

One may still ask if Chausson had possibly read the *Suite du Merlin*, the ultimate source for the episode of Merlin and Vivian. *The Suite* was a continuation of the Vulgate Cycle, a huge Arthurian compilation in thirteenth-century French prose. Well versed in literature, both classical and modern, Chausson was naturally attached to the Arthurian romances by Chrétien de Troyes.⁽⁹⁾ None of his romances deals with the subject concerned. It was as late as 1883, however, that the *Suite du Merlin* was edited by Gaston Paris and Jacob Ulrich from the then unique manuscript of the work, which was in the possession of Alfred H. Huth, now British Library, Additional MS 38117.⁽¹⁰⁾ It was therefore published too late to be used by Chausson, unless, by chance, he was permitted to see its proofs. It is perhaps interesting to note that the Arthurian *femme fatale*, often referred to as the Lady of the Lake, is spelled Nivian in the edition rather than Vivian. Arthurian onomastics, which covers Arthurian literature written in many languages and extending over many centuries, certainly allows many variant spellings for this figure such as Nimuë, Ninian, Nivian, Vivian, and Vivien: they all derive from different interpretations of minims, i.e., shortest vertical strokes, in the manuscript.

Now let us turn our attention to Burne-Jones' *The Beguiling of Merlin* (186.2 x 110.5cm). In this masterpiece of compelling eroticism and sensuality, depicting the male-female conflict over sovereignty, barefooted Vivian is shown consulting her notebook of spells, which she had learned from Merlin, and towering over the infatuated wizard who

cowers under the forceful gaze of her eyes. Indeed the virtually life-sized figure of the enchantress fills the foreground of the composition, which is uncharacteristically simple. 'Tall and elegant', in Debra Mancoff's description, 'she possesses all the hallmarks of his special brand of beauty: the strong profile with the sharp jaw and short upper lip, the columnar neck and narrow shoulders, the minimized upper torso and the elongated, swaying hips and full-modeled legs'.⁽¹¹⁾ The serpentine motifs of her snake-entwined hairdress are repeated everywhere in the painting: the folds of the purple dress, the hawthorn's sinuous roots, trunk and branches which surround the failing, aged magician. Spring, with white thorn bushes in full bloom, brings a splendid backdrop to courtly people at Camelot for a May outing. Spring in Bretagne, where Broceliande is traditionally set, is also a mating season. In Celtic myth hawthorns mark faerie trysting places.⁽¹²⁾

In the catalogue of the exhibition one finds an extract from 'Romance of Merlin', probably supplied by the painter himself :

It fell on a day that they went through the forest that is called the Forest of Broceliande, and found a bush that was fair and high, of white hawthorn, full of flowers, and there they sat in the shadow. And Merlin fell on sleep ; and when she felt that he was on sleep she arose softly and began her enchantments, such as Merlin had taught her, and made the ring nine times and nine times the enchantments....

And then he looked about him, and him seemed he was in the fairest tower of the world and the most strong ; neither of iron was it fashioned, nor steel, nor timber, nor of stone, but of the air without any other thing ; and in sooth so strong it is that it may never be

undone while the world endureth.⁽¹³⁾

Soon after it was first exhibited, there was a popular belief that the painter drew on the first lines of *Vivien* (1859, later changed to *Merlin and Vivien*), which was included in the first part of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Obviously he had read the work, because Burne-Jones and Tennyson were close friends. It was no one but the painter that suggested to the Poet Laureate in 1858 that he should adopt Vivian rather than the Malorian Nimuë.⁽¹⁴⁾ As seen in Gustave Doré's engraved illustration of the scene,⁽¹⁵⁾ however, there is no reference to hawthorns in Tennyson's *Vivien*, and the ending part of the poem does not match with the subject of Burne-Jones' painting :

A storm was coming, but the winds were still,
And in the wild woods of Broceliande,
Before an oak, so hollow, huge and old
It look'd a tower of ivied masonworks,
At Merlin's feet the wily Vivien lay. (ll. 1-5)⁽¹⁶⁾

Until even date, art historians—Penelope Fitzgerald, Christopher Wood, Russell Ash—have been in favour of the Old French *Merlin* as a source for Burne-Jones.⁽¹⁷⁾ If they mean by it an Old French version, this cannot be, since, as I mentioned above, there was no edition of the *Suite du Merlin* available in print at that time, but there happened to be a critical edition of the Middle English manuscript translated from the Old French *Suite du Merlin* in the mid-fifteenth century.⁽¹⁸⁾ John Christian was of opinion that this edition, published in 1865-69 by the Early English Text Society, was possibly used by Burne-Jones for his painting.⁽¹⁹⁾ Ninian, promising Merlin to fulfill his lust in exchange for instructions in enchantment, finally lulls him, using one of his own spells, to sleep beneath hawthorn bush in the forest of Broceliande, and confines him to the tower of air as an eternal prisoner. Thus the Middle

English version reads as follows :

...till it fill on a day that thei wente thourgh the foreste hande in hande, devisinge and disportinge, and this was in the foreste of brochelonde, and fonde a bussh that was feire and high of white hawthorne full of floures, and ther thei satte in the shadowe ; and Merlin leide his heed in the damesels lappe, and she be-gan to taste softly till he fill on slepe ; and whan she felt that he was on slepe she a-roos softly, and made a cerne with hir wymple all a-boute the bussh and all a-boute Merlin, and be-gan hir enchaumentz soche as Merlin hadde hir taught, and made the cerne ix tymes, and ix tymes hir enchaumentes ; and after that she wente and satte down by hym and leide his heed in hir lappe, and hilde hym ther till he dide a-wake ; and than he loked a-boute hym, and hym semed he was in the feirest tour of the worlde, and the moste stronge, and fonde hym leide in the feirest place that euer he lay be-forn ; (vol.II, p.681)

All through his life Burne-Jones remained almost dumb about his sources of *The Beguiling of Merlin*—a phenomenon that could be interpreted in various ways. The daunting influence of the Poet Laureate's *Merlin and Vivien*, where Vivien was made as a vicious *femme fatale*, the notorious controversy over the 'Fleshly School of Poetry' fiercely attacked by Robert Buchanan, a critic standing against the sensual and erotic tone found in A. C. Swinburne's poems, Burne-Jones' affair with Maria Zambaco, model for Vivian, which resulted in her abortive attempt at suicide—all these incidents would have led to a fatal scandal for Burne-Jones in Victorian Society, with sobriety and respectability on top of its morals. The very fact that, although the

painter used the name Nimuë in his *Merlin and Nimuë* (1861), he now adopted the spelling Vivian rather than Vivien, may reflect his deliberate attempt to avoid the formidably strong association with and influence from Tennyson. In the *New Arthurian Encyclopedia* Debra Mancoff maintains a possibility that Burne-Jones' *The Beguiling of Merlin* was inspired by the combination of Tennyson's poem and the Old French *Merlin*.⁽¹⁹⁾

As far as Burne-Jones is concerned, one must not forget Robert Southey's edition of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, published in 1817.⁽²⁰⁾ It was this reprint of Caxton's first edition of 1485 that both Burne-Jones and William Morris in their Oxford days in 1855 fell in love with. Mrs Burne-Jones later thought that 'the book never can have been loved as it was by those two men. With Edward it became literally a part of himself' (*Memorials*, I, p.116).

Malory does not mention either Broceliande or hawthorns in the *Morte Darthur*, making a slightly different version of the scene :

...And soo soone after the lady and Merlyn departed, and by the way Merlyn shewed her many wondres, and cam in to Cornewaille. And alwayes Merlyn lay aboute the lady to haue her maydenhode, and she was euer passynge wery of hym, and fayne wold haue ben delyuerd of hym, for she was aferd of hym by cause he was a deuyls sone, and she coude not beskyfte hym by no meane.

And soo on a tyme it happed that Merlyn shewed to her in a roche where as was a greete wonder, and wroughte by enchauntement that wente vnder a grete stone. So by her subtyle wyrchyng she maade Merlyn to goo vnder that stone to lete her wete of the merueilles there, but she wroughte so ther for hym that he cam neuer

oute for alle the crafte he coude doo. And so she departed
and lefte Merlyn. (*Morte Darthur*, Book 4, Chapter 1:
Southey's edition, vol.1, p.91)

Worthy of attention in this context, however, is Southey's
lengthy preface, which contains an English quotation of the scene of the
seduction of Merlin from the Old French *Suite du Merlin* :

...And when he had devised the whole, then had the damsel
full great joy, and showed him greater semblance of loving
him than she had ever before made ; and they sojourned
together a long while. At length it fell out that as they
were going one day hand in hand through the forest of
Broceliande, they found a bush of white thorn which was
laden with flowers ; and they seated themselves under the
shade of this white thorn upon the green grass, and they
disported together and took their solace, and Merlin laid
his head upon the damsel's lap, and then she began to feel
if he were asleep. Then the damsel rose and made a ring
with her wimple round the bush and round Merlin, and
began her enchantments such as he himself had taught
her ; and nine times she made the ring, and nine times she
made the enchantment ; and then she went and sate down
by him, and placed his head again upon her lap ; and when
he awoke and looked round him, it seemed to him that he
was inclosed in the strongest tower in the world, and laid
upon a fair bed;.... (pp.xlv-xlvi)

One may assume that the extract published in the exhibition
catalogue of the Grovesner Gallery was probably a version modernized
by Burne-Jones from what he had encountered in this preface, adding
a description of the mysterious tower of air, characteristically Celtic.

Burne-Jones' Arthurian subjects, ten in number, that he had painted in oil in his whole life, would all be derived from the *Morte Darthur* of 1817. The impact of the book was so powerful as to make him once say that 'Nothing was ever like Morte d'Arthur—I don't mean any one book or any one poem, something that never can be written I mean, and can never go out of the heart' (*Memorials*, II, p. 168). Since 1857 when he had chosen 'The Death of Merlin' for his subject of the Oxford Union murals, in which he was engaged together with a band of young Pre-Raphaelite painters and their followers led by D. G. Rossetti, he had been obsessed with the same theme—a woman depicted as a seductress with a man as her helpless and distressed victim. The image was to recur repeatedly in his work, and showed clearly how he viewed his own torrid relationship, recently terminated, with Maria Zambaco, a sculptor from Greece and one of Pre-Raphaelite 'stunners'. He later wrote to Mrs Helen Mary Gaskell :

The head of Nimuë in the picture called The Enchanting of Merlin was painted from the same poor traitor, and was very like—all the action is like—the name of her was Mary. Now isn't that very funny as she was born at the foot of Olympus and looked and was primaeval and that's the head and the way of standing and turning...and I was being turned into a hawthorn bush in the forest of Broceliande—every year when the hawthorn buds it is the soul of Merlin trying to live again in the world and speak—for he left so much unsaid.⁽²¹⁾

NOTES

- (1) Ralph Scott Grover, *Ernest Chausson : the Man and his Music* (London : Athlone, 1980), pp.127-129.

- (2) Tony Hunt, 'Ernest Chausson's "Le Roi Arthur"', *Arthurian Literature*, 4 (1985), 131, n.19.
- (3) Grover, p.128; Hunt 131.
- (4) Cited from Hunt, 132, though Jean Roy presents a little different version in his liner note to a CD (see note 6 below).
- (5) Hunt, 131-133. For the opera see Toshiyuki Takamiya, 'Chausson's *Le Roi Arthur*, a De-Wagnerized Opera?' (in Japanese), *The Kaleidoscope of Arthurian Legends* (Tokyo: Chûô-Kôron-sha, 1995), pp. 87-102.
- (6) Richard Langham Smith, Liner note to a CD: EMI France, CDM 7 64686 2, 1993.
- (7) Martin Harrison and Bill Waters, *Burne-Jones*, 2nd ed. (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1989), p. 173.
- (8) Penelope Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones: A Biography* (London: Michael Joseph, 1975), p. 220.
- (9) Like Wagner, he drew on literary sources for his operas. Chrétien de Troyes' romances and other Arthurian romances which derive from them were referred to as the Breton legends.
- (10) *Merlin: roman en prose XIII^e siècle*, par Gaston Paris et Jacob Ulrich, 2 vols., SATF (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1883). In a correspondence dated 15 January 1995, Professor Hideichi Matsubara wrote that 'Printed about 700 copies, the Gaston Paris-Ulrich edition was available only to SATF members, and so the story of Merlin was generally disseminated by the Enchanteur Merlin published in *Revue de Paris* of 1840....' A new manuscript of the *Suite du Merlin* was discovered in the twentieth century at the Cambridge University Library: for this manuscript, Additional 7071, see *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. by Eugène Vinaver, 3rd edition, revised by P. J. C. Field (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 1266-1273.
- (11) Debra N. Mancoff, *The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art* (New York: Garland, 1990), p. 219.
- (12) Muriel Whitaker, *The Legends of King Arthur in Art* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), p. 245.
- (13) *Examples of Contemporary Art: Etchings from Representative Works by Living English and Foreign Artists*, ed. with critical comments by J. Comyns Carr (London: Chatto & Windus, 1877), p.20. This

collection contains as frontispiece *The Beguiling of Merlin* engraved by M. Lalauze, which has been unnoticed by John Christian in his catalogue description (see note 18 below).

- (14) Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, 2 vols., (London: Macmillan, 1904), vol. I, p. 182.
- (15) Lord Tennyson, *Vivien*, illustrated by Gustave Doré (London: Moxon, 1867).
- (16) *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Longmans, 1969), pp. 1593-1620. John Christian's remark (see note 18 below) that 'Tennyson had also treated the subject in this way in the *Idylls of the King*' (p. 51) is not correct.
- (17) Fitzgerald, p. 151; Christopher Wood, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1981), p. 117; Russell Ash, *Sir Edward Burne-Jones* (London: Pavilion, 1993), note to Plate 10.
- (18) *Merlin, or the Early History of King Arthur: A Prose Romance*, ed. by Henry B. Wheatley, Part 3, EETS OS 36 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1869), pp. 681-682: cf. John Christian, *Burne-Jones: the Paintings, Graphic and Decorative Work of Sir Edward Burne-Jones, 1833-98* (London: the Arts Council of Great Britain, 1975), item 129, pp. 50-51.
- (19) *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, ed. by Norris J. Lacy (New York: Garland, 1991), p. 61.
- (20) *The Byrth, Lyf, and Actes of Kyng Arthur*, with an introduction and notes by Robert Southey (London: Longman, 1817): for the significance of Southey's edition see Barry Gaines, 'The Editions of Malory in the Early Nineteenth Century', *Publications of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 68 (1974), 1-17.
- (21) Quoted in Ash (note 17 above), note to Plate 10.



Edward Burne-Jones, *The Beguiling of Merlin*: reproduced by kind permission of the Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight