

## Fables of King Arthur

### Aelred of Rievaulx and Secular Pastimes

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#### *Introduction*

This article sets out to contextualise the famous Arthurian anecdote found in the *Speculum Caritatis* by Aelred of Rievaulx (c. 1110–1167) on two different levels. Firstly, I shall offer an analysis of the immediate textual context of this controversial passage, by which I wish to demonstrate that it is best interpreted as a reference to orally circulated stories, not to the Latin history of Geoffrey of Monmouth, as has often been argued. Secondly, I explore the ways in which Aelred speaks of storytelling and other secular pastimes elsewhere in his works, since I understand that his more general views on these topics provide important contextual information for the interpretation of the Arthurian anecdote. Doing this, I wish to emphasise how the anecdote is related to communication with monks who were probably strongly associated with lay aristocratic culture, and how, in consequence, the passage is all the more likely to refer to forms of vernacular storytelling pertaining to the settings of secular life.

Furthermore, I shall address the issue of how Aelred, contrasting monastic and secular ways of life, invoked the views of St. Augustine on pagan theatre, entertainers, and poetry. I shall briefly examine the relationship between the ideas of these two writers, and argue that Aelred used St. Augustine's ideas not only because they were *topoi* of a literary tradition in which he was writing, but because he found them useful in his analysis of contemporaneous cultural phenomena, even though these were certainly very different from those St. Augustine originally referred to. This examination, I hope, sheds further light on how high-medieval ecclesiastical writers used the patristic tradition to analyse their own immediate cultural surroundings.

### *Medieval Theologians and the Criticism of Secular Entertainments*

Before moving to the analysis of the Arthurian passage, it is useful to take a brief look at the problems related to discussing the tradition of criticism within which high-medieval theologians usually wrote when they addressed phenomena often described as 'popular culture'. I do not wish to deny that there was such a tradition, and it was certainly, up to a point, the context for much of Aelred's writings to be explored further on. Nevertheless, I believe it would be false to portray Aelred primarily as a player in this generic debate, i.e., as a representative of a universal clerical elite producing polemics against equally universal 'popular culture'.<sup>1</sup> The problems of this kind of dualistic cultural vision have been excellently summed up by Carl Watkins in his *History and the Supernatural in Medieval England*.<sup>2</sup>

I would, instead, like to emphasise that even though Aelred's comments resonate with what many other high-medieval theologians wrote on secular entertainments,<sup>3</sup> it should be kept in mind that he was writing to a very specific audience of Cistercian monks. I believe that Aelred should not be seen so much as representing general clerical opinion, but rather the concerns of a stern novice-master (or later abbot). In the texts examined in this article he was mostly talking to a very specific audience, that of Cistercian monks, supposedly the avant-garde of Christendom.

Within this restricted debate, however, Aelred not surprisingly comes across as having a generally negative view of the effects that participating in secular culture has. Again in this limited context, a sort of cultural dichotomy also appears. Aelred would seem to make a general distinction between worthy Christian and despicable secular cultural practices, the latter most conveniently, to my mind, described as

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank the two anonymous referees for the significant help their comments were of in remoulding this part of the article and my argument. Thanks are also due to Mirator's editor in chief, Jesse Keskiäho, for his patience.

<sup>2</sup> The biggest fault in this paradigm has perhaps been the persistent assumption of a universal medieval popular or folkloric culture, but the assumption of a single elite/clerical culture does not stand on firm ground either. Furthermore, as Watkins's study lucidly demonstrates, the clergy and the peasants (and lay aristocrats, it is to be supposed) did in many respects share a common culture in daily life. See T. C. S. Watkins, *History and the Supernatural in Medieval England*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2007, esp. 5–12.

<sup>3</sup> Edmond Faral's *Les Jongleurs en France au moyen âge* (Librairie Honoré Champion: Paris 1910) is the classic treatment of the topic and also gives most of the important textual *loci*. For the most important recent contributions, see Christopher Page, *The Owl and the Nightingale. Musical Life and Ideas in France 1100–1300*, J. M. Dent & Sons: London 1989, and John Baldwin, 'The Image of the Jongleur in Northern France Around 1200', *Speculum* 72 (1997), 635–663.

'entertainments', although many modern connotations of the problematic word 'popular culture' would actually serve.<sup>4</sup> Aelred is worried about secular entertainments because they are vain, take time from more important pursuits, are associated with other bad activities (primarily drinking, and socialising with women), and provoke overheated emotions. Thus they hinder men from knowing God in this world in many ways, and are detrimental to the ideals of monastic, and perhaps also more generally Christian life.

The rhetorical roots of this cultural division, visible in other medieval writers' work as well, go back to patristic writers who repeatedly condemned the non-Christian cultural practices, such as songs, poems and especially theatre, that were seen as both idolatrous and morally degenerating.<sup>5</sup> In the high-medieval context, analogous cultural forms were not, of course, understood as outright idolatry, but the moral effects were seen as they were in the patristic times. What was common to the medieval and late classical theologian's vision of such forms of secular culture, whether he considered them to be morally or spiritually harmful (or both, as he often did), was that they moved men away from God.<sup>6</sup> The patristic rhetoric on pagan culture was thus very adaptable to the purposes of medieval ecclesiastical thinkers.

With this context in mind, I wish to examine the writings of Aelred of Rievaulx, son of a Northumbrian priest, who spent his boyhood in the court of King David of Scotland, entered the Rievaulx monastery in 1134 and became its abbot in 1147. As we shall see, St. Augustine appears to have been the most prominent patristic influence on Aelred's monastic vision of secular culture. This is hardly surprising knowing how widespread Augustine's works were and also how much attention he gave to pagan cultural phenomena, especially theatre. But before going into these links, I

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<sup>4</sup> Modern criticism of modern popular culture often labels it as shallow, frivolous, emotionally cheap, scandalously violent or amorous, and finally, as a consequence, not contributing to the personal growth of the individual. Substitute 'personal growth of the individual' by 'the individual's approach to God' and, I believe, you have a fair approximation of what Aelred thought.

<sup>5</sup> For attitudes towards music, see James McKinnon, *Music in early Christian literature*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1987, especially pp. 1–3. For theatre, see Heiko Jürgens, *Pompa Diaboli – Die lateinischen Kirchenväter und das antike Theater*, Verlag W. Kohlhammer: Stuttgart 1972 and Mario Bonaria, *I Mimi Romani*, Edizioni dell'Ateneo 1965, 14–17.

<sup>6</sup> As a useful analogy, we may think of the medieval idea of conversion, meaning both conversion from paganism to Christianity and, once Christian, conversion from worldly to spiritual life. See James Muldoon, 'Introduction: The Conversion of Europe', in *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, ed by James Muldoon, University of Florida Press: Gainesville 1997, 1–10, here pp. 1–2, and Leonard P. Hindsley, 'Monastic Conversion: The Case of Margert Ebner', in *Varieties of Religious Conversion...*, 31–48, p. 31.

shall start my analysis from the depiction of an original twelfth-century cultural phenomenon.

### *Debate over the Arthurian Anecdote*

One of Aelred's devotional works, *Speculum caritatis*, contains a puzzling reference to Arthurian stories that a certain novice, whom Aelred was supervising, had been exposed to. In this oft-quoted passage, which I too shall quote at more length further on, the novice confesses how he was, in his previous life, moved to tears by fictitious stories about King Arthur, "...*fabulis, quae vulgo de nescio quo finguntur Arcturo...*"<sup>7</sup>

This crux has provoked much debate, since it could refer to two different traditions; Latin and written, or vernacular and oral. As *Speculum caritatis* was probably composed around 1142–1143 it postdates Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* by about five years, the first substantial narrative dealing with King Arthur.<sup>8</sup> It is well known that the *Historia* was available in Aelred's social circles by the 1140s, making Geoffrey's text a possible point of reference.<sup>9</sup> However, we also have indications that Arthur was known from oral stories that were circulating before Geoffrey's *Historia*, and the words used in *Speculum caritatis* seem to indicate some sort of popular tale.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1930s, the interpretation of this Aelredian crux provoked a heated debate, lasting for decades, between J. S. P. Tatlock and R. S. Loomis, leading Arthurian scholars of their generation. Each interpreted the reference according to his presuppositions, Loomis favouring the oral traditions, as the point of reference, Tatlock Geoffrey's *Historia*.<sup>11</sup> At stake was not only the significance of this single crux in Aelred's writings, but the anecdote was, and is, connected to the much larger question of how

<sup>7</sup> *Speculum Caritatis*, II.17, *Patrologia Latina* (hereafter PL) 195, col. 565D.

<sup>8</sup> On the dating of *Speculum caritatis*, see Charles Dumont's *Introduction* in Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Mirror of Charity*, Cistercian Publications: Kalamazoo 1990, 55–59. Dumont thinks it likely that Aelred kept working on the book for several years after 1142. However, the anecdote, in as much as it is based on a real discussion, would at any rate date from time when Aelred was novice master in Rievaulx, that is 1141–42.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Elizabeth Freeman, *Narratives of a New Order. Cistercian Historical Writing in England, 1150–1220*, Brepols: Turnhout 2002, 107–108.

<sup>10</sup> For these early sources, see Roger Sherman Loomis, 'The Arthurian Legend before 1139', in *Wales and the Arthurian Legend*, University of Wales Press: Cardiff 1956, 179–220 (first published in *Romanic Review* 32 (1941), 3–38).

<sup>11</sup> Tatlock summed up his arguments in *The Legendary History of Britain*, University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles 1950, 178–229 (for Aelred, see 207–211). Loomis's views are best expressed in his 1956 article; for Aelred, see 186–191.

Arthurian traditions emerged in twelfth-century Europe. Was the interest in Arthurian texts, like Geoffrey's Latin chronicle, created by widespread circulation of oral stories, or were the oral traditions mainly a Welsh curiosity, and perhaps something that arose elsewhere as a response to the Latin text?

Loomis thought that large quantities of Celtic story-material had filtered into French oral traditions by the 1130s, whereas Tatlock denied the existence of any oral prehistory for Arthurian stories outside Wales. Accordingly, Tatlock took the expression '*de nescio quo... Arcturo*' to mean that the whole character had been previously unknown to Aelred.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, he saw the anecdote as evidence of the critical reception of Geoffrey's Latin pseudo-history for the stories are labelled as 'fables and lies' (*fabula* and *mendacium*).

Until recently, opinions in favour of both views, Tatlock's and Loomis's, have kept on coming up and the exact interpretation of the anecdote remains open.<sup>13</sup> In what follows I shall reassess the passage, contextualising it more carefully than has been done previously. Firstly, I shall consider the immediate textual context in which the passage is found in *Speculum caritatis* and what function it serves there. Secondly, for further framing of the passage, I shall survey Aelred's more general attitudes towards secular entertainment, and story-telling in particular. I suggest that Aelred does indeed deal with oral, not literary, Arthurian traditions, and that the critical attitude towards the fabulous Arthur is much more likely to derive from his general disdain for courtly entertainment and fictitious composition (oral or written), both of which he understood to move the soul of a monk away from God, than from his mistrust of Geoffrey's Latin pseudo-historiography

### *King Arthur's place in the Mirror of Charity*

In Cistercian theology love, or charity, was an essential attribute of the divine. According to Cistercian doctrine, an individual should seek and find the love of God, since through this love the image of God could be restored

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<sup>12</sup> Tatlock, *The Legendary History*, 208 and 210.

<sup>13</sup> Antonia Gransden and, most recently, Elizabeth Freeman have adopted Tatlock's position, albeit with slight reservations (Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England c. 550 to c. 1307*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca, New York, 212–213; Elizabeth Freeman, *Narratives of a New Order. Cistercian Historical Writing in England, 1150–1220*, Brepols: Turnhout 2002, 108). For a recent example of the opposite interpretation, see Dennis Howard Green, *The Beginnings of Romance*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2002, 173.

in a sinful human.<sup>14</sup> Aelred's *Speculum caritatis* deals with this central concept, love of God, in an apologetic manner. The work was probably written at the request of Bernard of Clairvaux, one of its primary goals being to answer to the accusations of those who found the Cistercian observance too severe; so severe, in fact, that it suppressed the very sentiments of charity and love of God.<sup>15</sup> Most importantly, Aelred wished to show that love, or charity, had nothing to do with affections or emotions, but that the true nature of charity was found in loving acceptance and observance of God's will, i.e., the Cistercian rule. According to Aelred, whoever takes this burden up with love finds it easy to carry and attains true peace.<sup>16</sup>

Aelred's concept of love of God is crucial for the interpretation of the Arthurian reference, since the invocation of Arthur in the *Speculum caritatis* is related to the dismissal of the spiritual significance of sentiments. The anecdote is found in a long discussion Aelred reports he once had on the topic of love God with a monk he was supervising. The novice under Aelred's spiritual guidance was perplexed, feeling that he had been in closer contact with divine love when he was still leading the secular life: '...when he was still in the secular condition and way of life, he was so often moved by compunction, open to an attachment of divine love and enjoyed such great pleasantness of spirit...'.<sup>17</sup> Now, in Rievaulx monastery, he could no longer experience such sentiments, but was instead living a calm, highly regulated life, the hardships and blessings of which he vividly describes.<sup>18</sup>

The discussion between Aelred and the novice revolves around the tears, that, for the novice, had been a sign of his love and compassion for Christ but which he found he shed no more. Aelred explains this as nothing to worry about but, in fact, a positive development, for love of God must not be assessed by such outward signs as tears. For Aelred, complete submission to the divine will and monastic rule is the highest form of this love, and he demonstrates the unsuitability of tears as indicators of true charity with the following example, which leads immediately to the Arthurian reference:

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<sup>14</sup> For the immediate theological context of *The Mirror of Charity*, see Dumont's introduction, 48–55.

<sup>15</sup> The severity is, to my mind, to be understood partly in relationship to the fact that the Cistercian monks were recruited as adults, and thus were not naturally brought up to the monastic way of life. See the classic study, Jean Leclercq, *Monks and Love in Twelfth-Century France*, Clarendon Press: Oxford 1979, 9–12.

<sup>16</sup> See Dumont in *The Mirror of Charity*, 50–51.

<sup>17</sup> *Speculum caritatis*, II.17. Translation from *The Mirror of Charity*, 193. "...quod in saeculari adhuc habitu ac conversatione positus ita saepius compungebatur, ac in quemdam divini amoris resolvebatur affectum tantaque spiritus suavitate frueretur..." For the Latin text, see PL 193, col. 562A.

<sup>18</sup> *Speculum caritatis*, II.17 (*The Mirror of Charity*, 193–195; PL 193, cols. 562D–563B.)

Sometimes in tragedies or in epic poetry a character whose attractive handsomeness, admirable courage, and agreeable attachment are extolled, is portrayed as persecuted or suppressed. If someone hearing these things being sung or listening to them being recited is moved by some sort of attachment even to the point of weeping, would it not be terribly absurd on the basis of this worthless devotion to make such an inference about the quality of his love, that he loves some fabulous being? A being for whose rescue he would not pay a small fraction of his possessions, even if the events took place right in front of his very eyes.<sup>19</sup>

What Aelred is saying is, that it would be absurd to take these tears, shed by the audience of a play or poem for a non-existent fictional character, as signs of real love: '*nonne perabsurdum est, ex hac vanissima pietate de amoris ejus qualitate capere conjecturam, ut hinc fabulosum illum nescio quem affirmetur amare*'. That feeling cannot be love, as real love necessitates action if its object is in danger, and the theatre audience certainly would not risk even a fraction of their property to help a character in the play. As has been noticed, Aelred draws here directly on Augustine's *Confessions* (3.2), where the emotional effects of theatre are discussed.<sup>20</sup>

This patristic example about *tragoedia* and *carmina* precedes the famous Arthurian anecdote. That this passage has been interpreted in two opposite ways is reflected in the two ambiguous, bracketed expressions in the translation below:

At these words the novice blushed and, with his head bowed and his eyes fixed on the ground, he said: Truly so, very truly so. For also when (listening to / reading) fables that are popularly made up about that Arthur, whoever he is, I remember I was sometimes moved to the point of shedding tears. Therefore I feel greatly ashamed of my vanity, for when I succeed in squeezing out a tear listening to things that are, with piety, read, chanted or indeed preached about our Lord,

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<sup>19</sup> *Speculum caritatis*, II.17: "Cum enim in tragoediis vanisve carminibus quisquam injuriatus fingitur, vel oppressus, cujus amabilis pulchritudo, fortitudo mirabilis, gratiosus praedicetur affectus; si quis haec vel cum canuntur audiens, vel cernens si recitentur, usque ad expressionem lacrymarum quodam moveatur affectu, nonne perabsurdum est, ex hac vanissima pietate de amoris ejus qualitate capere conjecturam, ut hinc fabulosum illum nescio quem affirmetur amare, pro cujus ereptione, etiamsi haec omnia vere prae oculis gererentur, ne modicam quidem substantiae suae portionem pateretur expendi?", PL 195, col. 565B–565C. Translation based on E. Connor, *The Mirror of Charity*, 198–199.

<sup>20</sup> See Dumont's notes, *The Mirror of Charity*, 198 and 219.

I immediately congratulate myself as if some great and extraordinary miracle had happened to me. And it is, in fact, the mark of a very vain mind to become puffed up with vainglory because of these affections that, even though they accidentally come up in relation to piety, used to move my mind when (reading / listening to) fables and lies.<sup>21</sup>

It is strange, but hitherto scholars seem to have given no attention to the connection of the Arthurian passage with Aelred's treatment of the Augustinian themes of *tragoedia* and *carmina* presented above. Even so, the novice's confession seems to be a direct reply to what has just been said, and understanding this contextual feature affects the interpretation it should have.

The connection is made clear not only by the consequent positioning of the passages but also by rhetorical markers. The words with which the novice begins (*Verissime, inquit, verissime...*) demonstrate that he is reacting to what has just been said, and that he thinks he has captured the meaning of Aelred's comment. We may also note that both paragraphs open up with similar sentences, '*Cum enim in tragoediis...*', and '*Nam et in fabulis...*', respectively. Most importantly, that Arthur is described as *nescio quis* does not mean that he is an unknown character, but it rather creates a comparison with the heroes of the *tragoedia / carmina*, who have also been described '*nescio quis*' in the previous example. Likewise the verb *tingo*, that refers to the composition of the fables, (*quae vulgo de nescio quo finguntur Arcturo*), makes a connection with the passage before (*in tragoediis vanisve carminibus quisquam injuriatus fingitur*). I suggest that this framing effectively turns the novice's reaction to Arthurian stories into a present-day example of what Aelred's voice has said in a more theoretical and literary way using Augustine's ideas.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Speculum caritatis*, II.17: "Ad haec verba quodam ille pudore perfusus, demisso capite, fixisque in terram luminibus: 'Verissime, inquit, verissime. Nam et in fabulis, quae vulgo de nescio quo finguntur Arcturo, memini me nonnunquam usque ad effusionem lacrymarum fuisse permotum. Unde non modicum pudet propriae vanitatis, qui si forte ad ea quae de Domino pie leguntur, vel cantantur, vel certe publico sermone dicuntur, aliquam mihi lacrymam valuero extorquere, ita mihi statim de sanctitate applaudo, ut si magnum aliquid ac inusitatum mihi miraculum contigisset. Et revera vanissimae mentis iudicium est, pro his affectibus, si forte pro pietate contingant, vana gloria ventilari: quibus in fabulis et mendaciis solebat compungi'". PL 195, col. 565 D. Translation based on E. Connor's (*The Mirror of Charity*, 199), but I have deemed it necessary to change some wordings.

<sup>22</sup> In the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, we find a similar juxtaposition of the patristic and present-day reality in a sermon by Thomas Doking. He says, explicitly, that *histriones* are doing the same thing now as the comedians once did: "sicut olim fecerunt tragedi et comedi in theatris, et hodie fit in turpibus spectralibus et turpibus ludis..." from Page 1989, 24.

I would say that all this aims at making Arthur analogous to the characters of *tragoedia* and *carmina* and, consequently, making Augustine's thoughts on tears and theatre apply in Aelred's social reality. Aelred is saying that Arthur of the popular fables is a "made-up character" in the same way as the heroes of plays and epic poems.<sup>23</sup> It seems highly likely that the famous *nescio quis*, which caused Tatlock to speculate how well, and if, Aelred knew Arthur, does not actually tell us anything about Aelred's knowledge of Arthurian tradition, but is essentially an element in this juxtaposition. The expression is, after all, common in Latin and usually translates best as 'someone' or 'some', not allowing immediate conclusions to be made as to whether the person talked about is known or not. In the place of 'some Arthur' we could, in my view, have 'some Roland' or 'some Alexander' without substantially changing the meaning of *nescio quis* or indeed that of the whole sentence. It is some legendary hero about whom the fables tell; his exact identity is of no consequence. The vanity of tears is what matters. Seeing the passage in this context, I find it hard to believe that Aelred would have used his example-story to surreptitiously criticise Geoffrey's *Historia*. What would have been the point of putting it so ambiguously?

One thing that has left room for interpretation is the verb *tingo*, which indicates fabricated as opposed to true stories, but does not make it clear whether they are oral or written, although the agent *vulgo* would seem to suggest non-clerical transmitters and the use of the vernacular.<sup>24</sup> But there is also another reason for assuming that the stories were at least performed orally, whatever their mode of composition. This is suggested by the Augustinian passage, in which the *carmina* and *tragoedia* are said to have the aforesaid emotional effects when sung or recited, '*si quis haec vel cum canuntur audiens, vel cernens si recitentur*'. Furthermore, the novice also says that his better tears, those shed in the context of Christian devotion, are provoked, albeit rarely, by recited, sung or preached texts.<sup>25</sup> A performative element is very much present in all these cases.

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<sup>23</sup> Peter of Blois has a similar passage, in which the juxtaposition between *tragoedia* and *carmina* and *cantilena ioculatorum* is made explicitly. His passage draws from the same place in St Augustine, or from Aelred himself; it postdates Aelred by c. 50 years. See Peter of Blois, *De confessione*, PL 207, col. 1088D–1089A.

<sup>24</sup> D. H. Green finds the word *vulgo* in itself sufficient proof that the stories referred to are 'popular tales' (Green 2002, 173).

<sup>25</sup> "Unde non modicum pudet propriae vanitatis, qui si forte ad ea quae de Domino pie leguntur, vel cantantur, vel certe publico sermone dicuntur, aliquam mihi lacrymam valero extorquere..." PL 195, col. 565D.

### *Fables and lies*

I hope to have given strong reasons to believe that the anecdote is best understood as a reference to hearing stories told in vernacular, not reading them out of a Latin book. Nevertheless, this is not the end of the debate. Tatlock already made the reservation that the stories could well have been orally performed, but if they were, they were still certainly based on Geoffrey's *Historia*, not on any independent oral tradition.<sup>26</sup>

This possibility cannot be absolutely ruled out, although it seems to me somewhat unlikely. But what, I figure, can be demonstrated is that Aelred certainly was not referring to Geoffrey or casting doubt over his history. While Tatlock admitted the possibility of oral transmission, he still saw Aelred's characterisation of these stories as *fabula* and *mendacium* as a critical reading of Geoffrey. In the background we find the idea expressed by Maurice Powicke, to whom Tatlock partly credited the invention of his interpretation, that Aelred 'with his English traditions and keen historical sense' would have been suspicious of such historical fantasies.<sup>27</sup>

However, as the reference to the stories as *fabula* and *mendacium* is made in relation to what is most likely oral story-telling, labelling it as criticism of Geoffrey seems far-fetched to begin with. More importantly, the Augustinian context of the *tragoedia* and *carmina* makes it substantially clear that the stories discussed are fictitious in the same sense as poetry and plays. That is, they are by definition untrue because they belong to a certain genre of (literary or oral) fiction, i.e. *fabula*, not because they fail to fulfil a genre requirement (verisimilitude) of *historia*. As to the words used, it should be remembered there existed a long tradition of Christian writing where poetry, categorically, was labelled as *mendacium*.<sup>28</sup>

Again, we need to keep in mind what Aelred is trying to say. For Aelred, the focal point is that human emotions can be tricked by invented fables that are without reference to reality, and that emotions, as a

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<sup>26</sup> A. Gransden and E. Freeman do not deal with this possibility. Freeman, however, is quite careful in not expressing too strong an interpretation and presents reading aloud of Geoffrey as one possibility. See Gransden 1974, 212–213 and Freeman 2002, 108.

<sup>27</sup> F. M. Powicke, *Aelred of Rievaulx and his Biographer Walter Daniel*, Longmans, Green & Co.: Manchester 1922 (reprinted from *The Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 6 (1921–1922)), 66.

<sup>28</sup> See Green 2002, 136–137 for a compact survey and Ludwig Gompf, 'Fagmenta poetarum', *Litteratur und Sprache im Europäischen Mittelalter—Festschrift für Karl Langosch zum 70. Geburtstag*, A. Önnorfors, Johannes Rathofer and Fritz Wagner eds., Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft: Darmstadt 1973, 53–62, and Päivi Mehtonen, *Old Concepts and New Poetics – Historia, Argumentum and Fabula in the Twelfth- and Early Thirteenth-Century Latin Poetics of Fiction*, Societas Scientiarum Fennica: Tammisaari 1996, 123–129 for a more detailed treatment.

consequence, are not to be trusted. It is not possible to make conclusions about the reality on the basis of sentiments, for they do not necessarily reflect the reality at all. This is crucial for the theological issues under discussion, and to make the point clear Aelred refers to Arthurian tales that, as an example, communicate the Augustinian ideas into the present. The *nescio quis* underlines the insignificance of these fictitious characters, not their unfamiliarity as characters of fiction. Quite the contrary, one might argue that Aelred's exemplary use of Arthur suggests he was a rather well known figure to the audience at hand.

As a result, I would propose, the Arthurian stories the anecdote refers to are suspect because they belong to the category of *fabula*, not because they are fabrications masked as proper history. We may naturally deduce that Aelred understood the Arthur of the fables to be a fictitious character, but we cannot take the passage as a comment on Geoffrey's *Historia*, or even as a comment on the historical Arthur. One should keep in mind that William of Malmesbury clearly understood the oral (Welsh) Arthurian stories as fables, but at the same time hoped to find historical, true, narratives about him.<sup>29</sup> But history, trusted or not, wouldn't have fitted into Aelred's argument and wouldn't have juxtaposed nicely with Augustine's *tragoedia* and *carmina*.

### *Courtly entertainments*

To further develop our appreciation of the passage, we should pay attention to how Aelred categorised narrative genres and, in particular, how and in what context he used the word *fabula* in the *Speculum Caritatis*. As is well known, *fabula* was originally a concept of classical literary theory and it referred to fictional compositions that lacked verisimilitude.<sup>30</sup> Medieval writers used the term generally indiscriminately of both written and oral stories. In Aelred's case, it seems that with the word he commonly denotes to oral stories that are told in profane settings.

In another locus where Aelred dismisses the importance of emotions and tears, he gives an example of a monk who, after having spent the whole day telling fables (or just listening to them) and drinking with secular men and women, came back to monastery late and burst into tears and sighs.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom eds., Clarendon Press: Oxford 1998, i.8, 26–27.

<sup>30</sup> On the definition of *fabula*, see Päivi Mehtonen 1996, 119–144.

<sup>31</sup> *Speculum caritatis*, II.7: "Novi et ipse fratrem, qui cum tota die saecularibus viris ac feminis immistus, fabulis et potationi vacaverit, sero rediens monasterium ita in lacrymas ac suspiria erumpit, ut etiam importunis gemitibus multorum aures compellet; nec ideo vel modicum ab huiusmodi illecebris temperet.

Fables are also mentioned in a long list of worldly activities which Aelred gives as he explains a series of Biblical quotations where turning away from the world is advised. According to Aelred, reading these biblical extracts may make one realise he has, among other bad things, 'spent the days telling fables and arguing' (*litibus et fabulis occupare diem*).<sup>32</sup>

Effectively, such worldly situations where the *fabula* are told represent the opposite of the proper monastic and Christian life. In an other locus of the *Speculum Caritatis* Aelred explains that going through physical sufferings and appearing emotionally unshaken is not contradictory to feeling inward love; in fact it is those who suffer and toil who will have the spiritual rewards. Here he interprets a proverb by Solomon, 'Give strong drink to those who grieve and wine to the sad-spirited. Let them drink and forget their need, and remember their sorrow no more.'<sup>33</sup> Aelred says that Solomon clearly indicates those to be consoled who are of sad spirit, not those who 'spend their days in *cachinnis et fabulis*'.<sup>34</sup>

The contrast between the two ways of life, unsentimental, passion-free monastic ascetism and the worldly (aristocratic) life, full of emotional excitement, where the fables belong, is made abundantly clear by another Aelred's example, which doesn't actually mention the *fabula*, but speaks vividly of the other elements pertaining to the worldly, and in particular courtly, life, once again referring the tears:

'Perhaps they believe it is holier to display tear-smudged faces in the midst of sumptuous food and fine wines, amid portions fit for a king and carefully prepared feasts, amid idle chit-chat and all-night carousing, than it is to appear pale-faced and dry-eyed in the midst of toil and hardship, in numerous vigils, in hunger and thirst, in cold and exposure, in the fatigue of each day, in the mortifications of one's own will, in scorning the world and disregarding the flesh.'<sup>35</sup>

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Hujusce igitur spe compunctionis regularis districtio deserenda; et similis est sectanda spurcicia? Cujus non hoc abhorret auditus." PL 195, col. 553C.

<sup>32</sup> *Speculum caritatis* II.14 (PL 195, col. 558C).

<sup>33</sup> Pr 31:6–7.

<sup>34</sup> *Speculum caritatis*, II.6: "Denique Salomon quibus divina consolatio sit infundenda, mysticis verbis declarat, dicens: 'Date siceram moerentibus, et vinum his, qui amaro animo sunt. Bibant et obliviscantur egestatis suae, et doloris non recordentur amplius.' Aperte his verbis vinum illud quod laetificat cor hominis, non otio dissolutis, non diem in cachinnis et fabulis expendentibus, sed his qui amaro sunt animo, repromittit, siceramque illam, quae de pomis novis et veteribus, quae in sponsi deliciis sponsa conservat, conficitur, non epulantibus et potantibus, sed propter angustias hujus vitae moerentibus, et egestate et dolore laborantibus, pronuntiat esse donandam." PL 195, cols. 552C–552D.

<sup>35</sup> *Speculum caritatis*, II.6: "Si sanctius credent inter epulas et vina, inter regalia fercula et apparatus convivia, inter otiosas confabulationes et nocturnas potationes, madentia lacrymis ora praeferre, quam in

Finally, the most important passage, concerning the contextualisation of the word *fabula* in the Arthurian anecdote, comes from the beginning of the same dialogue between Aelred and the novice. Aelred asks the novice, who we remember was worried because he felt divine love less intensively after his entry to the monastery, if he had suffered for Christ in his previous life as much as he did now. The novice answers that the pains he had then were nothing like the suffering now, for before he did not restrict himself as regarded idle and vain talking (*me ulla ratione ab otiosis et vanis sermonibus continerem*). On the contrary, he tells what he did directly after the tears that were for him a sign of devotion:

'I returned immediately to loud laughter and story-telling (*ad cachinnos redibam et fabulas*), and I flittered hither and yon at whim. Having freedom of my will, I enjoyed the company of my relatives and amused myself in conversations with my friends. I attended sumptuous dinner parties and did not shrink from drinking...'<sup>36</sup>

I would suggest that this sort of aristocratic lifestyle should be seen as the context for the reference to the Arthurian fables, in addition to the immediate textual context defined by the *tragoedia* and *carmina* discussed above. We do not know who the novice was, or even if he was just Aelred's literary creation, but in all likelihood he was a son of a noble and rich family, real or not. Seeing this background makes it all the more dubious that the Arthurian stories Aelred writes about would have been Latin histories. They were, more likely, popular tales or, perhaps, poems and songs presented by professional entertainers. In fact, it is nowhere made explicit whether the *fabula* are something that the novice and other protagonists of Aelred's examples tell themselves, or rather listen to (or both). At least the sumptuous parties described in connection to *fabula*, for all we know, would have been natural instances for minstrel performance and other courtly diversions.

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labore et aerumna, in vigiliis multis, in fame et siti, in frigore et nuditate, et propriae voluntatis mortificatione, in diurna fatigatione, in mundi contemptu, et carnis despectu, pallentia ora siccis praeferre obtutibus." PL 195, col. 551C. Translation by E. Connor, *The Mirror of Charity*, 172.

<sup>36</sup> *Speculum caritatis* II.17. "Quinimo post illas, quas praefatus sum lacrymas, statim ad cachinnos redibam et fabulas, ac pro impetu animi huc atque illuc mobili discursione ferebar, ac meae voluntatis possidens libertatem, parentum praesentia gratulabar, sociorum confabulationibus arridebam; conviviis apparatis intereram, potationes non abhorrebam." PL 195, col. 562C. Translation by E. Connor, *The Mirror of Charity*, 193–194.

## Aelred and Augustine

It has become apparent that Aelred's attitude towards worldly, in particular aristocratic, pastimes was highly critical, and that to him Augustine's writings on theatre could inform present-day cultural phenomena. Courtly entertainments of Aelred's times were suspect because they were fictitious, caused emotionally overheated reactions, and were attached to a certain social setting in which other vices flourished as well. In all these respects Aelred's attitudes remind us of Augustine's critique of the late-classical theatre and poetry.

This is, perhaps, not very surprising as same kinds of judgements echoing patristic writers were often expressed by high-medieval theologians. But I wish to visit the topic shortly, for I feel that not only do the patristic references contextualise references to contemporary matters (as in the case of Arthur), but the contemporary issues also give us a clue to how Aelred saw the patristic legacy.

In another well-known locus of *Speculum caritatis*, 'On the vain pleasure of the ears', Aelred condemns the use of instruments and polyphonic singing in church.<sup>37</sup> Here he makes explicit reference to Augustine,<sup>38</sup> pointing out that the soul should be moved by the meaning of the words, not by the musical elements of the performance.<sup>39</sup> The indecency of such music seems to be much due to the fact it is performed in a way that resembles the singing of popular entertainers. Aelred says the singers gesticulate too much, and points out how their gests resemble those of the *histriones*, '*Interim histrionicis quibusdam gestibus totum corpus agitur*'.<sup>40</sup> The audience is amazed by this polyphonic, instrumentated, and impudent performance, so that by its reactions one would think he is in a theatre, not in a church. The words used here, like "*lascivas cantantium gesticulationes... non sine cachinno risuque intuetur...*" echo both the patristic debate on theatre and the language of the Cistercian statutes regulating church music at the same time.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Speculum caritatis*, II.23 (PL 195, col. 571A–572B). See *The Mirror of Charity*, 209–212 for Connor's informative translation and Dumont's notes. As Dumont remarks, here Aelred's thinking follows general Cistercian ideas.

<sup>38</sup> *Confessiones* 10.33.

<sup>39</sup> *Speculum caritatis* II.23: "'Mouetur animus ad affectum pietatis divino cantico audito: sed si magis sonum quam sensum libido audiendi desideret, improbatur.' Et alias: 'Cum me, inquit, magis cantus quam verba delectat, paenaliter me paccasse confiteor, et malle non audire cantantes.'" PL 195, col. 572A.

<sup>40</sup> *Speculum caritatis* II.23 (PL 195, col. 571 C).

<sup>41</sup> *Speculum caritatis*, II.23: "Stans interea vulgus sonitum follium, crepitum cymbalorum, harmoniam fistularum tremens attonitusque miratur; sed lascivas cantantium gesticulationes, meretricias vocum

That such features coming from the world of secular entertainment have no place in proper Christian life is made clear also in Aelred's *Relatio de Standardo*, a historical account dealing with the Battle of Standard (1138), that was fought between Scotland's King David, Aelred's one-time patron, and English forces led by Walter Espec, King Stephen's supporter.<sup>42</sup> Before the battle, there is a lengthy oratory by Walter Espec in which the barbarity of the opposing Scottish forces is colourfully portrayed.<sup>43</sup> The Scots are described as bad Christians because, among other things, 'Entertainers, dancers and dancing girls precede them, while the cross of Christ and relics of saints precede us.'<sup>44</sup>

Even though Aelred used words such as *histrion* and *theatrum* that he knew from patristic sources, I am fairly positive the meanings he gave them were mostly derived from the 12th-century reality. The theological significance of these popular tales of the court was for Aelred, in the end, comparable to the significance that theatre and other forms of pagan culture held for Augustine. Although the purported Scottish *histriones* were by no means seen as agents of a pagan cult, they still represented elements alien to Aelred's vision of what true Christianity should be. Whereas Aelred's Englishmen follow cross and Christ, the barbarous Scots are followers of fallacious vanities, and thus are strangers to God and his love

If Aelred's reference to Augustine's *tragoedia* and *carmina* would not be followed by the Arthurian link to the 12th-century reality it would be easy to interpret this quotation as a learned and topic one, meant to evoke the relevant Patristic tradition in the reader's (or listener's) mind,<sup>45</sup> and perhaps to show off the writer's learning. But I would suggest that there is more to the use of Augustine than mere literary topoi. Like so often, the topoi are also useful analytical tools. As Aelred refers to the patristic debate on theatre and poetry he does this mainly because Augustine's ideas are suitable for his analysis of the surrounding reality.

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alternationes et ifractiones non sine cachinno risu intuetur, ut eos non ad oratorium, sed ad theatrum, nec ad orandum, sed ad spectandum aestimes convenisse." PL 195, cols. 571C–571D. On the relevant Cistercian statute, see Joseph M. Canivez, *Statuta Capitulum Generalium Ordinis Cisterciensis ab anno 1116 ad annum 1786*, 1:30, statute LXXII (*De falcis vocibus*), cited from *The Mirror of Charity*, 210.

<sup>42</sup> The battle one of the engagements in the long civil strife between Matilda and Stephen. Scotland's king David was Matilda's uncle and supporter.

<sup>43</sup> PL 195, col. 704D–707B.

<sup>44</sup> *Relatio de Standardo*, PL 195, col. 707A: "Illos histriones, saltatores et saltatrices, nos crux Christi et reliquiae sanctorum antecedunt."

<sup>45</sup> Mary Carruthers characterises medieval reading as a "'hermeneutical dialogue' between the mind of the reader and the absent voices which the letters call forth"; see her *The Book of Memory*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1990, 186.

## Conclusions

As to my main argument, I hope to have demonstrated that we should interpret the Arthurian anecdote found in *Speculum caritatis* referring to popular tales told in 1130s or early 1140s, probably in Yorkshire, not to Latin histories circulating there. In Aelred's writings there are no indicia hinting that these tales would have had a connection to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, although this possibility cannot, of course, be absolutely ruled out.

Nevertheless, it is clear that *Speculum caritatis*'s main goal, which it achieved very effectively to judge by its popularity, was to communicate about the proper Cistercian way of life, and that the Arthurian anecdote was just one example used to drive a theological point home.<sup>46</sup> The text was intended to offer spiritual guidance to monks, not to be a manifesto about what is true history. Had Aelred wished to criticise Geoffrey he would have had a better opportunity to do this in his historical works. But he did not find it necessary there either, perhaps because his historical works, too, had other, more important goals, such as retaining memory of important events and moral education of the audience.<sup>47</sup>

From Aelred and other sources it seems that fables, poems and songs were an integral part of courtly, secular lifestyle, and it is not at all surprising that Aelred was concerned with the attractions of such a way of life. As Jean Leclercq pointed out in his classic study, Cistercian monks entered the order as adults and their vast majority came from the upper echelons of the society.<sup>48</sup> We can be fairly certain that most monks, like the novice of the *Speculum caritatis*, were only too familiar with courtly culture and secular ways of life. Neither is there any doubt that not all who were captivated by the Cistercian movement found spiritual happiness there. The possibility to come close to God is likely to have been a huge personal attraction in medieval culture. But to find out that there was no immediate gratification and, probably for most, no concrete experience of the divine, but that instead following the calling was a daily toil, terribly demanding, must have made the lures of the former life sometimes hard to resist.

Keeping this context in mind, it seems that Aelred used the

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<sup>46</sup> *Speculum caritatis* became a rather popular text, of which testify the 16 still extant medieval manuscripts. Nine of them date from the 12th and 13th centuries. Anselm Hoste, *Bibliotheca Aelrediana*, Nijhoff: Hagae Comitum, 1962, 41–43.

<sup>47</sup> On Aelred's historical works, see Freeman, *Narratives*, 31–87.

<sup>48</sup> LeClercq, *Monks and Love...*, 8–12.

Augustinian concepts related to theatre and poetry with the present-day cultural phenomena in mind. Augustine was useful because his thoughts found relevance in the reality around Aelred. To us the problems the Church Fathers had with theatre may look different from those that twelfth-century churchmen had with courtly entertainments or popular tales, for the latter were obviously not facing a pagan religion. But thinkers such as Aelred had little reason to read Augustine with a particularly historical interest. What moved the soul (in particular that of a Cistercian monk) away from God was always a threat, and in this way it made not much difference to the argument whether there was a pagan religion lurking behind a spectacle or not.

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