

The Arthurian Trilogy of Der Pleier: a Reassessment

Neil Thomas
University of Durham

Little is known of the poet using the name (or pseudonym) of Der Pleier. It is possible that the name comes from the verb *blaejen*, 'blow' which would be found in Upper German dialects with initial p-. This verb was used for the activity of glass-blowers, so that the poet may have come from a family who practised such a trade. Alternatively, the name could have been a poetic pseudonym which, it has been conjectured, 'refers metaphorically to his writing technique of using old materials, melting them up and fusing them into new works'.¹ His language and rhymes assign him possibly to the Salzburg region but the dating of his three Arthurian romances (and the sequence in which they appeared) is unknown. The poet mentions Hartmann and Wolfram as celebrated poets which demonstrates that he lived after them, but how long after has been much debated. Most scholars choose the second half of the thirteenth century, approximately 1260-1280.

Pleier wrote three Arthurian romances, *Garel von dem blühenden Tal*, *Meleranz* and *Tandareis und Flordibel*,² the combined number of lines of the trio amounting to more than fifty two thousand (almost twice as many as Heinrich von dem Türlin's *Diu Crône*).

The first of the above works, *Garel*, has received most critical attention since it appears to be a response to the *Daniel von dem blühenden Tal* (c.1220-1230) of Pleier's literary predecessor, Der Stricker.³ The latter author is best known as a writer of short stories containing shrewd and resourceful clerical heroes (of whom Pfaffe Amis is the best known). His one Arthurian romance is widely regarded as having transferred such a hero to the knightly sphere, for Daniel typically wins his combats by the application of *list* (cunning, resourcefulness).

Stricker's romance relates how the young Daniel goes to the Arthurian Court to offer his services to the King. At about the same time a giant arrives on a camel, an emissary of the King Matûr von

Clûse (440), with a threat to Arthur and his Court. (Matûr wishes Arthur to offer himself up as a vassal.) Daniel, overhearing this outrage, departs immediately to track down the departing giant. Before confronting his enemy he encounters two ladies in distress in whose service he develops his peculiar *modus operandi*: the use of cunning. The first of the ladies, the 'Frouwe von dem Trüeben Berge', is oppressed by the dwarf Juran who has in his possession an invincible sword. The dwarf agrees to give up his sword for the sake of a fair fight with Daniel, but after it appears that their combat is heading for a stalemate, both combatants run for the sword. Daniel reaches it first and decapitates his opponent. The hero's reaction to victory is one of jubilation that he has found an instrument capable of countering his gigantic foe in Clûse:

er was frô daz er daz swert
 an dem twerge hâte gewonnen,
 and wolde rehte erkunnen
 ob er den risen möhte snîden. (1774-77)

[He rejoiced in having won the sword from the dwarf and was eager to see if he might slay the giant with it too.]

[In the event he later kills the giant's brother with Juran's sword but Arthur kills the giant himself.]

He uses a similar ruse to overcome his next opponent, a 'bauchloses Ungeheuer' wielding a Gorgon's head. Daniel asks for a mirror so as not to have to look directly at the Gorgon's head which the monster carries under his arm:

eines listes er sich underwant:
 er nam den spiegel in die hant,
 als in sîn wîsheit lêrte.
 sînen rücken er kêrte
 rehte gegen dem bürge tor. (2075-79)

[Daniel thought of a ruse, for he was always resourceful. He took the mirror in his hand and turned his back to the castle gate.]

In this way the monster and his companions are defeated and, after many further adventures of the hero, so are the forces of Clûse. Then, however, the giant's father arrives on the scene and abducts Arthur and later Parzival. The king is rescued only by a further ruse of Daniel. Using a net which he takes from the Frouwe von der Grünen Ouwe, Daniel ensnares the father and persuades him to give up his opposition to the Arthurian knights.

This somewhat audacious work has met with mixed critical responses. Its cunning hero, an 'Odysseus redivivus' (Werner Schröder)⁴ is often perceived to detract from a chivalrous tone. Many episodes in the narrative are somewhat lacking in fine feeling as, for example, when, after the defeat of the forces of Clûse, countless widows are married off indiscriminately to Arthurian knights. Meanwhile, the following sanguinary description of the pitched battle between the two forces (which essentially evokes the *chanson de geste* genre rather than the Arthurian romance) appears to be excessive:

si riten in dem bluote,
daz gie den rossen an diu knie
dar inne ertrunken alle die
die dâ nider wurden geslagen. (5628-31)

[They were riding in blood coming up to the height of the horses' knees. All who were struck down drowned in the gore.]

Clearly standing apart from the mainstream of the Arthurian tradition, the work has been glossed as a mirror of the values and aspirations of the bourgeoisie:

Uns scheint der Daniel die Problematik des besitzlosen Adels und Bürgertums zu reflektieren, deren Welt Stricker in seiner Kleindichtung so oft geschildert hat. Sein Held repräsentiert den Menschen *âne guot*, der sich nur mit Hilfe außerordentlicher Mittel der *liste* um seinen Herrn verdient machen kann und dadurch *lop*, *êre* und das ersehnte *guot* erlangt.⁵

Recently it has been explained as a parody of the traditional

Arthurian ideal, that is, as a work which scorns unrealistic and fanciful rules governing armed engagements and puts forward the view that a cunning, rough-and-ready approach is more likely to prevail. The work would, on this view, be best understood as 'einen Generalangriff auf die illusionistische Artusdichtung':

Dieser Daniel ist kein Artusritter comme il faut. Er will es auch nicht sein, er hat begriffen, daß die von diesem erwarteten und kultivierten Tugenden nicht einmal in ihrer Märchenwelt genügten, geschweige denn in der wirklichen voll lauerner Gefahren. Und das war es wohl auch, was Stricker demonstrieren und lehren wollte.⁶

Pleier, in his *Garel*, on the other hand, according to an influential essay by de Boor,⁷ went back beyond his immediate source, Stricker's *Daniel von dem blühenden Tal*, to seek in the work of Hartmann material which would give a more acceptably chivalrous tone to his own work. Pleier, demonstrating a nobler conception of knighthood than his source, Stricker, provides a 'courtly corrective' to Daniel in the shape of his hero, Garel. The latter wins his fight not by *list* but through straightforward knightly prowess, the face-to-face mode of combat with which we associate Erec or Iwein:

Noch einmal will hier ein ritterlich gesinnter Dichter artushafte Vorbildlichkeit nicht ohne Sinn für die ethische Haltung Hartmannscher Gestalten zum Leben erwecken, und zwar in einer bewußten Gegendichtung gegen den Roman des Strickers, in dem er die Zersetzung des Höfischen spürte.⁸

In Pleier's 'Gegendichtung' the young hero arrives at Arthur's Court and soon wins a place as the King's trusted advisor. Presently the giant Charabin comes to the Court with a message from his master, Ekunaver. Charabin accuses Arthur's father of being responsible for the death of Ekunaver's father and throws down a military challenge to Arthur. Garel sets out to follow the departing Charabin and, like Daniel, is soon caught up in a multiplicity of gratuitous combats. However, Garel uses his various exploits as a means of winning friends and allies with which to swell the Arthurian tide against Ekunaver. Presently he comes to the land of Anferre, a place wasted by Vulganus, a centaur who bears a Gorgon's head on his shield.

After defeating him, Garel has the Gorgon's head covered with lead and sunk in the sea. After this Garel marries Laudamie, Queen of Anferre.

The rest of the romance is largely taken up with pitched battles between Garel's forces and those of Ekunaver. Eventually the latter is defeated, but he is treated chivalrously: Garel requires him and two further royal captives to deliver themselves up to Arthur (a stock convention of the 'classical' Arthurian romance) but allows him time to return first to his queen in order to arrange his affairs. When the captive kings arrive at the Court, Arthur pardons them and permits them to join the Round Table. On his way home Garel marries various ladies to *selected* Arthurian knights, whereupon he returns home to his wife Laudamie at Anferre. The work concludes with an epilogue in which a monastery is founded on the site of the battle.

Pleier probably went as far as his material permitted in producing a *contrafactura* of Stricker, yet this material appears to have laid definite restrictions upon him. Both *Daniel* and *Garel* abound in descriptions of military combats which evoke better the collective world of the heroic epic than the conventional 'Arthurian' world in which solitary knights make journeys of self-conquest.⁹ The latter world is more convincingly evoked in his other romances, *Meleranz* and *Tandareis und Flordibel*, to which attention will now be directed.

The eponymous hero of the first of these romances, Meleranz, is the son of Arthur's sister Olimpia and a French king. He desires to visit his uncle, who had always been held up to him as a model of perfection. He sets off secretly from his homeland, choosing to travel anonymously. He comes to the forest of Brijiljân (O.F. Broceliande) in the midst of which is a paradisiacal meadow. Here the beautiful princess Tydomie is taking a bath attended by handmaidens (who leave at Tydomie's behest when Meleranz arrives). The scene turns into a test of Meleranz's sexual self-control. The princess, having in mind to try him (544-45), bids him serve her with toiletries in her bath and even has him guard her from mosquitos ('muggen', 831) as she lies in her bed. We are not surprised to learn that Meleranz becomes considerably inflamed by the goddess Venus when ordered to keep this constant vigil by Tydomie's bedside (838-39). Later Tydomie admits to him that she had tested him in order to establish whether he could behave honourably (1075-78). At the same time she is able to see through his would-be anonymity through the good

offices of a female mentor versed in *nigromancie* (1022). Despite his evasions she knows that he is the son of the French king on his way to visit Arthur, whom she warmly praises (993-94).

Meleranz then proceeds to the Arthurian Court where he maintains his anonymity (despite Guinevere's suspicions of a family likeness with her husband) until a scout sent by his parents to look for him reveals his identity to the royal couple. He then stays at the Court for some years, communicating with Tydomie only by letter, but finally leaves to rejoin her in the enchanted forest. However, a number of chivalric challenges stand between him and his heart's desire, not least of which is represented by Libers von Lorgan, who sues for Tydomie's hand with the approval of her uncle, Malloas. Only after Meleranz has met these challenges, and seen off the pretender, can he marry Tydomie and establish himself in his kingdom, Terrandes.

We encounter a crux early on in *Meleranz*. The hero's uncle, Arthur, who lives in the distant realm of Camelot, is held up as a role model to Meleranz by his mother, Olimpia. For this reason, although he is a Frenchman, Meleranz quickly gains the cognomen 'the Briton' ('Brituneis', 166) for he takes after his uncle in appearance (169) and is brought up on stories of Arthur's greatness (181-85). For these reasons he soon determines to leave his own land and seek out his uncle, giving as his reason the desire to find out 'how a stranger might be welcomed there' (196-97).

The above lines are commonly glossed to the effect that Meleranz devises a 'test' for Arthur to see if the famous king would be as hospitable to an unknown person as he is to more celebrated notabilities.¹⁰ An examination of Meleranz's words in their full context, however, suggests that another reading may be possible. In order to clarify this issue I give here the hero's words *in extenso* (the lines cited are preceded by Meleranz's hearing of a glowing account of Arthur's Court):

nu gedâht der juncherre sâ:
 'benamen, daz wil ich besehen.
 mîns willen wil ich nieman jehen:
 ich wil mîne reise heln
 und wil mich heimlich ûz versteln,
 daz des iemean werde gewar,
 und wil alleine rîten dar,

daz ich ieman sî bekant
 swenn ich kum in mîns oeheims lant.
 ich wil besehen, ob ich kan,
 wie man einen frömden man
 in sinem hove grüeze. (186-97)

[Then the young knight thought: 'By God - that I should like to see. I won't tell anybody about my plan since I want to keep my journey secret. I'll steal out secretly so that nobody will be aware of my absence and I'll ride alone so as to arrive incognito in my uncle's realm. That way I'll endeavour to find out how an unknown man is greeted at his court.']

Meleranz's words indicate that he is not simply indulging what would be a gratuitous whim - that of testing his uncle. Rather does *he* hope to be tested by Arthur: he designs to go incognito to his uncle to find out how well he - presenting himself with no unfair distinction of rank - might be received at Court. For this reason he does not want his countrymen (or Tydomie) to know his destination (otherwise Arthur could quickly be alerted of his coming). The deeper motive underlying Meleranz's otherwise incomprehensible mystifications appears to be the desire to present himself in the guise of a Fair Unknown, and thus gain an estimate of his real worth, as opposed to that imputed to him on the basis of his rank. Just before he finds Arthur he says to the King's huntsman:

nu wolt ich sîn gesinde
 vil gerne werden, möht ez sin.
 ist ez an den saelden mîn,
 daz mich der künec ze knehte nimt,
 vil wol mich des gên im gezimt,
 daz ich im dienstes sî bereit.
 mir ist sô vil von im geseit
 tugentlicher maere
 daz ich ungerne waere
 dâ heim beliben, mirn würde erkant
 beidiu sîn tugent und sîn lant.
 sît al diu welt von im seit
 sô manic hôhe wirdekeit,
 sô wolt ouch ich versuoehen,

Arthurian ideal, that is, as a work which scorns unrealistic and fanciful rules governing armed engagements and puts forward the view that a cunning, rough-and-ready approach is more likely to prevail. The work would, on this view, be best understood as 'einen Generalangriff auf die illusionistische Artusdichtung':

Dieser Daniel ist kein Artusritter comme il faut. Er will es auch nicht sein, er hat begriffen, daß die von diesem erwarteten und kultivierten Tugenden nicht einmal in ihrer Märchenwelt genügten, geschweige denn in der wirklichen voll lauender Gefahren. Und das war es wohl auch, was Stricker demonstrieren und lehren wollte.⁶

Pleier, in his *Garel*, on the other hand, according to an influential essay by de Boor,⁷ went back beyond his immediate source, Stricker's *Daniel von dem blühenden Tal*, to seek in the work of Hartmann material which would give a more acceptably chivalrous tone to his own work. Pleier, demonstrating a nobler conception of knighthood than his source, Stricker, provides a 'courtly corrective' to Daniel in the shape of his hero, Garel. The latter wins his fight not by *list* but through straightforward knightly prowess, the face-to-face mode of combat with which we associate Erec or Iwein:

Noch einmal will hier ein ritterlich gesinnter Dichter artushafte Vorbildlichkeit nicht ohne Sinn für die ethische Haltung Hartmannscher Gestalten zum Leben erwecken, und zwar in einer bewußten Gegendichtung gegen den Roman des Strickers, in dem er die Zersetzung des Höfischen spürte.⁸

In Pleier's 'Gegendichtung' the young hero arrives at Arthur's Court and soon wins a place as the King's trusted advisor. Presently the giant Charabin comes to the Court with a message from his master, Ekunaver. Charabin accuses Arthur's father of being responsible for the death of Ekunaver's father and throws down a military challenge to Arthur. Garel sets out to follow the departing Charabin and, like Daniel, is soon caught up in a multiplicity of gratuitous combats. However, Garel uses his various exploits as a means of winning friends and allies with which to swell the Arthurian tide against Ekunaver. Presently he comes to the land of Anferre, a place wasted by Vulganus, a centaur who bears a Gorgon's head on his shield.

After defeating him, Garel has the Gorgon's head covered with lead and sunk in the sea. After this Garel marries Laudamie, Queen of Anferre.

The rest of the romance is largely taken up with pitched battles between Garel's forces and those of Ekunaver. Eventually the latter is defeated, but he is treated chivalrously: Garel requires him and two further royal captives to deliver themselves up to Arthur (a stock convention of the 'classical' Arthurian romance) but allows him time to return first to his queen in order to arrange his affairs. When the captive kings arrive at the Court, Arthur pardons them and permits them to join the Round Table. On his way home Garel marries various ladies to *selected* Arthurian knights, whereupon he returns home to his wife Laudamie at Anferre. The work concludes with an epilogue in which a monastery is founded on the site of the battle.

Pleier probably went as far as his material permitted in producing a *contrafactura* of Stricker, yet this material appears to have laid definite restrictions upon him. Both *Daniel* and *Garel* abound in descriptions of military combats which evoke better the collective world of the heroic epic than the conventional 'Arthurian' world in which solitary knights make journeys of self-conquest.⁹ The latter world is more convincingly evoked in his other romances, *Meleranz* and *Tandareis und Flordibel*, to which attention will now be directed.

The eponymous hero of the first of these romances, Meleranz, is the son of Arthur's sister Olimpia and a French king. He desires to visit his uncle, who had always been held up to him as a model of perfection. He sets off secretly from his homeland, choosing to travel anonymously. He comes to the forest of Brijiljân (O.F. Broceliande) in the midst of which is a paradisiacal meadow. Here the beautiful princess Tydomie is taking a bath attended by handmaidens (who leave at Tydomie's behest when Meleranz arrives). The scene turns into a test of Meleranz's sexual self-control. The princess, having in mind to try him (544-45), bids him serve her with toiletries in her bath and even has him guard her from mosquitos ('muggen', 831) as she lies in her bed. We are not surprised to learn that Meleranz becomes considerably inflamed by the goddess Venus when ordered to keep this constant vigil by Tydomie's bedside (838-39). Later Tydomie admits to him that she had tested him in order to establish whether he could behave honourably (1075-78). At the same time she is able to see through his would-be anonymity through the good

offices of a female mentor versed in *nigromancie* (1022). Despite his evasions she knows that he is the son of the French king on his way to visit Arthur, whom she warmly praises (993-94).

Meleranz then proceeds to the Arthurian Court where he maintains his anonymity (despite Guinevere's suspicions of a family likeness with her husband) until a scout sent by his parents to look for him reveals his identity to the royal couple. He then stays at the Court for some years, communicating with Tydomie only by letter, but finally leaves to rejoin her in the enchanted forest. However, a number of chivalric challenges stand between him and his heart's desire, not least of which is represented by Libers von Lorgan, who sues for Tydomie's hand with the approval of her uncle, Malloas. Only after Meleranz has met these challenges, and seen off the pretender, can he marry Tydomie and establish himself in his kingdom, Terrandes.

We encounter a crux early on in *Meleranz*. The hero's uncle, Arthur, who lives in the distant realm of Camelot, is held up as a role model to Meleranz by his mother, Olimpia. For this reason, although he is a Frenchman, Meleranz quickly gains the cognomen 'the Briton' ('Brituneis', 166) for he takes after his uncle in appearance (169) and is brought up on stories of Arthur's greatness (181-85). For these reasons he soon determines to leave his own land and seek out his uncle, giving as his reason the desire to find out 'how a stranger might be welcomed there' (196-97).

The above lines are commonly glossed to the effect that Meleranz devises a 'test' for Arthur to see if the famous king would be as hospitable to an unknown person as he is to more celebrated notabilities.¹⁰ An examination of Meleranz's words in their full context, however, suggests that another reading may be possible. In order to clarify this issue I give here the hero's words *in extenso* (the lines cited are preceded by Meleranz's hearing of a glowing account of Arthur's Court):

nu gedâht der juncherre sâ:
 'benamen, daz wil ich besehen.
 mîns willen wil ich nieman jehen:
 ich wil mîne reise heln
 und wil mich heimlîch ûz versteln,
 daz des iemean werde gewar,
 und wil alleine rîten dar,

daz ich ieman sîn bekant
 swenn ich kum in mîns oeheims lant.
 ich wil besehen, ob ich kan,
 wie man einen frömden man
 in sinem hove grüeze. (186-97)

[Then the young knight thought: 'By God - that I should like to see. I won't tell anybody about my plan since I want to keep my journey secret. I'll steal out secretly so that nobody will be aware of my absence and I'll ride alone so as to arrive incognito in my uncle's realm. That way I'll endeavour to find out how an unknown man is greeted at his court.']

Meleranz's words indicate that he is not simply indulging what would be a gratuitous whim - that of testing his uncle. Rather does *he* hope to be tested by Arthur: he designs to go incognito to his uncle to find out how well he - presenting himself with no unfair distinction of rank - might be received at Court. For this reason he does not want his countrymen (or Tydomie) to know his destination (otherwise Arthur could quickly be alerted of his coming). The deeper motive underlying Meleranz's otherwise incomprehensible mystifications appears to be the desire to present himself in the guise of a Fair Unknown, and thus gain an estimate of his real worth, as opposed to that imputed to him on the basis of his rank. Just before he finds Arthur he says to the King's huntsman:

nu wolt ich sîn gesinde
 vil gerne werden, möht ez sin.
 ist ez an den saelden mîn,
 daz mich der künc ze knehte nimt,
 vil wol mich des gên im gezimt,
 daz ich im dienstes sîn bereit.
 mir ist sô vil von im geseit
 tugentlîcher maere
 daz ich ungerne waere
 dâ heim beliben, mirn würde erkant
 beidiu sîn tugent und sîn lant.
 sît al diu welt von im seit
 sô manic hôhe wirdekeit,
 sô wolt ouch ich versuochen,

ob er mîn wolde ruochen
ze knehte und ouch ze gesinde. (1988-2004)

[Now I would very much like to become one of his retinue, if that were possible. If I am fortunate enough to gain service with him that would be right and proper since I am fully committed to the task. I've heard so much about his nobility that I'd be sorry not to be able to witness it with my own eyes. Since he is the subject of such universal acclaim I would like to find out if he would accept me as a knight in his company.]

In order to impress his uncle with his strength he performs an extraordinary act of braggadocio - that of carrying a live deer into his court, and is duly rewarded with a place at the Round Table for his efforts (2128 ff.). He achieves this honour without having to reveal to Arthur his identity, giving evasive responses to the King's enquiries about his descent:

'von welchem lande ir sît geriten,
juncherre, daz sult ir mir sagen
und die rehten wârheit nicht verdagen.'
er sprach 'ichn weiz wanne ich bin.
herre künic, ich hân den sin
daz ich iu aller êren gan:
dâ gezwîfelt nimmer an.' (2182-88)

[(Arthur said:) 'You must tell me the land from which you have ridden and conceal nothing from me.' Meleranz replied: 'I do not know anything about my origins, Lord King, but rest assured that I shall always serve you with honour.']

When, however, Meleranz leaves the Arthurian Court and aspires to kingship in his own right, his family origins take on a far greater importance. The denizens of the land of Terrandes accept him as their legitimate ruler only when they are assured that the brave young pretender is also of noble birth. Here they ask the seneschal, Cursun, to assure them on this score:

Si sprâchen al gelîche,
arme und ouch rîche,

'her truhsaeze, ir sult uns sagen
 und die wârheit niht verdagen,
 wer er von gebürte sî.
 ist der degen falsches frî
 von sô hôher art geborn
 daz unser prîs niht sî verlorn
 an im, ob wirn ze herren nemen,
 sô sol uns des vil wol gezemen
 daz wir leisten des wir haben gesworn.
 ist ab er sô swacher art geborn,
 sô sul wir sîn ze herrn enbern:
 sô endarf er des niht gern,
 daz wir im werden undertân. (6613-27)

[Rich and poor alike said: 'Sir Seneschal, tell us the truth and conceal nothing from us concerning the young knight's ancestry. If the man is genuinely of such high rank that we would not be diminished if we took him as our king then it would be appropriate for us to follow him as we have sworn to do. If, however, he is of lowly origin we will dispense with his services because in that case he could not reasonably aspire to have us as his subjects.']

His opponent Libers will only offer Meleranz his parole (*sicherheit*) when the latter can prove that he is of equal rank (the term 'satisfaktionsfähig' would be used at a later date). Here Libers is considerably relieved to hear of Meleranz's pedigree:

'nu hân ich dir kunt getân
 von mînem gesleht ein teil.'
 'ich wil mirz zellen für ein heil'
 sprach Libers der werde man,
 'sît mir ist gesiget an,
 daz mich doch überwunden hât
 ein man umb den ez alsô stât
 daz er mir ist genôzsam.
 swie hart ich mich des lasters scham,
 doch gib ich dir des sicherheit
 daz dir min dienest ist bereit,
 wan ich alsô gelobet hân.' (10266-77)

[(Meleranz said:) 'I have now given you an adequate account of my ancestry.' The noble Libers replied: 'I shall account it a blessing that, since it has fallen to me to suffer defeat, I have at least been vanquished by one of my peers. However bitterly I resent the shame of defeat I will give you my parole and offer to serve you as agreed.']

Finally, Tydomie's uncle, Malloas, threatens to make war on him until he is persuaded of the young pretender's nobility, an event which occurs when the king of France, Meleranz's father, and King Arthur, his uncle, arrive on the scene:

zuo dem künic Malloas
 reit der degen sâzehant
 und tet im diu maer bekant.
 daz im sîn vater von Francrîch
 koem und sîn oeheim wirdeclîch,
 Artûs der lobebaere.
 dô fröut er sich der maere,
 der rîche künic Malloas,
 daz Meleranz der werde was
 geborn von sô hôher art.
 der künic sprach 'nu wol mich wart
 daz ich sol ze friunde hân
 einen alsô werden man
 als ir von gebürte sît.' (11950-63)

[The youth immediately went up to King Malloas and informed him that his father was arriving with his renowned uncle, Arthur. Malloas the noble king was pleased to hear the news that Meleranz was of such high rank, saying: 'I am fortunate to be linked with such a noble man as you evidently are.']

Pleier's *Meleranz* is a continuation of the distinctively German tradition of the Fair Unknown romances in ideological conformity with *Wigalois* and *Wigamur*. It appears at first to endorse a classless ethic, only finally to insist on hereditary qualifications.

Tandareis und Flordibel, on the other hand, has a freshness of appeal deriving from the fact that its plot did not originate in the lit-

erature of the *matière de Bretagne* but rather in an independent love story which may have had Classical origins.¹¹ Khull long ago pointed out that Tandareis, despite Pleier's attempts to integrate him into an 'Arthurian' genealogical pattern, was in fact 'durchaus ein *homo novus*'.¹² However, the story, whatever may have been its ultimate origins, unfolds at the Arthurian Court and the love of Tandareis and Flordibel is assimilated to the theme which occupied Hartmann in *Erec* and *Iwein* and which was also treated by Pleier's contemporary, Konrad von Stoffeln,¹³ namely, the conflict of love and honour. The plot is as follows:

Tandareis, the son of Dulcemar and Anticonie, is sent to the Arthurian Court to receive tuition in the ways of chivalry. The Indian princess, Flordibel, also comes to the Court to learn 'des landes site' (621), and is particularly insistent to Arthur that anybody who should attempt to take from her her maidenly honour should be executed. Arthur agrees to this rather extreme request. Unfortunately the young Tandareis falls deeply in love with her, and she with him, and at length the couple elope from the Court. When the message of this event is conveyed to Arthur he, insisting on standing by his oath, vows to kill Tandareis. The latter, however, cannot be easily captured and later, after Arthur's anger has somewhat abated, Tandareis is summoned back to a trial (*taedinc*, 3343), where his advocate is Gawan. The result of the trial is that the young man's sentence is commuted from death to exile (3790-95) and it is decided that Flordibel be handed over to the close keeping of Guinevere. The story of Tandareis's long odyssey (in which he attempts to atone for his fault by the performance of many knightly deeds) takes up a good part of the rest of the romance. Eventually, as the result of Gawan's continued advocacy on his behalf, messengers are sent out to fetch Tandareis back to Court. Here three young ladies now sue for his hand - Antonie, Claudin and Flordibel. This issue too becomes a legal matter and Arthur is set to adjudicate. Prudently the king commands that the three contenders should stand in the judicial ring and that Tandareis should be given a free choice between them. He chooses his beloved Flordibel and the story receives a happy ending.

Pleier places his elopement story within a highly personalised Arthurian context. Flordibel becomes the special ward of Guinevere and Tandareis is treated by both King and Queen 'as if he were their own child' (213); their illicit union is played out against the background of a rather rigid 'Arthurian' honour code (after the couple's

flight Guinevere feels the Court to have been totally dishonoured (1654).

After the trial at which Tandareis is found guilty of a breach of faith with Arthur the romance to some extent follows the familiar pattern of a flawed knight atoning for his misdeed by performing knightly challenges, in the end being reintegrated into the Arthurian world as the result of his penitential trials. To that extent Pleier restores the kind of bipartite narrative structure to be found in Hartmann's *Erec*, where the hero, having been made aware of his own sloth and uxoriousness (*verligen*), feels himself to be *unhovebaere* and directs his best efforts towards his final rehabilitation at Court: Pleier builds his story on a 'classical' narrative model.

Yet the romance is more complex than this, and a notable sub-plot concerns the issue of the justice (or otherwise) of the verdict passed on Tandareis by Arthur. This in turn hinges on the well-worn motif of the king's rash boon (*don contraignant*).

When the young Flordimar induces Arthur to promise that he would slay any man rash enough to sue for her love she takes advantage of Arthur's reputation for unstinting generosity (for here, as in other romances of the time, the King is 'von sîner milte erkant' (295)). Sir Kei (Kay) alludes to a previous disaster which had befallen the Court on account of Arthur's excessive complaisance when he addresses his king:

'ir sit so dicke betrogen
 unt iwer gâbe alsô erzogen
 daz ir iuch sult bedenken ê,
 daz iwer gewer niht ergê
 als iu ouch zeime mâl geschach,
 dô man die maget komen sach
 diu iu den mantel brâhte
 dâ mit si uns gedâhte,
 ze lastern alle gelîche'.
 dô sprach der künec rîche
 'swes diu maget an mich gert
 bescheidenlîch si wirt gewert'
 Kei sprach, 'daz lâze ich sîn!' (369-81)

[‘You have so often been tricked when solicited for such boons that you should seriously think whether your promise

this time might not be like the time when the lady with the mantle came with the express purpose of shaming us all!' But the mighty king responded, 'Whatever the maiden asks of me shall be granted graciously!' Kei said, 'In that case I'll let the matter rest.']

Kei's allusion here is to the *mantel mautailé* tradition represented in *Der Mantel* and *Diu Crône*. In this story a female messenger brings a coat to the Court which has the property of testing the sexual fidelity of the courtiers. The coat becomes singularly ill-fitting on those courtiers (the majority) whose conduct is less than blameless, with the result that the Court is disgraced. Kei's prophecy that something similar will occur again here is amply fulfilled when Flordibel, growing swiftly beyond her emotionally unawakened state, wishes to take a lover. For now Arthur, having sworn on oath against such an outcome, is left trapped by his own legalistic rigidity:

'nu muoz ich durch gelübdes kraft
unt ouch durch mîn sicherheit
beidiu mîn triwe unt mînen eit,
loesen, wan ich hânz gesworn'. (1866-99)

['Now by the power of my oath I must keep my word, for I have sworn to do so.']

He will not deviate from this position even when Flordibel assures him that the lovers' union has not been consummated, and that she was never 'mannes wîp' (2959).

Kei is unsparing in his criticism of a king who continues to be both weak and over-rigid at the same time, and who, on Kei's analysis, is the only guilty party in the matter ('diu schult ist von rehte sîn').

Kei is traditionally a censorious, carping figure in the German Arthurian romances,¹⁴ so much so that Hartmann's Iwein can claim that to be criticised by Kei is taken as high praise by those with wit enough to see.¹⁵ However, in *Tandareis und Flordibel* Kei's position is considerably strengthened by the support of Gawan, the traditional model of sagacity in the 'classical' romances and the king's foremost advisor. It is this honoured figure who makes common cause with Kei when he takes on the role of advocate for the fallen hero, plead-

ing for Tandareis to be brought back from exile:

er hât der dinge niht getân
 daz ir traget langen haz
 gên im, herr, waz hilfet daz
 ob er immer ist vertriben?
 er ist doch ze lange von uns beliben
 umb ein sô kleine schulde
 nû gebet im iwer hulde! (8220-26)

[Lord, he has not committed the kind of crime which could merit your long opposition: what is the use of his banishment? He has been gone too long for so small an offence. Now please grant him your forgiveness.]

The presentation of the King as a somewhat crabbed patriarch rather out of touch with the concerns of youth is a notable innovation in *Tandareis und Flordibel*. (It is Arthur, rather than Tandareis, who has to modify his position in order to bring the romance to its conciliatory conclusion.) However, with the King's final acknowledgement that it is inappropriate for him to legislate in matters of the heart, he redeems his reputation at the eleventh hour in what becomes the literary equivalent of a re-hoisting of the Arthurian standard. The King at last comes to terms with a tension which had remained unresolved in a number of earlier romances, namely, how to strike a proper balance between stern absolutism and regal magnanimity.¹⁶

Pleier has enjoyed somewhat mixed fortunes in German literary history. For a long time he was consigned to the ranks of the literary 'epigones', but some post-war critics have attempted to defend him against the dismissive adjudications of earlier scholarship. These would-be rehabilitations have not always been successful, and have sometimes been counter-productive. Riordan, in his 'Vindication of Pleier'¹⁷ uses the rather damning phrase '*modus operandi* of the typical epigone' when describing Pleier's literary method. De Boor's arguments show Pleier to be capable of more than the mere mechanical, indiscriminating mode of literary composition which earlier critics felt to be his proper standard. Yet his contentions do little to alter the impression that Pleier was essentially a conservative disciple of Hartmann rather than an author who made an independent contribution to his genre.

Peter Kern devotes his large-scale monograph on Pleier almost exclusively to those various 'integrative techniques' whereby the author selects motifs and situations from the 'classical' romances to give his audience a comfortable sense of *déjà vu* and hence the reassurance that 'die Handlung des *Garel*, *Tandareis* und *Meleranz* in derselben, als werkübergreifend gedachten Erzählwelt abspielt, deren Gesetzmäßigkeiten von der klassischen Artusdichtung vorkonstruiert waren'.¹⁸ Werner Schröder, in a polemical contribution, objected that such formulations as the one quoted immediately above were simply euphemistic periphrases for the term 'epigone': '[Kern] bewies, was er bestreiten wollte: die exemplarische Epigonalität seines Autors.'¹⁹

It would clearly be absurd to attempt to defend Pleier on the basis of his creative contribution to his genre. His literary ambitions were not of such an order (he does not, for instance, touch on the Grail theme which other late thirteenth-century authors appear to have regarded as *de rigueur* after the appearance of Wolfram's *Parzival*). However, his works appear to have some independent interest for their ideological value as 'Standesdichtung'. In this respect his conservatism was put to good effect in a trilogy whose one common denominator appears to be a desire to defend the feudal status quo.

In *Garel* he challenges Stricker's 'unknightly' hero, Daniel, by creating a rival who is (properly) governed by aristocratic *idées reçues* rather than by bourgeois notions of prudence. In *Meleranz* he demonstrates how the established nobility (as represented by the eponymous hero) has true merit as well as historical privileges. Finally, in *Tandareis und Flordibel* he consoles his audience that the aristocratic honour-code embodied by Arthur is not irredeemably rigid and inhuman.

His work is thus perhaps best regarded as an apology for a courtly ideal which he may have perceived to have been imperilled by the literary incursions of such as Stricker. (We also know from the example of Wernher der Gartenaere's *Helmbrecht* that courtly manners were feared to be in decline in the mid-thirteenth century.²⁰) In the terms of our modern aesthetic Pleier, as a continuator of old literary traditions, may appear to be a merely 'derivative' author. In his own time, however, he may well have been valued for his political role in the cultural support system of the feudal élite. Through his defence of the dynastic principle and his continuation of fictional traditions from the *Blütezeit* Pleier stands out as a late thirteenth-century preserver of an earlier 'Arthurian ideal'.

NOTES

- 1 Petrus Tax, in *The Arthurian Encyclopaedia*, ed. Norris J. Lacy, Woodbridge 1986, 428.
- 2 *Garel von dem bluenden Tal von dem Pleier*, ed. Wolfgang Herles (Wiener Arbeiten zur germanischen Altertumskunde und Philologie 17), Vienna 1981; *Meleranz von dem Pleier*, ed. Karl Bartsch, repr. with 'Nachwort' by Alexander Hildebrand, Hildesheim & New York 1974; *Tandareis und Flordibel: Ein höfischer Roman aus dem Artussagenkreis*, ed. Ferdinand Khull, Graz 1885.
- 3 *Daniel von dem blühenden Tal*, ed. Michael Resler (ATB 92), Tübingen 1983; see also *Daniel of the Blossoming Valley*, trans. Michael Resler (Garland Library of Medieval Literature, series. B, vol. 58), New York & London 1990, Introduction.
- 4 Werner Schröder, '“Und zuckte in uf einen schoup”. Parodierte Artusherrlichkeit in Strickers *Daniel*', in *Sprache und Recht* (Festschrift für Ruth Schmidt-Wiegand zum 60. Geburtstag), ed. Karl Hauck et al., Berlin, New York 1986, vol. 2, pp.814-30.
- 5 Wolfgang Moelleken and Ingeborg Henderson, 'Die Bedeutung der *liste* im *Daniel* des Stricker', *ABäG* 4, 1973, 187-201 (199); Xenia von Ertzdorff, 'Strickers *Daniel von dem blühenden Tal*. Ein Artusroman des 13. Jahrhunderts im Ambiente des 15. Jahrhunderts' in *Festschrift für Siegfried Grosse* (GAG 423), ed. W. Besch, Göttingen 1984, pp.371-82; Hedda Ragotzky, *Gattungserneuerung und Laienunterweisung in Texten des Strickers*, Tübingen 1981; L. Stephen Wailes, 'Stricker and the virtue *prudencia*; a critical review', *Seminar* 13, 1977, 136-53; Ann G. Martin, *Shame and Disgrace at King Arthur's Court; a Study in the Meaning of Ignominy in German Arthurian Literature to 1300* (GAG 387), Göttingen 1984, especially 136-40.
- 6 Schröder, p.823; 824.
- 7 Helmut de Boor, 'Der *Daniel* des Stricker und der *Garel* des Pleier', *Beiträge* (T) 79, 1957, 67-84.
- 8 De Boor in Helmut de Boor and Richard Newald, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, vol. 3, Munich 1967, p.79.
- 9 See Günther Zimmermann, 'Die Verwendung heldenepischen Materials im *Garel von dem Pleier*. Gattungskonformität und Erweiterung', *Zfda* 113, 1984, 42-60.
- 10 See Alfred Karnein, 'Minne, Aventure und Artus-Idealität in den Romanen des späten 13. Jahrhunderts' in *Artusrittertum im späten*

Mittelalter: Ethos und Ideologie, ed. Friedrich Wolfzettel, Giessen 1984, pp.114-25, p.124, note 6: 'Die Verheimlichung der Herkunft ist als "Test" für Artus gedacht, womit der Knabe feststellt, ob Artus wirklich ohne Ansehen der Herkunft der Person so gastfreundlich ist, wie behauptet.' Carola L. Gottzmann has a similar reading, *Artusdichtung* (Sammlung Metzler 249), Stuttgart 1989, p.177.

¹¹ See Christoph Cormeau, 'Tandareis und Flordibel von dem Pleier: eine poetologische Reflexion über Liebe im Artusroman' in *Liebe und Abenteuer im Artusroman des Mittelalters*, ed. Paola Schulze-Belli and Michael Dallapiazza (GAG 532), Göppingen 1990, pp.23-38. For an exhaustive study of Pleier's sources, see Peter Kern, *Die Artusromane des Pleier. Untersuchungen über den Zusammenhang von Dichtung und literarischer Situation* (Philologische Studien und Quellen 100), Berlin 1981.

¹² Khull, 244

¹³ See Neil Thomas, 'Konrad von Stoffeln's *Gauriel von Muntabel*: a comment on Hartmann's *Iwein*', *OGS* 17, 1988, 1-9.

¹⁴ See Jürgen Haupt, *Der Truchseß Keie im Artusroman: Untersuchungen zur Gesellschaftsstruktur im höfischen Roman* (Philologische Studien und Quellen 57), Berlin 1971.

¹⁵ 'Dîn schelten ist ein prîsen / wider alle die wîsen', *Iwein*, ed. Georg Friedrich Benecke, Karl Lachmann and Ludwig Wolff, 7th edition, Berlin 1968, ll.150-51.

¹⁶ Cf. his inconclusive performances in Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette* and in Hartmann's *Iwein*.

¹⁷ John L. Riordan, 'A Vindication of Der Pleier', *JEGP* 47, 1948, 29-43.

¹⁸ Kern, p.312.

¹⁹ Schröder, p.141.

²⁰ *Meier Helmbrecht*, ed. Charles Gough, Oxford 1957, ll.964-1019.