

# Introduction

Courte messe et long disner est la joye au chevalier.<sup>1</sup>

The medieval French *Knight and the Barrel* (*Le Chevalier au barisel*)

## *Author and date*

*Le Chevalier au barisel* (henceforth *Barisel*) is a pious tale. The poet is anonymous. His poem – written in octosyllabic rhyming couplets, the theme of which is not of the poet’s invention – dates from around the beginning of the thirteenth century. It is almost impossible to put forward firm theories regarding a more precise date or provenance: the manuscript evidence (see below, ‘Manuscripts and variants’) dates from later than the composition of this particular version of the story.<sup>2</sup> The modern editor, Félix Lecoy, maintains that nothing of great value regarding the age of the text, nor the origin of the author, can be learned by studying rhyme or scansion. There are perhaps flimsy indications that the author’s language betrays a Picard background, although even this is far from certain.<sup>3</sup>

There are three extant medieval French versions of the tale (see below). If it can be shown that *Barisel* was used as the source for one of these versions (by Jouhan de la Chapelle, see below and Lecoy, *Barisel*, pp. xix–xx), that would place our tale before 1218. This hypothesis is, however, far from certain.

Readers new to *Barisel* – even to medieval literature – should not be put off by the doubt surrounding the poem’s author and date of composition: such uncertainty is common with medieval texts, and by no means detracts from the way the quality of a poem can be assessed; indeed, unhampered by precise details of authorship and date, scholars are able to read the text all the more assiduously and evaluate it for what it is. Anonymity takes nothing away from the brilliance of the author: as Lecoy insists, the evidence of the

manuscripts which preserve our story puts beyond any doubt 'en quelle haute estime il doit être tenu' [how highly the text should be regarded]. Of the author, Lecoy speaks of 'des qualités de fond, de sérieux, de réflexion' (*Barisel*, p. xxv) [deep, serious, reflective qualities]. In the case of *Barisel*, we certainly know more than enough to place the text in a relatively concrete context, and to realise very quickly that we are dealing with a true gem of medieval French literature.

### *Outline of the story*

The poem is a viscerally intimate portrait of conversion, painting at times a brutal picture of a journey from damnation to salvation. This is a spiritual text fulfilling the dual need to edify and entertain. It tells of a bold, bad baron, who is persuaded by his knights to visit a holy hermit, but in a spirit of such stubbornness that he violently refuses to repent of his many sins and crimes. After much argument and clearly just to get the hermit out of his hair, however, he agrees to take a small barrel, a keg – no more than a bucket – and to fill it at a stream, as a seemingly meaningless act of penance.<sup>4</sup> But the keg refuses to be filled, and the frustrated baron in his obstinacy swears not to rest until he has carried out the task. For a whole year he wanders the land, going from stream to stream, sea to sea, body of water to body of water, trying obsessively, but always unsuccessfully, to fill the barrel. At last, filthy, tattered, emaciated, he returns to the hermit; his spirit is broken, but he marvels at the hermit's grief at what he perceives as a lost soul, and in sincere repentance the baron bows his head and weeps ... Thereupon a tearful thunderbolt miraculously fills the barrel. There is no great moral exhortation; the story is so brilliantly recounted that the moral speaks for itself.<sup>5</sup> This is a story of conversion, punctuated by paradox after paradox, describing the transformation in identity of a single human being. Initially exhorted, possibly fooled, and finally of his own free will, the brash baron becomes a holy man deserving of divine grace. He dies in the arms of the hermit and his soul is admitted to Paradise. *Barisel* is a profoundly moving text which addresses human weakness, Christian paradox, identity and the brutality of salvation.

### *The characters*

- The lord/ baron ('*le Chevalier au barisel*')
  - His knights
  - The hermit

Far from standard archetypes, these are conflicted individuals.<sup>6</sup> The baron is a typical ‘baron révolté’ (of which more later). He is the personification of evil for much of the poem, yet through his stubbornness, and that of the hermit, he experiences the brutality and beauty of salvation. His is a hard lesson to learn, but it ends in transfiguration and entry into Paradise as a holy man. The hermit is from the outset a thoroughly good individual, benefitting from all the practical skills and spiritual integrity needed by a saviour of souls. He is a complex character, though, since his virtuous obstinacy almost leads him to commit the sin of pride before witnessing the glorious death of the baron. As for the baron’s knights, they are essentially a private army, marauders, violent thieves who follow the baron’s orders, yet wish to confess and do penance for their sins. In a world of fierce violence and feudal loyalties, it could be argued that they are the true heroes of the piece: it is they who show the courage and obduracy to convince their baron to accompany them to the hermitage on Good Friday. In the Commentary below, colour and detail are provided to flesh out these brief character sketches.

The only other characters have non-speaking parts in *Barisel*. There are the victims of the band’s evil actions, alluded to by category as opposed to name (e.g. ‘pilgrims’, ‘monks’, ‘merchants’ etc.). And then there is God, always in the background but always demanding attention. This is a spiritual action-tale, a quest which the author hopes will entertain and instruct. The Almighty may not have a speaking part as such; He is far more eloquent: it is through the words and deeds of the knights, the hermit and eventually the baron that He communicates.

### *Background and commentary*

In the following pages I examine the context and various dramatic turning points in the *Chevalier au barisel* upon which a striking change in character – and ultimately Christian conversion – are dependent. I hope, in doing so, that the modern reader can enjoy with the medieval audience the subtle brilliance of what amounts to a narrative psychological drama designed to bring those fortunate enough to hear the poem to repent. Rather than relying on modern assumptions of genre and audience, it is preferable to place ourselves in the hands of the anonymous poet. Background details will be provided where appropriate, but it is most profitable to trust the poet to guide the reader through the intricacies of quest and conversion. Brief details of cognate Old French versions will be

given, as will be a brief historical and religious contextualisation. I will suggest that the *Chevalier au barisel* crosses generic boundaries that have been created and often imposed by modern scholars; that the poet is fully aware of the taste of his audience; that the hermit's self is just as challenged – and indeed transformed – as that of the evil baron; and that the poem depends on the interconnected dramas of paradox, identity and salvation to place it head and shoulders above the mass of vernacular didactic thirteenth-century Old French literature.

### *Religious background (hagiography and exempla)*

Hagiography arguably manipulates identity more than any other type of text – it is the perfect platform for psychological exploration – but only brilliant hagiography is aesthetically pleasing, morally inspiring and psychologically realistic. Clearly, psychological realism would not be expected in thirteenth-century hagiography, but this does not exclude the possibility of an author achieving it, at least sporadically. For example, the physiological subtlety of the key dialogue explored below is unusual in most forms of medieval narrative, making *Barisel* all the more striking.

Hagiographers of any period have a deadly serious proselytising agenda. They use their talents in writing a literature of conversion to further their own chances of salvation. Real lives and souls are at stake. Within pseudo-historical narratives, real saints, legendary figures or fictional characters may relapse into sin but ultimately prove to be models of virtue. What became labelled hagiographical romance afforded authors latitude. Their stories were usually destined for courtly diversion at some stage (if not by authors, then by later copyists and manuscript makers). After all, twelfth- and thirteenth-century writers of vernacular Saints' Lives, miracle stories, Miracles of the Virgin, pious tales and other moralising texts knew well that their audience equally enjoyed Arthurian myth, stories of epic battles and sly Reynard, comic fabliaux and lyric poems. Patterns of manuscript ownership or anthologisation of the kind noted by Keith Busby provide evidence for such taste.<sup>7</sup> Hagiography has a natural, vital orality and benefits from firm belief in and quest for an Other World. Questions of identity and conversion lie at the heart of what hagiography is all about.

One form of hagiography, the *exemplum*, thrived throughout the Middle Ages. This type of brief homily consisting of an approving or cautionary tale started its life as a sermon technique, as a less

allegorical, more material alternative to the parable.<sup>8</sup> The great saints and early churchmen used it frequently; and by the late eleventh century, the *exemplum* was beginning to be found in learned books and theological manuals in addition to sermons aimed at a less lettered audience. By the twelfth century, its importance had grown considerably: the *exemplum* was a necessary adjunct to any didactic work, and its use was stressed in the new universities as a device of pious rhetoric. Gradually, a large fund of suitable anecdotes was collected. All the great churchmen of the age adopted this method of popular moralising. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries see the flowering of the *exemplum* with the heyday of the famous preacher-teachers, such as the Cistercians Alain de Lille and Jacques de Vitry, whose works on the composition of a good sermon insist upon all the various forms of *exempla*, and how each homily should be constructed.

Sources of the *exemplum*, and subjects for homilies, were culled from a wide range of options, both sacred and secular. On the one hand, the Bible and the writings of the Church Fathers are fecund in appropriate stories, as are the Lives of the Saints and celebrated miracle stories. On the other hand, works of literature, history, philosophy, chronicles, folk legend, fables, animal tales such as the account of Reynard the Fox's mischievous deeds in the *Roman de Renart*, and many other written and oral traditions have been found as sources for *exempla* by modern scholars. In other words, anything and everything is grist to the mill: anything can be converted into a moral message. Even the fabliaux can be turned to good account, less indecent and more didactic, and the mock moral ending used seriously.

Bearing in mind how vast the scope of the *exemplum* was, the corpus can seem daunting. There is value in making the corpus more manageable and more tangible; this is sometimes best done by concentrating on one *exemplum* in particular. By doing so one leaves oneself open to the argument that as there is no standard *exemplum*, any conclusions drawn will inevitably be of limited value. But there is a counter-argument: by getting to know one text better – not just linguistically but by placing it in the context of the medieval world and by placing us, the modern readers, in the shoes of its earliest audience – there is much to gain. It would be absurd to make generalisations and claim understanding of a vast and unwieldy corpus of disparate stories without actually reading some of those stories in detail. *Barisel* is an attractive and well-constructed story which yields valuable insights into the wider

corpus of *exempla*, not a typical *exemplum* per se but a pious story which allows us a glimpse into this forgotten world.

The plot of an *exemplum* can be of three broad types: first, a totally pious and approving one, showing the great virtue of a holy man or woman, a saint, bishop, an inspired person, an abbey-founding knight etc. These *exempla* might be described as approbatory. Second, an *exemplum* can be totally condemning, showing how God's miracles smite the impious and confound the enemies of the true faith, or how man's sins bring him to a bad end. Such *exempla* are unremittingly attritionist. Third, there is the exhortatory *exemplum*, showing how an erring individual can be made to see the light, usually after various tribulations, or after some miracle that opens their eyes. At the heart of these stories is remorse, leading to repentance, and then leading often to tearful contrition.<sup>9</sup>

It is this third type which occupies us here.

### *Textual background*

In 1976, Annette Brasseur asked, somewhat exasperated, whether scholars really needed still to be making a case for the exceptional quality of *Barisel*: for her, the question had by then been more than proven.<sup>10</sup> It is perhaps the form of the tale – the tradition of the short narrative as we have now pigeon-holed it – and the (at times exceptionally) difficult language of the surviving manuscript witnesses that have not encouraged modern scholarship and broader recognition. Since 1976, the case has been amply made, again and again: *Barisel* is now firmly established at the heart of the medieval French canon.

In this short tale of 1084 lines many of the background themes alive throughout the Middle Ages are played out in dramatic form.<sup>11</sup> The struggle between the hermit and the baron, and the struggle the baron has with himself, provide the author with a perfect opportunity to impress upon the faithful the necessity of the confessional and of penance.<sup>12</sup> Equally, this links up with the burgeoning evangelical movement from the later twelfth century, notably with the growth in popularity of the mendicant orders for whom the preaching of the need for repentance was so vital. There is similarly a connection with the period's proselytising impetus driven by the Church's dealings with the insidious Cathar heresy – there was a Christian prerogative to save their souls, and evil people must conform to the demands of the True Faith and repent of their sins in an orthodox fashion. This propaganda reached its peak at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, when heresy was

specifically condemned and annual confession was imposed by the Church upon all the faithful of mature age. *Barisel* reflects the influence of this pronouncement, or at least the prevailing penitential atmosphere. What we have before us is, at its rawest, a fairly typical example of the *exempla* employed in sermons and works of literature to underline the sacrament of penance.<sup>13</sup>

Except that *Barisel* is not quite so typical. First of all, it is a complete (if brief) poem, beautifully constructed in verse, rather than a bare-bones description of a story to be embellished and fleshed out by the preacher. As Félix Lecoy points out in his introduction to the standard edition, this *exemplum* is in fact a happy amalgam of two homily themes: that of the ‘easy penance’, where a sinner is given a simple act to perform, but finds it impossible; and that of the ‘miraculous tear’ which, welling sincerely from the heart, alone can fill a given receptacle. Tears are the sign of miraculously acquired Divine Grace, and by the time of our poem have also entered the more or less secular literary world. For example, Perceval’s state resembles examples of sinners humiliated, but not yet made humble, a notion promulgated by Bernard of Clairvaux. Frustrated, Perceval becomes alienated from God and falls into despair. He finds his wisdom on Good Friday, and weeps copiously (i.e. the repenting tear of St Bernard).<sup>14</sup> As we shall see, in *Barisel* there is a very similar – if unenthusiastic – quest for self-knowledge, its success depending upon both the imposition of a new identity and a begrudging acceptance of this imposition.

There are five basic elements related to the contemporary scene which have a strong bearing on *Barisel* (and indeed on many moralising narratives composed in the first half of the thirteenth century): there was the reality of evil barons; the Church’s message of Judgment; the 1215 Lateran Council, where heresy was strongly condemned and annual confession was imposed on all the faithful; the phenomenon of the hermit, with the growth of urban wealth and established Church power; and the popularity of the romance genre, in particular, tales of knights errant and of Arthurian heroes meeting hermits in the forest. *Barisel* blends its religious message – one not far from that of the early Church Fathers – with elements of *romans d’aventures*, in which the hero would pass through initiation (a rite of passage) to acquire a new code of behaviour. Hermits play a pivotal role in all these contexts, as usually does the *merveilleux* [i.e. the marvellous, supernatural], whether Christian (divine intervention) or not. This is the world in which our moral narrative was intended to operate.<sup>15</sup>

*Cognate versions*

The best Latin cognate version is certainly not the source of our tale: the *Speculum Laicorum* was composed between 1279 and 1292, much later than the composition of *Barisel* (see Lecoy, *Barisel*, pp. xvii–xviii). There are three versions of our *exemplum* in Old French literature: one, arguably the least effective, dates from the first third of the thirteenth century, one of the tales which make up a large collective text known as the *Vie des pères*. This version, known for over a hundred years by the short title *Baril*, has commonly been described as the weakest version because it fails to bring out much of the theme's dramatic potential: it merely tells of a sinner who desires to repent, but who rather weakly asks the hermit-confessor to prescribe a simple act of penance ... and who ends up by being sorely tried.<sup>16</sup> This treatment of the theme has none of the power and intensity of *Barisel*, where the sinner remains obdurate to the very end. And yet, this treatment is precisely how the story is handled in the various Latin prose versions composed after our tale (from the later thirteenth century into the fourteenth and even fifteenth centuries).<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the *Vie des pères* version of the story is hardly without merit – as some commentators and even Lecoy might have it<sup>18</sup> – and even ends with a surprise; for after a period of physical hardship, the penitent does not need to join a religious community, nor die the death of a hero, but in fact returns to live in the world and continues his former lifestyle, only this time according to improved moral standards. This is an almost sensational *dénouement* by thirteenth-century contritionist standards, leading one commentator to label it 'une œuvre d'avant-garde' [an avant-garde work].<sup>19</sup> Within the context of the *Vie des pères* this take on the story works admirably. The protagonist will have made a spiritual transformation without excessively long physical hardship or instant transfiguration. This single element duly makes it the most evangelical of the three Old French versions, offering a simple example accessible to all.<sup>20</sup>

A second version of *Barisel* – one worth exploring in just a little detail – was composed early in the first half of the thirteenth century, evidently under the influence of the 1215 Lateran Council. It remains to be ascertained which poem is the original, *Barisel* or the version known as *Le Conte dou barril*, composed by a certain 'Jehan de Blois dit de la Chapelle'. This version can be dated quite precisely to 1218.<sup>21</sup> The modern editors of both texts back their own particular horse as the earlier. It seems quite clear, following Lecoy and Jean-Charles Payen, that Jehan's poem bears all the



hallmarks of a specific redaction, of the reworking of an existing text. What is certain is that *Barisel* is a far better piece of literature, if perhaps marginally slightly less interesting didactically. This superior literary quality should become clear when we turn to a detailed textual commentary (see below).

Both Jehan's poem and *Barisel* have the same plot, the same dramatic nuances; on occasions, whole sections of verse tend to correspond, but Jehan's version of this *exemplum* lays greater emphasis on the theme's proselytising flavour: the whole poem reads more as a straight sermon than our text, which is clearly more 'literary'. Jehan's version seems more inspired in greater detail by the 1215 Lateran Council against heresy. For instance, it expressly teaches that the faithful should go at least annually to confession, accomplish the imposed penance and receive the sacrament; and the text is padded out with pious *hors d'œuvres* – notably, with two long sermons introduced into the plain homily, both insisting on the need for penance and the purging of sins. The first is intercalated at the moment of the first meeting of the hermit and the baron, and spells out the nature of Man's sin from Adam onwards, until the message of Christ and the Gospels comes to hold out hope for those who bend their knee in contrite repentance and confession. The second, another sermon delivered by the hermit, takes the form of an 'I told you so', after tears have at last come to the baron's eyes and the barrel is filled as a consequence. Here, humility is stressed, as is the value of orthodox pious faith; the Cistercians are mentioned approvingly, and the Cathars are also quoted as examples of the evil from without that must be combated. This technique is not dissimilar to prose romance, where the *entrelacement* sequence almost always moves from the simple to the complex.<sup>22</sup>

Jehan's version of our story is therefore a far more powerful vehicle for what may be dubbed 'the warning message'; but, inevitably, it loses out dramatically as a result of its agenda. The sermons slow the action intolerably, at least for a modern reader (the first is over 250 lines long, and the second all of 400 lines, which in total is half of the poem). Our version, *Barisel*, happily avoids this weakness; such 'sermonising *entrelacement*' is not appropriate in the version which is the subject of this book. Payen suggests that the three versions illustrate the evolution of contritionism from the second part of the twelfth century to the first third of the thirteenth: Jouhan de la Chapelle's version is older, more conservative and more orthodox; *Le Chevalier au barisel* pushes contritionism to its extreme consequences; and *Baril* from

the *Vie des pères* is the most 'humanist', giving the smallest role to divine grace and a larger role to personal freedom: 'Elle traduit une vision nouvelle des choses, plus humaine, plus sereine, plus confiante, celle d'un XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle moins mystique que le XII<sup>e</sup> siècle et beaucoup plus disposé à prendre la réalité comme elle est pour l'intégrer dans une philosophie équilibrée de l'homme et du salut'. [It conveys a new vision of things, more human, more dispassionate, more confident, a vision typical of a less mystical 13<sup>th</sup> century than the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and is much more likely to take reality as it is in order to integrate it into a balanced philosophy of man and salvation.]<sup>23</sup> Notwithstanding, it is *Barisel* which scholars recognise as the most complete and impressive Old French version of this story.

A further specific religious element in Jehan's version – this perhaps the most interesting one – is its pronounced anti-Albigensianism.<sup>24</sup> Not merely are *Aubigeois*, *Tolossains* mentioned pejoratively in the second sermon, but the very character of the wicked baron resembles that of Raymond VI, Count of Toulouse. The terms used to condemn him parallel those hurled at Raymond by a French chronicler (Pierre des Vaux-de-Cernay, in his *Histoire albigeoise*): Raymond is disloyal, God's foe, ravager of monasteries, cruel and ruthless to neighbours. All this the baron is, and more – and this also comes out in *Barisel*. Granted, *lieux-communs* abound: our baron is an anarchic *désmesuré* and it is only natural that Raymond should be treated in a similar vein. But Jehan specifically states that the baron is a Gascon, first linking him geographically to the region controlled by Raymond (*Barisel*, let us remember, is based in Normandy and Brittany). Then, Jehan has the Pope lay the baron and his land under interdict for his sins: so too did Innocent III treat Raymond. Again, just as the baron wanders through France and Europe, so Raymond, unable to accept papal conditions, travelled through Europe seeking support, until being forced (1214) into utter submission. There are many specific issues all but identifying Raymond as the baron in Jehan's poem, and thoroughly damning him until the miracle of the tear. *Barisel* is far more subtle, pious certainly, but stripped of Jehan's proselytising zeal. Notwithstanding, echoes of the poet's fear of heresy can be heard.

One theory regarding the relationship between these three poems might read as follows: is it not a distinct possibility that Jehan de Blois has been almost fanatically inspired by the career of Raymond, and by the prevailing anti-Albigensianism of the moment, to turn this tale into a more direct allusion to current/historical characters and events, far more so than the authors of

*Baril* and *Barisel*? If his poem were indeed composed around 1218, the contemporary scene might be said to be its ‘true’ origin, such was the anti-heretical fervour of the time. And if our anonymous version, *Barisel*, is earlier, this would explain its lack of such specific details. Had the anonymous poet of *Barisel* followed Jehan de Blois (depending on the context of *remaniement* and reception), he would surely have cribbed details such as these, recognising them as being very apposite. Further comparisons and contrasts between *Barisel* and Jehan de Blois’ version become subject to more speculative evidence, ranging from linguistic expression to manuscript nature and manufacture. More scholarly research is required to further our understanding of how the three extant Old French versions of our poem fit together.

Before we take a more detailed look at the dramatic events of *Barisel*, it is worth mentioning a fourth work of vernacular literature, almost as a postscript, which deals with a similar *exemplum* (the full significance of which will be explained below). A well-known Middle High German didactic poem dating from the early thirteenth century entitled *Der arme Heinrich* is of great interest to us. The author, Hartmann von Aue (c. 1170–c. 1210), describes a knight who is in all ways but one a perfect knight: his character is unbalanced only by his lack of humility. God tests him by afflicting him with leprosy, and sure enough his sole reaction is fury and outrage. He travels far and wide seeking a cure but all in vain, for he is still stiff-necked and proud. At last, in a blinding flash, he realises his folly and accepts God’s will. His submission made, the leprosy leaves him, and he leaves the world to become a monk.<sup>25</sup> Obviously, this Middle High German poem differs in important ways from *Barisel*, but in the essential human character of the hero-knight, the two plots come very closely together.

*Barisel* is the story of the reluctant penitent: I believe we can speak of the protagonist as ‘the penitent within’. By using this term, I follow Payen’s succinct description of the tale: a dreadful sinner is, after a painful quest, brought despite himself to repent; when he dies, he enjoys salvation.<sup>26</sup> We will return to this theme periodically.

Perhaps the most striking narrative aspect of *Barisel* is twofold: the exposition in literature of a theme of general social importance; and the ways in which such a common theme can be turned into something special in the hands of a master. For us, the effect of this tale will lie not in its actual *exemplum*, but in the quality of the drama itself. Franco Romanelli has already shown that the work

owes much of its powerful drama to its blending of a strong religious message with many elements of the *roman d'aventures*, and to its continual presentation of a series of dramatic oppositions in both *topoi* and episodes.<sup>27</sup> This indicates a subtle use of the courtly *aventure* motif of the hero passing through an initiation on the way to acquiring a new code and a new identity. The rite of passage of the *roman courtois* [courtly romance] is hence adapted to a moralising tale.<sup>28</sup> The baron is carefully shown as breaking all the rules of Church-approved behaviour: his is an unbridled *luxuria* clearly *contra naturam* (i.e. unnatural and un-Christian behaviour). This is important, since what we are going to observe in *Barisel* is a clash between carnality and abstinence, which explains the references to the baron's appetite. A further opposition that we will witness is the mobility of the baron and the stability of the hermit; this *topos* is very widespread in medieval literature, where the hermit's role is one of holy stability and revelation.<sup>29</sup> Also the opposition of *orator*/ *bellator* is accentuated in *Barisel*.<sup>30</sup> The *merveilleux* element of courtly adventure is concentrated here upon the divine miracles of the barrel and of tears in the pious tale. *Barisel* is decidedly a text adapted to and shaped by the *roman d'aventures* tradition, its hero unaware that his is a quest for an identity. Ultimately he freely chooses a new identity for himself – which seems most unlikely as the story progresses – and his freshly chosen new identity will save his soul.

### Commentary

The beginning of *Barisel* is wholly secular and feudal: on the borderlands of Normandy and Brittany there lives a great baron, in a sea-girt stronghold (vv. 5–8). The poet continues to paint a picture of a conventional hero of *roman d'aventures*:

trop biaux de cors et de visage,  
riches d'avoir et de lignage;  
et si paroît a son viaire  
qu'el mont n'eüst plus deboinaire (vv. 13–16)

[graced with a very beautiful body and splendid looks, possessing great riches and from a noble family; just by looking at his face it was clear that there was no one more noble than he.]

Then, abruptly, this careful image is shattered; beneath the fair face and body there lurks an evil nature: he is treacherous, hypocritical, disloyal, proud and cruel, afraid of no man or even of the Almighty himself (vv. 17–21). Here we have the first sight

of the poet's gift; the sense of paradox which pervades the whole work is skilfully brought out right from the beginning. The baron is a character who personifies an intolerable contradiction; for a satisfactory conclusion to the story, something will have to give ...

The poet now goes into greater detail. The villainous baron has ravaged the land around him, then maltreated anyone who falls into his hands; indeed, the line '*Trop ert en lui grans li descors*' (v. 26) [literally, 'there was too much disharmony in him', i.e. 'His desire to do evil was just too strong'], clearly suggests that he is literally an unbalanced character, schizophrenic even.<sup>31</sup> We are faced with someone who lacks all *mesure* (gallantry, balance, harmony, moderation), a *désmesuré* (one who lacks control, an immoderate person), an anarchic *baron révolté* (a dissident baron) of the established pattern.<sup>32</sup> More than that, he is a robber-baron, a foul highwayman, slaying travellers and pilgrims alike, and terrorising merchants. Note that his deeds become even blacker; there is a definite gradation – or rather degradation – as it becomes clear that no one is safe from him. Even the servants of Mother Church, at prey to his whim, are forced to lead wretched lives (vv. 31–36). No woman is safe from him, of whatever age or status; he holds what he might describe in patriarchal terms as the 'fair sex' in contempt, and he refuses to marry, considering it to be demeaning (vv. 43–46). No sooner has the text begun than the reader is privy to the baron's extremes, even in a misogynistic society. The whole point of all of this is to show the extent to which he alienates himself from his fellow human beings. He has put himself beyond the pale, he is totally unbridled and unprincipled, and the story has barely begun.

Having described how the baron has cut himself off from society, the poet turns the screw still more, now to show him cutting himself off in his excess from Mother Church. No fasting for him, no attendance at church services or sermons (vv. 47–52). In other words, he is neglecting the sacraments, those very externals of the faith upon which the orthodox Roman Church so insisted in the thirteenth century as an antidote to the unhealthy ritual of heresy. So the seal is set on his impiety; in every way he is the basest of wretches:

Je ne cuit que ja mais hom soit  
 ki tant par soit de put affaire.  
 Pensés tous mauls quë on puet faire  
 en dis, en fais et en pensés:  
 tous les eut en lui amassés. (vv. 54–58)

[I don't think any man has ever had such a terrible nature. Think of all the evil deeds that can be done whether verbally, in the flesh or in your head: he had managed to do them all.]

Matters come to a head one Good Friday, when he orders his dejected cook to prepare a meal of game meats. His household knights can stand no more: they protest vehemently, this being the holiest day of abstinence in the Christian calendar. The question of appetite and abstinence is an interesting one, given the role of feasting (as opposed to fasting) at a stereotypical court. Of greater significance yet is the drama of this initial narrative discourse, before we embark upon a scene full of sharp, conflicting dialogue in which the villain's character comes out more and more (vv. 78–91). How dare he desecrate holy Lententide? His knights might be thought of either as weak in having gone so far under such a blatantly un-Christian baron, or as strong, finally standing up to him. *Barisel* is predominantly a dramatic, psychological story concerning the baron and his apparent lack of eagerness to be saved. There is a subtext, however, which concerns his knights and even the reader/ audience. This is very much an interrogative text: questions abound, directed internally, from one character to another, or beyond the narrative, from narrator to audience. From the beginning all the way to line 748, questions come thick and fast, numbering in their twenties. It is only once all is resolved that these questions abate. For the moment, a forced retrospection is about to begin, followed by an introspection that could be interpreted as compelled and compelling – a ‘drame intérieur de l’orgueil et de la contrition’ [‘an internal drama of pride and contrition’], according to Lecoy<sup>33</sup> – but one that is also freely chosen. The baron will finally look forwards, contemplating the afterlife; but there is a great deal of ground to cover before we get to that point.

In the narrative, at vv. 78–91, when the baron has been described as an utterly despicable man, the first hint of looming judgment is mentioned. The baron's knights stand up to him. To heighten the anticipation of imminent punishment (and an adventure ...), the poet puts into his villainous mouth words of savage and blasphemous arrogance; these words come when his men declare that God has good reason to punish him:

Par foi, fait il, ce n'est mie ore,  
ançois arai mout de mals fais,  
homes pendus, mors et desfais. (vv. 92–94)

['Good God!'] he said, 'it's not happened yet! Before He gets to me I'll have done many evil deeds, ruined, hanged and murdered many men.']

As if to say: that's nothing, I'd just as soon do something really evil ... The baron's knights are outraged:

'Avés vous ent, font il, respit  
de faire Dieu tant de despit?' (vv. 95–96)

['Do you take no break at all from despising God so?']

Indeed they urge him to confess his deep-engrained sins, using terms a preacher would recognise and quite possibly be proud of.<sup>34</sup> The key motif of tears is introduced, but, rather than weep for his sins, the baron scoffs at the whole notion of penitence:

Plorer? fait il, est ce gabois?  
Je n'ai cure de tel harnois.  
Mais vous plourés, et je rirai,  
ke ja certes n'i plourerai. (vv. 101–4)

['Weep?' he says, 'is this a joke? I feel absolutely no obligation. But you weep as you wish, and I'll laugh. For sure, I'll weep about nothing.']

He lets out a coarse, blasphemous laugh; his *dém mesure* is growing apace as he condemns himself with every word he utters. Still, these lines do perhaps suggest a first chink in the baron's anti-penitential armour; there is a suggestion that he may at least go along with his surprisingly loyal knights, albeit to mock them. Ever reasonable, his apparently worthy retainers – such fine examples to their master despite presumably joining in with some of his excesses – urge him to accompany them on a visit to see a holy man who lives in a hermitage in a forest, there to receive confession. This very word – 'confession' – sends the baron into transports of rage (vv.113–19). Confession is the devil's work for him, the only thing that would take the baron to see the hermit would be if there is something to plunder. With this suggestion of the prospect of booty his bragging arrogance gets even worse. Still gentle, his desperate knights appeal to him as their lord, and this certainly amuses the man in a gross, fanciful way: he will go along with them out of feudal duty, not because of religious obligation, and after making fun of them he will then hope to do some evil deed.

All of this is finely observed. The baron's nature is unpredictable, he agrees to go to the hermitage on the spur of the moment

because he is in a jesting mood, and fancies some sport.<sup>35</sup> This coarse, swaggering, raucous character is caught perfectly by the poet in these and other telling lines (vv. 131–32, 330–38 etc.); the man is utterly without shame or sobriety. For him, this is nothing but a huge joke. Suddenly keen for some amusement, he calls hotly for his horse, still casting scorn on the whole business (vv. 126–31). It is the hypocrisy of it all that appeals to him: what a farce! After his pious followers have confessed, he will lead them off on a looting trip, just to show how worthless a piece of gibberish it all is:

Quant il seront fait confesser,  
s'irons reuber mainte part:  
c'est li confessions Regnart,  
k'il fist entre lui et l'escoufle,  
tels confesse chiet a un souffle. (vv. 132–36)

[When they've confessed, then we'll go off and pillage somewhere: this is just like Reynard the Fox's confession that he made to the kite, such confessions are forgotten in an instant.]

The poet is alluding to Branch VII of the *Roman de Renart*, where the anti-hero Reynard the Fox begs Hubert the Kite to hear his confession, then gobbles him up. There is usually something likeable about the roguish fox, however extreme his misdeeds. This is perhaps the manifestation of a Penitent Other in the baron's knights: for all their sins, they respect and honour their feudal bond, and also understand their Christian duty.<sup>36</sup> Over a hundred lines into the narrative, it seems that none of this has rubbed off on the protagonist. The knights set a good example, generously praying that their lord feel 'vraie humilité' (v. 140), which is necessary in order to make an act of confession pleasing to God. But the baron grumbles again, growling that he would prefer to not receive such a 'gift', otherwise no one would fear him ever again. We witness something of the complex nature of the baron's character in this statement. Is it a lack of security which pushes him to such excessive behaviour, or is there something more tangible in his obviously perverted psychological disposition? At this stage of the poem there are more questions than answers; arguably – and somewhat paradoxically – the episode raises more questions about his followers (who seem to possess fundamentally good characteristics) than there are about the baron himself.

And so, on this unpromising note (as far as Christian conversion is concerned) the scene ends, a scene in which the baron's character has been acutely depicted. He is a boor, and an impious boor at



that. Off they set, and the poet sees them off with a very neat juxtaposition:

Cil en cui fu li anemis  
va derriere aus trestout cantant,  
et cil vont devant lui plorant. (vv. 146–48)

[He who was inhabited by the devil rode behind the others singing,  
whilst his men rode ahead of him weeping.]

There is a conflict here in the baron's own camp: the knights in front, weeping, yet not daring to speak further against their lord (vv. 152–53); the baron following on behind, seemingly possessed by the devil, singing, mocking, jibing and cursing. Our moral text could hardly have begun in a bleaker way; it is very much to the author's credit that he has drawn this opening scene, depicting a wicked baron as both human and yet credible. What is more, the poet has also achieved the difficult task of making modern and medieval audiences condemn the baron, but at the same time nurture a secret sympathy for him (à la Reynard the Fox perhaps?), mainly as a result of his outrageous behaviour. Dramatically, this is necessary, since our interest in the baron must be retained if the audience is to appreciate his ultimate redemption.<sup>37</sup> The key themes of confession and the penitential tear have been introduced, as has the notion of sinners who are not all bad. And most importantly of all, the theme of the protagonist's confession and salvation is already a truly gripping one.

The party arrives at the hermit's cell, and the knights enter, leaving the villainous baron outside, snarling defiantly like some foul beast – 'plus irous/ ke ciens dervés ne leus warous' (vv. 161–62) [more furious than a mad dog or werewolf]. He looks blackly down at his feet, stretching arrogantly in the saddle. Once more, the poet's descriptive sense is just right, the baron's in-saddle body language more that of a beast – a demon even – than a man (vv. 163–64). These few lines are at the same time both hellishly out of the ordinary yet realistic. The baron is certainly not comfortable so close to a dwelling of the divine (i.e. the hermitage), recalling for this modern reader a famous episode from the horror film *The Omen*. His men beg him to unbend and enter for confession, but he refuses to give an inch (vv. 168–71). His attitude discloses his lack of comfort: hurry up and have done, he says. From where he sits he can see travellers on the road, just ripe for the plucking; they will all escape if this confession goes on any longer! Conjecture it

may well be, but I see in these words an excuse, a pretext just to get away from the hermit's proximity and from all this talk of confession. Whatever the case, the baron's men pay no heed to their arrogant master: they hasten to confess before the holy hermit.<sup>38</sup>

Once confessed, the faithful knights implore the hermit to see their master, who is in such need of spiritual aid; and so the feeble old man totters to the cell entrance leaning on his stick and confronts the imposing mounted baron. Visual and verbal symbols abound, from the stick and the hermit's sorry state (vv. 212–14) to previous talk of tears and possession. As previous commentators have pointed out, the text is full of symbolic echoes and repetitions; it is not just sublime poetry. Most important perhaps is that the hermit-confessor is already at work; Paul Bretel's comment that 'le travail de préparation psychologique s'opère souvent dès l'accueil à l'ermitage' [the psychological preparatory work often begins right from arrival at the hermitage] suggests that this harmless old hermit might be following an established pattern and is already preparing for an unusually difficult conversion.<sup>39</sup> The baron, despite himself, will little by little take on the mantle of the penitent. This first meeting becomes a dialogue of over 200 lines, taking on the form of a dramatic confrontation scene, a piece of muscular verbal fencing, in its own way as intriguing as any *marivaudage* [mannered, precious dialogue]. There is a clear and distinct disputation between good and evil; we become conscious that this is a test of wills, a struggle for a man's soul. The physical contrast between the two participants serves as a counterpoint to this battle: the sense of paradox is once more well displayed. For all his physical brawn, the baron uses words well, fending off apparently humble arguments put forward by the hermit with skill and vigour. At the same time, the physically weak hermit proves a sturdy foe. Of course, the baron will eventually fall into a trap, for the hermit is as wily as Reynard the Fox, however weak and feeble he may appear. It is during these 200 lines that we discover the various dimensions of the baron's character, the cunning of the hermit and, eventually, the faith God places in both of them.

The dialogue begins with perfunctory sparring along the following lines: welcome, my lord, to this place of confession – so what? You may confess to your heart's content, but I shall not ... (vv. 215–220). The hermit shows no anger, the baron is full of resentment. The hermit politely hears him out – 'Li boins hom l'ot, n'en ot point d'ire' (v. 221) [The holy man listens to what he has to say, feeling no irritation] – then gently and subtly changes

tack: he appeals to the baron's honour as a knight by pleading for the baron to show him the courtesy of dismounting and speaking to him in Christ's name. Although we expect the baron to be put in a slightly sticky position by this appeal to his feudal duty, he continues to bluster, insisting that he has no business with the hermit (vv. 229–33). Patiently, the hermit humours him: no need to do anything for me; just for the Almighty's sake ... The baron is put off his guard somewhat; he grants that the hermit is a good arguer ('fier plaidieu', v. 238), and begins to concede ground: he accepts that they can talk, but he insists that the hermit should not think that the baron is going to pray or to make any offering. The hermit gently persuades him, as one might persuade a child: 'S'il ne vous siet, si revenés' (v. 248) ['If you are not comfortable, there's no need to stay']. It is therefore the hermit's meek but repeated offer of hospitality that is successful in breaking down the baron's resistance, getting him down off his horse. The baron grumbles in a rather embarrassed manner, presumably brought on by the hermit's grace: 'Vous ne cesseriés, fait il, hui [...] A male joie fust hui emprise ceste voie!' (vv. 249–52) ['You just won't let up on me today', muttered the baron [...]] 'What a rotten idea it was to come along here today']. Readers might ask themselves if all this seemingly childish protest is in order to save face in front of his men. After all, it has not really taken much to get the baron off his horse, but the gesture is accompanied by constant immature grumbling that is presumably intended to show that he is still in charge of the situation. The baron came here in order to please his knights; is he doing as the hermit wishes still in order to please his men, or has he at this early stage in the narrative reached the limit of feudal mollification and fallen under the influence of the holy hermit? The question is an important one; it is natural for modern commentators to seek the point at which the penitent lurking deep inside the baron becomes manifest. One might plausibly argue that the verbal duel is lost at the first concession, a defeat which here marks the victory of Good over Evil.

The baron remains oafish but is led into the chapel by the hermit, and there, before the altar, the real cut and thrust begins: the saintly man declares that the baron is now his prisoner, and that he must speak with him (vv. 259–65). Even though the baron is a strong, armed knight, the hermit knows that he has gained the upper hand and trapped his opponent. The narrative language in these lines is remarkable, the poetry immaculate, the most intimate feelings of the baron laid bare before a tense audience:

Por tant me feriés decoler  
 ke vous ja mais m'escapisciés,  
 por rien que faire peüsciés,  
 si m'arés dite vostre vie. (vv. 262–65)

['Try as you might, the only way you will ever leave here without making your confession to me is by cutting off my head.']

At this, the embarrassed baron turns ugly, saying that he will then just have to kill the hermit, who will hear nothing from him; the hermit should just let him go. The situation is odd, a meek and mild hermit imprisoning a mighty warlord. But such is the power of the question of salvation in both hagiographical and non-hagiographical material. Whatever he says, the baron was born into a society dominated by a Christian belief system. The impulse to avoid damnation on the Day of Judgment must have been so ingrained that even our self-declared blasphemous baron finds that there is a limit to his evil doing. The verbal joust continues, but the reader/ audience is under no illusion that at any time will the hermit be in physical danger. Heedless of the threats directed his way, the hermit repeats his request; again, the baron refuses (v. 276). Again comes the request, the hermit playing his adversary like a fish on a line. The baron bursts out in frustration:

Ja, fait il, ne m'en merlerai.  
 M'amenastes vous por ce chi?  
 pres va que je ne vous ochi,  
 S'en seroit li siecles delivres.  
 u vous estes u sos u yvres  
 ki mon estre volés savoir,  
 et encore par estavoir  
 me volés faire a forche dire. (vv. 282–89)

['Never', he says, 'will I get involved with such a thing. Did you bring me here for that? It would take very little for me to kill you, the world would then be rid of you. Either you are mad or drunk to want to know everything about me, and even more so to want to make me tell you [*i.e. about my sins*] against my will.']

In these lines the baron sees his own personality in that of the hermit: who would not want to confess to a holy hermit, on Good Friday, unless they were mad or drunk? The psychological drama unravels further as again he threatens the old man with death; but it can be sensed that these are just blustering words, that already he is under the hermit's spell. The baron will not touch him; in fact we are keenly aware of this braggart's will slowly being sapped.

His words take on an aura of defiance, he is very much on the defensive now, rather weakly suggesting that the hermit wants to force him into confessing against his will.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, he repeats this complaint (vv. 289, 291), a rather preposterous objection, given his own physical might and background. There has by now been an interesting turn in events, for although the verbal sparring is with the hermit, his real opponent has become himself: he flaps to find objections for objection's sake. But he is still up for a fight, a frustrated yet powerful young man bred to do battle.<sup>41</sup>

Spiritual niceties remain of prime importance, notwithstanding the ever more engrossing drama. Yet again comes the steadfast repetition: repent, confess, sins, penance:

Si ferés, fait il, biaux amis,  
que Diex, qui en la crois fu mis,  
vous mece a vraie penitanche  
et vous doinst tant de repentanche  
ke vous conissiés vis pechiés.  
j'escouterai, or commenchiés. (vv. 293–98)

['So you will, my friend', said the hermit, 'and may God who was nailed to the cross bring you to true penitence, and provide you with enough remorse that you become aware of your sins. I'm listening: start now!']

The hermit is a consummate preacher, a model of the Church's post-Lateran IV penitential offensive. These lines represent the key to the entire story of *Barisel*, but also to the acute tension developing and playing out inside the baron's mind. Whether it is a question of a sincere confession, or of an individual who prides himself on being outside society having to conform for other reasons, to confess is viewed by the baron as a mark of weakness. He is the only individual both within the narrative and amongst the audience to view confession as it is expressed here. By this stage, it is clear that he needs to overcome his pride in order to be saved. For the baron, confession is not yet an act of religion, rather it is an act of frailty. And so, according to the author he remains a tyrant, an evil-doer (vv. 299–300). There is great narrative tension where the holy man is afraid, expecting to receive a blow at any moment, but the repetition is as effective as droplets of water dripping on a stone: the essential moral of this story is stressed, most effectively, quite hypnotically. And so comes an important turning point: this *tirans* glowers at the hermit, who trembles inwardly. This is a particularly fine dramatic and psychological moment: the old man is

in fact – has been all the time – mortally afraid of his adversary, but his adversary reads his sermonising repetition as a sign of strength. The penitent somewhere within the baron slowly reveals himself, despite the hermit's fear – which is completely misunderstood by the baron – and despite the baron's own arrogant words, which are worth nought. There is an irony that the old man gains the ascendancy in such circumstances, that the baron reads unwavering repetition as a mark of victory. The power of the scene is doubled by the twin effect of repetition in the face of mortal fear, and clear misunderstanding on the part of the protagonist. The hermit finds resolve in the words of scripture, and begs for the confession of even a single sin; he knows that once the baron begins to confess he will not be able to stop himself (vv. 306–10).

The final struggle for the villain's soul begins in a most evocative verbal to-and-fro; the poet has captured the art of investing his dialogue with a near physical quality (vv. 311–16). Continuing his gentle offensive, the hermit grimly repeats that, whatever happens, he will stay here all day if need be. He summons up all his faith and strength as the baron holds his own for a time, but speaks less and less and is forced to listen more and more. Like a priest carrying out an exorcism, having reminded the baron and the audience that today is Good Friday, the hermit reaches a climax of insistence:<sup>42</sup>

Je vous conjur de cele mort,  
qui l'anemi destruit et mort,  
de sains, de saintes, de martires,  
que vos cuers ne soit plus entires;  
ains vos commanc, dist li hermites,  
que vous tous vos pechiés me dites,  
et si n'alés plus atendant. (vv. 323–29)

[‘I implore you, in the name of this death [*i.e.* *Jesus on the cross*], which put an end to and finished off the devil, in the name of the saints, both men and women, and of the martyrs, no longer to be so hard of heart; and I command you’, said the hermit, ‘to tell me all your sins, and that you do so now with no further delay.’]

The dramatic power in these lines is palpable. Both parties are at the end of their tether: the hermit is drained of his strength, the baron sapped of his will. And, inevitably, it is the latter that snaps, releasing the intolerable tension, and sets up the scene for the homily-plot to come. The whole construction of this confrontation is superbly staged, and is far superior to the equivalent scene

in Jehan de Blois' version, which is slowed down by its long, admonishing sermon.

Completely overcome by the old man's *volonté*, our villain stands there in a state of amazed confusion: 'Dont fu mas et si tres soupris/ qu'il en devint trestous honteus' (vv. 332–33) [He was so dumbfounded and unhappy with this/ that he became filled with shame]. The baron may then take the devil's name in vain ('Comment, dyable ...?', v. 334), but he is already a changed man of sorts. Not yet fully penitent, not yet fully repentant, but the first stage of this epic personal battle has reached a climax, and his un-Christian insolence has lost. For the very first time, he feels a tinge of shame – and even a touch of confusion (vv. 334–35) – but only at his situation, not regarding his behaviour. He sees the hermit in a different light, asking what kind of person he is to be able to force him into this position. With an air of inevitability, as if fate has played a trump card and removed any element of free will, he resigns himself to telling the hermit his sins ('Puis c'autrement estre ne puet ...', v. 336 ['Since it cannot be otherwise']). There is still a touch of defiance and protest, notwithstanding, as he swears to recount his sins and do no more.<sup>43</sup> The baron is a reluctant penitent, telling his sins 'maugrés men' (v. 337) ['despite myself'], but he has become a penitent of sorts none the less, ready to confess his sins if not yet ready to ask forgiveness for them. Pinto-Mathieu notes that the baron in the cognate *Vie des pères* version *Baril* attaches no spiritual meaning to the task/ penance he is charged with; the same can be said of the circumstances in *Barisel*, where the baron is surprised and unhappy about the whole situation to the point of feeling shame (vv. 332–33).<sup>44</sup> There is great irony here, since under normal circumstances a penitent would feel shame for his/ her sins, not for having been tricked into listing them. There is equally a misplaced sense of wrongdoing: as the baron feels distanced from the role he feels he should be playing, the text suggests that the baron is humiliated at having given in to the hermit and gone back on his initial refusal to say a word. He is furious, and rightly in the eyes of a number of commentators, since this particular confession, if a forced confession, is of no use at all. The baron's violent behaviour is a classic manifestation of (pseudo-) chivalric masculinity, which the hermit has undermined. In effect, the baron stumbles along the road to salvation.<sup>45</sup>

So the thwarted baron confesses his sins to the hermit. The details of the sins are not important to our tale, we are already aware of the baron's wrongdoings, and to have them listed here would

break the rhythm of the psychological battle being played out before us. The four-line description of the 'confession' (vv. 339–42) is more than sufficient. At any rate, this is an inventory rather than a confession, it simply takes the verbal confrontation to the next level. Is the old man satisfied now? asks the baron somewhat bitterly and sarcastically. All he wants to do is to go, and never see or speak to the old man again. His defeat rankles sorely with him: 'Vous m'avés bien batu sans plaie,/ qui par force m'avés fait dire' (vv. 356–57) ['You have beaten me without leaving a wound, you who have forced me to speak']. But the hermit is far from crowing in triumph; he knows that confession is useless without repentance, and he weeps to see the baron still stubborn and effectively damned. These heartfelt tears of sorrow show the baron what he must do; they provide tangible proof of the author's belief that the hermit felt no desire for laughter at what he knows to be just a small victory ('Li boins hom n'ot talent de rire', v. 358). The hermit's tears play a useful role in the narrative matrix, but also offer an important spiritual model. The hermit begs the baron to perform an act of penance: any suitable one will do.<sup>46</sup> But the baron is determined not to lose any more face. He churlishly turns down each new proposal put forward by the hermit: fasting,<sup>47</sup> going barefoot, wearing sackcloth, self-mortification, pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Rome, Santiago de Compostela, daily prayers (vv. 373–405). It would be difficult to better for realism, liveliness and tension the dialogue in this section of *Barisiel*. The exchanges are short, sharp and to the point, having every quality required by the best farces several centuries later. Here there is drama in every sense of the word. Seven perfectly reasonable penances are offered, each time refused by the baron. In fact, some of the objections to the acts of penance put to the baron are quite reasonable in their own way; for example, he complains that the seas are too dangerous for a pilgrimage to Rome or Compostela. However, as each option is put to him, the baron's rebuttals begin to wane, from an initial downright 'no', followed by an insult, to concerns about his own welfare, and finally to the fact that daily services would require too much effort.

This sense of waning emotional strength is picked up by the hermit. All else having failed, the hermit tries once more. How about a purely nominal task, with no mumbo-jumbo about it: to fill the hermit's barrel with water, whereupon the hermit would assume responsibility for all the baron's iniquities and the baron would be free of sin? Just this straightforward proof of good faith will enable him to be clear of all his sins (vv. 409–19). The baron



contemptuously accepts; indeed, he laughs aloud (v. 421). After all, it is no trouble for him; he quite likes the idea of the deceptively simple penance. This running contrast between scornful laughter and regretful tears is one of the principal motifs in *Barisel*, and one of its most successful stylistic elements. For the moment, the laughter marks a return in the baron of the braggart: I shall not rest, he swears in mock solemnity, until I bring the barrel back to you full of water ... which turns out to be a fateful declaration dripping with irony:

Jel porc, fait il, par tel couvent  
ke je repos n'i prendrai  
descei que plain le vous rendrai (vv. 430–32)

['I accept', he said, 'and promise not to rest before bringing it back to you full']

This is a good point at which to reassess the position in which the baron now finds himself, for the action is so subtle and the narrative so understated that it is easy to misinterpret the emergence of the penitent. From refusing to dismount and address the hermit, the baron has undergone a verbal duel pitting his wits against those of the holy man. A point-blank rebuttal of the need to confess has gently and carefully been taken apart, the hermit persistently seeking a penitent within the sinner before him. This has been achieved stage by stage, and is not yet complete. Indeed, perhaps the hardest part is still to come. The baron has now accepted a penance, which he views as meaningless and undemanding. He has not accepted the need for penance, other than to get this annoying hermit off his back. But the words cited above (vv. 430–32) reveal just how cunning the hermit has been, for although the baron may make light of his duty as a Christian, he will not break such a solemn oath. He has now given his word, compelling him to perform his act of penance in a feudal society. He may not see the need for his Christian act of penance, but he is now bound to the barrel until he has managed to fill it.

In Jehan de Blois' version, the hermit persuades the knight to fill the bucket by saying that he needs some drinking water; we are thus faced more with a favour than a careless, impatient agreement in order for the baron to perform a seemingly simple act of penance. Dramatically, the version offered by *Barisel* is much more acceptable: it shows a degree of personal hubris, and contains considerable irony. The baron in a moment of weakness agrees

to perform an act, but then takes a grip of himself and refuses any orthodox penance; when the barrel is given to him, he thinks defiantly that he has cheated the hermit. Jehan de Blois' episode misses this nuance.

So, the baron now has his task and goes to the spring with the keg, but his attempts to fill it are in vain: not a drop of water will enter. The baron is mortified at this terrible assault on his pride:

Cil ki d'angoisse estraint les dens  
par mout grant ire se leva,  
a l'ermitage s'en reva. (vv. 458–60)

[[The baron] gnashes his teeth with rage, gets up full of fury and returns to the hermitage.]

This boiling anger is born of pique and frustration. He swears by God's name when he recounts his adventure to his knights. There is more irony when he then addresses the hermit; he has yet fully to understand his situation, now viewing the barrel as a diabolic instrument: 'Vous m'avés mis en mal trepel/ por vo dyable de barel' (vv. 473–74) ['You have brought me to a sorry state with your damned barrel']. Now, his oath is in earnest, his honour at risk. The barrel, which a few lines previously had been seen to present an easy way out, has suddenly become a yoke around his neck. It is now a point of honour for him; he lays down much more stringent conditions for himself, not so much a sign of repentance as a result of his desire to salve his own pride, like some athlete deliberately weighing himself down. In his stubborn, overweening *fierté* he rashly sets himself one handicap after another (vv. 477–86). Unbeknownst to the baron, he will bear all the outward signs of a penitent – fatigue, unwashed face, uncut hair, beard, untrimmed nails – until he actually becomes a penitent.

Now, Jehan de Blois' version fails to present sufficiently strong motivation for the knight's continuing in his task – is it still merely to help the hermit? The anonymous author of *Barisel* avoids this tricky issue skilfully: the baron's stubborn nature, his pride, his amour-propre, will not permit him to give up. This is psychologically satisfying, and also paves the way for a neat twist: namely, the presentation of the further paradox that the baron is led on the way to salvation by his own *démésure*.

Again, the hermit weeps for the man: this time it is out of recognition of the fact that his sins must be grievous if he cannot perform as a penance a task too simple even for a child. This is

obviously God's doing. Here stands enunciated a cardinal principle of medieval moralising: that one must pass through sore affliction on the way to salvation: 'Mais or veut il par sa pitanche/ ke vous fachiés vo penitanche/ et que vo cors por lui grevés' (vv. 497–99) ['Now He wishes in His mercy that you do an act of penance/ and mortify your flesh for His sake']. One of the basic principles of post-1215 confession has been voiced by the hermit, but the baron at this point is still far from seeing the light; he refuses to submit to God's will: he will perform his task not for God's sake but because *he* is set on it:

ains le fac par fine aramie  
et par grant ire et par anui. (vv. 504–5)

[‘I’m doing it out of sheer doggedness, anger and spite.’<sup>48</sup>]

The baron is still seething with rage; the hermit's compassion means nothing to him. What is more, the baron replies full of anger, appallingly stubborn to the end. And again, the poet succeeds in making us feel for him, as he burns his boats. Fiercely he dismisses his men, charging them all never to divulge what has become of him; he swears to fill that blasted barrel, if he has to try every sea, every lake or every spring in the world. He is still so blind to his proud rage that he continues to maintain that the barrel is bewitched by some demon (vv. 518–21). He refuses to see that a miracle has already taken place; again, all he can see is demonic enchantment.

So the baron sets off on his wanderings, the keg hanging like an albatross around his neck, with no money, and only the clothes he is wearing. And now the poet gives full range to his descriptive powers as he recounts this terrible penance. What follows is a magnificently sustained account of suffering and tribulation, with one detail after another coming as successive blows to the baron's pride and obstinacy. The poet has taken Job's trials as his model, and spins it all out into a vivid word-picture. This adventure narrative is crucial to the reader's understanding of how such a hateful villain comes to deserve his final reward. Just what does it take to bring a character full of bluster and anger, a wicked murderer and blasphemous criminal, to a state of contrition? Outwardly he has everything of the pilgrim: 'nus fors Diex ne le convoie' (v. 534) [his only companion was God]; he has cut himself off from society and from the easy life, as do so many penitents and pilgrims.<sup>49</sup> All the time, his efforts to fill the barrel are in vain. But still he stays

stiff-necked; his reaction remains one of outraged fury when the inside of his keg remains dry: 'tous jours alume et esprent' (v. 548) [he always flies into a fit of anger]. The author certainly sees the irony of the fact that in his mortification the baron starves himself, and in his fury he stakes his all: he has reached the point of no return, and assailed by hunger he is forced to sell his fine robe in exchange for rags. This tattered garment has no sleeves of any length, neither cap nor hood, and the elements begin to play havoc with his complexion. In effect he is fasting; he is reducing his status and mortifying his flesh. He ends up going barefoot, with untreated wounds, on the receiving end of uncharitable and cruel people whose behaviour resembles how he himself acted at the beginning of the tale. All of these are stages in the baron's degradation; from his pinnacle of pride and arrogance he is being cast down into the dust. The way to humility lies through humiliation. None the less he is not yet penitent. After his robe, his shoes are next to go (vv. 572–73). And always this incessant wandering: a penance that takes on the form of flagellation (vv. 572–78). The repetition of the word 'or' in the next few lines helps to build up a catalogue of his woes. The baron can find no shelter; his horrible appearance puts folk off and, irony of ironies, he, the evil robber lord, finds out what it is like to be cruelly treated (vv. 587–88). He feels miserable, all his earlier pleasure gone; but still he will not bend: his heart is still full of 'tres grant ire et grant anui' (v. 597) [very great anger and great irritation]. He is as blind as ever, and so the next act of his sufferings must take place; his money is gone, he is reduced to pilfering, scrabbling for a crust of bread. Again, the full force of the irony comes out: he has run the gamut of thieving; the careless, callous and noble highwayman is now forced to steal or starve. He complains to God – which is a start, I suppose – but he remains proud and unrepentant:

et bien vous puis dire de lui  
 k'ainc ne se puet humeliier  
 ne sen la cuer amoliiier,  
 fors tant qu'a Dieu se dementoit  
 des grans mesaises qu'il sentoit;  
 mais c'estoit en esmerveillant  
 car ce n'ert mie en repentant. (vv. 598–604)

[in fact I can tell you that he never tried to be humble nor soften the hardness of his heart, except in so far as to complain to God about the great misfortune that afflicted him; but this was out of pride since there was nothing of the penitent about him.]

By lines 608–9 he shows all the external signs of the mendicant: fasting, hunger, harsh treatment, barefoot, mortification of the flesh, rejection by society. But this is no preacher or holy homeless person. He finds himself forced to beg, and the incessant wandering continues. Like the legendary Wandering Jew – whom the author perhaps had in mind – as he suffers, so the baron journeys on and on. He tries to fill his barrel from every source of water from the English Channel to Barletta on the Adriatic, always in vain; and yet his stubbornness will not be broken, every day his anger grows (v. 646). And so a further (divinely ordained?) trial is sent to afflict him on top of all his other sufferings: now the people he meets automatically loathe and detest him (vv. 650–55); and as a consequence he withdraws into a bitter, sullen, disdainful silence. He has plenty of opportunity to contemplate his lot.

More irony: in the past, the baron was the insulting, jeering one, the intolerant one, the scornful one; the poet now makes a potent contrast with those who insult and jeer at the baron in his new threadbare, filthy and emaciated state. This social exclusion appears to have little importance for the baron, concurrently imitating the wandering knight, the penitent and the holy madman. The disparity between his social position at the beginning of the tale and his public exclusion some 600 lines later is just one layer of a powerful progressive irony which adds greatly to the dramatic force of the narrative, simultaneously providing the reader with an insight into the baron's heart of stone. It is easy to appreciate one piece of effective parallelism after another during the story of the quest. 'Que vous diroie?' (v. 661) ['What more could I tell you?'] asks the poet; well, to round off this episode, he has but to focus directly on the physical figure of the tormented baron, and give full rein to his artistry: he has already presented the villain's character, seething with resentment and forever growing in hatred. Now the poet gives us an accurate, almost naturalistic description of a physically exhausted man. The depiction essentially follows the head-to-toe formula that typifies rhetorical exercises in bodily description and is sustained and vivid; on the one hand this makes it impractical to talk of accuracy or realism in any straightforward sense. However, the modern reader is sufficiently equipped to understand, in this context, such terms at face value, as in 'faithful to the truth'. Our baron is now almost unrecognisable; lines 667–89 paint the portrait of a human body battered by the elements, starved, so weak that the poet is at a loss as to how it can still function. This passage really is a tour de force; rarely before

Villon do we have in French literature anything approaching this descriptive passage; in art, perhaps: such is the physical degradation often accorded to damned souls, or to the suffering Christ and his Saints. But in literary texts of this period this poetic, dramatic and naturalistic section in *Barisel* stands out as trail-blazing. The very ambiguity of the image maintains the sense of paradox: this agony is for the baron both a punishment for his wickedness *and* the sacrifice needed for his salvation. The external transformation of this literary character is brilliantly rounded off with the addition of a stick, upon which he leans in order to walk (v. 690); here we are again in a scene recalling the first meeting of hermit and baron (vv. 212–13), an echo of the earlier passage as resounding as it is subtle: physically at least hermit and baron now resemble each other. But an external transformation does not imply a transformed identity; there is still much more to come before this sinner of sinners becomes the model of penitents, and discovers the road to salvation.<sup>50</sup>

The world now stops spinning; a year has passed, turning the baron into a feeble old man, leaning on his stick, crippled by the weight of the barrel (symbolising his sins) round his neck.<sup>51</sup> He is at last at the end of his tether:

Merveille est qu'il a tant duré!  
Tant a souffert et enduré  
k'il sent mout bien que plus ne puet. (vv. 697–99)

[It is a marvel that he has survived for so long! So much has he suffered and endured that he realises very well that he can go on no longer.]

He decides to retrace his steps and return to the hermitage after a fruitless search, grumbling softly to himself. This decision to return to the hermitage is central to his personal transformation from sinner to penitent. Although not necessarily made for the right reasons, the choice to return paves the way for a decision that *will* save his soul. The reader suspects that the conditions for a conversion will this time be more in the hermit's favour. Moaning softly, the baron sets out and arrives back at the hermit's cave one year to the day after having left it: again it is Good Friday. The obvious symbolism of the pitiful baron is reinforced by the contrast with his former self: a year ago he had arrived with a harsh, loud voice, and was met with the meek words of a physically weak hermit. And there is more parallel symbolism still: before the baron arrives, we are told: 'Mais ja l'ermite n'en rira,/ ains

plouerra, mais qu'il le voie' (vv. 702–3) [And the hermit will not laugh, rather he will cry, if at all he can see [the baron]]. Again, the motif of laughter and weeping returns to punctuate the spiritual journey of the baron.

And so we have the second confrontation between the baron and the hermit. The latter fails even to recognise him, not surprisingly; but he does recognise the barrel, and assumes that this unknown man has found it, or been given it. He innocently asks who the visitor is, and where did he get the small barrel? His confusion lies in the nature of the man to whom it was given: 'je le carcai au plus bel home/ qui fust en l'empire de Romme/ et au plus fort, ce m'est avis' (vv. 731–33) ['I gave it to the finest and strongest man in the whole Roman Empire, I do believe']. The dramatic irony is immediately hammered home: 'Ains mais ne vi si tres povre home/ comme tu es et si despris' (vv. 738–39) ['I have never seen such a wretched man as you, nor one as undone as yourself']. This standard motif requires in most hagiographical contexts that the unrecognised stranger is the party that has previously been wronged; here the unrecognised stranger – the baron – continues to feel only malice, replying with anger. This outward sign that there has yet to take place an interior transfiguration works superbly in the hagiographical romance context of *Barisel*, where too much narrative intervention would break the spell of drama and tension. The baron hears the hermit's unconsciously ironic words and bursts out in anger: again it is made clear that his stubborn heart refuses to be open to the truth; his long tribulation has been punctuated on four separate occasions by his unrepentant fury (vv. 547ff, 596ff, 646ff, 744ff). Four times the baron has denied his Lord the Almighty, more times even than Saint Peter. The motif of tears and laughter has so far been important – and will eventually provide the expiatory miracle – but the motif of rage has been an even greater constant punctuation mark throughout the narrative to this point. The baron violently accuses the hermit of causing his misfortunes, reveals his identity and describes his fruitless wandering (vv. 763–77). In his sheer mortification he sees no further reason for living; perhaps it is the shame of a knight not fulfilling his quest.<sup>52</sup> And that is that: not a word of contrition or regret.

Astonishingly, it is now the hermit's turn to burst forth: in a mixture of pity and wrath, he lays into this miserable creature before him, the lowest of the low. His furious words are those of a real person at the end of his tether, also a brilliant sermoniser, and penned by a true genius:

'Leres, leres, fait li hermites,  
 tu es pires ke sodomites,  
 ne chiens ne leus ne autre beste.  
 Je cuic, par les iex de ma teste,  
 s'uns chiens l'eüst tant traîné  
 par tantes aigues, par tant gué,  
 si l'eüst il puchié tout plain,  
 et tu n'en as mie un seul grain!  
 Or voi je bien que Diex te het.  
 Te penitance riens ne set,  
 car tu l'as fait sans repentance  
 et sains amour et sains pitance' (vv. 771–82)

['Villain, crook', said the hermit, 'you are worse than a sodomite, worse than a dog, a wolf or any other beast. By my eyes, I believe that if a dog had lugged [the barrel] so much, across so many streams and brooks, it would have been brought back quite full; and yet you have not managed to get a single drop into it! I clearly see that God hates you. Your penance is worthless, since you did it without repenting, and without love and without godliness.']

The hermit thus spells out the precise nature of the baron's sin. He simply does not know how to react to the baron's lack of remorse. He has tried his best, but has been unable to bring the man to his senses. The constant narrative punctuation mark of anger surprisingly passes from baron to hermit, who not without pity simply breaks down. This creature before him is a dog, a wolf, echoes of earlier references to diabolical beasts. He is unreformed, the wicked creature within the baron remains in place, notwithstanding the experiences of the previous year. The hermit weeps bitterly, sighs and wrings his hands in grief to see a soul slipping away, inexorably (vv. 783–84);<sup>53</sup> and he turns now to God for direct assistance.<sup>54</sup> Modern scholars have been harsh on the hermit when the baron returns with his empty barrel. Payen, for example, suggests that the hermit has failed in his duties as a confessor because he did not initially pray for the baron's absolution; Blangez views the attempt to force a confession out of the baron as an outrage, presumably damning the whole exercise from the outset; Rouillard, more helpfully I believe, notes that 'when the baron returns from his long journeys with an empty barrel, the hermit has a new insight, suggesting his own metamorphosis and transformation in the context of this sacrament: perhaps his own failures as a man of God are the cause of this knight's damnation'.<sup>55</sup> The suggestion that the hermit is a fallible human being – perhaps



in trying to force a confession, perhaps in not following proper procedures – adds balance to *Barisel*. Both the hermit and the baron embark on a spiritual journey when their paths cross; it is not a question of outright evil meeting outright perfection. There may well be a penitent deep inside the wicked baron, but so too is there room for improvement deep beneath the hermit's veneer of near-sanctity. This final interpretation satisfies the medieval taste for circularity and equilibrium.<sup>56</sup>

This, then, is the dramatic crux of the story: the hermit makes appeals for God's mercy, and for the Virgin to intercede for him (vv. 786–94). This appeal is also the psychological crux of the issue: the hermit wants the baron to be something that he is not; in his prayer he asks for the baron to be saved, for him to be touched by God's grace. If the baron is incapable of prayer, then he, the hermit, must pray for him: he has been indirectly responsible for his trials; let it not be in vain. And now comes the hermit's last prayer, introducing a further element of paradox: it is he who shows the requisite spirit of self-sacrifice, not the baron (vv. 807–9). Accept his soul, even if it means rejecting mine ...<sup>57</sup> He weeps from the depths of his heart, imploring his saviour to save the baron's soul. But this would not be proper, for it would imply the imposition of salvation rather than salvation being sought by the sinner; it would take away every ounce of free will and negate the spiritual lesson of *Barisel*. The author clearly recognises the hermit's mistake, and brings the tale to a more than satisfying conclusion, one which allows the penitent harbouring within the baron to rise to the surface in a more natural manner.

The moment of breakthrough is upon us: the baron is stupefied; for the first time in confrontations with the hermit he is reduced to awed silence, and to a sudden realisation that the hermit is effectively to be damned in his place. This, after all, was the original deal, and it truly touches the hard-hearted baron. In fact, it brings the baron to prayer, and not just any prayer: he prays, in a voice so low that no one else can hear, for mercy to be shown to the hermit, and he prays for forgiveness. Gone is the previous bragging and swearing. He sees for the first time the extent of his egoism and selfishness, set into relief by the hermit's sacrifice. And for the first time he speaks from the heart on behalf of someone else (vv. 828–32). At long last he prays sincerely to his maker (vv. 838–42). This is the moment of epiphany, not easily identifiable as a specific verse or particular word, but more accurately as a slow realisation of what he has been, what he has risked and what the hermit now

risks. Perhaps the key moment is the beginning of his prayer, 'tres dous Diex ...' (v. 838), but it would be unreasonable to reduce a gradual moment of liberation and understanding, of fundamental character change, to three short words. It would be a disservice to the characters and their creator, the anonymous author of *Barisel*, to be so reductive. The baron has been brought to God by a process, one whose every element plays a part. As far as a penance for the baron is concerned, that has already been fulfilled by way of his almost unbearable quest.

Thus the baron's conversion is brought about through a final and particularly satisfying paradox: not through his own sufferings, but through the human agency of the self-sacrificing hermit. He, who has cut himself off in his evil from all men, and has suffered at the hands of many people during his quest to fill his barrel, gains salvation precisely by his pity for one man, and by that man's compassion ... Thus the human drama is accentuated, and accords well with the purely spiritual *exemplum*. Dramatically, the man is saved in the least expected way: the poet skilfully avoids the conventional ending of the other, more banal versions of this tale, which have the baron breaking down as a direct result of his privations. There is a far nobler spirit about this dénouement.

At this precise moment, the hardness and obstinacy fall from his heart, now divinely filled with humility, hope and penance. We are witness to all the keywords of early thirteenth-century evangelical preaching (vv. 844–48), and the baron weeps. As the baron rejects his worldly selfishness tears well up from the heart.<sup>58</sup> The act of weeping was considered vital to the theological moralists of the time: Alain de Lille – again like Pascal – stresses the need for such external proofs of penitence: 'ad sacerdotum accedat et cum multo dolore et lacrymis et gemitu confiteatur suos excessos' [the sinner must take the sacraments, and confess his sins to the accompaniment of tears and groans and mighty grief].<sup>59</sup> This piece of thirteenth-century teaching is certainly reflected here in the dramatic image of the hero's tears welling up to fill the barrel. The hermit is in every sense the model preacher, and the baron the model penitent. The baron becomes confused about just who he is and where he stands: at one point he marvels that the hermit, who is not one of his men, should place himself in such mortal peril; at another he declares himself as the hermit's man (vv. 815, 915). The spiritual lesson is quite naturally expressed in feudal language, the only language truly understood by the baron.<sup>60</sup>

Thanks to God's miraculous intervention at the moment of sincere repentance, the baron sheds a tear that speeds into the barrel like a bolt from a crossbow (v. 888). This act leads Ribémont to suggest that 'les deux personnages se confondent, comme noyés dans une identité unique dont le barisiel est emblématique' [the two characters come together as if swallowed up into a single identity of which the barrel is the emblem].<sup>61</sup> But perhaps such a commentary is too reductive, disallowing the poet's artistry. Confession to monks and hermit confessors was, according to medieval canon law, variously controversial or outlawed. But in narrative literature it can mark a powerful expression of individual devotion. It can equally provide dramatic material for poets seeking to edify and entertain, doing away with the commonplace details of a not always welcome annual confession to the parish priest post-Lateran IV. Paul Bretel provides plentiful examples of the enormity of confession for the confessors themselves in narrative texts of our period:

La confession pour [l'ermite confesseur] ne se réduit pas au seul exercice d'un ministère et à l'administration d'un sacrement. Elle se situe dans une stratégie plus générale de guérison des âmes, et celles qui paraissent le plus désespérément malades trouveront auprès de l'homme de Dieu, inspiré par l'Esprit, les conditions de leur rédemption.<sup>62</sup>

[Confession for [the hermit confessor] cannot be reduced to the simple exercise of a ministry and of bestowing a sacrament. Confession is part of a more general strategy by which souls are healed; those souls which seem to be the most desperately sick will find in the person of the holy man, inspired by the Holy Spirit, the conditions for their redemption.]

Following Bretel, it is not unreasonable to posit that the hermit in *Barisiel* is as much a spiritual counsellor as an instrument of a sacrament, the technicalities of which have become all but irrelevant. He is certainly an intermediary enabling the baron to enter into a relationship with God, a role that will have a profound effect on his own character. In assisting the baron to become a true penitent, the hermit confessor will discover another level of his own being. Permeated by gendered assumptions, Freud argued that we are not rational beings, that we are governed by emotion, by instinct, by images of ourselves that often prove quite unreal. The hermit in *Barisiel* is able to enter into the secret depth of the heart, and stand up to whatever darkness he may find. He listens and gives comfort; he is eventually able to establish between himself and the penitent