Eliduc and "The Ebony Tower": John Fowles's Variation on a Medieval Lay

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The epigraph for "The Ebony Tower" is taken from Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*, but John Fowles borrows much of the matter for his distinctly contemporary novella from another medieval romance, Marie de France's *Eliduc*. Fowles also clearly indicates his indebtedness. At one point David Williams, the protagonist in "The Ebony Tower," even listens to Henry Breasley go "off on Marie de France and *Eliduc*. 'Damn' good tale. Read it several times. . . . Archetypal and all that.' "[1] The old painter then proceeds to summarize the courtly tale of "crossed love," but David, who is quite certain that the other "misrepresented everything he talked about" (p. 52), does not particularly heed his host's account. Thus the protagonist, who gets most things wrong during the course of the story, gets this wrong too. Not forewarned by Eliduc's example, David also soon fails a test of faithfulness. He fails, in fact, to see which of his several tests is the real one; to construe rightly the crucial test when he faces it; to pass it; even to see, at first, that he has failed. And then, still oblivious to the significance of the twelfth-century analogue to his own twentieth-century predicament, he totally misestimates the nature and meaning of his paradigmatic failure—a failure that becomes paradigmatic precisely because of the manner in which he misestimates it.

Further attesting to the connection between the two works, the author includes his own translation of *Eliduc* in *The Ebony Tower*. That translation is preceded by "A Personal Note" in which Fowles, rather like Henry James writing his Prefaces, obliquely discusses the genesis of the volume at hand. He observes that *Variations*, his original working title for *The Ebony Tower*, was "meant to suggest variations" on the themes and narrative techniques he had already utilized in his previous fiction. "However," Fowles continues, "*The Ebony Tower* is also a variation of a more straightforward kind, and the source of its mood, as also partly of its theme and setting, is so remote and forgotten . . . that I should like to resurrect a fragment of it" (p. 109). There is a calculated understatement here, for the "resurrected" story is rather more than a representative example of old tales that provided the mood and something of the subject and setting for the four other stories in *The Ebony Tower*. As I shall subsequently demonstrate, "Eliduc" and "The Ebony Tower" are more closely related than that. The intrusive author, speaking in his "personal" voice, hints at his intent but does not completely give his game away.[2]

That game begins with the disposition of the first two tales in *The Ebony Tower*. The title story, it will be recalled, comes first in the volume; the medieval translation comes second. By giving precedence to the contemporary retelling of a much earlier original, Fowles dis-orders compositional sequence to a definite end. Coming to

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[1] John Fowles, *The Ebony Tower* (1974; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1975), p. 51. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.

[2] Peter Wolfe, in *John Fowles: Magus and Moralist* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1976), discusses "Fowles's passion for occupying center stage in his books" (p. 46). But as several critics have observed, Fowles's "presence" in his fiction does not always explain his purpose. See, for example, Gilbert J. Rose, "*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: The Unconscious Significance of a Novel to Its Author," *American Imago*, 29 (1972), 165-76; and Elizabeth D. Rankin, "Cryptic Coloration in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*," *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 3 (1973), 193-207.

"Eliduc" after "The Ebony Tower," we reread the chronologically later work even as we read the historically much earlier one. The ostensibly closed and codified twelfth-century text is thereby allowed to serve as an ironic commentary that undercuts the ostensible openness and indeterminateness (the hallmarks of modernity) of the twentieth-century text. As in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles is playing complex tricks with both authorial time and audience perspective.

The first trick is an invitation, fostered by the very different resolutions of the two juxtaposed works, to read them not as variations but as polar opposites. Thus Carol Barnum in her recent "The Quest Motif in John Fowles's *The Ebony Tower*" argues that "the medieval romance serves as a foil" to the modern one and contrasts Eliduc's "success achieved through his acceptance of the challenge of love" with David Williams' failure to "rise" to that same "challenge."[3] For Barnum, the one work "demonstrates love as a connecting force," while the other "demonstrates love as a dividing force."[4] That simple opposition, however, will not hold, for it is premised mostly on David's "failure" to pursue immediately the sexual opportunity that Diana, in the enchanted mythic world of Breasley's Brittany forest retreat, once briefly offers him. The postulated failure begs the very question that Fowles equivocates in the text. Indeed, even passages quoted by Barnum to attest to the validity and value of the love to which David does not surrender do no such thing: "Diana [Barnum argues] unlocks the experience of love for David: 'It was impossible [she quotes from Fowles] but he had fallen in love; if not with her wholly, at least wholly with the idea of love' (p. 106)."[5] But to be wholly in love with the idea of love, as mooning adolescents and adult victims of mid-life crises regularly demonstrate, is a passion that well might be held in check. Moreover, does David merit criticism when he cannot cavalierly dismiss the fact of his wife back home? Would he be a better man if, like the callous Peter in "The Cloud," he had no qualms about pursuing a possible sexual adventure?[6] Finally, as Constance Hieatt has rightly emphasized, Eliduc, in his tale, is no paragon either.[7] A man who betrays both his wife and his sworn lord for the sake of a new romance is hardly a "touchstone" whereby lesser men can be found wanting. The interplay between the medieval and the modern text is more than a matter of differences.

Turning, then, from differences to similarities, we can begin with Hieatt's apt summary of the obvious parallels between the two stories: "Like Eliduc, David is a married man temporarily away from a pleasant, loving, and undoubtedly faithful wife; like Guilliadun, Diana is clearly attracted to the male visitor, and presents an obvious temptation. David, like his medieval predecessor, struggles between his desire for the girl and his duty towards his wife."[8] In each tale the test of fidelity is originally the same. A man who would be true to his marriage vows finds himself passionately attracted to a woman other than his wife. In each tale, it should also be noted, the test is technically passed. When Guildelüec recognizes her husband's love

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[3]Carol M. Barnum, "The Quest Motif in John Fowles's *The Ebony Tower:* Theme and Variations," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language,* 23 (1981), 138.

[4]Barnum, p. 145.

[5]Barnum, p. 146.

[6]This point is made in slightly different form by Raymond J. Wilson III in "John Fowles's *The Ebony Tower:* Unity and Celtic Myth," *Twentieth-Century Literature,* 28 (1982), 316.

[7]Constance B. Hieatt, *"Eliduc* Revisited: John Fowles and Marie de France," *English Studies in Canada,* 3 (1977), 351-58.

[8]Hieatt, p. 357.

for another, "she asked his formal permission for a separation" and even insisted that as soon as he was free to do so "he must [as was both 'decent' and 'proper'] marry the girl he loved so much" (p. 132). There is no adultery, for Eliduc's love of Guilliadun is not consummated until he is married to her. Neither do David and Diana pursue their brief incipient affair to the point of actual intercourse. He is first reluctant to take that final step and then she is. Nevertheless, in both cases the wife is still betrayed, and faithfulness is thereby shown to be something more than simply refraining from extramarital sexual adventures. So each protagonist's limited success in a test of faithfulness also marks his failure. But "Eliduc" coming after "The Ebony Tower," shows that one can fail well and not just fail badly.

The failed test has different consequences in each text and is also approached differently. As Peter Conradi has noted, from the first the two protagonists move in opposite directions. Eliduc, to encounter his test, travels from Brittany to Britain; David from Britain to Brittany.[9] They travel in opposite directions following the test too. Eliduc, after remaining reluctantly true to Guildelüec, is rewarded with Guilliadun, "and for a long time they lived happily together in a perfect harmony of love" (p. 133). That harmony leads to a still greater harmony, the second wife leaving the husband to join the first in the religious order founded by the first wife and all three characters devoting themselves to God. For Eliduc, sorrow is succeeded by happiness; for David, however, that progression is simply turned around. Throughout much of "The Ebony Tower" he is happily secure in his complacent self-satisfaction. He is satisfied that his project to write the commentary for a book on Breasley's paintings is going well and that he is managing, thanks to Diana (Breasley's live-in maid/mistress/assistant/muse), the often difficult older man. He is pleased that Diana has long admired his paintings (a fact in the story that does not fit the general critical judgment of David as an obviously second-rate painter). He is flattered that Diana finds him sexually attractive and apparently wishes him to carry her away from Breasley and back into the real world. His collapse comes when Diana shuts and locks her bedroom door on his belated acceptance of her earlier ambiguous offer of herself. Immediately David gives way to a sense of desolation expressed in terms—his terms—almost fustian. He experiences an "agonized and agonizing deflation," "a rage of lost chance," "the horror" of "an acute and overwhelming sense of loss, of being cleft, struck down, endlessly deprived ... and deceived," all of which is "intolerable, intolerable, intolerable" (pp. 94-95). Her refusal to show herself when he departs the next day is a further measure of his loss: "Then he knew the agony of never seeing her again" (p. 99).

The failure of the affair—the failure to have an affair—signifies for him the unmaking of his future career as a man and an artist. In contrast to Eliduc who entered into a new life, David "had refused . . . a chance of a new existence, and the ultimate quality and enduringness of his work had rested on acceptance" (p. 104). Eliduc, at the end of his tale, "surrenders himself with his servants to omnipotent God" (p. 133); David, at the end of his, "surrenders to what [for him] is left: to abstraction" (p. 106). The last words on Eliduc commemorate his "peaceful death" (p. 133). David's last words, spoken during the airport reunion with his wife, voice his hollow claim, " 'I survived' " (p. 106).

Such similarities in opposition suggest that Fowles wrote "The Ebony Tower" as a kind of mirror version of "Eliduc." The former work is put first in the book, which makes "The Ebony Tower" the original work for which "Eliduc" becomes the inverted reflection. Such erasing of the sides—which story is on which side of the mirror?—removes the mirror even as it adds to the balance between the two texts which are each both a revision of and an ironic gloss on the other. The mirror

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[9]Peter Conradi, *John Fowles* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 82.

relationship between the two works also explains how each can reverse the narrative direction and attendant details of the other yet retain the same essential narrative configuration.

"Eliduc" and "The Ebony Tower" are, after all, two closely related versions of the traditional love triangle plot, and literally thousands of tales turn on the same quintessentially romantic casting of the same three actors to pose the same dilemma. A character of one sex, the protagonist, must choose between two characters of the opposite sex. One of those latter two, wed (or about to be wed) to the protagonist, necessarily embodies the responsibilities of matrimony, the restrictions of society—and the claims of the superego. The other, the present or prospective lover, promises immediate pleasure, radical freedom—and the indulgence of the id. The resolution of the plot typically affirms either passion or propriety.

Yet neither "Eliduc" nor "The Ebony Tower" is a typical example of the romantic form around which they both are structured. To start with, in each story, it should be noted, the central male character does not resolve for himself the issue that he confronts. It is the woman who ostensibly serves to embody one of "his" options who decides what his decision will be. In each case, he also accedes to that decision. Still more intriguing is the decision that "she" makes, for in each case the woman decides in favor of the other woman. One option, in effect, advocates the other, which tends to erase the supposed opposition of the two options. Thus Eliduc's quandary is solved for him by the wife who practically pushes her husband into the arms of the younger woman whom he loves and who, it might be remembered, has been revived from near death only through the capability of her rival, the wife. It is also the soon-to-be abandoned wife who advocates the validity of extramarital commitments and then further blurs any possible distinction between propriety and passion by insisting that the unmarried lovers be immediately wed. Fowles, in "The Ebony Tower," simply reverses the direction of that blurring to confuse differently the same issues. Diana, the intended lover, sends David back to his wife and does so for her reasons, not his. She calls off the affair mainly because it would have been only an affair. "Where will you be this time tomorrow, David?" (p. 94), she asks, a question that he is not prepared to answer. His refusal to offer any kind of promise means the failure of what would have to have been, at least for Diana, a quasi-matrimonial union. That failure reveals to David that his marriage has all along been mostly a quasi-adulterous cohabitation. Passion denied commitment is not passion; matrimony denied commitment and passion is even less, as is demonstrated by the grimly comic meeting between David and his wife Beth in the airport:

> She stops a few feet short of him.
> "Hi."
> She bites her lips.
> "I thought for one ghastly moment."
> She pauses.
> "You were my husband." (p. 106)

The scene she plays is a woman meeting her lover. The intended joke: How fortunate that the husband is also the lover! The real joke: How unfortunate that he is not.

At this point the reader can see why the two tests were, from the start, fundamentally ambiguous. Neither could prove what each, at first, seemed designed to test, for the issues were not wholly in the hands of the male protagonist, nor were they the simple matter of should he remain faithful or should he fall. In effect, each author subverts the standard structure of the triangular love story plot to go beyond the formula, and each does so in the same two ways. First, both Marie de France and

John Fowles portray protagonists more complex than the stock figures required by formulaic plots. Eliduc, for example, is guilty of any number of deceits and duplicities, yet he at least has the courage of his own baser convictions, as well as a few of his nobler ones, and we are willing, at the end of the lay, to see him rewarded. David, however, another odd combination of basic decency and basic dishonesty, weakly allows his baser qualities to predominate to the point that, finally, even when he is being honest, he is honest dishonestly: "There was a kind of superficial relief at being able to face Beth more or less openly—but even that seemed a consolation prize awarded the wrong man. He had finally stayed faithful by benefit of a turned key. And even that, the being technically innocent, that it should still mean something to him, betrayed his real crime: to dodge, escape, avert" (p. 101). With such pretended recognition he goes on, in a much more dubious fashion than the dodges he here acknowledges (appreciating the fact that he is still "technically innocent" of adultery), dodging, escaping, averting. The second subversion of the formulaic triangle is even more obvious than the first. Both authors dismiss the simplistic polarity of propriety or passion. There are other possibilities besides either/or dichotomies: this *and* that; *neither* this *nor* that.

There is one last point that can be clarified by a comparison of these two oddly similar different works. Guildelüec chooses for Eliduc exactly what he desires. Of course he is happy to bow to her better judgment and to act as she advises. Diana, however, turns David in the direction that, so he loudly proclaims, he desperately does not wish to go. Why then does he drive on to Paris, lamenting all the way his failure and loss, when he could easily return to Coëtminais to claim the reward, Diana, who would be waiting for him there? The answer, I think, is implicit in the text. The surface business of *Eliduc* is courtly life and courtly love, but beneath that surface we see, as Hieatt has suggested, a subtle critique of courtly behavior.[10] Certainly Eliduc, who manages so badly his own affairs and whose love is finally disposed of by his wife, does not cut a very impressive figure as either a lord or a lover. In much the same fashion, the surface business of "The Ebony Tower" is painting and existentialism, but beneath that surface we see both services—a supposed dedication to art or authenticity—subverted. Breasley, who is portrayed as a great painter and who thinks of himself as a realist in art, can still define reality in a most narrowly dubious sense—"Pair of tits and a cunt. All that goes with them. That's reality" (p. 39)—and thereby justify his long history of the sexual exploitation of others as a labor of love in the service of art. "How many women you slept with, Williams? (p. 39) is, for Breasley, synonymous with the question that he is really asking. "How good a painter are you?" The other accepts that double meaning, the Breasley equation, which becomes another reason why the failure of the affair with Diana "proves" David Williams to be a failure as an artist.

That proof, however, can easily be seen as self-serving juggling. Claiming that he has had his "existential chance" (p. 101) and failed it, David effectively avoids confronting any real existential task and particularly the task that he, even as he formulates his own failure, admits Breasley has accomplished. The other, throughout his career, had "faced up to the constant recasting of [him]self" (p. 101). David, by defining himself as a failed lover and then making that one failure the measure of another, promises that he will make no future attempts to recast himself as either a man or an artist. In obvious bad faith, he decides that essence must determine existence and thereby abjures the possibilities of freedom intrinsic in his own existential terminology. The ending of "The Ebony Tower," despite its seeming openness (David's last words, "I survived"), is as closed as Diana's door. All of which is to say that, at the end of "The Ebony Tower," we should finally see the relevance of the epigraph from *Yvain* with which the novella began:

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[10]Hieatt, p. 357.

And through forests long and wide
Through landscapes strange and savage
And passing through many treacherous trails
And many a peril and many a trial
Until he came straightway to the path.[11]

Eliduc, with a little help from his wife, discovers his path. But David mostly proclaims that he is lost, and that proclamation leaves him even more lost than he imagines.

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[11]This translation of the epigraph is quoted from Robert Huffaker, *John Fowles* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), p. 117.