

A SUMERIAN MYTH SAYS that all humans spoke one language until Enki, the god of wisdom, “changed the speech in their mouths / [brought] contention into it, / Into the speech of man that (until then) had been one.”¹ The cause of this ancient confusion of tongues is not clear, but it is clearly a precursor of the biblical tale of Babel. It may well be explained as a punishment for human ambitions to touch the divine realm or possibly for the reason given by Flavius Josephus, punishment for builders’ refusal to populate the earth with their offspring out of their fear that separation would weaken their population (I.4.1, § 110). In the book of Genesis (11:4), the builders’ motivation for their project is their fear of being scattered across the earth, and in an ironic twist, the thing they fear becomes reality.² Much has been written about medieval beliefs concerning languages, summarized here by George Steiner: “The tongue of Eden was like a flawless glass; a light of total understanding streamed through it. Thus Babel was a second Fall, in some regards as desolate as the first. Adam had been driven from the garden; now men were harried, like yelping dogs, out of the single family of man. And they were exiled from the assurance of being able to grasp and communicate reality.”³ As we will see in Chapter 3, this pessimistic narrative is only one interpretation of the myth of Babel, but it is nevertheless the most persistent. Isidore of Seville describes the standard history of language, as it remained until the early modern period.⁴ Hebrew was the universal language granted by God to Adam, but when men built the tower out of a prideful wish to get closer to Heaven, they brought their division upon themselves (*Etym.* I.1).⁵ These languages cause the descendants of the tower’s construction teams to be eternally at odds with one another, unable to regroup forces in order to challenge divine power again.⁶ Isidore notes that for his own time, some languages have retained a connection with divinity: “There are three sacred languages, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, which shine over the whole world” (I.3). However, Isidore’s three sacred

languages are not monolithic, and some are more authoritative than others. For example, Latin has four varieties, each corresponding to a historical period: “Priscam, Latinam, Romanam, Mixtam.” The “mixed” Latin of the fourth, post-imperial period is characterized by its corruption by solecisms and barbarisms (I.3–7). Even sacred languages, it would seem, have their colloquial and demotic varieties. It is interesting that Isidore singles out the Latin of his own time (and of his text) as a corrupt, post-imperial shadow of its predecessor, the expression of *romanitas*. His Latin is not a sacred hymn, nor is it scripture. Rather, it is a corrupt writing idiom designed to allow the reader to begin work on any language with proper levels of distance and skepticism. Isidore points to his *Etymologies* as an attempt to build a vision of languages from corrupt fragments, sifting through the ruins rather than the archaeology of Babel.

According to Isidore of Seville, “Peoples come from languages, languages are not drawn from peoples” (*Etym.* IX.I). Spoken and written idioms identified their users in both geographical and political terms, as well as in terms of religion and learning, and only did so in a context in which several languages coexisted. Christian intellectuals of the Middle Ages tended to focus on four biblical events related to language. In addition to the Creation (the gift of language) and Babel (the “confusion” of language) came the trilingual writing on the cross, a sign that the three sacred languages, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, enjoyed a closer relationship between themselves than with any others. Fourth came Pentecost and the gift of tongues to the Apostles, who were able to preach in all vernaculars across many lands.⁷ Pentecost did not resolve the disaster of Babel, but it provided one remedy for it. This was glossed typologically, citing the Pauline epistles that proclaimed the abolition of divisions between religions and peoples, but emphasizing conversion. Conversion and languages are important concerns in two texts that also illustrate the hybrid linguistic and generic nature of Occitan narratives. The *chanson de geste* titled *Girart de Roussillon* (after 1160) was popular in northern French regions, but its complete text survives only in three redactions that show that it was composed, or rewritten, for an audience that understood both Occitan and Old French. *Guilhem de la Barra* (1318), the fourteenth-century hybrid epic romance (*roman d’aventures*), appears to be an isolated product of the Languedoc after its absorption into the French crown. It is the work of a man who might have been trained as a lawyer, educated and probably working in Toulouse. *Guilhem de la Barra* is preserved in only one manuscript and seems to have had no impact on any other writers of its time. Both texts explore questions of language and conversion, Babel and

Pentecost, and do so in ways that shed light on their literary and spiritual contexts. In this chapter I will examine *Girart de Roussillon*. *Guilhem de la Barra* is discussed in Chapter 2.

Mainstream writings on the confusion of tongues preserved the idea that scattering, separation, and ultimately war were the inevitable results of linguistic divisions. Several versions of the vernacular Alexander romances (the earliest fragment of which survives in a Franco-Provençal dialect) include an account of the Tower of Babel related to the city of Babylon. Babylon emerges as the ultimate goal of Alexander's campaigns, largely thanks to its association by the High Middle Ages with the goal of crusaders, as well as with the eschatological identification of Babylon with sin. The lists of languages that illustrate these narratives of the Tower of Babel seem to crystallize Alexander's empire building, as they emphasize the connection between languages and peoples. The Venice redaction of the Old French *Roman d'Alexandre* (usually known as the B text, copied in the fourteenth century) recounts God's decision to punish humanity for its pride (*orgoil* [line 7792]) by ensuring that building work stops (when a man asks for a stone, he gets a loaf of bread; when he asks for mortar, he receives knives), and that the fathers grieve as their children scatter across the earth (line 7805), to become members of new nations:⁸

Li uns devient caldeus, li autre yndians
E li autres mesopotamians,
Li autres fu turqueis, e l'autre elemitans.

(B, lines 7806–8)

[One became Chaldean, the other Indian, and the other Mesopotamian; one became Turkish, the other Elamite.]

The list of fifty-two languages (approximating to the traditional seventy-two) (lines 7806–32) includes Western vernaculars:

Li autre fu romans e li autre toscans,
Li autre fu lombars e li autre musans,
Li autre proënsals e li autre tolsans,
Li autre fu gascuns e l'autre alvernans,
L'autre fu espaneis e li autre marmans,
Li autre erupeis e parla bien romans,
Li autre fu franceis e li autre loërans,

Li autre fu bretons e li autre venecians,
 Li autre fu flamens e li autre loarans.

(lines 7819–27)

[One became Roman, another became Tuscan, another Lombard, another *Musans*; another Provençal, another Toulousain, another Gascon, another Auvergnat. One man was Spanish and another *Marmans* [?]; another was from Hurepoix and could speak in the Romance language. Another was French and another of the Lorraine; another was Breton and another Venetian; one was Flemish, the other from the Loire.]

Once again, languages and peoples are associated, so that a language becomes a lineage both geographically and politically. These lists find an echo in the armies that are enumerated in *Girart de Roussillon*:

Gen devit ses escales Carles lo res,
 E met el premer cap ses Erupes,
 Ces d'entre Leire e Seine, vassaus cortes;
 Furent i cil de Cartes e de Bles,
 O les lances trencanz, auz arz entes.
 E gide les Arbez, uns cons de Tres.
 Mancel e Beruer e Aucores
 E la premiere escale ferrunt manes, (Manes)
 (E) en l'autre Peitevin e Bretones,
 (E) en la carte Normant e Flandines
 Poherenc e icil de Vermendes.

(laisse CCCXXIV/323, lines 4929–39)⁹

[King Charles led his companies well. He put in first place his men of Hurepoix, the ones from the region between Loire and the Seine, courtly vassals; then came those from Chartres and Blois with sharp lances and taut bows, under the leadership of Arbert, a count of Troyes. Manceaux, Berruyers, and Auxerrois in the first company attacked the men of Le Mans. In the other came Poitevins and Bretons, in the fourth company, Normans and men of Flanders, men of Picardy and those from the Vermandois.]

The Castilian *Libro de Alexandre* derives from the Old French romance but also uses Arabic sources and Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis*. It has a long

digression when it describes Babylon; provides a geography of the region; and appends the tale of Babel and of the multiple languages, it claims, of Babylon (sts. 1505–17).¹⁰ Here, all humanity speaks Hebrew, human beings’ “natural speech” (MS P, st. 1508), until God scatters them into seventy two linguistic groups (I have kept the orthography used by Willis for his edition):

Los vnos fon latinos los otros fon ebreos
 A los otros disen griegos a los otros caldeos
 A otros disen araues e a otros fabeos.

(st. 1513)

[Some are Latins and some are Hebrews; some are called Greeks and others are called Chaldeans. Others are called Arabs and others are Sabeans.]

The northwestern European groups are particularly tied to specific regions: “Otros disen jngleses otros son de Bretaña / escotes e yrlandos otros de Alemaña” (Others are called English; others are from Brittany, Scots and Irish, others from Germany) (st. 1514). Babylon itself is multilingual (sts. 1518–32), and the narrator concludes that it would be a great achievement for a mortal to learn all the languages of the earth (st. 1521). In the Alexander romances, fathers (in fact, giants, as the texts confuse the biblical tale with that of the Titans) witness their sons’ double alienation from them, for they forget both their original language and their skills. If a man who asks for building blocks or mortar is handed knives or horses, he is given substitutes for the tower that imply survival, but also warfare and travel. Linguistic confusion cuts off the direct connection between fathers and sons, at the very moment that it inaugurates the lineages of the various nations on earth.

In Christian art of the Romanesque period, one of the most interesting artistic explorations of the links between Babel and Pentecost appears at the Burgundian abbey of Vézelay, on the portal through which the laity entered the abbey church (built between 1120 and 1132).¹¹ This abbey also plays an important role in the final part of *Girart de Roussillon* (after c. 1160). This last section of the poem stages a penitential conversion predicated on preaching by example. I will argue that the relationships between languages, and the preaching association of Pentecost, play a crucial role in closing the narrative.

Synopsis

The Frankish emperor Charles Martel and his vassal Count Girart de Roussillon are betrothed by proxy to the two daughters of the emperor of Constantinople. But Charles prefers Elissent, Girart's intended wife. Girart is awarded his fief as an allod in compensation for agreeing to marry Berte. He and Elissent secretly swear to love each other. Charles later invades Girart's lands. This war ends when divine fire destroys the standards of both armies. The ensuing truce ends when a long-standing feud is reignited, and a more destructive war starts. Defeated, Girart and Berte hide in the forest of Ardenne, working as a charcoal maker and a seamstress, respectively. Twenty-two years later, in the cathedral of Orléans, Elissent obtains a reconciliation between the two rival lords. Later, Girart thinks about starting another war on behalf of his young son. One of his men kills the boy to protect the peace. Berte encourages Girart to penitence. Secretly, she builds a shrine to Mary Magdalene at Vézelay. She overcomes slander and attempted rape to promote peace and penance. A lasting peace is proclaimed by the pope at Vézelay.

The poet endows Berte with formidable linguistic skills:

Premereament Bertan o le vis clar,
 O le gent cosïer, au bel esgar,
 Sos paire li a fait les ars parar;
 Sat caudiu e gregeis e romencar,
 E latin e ebbriu tot declarar.
 Entre sen e beltat e gen parlar,
 Ne pout nus om el munt sa par trobar.

(lines 235–41)

[First, Berte of the bright face, noble bearing, and sweet gaze. Her father has taught her the arts. She knows Chaldean and Greek and can translate into Romance, and she can discourse on both Latin and Hebrew. Between her good sense, her beauty, and her lovely turn of phrase, no one could find her equal on earth.]

Berte's ability to translate sacred languages into the vernacular, as well as her interpretative command of both Latin and Hebrew, denote her as someone who can overcome the confusion of tongues. Her skills are crucial to her peacemaking role in the second part of the poem, where she enacts an

extensive *translatio studii* by teaching that she has built the abbey of Vézelay with her own hands, on the model of the Hagia Sophia of Constantinople.¹² Berte's skills are shorthand in other texts for wisdom, for example, that of an elderly adviser in the Venice (B text) *Roman d'Alexandre*:

Un sage clerc apelle, qui fu de sa contree,
 Qui sot gres e caldeu e sot lenga ebree
 E sot tot les lengages d'outre la mer betee.

(B, lines 7638–40)

[He calls for a learned clerk of his lands, who knew Greek, Chaldean, and Hebrew and knew all the languages from beyond the seas.]

However, the narrative of *Girart de Roussillon* draws attention repeatedly to the political and sacred values of languages of conflict, as well as their salvation through languages of peace, and Berte's status as a feminine *sage clerc* in a Christian setting is evidently one that demands comment.¹³

Medieval multilingualism was an inevitable and complex cultural phenomenon as, contrary to Isidore's claims cited above, peoples were only rarely drawn from languages. Those universal claims that were made for Latin Christendom ran against the fact of regional linguistic diversity, one that meant that the vernaculars were an inescapable source of alleged corruption. Nor was it possible to assert that Latin could be combined smoothly with the other two sacred languages. Intriguingly, the languages of the surviving manuscripts of *Girart de Roussillon* also draw attention to the conflicts and reconciliations that may be worked out between languages. Of the five surviving manuscripts of *Girart de Roussillon* (only two of which are complete or near complete), one is written in a transitional dialect between Old French and Old Occitan that has been variously identified as Poitevin or Franco-Provençal (MS O), another has been identified as a translation of this text into Old French (MS L), and another is a translation of the same text into Old Occitan (MS P). Simon Gaunt has devoted a recent article to reassessing the issue of the language of *Girart de Roussillon*, especially the long dialogue on this subject between the linguist Max Pfister and the poem's editor, Mary Hackett.¹⁴ Gaunt has rejected the label "hybrid" for the language of O on the grounds that the Franco-Poitevin text is not an artificial literary language. Rather, he suggests it is an example of code-mixing between a dominant and subordinate language, in this case, epic French poetry (dominant in generic terms) and an Occitan idiom that seems to owe little to troubadour

poetry of the time. The code-mixing imposed on Occitan aimed to, as he states, “emphasize its irreducible foreignness” rather than acculturate it, with the result that the poem’s language became “a marker of difference” of considerable self-consciousness.¹⁵ This hypothesis rests, as Max Pfister suggested, on the principle that what the author(s) of *O* attempted to do was to blend core elements of Occitan expression into the formulaic patterns of Old French epic poetry. Such a strategy would demand some explanation in terms of the intended audience, but none has as yet been suggested. Hackett favored the view that the transitional dialect of *O*, like the simplified Occitan of *P*, was intended to make the tale comprehensible to a wider audience, and it would seem that the two “translations” into French and Occitan reflect a desire to enlarge the poem’s audience.

It is unlikely that the composer(s) of *O* would have sought to impress their audience with a poem composed in an obscure, challenging language, as had they wished to do so, they could simply have written in Latin. It should be pointed out that it is accepted that the author(s) of *Girart de Roussillon* was or were learned in monastic and clerical matters, although the poem’s much discussed anticlericalism imposes some caution in that respect.¹⁶ Instead, it seems apposite to explore what the *O*-text says about language and, specifically, how multilingualism is associated with the typological opposition between Babel and Pentecost.

The poem opens with a court festival at Pentecost. Charles and Girart are called upon to assist the emperor of Constantinople against a Saracen invasion because they are already betrothed to the emperor’s two daughters. Subsequently Charles forces Girart to break his betrothal to Elissent and exchange her for Charles’s bride, Berte. In an illustration of her linguistic skills, Berte overhears the men’s negotiations and runs away to weep:

Partit de lor plorant soz une aulivie,
 E denant a ses piez magistre grive;
 Non [a] tant saive ne melz escrive.
 La donçele se claime sovent caitive:
 “Maldite seit de Deu ca mars undive,
 E li porz e la naus qui[m] mes a rive.
 Mel vougre lai morir que cai fu[s] vive.”

(laisse XXX/27, lines 407–13)

[She left them to weep beneath an olive tree, and at her feet, before her, was a Greek governess: none is wiser or writes better than she.

The girl repeatedly laments her wretched state: “May God curse the waves of the sea, the harbor, and the ship that brought me to these shores. I would prefer to have died there than to be alive here.”]

Berte’s learned governess makes her only appearance in the text in this comparatively short *laisse*, to support the rejected princess as the latter curses the ship, the sea, and the harbor that brought her to her humiliating predicament. It may be a learned allusion to the abandoned heroines of Ovid’s *Heroides* (the name of Berte’s sister, Elissent, moreover, is a transparent allusion to Ovid’s abandoned Dido/Elissa).¹⁷ In the O-text of *Girart*, the first figure, an equally fleeting one, to be found seated beneath an olive tree is its purported author:

Sestu, mongres corteiz, clerz de moster,
S’estaveit desos l’ombre d’un aulivier,
E fermat en son cuer un cosier.

(*laisse* III/3, lines 24–26)

[Sextus, a courtly monk, a clerk of a church, sat in the shade of an olive tree and formed a desire in his heart [to compose a poem].]

The silent *magistre grive* echoes the meditative *mongres corteiz*. One inaugurates the poem, and the other witnesses Berte’s learned allusion, but neither figure has any further part to play in the poem. Berte’s first independent speech is both implicitly Ovidian (by extension, pagan) and associated with her Greek learning. It affirms her literary and cultural dissociation from the feudal epic rationale that determines her rejection by Charles. Her fleeting display of pagan learning set aside, Berte engages in linguistic activity that is almost exclusively sacred, unlike her sister Elissent, whose actions and words tend to be both erotic and political. The two women, as Sarah Kay and Simon Gaunt have argued, are treated in the narrative as gifts, and the gifts they embody are the learned cultures of Constantinople and Rome.¹⁸ Berte’s Greek literacy, symbolized by her nurse, is invoked at the poem’s close when one of Girart’s men recalls her telling him the story of a woman penitent at Constantinople (lines 9678–9700).

The troubled status of sacred languages in *Girart* may shed light on the way liturgical Latin is mixed into the poem. Charles’s bastard brother, a bishop, has his head hacked off by Boson, who calls to him contemptuously to “sing his *saeculas saeculorum*” (line 6034). Charles’s men, their armor

covered in blood, clamor for the host as the “Corpre Dome” (*corpus Domini* distorted as the “body of a man,” *d’ome*) (line 6037). Church Latin, the lowest-ranking of the three sacred languages, is jarringly placed outside its usual context. However, in the closing sections of the poem, translations of scripture are woven into the text (lines 9930–31, 9981–84). The O-text closes as if it were a reading in the divine office, with the words “Tu autem, Domine.”¹⁹ Liturgical Latin is the object of corruption, translation, and (finally) incorporation into a text that has by the end turned into a hagiography.

The war between the king and his rebel baron is peppered with allusions to the conflicts between languages after Babel. When Charles decides to reclaim his lands, he attacks Girart in two successive campaigns, which culminate in the battle of Vaubeton, where God strikes both standards with lightning. Charles’s army is bilingual: its noblemen converse in both Romance and *Tiois* (a southern German dialect) (line 1860), and outside Girart’s palace they pitch sixty-two pavilions (lines 680–85), a number that echoes the seventy-two languages after Babel. Girart’s castle, the inanimate target of Charles’s lust, is dominated by a tower, made of cemented stones adorned with red marble, that boasts an outside gallery built by Saracens. This detail implies that there has been sufficient harmony between Christians and Saracens in the recent past to enable them to build a tower together (lines 1015–17). Charles’s men capture Girart’s proud tower and plunder the treasures it contains. They also abduct and rape Girart’s kinswomen, illustrating more forcefully the connection between Charles’s political and sexual aggression against his vassal (lines 1020–29).

Despite the emphasis on the territories of Aquitaine, Limousin, and Burgundy, there isn’t a clear geographical division between the two multilingual sides (*laisse* CCCLII/349). Girart’s army regroups noblemen from Catalan, Italian, and southern French lands, who speak “in their language” (lines 2437, 4892–99), as well as Bavarians, “Allemani,” and Burgundians (line 4707). We are told that about a French-speaking Breton lord, “uns romanz Bret” (line 7101), but shared language does not guarantee loyalty: Gascons and Provençaux defect to Charles’s side, which also includes lords of the Limousin.

At the battle of Vaubeton, both sides are equals in strength and words: “Li Breton el Gascon sunt per egance” (The Bretons and the Gascons are equals) (line 2505). This is partly because their battle cries are drowned out by the thunderous noise of lances clashing against shields. The battle is

ended when (wordless) divine fire strikes both standards. Charles's standard, decorated with letters of gold, bursts into flames, and Girart's crumbles to ashes (laisses CLXXI–II/168–69). The armies scatter as their men exclaim, “Segles feniz” (The world is ending!) (line 2888). These men are wrong, as Vaubeton marks the conclusion of only one kind of “world,” the one that was produced by the overweening pride of two men. One lord accuses his king: “Par Deu, Carles Martels, molt mar i fais, / Quan cuides tot un segle metre en pantais” (By God, Charles Martel, you are doing harm by wishing to put one whole world into confusion) (lines 2038–39). Vaubeton is presented as a battle that a century earlier was prophesied to make martyrs of a fifth of the men who took part in it (laisse CLXIX/166), but their martyrdom is solely at the service of their masters' pride (lines 2840–43). Charles's letters of gold are glittering but fallible signs, while Girart's standard, which has no words ascribed to it, simply disintegrates. At another point, Girart's standards are also said to be embroidered in gold (line 4950). Regardless of their inscriptions, moreover, neither battle standard can withstand wordless and unexplained fire.

As the feud progresses over the years from truce to broken truce, from one warring May and Easter to the next, it becomes evident that the “world” of Charles and Girart is one of confusion and vice, limited by an arrogant belief that their world is the only one that exists and that their word, as it is only made of words, can easily be broken. Both sides are knowingly in a state of sin, as both have broken sacred oaths, stolen each other's property, murdered kinsmen, and wreaked revenge.

The second stage of the campaign continues this depiction of two armies that map much of Europe. At the battle of Verdonnet, the narrator announces sonorously, “the Burgundians wage war on the French,” but Charles's army draws troops from the Loire Valley, Chartres, Brittany, the Vermandois, and the Poitou (lines 4926–43). His court comprises Lorrains, Germans, *Tiois*, Franks, and Normans (lines 3351–55). When Saracens invade these territories, we are told, they are equipped with a *mappa mundi* to guide their journey to the banks of the Gironde (lines 3286–87). The Franks do not resort to maps, as their languages appear to localize them in terms of political and geographical alliances. Where the Saracens can depict the world pictorially in terms of boundaries and territories, the Franks are mired in a network of interpersonal connections and conflicts, dominated by the spoken word. Charles resents his reliance on Girart's assistance in this short-lived crusade (lines 3296–97), but it illustrates that the disunity between the two sides can find common ground

only against an enemy that is defined not by language or place, but by religion (laisses CXCVIII–CC/195–97).

When Girart's tower falls to Charles for a second time, it is undermined from within by the porter and his wife, the latter of whom is also Berte's chambermaid. The porter delivers the keys to the fortress to the king. His men hurry in silence, without uttering so much as a cough, up to the tower's uppermost wall, whereupon they light a fire and yell, "Traït!" (Treason!) to alert both the king and Girart's men (laisses CCCCXXI–XIV/418–21). The whole of the fortress of Roussillon is then pillaged and consumed by flames. Girart's tower is betrayed at its gate and its marital chamber, and it is declared the object of treachery from its highest wall. As the *Imago mundi* declared that the Tower of Babel could be dissolved only by women's menstrual blood (see Chapter 3, p. 61), so Berte's bedchamber proves to be the weakest link in the structure of Roussillon. As he escapes barefoot and nearly naked, thinking that Berte has been abducted, Girart cries out to his three remaining men, "Seinor, or esgardas confusion!" (My lords, look at the disaster/confusion!) (line 6346). Girart enters his exile mourning the loss of his "castel antis" (ancient castle) (line 6388), and Charles boasts—erroneously—that he has finally reduced his enemy's pride (line 6416). Charles resorts to the advice of his men on rebuilding and strengthening Girart's tower, with the assistance of Folc's Jewish vassal, Baufadu. The narrator at this point inserts an attack on Jews and states that Charles's subsequent defeat is caused by his decision to employ Baufadu, something that is not borne out by the rest of the narrative (lines 6455–58). This puzzling insertion may be explained in terms of the theme of Babel, as Baufadu's first action after his introduction into the text is to write in Hebrew.

If Greek is relegated to literary allusion, Hebrew, the most sacred of the three sacred languages, is marginalized still more. Baufadu writes to Folc to warn him about Charles's treacherous plans: "escris un breu / En ses letres cui sat, en lang'ebreu. / Tramet le dun Folcon per un corleu" (He wrote a letter in the letters he knew, in Hebrew. He sent it to Sir Folc via a messenger) (lines 6467–69). Baufadu sends a verbal message with his written letter, and it is this spoken warning that Folc hears: "E Folco, quan l'ouit, loet en Deu" (And Folc, when he heard it, praised God) (line 6474). Baufadu's mastery of Hebrew script circulates as an unread guarantee of purely secular authenticity, as if it were his seal or token. Furthermore, it is likely that his letter is written in a Romance dialect encoded in Hebrew script, a multiscriptural writing process known in Spain as *aljamiado* that is attested in medieval Provence.²⁰ In *Girart de Roussillon*, the original language shared by

the builders at Babel subsists only as a visual code (a script) emptied of both its sacred and linguistic content. By way of contrast, Berte is noted for her skill in interpreting (explaining form and sacred content) both Greek and Hebrew. When Roussillon's tower falls for the second time, Berte leaves it, and the shattered remains of the structure symbolize a world that is more distanced from the divine than ever.

In this secular world divided by speech, where even the three sacred languages have lost their power, the anti-Jewish content of the first and central parts of the poem is striking. Both Girart and Charles are criticized by other characters in terms borrowed from Christian polemical texts that accused Jews of refusing to see or hear Christian doctrine. Thierry de Scanie accuses Charles: "Escoutes e esgardes, e rien ne ves / Plus que judeus Mesie qu'eu en croz mes!" (You listen and you look and you can see nothing, like the Jewish people who put the Messiah on the cross!) (lines 1813–14). Thierry is Charles's brother-in-law. Folc, his enemy, makes a similar attack (lines 4464–66).²¹ What is striking is that this polemical attack is aimed by both sides at each other, as Folc also accuses Girart in the same terms: "Oz e vez e escoutes e non entenz" (You can hear, see, and listen, but you do not understand) (lines 4216–17). He also states that Girart has "lowered the worth of Christianity" through the latter's inability to interpret events (line 5323). Each side also calls its opponents Jews, Saracens, Judas, and Satan (lines 4654–58, 5540–43), mixing different registers of invective and religious prejudice. Charles expresses his exasperation with the confused perceptions and loyalties that dominate the text:

"Ja non aurant tan dur car ne cuiram
 El ni Bos ni Folchers, li trei satam,
 Se pois de lor aicir, ne lor en dam.
 Per hoc soli' um dire parent eram;
 Nos hoc, quo m'es aviz, de linz Adam!
 S'en podie un tener en mon liam,
 Ferie la parer quant fort les am!"

(lines 5558–61)

[No matter how hard their flesh or hide might be (him, Folchier, and Boson, the three Satans) if I get near them, I will do them harm. Nevertheless, it was once said we were kinsmen; well, yes, I think we're all members of Adam's lineage! If I had one of them tied up before me, I'd show him how much I love him!]

Here, Charles's words pinpoint the tragedy of a human lineage that believes itself to be commonly descended from Adam but that is divided by arbitrary linguistic (and, by extension, religious) confusion to the point that *love* is a synonym for *hatred*, and "the three Satans" can also be his kinsmen.

Fallible language is a source of political confusion at several points in the poem. The fabled council scenes in *Girart de Roussillon* are notable for confusing the protagonists with contradictory advice.²² Human verbal encounters lead to misinterpretation, especially in the embassy of Pierre de Mont Rabei, which collapses into accusations that the interlocutors have childish or misguided minds (lines 4363, 4420). Pierre's own account of his embassy draws attention to the importance of his opponents' misleading words (lines 4600–4604), but ends with his lies (lines 4688–92). Yet again, neither side is shown to be different from the other in terms of its control, in this instance, over speech.

Other scenes show that language itself is drained of what symbolic content it may once have contained. Councilors appear to struggle to find appropriate terms for their rhetoric. In one scene, Andefrey inveighs against Girart's treachery: "Deus confunde vaissel o taus vis plante" (God confound the vessel in which such a vine grows) (laisse CCCLXVI/363, line 5591). Girart's emissary Begon evidently does not grasp the sense of his enemy's words:

Beget ot Andefret k'eissi desruche,
Que cubici Girart viel fole rusche,
[Con s'el er]e vaisels plens de lanbruche.

(laisse CCCLXVII/364, lines 5593–95)

[Begon heard Andefrei grow so angry he called Girart a piece of dried-up old bark, a vessel filled with wild vine branches.]

The narrator reports the content as it is understood by Begon, who appears to miss the sense of the curse and focus only on the words. Andefrey is punished for a far more compromising word during the battle of Civaux. He challenges Fouchier by saying that Charles's army will prove Girart to have been a traitor ("Ui proveren Girart a trachor tot" [laisse CCCXCVII/394, line 5958]). Fouchier takes suitable revenge for something he immediately calls a lie ("Mintez i glot!" [You lie, glutton!] [line 5959]):

Folchers fert Andefret en l'oberc blanc,
Que tot li fest vermeil e teint de sanc;

Que li trencat lo cor, lo fege el flanc,
 E crabentet lo mort a denz el fanc.
 E dis: “Querez proveire e queus estanc.
 Lo parlar del traïr mar vistes anc;
 Eu [en] defent Girart, lo conte franc.”

(laisse CCCXCVIII/395, lines 5962–68)

[Fouchier struck Andefrey on his white halberk and made it red and stained with blood; for he sliced through his heart, his liver, and his sides and threw him down dead into the mud. And he said: “Look for a priest and someone to staunch your blood. Your speaking of treason brought you harm; I have defended Girart, the noble count.”]

Andefrey is now a vessel that leaks wine-red blood rather than words. It would seem that despite the verbal confusion of some of Girart's men, others are capable of glossing and avenging the sense of specific (and secular) words such as *traitor*.

The “hagiographical” closing sections of the poem stage a recuperation of some sacred dimension to speech, in preparation for the inauguration of the shrine of Vézelay. As an act of penance after the murder of their son, Berte builds a church at Vézelay to house the relics of the Magdalene. She does so in secret, by night, helped by an old man (laisse DCXLIII–DCXLIX/640–46). Her actions are misinterpreted by gossips. Only Berte's verbal interpretation of her actions can lead her husband into identifying and supporting her penitential activity. She is rebuilding the Hagia Sophia of Constantinople (the site of her betrothal to Charles) at the site of Vézelay, a *translatio* of one sacred building and sworn promise into another. Berte's action highlights the importance of her learning, as she is not rebuilding Jerusalem, the enterprise of many cathedrals and churches. Rather, her ambition is to translate her place of origin and her multilingual learning into Girart and Charles's realm. She refuses to have the miracles attending her work preserved in writing, on the grounds that this would draw crowds of pilgrims to the shrine that she wishes to preserve as a personal monument (lines 9803–9).

Vézelay is also the commemoration of a disastrous betrayal, as Charles and Girart broke the betrothal oaths they swore at Constantinople. Elissent attempts to reconcile her public and secret husbands in the cathedral of Orléans without attempting to commemorate the betrothals. Berte's Vézelay, by contrast, transforms her learning into a monument that alludes

to the site of her betrothal and subsequent rejection. Elissent's Orléans is a location where ritual gestures cannot bring about a lasting peace. Elissent acts through posture and gesture, but Berte acts through *translatio* and *interpretatio*: she transfers the Hagia Sophia to Burgundy and recasts her personal humiliation as a spiritual triumph.

Above all, Berte's linguistic action is modeled on preaching, something that is particularly important in a *chanson de geste* composed in a transitional language. As a woman, she is not allowed to preach through sermons, but her actions are exemplary: first, in her obedience to her two husbands' political maneuvers; second, in her loyalty to Girart; and third, in her secret construction of the abbey. She resorts to speech only in her long exile in the forest of Ardenne. Her first lengthy verbal action is her *consolatio* to Girart on their exile. She recites several verses from the Psalms, the story of Job, and a saint's writings to her husband (lines 7667–69). From this point onward, Berte's actions and words are combined in a mission of spiritual guidance that raises further questions. Girart is both *illiteratus* and a lay nobleman confronted by the Pax Dei preached by a secular noblewoman to whom he is married, and by whom he has a son. This is no spiritual or chaste marriage, yet Berte's multilingualism makes her a living example of the preacher's connection to Pentecost, the necessary "abundance of language" that included *vulgaris loquutionis*.²³

Berte's ability to work between sacred and vernacular languages also necessitates evidence of her exceptional virtue, as *Girart de Roussillon* is contemporary with the circulation in intellectual circles of the same period of such necromantic treatises as the *Ars notoria*. This treatise depicts itself as the translation and exposition into Latin by Solomon and Apollonius of tablets written and "subtly distorted" in Greek, Chaldean, and Hebrew ("quae est ex Hebraeo, Graeco, et Chaldaeo sermone subtiliter distorta"). It served to concretize the belief that translating sacred languages one into the other could unlock necromantic powers.²⁴ Berte's multilingual education in Constantinople is connected with her father the emperor's harmless necromancy, but once it is transferred to Frankish lands, her long silence and twenty-two years of penitential activity appear to prepare her reemergence into rhetoric as a saintly noblewoman. In keeping with other scenes discussed above, this moment is depicted through a semi-allegorical scene. Berte's penitential activity is misinterpreted as an adulterous affair by her chamberlain Atain, whose name derives from the feminine noun *ataina*, "an irritation" or "an obstacle" (laisse DCL/9598).²⁵ Atain attempts to rape Berte as she lies asleep clad in a white linen nightshirt, her flesh as white as a hawthorn flower

(“Ot tan blanche la car cun flor d’espine” [line 9620]), but she fights him off with her nails, much as the hawthorn would repel its aggressor. Atain takes revenge by telling Girart that Berte is committing adultery, but her reported actions are glossed by an uninvolved figure (Bedelon) in terms of an anecdote she has told him of a poor woman’s exemplary actions in Constantinople (lines 9678–9700). Bedelon is rewarded for remembering her *exemplum* by a dream vision of Berte dressed in clothes that are as white as parchment and covered in more flowers than a hawthorn bush (laisse DCLVIII/9709, lines 9710–16).²⁶ The descriptions of Berte’s body shift from something that has been likened by a lustful observer to the hawthorn flower, to something that far exceeds that plant (“plus covert de flors d’un aube espin” [line 9713]). It represents, in that short description, both the power of the written word (*flores rhetorici* set on parchment) and the divine aspects of the transference of materials from one state to another, a form of *translatio*. If Susan Eberly is correct in suggesting that the hawthorn symbolized carnal love in medieval love allegory, there is here a *translatio* (interpretation) in the proper sense, in that the flower is turned from an image of Atain’s lust into a metaphor for Berte’s holy words.²⁷ Through two visual descriptions, Berte’s body and words are transposed from a shameful object of lust to a dream vision of interpretative and linguistic authority.

Girart de Roussillon ends with the proclamation of peace by papal authority, above the jeers of those poor knights who would rather continue their lucrative warring careers (laisse DCXXXVI/633). The peace also points to the poem’s connection with the visual program of the abbey of Vézelay, specifically the main narthex portal, through which the laity entered the abbey. According to Peter Low, this portal’s subject is Pentecost as a reversal of the confusion of Babel. Low has suggested, partly in reflection of the shared Pentecost theme between the portal and the Latin *vita* of Girart de Roussillon, that the Vézelay portal may depict the Pauline idea of building a new “church” through conversion (Eph. 2:1–22), the coming together of people from many lands to listen to multilingual preaching: “Ergo iam non estis hospites, et advena: sed estis cives sanctorum, et domestici Dei . . . in quo omnis aedificatio constructa crescit in templum sanctum in Domino, in quo et vos coaedificamini in habitaculum Dei in Spiritu” (Thus you are no longer aliens in a foreign land, but fellow citizens with God’s people, members of God’s household . . . In him the whole building is bonded together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you too are being built with all the rest into a spiritual dwelling for God) (Eph. 2:21–22).²⁸ The exile of Babel is reversed; humanity is reinvented as a “whole building” bonded

together and re-created as a community of individuals. Berte's building work at Vézelay reverses the fall of the tower of Roussillon and the exile of the protagonists from her betrothal onward in a world of confusion.

In the poem, Berte's multilingualism also reverses the confusion of Babel through spiritual conversion into a single language. Ironically, the poem that contains it is in two vernaculars combined, doomed by the historical accidents of language to remain firmly located in the margins of literary history. If *Girart de Roussillon* is read as a poem that is multilingual in content as well as in language, it ceases to be an aberrant object of scholarly scrutiny and becomes the site of a sophisticated exploration of communication and of the pervasive medieval idea that vernacular and sacred languages were in equal measure the source both of harmony and of conflict in the secular world.