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Hugh Primas and the Archpoet

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY
FLEUR ADCOCK
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Introduction

Hugh Primas and the Archpoet are the two most notable of the twelfth-century poets known as ‘Goliardic’. For centuries both were anonymous. The Archpoet still is, in that he cannot be identified with a nameable historical individual (although many conjectures have been and continue to be made); but there is now general agreement on the corpus of work to be assigned to him and on some details of his life. Primas, however, has been brought out of the shadows and shown to be not some vague appellation for one or more wandering versifiers but the scholar and teacher Hugh Primas of Orleáns.

As A. G. Rigg has pointed out in ‘Golias and other Pseudonyms’, both titles – ‘Primas’ and ‘Archipoeta’ – were in medieval times used to some extent interchangeably as labels for the authors of various skilful and witty poems. They were praise-words, not personal names. Rigg’s article calls into question the ascription of certain individual poems to Hugh of Orleáns, but agrees that there is no reason to doubt his existence.

It was Wilhelm Meyer who convincingly showed Hugh’s pre-eminent claim to the title of ‘Primas’. He had become curious about the contents of Rawlinson MS G109, as described in the 1895 ‘Summary Catalogue of Western Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library…’, and in 1906 he travelled to Oxford to see it. The opening pages proved to contain a group of twenty-three poems, twelve of them previously unknown, and all of them, believed by the same author. Eight of them (poems 1, 2, 11, 15, 16, 18, 21 and 23) were ‘internally signed’ by the name of Primas, and there was evidence from other sources that four more might well be his. These twenty-three poems now make up the accepted canon of Hugh Primas’ work, and my text is based on Meyer’s transcription of them in his 1907 edition.

Up to that time, as he so vividly put it, the name Primas had for decades ‘walked like a ghost through the literature’. The excitement he derived from reading the Oxford manuscript and discovering what it implied can still be felt. He has been criticised by Rigg and others (including C. J. McDonough, who published the most recent edition of
Primas) for allowing himself to be too easily persuaded by circumstantial evidence: but as a relative amateur in the field I am content to leave such arguments to the scholars. My interest is in the poems themselves.

If Goliardic poetry is to be confined to that which contains elements of satire and deals with such subjects as wine, women, gambling and attacks on the establishment, then the work of Primas transcends the definition, although the traditional subjects are well represented. His poems include plenty of satire and personal invective (against people who have cheated him or treated him brutally, in poems 1, 15 and 23; against prostitutes, in 7 and 8; against wicked churchmen and a heretic, in 16 and 18), and sex, wine and gambling are also featured; but in addition there are treatments of classical themes such as Orpheus and Eurydice, Ulysses and the fall of Troy, and an exercise on the biblical story of Dives and Lazarus. In this last, however (poem 5), it is not difficult to discern a parallel – albeit a typically exaggerated one – between the poor man begging for food and Primas himself; just as in poem 3 Orpheus is depicted as begging from Pluto, and in poem 10 the plight of Ulysses, returning to Ithaca with no means of supporting himself after years of wandering, clearly arouses the poet’s particular sympathy. Primas has a highly personal approach to his work. His own concerns are dear to him, and he figures regularly as a character in his poems, often by name: in 1.26 it is ‘poor Primas’ who has lost money; in 16.1.39 ‘Primas, who is poor and in need’ appeals for charity; 15 positively oozes with self-pity for ‘our good poet Primas’. Even his cloak, in 2c, addresses him by name and offers sympathy.

Cloak-poems are a recognised genre. Primas took his inspiration for those he wrote from Martial, who has several epigrams on the subject: in vi, 82, for example, he begs Rufus for a good cloak, and in viii, 28 he eulogises a new toga he has been given but says that it will make his old cloak look ridiculous. He was the first Latin poet to write true ‘begging-poems’ and to advertise his poverty shamelessly in his verse – a habit which Primas in his turn adopted and made popular.

The portrait of a whining self-seeker, given to begging for presents or sympathy and complaining about his misfortunes, may not sound immediately appealing; but there is more to be said. For example, I have mentioned exaggeration; this is a customary tool of the satirist, and one of several techniques Primas uses for comic effect. He calculatedly exaggerates his poverty, his age and his frailty, and doesn’t hesitate to joke about his short stature, calling himself ‘a Zacchaeus’ in poem 15.

There his assailant is a Judas, a Herod, a Dacian, while Primas himself is an old man at death’s door who is nevertheless granted a miraculous
turn of speed – ‘winged feet’ – and flies to safety. Even the form of the poem, with its deliberately repetitive variations on a theme, piles on the
effects, managing in the end to be pathetic as well as ridiculous. Poem
16 is full of over-the-top descriptions of excess: the bishop’s super-
human greed, his ‘thousands of thousands’ of relations, his ram-like
lust. Sometimes the tone is vicious, but there are some pleasantly
amusing touches, such as the young aspirant to office in lines 76–7 who
would have been prepared to bribe a mule with gold plate. We should
also not forget that many of the characters in this and other poems who
mean nothing to us, except as material for scholarly speculation, would
have been immediately recognisable to Primas’ audience: he knew how
to raise laughs by topical references.

As for his classical references, many of those in such poems as 14 and
15 would likewise have been picked up by an educated audience, and
the themes of poems 3, 9 and 10 were based on subject-matter currently
familiar. (See my notes to these poems.) Orléans was a well-known
centre for classical learning, in which Primas was thoroughly trained.
His expertise in the use of Latin as an instrument for writing verse shines
forth in his work.

The mood of the poems varies. In general the work of Primas has
been described as darker or more sombre and more vindictive than that
of the Archpoet, and his style as cruder. Certainly his language can be
coarse, and not only in the traditional sense; in the past poem 8, for
instance, gave offence to those who were inclined to be scandalised by
sexual explicitness, but elsewhere he uses expressions which are differ-
ently offensive: in poem 2A ‘a disgusting sore’ (sordida struma) is strong
language when applied to a member of the clergy, and the similar image
of ulcers running with pus in poem 5 is even more revolting than in the
biblical passage on which it is based. But his vulgarity can be subtle, as
it were, involving double entendres or suggestiveness: in 8.47 the pro-
tificate’s ‘smelly dent’ is not ostensibly an anatomical reference, and in
1.33–4 there is word-play in ‘turgida culo, evacuata’. Primas was far
from being unsophisticated. His satire can be cruel, but it is often
expressed with grace and wit.

An essential element in the effectiveness of his poetry is his facility in
rhymed verse-forms. He uses both quantitative metres, such as hex-
ameters and elegiac couplets, and rhythmical verse, but there is always
rhyme. His favourite form is Leonine verse: hexameters in which the
first section of each line, before the caesura, rhymes with the remaining
part. These make up poems 2–10, as well as some of the shorter,
cpigrammatic ones. There is sometimes additional rhyming at the ends
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of lines as well as internally; for example, in poem 9 the lines rhyme in couplets, with an occasional triplet (lines 27–9, 38–40, 47–9) and one single line at the end rhyming only internally. Poem 1 is in elegiac couplets, with end-rhyme, and this occurs also in 17 and in the first four lines of 14, which ends with two hexameters.

As for the rhythmical poems, his well-known complaint 'Divus eram et dilectus...' (poem 23) uses octosyllabics with large blocks of up to eleven lines rhyming together – the device known as 'tirade rhyme', which gives a particularly powerful impression of angry passion. Poem 18, a somewhat calmer piece, has lines of this length but rhyming mostly in couplets. Poem 15 is something of a hybrid, beginning with hexameters in tirade rhyme but then switching to a pattern of rhythmical strophes, with what Meyer calls Primas' inclination to tirade rhyme dominating the rhyme-scheme. In poem 16 it is the language, rather than the form, which is a hybrid: Latin and French are combined in a poem of mostly twelve-syllable lines, with tirade rhyme tending to take over once again.

Primas' virtuosity in rhyme gave him additional scope for comic effects; absurd or unexpected rhymes can be entertaining in themselves (as in some of Ogden Nash's verse). Poem 2 contains examples of such witty rhyming. But Primas was also capable of a more elevated and dignified style, as in poem 9 with its elegiac tone.

The Archpoet was perhaps a generation younger than Primas (his surviving work dates from the early 1160s, whereas Primas evidently flourished in the 1130s and 40s). All that is definitely known of him comes from the internal evidence of his poems or from what can be deduced about his movements from those of his patron, Rainald of Dassel, Archchancellor to the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa and later Archbishop of Cologne. As W. H. T. Jackson has said (in 'The Politics of a Poet: the Archipoeta as revealed by his imagery'), even his name is 'a mocking travesty of a title', probably a play on that of the Archicanellarius. I shall refrain from reporting on the mass of biographical speculation about the poet (which still continues) except to mention the suggestion of Peter Dronke (in 'The Archpoet and the Classics') that he may well have been at some stage a disciple of Primas at Orleans, where he would have had access to the classical literature of which he shows so extensive a knowledge. As Dronke points out, the Archpoet seems to have been influenced by Primas in his use of certain verse-forms: for example, poem 11 is in octosyllabics with tirade rhyme, a form used by Primas for 'Divus eram et dilectus'; the two poems have thematic elements in common (in each the poet claims to have been in disgrace),
but the Archpoet can be seen as attempting to outdo his predecessor by
beginning with sixteen lines, rather than ten, all rhyming perfectly
together.

As far as versification is concerned the Archpoet was not an innov-
ator, but simply a superb practitioner of what had already been tried.
Like Primas he also used Leonine hexameters (in poem 111 and the first
part of poem vi, of which the second part consists of caudati, or
end-rhymed hexameters, arranged in quatrains); but his preference on
the whole was for rhythmical verse, and in particular the Goliardic
measure, or ‘Vagantenstrophe’, which he deployed so brilliantly in
poems iv, v, ix and x. The introduction to Watenphul and Krefeld’s
dition gives numerous detailed examples of how his vocabulary and
taxtix were at times influenced by the needs of rhyme: for instance, in
1,8,2 he uses the rare word opilio for ‘shepherd’, rather than the more
obvious pastor, and in poem 111 he veers between the singular and plural
when speaking of himself, according to whether the rhyme requires me
or nos. But poets in any age or language may have recourse to such
expedients without compromising the essential naturalness of their
style, as long as they observe reasonable limits. The Archpoet seldom
seems to have strained unduly for his effects; the adverb name, in poem
iv,5,2, is a rare instance of a neologism introduced solely for the rhyme.

In his subject-matter he is even more inclined to focus on his own
personal concerns, or to use himself as a persona, than Primas: he
features in every poem, with the exception of the apparently fragment-
ary viii, and often depicts his poverty and grim circumstances in
language at least as extreme as the earlier poet’s. In 1,36 he is ‘dying of
thirst and of starvation’: in 111 (as also in iv,21–2) he is coughing
consumptively and close to death; in vii he is almost naked (‘nudus’, he
calls himself in line 18, but he admits in the next line to possessing some
vestiges of clothing, if only dreadful rags). In nearly every poem he asks
for gifts of some kind, whether clothing, money, wine, or, in 1,40–2,
almost anything from everyone, rich or poor.

His fondness for hyperbole also inflates his praise of the Archchance-
llor, notably in poem vii, where no superlative is too great for him;
generosity being so crucially admirable in the Archpoet’s eyes he makes
play here and in 1,39 with the conceit that his patron is more generous
than St Martin, who was a byword for that virtue because he gave half a
cloak to a beggar (the fact that it was the saint’s own, and only, cloak
being conveniently ignored by the poet).

However, there is a subtle irony behind the rhetoric. The poverty-
stricken poet grovelling before his powerful master is very much a
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persona, as Jackson emphasises in ‘The Politics of a Poet’, where he gives an acute analysis of how this self-representation of the Archpoet contrasts with ‘the independent, superior and quite unrepentant poet who is well aware of his value to his patron’. As Jackson makes clear, the latter persona is in evidence in poem ix, which, far from being the simple hymn of praise to the emperor which it purports to be, is constantly undermines its own rhetoric by veiled sarcasm. Although the poet begins by declaring that it is the duty of all loyal subjects to ‘render tribute unto Caesar’ (partly, he admits, because it is dangerous not to), his choice of biblical imagery emphasises the contrast between spiritual values and the actual behaviour of the emperor, so that in the end ‘the tribute due to Caesar has been vastly exceeded by the powers which Barbarossa has abrogated to himself’. If in this poem the Archpoet was writing the eulogy to the emperor’s achievements which he had declined to write in poem iv, he was doing so very much on his own terms.

Poem iv, which incorporates that refusal, goes on to describe the stressful conditions of a poet’s life, the sources of his inspiration, and his need for material support. It is intimately connected with poem x, the famous ‘Confession’. Indeed the two poems have six strophes in common: iv, 10–15 are repeated in x, 14–19. This passage is central to the Archpoet’s conception of himself as being at the mercy of his own nature: he can write only with a full stomach and an adequate amount of good wine inside him; when Bacchus has taken charge, then Apollo rushes in bringing inspiration.

The whole of poem x, with its comical/repentant portrait of the typical Goliardic poet, drunken, sensual and dissolute, is a tour de force. The Archpoet is both satirising and excusing himself, and he does so in language which subtly echoes not only biblical texts but a range of classical literature. Many commentators have listed these sources or discussed them in detail: Waterphul and Krefeld are admirably thorough, as always, and more recent treatments include Jill Mann’s ‘Satric Subject and Satric Object in Goliardic Literature’ and Peter Dronke’s ‘The Archpoet and the Classics’.

Professor Dronke has also applied his skills, in ‘The Art of the Archpoet’, to poem i, which is equally glittering but quite different in tone. Much of it reads like a straightforward exposition of Christian doctrines: only towards the end, after a few stanzas flattering his influential audience, does the poet move smoothly into a brief sermon on charity and then whisk aside his preacher’s robes to show the beggar’s costume underneath. In strophe 37 he confesses: ‘I’ve only one
vice: I like receiving... The last part of the poem is an intricately woven
texture of biblical echoes and allusions, leading to his final plea for cash.

The Archpoet is never at a loss for entertaining or attractive ways of
leading up to his inevitable appeal. Poem vi tells a tale of how he had to
abandon his medical studies in Salerno because he caught a fever; in
poem v (one of my own favourites) he is carried up to heaven in a vision
and has some instructive conversation with saints and angels. This is
presented in a suitably reverent (or mock-reverent) tone, but with
typical little touches of humour to puncture any pretentiousness: back
on earth the poet is (not for the first time) ‘at death’s door’. but he still
finds it impossible to forgive the Count Palatine for causing inflation in
the price of wine.

The Archpoet is admittedly a more polished performer than Hugh
Primas, but both sparkle with wit, vigour and technical ingenuity. I
should not like to have to choose between them. Translating them into
verse, though, has sometimes been a mixed pleasure – often rewarding,
always challenging, and occasionally frustrating to a degree which
made me admit defeat. My aim was always to convey the sense accur-
ately while preserving as much of the form as I could manage. The fact
that English is a far less homogeneous language than Latin means that
rhyme is correspondingly more difficult to achieve within the con-
straints of the original meaning. There have had to be compromises:
long sequences of tirade rhyme were impossible, under the circum-
cstances, and in many cases I had to settle for half-rhymes or even less
satisfactory substitutes. In poem 16 of Primas I had to abandon any
thought of rhyme altogether and content myself with aiming at a
reasonably acceptable pattern of rhythm. But any English translation
can be only secondary to the work of the poets themselves. For the
pleasures of exact rhyme, combined with metrical or rhythmical per-
fection, readers need only turn to the Latin.
Hugh Primas and the Archpoet: some historical (and unhistorical) testinomies

For the career of Hugh Primas, we have a range of anecdotal evidence outside his poems: for that of the Archpoet, nothing beyond what can be gleaned from the poems themselves.

In a number of sources Primas is said to be 'of Orléans': but the earliest and best-known testimony (the passage added to Richard of Poitiers’s Chronicle, c. 1171) links him also with Paris:

In those days [1142] there flourished in Paris an academic named Hugh – whom his colleagues nicknamed ‘the Primate’ – wretched of aspect, misshapen of face. He had been imbued with secular literature from his earliest years, and the renown of his name grew radiant in diverse provinces, because of his elegant wit and literary sensibility. Among his colleagues he was most eloquent and quick-witted (promtus) in making verses, as we can see from the ones he composed by way of declamation (declamator composuit), making all who heard them laugh aloud, about a poor cloak that a certain bishop had given him: ‘From Hugh, Primate of Orléans: Hoc indulmentum tibi quae dedit: an fuit emptum?’ [the incipit of Poem 23].

It has recently been argued that these sentences contain no independent information, but draw upon and embroider details from Primas’ poems, chiefly from the opening of Poem 23. This is indeed possible – we know that such embroidering was a common procedure in southern France, in the elaboration of ‘vides’ (vides) of twelfth-century trouva- dours, and of ‘commentaries’ (razos) explaining the circumstances in which they had composed particular songs. What is certain is that, whatever element of biographical truth this chronicler’s note – or Primas’ poems – may contain, a decade or so after the poet’s death (probably c. 1160) the personal myth he had created in his lifetime was alive and well.

The expressions promtus and declamator composuit indicate, I think, that one of the gifts for which Primas had been famous was that of composing impromptu. This is borne out by the anecdotes in Francesco

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Pippino’s chronicle (cited by Meyer, pp. 4–5). When Pope Lucius (whose name means ‘pike’) refused Primas a benefice, the poet ‘invieighed against him with these verses: “Lucius is the king fish and the tyrant of the waters...” ’2 And according to the same source, in the Roman Curia Primas defeated a rival claimant to the title of supreme versifier. The cardinals set a competition, to see who could make the briefest possible verse epitome of the Old and New Testaments. Where the unnamed rival poet needed four verses (which Francesco says are lost), Primas composed only two dazzling leonine hexameters, in which each word in the first verse (on the Old Testament) rhymes with the corresponding word in the second (on the New):

Quos anguis tristi virus mulcendae pavivt,
Hos sanguis Christi mirus dulcendae lavit.

Those whom the snake’s poison ravaged with doomed pleasure,
the wondrous blood of Christ has washed with gentleness.

The anti-papal and the biblical improvisations are brilliant, and are not undeservedly ascribed to the poet from Orleans.3 Yet whether they are really his or not is perhaps less important than that they became part of his myth: they are ‘in character’. Primas — the poet with misshapen face and matchless virtuosity of tongue — was perceived, we might say, as the Cyrano de Bergerac of his day.

He was also perceived as the poet who, by his eccentric humour, could strip the high and mighty of their pretensions. This aspect of his myth is stressed in Boccaccio’s story about ‘Primasso’ (Decameron I, 7), which medieval Latinists have generally ignored. Here Primas, world-famous both as teacher of literature and as poet, but ragged in looks and hence — as in his poems — easily victimised, travels from Paris to see the splendour of entertainment of the great Abbot of Cluny, who was lodging nearby. The Abbot, deceived by appearances, refuses to let Primas be served dinner; and the poet, sitting out his humiliation calmly, eating one by one the three breadrolls he had brought with him for emergencies, shames the prelate, who at last learns the identity of his

2 If the ascription of the verses to Primas is correct, the reference must be to Lucius II (1144–5), rather than, as Francesco claims, to Lucius III (1181–5), during whose reign the poet, if still alive, would have been about ninety years old.

3 On other attributions of verses and songs to Hugh Primas, see especially K. Langosch, Hymnen und Vampitenvierde (Basel-Stuttgart 1954), pp. 192–4. To me the majestick sequence in honour of the Cross, Laudes crissi altissimae (text and tr. in F. Brittain, The Penguin Book of Latin Verse, pp. 185–9), and the macaronic satire against greed, In nova fert animus (text in Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum 49 (1908) 181–5), are among the most notable and most plausible ascriptions.
Some historical testimonies xix
distinguished but poorly dressed visitor, and in remorse sends him back to Paris on a palfrey, with gifts of money and noble robes. Boccaccio’s story too may have been elaborated from Primas’ poetry (cf. especially the close of Poem 16); yet it is clear that, in Italy c. 1350, the myth of Primas remained intact and the message of his verses potent.

The allusions in Poem 16 to elections of bishops in Sens and Beauvais allow us to date this piece to 1144/5 (cf. Meyer, p. 24): since Primas here calls himself ‘more than fifty years old’, he will have been born in the early 1090s. The Archpoet, whose datable poems (I, IV, V, VII, IX, X) all fall within the years 1162–4, will probably have been thirty to forty years younger. (In his Confessio, x 7, he counts himself among the iuvenes: while technically a iuvenis can be any age between twenty-one and fifty, it would seem plausible to imagine the Archpoet as thirty or thirty-five at the time of this composition, and to set his birth not too far from 1130.) Strangely, the Franciscan chronicler Salimbene (d. 1288) confuses and conflates Primas and the Archpoet, and believes that his composite poet flourished in 1233. But in the autograph manuscript of his chronicle, while he makes Primas into a ‘canon of Cologne’ and ascribes to him, among other verses, the Archpoet’s Confessio (x), Salimbene also corrected himself, adding later, in his own hand, ‘Note that Primas was an Orléanais’ (Nota quod Primas Aurelianiensis fuit – cf. Meyer, p. 3). Presumably the Archpoet’s way of addressing his patron as ‘Archbishop-elect of Cologne’ (x 24) inspired Salimbene’s guess that the poet had held some office in that city – yet this guess is as wild as his date 1233 and his failure to distinguish the younger poet from the older. Clearly he took ‘Primas’ and ‘Archipoeta’ to be synonyms, since each of the two poets had affirmed himself supreme in his calling.

The careers of both were secular. There is no evidence that either of them ever became a priest, though in the course of their Liberal Arts studies (specialising in grammatica and the classical authors) they could well have taken minor orders. Hugh went on to teach literature, at Orléans, Paris and probably other northern French cathedral schools (his verses reveal familiarity with Amiens, Beauvais, Reims and Sens); the Archpoet, by contrast, after an attempt to study medicine in Salerno, frustrated by ill health (vii), became linked professionally with Barbarossa’s imperial court. As his poems indicate, he was himself of knightly birth (ortus ex milibus, iv 8), and he travelled with the courtly retinue to northern Italy (vii, ix, x), Vienne (ii), and Cologne (v). Nonetheless, a ‘La Bohème’ image of this poet – impoverished, consumptive, half-naked and half-starved – an image based on too naïve a reading of his begging-poetry – prevailed from the Romantic period
Hugh Primas and the Archpoet

until very recently. As I wrote in 1968, in an attempt to redress the balance:

He was in fact a court poet, perhaps also a civil servant or minor diplomat, in the service of the Imperial Chancellor, and so almost certainly a member of the circle around Frederick Barbarossa himself. I am convinced that his leitmotif of the wayward, wretched vagabond-poet who is compelled to beg from his patron and his audience contains far less autobiography than literary craft... [It was used] for the sophisticated entertainment of that international set of diplomats and legislators, high-born scholars and prelates who surrounded the Emperor, whose lingua franca was Latin, and among whom the Archpoet probably, by his birth and position, moved as an equal.4

This revised picture has meanwhile been accepted by a number of German scholars. At the same time there have been two recent attempts in Germany to revert to at least one aspect of Salimbene’s garbled account – to identify the Archpoet, after all, with a canon of Cologne. Two candidates, each called Rodulfus (neither of them a Rodolfo of Puccini’s kind, but securely placed, prominent academics), have been proposed. The arguments, however, seem to me to show more fantasy than critical rigour. In the earlier essay (1990)5, Rudolf Schieffer argues that one of the anonymous notaries in the Emperor’s chancellery – known to specialists as ‘Rainald H’ (i.e. the eighth notary to appear in Chancellor Rainald’s records) – has various unusual expressions and stylistic mannerisms. (These, it should perhaps be noted in passing, are not paralleled at any point in the Archpoet’s extant verse.) Schieffer goes on to claim that, when we can document the travels of ‘Rainald H’ and the Archpoet, they were in the same places in the same periods of time. If both were in the imperial retinue, this would not, in my view, be surprising; yet closer scrutiny shows that Schieffer has established their coincidence in only one case (Poem 19) among the six Archpoet compositions that are more or less datable, and has shown it to be possible – not proven – in the case of two others (11 and 8). Schieffer’s next move is to claim that the words notarius noster Rodulfus, written by ‘Rainald H’ in a document of April 1164, constitute a self-reference. No evidence is adduced for this assertion, nor for the further one, dependent on it, that this notary Rodulfus is identical with the Rodulfus who for decades was

5 ‘Bleibt der Archpoeten anonym?’, Mittellungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung 98 (1990) 59–79.
Some historical testimonies

in charge of the cathedral school in Cologne. In other words, while it is not impossible that the Archpoet was ‘Rainald H’, or that ‘Rainald H’ was a notary called Rodulfus, or that this notary was the Rodulfus who taught in Cologne, all this remains wholly unsubstantiated. In a subsequent essay Johannes Fried, accepting Schieffer’s tissue of speculations, has drawn from it a different conclusion. At the time of the Archpoet’s Confessio (1162/3), Schieffer’s Rodulfus had financial security in Cologne – where he was not replaced till 1166 – and hence, according to Fried, is unlikely to have addressed a begging-poem to Rainald of Dassel in those years. Fried would therefore make a younger Cologne master, a second Rodulfus, who did not die till 1201, his candidate for being the Archpoet.

Neither of these two proposed identifications seems to me plausible. It is prima facie improbable that the Archpoet should have lived until 1201; the later years of the reign of Barbarossa (d.1190) are richly documented, yet there is no trace of this poet or his poetry after 1164. More important, in the years that the Archpoet is attested, I believe he is most unlikely to have had any regular connection with Cologne. The reason for this lies in the wording of his appeal to Rainald (iii 14): writing in Italy, he says:

Et transmontanos, vir transmontane, iuva nos.

That is, help me because we are both from northern Europe, both from beyond the Alps. If the Archpoet, like the teachers called Rodulfus, had been Rainald’s fellow-townsman (convisus), would he not have ‘claimed kindred there, and had his claims allowed? If he had come to Italy not just from northern Europe but from Cologne, one can almost imagine the kind of hexametrical plea this might have prompted him to make:

Inter concives concivem suscipe, vives!

(‘Among fellow-townsmen, welcome your fellow-townsman, and you shall thrive!’ – though the Archpoet’s formulation, to be sure, would have sparkled more wittily.)

We simply cannot tell from where, north of the Alps, the Archpoet came. I have suggested (‘The Archpoet and the Classics’, p. 72) that around the mid-twelfth century he was probably a disciple of Primas at
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Orléans: not only because he inherited certain poetic themes and techniques from Primas, but because Orléans had a school where—exceptionally at that time—one could read the rarest classical poets, such as Propertius and Tibullus, whom the Archpoet subtly plays upon in his verse. But Orléans was attracting scholars from all over Europe, and this particular non-Italian might have hailed from Prague as easily as from Paris. It has often been maintained that he was German, and this cannot be ruled out, though there is no evidence in its favour. Unfortunately claiming the Archpoet for Germany has tended to be linked to an insensitive, German-oriented reading of his poem to Barbarossa (1x), which even today is still often given the incept and historically baseless title ‘Hymn to the Emperor’ (Kaiserhymnus). This singular composition, however, amid its praises, repeatedly reminds us of the ambiguities of imperial power and of the disturbing questions that such power raises. As a national indicator, the poem cannot serve.

The Archpoet’s poems i–viii are preserved together in a small Göttingen manuscript, in which they were discovered by Jacob Grimm. Each bears the superscription ‘Archipoeta’ (though it has been trimmed away above Poem i). The fragment viii comes at the end of a gathering. The loss of the next gathering in this manuscript, which would have given us the rest of Poem viii and presumably further ‘Archipoeta’ poems, is incalculable great. He himself claimed that sometimes he ‘composed a thousand verses swiftly’ (iv 8), and there has been no shortage of attempts to ascribe to him poems beyond the ten that are given below7. Yet in my view nothing else has been found that both shows the individual qualities of his art and is worthy of that art.

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7 Schieffer takes up two older suggestions – that the Archpoet might have composed an anonymous (and wholly conventional) sequence, Urbis Aquensis, urbs regalis (Analecta Hymnica 55, no. 201), for the canonisation of Charlemagne (Christmas 1165), as well as the satire Liar contra vitia (Carmina Burana no. 42). The second is a brilliant composition, but much closer in style to the Archpoet’s contemporary, Walter of Ghibellino (to whom it is indeed ascribed in the bilingual edition of the Carmina Burana, Zurich-Munich 1974). Fried makes a brave attempt to give the Archpoet the five additional strophes of the Confessio that are preserved uniquely in the Carmina Burana (no. 1910) – but I find it hard to see them as on the same artistic level as the 25 strophes printed as Poem x below. For other attributions, see G. Bernt, ‘Archipoeta’, in Verfasser-Lexikon 1 (1978) 426.