The Subject of Romance

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A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Trinity 2021

Word Count: 84,337

Acknowledgments

This thesis is dedicated to my Grandmothers. Maria Krystyna Siwiec passed on a librarian's love of books to me, and I'm unsure who I would be without that; such was the generosity of Pamela May Brookes's praise and love that I know she would be fiercely proud. My parents have been supportive in every way imaginable throughout my education, and I am grateful for them always.

Thanks must also go to Worcester College, my academic home since 2013, and the students and staff I've encountered over the years here. I am also grateful for the financial support, in the form of the Martin Senior Scholarship I held during the D.Phil. My BA, MA, and D.Phil. were all made possible by generous grants from the Leverhulme Charitable Trust. This project could also not have been completed without an AHRC-DTP Studentship.

Writing a thesis in the midst of a global pandemic has been difficult; it would have been far more miserable without my wonderful friends. My experience of the D.Phil. has been all the richer for Hannah Lucas; it has been invaluable to be on the Same Team, and to put the world to rights over endless Missing Beans. Lise Villemoes Grønvold, Sammy Patrick, Tazmin Mirza, Joshua Pike, Shannon Osaka, and Joshua Weston have all said the right things at the right times – thank you.

I am also grateful to the academics at the University of Oxford who read and commented on various parts of the thesis before its completion: Helen Moore, Daniel Wakelin, Nicholas Perkins, and Carolyne Larrington. I owe so much of my familiarity with and appreciation for the popular romances to Nicola McDonald. Thanks also to Hannah Piercy, for organizing romance panels at Leeds IMC in 2019, and for encountering my work with enthusiasm at various stages.

My final thank you is to my supervisor, Laura Ashe. The chances she has given me for the best part of a decade now have simply changed my life – a statement more saccharine than I imagine either of us would like, but it's simply the case. I wish I could tell the girl sinking into the sofa during my undergraduate interview in 2012 that she would get to think and write about what mattered to people of the past for as long as I have. It has been a privilege to be taught by such brilliance, and with such generosity.

Abstract

This thesis argues that the romances written in England between 1100 and 1500 should be afforded a more central – and indeed originary – position in the history of the literary subject. It is contended that the genre of romance is intimately concerned with the depiction of individuals: that this is, in fact, in every sense the subject of romance. The introduction outlines the growing significance of the individual in fiction after the twelfth century, situating romance as the key secular genre in this development. The following chapters explore the ways in which convention, expectation, and genre intersect with the representation of identity. The thesis suggests that the depiction of subjectivity is no less central in medieval romance than it is in the modern novel; as the forerunner to the novel, romance has been both celebrated and condemned for its emphasis on plot, its repetitive storylines, and recognizable character-types of knight, and lady. By reading *for* these conventions, the thesis offers new readings of well-known verse and prose romances (such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*) and several lesser-studied, 'popular' examples of the genre (including *Amis and Amiloun*, *The Squire of Low Degree*, and *Le Bone Florence of Rome*). As they attempt to uphold the tenets of chivalry (an ideology of constant striving and becoming), the protagonists in these texts grapple with complex and often contradictory inner lives – these are communicated to their audiences through the expression of emotion, and other 'shorthands' to interiority. The potential for transgression and poetic freedom is explored in a variety of romances, and their characters are recovered and expanded. The thesis concludes with a reflection on the sometimes uncomfortable positions the subjects of romance must face; unlike our own society, individuation emerges as an inevitable, but not altogether happy, state of being.

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List of Abbreviations

DMLBS	Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources
EETS	Early English Text Society
o.s.	Original Series
AND	Anglo Norman Dictionary
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
MED	Middle English Dictionary
MS	Manuscript
TEAMS	The Teaching Association for Medieval Studies
ACMRS	Arizona Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Introduction

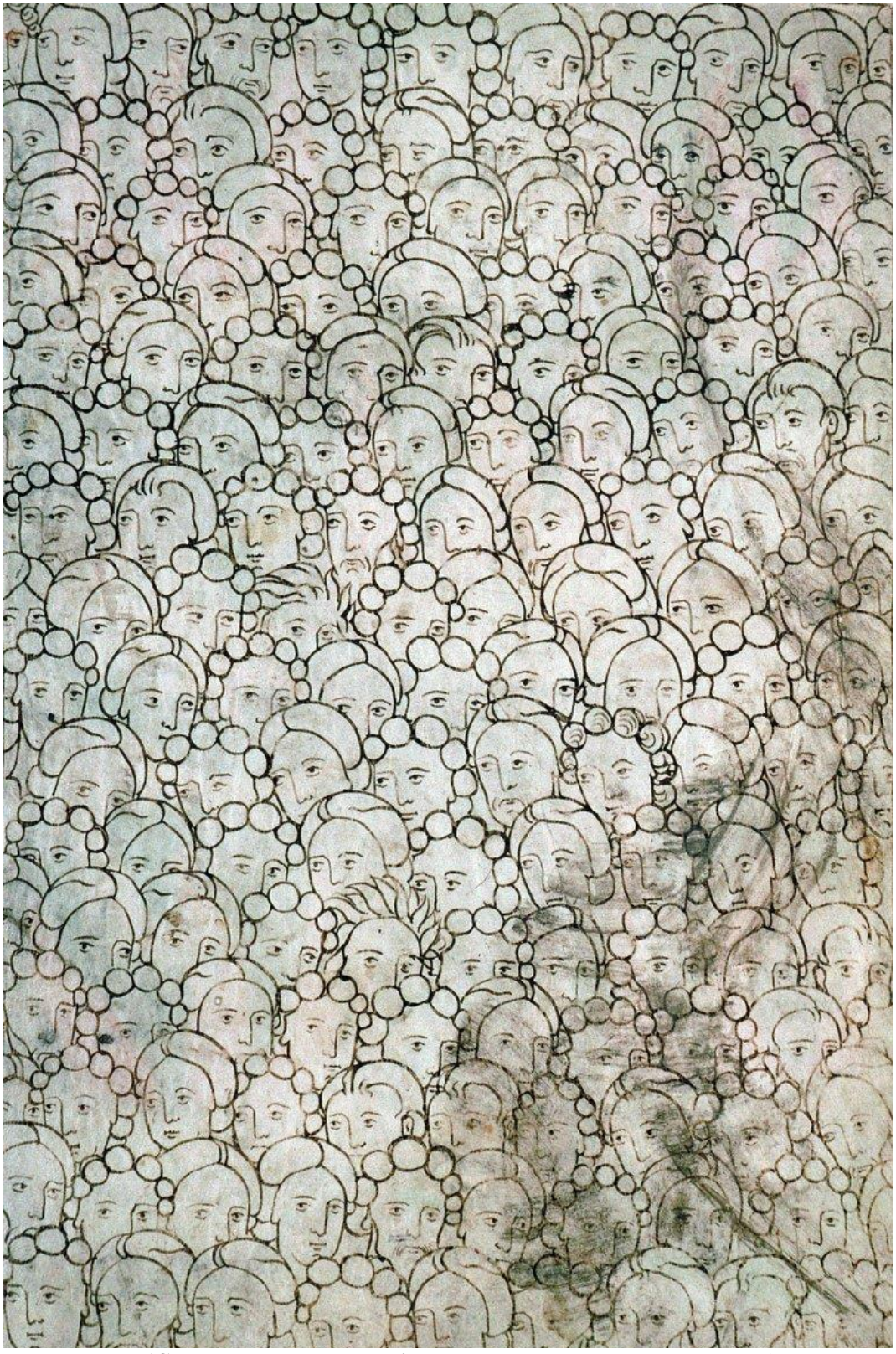


FIGURE 1: 'CROWD OF THE DAMNED', PAMPLONA BIBLE, NAVARRE 1197 (AMIENS, BIBLIOTHÈQUE MUNICIPALE, MS. 108, FOL. 254R)

Near the end of the Pamplona Illustrated Bible, there is a picture sometimes called the 'Crowd of the Damned'. It is an illustration of countless souls waiting, patiently it seems, for judgment; taking up almost the full page in its manuscript, it is as 'visually spare and unpretentiously rendered' as the other scenes from the Old and New Testaments and various saints lives that are depicted there.[1] The image is repetitive; there is a lot of the same. Many of the figures appear to have similar, bulbous, hairstyles. Features are reproduced identically over and over, and one has the sense that the illustrator would be fine with the charge of quantity over quality: it is reminiscent of other medieval depictions of large groups, like the crowds of saints that can be found in Books of Hours, or the masses of carved sculptures that adorn cathedral chancels and lintels.[2] But spend enough time looking at the people in the 'Crowd of the Damned', and one begins to see that the sea of sameness is punctuated, here and there, with a distinctive difference; sometimes a figure appears to be looking to the side; hair falls over a few foreheads; there are various styles of beards and personal grooming, particularly towards the bottom of the page. There is no *narrative* need to distinguish between these figures (the point is not who they are, simply that they are many): but a sporadic individuality emerges, through the subtle differences scattered through the crowd.

The subject of distinction is one to which I will return many times throughout this thesis. Without putting too fine a neo-liberal point on it all, it is strange for us to see so many

[1] Pamela A. Patton, 'Pamplona Picture Bibles', in *The Grove Encyclopedia of Medieval Art and Architecture*, ed. by Colum P. Hourihane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), available at: <https://ezproxyprd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2460/view/10.1093/acref/9780195395365.001.0001/acref-9780195395365-e-1744> [accessed July 2021]. For more on the style and provenance of this painted bible, see Julia Finch, 'Of Movement, Monarchs, and Manuscripts: the Case for Jeanne II of Navarre's Picture Bible as a Geopolitical Bridge between Paris and Pamplona', in *Moving Women Moving Objects (400-1500)*, ed. by Tracy Chapman Hamilton and Mariah Proctor-Tiffany (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 181-204 (esp. p. 188).

[2] Such as the saints depicted in the Hours of Louis de Laval, France (BnF, Latin 920, fol. 180r). This lavish manuscript came from the workshop of Jean Colombe in the late fifteenth century (c. 1480) but notably uses the same overlapping technique to represent a large crowd.



FIGURE 2: HOURS OF LOUIS DE LAVAL, FRANCE (BNF, LATIN 920, FOL. 180R)

people that look the same; it seems, to the modern consumer, a questionable artistic decision to make it so hard to differentiate between these figures – as if the notion of individuation, or distinction, does not matter to this medieval illustrator. Indeed, my impulse to search for the inconsistencies in the crowd – as if this were a twelfth-century game of Where's Wally?, and not an apocryphal scene – speaks to the significant anachronistic challenges the approach I

am taking in this thesis will generate. Perhaps individuality did not always seem relevant to the idea of 'people'? It would be possible to reach this conclusion when considering so much of the art and architecture from the twelfth century, when this Bible was produced. After all, some historians argue that portraiture did not truly begin until the grand masters of the Italian Renaissance. In the tomb monuments and impressively illuminated manuscript images of the later Middle Ages, so this argument goes, a nascent interest in the visual depiction of individuals can only sometimes be observed – and it is not until the work of a painter such as Rembrandt, who had been heavily influenced by artists who had studied in Italy, that the identifiable individual is understood to fully emerge in visual media.[3] The great cathedrals of Europe, which began the long and dangerous journey of construction in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries, were not always claimed by named architects. Countless anonymous lives, perhaps even anonymous generations, worked on these buildings, and yet it is rare to even find graffiti left by the masons, labourers, and artisans who toiled on them – and far more common to find marks and names left by pilgrims, visitors, and parishioners.[4] It can seem as if the makers of the Middle Ages actively sought to destroy any trace of themselves in their work, and that that work, concurrently, did not take very much interest in individuals, subjects, or selves.

And so it is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of the texts that I will discuss in this thesis are anonymous.[5] Of the 83 surviving Middle English verse romances, only a

[3] See Harry Berger Jr., *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt against the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Annabel Patterson, '"The human face divine": Identity and the Portrait from Locke to Chaucer', in *Crossing Boundaries: Issues of Cultural and Individual Identity in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. by Sally McKee (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), pp. 155-86; Stephen Greenblatt posits a similar timeline, which has been widely used in studies of both literary and visual Renaissance art – see *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[4] For more on medieval graffiti, see Matthew Champion, *Medieval Graffiti: The Lost Voices of England's Churches* (London: Ebury Press, 2015).

[5] Studies of the medieval Anonymous are often argumentative, quick to define who Anonymous *is not*. Roger Chartier has challenged Foucault's unfounded timeline for what he called the 'author-function', showing that it existed before the early modern period – in *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. by Lydia G. Cochrane (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) – c.f. Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-*

handful can be meaningfully understood to be by a named author – they certainly did not tend to travel with an author's name.[6] As Sebastian Sobecki has recently shown, this is entirely in keeping with the prevailing approach to authorship that can be seen across much of the surviving vernacular poetry of the later Middle Ages – this literature was 'not anonymous for any ideological reason', but rather 'anonymous to anyone but a text's primary audience who knew the author's identity. There is no anonymity in medieval vernacular poetry, there is only deictic presence'.[7] Romance poets, as I will argue throughout this thesis, self-consciously identified themselves as writing within a tradition of the extraordinary:[8] their primary impulse was not of self-promotion.[9] In contrast to this impersonal approach to the act of creation is the primary subject matter these texts explored. It is the contention of this thesis that the genre of romance is intimately concerned with the depiction of individuals: that this is, in fact, in every sense the subject of romance.[10] Using a comparative approach, I read the romances written in England (and occasionally France) between 1100 and 1500 as evidence of the growing significance of the individual in fiction after the twelfth century, paying particular attention to the ways in which convention, expectation, and genre intersect with the representation of identity. My hope is that in doing so I can offer new readings of both well-known and neglected romances, admired and derided examples of the genre. I will

Structuralist Criticism, ed. and with an intro. by Josue V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 141-60. Liz Herbert McAvoy deconstructs the critical assumption that the medieval Anonymous is a man in 'Anonymous', in *The History of British Women's Writing, 700-1500*, Vol. 1, ed. by Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 160-8.

[6] This the number of Middle English romances included in the *Database of Middle English Romance*, hosted by the University of York. Available at: <http://www.middleenglishromance.org.uk> [accessed July 2021].

[7] Sebastian Sobecki, *Last Words: The Public Self and the Social Author in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 6.

[8] See Jamie McKinstry, *Middle English Romance and the Craft of Memory* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), p. 14, on the self-conscious nature of this genre.

[9] Which is not to say they were not invested in the success of their given text; see Linda Marie Zaerr's work on the potential minstrel authors/performers of the romances, in *Performance and the Middle English Romance* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012).

[10] My title takes obvious inspiration from Lee Patterson's monumental study of Chaucer: *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (London: Routledge, 1991). Catherine Belsey plays with the same pun in her book *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), but with a focus on Renaissance literature and an argument rather at odds with the timeline advanced here.

demonstrate that the depiction of subjectivity is no less central in medieval romance than it is in the modern novel, for it is how meaning and value is generated in each. By identifying some of the central conventions of the genre, and considering their effect on the scope for individuation and interiority in both popular and canonical texts, my aim is twofold: to provide a sense of *how romance works*, and to show that we must take this genre seriously if we are to appreciate its nuanced handling of character and subject. This endeavour is circular: appreciation of its capacity to depict compelling people will lead to more sophisticated readings.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will define my understandings of the somewhat slippery concepts of individuality, subjectivity, and character, upon which the thesis will depend. I will outline the existing scholarship on the 'flowering' of individuality in romance and fiction more generally after the twelfth-century renaissance, and its development in the high to late Middle Ages. Criticism of the Middle English verse romances has undergone a turbulent transformation over the last half century; I will consider the implication of their designation as 'popular', and the legacy of this moniker in the type of thinking they engender in literary criticism.[11] I will then establish my methodology and choice of texts and terms. As the forerunner to the novel, romance is an obvious but arguably underutilized resource to look to in the theorization of the history of literary character. This thesis is an attempt to celebrate that resource.

The Emergence of Individuality?

> This thing we name the individual, this piece of matter, this length of memory, this bearer of a proper name, this block in space, this whisper in time, this self-delighting, self-condemning oddity – what is it? who made it?[12]

[11] The approach closest to my endeavours here is that taken by the edited volume *Thinking Medieval Romance*, ed. by Katherine C. Little and Nicola McDonald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[12] Michael Levenson, *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality: Character and Novelistic Form from Conrad to Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. xi.

Michael Levenson's questions have no easy answers – but they capture the capacious quality of the concept of the individual, which has been central to the fascination with the subject in disciplines as diverse as sociology, history, literature, and psychology.[13] There is a tendency for scholars of various historical periods to claim the individual's 'birth' or 'emergence' for their own respective fields; the claims made by historians of the Renaissance (responding perhaps to what Helen Cooper has described as the seventeenth-century humanists' excellent self-publicity) may particularly frustrate the medievalist.[14] Subjectivity, selfhood, identity; these terms are, like the beings they describe and explain, slippery and unstable; for this reason, after the definitions I provide in this introduction I will be using them fairly interchangeably.[15]At the most basic level, an individual describes a being who is distinct

[13] For an overview of general studies of the individual, agency, and subjectivity ranging from purely theoretical to historical, see: Anthony Appiah, 'Tolerable Falsehoods: Agency and the Interests of Theory', in *Consequences of Theory*, ed. by Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 63-90; Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1984); Roy F. Baumeister, *Identity: Cultural Change and the Struggle for Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) – Baumeister is a social scientist who attempts to use history and literary criticism empirically, to varying success; Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986); Aaron Gurevich, *The Origins of European Individualism*, trans. by Katharine Judelson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Limited, 1995); Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism: The Family, Property and Social Transition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978); Catherine McCall, *Concepts of Person: An Analysis of Concepts of Person, Self and Human Being* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1990); Sherry B. Ortner, 'Subjectivity and cultural critique', *Anthropological Theory* 5 (2005), 31-52; Alain Renaut, *The Era of the Individual: A Contribution to a History of Subjectivity*, trans. by M. B. DeBevoise and Franklin Philip, with a foreword by Alexander Nehamas (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject*, Theory and History of Literature, Volume 55 (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988); *The Emergence of Mind: Representations of Consciousness in Narrative Discourse in England*, ed. by David Herman (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), and especially Monika Fludernik, '1050-1500 Through a Glass Darkly; or, the Emergence of Mind in Medieval Narrative', pp. 69-100; Ian Watt, *Myths of Modern Individualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[14] Helen Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2010), p. 2. For an example of this tendency in Renaissance scholarship, see John Martin, 'Inventing Sincerity, Refashioning Prudence: The Discovery of the Individual in Renaissance Europe', *The American Historical Review* 102 (1997), 1309-42. For a medievalist's response to such claims, see Lee Patterson, 'On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies', *Speculum* 65 (1990), 87-108, and David Aers, 'A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists; or, Reflections on Literary Critics Writing the "History of the Subject"', in *Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. by David Aers (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 177-202.

[15] For an excellent overview of the applicability of these terms to medieval literature, as well as a discussion of medieval definitions of individuality, see Alcuin Blamires, 'Individuality', in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature in English*, ed. by Greg Walker and Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 479-95.

from a given group or society.[16] But as a scholar of twentieth-century literature, Levenson's ruminations speak to another sense available in the modern definition of the term: someone who is distinctive, or original; a person who stands out, or does not conform to a stereotype or expectation.[17] In the twenty-first century, it is *good* to be an individual; we are encouraged, by self-help books and across social media, to cultivate a strong sense of Self, to see ourselves as special, important, and to embrace the particular quirks or oddities that make up our experience of the world. A TikTok trend during the summer of 2020 saw young girls post dizzyingly edited montages of their insta-perfect lattes and sundresses, accompanied by a soundtrack of swelling piano arpeggios and the words: 'You *have* to start romanticizing your life. You have to start thinking of yourself as the main character'.[18] It makes sense that the trend took off in 2020, the year we had to place the collective wellbeing of our communities over personal freedoms; in the helplessness many of us felt in the face of the coronavirus pandemic, the notion of cultivating a life as a #maincharacter was understandably appealing to many young people. *Be yourself – everyone else is already taken!* Slogan t-shirts and Facebook posts often misattribute this aphorism to Oscar Wilde, but its neat emptiness is unknown in origin. We tend to read individuality into simple breaks from convention; to a certain extent, the individual is at the mercy of the norm in this conception, for it is in the divergences and differences from hegemony that individuality is usually demarcated in the modern context – although always (ironically or not), in the same old mode of encouraging emulation of others.

[16] OED, s.v. *n*. sense 1(a).
[17] OED, s.v. *n*. sense 1(c).
[18] @ashlaward, 'Take a second and listen', *TikTok*, May 2020, available at <https://bit.ly/3A9xsKS> [accessed July 2021]. Due to the endlessly self-replicating and intertextual quality of Tiktok (there is something to be said for its similarities with romance in this regard) it is notoriously difficult to navigate and therefore accurately cite trends on the app; but at the time of writing, the hashtags #youhavetostartromanticisingyourlife and #youhavetostartromantisizingyourlife cumulatively have over 18.5 million views.

It was not always this way: as I will explore throughout this thesis, to be an individual in the Middle Ages was often to be uncomfortable. Medieval Latin had at its disposal the term *individualis*, with its sense of a thing that could not be divided, whose label was not applicable to anything of the same kind.[19] As such, there is a degree of loneliness in this definition: it is *singular* and distinct – certainly a far cry from the celestial *communitas* and unity imagined of heaven (and therefore pure satisfaction) by writers such as Dante in the *Paradiso*, or the *Gawain*-poet in *Pearl* (it is not a coincidence that the most memorable figures of the *Commedia* exist in Dante's hell). It has become a critical commonplace to argue that the twelfth century marks a shift towards a consideration of interiority – the sense of an inner, subjective life – in almost all areas of public and private life. The scholarship is exhaustive;[20] many of these accounts are fairly similar, and tend to see several key events of

[19] Blamires, 'Individuality', p. 480, citing Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Revised Edition (London: Fontana Press, 1983), pp. 161-5. See also Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Introduction to the Problem of Individuation in the Early Middle Ages*, esp. pp. 17-20, and John F. Benton, 'Consciousness of Self and Perceptions of Individuality', in *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, ed. by Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable, with Carol D. Lanham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 263-95. cf. DMLBS, s.v. 'individualis': 'pertaining to or existing as an individual'.

[20] Laura Ashe, *The Oxford English Literary History Volume I. 1000-1350: Conquest and Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Introduction to the Problem of Individuation in the Early Middle Ages*, Second Revised Edition (München: Philosophia Verlag, 1988); Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak, *When Ego Was Imago: Signs of Identity in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2010) – this book incorporates her earlier article, 'Medieval Identity: A Sign and a Concept', *The American Historical Review* 105 (2000), 1489-533; Jennifer Bryan, *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), and 'Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31 (1980), 1-17; Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Linda Georgianna, *The Solitary Self: Individuality in the Ancrene Wisse* (London: Harvard University Press, 1981); *History in the Comic Mode: Medieval Communities and the Matter of Person*, ed. Rachel Fulton and Bruce W. Holsinger (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), particularly the editors' introduction, pp. 1-11; Susan R. Kramer, *Sin, Interiority, and Selfhood in the Twelfth-Century West* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2015); Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Stealing Obedience: Narratives of Agency and Identity in Later Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050-1200* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); Julie Orlemanski, *Symptomatic Subjects: Bodies, Medicine, and Causation in the Literature of Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Mariann Sanders Regan, *Love Words: The Self and the Text in Medieval and Renaissance Poetry* (London: Cornell University Press, 1982); Sarah Spence, *Texts and the Self in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Brian Stock, 'The Self and Literary Experience in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages', *New Literary History* 25 (1994), 839-52. Also 'Reading, Writing, and the Self: Petrarch and His Forerunners', *New Literary History* 26 (1995), 717-30, and *After Augustine: The Meditative Reader and the Text* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); *The Inner Life of Women in Medieval Romance Literature: Grief, Guilt, and Hypocrisy*, ed. by Jeff Rider and Jamie Friedman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Walter Ullmann, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages*

the long twelfth century as the birth of what is sometimes (misguidedly) described as the 'birth of the Western Man'.[21] A sense that in the twelfth century the individual rose, only to decline in the later Middle Ages until again reaching new heights during the Renaissance proper some 400 years later is common in some of the older historiography.[22] Charles Haskins was the first to gather together the transformations that took place in Europe during what is described as a 'renaissance' (and note the implied *return*, the sense of renewal in this designation) – this was the time of

> the Crusades, of the rise of towns, and of the earliest bureaucratic states of the West, it saw the culmination of Romanesque art and the beginnings of Gothic; the emergence of the vernacular literatures; the revival of the Latin classics and of Latin poetry and Romance law; the recovery of Greek science, with its Arabic additions, and of much of Greek philosophy; and the origin of the first European universities. The twelfth century left its signature on higher education, on the scholastic philosophy, on European systems of law, on architecture and sculpture, on the liturgical drama, on Latin and vernacular poetry.[23]

'The theme is too broad for a single volume or a single author', Haskins admits; and indeed, scholarship since then has tended to advance narratives that privilege one particular area of change as *most* impactful. A few events in the list above are of particular interest to my purposes here. Of the utmost importance, of course, is the explosion of vernacular poetry in the twelfth century that would only increase in pace as the Middle Ages progressed: becoming the *Dolce Stil Novo* in Italy, laying the groundwork for the masses of religious and secular poetry produced in France and England, and providing the conditions needed for the flowering of lay devotion across Europe that would sow the seeds of the Reformation.

(London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1967); Suzanne Verderber, *The Medieval Fold: Power, Repression, and the Emergence of the Individual* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[21] Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual*, p. 4. I am at best wary and at worst horrified when I encounter this sort of statement: it is often used when defining Western practices of identity formation as more advanced than, and certainly in opposition to, other cultures' – particularly, and troublingly, African. See, for instance, Timothy J. Reiss, *Mirages of the Selfe: Patterns of Personhood in Ancient and Early Modern Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 8-14; moments in Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*.

[22] Once again Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual*, p. 7, is a good example.

[23] Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. vi.

Romance is the most important of the secular genres that developed during this period; examples survive in nearly every European vernacular, as well as in Latin. As literacy levels began to accelerate – first among the lay nobility during the latter half of the twelfth century, continuing in pace throughout the high to later Middle Ages[24] – the decision to write in the vernacular became, in Sarah Spence's words, 'an acknowledgment of identity and difference': 'Vernacular text – and the self – become that which exists outside the court where the internal is externalized, private made public'.[25] Forms charged with what can be described as an (auto)biographical impulse – the songs of the troubadours, the lays, and, of course, romances – are the natural product of the vernacular. These secular genres often survive in manuscripts containing religious and devotional literature; it seems the owners of such miscellanies (the growing urban bourgeois classes as well as gentry families) had diverse appetites.

Various aspects of civil and urban life were becoming more organized, codified, even. The twelfth century saw an increase in the granting of town and communal charters (*libertas ecclesiae*);[26] craft and merchant guilds formed in larger cities, offering the burgeoning urban populations further opportunity for self-definition through distinction, albeit as part of a collective. This reliance on external forces is explored by Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak in her work on medieval seals and Augustinian semiotics; she suggests that individual identity in this period was largely subordinated to signs: 'seals acted through a system of identification, designation, and recognition in which representational identity rested on an ontological principle of likeness', offering a stable way by which to understand and verify individual identity.[27]

[24] Franz H. Bäuml, 'Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy', *Speculum* 55 (1980), 237-65 (p. 244).
[25] Spence, *Texts and the Self in the Twelfth Century*, pp. 144-5.
[26] Benton, 'Consciousness of Self and Perceptions of Individuality', p. 290.
[27] Bedos-Rezak, *When Ego Was Imago*, p. 111.

But if the medieval individual relied on exterior forces to confer upon them a classifiable identity, they had to look inwards to find their 'selves'. Religious experience in general was turning inwards; Christianity, the religion in which each man is created in God's image (and indeed called by name to dwell with Him), began to bear the fruits of its inherent individualism. So it was that the study of moral philosophy in the new European universities became preoccupied with questions of conscience, intention, and action, generating Abelard's injunction *Know Thyself*. The rise of introspective mysticism, with its cultivation of highly personal relationships with the divine, speaks to a similar impulse. Here, however, *annihilation* of the self could be the goal – as was to be the case in the pseudo-Dionysian tradition of the *via negativa*, propelled into popular thought by Meister Eckhart in the thirteenth century. Devotional literature taught its audiences to examine their inner selves: to develop a habit of mind, perhaps in response to a society that increasingly demanded they cultivate and perform their 'gentilnesse' in public life.[28] Rather than the unique, particular self necessary to individuality in the modern imagination, medieval thinkers sought to discover within themselves a common spirit; to recover within themselves the shared image of God.[29]

Michel Zink argues that 'the widespread recognition of subjectivity…in literary expression – or in expression that thereby became specifically literary – was essentially a thirteenth-century phenomenon'.[30] It is certainly true that it was the thirteenth century that saw some of the most significant institutional changes within the Church: reforms that were to alter the individual parishioner's experience of liturgical practice in significant and actionable ways. Following the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, a new emphasis was placed

[28] Bryan, *Looking Inward*, pp. 25-6.
[29] Walker Bynum, 'Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?', p. 14.
[30] Michel Zink, *The Invention of Literary Subjectivity*, trans. by David Sices (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 11, and 'Time and Representation of the Self in Thirteenth-Century French Poetry', trans. by Monique Briand-Walker, *Poetics Today* 5 (1984), 611-27 (p. 167).

on the performance of the sacraments – particularly the Eucharist and confession. Regular confession, most importantly before the feast of Easter, represents to many historians (and most famously Foucault) the birth of Western subjectivity: the recognition that experience is personal and private, and must be in some way externalized in order to be fully understood; that there is power to be gleaned in the institutionalized practice of disclosing and acknowledging that experience. Here we can begin to tease out the applicability of certain terms to our discussion of the literary depiction of people: for some scholars, 'the subject' becomes more useful than 'the individual'. Implicit in the former is a recognition that a given individual is 'not solely a sovereign consciousness ready to initiate action like the grammatical subject which theoretically controls a verb, but is at the same time subject to formation by a mass of subtle encompassing cultural and linguistic systems'.[31] The subject 'is spoken *of*, the subject is spoken *to*, before the subject can say: "I speak"', suggests Michel Pêcheux.[32]

The events of the twelfth-century renaissance were undoubtedly transformative, but there are some important caveats to the narrative described above. Susan Kramer, for instance, challenges the grand sweeping Foucauldian narrative of transformation with which confession is usually credited; she reminds us that public penance remained a key practice well into the thirteenth century, and possibly beyond; without the widespread use of individual confessionals, it would be entirely evident to the congregation who was confessing, and who was not – 'penitential practice thereby retained its public, shame-inducing elements with respect to the form of its rituals into the High Middle Ages'.[33] Similarly, Suzanne Verderber sees three main but interrelated flaws in the existing

[31] Blamires, 'Individuality', p. 479. See also Ortner, 'Subjectivity and cultural critique'.
[32] Michel Pêcheux, 'The Mechanism of Ideological (Mis)recognition', in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 141-51 (p. 148). Pêcheux deals in part with another essay included in the volume – Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)', pp. 100-40, where Althusser suggests that '*individuals are always-already subjects*' (p. 132).
[33] Kramer, *Sin, Interiority, and Selfhood in the Twelfth-Century West*, pp. 24-5.

scholarship on the so-called discovery of the individual: '(1) The sleeping beauty effect; (2) a failure to postulate causes; and (3) the instability of the term "individual"'; the first of these is important enough to quote at some length:

> By the term "Sleeping Beauty," I mean that it is presupposed that individualism is the natural, universal, predetermined, and *desirable* mode of subjectivity, waiting for the kiss of the right social conditions to awaken it from its slumber. As this usually unspoken narrative goes, if the individuated form of subjectivity does not appear in a given culture, this is due to social forces that are supressing or repressing it. Once these forces are overcome or removed, the individual appears and perhaps even flourishes. This is a romantic way of envisioning the situation, pitting the repressed individual against the repressive society. This model does not allow for the possibility that the individual is not *repressed* by, but rather is actually *produced* by specific configurations of power.[34]

Walter Ullmann represents a good example of this effect, when he writes: '[the twelfth century] is the dawn of the modern era in which the citizen had won victory over the subject, the era in which the individual was liberated and emancipated'.[35] In her study of agency and identity in the *early* medieval period, Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe gestures towards a similar process of creation, although she chooses to use 'agency' to differentiate between medieval and modern conceptions of selfhood: 'Agency is not opposed to cultural structure, but is enabled by it. To exercise agency requires actors to have knowledge of the cultural forms within which they are enmeshed and some ability to affect them'.[36] And yet this sounds a lot like Sarah Spence's description of the formation of the twelfth-century 'self':

> I would argue that indeed we can now call what we find in twelfth-century literature a self as long as we are willing to define that self in precisely these spatial terms. We can even, I would argue, assert that the twelfth century was witness to the origin of the self as we define it today. But we can do this only if we understand the self not as an autonomous unit but as a complex interaction of body, language, and space, a phenomenon that owes its existence, ironically, to the seemingly self-denying language of Early Christianity, and defines itself as much by a distancing from, rather than an assimilation of the classical Latin tradition.[37]

[34] Verderber, *The Medieval Fold*, pp. 4-5.
[35] Ullmann, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages*, p. 6.
[36] O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Stealing Obedience*, p. 13.
[37] Spence, *Texts and the Self in the Twelfth Century*, p. 4.

Despite the difference in terms, it is my sense that these accounts of the textual depiction of people are all describing the same process, and that this is best encompassed by 'the subject'. As Judith Butler would have it, power must always precede the subject; the quest to 'know oneself', to 'become' ourselves, should be understood as 'no simple or continuous affair, but an uneasy practice of repetition and its risks, compelled yet incomplete, wavering on the horizon of social being'.[38] In this sense, the subject is inherently performative; much like identity, certain formative aspects can be tried on and cast off – sometimes at will, but always under the pressure of the systems of power operating in a given society. Imitation, the necessary action in Lacan's mirror stage, is key: for the subject depends on an external model in order to form an ego.[39] In this way medieval and modern identity formation are not all that different. When he speaks of 'the coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject', Lacan could be describing the shape and plot of the very best examples of medieval romance: the knight, compelled by an unspoken but insistent motivation to strive, to push forward, towards a known but shifting conclusion.[40] The imitative requirements of the mirror stage may offer some explanation for the resistance of much romance scholarship (and particularly that from the last century) to accept that a genre so highly conventional can create appropriate or hospitable circumstances for the formation of a subject – let alone a feeling, thinking, self-conscious subject, such as the one I will seek to recover in this thesis. Conventionality and individuality, as I go on to argue, are not fundamentally at odds with one another.

By the twelfth century, then, fiction had discovered the individual.[41] Romance was central to this; but it remains something of a taboo freely to discuss the literary treatment of

[38] Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 30.
[39] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), esp. pp. 1-17; Verderber, *The Medieval Fold*, p. 10.
[40] Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 2.
[41] Studies of the individual specifically in fiction and/or romance include: Albert C. Baugh, 'Convention and Individuality in the Middle English Romance', in *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies: Essays in Honor of Francis Lee Utley*, ed. by Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970), pp. 123-46; Peter Dronke, *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages: New Departures in Poetry 1000-1150*

individuality, of subjectivity and interiority, in the vast majority of the surviving romances composed in England from the twelfth century onwards. The verse romances – or the *popular* romances – are often opposed to their earlier French or Insular French counterparts and sources; 'Middle English romances are often perceived as privileging action over interiority, and public ethics over private concerns or erotic encounters', as Megan G. Leitch has shown.[42] So it can be that Susan Crane, for instance, can argue that 'Anglo-Norman and Middle English romances of English heroes show *no* interest in the dominant continental themes of divided self or divided society… Rather than locating the human drama in self-discovery, the insular romances propose that the human drama is collective, a communal search for stability that takes place through the hero's search'.[43] It of course makes sense that romances composed in post-Conquest England would have paid particular interest to issues of national identity, finding pronounced expression in the early Matter of England texts[44] – but it does not follow that this preoccupation with regional identities and heredities should entirely obfuscate an interest in the individual. Rather, these texts' poets choose to privilege what their heroes *do* over what they *think*; who they *are* over how they *came to be*. This can create a somewhat inhospitable environment for the depiction of subjectivity; as does the relative brevity of the verse romances – for they can be as slight as a few hundred lines long,

(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); Sarah E. Gordon, 'The Man with No Name: Identity in French Arthurian Verse Romance', *Arthuriana* 18 (2008), 69-81; Robert W. Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* (London: Yale University Press 1977); Donald Maddox, *Fictions of Identity in Medieval France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Charles Muscatine, 'The Emergence of Psychological Allegory in Old French Romance', *PMLA* 68 (1953), 1160-82; A. C. Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[42] Megan G. Leitch, 'Introduction: Middle English Romance: The Motifs and the Critics', in *Romance Rewritten: The Evolution of Middle English Romance: A Tribute to Helen Cooper*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald, Megan G. Leitch, and Corinne Saunders (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018), pp. 1-24 (p. 19).

[43] Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (London: University of California Press, 1986), p. 83, my emphasis. See also Myra Seaman, 'Engendering Genre in Middle English Romance: Performing the Feminine in "Sir Beves of Hamtoun"', *Studies in Philology* 98 (2001), 49-75; Sarah Stanbury, 'The Embarrassments of Romance', *Arthuriana*, 17 (2007), 114-6.

[44] For a recent study of these texts, see Emily Dolmans, *Writing Regional Identities in Medieval England: From the Gesta Herwardi to Richard Coer de Lyon* (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2020).

as in the case of *Lay le Freine*. But even a proponent of the no-interest theory, such as Christine Chism, can accept that

> Middle English romances are subject-centered; a romance is about somebody. A medieval reader would probably not ask *what* a romance was about by rather *who*. As a result, ideas of identity and subjectivity – the performance of gender, class, and lineage – are at the heart of romance.[45]

The very literal subject of most romances is, of course, the knight: the single figure, facing a challenge, or perhaps a series of challenges, that stand between him and that which he most desires. The historical enterprise of knighthood also holds within it this kernel of individuality: despite the very real religious and colonializing impulses that charged the first Crusades, one can only imagine the personal motivations – devout fervour, appetite for true *aventure* – of the first men who travelled so far, to lands so unknown to them.[46] Romance is fundamentally interested in people, in dilemmas with highly personal consequences, and with the performance of various identities. Robert Hanning argues persuasively that

> chivalric romance, as it emerged in twelfth-century courtly society, offered a literary form in which to work out the implications of individuality – implications which twelfth-century theology and philosophy were beginning to confront, but were not yet able, for lack of technical and conceptual vocabulary, fully to describe and categorize.[47]

Of course Hanning has the work of someone like Chrétien de Troyes in mind. He suggests that 'the particular, defining achievement of twelfth-century chivalric romance does not survive its cultural moment' – an example, perhaps, of Verderber's 'sleeping beauty' effect beginning again.[48] I am not suggesting that the Middle English verse romances of the later Middle Ages are as actively engaged in the proto-academic dialogue Hanning describes; but they are, fundamentally, interested in the same ideas. Furthermore, there *is* individuality to be

[45] Christine Chism, 'Romance', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature, 1100-1500*, ed. by Larry Scanlon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 57-69 (p. 59).
[46] Charles Moorman, *A Knyght There Was: The Evolution of the Knight in Literature* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), p. 18.
[47] Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance*, p. 3.
[48] Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance*, p. 6.

found in these romances' characters: not *in spite* of their formulaic quality and tight adherence to highly conventional and recognizable plot structure and form, but as a result of this form. Indeed the strictures of the chivalric code, the standards of behaviour and ethics the knights depicted in these texts were bound to uphold, pose similar challenges to the scope for individuality. The constant negotiation of personal and public values inevitable to chivalry has led some critics to follow Charles Moorman's rather bleak assessment that the 'closer the medieval writer comes to expressing the fundamental moral issues implicit in the chivalric code, the closer he comes to its reality, its myth';[49] but as Ad Putter points out, when romances exhibit clear awareness of this conflict, as in the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, they are labelled 'anti-romance', or even 'meta-romance'.[50] Putter goes on to argue that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

> shares neither the ideological concerns nor the literary technique of Anglo-Norman or Middle English 'insular' romance. It takes no interest in the problems of land-ownership, inheritance, the perpetuation of the patrimony, or the preservation of feudal customs, which preoccupied the writers of 'insular' romance and the provincial baronial milieux in which they moved. The questions raised by *Gawain* are more profound and more basic: Should one prefer honesty to death? Do unforeseen consequences nullify a contract one has entered into? Are the elevated ideals of chivalry in fact attainable by human beings?[51]

I suggest that the questions raised by the romances discussed in this thesis – What does it mean to be great? What does it mean to be a knight? What does it mean to be satisfied? What does it mean to be a wife? What does it mean to be the best? are not all that different. These five questions could be the alternative titles for each of my following chapters, in turn. The relationship Putter imagines between the Old French *roman courtois* tradition and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (that the latter should not be seen as a failure to achieve the former) is how I suggest we could more productively approach the relationship between *Sir Gawain and*

[49] Moorman, *A Knyght There Was,* p. 8.
[50] Ad Putter, *Sir Gawain and French Arthurian Romance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 4.
[51] Putter, *Sir Gawain and French Arthurian Romance*, p. 6.

the Green Knight and the Middle English verse romances. The insular romances are not automatic failures when they eschew the older romance techniques of extended soliloquy and description of a character's inner state, in favour of rather more efficient ways of depicting the literary individual or subject; after all, it is a commonplace of literary commentary that show is better than tell. This is a benefit of their genre: its conventions can function as shorthand for concepts of some complexity. The following chapters demonstrate how many aspects of this shorthand are centred around the compelling depiction of the individual.

Why is it still somewhat controversial to suggest that the authors of the verse romances would have been interested in any such thing? In the 1960s and 70s the scant attention these texts received tended towards formalism, and the conviction that the verse romances were low-class, entertaining poems of little consequence charged the work of critics such as Derek Pearsall, and in particular his seminal essay 'The Development of Middle English Romance' from 1965 (although he would later go on to soften the rather caustic approach taken there).[52] The few monograph-length studies devoted to the popular romances at this time often stopped short of celebrating their texts' full achievements; Susan Wittig's otherwise very useful book *Stylistic and narrative structures in the Middle English romances* (1978) is hampered by her sense of the 'redundance' of romance formulae and conventions: 'The phrases of the romance must seldom have been attended to closely, because they contain nothing new, nothing that has not been heard before, nothing that cannot be predicted. They must have been accepted without question as truth', she writes.[53] But claiming something is true is not the same as simply stating it; and in the same vein, just

[52] Derek Pearsall, 'The Development of Middle English Romance', *Mediaeval Studies* 27 (1965), 91-116. In 'The Pleasure of Popular Romance: A Prefatory Essay', in *Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts*, ed. by Rhiannon Purdie and Michael Cichon (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), pp. 9-18, Pearsall suggests the very features of the genre that make it so conventional are precisely what make the texts so compelling.
[53] Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and narrative structures in the Middle English romances* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), p. 43.

because something is true does not explain why it is being said.[54] Elsewhere, I have argued that close attention to the *meaning* of even the most conventional, stock, or 'filler' lines renders this assessment untenable.[55] Suffice it to say, more recent scholarship has certainly demonstrated that romance is preoccupied with the marvellous and the 'new';[56] that in fact, in direct opposition to Wittig's statements, the texts actively encouraged their audiences to think critically or even transgressively about the cultural norms that bound them.[57] It is perhaps unsurprising that the revival of romance criticism at the end of the last century and the beginning of this took a redemptive approach to the genre; questions of taste and identity politics more generally are central to the scholarship from this period, perhaps most successfully and importantly characterized by Nicola McDonald's edited volume *Pulp Fictions* (2004). This thesis, then, no longer sees it necessary to redeem popular romance; popular and canonical texts will be read alongside one another. The legacy of their designation as 'popular' is a difficult one to fully appreciate; as McDonald explains in her aptly-named 'polemical introduction', medieval scholarship of the past seems to have been threatened at times by mass, popular appeal.[58] The diverse audience imagined of these texts (a 'great mass', to use W. R. J. Barron's term) is likely to be another reason for the hesitation to put them at the centre of serious scholarship.[59]

[54] See Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 3, on the 'Redundancy Theory' of truth.
[55] Lucy Brookes, 'Truth-telling and Truthiness in the Middle English Popular Romances', *New Medieval Literatures* 21 (2021), 144-71.
[56] See Patricia Clare Ingham, *The Medieval New: Ambivalence in an Age of Innovation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).
[57] See for instance James Simpson, 'Unthinking Thought: Romance Wisdom', in *Thinking Medieval Romance*, ed. by Katherine C. Little and Nicola McDonald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 36-51, where he argues that romance offered a space in which to confront the 'unthinkable'.
[58] Nicola McDonald, 'A Polemical Introduction', in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. by Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 1-21 (p. 10). See also Cory James Rushton, 'Modern and Academic Reception of the Popular Romance', in *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*, ed. by Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), pp. 165-79.
[59] W. R. J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (London: Longman, 1987), p. 51.

But we need not look much further than contemporary responses to the genre to render previous critical assumptions as to the genre's lack of interest in the depiction of interiority (or even unsuitability to achieve such a task) untenable. Objections to the unregulated and unrestrained reading of romance and the lies it told – such as those found in texts like *The Mirror*, *Jacob's Well* and some manuscripts of the *South English Legendary* – are very telling.[60] If the clergy were concerned that listening to stories of Sir Gawain or Guy could lead the undiscerning lay person into sin, it must follow that they believed audiences would see in these stories far more than mere caricature, or dull type – but rather real characters, formed well enough to be imagined, admired, and emulated. The number of these warnings attests to the prevalence – the popularity – of romance in England in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. As Paul Zumthor, Peter Haidu, and (most pertinently to the discussion of English romance) Helen Cooper have shown, there is significant information available to the modern reader if we engage with the conventions of romance as 'memes'; the repetition of certain motifs should not be seen to diminish meaning, but rather accrete a semantic value with each additional use, enabling audiences to identify the type of text they were encountering and make richer and more meaningful connections between it and other example of their genre.[61]

This thesis, then, argues that when we read medieval English romance, we are encountering an important moment in the history of the literary subject. I am not arguing for an obvious, linear development of individuality through time. The texts themselves resolutely resist this: for the subjects of Chapter 1, the Middle English and Insular French recensions of

[60] See Brookes, 'Truth-telling and Truthiness in the Middle English Popular Romances', pp. 167-9, for more.
[61] Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), esp. pp. 3-21. See also Peter Haidu, 'Making It (New) in the Middle Ages: Towards a Problematics of Alterity', *Diacritics* 4.2 (1974), 2-11. This is a review of Paul Zumthor's book *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), but is an important reflection on the aesthetics of repetition in and of itself. Zumthor's book appears in translation as *Toward a Medieval Poetics*, trans. by Philip Bennett (Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

the Amis and Amiloun story, represent some of the earliest, and yet most sophisticated, examples to be discussed in the thesis. Rather, my sense is that what we would call interiority has *always* interested people, and that different periods prioritize its depictions in art and literature to varying degrees.[62] Although it would be wrong to suggest that chronology is irrelevant – it is no coincidence that *Le Morte Darthur*, and its nearly-novelistic protagonist Lancelot, is the latest and most developed example that will be discussed here – we would do better to consider what it is about a given period that encourages the turn inwards, the prioritization of selves. Romance proves that a period can have a perfectly developed idea of the individual without necessarily *giving* that idea to character. The characters of romance are, I will argue, sporadic: they appear in flashes, in the inconsistencies and oddities, the outbursts, the unexplained actions, the emotions, and the extravagances of the textual figures these texts depict. They also, necessarily, appear in the minds of audiences: who fill in the gaps, as is also the case with the real people whom we encounter. If I can be forgiven a rather self-evident point: we are *not* privy to real people's inner monologues. There is something potentially realistic in romance's partial, limited depiction of another's interiority.

I have chosen to focus my discussion of romance to those texts composed in England; this of course encompasses Middle English and Insular French. This is not a hard and fast limitation, however; the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, for instance, loom too large in the history of the literary subject to omit completely, and are considered in some detail in Chapter 3. I have tried, as far as possible and reasonable, to centre the popular, verse romances in my arguments. It is important to remember that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, perhaps the most lauded Middle English romance, survives in a unique manuscript; *Le Morte Darthur* in just the Winchester Manuscript and Caxton's 1485 edition. But we have

[62] See Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, esp. p. 12; Verderber, *The Medieval Fold*, pp. 1-2. cf. Baumeister, *Identity* – 'Identity is not a recent invention, like television sets, that everyone suddenly began to want. People have always had identities' (p. 4).

6 surviving manuscripts containing copies of *Lybeaus Desconus*, for instance; 9 of both *Sir Isubmbras* and *Bevis of Hampton*, as well as many early printed versions of each. Chaucer's *Sir Thopas*, an invaluable example of early reception history of the genre, makes use of the obviously well-known popular romance heroes Horn, Bevis, Guy, and Lybeaus in order to evoke the necessary conditions for its cutting parody. Manuscript survival should obviously not be used as opaque evidence of a given text's failure or success: but it can be reasonably assumed that the verse romances are far more representative of the ways in which the majority of medieval audiences would have encountered the genre. This is the perennial oddity of canon formation, and its tendency to centre the distinctly atypical: the point is that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is *not* representative of the majority of the romance produced and consumed in the fourteenth century. What this means is that we need to look *around* our canonical texts – in their shadows, but also before and between; we need to understand the cultural context that produced Chaucer, but also the traditions in which Chaucer was participating, and those he was discarding, disrupting, and beginning. I will of course not be ignoring Chaucer or the *Gawain*-poet (who are discussed in Chapters 3 and 2, respectively), and indeed dedicate a whole chapter to Malory: but this thesis is an attempt to read romance for its conventions, for its most basic and constituent parts. As such, it seems proper that those texts most widely studied and universally praised play a secondary, supporting role in its argument.

In Chapters 1 and 2, then, I identify two primary romance conventions in which the construction and negotiation of the subject plays a key role: through the convention of the superlative and hyperbole in general, and the clear interest in emotion and feeling common in these texts. These early chapters describe how romance shows and tells its audiences what it is about, and what matters. Chapters 3 and 4, about plot and character respectively, dwell more on the place of romance in the history of narrative theory. My methodology is therefore

split between a series of close readings, and a somewhat classically literary-critical approach to questions of genre and form. For this reason, criticism from the last century and contemporary literary theory, often discussing texts completely unrelated to medieval literature, will be used throughout. As the forerunner to the novel, romance offers a particularly useful space in which to examine our use of concepts such as character, plot, and genre. I think it is impossible for us to read narrative without these terms; despite our best intentions, the novel has changed the way we experience narrative time, and the textual figures caught up in the ceaseless linearity of development we expect when encountering the literary depiction of people. Although I may disagree with Ian Watt's notion of the medieval period's 'unified world picture', it is certainly true that since the Renaissance literature has steadily presented us 'with a developing but unplanned aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places'.[63] This, in turn, informs what we seek and consequently find in the texts that we read – medieval and modern. This thesis invites us to approach our inevitable anachronism with some grace.

A note on editions

As a rule, I rely on the TEAMS editions of the Middle English verse romances, citing the older EETS editions when appropriate. My sense is that it is in the spirit of popular romance to be accessible and searchable – a valuable feature provided by these online editions. Fourteenth-century audiences would have been far more attuned to the intertextual references and verbal echoes that litter these texts than we can ever hope to be; but the ability to easily search for names, formulaic lines, and conventional descriptions allows the modern scholar to

[63] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 32.

experience a degree of that familiarity with the literary landscape of romance – so much of which must otherwise remain largely obscure.

Chapter Overview

An attempt to recover that landscape unites the following chapters. Chapter 1 demonstrates my methodology – I isolate a particular convention of romance, and explore its various implications (literary, thematic, and even theological). The convention of the superlative knight is perhaps the most obvious standard of romance: each knight is the *best,* his lady the *most* beautiful. When successive romance poets describe their protagonists as the 'beste knyghte', are they sincere? *Amis and Amiloun* offers a particularly rich tradition in which to consider this question: both knights are described as physically identical and the same in every way, and yet, somehow, both are described as 'best'. This fundamental paradox offers a useful way into considering the competing and overlapping superlatives of the genre, and this chapter asks whether the convention of the superlative supports the individual knight – emphasizing the value and importance of a single figure's experience – or, in its ubiquity, does it achieve the opposite? Comparison with the Insular French recensions of the story (*Amys e Amilioun*) demonstrates the particularly self-conscious and sophisticated manipulation of the convention of the superlative in the Middle English. The chapter also draws on contemporary theories of justice and grace.

This is romance *telling* us how things should be; after exploring the extremity of success and control in romance, my second chapter examines romance failure. There is a surprising amount of personal failure and dissatisfaction to be found in these texts, and in this chapter close readings of three popular romances – *The Squire of Low Degree*, *Le Bone Florence of Rome,* and *Lybeaus Desconus* – will demonstrate that as well as obvious moments of prescriptivism, romance is littered with moments of dissent. In each example, the

emotional experience of the central figure undermines the very ideals the romance simultaneously champions and ultimately upholds. Emotional expression reveals to us that which cannot be contained or controlled; when it erupts in a conventional genre, and shocks or surprises us, it is surely worth critical attention. Romance poets are often more subversive than we give them credit for. Drawing on recent work on affect theory and the History of the Emotions, the chapter ends with a reading of shame in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Emotional experience shows, rather than tells.

The flashes of interiority generated by the emotional outbursts of romance are only as affective as they are in the context of the rigidity and predictability of romance plotting. Plot is a wildly under-theorized aspect of narrative theory, perhaps because it is such a basic constituent of narrative. In Chapter 3, the extent to which initial audiences would have known how the life of a given knight 'ought' to go will be explored, as will the metatextual tools employed by the poets in order to keep their audiences on side. I go on to consider the role of improbability and coincidence in *King Horn* and *Emaré* (read alongside Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*), and the realistic potential of romance 'wonder' more generally. The role of anagnorisis in romance plotting will be examined: in both verse romances 'true' identity and recognition are central to the plot, but the trope is extremely pervasive throughout the genre, and is found in several of the romances considered in previous chapters. The spurious and imagined pasts of Chrétien de Troyes close the chapter, where I reflect on the ways in which the obscured or implied motivations of romance protagonists are so necessary to the generation of action, and plot. The rigidity of audience expectation is such that it casts into doubt the notion of any real risk in romance plotting – if we are to *expect* the improbable, what exactly is at stake for the subjects depicted in these texts?

Building on the implications for selfhood generated by the affectual reading of explored Chapter 2, and reading for the plot in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 searches for – and

attempts to recover – the characters of romance. *Sir Orfeo*, a romance which has received a relatively large amount of critical attention, will serve as the central text here. Types of romance character will be familiar to any reader of romance: a hero, heroine, villain and steward are to be found in countless examples of the genre. Such 'types' offer a shorthand for contemporary ideals of behaviour and self-presentation, and more broadly speak to the verse romances' economy of style. Drawing on medieval and modern theories of character (including Elizabeth Fowler's concept of 'social persons', and E. M. Forster's 'flat' and 'round' characters), this chapter argues that the strength and expectation of romance conventions means that readers can miss any interiority. In *Sir Orfeo*, the search for the *character* of Heurodis offers a far more subversive reading of the central relationship than is usually afforded of the hero and heroine. The poet deliberately poses ambiguous inconsistencies in the construction of character that enable us to understand Heurodis not as conventional romance-maiden, but as something for which we do not have a 'type' or stock name. I go on to consider the ways in which minor characters in a variety of verse romances including *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and *Sir Degrevant* can be used to create narrative landscapes of some psychological depth.

In my final chapter, I turn to Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*: which represents the 'end' of romance in more ways than one. At the later end of the period I consider in this thesis, Malory's retelling of the Arthuriad draws together sources and traditions with unprecedented skill and originality. The result is the end of romance: that is to say, the key issues of the previous chapters – romance success, romance failure, the development of individual character, the predictability of plot – receive their fullest romance exploration here as both *telos* and conclusion. In Malory's Lancelot, we encounter a proto-novelistic character: a textual figure forced into an individualism that at times he does not seem to want. I suggest that character in this late, great romance is shared between the narrative and its protagonists,

and consider why this most sophisticated treatment of the subject of romance essentially dismantles the genre from within. This analysis will serve as the conclusion to the thesis.

Chapter 1: Romance Telling

It should come as no surprise to even the most casual reader of romance that the wedding of Amis, one half of the pair of friends in the late thirteenth-century Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*, is a lavish affair:

> Miche was that semly folk in sale,
> That was samned at that bridale
> When he hadde spoused that flour,
> Of erls, barouns, mani and fale,
> And other lordinges gret and smale,
> And levedis bright in bour.
> A real fest thai gan to hold
> Of erls and of barouns bold
> With joie and michel honour;
> Over al that lond est and west
> Than was Sir Amis helden the best
> And chosen for priis in tour.[1]

The wedding of Amis and Belisaunt represents not inconsiderable success, for it is the product of complex and even suspect negotiation. It follows a series of deceptions: Belisaunt blackmails Amis into sleeping with her, and so Amiloun takes Amis's place in combat with the steward who betrays them to her father to prove his innocence of this – meanwhile, Amis poses as Amiloun, sharing a bed with his friend's wife. After this precariousness the wedding comes as something of a relief, providing a brief moment of respite before the punishment Amiloun and reader know to expect: just as the angel had warned before he fought the steward, Amiloun is struck with leprosy 'within tho yeres thre' (1548) for assuming Amis's identity. But this wedding is a happy affair, the 'semly folk' of the Duke's court gathering to celebrate and feast on the occasion of the union of the most beautiful man and woman of the land; Amis, in particular, is singled out, 'helden the best / And chosen for priis in tour.' It's a

[1] *Amis and Amiloun*, in *Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle, and Sir Amadace*, ed. by Edward E. Foster, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/foster-amis-and-amiloun> [accessed July 2021], ll. 1513-24. Subsequent references are in-text and to this edition.

curiously meaningless phrase with which to end the stanza, as it manages to be both conventionally hyperbolic – knights in romances tend to be 'best' – and oddly unspecific. Who is making this judgment of Amis, in what ways has he exhibited 'priis', and on what basis is he the 'best' of these happy wedding guests?

He is of course the groom, and the (current) protagonist of a romance, which distributes action and judgment according to certain unspoken rules. But these are not questions with simple answers, and, as this chapter seeks to show, they are questions the Middle English *Amis and Amiloun* forces us to ask, often with startling results. This romance is a highly self-conscious example of its genre, and the tale of the two friends was immensely popular throughout the Middle Ages (existing in Middle English, Insular French, Latin, German, Spanish, Italian, Welsh, Dutch and Norse analogues). Those versions composed in England have particularly interested modern critics, and it has received more attention than most verse romances from the period. But despite its evident success amongst medieval and modern readers, it has posed significant challenges to critics, whose approaches to the text broadly fall into four different groups: generic quibbles, that struggle to align the Insular French and Middle English recensions of the tale unambiguously with either romance or hagiographic traditions;[2] considerations as to whether the protagonists are depicted as identical, or crucially different;[3] discussions of 'trewthe', the oft-invoked value, considering the extent to which it is celebrated or fundamentally dismantled (self-consciously or otherwise) by the narrative;[4] and finally, critics have sometimes asked whether the highly formulaic and conventional nature of the romance means it is worth such close attention at

[2] Studies of this theme include: Ojars Kratins, 'The Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*: Chivalric Romance or Secular Hagiography?' *PMLA* 81 (1966), 347-54.
[3] For instance John C. Ford, 'Contrasting the Identical: Differentiation of the "Indistinguishable" Characters of *Amis and Amiloun*,' *Neophilologus* 86 (2002), 311-23.
[4] For instance Dean R. Baldwin, '*Amis and Amiloun*: The Testing of *Treuþe*,' *Papers on Language and Literature* 16 (1980), 353-65.

all.[5] In this chapter, I am not proposing solutions to any of these contentious issues, but would like to suggest that our reasons for responding to most, if not all of them, can be linked to the text's greatest (and most neglected) interest: the superlative.

Romance has long been associated with extravagance and extremity.[6] This tendency should be situated within the rhetorical tradition of *amplificatio*, which Robert Worth Frank Jr. describes as 'the method of [the] age – an obsessive medieval practice, not so much technique as a tic'.[7] *Amplificatio*, and its associated features of *descriptio*, *ornatus*, were understood as the way 'one moves from the implicit to the explicit':[8] romance wholeheartedly embraced this mode, and its ample use of superlative description is testament to this. Each knight is the best, his lady the most beautiful:[9] this we expect from the genre, which relies on extravagance to imbue its contents with the value it was so often presumed to lack. The distinctly worldly, secular, and entertaining preoccupations of romance form the basis of the majority of contemporary criticism the texts received; the preface to some manuscripts of the *South English Legendary* says of texts about battles, knights, and kings, 'þat muchedel is lesynge.'[10] Superlatives overlap across the genre: 'In the werlde ther ne was a better knyghte' than the Emperor Octavian, father of the equally excellent Florent and

[5] In Dale Kramer, 'Structural Artistry in *Amis and Amiloun*', *Annuale Mediaevale* 9 (1968), 103-22, Kramer suggests the text's sense of narrative economy comes at the expense of any explicit characterization, although he considers this romance poet far more skilled than most; Edward E. Foster, in 'Simplicity, Complexity, and Morality in Four Medieval Romances', *The Chaucer Review* 31(1997), 401-19, asks: 'Could it be that we are prone to invent sophistication rather than admit ineptitude [in the popular romances]?' (p. 419). This chapter disagrees with both assessments.

[6] See for instance Gerald Morgan, 'The Worthiness of Chaucer's Worthy Knight', *The Chaucer Review* 44 (2009), 115-58 (esp. p. 155). Howard R. Patch, 'Characters in Medieval Literature', *Modern Languages Notes* 40 (1925), 1-14, is an early article considering superlative characters in medieval literature more generally.

[7] Robert Worth Frank Jr., '*Troilus and Criseyde*: The Art of Amplification', in *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies: Essays in Honor of Francis Lee Utley*, ed. by Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970), pp. 155-71 (p. 156).

[8] Zumthor, *Toward a Medieval Poetics*, pp. 28-9. See also Jane Baltzell, 'Rhetorical "Amplification" and "Abbreviation" and the Structure of Medieval Narrative', *Pacific Coast Philology* 2 (1967), 32-9.

[9] On the convention of extreme beauty, see D. S. Brewer, 'The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature, Especially "Harley Lyrics", Chaucer, and Some Elizabethans', *The Modern Language Review* 50 (1955), 257-69.

[10] *The South English Legendary*, ed. by Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill, 3 vols., EETS o.s. 235 (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 1: l. 59.

young Octavian in the romance of the same name;[11] it is also possible for Launfal to be the best knight ('Never noon better ther nas!') in *Sir Launfal*;[12] Gawain is 'the best of Englond' in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*.[13] In the world of the romance, it is narratively necessary for every knight to be the best, for the best is the standard in such tales – the point is that no one *but* Gawain would have been able to transform Ragnelle into a beautiful woman. Over a hundred years ago Charles S. Baldwin argued that

> the heroes of epic, more like the real men that we know, are more distinct from one another, Achilles from Ulysses, Beowulf from Hrothgar. The heroes of romance, somewhat indifferently endowed with all manly virtues, are all very much alike, Lancelot like Gawain, Gareth like Percival.[14]

It is true that these knights are 'very much alike', but the fact that there are Lancelot romances and Gawain romances, Gareth romances and Percival romances, texts situated within narrative traditions found across Europe over centuries, emphasizes that in the minds of romance writers these figures *were* distinct: the implications of choosing Gareth over Percival are important to consider. (Furthermore, Lancelot romances are very different to Percival romances; the role Lancelot occupies in the Arthurian universe is of an entirely different order, as will be explored in more detail in Chapter 5). There are certain presuppositions that accompany the reading of an Arthurian romance that differ to the experience of a Charlemagne text; each comes with hosts of known characters and events. It could be argued that there is a specificity implied by the use of the superlative in romance:

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[11] *Octavian*, in *Four Middle English Romances: Sir Isumbras, Octavian, Sir Eglamour of Artois, Sir Tryamour*, ed. by Harriet Hudson, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/hudson-octavian> [accessed July 2021], l. 20. Subsequent references are in-text and to this edition.

[12] *Sir Launfal*, in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-launfal> [accessed July 2021], l. 12. Subsequent references are in-text and to this edition.

[13] *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. by Thomas Hahn, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/hahn-sir-gawain-wedding-of-sir-gawain-and-dame-ragnelle> [accessed July 2021], l. 695.

[14] Charles S. Baldwin, *Introduction to English Literature* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1914), p. 65.

the form, order, and quality of the story may be conventional, but the knight in question can emerge from the sea of other knights if he is better than all the others. And so each one is; the distinction becomes, ironically, the convention. We should not presume that romance poets were unaware of this convention, or that they believed that their protagonist would ever be seriously considered the best in any sense that goes beyond the internal logic of the text – the reader must accept that they are the best in *this* text, and then discard that as they encounter the next. The manuscripts show us that these texts would not have been experienced as isolated examples of their genre. The owners of a great household miscellany such as Cambridge, University Library, MS F.f 1.6 (owned by the Findern family) would have had access to both *Sir Degrevant* and *Alexander-Cassamus*; in each romance, a character is described as a superlative example of knight. In the former the eponymous hero has no match on the battlefield ('Was never knyght that he fond, / In Fraunce ne in Englond, / Myght sette a schafft of hys hond / On a stythe stede'),[15] and in the latter we find Porrus, 'of al' considered 'the beste knyȝte'.[16] Even a credulous reader (such as the undiscerning and uneducated audiences traditionally imagined for the popular romances by critics) would be struck by the fact that multiple bests jostle together in these romances, threatening to undermine their own purported greatness. In *Hamlet*, Polonius reads Hamlet's letter to Ophelia, where he claims 'I love thee best, O *most best*, believe.'[17] 'Believe', he urges – for the tautology of 'most best', just like the overlapping superlatives of romance, works against sincerity. Are romance poets sincere when describing their heroes as the best? Does the

[15] *Sir Degrevant*, in *Sentimental and Humorous Romances*, ed. by Erik Kooper, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/kooper-sentimental-and-humorous-romances-squire-of-low-degree> [accessed July 2021], ll. 13-16.
[16] [*Alexander-Cassamus Fragment] Editio Princeps Des Mittelenglischen Cassamus (Alexanderfragments) Der Universitätsbibliothek Cambridge. Inaugural-Dissertation Zur Erlangung Der Doktorwürde Der Hohen Philosophischen Fakultät Sektion I Der K. B. Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München: Vorgelegt Am 30. Dezember 1910 Von Karl Rosskopf*, ed. by K. Rosskopf (Erlangen: K. B. Hof-und Universitätsbuchdruckerei von Junge & Sohn, 1911), l. 564.
[17] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd edn., ed. by Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett and William Montgomery (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp. 681-718, 2.2.122-3.

convention of the superlative support the individual knight – emphasizing the value and importance of a single figure's experience – or, in its ubiquity, does it achieve the opposite?

A consideration of these questions in relation to the story of Amis and Amiloun successfully illustrates the contradiction at the heart of the convention of the superlative, and gives some sense of what romance 'bestness' might signify, and how it might be challenged, redefined, even, by the secular pressures of the genre. The romance depicts the various trials and misfortunes of the two friends, who were conceived on the same day and are physically identical, linked by a relationship that transcends all others. When one is not capable of completing a task for reasons beyond his control, the other can step in; individual identity often ceases to matter, so strong is their pledge of fidelity to one another. They are the same in every way, and yet, somehow (or necessarily, in a problem of signification created by their equally superlative sameness), they are both described as 'best'. There is a fundamental paradox in this construction, and, as I will argue in this chapter, I believe the Middle English poet-translator was well aware of the problem. This is borne out in the linguistic wordplay found throughout the text, a specifically *English* reworking of the Amis and Amiloun tale – as comparisons with Insular French recensions of *Amys e Amilioun* will demonstrate. The emphatic nature of the absolute superlative form in English (most obviously through the suffix *-est*) is one reason for the notable extravagance of the Middle English *Amis*;[18] a particularly self-conscious and skilful poet able to identify and distort the conventions of the genre, and who draws out the often complex themes of justice and grace in the inherited story, is another.

[18] In the fifteenth-century *Comparacio*, Oxford grammarian John Leylond describes the way the superlative is formed in Middle English: 'How know ȝe þe superlatyf degre? For hit passeth his posytyf w(ith) þis aduerbe *maxime* and endithe in Englisse in "-yste" a(s) "wisyst", "blackyst", þat is to sey "wisist": / most wyse", "blackyst : / most blacke"' – '*Comparacio Text* O, Aberystwyth, N. L. W., MS Peniarth 356B, fols. 163r-164v', in *An Edition of the Middle English Grammatical Texts*, ed. by David Thomson (London: Garland Publishing, 1984), pp. 66-9 (p. 66).

The Patterns of Romance

The basic structure of romance has been widely and variously described. Take, for instance, Auerbach's seminal description:

> The world of knightly proving is a world of adventure. It not only contains a practically uninterrupted series of adventures; more specifically, it contains nothing but the requisites of adventure. Nothing is found in it which is not either accessory or preparatory to an adventure. It is a world specifically created and designed to give the knight an opportunity to prove himself.[19]

Although Auerbach's generalization can certainly be met with several exceptions, many of them serve to emphasize his sense of how *vital* the constant drive forward is in the romance genre. England's romances, with their more precise and developed sense of a world beyond the quest – sometimes with precise geographies, and histories, tied to specific places – offer a sense of a world beyond the quest, that does not solely exist to test the hero. But in most cases, consistent proof of knightly prowess is needed – Arthur is notably exempt from this need, for the success of his knights is enough to sustain the court while he stays, stable and unnervingly unchanging, at home. This stable quality can appear feeble at times, as is the case in the opening scenes of Chrétien's *Yvain*. Many critics have argued that a diptych[20] or tripartite[21] structure best describes the conventional romance plot (by which I mean the pattern of test, prove, and return familiar to us from Chrétien, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*) but what links such approaches is a characterization of the genre as one that that

[19] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature,* trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 136.
[20] On diptych structure, and for some examples, see Carol Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), esp. pp. 20-2.
[21] This is the approach taken in Kathryn Hume, 'Structure and Perspective: Romance and Hagiographic Features in the Amicus and Amelius Story', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 69 (1970), 89-107. Hume breaks the conventional romance into 'three basic narrative parts or movements': the first introduces the hero, and sets up a problem (usually a task or quest); the second works to close the 'gap between *what is* and *what should be*; the third is the 'finale, generally brief, showing union and reunion, reconciliation, and reassertion of order' (pp. 90-1). This is a very good description of the basic pattern; my argument teases out the hierarchy of these three movements.

builds upon what is established at the beginning of the text. From the narrative's inception, the knight is strong and brave, and the rest of the romance exists to best illustrate that. It strikes me that many of these definitions can be consolidated by a single frame: good-better-best.[22] The good knight goes on adventures that may offer him an opportunity to get even better, until he is acknowledged to be the best. This pattern can be applied to the majority of the surviving romances, and especially to those that chart an individual knight's life. With very few exceptions, the named protagonist of a romance is understood to be a superlative example of his or her kind from the very beginning, the various trials they may face along the way serving simply to confirm what the reader surely knew all along. Fair Unknown narratives, such as *Lybeaus Desconus*, are a particularly good example of this: Gingelayne arrives at Arthur's court desperate to prove himself as a knight, unaware that he is Gawain's son. Renamed Lybeaus by Arthur, his enthusiastic questing and eventual success demonstrate that his natural aptitude simply needed the space in which to flourish: he was good at the beginning, is challenged to be better, and in the text's climactic marriage and reunion scenes, he is finally publicly recognized as being of 'moche pris' – an inevitable state for the son of the king's best knight.[23] Exile-and-Return romances, such as *Havelok the Dane* and *The Romance of Horn*, also conform to the good-better-best pattern: here the heroes are denied their rightful lands or positions, but rather than functioning as any reflection of the moral value or worth of the knight in question, their subsequent low rank or poverty highlights the injustice of their betrayers and enemies. Such romances test their audience's expectation of

[22] Good-better-best obviously evokes the visions in *Piers Plowman*. Nicolette Zeeman has drawn parallels between this religious poem and thirteenth-century French grail narratives, suggesting they share an interest in personal and spiritual seeking and *aventure* – see 'Tales of Piers and Perceval: *Piers Plowman* and the Grail Romances', *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 22 (2008), 199-236.

[23] *Lybeaus Desconus*, ed. by Eve Salisbury and James Weldon (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/salisbury-and-weldon-lybeaus-desconus> [accessed July 2021], l. 2237. This is a multi-variant edition: as has been identified by the latest editors of the text, the versions found in London, Lambeth Palace Library MS 306 and Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale MS XIII.B.29 represent the central editorial tradition of the text and the most complete of the revisions, respectively, the other extant copies falling loosely into one of the two traditions. The quotation is from the Naples version in this edition. See Chapter 2 for a detailed reading of *Lybeaus Desconus*.

the good-better-best pattern, even if to prove the rule later on. Texts that do not conform to the pattern, such as *Sir Gowther*, often incite a certain degree of generic speculation:[24] this romance tracks the knight's progression from monstrous rapist and mass-murderer to a proto-saintly builder of abbeys. This conversion narrative takes much from hagiography, and in its movement from quite literally the fiendish (Gowther is conceived when his mother is deceived by the Devil disguised as her husband) to the divine, the better and best stages are certainly represented – the pattern is bad-better-best, or perhaps even worst-better-best (it is hard to imagine anything worse than an infant with teeth sharp and anger harsh enough to tear off the breasts of multiple wet-nurses). This is a rather brilliantly self-conscious play with the typical pattern: being a romance hero means that you *must* end up as the best, even if you start as the very worst. But this romance is unusual; the knight is usually perfect from the very start. There is a difference of course, between perfect and perfect but yet unproven. Comparison is the driver of narrative: the romance narrative in particular is set in a 'good' world of knights and ladies; it allows a knight some tests so that he can be compared and distinguish himself as 'better' than other, non-protagonists or antagonists; finally he is recognized as 'best'.

The criticism I would most expect the good-better-best formula to receive would be directed at the 'better' stage, which implies a sense of improvement, or change. Romance cannot be easily identified with *bildungsroman*, for instance, where, as Bakhtin posited, '[c]hanges in the hero himself acquire *plot* significance', and so, as the character learns and changes, the narrative moves forward.[25] In his consideration of 'Superman stories', Umberto Eco writes that in such narratives 'the plot must be static and must evade any development,

[24] The tendency is outlined in Joanne A. Charbonneau, 'From Devil to Saint: Transformations in *Sir Gowther*', in *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance*, ed. by Phillipa Hardman (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), pp. 21-8.
[25] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 21.

because Superman *must* make virtue consist of many little activities on a small scale, never achieving total awareness.'[26] It is true that the superlative status of most romance protagonists offers narrow scope for change (it is only down from the top); but I would suggest that these texts can still be understood as, to use Bakhtin's definition of *bildung*-narratives, stories of 'human emergence'.[27] Eco's analysis of Superman stories neglects the cumulative effect of 'many little activities' throughout the narrative: for if it is not that romance protagonists themselves change (although I would argue that this is, sometimes, the case, as will be demonstrated in the following chapters) it is that the world around them does; if they do not get better, then the society depicted in the romance, and the figures with whom the character interacts, better understand and appreciate our hero's greatness. As they overcome a series of trials, or defend the honour of a woman, or defeat the monster, the hero 'emerges' from obscurity into public glory: what the narrator and audience knew all along – that which was implicitly established by the very fact that the narrative is a romance – is finally made explicit *within* the romance world itself. The conventional marriage scene, or feast, or public celebration, is the supreme statement of *best*, but it is also a sign of the world being *better*: it has finally caught up to what always was.

Good

It is no good being the best unless your greatness is recognized. Furthermore, without some element of testing, and a degree of observation, the superlative might not exist, for it relies on comparison – *this* is *best* insofar as it is *better* than *that*. In these stanzas describing an early banquet scene, the superlative nature of Amis is clearly widely observed and appreciated:

> Than was the boteler, Sir Amis,
> *Over al yholden flour and priis*,

[26] Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 124.
[27] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, p. 21.

Trewely to telle in tale,
And douhtiest in everi dede
And worthliest in ich a wede
And semliest in sale.

Than the lordinges schulden al gon
And wende out of that worthli won,
In boke as so we rede,
That mirie maide gan aske anon
Of her maidens everichon
And seyd, "So God you spede,
Who was hold the doughtiest knight
And semlyest in ich a sight
And worthliest in wede,
And who was *the fairest man*
That was yholden in lond than,
And *doughtiest of dede*?"

Her maidens gan answere ogain
And seyd, "Madame, we schul the sain
That sothe bi Seyn Savour:
Of erls, barouns, knight and swain
The fairest man and mest of main
And man of mest honour,
It is Sir Amis, the kinges boteler;
In al this warld nis his per,
Noither in toun no tour;
He is douhtiest in dede
And worthliest in everi wede
And chosen *for priis and flour*." (464-93)

It is not possible to know how the romance would have been performed or experienced by audiences and readers, but the repeated and alliterating references to *such* perfection italicized in the passage above could be read as intentionally (and intonationally) comedic – '*And* doughtiest in everi dede,' '*And* semlyest in ich a sight.' Indeed, the metre shapes the use of superlatives here: it adds a syllable, and a stressed one, thus allowing for an unstressed preposition followed by a stressed noun. Without prepositions (the repeated *ands*) the alternating metre would not work. Susan Crane has commented that 'repetition is so ubiquitous in *Amis and Amiloun* that it becomes not a rhetorical figure so much as a

fundamental, integral part of narrative diction': it is clear that there is more to this kind of recurrence than mere conventional filler, the phrases pointedly chosen to poetic effect.[28]

Both Amis and Amiloun incite such extravagant praise, the superlative featuring in abundance in descriptions of their appearance, behaviour and actions. Although the absolute superlative (an adjective with the suffix *–est*, as in 'worthliest') is the most obvious way in which to indicate supremacy, the boys' greatness is explored in many other ways. In his study of the style of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, Mark Lambert introduces the concept of 'narrative confirmation', the process of repetition or the similarity between the words spoken by the characters and the narrator of a text. This process obviously occurs in more than just Malory's Arthuriad, and is found in both prose and verse romances as well as in other genres altogether. Lambert suggests that narrative confirmation encourages audiences to

> regard the vocabulary of a given speech as either correct or incorrect, accurate or inaccurate rather than as expressive of personality, of a unique, individual point of view… by the time we have had fifty or one hundred such confirmations, we are trained to accept the words of the Malorian narrator and the Malorian knights not as statements made from particular points of view but as Truth.[29]

In the passages of *Amis and Amiloun* quoted above, we can observe this happening. Courtiers, Belisaunt and narrator all repeat the 'doughty, semely, worthy' formula, and the accuracy (or perhaps 'truth') of this description of Amis is constructed and emphasized. Phrases are repeated verbatim, forming a kind of refrain, and are also confirmed in more subtle ways; the narrator's assertion than Amis 'over al yholden flour and priis' is echoed by Belisaunt's maidservants, where it becomes 'And chosen for priis and flour'. By using the same adjectives in reference to Amis's superlative status, conviction in the aptness of such description is demanded of the reader, maintaining the inevitability of certain narrative events

[28] Susan Crane (née Dannenbaum), 'Insular Tradition in the Story of Amis and Amiloun', *Neophilologus* 67 (1983), 611-22 (pp. 613-4).
[29] Mark Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision in Le Morte Darthur* (London: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 8-10.

of the text (marriages to the most beautiful ladies, the triumph of the heroes) and cementing these extraordinary events in the minds of the audience. Of course the most vivid contemporary readers' response we have to the convention is Chaucer's ironic sense of such phrases' vapidity in *Sir Thopas*; but even he slips into romance formulae elsewhere in his own poetry, demonstrating the utility of what Nancy Mason Bradbury characterizes as features of 'minstrelsy' in storytelling.[30]

Lambert does not explicitly link his sense of 'narrative confirmation' to the abundance of superlatives in Malory, although he does go on to write about the similarly affirmative role these words play:

> Superlatives imply standards. To describe something as the best suggests that degrees of excellence in a particular category can be measured. And frequent implied references to standards, together with a wide range of things so referred, encourage the audience to see the world of the romance as one in which values are fixed and objective (there is no "in my opinion" attached to these superlatives) and comparative worth can be determined with assurance. That superlatives occasionally contradict one another suggests only the obvious: they are used heavily, and the author isn't *really* keeping score in each of the categories whose existence we infer from his rhetoric. The important thing is that the rhetoric *suggests* he is keeping score – or that he might be.[31]

Romance poets may not '*really* [be] keeping score' of the superlatives they use in their narratives, but something perhaps neglected by this otherwise very good characterization of the abundant descriptions of romance is the notion that the *characters* of the romance, the figures being compared and exulted, might be. The *Cursor Mundi* begins with the pronouncement that:

> Man yhernes rimes for to here
> And romans rede on maneres sere;
> Of Alisaunder þe conquerour,
> Of Iuly Cesar þe emperour
> […]
> Of kyng arthour þat was so rike,

[30] Nancy Mason Bradbury, 'Chaucerian Minstrelsy: *Sir Thopas*, *Troilus and Criseyde* and English Metrical Romance', in *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance*, ed. by Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), pp. 115-24.
[31] Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision*, 26-7.

Quam non in hys tim was like.[32]

The implication here is that Arthur was incomparable (superlative-by-elimination) but anyone familiar with romance will know that there *were* knights 'like' Arthur. Arthur is king, and hierarchy matters in romance – it is, often, the only way minor characters are individuated at all – but in terms of strength, bravery, and prowess, he can be matched, and even surpassed. Arthur is generally unconcerned by this reality, but the knights in question are more uneasy with what a non-superlative king means for the collective identity of the court. In *Sir Launfal*, Launfal's prowess as a knight leads him to possess the heart of a lady more beautiful than Guinevere herself. By the end of the romance Launfal and his fairy lover Tryamour are forced to leave Arthur's court, for as the king himself admits, 'Ech man may ysé that ys sothe, / *Bryghtere* that ye [Tryamour] be'– as king, *his* wife should by rights be the 'bryghtest.'[33] Arthur should be the best knight, and yet, he is not. This is the paradox faced by each writer of Arthurian romance; the introduction of the queen's champion is the moment the resultant cracks are allowed to show. Static and unchanging, Arthur cannot leave the court and prove himself on quests, as the individual knights of the Round Table must during peacetime: and so a new position, the queen's champion, emerges. As I will explore in more detail in Chapter 5 of this thesis, Lancelot steps in to be the greatest knight for the greatest lady, although his love can never be fulfilled (for this would mean exposing adultery).[34] The tragedy of the Fellowship of the Round Table has, at its heart, this instability: it is a system that relies on greatness, which is signified by love. For the sake of stability, love in romance narratives must be meritocratic, and so the queen must love the greatest champion, and so, if followed through to its logical end, the court is destroyed. The reality of individual desire,

[32] Here I use the version found in British Museum MS. Cotton Vespasian A iii, in *Cursor mundi (The Cursor o the World): A Northumbrian Poem of the XIVth century*, ed. by Richard Morris, 3 vols issued in 7 parts, EETS o.s. 57 (London: Oxford University Press 1874–93), 1:ll. 1-4, 9-10.
[33] *Sir Launfal*, ll. 1003-5, my emphasis.
[34] See Ashe, *The Oxford English Literary History Volume I. 1000-1350*, pp. 262-3, for the development of this paradox.

inflected with personal motives and meanings more subtle than collective identity, means that in the hands of a romance author willing to consider the implications of interiority this formulation is doomed to failure; it is this reality that charges the final books of Malory's *Morte Darthur*. The problems the characters face there are wholly structural. When interiority is added, that structure recedes from view – leaving the reader to wonder as to why it is that *these particular people* behave in *these ways*. The effect of this will be more fully explored in Chapter 5, but is worth noting at this point: interiority distracts attention from structure and focuses it on individual personalities, thereby creating a novelistic effect.

Better

It is therefore an explicit provocation of the romance structure to have two heroes in *Amis and Amiloun*, and to insist that they are equal. Greatness is established in a variety of ways in these texts; *Amis and Amiloun* is no exception. The boys' hyperbolic nature is clear from an early age. As young as five it is recognized by those around them: 'The children gon then thryve, / Fairer were never noon on lyve' (49-50); a little later, 'When they were twel winter olde, / In al the londe was ther non hold / So faire of boon and blood' (58-60). This is a very common construction in the text: comparison ('fairer', 'so fair') to something else (in this case, *everyone* alive, *all* the land) leads to a sweeping assessment of superiority in the face of extremity – the boys are best by the nature of their better*ness*; simultaneously, this could be read as a contrastive, negative comment (there is *nobody better*).[35] The superlative expressions in this passage describing Amis and Amiloun's perfect love for each other are italicized, showing the density of such description:

[35] Leo Spitzer describes this form of superlative-formation as 'negative comparison which excludes the possibility of any equal in time or in space', and explores other ways the superlative is expressed in Middle English poetry in '*Explication de Texte* Applied to Three Great Middle English Poems', in *Essays on English and American Literature*, ed. by Anna Hatcher (Princeton: New Jersey, 1962), pp. 193-247 (p. 199). See also Davis Taylor, 'The Terms of Love: A Study of Troilus's Style', in *Chaucer's Troilus: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Stephen A. Barney (London: Scolar Press, 1980), pp. 231-56, on the convention in *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Over al the lond than were thai priis
And *worthliest* in wede.
So wele tho children loved hem tho,
Nas never children loved hem so,
Noither in word no in dede;
Bituix hem tuai, of blod and bon,
Trewer love nas never non,
In gest as so we rede. (137-44)

The mix of superlative and comparative inflexions in these lines leads to the sense that there is nothing 'trewer' than their love; it can be implicitly understood to be the 'trewest'. The power of this love is constructed and defended in the face of the realistic improbability of such extremity, which is acknowledged by the poet's use of the truth-claiming line 'in gest as so we rede' that follows the abundance of positive and negative comparisons; this self-conscious recognition of hyperbole is a common feature of the genre.

If we look at the Insular French analogues to the text, we find that this kind of extravagant comparison is by no means unique to the Middle English poet. The poem survives in three Insular French versions, but for the purposes of this chapter Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, MS. 345 (formerly Codex Durlac 38) (Karlsruhe) and London, British Library, MS Royal 12 C. XII (London) will be used.[36] Of the two, Karlsruhe offers a richer sense of interiority, as I discuss in further detail below. The two recensions are distinct enough to prove that romance poets and revisers made conscious decisions about the convention of greatness their genre demanded of them and, furthermore, that the Middle English poet is playing with already established heights in the story of the two friends.[37]

[36] The versions are printed in parallel in John Ford, *Anglo-Norman Amys e Amilioun: The Text of Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, MS. 345 (olim Codex Durlac 38) in Parallel with London, British Library, MS Royal 12 C. XII*, ed. by John Ford, Medium Aevum Monographs 27 (Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 2011). Subsequent references are in-text and to this edition. Translations are my own, although I have relied on Judith Weiss's translation of the London version in *The Birth of Romance in England: The Romance of Horn, The Folie Tristan, The Lai of Haveloc, and Amis and Amilun*, trans. and introduced by Judith Weiss (Tempe: ACMRS, 2009), pp. 171-88.

[37] That is not to say that the Middle English poem is a direct reworking of either of these two recensions; indeed, Susan Crane reminds us that comparisons of the two poems 'would proceed falsely' if treated as source and translation – but that 'in some cases the Middle English poem's stylistic procedures are foreshadowed suggestively' in the Insular French. See 'Insular Tradition in the Story of Amis and Amiloun', p. 611.

Amys and Amilioun are just as impressive as their Middle English counterparts. When Amilioun leaves the duke's court and returns to his father's land to take his place as ruler, his people marvel at his appearance:

> E il memes si bel estoyt
> Qe tut le pays le disoyt
> Si Deu mesmes le eust purtret,
> Plus bon ne meuz [ne] serra fet. (London, 165-8)
>
> (And he was even so handsome that all the country said that even if God himself had fashioned [him], he couldn't be any better.)

A great knight must have a beautiful wife, and indeed, the woman Amilioun marries is described as the most beautiful woman in the land ('De beauté avoit le pris / Sour touz les dames du pays', 177-8, London). Less than twenty lines later, however, the Count's daughter (who is to become Amys's wife), is afforded the same distinction, although formed differently – here, a negative comparison ('En une realme ne out plus bele', 194). This overlapping of superlatives is highly conventional – as noted above, there can be many bests – but in the context of *this* story, with its ambiguous doubling and uneasy balance of fidelity and deception, the equality of the friends' wives seems significant. Despite repeated assertions of their sameness, there is a degree of distinction established in both versions; in the Middle English *Amis*, the difference creeps in from the very first description of the boys, when Amis is merely mentioned by name, but Amiloun's introduction is accompanied by the line 'that was a childe of grete renoun' (48). As critics have noted, Amiloun's considerably more active and heroic behaviour in the tale make him at least a more *obviously* 'great' knight. John Ford, for example, suggests the pair 'fulfil separate gender roles; Amis the feminine counter-part to Amiloun's masculine one.'[38] Their simultaneous conception and identical appearance point to strongly folkloric origins, and Françoise Le Saux posits that notable moments of distinction may be intentional in order to 'dispel the suspicion of a

[38] John C. Ford, 'Contrasting the Identical', pp. 320-1.

diabolical intervention in too perfect a similarity'.[39] The proximity of the (logically) competing superlative descriptions of the women Amys and Amilioun are to marry quoted above suggests a conscious and pointed attempt on the part of the poet to maintain the 'bestness' of *both* men, their beautiful wives functioning as synecdoche for the precariousness of the whole situation. That Amys can take Amilioun's place in his wife's bed while his friend is fighting to save his honour, and seem to commit no sin there, further supports this strange equality and sameness.

Despite clear similarities in approach, there are disparities between the Insular French and Middle English versions, not least in terms of plot. The Middle English reviser ties a few of the looser ends of the story together, for there are structural inconsistencies in the earlier versions. In the Middle English, the identical gold cups (which are integral to Amis' finally identifying Amiloun in his diseased state) are introduced at the beginning of the narrative, as Amiloun has them made in preparation for their first separation as perfect symbols of their relationship. This is a distinct improvement on the Insular French versions, where the cups awkwardly first appear when Amilioun arrives at the castle and is unidentifiable, necessitating clumsy explanation. Plot differences also exemplify the varying thematic motivations of the different recensions of the text, most notably in the treatment of the death of the young sons, and Amis and Belisaunt's responses to this event**.** In the Latin, generally agreed to be hagiographic, version of the tale Belisaunt does not know that the boys have been killed in order to save Amiloun until they are alive once more, thereby silencing the possibility for horrified response;[40] the French miracle play analogue (forming part of the fourteenth-century French *Les Miracles de Nostre Dame par Personnages*) concentrates on

[39] Françoise H. M. Le Saux, 'From *Ami* to *Amys*: Translation and Adaptation in the Middle English *Amys and Amylion*', in *The Formation of Culture in Medieval Britain: Celtic, Latin, and Norman Influences on English Music, Literature, History, and Art*, ed. by Françoise H. M. Le Saux (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), pp. 111-27 (p. 127).
[40] The *Vita Sanctorum Amicii et Amelii* can be found edited from MS.lat. 6188, Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, in *Amis and Amiloun*, ed. by Eugen Kölbing (Heilbronn: Gebr. Henninger, 1884), pp. xcvi-cx.

the death of the sons (but not their unnecessarily being killed) in order to emphasize and exalt the role of the Virgin in their miraculous recovery, in keeping with the broader Marian interests of this series of plays.[41] Various poet-revisers clearly saw varying levels of significance in the narrative event that has caused modern critics the most discomfort – Belisaunt's total conviction that Amis has acted properly and sensibly. This will be further explored below, but is another symptom of the Middle English poet's concerted effort to establish the relationship between Amis and Amiloun as the clear and unassailably supreme bond in the text: familial ties do not compete, and the poet's emphasis on establishing the superlative nature of the friends is extreme enough to allow for, or even require, a moral ambiguity not fully explored in the other versions.

A consideration of the linguistic differences between Insular French and Middle English may elucidate further this shift in tone that so many have identified between the recensions. I would like to firstly and firmly set aside any preconceptions of value in this comparison; the (presumed to be) emphatic will not be regarded as inferior to the (presumed to be) subtle, here. For if one considers how the superlative is formed in each language, what becomes clear is that some of the artistic qualities so long celebrated in French or Insular French romance (and mourned in Middle English) are often quite simply the result of grammar. In French, *le moins* and *le plus* are used to indicate superiority and inferiority; the comparative is formed in a similar way (*plus… de/que*, *moins… de/que*). In the first description of the heroes' greatness in *Amys e Amilioun*, the poet quickly establishes the boys as supreme examples of romance protagonists:

> Moult furent de grant vassalage,
> Gentils e de grant parage;
> Fiz estoient de barons,

[41] *Miracles de Nostre Dame par Personnages*, ed. by Gaston Paris and Ulysse Robert, Vol. 4, Société des Anciens Textes Français (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1879). Alexandra F. Johnston presents compelling evidence that an English dramatic version also existed, in her article: '"Amys and Amylon" at Bicester Priory', *Records of Early English Drama* 18 (1993), 15-18.

Si vous dirroy bien lor nouns:
Li un estoit Amys par noun,
L'autre est appelé Amillyoun.
Li deus estoient de une nature,
Angeles resembleient de faiture. (London, 9-16)

(Both were of great lineage, gracious and of high parentage; they were sons of barons, and I shall readily tell you their names: one was Amys, by name, the other was called Amillyoun. The two were of one nature, they resembled angels in their features.)

Courageous and well-born, the boys' physical appearance conventionally matches their interior beauty, for they resemble angels (again, note the power of comparison here). The London manuscript is arguably less emphatic than Karlsruhe in its construction of the superlative, at times. As Florie and her courtiers admire the beauty of Amys, Karlsruhe uses the superlative-by-elimination model, 'moult' used again emphatically, fronted at the start of the line before the verb:

Mut fu beauz e alignez,
Des chivalers fu mud preysez,
Car tut en comoun le disoyent
Plus beaus chivaler veu ne avoyent.
E le roy memes sovent le dyt,
Unkes plus beuz chivaler ne vyt. (Karlsruhe, 355-60)

(He was handsome and well-aligned, highly esteemed among the knights. Between them it was publicly said that they had never seen a more handsome knight. The king himself agreed that he too had never seen a more handsome knight.)

In London, on the other hand, the emphatic 'plus beuz' construction is tempered by a repeated use of 'si':

Entre eux communement disoient
Qe unque *si* bel chevaler ne veient;
E li quens meme le dist
Qe onqe *si* bele chivaler ne vist. (London, 217-20)

(Between them it was publicly said they had never seen so handsome a knight; the count agreed that he too had never seen so handsome a knight.)

The difference here is between the power of 'more' and 'so'; but neither description of the knight's beauty has the unambiguously, singular confidence that is linguistically available in Middle English, and that is, indeed, used with some precision in *Amis and Amiloun*. In the

Insular French texts the judgment that emerges as a result of the comparative or superlative mood is uncertain. The text reports what people saw and said, rather than the absolute truth: as Amilioun and the treacherous steward fight, they appear to be so closely matched in strength and prowess that 'Ne savoit [nul] del chaump juger / Lequel fuit meillour chevaler' ('None knew how to judge which was the better knight', London, 651-2). In the Middle English recension the comparative sense is located in the watching crowds surrounding the fight; when he finally defeats the steward after a long battle, repeated comparative formulae emphasize the individual victory of Amiloun in the face of great and varied onlookers:

> Alle the lordinges that ther ware,
> Litel and michel, lasse and mare,
> Ful glad thai were that tide. (1369-71)

The effect of this type of individuation is interesting. The protagonists are 'doughtiest', 'worthliest', and 'semliest'; the world is bigger, smaller, older, younger, less, more. A repeated line throughout the romance is the conventional formula 'Litel and michel, lasse and mare' – the phrase is used to describe the people of the duke's court (1555), as well as the crowds watching the fight (1407). The comparative nature of the phrase allows this formula to effectively describe the rest of the world, simultaneously acknowledging the variety and disparity of people and reinforcing the fundamental individual nature of Amis or Amiloun (whichever is the subject of the particular passage in question). Indeed, the ubiquity of the line means that it is used when referring to members of society as different as it is possible to be: as the leprous Amiloun unwittingly finds his way to Amis's castle, he finds himself to be one of the many poor gathered outside, begging for alms. A servant tells Amis:

> Pover men y seighe mani thare,
> Litel and michel, lasse and mare,
> Bothe old and ying,
> And a lazer ther y fond;
> Herdestow never in no lond
> Telle of so foule a thing. (1963-8)

Used previously to describe the noble men and women of a great court, 'Litel and michel, lasse and mare' as effectively denotes the variety of the beggars and lepers congregated beyond the castle walls. That the crowd is truly multitudinous is reinforced by 'old and ying'; ubiquitous but impersonal, the opposite adjectives do work that is easy to overlook if dismissed as a stock phrase, or conventional filler. But from the crowds of poor, Amiloun quite clearly emerges: he is, of course, a romance hero, and so no normal leprosy would be good enough for him. He is the foulest leper to be found; 'Herdestow never in no lond / Telle of so foule a thing', the servant tells Amis, the superlative-by-elimination showing the extremity of Amiloun's situation. This is the fulfilment of the earlier heavenly warning, when Amiloun learned that if he took Amis' place in the fight he would be punished:

> So foule a wreche thou schalt be,
> With sorwe and care and poverté
> Nas never non wers bigon.
> Over al this world, fer and hende,
> Tho that be thine best frende
> Schal be thi most fon (1264-9)

'Best' and 'most' are significant here. Rejection of any kind is hard to bear, but a 'best frende' becoming 'most fon', a worst enemy, is surely the superlative form of this experience. Amiloun is so foul that the man who loves him most in the world is disgusted by his appearance. Narratively, it is vital that he be superlatively disgusting, for his particular 'foulenesse' is the reason he is singled out and brought before Amis. Rendered unrecognizable by the disease, the extent of his sores allows him to stand out and thus the two friends are reunited – albeit after Amis strikes Amiloun, thinking he is a beggar who has stolen the gold chalice. The cups are, we are reminded, 'bothe ful yliche / And noither lesse no mare' (2027-8); when it comes to assessing the two friends, comparatives are of only limited use – for neither is lesser or greater than the other. The hagiographic tenor often identified in the romance may offer one explanation for this incomparability: once the boys are considered saintly, or divine, a shift occurs, for they must no longer be subject to the

constant comparisons that exist in the world.[42] The shades of grey that apply to postlapsarian existence are at extreme odds with the binary formulation of heaven, where there is either perfection (unity with God) or not – best, or not best. In mortal life comparatives reign supreme, providing shades of greatness but nothing approaching the simple perfection of heaven, where difference and distinction no longer equate to separation. Indeed, as I discussed in my Introduction, in this sense individuation was far less appealing than it may be in the modern imagination. This Augustinian concept is clarified by Aquinas, who describes the dizzying diversity of man and the great unity of God:

> Unde dicendum est quod distinctio rerum et multitudo est ex intentione primi agentis, quod est Deus… nam bonitas quae in Deo est simpliciter et uniformiter, in creaturis est multipliciter et divisim. Unde perfectius participat divinam bonitatem, et repraesentat eam, totum universum, quam alia quaecumque creatura.
>
> (The distinction (*distinctio*) and multitude of things come from the intention of the first agent, who is God…. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided; and hence the whole universe together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever.)[43]

Together, and as one, Amis and Amiloun represent a unity closer to the divine wholeness of God, rather than the messy and complicated divisions and gradations of the world. Amis and Amiloun's divine natures permit them respite from the direct comparisons of the world. *Better* than their environment, they need only answer to each other.

Best?

All these superlatives require justification; they also require constant exposition, in the form of evidence of success when challenged – this may be one reason for the 'impossible

[42] Dean R. Baldwin, in '*Amis and Amiloun*: The Testing of *Treuþe*', makes a similar argument – suggesting that as the friends 'are presented as above ordinary life', they can and should not be considered exemplary models of behaviour (p. 356).
[43] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae prima pars*, from *Library of Latin Texts – Series A* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), Prima Pars, Quaestio XLVII, Articulus 1. Translation from *Summa theologica*, trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Boston: MobileReference.com, 2010), available at ProQuest Ebook Central [accessed July 2021], 1.47.1.

predicament' trope on which so many romances are based.[44] There are two events that can be aligned with the impossible predicament in the story of Amis and Amiloun, and both concern the complexities of sacrifice: Amiloun's decision to suffer the punishment of leprosy for fighting in Amis's stead against the steward, and Amis's decision to kill his own children in order to cure this ensuing leprosy. A comparison between the London and Karlsruhe manuscripts of the Insular French *Amys* again exposes stark differences in the ways in which this impossibility is handled by the respective versions. Karlsruhe's extra lines and deeper interest in the intentions and motivations of its protagonists offers audiences a more satisfying psychological portrayal of these predicaments. As Amilioun contemplates taking his friend's place, some 100 lines are dedicated to an agonised lament. The difficulty of the decision is clear as he prays and pleads to God:

> Sire Amylloun lors se turna
> E vent tut dreit devant la croiz,
> Tremble le quer, lerment les oyls,
> E dyt a pitouse pleynt privé:
> "Hee sire Deu!" fet il, "roy benuré,
> Ke pur nostre sauvacioun
> Suffrites si forte passioun,
> Tu sire, ke veis e entens
> Les corages de tote gens,
> A tei soul, a la croy seynte,
> Ma reqeste faz, e ma pleinte,
> Qe ce cheytyf cors esgarrez
> Endreit de tei seit conseillez." (Karlsruhe, 1000-12)
>
> (Sir Amylloun then turned and came straight before the cross with a trembling heart, tears in his eyes, and in a piteously plaintive plea implored: 'Oh sir God! Benevolent king, who for our salvation suffered so strong a passion – you, Sire, who sees and tends to the courage of all people. To you only, at the sainted cross, I make my request, and my plea, that this mistake of my heart that I have made causing my exile may be led by your saintly counsel.")

[44] This is J. A. Burrow's term, in *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 164.

This is a notably long instance of direct speech, the inevitability of his willing sacrifice hanging heavy in the pain and shame he can already acutely imagine. In an audacious move, the poet encourages readings of this sacrifice as something akin to the behaviour of martyrdom, as Amilioun effectively compares the sacrifice he is about to make with Jesus's suffering on the cross 'pur nostre sauvacioun'. The relative clustering of second and first person personal pronouns in this passage ('tu', tei' standing in opposition to the repeated '*ma* reqeste faz, e *ma* pleinte') serves to reinforce the notion that Amilioun considers this to be a shared experience. Aligning his personal sacrifice (to save an individual, Amys), with Christ's ultimate sacrifice (to save all of humanity) makes sense only in the context of this romance, where as we have seen, the friends are repeatedly plucked from a sea of generality, their importance reinforced by their singularity in the face of masses. Amys is the best, and therefore, to Amilioun, more important than *the rest of the world*. Amilioun becomes fully Christlike in martyring himself to save his friend, rather than simply bearing witness to the faith – made all the more outrageous given that his actions are so unchristian, and punished by God. The point of this prayer, then, may be to nudge the audience into forgetting that he is planning to sin: sin and punishment can then be wound up together into a selfless deed. In the Middle English text, the oath the boys swear to each other stands 'in wele an wo, in wrong and right' (149); this curious promise clearly foreshadows the 'wrong' the brothers will commit in order to upheld their 'trewthe-plight'. As Amis explains why he can't fight the steward, he points out 'Ich have the wrong and he the right' (940) – and so he fears he would be killed in the duel. When Amiloun hears of the trial, the poet again uses the formula: 'Y schal the help in right and wrong' (1451).[45] As studies of sworn brotherhood in this period have shown, troth-plights carried a 'specific set of obligations, which included fighting

[45] Lancelot uses this phrase when speaking about his love for Guinevere in *Le Morte Darthur*; see Chapter 5 for more on the implications of his superlative love for the queen.

alongside the brother, sharing possessions, fighting duels on behalf of the brother, claiming his wer-gild or, if necessary, avenging his death.'[46] It is an 'impossible predicament' for Amiloun because from this point he never had a real choice: the 'trewthe' the boys swore to each other as children precludes all else. This is definitively unorthodox, and yet the poem continually casts it as not so.

But Karlsruhe chooses to explore the *personal* implications of this non-choice. The shame of the leprosy Amilioun knows awaits him as punishment causes him not insignificant pain – 'Pur quei, Due, feis tu tel convenaunt, / Qe cel hounte me aprochast?' ('For why, God, have you made such a covenant, that this humiliation is cast upon me?', 1022-3), he begs, in an echo of Christ's pleas on the cross. He asks why, but not for alternatives; in the all-or-nothing, superlative world of romance, the question would be entirely inappropriate. Amilioun's suffering should be considered akin to the worldly trials faced by martyrs; the value of their life is located in their willing *consent* to experience pain when alive, buoyed with hope for and faith in God's grace. This is not exactly choice – they do not *want* to be tortured or killed – but acceptance of the terrible price of love, freely willed.

This extended pause in the action represents just 4 lines of the London manuscript;[47] it is a symptom of Karlsruhe's emphasis on the individuality of the characters. John Ford finds long passages of the Karlsruhe manuscript to be exceedingly similar to the Middle English

[46] Robert Stretter, 'Engendering Obligation: Sworn Brotherhood and Love Rivalry in Medieval English Romance', in *Friendship in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Explorations of a Fundamental Ethical Discourse*, ed. by Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), pp. 501-24 (p. 505). For more general studies of sworn brotherhood and male friendships and relationships in Middle Ages and beyond, see Maurice Keen, 'Brotherhood in Arms', *History* 47 (1962), 1-17; John Boswell, *Same-sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). See John C. Ford, 'Merry Married Brothers: Wedded Friendship, Lovers, Language and Male Matrimonials in Two Middle English Romances', *Medieval Forum* 3 (2003), available at: <http://www.sfsu.edu/~medieval/> [accessed July 2021], for a consideration of the concept specific to *Amis and Amiloun*.

[47] 'Amillioun l'ad bien entendu,
E la prist sicom son dreu,
Mes pur ceo ne vout lesser,
Mes la receipt come sa mullier' (ll. 721-4).

text, the presence of English influence on both vocabulary and syntax leading him to describe this recension as the closest of the extant Insular French manuscripts to the Middle English poem.[48] It is significant, I think, that the English Amiloun also pauses – his stanza of anguish pales in comparison to the extended reflection we find in Karlsruhe, but he quite literally stops to think the choice through: 'That knight gan hove stille so ston / And herd tho wordes everichon, / That were so gret and grille' (1273-5), eventually deciding to accept the punishment as God's 'wille' because 'for drede of care / To hold mi treuthe schal y nought spare' (1282-3). Once again, the 'trewthe-plight' takes precedence, Amiloun self-consciously choosing both wrong (the morally questionable decision to kill an innocent man) and pain (the ensuing leprosy) for his brother. This is a heroic, not a moral, dilemma – Amiloun is not concerned, in this moment of contemplation, with what is *right*, but whether he is strong enough to bear the terrible price of the sacrifice. Greatness is suddenly afforded more significance than morality: this is the effect of the pause, and this is what makes the 100 lines of Karlsruhe so extraordinary. In both versions, he reaches the eventual conclusion that Amis is worth the punishment of leprosy. His will be a life physically marked by shame; throughout the Middle Ages leprosy was considered to be the result of God's judgment, to varying effect – most commonly, as punishment for (particularly sexual) sin, or, in the case of some holy unfortunates, as a sign of distinction and blessing. The leper could be understood as having been granted particular grace from God, as they had the chance to start repenting for their sins in this life, potentially leading to earlier redemption after death.[49] Release from the suffering through a cure or in death was entirely dependent on the will of God, and this compounded the moral significance the disease held – but the pain of leprosy could also be

[48] See Ford's 'Introduction' and esp. pp. 16-17 in *Amys e Amilioun*. In *The Birth of Romance in England*, Weiss also comments that the Karlsruhe manuscript is 'evidently related in some way' to the Middle English romance (p. 28), as does Crane, 'Insular Tradition in the Story of Amis and Amiloun', p. 611.
[49] R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987), p. 60.

understood as an actively positive experience, bringing the sufferer closer to Christ through ascetic trial and reflection. As she slowly died of the disease, the Cistercian laysister Alice of Schaerbeke wrote 'Dear sister, do not grieve [for me]; and do not think that I suffer for or expiate my own sins; I suffer rather for those who are already dead and in the place of penitence [i.e., purgatory] and for the sins of the world."[50] Regardless of whether we read Amiloun's leprosy as punishment or distinction, what is clear is that he suffers not only for himself but for his friend, a reality that makes Amis's violent episode upon their reunion, when he no longer recognizes his brother, all the more painful.

The power of comparatives and superlatives reaches full force in the final events of the narrative. Once he has recognized his friend, Amis insists on taking care of Amiloun; this decision is not immediately welcomed by his wife Belisaunt, who is horrified that a leper has been allowed into their home:

> "Sir," sche seyd, "wat is thi thought?
> Whi hastow him into halle ybrought
> For Him that this world wan?" (2158-60)

Amis's reply is emotive; she may not be able to imagine what he was thinking, but he worries that she may not understand why this is something he must do:

> "O dame," he seyd, "bi Seyn Jon,
> Me nas never so wo bigon,
> Yif thou it wost understond,
> For better knight in world is non,
> Bot almost now ichave him slon
> And schamely driven to schond". (2161-6)

In a text far more interested in homosocial than romantic relationships, this is a moment of rare intimacy between husband and wife.[51] The very fact this conversation concerns the

[50] Quoted in Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 69.
[51] On homosociality, and the potential for a queer reading of this text, see Sheila Delany, 'A, A and B: coding same-sex union in *Amis and Amiloun*', in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England,* pp. 63-81.

friends may be the reason for the interiority it depicts: Amis's uncertainty that his wife could fully grasp the importance of this man represents how deeply personal his love for him is. His use of the superlative-by-elimination is for her benefit ('nas never so wo bigon', 'For better knight in world is non') – this may allow her access to his 'thought' and inform her 'understanding'. The distinct and individual nature of the love between Amis and Amiloun is reinforced through the convention of the superlative. When she realises who the leper is, Belisaunt immediately welcomes him, tending to his wounds and bathing his body. As his leprosy is the result of her desire for Amis, this is perhaps an understandable sign of gratitude. Less understandable, and, indeed, the cause of much critical debate, is her reaction to the text's most troubling sequence: the infanticide.

In what amounts to a dubious reworking of the Abraham and Isaac story, Amis receives a divine message: an angel informs him that the blood of his two young sons would heal Amiloun, and so he is faced with a choice. He must either kill his innocent children, or, by letting them live, *knowingly* consign his friend to a life of leprosy; this is a choice between committing one terrible act, or failing to repay his friend for another (for it is important that Amiloun's suffering is the result of the murder of the steward, who may be unpleasant but is frustratingly innocent). What distinguishes this sacrifice from Amiloun's earlier choice is that this time it is a divinely sanctioned 'wrong': Amis may feel personal guilt for killing his children, but has no cause for concern as to the morality of the event (indeed, this is compounded by the fact that Amiloun also receives the same instructions). Through considerable narratorial maneuvering (the 'wrong and right' formula punctuating the romance at regular intervals), this is not a question of what is morally right, but rather, how much Amiloun is willing to sacrifice for his superlative friend: the answer is everything else. As he contemplates the two possible outcomes, negative superlatives by comparison and comparatives jostle and reveal that one choice is in fact the more terrible:

Ac for his childer him was ful wo,
For fairer ner non born.
Wel loth him was his childer to slo,
And *wele lother* his brother forgo,
That is so kinde ycorn. (2216-20, my emphasis)

Amis may be 'lothe' to slay his children, but he is 'wele lother' to subject his brother to a life of leprosy. He is 'lother' because Amiloun is irreplaceable, and thus not subject to the direct comparatives that apply to the rest of the world. It is worth noting that his children are also conventionally brilliant ('for fairer ner non born'); as soon as they are separated, both Amis and Amiloun seem to require supplementary greatness, as if to make up their now-incomplete superlative status. Amiloun quickly acquires a companion, Amoraunt:

A gentiler child, for sothe to sain,
In world no wot y non.
He is the *fairest* gome
That ever Crist yaf Cristendome
Or layd liif opon. (1973-7, my emphasis)

It is of course only right that Amis and Amiloun would be surrounded by similarly superlative figures. For this makes Amis's decision even more significant: no matter how good his children are, Amiloun is better, and so he would be 'lother'. The love between the friends is not comparable to any other relationship, and this is borne out in the decision that Amis makes: for, as he states, 'Jhesu, when it is His wille, / May send me childer mo' (2336-7). The moral validity of this decision is compounded by Belisaunt's total acquiescence upon discovering her children have been killed by her husband – her assertion that 'God may sende ous childer mo / Of hem have thou no care' (2393-4) has struck more than a few critics as unrealistically callous, or as evidence of the deviance hinted at earlier in the story through her seduction of Amis as conventional temptress (as Jill Mann has commented, it seems all too easy to read this poem from a 'masculinist perspective').[52] It is of course deeply

[52] See Jill Mann, 'Messianic Chivalry in *Amis and Amiloun*', *New Medieval Literatures* 10 (2008), 137-59 (pp. 154-5), for an overview of the roles she plays.

wrongheaded to misogynistically read a moment when character is subordinated so completely to narrative structure as evidence for her perceived cruelty – for if considered an extension of the narrative logic of the poem, her pragmatism is the only correct response to the dramatic event. The children are not Amiloun, and Amiloun is the best. This is a sentiment echoed by Malory's Arthur in the final book of the *Morte Darthur*; once the infidelity of Guinevere and Lancelot has been exposed and the court begins to disintegrate, Arthur states that he is 'soryar for my good knyghtes losse than for the losse of my fayre quene; for quenys I myght have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company'.[53] The lack of specificity here is significant: he speaks of 'quenys', not Guinevere; Amis and Belisaunt refer to 'childer', not individuals. These are categories and roles, replaceable in a way the superlative is not. The protagonist, or hero, is the only romance role that simply cannot be done without: but in the Amis and Amiloun story, it has been split, and the result is that all other character-types and roles are exposed as expendable.[54] Just like the love between Amis and Amiloun, the glory of the Round Table – a collective the like of which the world had never seen before – represents a best that can only be compared with itself.

Good ≠ Best

The story of Amis and Amiloun exposes the fact that being the *best at* or *most of* something does not guarantee that you are in the right, or even good. In fact, this truth is illustrated throughout the narrative, for the task that forms the basis of the impossible predicaments to come – the fight in which Amiloun assumes his friend's identity – is necessary precisely

[53] Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur: The Original Text edited from the Winchester Manuscript and Caxton's Morte Darthur*, ed. by P. J. C. Field (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017), 886.30-31 – 887.1. Subsequent references are in-text and to this edition.
[54] The roles and types of romance characters are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

because, as Edward E. Forster argues, 'the steward is evil, but in the right; Amis, however much the victim, is in the wrong'.[55] Amiloun, admonished by the angel before he goes into battle and kills a man for telling the truth, is also in the wrong. Foster's article is charged with clear frustration, which centres on the infanticide:

> the poem is just full of too much nastiness to be retrieved by a happy ending…I know what I am supposed to think; but I can't. I can't because sleaze abounds and is respectfully rewarded. Oh, there is an occasional poetically just retribution, but by and large this poem is simply a matter of God snatching the corrupt from destruction. There is not here the simple repentance of Robert or the graceful salvation of Cleges. Here are mean people continually rescued from their own immorality. That may justify God, but it is hard to see how it justifies the narrative.[56]

In the emotion of Foster's response, we can identify the central crux of the poem: what charges this observation is an acute sense of the injustice of it all. Logically, morally, Amis's decision should be clear: the sons *should* live, Amiloun *could* find peace some other way – he is, after all, the named hero of a romance. The tension of the choice takes something of a hit if the conventions of the genre are considered, which, of course, they would have been by initial audiences – contemporary readers and listeners would have been much more attuned than the modern critic to the rules and patterns by which romance worlds function. A happy, divinely-sanctioned ending for both brothers would doubtlessly have been expected – it is, therefore, curious that the particular method of resolution offered by this narrative has troubled critics so much. It is the *narrative* injustice of the event that bothers Foster; the fact that the children are miraculously resurrected so soon after Amiloun's recovery simply adds fuel to the fire of irritation. What was the point, one could ask, of forcing Amis to make the sacrifice? Without having to experience the real and full consequences of murdering his own children, should Amis's actions truly be considered a sacrifice at all? It all seems, in this reading, most unfair.

[55] Foster, 'Simplicity, Complexity, and Morality', p. 413.
[56] Foster, 'Simplicity, Complexity, and Morality, p. 418.

There are obvious flaws in Foster's approach to the text, not least in his apparent treatment of the characters as real people. But the lack of justice he observes is significant: the story of Amis and Amiloun may adhere to the rules of the romance world it portrays, but it does not satisfy typical conceptions of justice. This response is reminiscent of the difficulty Chaucer's Griselda has caused critics, in *The Clerk's Tale*. Often characterized as either wildly monstrous or monstrously moral, Griselda's constancy throughout the tale means that she accepts her husband's cruel behaviour, remaining faithful to him even as she believes her children are being killed.[57] There are obvious parallels between the behaviour of Griselda and Belisaunt; both are mothers who accept the choices of their husbands, and hold the men's right to make these decisions over the value of their children's lives. Rather than understand this as passive wifely submission, however, it is important to recognize that this is, in fact, an active choice: it is not thoughtless acceptance. Griselda consents to Walter's will, and so does not disagree with his desire – there is still space in this dialectic for personal pain, which we see acutely felt throughout the tale: 'Grisildis moot al suffre and consente, / And as a lamb she sitteth meke and stille / And leet this cruel sergeant doon his wille.'[58] As Laura Ashe has argued, 'Griselda's creed is in Walter's goodness; and the strength of her faith is such that it creates that goodness'.[59] Griselda insists that Walter is the best until he is; a similar process is taking place in *Amis and Amiloun*, where the *interpretation* of the actions and superlative status of the eponymous characters – what they represent – comes to mean more than the true moral validity of those actions. The injustice that Foster and other critics have charged these texts with fails to acknowledge the power of this romance mechanism: such stories aren't about real people but about interpretation, and the superfluity of love in each story

[57] See J. Allan Mitchell, 'Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale" and the Question of Ethical Monstrosity', *Studies in Philology* 102 (2005), 1-26, on the dichotomy of the monstrous and the moral in the tale.
[58] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Clerk's Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn., ed. by Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 137-53, ll. 537-9.
[59] Laura Ashe, 'Reading like a Clerk in the Clerk's Tale', *Modern Language Review* 101 (2006), 935-44 (p. 939).

(Griselda's for Walter, Belisaunt's for Amis, and Amis and Amiloun's for each other) means that the unimaginable can be accepted as right. In unambiguously religious texts, such superfluity of love would be called grace.

In both cases the only available alternative explanation is that Amis/Walter is God, who tests and tries us, who kills his son – but these narratives cannot fully contain such a claim, and so must give up: literally, in Chaucer's case, since he knew that was Petrarch's interpretation. Recent years have provided more subtle analyses of medieval attitudes to justice than were offered by the twentieth century, for the concept was central to much popular and scholastic thought.[60] The Devil's rights (also known as the Abuse-of-Power or *Christus Victor*), which framed the Incarnation as a form of divine trick to entrap a 'trickster' Devil, [61] were explored in a variety of theological and literary texts, and the concept provides many useful parallels with the story of Amis and Amiloun.[62] The idea has its foundation in patristic conceptions of the power of the Devil, which relied on an acute sense of the gulf between the total perfection of God and the flaws of postlapsarian humanity. Man had willingly subjected himself to the Devil by succumbing to temptation: from this point, the Devil had a right over the sinful souls of mankind, until the coming of Christ. Tricked by the reality that Christ was God, Man, and, crucially, sinless, the Devil overstepped the bounds of divine justice by subjecting him to his 'empire of death', and consequently lost his rights to

[60] Huizinga's chapter 'The Violent Tenor of Life' poses a particularly bleak picture of what he characterizes as the 'popular sense of justice', which 'always sanctioned the most rigorous penalties' – *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, trans. by F. Hopman (London: Penguin, 1990), esp. pp. 13-17.

[61] For a consideration of the pervasive nature of the theory, and particularly the influence of folkloric 'trickster' qualities in popular thought, see Kathleen M. Ashley, 'The Guiler Beguiled: Christ and Satan as Theological Tricksters in Medieval Religious Literature', *Criticism* 24 (1982), 126-37. See also C. W. Marx, *The Devil's Rights and the Redemption in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), for an extensive study of the concept. Marx revises R. W. Southern's seminal analysis of the topic, cited below.

[62] In Mann, 'Messianic Chivalry in *Amis and Amiloun*', Mann uses the notion of 'blood brotherhood', and of the 'disguised' Christ (God in Man's form) fighting for humanity, to elucidate the sacrifices made in the romance. Although her analysis mentions the parallels with the Devil's rights, it does not focus on justice, as will be the case here.

that justice completely.[63] The well-known objections of Anselm and Abelard in the eleventh and twelfth centuries queried the fundamental validity of this contract. Anselm's concerns with the patristic arguments were clear: any 'right' to torment humanity that the Devil held after the fall was given to him by God, who had judged humanity deserving of that torment. Indeed, the Devil should truly be understood to hold humanity not by *right* but *power*, this power dependent on the ready supply of humans existing in a state of sin that the Devil received until Christ's sacrifice, and, fundamentally, God's will for this punishment to continue and then end. Abelard was to challenge the reality of the Devil's rights even further; if redemption simply required God's will (or Word made Flesh), then the complexity of the Incarnation, and, most particularly, the indignity of Jesus's difficult and underserved death on the cross begins to appear unjustifiably difficult to rationalize. Such cruelty did not make sense to the theologian, his horror at the accepted injustice palpable in the *Commentaria in epistulam Pauli ad Romanos*:

> Quam uero crudele et iniquum uidetur, ut sanguinem innocentis in pretium aliquod quis requisierit, aut ullo modo ei placuerit innocentem interfici, nedum Deus tam acceptam Filii mortem habuerit, ut per ipsam uniuerso reconciliatus sit mundo.
>
> (How very cruel and unjust it seems that someone should require the blood of an innocent person as a ransom, or that in any way it might please him that an innocent person be slain, still less that God should have so accepted the death of his Son that through it he was reconciled to the whole world.)[64]

Jesus faced and overcame a difficult, underserved death. In the injustice and pain of that experience, any right the Devil may or may not have held over humanity was rendered immaterial in comparison to the extreme love the *choice* to die for another's sins represented. For it is here that Abelard located the true power of this dialectic: Ashe writes, 'Christ's life and his death teach us that love is greater than all things, and free us from the need to fear

[63] R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm and his Biographer: A Study of Monastic Life and Thought 1059-c.1130* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), esp. p. 94.
[64] Quoted in Ashe, *The Oxford English Literary History: Volume I*, p. 173.

anything.'[65] Notions of fairness or justice are, in the end, irrelevant when compared with such love.

I am not suggesting that the *Amis*-poet is actively participating in contemporary discussions of justice; nor am I in any way associating this popular text with the theological expositions that followed Anselm and Abelard's controversial pronouncements on the topic. However, it is significant, I think, that questions of justice continue to trouble the poem's modern commentators, and that the poem is the product of a period in which conceptions of this kind of justice were particularly volatile, and particularly up for negotiation. The concept is explored in vernacular texts both contemporary to and later than the Middle English recension of the Amis story; it is, perhaps unsurprisingly, more explicitly the subject of religious rather than secular texts, although other romances, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, demand similarly subtle considerations of what is 'right' and what is 'good'. P. J. C. Field identifies in the literature of the period a taste for 'stories in which a single virtue was tested to the exclusion of others';[66] it could be this feature of texts such as *Amis and Amiloun* (with its commitment to 'trewthe') and *The Clerk's Tale* (patience and constancy) that provokes a sense of injustice in readers. But in a religious allegory such as *Piers Plowman*, more than one virtue is tested: as Will seeks Do-Well, Do-Better and Do-Best (figures that align with the pattern of romance this chapter has hoped to elucidate), he encounters a much more complex series of virtues. The dreamer often interrogates the allegorical characters he meets, identifying worldly conceptions of injustice in the various qualities and truths they represent. In Passus I, Holy Church informs the dreamer that:

> For though ye be trewe of youre tonge and treweliche wynne,
> And as chaste as a child that in chirche wepeth,
> But if ye loven leelly and lene the povere,
> Of swich good as God yow sent goodliche parteth,

[65] Ashe, *The Oxford English Literary History: Volume I*, p. 174.
[66] In P. J. C. Field, 'A Rereading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Studies in Modern Philology* 68 (1971), 255-69 (pp. 264-5).

Ye ne have na moore merite in masse ne in houres
Than Malkyn of hire maydenhede, that no man disireth.[67]

It is not only possible but probable that even if the dreamer lived a completely pure life, he would experience hardship or pain in some capacity; Holy Church points to the virtues that require sacrifice, that cost the individual. Indeed, the Incarnation is the ultimate proof of this, for as both Man and God Christ's pain on the cross exemplifies the harsh reality of postlapsarian existence on earth. Holy Church attempts to demonstrate that grace does not function on a give and take basis – it is not an investment, from which the individual can gain happiness or enlightenment on demand. Consider also the maiden in *Pearl*, forced to explain to the dreamer there that God's grace should not be understood as a commensurable commodity, after his accusations that

Þyself in heuen ouer hyȝ þou heue,
To make þe quen þat watȝ so ȝonge.
What more honour moȝte he acheue
Þat hade endured in worlde stronge,
And lyued in penaunce hys lyueȝ longe
Wyth bodyly bale hym blysse to byye?
What more worschyp moȝt he fonge
Þen corounde be kynge by cortaysé?[68]

The maiden 'lyfed not two ȝer in oure þede';[69] the dreamer struggles to see how this brevity can be rewarded as soon as, and as much as, the hard life of one who has suffered for years. In a poem of exceptional beauty, the fraught conversation is notable for the surges of disagreement it brings, adding a note of sometimes stark realism to the highly allegorical exposition. The finely-told parable of the Vineyard can not placate him; again the speaker charges:

Me þynk þy tale vnresounable
…

[67] William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, 2nd edn., ed. by A. V. C. Schmidt (London: Dent, 1995), I. 179-84.
[68] *Pearl*, in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, 5th edn. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), pp. 53-110, ll. 473-80.
[69] *Pearl*, l. 483.

In sauter is sayd a verce ouerte
Þat speke3 a poynt determynable:
"Þou quyte3 vchon as hys desserte,
Þou hy3e Kyng ay pertermynable.'
Now he þat stod þe long day stable,
And þou to payment com hym byfore,
Þenne þe lasse in werke to take more able,
And euer þe lenger þe lasse þe more."[70]

It is as if the dreamer's initial joy upon discovering the pearl is overshadowed by his sense of injustice. The pettiness of the situation is surely compounded if we consider what it is the speaker is truly taking issue with; that a father would not rejoice in the peace and beauty of a child's afterlife is a damning indictment of mortal conceptions of what is 'fair'. But the maiden, no longer subject to the trivialities of this world, uses an entirely different set of semiotic markers of value: the dreamer is preoccupied with comparisons ('þe lenger, þe lasse, þe more'), whereas she experiences eternity, in which such differences cease to cause any meaningful effect. It is the pettiness of scarcity and finitude that charges these worldly conceptions of injustice.

There are quite clear parallels between Anselm and Abelard's analysis and the sacrifices made in the story of Amis and Amiloun; furthermore, Foster's frustration with the injustice of the romance recalls Abelard's horror over the notion that God would 'require' the death of his innocent son in order to redeem humanity. Consider Amilioun's pleas to God in Karlsruhe, where he directly compares Jesus's death on the cross to his own sacrifice, or the emphasis placed on the perfection of the two sons, who are killed, according to the angel's instructions, 'on Cristes night, / Swiche time as Jhesu, ful of might, / Was born to save mankunne' (2251-3). Three days later the Feast of the Holy Innocents would be celebrated, remembering Herod's massacre of the infants in the vicinity of Bethlehem; this midwinter period, charged by feast days of birth and death, offers a particularly significant space in

[70] *Pearl*, ll. 590, 593-600.

which to experience the death of the children and Amiloun's restoration to health. In a collection of carols found in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 302 (belonging to John 'The Blind' Audelay), the massacre of the infants is a highly emotive and dramatic experience:

> Crist crid in cradil, "Moder, ba, ba!"
> The childer of Isral cridyn, "Wa, wa!"
> Fore here merth hit was aga
> When Erod fersly cowth hem fray!
> With al the reverens that we may,
> Worchip we Childermasday.
>
> Al knavechilder with two yere
> Of age in Bedlem, fere or nere,
> Thai chedyn here blod with swerd and spere –
> Alas, ther was a rewful aray!
> With al the reverens that we may,
> Worchip we Childermasday.[71]

It is a grisly spectacle; strictly speaking, the unbaptized pre-Passion infants cannot be martyrs. The feast days immediately following Christmas are Saint Stephen's Day, Saint John's Day, Holy Innocents Day, and Saint Thomas Becket of Canterbury's Day, each of which is considered in this series of carols. The editors of Audelay's manuscript point to *The Golden Legend*, where Jacobus de Voragine also writes about Stephen, John, and the Innocents: all are associated with Christ's birth, illuminating 'the different classes of martyrs . . . the first is willed and endured, the second willed but not endured, the third endured without being willed. Saint Stephen is an example of the first, Saint John of the second, the Holy Innocents of the third.'[72] The event is described in Matthew 2:16-18, where the anguish of the women of Bethlehem is said to fulfil Jeremiah's prophecy: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted,

[71] 'Carol 9. Day of the Holy Innocents', in *Poems and Carols (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 302)*, ed. by Susanna Greer Fein (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2009), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/fein-audelay-poems-and-carols-carol-sequence#c9> [accessed July 2021], ll. 1-12.
[72] Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1:49-50, quoted in *Poems and Carols.*

because they are no more'. This is the expected response to the killing of innocent children; but Belisaunt exhibits none of the 'rewful aray' of the carol, or the inconsolability of Rachel. This is not to say that her acceptance of the infanticide does not come at a considerable personal cost: she can *feel* and *will* different things, the gap between the two states providing a pathos that is perhaps too often neglected.[73] Just like Griselda in *The Clerk's Tale*, Belisaunt is appropriately emotional ('Than was the levedi ferly wo'), looks to her husband ('And seighe hir lord was also'), and chooses to 'comfort him ful yare' (2389-400), for she understands what was at stake for him in this sacrifice. To use *The Golden Legend*'s categories: innocent and unknowing, the murdered children are examples of the third class of martyrs ('endured without being willed'); Griselda, Belisaunt, and Amis would have to be placed in the first class ('willed and endured'). Through the pain of such endurance come the greatest rewards: in this romance, the miraculous resurrection of the children; in the case of true martyrs, eternal life in heaven.

If we were to somewhat crudely extend the parallels with the theology of the Passion even further, we could say: in the act of sacrificing his innocent and perfect children, Amis assumes the role of both God and Jesus. Amiloun, tormented as a result of his guilt, represents humanity, saved by the ultimate sacrifice his brother makes. As with every troubling and questionable decision made throughout this romance, Amis's sacrifice is the result of love: his extraordinary love for Amiloun gives him the strength to commit the unthinkable act of filicide. The only way to understand (let alone condone) the behaviour of the two men is to use Abelard's logic, and consider their actions through the magnifying lens of love – a force *greater* than fear, and the *greatest* power in this narrative.

[73] This is how Ashe resolves Griselda's acceptance of Walter's supposed child-killing, in 'Reading like a Clerk in the Clerk's Tale''. She writes: 'this pathos is the essential ingredient of martyrdom: the martyr must feel the pain, must undergo the suffering, which he nevertheless reads, interprets, as the route to the highest good; that is, suffering is itself good', p. 942.

The sense of injustice that so many have felt when reading this text should not be dismissed outright as irrelevant, for it could be argued that certain poet-revisers of the story of Amis and Amiloun – most particularly the Middle English and Karlsruhe poets – do offer some space for reflection on the topic, extending speeches, providing moments of interiority and pain. But to condemn a sacrifice that results in Amiloun's restoration and is rewarded in the miraculous resurrection of the sons is to neglect quite how superlatively the two friends love each other; it is to miss the point of the text, that both defends and exposes the extreme effect of such superlative love. The unjustified death of innocents could *only* make sense in the face of such love, which has been constructed and supported throughout the English romance by a concerted effort to emphasize the superlative nature of the brothers. There is a happy ending, of sorts – but this resolution is the result of an often dirty fight, and relies on God's grace to tie up the loose ends that even Amis and Amiloun are not great enough to control. It is fitting, therefore, that the poem ends with a form of acknowledgment of the divine involvement in the fortuitous conclusion, as the brothers

> let reyse a faire abbay
> And feffet it ryght wel thoo,
> In Lumbardy, in that contray,
> To senge for hem tyl Domesday
> And for her eldres also. (2498-502)

The love between the two brothers may be superlative on earth, but mortal excellence alone is not enough to explain the miraculous events of the narrative. Ultimately it is the eternal and supreme will of God that resurrects and heals in this difficult romance.

Conclusion

Events after the miraculous resurrection move very quickly. Amiloun is indeed healed and restored to his previous beauty: 'Then he was as feire a man / As ever he was yet or than, / Seth he was born in londe' (2410-2). By the end of this poem, the superlative status of the

friends has been so well established that comparatives function deictically, as in these lines: the audience, well aware at this point of the extreme 'feireness' of Amiloun, can read into 'yet or than' a whole world of people he is now back to surpassing. If we were to try and identify the precise shift in tone between the Middle English and Insular French versions of the story, it would perhaps be this: the Middle English text is more confident in its assertions of its heroes' greatness, and the English superlative forms bolder than the more hesitant constructions found in the Insular French recensions. Yes, there is less subtle comparison here – the gradations and levels of *plus* and *moins* subsumed by the presumptive sweeps of the English text – but the emphatic nature of *Amis and Amiloun* provides powerful moments that challenge the very conventions that necessitate such extravagance. The strangeness of the Amis and Amiloun story is that the conventional romance 'best' is doubled; there is something harshly, starkly secular in the insistence that there can be so much greatness in the world. It would certainly seem at odds with the infinity, the undivided eternal love, of *Pearl*'s heaven, and Abelard's God; the boldness of the claim the story makes (that their greatness could justify a terrible sin) can only find narrative and moral salvation in the boundlessness of God's grace.

The best romances tend to build to a point of crisis that throws the rules of the genre into disarray, and the only way out is to follow the patterns of the romance world to the letter – as I will go on to demonstrate in my discussions of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Le Morte Darthur* in Chapters 4 and 5. This is what the story of Amis and Amiloun does so well. Questions of justice so often accompany explorations of the superlative because extremity frequently forms the basis of dilemma. Romance is a genre that recognizes and capitalizes on the easy interest of the superlative: a story is likely to be more interesting if it charts the life of an extraordinary person (if we consider interesting too generous a word, voracious or engaging may work as more appropriate substitutes). But as I hope to have

shown, it isn't surprising that in their depictions of greatness, romance poets often felt cause to introduce impossible predicaments and tests, or raise sometimes startlingly complex questions of morality and justice. The dramatic space between *worst* and *best*, and the scope for exploration and insight that range of experience represents, is a feature of romance that is overlooked if convention is immediately aligned with 'hack' writing, or repetitive tropes. Repeated and overlapping superlatives are sometimes merely formulaic – the construction of particularly verse romance encourages this – but there is also potential for the *greatest* man to undergo the *hardest* trials. In such a world, anything can happen, and yet this is an anything bound by the expectation that some kind of justice will prevail, that a pattern as simple as good-better-best is a possible and even probable formula for life. This is far from meaningless. In the superlative knight's inevitable success, we see the power of the social conventions that give shape and form to lived experience; in the uneasy negotiations of morality and justice that take place along the way, we see both the power and limitations of the literary and poetic conventions that are the shape and form of the genre.

Without the commentary of superlatives keeping a running total of their mutual greatness and reminding the audience that these are important individuals, the decisions Amis and Amiloun make throughout the story would render them unsympathetic characters, to say the least – but the poetic decision to maintain an abundance of superlatives works hard to counteract this negativity. If they face such terrible decisions *because* they are so great, their greatness is not up for debate; not subject to the comparatives of the rest of the world, their distinction functions as the buffer of improbability typical to romance narratives. *Amis and Amiloun* is the product of a highly self-conscious poet-reviser – one aware that the protagonists of his story, if elevated to lofty enough heights, can escape the restrictive rules of ordinary life.

Chapter 2: Romance Showing

The previous chapter considered success – superlatives, it transpired, offer heights of romance success that contribute to the perception of the genre as one of abundance and extremity. But here I am interested in romance failure, which is (also) everywhere. Read through a lens of failure, romance superlatives could be seen as a reaction to the simple, rather literal, reality of knighthood – the very likely possibility of injury, disability, and basic trauma that a knight would face across his career.[1] In some chivalric texts, knights' hardships and injuries are used as markers of their Christlike-willing to suffer; Lancelot, in particular, often takes weeks to recover from wounds. But as a rule, the knights of romance are at the peak of their physical fitness until death: a wealth of medical texts dealing with wounds and on-going battle related ailments reveal a reality of knightly experience not often the focus of the genre, where wounds are mentioned, but rarely described. Archaeological evidence confirms that many continued to fight with long term injury and, presumably, substantial pain; the young, strong, 'perfect' body was unlikely to last long. And so the fantasy of a physically superlative figure such as Bevis, who fights until his last day, or the numerous protagonists who leave their happy endings to travel, fight, and eventually die in the Holy Land could be seen as the genre's attempt to respond to the reality of the fragile, mortal body, bound by its tolerance and resilience; as Elaine Scarry has argued, 'what is quite literally at stake in the body in pain is the making and unmaking of the world'.[2]

Medieval romance is littered with failures of the personal, emotional sort. Knights fail, kings fall, people are unhappy and upset and unsatisfied, and yet we still come away

[1] For a consideration of texts that do confront the 'sad' realities of battles, see Katie L. Walter, 'Peril, Flight and the Sad Man: Medieval Theories of the Body in Battle', in *War and Literature*, ed. by Laura Ashe and Ian Patterson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), pp. 21-40.
[2] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 23.

from individual romances content with, even satiated by, the deeply conservative and conventional happy ending we know to expect. Indeed romance operates at its sharpest and best in the space between personal and social tragedy. To readers of Malory or the *Gawain*-poet this may not be an original observation, for here the personal experience of individual characters is actively juxtaposed with the collective honour of the Round Table – this is central to the plot of both. But it is an observation worth returning to, not least when exploring the failures (big and small) that mar the otherwise superlative landscapes of other romance texts, Arthurian and otherwise. Take, for instance, this scene from near the end of *Le Bone Florence of Rome*: as her husband and (sometime) protectors celebrate their reunion and the ensuing conclusion of Florence's horrific series of ordeals, the protagonists express a confusing mixture of emotions as the perpetrators are burned in front of them:

> The venome braste owt of hys ere,
> He seyde, "Y fynde yow iiii in fere,"
> Hys herte was full throo.
> He made to make a grete fyre,
> And caste þem yn wyth all þer tyre,
> *Then was the lady woo*.
> The emperowre toke dame Eglantyne,
> Tyrrye, and Florence, feyre and fyne,
> And to the halle can goo.[3]

The MED provides several definitions of the word 'woo', including one similar to the modern understanding of misery, distress, or wretchedness; it could also mean difficulty, trouble, or annoyance.[4] It is not an emotion usually associated with the end of a popular romance, and certainly not with the protagonist of such a text, for whom the conclusion is, for all intents and purposes, a conventionally happy one. But Florence is 'woo' – distressed, crying, perhaps, as her aggressors are burned by Emere, who is 'full throo' – angry, or violent. Rather than view these two emotional states, suspended, as they are, in rhyming

[3] *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, ed. by Carol Falvo Heffernan (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), lines 2116-24, my emphasis. Further references are in-text and to this edition.
[4] MED, s.v. 'wō', *adj*. sense 1(a); *n*. sense 3(a).

tension, as antithetical – Emere's active anger the opposite of Florence's nominally passive sadness – in this chapter I read Florence's 'woo' as remonstrative, and even as an expression of protest or dissent, in keeping with the potential meaning of 'annoyance' 'woo' could express. *Le Bone Florence of Rome* is a text in which questions of female agency and, implicitly, power abound; however Florence is certainly not the only romance protagonist to cry at unusual times. As examples from a variety of popular and canonical texts will show, this kind of negative emotion can be seen as a protest against or challenge to the conventional nature of the narratives in which it is found. Like this scene from *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, these are often *not* long, drawn-out experiences of pain – but rather some surprising 'woo', intense shame in the middle of a celebrating court, or outbursts of emotion ignored or overlooked by other characters in the poem, and not commented or elaborated upon by the author.

The emotions that will be of particular interest to me in this chapter are what Sianne Ngai has called the 'ugly' kind (anger, shame, and sadness), and are often expressed through tears.[5] There is latent power in crying; medieval anxieties as to the sincerity and truth of emotional outbursts (especially those of women) attest to the oxymoronic notion of powerful tears.[6] Bodily affects occur both *in bono et in malo*, and medieval medical analysis of physiological emotional expression is absolutely tied to this belief.[7] Descriptions of mystics show that weeping and extreme emotional response were common manifestations of the

[5] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005). cf. Richard Kaeuper's discussion of the 'nasty emotions' of knighthood – 'What might seem, from an idealistic modern perspective, a triumvirate of the nasty emotions – anger, wrath, and a thirst for vengeance, hot emotions working in tandem with their first cousin, icy fear – actually constituted sturdy pillars upholding structural elements of chivalric ideology', in *Medieval Chivalry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 353.
[6] For medieval perceptions of the sincerity of tears, see Lyn A. Blanchfield, 'Considerations of Weeping and Sincerity in the Middle Ages,' in *Crying in the Middle Ages: Tears of History*, ed. by Elina Gertsman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp. xxi-xxx. See also Angela Jane Weisl, 'Confession, Contrition, and the Rhetoric of Tears: Medievalism and Reality Television', in *Medieval Afterlives in Popular Culture*, ed. by Gail Ashton and Daniel T. Kline (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 129-43. This article sees a 'medieval' concern with sincerity and performativity in the 'confessional' dimension of much reality television.
[7] See Mary Carruthers, 'On Affliction and Reading, Weeping and Argument: Chaucer's Lachrymose Troilus in Context', *Representations* 93 (2006), 1-21 (p. 9).

Revelation of Christ. Margery Kempe receives the gift of crying and is told by Christ that it is akin to the spiritual warfare of the eternal battle for the soul against the devil, a notion cemented in the medieval imagination by Prudentius' allegory, *Pyschomachia*. As Andrea Dickens writes, '[f]or a woman living shortly after the end of the largely unsuccessful crusades, who had visited the Holy Land, this would be a particularly poignant image', evoking a sense of real power and action in the world.[8] Other examples of powerful spiritual crying include the writings of Julian of Norwich; but the performativity and extravagance of such public experiences was also key to the accusations of heresy levelled at some mystics, including Margery. The troubling and transgressive status of crying plays well into an interpretation of tears as protest: crying is a reaction, and therefore potentially remonstrative. Emotions are shaped by both individual, inner feeling and the expected public reception of that outward expression;[9] tears 'may come involuntarily, but they are always a goad to action', suggests Tom Lutz – and so consequential *inaction*, or pointed un-acknowledgement, may be of import (although somewhat easily overlooked, as has been the case in *Le Bone Florence of Rome*).[10] But it should also be noted that tears and vocal mourning are an action some societies make space for in and of themselves, sometimes in preference to doing anything else to redress the pain or loss being mourned. Tears formed part of the strong economy of relics associated with Christ's body,[11] and churches across France claimed to possess the holy tear of Christ (*la Sainte Larme*), which came to be most readily associated

[8] Andrea Janelle Dickens, *The Female Mystic: Great Women Thinkers of the Middle Ages* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2009), p. 172; *The Book of Margery Kempe: Annotated Edition*, ed. by Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004).
[9] Rom Harré, 'An Outline of the Social Constructivist Viewpoint,' in *The Social Construction of Emotions*, ed. by Rom Harré (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1986), pp. 2-14.
[10] Tom Lutz, *Crying: The natural and cultural history of tears* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 225.
[11] Archaeological evidence for this survives in the form of pilgrim ampullae from various sites across Europe: see Katja Boertjes, 'Pilgrim ampullae from Vendôme: souvenirs from a pilgrimage centre to the holy tear of Christ', in *Art and Architecture of Late Medieval Pilgrimage in Northern Europe and the British Isles*, ed. by Sarah Blick and Rita Tekippe (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 443-72.

with a shrine at the Abbey of La Trinité, in Vendôme.[12] 'Blessed are those who weep', Jesus preached at the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6.21); his own tears, believed to have been gathered at the death of Lazarus (John 11.32-37), served as powerful corporeal evidence of both his human and divine natures, contained within one body. As various historians have noted, Christ's tears also speak to the femininity that characterizes much of the devotional material from the later Middle Ages – the wetness of these tears, as well as the blood from his wounds (and even the milk from his breast, depending on the source in question) must be read alongside the medieval medical belief in the heat and humidity of the female body, which was of course provided by Mary.[13] A French verse litany to *la Sainte Larme* survives in a fifteenth-century manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian MS Rawl. poet 224):

> Jésus, qui pleurez avec humilité,
> Jésus, qui lavez le monde avec des Larmes,
> Jésus, qui ressuscitez le monde avec des Larmes,
> Jésus, qui éclairez les aveugles avec des Larmes,
> Jésus, qui illuminez les entendements avec des Larmes,
> Jésus, qui nourrissez les volontés avec des Larmes,
> Jésus, qui nourrissez les esprits avec des Larmes,
> Jésus, qui amolissez les esprits avec des Larmes,
> Jésus, qui sanctifiez les corps avec des Larmes,
> Jésus, qui rendez les âmes fécondes avec des Larmes...
>
> (Jesus, who weeps with humility, Jesus, who cleanses the world with Tears, Jesus, who revives the world with Tears, Jesus, who enlightens the blind with Tears, Jesus, who illuminates our understanding with Tears, Jesus, who feeds our will with Tears, Jesus, who feeds our spirits with Tears, Jesus, who soothes our spirits with Tears, Jesus, who sanctifies our bodies with Tears, Jesus, who makes souls ripe with Tears...)[14]

[12] For a useful bibliography on *la Sainte Larme*, see Kimberley-Joy Knight, 'Droplets of Heaven: Tears Relics in the High and Later Middle Ages', *The Mediæval Journal* 6 (2016), 45-80. See also Helen M. Hickey, '*La Sainte Larme* in Medieval and Early Modern France', in *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History*, ed. by Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 58-71. Hickey's analysis of *La Sainte Larme* uses Thing Theory in order to explore the physical properties of the tear.

[13] For instance Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, esp. pp. 79-100.

[14] Translation my own, but based on that in Helen M. Hickey, '*La Sainte Larme* in Medieval and Early Modern France', p. 71. This verse description was transcribed in the nineteenth century by Achille de Rochambeau, in *Voyage à la Sainte-Larme de Vendôme* (Vendôme: Lemercier, 1974), pp. 89-96.

The response to each line is, of course, 'Faites-nous Miséricorde' ('Grant us Mercy'). As the physical manifestation of extreme inner turmoil or emotion, tears represent a wide variety of human psychological experience spanning grief, shame, repentance, laughter, and anger; this French litany serves to demonstrate this multiplicity, as well as to remind us that tears are usually bound to action. Action charges the form of the litany, which demands response, the verbs emphasising the distinctly present (and enduring) nature of Christ's ability to effect change in the world. Tears are everywhere in the middle ages: consider the apocryphal tale of St Francis, blinded by tears, or the increasing prominence of maternal weeping expressed in the Pietà throughout medieval art; largely disseminated by the mendicant orders, the Doctrine of Compunction reached its peak in this period.[15]Albrecht Classen has argued that tears allow us to comprehend their crier's identity;[16] as such, they deserve our attention.

This chapter reads moments of crying, distress, and shame in romance as the performance of emotion, or affect, to various effect.[17] When I speak of affect, I'm thinking not only of the expression or experience of feeling and emotion, but of affect theorists Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg's sense of a force of creation, and change:

> Cast forward by its open-ended in-between-ness, affect is integral to a body's perpetual *becoming* (always becoming otherwise, however subtly, than what it already is), pulled beyond its seeming surface boundedness by way of its relation to, indeed its composition through, the forces of encounter.[18]

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[15] See Sandra J. McEntire, *The Doctrine of Compunction in Medieval England* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990).

[16] Albrecht Classen, 'Crying in Public and in Private: Tears and Crying in Medieval German Literature', in *Crying in the Middle Ages: Tears of History*, ed. by Elina Gertsman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp. 230-48.

[17] Following Sianne Ngai, I will be using affect and emotion fairly interchangeably here – see *Ugly Feelings*, p. 27; Stephanie Trigg also discusses the distinction between the two terms in 'Introduction: Emotional Histories – Beyond the Personalization of the Past and the Abstraction of Affect Theory', *Exemplaria* 26 (2014), 3-15. Ngai's sense of the dissenting force of emotion will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 of this thesis, where I draw out the connections between feelings of irresolution, narrative closure, and satisfaction.

[18] Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1-25, (pp. 2-3). Jane Gilbert's distinction between 'emotion' and 'affect' is also useful; as she writes, '"emotion" designates something relatively identifiable and self-contained, while "affect" proclaims the overwhelming of containment and identity and a move beyond the actual, and even normally heroic human' – see 'Being-in-the-Arthurian-World: Emotion, Affect and Magic in the Prose *Lancelot*, Sartre and Jay', in *Emotions in Medieval Arthurian Literature: Body, Mind, Voice*, ed. by Frank Brandsma, Carolyne Larrington and Corinne Saunders (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), pp. 13-30 (p. 19).

Raymond Williams's 'structures of feeling' also rely on this sense of 'becoming'; the depiction of meaning, feeling and experience in art and literature must be understood, in his Marxist reading, as 'a social experience which is still *in process*, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating'.[19] A reader of affect and romance can grasp on to this 'becoming', and through it see how the structural realities of the genre – whether it be the good-better-best pattern described in the previous chapter, or the set-pieces of quest, conquest, and celebration that mark the most conventional of texts – are potentially more meaningful, and even transgressive, when seen through an emotional (or *affectual*) lens. The 'affectual turn' found across the humanities is rooted in the basics of phenomenology – it requires an examination of experience, broadly construed: of the interaction between thinking and feeling, body and mind, self and world.[20] An affectual reading is one that must take for granted that an event can never simply be what it seems. Even as it is described as one thing it is both that and a moment of transition: amidst the joy of a wedding a husband, newly gripped by fear, understands that he now possesses something he can lose; a grieving daughter thinks of her abusive mother's will, and considers what it will be like to buy and own a new car. Conventional events, especially those tied to generic expectations, can suggest that a space between emotion and reaction does not really exist. It does, of course, and this chapter will argue that it is in that space that Florence cries, as Emere burns the men that tormented her but whom she has forgiven. Affect, and emotional performance, form the basis of a burgeoning field known as the 'History of the Emotions'. Barring a few key studies, the field is overwhelmed by descriptive (and often fairly prescriptive) survey articles and sweeping introductory essays;[21] such work is, perhaps, a

[19] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 32.
[20] These are Corinne Saunders' pairings, in 'Mind, Body and Affect in Medieval Arthurian Romance', in *Emotions in Medieval Arthurian Literature: Body, Mind, Voice*, ed. by Frank Brandsma, Carolyne Larrington and Corinne Saunders (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), pp. 31-46 (esp. p. 31).
[21] For better survey articles on emotion, see; Sarah McNamer, 'Feeling', in *Middle English*, ed. by Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 241-56; William M. Reddy, 'Historical Research on the Self and

necessary step in cementing the methodology in the academy, but it has meant that examples of scholars actually showing *how* a consideration of the History of the Emotions can enrich our existing readings are surprisingly few and far between.[22] The history of emotion is really the history of how we have spoken of affect, and how that affect has been judged or allowed to be expressed. As Barbara Rosenwein famously argued, the performance of emotion is conditioned by 'emotional communities': any given social group has a 'system of feeling' (here echoing Williams), that governs

> what these communities (and the individuals within them) define and assess as valuable or harmful to them; the evaluations that they make about others' emotions; the nature of the affective bonds between people that they recognize; and the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate, and deplore.[23]

Stephanie Trigg demonstrates that perhaps the most productive consequence of work in the history of emotions is its excavation of not only the individuals of the past, but 'also the social, cultural, and political frameworks in which they experienced, performed, and narrated their emotions' – I would suggest that literary and generic frameworks could be added to her list.[24]

Emotions', *Emotion Review* 1 (2009), 302-15; Susan J. Matt, 'Current Emotion Research in History: Or, Doing History from the Inside Out', *Emotion Review* 3 (2011), 117-24; Monique Scheer, 'Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (And is that what makes them have a history)? A Bourdieuian Approach to Understanding Emotion', *History and Theory* 51 (2012), 193-220. Considerations of affect specifically include: Brian Massumi, 'The Autonomy of Affect', *Cultural Critique* 31 (1995), 83-109; Paul E. Griffiths, *What Emotions Really Are: The Problem of Psychological Categories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Ruth Leys, 'The Turn to Affect: A Critique', *Critical Inquiry* 37 (2011), 434-72.

[22] For a productive example of the History of Emotion in action, see Marcel Elias, 'Mixed Feelings in the Middle English Charlemagne Romances: Emotional Reconfiguration and the Failures of Crusading Practices in the Otuel Texts,' *New Medieval Literatures* 16 (2016), 172-212. Elias argues that key passages of the Middle English Charlemagne Romances 'call upon emotions to rework, complicate, and problematize motives for action… engage with historical failure and contemporary anxieties through fictional situations which speak to some of the principal issues of contention recorded by commentators of the crusades' (pp. 180-2). See also the essays included in *Emotions in Medieval Arthurian Literature: Body, Mind, Voice*, ed. by Frank Brandsma, Carolyne Larrington and Corinne Saunders (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015).

[23] From her now seminal article, Barbara H. Rosenwein, 'Worrying about Emotions in History', *The American Historical Review* 107 (2002), 821-45 (p. 842). Her other work on emotion includes *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Barbara H. Rosenwein (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (London: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[24] Stephanie Trigg, 'Introduction: Emotional Histories', p. 14. See also 'Weeping Like a Beaten Child: Figurative Language and the Emotions in Chaucer and Malory', in *Medieval Affect, Feeling, and Emotion*, ed. by Glenn D. Burger and Holly A. Crocker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 25-46; 'Affect Theory', in *Early Modern Emotions: An Introduction*, ed. by Susan Broomhall (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), pp. 10-13.

Several romances will form the basis of the affectual reading that is to follow: *The Squire of Low Degree*, *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, and *Lybeaus Desconus* demonstrate that even popular romance poets understood the disruptive power of emotion; a shame-filled moment in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* will merely remind us that the *Gawain*-poet worked with interiority to a more subtle degree than most. In each example, the emotional experience of the central figure undermines the very ideals the romance simultaneously champions, and ultimately upholds. Emotion expresses that which cannot be contained or controlled; when it erupts in a conventional genre, and shocks or surprises us, it demands critical attention.

The Squire of Low Degree: Performing Interiority

KING PHILIP. Patience, good lady; comfort, gentle Constance.
CONSTANCE. No, I defy all counsel, all redress,
But that which ends all counsel, true redress:
Death, Death, O amiable, lovely Death!

…

KING PHILIP. O fair affliction, peace!
CONSTANCE. No, no, I will not, having breath to cry.
O, that my tongue were in the thunder's mouth!
Then with a passion would I shake the world,
And rouse from sleep that fell anatomy,
Which cannot hear a lady's feeble voice,
Which scorns a modern invocation.

PANDOLF. Lady, you utter madness, and not sorrow.
CONSTANCE. Thou art not holy to belie me so.
I am not mad: this hair I tear is mine;
My name is Constance; I was Geoffrey's wife;
Young Arthur is my son; and he is lost.
I am not mad; I would to God I were,

For then ‘tis like I should forget myself.[25]

In Act 3 Scene 4 of Shakespeare’s *King John*, Constance is distraught. Her son is going to be killed; she knows this, and grieves what will, and will no longer be. With hair dishevelled, she troubles those around her with the extremely vocal nature of her grief. Their attempts to invalidate her emotions charge the back and forth throughout this scene. The point is that she *wants* to feel her sorrow. Philip and Pandolf dismiss her emotion as unproductive ‘madness’, a term used here to describe a perception of reality and experience of emotions are not shared by others. Constance rejects their assessment of the situation, for she believes that she is responding to reality appropriately; it would be mad to behave in any other way. Her personal experience of emotion is thus a visceral moment of dissent. Constance disagrees with what has happened and refuses to see the events as others see them, and so her cries of pain are all that is left for her to throw at a world in which her son is going to die. The deeply personal nature of her experience plays out in Shakespeare’s pronouns throughout this dialogue: this hair *I* tear is *mine*, *my* name, *I* was, *my* son, *I* am, *I* were – most powerfully of all – ‘*I* should forget *myself*’. She cannot escape her emotion, and now will not allow those around her to do so, either: and forced into witnessing and perhaps even feeling the degree of her grief, the men are uncomfortable and want it to end. This means it is working; but this is only the case because the onlookers let her make the scene. They are prepared to see Arthur killed and bear witness to the ‘ugliness’ of Constance’s grief, rather than the alternative of not letting Arthur be killed. As I will go on to demonstrate, moments of disruptive affect may be used in romance to similar effect: that they are, perhaps, the necessary price of the extravagances of the romance plot, offering a glimpse of realism in an otherwise conventional narrative. That

[25] William Shakespeare, *King John*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd edn., ed. by Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett and William Montgomery (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp. 425-52, 3.4.22-5; 3.4.37-49.

which cannot be contained returns as spectre; in an explication of Claude Levi-Strauss, Slavoj Žižek describes how '"reality" itself, so far as it is regulated by a symbolic fiction, conceals the real of an antagonism – and it is this real, foreclosed from the symbolic fiction, that returns in the guise of spectral apparitions'.[26]

Despite many years of critics working to undo the assumptions fuelled by Greenblatt's Renaissance self-fashioning, it is far more controversial to consider the interiority of the characters of medieval romance than it is to undertake such analysis of Shakespeare. In medieval romance, interiority is most powerfully represented through emotional expression. What romance tends to lack in long soliloquies or lines of private thought (although these can be found in Chrétien, and Malory), it makes up for in emotional outbursts. If interiority is understood as inner character, then the performance of emotion – the outward expression of an inner experience – offers a representation of interiority, albeit one mediated by the gap between thought and action, and the interpretation of both the other characters, and the audience. As discussed in my Introduction, most critical studies of interiority in the Middle Ages take as their starting point the twelfth century, largely due to a historiographical narrative that overstates the 'transformative' power of institutionalized confession. Studies of interiority since Foucault's *History of Sexuality* traditionally credit the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 with generating interiorized subjectivity; faced with a new mandate to attend confession at least once a year, the faithful individual had to speak their innermost truths aloud to a priest. According to some scholars, this event served to bring to the surface central tenets of Christianity that had certainly been implicitly true in the earlier Middle Ages, too; in a religion in which God has called each man by name, and formed them in His own image, the value of the individual mind and heart was perhaps not that obfuscated

[26] Slavoj Žižek, 'Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology', in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 1-33 (p. 26); discussing Claude Lévi-Strauss' approach in *Structural Anthropology* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1968).

to begin with.[27] Confession, it has been argued, 'is a synonym for "penance" and "penance" is as old as the church', and although regular private confession may not have been particularly widespread before Fourth Lateran, the council should be understood less as a moment of transformation, and rather as a game of institutional catch-up.[28] Confession has proved to be a useful focus for scholars charting the development of interiority (and especially to those who wished to 'discover' individuality), as it offers a site where 'inner' and 'outer' experience must converge, through the spoken word. In literature, the metaphor of speaking, thinking, or feeling 'inwardly' is widely used; romance authors in particular appear to have recognized the literary potential of playing with the boundaries between the internal experience of emotion and the outer expression (and thus consequences) of its performance, to dramatic and moving effect. It is important to make the distinction when reading for affect in these texts between narratorial attribution of emotional states as opposed to a given character's performance of emotionality, be that via speech or somatic indices. One of the most prolific emotional performances in romance is the swoon, the most famous of which must be Troilus's faint in *Troilus and Criseyde*. As Jill Mann, Judith Weiss and others have shown, swooning indicated a range of emotional and even medical states in the Middle Ages.[29] The feminine and passive connotations of our modern understanding of the term are

[27] For instance, Zink, *The Invention of Literary Subjectivity*: 'Starting in the twelfth century, absolution depended on sincerity of repentance, which was a psychological notion, although here again it was defined materially by the criterion of tears…Thus, the progress of psychological analysis in the Middle Ages was linked to the passion for the individual at the heart of the Christian faith' (p. 9). Andrew James Johnston goes further and actually argues that 'the most subjective and interiorised attitudes to confession, attitudes of a kind documented well before 1215, could do without secrecy. Confidentiality gains importance only when there is a clash between the principles of interiority and exteriority, a clash between the principles of interiority and exteriority, a clash that the later Middle Ages somehow had to deal with since the Fourth Lateran Council had made it ineluctable', in 'The Secret of the Sacred: Confession and the Self in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *Performance of the Sacred in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. by Susanne Rupp and Tobias Döring (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 45-63 (pp. 58-9).

[28] For the development of the practice of private confession, see Alexander Murray, *Conscience and Authority in the Medieval Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 20; Ashe, *The Oxford English Literary History: Volume I*, esp. pp. 161-8.

[29] Jill Mann, 'Troilus' Swoon', *Chaucer Review* 14 (1980), 319-35; Judith Weiss, 'Modern and Medieval Views on Swooning: the Literary and Medical Contexts of Fainting in Romance', in *Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts*, ed. by Rhiannon Purdie and Michael Cichon (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), pp. 121-34. See also Gretchen Mieszkowski, 'Revisiting Troilus's Faint', in *Men and Masculinities in Chaucer's Troilus and*

largely the product of eighteenth-century narratives; both men and women swoon in medieval literature, and it is reductive to read these moments as either simple gendered stereotype or typical romance extravagance. Swoons are used precisely and with purpose by Malory: the number and frequency increase in the final books of the *Morte Darthur*, where his additions and developments to the already numerous examples in the *Mort Artu* intensify the tragic tenor of the narrative.[30] The fifteenth-century *The Squire of Low Degree* is a particularly good reminder that hyper-conventional features should not be presumed to preclude access to interiority. Following a scuffle outside her chamber, the Princess of Hungary comes to believe that her suitor, the eponymous squire, has been killed trying to 'undo' her door. Believing it to be her fault for not letting him in, she takes the body she finds by the door (which has been inexplicably swapped with the merely-wounded Squire's – its face has been unrecognizably disfigured, and is in fact the steward's), embalms it, and keeps it at the foot of her bed for seven years, kissing and embracing the effigy until it disintegrates into a 'powder small'.[31] Her extraordinary behaviour alone is testament to the degree of her grief, but there are several emotional outbursts to represent her inner feeling to the audience. Once the body completely falls to pieces, she desperately renounces the world in the following inventory:

> And, squyer, for the love of thee,
> Fy on this worldes vanyté!
> Farewell golde pure and fyne;
> Farewell velvet and satyne;
> Farewell castelles and maners also;
> Farewell huntynge and hawkynge to;
> Farewell revell, myrthe, and play;
> Farewell pleasure and garmentes gay;
> Farewell perle and precyous stone;

Criseyde, ed. by Tison Pugh and Marcia Smith Marzec (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 8-106; Barry Windeatt, 'The Art of Swooning in Middle English', in *Medieval Latin and Middle English Literature: Essays in Honour of Jill Mann*, ed. by Christopher Cannon and Maura Nolan (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), pp. 211-30.

[30] Windeatt, 'The Art of Swooning', p. 223.

[31] *The Squire of Low Degree*, in *Sentimental and Humorous Romances*, ed. by Erik Kooper, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/kooper-sentimental-and-humorous-romances-squire-of-low-degree> [accessed July 2021], l. 931. Subsequent references are in-text and to this edition.

Farewell my juielles everychone;
Farewell mantell and scarlet reed;
Farewell crowne unto my heed;
Farewell hawkes, and farewell hounde;
Farewell markes and many a pounde;
Farewell huntynge at the hare;
Farewell harte and hynde for evermare.
Nowe wyll I take the mantell and the rynge,
And become an ancresse in my lyvynge. (939-56)

The repeated 'Farewell', eye-catching on the page and perhaps even more so in spoken performance, demonstrates the significance of this moment for the Princess. Two hundred lines earlier, her father had attempted to coax her back into society with an even more extensive list of material and worldly possessions (739-852); but the Princess believes that her lover is no longer of this world, and as such, wants little more to do with it. In a way, she has experienced two losses – the first, emotional, the second, material, and all that is left for her to do after her speech is to fall down in sorrow, 'sownyng'. Overhearing her outburst, her father finally admits that the body she has been grieving over for seven years is not her Squire, but the treacherous steward; this instances further emotional reaction. 'Alas! Father, why dyd ye so?' (987), she demands, a few lines later repeating

"Alas, father," anone she sayde,
"Why hath this traytour me betraid?
Alas," she sayd, "I have great wrong
That I have kept him here so long.
Alas, father, why dyd ye so?
Ye might have warned me of my fo;
And ye had tolde me who it had be,
My love had never be dead for me."
Anone she tourned her fro the kyng,
And downe she fell in dead sownyng. (1039-48)

The Princess is expressing very properly her agency as feeling subject, whose existence is not merely a structural part of the narrative; her father tells her to be happy, because he is not dead – but she is understanding that she needn't have undergone all that grief. At no point in the romance do the male characters take the desire of the Princess seriously. The poet demonstrates a remarkably clear understanding of contemporary theories of sexual and

marital consent, and uses this understanding to subtle and significant effect. The Squire is apprehended whilst trying to 'undo' the Princess's door, and enter her chamber against her consent; her Father, struck with sudden desire for the Squire as well, further undermines the Princess's consent as he declares he cannot believe the Squire would do such a thing:

> Though she would to hym *consente*,
> That lovely lady fayre and gente,
> I truste hym so well, withouten drede,
> That he would never do that dede. (365-8, my emphasis)

Consent requires acknowledged interiority, for it presupposes that permission and desire need to be communicated, or articulated, to be fully understood by another. It is no coincidence that in the same century that Bernard of Clairvaux and Ailred of Rievaulx used the discourse of desire in their affective writing, the Church set about clarifying its stance on the conditions of a valid marriage, placing the free and willing consent of both parties at the centre of the decision. Love, central to both Christian salvation and the secular experience, had started to take itself seriously. The proliferation of pastoral and confessor manuals such as John Myrc's *Instructions to Parish Priests* communicated the practicalities of this doctrine of consent to a wide audience in England, endowing lay people with considerable agency;[32] the fact that exact words of both present and future consent appear in *The Squire of Low Degree*, as well as many other popular romances, suggests that romances may have had a role to play in this informative process as well. Interiority is problematized in this passage, the King confusing his daughter's potential 'consente' with what would have amounted to rape (she has made it clear that she will not 'undo' her door until he returns from his quest); he may credit her with little to no agency, but the audience has had access to her intentions, and so know better.

[32] See Jacqueline Murray, 'Individualism and Consensual Marriage: Some Evidence From Medieval England', in *Women, Marriage, and Family in Medieval Christendom*, ed. by Constance M. Rousseau and Joel T. Rosenthal (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998), pp. 121-51.

The systematic erosion of the Princess's consent culminates in her repeated demands – 'Alas, father, why dyd ye so?' she reasonably asks, her questions functioning as rhetorical in spite of the clear search for meaning and answers behind them. Not only does she realise the horror of the 'wrong' she has done – kept the body of the wrong man in her chamber for seven years – but she must also comprehend her father's decision to keep the truth from her. The use of swoons, then, in these final scenes, seems a rational exercise of emotion. Contemplating the variety of emotion and experience that could provoke one to swoon, Barry Windeatt comments that

> the self-absenting that occurs during swooning – the self-vacating of the character from its bodily presence and awareness – can be read as a self-distancing, at whatever level of consciousness, from some abhorrent situation or predicament. Swoons of shame and embarrassment may reflect a temporary inability to bear being with oneself.[33]

Shame at her behaviour, anger at her father, shock at the revelation, and presumably a degree of relief that her lover is still alive all combine here, the swoon standing as shorthand for these various and almost contradictory emotions. The notion of 'self-absenting' is interesting to consider, for the still and unresponsive 'swooned' body is in some ways reminiscent of a dead one. As Windeatt reminds us, the Middle English verb 'swelten' could mean both to die and to swoon; in this way, the Princess resembles the body she kept for so many years. The extremity of the revelation is such that there is no clear or right reaction to what she's been told: like Shakespeare's Constance, extraordinary behaviour (in *King John* 'madness', here, excessive swooning) is perhaps the only rational response to the information in question. She swoons again when she is reunited with the real Squire, alive and well ('As sone as she saw him with her eye, / She fell in sownyng by and by', 1065-6). From this point on, any expression of her individual emotional experience is conspicuously absent. We learn that 'there was myrth and melody' (1069) at court; that the king 'was full blithe' (1089); it is the

[33] Windeatt, 'The Art of Swooning', p. 212.

happiness of the *couple*, not the Princess, that ends the poem: 'That yong man and the quene his wife, / With joy and blysse *they* led *theyr* lyfe' (1127-8, my emphasis). This is entirely in keeping with the space the Princess's agency has been afforded throughout the romance, illustrating the power and the limitation of her kinds of emotional expression. The poet does not deviate from the conventional romance structure – the ending is clearly a happy one – but this is not an unambiguous conclusion. Her strange treatment of the effigy is ignored by the other characters (the majority of modern editors and critics have followed their example),[34] and after her final swoon we lose access to her interiority, which is not necessary for a conventional ending. Unwittingly or not, the poet's inclusion of the Princess's affectual response at various significant moments in the narrative serves to force the reader to stop and consider events from a troubled perspective, and thus to question and even critique the behaviours and cultural norms shaping her experience. The narrative must also stop, and wait for return. Like the tears discussed in the next sections, her swooning is far from passive.

'Woo' as Dissent in *Le Bone Florence of Rome*

Le Bone Florence of Rome begins with dissent. Garcy, the aging Emperor of Constantinople, rages into war with another great empire when Florence, the daughter of the Emperor of Rome, rejects his proposal. Florence's disgust is a reasonable if unfortunate response: 'a hundurd yerys olde', his hair 'all whyte' and body 'bresyd and all tobrokyn' (83, 87, 103), the match is hardly appropriate for a superlative romance heroine ('in þys worlde was not soche a wyȝt', 39), after all. Sometimes romance characters seem to behave as if they are complicit in the construction of the narrative, functioning as if they know they are characters in a

[34] In his introduction to the TEAMS edition, Erik Kooper does not mention this potential necrophilia (for it is, at the very least, unconventionally intimate interaction with a corpse); for a consideration of why this central plot event has effectively been erased in scholarship on the poem, see Nicola McDonald, 'Desire Out of Order and *Undo Your Door*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 34 (2012), 247-75.

romance. Felicity Riddy suggests that this may be what is happening here: Florence's distaste is informed by the fact that 'she knows the plot she is part of: she is to marry a young man who can make her pregnant the first time they sleep together, as Emere will do.'[35] Florence is assiduously educated by her father ('He set to scole that damysell, / Tyll sche cowde of þe boke telle, / And all thynge dyscrye', 58-60), and to a certain degree the narrative may be encouraging us to draw connections between her elevated curiosity, and her self-assurance. It is also worth remembering that a well-read young woman at the time would have conceivably come across some romances in her education, which would support Riddy's thesis, and my own: that these romances are thoroughly conscious and self-conscious in what they are doing.[36] Despite the clear socio-economic and ideological benefits of the proposed marriage (effectively the unification of two mighty Christian empires, Rome and Constantinople) there would be no narrative if at the beginning of the romance a perfect marriage alliance were simply proposed and accepted. Her request to delay the consummation with the more appropriate Emere until he has avenged her father further illustrates the conspicuously *useful*, generative role she plays in the plot, as both participant in but often also instigator of its events. This is the fate of many a romance heroine.

Florence should therefore be seen as a distinctly powerful character, despite (or perhaps in spite of) the seemingly never-ending list of horrific circumstances she faces. These events take a clear emotional toll, but although she is frequently described as desperately grieving and suffering, the poet never presents her as a passive figure in the text: she firmly

[35] Felicity Riddy, 'Temporary virginity and the everyday body: *Le Bone Florence of Rome* and bourgeois self-making,' in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England*, pp. 197-216 (p. 206).
[36] Phillipa Hardman has suggested that the Middle English popular romances could have been written for children, potentially forming part of their education – see 'Popular Romances and Young Readers', in *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*, ed. by Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), pp. 150-64. Consider also the Findern family, associated with Cambridge, University Library F.f. 1.6 containing both *Sir Degrevant* and *Alexander-Cassamus*; see Michael Johnston, *Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), for more on the reading habits of such gentry families.

inhabits her emotional experiences. Her 'woo' at the end of her story is pointed, and significant. It does not appear in an Insular French analogue, *Florence de Rome,* and this *added* response to her husband's decision to burn her persecutors should be read as a moment of real significance – despite the inaction that follows. Throughout the romance characters consistently describe their negative emotional states; Florence herself is clearly aware of the social implications of public displays of emotion. When she hears of her father's death, she deliberately leaves her courtiers and the messengers who brought her the devastating news, taking her maidservant Awdydon into a separate hall where they can be 'allone wythowten fere'; then 'the lady swowned and was full woo, / Ther myght no man hur stere' (822; 824-5). It may be worth noting the multiple meanings of 'fere' here: the text's editor Carol Falvo Heffernan translates it as its modern homophone of 'fear', but an alternative definition, 'a group of companions, associates, or followers; company; crowd', seems to me more likely.[37] Florence understands a public show of such distress would be both improper and a sign of weakness in the socially unstable aftermath of the death of a ruler, and behaves accordingly. Lisa Perfetti has argued that emotions in the Middle Ages 'are oriented outward and define the individual's relationship to a community'; to her it 'goes without saying that texts written more than five hundred years ago inform us more about emotional conventions and standards than about actual emotions.'[38]At times Perfetti's argument approaches the dismissive tone of earlier scholars of medieval emotion (Johan Huizinga, Norbert Elias, Peter Stearns) who characterized the period as emotionally naïve, desperately oscillating 'between despair and distracted joy, between cruelty and pious tenderness'.[39] Perfetti concedes there was 'some' distinction between inner feeling and outer behaviour, but fails to emphasize the power that

[37] MED, s.v. 'fēre', *n*. sense 1.
[38] Lisa Perfetti, 'Introduction,' in *The Representation of Women's Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, ed. by Lisa Perfetti (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), pp. 1-22 (p. 8, p. 2).
[39] The words are Huizinga's, in *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, p. 10.

lies in the space between the two – a stance this scene in *Le Bone Florence of Rome* arguably renders untenable.

For Florence becomes increasingly emotionally discerning as her romance progresses; as the relentless episodes of attempted sexual assault and mistreatment unfold, she becomes more restrained in her performance of emotion and instead learns to lean on the support of the divine intervention provided to her through prayer. In the Mylys sequence she moves from a clear expression of grief, 'tho þe lady syghed wondur sare… caste vp many a rewfull rerde' (1424-7), to a more measured and restrained 'mylde mode' once her prayers have been answered and Mylys loses his sexual desire (1510), to once again giving a 'rewfull crye' as she is stripped, hung by her hair and beaten (1518). She cries again when Terry's steward Machary attempts to rape her ('The lady wepyd sore for dredd', 1601), but the following scenes of horror are marked by characters *reacting to* Florence; she engenders emotional response in others, learning to harness her own reactions. A similar process can be found in the twelfth century *chanson de geste*, the *Song of Roland*: Charlemagne's grief as he tears at his beard after Roland's death causes a hundred thousand troops to swoon in shared sorrow, but they are then inspired to victory – emotion instances action, and even creates community.[40] Marie de France may be mocking the same process of chaotic male violence as community-building in *Chaitivel*, when the men who kill and injure the four suitors all grieve together, crying out and tearing at their hair in consternation.[41] In *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, Terry and his family find the bloody knife that killed his daughter in the framed Florence's hand, and 'wondur sore wepeande' (1653) at the sight of Florence, who 'glyste vp wyth þe hedeows store' (1657). Tied to the stake and about to be executed, the pity she generates in others saves her life:

[40] *The Song of Roland*, trans. by Glyn Burgess (London: Penguin, 1990), ll. 2916-32.
[41] Marie de France, *Chaitivel*, in *Lais*, ed. by Alfred Ewert (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1995), pp. 116-22, ll. 111-42.

All that euyr on hur can see,
Wrange þer hondys for grete pyte
  And farde as they wolde wede.

The lorde that had þe doghtur dedd,
Hys herte turned in that stedd,
  To wepe he can begynne.
He seyde, "Florence, also mote Y the,
I may not on thy dethe see,
  For all the worlde to wynne." (1681-9)

If we agree with Riddy's assessment of Florence as a self-conscious actor in this text, then she must be understood at this late stage as a character with a clear understanding of the power and consequences of the outward representation of emotional experience. In this sense Florence and the poet share the same knowledge, and can manipulate that information to various ends. This in turn casts some light on the two radically different emotional experiences she exhibits in close succession at the end of the text: enjoyment, expressed as laughter, and sadness, shown through her tears. As those who have wronged her arrive in procession to be healed, afflicted with various sicknesses and disease, 'thankyd sche Heuyn Kynge, / And lyghtly at them loghe' (2018-9). Seeing her persecutors experience bodily discomfort akin to that to which she has been subjected causes her to laugh: perhaps at their disease, or her power to cure, or their presence – their being brought to cyclical resolution. In more ways than one, this is an unattractive (albeit understandable) response, especially in the Christian context of the exhortation to God. Perhaps she is triumphant: as she commands the men to publicly confess their sins against her before touching and healing them, a dramatic and emphatic restoration of power and agency takes place – she regains control from those who drove and shaped her narrative so appallingly, and is indeed in control of them. The poetic language itself revels in this triumphant control; potential puns on 'wholeness' and possibly even 'holiness' abound in these lines spoken in an abbey by the proto-saintly Florence:

Sche seyde, "Ye that wyll be *hale*,

And *holly* broght owt of yowre bale
Of that ye are ynne" (2032-4, my emphasis)

This is playful language. It is perhaps then unsurprising that Florence does not wholly appreciate her husband's subsequent decision to take matters into his own hands, as, full of 'throo', he burns all but Tyrry, condemning them to a death echoing the earlier one from which Florence was saved by the empathy *she* inspired and the prayers *she* made. Her laughter at their afflictions prohibits a convincing reading of her as sympathetic to her persecutors' plight; these tears aren't expressive of sadness for them, but for herself: Emere has effectively stripped her of her recently-regained power, and it seems that she does not appreciate this appropriation of the agency she actively worked for. These are tears of sadness, and tears of rage: Florence, conscious of the power of emotional expression through performance and interpretation, publicly shows her 'woo' in an otherwise conventional romance ending. She may be, as Riddy argues, a good romance heroine, but she is not entirely happy in this position; the generic expectations that demand an active male resolution do not allow her the levels of agency she would otherwise possess. Significantly, Emere also needs her healing touch; the fact that he is suffering from an infected wound in his apparently guiltless state may be the poet's attempt to further distort the balance of power by implying a level of pre-emptive narrative retribution. Florence demonstrates her power to heal him, and in so doing unwittingly necessitates his hypermasculine 'throo' and the ensuing burnings.

In this way, *Le Bone Florence of Rome* is a text that realises and harnesses the power of emotional expression, using it to challenge and simultaneously support the conventions of its genre. Pierre Macherey writes that 'the finished literary work (since nothing can be added to it) *reveals* the gaps in ideology'; bound by its ending, the text shapes and therefore limits amorphous ideological agenda, exposing its inconsistencies and deficiencies.[42] Romance is

[42] Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. by Geoffrey Wall (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 69.

particularly appropriate for such a task: as several recent essay collections assert, the genre provides 'a space, narrative as well as imaginary, in which cultural norms and divergences from those norms are negotiated and articulated';[43] it is a realm in which boundaries are exploited and transgressed. However, exposing an inadequacy does not amount to its undoing – events will not *un*happen, Florence's foes cannot be *un*burnt. Her 'woo' may protest, but it does not, at this point in the narrative, effect change: the scene is a conventional 'happy ending' in a genre that is driven by the desire to get to this expected end.[44] There is little room for transgression here: but it is significant that her emotion is both necessary and confined in this way by the narrative.

Self-Knowledge and Sadness: *Lybeaus Desconus*

Critical discussions of the emotional pain of Chaucer's Troilus, or of Arthur or Lancelot in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, are common;[45] it is perhaps not surprising that emotion and feeling have not been fully explored in such texts' popular counterparts. As I discussed in the Introduction, popular romance's less licit and certainly more audacious approach to various aspects of the romance-project (be that through their depiction of sensationalistic events, or their more brief, brisk or linguistically conventional approach to story-telling) have led to an overwhelmingly negative critical legacy that assumes these characteristics inhibit depictions of true individuality or interiority.[46] In Malory's Arthuriad, expressions of grief increase in density – unsurprisingly – as the narrative moves towards its inevitable tragic end. Much has

[43] McDonald, 'A polemical introduction', p. 12.
[44] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); plot, the 'thread of design', makes narrative 'finite and comprehensible' (p. 4). See Chapters 3 and 5 for more on romance plotting and ending.
[45] Simon Meecham-Jones explores modern readers' sustained fascination with Troilus's weeping in '"He In Salte Teres Dreynte": Understanding Troilus's Tears', in *Emotions and War: Medieval to Romantic Literature*, ed. by Stephanie Downes, Andrew Lynch, and Katrina O'Loughlin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 77-97.
[46] See Ralph Hanna, *London Literature 1300-1380* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), for a brief discussion of the negative legacy of 'popular' – he cites Laura Hibbard Loomis and Carol M. Meale as proponents of an 'action over interiority' conception of popular romance (pp. 108-9).

been said of certain figures' grief functioning as synecdoche for the emerging emptiness of the Arthuriad's chivalric project;[47] one could argue that such examples of simply more *obvious* criticism of literary or ideological convention are key to the conception of such texts as canonical in the first place.

But *Lybeaus Desconus* is a decidedly popular romance.[48] The story exists in many variants, the closest analogue being Renault de Bâgé's late twelfth century *Li Biaus Descouneüs*, in Old French.[49] The versions of the Middle English romance surviving in Lambeth Palace Library MS 306 (Lambeth) and Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale, MS XIII.B.29 (Naples) represent the central editorial tradition of the English poem and the most complete of the revisions respectively, the other extant copies falling loosely into one of the two traditions – I will be referring to both recensions throughout. This romance provides another instance of potentially dissenting 'woo', this time in a text bound up in issues of knowing and being known. Rather than guiding action, as in *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, emotions in *Lybeaus Desconus* function to reinforce the knightly (and therefore stereotypically masculine) role Lybeaus desperately chases throughout his narrative. The power of the romance conventions in which the text self-consciously participates forces Lybeaus' 'woo' into similarly inactive and surprising fruition. Unaware that he is the illegitimate son of Gawain, the young Gingelayne arrives at Arthur's court pleading to be given the chance to prove himself; taken by his beauty, the King dubs him Lybeaus Desconus, knights him and assigns him to Elene and her dwarf companion, who have journeyed to the court to find help for the Lady of Soudane. This is of course an eponymous 'fair unknown' narrative; the

[47] Bonnie Wheeler's study of Palomydes' grief, 'Grief in Avalon: Sir Palomydes' Psychic Pain', in *Grief and Gender: 700-1700*, ed. by Jennifer C. Vaught, with Lynne Dickson Bruckner (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 65-77, is an interesting example of this argument.
[48] Subsequent references are in-text and to the Salisbury and Weldon edition cited above.
[49] Other analogues include the Middle High German *Wigalois*, by Wirnt von Grafenberg, the Italian *Carduino*, and even Middle English texts such as Malory's 'Tale of Sir Gareth' or *Sir Perceval of Galles*. For a full overview, see Salisbury and Weldon's 'Introduction' in *Lybeaus Desconus*.

concealment and eventual discovery of the protagonist's true identity in romances based on this trope is rooted in the implied, *innate* qualities of excellence that they possess.[50] The fair unknown speaks to a preoccupation (demonstrated not only in romance but the customary law and courtesy books from the thirteenth century onwards) with distinguishing the noble classes from their 'lesser' counterparts.[51] This desire attests to the increasing challenges faced by the noble families of Europe: the economic threat posed by land competition, and the burgeoning success of the newly prosperous urban and agricultural classes in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is doubtless in the background of these texts' seeking to define and set apart the nobility, stating the privileges they must be afforded, various distinctions of dress and arms to be upheld, and, indeed, the complexities of aristocratic sensibility. The increasing emphasis on hereditary knighthood seems no great coincidence; interest in eligibility, rather than initiation, characterizes much of the chivalric writing from the period.[52] Richard Kaeuper suggests that 'the elite were certain that peasants especially could feel no elevated emotions at all… that only they experienced love'; this belief would have been compounded by the decidedly *public* nature in which aristocratic emotion could be expressed – in lavish tournament, duel, or even war – and its often far greater social consequences.[53] Influence and intensity are artificially conflated here. The verse romance follows Lybeaus'

[50] For more on 'fair unknown' or bel inconnu narratives, see: Robert Wilson, 'The "Fair Unknown" in Malory', *PMLA* 58 (1943), 1-21; Barbara Nolan, '*The Tale of Sir Gareth* and the *Tale of Sir Lancelot*' in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996), pp. 153-81.
[51] For a consideration of the depiction of nobility and hereditary knighthood in romance, see Marianne A. Fisher, 'Nobility in Middle English Romance' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Cardiff University, 2013). On the self-conscious negotiation of heredity in the noble families of the later Middle Ages, see, for instance, Jennifer Ward, 'Noblewomen, family and identity in later medieval Europe', *Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe: Concepts, Origins, Transformations*, ed. by Anne J. Duggan (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2000), pp. 245-62. On the 'crisis' of the later middle ages (especially after the Black Death), and its impact on the nobility in particular, see Charles Muscatine, *Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972).
[52] Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (London: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 145-7.
[53] Kaeuper, *Medieval Chivalry*, pp. 314-8. See also Susan Wittig's comments on *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, in *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English romances* – she suggests that in this romance 'worth and birth are synonymous'; 'only a gentleman can be a gentle man', p. 189.

trials, as he changes from a ‘child unkowthe’ (49, Lambeth), ‘child unknowe’ (49, Naples) to the kind of knight you talk (or read) about:

> And tho in courte fast roose
> Syr Lybeous Dysconeus noble loose
> And all his gentill fame. (715-7, Lambeth)

As he successfully defeats famous giants and knights, sending their heads back to Arthur, he gains a reputation and becomes known; this does not, however, equate to knowing himself. In an extraordinary moment of honesty, Lybeaus reveals an empty meaninglessness at the heart of his conventional knightly questing: in response to the steward Lambard’s revelation that he is of Gawain’s kin, he asserts that he will certainly fight to free the Lady of Soudane, but that he ‘ne wote wherfor ne whye’ (1716, Lambeth). If we agree with Auerbach that conventionally, romance is a ‘world specifically created and designed to give the knight an opportunity to prove himself’ this statement is all the more important:[54] even when given this chance by Arthur, Lybeaus does not fully understand the point of his endeavour, or why he has been sent. Knights of ‘renowne’ kill giants, save villages, rescue maidens, and therefore so has he. At the point at which he *knows about* himself better than he has ever before (he has just discovered he is the son of Arthur’s best knight) he understands the *least* about *why* knights do what they do. In the fourteenth century, the French knight Geoffroi of Charny could praise knights who fought exclusively at tournaments quite seriously: ‘Car je ne tieng qu’il soit nul petit fait d’armes fors que tous bons et grans, combien que li un des fais d’armes vaille miex que li autre’ (‘For I maintain that there are no small feats of arms, but only good and great ones, although some feats of arms are of greater worth than others’).[55] Such unequivocal praise for fighting could not have been imagined before the twelfth century.

[54] Auerbach, p. 136.
[55] Geoffroi de Charny, *The Book of Chivalry: Le Livre de chevalerie*, ed. and trans. by Elspeth Kennedy and Richard W. Kaeuper (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp. 86-7, quoted in Ashe, *The Oxford English Literary History: Volume I*, p. 185.

Knighthood had previously required the justification of a Church-sponsored movement as global as the Crusades to save the participant from hell; extolling the virtues of fighting in tournaments at the height of the Hundred Year's War, 'knighthood is for [Geoffroi] now so far from being considered inherently sinful that it no longer requires even the justification of purpose *at all*', Ashe writes.[56] The emergence of the self-sustaining code of chivalry removed the need for this purpose, and thus the concerns of earlier warriors (that they were going to hell, and that this was the price to pay for worldly glory). Lybeaus clearly lacks purpose, the romance merely moving between defining him by what he *is,* and what he *does*: this is achieved in both broad and narrow strokes. He *is* 'Bewfiz', a beautiful son; his mother's attempts to keep his father and courtly connections secret may be the result of the suspicious conditions of his conception 'under a forest syde' (9):

> His moder hym kepte with hir myght
> That he shulde se no knyght
> I-armed in no maner,
> For he was full savage
> And gladly wold do outerage
> To his fellaues in fere;
> And all for dred of wycke loose
> His moder alwey kepte him close,
> As dughty childe and dere. (16-24, Lambeth)

It seems her efforts to keep him hidden in the forest are in vain, for there is a 'savage' impulse in the child that leads him to ape, unknowingly, the knightly pastime of hunting: 'The childe wente him forthe to playe, / Of dere to have som game' (32-3), at which point he finds the body of a dead knight. In his description of 'gens d'armes' ('men-at-arms'), Geoffroi de Charny paints a similarly enthusiastic picture; of those who

> de leur propre nature et de leur propre mouvement, des lors que cognoissance se commence a mettre en eulx en leur joennesce, et de leur cognoissance ilz oent et escoutent volentiers parler les bons et raconter des faiz d'armes, voient volentiers gens d'armes armez et leurs harnois, et si voient volentiers beaux chevaux et beaux coursiers; et ainsi come ilz viennent en aage, si leur croist leur cuer ou ventre et la tres grant volenté qu'ilz ont de monter a cheval et d'eulx armer. Et quant ilz sont en aage

[56] Ashe, *Oxford English Literary History: Volume I*, p. 185.

> et en estat qu'ilz le peuent faire, ilz n'en demandent conseil, ne n'en croient nullui qui les en vueille conseillier qu'il ne s'arment ou premier fait d'armes qu'il truevent, et d'ileuc en avant tousjours de plus en plus.
>
> (from their own nature and instinct, as soon as they begin to reach the age of understanding, and with their understanding they like to hear and listen to men of prowess talk of military deeds, and to see men-at-arms with their weapons and armor and enjoy looking at fine mounts and chargers; and as they increase in years, so they increase in prowess and in skill in the art of arms in peace and in war; and as they reach adulthood, the desire in their hearts grows ever greater to ride horses and to bear arms. And when they are old enough and have reached the stage when they can do so, they do not seek advice nor do they believe anyone who wants to counsel them against bearing arms at the first opportunity, and from that time forward, on more and more occasions.)[57]

Despite being denied the opportunity to observe men-at-arms in action in his youth, Lybeaus has the 'nature' Geoffroi describes here in abundance; in a sense, his romance charts his delayed education, providing purpose and direction to his innate knightly behaviours. His first, macabre impulse upon discovering the dead knight is to take his armour and travel to Arthur's court at Glastonbury. It is as if the truth and strength of this identity, hidden even to himself, can simply no longer be contained. Who he unknowingly is informs what he does, and inevitably dictates the trajectory of the entire romance, and so the need for purpose is almost entirely erased – so he can quite honestly not understand 'whye' he is saving the maiden. What becomes clear as the romance moves towards the climactic battle scenes is that this does not matter: action, not intention, takes precedence in a romance so hyper-conventional that at times it seems to fall into self-parodic territory.

I propose that Lybeaus' 'woo', found, like Florence's, at his respective text's denouement, serves as dissenting commentary on the preceding narrative, and the conventions by which it has been so clearly driven. Expressions of male grief are, as we have seen, common in romance texts; the tears of lovesickness are a conventional feature of chivalric endeavours but they could also express an insincerity more often levelled against

[57] Geoffroi de Charny, *The Book of Chivalry*, pp. 100-1.

women. In *The Poet's Repentance*, a lyric of MS. Harley 2253, for instance, the speaker appears to repent for his past of slandering women as a mask for an act of courtship; 'weping' may make his 'wonges wet', but does not obscure his humour or alliterative and linguistic playfulness, and he quickly moves from tears to exclamations of happiness by the end of the short text.[58] The speaker's ability to change his emotions so swiftly suggest his motives are mutable, and for this reason, possibly insincere. The 'woo' found in *Lybeaus Desconus*, on the other hand, appears to have no clear motive, and no real consequence. Upon finally reaching the Lady of Soudane and discovering she has been enchanted to take the form of a 'worme… With a womanes face' (2067-8, Lambeth), complete with wings and tail, Lybeaus is understandably 'agaste / Hym thought his herte tobraste' (2079-80, Lambeth). 'Braste' can mean 'to be broken, fall apart, break, shatter' but also 'to break because of pressure from within, burst'; Elly McCausland has demonstrated its utility in Malory, where it is usually aligned with female emotion (their spurned hearts bursting when heartbroken). It is also used provocatively when describing men who have been physically or emotionally affected by an emotional encounter with a woman: 'through their association with women, these knights are no longer in control of their bodily fluids; they are feminized, aligned with the uncontrollable leakiness that typifies the female body'.[59] This is of course the way the verb is used in *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, in the description of Emere's extreme emotional response to Florence's oppressors ('The venome *braste* owt of hys ere', 2116, my emphasis); there is something to be said for the violence of his bodily reaction in this scene which reasserts the trope of male dominance and control, undermining Florence's own efforts to conclude the

[58] *The Poet's Repentance*, in *The Complete Harley 2253 Manuscript*, Volume 2, ed. by Susanna Fein (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2014), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/fein-harley2253-volume-2-article-33> [accessed July 2021], l. 1.

[59] MED, s.v. 'bresten', *v.* senses 1 and 2; Elly McCausland, '"Mervayle what hit mente": Interpreting Pained Bodies in Malory's *Morte Darthur*', *Arthuriana* 26 (2016), 89-113 (p. 107). Moments of male physical and emotional 'brasting' in Malory include Sir Patryse's dramatic death when he eats the poisoned apple (1049.11-12) and Lancelot's anguish when he is forced to leave Guinevere and the court in 'The Fair Maiden of Astolat' (827.10-14).

whole affair. But in *Lybeaus Desconus*, the knight's reaction to the transformation from dragon to beautiful woman that takes place as she kisses him is rather less logical:

> So fayre, of all thinke,
> Woman, withoute lesynge,
> Sawe he never ere thoo;
> But she was moder naked,
> As God had hir maked:
> *Therfor was Lybeous woo.* (2088-93, Lambeth, my emphasis)

'Woo' is perhaps not the reaction we would expect from such a scene, or from Lybeaus, who has previously been appropriately 'wooful' only at times of danger or defeat.[60] It is the narrator who attributes this distress to Lybeaus, who stays silent as the Lady of Soudane explains how he has saved her, how she came to be enchanted in the first place, and how he will now be rewarded with castles and marriage (if it be Arthur's will); the attribution rather than personal expression of emotion here is entirely in keeping with the sense of compromised agency at the heart of this text. We are provided with no more direct access to his emotions through either speech or physical acts while this explication occurs, and then simply with the single, conventional phrase 'Lybeous was glad and blythe' (2115) to describe his response to this significant new information. When commented on, Lybeaus' woo has been interpreted by some critics as a response of fear to the 'monstrous-feminine' the enchanted lady quite literally embodies;[61] it could also be seen as an appropriately chivalrous performance of dismay on behalf of the lady in her vulnerable state. But it is certainly not the physical reality of the naked body that is the cause of his annoyance or grief; seduced by Dame Amoure into a twelve-month, lust-driven pause earlier in the narrative, and quick to identify desirable women with knightly endeavour throughout his story (as in the duel with Sir Jeffron, where he presents Elene as a challenge to his opponent's lover's beauty), Lybeaus

[60] For instance ll. 658-69, Lambeth, the fight with giant.
[61] For instance Eve Salisbury, '*Lybeaus Desconus*: Transformation, Adaptation, and the Monstrous-Feminine,' *Arthuriana* 24 (2014), 66-85.

is neither bashfully inexperienced nor courteously aloof when it comes to matters of love and lust. Instead, I suggest that in this 'woo' the reader may be witnessing Lybeaus' sudden understanding that the Lady of Soudane, in this unclothed and transformed state, represents an ending of sorts. After fighting for and saving this maiden, her naked readiness is a clear signifier of the success that he has been pursuing without truly knowing *why*; she is used as a 'tool' in Lybeaus' demonstration of masculine identity, functioning almost as a currency by which knightly success might be measured.[62] Her naked presence indicates his quest is complete – once a knight is married, as they soon will be, his youth is over; he should roam no more, instead staying as a stable and effective head of the household. His 'woo' may be brief, and, like Florence's, unremarked upon by narrative voice or other characters, but it is there, in both the Lambeth and Naples versions of the romance.

Its very inconsequentiality forms the dissent; the thrust of such a narrative, driven by desire, and the inevitability of the 'happy' ending reader and Lybeaus expect to follow mean that this experience of 'woo' is important, pointed, and potentially critical. Its presence is unremarkable *unless* the audience of the romance – and we as modern readers – are aware of the conventions to which the text has so doggedly adhered, the boundaries it has transgressed, the expectations it both meets and defies. It is a moment of self-consciousness; both the character and the *romance* of Lybeaus know how these things go. Much as in *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, 'woo' protests: it cannot change the past, and it does not subvert the consequently conventional ending. These realities are the basis of its very existence.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Becoming Ashamed

Our final example of emotion as dissent comes in the form of the most celebrated Middle

[62] Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 11; p. 51.

English romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The failures of the hero of this poem are familiar to all: the concealment of the girdle and the flinch, the two actions that plague Gawain at the end of the romance and that instance emotional response.[63] The nature of Gawain's guilt, and the 'confession' scenes (between Gawain and priest, and then Gawain and Bertilak), have also been the subject of considerable debate;[64] my interest here is in how Gawain *feels* in the romance, and how affect is used by the poet when considering these wider questions of penance and shame. Gawain, Arthur's best knight, represents the collective greatness of the court, and its chivalric values – his name effectively becomes metonymic for superlative knighthood.[65] When reproached for his failures, his challengers accuse him of not behaving as himself – 'þou art not Gawayn', insists the Green Knight – 'Such cowardise of þat kny3t cowþe I neuer here'.[66] This is what makes his quest so important – he must uphold the honour of his King and the Round Table, his shield adorned with the symbolic pentangle, no less, but he must also live up to a pre-established standard of Gawain-ness. In the final fitt, however, things become quite pointedly about Gawain the individual (until they aren't again by the end). Affect – how Gawain feels and responds to his experiences – is central to this shift in focus. It is Gawain alone who faces the three blows of

[63] Corinne Saunders, for instance, has considered the *Gawain*-poet in the context of contemporary cultural theories of 'mind, body and affect', in 'Mind, Body and Affect in Medieval English Arthurian Romance', pp. 31-46.

[64] John Burrow argues that 'the two scenes are intended to form a contrasting pair. Each has what the other lacks' – one has sacramental orthodoxy, the other true penitential feeling – in 'The Two Confession Scenes in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', *Modern Philology* 57 (1959), 73-9 (esp. p. 76). For more considerations of the confession scenes, see: Johnston, 'The Secret of the Sacred'; Gerald Morgan, 'The Validity of Gawain's Confession in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Review of English Studies* 36 (1985), 1-18; Derek Pearsall, '*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: An Essay in Enigma', *Chaucer Review* 46 (2011), 248-60; Ethan Campbell, *The Gawain-Poet and the Fourteenth-Century English Anticlerical Tradition* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2018), esp. pp. 207-21; David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Society: English Writing 1360-1430* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 169-75.

[65] Crane, *The Performance of Self*, p. 135. Crane argues that as Gawain 'is identified with his public reputation alone…that the sense of interiority arising at the work's end derives from the conflict over what measure of renown to accord his most recent exploits'; here I argue that there is more to it than simply being known – it is the fear that others may know how he *feels*, and, accordingly, who he *is*.

[66] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, 5th edn. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), pp. 207-300, l. 2270, l. 2273. Subsequent references are in-text and to this edition. cf. 'Bot þat ȝe be Gawan hit gotz in mynde!', l. 1293; 'Sir, ȝif ȝe be Wawen, wonder me þynkkez', l. 1481.

the Green Knight's axe; the court does not see the blade as it speeds towards their necks, or their blood spurting onto the white snow. The court does not flinch; but when the Green Knight gently reprimands Gawain for this momentary lapse of courage, as well as for wearing the girdle, Gawain and the court are shamed: for he represents them still, despite their disapproval of the quest:

> Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewté yow wonted;
> Bot þat watz for no wylyde werke, ne wowyng nauþer,
> Bot for ȝe lufed your lyf – þe lasse I yow blame. (2366-8)

Rather than the more obvious stumbling blocks (taking the girdle, succumbing to lust) Gawain's fault is more basic, and far less bound up in the performance of chivalry. Wearing the girdle was, of course, a species of acedia, a lack of faith in God; but 'Ȝe lufed your lyf', the Green Knight says – and he doesn't blame him for that. In response to this criticism, Gawain's shame is obvious:

> Þat oþer stif mon in study stod a gret whyle,
> So agreued for greme he gryed withinne;
> Alle þe blode of his brest blende in his face,
> *Þat al he schrank for schome þat þe schalk talked.*
> Þe forme worde vpon folde þat þe freke meled:
> "Corsed worth cowarddyse and couetyse boþe!
> In yow is vylany and vyse, þat vertue disstryez."
> Þenne he kaȝt to þe knot and þe kest lawsez,
> Brayde broþely þe belt to þe burne seluen. (2369-77, my emphasis)

The Green Knight has revealed who he is 'muryly wyth a much steuen' (2336), cheerfully bringing about this visceral reaction of shame in Gawain, whose emotional state is markedly less light-hearted.[67] The line emphasized above is of course cleverly reminiscent of Arthur's shame at the beginning of the poem, a reaction that is also instigated by Bertilak's laughter:

[67] A. C. Spearing comments that the Green Knight's response to Gawain in this scene has the quality of an indulgent parent: as he watched Gawain waiting for the final blow, 'he is pleased with him, as one might be pleased with a child or a pet animal that showed fighting spirit', in A. C. Spearing, '*Patience* and the *Gawain*-Poet', *Anglia* 84 (1966), 305-29 (p. 328). Indeed, Marie Borroff's sense of 'maturation' works well alongside this indulgence: she argues that as the court laughs and then comforts Gawain upon his return, 'it implies that Gawain's agonizings have something about them of the melodramatic self-centredness of youth and may justifiably evoke our amusement along with our sympathy as the story ends'. These two readings emphasize that despite the significance of the moment for the individual, from the outside the implications of 'failure' are not as

Wyth þis he laȝes so loude þat þe lorde greued;
Þe blod schot for scham into his schyre face
And lere;
He wex as wroth as wynde;
So did alle þat þer were. (316-30)

Ethan Campbell points out that 'as the stanza's long lines turn to short trimeters in the wheel, the shame shifts to anger and reckless abandon…as if the shot of shame has been blown away by a windy gust'.[68] Although it is true that the shift is sudden, Campbell's simile is perhaps a little too conclusive: shame often leaves anger in its wake. It moves Arthur to seize the axe in the first fitt; Gawain's shame in the last leads him to angrily fling the girdle at Bertilak. Elspeth Probyn has argued that 'the crucial element that turns sham into shame is the level of interest and desire involved. There is no shame in being a sham if you don't care what others think or if you don't care what you think'.[69] Probyn's focus is on 'Writing Shame', the literal and physiological experience of expressing shame on the page. During the course of a book project on the topic, she became increasingly unwell, later coming to the conclusion that the process of writing about shame was partly to blame: as her friend explained to her, 'shame is a painful thing to write about. It gets into your body. It gets to you.'[70] Gawain's actions are natural responses to the pain of shame: the burning of the cheeks, physically lashing out – but also shifting the blame, searching for a reason where there needn't be one. Note that the first words Gawain speaks after the truth has been revealed are not of remorse: he curses 'cowarddyse and couetyse boþe', implying a little later that these behaviours are the cause of what he has done – 'cowardyse me taȝt / To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake' (2378-80). This isn't like me! Gawain is claiming. His fearful response went against his

extreme – see Marie Borroff, *Traditions and Renewals: Chaucer, the Gawain-Poet, and Beyond* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 113.
[68] Campbell, *The Gawain-Poet and the Fourteenth-Century English Anticlerical Tradition*, p. 220.
[69] Elspeth Probyn, 'Writing Shame', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 71-90 (pp. 72-3).
[70] Probyn, 'Writing Shame', p. 72. The project she was working on became *Blush: Faces of Shame* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

‘kynde’, his very nature. This desire to shift the blame, or at the very least to somehow dilute it with reasons or causes situated somewhere beyond the Self, forms the most human dimension of the romance; it proves that this is a poem about a person, not a system. It also informs the misogynistic outburst as he bids farewell to Bertilak:

> And comaundez me to þat cortays, your comlych fere,
> Boþe þat on and þat oþer, myn honoured ladyez,
> Þat þus hor kny3t wyth hor kest han koyntly bigyled.
> Bot hit is no ferly þa3 a fole madde
> And þur3 wyles of wymmen be wonen to sor3e;
> For so wat3 Adam in erde with one bygyled,
> And Salamon with fele sere, and Samson, eftsonez –
> Dalyda dalt hym hys wyrde – and Dauyth, þerafter,
> Watz blended with Barsabe, þat much bale þoled.
> Now þese were wrathed with her wyles, hit were a wynne huge
> To luf hom wel and leue hem not, a leude þat couþe.
> For þes wer forne þe freest, þat fol3ed alle þe sele
> Excellently of alle þyse oþer vnder heuen-ryche
> Þat mused;
> And alle þay were biwyled
> With wymmen þat þay vsed.
> Þa3 I be now bigyled,
> Me þink me burde be excused. (2411-28)

The petulant tone of this tirade immediately puts me in mind of Gawain’s preposterous words between the second and the third blow of the axe. As he waits for the Green Knight to raise his weapon for the final time, he exclaims ‘Wy! þresch on, þou þro mon! Þou þrete3 to longe. / I hope þat þi hert ar3e wyth þyn awen seluen’ (2300-1). The notion that the Green Knight would have lost his nerve is obviously ludicrous; Gawain says this ‘ful gryndelly with greme’ (2299), perhaps moved to this anger by the shame of his flinch in the first strike, and frustration with the second feigned blow. This is volatile behaviour, wildly accusing others of the inadequacies he most fears to acknowledge in himself. Here, Gawain relies upon the well-worn excuse of supposed female weakness and capriciousness. If the noblest men of old (‘þes were forne þe freest’) succumbed to the manipulations of women, why should he not be ‘excused’ for his weakness? It is a strikingly psychologically realistic outburst, because even Gawain does not take it seriously. It ends as suddenly as it begins, and turns into the

repentance that characterizes the final scenes of the poem. To use Seigworth and Gregg's definition of affect once more, the embodied nature of feeling and emotion means that it is always a process of 'becoming', composed by 'the forces of encounter' a given individual will experience. His shame is not his own: not just because his status as the best knight means he represents a system greater than himself, but because shame requires external judgment and pressure – forces of encounter that, in the world of the romance, are far more powerful than he is alone.

When Gawain shows Arthur and the court the girdle and the nick on his neck, 'grame' and 'shame' are used again:

> He tened quen he schulde telle;
> He groned for gref and grame.
> Þe blod in his face con melle,
> When he hit schulde schewe, for schame. (2501-4)

Their laughter, and subsequent appropriation of the girdle as a symbol of their collective 'renoun' are a clear sign that the poet was keenly aware of the processes by which emotions are expressed and experienced in the world, and the extent to which interpretation warps subjectivity. A moment of real disruption is quickly and efficiently shut down by this appropriation, but the shift from personal and painful experience to collectivity begins in Gawain's own retelling of his failures in Bertilak's castle and the Green Chapel. The poet prefigures this change through the shift from 'I' to something closer to 'one' in Gawain's explanation:

> Þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne.
> And I mot nedez hit were wyle I may last;
> For mon may hyden his harme bot vnhap ne may hit,
> For þer hit oneȝ is tachched twynne wil hut neuer. (2509-12)

These four lines effectively summarize the central problem of the poem. By shifting the focus from his individual shame ('vntrawþe þat *I* am tan inne') to a more oblique sense of a 'mon' to whom once attached a symbol cannot leave, Gawain's words essentially give the court a

solution: it is possible to avoid Gawain's failure through a similar manoeuvre. They simply do not allow for individuation, instead offering a stable and powerful alternative when they choose to share the burden (that is becoming the distinction) of the girdle. 'Tachched' to the Round Table, individual shame pales in comparison to the 'renoun' of the court, a satisfying ending only if we read the poet as ultimately conservative in his romance writing. 'One might well ask, what else could Gawain do?'[71]A. C. Spearing observes of the impossible predicaments Gawain faces in this romance; the implicit answer is, of course, 'nothing'. It is tempting to read this 'nothing' as negative – the lack of choice jarring, perhaps, with a sense of justice, and certainly with a modern notion of individuality – but this is not the intention of the poet.[72] Laura Ashe has argued that Gawain's shame and guilt is the result of his submission to chivalry; 'to expect a man to die for such a social convention is inherently a mocking proposition', she writes.[73] This is true; Gawain could not have died for chivalry, which requires life, and repetition, to sustain itself (as I argue in more detail in Chapter 5): but perhaps another failure of chivalry is its mutability. The fact that Gawain can slip in four short lines between blaming himself and blaming 'mon', the *idea* of a knight, should not be taken lightly. It is the same slippage that allows the girdle to change from a symbol of shame to glory. Social conventions are simply the rules we receive and choose to follow: if enough people reject those rules, it exposes the inadequacy of the convention – but it may also mean that it is possible to change the ideology by which it is guided. If the court choose to read the girdle as a symbol of 'renoun', this is what it will be. Gawain's shame, full of disruptive potential, is rendered irrelevant.

[71] Spearing, ''*Patience* and the *Gawain*-Poet', p. 328.
[72] Mickey Sweeney, for instance, suggests that the romance's discordant ending is due to the reality that 'Gawain has outgrown his romance', in 'Divine Love or Loving Divinely?: The Ending of Malory's *Morte Darthur*', *Arthuriana* 16 On Malory: Festschrift in Honor of D. Thomas Hanks Jr. (2006), 73-7 (p. 75).
[73] Laura Ashe, '*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Limits of Chivalry', in *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance*, ed. by Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjevic and Judith Weiss (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), pp. 159-72 (p. 170).

Conclusion

It is striking that in each of the romances discussed in this chapter, the final lines of the poem set about undermining the individual experience of their protagonists, and the flashes of interiority to which their audiences have been witness. The social and generic conventions at work at these moments cannot bear the weight of individuals, characters with emotional experiences that do not fully align with the systems to which they have all ultimately capitulated. Gawain disappears once the court laughs, the poet concluding with a reference to Brutus and Troy. This is how the romance began, and the only way it can continue: romance beginnings and endings are hyper-conventional not to demonstrate the meaninglessness of their social codes, but to endow them with a shared meaning and significance, which is the product of endless repetition and expectation. Scarry writes:

> If self-hatred, self-alienation, and self-betrayal (as well as the hatred of, alienation from, and betrayal of all that is contained in the self – friends, family, ideas, ideology) were translated out of the psychological realm where it has content and is accessible to language into the unspeakable and contentless realm of physical sensation it would be intense pain.[74]

The characters in these scenes – the Princess in *The Squire of Low Degree*, Florence in *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, Lybeaus in *Lybeaus Desconus*, and finally Gawain, here, must reckon with worlds in which their emotions are seen but not heard, where what they feel is (sometimes barely) acknowledged but rarely acted upon. Often this is due to the power of the customs that govern the social norms of their day, or the generic conventions that shape their stories. But each character provides telling evidence that romance poets could, and did, use the disruptive power of emotion throughout their poems in order to give meaning and texture to otherwise typical narratives. In supplying these moments of contradictory affect, romance poets endow their characters with a spectral sense of reality and depth, of interiority and individuality which the plots themselves simply do not require – and indeed, that the

[74] Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 47.

romances themselves go on to surround and occlude. Endings were to remain subordinate to convention. What, then, is the purpose of all this ‘woo’ and ‘sham’? I think these ugly feelings are inevitable; they are what being a subject feels like.

Chapter 3: Plotting Romance

The study of romance and the literary-critical analysis of plot have suffered similarly from intellectual snobbery. Romance has sometimes been seen as what happens when plot is privileged over other features of narrative; in such scholarship one gets the impression that more 'serious' genres find the balance between action, characterization, motivation, description, and commentary far more successfully.[1] Elizabeth Dipple argues that 'plot currently has no strong place in the pantheon of acceptable literary terms',[2] tracing an unease with the concept back to a Romantic sensibility, one increasingly concerned with celebrating the organic, or unique, in poetry and prose. As Peter Brooks writes in his influential *Reading for the Plot*,

> plot has been disdained as the element of narrative that least sets off and defines high art – indeed, plot is that which especially characterizes popular mass-consumption literature: plot is why we read *Jaws*, but not Henry James. And yet, one must in good logic argue that plot is somehow prior to those elements most discussed by most critics, since it is the very organizing line, the thread of design, that makes narrative possible because finite and comprehensible.[3]

Inherent to the disdain described by Dipple, Brooks, and others, is a strangely divergent assessment of plot. Plot is widely recognized as essentially the *intention* of narrative: it is the reason events happen, and it is through the temporal experience of plot that meaning is made and generated by and in the reader. One might go further and say that plot *is* narrative: there is no narrative without events happening in time, even if those events are just thoughts or observations; these events are plot. For a plot to be considered good, the reader must have a basic level of interest – a desire to know what will happen next, how the various events that

[1] These terms are those supplied by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg as 'what we respond to in the greatest narratives', the way 'quality of mind [is] transmitted to us' – in *The Nature of Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 239.
[2] Elizabeth Dipple, *Plot* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1970), p. 1. See also her book *The Unresolvable Plot: Reading Contemporary Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), for a consideration of the fate of plot in the contemporary novel.
[3] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 4.

have come will shape what will be.[4] 'The plot, then, is like the trees and houses that we focus our eyes on through a train window: the narrative is more like the weeds and stones that rush by in the foreground', Northrop Frye suggests, gesturing to the almost physical necessity of plot in relation to the decorative, descriptive nature of narrative.[5] Plot is action, but it is also the unspoken *why* of all narrative: this is far more apparent in the novel, where the why? of individual experience is central to how modern conceptions of character are understood.[6]

This unspoken *why* also has a role to play in romance, where rather than being located in qualities of character it is more often to be found in aspects of plot. This chapter argues that the hiddenness of the individual *why* in romance may actually indicate an awareness that inner lives are hidden; that the subjective experience of others must always remain to some degree inaccessible. But here a key difference between romance and the novel may be worth unpacking, for it can tell us something important about the depiction of literary identities, then and now. The essential structure of the novel suggests that what shapes us is within us; that progress, or development, is the flowering of an inner truth, the externalization of interior realities – this is also a belief central to many types of talk therapy. The novel is, in effect, a literary attempt to work out the hidden 'why' – to make explicit that which the romance is content to leave unspoken, or obscure. The answer is *within* you: a truth not yet actualized, or exposed. I think this is why the most common metaphor associated with plot is that of the skeleton, an image espoused by creative writing blogs and literary critics alike; a solid skeleton appears to be central to modern fiction-writing.[7] As an essential, structural centre,

[4] R. S. Crane, 'The Concept of Plot and the Plot of *Tom Jones'*, in *Critics and Criticism: Essays in Method*, ed. by R. S. Crane (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 62-93 (esp. p. 67).
[5] Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcout, Brace & World, 1963), p. 22; see also *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), esp. pp. 33-67.
[6] Elizabeth Dipple suggests that for this reason, plot must apply to both exterior and interior action – 'This means that it must go beyond scene or incident and account, to some degree at least, for the movement of mind or soul in poems or psychological novels… it is the primary term whose ramifications imply the whole art of constructing temporal progression in art', in *Plot*, p. 3.
[7] Scholes and Kellogg write, 'Plot is only the indispensable skeleton which, fleshed out with character and incident, provides the necessary clay into which life may be breathed', in *The Nature of Narrative*, p. 239.

plot, in this defining metaphor, provides form and shape from within, holding space for the aspects of narrative it is perhaps more critically acceptable to appreciate in fiction.

But as with all the most enduring metaphors, it is important to test the ubiquity of this image. For a genre as conventional as romance, the notion of a skeleton is in fact inside out, a back to front image of the way things actually work. I would suggest that here we ought to replace one metaphor with another: *scaffolding* may in fact prove to be more accurate, for romance (by and large) does not tell us the lie of exclusively interior meaning-making. When plot is conceptualized as a skeleton, the point that is being made is that it is necessary but not what we are interested in, or even perhaps what we primarily experience, when reading. But the structure of romance does not come from an individual protagonist's inner reality, but rather from exterior forces – plot, in romance, is the purpose of the character, and this purpose is supplied by the conventions of the genre, the expectations of both reader and society. In this sense, it scaffolds the narrative, providing certain limitations to the scope and final shape of a given text, but also potentially obscuring what is beneath. As I outlined in the Introduction to this thesis, this has caused critics to assume that interiority must be lost as a result.

Valuable to this argument will be a consideration of the role of *peripeteia* in narrative's ability to depict reality. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode writes:

> Now peripeteia depends on our confidence of the end; it is a disconfirmation followed by a consonance; the interest of having our expectations falsified is obviously related to our wish to reach the discovery or recognition by an unexpected and instructive route… The more daring the peripeteia, the more we may feel that the work respects our sense of reality; and the more certainly we shall feel that the fiction under consideration is one of those which, by upsetting the ordinary balance of our naïve expectations, is finding something out for us, something *real*.[8]

Julian Barnes' novel of the same name plays with this provocative assessment of reality: there, the speaker comes to the end of his life and realizes that he has not been the protagonist

[8] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 18.

in (what he has imagined to be) his own story; the truth of this has been revealed far more steadily and clearly to the reader, throughout.[9] Our confidence in the happy ending of romance is at the extreme end of what Kermode could possibly be describing. A romance such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* provides perhaps the clearest possible example of this sort of 'disconfirmation' and 'consonance' at work; although *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is considered superior to its popular romance counterparts, I will argue that it can be found across the genre – and the scaffolding nature of the romance plot is key to this.

In this chapter, then, I am reading for the romance plot, to borrow Brooks' phrase. Romance poets self-consciously position their texts within a wider romance landscape – as a result of translation, or re-telling, or through the intertextual tendency to invoke other heroes or villains, placing a given character or event in context. The end of a romance is set from the beginning: so how can it be that these stories are so compelling, and what are the implications of this predictable plot on the literary subjects depicted? I start by examining the metatextual awareness of the verse romances, and consider the ways in which these poets draw attention to both the predictabilities and improbabilities of their plots. I then read the verse romances *King Horn* and *Emaré* expectantly, from the outside, paying attention to what we assume and what surprises, and how this intersects with the experience of these romances' protagonists. Finally, I turn to work of Chrétien de Troyes, to understand how it can be that his romances, the genre's originary texts, are already playing with the limitations of the form. There are cognitive, temporal, and spatial aspects to the varying definitions of plot, that will be important to keep in mind throughout.[10] On the surface, the relationship between plot and

[9] Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (London: Vintage Books, 2012).
[10] These are described by Hilary P. Dannenberg, in *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008) – 'On one level, narrative fiction itself, in the finite form of a book, represents the attempt to create a miniature map or "plot" of time and space with a beginning and an end. This sense of *plot* as an organizing and delimiting system also underlies the other major semantic variants of plot outside narrative. Defining a plot of land involves the erection of borders on a map, while a conspiratorial plot involves the attempt of a group of individuals to impose a particular event structure on the larger flow of time in order to achieve a particular end' (p. 13).

genre may seem self-evident: texts within the same genre are often linked by regularities of plot, certain events or tropes that form shape and structure. This basic point is *particularly* significant to a genre such as romance, and really any genre considered especially conventional – governed by a set of expectations or tropes.[11] I argue that the weight of the conventional romance plot – and its scaffolding, rather than skeletal, nature – may be one reason for the critical hesitancy to read the genre for individuals. But as the previous chapters have shown, there is surprising wriggle room within the scaffold; some of the most distinct oddities of romance – the coincidences, the impossibility and futility of endless questing, the hiddenness of individual motivations – can actually constitute some of the genre's most realistic depictions of the restrictions and improbabilities of human experience.

Author and Audience

As I described in Chapter 1 of this thesis ('The Patterns of Romance'), the patterns and shapes that romance plots take are remarkably stable. But if the crucial moments of tension and resolution are fixed and predictable, the ways in which a given romance protagonist might move between them are various and often very strange; this is where the pleasure of the genre is to be found. The poets themselves were all too aware of this. The verse romances, in particular, have a tendency to remind their audience of the *type* of story that is being told: there are near constant references to 'gestes', 'tales', or 'romaunces', most often and densely in the highly conventional opening lines. Take, for instance, the opening exhortation to the audience found in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*:

> Lystonnyth, lordyngus, a lyttyll stonde
> Of on that was sekor and sounde
> And doughgty in his dede.
> He was as meke as mayde in bour
> And therto styfe in every stour;

[11] See Melissa Furrow, *Expectations of Romance: The Reception of a Genre in Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009).

Was non so doughtty in dede.
Dedus of armus wyttout lese
Seche he wolde in war and pees
In mony a stronge lede.
Sertaynly, wyttoutyn fabull
He was wytt Artter at the Rounde Tabull,
In romans as we reede.[12]

As I have argued in more detail elsewhere,[13] this plays out formally and stylistically through the abundance of what I have called 'truth-telling conventions'. These conventions are often described as filler lines or stock phrases: phrases such as 'in gest as so you rede', 'wytthout lese', or 'as I find in me sawe'. These lines have obvious utility when it comes to making up rhyme and metre, but crucially have a secondary truth-telling function when a simple conventional or descriptive formula would do. As Carol Fewster has demonstrated, literary formulae in general 'recur at points of literary amplification in romance… they are grouped into the topoi of beauty descriptions, feast and battle scenes'; as such, they serve a literary, amplifying role.[14] I suggest that this is particularly the case with truth-claiming lines, which so often self-consciously remind the audience that a storyworld is being carefully constructed. This is well illustrated by the following scenes in the Northern *Octavian*, where superlative descriptions abound as the eponymous Emperor is introduced:

In Rome ther was ane Emperoure,
Als men in romance rede.
He was a man of grete favoure
And levede in joye and grete honoure
And doghety was of dede.
In tornament nor in no fyghte
In the werlde ther ne was a better knyghte,
No worthier undir wede. (14-21)

[12] *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. by Thomas Hahn, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/hahn-sir-gawain-sir-gawain-and-the-carle-of-carlisle> [accessed July 2021], ll. 1-12.
[13] The following discussion of truth-claims is expanded in my article 'Truth-telling and Truthiness in the Middle English Popular Romances'.
[14] Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance*, p. 12.

The unparalleled nature of the wedding of Florent and Marsabelle is similarly supported with a truth claim:

> Florent to wyefe hir chese.
> Swylke a brydale als was thore,
> In that ceté was nevir ore,
> *Ye wiete withowtten lese*. (1812-5)

A battle between the young Florent and a Giant is described as far from 'childes playe', and again, is accompanied by a truth-claim:

> Childe Florent in his unfaire wede
> Spronge als sparke dose of glede,
> *The sothe I will yow saye,*
> And rode hym forthe with egre mode
> To the geaunt, righte ther he stode -
> Was thore no childes playe! (1016-21)

The superlative, significant and monstrous nature of these noteworthy moments in the plot instances the truth-telling lines 'als men in romance rede', 'ye wiete withowtten lese', and 'the sothe I will yow saye'. When they are considered in their totality, the sheer quantity of these lines across the romances demonstrates that poets were aware that their hyperbolic language and sensationalistic events were distant from that life experienced by their audiences. Simultaneously, the role they play in the maintenance of metre and rhyme serves a poetic purpose: there is a particular pleasure to be found in stock phrases, for they can offer the audience an opportunity to keep up with the plot and action, but also to think ahead, to fill in the blanks or guess at what will happen next. The episodic structure of these texts ('Now we leave X, and turn to Y') also serves this purpose; it seems natural that romance, the product of a 'context of writing, memory, and limited improvisation in performance',[15] would utilize such moments of recognition for the entertainment of its audiences.

[15] Nancy Mason Bradbury, *Writing Aloud: Storytelling in Late Medieval England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), p. 20.

In light of this, conventional lines such as these from *Emaré* take on a new dimension: for the collective effect of 'for sothe, as y say the', 'in romans as we rede', 'as y have herd menstrelles syng yn sawe', and 'certys, wythowten lesynge', is akin to modern storytelling conventions. The extraordinary series of misfortunes that befall Emaré in her romance (the incestuous advances of her father, being cast adrift without provisions, the machinations of an evil mother-in-law) are not only justified but potentially *intensified* by the truth-claims. 'I know!' one can hear in the narrator's voice, at times – 'What a nightmare'. Medieval audiences did not have to believe that Guy truly slew dragons, or that Galahad actually attained the grail, to understand knighthood to be a valuable enterprise (it is this knowledge that informs the young Gingelayne's chivalric pretensions in *Lybeaus Desconus*, and seems to organically motivate all Fair Unknowns). The generic form of romance establishes certain received truths about the world, and unbelievable events and superlative characters are thus situated *within* a tradition of the extraordinary – consigned to the impressive ranks of dragon-slayers and grail-knights. By retelling stories containing prescriptive cultural truths, the romances reassert the centrality of these beliefs and hegemonies to their audiences, while the *solaas* of their presentation simultaneously offers up valuable and potentially transgressive arenas in which the irrefutability of these truths can in fact be called into question.[16]

Improbable Realities in *King Horn* and *Emaré*

It is clear, then, that those who decided to write romance in medieval England understood that there was a balance to be drawn between the predictability of their plots, and the fantastical nature of their narratives. Such extremity is one of many improbable features of

[16] Several recent essay collections have characterized the genre as a prime space for this type of transgression – see *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance*, ed. by Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjevic and Judith Weiss (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010); *Boundaries in Medieval Romance*, ed. by Neil Cartlidge (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008).

romance, a genre that can be defined by its relationship to the incredible, fantastic, and wonderful.[17] As Nicola McDonald has recently argued,

> marvels and the marvellous are synonymous with medieval romance, and not just as a form of festive entertainment. They are at once constitutive of the genre – wonder informs the structure and dynamic of romance, its subject matter, even its verbal complexion – and, for both medieval and modern readers, emblematic of it.[18]

McDonald situates her assessment of romance wonder in its wider medieval and contemporary context; the extent to which the genre baffles us, she suggests, 'incites us to ask "hwat may this mene?"'[19] This provocative characterization of the genre represents the position taken by the volume in which the essay appears: that romance 'thinks', reflects upon, and responds to the realities of the world, and encourages its audiences to do the same.[20] Ad Putter's use of Roland Barthes' 'proairetic code' in his study of romance story-lines and shapes draws out this same principle of curiosity – for as there is little need in romance to ask what will happen next, a ruminative space is generated in which one can ask: 'what does it *mean*?'[21] The extreme, improbable, and exotic provide a flexible realm in which to test boundaries, and engage imaginatively with both issues of political and religious significance, and the everyday. 'Improbable figures' appear throughout literature and have received some attention in studies of 'magical' narratives;[22] in romance, where the improbable is expected –

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[17] On wonder in romance, see L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, 'Simply Marvellous', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004), 1-27; Ingham, *The Medieval New*, esp. Chapter 3; Aisling Byrne, *Otherworlds: Fantasy and History in Medieval Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). On the concept in medieval culture and thought more generally, see Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Wonder', *American Historical Review* 102 (1997), 1-26, and, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, Chapter 1, pp. 37-75.

[18] Nicola McDonald, 'The Wonder of Middle English Romance', in *Thinking Medieval Romance*, ed. by Katherine C. Little and Nicola McDonald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 13-35 (p. 14).

[19] McDonald, 'The Wonder of Middle English Romance', p. 35.

[20] See, in particular, the editors' introduction in the volume – pp. 1-19.

[21] Ad Putter, 'Story line and story shape in *Sir Percyvell of Gales* and Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte du Graal'*, in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England*, pp. 171-96 (p. 173, my emphasis), drawing on Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 19. Putter ruminates on the relationship between *fabula* and *siuzhet* (story and plot) in Middle English romance, suggesting that the 'foregrounding of the proairetic code… produces little description but powerful closure, and it is no coincidence that in this respect many English romances (e.g. *Amis and Amiloun*) are more decisive than the French', p. 173. In his hesitation to assign priority to *fabula* over *siuzhet*, Putter essentially agrees with Jonathan Culler's observations, in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 170-2.

[22] See Eleni Coundouriotis, 'Improbable Figures: Realist Fictions of Insecurity in Contemporary African Fiction', *Novel* 49 (2016), 236-61 (p. 236).

it *is* the convention – it is important that they are not overlooked.[23] We would do well to keep Roman Jakobson's reminder as to 'the extreme relativity of the concept of "realism"'[24] in mind when reading romance: rather than meaning simply '"transparent" representation',[25] or the 'direct correspondence to the material of reality', I use the term here to refer to the organization of that material 'in order to disclose its salient features.'[26]

One of the more obviously improbable features of romance to the modern reader, and one I considered in my reading of *Lybeaus Desconus*, is the issue of intention, or motivation, on the part of the protagonist. *Why* a knight does what he does is often far from the most interesting question to ask of a romance (remembering Lybeaus' curiously dispassionate desire to be a knight), but it is tempting to search for something more complex than simple obligation charging the life of a given knight, regardless. This obfuscation of individual drive or desire has been understood by critics as evidence of a simplistic and naïve understanding of subjective experience on the part of romance poets; the obfuscation is particularly rife in the English verse romances, many of which are translations from French that remove precisely those passages in which interior experience is most sensitively developed. Ironically, perhaps, it is impossible to know the authorial intention behind this widespread lack of explicit character motivation, but it is worth acknowledging that a paucity of written insight into the consciousness or experience of another should not be automatically equated with a lack of realism, and that it is connected, in many ways, to the scaffolding, enclosing

[23] A similar approach is taken by Ad Putter, in his important reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; he argues that 'the reason why the *Gawain*-poet did not place romance and realism in an antithetical relation to one another appears here in its clearest form: life, according to the *Gawain*-poet, is too much like romance. And that, finally, is a statement not only about the veracity of romance, but about the fictitiousness of life, which, in its blithe imperviousness to human reason and foresight, can seem as unreal and fantastic as the genre of romance itself' – see *An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 71.
[24] Roman Jakobson, 'On Realism in Art', in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. by Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1978), pp. 38-46
[25] This term is used by Harry E. Shaw, in *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 39.
[26] Adam Grener, 'Coincidence as Realist Technique: Improbable Encounters and the Representation of Selfishness in *Martin Chuzzlewit*', *Narrative* 3 (2012), 322-42 (p. 339).

nature of romance plotting. While it is true that the form and pace of verse romance has an undeniable role to play in the pared-down depictions of subjectivity, key striking moments *do* remain (most often in descriptions of intense emotion). The hiddenness of the *why* may indicate, in fact, an understanding that inner lives must always to some extent remain hidden. Reading *Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*, E. M. Tillyard observed that Shakespeare's so-called 'problem' plays 'create a peculiar sense of real life but they prevent the sharp clarity of intention we are apt to demand of very great art'; whether belonging to the author of or the characters in a given text, this misplaced search for 'intention' can be productively applied to the effect of the hidden *why* of Middle English romance.[27] These plays are only 'problems' insofar as they evade neat interpretation, and categorization; furthermore, that 'sharp clarity of intention' that Tillyard describes is interesting. It is *not* actually realistic to have unrestricted access to the interior lives of others.

In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer's notably slippery narrator 'honestly' offers his readers a sense of the limitations of his insight into his own characters' inner lives, and therefore their intentions; in Book V, as Criseyde begins to turn towards Diomede and betray Troilus, a tone of uncertainty enters the narration with force:

> And after this the storie telleth us
> That she hym yaf the faire baye stede
> The which he ones wan of Troilus;
> And ek a broche – and that was litel nede –
> That Troilus was, she yaf this Diomede.
> And ek, the bet from sorwe hym to releve,
> She made hym were a pencel of hire sleve.
>
> I fynde ek in stories elleswhere,
> Whan thorugh the body hurt was Diomede
> Of Troilus, tho wep she many a teere
> Whan that she saugh his wyde wowndes blede,
> And that she took, to kepen hym, good hede;
> And for to helen hym of his sorwes smerte,

[27] E. M. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1949), p. 6.

Men seyn – I not – that she yaf hym hire herte.[28]

There was 'litel nede' to give him the brooch, the narrator comments; but he doesn't know why she did that, despite his supposed access to 'stories elleswhere'. Why it is this aspect of her interiority, and motivation, that he does not know, and not other moments of significance (the passages of description in which she essentially talks herself into loving Troilus, or when she is forced to leave Troy, for instance) must remain obscure: but it seems pertinent that this moment of real narrative consequence – the effective end of the central, generative relationship of the poem – is destined to remain private and unknowable. Only Criseyde knows the *why* – far from improbability, this is a starkly realistic depiction of choice and betrayal. This hidden motivation serves to link reader, narrator, and Troilus (those who do not know); the effect this unity may have on our eventual judgement of Criseyde forces us to consider the ways in which we, as readers, have been subject to manipulation as we have read this story of contingency and control.

In the more obviously conventional verse romances, however, the weight of expectation (engendered by the predictability of plot) means that the question of motivation can sometimes seem entirely irrelevant. It is clear that plot and character have much to say to and about one another; ever since what Alan Singer has described as Aristotle's 'clarion privileging of act over character in the *Poetics*',[29] narrative theorists have sought to understand the significance of each in the reader's experience of a story. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle asserts that 'a plot-structure does not possess unity (as some believe) by virtue of centering on an individual. For just as a particular thing may have many random properties, some of which do not combine to make a single entity, so a particular character may perform

[28] Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson and F. N. Robinson, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 473-585, V.1036-50.
[29] Alan Singer, 'Plot', in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*, ed. by Richard Eldridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 369-90 (p. 369).

many actions which do not yield a single "action"'.[30] Henry James could have been directly responding to these lines when he asked 'what is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? What is either a picture or a novel that is *not* of character? What else do we seek in it and find in it?'[31] In his monumental *Morphology of the Folktale*, Vladimir Propp demonstrates the inextricability of plot and the construction of character in mythic and folk narratives, where 'the majority of the characters' acts in the middle of a tale are naturally motivated by the course of the action, and only villainy, as the first basic function of the tale, requires a certain supplementary motivation.'[32] In fact, the villainous motivation (in his examples, the dragon, the stepmother) could be said to simply be at odds with the desire of the *plot*: attempting to derail the end appropriate to the type of tale being told, but, in the process, creating divergence, interest, and so creating more plot. Without obstacle there would be no narrative. In exile-and-return romances such as *King Horn* or *Havelok the Dane*, action is initiated by 'calamity'; the protagonists' rarefied lives are stolen from them by invaders or usurpers.[33] This essentially forms the motivation for the rest of the plot: the boys must reclaim their lands, and the romances depict the processes of doing so. Romance heroes are often passive, the action happening not just by them but *to* them; when in *King Horn* the young protagonist and his companions land on King Aylmar's land, Horn's speech simply recounts their plight, and pleads for mercy – no greater ambition of conquest (or even return) is expressed. It is in Rymenhild, the female protagonist and Horn's eventual wife, that discernible desire and ambition can be identified.[34] This is the

[30] Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. and commentary by Stephen Halliwell (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1987), p. 40.
[31] Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', in *The Art of Fiction and Other Essays*, with an intro. by Morris Roberts (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 3-23 (p. 13).
[32] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 1st edn. trans. by Laurence Scott with an introduction by Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson, 2nd edn. revised and edited with a preface by Louis A. Wagner/New Introduction by Alan Dundes (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), p. 75.
[33] Hume, 'Romance: A Perdurable Pattern', p. 135.
[34] On the narrative effect of ambition, see Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*: 'Ambition provides not only a typical novelistic theme, but also a dominant dynamic of plot: a force that drives the protagonist forward, assuring that

Middle English poet's version of the drastically unbalanced feelings of the central couple that are so evident in the Insular French *Romance of Horn*, where it is clear that only Rigmel is really in love; there Horn does not seem to be very invested in the match, but knows what the plot requires.[35] In both versions, however, it is her desire that drives the action (and therefore the plot) forward; her immediate attraction to Horn is forceful and generative.[36] As Rymenhild and the steward Athelbrus scheme to create an opportunity for the young lovers to meet (to 'pleie / Bitwex ou selve tweie') the power of her desire is evident:

> He schal with me bileve
> Til hit beo nir eve,
> To haven of him mi wille;
> After ne recche ich what me telle.[37]

This is quickly juxtaposed with Horn's passivity when they are together, and when Rymenhild proposes to him, the imperative nature of the active verbs emphasizes their difference:

> Rymenhild up gan stonde
> And *tok* him bi the honde:
> Heo *sette* him on pelle
> Of wyn to drinke his fulle:
> Heo makede him faire chere
> And *tok* him abute the swere.
> Ofte heo him *custe*,
> So wel so hire luste.
> "Horn," heo sede, "withute strif,
> Thu schalt have me to thi wif.
> Horn, have of me rewthe,
> And plist me thi trewthe." (403-14, my emphasis)

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no incident or action is final or closed in itself until such a moment as the ends of ambition have been clarified, through success or else renunciation', p. 39.

[35] See *Romance of Horn*, in *The Birth of Romance in England: The Romance of Horn, The Folie Tristan, The Lai of Haveloc, and Amis and Amilun*, trans. and introduced by Judith Weiss (Tempe: ACMRS, 2009), pp. 45-137.

[36] Differences between the two versions have recently been explored by Nicholas Perkins in his chapter on the romances of Horn, in *The gift of narrative in medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), pp. 16-68.

[37] *King Horn*, in *Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston*, ed. by Graham Drake, Eve Salisbury, Ronald B. Herzman, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/salisbury-king-horn> [accessed July 2021], ll. 349-50, ll. 367-70. Subsequent references are in-text and to this edition.

Horn conventionally delays the marriage until he has been able to prove himself (similarly generative delays can be found in *Le Bone Florence of Rome* and *The Squire of Low Degree*), promising his future wife that she will have her 'wille' in time:

> "Rymenhild," quath he, "beo stille!
> Ich wulle don al thi wille,
> Also hit mot bitide.
> Mid spere I schal furst ride,
> And mi knighthod prove,
> Ar ich thee ginne to woghe." (545-50)

Nevertheless, Rymenhild arranges for him to be knighted by her father, in an attempt to bring about their union sooner. They are betrayed by Fickenhild, and it is this event that provokes the seven year questing and proving episode. It is a narratively necessary diversion: the romance is particularly interested in fidelity and trust, and as Horn has not yet had the chance to adequately prove himself, marriage would, at this point, be unsatisfactory to both protagonist and reader.[38] When he has been adequately tested, however, the romance ends exceptionally abruptly – the final twenty lines see two coronations, a wedding, a sea voyage and, of course, a happily-ever-after – which here, rather unusually, includes details of the protagonists' death:

> Al folk hem mighte rewe
> That loveden hem so trewe:
> Nu ben hi bothe dede –
> Crist to hevene hem lede! (1535-8)

Death in romance can only really be treated like this: a brief, perfunctory nod to an appropriate and timely expiration – a death that comes outside the important part of the knight's life, and can therefore be somewhat glossed over and forgotten about in the grand sweep of romance success. In this way, romance is far closer to (what we might tentatively

[38] Anne Scott, 'Plans, Predictions, and Promised: Traditional Story Techniques and the Configuration of Word and Deed in King Horn', in *Studies in Medieval English Romances: Some New Approaches*, ed. by Derek Brewer (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988), pp. 37-68. Scott suggests that the romance utilizes what Mark Lambert calls 'narrative confirmation' in order to asset the importance of deeds confirming words.

call) real life than epic, where it is possible to die for a cause. At best, death in romance can only mean the end of the story; at worst, it represents total failure.[39]

If ambition and motivation are difficult to locate in the figure of Horn, it is because those around him, and the plot in which he appears, so successfully supply him with purpose – furnish him completely with the *why*. Interiority is housed, therefore, not simply in the textual figure of Horn but in the plot *as a whole*: it is inbuilt, in a sense, in the genre of romance. A comparable process is at work in *Emaré*, where the protagonist is similarly cast into the midst of action by the occasion of parental weakness, or compromise. Here, Emaré's father suddenly develops an incestuous attraction to his beautiful daughter, casting her adrift in a rudderless boat when she rejects his advances. The romance then depicts her struggles as she travels from land to land, and as this Constance-romance progresses certain clear patterns emerge. Another treacherous parent – this time her mother-in-law – causes her to leave her new husband, the King of Galys, and casts her adrift again; and again, it is Emaré's beauty that provokes this action. The highly episodic and repetitive quality of the plot creates the sense that the *right* iteration of Emaré's story is just around the corner, if only she and her audience can hold on a little longer. The suitability of Emaré's marriage, as opposed to her father's earlier incestuous desires, is demonstrated by the speed with which she falls pregnant; father and husband are also productively paralleled when the King of Galys's penance in Rome recalls the Emperor Artyus's sudden grief once he has cast his daughter adrift – and foreshadows the future penance he is to undertake, as an old man.[40] That her

[39] See Ashe, '*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Limits of Chivalry', where Ashe argues that it is impossible to die for chivalry. Consider, also, that the romance in which death reaches its fullest exploration – Malory's *Morte Darthur* – is also the romance story that most powerfully resists death's finality. Arthur will come again at the time of England's greatest need; despite the total disintegration and destruction depicted in the final books, there is an attempt to save him, at least, from pointless romance dying – see Chapter 5 for more detail.

[40] See ll. 820-2; ll. 280-5; l. 955 in *Emaré*, in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-emare> [accessed July 2021]. Subsequent references are in-text and to this edition.

husband's penance does not really make sense (for it was his mother who jealously sent his wife and child into exile, and not him) is of little consequence to the plot: his journey to Rome represents a restorative, reparative movement towards narrative justice. Everything about his voyage is different from the terrible sea crossings previously faced by Emaré – who is evocatively described as alone, without 'mete' or 'drynke' (272, again at 593), and has suffered terribly. But here:

> He lette ordeyne shypus fele
> And fylled hem full of wordes wele,
> Hys men mery wyth to make.
> Dolys he lette dyghth and dele,
> For to wynnen hym sowles hele;
> To the shyp he toke the gate.
>
> Shypmen that wer so mykyll of pryce,
> Dyght her takull on ryche acyse,
> That was fayr and fre.
> They drowgh up sayl and leyd out ore;
> The wynde stode as her lust wore,
> The wethur was lythe on le.
> They sayled over the salt fome,
> Thorow the grace of God in trone,
> That most ys of powsté. (823-37)

The king brings food, and various possessions; even the weather is better on his journey. What his *choice* to travel to Rome achieves is the chance reunion of husband, wife, and child, the richly embroidered cloak[41] that initiated her father's disruptive desire serving now as a token of recognition:

> Ayeyn hem come the lady gent,
> In the robe bryght and shene.
> He toke her yn hys armes two,
> For joye they sowened, both to,
> Such love was hem bytwene. (932-6)

[41] On the significance of the cloak, see Ross. G. Arthur, 'Emaré's Cloak and Audience Response', in *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*, ed. by Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Roney (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1989), pp. 80-92.

In Chaucer's hands, this Constance-material is even more affecting; in *The Man of Law's Tale*, Alla's chance encounter with his child leads to the recognition scene, and the following emotional reunion:

> When Alla saugh his wyf, faire he hire grette,
> And weep that it was routhe for to see;
> For at the firste look he on hire sette
> He knew wel verraily that it was she.
> And she, for sorwe, as doumb stant as a tree,
> So was hir herte shet in hir distresse,
> Whan she remembred his unkyndenesse.
>
> Twyes she swowned in his owene sighte;
> He weep, and hym excuseth pitously.
> "Now God," quod he, and his halwes brighte
> So wisly on my soule as have mercy,
> That of youre harm as giltelees am I
> As is Maurice my sone, so lyk youre face;
> Elles the feend me fecche out of this place!"[42]

The constant turmoil and movement of the narrative are punctured by the image of Constance 'doumb stant as a tree'; locked, one can imagine, in place by the strength of her emotion and incredulity in the face of this improbable encounter.

The marvellous events across the romance canon can been divided into three categories – the mysterious, the magic, and the miraculous (unmotivated, controlled by man, or controlled by God, respectively).[43] Of the miraculous events found in a group of romances he defines as 'exemplary', or 'homiletic' (*Sir Gowther*, *Octavian*, *Isumbras*, *The King of Tars*, *Torrent of Portingale*, and *Amis and Amiloun*), John Finlayson writes: 'improbabilities, therefore, are totally assimilated into a Christian Providential scheme' – resolution is immanent in these texts.[44] Note the similarities between Peter Brooks' sense of plot as 'the very organizing line, the thread of design, that makes narrative possible because finite and

[42] *The Man of Law's Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson and F. N. Robinson, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 87-104, ll. 1051-64.
[43] John Stevens, *Medieval Romance: Themes and Approaches*, (London: Hutchinson, 1973), esp. Chapter 5.
[44] John Finlayson, 'The Marvellous in Middle English Romances', *The Chaucer Review* 33 (1999), 363-408 (p. 381).

comprehensible', and Aquinas's explanation of predestination in the *Summa*: 'Unde manifestum est quod praedestinatio est quaedam ratio ordinis aliquorum in salutem aeternam in mente divina existens' ('Clearly predestination is like the plan, existing in God's mind, for the ordering of some persons to salvation').[45] God's will, of course, is *infinite* and *incomprehensible*; in a romance such as *Amis and Amiloun*, this is borne out in the fantastic nature of the miracles that resolve the mess of the story (*fabula*) – providence functioning, effectively, as *siuzhet*, plot.[46] Parallels can be drawn here with Paul Ricoeur's sense of 'emplotment' (the *act* of plotting, of construction),[47] and with the *Poetria nova*, where when Geoffrey of Vinsauf uses the image of the architect carefully laying the foundations of a house before leaping into action to illustrate the art of the poet, he is arguing for the same principle: 'Circinus interior mentis praecircinet omne matereriae spatium. Certus praelimitet ordo unde praearripiat cursum stylus, aut ubi Gades figat' ('Let the inner compasses of the mind lay out the entire range of the material. Let a certain order predetermine from what point the pen should start on its course, and where the outermost limits shall be fixed').[48] The text must progress clearly and surely towards its end, in this formulation; the outermost limits of the plot are fixed, unshakeable.

[45] Aquinas, *Summae Theologiae*, 1a, q. 23, a. 2 – text and translation in *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 5: *God's Will and Providence: 1a 19-26*, ed. and trans. by Thomas Gilby (London: Blackfriars in conjunction with Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964). He continues: 'actiones in exteriorem materiam transeuntes inferunt ex se passionem ut calefactio et secatio, non autem actiones in agente manentes, ut sunt intelligere et velle' ('transitive actions, like heating or cutting, are those that reduce a reaction in outside material, but immanent actions, like understanding and willing, remain in their doer').
[46] For early formalist discussions of the relationship between *fabula* and *siuzhet*, see Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*; Boris Tomashevski, 'Thematics', in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. and with an intro. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 61-98.
[47] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 2, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985).
[48] Geoffrey of Vinsauf, text and translation by Ernest Gallo, *The Poetria Nova and Its Sources in Early Rhetorical Doctrine* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), ll. 55-8.

And so there is certainly something to be said for the similarities between medieval conceptions of providence and the scaffolding impulse of romance;[49] both offer reassurance that resolution is coming, one way or another. The concept of predestination speaks to the fate of the romance knight, whose life of constant movement is a sort of vocation, in which 'one is called by God to perform an action and one must listen… Man is tested by the unknown, and his quality is measured by his reaction to this test', writes Morton Bloomfield.[50] The notion of knighthood as vocation is an underutilized one, and I am struck by the potential to read this sense of a 'calling' alongside our own moment's neoliberal preoccupation with the *necessity* of finding a fulfilling or satisfying career in order to live a good or satisfying life;[51] but in any case, it is born out in the proairetic mode of romance – story and character need not ask *why*, but simply *do*. The justification is instantiated in the thing itself; the chivalric knight, the romance narrative.

Within the space supplied by the scaffolding of romance plot, the pleasure of improbable coincidences can flourish. The recognition sequence is a particularly common plot device – it is central in *Amis and Amiloun*, for instance, where the brothers' reunion is also aided by the token of the cup. Chapter 4 will further demonstrate that the hiddenness of individual motivation, or intention, should not be dismissed as unrealistically flat portrayal of character – but here I would like to make the case for coincidence as a similarly multifaceted process of self-conscious romance plotting. Coincidence has been the subject of several useful studies;[52]Adam Grener does well to point out the critical tendency towards an 'implicit

[49] On medieval conceptions of providence, see Hester Goodenough Gelber, 'Providence', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. by Robert Pasnau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 761-72; Mikko Posti, *Medieval Theories of Divine Providence: 1250-1350* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).
[50] Morton Bloomfield, *Essays and Explorations: Studies in Ideas, Language, and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013, repr. 2014), p. 108.
[51] Is knighthood closer to vocation than simple labour? I am not sure. But Foucault's 'technologies of the self' speak to the link between work and identity that is so clear in the life of a knight – see Michel Foucault, 'Technologies of the self', in *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed by L. H. Martin, H. Gutman and P. H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).
[52] Dannenberg, *Coincidence and Counterfactuality*; Marie-Laure Ryan, 'Cheap Plot Tricks, Plot Holes, and Narrative Design', *Narrative* 17 (2009), 56-75. See also her *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and*

assumption that coincidence is by its very nature at odds with realist interpretation.'[53] He argues that in the hands of an author such as Dickens, coincidence must be read as an opportunity to 'reveal how the complexity and opacity of the social world generate the subjective feelings of independence and self-containment'.[54]Although visible machinations of plot (such as those necessary to the process of coincidence) could be seen to work against realism in a given narrative, they can also speak to the contradictions and irrationalities of real life in meaningful ways. Coincidences communicate 'our sense that real life blends the casual and the causal, that things are connected and contingent, patterned and random, that we are both free and determined.'[55] They can be fuel on the fire of a sense of injustice, but can also serve as a balm, offering a hopeful notion that there is space for endless possibility, and connection. This is why plots of 'divergence' (bifurcating and meandering story-lines) satisfied by narrative 'convergence' (the interconnection and intersection of characters or events in a narrative world) such as that found in *Emaré* have proved to be some of the most enduring; Kermode's 'disconfirmation' and 'consonance' speak to the same desire – to witness an (even unlikely) interconnectedness between people, places, and events, and result in a closed ending.[56] This desire trumps the need for probability, or even realism. In a plot that relies upon coincidence, *why* is a ridiculous question to ask: romance, a genre in which conventions and expectations give shape and form to the story from *without*, consistently asks the sceptical romance-reader to suspend their disbelief. The promise of romance is that the world is answerable to us, the secular reader, and that it has meaning and structure that will deliver significance to even the 'chance' events that make up our lives.

Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Grener, 'Coincidence as Realist Technique'.

[53] Grener, 'Coincidence as Realist Technique', p. 322.

[54] Grener, 'Coincidence as Realist Technique', p, 324.

[55] W. J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 142.

[56] Dannenberg discusses the literary-historical significance of 'divergence' and 'convergence' in *Coincidence and Counterfactuality*, esp. pp. 1-6.

Generating Plot in Chrétien de Troyes

Romance plots limit and obscure as much as they surprise and delight. In this final section, I turn to the romances of Chrétien de Troyes; for if, as I have argued, there is a self-conscious and metatextual impulse in the Middle English poet-revisers of the later Middle Ages, then to what extent where they drawing on older and perhaps more sophisticated traditions of romance storytelling? Take, for instance, this opening of *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, Chrétien's great unfinished romance:

> Del Chevalier de la Charrette
> comance Crestïens son livre;
> matiere et san li done et livre
> la contesse, et ils s'antremet
> de panser si que rien n'i met
> fors sa painne et s'antancïon;
> des or comance sa raison.
>
> (Chrétien begins his book about the Knight of the Cart; the source and the meaning are furnished and given him by the countess, and he strives carefully to add nothing but his effort and diligence; now he begins his story.)[57]

Writing for his patron Marie de Champagne, Chrétien expresses a need to explain his project. The source and meaning of the story of Lancelot apparently pre-exist the telling; conventionally against 'originality', in its modern sense, Chrétien asserts a desire to change very little of what he claims to have been told. The plot of *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, we could say, is fixed before the story has even begun: such is the fate of many of the most enduring Arthurian knights' tales, and the romance-poets who tell them. There is a gap, of course, between generic expectation (there *will* be fights and eventual success) and the specifics of plot, which function more as variation on a theme – here there is far more freedom available. Unlike many other romances, however, we do not know the source to which Chrétien is referring here – and it is possible that his first audiences did not either. This

[57] Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot or, The Knight of the Cart (Le Chevalier de la Charrete)*, ed. and trans. by William W. Kibler (London: Garland Publishing, 1981), ll. 24-30. Subsequent citations are in-text and to this edition and translation.

is a different claim, after all, to that made by Thomas of Britain in his *Tristan*, where he explains that he has used reason and common sense in order to pick out the *true* version of the story from a mass of inadequate tellings.[58] The congruence of plot, Chrétien's *mult bele conjointure*, must be central to his claims – but an implied sense that there is a *right* way to tell this story can be found throughout the genre.[59] Such is the fate of plot in romance; whether the example in question is part of a larger tradition of storytelling, such as the prose-Lancelot Vulgate cycle, or simply a conventional celebration of a single, superlative knight's life, key moments of action are inflexible. But if subject matter and meaning are, as Chrétien claims, already furnished, provided, delivered, or handed over to him,[60] then what is his role in the construction of *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*? An effect of old-newness is created, in both the romances of Chrétien and *Tristan;* this effect is part of the genre itself. The self-conscious situation of these poems within their traditions gestures towards the scaffolding of plot, but suggests that *this* iteration will be best, most detailed, and exciting; indeed, it is another facet of the convention of the superlative I explored in Chapter 1. The restrictions of this supposedly rigid plot might even offer romance authors an exciting space and opportunity to individuate *their* retelling, their protagonist, from all the rest. I have experienced the benefit of such a structured method of writing myself; when I return to creative writing after some time away, I find small writing tasks with clear boundaries to be easiest and most generative – I describe the experience of riding the bus in the voice of Holden Caulfield, for instance, or compose a very bad sonnet about boredom. The form and

[58] Thomas of Britain, *Tristran*, ed. and trans. by Steward Gregory (London: Garland Publishing, 1991), ll. 2104-53. I will be using the more commonly used title 'Tristan' to refer to this text, and to its protagonist. Subsequent references are in-text and to this edition and translation.
[59] For more on truth-claims, see Brookes, 'Truth-telling and Truthiness in the Middle English Popular Romances'; on notion of *conjointure* in medieval French romance, see Anne Berthelot, 'The Romance as *Conjointure of* Brief Narratives', *L'Esprit Créateur* 33 (1993), 51-60.
[60] AND, s.v. 'liverer', sense 1.

style are already provided for me in these exercises, and within this scaffolding I can write with a freedom that is often very productive.

So it is that despite its position as the first of Chrétien's romances, *Erec et Enide* can challenge the rigidity of romance structure and plot, suggesting that a tension may be built into the genre itself; as Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner would have it, 'from its inception, romance is an art of reshaping through rewriting'.[61] The text opens with an enigmatic proposition:

> Au jor de Pasque, au tans novel,
> a Quaradigan, son chastel,
> ot li rois Artus cort tenue.
> Einz si riche ne fu veüe,
> que molt i ot boens chevaliers,
> hardiz et conbatanz et fiers,
> et riches dames et puceles,
> filles de rois, gentes et beles;
> mes einçois que la corz fausist,
> li rois a ses chevaliers dist
> qu'il voloit le blanc cerf chacier
> por la costume ressaucier.
>
> (On Easter day, in springtime, at Cardigan, his castle, King Arthur held court. So rich a one was never seen, for there were many good knights, brave and combative and fierce, and rich ladies and maidens, daughters of kings, noble and beautiful; but before the court concluded the king said to his knights that he wanted to hunt the white stag in order to revive the tradition.)[62]

In a conventional superfluity of greatness, the introduction of Arthur and his court is closely followed by that most generative of conjunctions: 'mes', Chrétien writes, a hunt is proposed by the king. It is this hunt, and this 'but', that are to set the plot of this tale in motion. Gawain is quick to point out to his uncle that this plan will not pass without controversy: according to

[61] Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, 'The shape of romance in medieval France', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. by Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 13-28 (p. 13).
[62] Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide*, ed. and trans. by Carleton W. Carroll, with an intro. by Willian W. Kibler (New York: Garland, 1987), ll. 27-38. Subsequent quotations from the French, and translations into English, are in text and to this edition.

tradition, the knight who kills the stag must kiss the most beautiful of the maidens of the court, and he sees potential strife and unrest in the prospect:

> Maus an puet avenir molt granz,
> qu'ancor a il ceanz cinc cenz
> dameiseles de hauz paraiges,
> filles de rois, gentes et sages,
> n'i a nule qui n'ait ami
> chevalier vaillant et hardi,
> don chascuns desresnier voldroit,
> ou fust a tort ou fust a droit,
> que cele qui li atalante
> est la plus bele et la plus gente. (49-58)
>
> (Great evil can come from this, for there are easily five hundred damsels of high lineage here, daughters of kings, noble and prudent, and there is not a one who is not the favourite of some valiant and bold knight, each of whom would want to contend, either rightly or wrongly, that the one who pleases him is the most beautiful and the most noble.)

His warning of danger is not purely forward-looking; Chrétien creates a spuriously extended past through this caution, which gestures towards a framework of sorts – Gawain knows enough that he can say that this is the *type* of thing that *can* cause argument, and therefore generate action (for it seems inevitable that the stag *will* be caught). Gawain's warning also speaks with sensitivity to the issue of competing superlatives discussed in my first chapter. Rather than weakening the semantic value of such description, the overlapping of superlatively beautiful women in Arthur's court demonstrates the reality of subjective experience: the task of singling out a single woman will initiate conflict because each knight ('rightly or wrongly') will have his own, most beloved lady. By way of a teasing joke on Chrétien's part, Gawain's concerns depict with some realism what it means to value, and to love; nevertheless, Arthur's hunt takes place, and, when Arthur returns victorious and ready to bestow his kiss, the tension amongst the knights is just as Gawain had predicted. Before things get too out of hand, Guinevere returns from the hunt herself, where she and Erec encountered the armed knight and the evil dwarf; she insists Arthur waits for Erec to return before making his decision.

Several strange things have happened in these opening scenes, and the strangeness of each is particularly useful for the plotting, or generation, of the events that are to come. Why would Arthur insist on this particular hunt, after being warned by Gawain of the long 'tradition' of dispute it holds? No adequate explanation is given; indeed, Arthur's response makes little sense:

> Li rois respont: "Ce sai ge bien,
> mes por ce n'an lerai ge rien,
> car parole que rois a dite
> ne doit puis estre contredite.
> Demain matin a grant deduit
> irons chacier le blanc cerf tuit
> an la forest avantureuse:
> ceste chace iert molt mervelleuse." (59-66)
>
> (The king replied: 'This I know well, but I will not give up my plan for all that, for the word of a king must not be opposed. Tomorrow morning with great pleasure we will all go to hunt the white stag in the forest of adventures: this hunt will be truly wondrous.")

Already the *roi fainéant* of much later Arthurian romance, Chrétien's Arthur essentially has one job: to provide and maintain an environment in which the knights of his Round Table can flourish and succeed. The emptiness of his response to Gawain's warning hardly reflects this purpose; for although his constancy does preserve the value of the king's word, and so saves face in this moment, it also provides is an opportunity for Erec to ride out, immediately establish himself as a great knight in the sparrow-hawk episode, and meet Enide. Similarly, Guinevere's intervention – asking her husband to delay bestowing the kiss – makes no sense unless we read it as part of this generative methodology, a result of the internal logic of the poem. When Erec does return to court, he is accompanied by Enide – the most productive force in the romance. As soon as she is presented to the court, Gawain's concerns as to the disruptive and divisive nature of the king bestowing such distinction on a single woman are immediately assuaged, for

> Tuit s'escrïent a une voiz:
> "Par Deu, sire, ne par sa croiz,

vos pöez bien jugier par droit
que ceste la plus bele soit:
an ceste a asez plus biauté
qu'il n'a el soloil de clarté.
Beisier la pöez quitemant;
tuit l'otroions comunemant." (1785-92)

(All cried out with a single voice: "In God's name, Sire, and by his cross, you can indeed judge by right that she is the most beautiful: in her there is far more beauty than there is brightness in the sun. You may freely kiss her; we all concede it with one voice.")

Significantly, Guinevere also encourages this assessment;[63] the unanimity with which Enide's superlative beauty is recognized by the court speaks to its extremity, and, perhaps, objective truth. On the other hand, it could be one huge joke: Chrétien flirts playfully with allowing multiple subjectivities into the storyworld – and then must retract it, because this lady *really is* the most beautiful. She, and the romance itself, is exactly as the genre prescribes. For the joke to work we must understand Chrétien to be self-consciously and knowingly toying with breaking the rules of his genre, and then not allowing them to break, all for our amusement. In other romances, beauty contests generate irreconcilable discord.[64] This is the case in *Lanval* by Chrétien's contemporary Marie de France, and its Middle English reworking as *Sir Launfal* where, as discussed in Chapter 1, Launfal and Tryamour must leave the court when it is his lover, and not Guinevere, who is publicly acknowledged as the 'bryghtest.''[65] But in the source text *Lanval* their departure is not understood as exile but the logical conclusion of the wish-fulfilment fantasy of having no need for a patron, and as a result having no role to play

[63] 'Je ne cuit qu'a mal nus l'atort:
ja nus ne dira, qui ne mante,
que ceste ne soit la plus gente
des puceles qui ceanz sont
et de celes de tot le mont.'
('I think no one will take it ill; no one will ever say, without lying, that this is not the most beautiful of the maidens present here and of those in all the world', 1736-40).
[64] cf. the beauty contest in *Lybeaus Desconus*, (Lambeth, ll. 751-1004), which serves as one of the trials the protagonist must overcome on his quest towards self-knowledge and -fashioning.
[65] *Sir Launfal*, ll. 1003-5.

in the court.[66] The Middle English author resists this particular form of individuation, for Launfal's spirit returns from the Otherworld once year to joust any knight who wishes 'to kepe hys armes fro the rustus'; the challenge to the court's authority persists.[67] The potential disaster of the beauty contest averted, then, these opening scenes of *Erec et Enide* function much like a mini-romance: Erec has ridden out, quest in hand; he has returned, triumphant, lady gained. But Chrétien's tale exposes the romance's tendency toward endless self-replication; the conditions for a happy ending have already been met, and so Enide's distress and Erec's crisis are the product of these premature conditions, and do not allow the ending to take place. Rather than function as a conventional romance ending, Erec and Enide's marriage is simply the end of the beginning.[68] It is the extremity of Enide's beauty, and the perfection of the eponymous characters' union, that is to generate the rest of the romance; Chrétien delivers a happy ending, and asks – what happens next? What now, that a key purpose of a knight's life has been achieved?

In the opening episode (or mini-romance), Enide's beauty is the answer to crisis, but the perfection of that solution is far too final, and so, for the generation of more romance, it must become a problem. And so Erec famously loses his taste for questing, his change indicated once again by that troublesome *mais*:

> Mes tant l'ama Erec d'amors
> que d'armes mes ne li chaloit,
> ne a tornoiemant n'aloit.
> N'avoit mes soing de tornoier:
> a sa fame volt dosnoier,
> si an fist s'amie et sa drue.
> En li a mise s'antendue,
> en acoler et an beisier;
> ne se queroit d'el aeisier.

[66] Marie de France, *Lanval*, in *Lais*, ed. by Alfred Ewert (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1995), pp. 58-74, ll. 611-46.
[67] *Sir Launfal*, l. 1028.
[68] See Kathryn Hume, 'Romance: A Perdurable Pattern', *College English* 36 (1974), 129-46 for more on the implications of marriage to the romance plot: 'Marriage is one of the ways a romance hero contributes to society's future stability, and "they lived happily ever after" is as much ingrained in the form as is "once upon a time" in a fairy tale"', p. 141.

Si compaignon duel en avoient;
sovant entr'ax se demantoient
de ce que trop l'amoit assez.
Sovant estoit midis passez
einz que de lez li se levast.
Lui estoit bel, cui qu'il pesast. (2396-410)

(But Erec was so in love with her that he cared no more for arms, nor did he go to tournaments. He no longer cared for tourneying: he wanted to enjoy his wife's company, and he made her his lady and his mistress. He turned all his attention to her, to embracing and kissing; he sought no other delight. His companions were grieved thereby; often they lamented among themselves that he loved her far too much. Often it was past noon before he rose from her side. This pleased him, whoever might be grieved by it.)

The implication here must be that Enide (and her beauty) is causing this inaction; there is a certain irony in the fact that it is the type of subjectivity that Gawain had previously warned Arthur against that we are seeing borne out here. Erec is pleased, the nobles of the court are not; they do not love Enide, and so cannot fully understand this behaviour – finding it a self-indulgent shame, and waste of time. It is his and hers alone. Notably, the narrative voice does not offer any real judgement as to the validity of Erec's new lifestyle, although we are informed that he continues to provide for his knights, sending them off to the tournaments he would have previously attended 'richly apparelled and equipped'. This version of Erec is what happens after the happy ending: a static contentment, one that is not useful to romance, and certainly no good for plot. Previously declared objectively the most beautiful, Enide laments her role in shaking her husband's similarly superlative status in the court:

"Lasse," fet ele, "con mar fui!
De mon païs que ving ça querre?
Bien me doit essorbir la terre,
quant toz li miaudres chevaliers,
li plus hardiz et li plus fiers,
li plus lëax, li plus cortois
qui onques fust ne cuens ne rois,
a del tot an tot relanquie
por moi tote chevalerie.
Dons l'ai ge honi tot por voir;
nel volsisse por nul avoir." (2458-68)

> ("Wretch," said she, "unhappy me! Why did I come here from my land? The earth should truly swallow me up, since the very best of knights, the boldest and the bravest, the most loyal, the most courtly that was ever count or king, has, because of me, completely abandoned all chivalry. Now have I truly shamed him; I should not have wished it for anything.")

The rest of the romance works to undo the stupifying effect Enide has had on the knight, his rejection of her warnings and help the harshest and fullest manifestation of the impulse to generate more discord, and therefore plot. Her beauty may be objective, but his love for her is subjective – this is the difference between romance convention, and the experience of romance. For all its self-conscious focus on interiority, there is a narrative requirement to generate physical action, and so Erec must create unnecessary difficulty in his tasks by rejecting the help of his wife and the various 'endings' such help represents. This is compounded by the oddity of his decision to take her with him – *she* is the audience before whom he seeks to construct his honour – even as she repeatedly disobeys him, working alongside him to resolve the obstacles they encounter on the quest. It is ultimately *both* Enide and Erec who bring the couple in the Joy of the Court back into society; the extent to which Erec's identity is bound up in this union is reinforced in the prologue to *Cligés*, which speaks of both 'Erec *et* d'Enide' when describing the earlier romance.[69] Rebecca Newby argues: 'it is therefore not fanciful to suggest that Erec and Enide are allegorical of chivalric *matière* and beautiful poetic form, respectively; as symbolic figures, they must continuously test their relationship until they find a proper balance, until they are working together for themselves and for the common good, as Chrétien directed in his prologue.'[70] *Erec et Enide* is Chrétien's most concerted attempt at showing how between them, knight and lady can manage chivalry, fashioning it into a social good. Marriage emerges as a metaphor for social and economic

[69] Chrétien de Troyes, *Cligés*, ed. by Claude Luttrell and Stewart Gregory, Arthurian Studies 28 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), l. 1.
[70] Rebecca Newby, 'Illusory ends in Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide*', *Arthurian Literature XXXIV*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and David F. Johnson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018), pp. 1-21 (pp. 19-20).

success; romance's greater aim (to normalize, celebrate, and perhaps even canonize the rule of mounted aristocracy as one of Christian, ethical, selfless virtue) is encoded in the very earliest examples of the genre.

The self-imposition of unnecessary difficulty can also be found in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, and most particularly in the Sword-Bridge episode. The Sword-Bridge serves to create, rather than embellish, the key narrative events of this romance which Chrétien tellingly left unfinished. Faced with two paths on their quest to save Guinevere, Gawain and the Knight of the Cart (who we know to be Lancelot) must choose between an 'Underwater Bridge', the less dangerous of the two, or the 'Sword Bridge'. The girl the knights meet at the crossroads describes the nature of the bridges, claiming the former should be shunned, and stressing the peril of the latter. The task of choosing between the two would be far more powerful if there was a suggestion that the more dangerous bridge represented a more direct route, and that taking it would necessarily shorten the quest and thus lessen the suffering of Guinevere – but no such detail is provided, and therefore Gawain's decision to take the easier bridge is arguably the right one.[71] Knights in the later, thirteenth century *Queste san Graal* are similarly tasked with decisions the implications of which they do not fully understand; there the clerkly author takes the rules of the genre and twists them for his own didactic message. The grail knights in the *Queste san Graal* repeatedly mistake danger for honour (or honour for virtue), and then must be told that these decisions demonstrated their sin – most particularly pride. But in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* less peril means more chance of success; what this episode, and this choice, really achieve is to show us that this is a Lancelot-, not Gawain-romance. By taking the passage to the Sword-Bridge, action is generated and compared with the less tumultuous journey faced by Gawain; it is not through

[71] The weight of audience expectation – we 'know the type of story' being told, and it's one in which difficulty *should* equal reward – might 'furnish' Chrétien's tale with this detail, regardless.

any great speech or interior monologue that the depth of Lancelot's love for Guinevere is demonstrated, but rather the complication of his journey to get to her.

Once he reaches the bridge, the task appears almost comically treacherous: literally a bridge made of sword, over a cold stream, two lions tethered to a rock on the other side. There is more than a touch of the ridiculous here: the problem is that Lancelot can *never* reach the end of his particular romance; he cannot marry the queen. The romance must therefore find ways to prolong and replicate itself, while never allowing him definitive failure nor complete success; this is a test of bravery, of who Lancelot is, rather than true skill. He is tasked with the impossible; hence, his story remains unfinished. The description of the crossing is relatively brief, and once he has crossed things are not as they seemed:

> A la grant dolor c'on li fist
> s'an passe outre et a grant destrece –
> mains et genolz et piez se blece;
> mes tot le rasoage et sainne
> Amors qui le conduist et mainne,
> si li estoit a sofrir dolz.
> A mains, a piez et a genolz
> fet tant que de l'autre part vient.
> Lors li remanbre et resovient
> des deus lÿons qu'il i cuidoit
> avoir veüz quant il estoit
> de l'autre part. Lors s'i esgarde:
> n'i avoit nes une leisarde
> ne rien nule qui mal li face,
> s'esgarde son anel et prueve. (3110-25)
>
> (In the extreme pain it caused him and in great distress he crossed, wounding his hands, knees, and feet. But Love, which led and guided him, comforted and healed him at once and made his suffering a pleasure. On hands, feet, and knees he advanced until he reached the other side. Then he recalled and remembered the two lions which he thought he had seen when he was still on the other side. He looked, but there was not so much as a lizard to do him harm. He raised his hand before his face, gazed at his ring, then looked again.)

In the end, it is not that Lancelot was the only knight with the prowess to cross the bridge; it is that he is the bravest, in possession of the strongest will, and is most powerfully guided by his love of Guinevere. This specific task is an entirely artificial one, not least because it was

not undertaken by Lancelot through meaningful choice; Gawain simply chose first, leaving Lancelot to quite unthinkingly embark on the series of events leading up to the crossing itself. The comfort provided by 'Love' in this passage poses a potential problem (not unlike the crisis that sits in the shadows of hagiography): for should reward follow a sacrifice that costs nothing? The suffering that becomes pleasure also exposes the meaninglessness of all Lancelot's obstacles and triumphs – for the combination of adultery and the will to a happy ending in this narrative means that there is nowhere for the plot to go; union with Guinevere could only ever lead to destruction.

As the knight rides forth, this thoughtlessness is striking:

> Et cil de la charrete panse
> con cil qui force ne desfanse
> n'a vers Amors qui le justise;
> et ses pansers est de tel guise
> que lui meïsmes en oblie;
> ne set s'il est, ou s'il n'est mie;
> ne ne li manbre de son non;
> ne set s'il est armez ou non,
> ne set ou va, ne set don vient.
> De rien nule ne li sovient
> fors d'une seule, et por celi
> a mis les autres en obli;
> a cele seule panse tant
> qu'il n'ot ne voit ne rient n'antant. (711-24)

> (The Knight of the Cart was lost in thought, a man with no strength or defence against Love, who torments him; his meditation was so deep that he forgot his own identity; he was uncertain whether he truly existed or not; he was unable to recall his own name; he did not know if he were armed or not, nor where he went nor whence he came. He remembered nothing at all save one creature, for whom he forgot all others; he was so intent upon her alone that he did not hear, or see, or attend to anything.)

Identity in the form of a name, a past, or even a future are unnecessary for the task at hand: the skeletal structure of the novel, the notion of inner realities dictating outer experiences, is in no way applicable to Lancelot at this point. The love that guides him arrives, as Norris J. Lacy has argued, in a similarly thoughtless way: 'Lancelot's love *explodes* into romance

without any beginning revealed or end foretold'.[72] Such love is not a narrative trope, but a lyric one: love that is ignored, rejected, or endlessly unknown. The narrative of love that would more fully occupy later romance authors is different – there the lady's love must be won, and possessed. This is not to diminish the significance of Lancelot's love; indeed, it is perhaps the single most generative relationship in the Arthurian universe, and was soon incorporated into the Lancelot-Grail cycle. As the Queen's champion, Lancelot was the answer to the problem of the *roi fainéant*, the necessarily static nature of Arthur; such extreme love engendered almost endless plotting potential. As will be explored in more detail in Chapter 5 of this thesis, Lancelot must exist in a constant series of life-threatening situations – for he cannot die until the whole Arthurian world is gone.

Conclusion

What is the fate of our sporadic individual, who is caught up, as it were, in the scaffolding of their romance's plot? Denied the organic plot of development or emergence that would later be established in the literary-critical imagination by the novel, the characters of romance can seem obscured, or perhaps overshadowed, by their fixed plots. This is the cause of the dissent and distress performed by some romance characters, as described in Chapter 2 – but perhaps it was also key to the freedom and capacity for wonder available to the romance poet, and therefore the protagonists they produced. By about the fourteenth century (the peak of verse romance production in England) this fixity of the romance plot meant that it was appropriate (and perhaps even necessary) for poets to refer to the phenomenon within their own narratives: to show that they were *writing* for the plot, self-consciously pointing to the scaffolded limits as and when it became necessary to satisfy the obligations of the genre, and the expectations of their audiences. Simultaneously, there is perhaps a certain realism in the

[72] Norris J. Lacy, *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1991), p. 89, my emphasis.

obscured access to interiority that the rigidity of romance plotting requires: the protagonist's motivation in these texts is either entirely obvious (for it is the plot), or, in its unspokenness, remains partly obscured and hidden from the audience. In this way, it is not unlike real life. Improbable coincidences and recognitions can be interpreted in a similarly generous manner, responding, perhaps, to the various confusions and injustices of secular, postlapsarian experience. But the romance plot is not inherently at odds with the depiction of textual individuals – as the next chapter will show, character could still find its way through the web of convention.

Chapter 4: Romance Characters

Only in recent decades have historians and critics begun to challenge the old inherited assumptions as to the Middle Ages' obsessions with 'type' – the spectre of feudalism loomed large in such assumptions, and the conviction that society *was* hierarchy, rigid and self-aware of its gradations, has been a difficult one to shake. Ruminations on the seven sins, four elements, twelve zodiac signs, and countless other lists abound in the surviving texts, and through this presentation some modern critics have been able to draw connections between medieval scholasticism, and the medieval perception of personhood. To these critics, classification, hierarchy, and distinction were central to conceptions of self: 'to conform to a pattern is to be somebody. Not to conform is to be nobody', concludes John A. Alford;[1] Judson Boyce Allen has argued that 'medieval classifications were made, apparently, in the faith that any given entity – act, person, or fact – was enhanced by being so classed. One's label, one's context, was properly a part of one's essence and definition, and one could not do without it.'[2] Although a preoccupation with adequately distinguishing *is* evident in texts such as the widespread *distinctiones* (which offered scholastic explication and exegesis from the second half of the twelfth century –'in them, meanings were broken down, divided into their constituent parts, so that the senses or aspects of key words were easier to grasp', A. J.

[1] John A. Alford, 'The Scriptural Self,' in *The Bible in the Middle Ages: Its Influence on Literature and Art*, ed. by Bernard S. Levy (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1992), pp. 1-21 (p. 2).
[2] Judson Boyce Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A decorum of convenient distinction* (London: University of Toronto Press, 1982), p. 5. Allen echoes Jacob Burckhardt's pronouncement that medieval man 'was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation – only through some general category', in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. by S. G. O. Middlemore (London: Phaidon Books, 1965), p. 81. c.f. Ruth Mazo Karras, 'Separating the Men from the Goats: Masculinity, Civilization, and Identity Formation in the Medieval University', in *The Animal/Human Boundary: Historical Perspectives*, ed. by Angela N. H. Creager and William Chester Jordan (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2002), pp. 50-73, where she describes medieval society as 'one of collectivities in which identity came from membership in particular groups' (p. 50), and Ullmann, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages*, pp. 40-5.

Minnis describes),[3] there is of course a difference between establishing the components of the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*, and the construction of personhood – or the creation of literary character, the subject of this chapter and this thesis more generally. But this sense that type and selfhood are related is an enduring one, and reveals itself today in the popularity of personality tests such as the Myers-Briggs test, the enneagram, or BuzzFeed quizzes that can tell you which Harry Potter character *you really are*.[4] Self-conscious identification with a category or type of personality can, in this way, offer a route to greater self-knowledge; there may not be a clearly expressed idea of 'personality' in the Middle Ages, but rather, as discussed in my Introduction, a requirement for the Christian thinker to know themselves – to examine their soul before God, understanding both their weaknesses and strengths. When it comes to medieval romance, types and roles abound: in this chapter I am interested in both the primary and secondary figures of romance, the heroes and heroines but also the squires and stewards and uncles and stepmothers. Indeed, such secondary characters form the vast majority of the cast found in most romances, where there is, typically, one superlative hero – and everyone else. This is a wildly unbalanced way to write, but, as turned out to be the case with the coincidences and improbabilities discussed in the previous chapter, perhaps not an entirely unrealistic way to portray the world: in real life, there is a natural limit to the extent to which we can comprehend all those around us as having lives as full and complicated as our own. I would argue that stock figures offer a valuable way into considering broader and

[3] A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic literary attitudes in the later Middle Ages*, 2nd edn. (Aldershot: Gower, 1988), pp. 63-4.

[4] Available at: <https://www.buzzfeed.com/marietelling/which-harry-potter-character-are-you>. The BuzzFeed quiz format exploded into the internet space in about 2013, and has remained remarkably popular ever since. For an interview with Summer Anne Burton, the editor behind the phenomenon, see Dino Grandoni, 'Mastermind Behind BuzzFeed's Quizzes Explains How They Work And Why They're So Crazy Viral', *Huffington Post*, 20 February 2014, available at: <https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/buzzfeed-quiz-how-do-they-work_n_4810992?ri18n=true> [accessed July 2021]. Burton compares the appeal of these quizzes to astrology: 'It's not scientific, but if you have a good attitude, that doesn't keep it from being fun. When you get the results, you can relate it to yourself.' On the origins and use of the pseudo-scientific Myers-Briggs test, and personality tests more generally, see Merve Emre, *What's Your Type? The Strange History of Myers-Briggs and the Birth of Personality Testing* (London: William Collins, 2018), esp. p. xviii.

perhaps more complex questions of subjectivity, as they speak to how we experience most people we encounter. Family and friends stand out in our lives as being people of significant or distinct character (in various senses of the word) and even then, always through the filter of what they are *to us* – the role they play regardless of who they are. But the rest are not so sharply defined: people we understand, vaguely, as fulfilling the roles that others fill (the passer-by, the loud person on the bus, someone in a crowd you are trying to push past on your way to see the real people). Stock figures in literature rarely receive recognition for the distinctly *useful* role they play in the construction of believable narrative landscapes; with its careful and at times precarious balance of conventionality and interest in personhood, romance is a productive genre in which to explore the utility of the stock figure in the Middle Ages, and the question of medieval character more broadly.

If in Chapter 3 I was reading for the romance plot, here I am reading for the romance character. To do this, I need first to define what it is I mean when I use that term; the opening section of the chapter spends some time unpacking the literary-critical hesitation to apply it to medieval romance. I then go on to offer an alternative reading of *Sir Orfeo,* discovering, in my search for inconsistency, a new dimension to the character of Heurodis. The final section centres the secondary figures of romance – stewards and servants in *Sir Orfeo*, *Havelok the Dane, Amis and Amiloun, Sir Degrevant* and Thomas of Britain's *Tristan*, and the loathly lady in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* – in order to consider the implications of this approach to romance characterization.

Medieval Character and the Novel

John Frow has commented that 'the concept of character is perhaps the most problematic and the most undertheorized of the basic categories of narrative theory'.[5] It is worth noting that not all narrative requires character (paradigm, a recognizable or conventional textual figure, is the essential thing), but considering its centrality to the vast majority of fiction this is a strange state of affairs: since E. M. Forster's concept of 'flat' and 'round' characters entered the critical discussion over half a century ago, the most productive work on character can be found in author- or genre-specific criticism – the eighteenth-century novel, in particular, has garnered several useful studies.[6] Forster's theory of character has not, however, been universally well-received (and I find it only superficially useful when thinking about romance). In a letter to Oliver Stallybrass (who would go on to edit the 1927 Clark Lectures which were to become *Aspects of the Novel*) F. R. Leavis remarked that Forster's terminology 'at once became a nuisance: all the girls' school English mistresses in England seized on the distinction between flat and round characters – which after all was as good as anything the book did yield critically.'[7] Others have offered terms such as 'essentialist' and 'existential' as a counterpoint to Forster's 'flat' and 'round';[8] but the longevity of the concepts attests to the undeniable utility of his original terms. Forster writes: 'The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is flat pretending to be round. It has the incalculability of life about it – life within the pages of a book.'[9]A novel will have a few choice round characters

[5] John Frow, 'Spectacle, Binding: On Character', *Poetics Today* 7 (1986), 227-50 (p. 227); see also his literary-philosophical attempt to address this lack of scholarship – *Character and Person* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[6] In both Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonists in the Novel* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003) and Maria DiBattista, *Novel Characters: A Genealogy* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) the eighteenth-century is used as the starting point for character-study.
[7] Quoted in Oliver Stallybrass's 'Editor's Introduction' to *Aspects of the Novel*, p. xxiv.
[8] Paul Pickrel, 'Flat and Round Characters Reconsidered', *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 18 (1988), 181-98.
[9] E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, ed. by Oliver Stallybrass, with an intro. by Frank Kermode (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 81.

(protagonists, and those significant to the protagonists) and a whole host of flat; the flat characters are indispensable, according to Forster, for they 'are easily recognized whenever they come in – recognized by the reader's emotional eye, not by the visual eye which merely notes the recurrence of a proper name'.[10] It is Forster's sense of the 'surprise' located in round characters that interests me most, as it works against the way in which 'character' is usually used. For do we not also speak of unexpected behaviour in others as that which is 'out of character'?[11] Consider, too, the root of 'identity' – *idem*, meaning 'the same' – the construction and recognition of identity requires a persistence over time that speaks to the dichotomy of character.[12] In this way, character demands a negotiation of sameness and difference. In a recent move to resist a variety of assumptions about the way literary character works (the notion that characters must represent individual people among them), Aaron Kunin suggests that 'character is a collection of every example of a kind'; it is an active gathering together of instances that are replicable and repeatable, functioning, in this sense, as 'form'.[13] To illustrate this, he points to the way in which we encounter dramatic character (actors can play different characters, different actors can play the same character), as well as the replicability of the not-very-particular qualities that individuate Elizabeth Bennet, for instance, in *Pride and Prejudice* – the eponymous character of *Bridget Jones's Diary* can be

[10] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 74. Alex Woloch argues for the centrality of flat characters to 'realism, in *The One vs. the Many*: 'Flatness simultaneously renders subordinate characters allegorical and, in its compelling distortions, calls attention to the subordination that underlies allegory. Flat characters – or the flattening of characters – becomes a primary site for the dialectic *between* reference and allegory that is generated out of the distributional matrix', p. 20.

[11] In a consideration of dramatic character, Bert O. States comments that interest in character is generated through 'the tension between a character's lifelikeness, or like-us-ness (greatly enhanced on stage by the person of the actor) and his perfection as a self-consistent entity that is doing *one thing* beneath all the things that he does – and moreover doing it in the invisible channel of a precise future – tension is the key to our fascination with dramatic character' – in 'The Anatomy of Dramatic Character', *Theatre Journal* Vol. 37, No. 1, "Theory" (1985), 86-101 (p. 87). This is essentially the same position as the one taken by Paul Ricouer, who writes: 'By "character" I understand the set of distinctive marks which permit the reidentification of a human individual as being the same', going on to speak of the '*self-constancy'* of acting *in* character, or 'keeping one's word', in *Oneself as Another*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 119, p. 123.

[12] DiBattista, *Novel Characters*, p. 138.

[13] Aaron Kunin, *Character as Form* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. 5.

understood to be *playing* the role of Elizabeth, he suggests.[14] This approach has obvious utility when applied to the self-replicating world of the romance, with its countless versions of named and recognizable knights. I suggest that fully-formed character makes use of inconsistency: a notion that requires a recognizable, established standard.[15] Practically, this manifests itself as tension in the narrative, which must provide a stable enough framework within which a textual figure undergoes a combination of continuity and change, convincing while allowing surprise. Character is the unexpected: that which emerges out of and in contrast to stock roles that cannot contain the specifics of the textual figure in question.

How can we speak of character in the Middle Ages without imposing these *novelistic* standards onto texts with distinctly different processes of depicting people and personhood? 'Personhood' will prove to be a particularly useful as term in this discussion, as it establishes the quality possessed by a given figure in a text, whose actions are described and whose continuity is assumed; nascent personhood may or may not amount to character. Full-length studies of specifically medieval character are difficult to find, but Jill Mann's *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (1973),[16] and Elizabeth Fowler's *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* (2003)[17] are amongst the most comprehensive; unsurprisingly, both use *The Canterbury Tales* as their base text. Fowler builds on Mann's seminal book as well as the work of sociologist Marcel Mauss[18] when she describes the 'social persons' of medieval literature, epitomized by Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims:

[14] Kunin, *Character as Form*, p. 67, pp. 53-4.
[15] Pickrel reiterates Forster's sense of consistency in his article, where he writes: 'our root notion of character is of an unchanging nature; of the many meanings of the word offered by a big dictionary far more have to do with fixity than with alteration – a character in an alphabet will always be the same, for instance, and when we speak of someone we know as "quite a character" we ordinarily are thinking, I believe, of someone who pretty well manages to impose his own (unchanging) style on experience' – in 'Flat and Round Characters Reconsidered', p. 182.
[16] Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973).
[17] Elizabeth Fowler, *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* (London: Cornell University Press, 2003).
[18] Marcel Mauss, *Sociology and Psychology: Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979).

> As conventional kinds of person, social persons are very much like literary genres, because they depend upon the recognition of convention. They are better regarded as cumulative and changing sets of resemblances than as susceptible to definition by a list of features. Social persons are sets of expectations built in the reader's mind by experience, and they are notions of what it is to be a person.[19]

Conventional genres are those in which expectation operates most acutely. Fowler's 'social persons' are perhaps most applicable to specific portrayals of contemporary clergy or professional figures such as those found in *The Canterbury Tales*, but her methodology offers a provocative idea: that the way characters are depicted can tell us about the way that people understand one another, and themselves.[20] 'Social persons are, by definition, simple and thin; positioned among a number of them, a character takes on complexity and weight. The process of reading begins with recognition and moves quickly to deliberation',[21] Fowler continues, here directly employing Forster's metaphor of 'flatness'. Common to most modern considerations of medieval character is a sense that when convincing ones appear, they are either the result of some genius of the author (and that sort of genius, in Middle English, is usually only afforded to Chaucer), or have somehow slipped through *in spite* of the considerable forces working against the modern sense of the term (and these are mysterious and vaguely-defined pressures; a perceived lack of interest in individuals is certainly among them).[22] The only way to avoid these two pitfalls is to accept that our current sense of character is irrevocably shaped by the early realist novel, or the *bildungsroman* – by a form entirely constructed through and around a central figure. 'Unlike the epic and romance', Maria DiBattista has argued, 'the novel is concerned to show us not only the exceptional, but also the everyday, the feeble, or the stunted as well as the heroic manifestations of

[19] Fowler, *Literary Character*, pp. 2-3.
[20] I share John Frow's reservations as to the universality of Fowler's term: 'Let me note in passing several problems with the concept of social person as Fowler uses it. The first is that the term is a tautology: persons are, by definition, social. But avoiding the oxymoron by using simply the term 'person' would be wrong too, since what Fowler is concerned with is metonyms of the person, particular types or qualities of personhood: 'social categories' might catch the sense better', in *Character and Person*, p. 118.
[21] Fowler, *Literary Character*, p. 9.
[22] An example of this approach includes Patch, 'Characters in Medieval Literature'.

character.'[23] This is in stark contrast, of course, to the dizzying superlative heights that I explored in Chapter 1.

It is clear, then, that the characters of romance must be delineated from the characters of novels in one significant way: where the protagonist of most novels gains their roundness by behaving against the expectations of their character *as established by the world of the novel*, the romance protagonist's is formed against (or within) the expectations of the *genre* itself. This means that the romance can work with astonishing economy and then much greater rapidity of reversal: a novel cannot break rules until it has set them, which takes time; a romance can break them almost immediately. The characters of romance are to be found in the space between the protagonists, or stock figures, of the genre, and any depiction of the personhood, or personality, of these figures. They are the products of any inconsistency, or unevenness, generated by the expectations of romance as they encounter the rigidities of plot discussed in the previous chapter.[24]

Recovering Character in *Sir Orfeo*

In a verse romance such as *Sir Orfeo*, the weight of these expectations is apparent from the very first lines:

> We redeth oft and findeth y-write,
> And this clerkes wele it wite,
> Layes that ben in harping
> Ben y-founde of ferli thing:
> Sum bethe of wer and sum of wo,
> And sum of joie and mirthe also,
> And sum of trecherie and of gile,
> Of old aventours that fel while;
> And sum of bourdes and ribaudy,
> And mani ther beth of fairy.
> Of al thinges that men seth,

[23] DiBattista, *Novel Characters*, p. ix. See also Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, where he argues that, in contrast to the novelist, 'the romancer does not attempt to create 'real people' so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes', p. 30.
[24] On romance 'expectations', both contemporary and modern, see Furrow, *Expectations of Romance*.

> Mest o love, forsothe, they beth.
> In Breteyne this layes were wrought,
> First y-founde and forth y-brought,
> Of aventours that fel bi dayes,
> Wherof Bretouns maked her layes.
> When kinges might ovr y-here
> Of ani mervailes that ther were,
> Thai token an harp in gle and game
> And maked a lay and gaf it name.
> Now of this aventours that weren y-falle
> Y can tel sum, ac nought alle.[25]

Summaries of romance like this evidence what will already be clear to anyone familiar with the genre: that romance-poets were exceptionally self-conscious creators. The place, and potential, for the individual character within such seemingly set and prescriptive generic confines can seem fairly limited: and, indeed, a standard cast of figures certainly occupies and furnishes these expectations. Heroes, maidens, stewards, uncles, stepmothers; all occur with a frequency and consistency throughout the genre that has led to a modern critical conception of them as merely convention. But conventionality is hardly meaningless; functioning as shorthand for the expectations of medieval audiences, stock figures offer an insight into the roles played by people others believed to be living hundreds of years ago. Considering the development of the stock character in modern Irish drama, J. O. Bartley argues that

> the playwright, who must consider the stage, the actors, and the acceptable length of a performance, is confined by physical restraints which do not affect the novelist. Even a best seller is read privately, and the reader can skip, refresh his memory, pause to consider, or lay the book aside; but the audience in a theater can do none of these; and, being a social congregation, tends as a whole to have a lower level of judgement than its individual members. If the audience is to follow the play effortlessly enough not to evite a 'willing suspension of disbelief', it has to accept, readily and almost unconsciously, a set of mental and physical conventions; and hence drama accepts and clings to convention more than other branches of literature.[26]

[25] *Sir Orfeo*, in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-orfeo> [accessed July 2021], ll. 1-22. Subsequent references are in-text and to this edition.
[26] J. O. Bartley, 'The Development of a Stock Character I. The Stage Irishman to 1800', *The Modern Language Review* 37 (1942), 438-47 (p. 438).

In this reading, stock characters are a form of 'labour-saving device' for the dramatist, who of course shares many constraints with the romance-poet. The likely household-reading experience of romance texts, the distractions inherent to any such social performance, and the narratively efficient length and scope (of particularly verse examples) of the genre similarly means that recognizable figures, shorthand for 'social persons' familiar to audiences, are a logical and practical feature of romance. In *Sir Orfeo* we have a hero, a heroine, a villain, and a steward. This is standard romance fare, and one could argue that if it looks conventional and sounds conventional, it is perhaps sensible to call it conventional; but *Sir Orfeo* manages to warp expectations even as it consistently matches them. Sensitive attention to the inconsistency of character is central to this.

Nothing is quite as it seems in the world of *Sir Orfeo*. This is perhaps best exemplified by the fairy court, a place that resembles the human world in nearly every way: as has been demonstrated by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and 'monster theory' more broadly, the non- or nearly-human has always had a particular role to play in self-definition and the construction of identity.[27] Part-retelling of the Orpheus legend, part Breton lay, the strangeness of the central event – the abduction and subsequent restoration of Heurodis – has tested modern critics, evidencing the slippery nature of the narrative. As she sleeps in her orchard under a grafted tree, our conventional romance heroine ('the fairest levedi, for the nones', 53) is visited by the Fairy King, who tells her that she will soon be carried away to live with him. Despite the best efforts of Orfeo and his knights, she does in fact disappear from their midst the next day, and the bulk of the narrative is occupied by her husband's 'self-exile', as he wanders the forest grieving his loss. We can begin to identify deliberate inconsistencies in this wandering: it looks like a quest (the heroine has been captured, and

[27] See Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

seems to require saving) and ends like a quest (Orfeo leaves home and returns, and the heroine eventually returns too), but as critics such as Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis have pointed out, it is *not* a quest, in the typical romance sense. 'There is no search in the entire poem, nor does Orfeo ever plan to make one. If we do not recognize this crucial fact, we fail not only to see the uniqueness of *Sir Orfeo* in the tradition of the Orpheus myth, but also to understand the intention of its author', he writes.[28] Rather than actively pursuing Heurodis/Eurydice, as we would expect in a re-telling of the Orpheus legend, there is a passivity to Orfeo's actions once his Queen has disappeared. He simply roams the forest and heath alone, sometimes glimpsing the fairy realm but never seeking, never searching. Indeed, it is the fairies who find him, and he simply follows the hunting party of ladies (and Heurodis) when he stumbles across them one day. It is in this way that he makes contact with the Fairy King, and sees a chance to regain his past life. It is valuable to make this distinction between 'self-exile' and 'quest', as it shows how expectation can dictate interpretation – or rather, how convention can overshadow content.

Nowhere is this more acute than in our understanding of Heurodis herself. We are so used to not listening to the desires of women in romance that some of the most ambitious inconsistencies in *Sir Orfeo* can be – and have been – overlooked. I would like to argue that the presentation of Heurodis may appear to be that of a helpless victim, who is stolen against her will – but that the poet deliberately poses ambiguous inconsistencies that, if noticed, may shift her position of conventional romance-maiden to one for which we do not have a 'type' or stock name. Central to this is her reaction to the news of her forthcoming disappearance. As she awakes from her dream under the tree, she is distraught:

> Ac, as sone as sche gan awake,
> Sche crid, and lothli bere gan make;

[28] Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, 'The Significance of Sir Orfeo's Self-Exile', *The Review of English Studies* 18 (1967), 245-52 (pp. 245-6). Lewis J. Owen makes a similar argument in 'The Recognition Scene in *Sir Orfeo*', *Medium Aevum* 40 (1971), 249-53.

Sche froted hir honden and hir fete,
And crached hir visage – it bled wete –
Hir riche robe hye al to-rett
And was reveyd out of hir wit. (77-82)

Her behaviour is sudden and shocking to those around her, to Orfeo, and to the reader – so much so, that it has been interpreted as the depiction of mental illness by some critics.[29] The horrifying tableau of dismembered bodies that Orfeo sees in the Fairy court later on in the text is often used to support this reading, where Orfeo is effectively understood as a sort of psychotherapist whose healing music and patient waiting gently invite Heurodis back from the depths of despair. It is an appealing interpretation, although a direct importation from the Orpheus myth. Certainly, it makes generic sense that a captured heroine would desire to return to her husband, the hero of the romance: but this is a reading entirely predicated on *expectation*, and, much like the idea of Orfeo's 'quest', has no basis in the text itself. If are attentive to Heurodis's behaviour throughout the romance, something surprising emerges: it is not clear that the 'abduction' that provokes the action of the narrative is an undesired event at all. If this were a case of *raptus*, the well-studied (and markedly widespread in both literary and legal texts) phenomenon of female abduction in the Middle Ages, the poet had a variety of words at their disposal in order to make the unwanted nature of the disappearance far more obvious.[30] It is undeniable that she is distressed upon waking from her dream, and that this initial encounter with the Fairy King is unsettling – but as she tearfully describes the experience to Orfeo, the image she paints is far from an undesirable prospect:

Y no seighe never yete bifore
So fair creatours y-core.

[29] See, for instance, Penelope B. R. Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (London: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 12; A. C. Spearing, '*Sir Orfeo*: Madness and Gender', in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. by Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 258-72.

[30] For studies of *raptus* and ravishment, see: Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Shannon McSheffrey and Julia Pope, 'Ravishment, Legal Narratives, and Chivalric Culture in Fifteenth-Century England,' *Journal of British Studies* 48 (2009), 818-36; various essays in *Medieval Women and the Law*, ed. by Noël James Menuge (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000).

The king hadde a croun on hed;
It nas of silver, no of gold red,
Ac it was of a precious ston –
As bright as the sonne it schon.
And as son as he to me cam,
Wold ich, nold ich, he me nam,
And made me with him ride
Opon a palfray bi his side;
And brought me to his palays,
Wele atird in ich ways,
And schewed me castels and tours,
Rivers, forestes, frith with flours,
And his riche stedes ichon. (147-61, my emphasis)

The fairy retinue are superlatively beautiful; there is only a single line, italicized above, whose ambiguity speaks to the uneasiness of the prospect. The Fairy King takes her whether she wishes it or not ('wold ich, nold ich'), and so she rides with him to the palace and sees the life he tells her she will have with him there. It is this ambiguity that I think we must consider: Heurodis makes clear that the Fairy King did not give her a choice in the matter, but does not make her desire obvious one way or another. If she does not go willingly the consequences will be extreme:

And yif thou makest ous y-let,
Whar thou be, thou worst y-fet,
And totore thine limes al
That nothing help the no schal;
And thei thou best so totorn,
Yete thou worst with ous y-born. (169-74)

Heurodis essentially has no choice – there is an inevitability to her disappearance that Orfeo does not accept, surrounding her with guards that stand no chance against the magic of his rival. We assume her disappearance is completely unwanted because we know how such stories go: villains steal heroines away from heroes (who will eventually retrieve them), and we can fill in any gaps that the poet has created. It is particularly strange that the Fairy King does not just keep her after this first encounter; he is clearly *capable* of doing so (for he takes her for good soon after without issue). Other romance examples of supernatural abduction or

rape are singular events, such as the conception scenes in *Sir Degare* and *Sir Gowther*.[31] In the latter, the Duchess of Austria prays in an orchard 'to God and Maré mylde / Schuld gyffe hur grace to have a chyld, / On what maner scho ne roghth'; as a result, she is impregnated by a devil disguised as her husband and gives birth to the monstrous Gowther.[32] Implications of female sexual impropriety are clear in this romance, and similar accusations have been levelled at Heurodis in *Sir Orfeo*, who has chosen to 'play bi an orchardside'(66) the morning of her encounter with the Fairy King. ('Play' in romance is often used as a conventional euphemism for sex.)[33] Her dream can certainly be read as unsettling, and as it would be consistent with the generic character of romance heroine for Heurodis to be distressed in this moment, this is what we read into the narrative. But if we pay attention to the evidence we *do* have, the words that she actually says, a new reading emerges: not long before the ambiguous 'wold ich, nold ich' construction, Orfeo begs his wife to stop her crying with the troubling exclamation 'Allas! thy lovesum eyyen to / Loketh so man doth on his fo!' (111-2); when she eventually explains the cause of her distress, it is equally disquieting:

> Allas, mi lord, Sir Orfeo!
> Sethen we first togider were,
> Ones wroth never we nere;
> Bot ever ich have yloved the
> As mi liif and so thou me;
> Ac now we mot delen ato;
> Do thi best, for y mot go. (120-6)

Imagine this is as the end of a relationship; distraught, Heurodis explains that she has loved (note the past tense of the verb 'yloved') her husband, but that she must leave him. It is painful to fall out of love: to lose the particular sense of a relationship, the meaning it once

[31] *Sir Degare*, in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-degare> [accessed October 2021], ll. 109-14.
[32] *Sir Gowther*, in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-gowther> [accessed July 2021], ll. 64-6.
[33] MED, s.v. 'pleien', *v*. sense 2a: 'To play amorously; make love, engage in sexual intercourse'. An example includes this description of sex in *Sir Launfal*: 'For play, lytyll they sclepte that nyght', l. 349.

engendered gone. It is possible to grieve a love that has ended; and read alongside her ambiguous consent to ride with the Fairy King, and her overwhelmingly positive experience of his court in her dream, a new sense of Heurodis's predicament may emerge. For the sake of this reading, I am obviously reading into Heurodis's words and actions exactly as though she were a real living figure, and there is clear potential for circularity here – assume character and then you find it – but to do so it to afford the poet a degree of psychological sensitivity that I think is warranted. There is textual evidence for my reading of *Sir Orfeo*; or, at least, as much evidence as can be found for any of the other existing interpretations of Heurodis's anguish and disappearance. Perhaps, prefiguring the bodies Orfeo will see in the fairy court, Heurordis is emotionally 'totorne'; consider, for instance, her conspicuous silence when she and the fairy retinue happen across Orfeo in the forest after years of separation:

> Yern he biheld hir, and sche him eke,
> Ac noither to other a word no speke;
> For messais that sche on him seighe,
> That had ben so riche and so heighe,
> The teres fel out of her eighe. (323-7)

It is unclear why they cannot communicate in this moment – it is not a matter of secrecy, for we know that the ladies of the retinue witness the encounter, and promptly ride away once they have looked upon each other. What is clear is that Heurodis is moved by the state of her husband, who is dressed in rags, and she clearly pities him here; Orfeo, too, is affected by the encounter:

> "Allas!" quath he, "now me is wo!
> Whi nil deth now me slo?
> Allas, wreche, that y no might
> Dye now after this sight!
> Allas! to long last mi liif,
> When y no dar nought with mi wiif,
> No hye to me, o word speke.
> Allas! Whi nil min hert breke!" ` (331-8)

This is a crisis of communication: they cannot 'speke' to one another, and therefore cannot understand. It is certainly significant that from the moment she leaves Orfeo's court, the poet

provides Heurodis with no more direct or reported speech; furthermore, we have no access to how she feels once Orfeo has won her back through his trick with the Fairy King, or even upon their eventual return to Winchester. At no point are we *told* that she is unhappy to leave Orfeo, or pleased to be reunited: these are assumptions, plot details we expect and therefore find in the events and words that are given. It would be *inconsistent* to read Heurodis as a willing participant in the disappearance from Orfeo's court – not inconsistent to the particularity of her personality, to which we have little access, but rather inconsistent with the expectations of the character-type she plays in the romance. The poet further defies convention at the end of the romance, when, despite living 'long afterward' (595) Orfeo and Heurodis presumably die childless, as they are succeeded by the loyal steward; their return to Winchester is widely rejoiced and celebrated, but there is no description of the state of the marriage to match this happy resolution. They are simply reunited, as a conventional romance hero and heroine should be. It is the strength of these generic expectations that allow readers to miss the glimpses of interiority, and selfhood, that do occur in these popular texts – such as the tears Lybeaus Desconus cries at the denouement of his romance. This is of course an extension of the scaffolding, enclosing nature of the romance plot I discussed in the previous chapter. Romance protagonists may *look* like Forster's 'flat' characters, but are, in a sense, round characters flattened by genre and reader: they will only surprise us if we credit poets with the skill and dexterity to read and rework the conventions of the mode in which they are writing. Heurodis's desires may or may not deviate from those typical to a romance heroine: but regardless, the strength of the generic form dictates that the ending will be conventional.

Types of Type: Servants, Stewards, Women

What are the implications of this understanding of the characters of romance? To a certain extent, this method of reading romance is (perhaps unfortunately) structuralist. It certainly

requires an attention to the schema of a text that characterized Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*. Roland Barthes saw in such structuralist approaches an impulse to define "character [*le personnage*] not as a "being" [*un être*], but as a "participant" … The point is to define character through its participation in spheres of action, these spheres being few in number, typical, classable.'[34] There is certainly medieval precedent for such an approach: in his thirteenth-century Latin translation of Averroes's exposition of the *Poetics*, Hermannus Alemannus states that

> the more important parts of a poem which bestows praise are typical characteristics and belief. For tragedy is not an art representing men as they strike us individually, but rather represents their honourable characteristics and praiseworthy actions and ennobling belief. "Typical characteristics" embrace actions and morals.[35]

Bart Veldhoen has a different sense of 'tragedy' in mind when he argues that romance and allegory also

> start from an ideal, and introduce characters to illustrate or analyse that ideal dramatically, something which gives to those characters their typical flatness. The complex tensions are dramatised *between* the "characters", not *in* them. In that respect romance and allegory differ from comedy and tragedy, which start from human characters, rather than from a preconceived ideal, virtue or folly, and then proceed to illustrate what actions and interactions proceed typically out of such characters. Compared with these more typically humanist modes, romance and allegory seem to be distinctly medieval, products of the age of nominalists and realists, of scholastic dissections and of rhetorical debates between various facets of complex phenomena.[36]

Veldhoen credits tragedy with an originality that was not necessarily obvious to medieval commentators on the classical texts. But his sense that dramatic tension in romance is located '*between* the "characters", not *in* them' is interesting; I might suggest that a better distinction

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[34] Roland Barthes, 'Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits,' *Communications* 8 (1966), 1-27 (p. 16) – trans. by and quoted in Alexander Gelley, *Narrative Crossings: Theory and Pragmatics of Prose Fiction* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 60.

[35] Hermann the German, *Poetics*, in *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100 – c. 1375: The Commentary Tradition*, Revised Edition, ed. by A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott, with the assistance of David Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 294. I have been unable to access an edition of the Latin text and therefore cannot provide the original, but this translation is based on *De arte poetica cum Averrois expositione*, ed. by L. Minio-Paluello, Corpus philosophorum medii aevi, Aristoteles Latinus XXXIII, 2nd edn. (Brussels: De Brouwer, 1968).

[36] Bart Veldhoen, 'Psychology and the Middle English Romances: Preliminaries to Readings of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Sir Launfal*', in *Companion to Middle English Romance*, ed. by Henk Aertsen and Alasdair MacDonald (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1990), pp. 101-28 (p. 103).

would be that in romance and allegory, we witness the drama *of* the characters – and perhaps, in the best examples, even in them too.[37] It is certainly true that much of the most acute character observation of the period utilizes the shorthand provided by 'type', employing preconceptions in order to strengthen the desired meaning or result. Consider, for instance, the Anglo-Norman verse sermons of Franciscan friar Nicholas Bozon, who employs both allegory and 'social persons' to paint a complex and dynamic image of fourteenth-century life. Bozon was displeased with the moral state of his congregations. In his sermon on 'Man's Contrary Nature' ('*Coment nous sumus si contrarious a nostre seygnur k'est sy dous*') (described by editor Brian J. Levy as 'the bleakest and most accusing of Bozon's texts')[38] a sense of the concurrently typical and specific charge the allegorical figures who have been forced to abandon – or have been raised above – the actions befitting their stations, in a 'sequence of vivid and lamenting parallel antithesis':[39]

> La Leauté tapit e se cele,
> Fausine se moustre e revele;
> De Amour ne peert ja une estencele,
> Mes tut est allumee de Malice l'astele;
> Largesce se byngne en petit urcele,
> E Chynchesce se baynne en large paele.
> Pyté en flestryt, Haunge renovele;
> Lecherye est reyne, Chausteté auncele;
> Courtesie dort, Usure chaele;
> Naturesce est baraynne, Coveityse angnele. (37-46)
>
> (Fidelity is hidden away, Falseness displays and reveals themselves; Love has now lost her spark, But everything is illuminated with the kindling of Malice; Generosity crouches in a small jug, and Avarice bathes in a large pan. Pity withers, Hatred renews; Lust is

[37] In his discussion of 'traditional' stories, Derek Brewer uses the concept of 'rationalization' to distinguish between characters of folk narratives, and the novel: Rationalizations involving characterization are particularly important to understand because they make the personality of the character subsequent to the deed, whereas the normal theory of the novel makes the deed issue from the personality of the character. The point of view then becomes different. The point of view of the novel is 'within' the character, while the point of view of the traditional story resides in the story-pattern which is focussed on the central figure, the protagonist' – in *Symbolic Stories: Traditional narratives of the family drama in English literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1980), p. 4.

[38] Brian J. Levy, *Nine Verse Sermons by Nicholas Bozon: The Art of an Anglo-Norman Poet and Preacher* (Oxford: The Society for the Study of Mediæval Languages and Literature, 1981), p. 51. Subsequent references to Bozon will be in-text and to this edition. Translations are my own.

[39] Levy, *Nine Verse Sermons*, p. 54.

queen, Chastity a serving-maid; *Courtoisie* sleeps, Usury commands; *Naturesce* is barren, Covetousness whelps.)

There is a degree of specificity in the behaviour of these allegorical figures that differentiates them from the sweeping sense of a single ideal with which Veldhoen credits medieval writers. Man's contrary nature means that 'Leauté' is not simply cowed, but cowers and hides away; Fausine, clearly buoyed by the state of affairs, 'struts about openly'.[40] There is physicality and personality here. In the sixth sermon, 'On Foolish Chatter' ('*Une courte ditee de longe folie usee*'), it is the turn of individual parishioners to be described and criticized; the tendency for women to gossip in church, seemingly more concerned with their expensive clothes than (his own) sermon, is of particular irritation to Bozon:

> Le parlent dames e dammeseles
> De riche dras e bele seles,
> De beau treszours, de corouneles,
> De noveu geu, de vei ceneles. (18-21)
>
> (The women and girls speak of expensive clothes and fine saddles, of lovely hairstyles, of jewellery, of new sport, of other trifles.)

If it's not jewellery or fashion, the practicalities of running a household occupy the women:

> E la se pleynt la matrone
> A ses veysynes Gylle e Jone,
> Ke ele ad perdu ces pocyns
> Par felonie de ses veysyns.
> L'autre respont: 'E par veysynes
> Ay jeo perdu mes gelynes!'
> La terce dit ke tut sun lyn
> Si est destrut par oselyn. (32-9)
>
> (A matron laments to her neighbours Jill and Joan, that she has lost her chickens to the felony of her neighbours. And the others reply: 'And our neighbour, so too have we lost our hens!' A third of their crop of flax has been destroyed by birds.)

There is of course a humorous streak in these chastisements – the figures of Jill, Joan, and neighbour discussing their lost chickens and hens above the sound of the Mass are certainly meant to be comic – but the issue of such 'jaunglerye' was a serious one in this period. In the

[40] Levy, *Nine Verse Sermons*, p. 54.

fifteenth-century morality play *Mankind*, the demon Tutivillus (there, 'Titivillus') holds the play and its audience to ransom, demanding payment before the drama can continue: traditionally, this figure was said to collect the idle words spoken in churches by parishioners and the Latin errors made by priests, storing them away as ammunition to be used against them on Judgment Day.[41] By employing images of daily life, Bozon's criticism is both softened and sharpened for his congregations; whether they would self-consciously see themselves in the allegories and portraits he painted is of course unknown, but what his work demonstrates is that offering recognizable roles in this way would certainly not have not been considered meaningless to fourteenth-century audiences. As such, we can be confident that the similar processes at work in romance would not have gone unnoticed.

This balance of the specific and general is also central to the presentation of character in *Piers Plowman*. By sustaining allegory as successfully as he does, Langland challenges preconceptions as to the limiting nature of such broad representation. Piers' family members are a provocative example of the balance; personally significant to the various trials he faces throughout the vision, their names are also broad assessments of human personality:

> Dame Werch-whan-tyme-is Piers wif highte;
> His doughter highte Do-righte-so-or-thi-dame-shal-thee-bete;
> His sone highte Suffre-thi-Sovereyns-have-her-wille-:
> Deme-hem-noght-for-if-thow-doost-thow-shalt-it-deere-abugge-;
> Lat-God-yworthe-with-al-for-so-His-word-techeth.[42]

Throughout *Piers Plowman* we encounter allegory, but also character: the two do not have to be in opposition with one another. Indeed, Alex Woloch could be describing Langland's poem when he considers the project of the realist novel:

> This tension between the one and the many becomes particularly pressing in the realist novel, which has always been praised for two contradictory generic achievements: depth psychology and social expansiveness, depicting the interior life

[41] *Mankind*, ed. by Kathleen M. Ashley and Gerard NeCastro, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2010), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/ashley-and-necastro-mankind> [accessed July 2021]. For more on Tutivillus, see Kathleen M. Ashley, 'Titivillus and the Battle of Words in *Mankind*', *Annuale Mediaevale* 16 (1975), 128–50.
[42] Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, VI.78-82.

> of a singular consciousness and casting a wide narrative gaze over a complex social universe.[43]

The individual and their situatedness within 'a complex social universe' cannot be untangled; the language of the type of others, surrounding (and hence shaping) them, is central to this.

As I demonstrated in my discussion of *Le Bone Florence of Rome* in Chapter 2, characters in romance often behave as if they are complicit in the construction of plot, functioning as if they know the role those like them usually play in a given romance. If the characters themselves are not particularly self-conscious, then they are certainly self-consciously employed by romance poets, who utilize the inherent practicality of recognizable figures in generating action, emotion, or narrative tension. These are 'flat' characters, if we are to return to Forster's terminology. Flatness is a prerequisite of the genre – but not one the romances themselves have to adhere to, as my reading of *Sir Orfeo* has shown. Such figures are integral to the way in which romance narratives work; romances deal in certainties, and an effective stock figure can provide a great deal of stability to a narrative predicated on the success of a single protagonist: a treacherous steward, for instance, can lay the groundwork for much of the action the knight he serves must complete. Stewards can also be (shockingly) faithful; in *Havelok the Dane*, the narrator comments on the value of surrounding oneself with the right retainers – 'Wel is him that god man fedes!', he aptly remarks, for in this romance Grim's three sons Robert, William and Huw are more integral than most romance companions to the success of their protagonist.[44] If we return to *Sir Orfeo*, we find another steward whose actions facilitate the narrative; before he embarks on his decade-long self-exile, Orfeo appoints his 'heighe steward / To wite mi kingdom afterward; / In mi stede ben he schal / To kepe mi londes overal' (205-8). Critics have disagreed as to whether this

[43] Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, p. 19.
[44] *Havelok the Dane*, in *Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hamtpon, Athelston*, ed. by Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/salisbury-four-romances-of-england-havelok-the-dane> [accessed July 2021], l. 1693.

decision to abandon his kingdom demonstrates good or poor judgment on the part of the recently devastated Orfeo (the positions represented by A. M. Kinghorn and Edward D. Kennedy, respectively)[45] – regardless of our own conclusions on the matter, what emerges from the debate is that the behaviour of the steward, a secondary, stock figure, offers some commentary on the quality of the protagonist. This critical disagreement also illustrates a tendency to read the textual figures of *Sir Orfeo* as real people. The steward's loyalty means that Orfeo can return to his kingdom once he has been reunited with Heurodis: as the latest editors of the poem identify, after this the poem 'becomes a story about the testing of a steward', with analogues in both the story of Odysseus, and Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*.[46] Orfeo returns to his court disguised as a beggar, and, when his harp is recognized by the steward must claim that he found it by a corpse; swooning and weeping at the news, the steward proves his loyalty and thus Orfeo is safe to reveal himself and reclaim his throne. The steward is named heir as thanks for his steadfast devotion, which facilitates the poet's triumphantly conventional ending: a particularly memorable minor or secondary figure, then, is perhaps best described as the product of a writer who has 'done a lot with a little' – instigating change or action without the need for the inconsistencies or vagaries of true character.[47]

In *Amis and Amiloun*, Amoraunt, Amiloun's nephew, performs this useful role – he physically pushes his leprous uncle through the narrative in a cart as Amiloun deteriorates; it is his beauty that engenders the invitation into Amis's court at the text's denouement, and it is he who finally reveals Amiloun's identity to Amis in the climactic beating scene. Not as preoccupied with the issues of self-fulfilment or success that motivate the protagonist, a

[45]A. M. Kinghorn, 'Human Interest in the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*', *Neophilologus* 50 (1966), 359-69; Edward D. Kennedy, 'Sir Orfeo as *Rex Inutilis*', *Annuale Mediaevale* 17 (1976), 88-110.
[46] See n. 477, in *Sir Orfeo*.
[47] Woloch, *The One vs. The Many*, p. 37.

minor figure such as Amoraunt is easily dismissed as insignificant; but without the loyalty of a steward – or the love of a maiden, or the antagonism of a villain – there is no narrative. There would simply be men walking around with no one to prove themselves to or for. Furthermore, there is malignant power in the repetition and reassertion of the stereotype that often accompanies the stock figure;[48] the trope of the wicked (step)mother, for instance, plays as prominent a role in medieval romance and modern fiction as it does not due to any particular complexity in the existing examples, but due to the strength of the action their conventional jealousy, or betrayal, generates.[49] That is not to say that the trope is by any means arbitrary; it is founded in the deep structure of patriarchy, of primogeniture, and the intentional burden of contingency placed on women in unjust societies.

The utility of a larger, more developed cast of characters is evident in Thomas of Britain's twelfth-century poem, *Tristan*. As Ashe writes, 'Kaherdin admirably serves his purpose as a secondary character, for if he has more complex feelings than pure loyalty they are irrelevant to the narrative, at least in the fragments that remain. The same cannot be said of Yseut of the White Hands – nor of the other scorned and abused woman, Queen Yseut's lady-in-waiting Brengain.'[50] Kaherdin and Brengain, in a different poet's hands, would effectively be the same character: both serve their respective protagonist, and are tasked with key structural events, such as delivering messages or strategic lying (Chrétien's Lunete in *Ywain* is a safe and compliant version of this supportive type, for she serves Ywain by tricking her mistress). But although Kaherdin appears to be comfortable in his dutifulness, there are notable moments of self-conscious complaint from Brengain. Indeed, she protests her utility in the protagonists' lives: she is used to trick King Mark, sacrificing her virginity

[48] See, for instance, Kamesha Jackson's entry for 'Stock Character' in *Encyclopedia of Identity*, ed. by Ronald L. Jackson; consulting editor, Michael A. Hogg (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2010), pp. 791-4.
[49] Examples of the figure in romance include Kadore's mother, the Queen, in *Emaré*; the stepmother in *William of Palerne*; Bevis's mother in *Bevis of Hampton*.
[50] Ashe, *The Oxford English Literary History: Volume I*, p. 285.

as she stands in for Yseut on their wedding night; she is later offered to Kaherdin as a lover. Her anger with Yseut at the prospect of being given in this way to Kaherdin, whom she considers 'al plus cuard' ('the greatest coward', 1424) leads her to criticize her mistress's behaviour more generally: it is wrong, Brengain argues, for Yseut to have treated King Mark which such disrespect:

> Ne larai, Ysolt, nel vus die:
> Vus faites mult grant vilanie,
> A vostre cors hunisement,
> Quant il vus aime durement
> E vus vers li vus cuntenez
> Cum vers home qui naent n'amez.
> Eussez vus emvers lui amur,
> Ne feïsez sa desonur. (1560-7)
>
> (Yseut, I tell you this, without any hesitation: you do great wickedness, and bring disgrace upon yourself, when, though he loves you so dearly, you behave in respect of him as if he were a man you did not love at all. If you felt any love for him, you would not act in a manner to disgrace him.)

These are strong words for a servant to say to her mistress, and the argument between the two women is extensive, and personal. Inconsistent with any expectations of willing compliance typical to her romance 'type', Brengain's personality (and perhaps even character) emerges here. Brengain's point is that Tristan and Yseut's affair involves more than the two lovers: 'L'en vus deust faire grant huntage / Quant hunissez vostre lingnage, / Voz amis e vostre seingnur' ('You ought to have been thoroughly disgraced for bringing shame upon your line, your friends and your lord', 1546-8), she declares. This minor romance figure is resisting the tide of convention, refusing to be as easily swept up as Kaherdin is by the relationship between the protagonists. The later English verse romances rarely afford minor female characters such moments of agency, but one example is that of the maidservant in *Sir Degrevant*. As a result of her maidservant's open desire for the eponymous hero, Melidor (the daughter of Degrevant's enemy, and the eventual love interest) does not call the guards to remove the intruder; the maidservant also goes on to inform Degrevant of a tournament that

is to be held in Melidor's honour, generating two key events in the timeline of the protagonists' relationship. She is rewarded for her service with betrothal to Degrevant's squire – a fitting prize for this notably focal minor figure, whose sexuality and worldliness has been of such use to the plot throughout. But this verse romance is exceptional for the sheer amount of direct speech between women, including minor characters, that it depicts; perhaps most interesting is the fraught discussion between maidservant and mistress about virginity, consent, and female value that takes place as a result of the maidservant's efforts.[51]

Yseut's response to Brengain's criticisms in *Tristan* suggests that she is also surprised by the resistance of her attendant:

> Certes, si jo sui feimentie
> [U] parjurë u ren hunie,
> U se jo ai fait malvesté,
> Vus moi avez ben conseilé:
> Ne fust la consence de vus,
> Ja folie n'eust entre nus,
> Mais pur ço que le consentistes,
> Ço que faire dui m'apreïstes.
> Les granz e[n]ginz e les amurs,
> Lé dutaunces [e] lé tristurs,
> E l'amur ke nus maintenimes,
> Par vus fud quanque [nus] feïmes. (1574-85)
>
> (I can say this for sure, if I am faithless in word, a perjurer or some such shameful creature, or if I have behaved in some wicked way, [remember] that it was you who gave me advice: had it not been for your connivence, Tristan and I would never have had an affair, but, to the extent that you condoned it, you showed me the way to do what I did. Those great acts of deception, our lovers' trysts, the fears we had and all the pain, the love we kept alive between us – whatever we did was all done through you.)

Yseut reasons that without Brengain's early machinations, the affair would never have been possible. All was done 'through' the minor figure, who was simply fulfilling her 'type' or 'role'; and so perhaps Yseut's irritation is justified insofar as, apart from Brengain's open and

[51] *Sir Degrevant*, ll. 954-90.

explained disapproval, there is very little out of the ordinary in this romance situation. Brengain goes on to warn King Mark that Yseut may not be entirely loyal to him, making things even more difficult for the separated lovers; the other scorned woman of Thomas's poem, Yseut of the White Hands, also uses her unhappiness with her secondary position in relation to the couple to negative effect. Married to Tristan but untouched and unloved by him, a striking moment of inconsistency occurs when Yseut of the White Hands is splashed with water between her legs, causing her to laugh uncontrollably for a moment. When questioned by her brother Kaherdin as to the reason for her outburst, she explains:

> Ge ris de mon pensé,
> D'une aventure quë avint,
> E por ce ris que m'en sovint:
> Ceste aigue, que ci esclata,
> Sor mes cuisses plus haut monta
> Quë unques main d'ome ne fist,
> Ne que Tristran onques me quist. (1190-6)
>
> (I was laughing at a thought I had, about something that has happened, and remembering it made me laugh: that water which splashed up and touched me here came higher up my thighs than ever did a man's hand or than where Tristan ever sought to touch me.)

The shocking moment demonstrates that Yseut of the White Hands is aware that the state of her marriage to Tristan is unconventional, and, furthermore, that she is unsatisfied by this. Suddenly, we see a whole rounded character. She eventually brings about the protagonists' deaths when she lies to Tristan, causing him to believe that Yseut has forsaken him; this resistance to the central relationship is unusual, although, not unheard of in romance – Malory's Agravaine and Mordred could be considered analogues to Brengain and Yseut of the White Hands. The difference, of course, is motivation: Mordred's desire to expose the adultery between Lancelot and Guinevere is motivated by the power he hopes to gain as a result of the disruption such a revelation must inevitably provoke. He stands to gain from disorder in way that these women can not. They gain nothing of real value from their defiance; as such, it is arguably a more transgressive position to take. *Tristan* is a tragedy of

types: for so much of the action is generated by Tristan's inability to distinguish between the type of Yseut and the individual herself – he thinks it possible that by attempting to replicate both the experience of Yseut (by marrying Yseut of the White hands, as a substitute), as well as Yseut's experience (of being married), he may find peace.[52] But of the four lovers caught up in the drama of the poem Tristan is the only one to make this mistake; 'Plus coveit la vostre santé / Que d'ariver n'ai volenté, / Car vers vus ai si fine amur' ('I long more for your return to health than I desire to arrive, for my love for you is so perfect', 2946-8), Yseut despairs as she is waylaid by a storm on her way to save Tristan's life. Thomas's narrator says he could not say which of the four lovers suffered most in the miserable situation, but perhaps the argument could be made that it is Tristan who suffers the *least*: his ability to confuse types with individuals offers him the kind of respite not available to either Yseut of the White Hands or Yseut the Queen, both whom love the *individual* Tristan and never waver – or to King Mark, who similarly loves Yseut singularly and exclusively. Tristan's suffering is magnified by this mistake, but it is a split suffering.[53]

The final character-type I will consider here is that of the 'loathly lady', an apparent experiment in reversal of convention which ends with every convention satisfied; for unlike lovers or stewards or stepmothers, she is purely a 'creature of imagination' – a simple equivalent does not and cannot exist in the real world.[54] First extant in Irish legend, the loathly lady appears in stories of transformation – an ugly woman will become beautiful

[52] On Tristan's attempt to 'identify' with Yseut in this way, see Toril Moi, '"She died because she came too late…" Knowledge, Doubles and Death in Thomas's *Tristan*', *Exemplaria* 4 (1992), 105-33 (esp. p. 113); Ben Ramm, '"Cest cunte est mult divers": Knowledge, Difference, and Authority in Thomas's "Tristan"', *The Modern Language Review* 101 (2006), 2360-74 (esp. pp. 2361-2); Roger Pensom, 'Rhetoric and Psychology in Thomas's "Tristan"', *The Modern Language Review* 78 (1983), 285-97 (esp. p. 292).

[53] In its complex overlaps and conflicts, the relationship between these four figures speaks to the events of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. When she finds herself pursued by both Lysander and Demetrius, Helena's suffering also increases – for she is convinced that both are mocking her. In *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd edn., ed. by Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett and William Montgomery (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp. 401-23, 3.2.

[54] S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter, 'Introduction', in *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales: Boundaries, traditions, motifs*, ed. by S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), pp. xiii-xix (p. xiii). For more on the trope of the loathly lady, see the other essays in this volume.

when a knight treats her correctly (in the Middle English examples, this amounts to affording her sovereignty). In the prologue to the most famous of these stories, *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, the speaker takes issue precisely with the issues of type and expectation in her description of the misogyny of clerks:

> And every nyght and day was his custume,
> Whan he hadde leyser and vacacioun
> From oother worldly occupacioun,
> To reden on this book of wikked wyves.
> He knew of hem mo legendes and lyves
> Than been of good wyves in the Bible.
> For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
> That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,
> But if it be of hooly seintes lyves
> Ne of noon oother womman never the mo.
> Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?
> By God, if women hadde writen stories,
> As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
> They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
> Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.[55]

The Wife of Bath invokes Aesop's fable of the man and lion here to raise the issue of perspective: to remind her audience that stereotypes tend to serve one group over another; that the power behind conventions tends to lie with those who use them, over and over again. In the tale she goes on to tell, the loathly lady ('a fouler wight ther may no man devyse')[56] satisfies none of the conditions typical of a romance heroine: she is old, ugly, and notably vocal about what it is that she wants. As such, this figure represents a significant challenge to the status quo: individualized or distinguished by what she *is not*, the notion that a knight of Arthur's court would choose to marry such a woman is laughable. This may be one reason for the woman's enigmatic smile – 'his olde wyf lay smylynge everemo' – as the newly married couple lie together and the knight is repulsed by his bride, in the tale's climactic scenes.[57] The

[55] *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson and F. N. Robinson, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 105-22, ll. 682-96.
[56] *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, l. 999.
[57] *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, l. 1086.

unconventionality of the situation is certainly not lost on her. But despite the lessons a sensitive listener could have gleaned from this story, the irony of the trope is that the knight still gets the beautiful lady; the conventions that are exposed for their silliness are satisfied by the ending, the young couple living out their days together: 'And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende / In parfit joye; and Jhesu Crist us sende / Housbandes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde', the Wife of Bath quips at the end of the tale.[58] In its verse romance analogue *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, however, the loathly lady trope generates an arguably more interesting ending; there, the couple are only afforded five years of marital bliss after Ragnelle's miraculous transformation from a figure of pure 'lothynesse' to, in Guinevere's words, 'the fayrest nowe in this halle', before she dies, leaving Gawain heartbroken.[59] In the few years they do have together, Gawain resembles Chrétien's satisfied, inactive Erec:

> Gawen lovyd that Lady, Dame Ragnelle;
> In alle his lyfe he lovyd none so welle,
> I telle you withoute lesyng.
> As a coward he lay by her bothe day and nyghte.
> Nevere wold he haunt justyng aryghte;
> Theratt mervaylyd Arthoure the Kyng.[60]

This cannot be the way a Gawain romance ends; it does not satisfy the conditions of the type that Gawain plays in the Arthurian universe, the figure always ready, indeed, defined by his readiness for adventure and his romantic (or sexual) availability.[61] Ragnelle, who is happy when both ugly and beautiful, is entirely too powerful for the narrative to contain and must be killed off before her transformation – predicated on the desires of women, fully appreciated and enacted – changes Gawain, too. As ever, character is flattened by the conventional

[58] *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, ll. 1257-9.
[59] *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, l. 245, l. 794.
[60] *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, ll. 805-10.
[61] For more on the specific function of Gawain in the Arthurian universe, see: C. V. Catalini, *Gawain Narrative: Plot Components in Five Medieval Romances: in English, French and German* (Bologna: Cooperativa Libraria Universitaria Editrice Bologna, 1979); Barbara Gray Bartholomew, 'The Thematic Function of Malory's Gawain', *College English* 24 (1963), 262-7.

ending – but a flicker remains, in the romance's assertion that despite his many future relationships, Ragnelle was to remain Gawain's truest love: 'Gawen was weddyd oft in his days; / Butt so welle he nevere lovyd woman always, / As I have hard men sayn.'[62] The minstrel truth-tag here nods to the wider tradition of Gawain romances; this is a romance 'of' Gawain, and so its characters must be shaped, accordingly, to its will.

Conclusion

Although it remains undeniable that the romances composed in medieval England overwhelmingly represent the experience of a singular, elite male figure, it is also true that these lone protagonists are supported, inflected, and even changed to varying degrees, by wide casts of diverse character-types. More richly populated narrative landscapes were to emerge in the longer prose romances of the later Middle Ages; but even verse romances, such as *Sir Degrevant*, utilize minor figures in order to create more interesting and even realistic narrative landscapes. As I have already come up against many times in this thesis, the sheer recognizability of romance conventions has encouraged sometimes superficial readings of these texts; but if the formulaic description of a beautiful woman reminds us of another we have encountered in a different romance, the meaning and sense of the literary person this generates should be considered accretive – we should not go about needlessly flattening the sporadic individuals of the genre. In the end, the subject (the being who becomes more themselves as they are subjected to and shaped by various forces and pressures) can never exist in a vacuum; the major and minor characters of romance are evidence of this. Sporadic individuality cannot help but emerge in disruptive moments in these narratives; the fixed and extraordinary nature of romance plots coupled with their use of emotion and failure as a

[62] *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, ll. 832-4.

method of depicting interiority generates moments of inconsistency – and the creation of real character.

Chapter 5: The Subject of Malory

> It is easy to see the beginnings of things, and harder to see the ends. I can remember now, with a clarity that makes the nerves in the back of my neck constrict, when New York began for me, but I cannot lay my finger upon the moment it ended, can never cut through the ambiguities and second starts and broken resolves to the exact place on the page where the heroine is no longer as optimistic as she once was.[1]

This is how Joan Didion describes the process of falling out of love with New York, the city she called home in her twenties, and felt compelled to leave at twenty-eight – when she realized that 'it is distinctly possible to stay too long at the Fair.' Didion is celebrated for her mastery of the personal essay, her slick centering of the self as she chronicles the social landscape of modern American life and culture; as a less-than-enamoured critic once wrote: 'her subject is *always* herself'.[2] It is possible for Didion to narrativize her life: to look back on herself productively as protagonist (or rather tellingly, 'heroine', even) and impose a literary and structural order onto her lived experience. Ends must always begin *in medias res*; Didion, a writerly writer, demonstrates here the eschatological impulse that Frank Kermode once argued has charged all narrative since St Paul and St John: the end as already happening, as imminent, and immanent.[3]

Throughout this thesis I have resisted the urge to centre canonical romance, or to use the giants to drive my argument. As I hope to have shown, the fundamental and constituent parts of medieval romance, and its major preoccupation with character and personhood, can all be found in popular verse examples of the genre. So it is with a certain regret that I turn, in this final chapter, to the undeniable heavyweight that is Sir Thomas Malory, his *Le Morte Darthur*, and the subject of romance endings: written at the turn of the Middle Ages, *Le Morte Darthur* represents the 'end' of romance in more ways than one (although of course

[1] Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (London: 4th Estate, 2017), p. 225.
[2] Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, 'Joan Didion: Only Disconnect', in *Off Center: Essays* (New York, The Dial Press, 1980), pp. 113-37 (p. 115), my emphasis.
[3] Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 25.

romances survived well into the early modern period, and were revived in very popular print). When we think about endings, we must also think about the type of narrative they conclude. *Le Morte Darthur* is a romance, but as critics have variously argued, it is also history, it is also something approaching a novel, it is evasive. In the artificial binary of tragedy and comedy, romance has always been considered structurally closer to the latter. However it is that romance ends, there is a sense that the world in which the story has taken place has not been substantially (or, indeed, substantively) changed by the events of the narrative. But *Le Morte Darthur is* tragic, and close to tragedy, as are some of Malory's most important sources – the *Mort Artu,* and *La Queste del Saint Graal*. In tragedy, the relationship between individuals and their world has been twisted out of proportion; by the end of *King Lear,* to give just one example, the actions of about six people have destroyed the world. The novel's key development of this structure is that in it it is possible to follow a person to their end; there can be joy and sorrow and commemoration in various proportions, but in the wake of the narrative the world will survive. The novel is an attempt therefore to encompass tragedy and nonetheless carry on; it is a way to resolve – or to absolve – the horror of a life lived and not understood.

In this sense, Malory's Arthuriad certainly approaches some of the achievements of the novel. I have come to think of romance, and the concept of literary genre more generally, as iterative algorithm or machine learning script: like a computer program that runs again and again, incorporating the lessons from the previous game each time. By the fifteenth century, the medieval romance algorithm has run and learnt and run and learnt efficiently and effectively for several centuries: in this metaphor, Malory represents the point where it all could shut down, short-circuit, exceed server capacity. But instead, Malory's romance is the grand, hopeful return that goes to show what *cannot* be escaped in this genre, the ends that cannot be evaded, as the whole breakdown of the chivalric system comes yet again despite all

Malory's adjustments to his source material. With these adjustments come features that we can understand as expansions on the processes of individuation that were the earlier chapters' focus: dissonance, the inconsistency that creates the texture of character, surprise, and the spectre of what cannot be contained. I am going to argue that in *Le Morte Darthur*, character becomes something shared between narrative and protagonists. For in Malory's text we find perhaps the most compelling of romance figures: Lancelot, an individual of striking constancy and consistency in the Arthurian universe, who in Malory's hands feels and thinks inconsistently. As we saw in Chapter 4, it is this capacity for the unpredictable, the texture preventing a smooth reading, that gives a sense of living character. But the character of the *text* is also a developing one; starting as a youthful romance in which time and space seem infinitely available, then pulling towards being a novel in its treatment of the ending inherited from his sources (and which Malory so actively tries to elevate, resolve, and save from the total tragedy of the *Mort Artu*). As perhaps the greatest romance celebration of chivalry – the ideology of becoming – this changing character is entirely appropriate. Chivalry requires constant self-improvement and change: if the goal is to be an ever-better knight, the ultimate quest must be that of salvation.

But there is nothing useful for narrative, or for Malory's contemporary aristocratic world, in quests that end in death. The *Mort Artu* author is not as uncompromisingly didactic as that of the *Queste del Saint Graal*, but the effect of each narrative is tragic: for both these sources tell the story of the end of the mortal world; orthodoxy would not count this as tragedy, but Malory does. In battle with his sources, he attempts to reconstruct the romance, out of, or amid, this tragedy; to demonstrate that the things of this world (and in particular chivalry and Lancelot, the man who is the *most* chivalrous) are real, and can be carried to an ending worth seeing, celebrating, remembering, and emulating. It is this, I believe, that makes *Le Morte Darthur* nearly a novel. Both protagonist and narrative become more vividly

themselves as the romance goes on. The challenge Malory faces lies in his attempt to recreate and instantiate the chivalric world of Arthur's court such that it comes to outlive itself: that it can be and become the character who dies, and the world that survives him. I want to argue that Malory's partial success in this apparently impossible feat that has rendered his work simultaneously so open and so resistant to analysis.

This chapter seeks to demonstrate this. First, I will consider the narrative impact of knowing the end in the beginning; I go on to discuss some recent trends in literary criticism to consider expectation, satisfaction, and the development of character in this last great medieval English romance, and its position in the history of the novel. The subsequent sections then address the issues raised by the previous chapters: the concurrent rigidity and improbability of romance plotting and characterization; the importance of feeling in the depiction of romance interiority in 'The Begetting of Galahad' and 'Sir Urry of Hungary'; and the overlapping of superlatives in episodes including 'Balyn le Sauvage'. As we see through the development of Malory's Lancelot, to be an individual in romance is rarely to be comfortable: distinction often equates to separation. It is the subject, *in* and *of* romance, that eventually becomes the genre's undoing and remaking; chronologically the 'end' of medieval romance writing and arguably the beginning of something different, *Le Morte Darthur* will conclude this study.

The End at the Beginning

When action furnishes plot so completely, when character is so heavily dependent on the sum of the things that are done, there is a greater imperative than usual just to keep going. An end, in romance, means death. This is frequently made to be sufficient, as a romance ending tends to follow a resolution – the rightful heir has been reinstated, the lovers have married – and,

ideally, the establishment of a line, a successor, and so, a post-narrative future. *Havelok the Dane*, for instance, ends with extravagant promises about the lines of kings:

> He geten children hem bitwene
> Sones and doughtres rith fivetene,
> Hwar-of the sones were kinges alle,
> So wolde God it sholde bifalle,
> And the douhtres alle quenes:
> Him stondes wel that god child strenes![4]

Where at all possible, the finality of the ending of romance is erased by evocation of a successor – as in *Gui of Warewic*, which becomes a new romance of Reinbrun, son of the eponymous hero. When multiple generations coexist, in contrast, there must be conspicuous silence about change: there have never been children that didn't function as potential threats as they wait, becoming increasingly ready or qualified, to step into their birthright.[5] As demonstrated in the previous chapter, there are a few romance examples of resistance to this charge towards the end, but it is Arthurian romance that represents the greatest challenge to the convention of the satisfying ending. There is a dual pull to the Arthurian story, one that is played out in the texts that followed Chrétien's truly timeless and circular romances[6] – in those many-authored cycles, we can observe ever-expanding narratives on the one hand, and an irresistible move towards endings on the other, for it is in this material that the Grail Quest *and* the death of Arthur are first fully explored. Time can function differently in a single-knight narrative (as seen in the popular romances) than it must in a cycle, or a chronicle or biography; proto-historical texts are bound by what people do, and how things end.

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[4] *Havelok the Dane*, ll. 2978-83.

[5] A notable romance exception to this is *The Squire of Low Degree*, where the King of Hungary appears to rule alongside his daughter and her husband without issue. In the context of the father's involvement in the daughter's marriage, and the complex and multiple desires of the romance, this unusual but seemingly peaceful resolution is significant: allowing, as it does, the fantasy of male wish-fulfilment to play out as a romance of king and upwardly-mobile son-in-law.

[6] Eugene Vance argues that Chrétien expresses an *interest* in time, that 'reflects the implantation, in twelfth-century culture, of what Jacques Le Goff calls the "merchant's time"' – in 'Chrétien's *Yvain* and the Ideologies of Change and Exchange', *Yale French Studies* 70 (1986), 42-62. c.f. Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 35. I think any identifiable interest is just that: a nod to the need for timeliness in a poem like *Yvain*, but certainly not enough concern to challenge the sense that the adventures could all happen again and again.

It can be difficult to keep track of the passing of time in *Le Morte Darthur*, and most particularly in the books of Tristram; P. J. C. Field has commented of this much-maligned tale's vague circuitousness that 'the result is to create quintessentially here what we find less perfectly in the other tales, the timeless world of romance'.[7] Time moves at different speeds in different places, according to the focus of the book in question. True *aventure*, which charges the less complex early books (encompassing the pseudo-historical rise of Arthur, and the first romances that follow the conquest of Rome), and culminates in the tales of Tristram and Lancelot, requires a capacious approach to space and time; as Stephen Atkinson puts it, the world represented in the *Le Morte Darthur* 'is young and exploratory until it is suddenly old and collapsing'.[8] In the early tales of the Arthuriad (what we could call Malory's 'true' romances), time and space exist so that *aventure* can take place. Correspondingly, they are infinitely extensible; *another* campaign to a *further* land could always be added, without altering the fundamental shape and pace of the story. The moment the narrative ages, in the abrupt manner Atkinson describes, is of course the Grail Quest. Suddenly space and time are limiting factors, because several important variables are introduced: the questions of whether the knights can even find the Grail, what is changed by Galahad's death, Lancelot's location when Guinevere is threatened and when Mordred is about to attack. Rather than the incidental violence between often peripheral figures that peppers the earlier books, the narrative after the Quest contains mortality – to far more complex and affecting ends.

But despite this new focus on mortality, there is fundamental resistance to the end built into the Arthurian story: *Rex quondam Rexque futurus*. This promise of return, inscribed on Arthur's tomb, means that the king's death does not provide the sort of closure a romance

[7] P. J. C. Field, 'Sir Thomas Malory' in *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, ed. by Norris J. Lacy (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. 294-7 (p. 296).
[8] Stephen Atkinson, 'Meaning "spryngyth, burgenyth, buddyth, and florysshhyth": Reading Malory's May Passages', *Arthuriana* 25 (2015), 22-32 (p. 28).

reader would expect. For the narrative itself does not even end with this death; the final section of the last book returns once again to the ends of Lancelot and Guinevere.[9] The dissolution of the Round Table, the lack of an heir, and the tragic end to the relationship that has ruined it all appear all but forgotten by the brisk final lines of Caxton's edition; the shift from Hector and his companions weeping over Lancelot's body for fifteen days to the establishment of the new King of England is abrupt, even by Malory's standards: 'Than Syr Constantyn that was Syr Cadores sone of Cornwayl was chosen Kyng of Englond, and he was a ful noble knyght, and worshypfully he rulyd this royame' (939.29-31). The wholesale loss of the great king must be patched up in this moment, in order to maintain the notion that there was a true hereditary line and meaningful continuity from Arthur to the present monarch.[10] Some of the remaining knights return to their countries, living there as 'holy men'; Bors, Hector, Blamour, and Bleoberis go to the Holy Land. And that is it – Malory asks 'all jentylmen and jentylwymmen that redeth this book of Arthur and his knyghtes from the begynnyng to the endynge, [to] praye for me whyle I am on lyve that God sende me good delyveraunce' (940.21-4), and it's over. This is only a satisfactory 'endynge' in the context of the 'begynnyng'; that is to say, in the context of all that has come before the final two books, which must be taken together as the end. Tennyson captures something of Malory's rather utilitarian ending in the final moments of his *Idylls of the King*, where there is even less ceremony as Bedivere watches the barge carrying Arthur's body move off into the distance:

> Thereat once more he moved about, and clomb
> Even to the highest he could climb, and saw,
> Straining his eyes beneath an arch of hand,
> Or thought he saw, the speck that bare the King,
> Down that long water opening on the deep

[9] See Sweeney, 'Divine Love or Loving Divinely?', on the role of the lovers in Malory's 'multiple awkward endings'.

[10] The issue of kingship, and the effect of the years of political turmoil surrounding the writing of the *Morte Darthur* has been widely considered: see, for instance, Megan Leitch, *Romancing Treason: The Literature of the Wars of the Roses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Ruth Lexton, 'Kingship in Malory's *Morte Darthur*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 110 (2011), 173-201; Raluca Radulescu, 'Malory and Fifteenth-Century Political Ideas', *Arthuriana* 13 (2003), 36-51.

> Somewhere far off, pass on and on, and go
> From less to less and vanish into light.
> And the new sun rose bringing the new year.[11]

A new day, and year, must and will begin; despite its capacious romance nature, this story *has* to end. What is at stake when telling a story that most people know already? Conventional genres confront this challenge over and over, and Malory's use of prophecy (particularly in the earlier books) speaks to the textual potentialities posed by certain types of foreknowledge. The question can be explored throughout the text by paying attention to Malory's use of the conventions of romance that have been the subjects of my previous chapters.

Although it seems that the world as constructed in the Arthuriad is resilient – Constantine is a noble knight, and so can become king without undue difficulty – it is undeniable that something profound has occurred in this ending. Here it may be worth returning to the conclusion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: an ending which has similarly been read as a deconstruction of the genre, insofar as it exposes the inadequacies of the codes by which it is governed and structured. This is a temptingly neat reading – but as I argued in Chapter 2, the *Gawain*-poet does not believe that romance has failed, and, I believe, neither does Malory; in both cases, the (character of the) romance has essentially *grown up*. Mortality – the impulse that charges self-examination in the novel, the critical examination of a life – is real, and so any genre that excludes it can only be a temporary holding pattern. The fact that readers of both *Le Morte Darthur* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* have been troubled by these texts' respective endings speaks to the maturity of both texts: for although they are resolved through the conventionally closed endings so necessary to the genre, there

[11] Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, ed. by J. M. Gray (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), ll. 501-8.

has been a little too much development along the way for this neat satisfaction to ring quite true.

'th'ende is every tales strengthe' Pandarus tells Criseyde;[12] in the *Poetria Nova*, Geoffrey of Vinsauf writes:

> Carminis ingressus, quasi verna facetus, honeste
> Introducat eam. Medium, quasi strenuus hospes,
> Hospitium sollemne paret. Finis, quasi praeco
> Cursus expleti, sub honore licentiet illam.
>
> (Let the beginning of the poem, like a pleasant servant, introduce the matter. Let the middle, like a diligent host, prepare a dignified entertainment. Let the end, like a herald of the completed course, send it away with honour.)[13]

Medieval and modern commentators alike place great stock in the importance of narrative endings. Over the last twenty years, contemporary narrative theory has often conceived of closure – here defined as a sense of completion, coherence, and satisfaction of design – in terms of economic ideology. In the work of theorists such as Rachel Greenwald Smith and Sianne Ngai, classic narrative closure functions in a highly neoliberal manner: the reader is imagined to approach the experience of reading as an investment of time and energy, and the text in turn tends to deliver on an unspoken narrative promise in its conclusion (by tying up any loose ends, for example).[14] The only way to deny this logic is to break the implicit promise of satisfaction in the ending, even if only in part. Of course, the observation that modern texts often resist closure had been made by critics such as Frank Kermode and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, and by Umberto Eco, who argued for what he saw as the resolutely 'closed' nature of medieval texts, in opposition to modernity's increasing 'openness'.[15] Rachel Greenwald Smith charts a trend in more recent literary criticism,

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[12] *Troilus and Criseyde*, II.260.
[13] *The Poetria Nova and Its Sources in Early Rhetorical Doctrine*, ll. 71-4.
[14] Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*.
[15] Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending;* Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968); Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). See also his *The Role the Reader: Explorations in the*

however – 'the belief that literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience'; she calls this the 'affective hypothesis', which has thrived under neoliberalism: a climate in which feelings can be traded, invested and acquired.[16] This highly market-oriented behaviour tends to overlook what Smith calls 'impersonal feelings': 'feelings that are not as easily identifiable as such to readers trained to look for emotional payoff for their readerly investments'.[17] These feelings may be complex or particularly difficult to assign to individuals. Readings such as Smith's, that challenge the 'affective hypothesis' so prevalent in criticism, argue for the productivity of these feelings which are, in this conception, anticapitalist.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, Sianne Ngai similarly maps the affective potential of the representation of 'ugly feelings' in her important book of the same name: the negative affects envy, irritation, anxiety, paranoia, and her own categories animatedness and stuplimity are understood as 'affective gaps and illegibilities, dysphoric feelings, and other sites of emotional negativity'.[18] Ngai charts their relationship to a growing sense of the passivity and therefore unthreatening nature of both the modern subject, and modern art. What emerges from Ngai's analysis of a wide range of writers (Herman Melville, Sigmund Freud, Alfred Hitchcock, and Gertrude Stein, among others) is quite how *productive* reading for these nastier affects can be: indeed, ugly feelings offer a way to negotiate compromised agency in the ceaselessly affirmative culture of market capitalism. The implications of the generative power of dissatisfaction are wide-ranging – but when applied to the precapitalist Middle Ages, they are certainly complicated.[19] Romance *knows* its position in the marketplace: texts

Semiotics of Texts (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979). On closure in the novel specifically, see Marianna Torgovnick, *Closure in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); D. A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[16] Smith, *Affect and American Literature*, p. 1.

[17] Smith, *Affect and American Literature*, p. 33.

[18] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 1.

[19] On medieval theory of economic value, see Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, pp. 351-5.

self-consciously situate themselves in relation to other examples of the genre, whether that be by evoking comparable heroes or events. Somewhat paradoxically perhaps, the experience of reading romance can be unsatisfactory because it is *too* efficient in its movement towards closure, the algorithm pumping out more and more perfect versions of the genre; it may be that the fickle changeability of the parameters or conditions for narrative satisfaction (audiences requiring bigger or better spectacle, for example) is the particular burden all popular genres must bear. In his study of Middle English debate poetry, Thomas L. Reed Jr. makes the case for a medieval 'aesthetic of irresolution': he studies a group of texts that appear to be 'less interested in settling on a winner than in the apprehension or appreciation (in the multiple senses of the words) of the differences that give rise to the debate'.[20] Reed's key texts (including *The Parliament of Fowls, The Owl and the Nightingale, Wynnere and Wastoure*) participate in a medieval tradition of grammar and rhetoric that thought clearly and self-consciously to the extent that it can be called literary theory;[21] but I believe it is also possible to see the influence of an 'aesthetic of irresolution' in certain romance examples, and not least in Malory. The conventions of romance necessitate closed endings, but simultaneously a continual sense that there is no real ending at all. There are, to use Ngai's terminology, 'ugly feelings' aplenty in Malory, and many of Greenwald Smith's 'impersonal' ones too. The following sections will demonstrate that Malory's characters – composite figures with sporadic individuality who often feel 'oute of mesure' – are the product of a text

[20] Thomas L. Reed Jr., *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* (London: University of Missouri Press, 1990), p. 2. For a similar position, see Larry D. Benson, 'The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Medieval Tragedy', *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 11 (1966), 75-87, who praises the poem's 'ability to maintain contradicting attitudes and to derive pleasure from the tension of unresolved conflicts' (p. 75).
[21] On the concept of medieval literary theory, see Rosemarie McGerr, 'Medieval Concepts of Literary Closure: Theory and Practice', *Exemplaria* 1 (1989), 149-79. McGerr provides a definition of medieval literary theory that situates it in relation to grammar and rhetoric, and advances an 'inclusive' approach to such texts. See also Rebecca S. Beal, 'Ending in the Middle: Closure, Openness, & Significance in Embedded Medieval Narratives', *Annali d'Italianistica* 18 Beginnings/Endings/Beginnings (2000), 175-98; Timothy S. Miller, 'Closing the Book on Chaucer: Medieval Theories of Ending and the Ends of Chaucerian Narrative' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Notre Dame, 2014).

that both satisfies the demands of its genre, and breaks and remakes that genre in seeking to depict the complexities of secular human experience.

Character and Genre

When faced with the unwieldy brick of prose that is a modern edition of *Le Morte Darthur* in the midst of a busy university term, undergraduate students often feel overwhelmed by the prospect of tackling Malory. Such was Scott Hess's impression of the task of teaching *Le Morte Darthur* at Harvard at the turn of the century, when he and his students came up with an exercise that he hoped would 'stir their interest and involvement and hopefully bring more creativity into the classroom'. Assuming the identities of Malory's characters, students would 'joust': 'For each encounter, two students drew separate cards and then pretended to meet, hailing each other and beginning to converse somewhere in the middle of Malory's generic imaginary forest.'[22] Several interesting observations emerge from Hess's experiment. The exercise clearly made some aspects of Malory's prose accessible to students who had otherwise struggled to engage with the dense text; the pleasure of the game was to found in the 'drama of unexpected developments, in finding out whom one had been facing or watching – like the denouement of a bad mystery novel, where not enough information has been given to come to the solution yourself, but where the revelation of identity still holds a kind of crude fascination.' But Hess argues that 'this pleasure is almost entirely absent' in the actual experience of reading Malory, where the reader, 'from a God's-eye perspective, knows exactly what is going to happen'.[23] Furthermore, he ruminates on what the structure of the game demonstrated about Malory's characters: 'Our identities and our power ratings were equivalent. On a scale of one to ten, for example, 'Lancelot' and 'ten' mean the same thing.'

[22] Scott Hess, 'Jousting in the Classroom: on Teaching Malory', *Arthuriana* 9 (1999), 133-8 (p. 133).
[23] Hess, 'Jousting in the Classroom', p. 135.

These are, he writes, 'characters whose heads have no insides… Malory's characters do not think in the way we do, they do not learn from experience, and their identities do not change – they simply act out the code of who they are'.[24] The following issue of *Arthuriana* published a response to Hess's piece. Felicia Ackerman, clearly frustrated with the implications of the exercise, identified three main principles that she felt Hess had taken for granted:

> First, [that] the reader virtually always knows who is jousting with whom in the *Morte Darthur*. Second, the *Morte Darthur* gives almost every knight, in effect, a stable 'power rating' that can be measured against the power ratings of almost everyone he jousts with, a rating that readers know in advance. Third, such power ratings determine the outcomes of almost all Malorian jousts.[25]

'All three principles are false', she concludes, and goes on to provide a series of (what Hess, in his own reply to Ackerman's response, terms) 'well-chosen' examples disproving the claims. Ackerman takes particular issue with Hess's position on Malory's characters:

> Not all the experientially-gained knowledge in Malory's world is lasting, but if Hess thinks this means Malory's characters do not think in the way we do, he must move in pretty rarefied circles. And some Malorian characters who learn from experience do undergo lasting transformation. Lancelot and Guinevere, learning from the consequences of their illicit love affair, transform themselves, respectively, into a priest and a nun. Arthur's most worshipful knight never fights again. Arthur's adulterous queen 'lyved in fastynge, prayers, and almes-dedis, that all maner of people mervayled how virtuously she was chaunged' (1243.8-10). If this does not count as changing one's identity, what does?[26]

Hess replies:

> though characters do sometimes change in Malory, it would be a stretch to argue that they 'learn from experience' or develop as unique individuals in the modern sense. Rather, they change in coming to recognize aspects of the Malorian code that has been concealed or mistaken… When Guinevere's identity changes, moreover, it is not in an continum [sic] of individual experience or development but an abrupt shift from one pre-established role to another: from the role of courtly lover to the role of religious penitent. The characters' 'inner' psyches simply aren't represented as such and it seems a stretch to me to postulate their existence – as if Professor Ackerman for some reason *wants* these characters to be modern, or like us.[27]

[24] Hess, 'Jousting in the Classroom', p. 137.
[25] Felicia Ackerman, '"The More He is of Worshyp the More Shall Be My Worshyp To Have Ado With Him": Jousting With Scott Hess About Malory', *Arthuriana* 10 (2000), 127-30 (p. 127).
[26] Ackerman, '"The More He is of Worshyp", p. 129.
[27] Hess's response, in Ackerman '"The More He is of Worshyp"', pp. 129-30.

I quote this particular argument between scholars at some length here because it demonstrates, I think, the two main critical approaches to the issue of character in Malory. On the one hand, we have a critical tradition (as exemplified by Hess) that sees no real formation of consistent character, no development of interiority, and, indeed, no interest on the part of Malory in such things: 'The contours of individuality as such are of little interest to Malory, as to most traditional writers', writes Derek Brewer.[28] On the other, we have voices such as Ackerman's: determined, sometimes apologetically, always earnestly, to demonstrate that characters *do* exist in Malory, but with significant caveats. Malory's characters are 'a composite of the things they *do*', according to Rachel Kappelle;[29] characters are used to demonstrate how the individual's 'choices and actions affect the whole organism' – i.e., the court – in Paul R. Rovang's study.[30] Implicit in Ackerman's defence is the sense that Malory's characters 'feel like us', which is misguided for several reasons – the least of which being, of course, that emotive scripts are changeable, historically-contingent, and performative, as discussed in Chapter 2. But this is also an example of Greenwald Smith's 'affective hypothesis' in action: a search for 'personal' feelings in Malory may not uncover a great deal of textual evidence beyond traditional romance figures behaving according to their role and rank, as emerges in Hess' analysis. A middle way, between Ackerman and Hess, emerges as the most productive approach: for attentive reading of the 'impersonal', the illegible, can uncover textual figures with some psychological depth.

Access to the interior experience of his characters may be sporadic, but it is clear that Malory went to considerable effort to individuate his distinctly *populated* Arthurian world. Specificity matters to Malory. Locations of particular significance to plot and action are more

[28] Derek Brewer, 'Malory: The Traditional Writer and the Archaic Mind', *Arthurian Literature* 1 (1981), 94-120 (p. 107).
[29] Rachel Kapelle, 'Merlin's Prophecies, Malory's Lacunae', *Arthuriana* 19 (2009), 58-81 (p. 74).
[30] Paul R. Rovang, *Malory's Anatomy of Chivalry: Characterization in the Morte Darthur* (Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), p. 183.

precisely named than in his sources, and often Anglicized. Minor figures, nameless in the French, are provided with names, and again these tend to be English.[31] Despite the ongoing debate as to the place and role of 'unity' in the writing of the Arthuriad,[32] we can say with some confidence that a sort of internal coherence (or the structural effect of coherence, perhaps in the absence of its content) *is* generated by this precise and consistent naming; Malory's lists of knights (of which the catalogue in 'Sir Urry of Hungary' is the most significant), appear throughout the books, further serving to remind the reader of the universe of major and minor players surrounding Arthur. The effect of a rich, differentiable background of smaller roles is attested to by the utility of extras in Grand Opera, big-budget Hollywood films, and TV series. As Robert H. Wilson writes: 'the value of such a cast of minor characters, in providing a background which joins narratives that are otherwise only slightly related, and in giving the realistic effect that the world is more complex than can be indicated in plots centred around a few individuals, has been acknowledged in modern novelists.'[33] Dorsey Armstrong has argued that 'certain knights – especially Gawain, Tristram, Palomides and, of course, Lancelot – become more interestingly three-dimensional simply by virtue of there being so many examples of knighthood against which each can be compared.'[34] This abundance of knights is a particular feature of fifteenth-century Arthurian

[31] See Ralph Norris, 'Malory and His Sources', in *A New Companion to Malory*, ed. by Megan G. Leitch and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2019), pp. 32-52 (p. 41), also *Malory's Library: The Sources of the Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008); Robert. H. Wilson, 'Malory's Naming of Minor Characters', *The Journal of English and Germain Philology* 42 (1943), 364-85, and 'Addenda on Malory's Minor Characters', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 55 (1956), 563-87.

[32] See Carol M. Meale, '"The Hoole Book": Editing and the Creation of Meaning in Malory's Text', in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996), pp. 3-17, for comprehensive analysis of the Vinaver/Brewer schools of thought on the subject of unity. See also R. M. Lumiansky, 'Introduction', in *Malory's Originality*, ed. by R. M. Lumiansky (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1964), pp. 4-7; Stephen Knight, *The Structure of Sir Thomas Malory's Arthuriad* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1969), p. 76. I am always struck by the effective clarity of C. S. Lewis's stance on the matter: 'I do not for a moment believe that Malory had any intention either of writing a single "work" or of writing many "works" as we should understand the expressions. He was telling us about Arthur and the knights. Of course his matter was one – the same king, the same court. Of course his matter was many – they had had many adventures'. In 'The English Prose *Morte*', in *Essays on Malory*, ed. by J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 7-28 (p. 22).

[33] Wilson, 'Malory's Naming of Minor Characters', p. 378.

[34] Dorsey Armstrong, 'Malory and Character', in *A New Companion to Malory*, pp. 144-63 (p. 150).

texts, and a far cry from earlier depictions of the king where he is usually portrayed as accompanied by just a few truly individuated men.[35] Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthur may lead armies of thousands; and in Chrétien the King knights 500 men before breakfast – but the proliferation of *named,* and therefore potentially protagonistic characters, produces an undeniably more specific world with far more latent possibility for character and personhood.

In previous chapters I have argued that the spectre of the novel has clouded accurate romance-reading – that it is difficult for modern scholarship to conceive of narrative in non-novelistic terms – and that this has resulted in criticism that has neglected some of the more subtle achievements of the popular romances in particular. But with Malory we face a different challenge: *Le Morte Darthur* is very much more like a novel than the verse romances. Cory James Rushton's recent work is closest to my endeavours here; he argues convincingly that the text demands an approach to form that is both malleable and capacious: 'The Malorian paradox is this: he did not set out to write a novel, but to all intents and purposes he ended up doing so nonetheless. Or, at least, given the complex terminological history of the terms "romance" and "novel", he wrote something that was both and neither'.[36] Others are more hesitant to lean into the novel-ness of Malory: Stephen Atkinson warns that 'a great deal of today's criticism treats the *Morte* – without acknowledging the fact, perhaps unaware of it – as if it were a novel';[37] he finds nothing wrong with this approach *per se,* but is clearly uncomfortable with the idea that it may not always be intentional. My sense is that scholars such as Hess and Atkinson are concerned that novelistic readings will find in Malory something that was never supposed to be there: I would argue that even if this were true –

[35] See Miriam Edlich-Muth, *Malory and his European Contemporaries: Adapting Late Arthurian Romance Collections* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), p. 116. Here, Edlich-Muth places *Le Morte Darthur* in a wider context of late-medieval Arthurian romance writing, with particular focus on the Italian *Tavola Ritonda*, Ulrich Fueter's German *Buch der Arbenteuer*, the Dutch *Lancelot* Compilation and Micheau Gonnot's French BN.fr.112 manuscript.
[36] Cory James Rushton, 'Malory and Form', in *A New Companion to Malory*), pp. 125-43 (p. 143).
[37] Atkinson, 'Meaning "spryngyth, burgenyth, buddyth, and florysshhyth"', p. 23.

that individuals aren't of as much concern to Malory as his nearly-novel form has led some scholars to believe – characters emerge from the sea of stock figures, regardless. This is most obvious in the development of the character of Lancelot.

Feeling and Failure

In *Le Morte Darthur* the downfall of the fellowship of the Round Table can be marked by creeping moments of failure that accelerate in the books following the Grail Quest, until the crisis comes all at once. This crisis is then itself protracted and prolonged – timeless cyclicity replaced by a linear sense of progressive futility, punctuated by tournaments and tests. One such moment includes the events at the beginning of *Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenivere*, which opens with 'Sir Mador de la Porte'. The knights who are still alive, and therefore have failed in some way on the Grail Quest, have returned to Camelot. The jubilation that marks their return is in stark contrast to Malory's main source for his final books, *La Mort le Roi Artu*, where the mood is sombre from the beginning, the tragic end weighing heavy in the telling throughout. As we read 'than was there grete joy in the courte, and en especiall Kynge Arthure and Quene Gwenyvere made grete joy of the remenaunte that were com home. And passyng gladde was the kynge and the quene of Sir Launcelot and of Sir Bors, for they had bene passynge longe away in the queste of the Sankgreall' (790.5-9), we would do well to remember Arthur's prescient pain when Gawain had enthusiastically encouraged his fellow knights to embark on the Grail Quest in the previous book: 'And therwith the teerys felle in hys yen, and than he seyde, "Gawayne, Gawayne! Ye have sette me in grete sorow, for I have grete doute that my trew felyshyp shall never mete here more agayne"' (675.3-6). Ironically, it is Lancelot who comforts his king in this moment. But in *Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere*, it is also Lancelot who provokes the beginning of the end:

> Than, as the booke seyth, Sir Launcelot began to resorte unto Quene Gwenyvere agayne, and forgate the promyse and the perfeccion that he made in the queste; for, as

> the booke seyth, had nat Sir Launcelot bene in his prevy thoughtes and in hys myndis so sette inwardly to the quene as he was in semynge outewarde to God, there had no knyght passed hym in the queste of the Sankgreall. But ever his thoughtis prevyly were on the quene, and so they loved togydirs more hotter than they dud toforehonde, and had many such prevy draughtis togydir that many in the courte spake of hit, and in especiall Sir Aggravayne, Sir Gawaynes brothir, for he was ever opynne-mowthed. (790.10-19)

The tales of this penultimate book of *Le Morte Darthur* are the most quintessential and successful of the entire Arthuriad, depicting, as they do, the exploits of the best knight (remaining) in the world. The book ends, after all, with a scene of apparent success: despite its negative implications for the events that are to follow, 'Sir Urry of Hungary' is, if nothing else, a demonstration of what can be achieved by the greatest knight of the greatest court in the world. But the book *begins* with this foreshadowing of the way that things will end: the 'opynne-mowthed' gossiping of certain knights, who are displeased with the affair between the king's best knight, and his queen. Something has changed as a result of the Grail Quest: what was hidden – Lancelot's love for Guinevere – has been made harshly and acutely apparent in the exterior reality of his failure to achieve the Grail. When Lancelot and Guinevere return to their affair at the start of this book, it is as if this failure to align his inner experience with his outward presentation of piety during the quest has ruptured something for good – thus his 'thoughtis' may be 'prevyly' on his love, but this no longer affords the couple privacy or even tacit acceptance in the public court. The love that they love together begins to rip the fellowship apart, first manifest in the court's total mistrust of the queen.

The relationship between personal, private experience and exterior reality are felt throughout *Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere.* In a flash of observational detail, Guinevere and Elaine's animosity towards one another is amply demonstrated by the space between inner experience and outward, performed courtesy: 'So whan Dame Eleyne was brought unto the quene [Guinevere] ayhtir made other good chere as by countenaunce, but nothynge wyth there hartes' (631.23-4). Each woman believes she loves Lancelot best; they may act

appropriately, but their politeness is entirely insincere. As he begins to feel the weight of his peers' disapproval, Lancelot attempts to distance himself from Guinevere, and after she confronts him explains in a notably long and reasoned speech why it would be prudent for them to be more private. He does so to no avail, and, having angered the queen, leaves court. Guinevere remains, and despite what he claims 'the booke seyth', Malory explores the space between interior and exterior experience in his description of her reaction in this addition to his source:

> So whan Sir Launcelot was departed, the quene outewarde made no maner of sorrow in shewyng to none of his bloode nor to none other, but wyte ye well, inwardely, as the booke seythe, she toke grete thought; but she bare hit oute with a proude countenaunce, as thought she felte no thynge nor thought no daungere.
>
> (792.35-793.1-5)

As I discussed in Chapter 3, Malory is far from alone in his tendency to evoke a supposed source ('as the booke seythe') at moments when he is most freely inventing; it seems significant that this extra detail, offering insight into her private feelings, would necessitate this claim. The new novelistic impulses (the compulsive rise of unpredictable character) of the later books are the reason for this necessity, and the emergence of self-conscious disparity between inner and outer state. Lancelot's attempt to withdraw from Guinevere at this point in 'Sir Mador de la Porte' suggests that in Malory's retelling he is more profoundly affected by the events of the Grail Quest, that he was more fervent in his repentance on that Quest, and that he fails more devastatingly when he does, heavily and inevitably, fall back into his old adulterous ways with the queen. It is Malory, and not the 'Freynsshe book', who says Lancelot is *this* kind of man; pertinently, this tale (and therefore the penultimate book) begins with Malory evoking his *own* earlier books as the named source for what is to come ('as *The Booke of the Sankgreall* makith mencion', 790.4-5).

It is the 'motion' in 'emotion' that is crucial to Malory, as Andrew Lynch has shown.[38] These scenes depicting the negotiation of Guinevere and Lancelot's relationship demonstrate an awareness that the strength of interior experience ('physiological and psychological movements', in Lynch's words) may remain private but can nevertheless instance action – indeed, this process can set whole tales in motion. In the verse romance *The King of Tars* the unnamed princess manipulates those around her by hiding her true feelings; she maintains peace in her new marriage by performing the rituals of her husband's religion:

> Sche kist Mahoun and Apolin,
> Astirot and Sir Jovin.
> For drede of wordes awe,
> And while sche was in the temple
> Of Ternagant and Jubiter,
> Sche lerd the hethen lawe.
>
> And thei sche al the lawes couthe
> *And seyd hem openliche with hir mouthe*,
> Jhesu forgat sche nought.
> Wher that sche was, bi northe or southe,
> No minstral with harp no crouthe
> *No might chaunge hir thought*.
> The soudan wende night and day
> That sche hadde leved opon his lay
> Bot al he was bicought,
> For when sche was bi herselveon,
> To Jhesu sche made hir mon,
> That alle this world hath wrought.[39]

Both Malory and the composer of *The King of Tars* utilize private, inner experience, using it to complicate and even generate plot. In the popular romance, the princess hides her true faith until the birth of her deformed son, at which point both father and mother blame each other's false religion for the formlessness of the child. When the Sultan's prayers fail, the central tensions of the poem are forced to a head: for inner faith, outward expression, and the poem's

[38] Andrew Lynch, 'Malory and Emotion', in *A New Companion to Malory*, pp. 177-90 (p. 178).
[39] *The King of Tars*, ed. by John H. Chandler, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2015), available at: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/chandler-the-king-of-tars> [accessed July 2021], ll. 496-513, my emphasis. Subsequent references are in-text and to this edition.

conception of 'true' religion must all unite to instance the miracle transformation of the lump to child (for before his conversion both he and his wife have only two of the three). It is also expressed in the Sultan's own change from 'blac and lothely' to 'white…And clere withouten blame';[40] as Cord Whitaker has argued, 'the physical reality of skin-color difference gives way to the metaphor of color that facilitates Christendom's necessary "blackness"', so that 'in the black-become-white sultan, the English Christian reader is invited to consider his own Christian virtue—he just might find that, despite his white skin, he is spiritually black.'[41] When the princess pretends to convert, there is no physical change because she remains inwardly true. The Sultan's change in skin colour goes unremarked upon by his own people, but after his baptism he commits to converting them, executing those who refuse. A complex epistemological problem is raised by the events of this brief romance: for it *should* be a problem that the princess betrays Christ in speech – why else would Peter weep after denying his Lord three times in the gospels (Luke 22:59-62) – and yet the miracle of the transformation would seem to indicate otherwise. Perhaps the lump child is her punishment for the inter-faith marriage, and is restored to human form by her husband's conversion *regardless* of what the (powerless, Christian) woman does; in Aristotelian conception theory, after all, it is the father who provides the life- and form-giving spirit, shaping the mother's fleshly contribution.[42] In the end, any attention paid to these epistemological questions is not fully rewarded. The problem is that charged with crusading ideology, the romance has taken on too many interlocking issues when it ostensibly seeks only to demonstrate that Christians are right, and pagans wrong. It becomes *all* about the exterior; it is pageantry and spectacle.

[40] *The King of Tars*, ll. 922-4.
[41] Cord J. Whitaker, 'Black Metaphors in the *King of Tars*', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 112 (2013), 169-93 (p. 169, p. 192).
[42] This is explored in detail by Jane Gilbert in her articles "Unnatural Mothers and Monstrous Children in *The King of Tars* and *Sir Gowther*", in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain. Essays for Felicity Riddy*, ed. by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Rosalynn Voaden, Arlyn Diamond, Ann Hutchison, Carol M. Meale, and Lesley Johnson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), pp. 329–44, and "Putting the Pulp into Fiction: The Lump-Child and Its Parents in *The King of Tars*', in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England*, pp. 102-23.

It is important to consider the weight of the emotional labour forced upon the women of *The King of Tars*, and its intersection with the racist portrayal of the Sultan. He is described as a boar and the Saracens more generally compared to hounds; there is a sense that his implied bestial nature may be why he is prone to fly into mad rages and ecstatic joys within the space of a few lines. When his new wife eventually agrees to convert he is so happy 'his joie couthe he no man kithe' – his feelings become indescribable to those around him.[43] This is in direct contrast to the control of the princess throughout the scene, who agrees to convert with carefully controlled 'mild chere' in the previous stanza. This is a textual echo of her own mother's resignation to the marriage earlier in the text: both women perform acceptance to try and keep the peace amongst the unpredictable and impulsive men.[44] In the passage quoted above the princess goes so far as to speak the heathen law 'openliche with hir mouthe' – the poet utilising the spatial metaphor of inwardness and outwardness so common to the textual construction of interiority in such texts – but 'Jesus forgat sche nought'. She makes her 'mon', her prayer, to Jesus, in private: the alternative translation, its homonym, feels pertinent here – the MED provides a sense of lamentation, mourning, and weeping.[45]

In Malory, emotional regulation is equally important. Like Guinevere, Lancelot works hard to keep his feelings private, and this dissonance is new to the post-Grail knight. It is striking that both before and after the Grail Quest Lancelot feels no dissonance in serving Arthur and Guinevere (he repeatedly says as much). In the *Livre de chevalrie*, Geoffroi de Charny explains that the truest love is also the most secret:

> Ce n'est mie le plus grant deduit que l'en en puisse avoir que de dire: "J'ayme celle la," ne de vouloir en faire telx semblans que chascun doie dire: "Celi aime trop bien par amours celle dame la." Et moult en y a qui dient qu'ilz ne vouldroient pas amer la royne Genyevre, s'il ne le disoient ou s'il n'estoit sceu. Ycelles gens aimeroient miex

[43] *The King of Tars*, l. 493.
[44] *The King of Tars*, l. 478, l. 343.
[45] MED, s.v. 'mōn', *n*. sense 1a.

> que chascun dist et cuidast qu'il amiassent trop bien par amours et ja n'en fust rien, que ce qu'il amassent et bien leur en deust venir et fust tenu bien secret… Et devons savoir certainement que la plus secrete amour est la plus joieuse et la plus durable et la plus loyal, et tele amour doit l'en vouloir mener.
>
> (The greatest pleasure to be derived from love is not to be found in saying "I love so and so" nor in behaving in such a way that everyone will say: "That man is the lover of that lady." And there are many who say that they would not want to love Queen Guinevere if they did not declare it openly or if it were not known. Such men would prefer it to be said by everyone that they were the accepted lovers of ladies, even if this were not true, than to love and meet with a favourable response, were this to be kept secret… And we should know for certain that the most secret love is the most lasting and the truest, and that is the kind of love for which one should aim.)[46]

Lancelot would be behaving entirely chivalrously, then, if he were not also betraying his lord with his secret love. Throughout *Le Morte Darthur*, the private experience of Malory's characters is available to readers through various forms of interior monologue, often announcing the feeling of extreme pain or anger a given character is experiencing. Examples of 'self-talk' have been noted by Meredith Reynolds, who argues that this type of interior monologue is most prevalent in depictions of the most significant and therefore 'evolved' characters; 'the world in which Malory's knights find themselves is dangerous not just for the existence of external threats but also for the potential for inherent, internal risks.'[47] One such risk is that of feeling 'oute of mesure'. This is one of the Malory's most used phrases when depicting interior experience: individuals and groups are described as feeling anger, despair, or delight through this phrase indicating outrageous excess, exceeding all bounds of propriety in emotional response to a given event.[48] Raluca Radulescu argues that 'to a certain extent it appears that "oute of mesure" becomes the only "mesure" of most emotions Malory's characters experience';[49] here, as elsewhere, a romance standard of impossible hyperbole is

[46] Geoffroi de Charny, *The Book of Chivalry*, pp. 118-9.
[47] Meredith Reynolds, 'Interior Monologue in Malory', *Arthuriana* 24 (2014), 79-98 (p. 81).
[48] MED, s.v. 'mĕsūre', *n.* sense 9a.
[49] Raluca L. Radulescu, '"Oute of mesure": Violence and Knighthood in Malory's *Morte Darthur*', in *Reviewing Le Morte Darthur: Texts and Contexts, Characters and Themes*, ed. by K. S. Whetter and Raluca L. Radulescu (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), pp. 119-31 (p. 121). Radulescu's essay situates Malory's use of the phrase within the context of fifteenth-century civil war. See also her essay 'Tears and Lies: Emotions and the

set. Despite its prevalence (Radulescu finds 49 examples) the phrase is used to great effect throughout the text, most famously in the tales involving Elaine, whose unrequited love for Lancelot showcases some of Malory's most realistic emotional literacy: 'But whan Dame Elayne saw Sir Launcelot wolde nat speke unto her she was so hevy she wente her harte wolde have to-braste; for wyte you well, oute of mesure she loved hym.' (631.13-15).[50] Women, who do not get to do what they want, often have mysterious inner lives – in romance and its contemporary genres, misogyny exposes itself in the convention of the duplicitous woman who intentionally misleads those around her with her superior powers of self-control and emotional regulation. The inner life of the princess in *The King of Tars* is entirely necessary; it demonstrates her commitment to Christianity, but also serves to highlight the poet's sense of the fundamental *difference* between her and the Sultan. So it may be no coincidence that women are so often described as feeling 'oute of mesure' in Malory. The measure of Guinevere's love is tested when Lancelot is tricked, once again, into Elaine's bed:

> Than Sir Launcelot had a condicion that he used of custom, to clatir in his slepe and to speke oftyn of hys lady Quene Gwenyvere. So Sir Launcelot had awayked as longe as hit had pleased hym, and so by course of kynde he slepte and Dame Elayne bothe. And in his slepe he talked and claterde as a jay of the love that had been betwyxte Quene Gwenyvere and hym, and so as he talked so lowed the quene harde hym thereas she lay in her chambir. And whan she harde hym so clattir *she was wrothe oute of mesure*, and than she cowghed so lowde that Sir Launcelot awaked. And anone he knew her hemynge, and than he knew welle that he lay nat by the quene, and therewyth he lepte oute of hys bedde as he had bene a wood man, in hys shurte.
>
> (632.33-4-633.1-10, my emphasis)

Lancelot's unconscious 'clattering' only makes explicit what was already painfully obvious; he is in love with the queen, who banishes him from her chamber and the court in a rage, and pushes Lancelot into the madness already hinted at in the passage above. Elaine may love Lancelot 'oute of mesure' ('I shall do all that I may do, for I wolde lose my lyff for hym

Ideals of Malory's Arthurian World', in *Emotions in Medieval Arthurian Literature: Body, Mind, Voice*, ed. by Frank Brandsma, Carolyne Larrington and Corinne Saunders (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), pp. 105-21.

[50] Note the conjunction of 'to-braste' and 'oute of mesure', here; c.f. Elly McCausland's comments on the relationship between the verb 'braste' and assumed female leaky uncontrollability in '"Mervayle what hit mente"', p. 107.

rathir than he shulde be hurte', she claims, 635.3-4), but he is the best knight – how else should one love such a man?[51] On the Grail Quest, Lancelot meets a hermit and explains 'how he had loved a quene unmesurabely and oute of mesure longe, "and all my grete dedis of armys that I have done for the moste party was for my quenys sake, and for hir sake wolde I do batayle were hit ryght other wronge' (696.18-22); for Felicity Riddy, 'unmesurabely' and 'oute of mesure' must be understood as 'the language of Aristotelian ethics: social rather than personal, a violation of the decent rather than the holy'.[52] The character of Lancelot still believes in this book that there is an appropriate order to things, and that he has allowed excess to enter into this one area of chivalric life – the service of ladies – in a manner that can be addressed, repented for, and overcome. The genre itself is trying to contain both the disruptive role of the queen's champion, and the emergence of the character of Lancelot. Measured restraint, order and hierarchy, are the antidote to 'unmesurable' and disruptive feeling – and crucially, the character of the text at this point is similarly optimistic.

The interrelation of secular, personal emotion and a faith in hierarchy come to a head in Malory's original episode 'Sir Urry of Hungary', the final tale in *Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere*. This tale is Malory's artificial ending to the Lancelot-Guinevere plot, for in it Lancelot is wholly redeemed and recuperated from the failure of the Grail – meaning Malory can have perfect chivalry outlive the final ending. As the end of the cycle of fall and redemption, it is also the end of the story of character of Lancelot: the rest of the narrative

[51] Here I modify the question Felicity Riddy asks of Lancelot's 'unmesurable' love for Guinevere, as expressed to the hermit in the *Sankgreal*: 'How else should one love a queen? Anything else would be ignoble parsimony'. See Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987), p. 120. See also Corey Olsen, 'Adulterated Love: The Tragedy of Malory's Lancelot and Guinevere', in *Malory and Christianity: Essays on Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur*, ed. by Thomas Hanks Jr. and Janet Jesmok (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013), pp. 29-55. Olsen is determined to elevate Lancelot and Guinevere's love, and somehow save them from adultery: 'The excess involved in Elaine's love even pushes her to toward compromising her oft-proclaimed chastity. When Lancelot refuses to be her lawful husband, she offers herself as his paramour as the only alternative to death. Could the moral lapses in Guinevere's relationship with Lancelot be seen in this same light? Might not her occasional overreactions be overlooked and even her treason be mitigated by conceding that, though her love was true, she loved Lancelot out of measure?', p. 34.

[52] Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory*, p. 120.

attempts to displace the responsibility for the downfall onto the figures of Agravain, Gawain, and Mordred. When the knight Urry comes to court needing the touch of the 'beste knyght of the worlde' to heal his cursed wounds, the inevitability of Lancelot's distinction hangs heavy in the exhaustive list of knights, who are described as 'Sir Launcelottis kyn', or knights that Launcelot has 'wan' and brought to the Round Table.[53] When he eventually returns to court, Arthur commands him to attempt to touch and heal Urry, and reluctantly Lancelot does so and, of course, succeeds. Before he tries, he speaks aloud and to himself:

> Than Sir Launcelot kneled downe by the wounded knyght, saiying, "My lorde Arthure, I muste do youre commaundemente, whych ys sore ayenste my harte." And than he hylde up hys hondys and loked unto the este, saiyinge secretely unto hymselff, "Now, Blyssed Fadir and Son and Holy Goste, I beseche The of Thy mercy that my symple worshyp and honesté be saved, and Thou Blyssed Trynyté, Thou mayste yeff me power to hele thys syke knyght by the grete vertu and grace of The, but, Good lorde, never of myselff."
>
> (867.19-26)

He does not think of Guinevere in this private moment, as he did when deprived of the Grail; she is conspicuously absent throughout the episode, mentioned only as part of the closing description of Aggravayne, who 'awaytes' an opportune moment to expose the lovers (868.32-4). But as with the Grail, success in this tale is a visceral and visible event: Urry will either be 'hole' again or he won't, and this public outcome will offer the court powerful insight into who Lancelot is. In this way, the tale functions as a counterpoint to Arthur's removing the sword from the stone in the first book: both narrative events serve to establish their principal actors as irrevocably *right* for the job in hand, therefore asserting a certain truth as to their value and character. There is an inevitability to both events, but whereas the earlier event leads to Arthur's establishment as king rule and his many successes, such distinction is the cause of great turbulence in 'Sir Urry of Hungary'. The reason for this can

[53] For a consideration of romance listing more generally, see Elizabeth Gee, 'The Lists of Knights in *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*', *AUMLA* 62 (1984), 171-8.

be found in Lancelot's need to speak secretly to himself. In the romances of Chrétien, internal monologue provides characters with the space to interrogate private thoughts that must (and will) be made public in order to exist in effective reality. These monologues are always enacted in some way: but significantly, in 'Sir Urry of Hungary' the prayer that Lancelot speaks to himself has *ultimate* effective reality, despite the court knowing nothing of it.

Lancelot claims he would not presume to succeed where his king and fellow knights have failed – even to try, he tells Arthur, would be to hurt his heart – and then he prays for the power to succeed in healing Urry: 'never of myselff'. It is essential to read this request in the context of the puzzling tears that follow the completion of the miracle, when he weeps 'as he had bene a chylde that had bene beatyn' (868.1-2). Critics have seen shame, relief, and humility in Lancelot's response to his success; the feeling is 'ugly', to use Ngai's terminology, not easily understood in the context of this supremely successful moment for knight and the court.[54] Malory attempts, in this episode, to address the crisis in Lancelot's moral standing after his failure in the Grail Quest – a failure shared, of course, with the court that he represents – by appropriating and demonstrating Christian favour for their greatest knight once more. But the tale goes a step further: the Lancelot at the end of this penultimate book is shown to be aware of the space between the moral state of his 'inwarde' thoughts and desires and the outward performance of knightly deeds. As he weeps, surrounded by the jubilant court, we see a character not only humbled by the grace he is granted through the ability to heal Urry but aware, upon his success, of the emptiness of the values by which the

[54] See J. Cameron Moore, 'Outward Seeming: Lancelot's Prayer and the Healing of Sir Urry in Malory's *Morte Darthur*', *Arthuriana* 24 (2014), 3-20, for an overview of the main critical traditions. These are perhaps best represented by C. S. Lewis and Larry Benson: Lewis argued that the weeping speaks to the insufficiency of secular values in the aftermath of the (mostly) failed Grail Quest, Benson that the tears are a reaction to the culmination of Lancelot's knightly career – see Lewis, 'The English Prose *Morte*', and Larry D. Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1976). K. S. Whetter argues that the tears represent 'religious joy' as well as relief, in 'Malory's Secular Arthuriad', in *Malory and Christianity: Essays on Sir Thomas Malory's Morte D'arthur*, ed. by Thomas Hanks Jr. and Janet Jesmok (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013), pp. 157-79 (esp. p. 169).

Round Table is governed. Arthur may insist that his success represents 'no presumpcion, but for to beare us felyshyp, insomuche as ye be a felow of the Rounde Table' (867.4-5), but Lancelot cries alone; his feelings in this moment are inaccessible, opaque, and 'unmesurable'. This is the painful individuality of Gawain, at the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: the figure who sees what his companions can't, or won't. In both, the individual knight's acute self-consciousness is highlighted by the collective reaction of the court, who celebrate something that represents, when truly examined, that individual's greatest shame. The point is that Lancelot's private shame does not change his lived reality or the consequences of this sweep of extreme grace: the court celebrate the success of their best knight, who is a sinner. This is the moment when he is forgiven, and knows that he is forgiven, for loving Guinevere 'oute of mesure'. His brief revelation of subjectivity is short lived – as we move into the final book Malory returns to his source, and Lancelot is barrelled along by the plot until Arthur's death, when he is once again forced into introspection. But as Lancelot heals Urry, what emerges is that the very 'beste' expression of chivalry is not the king, and it is not a man with a clean conscience; actions, it seems, speak louder than words spoken secretly to oneself. This is ultimately one of the key motivations of the genre: support for the lifestyle of the secular aristocrat, and the promise of salvation despite a life that may entail any number of minor sins.

Success and Recognition

In this way, the Urry episode represents an end, of sorts: the last time, of course, that the majority of the knights are all together in one place, the last time they (albeit misguidedly) celebrate something that resembles collective success, the last time anything approaching the lofty ideals of fellowship Arthur had earlier espoused are in clear and undeniable action. Arthur sets an important precedent very early in his career: superlative success should not

threaten the collective identity of the Round Table; it must not provoke undue distinction and therefore inspire competition. 'Balyn le Sauvage', the second tale of *King Uther and King Arthur*, opens with a potentially divisive problem: the Lady Lyle of Avalon has a sword that can only be drawn by a truly virtuous knight, and so Arthur steps forward to try:

> "Thys ys a grete mervayle," sayde Arthure. "If thys be sothe I will assay myselffe to draw oute the swerde; nat presumynge myselff that I am the beste knyght, but I woll begynne to draw youre swerde in gyvyng an insample to all the barownes, that they shall assay everych one aftir othir whan I have assayde."
>
> (48.8-12)

When he fails to draw the sword, there could be crisis – Arthur's court is young, and if he were a weaker man this could have been seized as an opportunity to challenge his crown. Rather than the typical romance pattern of striving and proving, Arthur is declared best from the very beginning – it is upon this truth that the ensuing narrative is based. In romance terms, this leaves the plot with nowhere to go – he is both best and *recognized* as best, in spite of his role as the static centre of the court, unable, for the stability of the fellowship, to ride out and behave as knights do. In this section, I will consider the narrative effect of recognition of various kinds: first in the story of Balyn and Balan, the earliest example of competing 'bests' in Malory, and next in the figure of Lancelot, his most developed and novelistic character. Expectation and satisfaction will once again become important; forced to live up to a superlative version of himself, Lancelot chases confidence in this idealized version of chivalry until the very end.

First, however, it will be valuable to remember the ways in which the romance genre and the ideology of chivalry are similar: both generate value systems that must be bought into, entirely and earnestly, if they are to exist. Just as romance creates its own particular marketplace by being written and rewritten, chivalry was the way to make endemic violence amongst the aristocratic classes of Western Europe a generator of social, political, and economic value for over half a millennium. What emerges from the treatises and tracts

characterizing chivalry (including the accounts of Geoffroi de Charny, and the *Histoire de Guillame de Maréchal*) is a sort of Christian economics of knightly morality – these texts use an individual's prowess to chart both piety and worldly achievements, as if they were not often at odds with each other. Charges of performativity have often been levelled at the chivalric classes of the later Middle Ages; in his seminal study of chivalry Maurice Keen worked hard to dispel the opinion, most influentially espoused by Huizinga, that late medieval chivalry's staged tournaments, ceremonies, and orders modelled on romance signalled the waning of the ideal itself.[55] The abundance of chivalric literature from the twelfth century onwards attempting to define, describe, and defend chivalry speaks to its self-conscious negotiation of religious obligation with the needs of the secular and martial courtly culture of medieval Europe. But 'chivalry involves a constant quest to improve on achievement and cannot rest satisfied', as Keen writes; there can be no neat 'end' to the truly chivalrous secular life.[56] More recently, Richard Kaeuper has demonstrated the seriousness of the idealistically educational impulses of chivalric literature of the period; descriptions of ideal knighthood should be read as 'goal[s] for improving society, rather than as a description of universal social practice. This reformative aim of all such works makes them highly informative, even if they are not simply descriptive.'[57] Kaeuper points out that chivalry is something one *does*: he quotes the *Histoire de Guillame de Maréchal*, where the action of the knights each day at the siege of Winchester is described as sallying forth 'to *do* chivalry' ('por *faire* chevalerie').[58] One cannot be chivalrous without action, and so the rhythms of romance are ideally suited to explore the concept – and the obstacle of the Grail Quest represents the most perfect and troubling plot.

[55] Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 3; Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*.
[56] Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 15.
[57] Kaeuper, *Medieval Chivalry*, p. 21; see also 'The Societal Role of Chivalry in Romance', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. by Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 97-114.
[58] Kaeuper, 'The Societal Role of Chivalry in Romance', pp. 101-2.

What is chivalry for if you fail the ultimate quest? How can the Christian quest be displaced from its preeminent position? How can Malory recover his romance of chivalry from a tragedy of fallen humanity, and a divine comedy of Christian ascetic redemption? These are the sophisticated but unspoken questions that charge the post-Grail books of Malory's Arthuriad; the character of the narrative has outgrown its youthful simplicity, and been forced to develop. The answer to these questions may lie in the *Histoire*'s sense of *doing* chivalry: the constant striving, improving, and changing impulse of chivalry leaves little room for thinking, regretting, or ruminating on what has been. The various failures of all the knights but Galahad are not insignificant to the narrative – but they are productive and generative in a way that the *real* perfection of Galahad is not. The greatest of 'earthly' knights is of far more interest to Malory. Chapter 1 of this thesis argued that it is worth paying attention to the overlapping superlatives of romance; Malory moves from conventional romance extravagance *before* the Grail Quest, to a markedly specific approach to hierarchy and greatness once secular chivalry has been found lacking upon the knights' return to Arthur.

The story of Balyn and Balan, like so many of the smaller episodes in *Le Morte Darthur*, is about recognition of various kinds. Having been just released from prison, Balyn looks lowly: 'but for he was poore and poorly arayde, he put hymselff nat far in prees. But in hys herte he was fully assured to do as well, if hys grace happed hym, as ony knyght that there was' (49.3-6). Balyn succeeds in drawing the sword, proving his 'vertue'; for a moment, he is the best knight in the world – but when he refuses to return the sword to the Lady, the slippery instability of such hierarchies is thrown into sharp relief. Although some critics maintain that there is no way that Malory could be keeping track of the abundant

superlatives he uses throughout the *Morte Darthur*,[59] there is a good deal of evidence to show that hyperbolic superlative description can be used with some specificity, and to considerable narrative effect. Certainly there is enough delicacy that it *is* possible, as in Scott Hess's classroom jousting, to develop a sort of working hierarchy as readers – to know Percival is a better man than Kay, for example. This impression of the men is generated not only through the scale and spectacle of their martial triumphs, but through repeated descriptions such as this of Percival as he prays during the Grail Quest: 'And than he kneled downe and made hys prayer devoutely unto Allmyghty Jesu, for he was one of the beste knyghtes of the worlde at that tyme, in whom the verrey fayth stoode moste in' (643.2-5). Percival is 'one of the beste'; this is how we are meant to understand him, and his actions.

This is the case in 'Balyn le Sauvage', where Balyn is warned that as punishment for not returning the sword to the Lady, he shall 'sle with that swerde the *beste* frende that ye have and the man that ye *moste* love in the worlde, and that swerde shall be youre destruccion' (50.2-4, my emphasis): Balyn will kill his own brother.[60] Balyn leaves the court soon after this, significantly rejecting Arthur's offer of 'felyship'; the trials he faces as he makes his way towards the inexorable end all evoke the issue of distinction, 'bestness', and of reputation. Launceor, the knight he faces first in combat, is described as 'one of the beste of the courte' (52.25); in the grounds of the Castle Terrable, Balyn and Balan preparing to fight together is a sight to behold: 'And all they that behelde them seyde they were sente frome hevyn as angels other devilles frome helle. And Kynge Arthure seyde himself they were the doughtyeste knyghtes that ever he sawe' (60.15-18). As in *Amis and Amiloun*, such heights of knightly prowess mean that extremes – angels *and* devils – are necessary for

[59] As discussed in Chapter 1 – 'The important thing is that the rhetoric *suggests* he is keeping score – or that he might be', suggests Lambert, in *Malory: Style and Vision*, pp. 26-7.
[60] Carolyne Larrington reminds us that in Malory 'Fratricide occurs only unwittingly, when identities are obscured' – see 'Sibling Relations in Malory's *Morte Darthur*', *Arthurian Literature XXVIII: Blood, Sex, Malory: Essays on the 'Morte Darthur'*, ed. by David Clark and Kate McClune (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), pp. 57-74 (p. 72).

adequate description. As Judson Boyce Allen writes of the soaring extremes in Malory: 'any idealist who is honest will know, that the ideal is at once most desirable and most destructive. Without its real presence, society is not worth having, but if it is present for long, it causes either chaos or fascism.'[61] The potentially destructive power of the ideal of the best is compounded by Merlin's prophetic writing on the tombs: 'in this same place the grettist bateyle betwyxte too knyghtes that ever was or ever shall be, and the trewyst lovers; and yette none of hem shall slee other' (56.35-57.1-2). The invocation of these two great knights – Lancelot and Tristram – midway through the episode is, of course, significant. Merlin is right – Lancelot and Tristram are indeed the 'trewyst lovers' of Malory's text, but to tragic effect; the superlative nature of the loves they love does not make them right, or good. But in this early book, Malory is not yet concerned with distinguishing Balan as an individual with any degree of psychological realism or sensitivity: the character of the narrative is not yet developed enough to warrant this, and so Balan can be distinguished effectively by a rather blandly reductive greatness with relative success.

In the first instance of many, the story turns towards the issue of recognition and being known in the Arthurian universe. Balyn may have earned himself the epithet 'Knyght with the Two Swerdes', but this is not an individual identity in the sense that we would understand it – it does not make him knowable to his brother, who recognizes only something of his brother's greatness during the fight: by his prowess he 'shold' be Balyn (71.30). This is an echo of the accusatory 'should' in the despairing speech given by an unnamed damsel a few lines before: 'O, knyght Balyn, why have ye lefte your owne sheld? Allas! ye have put yourself in grete daunger, for by your sheld ye should have ben knowen' (71.17-19). The need for identification by shield in Malory (and throughout the romance canon more

[61] See Judson B. Allen, 'Malory's Diptych Distinctio: The Closing Books of his Work', in *Studies in Malory*, ed. by James W. Spisak (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1985), pp. 237-55 (p. 252).

generally) speaks both to the realities of armoured battle, and to the challenge of maintaining and meaningfully differentiating so many identities over a long period of time on the part of the literary adaptor. In the later books of the Arthuriad the recognition of Lancelot becomes increasingly significant, and his frustration with being *too* well-known leads him to take risks that make little narrative sense. Once the brothers are both dead, the lady buries the men together; she knows what has occurred – Balan has been killed by his brother – but 'she knewe not Balyns name' (73.32) to adequately mark the tomb. Reputation and understanding are not the same thing. It is up to Merlin to write the names, and to laugh as he speaks another prophecy over the sword: 'There shall never man handyll thys swerde but the beste knyght of the worlde, and that shall be Sir Launcelot…And Launcelot with thys swerde shall sle the man in the worlde that he lovith beste: that shall be Sir Gawayne' (74.9-13). Superlative secular ideals will once again lead to extreme instability; Merlin, whose experience of time (and therefore narrative) is closer to Malory's and the reader's than it is to his fellow characters', laughs perhaps at the tragic silliness of men dying for chivalry. There is something supernatural about the nature of resolution; similarly, it is not until the end of 'Sir Mador de la Porte' that the true culprit (Sir Pionell) is named, and here once again this crucial plot detail is revealed by a magical figure (Nineve). The tomb in this episode too serves to recapitulate and even retroactively motivate the often frustratingly opaque events of the preceding episode: we learn at the end that Pionell's aim had been to kill Gawain, and Guinevere's innocence is reasserted again in the inscription. And of course in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it is not until the end that Bertilak reveals the mysterious involvement of Morgan le Fey, supplying the vague motivation of frightening Guinevere and testing her brother's knights. Prophecy and supernatural omniscience offer means of concrete narrative resolution; it is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the agency of the non-magic characters caught up in these devices is often severely compromised. Perhaps this is the nature of

popular romance, as yet undeveloped in Malory's narrative; perhaps this is a place where romance mocks the fetishization of agency and subjectivity in its contemporary genres. Compelling plot is certainly available without it.

There is an unstoppable momentum to episodes such as Balyn's. The end has been inscribed from the beginning, and it is in the spirit of inevitability that the story ends with a reassertion of the role this individual episode will play in the organization of the narrative as a whole.[62] Superlative success may be inherently unstable – a model of society which teeters on the smallest and sharpest of points – but that doesn't make it an undesirable prospect to Malory. This is why it is fitting that *Le Morte Darthur* ends with Hector's Threnody: a list, in true Malorian style,[63] of Lancelot's superlative qualities – not formulaic adjectival phrases, nor conventional exclamations of knightly success, but a series of pointed and accurate descriptions of Lancelot's time as a knight of the Round Table. Hector, a man who has not witnessed the end, has the final say; after seven years of seeking his brother in England, Scotland and Wales, the men who have gathered a Joyous Garde all 'knewe Syr Ector, but he knewe not them' (939.4-5).

> "A, Launcelot!" he sayd, "thou were hede of al Crysten knyghtes! And now I dare say," sayd Syr Ector, "thou Sir Launcelot, there thou lyest, that thou were never matched of erthely knyghtes hande. And thou were the curtest knyght that ever bare shelde! And thou were the truest frende to thy lovar that ever bestrade hors, and thou were the trewest lover, of a synful man, that ever loved woman, and thou were the kyndest man that ever strake wyth swerde. And thou were the godelyest persone that ever cam emonge prees of knyghtes, and thou was the mekest man and the jentyllest that ever ete in halle emonge ladyes, and thou were the sternest knyght to thy mortal foo that ever put spere in the reeste."
>
> (939.12-23)

[62]Ad Putter argues that this recursive pattern is a result of Malory's commitment to writing a *history* of Arthur, and therefore his belief in the structuring principle of providential design – see Ad Putter, 'Late romance: Malory and the *Tale of Balin*' in *Readings in Medieval Texts: Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature*, ed. by David F. Johnson and Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 337-53.

[63] Charles Wuest has suggested that the threnody may have been written by Caxton; the first and last quires of the Winchester manuscript are missing, and therefore the passage is extant in Caxton's edition alone – see 'Closure and Caxton's Malory', *Arthuriana* 27 (2017), 60-78. Although I agree with Wuest's characterization of Caxton as a 'progressive editor', I find his argument that the 'function of the threnody shares the function of Caxton's preface, effectively doubling the printer's insistence that a reader's interpretation is necessary to "Doo after the good and leue the euyl"' to be insufficient proof of authorship (p. 67).

There is no room for opinion in Hector's lament: stated quite plainly as fact, Lancelot's supremacy encompasses the full range of behaviours and characteristics befitting a knight. Significantly, this speech is the only time the superlative 'godelyest' (most excellent) appears in *Le Morte Darthur*.[64] After the disintegration of the final books, this is an emphatic attempt to resolve the paradoxes of earthly chivalry that Malory's text depicts; the descriptors are not the throwaway conventional comments that appear so often throughout the tales, but rather are tied, in time and space, to specific events. If the text has shown us nothing else, it is that being the 'trewest' means nothing until the subject, a 'synful man', has acted, and truly 'loved [a] woman'. The reality of Lancelot's inner moral state has been played out against a backdrop of the rise and fall of a civilization, and it is because he has distinguished himself quite so much that Hector can, with such confidence, make this speech. Read one way, the speech is morally empty: praising Lancelot only for superlatively exhibiting the qualities of chivalry, and not for the types of action that have real-world consequences – such as fighting for king or country in a campaign, or on crusade for Christendom. But this reading neglects the ferocity of Malory's faith in chivalry – in the very enterprise itself, as something that is right and just. In its purest state, such chivalry has no purpose other than to exist and to replicate – much like the romance itself. This casts the relationship between chivalry and fellowship (the ideals most perfectly embodied by Lancelot and Arthur respectively) into sharp relief. Fellowship is assumed to be a vital ingredient of chivalry by Malory; as Elizabeth Archibald has shown, his senses of 'felyship' as 'loyal friendship… [as well as] an organized and permanent knightly order become increasingly important as his story develops'.[65] Chivalry is a fundamentally socialized set of ethics, and so in this sense one

[64] See entry for 'godelyest' in *A Concordance to the Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. by Tomomi Kato (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1974). The superlative 'curte(y)st' is also reserved exclusively for Lancelot – see 205.33.
[65] Elizabeth Archibald, 'Malory's Ideal of Fellowship', *The Review of English Studies* 43 (1992), 311-28.

cannot be chivalrous in private. But on the other hand, another's man's action is his own. In the pursuit of fellowship there is space to recognize intention and celebrate collective success; chivalry, an ideology it is impossible to die for, is simply the doing, the striving, and the recognition of individual success.[66] Lancelot is the embodiment of chivalry as the best of all *earthly* knights, and so this is all Hector can praise. Malory may not be keeping track of each and every one of his conventionally abundant superlative descriptions of the various knights of the court, but when it comes to Lancelot, I would argue that he emphatically is. For there is evidence that Lancelot is too: in an attempt to keep Lancelot from leaving her once again, Elaine praises their son Galahad: 'I doute nat he shall preve the beste man of hys kynne excepte one', she says, ingratiatingly; 'Than shall he be a good man inowghe', is his response (656.34-5, 657.1).

The hierarchy of the knights is so ossified by the final books that everyone must fight in disguise for their actions to have any meaning. If this were a straight romance, the need to adequately distinguish between these textual figures would not be so acute; this is further evidence of the changes Malory is making to the genre. The weight of expectation is a burden, but it is also a stabilizing force in the lives of the knights. Lancelot becomes so famous that people can recognize him without knowing him, and so he must behave the way he is expected to. As I described in Chapter 2, the same happens throughout *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* when various characters explain that they know 'well' who Gawain is, and how he should behave.[67] This is also the basis for Guinevere's scorn in Chrétien's *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*. The knight's hesitation before the cart is brief, but significant:

> Tant solemant deus pas demore
> li chevaliers que il n'i monte.
> Mar le fist et mar en ot honte

[66] On the relentless nature of knightly striving, see Jill Mann, '"Taking the Adventure": Malory and the *Suite du Merlin*', in *Life in Words: Essays on Chaucer, the Gawain-Poet, and Malory*, ed. and with an intro. by David Rasmussen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), pp. 243-74.
[67] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 1293, l. 1481, l. 2270.

que maintenant sus ne sailli,
qu'il s'an tendra por mal bailli.
Mes Reisons, qui d'Amors se part,
li dit que del monter se gart;
si le chastie et si l'anseigne
que rien ne face ne nanpreigne
dom il ait honte ne reproche.
N'est pas el cuer, mes an la boche,
Reisons qui ce dire li ose;
mes Amors est el cuer anclose
qui li comande et semont
que tost an la charrete mont.
Amors le vialt et il i saut –
que de la honte ne li chaut
puis qu'Amors le comande et vialt. (360-77)

(…the knight, who waited but two steps before climbing in. He would regret this moment of hesitation and be accursed and shamed for it; later he would consider himself ill-fortuned. But Reason, which does not follow Love's command, told him not to get in, and chastised and counseled him not to do or undertake anything for which he might gather shame or reproach. Reason, who dared tell him this, spoke from the lips, not from the heart; but Love, which held sway within his heart, urged and commanded him to climb into the cart at once. Love wished it and he jumped in – shame mattered not to him since Love ruled his action.)

He does rue the hesitation; for when the Queen says to him

Çomant? Don n'eüstes vos honte
de la charrete et si dotastes?
Molt a gran enviz i montastes
quant vos demorastes deus pas. (4484-7)

(What? Where you not ashamed and fearful of the cart? By delaying for two steps you showed your great unwillingness to mount.)

she is asking him to behave more like himself. In this recounting of his hesitation, the sense essentially moves from an unspoken *just* two steps, to her implied disappointment that two *whole* steps were taken. The tension of Lancelot's identity charges Chrétien's whole poem; for Lancelot remains unnamed for much of it, his identity constructed simply from and of his love for the Queen. Throughout the Arthurian corpus, it is understood to be hard to be Lancelot, and to behave as well as Lancelot should (indeed the representation of the character's sufferings is the scale of his superlative value). The first time he is tricked into sleeping with a woman who is not Guinevere in *Le Morte Darthur* ('The Begetting of

Galahad'), an incensed Lancelot springs out of Elaine's bed with his sword in his hand. Elaine must coax him down by reminding him of quite who he is, and who, therefore, the child she is carrying must be: 'Fayre curteyse knyght, ye ar comyn of kynges bloode, and therefore I requyre you, have mercy uppon me! And as thou arte renowmed the moste noble knyght of the worlde, sle me nat, for I have in my wombe bygetyn of the that shall be the moste nobelyste knyght of the worlde' (624.17-21). Lancelot must not fail to behave according to his own standards, even in a moment of rage – although when Guinevere's rage leads him to madness, he appears to forget himself, leaping 'oute at a bay wyndow into a gardyne, and there wyth thornys he was all to-cracched of his visage and hys body, and so he ranne furth he knew nat whothir, and was as wylde woode as ever was man. And so he ran too yere, and never man had grace to know hym.' (633.19-24). The narrative cannot follow him here, and cannot know him, either; this Lancelot does not exist. His experience of madness parallels Heurodis's extreme reaction to her dream in *Sir Orfeo*; in both scenes, the scratching of the face and physical dishevelment is the first step to a much more profound, long-lasting loss of identity.[68] It is Elaine's understanding of the type of man that Lancelot is that brings him back into society:

> "Sir," seyde Dame Elayne, "into thys contrey ye cam lyke a mased man, clene oute of youre wytte. And here have ye ben kepte as a foole, and no cryature here knew what ye were, untyll by fortune a mayden of myne brought me unto you whereas ye lay slepynge by a well. And anone as I veryly behylde you I knewe you. Than I tolde my fadir, and so were ye brought afore thys holy vessel, and by the vertu of hit thus were ye healed."
>
> (650.14-18)

The space between the ideal of Lancelot and the stark reality of the wild man in front of her causes Elaine's bitter tears in this episode. Lancelot's fame follows him everywhere – and so

68 'Ac, as sone as sche gan awake,
Sche crid, and lothli bere gan make;
Sche froted hir honden and hir fete,
And crached hir visage – it bled wete –
Hir riche robe hye al to-rett
And was reveyd out of hir wit', in *Sir Orfeo*, ll. 77-82.

the misidentification plot becomes a more and more significant device as the text progresses. Earlier in Arthur's reign, misidentification encounters such as the fight between Gawain and Gareth in 'The Tale of Gareth' are 'often brought about through Arthur's struggle to establish a central ideology of chivalry as defined by the so-called "Pentecostal oath" and the regularisation of custom', as Mikayla Hunter has shown – knights get into skirmishes over the right to maintain their individual lands and customs.[69] But after the Grail Quest, moments such as Lancelot's fight with Bors, or his decision to arrive at the court in disguise and anonymously in 'Sir Mador de la Porte' 'with a straunge shylde of straunge armys' (800.12-13) carry far more significance. Freed from any association with other characters, and, indeed, from the burden of fellowship, this 'blank' Lancelot admonishes the court for having 'rebuked and shamed' the Queen. This increasingly distinct Lancelot goes on to ride in disguise in the tournament of the next episode, 'The Fair Maiden of Astolat', although here he notably goes a step further by not merely suppressing his identity, but actively obscuring it when he self-consciously chooses to wear Elaine's sleeve: 'because he had never aforne borne no maner of tokyn of no damesell, he bethought hym to bere a tokyn of hers, that none of hys bloode thereby myght know hym' (806.27-29). Lancelot is acting out of character here, intentionally, in order to fight against his brothers and not be known by them. This type of complex self-fashioning is reserved for Lancelot alone in Malory's romance, culminating in the painful distinction the best knight feels in the 'Sir Urry of Hungary' before the character of the text pulls, firmly and irrevocably, towards the predetermined end in the final book, and there is little room for interiority once again. But Lancelot, and therefore chivalry,

[69] Mikayla Hunter, 'Disguise, Transformation, and Revelation in Middle English Romances and Outlaw Ballads' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2019), p. 131. On the centralisation of royal power, she cites Stephen Knight, *Arthurian Literature and Society* (London: Macmillan, 1983), esp. p. 80. For another discussion of the significance of disguise in romance, see Norris J. Lacy, 'On Armor and Identity: Chrétien and Beyond', in *De sens rassis: Essays in Honor of Rupert T. Pickens*, ed. by Keith Busby, Bernard Guidot, and Logan E. Whalen (New York: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 365-74.

has been recuperated, salvaged, and saved: and so it can survive the ending of the whole court and world.

Conclusion

If I were to write myself into the argument between Hess and Ackerman cited earlier in this chapter, I would offer the following proposition: in Malory, we might most clearly see character as shared, between the narrative and protagonists. The character of the narrative changes over time, and interacts with the different protagonists in different ways. In this way, a convincing inner life is incipiently available: for all we ever receive in narrative from any period is action, consequence, and reaction. In the modern novel, a textual figure may reach the end of their life and ask 'what was my life for? what was it about?': the romance protagonist, committed to a life of chivalry and bound by the strict conventions of their genre, simply does not need such self-examination. Malory, who has read French romance, alliterative English romance, and popular verse romances, represents the end-product of the romance algorithm: as Ralph Norris notes, *Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere* 'is unlike any other tale in the *Morte Darthur*… when Malory came to his final tale, he returned to a more characteristic relationship with his sources'[70] – it follows that it is in this penultimate book, which combines an unusually high number of major and minor sources, that Malory's fullest and richest psychological depiction of character is to be found. As he draws on his sources, picking and choosing episodes and character arcs to discard or expand, adding depth and content when it suits his purposes, Malory's retelling of the Arthurian story displaces the Christian quest from its preeminent position – perhaps even dispenses with it by bringing the quest to a premature end, in Urry's miraculous healing. The only thing that can replace it is a convincing commitment to the prevailing hegemonic secular ideology of his day – chivalry,

[70] Norris, *Malory's Library*, p. 139.

concentrated in the individual figure of Lancelot – who changes and develops with the narrative itself, moving as he does between his fervent recommitment to Christian ascetic duty after the quest, his inevitable fall back into adultery with the Queen, his self-conscious shame and distinction in the Urry episode, and his dogged attempts to do what is right throughout 'The Morte Arthur', right down to his withdrawal from secular life which is eventually repudiated in Hector's encomium. Mickey Sweeney argues provocatively that in the ambiguity of Lancelot's sweet smile as he dies (938.18-19), Malory may be 'depicting, finally, the death of a glorified sinner, the ending of whom gives value once again to human passion, or the passing of a saint martyred, by, of all things, the experience of human love'.[71] If anything, Lancelot is martyred by *human experience*, encompassing of course love, but also the hyperbolic highs and lows of status, recognition, and feeling that are so central to the way that meaning is generated in romance. It is therefore not surprising that it is not Lancelot's holiness that Hector most celebrates in the threnody, but rather the active and dynamic ways in which his superlative nature was enacted in the secular world; the narrative's fundamental nature as romance demands this.

For these reasons, Malory's Lancelot can only be understood as a proto-novelistic character (and Malory's final books as a proto-novel), despite his burgeoning self-awareness. It is more difficult for Lancelot to be Lancelot than it is for Malory's other characters to be themselves. The process of understanding Lancelot demands something different of the romance-reader, too: a capacity to change her mind, to encounter inconsistency and assimilate multiple facets of the character into a single literary subject. Lancelot is the knight who feels shame for hesitating by the cart in Chrétien's version, and who cries after healing Urry in Malory's; the textual figure caught up in the destruction of greatest fellowship of men. When as modern readers we encounter these contradictions and incongruities, we are

[71] Sweeney, 'Divine Love or Loving Divinely?', p. 77.

prone to see a figure full of productive, 'ugly' feelings, expressive of compromised agency, and a nascent, radical individualism. Perhaps this was what Malory saw in the figure of Lancelot, too. Regardless, the character of the text, the greatest romance, wins out in the end and so Lancelot, Arthur, and the rest of the knights must be reintegrated into a neat conclusion – one that puts an effective stop to any more change or 'becoming', and points, instead, to textual figures that may, one day, (be)come again. Malory's Lancelot is something genuinely new to romance, as is the form of the narrative: but these developments have come, and could only have come, from the structures of romance.

Epilogue

It is not comfortable to be an individual; it is not easy being the best. This is the wisdom of Achilles in Madeline Miller's modern imagining of the greatest of all Greek warriors, who demands the following of his lover Patroclus:

> "Name one hero who was happy."
> I considered. Heracles went mad and killed his family; Theseus lost his bride and father; Jason's children and new wife were murdered by his old; Bellerophon killed the Chimera but was crippled by the fall from Pegasus' back.
> "You can't." He was sitting up now, leaning forward.
> "I can't."
> "I know. They never let you be famous *and* happy." He lifted an eyebrow. "I'll tell you a secret."
> "Tell me." I loved it when he was like this.
> "I'm going to be the first."[1]

Part of what makes Miller's novels (*The Song of Achilles*, *Circe*) quite so compelling is the self-conscious quality of her characters: they are more than literate in their own *mythos*, and understand with sometimes painful precision the roles they are to play. Achilles knows the sort of man he is to become; myth is a living, dynamic force in this storyworld, informing the decisions he makes (and thus the shape of the plot). Achilles looks back at the great heroes of his culture, and sees that great fame goes in hand with pain, and that adventure is the product of difficulty and disaster. Like the superlative tragedy faced by Amis and Amiloun discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis, there is a sense that such a superfluity of anything must teeter on the edge of dismay. Fame – *being known of* – is not the same as *being known* (the unspoken preoccupation of the romance characters I discussed in Chapter 2); Miller's re-imagining of the story of Achilles as a man caught between the obligations of his renown (which are aggressively enforced by his mother Thetis) and the personal reality of his love speaks to a

[1] Madeline Miller, *The Song of Achilles* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 98.

tendency (already present in the *Iliad*) to self-consciously follow a script, with all the dissonant interiority that entails. But any narrative tradition that centres a hero will encounter the truth of his binary formulation – of fame and happiness.

In this thesis I have traced the ways in which the writers of romance in medieval England constructed compelling literary figures; these texts are fundamentally about people, and how they think and feel and act. I have shown how romance protagonists confront the burdens of their superlative greatness; they may go about this with the wild enthusiasm of Lybeaus Desconus, or, like Lancelot, with periodic reluctance – but they *will* fulfil the expectations generated by text and reader for them, by their genre. This thesis has demonstrated the ways in which these expectations 'furnished' (to borrow Chrétien's terminology) the writers of the medieval English romances with character and plot; self-consciously writing within a tradition of the extraordinary, the authors of the verse romances in particular clearly saw and satisfied a mass appetite for their popular texts. Plot remains a somewhat denigrated feature of fiction-writing; the byline to a recent Guardian interview with the novelist Jean Hanff Korelitz (of *Admission*, *You Should Have Known*) reads 'I wanted to be a literary novelist. But I realised that I liked plot'.[2] Her new novel *The Plot* tells the story of a failing author and creative writing professor who appropriates the plot of his student's novel, left unwritten due to his untimely death.[3] As the latest revelations in the saga of *The New Yorker* short story 'Cat Person' reveal, it is far easier, relatively speaking, to appropriate plot as opposed to fully-formed character.[4] The success of 'Cat Person' in 2017 was rooted in the phenomenon of a subject who felt *so real* to readers – and has emerged, in

[2] Lisa Allardice, 'Jean Hanff Korelitz: "I wanted to be a literary novelist. But I realised that I liked plot', *The Guardian*, 23 July 2021, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jul/23/jean-hanff-korelitz-i-wanted-to-be-a-literary-novelist-but-i-realised-that-i-liked-plot> [accessed July 2021].
[3] Jean Hanff Korelitz, *The Plot* (London: Faber & Faber, 2021).
[4] See Kristen Roupenian, 'Cat Person', *The New Yorker*, 4 December 2017, available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person> [accessed July 2021], and Alexis Nowicki, '"Cat Person" and Me', *Slate*, 8 July 2021, available at: <https://slate.com/human-interest/2021/07/cat-person-kristen-roupenian-viral-story-about-me.html> [accessed July 2021].

fact, to be so. Writer Kristen Roupenian appears to have appropriated the lived experience of Alexis Nowicki, an ex-girlfriend of a man they both knew and who is featured in the story; the resulting discourse has generated an important conversation about authorial responsibility and integrity in the age of autofiction.[5]

This fear of appropriation does not, of course, apply to medieval romance. If these texts are at times repetitive or predictable, this is entirely intentional; conventions should be understood as shorthand to the wider romance landscape. As a result, the flashes of interiority, feeling, and individuality that I have outlined in this thesis are as central to the genre as the formulaic lines that have at times obscured earlier scholarship's vision of the whole romance text. Romances are about people: they explore and celebrate elite secular experience by placing extraordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. The Middle English verse romances utilize their audiences' expectations and thus do not need to paint detailed pictures of their characters' inner lives. A line explaining that a knight is angry or a daughter distraught would have given the fourteenth-century reader of a brief poem more than enough of a sense of the situation – for they would have a large bank of expectations to draw upon in order to contextualize a given convention. Indeed, the more celebrated examples I have used in my analysis – poems by Chaucer, and the *Gawain*-poet – also utilize the accretive power and meaning of these conventions.

It is perhaps this that most distinguishes Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, the latest romance I have discussed here, from its contemporaries. Whereas the verse romance poet may be content to allow audiences to sometimes supply motivation, the distribution of character in Malory's narrative means that the narrative interacts *with* Lancelot, almost like

[5] Not that 'Cat Person' was strictly presented as autofiction, initially; but it strikes me that Roupenian did not *as* actively discourage the subsequent association of her work with the term as perhaps she should have – see, for instance, her hedged comments about autobiography (that now read as an extraordinary expression of her sublimated guilt), in 'What it felt like when "Cat Person" went viral', *The New Yorker*, 10 January 2019, available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/what-it-felt-like-when-cat-person-went-viral> [accessed July 2021].

two protagonists. This is not achieved through the integrated revelations or consistent interiority that would become ingrained in fiction-writing by the novels of the seventeenth century, and beyond – but through a form of narrative confirmation based on earlier romance conventions which are allowed, through the length and scope of his long prose romance, to play out fully. Malory essentially expands the shorthand of romance: and the result is Lancelot, a proto-novelistic character who changes and develops in a way that defies typical romance characterization. The conditions for this more developed literary subject, however, were inherent to the genre already.

For these reasons, the romances composed in England between 1100 and 1500 should be afforded a more central role in the history of the literary subject; for what they may sometimes lack in poetic flair and metric complexity, they make up for tenfold in self-consciousness and memorability. Their heroes would remain in the popular imagination for centuries to come: marks and annotations in some manuscripts of *Sir Bevis of Hampton*, for instance, show that this romance was still being read in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and it survives in numerous printed book copies from the early eighteenth century.[6] It goes without saying that stories of Arthur and his knights continued apace; every century since has seen the utility of the legendary figure for its own political and ideological purposes – so compelling is the story of the king whose knights who fight so well that they destroy their world. The subject of romance is its subjects: the drama of textual figures becoming themselves.

[6] See Andrew King, '*Sir Bevis of Hampton*: Renaissance Influence and Reception', in *Sir Bevis of Hampton in Literary Tradition*, ed. by Jennifer Fellows and Ivana Djordjević (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 176-92 (p. 176); Siân Echard, *Printing the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), esp. pp. 60-96.

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