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Popular Romance: The Material and the Problems

ROSALIND FIELD

The Middle English verse romances of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries have always posed a problem to academic study and modern readers. The majority are textually fragile, anonymous, and lack clear cultural and social contexts. Dealing with such textual and cultural problems is the business of scholarship, but these works remain resistant to an academic discourse that privileges difficulty in interpretation, an elite response, a professional readership. More seriously they are evidently the ancestors of a popular literary culture that academic discourse prefers to ignore, unless under the copious umbrella of cultural studies.

There are basic problems with the double meaning of 'popular' as both widely appreciated and culturally of 'the people', with an accompanying sub-text of mediocrity: 'Rather than being only demographically descriptive, in critical practice, "popular" has tended to drag in its train the sense "unso-phisticated".'[1] This perceived lack of sophistication has in turn generated some questionable assumptions about audience and reception, assumptions which have all too often served to mark the superior cultural level of critic and reader.

However, since 1971, when John Halverson was able to remark that '*Havelok the Dane* is one of a very small number of Middle English romances that still retain their charm', attitudes to the anonymous romances have moved considerably – Derek Brewer remarked on the 'explosion of interest' that took place in the 1980s,[2] and this has continued. The reasons have as much to do with new developments in critical approaches as with the romances themselves, especially the willingness to give serious considera-tion to works outside the canonical texts recognized as major Literature. At the same time a new appreciation of the power of narrative convention has altered attitudes, most notably in Helen Cooper's recent adaptation of the

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[1]   Ralph Hanna, *London Literature, 1300–1380* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 107.
[2]   John Halverson, '*Havelok the Dane* and Society', *Chaucer Review* 6 (1971–2), 142–51 (p. 142); Derek Brewer, 'Escape from the Mimetic Fallacy', in *Studies in Medieval English Romances*, ed. D. Brewer (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988), pp. 1–10 (p. 1).

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'meme' to chart the movement of romance conventions from the Angevin period to the Renaissance.[3]

The initial problem has always been the unmanageable nature of the raw material and the sheer quantity of narratives of all shapes and none. Various taxonomic strategies have been used to organize Middle English romances. The clearest and most influential is by subject matter – as in the *Manual*, Hibbard (Loomis)'s *Mediæval Romance in England*, Barron's *English Medieval Romance* and numerous anthologies. Categorization by subject matter tends to adopt the Matters of medieval narrative: Rome, France, Britain, sometimes extended to England,[4] but this leaves a large and varied group of works under Miscellaneous or 'non-cyclic'. Hibbard (Loomis) adopted a more thematic approach to avoid this (Romances of Trial and Faith/ of Love and Adventure) and this approach is reflected in the titles of a number of recent collections – *Tales of Love and Chivalry* (Fellows), *Humorous and Sentimental Romances* (TEAMS), the homiletic or pious romances. The shifting, often subjective nature of this approach is avoided by other, more factual, categories, including classification by length (Mehl's Shorter Romances, Longer Romances, Novels in Verse), date – Early Middle English, fourteenth or fifteenth century (Pearsall) – and form – verse, tail-rhyme, alliterative (Mills).[5]

This presents further problems, as any attempt to organize or to select works that seem by one set of criteria or another to belong together shapes and controls the perception and reception of the romances. Another unacknowledged, but powerful, factor is the marketing of the romances. Anthologies and selections are put together with an eye to their accessibility to modern readers and especially their usefulness in courses; brevity is a strong survival factor here and many long romances are sadly neglected.[6] This is partly a pragmatic response to the realities of modern conditions of readership, and student courses and anthologies are the drivers which have established a 'canon' of standard texts. However, recent scholarship has moved beyond

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[3]   Cooper, *English Romance in Time*.
[4]   Rosalind Field, 'The Curious History of the Matter of England', in *Boundaries in Medieval Romance*, ed. Neil Cartlidge (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 29–42.
[5]   *Manual*; Laura A. Hibbard (Loomis), *Mediæval Romance in England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1924); W. R. J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (Harlow: Longman, 1987); Mehl, *Middle English Romances*; Derek Pearsall, 'The Development of Middle English Romance', *Medieval Studies* 27 (1965), 91–116; *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Maldwyn Mills (London: Dent, 1973); *Of Love and Chivalry: An Anthology of Middle English Romance*, ed. Jennifer Fellows (London: Dent, 1993); *Sentimental and Humorous Romances*, ed. Erik Kooper, TEAMS series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006).
[6]   The prime example of this is the tail-rhyme *Ipomadon*, generally recognized as one of the finest Middle English romances, extracts from which are to be found in only two student-level anthologies, *Middle English Metrical Romances*, ed. W. H. French and C. B. Hale (New York: Russell & Russell, 1930) and *Medieval English Romances*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt and N. Jacobs (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980).

this canon, to investigate largely neglected texts,[7] while the increasing availability of on-line texts in good editions is opening up a wider area to a larger readership.

Gaps in our knowledge about the occasions and conditions under which these texts were written and performed are inevitable, given the passage of time, but the anonymous nature of popular romance is in itself disorientating for modern readers, particularly perhaps in texts like these which deal with personal, family and social relationships. Arguably, medieval studies have long been familiar with the consequences of the Death of the Author, but modern theoretical developments have conferred respectability upon this situation. In the absence of an individual authorial voice, let alone the biographical dimension so vital to traditional literary study, the reader has to fill the gap with an attempt to historicize, to examine the audience, to deconstruct the texts' attitudes to power, gender, or society.

However, the conditions that are responsible for the anonymity of the majority of these texts also produce a narrative style that permits spaces and silences which modern narrative fiction would hasten to fill, but by which medieval popular romance engages its readers. We read into the conventional narrative, precisely because it is conventional narrative, the unspoken nuances that give the romance particularity and power. As will be indicated in this discussion, the result has been some critical readings of considerable subtlety and perception, as well as a constructive lack of agreement as to the meaning of some of the shortest and apparently simplest of romances.

We shall look at a selection of romances that have always been seen as 'popular' in the unsophisticated sense of the word and have proved popular with modern as well as medieval readers. We shall use them to examine the assumptions about popularity, the procedures of the long romance and the critical search for meaning and context in the romance of the family and the romance of the popular hero.

Popular romance in Anglo-Norman

If you give me some of your silver I shall now tell you more of the truth of this: if not, I shall leave it at that.[8]

The performer demanding money from his audience in the middle of his romance would seem a clear indicator of a popular level of literary produc-

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[7] *Pulp Fictions* contains studies on largely neglected romances such as *The King of Tars* (Jane Gilbert), *Richard Coeur de Lion* (Nicola McDonald) and *Le Bone Florence of Rome* (Felicity Riddy).

[8] 'Issi com vus me orrez a dreit conter / Si vus me volez de vostre argent doner, / Ou si noun, jeo lerrai issi ester', *Boeve*, 434–6; my translation. The complete romance is available in translation in *Boeve de Haumtone and Gui de Warewic*, trans. and intro. Judith Weiss (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2008).

tion and reception.[9] And the romance in question, that dealing with the career of Bevis of Hampton, is a fast-moving narrative, with rather blunt and confused morality, little finesse of behaviour, and a direct appeal to a horse-loving, xenophobic, audience. The style is accessible with few pretensions of symbolic depth, there is no clearly individual authorial voice and the work has a confused textual history. All these are recognized features of 'popular' romance. As well as providing highly effective entertainment, the narrative deals with important issues of the day, and its later history shows it to be widely successful, that is, popular in the other meaning of the term.

But there is a problem here for modern systems of classification. This 'minstrel' demand is from the Anglo-Norman *Boeve de Hauntoun*, written in the vernacular associated with the higher ranks of post-Conquest society. Its subject matter links it firmly with a baronial family, and the name of the hero's horse with Arundel and its aristocratic owners.

The case of *Boeve* raises two issues around the definitions of popular literature. Firstly, the unexamined class-based assumptions according to which aristocrats, by virtue of their rank, have refined literary tastes. And secondly the question that arises from the peculiar situation in medieval England – in a bilingual culture can popular literature exist in the socially superior vernacular, a language largely inaccessible to the majority of the population? Rather than accepting the sophisticated tastes of the aristocracy as a given, it is more helpful to start with the distinction between 'open' and 'closed' narratives.[10] Most Anglo-Norman romance originates as 'coterie' literature and has the named author and the identifiable patron to go with it.[11] The aesthetics of this 'closed' literature are exemplified in another AN romance, Hue de Rotelande's *Ipomadon*: well-informed literary references, in-jokes and a generally subversive humour, a named author, the flattery of a named patron: all indicative of a close and familiar audience with shared assumptions about fashionable courtly literature. It is a courtly aesthetic evident in several of the AN romances, but more likely to be familiar to readers through the later works of Chaucer or the *Gawain*-poet.

The clearest exceptions to this aesthetic amongst the AN romances of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries are *Boeve* and *Gui de Warewic*, translations of which are found in the Auchinleck MS and which go on to have a long history as popular English romances. The AN period thus indicates that romance in England held an appeal from the highest in the land to a wider audience for performed entertainment.

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9 Nancy Mason Bradbury, 'The Traditional Origins of *Havelok the Dane*', *Studies in Philology* 90 (1999), 115–42 (p. 127), surveys work on the fictionality of such 'minstrel' remarks, but sees them as typical of Middle English romance.

10 Harriet E. Hudson, 'Towards a Theory of Popular Literature: The Case of the Middle English Romances', *Journal of Popular Culture* 23 (1989), 31–50.

11 Rosalind Field, 'Romance in England, 1066–1400', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 152–76 (pp. 154–62).

Nevertheless, the AN romances tend to be long, and length is often a marker of courtliness as it requires a given audience's attention over several occasions. But the AN *Gui* demonstrates that length can be turned into a feature of the popular narrative. The difficulties posed by a romance of some thirteen thousand lines to the medieval audience, or indeed the modern reader, can be met if we take into account the apparently careful structuring of a romance such as *Gui/Guy* into discrete episodes of a manageable length. To read a long romance, an episode at a time, over a length of time is to release its entertainment potential. These long works are not meant to be read at one sitting, any more than a television series is designed to be watched for ten hours.

We can examine this by looking at one of the typical episodes the accumulation of which make up the lengthy whole of *Gui/Guy*. Critical attention tends to focus on key episodes – Guy's declaration of love for Felice, his conversion, his fight with Colbrond, his death – but the sheer length of the romance is due to a number of quasi-independent adventures. We take as an example the episode in which Guy, disguised as a pilgrim, comes to the rescue of his old friend Terri of Worms (lines 9393–10775 in *Gui*, 1693–2788 in Stanzaic *Guy*). The episode is approximately a thousand lines in length, as could be delivered in a single performance. The 1095 lines of the ME is a reduction from the 1382 lines of the AN, some of which is the result of turning fast-moving couplets into tail-rhyme, but most of which relates to the more relaxed narration of the AN.[12] The synopsis of the episode is the same for both versions:[13]

> After another long pilgrimage, Guy reaches Germany where he encounters his sworn brother Tirri dressed as a pilgrim, begging for his bread, and full of sorrow. Unrecognized, Guy encourages him to explain the cause of his poverty and distress. Tirri describes how Emperor Reiner's steward Berard has falsely accused him of the death of his uncle, Duke Otes of Pavia (who in fact was slain by Guy previously). Tirri tells how, following his friends' appeal to Reiner, he has been released from prison on agreement that he find and bring Guy to defend him against Berard's accusation. Having searched far and wide, Tirri is convinced that Guy must be dead. As the time has now come to fulfill his agreement with Reiner, Tirri is desperate [stanzas 142–158].
>
> Guy offers comfort to his old friend. Tirri then has a dream which leads the two of them to a cave of treasure, from which Guy takes a magnificent sword. They head towards court together but Tirri becomes so fearful that Guy leaves him at an inn, with the sword in his possession. Guy therefore enters the court alone as an anonymous pilgrim. He enrages Berard with

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12 See *Ipomadon*, ed. Rhiannon Purdie, EETS OS 316 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. lxvii–xx on the effect of translating Anglo-Norman couplets into Middle English tail-rhyme stanzas.

13 Synopsis by Alison Wiggins in *Guy of Warwick: Icon and Ancestor*, ed. Alison Wiggins and Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), pp. 201–13.

reports of his bad reputation abroad and challenges his treatment of Tirri, whom he agrees to defend [stanzas 159–178].

Guy and Berard are prepared (Berard with a suit of 'double' armour and Guy with the sword from the treasure cave) and engage in a fierce battle. Tirri hides in a church and visits the battlefield only once, when he cannot believe that the fierce warrior he sees is the same pilgrim he met. Evening falls and it is agreed that combat will be resumed the next morning. During the night, through Berard's treachery, Guy is carried to the sea and set adrift in his bed. He awakes to see the stars above him but, by luck or providence, is rescued by a fisherman. At daybreak, finding the pilgrim gone, Reiner confronts Berard. The fisherman intervenes with the news of his rescue and the battle is resumed until Guy is victorious. Guy goes to tell Tirri the news of his defeat and, after correcting his fears of betrayal, has him instated as steward in place of Berard. Before departing, Guy reveals his identity to Tirri [stanzas 179–232].

In modern terms the episode is structured in relation to the whole as part of a series, not a serial. It develops several themes germane to the romance's purposes but it is not essential to the narrative structure: Guy's life-story would be complete enough without it. The cast of characters – Guy, Terri, Berard, the emperor – are familiar from the first half of the romance, so need, and receive, little introduction. Those in the audience who have missed the earlier episodes are brought up to speed by the back-story provided at the beginning, through the now well-worn device of Terri telling his story to the disguised hero whom he believes to be ignorant of it. The episode is marked out by its setting, beginning with a change of scene from Constantinople to Germany and ending as Guy sets out to return to England. The introductory information is fuller in the earlier version, possibly because the material is not yet as familiar as it will be by the fourteenth century, but the balance of the narrative components is similar in both versions. The relationships between the two versions are not direct enough to provide a line-by-line equivalence throughout, but the proportions are similar enough to indicate that the ME redactor(s) saw no need to alter the shape of the original.

The differences in tone and emphasis between the two versions are not such as to indicate significant differences in level of audience taste or literary competence. Both versions rely heavily on direct speech to convey informa-tion and emotion and the authorial voice is largely neutral. At some points the ME appears to clarify details in the AN, as in Guy's decision to keep the sword from the magic hoard [*Gui*, 9830; *Guy*, 2000], but it loses the neat narrative symmetry of the first and final conversations between Guy and Terri taking place at a roadside cross. Terri fears that Gui suffers from epilepsy when he swoons at their meeting: the ME omits this. The AN provides more names of people – the emperor is Reiner – and places (Speyer, Worms). The AN duel takes place on an island (perhaps a Tristan echo), which is normal-ized to a 'launde' in ME.

Gui's imitation of *chanson de geste* style means that the AN is more

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violent as much of the verbal aggression is lost in translation into English, and the AN tends to give a larger role to the choric onlookers of the emperor's court, another characteristic *chanson* technique. So the angry confrontation between the pilgrim Gui and the emperor and Berard at court is longer and more aggressive in the AN, although the ME Guy makes a telling jibe about boasting (2134–6), and Berard's defiance of the emperor the following morning, when accused of killing the pilgrim, is expanded in the ME into a sustained threat of feudal insurrection (2425–36). This may seem to suggest a stronger emphasis on aristocratic interests, although the ME then omits Gui's generously chivalric lament over the body of his foe. The bed on which Gui spends the night and goes to sea is described as richly furnished in AN, a description omitted in the English which adds its own extra flourish in describing the sea with 'winde and wateres wawe' (2352). In the AN the fisherman first thinks the floating bed is an object of enchantment, whereas the narrative voice in *Guy* ascribes the hero's rescue at sea to the intervention of Jesus (2365–7), and the ME versions rework Guy's prayer. While the ME may here be more pious in expression, the fact remains that it is the AN author who invents the main theme of the conversion of the hero.

These slight changes do not indicate a change in the social make-up of the audience and far more is unchanged: the emotional focus on Guy's relationship with Terri; the marvellous animal dream; the examination of the nature of good and bad rule, both in the criticism of the Emperor and in Guy's parting sermon to Terri; the comic cameo of the fisherman and the scolding of Terri by his wife at the end. The essential themes of the episode, the irony of Guy's disguised persona, the pious nature of his adventure, the repeated defence by the hero not only of his friend but of abstract justice, the bullying nature of his opponents are unchanged in detail or in emphasis. It is an episode that measures Guy's development – as Wiggins has noted, his awareness of the stars echoes the scene of his conversion.[14] But as an adventure it carries its moral message lightly, and the stage business by which the sleeping Guy ends up floating down to sea on a mattress is inescapably absurd – and entertaining.

This is the main point here. The episode is entertaining on several levels, quick-moving, emotional, sensational, violent or comic in places and comfortably moral or pious in others. This is (as I have argued more fully elsewhere[15]) the translation of popular romance from one vernacular into popular romance in another; both versions are 'open' narratives. The tally of extant manuscripts indicates that in the fourteenth century the AN *Gui* was more popular than the ME,[16] although of course it is in English that the story

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[14] *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick*, ed. Alison Wiggins, TEAMS series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), note to lines 2347–8.

[15] Rosalind Field, 'From *Gui* to *Guy*: The Fashioning of a Popular Romance', in *Guy of Warwick: Icon and Ancestor*, pp. 44–60.

[16] There are sixteen extant Anglo-Norman copies, five in Middle English; see further two chapters in *Guy of Warwick: Icon and Ancestor*: Marianne Ailes, '*Gui de Warewic* in its Manuscript

of Guy becomes a long-lasting and multi-media legend. The procedures of a romance like *Gui* establish the groundwork for popular romance as it is to develop in England, giving an episodic narrative, that is much copied, famous beyond the text, appealing to the immediate interests and tastes of a wide audience. It should not surprise us that the later history of Guy in English sees it taken up as an ancestral history by one of the most powerful baronial houses in the land; its very directness and lack of narrative ambiguity make the story of Guy into a powerful propaganda tool.

The Middle English Breton lay: the search for meaning

Guy is the model of the long episodic romance, but there are a large number of short verse romances that have been seen as more typical of the popular ME romance of the fourteenth century. Of these the so-called 'Breton Lais' have come to represent the most medieval and most romantic of the English medieval romances and as such have proved particularly popular with modern readers.

The self-identification as Breton Lai as expressed in the prologues to the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* and Chaucer's 'The Franklin's Tale' serves to draw attention to an antique origin and association with the marvellous or magical which signals to a medieval audience, not just a modern one, that these works operate symbolically and so require interpretation, and also that they may carry meanings at odds with the fourteenth-century world view. The problem has long been to find meanings which resonate with both the medieval poems and modern understandings of them.

The distance travelled in critical responses to *Sir Orfeo* has been vividly recalled by Derek Pearsall:

> … over thirty years ago when I was teaching [*Sir Orfeo*] as a set text … I had no idea why it should have been set or why I was teaching it, but I tried to make the best use of it I could in giving students a grounding in Middle English philology. I remember that the word *owy*, as a possible Kentish dialect form, was a very exciting feature of the poem … my own individual contribution to the study of the poem consisted principally of scornful attacks upon its artlessness and naivety … It has taken me a long while to realise that any analysis of those skills according to which *Sir Orfeo* falls short must be a bad analysis or must have chosen the wrong skills to analyse. For in truth *Sir Orfeo* is a small poetic miracle …[17]

Context', pp. 12–26, and Alison Wiggins, 'The Manuscripts and Texts of the Middle English *Guy of Warwick*', pp. 61–80.

[17] Derek Pearsall, 'Madness in *Sir Orfeo*', in *Romance Reading*, pp. 51–63 (p. 51). Stephen Knight argued in 1966 that *Sir Orfeo* should be read and appreciated on its own terms: 'The Characteristic Mode of "Sir Orfeo"', *Balcony: The Sydney Review* 5 (1966), 17–24.

The literary qualities, which Pearsall and others have recognized, are not those that lend themselves to easy identification or analysis. The problem with a poem like *Sir Orfeo* is simultaneously its particular strength: its apparent simplicity and transparency. It appears to lack the qualities of irony, verbal complexity, conscious artistry and ambiguity that are valued in writers such as Chaucer and of course those of the modern period. But some of this simplicity is not what it seems. The story of Orfeo's rescue of his abducted queen from the fairy otherworld is a deliberate reworking of the Orpheus myth into the romance mode. We may notice the turn in the narrative at precisely the mid-point of the poem,[18] the effective use of repetition with variation and the manipulation of a myth which is the possession of European culture, the appropriation of Celtic magic to make that myth accessible to an insular Christian audience, all evidence of the layered handling of the tale by successive generations of the multilingual culture of medieval England.

Moreover this version represents a move away from the potential for Christian allegory available in medieval readings of the Orpheus myth. The Auchinleck MS is sometimes chided not only for the line about King Juno (which is pretty irredeemable) but for re-situating 'Traciens' (Thrace) in Winchester. But as Rouse has shown in his detailed discussion of the use of Winchester in *Guy of Warwick*, this ancient capital of the Wessex dynasty held a significance for a fourteenth-century audience and this scribal altera-tion can be seen as part of the 'nationalistic agenda of the Auchinleck MS as a whole'.[19] Furthermore, the Winchester setting is particularly suitable for the story of Orfeo as handled in the ME version where it is no longer a myth of restoration operating on the level of emotional or spiritual fulfilment, but a romance that also examines the nature of kingship and good rule. When the classical Orpheus invades the kingdom of Dis he does not do so as an equal, but Orfeo and the Fairy King of the Otherworld are mirror images of each other. This is first established by one of those conscious repetitions that mark important narrative moments –

Castels & tours / Riuers, forestes, friþ wiþ flours (159–60; 245–6)

and then crucially by Orfeo's demand that the king act in accordance with royal codes of honour. The Rash Promise of folk-lore has transmuted into a test of royal credibility. But it is not only in the Otherworld that kingship is important; the nature of Orfeo's own rule as depicted in his departure and return is clearly exemplary. He does not leave his kingdom irrespon-sibly, and in appointing his steward as regent opens up the romance to the

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[18] The turn in Auchinleck, 'And on a day he seiȝe him biside', is at line 303 out of a total of 604 lines. It is not so marked in London, British Library, MS Harley 3810 (line 289) or Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61 (line 303). See *Sir Orfeo*, ed. A. J. Bliss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954).

[19] Robert Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), pp. 59–60.

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topic of good rule in absolute terms, irrespective of birth. The testing of the steward on Orfeo's return is the emotional focus of the optimistic closure to the tale, much more so than the reunion with Herodis.[20] The childlessness of the central couple – usually the narrative sign of an unhappy marriage – is necessary to allow the steward to succeed to the throne through merit, not birth.

So the ancient themes of loss, love and restoration are given a positive outcome in *Sir Orfeo*, while the medieval pressure towards allegory and religious exempla is resisted in favour of extending the personal into the political. If, as seems likely enough, Chaucer knew this romance, he may well have mapped onto its structure the pattern that emerges in 'The Franklin's Tale' in order to expand the love triangle of a happy marriage threatened by a magically empowered rival with the addition of the non-noble but honourable figure of the clerk. Both lais demonstrate the power of the contagious nature of virtue, especially the virtue of loyalty exemplified by marriage, converting the predator to honourable behaviour and spreading out from the central couple to become a pattern for a post-feudal society.

A further complication in *Sir Orfeo* is that the supernatural is represented by the fairy otherworld and this contains its own interpretative problems.[21] For several influential readers the poem uses the fairy to construct a myth of madness.[22] Others have been concerned to explore the relationship of the fairy with the mythic kingdom of death, but noted that the 'taken' are presented as undead. I would suggest, however, that while the 'other' that establishes identity in medieval romance is often the traitor, the uncourtly, the Saracen, against which the identity of the loyal, the courtly, the Christian can be asserted, *Sir Orfeo* provides an 'other' which explores nothing less than the identity of being human. The interpretation of the elves of Celtic tradition familiar to modern readers from Tolkien's work is helpful here; and Tolkien, a translator of *Sir Orfeo*, drew heavily on that poem for his material. Here mortality is seen as the key to the human difference from the magical denizens of the otherworld – those taken by the fairy are not dead, because the fairy world knows nothing of the death that defines the human.[23] That Orfeo and Herodis do eventually die in the natural course of events at the

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20 Ralph Hanna sees this as Orfeo's 'climactic test', relevant to the world of provincial knighthood represented in the Auchinleck MS's romances, *London Literature*, p. 131; Lynne Staley reads it as speaking 'to many of the political anxieties that characterise late fourteenth-century literature', *Languages of Power in the Reign of Richard II* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), p. 316; Oren Falk sees the childlessness as a negative, with references to the problems of the reign of Edward II: 'The Son of Orfeo: Kingship and Compromise in a Middle English Romance', *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30 (2000), 247–74.

21 See the detailed discussion of the critical difficulties of the supernatural world in *Sir Orfeo* and its place in the literary tradition of the fairy in Neil Cartlidge, 'Sir Orfeo in the Otherword: Courting Chaos', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004), 195–226.

22 Pearsall, 'Madness'; A. C. Spearing, '*Sir Orfeo:* Madness and Gender', in *Spirit*, pp. 258–72.

23 For a recent analysis of the relationship between *Sir Orfeo* and Tolkien's concepts of elves in his own fiction, see Stuart D. Lee and Elizabeth Solopova, *The Keys of Middle Earth* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 123–9.

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end of the romance is a signifier of their humanity, of the processes of time, even of the possibility of resurrection,[24] at any rate of the re-establishment of the norms of human existence. This is a reading which, in its response to the intervening narrative of Tolkien and to contemporary anxieties about the boundaries of humanity, may well be seen as revealing more of the twenty-first century than the fourteenth.

Sir Orfeo thus requires interpretation which provides a balance between the mythical and the political. Whether it is seen primarily as one of Auchinleck's romances of social responsibility or a mythic exploration of the frontiers of human existence, it retains its ability to engage the reader in concerns that are far from trivial. Its narrative procedure of silences, repetition and patterning demands the readers' active engagement with finding meanings that are not necessarily confined to those available to the original audience.

Emaré is another work that identifies itself as a Breton lai and it is one that even more than *Sir Orfeo* teases by its silences and narrative gaps. It belongs to the narrative type of the 'flight from the incestuous father', in which the daughter flees or is exiled into a life of danger, and shares with many analogues the voyages of the exiled mother and child in a rudderless boat, the cruel mother-in-law and the final reunion of the fractured family.[25] The strong patterning of structural and verbal repetition would seem to suggest a purpose to the outrageous fate visited on a heroine whose only provocative action is to refuse an incestuous relationship with her father. But where most of the analogues, including Chaucer's 'The Man of Law's Tale', are exemplary tales demonstrating providential protection, the problem with *Emaré* would seem to be its failure to contain the power the narrative releases.

Emaré can be seen as one of those passive-aggressive heroines who expose the evils of their society, like the young Jane Eyre, and recent readings have focused on her power in the narrative, a power in excess of that shown by most calumniated heroines. For Robson, the events are a means by which female desire achieves its ends, for Tsai they are a strong expression of a parent-child tension which occupies many of the family romances. Putter views the repetition in the romance in Freudian terms as a trauma that has to be consciously reclaimed from the past, a process which Emaré herself sets up in the final sequences of reunions with her father and husband.[26] It seems that because this romance frees its tale of redemptive suffering from an explicit religious meaning (although Putter argues for a deep-structured

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[24] For a different view of the resurrection theme in *Sir Orfeo,* see Cartlidge, 'Courting Chaos', p. 26.

[25] See Cooper, *English Romance in Time*, pp. 108–13 for a wide-ranging account of the motif of the sea voyage.

[26] Christine Li Ju Tsai, 'Parents and Children in Middle English Romance: Personal, National, and International Relations in the Thirteenth to Fifteenth Centuries' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Kent at Canterbury, 2006), pp. 33–42; Ad Putter, 'The Narrative Logic of *Emaré*', in *Spirit*, pp. 157–80; Margaret Robson, 'Cloaking Desire: Re-reading *Emaré*', in *Romance Reading*, pp. 64–76.

Christian meaning), it allows readers to move beyond regarding Emaré herself as a figure of simple goodness, to find instead a heroine capable of complex power-play and manipulation. The question then arises as to what extent this is a modern back-formation reflecting our tendency to look for empowered heroines, even if power detracts from moral probity. We may have lost the ability to recognize virtue itself as power, an ancient belief in many of the romances with female protagonists.

However, Emaré's power is further materialized in the mysterious gemmed robe which, with its embroidery of famous lovers and its intrinsic luxury, does not seem emblematic of simple virtue. This poses more problems as there is so little agreement as to the meaning of the robe as to demonstrate that it has no clear retrievable meaning. Putter notes that the robe confounds critical attempts to interpret it consistently, and chooses instead to take it at its narrative face value – 'the robe makes things happen … because making things happen is what it does'. But the means by which the robe becomes a motive force in the narrative is not clear: because of what it symbolizes, or because it is supernatural? If, as has been noted by Amanda Hopkins,[27] the robe calls forth different responses in different characters in the romance, it has also given rise to a wide range of critical responses, often fuelled by a conviction that meaning exists to be found. It may be that we should be willing to be left in what is an entertaining and absorbing state of uncertainty and note the function of romance to provoke questions; to recognize that purpose may lie in the debate, not in the achievement of answers, is in itself a challenge to the critical ambition to fill in the gaps and find explanations.

In denying the straightforward interpretation of the suffering of the innocent as a vehicle for Christian meaning, *Emaré* is markedly different from the analogous 'The Man of Law's Tale'. The narrative spaces and lack of rationalizing or religious explanation leaves room for the reader's imaginative engagement, and this may explain why *Emaré* fascinates and attracts a range of reader responses, whereas Chaucer's tale is one of the less read of the *Canterbury Tales* and seems to attract respect rather than excitement.

These two romances are, in their different ways, romances about marriage, and it is noticeable that marriage and the family are as likely as courtship to provide the staple shape of many of these ME romances. Since the time of the Greek romances the narrative of the vulnerable and fractured family has been a strong element in romance.[28] The romance is characterized by an

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27 Ross G. Arthur, 'Emaré's Cloak and Audience Response', in *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Culture*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Roney (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1989), pp. 80–92; Mortimer J. Donovan, 'Middle English *Emaré* and the Cloth Worthily Wrought', in *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 337–42; Putter, 'Narrative Logic of *Emaré*'; Amanda Hopkins, 'Veiling the Text: The True Role of the Cloth in *Emaré*', in *Insular Romance*, pp. 71–82.

28 Margaret Anne Doody, *The True Story of the Novel* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

occupation with personal relationships over public events, but it is a misconception to see this as necessarily 'romantic'; the relationships of families or of friendship can be as central as those of lovers.

Sons and lovers: the inter-generational romance

Among the shorter romances, the narrative themes of both exogamous courtship and the divided family provide a variety of structures and conventions.[29] The strength and repetition of the patterning of conventions indicate the perennial nature of the anxieties about intimate relationships, of problems with loss and destructive emotions and the need to test out ways of solving them. However, the domestic and intimate nature of the concerns in these romances are displaced onto a wide geographical and political canvas, a pan-European geography criss-crossing the Mediterranean sea and probing the boundaries of the familiar world, so that the division and restoration of the family unity have the potential to act metonymically for Europe seen as Christendom.

Octovian [or *Octavian*], taken from an OFr original (available in AN[30]), survives in two different versions, Northern and Southern, the latter attributed to Thomas Chestre, a writer distinguished by his available identity, rather than by his merits. Brevity and simplicity are not the aim here: it is three times the length of *Sir Orfeo* and a multilayered family romance using interlace to follow the separate fortunes of its protagonists. The tale opens with the narrative of the calumniated queen who gives birth to twin sons only to have them seized by wild animals, a stock feature of the divided family romance. The narrative then moves between the two as they grow into the mature heroes who will prove themselves in love and war, and finally reunite their parents. *Octavian* shares with *Emaré* many of the narrative ingredients of the family romance, and the problem here is that such a text can appear to be no more than a prefabricated construction of familiar elements.[31] Like *Emaré*, it occupies the romantic geography of mainland Europe, with its emperors, kings and allied kingdoms, thus finding opportunity for violence, warfare and heroism and the crusading response to the Saracens. But new variants are offered to provide a displaced examination of the difficulties of the parent-child relationship, in particular through the figure of the foster-parent.

The figure of the calumniated queen, exiled to give birth in the wilderness, is one of female suffering, and the mother as victim is a feature of

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[29] Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English Romances* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978).

[30] Ruth J. Dean, with Maureen B. M. Boulton, *Anglo-Norman Literature: A Guide to Texts and Manuscripts* (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1999), p. 101.

[31] See Julie Burton, 'Folktale, Romance and Shakespeare', in *Studies in Medieval English Romances*, pp. 176–97.

popular romance as it is of popular religion. As Fellows has noted,[32] the queen in *Octavian* displays a courageous maternal love, which even the lioness respects, when she insists on going into the lion's den in search of her infant son. But the lioness herself bears closer scrutiny. A number of romance heroes have companion lions – Chrétien's *Yvain* in particular, closely imitated by Guy. Readers of these texts have been quick to find meaning in these animals, even if the meanings found may differ, and the lion can be read as an embodiment of the hero's nobility, ferocity or chivalry. A lioness is not such a usual companion, but this one fills that role once the queen has reclaimed her son. For the son is shared, the lioness accompanying them to Jerusalem and staying with them to join the son, Octavian, in his greatest battle and protecting him on the battlefield (an unfair advantage according to the steward in *Guy*). She operates in effect as an externalization of the queen's maternal love, not only nurturing the child in infancy, but fighting his corner with a robust energy as he grows to maturity. She fades out when he marries. So the lioness, as a symbolic expression of the fierce female protectiveness that holds the family together, provides some compensation for the passive, suffering mother of romance.

By contrast, and the contrast is a basic structure of the romance, the fostering of Florent, the child initially seized by an ape, lacks the regal touch, and the Northern version finds opportunity for humour and social commentary in the experiences of the lost prince reared in a bourgeois family. The figure of Clement, the Paris butcher and foster-father, veers from the brutal through the burlesque to the pathetic, as the parent figure moves from being a fearsome authority, to an embarrassment, to an object of pity in the narrative of maturity.[33] It is also a challenge to another easy assumption about the nature of popular romance, for here we find the bourgeois treated with sheer contempt as he is confused by the world of courtly etiquette. John Simons makes out a good case for envisaging a courtly and gentry audience for *Octavian*, in order to explain the treatment of Clement;[34] but in terms of narrative material and treatment it is nevertheless a romance that exemplifies the sensational, dramatic and humorous nature of the popular romance. So like the AN *Boeve* it challenges easy assumptions about popularity, language and social rank.

The two brothers provide contrasting portraits of the maturing hero. The winsome, precocious Florent, the Paris foster-child, demonstrates his innate superiority by preferring courtliness to profit. He goes on to prove his nobility

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[32] Jennifer Fellows, 'Mothers in Middle English Romance', in *Women and Literature in Britain 1150–1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993; 2nd edn 1996), pp. 41–60 (pp. 44–6).

[33] Derek Brewer, *Symbolic Stories: Traditional Narratives of the Family Drama in English Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1980).

[34] John Simons, 'Northern *Octovian* and the question of class', in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows and Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), pp. 105–12.

further by displaying the career of a successful lover, pursuing and winning that most enticing of brides, the 'belle sarrasine', daughter of the Sultan. However, Florent's military success fails and he, together with the kings and emperors of the Christian army, is captured; it falls to Octavian, the warrior reared in Jerusalem by his royal mother, to rescue them and Christendom. So the final reunion of parents and children is less emotional and personal than that in *Emaré*, but rather an assertion of the strength of the family and the empire.

Floris and Blancheflour provides a refreshing contrast after the battlefield triumphalism of the ending of *Octavian*. One of the earliest ME romances, it is another romance adapted from a French original available in England in an AN copy.[35] It is found in the Auchinleck MS with *Guy* and *Orfeo*, although not so clearly part of that collection's programme. The story of a Moorish prince in love with a Christian girl who is sold into the seraglio of the Sultan of Babylon, it is something of a rarity for several reasons: it is a simple courtship romance with no aim beyond the achievement of the union of the couple; it has children as its protagonists; and it is an Eastern story, and retains a positive and sympathetic, if wide-eyed, attitude to the lands and customs of the Saracens.

The problem for the modern reader here is not as a rule one of sympathy, for it is one of the most accessible and appealing of the ME romances, and its toleration of the Saracen other is refreshing, but rather how seriously to take it – the TEAMS edition is in a volume entitled 'Sentimental and Humorous Romances' which may, perhaps unintentionally, give grounds for dismissing it as more trivial than romances dealing with the fate of kingdoms.[36]

Like *Sir Orfeo* it oscillates between love and death, beginning with a false death, when Florent's parents pretend that Blancheflour has died, and ending with the threat of death defeated by a test of love, in this case as the children's mutual love moves the Sultan to pardon them. The cup that initiates Floris's quest is as exotic as Emaré's robe and carries the western world of Troy and Rome into the romance as the lover's quest takes him beyond the boundaries of the known world: Babylon here takes the place of fairy, and its strange eastern customs and marvellous plumbing the role of the supernatural. The harem is envisaged as a lively female community, represented by the warm and humorous relationship between Blancheflour and her confidante, Clarice. Despite this lightness of touch, the family is not presented positively. As with many courtship narratives, the parents are the obstacle and their moral confusion serves to highlight the single-mindedness of the hero-lover. There is no reunion with the parents: Floris's father must die in order for the couple to attain to the kingdom that symbolizes maturity. Courtship and the triumph of the younger generation dismantle the original, unsatisfac-

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[35] Dean and Boulton, *Anglo-Norman Literature*, p. 97.
[36] Kathleen Coyne Kelly, 'The Bartering of Blauncheflur in the Middle English *Floris and Blancheflour*', *Studies in Philology* 91 (1994), 101–10, offers a darker reading.

tory, family. Like *Orfeo* and *Emaré*, *Floris and Blancheflour* is a romance in which love is important but violence is virtually absent; the lover is regained by the resourcefulness of the hero, not by displays of military valour, and in this it contrasts with the crusading strand in *Octavian* and the larger group of crusading romances.[37] These romances exemplify much that is typical and difficult about the shorter ME romances that lack the attractive symbolic implications of the Breton Lai. But the structuring around the generational clash between young and old, parents and children, is an important generic characteristic of romance, and these texts demonstrate the creative possibilities of the thematic variations that account for the sheer number of shorter romances.

While these romances are undeniably popular, in spread as well as aesthetic, they still lack any direct engagement with the social world of their audiences and thus contribute to the problems of defining the popular. All experience is viewed through the prism of aristocratic or royal identity and any attempt to break out of this, as in *Octavian*, is dealt with harshly. There are however a few romances that do deal with life from outside the charmed circle of romance courtliness, the most famous of which is *Havelok the Dane*.

Men of the people: the romance of the popular hero

Written at the turn of the thirteenth century,[38] *Havelok* derives from a chronicle tradition of a Danish prince, exiled to England in disguise, who regains his own kingdom and, in marrying the heiress to the English throne, establishes a joint Anglo-Danish kingdom in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Canute. It is one ME romance, agreed to be 'popular', which has received considerable scholarly attention from the earliest editions,[39] and continued to provoke a number of finely argued and important discussions.[40] There are two reasons

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[37] For the importance of this theme, see Geraldine Barnes, *Counsel and Strategy in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993).

[38] *Havelok*, ed. G. V. Smithers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. lxiv–lxxii.

[39] David Matthews, *The Making of Middle English, 1765–1910* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 120–6.

[40] The following consider the historical context of *Havelok*: Robert Levine, 'Who Composed *Havelok* for Whom?', *Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992), 95–104; David Staines, '*Havelok the Dane*: A Thirteenth-Century Handbook for Princes', *Speculum* 51 (1976), 602–23; Halverson, '*Havelok the Dane* and Society'; John C. Hirsch, '*Havelok* 2933: A Problem in Medieval Literary History', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 78 (1977), 339–49; Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature and National Identity, 1290–1340* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 143–55, '*Havelok* and the History of the Nation', in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), pp. 121–34; Diane Speed, 'The Construction of the Nation in Medieval English Romance', in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, pp. 135–57; Sheila Delany, 'The Romance of Kingship: *Havelok the Dane*', in her *Medieval Literary Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 61–72.
    The following consider the style and aesthetics of *Havelok*: Roy Michael Liuzza, 'Representation and Readership in the Middle English *Havelok*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 93 (1994), 504–19; Judith Weiss, 'Structure and Characterisation in *Havelok the Dane*', *Speculum*

usually cited for this level of interest: its apparent or evident 'Englishness' which attracted the early editors and has formed the centre of discussions of the nature of insular literature ever since; and its 'realism' which seems to offer a respectable alternative to the escapist world of romance. It has thus provided material for both historicizing readings and for a discussion of popular aesthetic. Another reason is the story-telling ability of the poet (and most readers have a strong sense of authorship); *Havelok* is an entertaining, sensational, serious representative of the widespread tale-type of the male Cinderella.

Havelok shares many motifs with *Floris and Blancheflour* – the repetition-with-variation of scenes of eating as a measure of narrative development; the hero disguised as non-royal, a merchant or a mason; the voyeuristic viewing of the lovers in bed when the truth about them is discovered. But so different are the two romances that this serves mainly to illustrate the chameleon quality of narrative convention. *Havelok* is famously a narrative that engages with the realities of peasant and urban life and the world of the castle as seen from the perspective of the servants and is firmly based in a recognizable Lincolnshire. For much of the narrative, power and the court are associated with tyranny and the author draws two differentiated portraits of tyrannical usurpers to provide negative exempla against which the hero is to be measured. Havelok the lost heir seems to believe himself to be a peasant, reared by the eponymous Grim of Grimsby. He is of course of royal birth, and has the signs to prove it; this is no revolutionary text but a version of what in Arthurian romance is recognized as the tale-type of the 'fair unknown', a demonstration that royal birth will out (as in *Octavian*). But Havelok's education is in the school of hardship, his followers range across the social spectrum and he is that rarity in medieval story, a genuinely popular king.[41]

The events and the tone of narration imply the operation of a benign providence, protecting the weak, punishing the evil and restoring justice. The protagonists are orphans so there is no opportunity for the family romance pattern of loss and restoration; what is restored is the land to its rightful ruler. Havelok will triumph over his enemies and his kingdom of Denmark, but more importantly, Goldborough's kingdom of England will be saved from misrule. England is both clearly envisaged by this author – 'fro Douere to Rokesborw' (265) – and seen as under divine protection (as in *Guy*). There is a strong popular political creed at work here which links God, the realm and the king.

The materiality of the world of *Havelok* is matched by that of *Gamelyn*. As

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44 (1969), 247–57; Anne Scott, 'Language as Convention, Language as Sociolect in *Havelok the Dane*', *Studies in Philology* 89 (1992), 137–60; Nancy Mason Bradbury, 'The Traditional Origins of *Havelok the Dane*'; A. C. Spearing, *Readings in Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 43–55.

41 This does not necessarily prove a 'popular' audience: see Hirsch, '*Havelok* 2933': 'Such romances as *Havelok* tell us not so much what the lower classes thought of the upper, as what the upper classes liked to think the lower classes thought of them' (p. 343).

recent studies of the poem have shown,[42] *Gamelyn* is an unusually realistic fiction that illustrates social conditions and changes in the later fourteenth century and has long been read as of historical interest, rather than appreciated for its literary qualities. However, it is a dramatic, humorous and idiosyncratic work that is a pleasure to read.[43] Its popularity in terms of manuscripts is considerable, due to its association with the *Canterbury Tales*, and its popularity in terms of direct expression of and appeal to non-aristocratic interests is evident. As with *Havelok* it expands the definition of romance away from the courtship or family romance with aristocratic protagonists towards a validation of the experience of those outside the courtly world.

Gamelyn is another male Cinderella story in which the youngest son of three is dispossessed of his inheritance on the death of his father by his grasping eldest brother, and put to work in the kitchens. Here, however, we have no *beau inconnu*, as the status of the protagonist and those around him is consistently that of the country gentry. Like Havelok, Gamelyn is too simple for his own good in a world of corruption and abuse of power. But where Havelok triumphs through his own innate virtues, Gamelyn is one of the founding figures of the outlaw tradition, and operates outside both the law of the realm and to a surprising extent, the moral law. *Gamelyn* is a darker work than *Havelok* although even more directly entertaining. There is no sense of providence at work in this tale, no supportive love or marriage, only the fellowship of a single servant and the slippery comradeship of forest outlaws.

The entertainments offered by these romances are in some ways problematic. Violence is uncourtly, unchivalric, often indiscriminating and totally celebrated in these poems.[44] The cloaking glamour of chivalry, of armour, horses and cavalry warfare is absent, and in its place is the physicality of hand-to-hand fighting with whatever weapon comes to hand: a doorpost in *Havelok*, a pestle in *Gamelyn*. Nor is the enemy spared – Havelok kills sixty would-be abductors in the defence of his wife, Gamelyn kills his brother's porter, and eventually the entire cast of a corrupt trial. The violence is fuelled by justified anger, against tyrants and thugs in *Havelok*, against corrupt clergy and self-serving local justices in *Gamelyn*.

Both heroes are displaced from the world of established power by corrupt usurpers who re-invent them as criminals – so Havelok is cast in the role of marauding Viking by Godric and Gamelyn is turned into an outlaw –

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42 Stephen Knight, '"Harkeneth aright": Reading *Gamelyn* for Text not Context', in *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance*, ed. Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), pp. 15–27; Noël James Menuge, 'The Wardship Romance: A New Methodology', in *Tradition and Transformation*, pp. 29–43; T. A. Shippey, '*The Tale of Gamelyn*: Class Warfare and the Embarrassments of Genre', in *Spirit*, pp. 78–96.

43 *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, ed. Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, TEAMS series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997).

44 Compare the moralistic treatment of violence in *Guy of Warwick*: see Paul Price, 'Confessions of a Godless Killer: Guy of Warwick and Comprehensive Entertainment', in *Insular Romance*, pp. 93–110.

'wolfshead' – by his brother the sheriff. The effect is to revolve the normal romance perspective to show the aristocratic world as corrupt – and furthermore to explode the vocabulary of feudal narrative; so descriptive terms such as 'king', 'lord', 'outlaw' (vividly expressed as 'dogges' or 'uten-laddes') are unreliable terms exploited by the corrupt and powerful. It is deeds that prove value and the action-laden careers of these heroes have meaning at this level and lead to the conclusions where Havelok becomes a worthy king and Gamelyn an honest justice.

Havelok, despite its positive and informed presentation of peasant life, comes across as a literary version of that life. The realistic detail is rhetorical display, none the less lively and entertaining for that but not necessary an authentic account of peasant life. Havelok's upbringing in the fisher settlement of Grimsby and his early career as a cook's assistant are part of the wider agenda of this deeply political romance, part of the training of an ideal king, a man who is marked out by destiny but whose experience gains him the trust of an entire people. The cohesive society that *Havelok* famously envisages –

> Erl and barun, dreng and þayn,
> Knict, bondeman, and swain,
> Wydues, maydnes, prestes and clerkes   (31–3)

– is embodied in a hero who moves upwards from country peasant, to court servant, to disguise as a merchant, to warrior and finally to king. The only social rank closed to him is that of cleric, but the authorial voice supplies that lack. Havelok is a good king, eventually, because he has experienced a time in the wilderness of poverty and servitude, but he is still destined to escape it and to remove his followers from it as he promotes his foster-brothers to the aristocracy.

Gamelyn has a less ambitious agenda and a narrower social range. The hero represents the dreams and resentments of a section of society rarely represented in fiction and if there is a wider moral it is that of the insecurity of a post-feudal society – 'many goode mannes child in care is brought' (619). Like Havelok, the hero is something of a simpleton, easily manipulated by the false words of his brother – 'the knyght thought on tresoun and Gamelyn on noon' (165) and responding to all situations with violence. His career does show some of the features of more chivalric heroes; he is motivated by the need to rescue the oppressed (the franklin's sons, his brother Ote) and he does grow up, for this is an unusually convincing romance of maturation.

These two romances undermine any definition of romance as the self-realization of aristocratic protagonists through adventure and love. Both present a popular hero and are read as appealing to a popular audience. That they are popular romances also accounts for their innate conservatism, another factor in the critical impatience with popular narrative. The corruption they expose is that of individuals not of systems and is corrected by

replacing false kings or officials with the hero. In both poems, there is a strong ideal of kingship which is reasserted at the end in a display of justice and harmony. Such an unsubversive attitude is one of the characteristics of popular fiction. The dangers, scandals and exposures of the hero's career will settle into a familiar and reassuring stasis. Nevertheless what we seem to have here is evidence of the use of fiction to explore other possibilities, to move romance into areas of serious concern and wider social implications. If romance encourages the exercise of the imagination to conceptualize a world in which justice and virtue triumph over power and corruption, then a work such as *Gamelyn* shows such imaginings being transposed onto a different social scale and the working out of methods by which justice might be made to triumph.

These six representative romances of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries demonstrate the flexibility and inherent interest of conventional narrative, but a different selection of romances would of course produce variations on these themes and types. If romances were totally predictable and conventional it would be sufficient to read one or two, and a knowledge of more would offer little; there are plenty of modern popular genres to which this applies. But the experience of reading these works is quite the reverse. We find something of a kaleidoscopic effect by which each work throws a new light and different perspective onto the others, accumulating a cultural and aesthetic depth. In this respect, the very size and categoric slipperiness of the corpus of popular romance become part of its particular quality.[45]

We can also recognize that however predictable a romance may be, it is grounded in the anxieties, aspirations and difficulties of its readers and audience. This applies as much to *Emaré* as to its distant cousin, *Jane Eyre*, as much to *Floris and Blancheflour* as to the parallel narrative in *Northanger Abbey*. Indeed, as the difficulties that *Gamelyn* has posed to later readers may indicate, it is the conventional tales set in distant lands and peopled with kings, queens and emperors that lend themselves to a clearly accessible symbolic coding of perennial human experience, whereas the realistic modulations into the recognizably contemporary medieval world remain rooted in that world and so require historical interpretation and contextualization.

While there is no need to look for, or regret the lack of, originality, there is evidence (as we have seen) of the creative use of convention and the awareness of audience expectation. Popular romances by definition are not written for audiences looking for verbal dexterity, artistic experimentation and literary innovation. The audience that supports the work of Chaucer and the *Gawain*-poet is always a minority in any culture. But there is plenty of evidence that medieval audiences were used to handling symbolic complexity and allusive

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[45] See Nancy Mason Bradbury, *Writing Aloud* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), p. 9: 'Each text is in a sense in its own category; each new text makes the old definition obsolete.'

depth,[46] and the concerns of the audiences of these romances are not trivial, nor are they narrowly localized. And of course, for the modern reader, verbal complexity can be an initial barrier as can coterie humour. The open appeal of the popular romance is that of a literature which is a window onto another culture, but also a mirror in which we see our own.

One of the problems with aligning the experience of reading ME popular romance with that of encountering its modern equivalents is the tendency to take the modern generic self-identification of 'romance' at its face value. But few, if any, ME romances resemble Mills & Boon (they are not so concentrated on female experience and desire to start with). The modern equivalent is to be found in deliberately non-mimetic novels, in fantasy and Science Fiction and in the developing genre of political romance. Adam Roberts's defence of the 'escapist' quality of modern fantasy can be applied to these earlier texts:

> Escapism isn't a very good word, actually, for the positive psychological qualities its defenders want to defend; it's less a question of breaking one's bars and running away (running *whither*, we might ask?); and more of keeping alive the facility for imaginative *play* … What's wrong with Art that insists too severely on pressing people's faces against the miseries of actual existence is not that we shouldn't have to confront Darfur or Iraq, poverty or oppression; it's that such art rarely gives us the imaginative wriggle room to think of how things might be improved, or challenged … Imaginative wriggle room, on the other hand, is something SF-Fantasy is very good at.[47]

While the world of the romances may be a heightened reality, it is one recognizably familiar to the original audience, but in the 'wriggle room' of constructive escapism, we can see a culture testing its boundaries and probing new possibilities. These romances offer entry into a world where justice triumphs over law, tyranny is vanquished, losses are restored. It is a world in which, by contrast with its contemporary experience, the young, the female, the loyal, triumph over the powerful and corrupt. This is not mere escapism, it is powerful imagination.

With popular romances we are not dealing with the more culture-specific issues that occupy courtly writers: chivalry, *courtoisie* and passionate love. These texts deal with the bases of human existence in society: getting born, surviving childhood, negotiating the family, finding a mate, facing threats, achieving justice and accepting mortality. And they demonstrate the enduring need to find meaning and even comedy in the narratives of human life.

The problem is not that there is so little to say about anonymous, conven-

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46 See for example Roy Liuzza's argument that the *Meditationes vitae Christi* provides a model for the realistic detail in *Havelok* in 'Representation and Readership', pp. 514–17.
47 Adam Roberts, '*The Name of the Wind* by Patrick Rothfuss and *The Children of Húrin* by J. R. R. Tolkien', 16 July 2007. http://www.strangehorizons.com/. Accessed 23 May 2008.

tional works, but there is so much. The old complaint that such narratives do not seem important, intellectual or weighty enough to provide material for academic discourse has been invalidated by at least the last half century of editorial and critical work. But these works do present challenges to our skills as readers. 'This duality of historicity and timelessness'[48] requires us to work to fill the gaps in our cultural understanding in order to read works that are the expression of a distant culture not an individual voice, and at the same time to recognize the perennial significance of their concerns and more honestly the success of their appeal as entertainment. If we look around, the stories are still with us, sometimes in simpler and cruder form than those which appealed to medieval audiences.

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[48] Corinne Saunders, ed., *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 539.