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Genre and Classification

RALUCA L. RADULESCU

An attractive and, in some cases, defining feature of some medieval popular romances is (the intrusion of) the outrageous and the spectacular or unexpected, which unsettles the order of chivalric adventures encountered in these texts. The shocking twists and turns of popular romance have continued to appeal to medieval and modern audiences alike, and have prompted, at least in part, the revival of critical interest in these texts in recent decades. It is the anonymous romance authors and audiences that we should credit with the enduring appeal of texts that continue to ‘unsettle our assumptions about, among other things, gender and sexuality, race, religion, political formations, social class, ethics, morality and aesthetic distinctions’.¹ Although not all popular romances include spectacular events or characters, or even purely chivalric exploits, the presence of such elements has produced strong responses of either dismissal or, more recently, positive appraisal from critics. As is now generally agreed, authors and audiences contributed to the creation of meaning in medieval texts and, unsurprisingly, the wide range of reactions to narrative elements in popular romances corresponds to the sheer variety of topics and taboos they challenge.² Read in this context, the adjective ‘popular’, when attached to particular romances, can be seen to indicate the spread of concerns tackled by these texts, and the wide application of their function: to entertain, to educate, to provoke repulsion and so on.³ Traditionally, however, critics have used the term ‘popular’ in contrast to ‘elite’ to draw a negative comparison between the sophisticated content

¹ Nicola McDonald, ‘A Polemical Introduction’, in *Pulp Fictions*, pp. 1–21 (p. 17).

² It is generally agreed that popular romances were aimed at, and appealed to, a non-courtly audience, given their less sophisticated content and form. The question of what audience the authors of these popular romances had in mind remains open to debate. See, for example, Felicity Riddy’s recent assessment of the middle-class, bourgeois, outlook in evidence in the Lincoln Thornton manuscript version of *Le Bone Florence of Rome*: ‘Temporary Virginity and the Everyday Body: *Le Bone Florence of Rome* and Bourgeois Self-making’, in *Pulp Fictions*, pp. 197–216. The Lincoln Thornton MS is Lincoln Cathedral MS 91, attributed to Robert Thornton, a fifteenth-century middling member of the gentry with a collector’s tastes. See *The Thornton Manuscript (Lincoln Cathedral MS 91)*, intro. D. S. Brewer and A. E. B. Owen (London: Scholar Press, 1978), pp. vii–xvi.

³ For a definition of the term ‘popular’ when applied to medieval romance, see the Editors’ Introduction to this volume, pp. 5–7.

and form of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and prose romances and the apparently low aesthetic value of the metrical romances that form the bulk of popular romances.⁴ Distinctions have, therefore, been based on the low aesthetic of the popular romances, their presumed non-courtly audiences, their non-cyclic nature (as opposed to the great cycles of Arthurian or Charlemagne romances), highly formulaic structure, and ‘popular’ metre (couplet or tail-rhyme). This chapter contains a reassessment both of critical debates over generic features of medieval romance in general and of those particular elements that could be considered to define the core group of what critics have called ‘popular romances’ (identified as such by contrast to the cyclic romances, of Arthur and Charlemagne, for example, or those belonging to the alliterative tradition; see further below). The discussion will start with a brief review of the vexed definition of romance genre, to be followed by brief analyses of some representative examples that fall under the label of popular romance, and the equally contested and ever-reinterpreted functional sub-categories developed by various critics.

Critical work on Middle English literary works has established that medieval audiences of any social background were highly sensitive to the demands of certain genres, and were able to recognize texts for what they were. As Helen Cooper put it, ‘[r]omances could provide a secular forum analogous to academic debate. Their audiences expected to respond actively to them, and the writers encouraged such a response.’⁵ By implication, the assumptions made in relation to the audiences for popular romance imply an awareness of certain demands on the genre, coupled with a demand from such audiences for particular types of topics and texts. Non-courtly audiences had at least some idea of what sophisticated literary forms were; the emulation of courtly values is a feature of gentry culture, the primary audience for popular romances, whose overall aim appears to be didactic or instructional as much as entertaining. Medieval audiences who could afford books or the exchange of books gave precedence to religious values and cultivated the exemplary element in material used for the instruction of their offspring. Just as the Bible offered examples of famous political and religious figures in the Old Testament – and the positive value of those examples to any social class in medieval society is uncontested – so the vulgarized versions of stories both religious and historical in outlook contained in Middle English popular romances (as opposed to more sophisticated models in Anglo-Norman or ‘high’ forms in Middle English) can be seen as appealing to a wide audience, irrespective of their predominantly upper-class characters.

When analysing the context for the composition and writing of the texts contained in one of the most well-known surviving collections containing romances, the Vernon MS (Oxford, Bodleian Library, English Poet 1.a.), A.

⁴ For a more detailed investigation, see Cory Rushton’s chapter in this volume, ‘Modern and Academic Reception of the Popular Romance’, pp. 165–79.

⁵ Cooper, *English Romance in Time*, p. 13.

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S. G. Edwards rightly points out that '[a]ny discussion of romances in the Vernon manuscript must, at the outset, acknowledge that the elasticity of the term "romance" in Middle English is so great as to rob it of much useful definitional capacity'.⁶ The vexed question of romance as a medieval literary genre remains open – witness the continuing publication of genre-based discussions of romance including the existence of the present volume/chapter – though no evidence can be gleaned from extant texts and manuscripts as to a precise definition of the genre as understood by medieval authors and audiences, except that 'romance' designated the language in which some narratives were initially written. Critical examination of both lists of romances included in the body of medieval English texts as well as of generic titles given to romances in surviving manuscripts shows that medieval authors and audiences alike favoured a more flexible approach than modern critics would allow for. In his survey of terms associated with narratives that may be classed as romance, Paul Strohm has shown how difficult it is to classify Middle English Troy narratives according to the terms used by the narrators themselves:

Middle English writers lacked any truly neutral terminology for describing narrative genres – *narratioun* emerged only at the end of the period, and the nearly synonymous *process* was never widely popular. As a result, Middle English writers classify their narratives with a number of different terms, reflecting such criteria as the relationship to actual events (*storie*, *fable*), mode of narration (*spelle*, *tale*), language (*romaunce*), literary tradition (*romaunce*, *legend*, *lyf*), proportion of represented action to argument (*geste*, *treatise*), and movement of the fortunes of the protagonist (*tragedie*, *comedie*).⁷

A similar perspective in analysing what romances say about their subject matter and their possible self-definition is given by Maldwyn Mills, who has examined generic titles in two romance miscellanies;⁸ in fact, a close examination of titles has shown that only eight refer to the texts as 'romance' (see Mills's chapter below, pp. 49–57). However, as becomes evident from any analysis of such titles, a broad range of narratives modern critics consider to be under the umbrella of romance were seen by medieval authors and scribes as 'lives', 'histories', 'treatises' or 'jests', not to mention the more

⁶ A. S. G. Edwards, 'The Contexts of the Vernon Romances', in *Studies in the Vernon Manuscript*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), pp. 159–70 (p. 159).

⁷ Paul Strohm, 'Storie, Spelle, Geste, Romaunce, Tragedie: Generic Distinctions in the Middle English Troy Narratives', *Speculum* 46:2 (1971), 348–59 (p. 348). See, also, his 'The Origins and Meaning of Middle English *Romaunce*', *Genre* 10 (1977), 1–28, and 'Middle English Narrative Genres', *Genre* 13 (1980), 379–88; John Finlayson, 'Definitions of Middle English Romance', *Chaucer Review* 15 (1980), 43–62, 168–81 and Robert B. Burlin, 'Middle English Romance: The Structure of Genre', *Chaucer Review* 30 (1995), 1–14.

⁸ Maldwyn Mills, 'Generic Titles in Bodleian Library MS Douce 261 and British Library MS Egerton 3132A', in *Matter of Identity*, pp. 125–38.

controversial labels of 'legend' and 'chronicle'. Even more confusing is the fact that the same romance would, in one instance, be called a 'romance', and in another a 'life'; in the two extant copies of *Sir Gowther* we see the same hero as a saint and a secular hero, respectively.⁹ The multiple facets of a popular romance become even more evident when studied in its manuscript context; as Murray Evans has shown, romances borrow features from and are affected by the characteristics of texts they are contiguous to in composite manuscripts.¹⁰ This indicates not only the flexibility of the genre, but also the medieval audiences' expectations that generic boundaries could be adapted to suit the fabric of the miscellany in which they were included.

Six well-known lists of romances (or, to be more precise, romance heroes) have been scrutinized by critics over the decades in an effort to define the romance genre. Among them, the lists contained in *Richard Coeur de Lion* and *The Laud Troy Book* are most often cited, though Chaucer's parodic list of heroes in his 'Tale of Sir Thopas', and the negative connotations associated with romance in religious texts like *Cursor Mundi* and William of Nassington's translation of *Speculum Vitae*, are equally relevant and now as well known.¹¹ The difficulty in assessing the contents of these lists lies in discerning what portion constituted material grouped together on the basis of the popularity of its subject matter (heroes of the nation), whether romance was only associated with the language in which it was originally written (rather than a fixed or flexible set of generic features) and how critics might separate the popular from the courtly in these lists, since no evident hierarchy is imposed in any of them. A first example is the list in *Cursor Mundi*, a vast history of Creation in some 30,000 lines, which incorporates biblical stories and Christian legends, and famously deplores medieval audiences' desire to listen to stories focusing on great romance heroes rather than on morally edifying ones. Interestingly, the order of the list in this text appears to be in tune with modern critical opinion about the division of medieval romance into three matters: of Rome, of Britain, and of France, a classification based on the only available medieval classification of romances, that proposed by the medieval writer Jean Bodel, who referred to three 'matières', 'de France, de Bretagne, et de Rome la grant':¹²

⁹ In London, British Library, MS Royal 17.B.43, fol. 131v: 'Explicit vita Sancti' and Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates' 19.3.1, respectively. See the editions in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Maldwyn Mills (London: Dent, 1973), and *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995).

¹⁰ Murray Evans, *Rereading Middle English Romance: Manuscript Layout, Decoration, and the Rhetoric of Composite Structure* (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995); see also Mills's discussion in the chapter on manuscripts in this volume, pp. 49–57.

¹¹ Among the most recent, see Yin Liu, 'Middle English Romance as Prototype Genre', *Chaucer Review* 40 (2006), 335–53. See also John J. Thompson, 'The *Cursor Mundi*, the "Inglis tong", and "Romance"', in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), pp. 99–120.

¹² Jean Bodel, *La Chanson des Saisnes*, ed. A. Brasseur, 2 vols (Geneva: Droz, 1989), lines 6–7. For the first use of Bodel's 'matters', see W. H. Schofield, *English Literature from the Norman*

English romances' tendency to favour slightly different themes than their French counterparts. An identical focus, albeit devoid of the apparent order of the three 'matters', is evident in the other lists, and particularly in those contained in romances, like the two lists in *Richard Coeur de Lion*. In such texts it appears that the more popular heroes are given priority and the mix between the three 'matters' makes it difficult to ascertain if any hierarchy is intended. However, as Brewer has pointed out, one of the lists in *Richard* does establish the precedence of English over French heroes among the interests of the audience:

In Frensche bookys this rym is wrought
Lewede men ne knowe it nouȝt
Lewede men cune Ffrench non
Among an hondryd vanethis on.
Neuertheles, with glad chere
Ffele of hem that wolde here
Noble iestes, j. undyrstonde
Off douȝty knyȝtes off Yngelonde...¹⁶

Lists are a feature of traditional literature, for the very reason that they help bring 'shape and a point' to the narrative,¹⁷ though not enough survive to help modern critics to define the exact generic features that shaped popular romance for its initial audiences. In addition, one of the reasons why it remains hard to classify romances, whether into 'matters', according to the cycles they form or can be grouped into (cyclic and non-cyclic), or by meter, is that their French (and other language) models come from different genres, and influences on the resulting product may be given precedence according to the critic's preference for one or another. A good example is the Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*, whose antecedents in Anglo-Norman include, as its modern editor has pointed out, 'the most heterogeneous works, such as legends, tales in prose and metrical romances'.¹⁸ A further gap is perceived between the high courtly style of the Anglo-Norman models and the low tone and poor artistic qualities displayed by their Middle English counterparts (a view questioned by Rosalind Field in her chapter above, pp. 9–30). The difficulty is compounded by the wide spectrum of features that can be referred to in any given example. In the popular *The Erl of Toulous* we are told 'the romaunse tellyth soo' (line 1197), but just a few lines later the same narrative is identified both as a 'geste' and a Breton lay: 'Yn Rome thys geste

Classical to Contemporary, ed. Corinne Saunders (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 45–64 (p. 50).

¹⁶ Lines 21–7 in *Der mittelenglische Versroman über Richard Lowenherz*, ed. K. Brunner (Vienna and Leipzig, 1913), pp. 81–2 (cited in Brewer, 'Popular English Metrical Romances', p. 51).

¹⁷ Brewer, 'Popular English Metrical Romances', p. 51.

¹⁸ See Mehl, *Middle English Romances*, p. 32. See the discussion in the introduction to *Amis and Amiloun*, ed. MacEdward Leach, EETS OS 203 (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), Intro., p. xviii ff.

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ys cronyculyd, ywys; / A lay of Bretayne callyd hyt ys' (line 1214–15).¹⁹ Confusingly, the story is 'cronyculyd', a feature that indicates the desire to portray the story as 'history'. The discrepancy between these generic titles is evident in many romances – in the stanzaic *Guy of Warwick* in the Auchinleck MS (National Library of Scotland Advocates' MS 19.2.1), the narrative is said to be a romance right from the start: 'God graunt hem heuen-blis to mede / þat herken to mi romaunce rede / Al of a gentil kniȝt' (lines 1–3). The author of *Havelok* does not refer to the genre of the text she is writing, but only informs the reader in the middle of his text of the importance of performing it, thus giving a context for our understanding of romance as general entertainment: 'Romanz-reding on þe bok. / Þer mouhte men here þe gestes singe' (lines 2328–9).²⁰ *Sir Gowther* identifies itself as a Breton lay but ends, in one version, by calling its protagonist St Guthlac ('Seynt Gotlake', line 726 in the Royal manuscript version; see above, note 9). The phrase 'in romaunce as we rede' functions, in many of these texts, as a pointer to authority as well as a formula signalling to the audience the parameters within which the action will take place. Romance is 'a highly formulaic and stylised genre', characterized by 'formalised and distinctive style' and a very self-conscious approach to its subject matter; according to Carol Fewster, the 'formulaic quality' of the line just mentioned has 'a double role – metrical, and as a comment on poetic creation'.²¹ These examples and many more not mentioned here attest to a flexible approach to genre by medieval authors, and a similarly variable medieval response to their content by medieval audiences. Sometimes the term can also refer to the whole as much as a small part of the text, as in the romance of *Kyng Alisaunder* (line 663 reads: 'þis nis nouȝt ramaunce of skof', line 1916: 'Here begynneþ þe romaunce best', line 6159: 'Now ariseþ a gode romaunce').²²

As the question of how romances/popular romances refer to themselves cannot be easily answered, critics have turned to comparisons between models and translations, as well as features such as metre, performance and theme. Unfavourable comparisons between models and translations shaped most critical debates in the first part of the twentieth century, to the extent

¹⁹ Cited from *Of Love and Chivalry: An Anthology of Middle English Romance*, ed. Jennifer Fellows (London: Dent, 1993), by line number. In *Amis and Amiloun*, reference is made to the authority of the genre from the start: 'in romaunce as we reede' (line 27). Fellows notes that 'Middle English romances often contain such appeals to authority; the device goes back to late classical antiquity and, more directly, links the techniques of Middle English romance with those of early English hagiography' (n. to line 27, p. 289).

²⁰ *Havelok*, ed. G. V. Smithers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 64.

²¹ Carol Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), pp. ix and 7. In *Athelston* the formula appears at lines 383, 569, 623, 779; see *Athelston: A Middle English Romance*, ed. A. McI. Trounce, EETS OS 224 (London: Oxford University Press, 1951, reprinted 1957, 1987, 2002). Formulae are discussed by Susan Wittig in *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English Romances* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1978).

²² Mehl, *Middle English Romances*, p. 15. See *Kyng Alisaunder*, ed. G. V. Smithers, EETS OS 227 (London: Oxford University Press, 1952).

that the work of popular romance authors was merely classed as ‘debased’, or ‘hack work’, hence not worthy of academic study.²³ A further complication, when one considers the multiple narrative threads running in Middle English romances, is that the popular romances (or, as critics have called them, non-cyclic, or metrical) lend themselves to categorization by either theme, as proposed by Laura Hibbard (Loomis) – of Trial and Faith, Legendary English Heroes, and Love and Adventure – or by a combination of length, theme and format, as proposed by Dieter Mehl – long and short, homiletic and novels in verse (though he separates the ‘homiletic romances’ from the rest irrespective of their length), to take just two influential examples.²⁴ Hibbard’s categories correspond to more recent labels used by critics: for Trial and Faith – penitential, pious, or hagiographical romance; for Legendary English Heroes – the romance of English local and national heroes like Havelok, Guy, Bevis and Richard; for Love and Adventure – the rest of the romances that feature love relationships as a primary interest. It soon becomes apparent that both Hibbard’s and Mehl’s categories are insufficient, as family as well as social concerns feature in each group, and themes like exile or incest, though prevalent in many romances, are not found in all texts. There are popular romances that straddle two (or more) genres, for example the ‘secular legend’ type,²⁵ just as romances whose protagonists are outlaws like Gamelyn do not really fit in with either the idea of knightly adventures or legendary heroes or, according to some critics, even with the notion of romance genre itself.²⁶ The Breton lay sometimes poses problems as it is usually classed and discussed together with popular romances, but its brief format and occasional lack of typical chivalric exploits does not always allow an easy fit into the genre; its magical/supernatural elements and the appearance of the unexpected do, however, justify its inclusion.²⁷ Recent editors of popular romances have brought in new labels and groupings, which, though functional, lead to further

²³ For an overview of attitudes, and their origins, see McDonald, ‘Polemical Introduction’, *passim*, and Rushton, below, pp. 165–79.

²⁴ Laura A. Hibbard (Loomis), *Medieval Romance in England: A Study of the Sources and Analogues of the Non-Cyclic Metrical Romances* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1924); Mehl, *Middle English Romances*. Maldwyn Mills proposes to rename Hibbard’s categories ‘chivalrous’ (for love), ‘heroic’ (for legendary heroes), and ‘edifying’ (for trial and faith) (*Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Mills, p. vii). However some romances still cross these boundaries, as will be shown in this chapter.

²⁵ See Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Susan Crane Dannenbaum, ‘Guy of Warwick and the Question of Exemplary Romance’, *Genre* 17 (1984), 351–74 and a review of these attitudes in Rhiannon Purdie, ‘Generic Identity and the Origins of *Sir Isumbras*’, in *Matter of Identity*, pp. 113–24.

²⁶ For an analysis of the problems posed by these, see Field’s chapter in this volume, pp. 9–30. See also T. A. Shippey, ‘*The Tale of Gamelyn*: Class Warfare and the Embarrassments of Genre’, in *Spirit*, pp. 78–96.

²⁷ Elizabeth Archibald, ‘The Breton Lay in Middle English: Genre, Transmission and the Franklin’s Tale’, in *Insular Romance*, pp. 55–70. The Middle English Breton lays are considered to be *Sir Orfeo*, *Lai le Freine*, *Sir Degaré*, *Emaré*, *Sir Launfal*, *Sir Gowther*, *The Erl of Toulous*, *Sir Cleges*, Chaucer’s ‘The Franklin’s Tale’ and sometimes even his ‘Wife of Bath’s Tale’. For a recent edition, see *Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Laskaya and Salisbury.

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general confusion about the nature and classification of the popular romance genre. In one such anthology *Floris and Blanche flour* appears side-by-side with *Sir Degrevant*, *The Squire of Low Degree*, *The Tournament of Tottenham* and *The Feast at Tottenham*; although the first three share an interest in love that conquers all barriers (mostly of social class in these cases), the last ones are actually widely considered as parodies of romance, hence sit uneasily alongside the others.²⁸

A question that needs answering, therefore, is how the ‘elasticity’ of the romance genre more generally extends to popular romance, and what particular elements define the latter. An influential, though debatable, definition provides a functional understanding of the romance genre as ‘a narrative about knightly prowess and adventure, in verse or in prose, intended primarily for the entertainment of a listening audience’;²⁹ as a starting point of sorts, such a definition helps to sharpen our overall awareness of the characteristics that may shape popular forms. Four main elements are taken into account in this definition: movement, that is, ‘adventure’; social class, ‘kighthood’; form, ‘verse or prose’; and delivery, ‘listening audience’, referring to performance. An expectation shared by medieval and modern audiences alike is that, broadly speaking, medieval romance deals with male aristocratic heroes who engage in some extraordinary exploits, usually in the service of ladies. A process of maturation is involved in most texts, allowing for the development of the (sometimes unknown or inexperienced) young knight into a recognized hero.

Popular romances, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, include unexpected elements, usually related to the manner in which the traditional trajectory of the story is handled, and the variety of perspectives the reader/listener is presented with. Popular romances share with their courtly, sophisticated counterparts preoccupations with, for example, penance and salvation, the breaking up of relationships or families, and much more. However, a distinct feature of popular romances appears to be the deliberate difference or deviation from the norm; for instance, at times plots have relatively little or nothing to do with male protagonists progressing through to maturation or through actual knightly exploits, but rather focus on disempowered heroines, who engineer their own careers or life paths. To take one example, the Middle English version of the Breton *Lai le Freine* (usually classified as popular romance) hardly qualifies as a romance, given that its protagonist is a rather passive female heroine, and the plot includes hardly any chivalric adventures or magic to justify the romance label. Moreover, contrary to the evidence

²⁸ The mini-anthology referred to here is titled *Sentimental and Humorous Romances*, ed. Erik Kooper (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006). On the difficulty with studying parody in medieval romance, see Wim Tigges, ‘Romance and Parody’, in *Companion to Middle English Romance*, ed. H. Aertsen and Alasdair A. MacDonald (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1990), pp. 129–51. Tigges discusses, among others, *Sir Cleges*, *The Squire of Low Degree* and Chaucer’s ‘Sir Thopas’.

²⁹ *Manual*, p. 11.

presented in the vast body of romances (and popular romances), the female heroine Freine lives in concubinage with Gouron, thus having 'no moral or legal claim over him', but she does not complain.³⁰

If we continue to allow such flexible boundaries for popular romance, what generic elements may be said to define it and how can they be identified? Three main characteristics of the popular romance genre will be discussed in what follows: the mixed features which seem to (almost always) bring into focus social and family concerns into any romance; the widespread appeal of the presence of independently-minded female heroines in Middle English popular romance; and the self-consciousness of the narratives, whether expressed at the level of criticism against courtly or chivalric values or cultural taboos.

Pious heroes and social concerns: popular romance and authority

As a reflection of medieval audiences' concerns with spiritual matters and with the afterlife, chivalric romances also developed an awareness of, and sometimes even a narrow focus on, religion. Unlike the related genre of saints' lives or legends, popular romances use the features they borrow from their more pious counterparts in order to appeal to the audience to become more involved in the story. The strong homiletic (and hagiographic) strain has been a feature recognized as defining the Middle English romances by contrast with their French antecedents. Mehl points out that 'the narrative technique of the romances may help with defining the genre' and that Middle English metrical (popular) romances 'are characterized by an abundant wealth of plot and incident', 'a more concise mode of narration, a much sparser use of description and less reflection' by comparison with French models.³¹

In particular, the popular romances shaped as saints' lives, or those said to be a 'vita' or secular legend (*Havelok* and *Gowther* are in this category, even if *Havelok* is not a pious romance), the audience is moved to ponder on the hero's progress through various stages. In some of the pious texts, the audience is called to pray for the hero, as if 'praying for the hero implies that his fate is still open and can be influenced by intercession. In this way the dramatic tension is heightened and again the plot assumes a new importance.'³² To this extent the romance involves the reader more than a saint's legend would (the latter functions by example, and requires meditation and imitation rather than active involvement), and thus ensures a more immediate response than the merely didactic, pious goal of saints' legends or lives. It is not without importance that texts like *Havelok* and *King Horn*, usually clas-

³⁰ Elizabeth Archibald, 'Lai le Freine: The Female Foundling and the Problem of Romance Genre', in *Spirit*, pp. 39–55 (p. 52).

³¹ Mehl, *Middle English Romances*, pp. 18–19, 22.

³² Mehl, *Middle English Romances*, p. 27.

sified as popular romances concerned with a local hero, both feature main characters whose recognized primary concern is social and political order; to some extent it can be said that the coalescence of social and religious roles in the person of the leader or ruler of nations is of great importance to the author and audiences of such texts. Despite the fact that Gowther is usually associated with the penitential pattern familiar to readers in other pious romances (as he is indeed seen as a persecutor of the Church, who needs to do penance to expiate his sins), he is ultimately called to become a ruler in his own right, and to put right the wrongs he has done in society. Similarly, the eponymous hero of *Robert of Sicily* learns as much about his own need to reform inwardly as about becoming a good ruler through the various tests to which he is subjected.

These popular romances also address anxieties over heredity and the ruling of the country, which are, in typical romance fashion, satisfactorily resolved for all concerned. Political concerns with inheritance and succession are unavoidable in these popular romances, and it is not surprising to find that the Middle English *Havelok* is particularly shaped as a leader of the masses, while Gowther's restitution to humanity is accompanied not only by typical romance gains – a suitable heiress and an empire – but also by his restoration of political order in his home lands.³³ Alcuin Blamires has recently pointed out that *Sir Gowther* has largely suffered neglect in terms of its socio-political implications, and its reflection of medieval anxieties over male succession, to the extent that only its penitential vein, and the accompanying embodiment of medieval ideas of the 'wild man', have been debated and explored.³⁴ However, penance and social order together clearly signal the main focus of Middle English popular romance – dealing with authority, implying challenges to definitions of humanity (madness and 'wild'/devilish behaviour), heredity (whose features does the heir inherit?) and authority (paternal, religious, political). To some extent, a popular romance like *Sir Gowther* could be said, as Neil Cartlidge has proposed, to tackle even the issue of written authority in the form of the written law – whether referring to rape, slander³⁵ or, I would like to suggest, the applicability of all types of law (biological, religious, moral, political) to heirs of the highest rank, of royal blood.³⁶

³³ For an examination of genealogical concerns in *Havelok* and other insular romances, see my 'Genealogy in Insular Romance', in *Broken Lines: Genealogical Literature in Medieval Britain and France*, ed. Raluca L. Radulescu and Edward Donald Kennedy (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), pp. 7–25.

³⁴ See 'The Twin Demons of Aristocratic Society in *Sir Gowther*', in *Pulp Fictions*, pp. 45–62. For an examination of *Sir Gowther* as the wild man, see Joanne A. Charbonneau, 'From Devil to Saint: Transformations in *Sir Gowther*', in *Matter of Identity*, pp. 21–8.

³⁵ Neil Cartlidge, "'Thereof seyus clerkus': Slander, Rape and *Sir Gowther*", in *Cultural Encounters*, pp. 135–47.

³⁶ This forms the topic of my unpublished work in progress on the political appeal of popular romances like *Sir Gowther* and *Isumbras* to fifteenth-century audiences – henceforth referred to as 'Spiritual Journeys and Political Realities in the Pious Romances'.

Penitential romances thus appear as more complex than some critics might see them as loci of debate over all-encompassing issues of society and law, and in the private sphere (relationships between husband and wife, for example). A broadening of the definition of such texts is required in order to understand what features might constitute the backbone of popular romance, and whether narrow categories carry enough weight to be considered functional. An emerging feature in all penitential romances is the concern with social reintegration, healing and peaceful resolution, at the end of a long sequence of highly disturbing events. While such features might be said to inform most romances, the preponderance of unexpected, shocking developments can safely be assigned to the popular ones. *Sir Isumbras*, another popular romance usually classed as penitential, follows the Job-like journey of the main hero from his loss of high position in society, including his possessions and close relatives (wife and sons), only to regain everything at the end of a long and painful process of learning about (and climbing) the social ladder. Isumbras suffers a 'civil death', which leads him to become a pilgrim, then a smith; as Elizabeth Fowler put it, '[h]e forges armour as if he were reconstituting the social person of the knight he once was: he rebuilds his social body as he builds his armour.'³⁷ In view of this assessment, as well as the powerful combination of themes (Saracen fighting, friendship with and protection offered by symbolic animals, female agency in regaining power, to name but a few), *Sir Isumbras* cannot be considered just a penitential romance, but instead emerges as a popular romance which typically challenges the boundaries inherited from its model, the legend of St Eustace, and its other romance counterparts, by combining elements typical of family romance and crusading romance with the main character's penitential progress.³⁸

The problematic nature of hagiographic romance is nowhere more evident, perhaps, than in *Amis and Amiloun*, usually considered as a romance variation of the stories about pairs of saints or apostles like Peter and Paul, Simon and Jude, Philip and Bartholomew, and many others.³⁹ The identical, though unrelated, heroes in this romance prefer their friendship to any other relationship, whether heterosexual (Amis weds Belisant, who had seduced him; Amiloun also weds a lady, who later abandons him on account of his leprosy) or homosexual (Amis rejects the erotically-charged proposal of friendship the steward offers him). In the midst of events which involve a great deal of

³⁷ Elizabeth Fowler, 'The Romance Hypothetical: Lordship and the Saracens in *Sir Isumbras*', in *Spirit*, pp. 97–121 (p. 102).

³⁸ For an investigation of the origins of *Sir Isumbras*, see Purdie, 'Generic Identity', references above, n. 25. A political interpretation of this romance is proposed in my 'Spiritual Journeys and Political Realities'; see reference above at n. 35.

³⁹ For an investigation of generic concerns in this romance, see Ojars Kratins, 'The Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*: Chivalric Romance or Secular Hagiography', *Publications of the Modern Languages Association* 81 (1966), 347–54. Kratins emphasizes the importance of the Christian dimension in the romance, by pointing out, among other things, the divine intervention in testing by leprosy with the test of 'trouthe', rather than seeing it as punishment (p. 350) and leprosy as a blessing rather than curse.

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aggression (whether physical, verbal or emotional), including punishment for dishonesty with leprosy and killing one's children to save a friend (complete with the apparent divine miraculous revival of Amis's children), the main heroes' abandonment of earthly relationships and possessions, followed by their death and burial in the same grave, points the reader into the direction of saints' lives as well as a celebration of same-sex love, beyond all constraints – social, political or religious. In fact this popular romance seems to condone the choices its heroes make, to the point of subverting social order, which would favour concern over succession and the union of the family, not to mention models for children. In an original reinterpretation of this romance, Sheila Delany suggests that the story contains visible parallels between the relationship between Amis and Amiloun and the more famous and much reviled liaison between Edward II and his favourite, Piers Gaveston.⁴⁰ Interestingly, the Middle English version of this romance is contained in the Auchinleck MS, a collection regarded by critics alternatively as a 'handbook for the nation', or an instructional manual for the middling gentry.⁴¹ Despite the presence of romance motifs (chivalric heroes, the notion of 'trouthe' in the form of pledged friendship, union between knights and ladies, challenges by duel, miraculous healing and revival), this popular romance actually subverts typical expectations by offering little in the way of chivalric adventures as such, or even educational material relating to spiritual, family or political matters, or indeed social order.

These representative examples of penitential romance show, on the one hand, that the Middle English versions fully achieve their popular potential/appeal by combining elements belonging to their original model (hagiographic, pious) with interests that are recognizably not sophisticated or courtly, and rather scandalous in one way or another, including inhuman social behaviour and taboo desires.

Feisty females

By contrast to French and Anglo-Norman romances, the Middle English versions are concerned with the effects of tension or aggression in the couple or in parent-child relationships, and rarely if ever with adultery, a dominant theme in the original stories.⁴² Critics agree that Middle English popular romances in particular favour family values confirmed by authority – whether in the form of the customs of lay society, the Church or the law. The interven-

⁴⁰ Sheila Delany, 'A, A and B: Coding Same-Sex Union in *Amis and Amiloun*', in *Pulp Fictions*, pp. 63–81.

⁴¹ See Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature and National Identity, 1290–1340* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 112 and Phillipa Hardman in this volume, p. 157.

⁴² For a detailed analysis of gender roles, see the chapter on 'Gender and Identity' in this volume, pp. 96–110.

tion of divine providence is common in romances, so that the values of the couple can triumph; moreover, genuinely illegal births are a rarity in these texts. The nature of the union between the partners is very important, as it points to anxieties over social climbing, the debate about nobility by birth or virtue, and the desirability of having female heiresses choose their partner without outside intervention or constraint.⁴³ The heiresses of popular romance manifest independence and yield unexpected levels of power, despite frequent obstacles in their path. In particular, the heroines of the shorter romances or Breton lays (Emaré, the Empress Beulybon in *The Erl of Toulous*, Freine, as well as those in the longer romances like Belisant in *Amis and Amiloun*, Rimenhild in *King Horn*, Fere in *Ipomadon*, and the enterprising and strong-willed Melidor in *Sir Degrevant*) all exercise their independence in forging a path for themselves and their chosen partner, taking risks that sometimes involve near-death experiences. In some cases at least the strength of character of these heroines reminds the reader of the model of patient suffering typical of more pious heroines like Constance and Griselda (encountered in Chaucer's 'The Man of Law's Tale' and 'The Clerk's Tale', respectively), though it can be argued that the feisty heroines of popular romance exhibit more resourcefulness than their almost silent, compliant counterparts. Even the Princess in *The King of Tars* can be seen as an active agent, though a suffering one, who brings social unity and ultimately Christian redemption to both the Sultan's people and her own; as Jane Gilbert has shown, in the midst of the disaster brought about by the birth of a lump of flesh rather than a child and heir, the Princess exhibits moral strength to the point that 'she sees through her grief to seize the opportunity for ideological confrontation, and in her emotional muscularity she exemplifies the subordination of sentiment to doctrine which befits a Christian heroine'.⁴⁴

The initiative taken by these women is typically related to their ancillary function in the romances, as they help the hero succeed in regaining his position, winning fame and the rule of a country, and reinstating social order. Female agency in achieving these goals should not be underestimated, however; in some romances, like the popular *Sir Isumbras*, the unnamed wife decides to wear armour and fight side-by-side with her husband in the battle against the Saracens. The presence of such acts is indicative, most critics agree, of an identifiable concern with contemporary social issues in late medieval England, when middling gentry women could be found in the position of administrators of lands and defenders of both family honour and property, and anxieties over the lack of male heirs justified the acceptance of lower-born males into gentle society.⁴⁵ In the same way *Le Bone Florence of*

⁴³ See Harriet E. Hudson, 'Construction of Class, Family, and Gender in Some Middle English Popular Romances', in *Class and Gender in Early English Literature*, ed. Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 76–94.

⁴⁴ Jane Gilbert, 'Putting the Pulp into Fiction: The Lump-Child and Its Parents in *The King of Tars*', in *Pulp Fictions*, pp. 102–23 (p. 113).

⁴⁵ Typical examples are found in the correspondence of the Paston family; see also Hudson,

Rome exhibits middle-class preoccupations with shaping female identity in the household (see references at n. 2 above).

Family relationships occupy centre stage in Middle English popular romances, and the pervasiveness of threats to unity, through evil mothers, step-mothers, and incestuous fathers, only adds more dramatic tension to the progress of the protagonist and refocuses attention on the interaction between the private and the public spheres, issues of perennial appeal to medieval audiences.

Self-conscious narrative in the popular romance

Popular romance can also be defined through its testing of the limits of the romance genre itself, by directly confronting prejudices against lower-class values as much as the upper-class, carefully crafted, notions of 'trouthe' and social duty. At times the challenge posed by popular romances relates to the extent to which the text under scrutiny can or should still be considered a romance; to take an example, *Sir Amadace*, typically seen by one modern editor as 'a commercial romance', talks rather unashamedly about financial problems and the implication of winning not only a social position but the material advantages that come with it.⁴⁶ Unlike *Sir Launfal* and *Sir Cleges*, where emphasis is placed on the knights' excessive liberality, but constant attention is paid to their lofty ideals, the chivalric values discussed in *Sir Amadace* are compromised through low ideals, and the traditional romance elements may appear as a cover for a persistent concern with a didactic lesson to be learned: no knight should underestimate the value of money. Despite the atypical emphasis on material values, a romance such as this one does in some ways relate to more complex issues explored in other romances, like recovering or discovering one's identity, social climbing and local violence, for example in *Sir Degaré*, *Libeaus Desconus* and *Sir Degrevant*, and even *Gamelyn*.⁴⁷

Many other romances, such as *The King of Tars*, contain evidently self-conscious, ironic elements, which conduct a deliberate assessment of courtly values and their importance. The King of Tars is forced to send his daughter as a wife to the Sultan, following the defeat of the Christian forces and the Princess's willing act of self-sacrifice. At the Sultan's wedding feast the

'Construction of Class'; Joanne Charbonneau, 'Transgressive Fathers in *Sir Eglamour of Artois* and *Torrent of Portyngale*', in *Discourses on Love, Marriage, and Transgression in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004), pp. 243–65.

⁴⁶ See *Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle, and Sir Amadace*, ed. Edward E. Foster (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), Intro. to *Sir Amadace*.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of generic issues including links with the ballad in *Sir Degrevant*, see W. A. Davenport, 'Sir Degrevant and Composite Romance', in *Insular Romance*, pp. 111–31.

lavish chivalric display cannot disguise the forced wedding.⁴⁸ The double meaning of the description is evident: on the one hand the Sultan's nobility and liberality can be admired, despite his heathen presentation; on the other questions are raised over what makes a noble knight and how heathens and Christians can be separated. In typical fashion, the habits and temperament of the Sultan and his followers (in the Auchinleck MS called 'knights', in the Vernon MS, 'Sarazins') justify their exclusion from the world known to medieval English audiences, Christian and white. It is evident that racial stereotypes in this romance are used, alongside other controversial elements, to confirm anxieties and prejudices about the Other, and justify the sermonizing aspect contained in the Princess's successful conversion of the Sultan. However, the same elements also suggest ambiguous interpretations of what chivalric and courtly values are, and who can display them, and in this way the author invites reflection on the very nature of romance and its purpose.

Last but not least the reflexivity of popular romance may be identified in its openness to other genres. The historical romances (known as either ancestral or as legendary), among which *Sir Bevis of Hampton*, *Guy of Warwick* and *Richard Coeur de Lion* are most prominent, were enthusiastically adopted by medieval audiences. In addition to these, the fascinating, though generically hard to place, *Romance of Thomas of Erceldoune* exhibits a complex mix of features (romance, prophecy and ballad). This text also marks a transitional moment between medieval and early modern prophecy later expressed in ballad form. As Helen Cooper has pointed out, instead of the usual tetrameter couplets or tail-rhyme encountered in popular romances, here we have quatrains typical of the ballad stanza (abab).⁴⁹ The text is not classed as a romance in *Manual* and the nineteenth-century editor of the text, James Murray, chose not to identify which part can be considered romance, which prophecy. More importantly, the medieval copyist of the only complete text of the romance plus prophecies, Robert Thornton, chose not to call his text a romance either but simply 'Thomas of Erceldoune' (Lincoln Thornton MS, fol. 149v), though he did identify other texts in his collection as romances (for example, 'The Romance of Sir Ysambrace' and 'The Romance of Sir Percyvelle of Gales' on fols 109r and 161r, respectively).

Murray identified a strong link between a historical character and the romance-teller; in 1286 a Thomas of Erceldoune is said to have predicted the terrible death of the King of Scotland, Alexander III, and the incident is noted in the *Scotichronicon* by John of Fordun, or more precisely by his continuator Walter Bower (b. 1385, wrote about 1430), who records that Thomas's skills were required by the Earl of March to prophesy about the

⁴⁸ Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre*, p. 12. For a summary of discussions of generic debates over this romance, see Karl Reichl, 'The King of Tars: Language and Textual Transmission', in *Studies in the Vernon Manuscript*, ed. Pearsall, pp. 171–86 (pp. 171–2).

⁴⁹ See Helen Cooper, 'Thomas of Erceldoune: Romance as Prophecy', in *Cultural Encounters*, pp. 171–87 (p. 173). For an edition, see *The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune*, ed. James A. H. Murray, EETS OS 61 (London, 1875), cited parenthetically below.

current political situation.⁵⁰ Similarly, Robert Mannyng of Brunne also seems to indicate widespread knowledge of Erceldoune in his preface to his *English Chronicle*, as did Thomas Grey in his *Scalacronica* of about 1355.⁵¹ Apart from his prophetic talents, Thomas was also credited with the authorship of the popular romance *Sir Tristrem*, itself contained in another mid-fourteenth century collection of romances, the Auchinleck MS.⁵²

The connection between romance-writing and prophecies influences our understanding of the flexible generic boundaries between the two types of texts, and in particular the medieval audiences' interest in the mixed genre. Murray notes that in the tripartite structure of the text attributed to Thomas, the beginning of the romance of Thomas resembles the prophecies which follow it in both style and meter, while in the third section, the ballad that usually follows the prophecies is markedly different, being much more 'interesting and lively' (p. xxvi). At the start of the *Romance of Thomas* we encounter strikingly typical features, such as the appeal to authority ('Gyff it als the storie sayes ...') and the meeting of the protagonist with the fairy queen under a tree, so often referred to in Breton lays, like *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Launfal*. The prologue, only present in the Thornton MS, contains prayers for the 'ynglysche mene' twice (lines 14 and 24) and incorporates the typical minstrel address: 'Lystyns, Lordyngs, bothe grete and smale' (line 1), only to follow with a promise of 'Of doghety dedis þat hase bene done' (line 10) and 'Of felle feghtyngs and batells sere; / And how þat þir knyghtis hase wonne þair schone' (lines 11–12). The prayer for 'Englishmen' reminds us of the 'matter of England' romances, with their link between real historical events and characters of romance, and displays the attention paid to the nature of the story told and its impact on its audience. As Lesley Coote has shown

The *Erseldoune* romance connects king, people and nation with ideas of social class and regional loyalty, under the aegis of political prophecy. As a member of the northern gentry, the answers to Thomas's questions were precisely what interested Thornton himself, and they demonstrate how these potentially conflicting ideas and loyalties formed part of a single political consciousness.⁵³

Such a link is not surprising in the *Romance of Thomas*, even if this text remains on the borders between two genres; as scholars have shown, various romance heroes of the legendary type have counterparts in medieval histories.⁵⁴ Havelok is among the prominent examples, followed closely by Guy,

⁵⁰ Murray, Intro., pp. xiii–xiv.

⁵¹ Murray, Intro., pp. xx, xviii; Cooper, 'Thomas', p. 174.

⁵² Murray, Intro., p. xxi; Cooper, 'Thomas', p. 175.

⁵³ Lesley Coote, *Prophecy and Public Affairs in Later Medieval England* (York: York Medieval Press, 2000), p. 184.

⁵⁴ See the many articles by Rosalind Field on this subject, among them 'Romance as History, History as Romance', in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. M. Mills et al. (Cambridge: D. S.

the ancestral hero adopted by the Warwick earls, and Bevis, the hero adopted by the Arundels. In Cooper's words:

Yet romance and prophecy are not in practice so far adrift from each other. One of the most familiar forms of romance is the ancestral or genealogical variety: the association indeed goes back to before romance was invented as a formal genre at all, to the *Aeneid* as a founding legend of Rome. All the romances deriving from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* have something of that foundational quality about them, not least the legends of Brutus and Arthur. [...] Not all of these romances contain explicit prophecies (although the *Aeneid* offers a model for such a process), but even when they do not, they tell stories set in an imaginary past to justify and explain the present of their writer and readers, just as prophecy sets itself in the past to demonstrate that the present is shaped and authorized by what has gone before. *Ancestral romance and prophecy both invent a past that contains the seeds of the present.* [...] both [romance and prophecy] are located backwards in time in order to look forwards, to the here and now.⁵⁵

The flexibility of the popular romance genre may be said to have been once again tested and proven in the *Romance of Thomas* and the ancestral popular romances, while their appeal in the post-medieval period bears witness to the endurance of the topics they tackle.

Generic boundaries are hard to define when it comes to popular romance; however features such as those mentioned in this chapter do help to identify some of the texts, and shape our understanding of the vitality of the stories they tell us. The chameleonic nature of medieval popular romance, always on the verge of becoming something else, or taking on the resemblance of neighbouring narratives, is the key to the interpretation of a genre that continues to engage modern audiences.

Brewer, 1991), pp. 163–73 and 'The King Over the Water: Exile-and-Return Revisited', in *Cultural Encounters*, pp. 41–53.

⁵⁵ Cooper, 'Thomas', pp. 183–4 (my emphasis).