

REVEALING OTHERNESS:
A COMPARATIVE EXAMINATION OF
FRENCH AND ENGLISH
MEDIÉVAL HAGIOGRAPHICAL ROMANCE

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Summary

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This dissertation is an analysis of three hagiographical romances written in France around the thirteenth century and later adapted into English. The texts are *Ami et Amile*, *Robert le Diable* and *Florence de Rome* and their English counterparts *Amis and Amiloun*, *Sir Gowther* and *Le bone Florence of Rome*. All six texts have been understudied, with the possible exception of *Ami et Amile*. They are linked in many ways, some thematic, some generic. They have all caused confusion and arguments as to what their genre is (Epic? Saint's life? Romance? A combination of two or three genres?) and feature the defining notions of otherness, exile and penance. In spite of appearances, this work shows that the French and English authors prove to have quite different takes on the same stories. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory, the chapters discuss the presence of otherness in the texts, in all its manifestations and offer new readings of the poems as well as possible solutions to the difficult question of genre in the middle ages. The many shapes taken by the other/Other (physical and emotional otherness; hybridity and gender) are exposed and utilised to uncover the meanings and ideological complexities of these multidimensional poems. This approach also reveals that the English texts propose a more conservative reading of common material than did their French originals. It is therefore suggested that the generic tendencies of these medieval texts be correlated with the importance of the Other in the respective redactions of the tales. Reading without consideration of these two factors produces a lopsided comparative view, while reading with both in mind leads to a better appreciation of rewriting and adaptation in the Middle Ages.

Declaration

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text.

67126 words including footnotes, references and appendices, but excluding bibliographies.

A ma mère.

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My thanks go first to my brave, devoted mother who supported me and believed in me for as long as she lived. I think she would be immensely happy to know that I completed this dissertation.

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Introduction

I WHY COMPARATIVE LITERATURE?

It is well known that even despite the absence of the internet and a reliable postal system, people managed to communicate and exchange ideas in the Middle Ages. Poems travelled across Europe and beyond, as well as across the centuries and the norms of literary forms. As Judith Weiss rightly stresses, ‘romances travelled between England and France, becoming everyone’s property; it is only for our convenience that we allocate them firmly to one country rather than another’¹. It is, for example, quite common to read a story in a given European language and learn from a conscientious modern editor that that said story has several analogues². Those analogues may range from close translations to creative adaptations or loosely-inspired renditions. Such links are normally retraced in the introductions of the medieval texts that we read today but they have often been assembled essentially through patient detective work. More often than not, the editor is in fact trying to build a genealogy for a text, resorting to the analysis of dialects or the evolution of a specific folkloric element to reconstruct the chronology that they are proposing; and thanks to their painstaking work, we

¹ Judith Weiss, ‘Ineffectual monarchs: portrayal of regal and imperial power in *Ipomedon*, *Robert le Diable* and *Octavian*’, in *Cultural Encounters in the Romance of Medieval England*, ed. by Corinne Saunders (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), pp.55-68 (p.56).

² See, for example the introduction to Elisabeth Gaucher’s recent bilingual edition of *Robert le Diable: Robert le Diable: Edition bilingue français-ancien français* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006).

can then visualise family trees for the texts we wish to study. Despite all that effort, however, family trees are not really exploited at all. In fact, very few scholars attempt to look at the various versions of the same story over time and/or space³. Instead they examine one text at a time, without ever getting to the stage where they would compare notes on the different versions and draw the larger conclusions that might be suggested by that comparative work.

Having said that, I must now admit that the study of all the different versions of *Robert le Diable*, to name but one of the tales that I will be discussing in the following chapters, is a colossal task that is only likely to be achieved with the cooperation of a wide range of scholars. Such a task would not be feasible in the scope of an analytical (rather than philological) PhD thesis but I see my work as the first step in this direction and I invite other scholars to add their share to a worthwhile project. Literature is a part of society as well as a part of history. I firmly believe that studying the literature of an epoch will teach us something about the people who created and enjoyed this literature. Likewise, it can say something about the place where

³ One notable exception is James Hartman Blessing's unpublished PhD dissertation, *A Comparison of some Middle English Romances with the Old French Antecedents* (Stanford, 1960), in which Blessing attempts to highlight general differences between *William of Palerne*, *Guy of Warwick*, *Floris and Blancheflour*, *Le Freine*, *Yvain and Gawain*, *Otuel*, *Libeaus Desconnus* and *Ipomadon* and the Old French versions of these stories. Two articles worth mentioning are Roger M. Walker's 'From French verse to Spanish prose: *La Chanson de Florence de Rome* and *El Cuento des Enperador Otas de Roma*', *Medium Aevum*, 49 (1980), 230-43 and Anne Thompson Lee, 'Le Bone Florence of Rome: A Middle English Adaptation of a French Romance', in *The Learned and the Lewed, Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, ed. by Larry D. Benson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 343-354.

it was once produced and appreciated. Joining different versions of the same tale is bound to offer us valuable information on the texts' context, in this case France and England in the 13th and 14th centuries. Likewise, it can be helpful to introduce history into a literary discussion in order better to understand a text. I will, on occasion, during the discussion in the following chapters bring historical elements into play in order to highlight certain points in my argument: literature must be used to further our understanding of a remote past and comparative literature, as a form of multidisciplinary, is the best way to further a more comprehensive knowledge of the Middle Ages.

II WHY THIS CORPUS? THE QUESTION OF GENRE

The texts I have chosen to study have all found receptive audiences in several European countries. *Ami et Amile*, *Robert le Diable* and *Florence de Rome* may have earlier roots but all were composed in written form in France at some point in the thirteenth century and adapted into Middle English around a century later: *Amis and Amiloun*, *Sir Gowther* and *Le Bone Florence of Rome* are the result of a *translatio studii*⁴. All these texts generated in turn more or less faithful adaptations or translations. This, of course, can be said of any number of Old French and Middle English texts. Nevertheless, as Marianne Ailes and Phillipa Hardman remind us, 'very few of the hundred-off Old

⁴ Precisely how these specific texts travelled is, unfortunately, a matter of speculation.

French *chansons de geste* were translated into Middle English. The few Middle English translations made were usually preceded by Anglo-Norman texts, and this pre-selection gives useful hints on what interested audiences in England.⁵ Moreover, even if 'the history of English romance has always been seen as predominantly a history of translation', 'many Middle English romances, especially from the second half of the fourteenth century, have no identifiable source and do not assume or imply one.'⁶ In other words, the position of a scholar who wishes to compare French and English medieval literature is not one in which he or she can randomly pick a text in one language and necessarily find a counterpart in the other language. The pool of texts at our disposal is far from infinite and if one wishes, as I did, to study a specific subgroup of poems, the pool shrinks significantly. The quotations I have just used show that working on a comparison of French and English⁷ versions of the same tales cannot be done without paying attention to the question of genre, a question that gives shape to the corpus used in this dissertation. Discussing literary genres is never simple but it is undoubtedly more difficult when it comes to the Middle Ages and agreement on what

⁵ Marianne Ailes and Phillipa Hardman, 'How English are the English Charlemagne Romances?', in *Boundaries in Medieval Romance*, ed. by Neil Cartlidge (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp.43-55 (p.43). Note also that Ailes and Hardman include *Florence de Rome* and *Ami et Amile* under the title of *chanson de geste*, an assumption that will be challenged in this dissertation.

⁶ Rosalind Field, 'Romance' in *The Oxford History of Literary Translation, Volume 1. To 1550* ed. by Roger Ellis (Oxford: OUP, 2008), (pp.296 and 321)

⁷ Here and elsewhere, the terms 'French' and 'English' are used as portmanteau words or shorthand to refer to the set of works studied here.

medieval poets meant when they used words such as 'romance' or 'chanson' has yet to be reached⁸. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the meaning of the word 'romance' changed over time and has come to be used differently in French and English studies even if the basis for a definition is the same (i.e. a romance is a narrative in the vernacular and in French more specifically)⁹. Moreover, 'the term romance is also used to indicate a system of values'¹⁰.

Some critics have opted for purposefully broad definitions such as 'the principal secular literature of entertainment of the Middle Ages'¹¹, while others have seen 'little practical value'¹² in the use of the word and denounced

⁸ Douglas Kelly puts it mildly in *The Art of Medieval French Romance*, saying that 'in the Middle Ages, generic definitions are not remarkable for their consistency, nor even for a genuine desire to classify and conceptualize' (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992) p.96. Kelly's book is based on auctorial interventions in medieval romances.

⁹ For the evolution of the meaning of the word 'romans', see Paul Strohm's very useful article and Carol Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987). See also Barbara Fuchs, *Romance* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁰ John Finlayson, 'Definitions of Middle English Romance' *Chaucer Review* 15 (1980) pp.168-81 (p.145).

¹¹ Derek Pearsall, 'Middle English Romance and its Audience' in *Historical and Editorial Studies in Medieval and Early Modern English for Johan Gerritsen* ed. by M. J. Arn, H. Wirtjes and H. Jansen (Groningen: Welters-Noordhoff) pp.37-47 (p.37). Pearsall's definitions is used again by Rosalind Field in 'Romance in England, 1066-1400' in *The Cambridge History in Medieval English Literature* ed. by David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) pp.152-76 (p.152). See also Nathaniel E. Griffin, "The Definition of Romance," *PMLA* 38 (1923) 50-70; John Finlayson, 'Definitions of Middle English Romance', *Chaucer Review* 15 (1980) 43-62, 168-81 and Edmund Reiss, 'Romance' in *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, ed. by Thomas J. Heffernan (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 108-30.

¹² W.R.J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (New York: Longman, 1987) p.57. Such a statement comes as a surprise when the word 'romance' is one of only three words in the title of Barron's book but this shows how unavoidable the word 'romance' is in medieval studies.

others' 'growing lack of confidence'¹³ in the definitions they try to offer. Some scholars have tried to tackle the problem from a different angle and argued that romance was not a genre but a mode¹⁴, a kind¹⁵ and, more recently, that it was a prototype¹⁶. Finally, it has become common now to divide romance into a variety of subgenres, according to subject matter, length¹⁷ or metrical form¹⁸. One of those subgenres is hagiographical romance, a label that designates secular narratives with a strong religious element¹⁹. The use of this label remains problematic if we consider that romance is considered to be a lower, popular genre: ' "Romance" can be used as the Other by which serious literature defines itself', says Rosalind Field²⁰. Yet, the association or blending

¹³ Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, note 14 p.61.

¹⁴ For romance as mode, see Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1957), For a discussion of romance as mode *and* as genre, see Fredric Jameson, "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre," *New Literary History* 7 (1975–76): 135–63, republished in an expanded and revised version as "Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism" in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981), 103–50

¹⁵ For a very useful and detailed account of the difficulties of the use of genre in medieval studies and of scholars' successive attempts to find better-suited terms, see K. S. Whetter's *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008). The second chapter, 'Redefining Romance', is particularly helpful.

¹⁶ See Xiu Yin, 'Middle English Romance as Prototype Genre' in *Chaucer Review* 40 (2006) pp.335-53.

¹⁷ See, in particular, Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1969)

¹⁸ For a summary of the various subdivisions, see William Calin, *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995) pp.432.

¹⁹ Of the hagiographical romances that exist in English, few have surviving French antecedents. *The King of Tars*, *Emaré* or *Sir Ysumbras*, do not have known or available French sources so they cannot be used for the purpose of comparative analysis. The Middle English *Lay le Freine* only survives in a fragment which makes comparative analysis very difficult. Hence my choice of this specific corpus. See also: Brigitte Cazelles, *The Lady as Saint: A Collection of French Hagiographic Romances of the Thirteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

²⁰ Field, 'Romance in England, 1066-1400', p. 298. See also the very useful introduction to *The Spirit of Medieval English Romance* ed. by Ad Putter and J. Gilbert (Harlow: Longman, 2000).

of 'discrete' genres did not trouble medieval writers as much as it puzzles modern scholars who have called romance 'the most textually slippery of all genres'²¹. Susan Crane may well be right when she states that 'insofar as observations about the generic nature of medieval romance can be made, they must be fluid and contingent, seeking to clarify the nature of single works rather than to classify them'²².

Ami et Amile, *Robert le Diable* and *Florence de Rome* were all adapted into English but they also have in common the fact that they have alternately been called 'hagiographical romances', 'secular hagiographies' and 'homiletic romances'. This terminology would seem to indicate a certain insecurity about classifying them generically. All six texts I will be discussing offer a blend of at least two genres and the aforementioned denominations might be taken to indicate that they are primarily, romances with only a hint of the saints' life²³. In fact, all six texts go much further than that unbalanced

²¹ See A. S. G. Edwards, 'Middle English Romance: The Limits of Editing, the Limits of Criticism', *Medieval Literature: Texts and Interpretations* ed. by Tim Machan (New York: Medieval and Renaissance Text Studies, 1991) pp.91-104.

²² Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) p.7.

²³ The interaction of romance and hagiography has been a topic of great interest for a number of critics. For example, Margaret Hurley offered a detailed examination of the parallels between the two genres in 'Saints' Legends and Romance Again: Secularization of Structure and Motif', 8 (1975) pp.60-73. She, like Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, believes that the legends and romance resemble each other very much. Wogan-Browne even states that 'for some purposes, generic difference between romance and hagiography can and should be ignored'. She also argues for the 'limited meaningfulness of this distinction as a categorization of medieval narratives' in ' "Bet...on holy seyntes lyves to rede"; Romance and Hagiography Again' *Readings in Medieval English Romance* ed. by Carol Meale (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer,

terminology would suggest and successfully associate three genres rather than two: epic, romance and saints' life. I will explore the assets and implications of such an association in the following chapters and it should be clear from my argument that the weaving together of the three genres endows the texts with much subtlety and moral complexity. It is evident that the authors wished to tell stories that entertained as well as edified their audiences and the way they modulate the balance between the genres within their poems must be taken as an indication of the tastes of the time as well as of the ambitions of the poets. Now we must also acknowledge that they did not choose easy routes to reach their goals. Opting for a female protagonist, and a married maiden at that, could be creative suicide and making the Divine very present has its dangers too: as Ivana Djordjević reminds us that as the hero 'relies increasingly on God's help, [he] becomes in a sense less heroic, but God also becomes less divine, as his interventions in the hero's favour span the entire range from the sublime to the ridiculous.'²⁴ The resulting texts provide refined examples of medieval literature, French and English, and prove to be treasures for the inquisitive scholar. Strangely enough, however,

1994) pp. 61-85 (p.83). Rosalind Field, for her part, argues that 'it is unlikely that any medieval audience would have been disturbed by such merging of narrative types, nor so eager as modern criticism to separate them' in 'Romance in England, 1066-1400', p.174. See also chapter three of Murray James Evans' *Rereading Middle English romance: manuscript layout, decoration, and the rhetoric of composite structure* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1995) and chapter three of Susan Crane's *Insular Romance*.

²⁴ See Ivana Djordjević, 'Rewriting Divine Favour' in *Boundaries in Medieval Romance*, ed. by Neil Cartlidge (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp.161-73 (p.168). In the texts discussed here, the miracles also range from resuscitating children (*Ami et Amile*) to sending monkeys to distract a rapist from attacking his victim (*Florence de Rome*).

these texts have not attracted much attention at all, especially *Florence de Rome* and its English adaptation, for reasons that I cannot comprehend. Most of the critique this corpus has attracted has been rather superficial: those who have commented on *Robert le Diable* have taken shortcuts to make the text fit their ideas about it²⁵; and *Florence de Rome* seems to have attracted their attention only because it has a female protagonist, admittedly an unusual trait in medieval literature²⁶. As for *Ami et Amile*, it is a much deeper and sombre tale than most secondary literature would make us believe²⁷.

Because the association and intermixing of different genres²⁸ is such a prominent feature of all six texts, this point has attracted a fair amount of commentary from the few critics who have studied these poems. I have found at least three articles dealing with the question in *Sir Gowther* and the same can be said of *Amis and Amiloun* and *Ami et Amile*. While it is

²⁵ See, for instance, the insistence on making the protagonist the son of the devil (Gaucher's introduction to the aforementioned edition of *Robert le Diable*, p.11) or the transformation of the battles into religious wars (Elisabeth Gaucher, '*Robert le Diable*': *histoire d'une légende* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2003) p.48).

²⁶ See Marijane Osborn, *Romancing the Goddess: Three Middle English Romances about Women* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), Kathy M. Krause, 'Generic Space-off and the Construction of the Female Protagonist: the *Chanson de Florence de Rome*', *Exemplaria*, 18 (2006), 93-136 and Sarah Crisler, 'Epic and the Problem of the Female Protagonist: The Case of *Florence de Rome*', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 106 (2005), 27-33.

²⁷ Despite appearances, the text is about much more than just friendship. Yet, even Jean Dufournet, editor of a relatively recent collection of essays on the text, gives the volume the following title: *Ami et Amile: Une chanson de geste de l'amitié* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1987).

²⁸ On this subject, see: Caroline Cazanave (ed.), *L'épique et le mélange des genres* (Presses universitaires de Franche Comté, 2005); Brigitte Cazelle, *The Lady as Saint*; Paul Maurice Clogan, *Medieval Hagiography and Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1975); Simon Gaunt, 'Romance and Other Genres' in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* ed. by R. L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) pp.45-59; Margaret Hurley, 'Saints' Legends and Romance Again'.

understandable that this feature would have attracted scholars' interest, the way it has been handled has not been particularly helpful to our understanding of the texts. Indeed, the articles I have read have more or less attempted to make a square peg fit a round hole. Because the texts are neither 'pure' hagiography nor romance nor *chanson de geste*, critics have found it necessary to create new categories in an attempt to make the texts fit into a box they could label. The expressions, 'secular hagiography', 'homiletic romance' or 'hagiographical romance' mentioned earlier appeared as the direct result of scholars' fulfilling their urge to classify²⁹. The need for such classification in this case is unclear, however, and so, unfortunately, is its usefulness. The imposition of established genres onto medieval literary texts has served to establish that medieval authors' understanding of a *roman* or a *chanson* was much broader and looser than that of modern scholars. Critics may want to see genre distinctions because they hope that a correct diagnosis will illuminate the uses and understanding of the text, both in its original context and amongst modern readers, but there is a major caveat that should counterbalance that instinct: genre, as a label, itself determines reading practices and expectations. In the case of the texts that I have written on in this thesis, the ineffectiveness of a label becomes obvious when one realises

²⁹ See, for instance, Ojar Kratins, 'The Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*: Chivalric Romance or Secular Hagiography?', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 81 (1966), 347-354 or E.M Bradstock, '*Sir Gowther*: Secular Hagiography or Hagiographical Romance or Neither?', *AUMLA*, 59 (1983), 26-47;

that these texts were constructed through a clever and inextricable blend of elements that can be linked to either one genre or another. I am not at all suggesting that the texts are 'genreless'. Rather, these texts are saturated with genre(s) and these genres support strong didactic messages. If genre as a concept can be likened to institutions, as Todorov argued in 'L'origine des genres', then one has to wonder about the motivation of the authors and the consequences to the texts in relentlessly intermixing genres. The answer is not one-dimensional but indicates tension between different modes of thinking, different sources of authority, the secular and the religious.

This combination of genres is not, however, the only element that links these texts together. Genre is but the most obvious common denominator but the texts are also joined thematically. They all problematize, in different ways, the notions of otherness, exile and penitence. Broadly speaking, they all show characters that move out from a secular milieu to end their lives in a more or less intense odour of sanctity. The circumstances vary significantly, but all six texts follow this general path. Some of the characters may opt for total immersion in religion while others go through a religious phase before returning to their secular place in society: Gowther marries and rules over his lands, Florence goes back to Rome with her husband and gives birth to an heir. Some perform miracles, others are visited by angels. In the end, a decision needs to be made and the characters are always confronted by a

choice between a religious and a secular life. The changes in the characters' lives are symbolised by exile and a necessary confrontation with otherness. The exile can be physical but it is always moral and emotional as well. Ami and Amile, for example, cannot stand to be separated: exile, in their case, is therefore not only physical, but also emotional. Robert, excommunicated, is exiled from Christianity, but he is also in exile in Rome. Florence is kidnapped and exiled from both her home and her social standing. Finally, all of the characters experience a confrontation with the other over the course of their ordeals: they are faced with other people as well as with a mirror of what it is thought they should be.

I have chosen these three particular tales for the breadth of representations of otherness that they display and for their thematic and generic wealth. These unusual yet formidably popular stories also address some of the most fundamental questions that fascinated the Middle Ages: chivalry and the end of feudalism, intent, repentance and God's forgiveness, virginity, the threat of rape and sanctity, the supernatural and magic. Otherness, in the broadest sense, is the catalyst which brings out the difficult questions that these texts confront and helps map some answers to these questions.

Otherness as a heuristic concept allows me to go beyond the traditional scholarly themes: identification of folkloric elements, erection of family trees and argument as to whether the text is a *chanson de geste* or not. For the purposes of this dissertation, I conceive of the 'other' as an outsider, the other within the self, and the Other, in the Lacanian sense of the word, that is, a representative of authority and order. Ami and Amile, absorbed in their exclusive friendship construe everything that is not within themselves as other, as an intrusion and a threat. Gowther is inhabited by the devil. Robert's penance consists of pretending to be a madman. Like Amiloun the leper, he is other to all. As for Florence, she is the ultimate other, the female protagonist. Like the aforementioned characters, she too experiences exile, but in its most literal sense. Penance in all six texts works as an excellent marker of man's relationship to the Other because it confronts the main characters with questions of authority, the recognition of authority figures, obedience and defiance for the main characters. Penance is an important element in all six texts and is apprehended in different ways that tell us a great deal about the ambitions of the different poets for their creations. Penance is not always a straightforward submission to a religious code and it does not always guarantee forgiveness.

III WHAT APPROACHES?

The objective of this project is to uncover patterns or constants in both French and English literature and also to analyse how authors writing in a different language and within a different community dealt nonetheless with the same complex and haunting questions. The various forms assumed by the alienating process will be studied from a range of perspectives, all of which correspond to a type of alienation.

Otherness is admittedly a very broad concept and one that can be used to reach different conclusions. I have just mentioned the materialisations of Otherness within the narratives, how it arises both within and without, but the texts themselves, as material objects, can also be studied from this perspective. Each original has a counterpart, an other story, created in an other language, in an other country, in an other century. This means that we must be attuned to discovering differences between two versions of a story that can be accounted for not only by the genre of the text, but by the provenance of its author and the century in which he lived³⁰. Otherness will help us read those differences but it needs further theoretical delineation. The other is much more than what is not the self, or what is different from the self. The other embodies questions about our relationship to alterity in general.

³⁰ Issues of cultural context are too broad to be dealt with in detail in this dissertation, unfortunately.

When the relationship of self to other is dysfunctional, even pathological, we need a framework within which to discuss it and the best framework at our disposal is, I believe, the language of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic analysis of literature has been with us now for many years. As Ranjan Khanna reminds us in *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism*, 'creative work is, in Freud's analysis, akin to the work of dreams, and psychoanalysis is thus a fitting instrument for its interpretation. But more than this, psychoanalysis is a hermeneutic built of such mythological ground, and is thus a form of the literary itself.'³¹

Because literature is a creative process and the fruit of either an individual or a group's intellectual effort, it bears the traces of an imaginative psyche and it is not surprising that psychological patterns can be uncovered in literary works. For our purposes, the choice of Lacanian psychoanalysis is justified by Lacan's notion of the Other, a construction that represents relations of power and authority that are particularly prominent in texts that touch on the themes of secular power and religion³². The Other will be

³¹ Ranjan Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (London: Duke University Press, 2003) p.158.

³² The Other designates radical alterity. Bruce Fink explains: 'At the most basic level, the Other is that foreign language we must learn to speak which is euphemistically referred to as our "native tongue", but which would be much better termed our "mOther tongue": it is the discourse and desires of others around us insofar as the former are internalized. By "internalized" I do not mean to suggest that they become our own; rather, albeit internalized, they remain foreign bodies in a sense.' In *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995 repr. 1997) p.11.

referred to throughout this thesis and will act as a touchstone in my analysis of the development of the three tales. We will find that the way that the authors depict their characters' handling of the 'Other' and relations with the 'other' will be key to analysing the texts' genre and position in relation to authority.

Otherness and authority are, of course, key concepts as well in postcolonial theory, and this overlap will emerge particularly in the second chapter. Postcolonial theory provides scholars with conceptual tools to analyse alterity in new ways. The notion of hybridity in particular, as developed by Homi Bhabha, allows for a successful reinterpretation of Robert (le Diable) as a hybrid, with all the attendant consequences of this statement. In the final chapter, however, otherness, home and exile take on their most literal meaning and there is less space for theory. This does not mean that the texts have nothing profound to offer. In fact, the texts are exceptional in their difference: it is perhaps their uniqueness that makes them resistant to literary theory. It may even be that it is that quality of uniqueness, of resistance to categorization, that has made scholars uncomfortable with studying them. Or could it be the female protagonist herself, a character that several modern readers have attempted to domesticate as a medieval example of feminism, but without much success?

Theory, in other words, liberates us from old-fashioned methods of literary analysis and allows more hidden or unconscious organising principles to reach the surface of the works studied. It has its limitations, however, and must be used with care and discrimination, otherwise we run the risk of projecting what we wish onto our readings of the texts. All three chapters will indicate that reading through a critical theory framework allows us to go further in our understanding of medieval literature than earlier readers. Of course, there will be detractors who argue that psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory should not be used together, or should not be used at all in discussing medieval literature. Psychoanalysis is deemed valuable by such critics only for Westerners and perhaps even only Westerners at the turn of the 20th century. Postcolonial theory, which in turn depends at least partially on psychoanalysis, as the work of Frantz Fanon shows, is problematic as well because it can be read as a Western imposition onto non-Western subjects. Such caution is justified but it does not apply here. The point of this thesis is not to study people but to study texts; texts that were created in the West for a Western audience. I use psychoanalysis as a method of analysis, a way of explaining things that unearths underlying structures and reveals the way they function, not as a therapeutic tool. The texts that I am discussing benefit greatly from the use of theoretical models that provide new ways of discussing power, authority, discourse, ethics, all of which are extremely important in these six texts because of their didactic messages.

IV THE THREE CHAPTERS

The first chapter is devoted to *Ami et Amile* and *Amis and Amiloun*. This story of two men who were identical in all things and whose lives were ruled by exclusive friendship offers an interesting take on the theme of Otherness. Of course, the most visible feature in this narrative is this *lack* of otherness insofar as the protagonists are mirror images of each other; in other words, they exclude otherness. It is their relationship to the other and the Other that is the subject of this first chapter. Assessing what is construed as 'other' constitutes the basis of the comparison of the two texts. The protagonists' rejection of everyone and any form of authority is what characterises the French heroes. The result is a story that, through generic changes, proves critical of the patriarchal order of its age. The Other is in *Ami et Amile* the object of uncontrollable paranoia. A century later, *Amis and Amiloun* still look alike but their relationship has evolved into a more lifelike relation that the narrator nevertheless tries to present as a perfect friendship. The sort of paranoia found in the French text has become a form of perversion, where one man goes to great lengths to uphold an ideal that does not exist any longer. Lacanian psychoanalysis, helping to unveil the structures of the two texts, shows how they are both, despite their similarity on the surface, structurally, ethically and perhaps even generically at odds.

The second chapter moves on to a form of Otherness that fascinated and terrified people in the Middle Ages and beyond: otherness within the self. *Robert le Diable* and *Sir Gowther* present the worrying subject of demons and their influence of human beings, from conception to later life. Otherness and exile are explored in a particularly rich fashion in these poems: they can be construed as physical, social and geographical. In short, the hero, who was born under the influence of the devil, goes into exile before turning into a saintly figure. Because Robert's status and identity are always the result of a combination of assumed roles (knight, penitent, mysterious warrior, hermit, to name a few), his identity is more accurately defined as a form of hybridity. It is on the basis of this concept, as defined by Homi Bhabha, who links it with issues of power and subversion, that the analysis of the two texts proceeds. Studying these texts with otherness in perspective has enabled me to reveal some underlying but fundamental questions addressed by the poems, questions that reflect on power, earthly and heavenly. It is at this point that a major pattern becomes apparent: on the one hand, *Ami et Amile* and *Robert le Diable* are related stories, in which structures of power were seriously challenged and damaged. On the other hand, both English versions of these texts showed power structures to be not only ubiquitous but also triumphant. This is an important find. It explains all the differences between the French and English versions of the texts and indicates major interpretive changes that

transform the focus, the ambition, perhaps even the genre of the English poems. What I want to suggest is that the extent to which the Other is implicated in the telling of the story could be a useful touchstone to help differentiate texts generically: texts that depict contested authority tend to err on the side of hagiography, while texts pervaded by the symbolic order would denote a rather secular approach and a tendency towards romance. My hypothesis is that it is possible to see a correlation between literary genre and the Other in medieval hagiographical romances; and even if this correlation is not visible in every single hagiographical romance, the conclusion I reached can be seen, at least, as indicative of a linguistic divide: French texts tend to take issue with power relations while English texts seem to be more conformist and deferential.

The third chapter presents the opportunity to test this theory, bearing in mind that the new set of texts (*Florence de Rome* and *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, the fourteenth century redaction of the tale) distinguishes itself from the other tales in the most drastic way: the protagonist is a woman, that rare thing in medieval fiction. Moreover, the protagonist is not just any woman, she is a married maiden. Her strange status is a challenge for the author and a real departure from the sort of predictable story that generally satisfied audiences. The author's sense of adventure does not go much further, however. Indeed, he is always careful to stay clear of potentially sensitive

issues. For instance, he makes sure that Florence cannot be identified with a saint. The text may show some resistance to the patriarchal order but in the end, it perpetuates it. This is made clear in the very symbolic emphasis the author puts on Florence's physical translation from Rome to unknown places. Her exile is the result of male negligence. The importance of Florence's place of birth and home (Rome) is highlighted by the time she spends in exile before being able to go back to Rome and return to a clear-cut social status as wife in the full sense of the word. Her marriage is consummated and she bears an heir to the throne. Florence is not one of these rebellious heroines who leaves of her own accord and rejects her origins. She was kidnapped and she always longs to get back to Rome. Of all the texts I have studied for this project, *Florence de Rome* is the only poem where the character's geographical home matters because the geographical home is also a very potent symbol. Return from exile is a return to the epitome of patriarchy. Florence's physical translation must be paralleled with the place occupied by the Other in the text, thus continuing with the discussion of Otherness begun in the previous chapters. As with the other four texts already discussed in the first two chapters, this discussion will be linked to the points made earlier about genre in medieval literature. In the two *Florence* texts the central themes are successively treated through the spectrum of all three genres — *chanson de geste*, romance and hagiography. This could have been in order to appeal to a

quite varied audience but the genres are not blended this time but are presented as neatly separated, one from the other.

V PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

It has to be said that I have not found any studies of the same nature as mine either in English or in French. I do not believe that this has anything to do with the size of the corpus or the topic of this dissertation, as both are, in my humble opinion, rich and broad. The six texts have nonetheless attracted little interest, good or bad. English scholars in general tend to focus on major authors such as Chaucer or Malory and often disregard the vast majority of other texts available for study in their field. Those who do work on anonymous English texts sometimes try either to attach them to Chaucer so as to claim some of the poet's prestige or to disparage related texts in order to highlight the qualities of their object of study. I give one such example of this strategy in my third chapter. All of this explains, or at least contributes to a fuller explanation of why so little has been written about these poems. I did, nonetheless, find one recent book that does look at the texts for what they are. Rhiannon Purdie's *Anglicising romance*, published in 2008, is strikingly different from other scholarship on medieval English literature. Her book matters because it deals with a phenomenon unique to Middle English, tail-rhyme romance, the study of which needed a serious updating. Purdie has looked at the whole corpus of tail-rhyme romances, of which *Amis and*

Amiloun, *Sir Gowther* and *Le bone Florence of Rome* are a part, and asserts that there is an unambiguous link between tail-rhyme and religious material (reminding us that medieval Latin hymnody was written in tail-rhyme). Based on these premises, Purdie suggests that tail-rhyme, 'with its strong pious associations, may have been used to temper or even redirect an audience's reception of a poem which was otherwise quite recognisably a romance.'³³ Her final argument is that 'the casting (or recasting) of a romance in tail-rhyme may have been recognised at the time as a form of "Anglicisation".'³⁴ And she goes as far as to claim that 'tail-rhyme may, in fact, have been perceived as an appropriate English equivalent to the *laissez* used in Old French and Anglo-Norman *chansons de geste*, a genre similarly defined by a combination of subject matter and poetic form.'³⁵ This unity of meter and ideology is also, in my view, a unity in the texts' rapport with otherness.

Even though the study of genre conventions and poetic form are not the objects of my thesis, they are nevertheless relevant issues and it is good to see that my own findings can be backed up or supplemented by theses such as Purdie's. The routes I chose to follow do point in a similar direction. As I

³³ Rhiannon Purdie, *Anglicising Romance: Tail-rhyme and Genre in Middle English Literature* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008) p.6.

³⁴ Purdie, *Anglicising*, p.6

³⁵ Purdie, *Anglicising*, p.9.

have noted, I demonstrate over the course of these essays that all three English texts tend to be much more order-oriented and didactic in nature than their earlier French models. This may be due to the social or historical context in which the texts were written, of course, but Purdie's idea that the decision to adapt texts not only into a different language but also a difficult meter (writing in tail-rhyme is not easy) in order to anglicise the material is both seductive and, I believe, convincing.

If the three English poems I write about are united by the meter used by their authors, such is not the case of all three Old French texts. A study like Purdie's is therefore limited to discussion of English material and no such study has been done by a French scholar. What joins the three French texts is clearly their genre. As I said earlier, my aim is not to discuss the question of genre in general. My corpus is too small for that. Yet the problematic nature of the texts implies that I cannot go without discussing their genre to a certain extent, and I do do so along the way. Genres can be summarized as a necessary evil. They can be incredibly reductive and they can influence readers insofar as they inevitably determine a reading practice and provide a circle of expectations. They can even be used in an abusive manner, especially when a text does not fit a particular genre, as is the case for the poems on which I have worked. Some scholars decide to ignore certain episodes or relate them to their reader in a slightly distorted way in order to

make the story fit into an old-fashioned box. As we shall see, however, there are no advantages to adopting such 'techniques'. Only 'creative' misinterpretation ensues³⁶. The debate around the notion of genre and the definition of the various literary genres is as old as literary criticism and I do not intend to recapitulate the successive episodes in the scope of this introduction. Some have already summed up the arguments in favour of, and against, the use of the concept of genre. K. S. Whetter, for one, has done so recently in her introduction to *Understanding genre and medieval romance*, published in 2008. The question of whether to resort to the concept of genre when discussing literature is a controversial one, as Whetter shows. Yet the fact remains that it seems near impossible to do without it. If agreement can be reached on this point, then the next thorny problem that crops up is: how to define romance? Surely the easiest way is to define it as against another genre but that involves a straw man argument, asserting that there exists another genre that can be securely defined when we know perfectly well that there is no such thing. Romance is one of those words that has come to represent a staggering amount of things. However, I have endeavoured in all three chapters of this dissertation to bring us closer to an understanding of the notion in the Middle Ages. Romance proves very volatile and flexible but also able to welcome and accommodate other genres in a way that we do not

³⁶ See, as an example, Kathy M. Krause, 'Generic Space-off'. Krause wants to read *Florence* as an epic and consequently manages to create an extremely far-fetched lineage between the heroine and Charlemagne to 'strengthen' her point (p.103-4).

encounter in other medieval genres. In the case of our corpus, all six texts accommodate more or less large chunks of epic or hagiography in order to deliver successful, rich and exciting tales.

In recent years the tendency has been to link genre and gender. One of the more prominent examples of this tendency is Simon Gaunt's excellent *Gender and Genre in medieval French literature*. I found this book thought-provoking and inspiring. The way Gaunt brings genre and gender together has definitely influenced my way of apprehending six understudied texts by using otherness as a possible gauge for understanding genre. I do not use gender theory in this discussion because it has already been done, and very well at that, but also because gender is not one of the issues that arise in the texts that form this corpus.

It has been a privilege to explore these medieval treasures and I can only hope that my work will contribute to enticing other scholars into devoting time and passion to them. I also very much hope that my findings will demonstrate to those who still shy away from multidisciplinary or who are looking forward to a new research project that comparative literature, especially in the Middle Ages, is the way forward if we are ever to have a more comprehensive understanding of the period. For those who are not

(yet!) familiar with these wonderful stories, summaries can be found in the appendix. Now let us begin with the better known of the texts: *Ami et Amile*.

Chapter one

Otherness and the Orders of Friendship: The very imperfect examples of the Old French *Ami et Amile* and its Middle English Counterpart *Amis and Amiloun*

Part one : *Ami et Amile*

I INTRODUCTION

*Ami et Amile*³⁷ ought to be a celebration of perfect friendship. The thirteenth-century French text, consensually defined³⁸ as a *chanson de geste*, has many counterparts and took diverse forms — miracle play, romance, epistle, *vita* —

³⁷ Peter F. Dembowski (ed.), *'Ami et Amile': Chanson de Geste* (Paris: Champion, 1969 ; repr. 1987). All references will come from this edition. Only one manuscript of *Ami et Amile* survives: BN860.

³⁸ Dembowski starts his edition to the text as follows: 'La version francienne de la chanson de geste d'*Ami et Amile* nous a été conservée par un seul manuscrit' (p. 7) thus leaving no doubt as to the genre in which he classifies the text. His very significant choice to introduce the term *chanson de geste* in the title, thereby appearing on the cover of the book, is by no means controversial. It only follows a tradition that did not see any problem in categorizing the text as a *chanson de geste* in spite of the complex and very important interweaving of elements that are indicative of other genres: romance and hagiography in particular. William Calin, in *The epic quest: studies in four Old French chansons de geste* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966) takes part in that tradition, *Ami et Amile* being one of the four chansons he discusses. Simon Gaunt also sees *Ami et Amile* as a *chanson de geste* to the point that the text is one of only four tales with which he has chosen to illustrate the functioning of the genre in *Gender and genre in medieval French literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). MacEdward Leach did not seem to have any objections to that classification either in his 1937 edition of the Middle English version of the tale (from now on, ME). *Amis and Amiloun*, ed. by MacEdward Leach (London: Published for the E.E.T.S. by H Milford, Oxford University Press, 1937) p.9-10. This classification was encouraged by the metrical form of the text, characteristic of the genre, and by the fact that in the MS it is surrounded by other *chansons de geste*. The central theme of the work, male friendship, is also considered as evidence of the epic quality of the text. The treatment of the central theme, however, complicates matters to a great extent, as this chapter will show.

as well as several languages — Latin, Anglo-Norman, Middle English, etc. — as it was disseminated across Europe and the centuries³⁹. Critics believe that a first version of the tale existed as early as the eleventh century⁴⁰. MacEdward Leach, who edited the Middle English romance *Amis and Amiloun*, explains that the different versions of the story fall into two groups — romance and hagiography — and considers the two texts of interest representative of the former type — a grouping the inadequacy of which will become clear throughout this chapter⁴¹. The text relates the story of an intense friendship uniting two men, Ami and Amile, conceived at the same time and born on the same day. An effort to cast the couple in a sacred light can be observed in the omnipresent references to God at the opening of the text: first of all, an angel announces the extraordinary friendship that will link the two boys (l. 21), and seals their fates even before they are born. Then the narrator tells us that the story is well known and true, as many, including ‘gens de religion’ (l.8) and pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela, can attest. Moreover, the boys’ godfather is none other than the pope, Ysoret, who baptises them (on the same day, unsurprisingly) and gives them identical cups. These discrete elements are shortly thereafter characterised by the narrator thus: God had

³⁹ Leach conveniently gives a list of all the versions in his introduction.

⁴⁰ Dominique Boutet, ‘*Ami et Amile* et le renouvellement de l’écriture épique vers 1200’, in Jean Dufournet, ed., *‘Ami et Amile’: Une Chanson de geste de l’amitié* (Paris: Champion, 1987) p. 79-92 (p. 79).

⁴¹ Peter Dembowski endorses Leach’s categorization. See his introduction to *Ami et Amile*, pp.9-10.

worked a miracle in making them⁴²: ‘Dex les fist par miracle’ (l.43). Ami and Amile go on to grow up separately but identically: we are told that they have the same eyes, nose, mouth, way of walking, riding, bearing arms. If they are presented as mirror images of one another, their resemblance is not merely physical, it is anchored in their character as well — however little developed it actually appears to be. There is little subtlety and no distinction in the psychological depiction of Ami and Amile — hence no one could tell which of the two is the finer young man. They might live apart but they grow up constantly hearing about one another and they cannot refrain from desiring to be together. They have been made to feel incomplete or, more to the point, exiled from a palpable happiness; i.e., the happiness derived from forming an extraordinary, totally exclusive friendship. At the age of fifteen then, after they are knighted, each leaves his house in order to find the other. Their quest can only make sense if we consider that they have heard much of one another. This motif strongly recalls the love by hearsay motif common to very many medieval stories, although it usually concerns only male-female couples. The seven-year-long search runs over 127 lines and is punctuated by the interventions of several characters, including a pilgrim, all of whom

⁴² The translations of the Old French (from now on OF) text in this chapter are based on that provided by Samuel N. Rosenberg and Samuel Danon in *‘Ami and Amile’: A Tale of Medieval Friendship translated from the Old French with a new afterword by David Konstan*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.). Rosenberg and Danon’s translation, although generally satisfactory, is not always entirely accurate, or at least fails to bring out some of the features that I wish to discuss in more detail. It is consequently modified quite often in this chapter, in an effort to provide the reader with a more precise translation.

provide information as to the whereabouts of the friends. They finally meet in an idyllic meadow and easily recognise one another. This could be the end of the text but the narrator's purpose is elsewhere. He has only set the basis of the relationship and is going to let it blossom into its full, extreme potential.

The foundations of the tale make it clear that the concept of otherness is not only at the heart of the texts but that it is also problematic. The protagonists' uncanny similitude has intrigued critics to the point that some have had the intuition that the two heroes could be one and the same person⁴³. Judy Weiss for instance, introducing her translation of an Anglo-Norman version of the tale, mentions in passing that 'to a large extent they are identical, the two halves of a split protagonist'⁴⁴ but no one has yet explored the consequences of such a statement, nor justified it. To begin with, I will lay out the characteristics of the heroes' bond and its functioning. Once these are established in one text the notions of otherness, home and exile can be set and used as analytic tools. By subsequently demonstrating that the two relationships' defining traits are at odds, I will show how the aforementioned notions take on new meanings. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, I will

⁴³ 'Dans le péché et le malheur, dans le bonheur et la paix, les compagnons se sentent incomplets l'un sans l'autre, au point qu'on se demande s'ils sont originellement deux, ou s'ils représentent une même âme scindée en deux.' in Alice Planche, '*Ami et Amile* ou le Môme et l'Autre' in *Beiträge zum romanischen Mittelalter*, ed. by Kurt Baldinger (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1977), pp.237-269 (p.266).

⁴⁴ Judith Weiss, *The Birth of Romance: An Anthology. Four Twelfth-Century Anglo-Norman Romances* (London: Dent, 1992), p. 30.

compare the OF and the ME versions of the tale and show how differences in what some would call detail yield two very distinct stories, attributed to, and associated with, different mechanisms. These mechanisms will then be compared with different clinical structures (psychosis and perversion), each offering differing ideals and impacts on the reader. Some of those differences may be ascribed to an authorial agenda but where they may more fruitfully be examined as emerging from the genre of the text, however problematically this is established, I will delve more deeply into the concomitant contradictions.

II THE FOUNDATIONAL RELATIONSHIP

To begin with, let us dwell for a moment on the very important passage relating the boys' first encounter:

Devant lui garde, si a veü uns prés
 Touz fu floris si comme el mois d'esté.
 Le conte Amile vit enmi lieu ester ;
 Nel vit ainz mais si le connut asséz
 As bonnes armes dont il iert adoubéz
 Et as nouvelles que on li ot conté.
 Le cheval broche des esperons doréz,
 Isnellement est celle part aléz,
 Et cil le vit qui l'ot ja avisé.
 Vers lui se torne quant il l'ot ravisé,
 Par tel vertu se sont entr'acolé
 Tant fort se baisent et estraignent soef,
 A poi ne sont estaint et définé ;
 Lor strier rompent si sont cheü el pré.
 Or parleront ensamble.

Il.169-83

[He saw straight ahead a field that was covered with flowers as in summertime. And there he saw, astride his steed in the middle of the field, count Amile; he has never seen him, yet knew him instantly by his fine armour and all else he had heard described. With a kick of his golden spurs, he rushed towards him, and Amile recognized him in turn. He raced forward, and the two met in such a tight embrace, so mighty was their kiss and so tenderly did they clasp each other, that they almost fainted dead away; their stirrups snapped and they fell together to the ground. Only now would they speak.]

This passage could mark the end of a very short romance: the heroes do not encounter any difficulties on the way because they do not aim to prove their personal worth, as is normally the case in romances. However they have nonetheless embarked on a quest that tests their determination (to be reunited). If what needs to be proved, if the touchstone of heroism is that infallible resolve to be together, then Ami and Amile are true romance heroes. What we see already emerging here, very early on, is that the text, borrowing from another literary genre, adapts those elements to its own purpose and significantly modifies them to make it suit the set of values it extols. Already, from their first meeting, the individual is subordinated to the ideal relationship. The end of the quest coincides with the end of a form of exile typical to this text: the exile of one from the other. With the reunion in the meadow, it can be said that Ami and Amile are back where they always belonged, where they feel safe and happy — together. This passage and the lines that lead up to it are, I believe, crucial in the economy of the text in that they lay a strong emphasis from the outset on the relationship rather than on

the individual characters⁴⁵. It is worth adding here that, as early as line 21, what is accentuated is not the individual qualities of the protagonists but the quality of their bond. The religious setting and the protagonists' longing to be reunited work together to depict an utterly extraordinary relationship. This relationship is already characterised by an indisputable reciprocity which will soon be marked by its formidable, *unquestionable* and destructive exclusivity. The passage also cannot but evoke the unachievable human dream of meeting one's other half, a half one mysteriously guesses the existence of without having ever seen them, a half one immediately recognises and loves at first sight⁴⁶. Obviously Ami's existence is known to Amile and vice versa, as pointed out above, and so no mystery envelops their instantaneous love for one another. Yet Ami and Amile's so-called exemplary friendship provides a good example of the fulfilment of this dream. Being identical in all respects, only two choices could present themselves to them: either rivalry or love. Only the latter is possible here, conditioned as it is by their love by hearsay; but, as we shall see, one never really goes without the other.

⁴⁵ Note that if the English poet does tell us of the heroes' respective *enfances*, he leaves us in the dark as to the feelings of the two boys for one another. Significantly, there is no quest and the first encounter or reunion scene is skipped altogether, which shifts the emphasis considerably: Amis and Amiloun are his priority and their relationship comes second. This point is further discussed later in the chapter.

⁴⁶ See Blanchard, Joël and Quereuil, Michel, trans., '*Ami et Amile*', *Chanson de geste* (Paris : Champion, 1985) p. 1.

The lines quoted above matter so much because they illustrate a key moment in the construction of the relationship central to the poem. They describe a scene that Lacanian psychoanalysis would not hesitate to liken to what it refers to as the 'mirror stage'. Technically, the mirror stage is a phase infants go through in the process of formation of the ego. Dylan Evans describes it thus:

The ego is the result of identifying with one's own specular image. [...] The baby [...] can recognise itself in the mirror. [...] The baby sees its own image as whole, and the synthesis of this image produces a sense of contrast with the uncoordination of the body, which is experienced as a *fragmented* body. [...] The moment of identification, when the subject assumes its image as its own, is described by Lacan as a *moment of jubilation*, since it leads to an imaginary sense of mastery.⁴⁷

(emphasis mine)

I should add that for Lacan, the ego and the specular image are interchangeable. I believe that the first reunion scene can successfully be read in the light of this specific moment of ego formation: the mirror stage. The parallels may be obvious but I will list them. Ami and his companion are like the ego and its specular image, so identical that they are literally interchangeable and they experience a feeling of completion or coordination when they finally meet. Finally, I have already illustrated in the citation above their jubilation as they meet.

⁴⁷ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996) p. 115-6.

What we are presented with here is a total identification in both of the two meanings of the word: on the one hand, the realisation of a perfect and uncanny physical resemblance that completes the already identical personal histories and sound-alike names; on the other hand, immediate recognition of one character by the other. I should point out that this identification, followed by the expected *illusion* of wholeness that the phase entails⁴⁸, evokes the Neo-Platonic idea that we were once whole and will spend the rest of our lives trying to go back to that state of completeness⁴⁹. Because Ami and Amile have reached this blissful state, the rest of their lives will logically consist of a perpetual defence of this *miraculously* achieved (sense of) unity. The dreamlike, imaginary meadow where they meet for the first and following times, always situated half way between the protagonists seeking reunion, is therefore comparable to the place of captation where Ami and Amile become like the interchangeable ego and specular image to one another. Their immeasurable happiness at seeing one another is construed as the satisfaction

⁴⁸ Here too, part of the surprise comes from the fact that the search for the other half does not involve a male-female couple. The well-known story of *Floire et Blanchfleur* would be a more conventional example of the same situation since in this case too, as Flore Alexander has explained, 'identification is such that [Floire and Blanchfleur's] love becomes, in effect, a search for the missing part of one's self.' See Flora Alexander, 'Women as Lovers in Early English Romance' in *Woman and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, 2nd edn, ed. by Carol Meale (Cambridge: University Press, 1996) pp. 24-40 (p.30).

⁴⁹ See Jacques Ribard, '*Ami et Amile: une œuvre-carrefour*' in *Actes du XIe Congrès international de la Société Rencesvals* (Barcelone, 22-27/08/1988) Real Academia de Buenas Letras, (1990), 155-169 (p.169). Finn Sinclair makes a similar point using Jean Baudrillard's *Impossible Exchange*: 'The image of the twin, or double, is here extended from a kind of magical fascination with the uncanny to represent the innate human desire for a cohesion and synthesis that would bring about the annihilation of the individual'; Finn E. Sinclair, 'The Imaginary Body: Framing Identity in *Ami et Amile*', *Neophilologus*, 92 (2008), 193-204 (p.195).

derived from witnessing a sought after wholeness that hides the *fragmented* state of their being, that is to say, the fact that they are two. The fact that no one can tell them apart, as the narrator repeatedly remarks, illustrates as well as conveys that illusion of wholeness. This moment of identification corresponds to the moment of jubilation described by Evans and the kisses and embraces they exchange are charged with an erotic value that their names prefigured (the word *ami* referring to the lover in OF). All of these elements would seem to point towards a narcissistic relationship. Such a relationship is characterised by, on the one hand, an erotic attraction to the specular image and, on the other hand, a certain aggressivity, since the threat of disintegration always lurks in the background. As we shall see, both aspects are defining factors of the heroes' relationship: indeed, reunions and partings are always very emotional in this text and aggressivity, when it does not altogether break out, never lies far beneath the surface of the narrative.

Now that the narcissistic nature of the protagonists' love for one another has been established, let us turn to its twofold consequences. The first observable consequence is a rather undeserved yet uncontested praise of the heroes' qualities. As Thomas Vesce rightly points out in his discussion on the epic quality of *Ami et Amile*, there is not much evidence for the heroes'

prowess or courtesy in the text⁵⁰. In other words, the ego-like structure of their relationship induces a not altogether justifiable overrating of their virtues⁵¹. This disproportionate praise is tightly entangled with the second corollary effect of Ami and Amile's narcissistic relationship, which is the *paranoid* turning of the other characters into genuinely bad, dangerous entities. In a sense, they will conveniently serve as well needed foils and the heroes' so-called perfection will make those who 'oppose' them appear even worse in return. It also follows that no matter what Ami and Amile do, however reprehensible the deed, atonement will always be found since it is not possible for the ego to tolerate an unflattering reflection of itself⁵². In the end, the fact that the extraordinariness of their bond makes it necessary for them to defend it at all costs makes sense. It will be the paranoid driving force in the narrative.

⁵⁰ Thomas E. Vesce, 'Reflections on the Epic Quality of *Ami et Amile*, Chanson de Geste', *Mediaeval Studies*, 35 (1973), 129-145 (pp. 134-5). Vesce's views tend to echo Jacques Ribard's, who states that *Ami et Amile* is a '*fausse chanson de geste*' in '*Ami et Amile: une œuvre-carrefour*' (p.155).

⁵¹ In Calin's words, 'rather than that the hero be considered good because he conforms to given standards, his actions are proved because it is he who commits them. In other words, right and wrong are determined not with reference to a moral code but by the hero himself' (*The Epic Quest*, p.87). I only disagree with Calin in that there *is* a form of moral code in the text. It is a code of extreme friendship, which will be discussed shortly.

⁵² Interestingly, this idea is found in some love stories as well, especially in the narratives that include the eaten heart motif. Simon Gaunt refers to the eaten heart stories as tales 'where acts that are incontrovertibly sinful within a Christian framework are viewed as redemptive and positively valued, leading to a form of profane sanctity.' In Gaunt, *Love and Death in Medieval French and Occitan Courtly Literature: Martyrs to Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) p.208-9.

In the idyllic meadow Ami and Amile swear eternal friendship to each other before going to Charlemagne's court. There trouble begins as they come across people who do not understand their private bond. Hardré is, in this sense, the first victim of their paranoia. He seeks their company but, rejected and jealous of their closeness, he plots against them and is defeated. When his treacherousness is exposed to Charlemagne and the heroes he offers his niece Lubias to Amile to keep things quiet and preserve his honour. Amile suggests she should be given to Ami to reward his qualities on the battlefield. Ami accepts and marries Lubias in Blaye. In Paris, Charlemagne's daughter Belissant falls in love with Amile and is repulsed by him on two occasions. One night, the determined young woman slips into his bed; in the dark Amile believes that she is only a chambermaid and he lets himself be seduced before Hardré hears and denounces them. The immediate consequence is Charlemagne's proposal of a trial by combat, which Amile cannot possibly win since he is clearly in the wrong. Amile's reaction epitomises the pair's resolute rejection of the Other, of order, since he decides to cheat with the help of his companion⁵³. Confident that his good friend will agree to a substitution, he promptly leaves the court to ask for his help. The same day Ami leaves his residence as well, alerted by a vivid dream⁵⁴ in which Amile

⁵³ Let us not forget that 'for medieval society the oath was the cornerstone of civilization' as Emanuel Mickel rightly stresses in his article 'The Question of Guilt in *Ami et Amile*', *Romania*, 106 (1985), 19-35 (p.24).

⁵⁴ In the light of my comparison of Ami and Amile with the ego and its specular image, it is interesting to draw attention to this specific moment in the story, where the men

was battling courageously with a lion and was up to his spurs in blood. Ami comes to his rescue and decapitates the evil lion, called Hardré. Ami and Amile meet again in the meadow and upon hearing what situation his friend has put himself in, Ami suggests a substitution. He goes to Paris and dishonestly manipulates Hardré's charge so that technically he will not be lying⁵⁵. This technicality in fact allows him to 'rightfully' decapitate Hardré in single combat. However, the trickster is tricked when he is consequently offered Belissant by Charlemagne. And so he swears on relics to marry her. After Ami displays so much dishonesty an angel comes down from heaven, sits on his shoulder and tells him:

Di va, Ami, com te voit nonsaichant!
 Tu preiz fame as los de tes parans
 Que n'a plus bele chevaliers ne serjans.
 Hui jures autre, Deu en poise forment.
 Moult grans martyres de ta char t'en atent :
 Tu seras ladres et meziaus ausiment,
 Ne te parront oil ne bouche ne dent,
 Ja n'i avraz aide d'ami ne de parent
 Fors d'Ysoré et d'Amile le gent.

ll.1812-20

[Well, Ami! How senseless you are! You have a wife, whom you took with the consent of your kin, and no knight or warrior has one more beautiful. Yet today you are pledging your word to another, and God is sorely grieved. Affliction and torment of the flesh will be your

communicate by telepathy. Darian Leader has pointed out that 'the motifs of mirrored images, telepathic communication [...] and external persecution so common in paranoia may be understood as fundamental building blocks in the constitution of the ego. [...] The truth of the ego emerges precisely in madness [here, paranoia] [...] where the difference between self and other is radically put in question.' Leader, p.28. Leader's words describe very accurately the situation experienced by the two protagonists, as this chapter will show.

⁵⁵ This technicality matters greatly as it shows that the protagonist holds the system in contempt. For the importance of accuracy in medieval trials, see Mickel's article 'The question of guilt' p.24-5. Mickel also argues that 'the situation required them to go beyond the law to serve a higher code of morality' p.28. This morality is their seamless relationship.

lot; you will be a loathsome leper; your eyes will dim and teeth drop out. And from neither kith nor kin will you have any help, save from the pope Ysoret and kind Amile.]

The angel's words are performative: they will very soon materialise for the young man the disaster the angel has painted. Ami disregards the message but the actual, visible illness soon follows. Ami is aware that he is committing the sin of bigamy and already expects due punishment before the angel addresses him, yet he does not think twice and unwillingly marries a second time, ready to endure harsh punishment. His answer to the angel attests to this:

Je n'en puis mais, bonne chose, va t'en.
 La moie char, quant tu weuls, si la prent
 Et si en fai del tout a ton conmant. ll.1821-3

[There is nothing more I can do, good creature; be off now. Take my flesh whenever you will, and whatever you inflict I will accept.]

I would argue that Ami's conscience, his deliberate, resolute, dismissal of the direct effects of his act upon himself, is nothing less than compliant self-destruction. This, as we know, is extensively encountered in hagiography, when martyrs rather arrogantly show contempt for torture to come, remaining focused on the higher purpose of their gesture⁵⁶. Of course, it should be pointed out here that there is something inherently self-destructive

⁵⁶ Almost any saint's life could illustrate this point. Jacques de Voragine's life of St Agatha (in modern French translation) is a good example. She replies to Quintien's threats thus: 'si tu m'infliges plaies et tortures, je possède en moi le Saint-Esprit par la puissance duquel je méprise tout' (if you hurt and torture me, I despise all through the power of the Holy Spirit that I hold within myself) in *Jacques de Voragine, La Légende dorée, Volume 1* translated by J.-B. M. Roze with a chronology and notes by Hervé Savon (Paris : Garnier-Flammarion) p.201.

about orthodox Christianity, with its variety of mortifications and refusal of sexuality. This does not make Ami a martyr though: first, he is suffering for the wrong reason, that is to say, not for the sake of Christianity⁵⁷; second, he is not tortured by a man but is punished by God; and thirdly, martyrdom is always public because it is meant to serve as an example. Thus secrecy is another problem since Ami's 'good deed' is kept secret for the wrong reasons, that is not out of humility⁵⁸ but because it is not in the heroes' interest to unveil the trickery. Despite these fundamental differences, the frame of mind is comparable. The angel's admonitions have no impact on Ami despite the fact that they depict a frightful future for him, promising an ultimately unenviable position in medieval society — not to mention the terrible physical suffering and diminution involved that jeopardises the resemblance of the two friends.

This last point, of course, has larger theoretical implications in that a threat to the protagonists' resemblance is also a threat to the ego-specular image relation that *conceals* fragmentation and allows the dyad to appear as a

⁵⁷ Suffering for the 'wrong reason' is also a prominent aspect in the OF *Florence de Rome*, where the protagonist is persecuted not because of her faith but because she wants to remain a virgin for her very earthly husband. This will be discussed at length in the third chapter.

⁵⁸ As in the case of the ME *Le bone Florence of Rome* where the heroine wishes to keep her healing powers secret. Likewise, the eponymous hero of *Robert le Diable* does his utmost to conceal his good deeds.

whole and coherent one⁵⁹. In other words, Ami and Amile's friendship is based on a very precious fallacy that estranges everyone outside it. One of the main traits of dual relations, as theorised by Lacan, is the fact that they are characterised by *illusions* of similarity, symmetry and reciprocity, which are the constituents of the Ami-Amile dyad and, importantly for our purpose, locate it in the imaginary. In Lacan's psychoanalysis, what is referred to as 'the imaginary' is one of Lacan's three orders, concisely defined by Elizabeth Wright thus:

The imaginary stems from the first identifications the child makes in the mirror stage, in which it patterns its ego upon an imaginary counterpart that appears to offer the *unity, cohesion* and *integrity* that is never to be attained by the ego. The imaginary is therefore *essentially narcissistic*, and thus contains a recurrently aggressive element that shows itself each time the subject discovers itself to be fragmentary and not whole.⁶⁰ (emphasis mine)

And, one should add, each time something or someone imperils the imaginary wholeness. This is the very stuff that the protagonists' seamless union is made of. Wright's definition clarifies the reasons why a relationship based in the imaginary cannot tolerate any threats, a category which anyone outside the dyad inevitably represents⁶¹. Ami and Amile simply cannot

⁵⁹ In this sense, the ego-specular image relation can be said to be 'constituted by an *alienating* identification based on an initial lack of completeness' (emphasis mine). Leader, p. 23.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Wright, *Lacan and Postfeminism* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2000) p. 68.

⁶¹ Simon Gaunt came to a similar conclusion while stressing the tendency of the *chanson de geste* to reject women: 'because the texts also draw on a strong and pervasive myth of brotherhood, of the unity of the masculine, they attempt to produce what I shall call a "monologic" construction of gender, a model which has *difficulty in tolerating difference* and which therefore engages in an *obsessional*, but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to *repress* and

afford to let anyone threaten such a perfect unity, one that brings so much satisfaction. They are bound to be more than distrustful of anyone who attempts to breach the carefully erected and protected walls that shield their relationship. This definition also clarifies why the ego is said to have a paranoid structure. It is my contention here that the protection of the imaginary wholeness, of the unity of the alienated dyad and the subsequent rejection of the O/other, shape the narrative and lend it a paranoid structure comparable to that of the ego. I would now like to address the effect of this statement on the narrative, to show how the analysis of the exclusivity of Ami and Amile's bond can lead to a new understanding of the text and especially of one character, Ami's wife Lubias, a hitherto uncontested representation of malign femininity.

III EGO AND RATIONALISATION: THE EXAMPLE OF HARDRÉ

Leprosy may be, in effect, the most serious threat of literal and figurative disintegration in this text but it turns out that it is actually the 'other', invariably conceived of as an intruder, who is consistently converted into the very real menace here. It is this type of direct yet complex threat and the reactions it demands that I wish to explore now and I believe that Hardré illustrates this phenomenon very well. This character is a very good example

marginalise alterity' (my emphasis). Gaunt, *Gender*, p.23. Unlike Gaunt however, I think that Ami and Amile are exceptionally good at repressing alterity, as this chapter shows.

of the other as danger: a danger that needs to be isolated by the ego and rationalised, turned into an unambiguously evil character so as not to perturb the functioning of the ego. This is a technique that hagiographers are very familiar with, as the example of St Agnes will illustrate⁶²: the young Agnes, loved by the prefect's son, arrogantly spurns him on the grounds that her fiancé is much more worthy and rich than the young man will ever be. Serious love-sickness seizes him and his worried father consequently pays a visit to Agnes, hoping to arouse some compassion for his son. Scornful Agnes rejects both his offers (wealth and honour attached to marriage with his son and then the possibility to remain a virgin if in a pagan context) and the father, who had thus far been understanding, turns into an evil and ruthless torturer without warning. This is the only way to make sense of his character without starting to question the young saint's original scorn. As a result, Agnes' valour is increased by her insightfulness as well as her ability to reveal the real personality of the young man's father, whose plight we might otherwise have sympathised with. No hagiographer can take such a risk and I believe that the same applies to the author of *Ami et Amile*. Agnes' exclusive relation to God, the fact that she calls herself his bride and harshly debases the prefect's son is bound, if not designed, to provoke jealousy and desire. Ami and Amile's exclusive relationship and their refusal to be friends with anyone at all generates the same kind of antagonism. In this text at least, it seems that

⁶² Roze, *Jacques de Voragine*, pp.140-4.

all Hardré desires is to have a share in their friendship, a very natural reaction: he only desires what is desired by another, something he cannot have. The problem is that Hardré is asking a two-sided relationship to turn into a triad and inevitably, 'trying to triangulate, to introduce an 'outside' into a dyadic relationship leads to a psychotic break'⁶³.

What can be the narrative equivalent of a psychotic break? I suggest that the various instances of violence in the text be regarded as the result of the triggering of psychosis by a character who endeavours to triangulate. Such psychotic breaks, Bruce Fink explains, can also happen without an actual encounter, when a man is called upon to occupy a symbolic role, such as a social or political role⁶⁴. Therefore, when the protagonists are at court, when they marry or when Amile is a father, psychosis is sparked off by the threat of triangulation, which would disturb the heroes' alienating cosmology. In Lacanian terminology, the threat consists in trying to make the heroes' relationship move from the imaginary to the symbolic order. However, the symbolic order is the realm of absolute non-reciprocity and is characterised by triads since it comprises an Other that mediates all imaginary dual

⁶³ Bruce Fink, *Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 1997) p.104. Please note that Lacan identifies three different clinical structures — neurosis, perversion and psychosis — and that paranoia is a type of the latter.

⁶⁴ Bruce Fink, *Clinical Introduction* p.106.

relations⁶⁵. In other words, what is missing in the men's world is a third party that would be recognised by Ami and Amile and placed into an authoritative position. The problem is that everyone wishes, yet fails, to occupy that symbolic space for them: Belissant's determination to seduce Amile makes her deceitful and therefore a danger for the dyad, despite her oath.⁶⁶ Charlemagne, who proves very gullible on several occasions and who is deceived by almost every character, cannot embody that third party either. As for Hardré, he has no chance of succeeding for two reasons⁶⁷. First of all, his approach, suggesting the possibility of pecuniary advancement via companionship with him, cannot possibly appeal to Amile, who is already engaged in the most intense narcissistic relationship. Secondly, because by the time he offers companionship to Amile the heroes have already made a pledge to each other. As this does not seem to be the most valid reason to reject Hardré altogether, I would argue that he has to be turned into⁶⁸ the

⁶⁵ Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary*, p.49.

⁶⁶ As Belissant marries, she is made to swear:

Voz jurrerez orendroit a bandon

Que [...]

Ne antr'euls douz ne meteréz tanson.

— Sire, dist elle, volentiers le jurronz :

Si m'aït Dex et li saint qui ci sont,

Que [...]

Ne entr'euls douz ne mouvrai ja tanson. ll.1831-9

[You will swear of your own free will that you will never sow discord between them two. Lord, she said, I shall gladly swear. Never shall I cause discord between them.]

⁶⁷ It also seems that the weight of history was against Hardré. In *The epic quest*, William Calin states that 'we know now that [Hardré] has a historical prototype, a certain Hardracus who tried to kill Charlemagne in 785' in *The Epic Quest*, p.77.

⁶⁸ I really want to stress the verb 'to turn into' as this is a deliberate process that the author needs to engage in. Interestingly, François Suard may have perceived this process too since he writes about Hardré that 'situé dans une perspective religieuse, [il] devient une figure

most vicious character so that his dismissal finds a more acceptable narrative justification⁶⁹. In other words, making every character who tries to disturb the dyad indisputably bad is a narrative necessity in *Ami et Amile*: the sole desire for a tripartite relationship is not a crime in itself but is definitely one in the logic of the very vigilant ego, as well as in that of the narrative.

Since he cannot be integrated into the dyad or separate the ego from the specular image by slipping between them, Hardré attempts to kill Ami and Amile. Their inseparability shines through notwithstanding Hardré's efforts as he prepares an ambush in which the two men should die: if everything goes according to plan, Ami and Amile will die in the same place, at the same time, that is, once again, together. Despite himself, Hardré works towards further alienation for the dyad by unwillingly programming the protagonists' ultimate and eternal union. It is also worth noting that in planning their simultaneous deaths he is also reinforcing the protagonists' interchangeability. He does not hope to replace one in the eyes of the other and he has, so to speak, no preference for Ami or Amile but would rather they were both dead. Their identity is a matter of indifference to him because

diabolique' (my emphasis) in 'Le merveilleux et le religieux dans *Ami et Amile*' in *De l'étranger à l'étrange ou la conjointure de la merveille (en hommage à M. Rossi et P. Bancourt)* Senefiance 25 (1988), 451-62 (p.453).

⁶⁹ Such narrative justification must be paralleled with Bruce Fink's explanation that 'ego thinking is mere conscious rationalization.' Ami and Amile do function, as a pair, just like the ego. Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1995) p.44.

there is no such thing as an identity for each of them. The individual characters in *Ami et Amile* are not particularly well developed, a fact that can be related to the admitted genre of the text⁷⁰ (*chanson de geste*) and to hagiography⁷¹ as well. This absence of differentiation still interestingly emphasises their similitude and its corollary effects on the narrative structure of the text.

Hardré's final attempt at exiling one half of the dyad from the other takes the form of the ordeal where he fights against Ami, thinking like the rest of the spectators that he is Amile. Here again, the protagonists' interchangeability is highlighted and enhances their unity. Hardré's defeat,

⁷⁰ Provided, of course, that one agrees that the text is a *chanson de geste*, itself a very problematic assertion. What can be said for certain is that if the text cannot be regarded as a *chanson de geste* in the same way as *La chanson de Roland* for example, it still has some of this genre's characteristics (its metric form and the prominence of a bond between men as central theme) and minimal character development is another of those traits.

⁷¹ Character development in saints' lives is rather limited too. Hervé Savon, author of the introduction to the modern French translation of the *Golden Legend*, emphasises 'la faible individualisation des différents personnages dont la vie nous est contée' and further adds: 'ce qui apparaît dans la *Légende dorée*, c'est le type ou, si l'on veut, l'idée du martyr. Les nuances individuelles, les différences psychologiques sont inexistantes' (in Roze, *Jacques de Voragine, La Légende dorée, volume 1*, pp. 8 and 14). Calin's words when he writes about Ami and Amile are strikingly similar: 'although the villains Hardré and Lubias are endowed with a relatively complex psychology, the heroes are not. [...] They are presented in stylized fashion, as exemplary figures typifying virtues that medieval society considered important. They appear as models to be imitated by all men' (p.92). Calin's last sentence is surprising since Ami and Amile are fundamentally dishonest. In fact, I think that it reflects Calin's manipulation *by* the text. Calin's chapter repeatedly shows how its author succumbed to the heroes' paranoid charm. Unlike Vesce, Calin cannot see through the men's undeserved praise. Calin, incredibly, states that 'they love other people too: their wives, their children, their servants, their lord the king. They love and honour abstract concepts and devote their lives to them: public service, law and order, the defence of ladies in distress, secular justice, God's will' (p.95). This chapter demonstrates that this is just a fallacy and evidence of the success of narrative rationalisation.

so unjust on a moral level⁷² (because he tells the truth whereas the protagonists are tricksters), is justified by the fact that he poses a terrible and even more vivid menace to their wholeness, since the injuries he tries to inflict on his opponent directly threaten Ami's physical integrity. His spectacular defeat is a powerful celebration of their victorious and invincible unity. Yet it remains problematic: the narrator needs to make Hardré overtly extol deceitfulness at the end of the first day of the duel and decide to fight in the devil's name on the second day to assure a decent justification for Ami's victory. This is what I mean by the paranoid structure of the narrative: although a character is not in the wrong, he or she is made to appear viler in order to substantiate his or her dismissal by the central couple. In *Ami et Amile*, the degrading of Hardré can find one outcome only: the physical dismantlement of the peril that he embodied. Significantly, he first loses his ear (it was hearing Amile and Belissant that triggered this episode) and then his head, that is, the locus of many conspiracies against the protagonists, the place where an Other attempted to emerge and triangulate the inviolable dyad.

⁷² It is also important to underline that Hardré, the one who does respect feudal order, i.e. the Other, by denouncing Amile (who abuses the Emperor), is the one who is punished.

IV THE FEMININE THREAT

Lubias and Belissant, the two women in the text, turn out to pose a very similar threat to the wholeness of the heroes' relationship, so they too are subjected to paranoid rationalisation⁷³. Although Belissant is treated with more respect than Lubias, she too faces repeated rejection and only comes close to her goal through deceit and with the most catastrophic consequences for the dyad. In one sense she proves far more dangerous than Lubias but it might be said that she finds atonement for her behaviour through its passionate origins. Belissant loves Amile but when she offers herself to him he repeatedly repels her on the grounds that she is Charlemagne's daughter. She is too high on the social ladder as well as effectively belonging to his feudal lord⁷⁴. Although he agrees to serve her, Belissant, dissatisfied with that compromise, subsequently resorts to deceitful methods to try and possess Amile against his will. Belissant's overwhelming passion is not wrong in

⁷³ On the subject of Lubias and Bellisant, see: William Calin, 'Women and their Sexuality in *Ami et Amile*', *Olifant*, 16 (1991) pp.71-89; Kimberlee Anne Campbell, 'Fighting Back: A survey of patterns of female aggressiveness in the Old French Chanson de Geste', in *Charlemagne in the North: Proceedings of the Twelfth International Conference of the Société Rencesvals* (1992), pp.241-51; Sarah Kay, 'La représentation de la féminité dans les chansons de geste', in *Charlemagne in the North : Proceedings of the Twelfth International Conference of the Société Rencesvals*, ed. by Philip E. Bennett, Anne Elizabeth Cobby and Graham A. Runnalls (Edinburgh: Société Rencesvals, British Branch, 1993), pp.223-40; Michel Zink, 'Lubias et Belissent dans la chanson d'*Ami et Amile*' in *8 Congresso de la Société Rencesvals* (Pamplona, 1981) pp.567-74. See also: Jane E. Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); Sara S. Poor and Jana K. Schulman, eds., *Women and Medieval Epic: Gender, Genre, and the Limits of Epic Masculinity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

⁷⁴ The latter excuse is particularly poor: after all, Amile will not hesitate to deceive Charlemagne in order to save his life by having Ami fight Hardré in his stead in the trial by combat.

itself and is rather understandable since Amile is very much praised at court. However it is tarnished by her unreasonable pursuit of his favours and its dramatic aftermath. It is the consequences of her act, spiralling out of control, that make her deed reprehensible. Her deceitful seduction of the protagonist turns out to be the most potent destructive incident in the text: it leads to a duel in which Amile should lose his life, in which Ami risks his and for which he is severely punished — the punishment itself being the most serious threat to the dual relationship. First of all, it brandishes the spectre of potential death, or the ultimate and irreversible separation. Second and perhaps more importantly, it involves an annihilation of the protagonists' physical resemblance through leprosy — and let us not forget that the basis for the ego-like structure of the couple is this uncanny resemblance. The passage relating the afflicted Ami's arrival at Riviers, where Amile lives, illustrates this point particularly well. After Lubias expels him from their home, Ami has found refuge for some time with his godfather the pope, who eventually dies. This forces Ami to wander for some time with the two slaves Lubias gave him until he reaches Riviers, where he hopes to ask for Amile's help. They do not recognise each other on meeting, a striking detail considering their mutual recognition at first sight at the very beginning of the text. What is noteworthy is that if it makes sense for Amile not to recognise his leprous friend, Ami's failure to identify Amile does not. Indeed it is only his cup, metonymy of their former identicalness, which enables the heroes to identify

one another. The implication of this painful scene is that Ami's affliction has become more than just his illness insofar as it has shattered the heroes' resemblance to such an extent that the specular image is specular no longer⁷⁵. The permanence of the structural foundation of their relationship now depends on a mere external, material object, however symbolically charged. The dyad has never been so close to disintegration.

None of this is foreseeable by the time Ami departs from Charlemagne's court to settle down in Blaye with Lubias and yet he lets paranoia manifest itself in his premonitory warning. After alluding to their pledge, he alerts Amile of the perils of Hardré's company before promptly adding:

La fille Charle ne voz chaut a amer
 Ne embracier ses flans ne ses costéz,
 Car puis que fame fait home
 acuverter,
 Et pere et mere li fait entr'oublier, ll.566-70
 Couzins et freres et ses amis charnéz ;

[As for Charles' daughter, do not concern yourself with loving her or taking her in your arms. For once a woman has made a man her slave, she makes him forget father and mother, cousins and brothers, and his closest friends.]

⁷⁵ This episode is also reminiscent of the walk to Emmaus as described by St. Luke, chapter 24. Luke describes how a resurrected Christ appears to two disciples who cannot recognise him. When they later understand who He was, they also understand that their faith was being tested. The scene in *Ami et Amile* likewise shows the strain on the companions' relationship to each other.

Woman is clearly identified as a direct menace that must be avoided at all costs. The passionate yet treacherous Belissant is therefore already labelled as a peril and defeated before there is any reason to do so. Even at the end of the text, when it may seem that she is accepted by the friends, evidence is found that she never was and never will be. When the heroes leave Riviers for Blaye and then Jerusalem, Belissant is only told that Amile will return before long, when in actual fact ‘moult grant chose remest de son panser,/ Nel verra mais la damme’⁷⁶ (l.3292-3). Belissant is other and remains so until the end.

In the case of Lubias, being a member of Hardré’s family is already a guarantee that she will automatically be victimised by the ego-like couple and regarded as genuinely evil.⁷⁷ Here this predictably translates as an attempt to annihilate the heroes’ relationship by seduction, separation or even death. The narrator is very clear in that respect:

S’elle onques puet, el le cunchiera,
 Les amistiés d’Amile li tordra,
 Mais Dammeldex, seignor, l’en gardera,
 Car moult est saiges contes. ll.494-7

[If ever she can, she will shame him, she will rob him of the friendship of Amile. But God won’t let her, my lords, for count Amile is a man of great sense.]

⁷⁶ This translates as: There is much that he does not disclose. The lady will never see him again.

⁷⁷ Peter Dembowski, explains that ‘Dans l’épopée française du Moyen Age le mal existe tel quel, inexpliqué ou inexplicable, sauf par lui-même : les mauvais ne sont mauvais que parce qu’ils descendent des mauvais. Le mal vient aussi des profondeurs de l’héritité.’ in Peter F. Dembowski, ‘*Ami et Amile* : Une chanson de geste’, in ‘*Ami et Amile*’ : *Une chanson de geste de l’amitié*, ed. by Jean Dufournet (Paris: Champion, 1987), pp.7-14 (p.13)

Later in the text Lubias can be regarded as a malevolent character: when Ami is struck with leprosy as a punishment for marrying twice (Lubias, then Belissant in Amile's stead) she proves very cruel towards her husband, rejects him completely and even tries to get the bishop to dissolve their marriage. She lets Ami suffer from hunger and goes so far as to have her own son thrown into jail for taking care of his father. Yet at this stage, the narrator's allegations are still totally incomprehensible: so far, all we know about Lubias is that she was quietly sitting under a pine tree when she was taken to church and married off without any form of discussion. Apart from the obvious pleasure this union causes in her family there is no record of her reaction and the next thing we know is that she soon becomes quarrelsome. Significantly, the examples of Lubias' hostility that the narrator chooses to give us all display a form of aggressivity towards Amile. This is clearly an early example of paranoid rationalisation: the wholeness of the heroes' couple is endangered and Lubias is, unwittingly at first, the image of that threat. A few lines after her wedding to Ami is evoked, she alleges that Amile regrets having given her to his friend and has attempted to seduce her. In fact, I would argue that Lubias is hopelessly struggling to create a space for herself in the dual relationship and that her only option is slander — or rather something else that we are supposed to read as slander and that I will elucidate shortly. However clear-cut her portrait seems to be, there are a number of elements that betray its problematic rationalisation and that unveil

its alienating process. For instance, it soon appears that her accusations are not always unfounded, even if they seem purely and simply malevolent to everyone. Not only are they not unfounded but they can be given a very reasonable twofold explanation.

First of all, I should point to the fact that, like Hardré, Lubias does not distinguish between the two men; this should be welcome because it stresses and reinforces Ami and Amile's unity. The difference is that Lubias is involved with the men, even if she did not choose to be. She will therefore pay the price for finding herself in their way. Naturally, just as the saint is implicitly envied his special, intimate relationship with God, 'the object of Lubias' seduction is not Ami in himself, but in his relationship to Amile.'⁷⁸ However, when Lubias starts putting words onto this confusion, when she *symbolises* what used to be implicit, she is rebuked and blamed for the slander, slander that always takes the shape of sexual calumnies. She fantasises Amile's desire for her as well as Ami's desire for Belissant as if they were all interchangeable and the point is that they actually are. Everything indicates the prospect, the likelihood and the actuality of the substitution; her allegations are the verbalisation of the authentic exchanges of which she has been the object. Lubias herself passed from Amile to Ami (laisse 28) and is

⁷⁸ Sarah Kay, 'Seduction and Suppression in *Ami et Amile*', *French Studies*, 44 (1990), 129-142 (p.132).

now menacing a bond she unwillingly confirmed⁷⁹. Ami marries Belissant in Amile's place while the latter is at home with Lubias, who has not noticed that he is not Ami; this same Ami whom Belissant cannot tell apart from her husband once he is cured. In other words, exchanges did take place but they were carefully framed within feudal practice and friendship vows or, in psychoanalytic terms, fitted into the psychotic image the ego had formed of itself. My point is that Lubias denounces interchangeability, sees the real implications of these exchanges and symbolises them, as if she could see beyond them to the actual state of things. As Sarah Kay put it 'the affront she alleges against him [Amile] (having her coat interfered with) is insignificant compared to the outrage he is currently perpetrating against her as he lies beside her *nu a nu*. Lubias' indignation is better founded than she knows.'⁸⁰ Exchanges take place but are not meant to be exposed at all. However, because Lubias puts words onto them, guesses their existence, she faces accusations of gratuitous wickedness because of the apparent incoherence of her discourse. Indeed Lubias mixes incredibly perceptive statements and shameless lies in a rather confusing manner that illustrates the narrator's own uncertainty and lets us catch glimpses of paranoid rationalisation at play. Despite himself, the narrator depicts a very ambiguous Lubias. Sometimes loving, often cruel, unknowingly telling the truth, shamelessly accusing,

⁷⁹ Kay, 'Seduction', p.132

⁸⁰ Kay, 'Seduction', p.138.

Lubias lives in an aggressive fantasy. As a result, what she says is denied her whether it is true or not and the difference does not even matter. Her allegations prove that Lubias is unable to distinguish between the two men. In other words, she plays the game of Ami and Amile's uncanny similitude and falls victim to this very game.

If Lubias' situation and attitude are comparable to Hardré's — 'seducers' operating in like fashion —, they nevertheless differ from his because from the outside it would seem that Lubias does possess Ami. Ami attests to his love for her on several occasions and their clearly stated sexual appetite for one another should prove sufficient. Moreover they are lawfully married, although this points to her belonging to him rather than the opposite. From what we know about the functioning of desire, Lubias' desire for Ami would seem nonsensical: how could she desire something she already has? How can the foolish woman hope for the ultimate and totally impossible to give evidence of his love for her? In actual fact, we notice that Ami is away from her for stretches of time amounting to seven years (*laisse* 33). It is also clear that he is physically violent towards her: upon departing to Paris to fight Hardré, Ami recommends that Amile should beat Lubias should she say anything arrogant or false (l.1068-9) and Amile obliges. All along a parallel reading is possible that reveals the abuse Lubias is undergoing and at

times even indicates her harsh sufferings, as the following passage, relating

Amile's arrival at Blaye, shows:

Et Lubias fors de la tor issi,
 Bien reconnut les chevaliers de pris
 Et la maisnie que ses peres norri.
 Enz en son cuer forment s'en esjoï,
 Encontre vint desoz l'ombre d'un pin.
 L'espee Amile vait elle recoillir.
 Li ber la voit, d'autre part se guenchi.
 Voit le la damme, dou sens cuida issir.
 'Sire, dist elle, moul m'avéz enpor vil'.

ll.1117-25

[Lubias came forward from the tower; she recognised the valorous knights and all the men of her father's house. In her heart she was full of cheer. She came to meet them in the shade of a pine tree and asked to receive Amile's sword. But noble Amile saw her and turned away. At that, the lady thought she would lose her senses. 'Lord,' she said, 'you are treating me with contempt.']

Rejected without further explanation, Lubias is treated with equally unjustifiable contempt on several instances without arousing much compassion. I would therefore agree with Thomas Vesce when he excuses

Lubias' behaviour:

It would seem that there are real psychological grounds for the contemptuous actions Lubias will be guilty of against her spouse. Unfortunately however, the poet is not inclined to make her into an object of sympathy. Instead, he treats her simply as a member of a treacherous clan from which better is not to be expected. Since the poet has no interest in 'fleshing on' [sic] her character, Lubias stays on the level of the stock type: a shrewish wife and a merciless mother who will be put away finally and barely tolerated by those around her. In all, the poet's portrayal of Lubias as a questionable bagatelle at the mercy of her men-folk strongly speaks against any attempt to invest the poem with courtesy.⁸¹

⁸¹ Vesce, 'Reflections', p.140.

However it should be clear by now that Lubias is not a stock character at all but a very ambivalent one, sometimes also described in an unexpectedly positive light, by Ami himself (laises 88 and 168) and even by the angel that comes down to announce his future leprosy (laisse 90). She is not well thought of though, on the grounds that she endeavours to create a space for herself. By complaining about the sword Amile places between them as he replaces Ami, (a sword that connotes knighthood and the male companions, as Sarah Kay points out) Lubias struggles against a relationship 'clearly perceived [...] as a rival between herself and her husband'⁸². In a word, there is not any room for a true two-way relationship between Ami and Lubias and, as I explained earlier, a triad is definitely out of the question. Lubias is irrevocably other yet fails to become an Other for Ami and Amile and has to be violently rejected despite her legitimate claims.

In spite of her efforts Lubias cannot possess Ami and falls prey to her desire for a man she cannot truly have. Functioning in this sense very much like a Lacanian drive⁸³, she circles around him, shows and tries to arouse jealousy without ever approaching him close enough (or, if she comes too near, her presence activates paranoia at once). Left aside, she repulses Ami and shames him as soon as he becomes ill. Finally, she is left behind, like the

⁸² Kay, 'Seduction', p.137.

⁸³ This term is discussed in more detail further in this chapter.

more respectable Belissant, when Ami and Amile go to Jerusalem, never to be seen again — thus showing that a woman's actions are unimportant in the end. Lubias and Belissant: the nature and seriousness of the threat are not an issue here; what is relevant is the character's irretrievable otherness, her totally irreconcilable quality in a cosmology that denies the void that is desire. This absence of desire is tangible in the fact that neither of the men woos any woman, their wives are imposed upon them or impose themselves upon them⁸⁴. This situation stems from the existence of a vow of exclusivity that supersedes absolutely everything else⁸⁵ and that only ratifies a pre-existing situation. As I explained at the beginning of this chapter, Ami and Amile have attained a miraculous state of bliss: each one sensed that something was missing, and that that something was no less than each other's other half. However with the definite and illusory filling up of the anxiety-producing void Ami and Amile revert to the imaginary (the realm of narcissistic love, dyads and the ego) for good. A narrative incarnation of the ego, the pact that protects their wholeness also indicates the disappearance of lack of any kind. The obvious and immediate consequence of this firm entrenchment in the

⁸⁴ Belissant woos Amile; Lubias, first given to Amile as a reward for his prowess, is subsequently given to Ami. Neither Ami nor Amile shows interest in Belissant or Lubias prior to the women's interference (voluntary or not).

⁸⁵ This situation should be likened to that of St Paule: for the sake of God, the saint abandons her children in a remarkably pathetic scene where the youngest is left crying on the shore, stretching his arms out to his departing mother, 'mais Paule, élevant les yeux au ciel sans verser une larme, surmontait, par son amour pour Dieu, l'amour qu'elle avait pour ses enfants.' In Roze, *Jacques de Voragine*, p.163. Ami and Amile's privileged relationship is comparable to the saint's exclusive relation to God.

imaginary is that the protagonists live without any desires, theirs being fulfilled by one another. There is no lack and therefore no room for desire of anyone⁸⁶. The gaping void has given way to a state of plenitude for the heroes which the reader experiences as paranoid suffocation.

CONCLUDING WITH THE MURDER OF THE CHILDREN

This disturbing atmosphere brings about a fair amount of brutality in *Ami et Amile*. This violence reaches its climax in the scene in which Amile slaughters his two sons. When Ami finds shelter in Riviers, he is being cared for by Amile and his wife. One night an angel informs him that he can be cured if Amile beheads his children and bathes him in their blood. The following morning Amile comes to see him and openly laments his dear friend's illness and wishes he could help him, whatever the cost. At this stage he overtly envisages surrendering Belissant or his two boys to a cruel death, were it necessary. Ami cannot hide his emotion upon hearing this and is eventually convinced to give an account of what happened the night before. Amile listens and decides to sacrifice his sons for:

C'est moult grant chose d'omme mort restorer
 Et si est maus des douz anfans tuer,
 Nus n'en porroit le pechié pardonner,
 Fors Dex de gloire qui se laissa pener.

ll.2929-32

⁸⁶ Without going into the complex details, and this is not the place for that, I would like to call attention to the fact that lack of desire is also a trait of psychosis, where 'the dialectic of desire has no place' as Bruce Fink explains in his *Clinical Introduction* p.101.

[It is an awesome thing to bring a man back from death, yet a terrible act to slay two children; no one can forgive such a sin, save almighty God, who let himself be tortured.]

Amile's priorities are clear and 'if sacrifice involves giving up something for a higher good, it also ritually enacts a definition of what is "higher" and therefore imposes a value system.'⁸⁷ He makes sure that his palace is empty and goes to the boys' room to kill them. However his turmoil is such that he faints on two occasions before finding the courage he needs by focusing on his friend's restored health. One of the children wakes up and, informed of the situation, happily cooperates. Amile kills both children and tenderly washes Ami's illness away. Prepared to face due punishment for the infanticide, Amile publicly confesses the crime but when, horror and grief-stricken, Belissant hurries back to the palace, she finds her sons playing with a golden apple in their room. Grandiose celebrations follow and, shortly afterwards, Ami and Amile go to Jerusalem before dying and being buried together in Mortara.

Beheading the two boys ostensibly recreates the perfection of Ami and Amile's union by removing the scaly crust that had physically veiled the identity Ami had had to conceal for the trial. Killing two does not make one reborn but two and therefore resuscitates the protagonists' wholeness.

⁸⁷ Peggy McCracken, 'Engendering Sacrifice: Blood, Lineage and Infanticide in Old French Literature', *Speculum*, 77 (2002), 55-75 (p.57).

Therefore there is no doubt that the episode is supposed to be read in a positive light, where killing children might be wrong but can be acceptable or understandable. It seems that the heroes look even more alike (if that is possible) after Ami's recovery⁸⁸. This interpretation of the episode is sharpened when it is related to the aggressivity associated with any narcissistic relationship. When one fears that the image might disappear aggression can be turned against oneself but it can also be directed against something beyond the specular image. Here, because the resemblance between the ego and the specular image is jeopardised by leprosy, a point beyond the specular image can be found in Amile's sons: they are, as he himself says, his own flesh (l.2938). The trajectory of this aggression is deflected towards the children. What must be remembered here is that, ultimately, it is Ami who suggests the assassination of the two boys. Still, by indicating twice the angel's intervention in the process, he places the idea of the infanticide into another sphere and somehow refuses to endorse the fomentation of such a criminal scheme. I therefore think that it can be argued that, beyond a test of friendship or the reciprocity of punishment, the murder is an act of aggression prompted by the fading of the specular image and redirected from Amile's own person to his sons, a physical extension of himself but still not directly him. The murder can therefore be read as the most extreme accomplishment of paranoia in the text, even if it is

⁸⁸ See the author's insistence on their resemblance: ll.3097-4006; 3119-25; 3139-42; 3342-4.

miraculously cancelled out. This confers upon this final episode a very dream-like quality and is it not, after all, the worst possible nightmare?⁸⁹ Indeed, if one accepts the possibility of a secular interpretation of the passage, if the reader puts aside the hypothesis of a miracle, then it becomes legitimate to question whether the murder really took place; even whether Ami was really afflicted by leprosy or whether the illness was only a symbol of his exile from Amile. Dream or not, this last scene can be read, like previous outbursts of violence, as a psychotic break triggered by Ami's imminent death and the unavoidable ultimate dissolution of the dyad.

⁸⁹ Although the possibility is not considered by the author, this scene could well be a dream, since Amile is not conscious all the way through: overwhelmed by emotion, he faints on several occasions.

Part two: *Amis and Amiloun*

The ME *Amis and Amiloun*⁹⁰ relates a story almost identical to that of *Ami et Amile* and yet it is not a translation of the OF text. Rather, it distinguishes itself from it in a manner of great relevance for our purposes. A complex and subtle text, it deserves more attention than it has been granted so far, English adaptations of French works being widely dismissed for their alleged poorer quality⁹¹. If its editor, Edward Foster, stresses the romance's 'unresolved moral ambiguities' in a world of 'tenuous ideals'⁹², I would add that the ME tale also acts as an intricate knot that binds together competing ethics or ways of apprehending the same drive⁹³. This results in a significant difference in the nature of the heroes' relations, as well as of their rapport with the other characters. In other words, otherness finds a discrete definition here: whereas *Ami* and *Amile* could be considered as one character, *Amis* and *Amiloun* prove to be distinct from one another; they truly are two protagonists with

⁹⁰ Edward E. Foster (ed.), *Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle and Sir Amadace*, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997). For purposes of convenience and to avoid retelling identical episodes, it should be assumed that the plot is the same as that of the OF redaction, unless otherwise specified. *Amis and Amiloun* survives in four manuscripts, two of which are fragments only. The text used here comes from the Auchinleck manuscript and was supplemented with 'a trustworthy version of the beginning and ending' from BM Egerton 2862 by the editor.

⁹¹ One example would be the following statement: 'English poems are usually regarded as, in some sense, popularizations [of French analogues]. (A few are translations; many are more or less crude adaptations).' in Stevens John E., *Medieval Romance: Themes and Approaches* (London: Hutchinson, 1973).

⁹² Foster, *Amis and Amiloun*, p.7.

⁹³ It is interesting to find that in spite of the moral complexities of the text, W.R.J. Barron uses *Amis and Amiloun* as the epitome of romance as a didactic genre. See *English Medieval Romance*, p.199.

their own personalities⁹⁴. Their development is more meticulous and so is that of some of the secondary characters, especially Belisaunt and her mother⁹⁵. (Amiloun's wife is given less attention on the other hand and is not given a name). Whether this phenomenon should be attributed to the fact that the text is a romance — a genre that allegedly allows for finer character development⁹⁶ — the consequence remains that the heroes' affinity to the ideal they are supposed to embody is significantly altered⁹⁷. The way they relate to the o/Other, which is crucial to determining the structure of the text, is dramatically different: the absentee Other of *Ami et Amile* is now at the core of the text and its nerve-racking emptiness prompts crises. It will be my contention that such fundamental changes in genre and focus and the significant modifications in the rapport to the o/Other yield, despite appearances, a very dissimilar story.

If ideal friendship is seen as the central theme in these works it is nonetheless approached very differently in each version. We have just seen

⁹⁴ John C. Ford is, to my knowledge, the only scholar who has recognised the difference between Amis and Amiloun. In his article 'Contrasting the Identical: Differentiation of the 'Indistinguishable' Characters of *Amis and Amiloun*', Ford argues that even though the text is a well-known exemplum of ideal friendship, the heroes are complements of each other. Ford thinks that the heroes are so different that they are as opposed and complementary as male and female. See 'Contrasting the Identical: Differentiation of the 'Indistinguishable' Characters of *Amis and Amiloun*', *Neophilologus*, 86 (2002), 311-23.

⁹⁵ See Jean E. Jost, 'Hearing the Female Voice: Transgression in *Amis and Amiloun*', *Medieval Perspectives*, 10 (1995), 116-32

⁹⁶ As I pointed out earlier, neither hagiography nor epic is credited with the display of well-rounded characters.

⁹⁷ This is not surprising if we recall that little character development was directly associated with the protagonists standing as better 'models to be imitated by all men'.

that *Ami et Amile* illustrated it at its most intense. Now I am going to show that the ME text, despite the narrator's attempts, fails to depict ideal friendship. What should be epitomised in *Amis and Amiloun* is turned instead into the impossible, or in Lacanian terminology, the real. I would like to argue that the narrator finds himself trapped into trying to sell us, the readers/audience, something different from what we know it says on the label. Every effort is made to save appearances but I will explain how the multiple instances of situations that should provide examples of perfect friendship point, paradoxically, to the very emptiness of the concept⁹⁸.

Actual flawless friendship, insofar as it needs to be reciprocal, is not on the agenda. *Amis and Amiloun* are too estranged from one another for that. Each episode aiming to illustrate perfect friendship and therefore to give a meaning to the nonsensical (that is, the fact that what should be there is missing, without explanation) is comparable to the notion of repetition as developed in psychoanalytic theory. Repetition is 'an excess of enjoyment that returns again and again to transgress the limits of the pleasure principle and seek death'⁹⁹. This exact pattern is illustrated in each attempt to evidence perfect friendship. Each attempt is enjoyable and even reassuring in so far as

⁹⁸ This pattern is not exclusive to this text. In chapter three, I will develop a similar point regarding the OF *Florence de Rome* in which each occurrence of the religious is also the occasion to dispel it vigorously.

⁹⁹ Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary*, p.164.

it mimics perfect friendship very convincingly; yet it ultimately puts the protagonists in an uncomfortable situation in as much as it indicates the non-existence, the emptiness of that unbearably valuable Other, the ideal of perfect friendship.

Where the French version highlights the uniqueness and supernatural nature of the heroes' relationship, the ME poem tends to rationalise the story. In *Ami et Amile*, anyone outside the dyad is other and for that reason considered a potential threat. Home, in the sense of the place where we belong, where we feel safe and reassured, is to be found in the attachment the protagonists have for one another. Shortly after the beginning of *Amis and Amiloun* however, one already senses a change, and suspicion arises as to the effective reciprocity in the protagonists' relationship. Indeed this relationship noticeably does not function exclusively, a core change between the two texts. The relationship being the centre of the story, any alteration of its nature or of its functioning necessarily implies deep, crucial modification in the whole narrative. I will thus begin by submitting Amis and Amiloun's friendship to scrutiny and this will lead to the evaluation of the consequences of the text's modifications on the aspects of particular interest here.

I SCRUTINISING THE PROTAGONISTS' FRIENDSHIP:
NON-EXCLUSIVENESS AND IMBALANCE

If Amis and Amiloun are still mirror images of each other in the English text, they are however separate characters, developing and acting differently. This may stem from the genre of the text, for the romance hero's career 'remains that of an "individual" who pursues private goals of emotional fulfilment and ethical self-validation'¹⁰⁰. What this directly implies for us here is that they do not entertain the kind of rapport that enabled me to liken them to the ego and the specular image in *Ami et Amile*. As in the French text, the boys do not grow up together in the ME version and yet no emphasis is placed on the first time they meet at the Duke's castle: no dialog or record of their reactions or emotions singularises what we have seen is a defining moment in the OF text. In fact, their friendship is not even mentioned before line 139 and so one gets the impression that it has been thrust upon them, that it comes from the outside. There seems to be a tacit, *symbolic* Law according to which two young men, alike in all things and esteemed by all, *have* to be friends. References are later made to their physical resemblance and love for each other but they are not overwhelming, remain formulaic and hardly seem to challenge this first impression. Indeed, we are very far from the very strong feeling that forces Ami and Amile on a quest for vital reunion at the beginning of the OF text. The most relevant modification in the nature of the

¹⁰⁰ Sarah Kay, *The Chanson de Geste in the Age of Romance: Political Fictions* (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1995) p.2.

protagonists' relationship is their acceptance of a third party, which is perceptible in the early stages of the text. The dyad based in the imaginary order described earlier is now based in the symbolic order, that is, the realm of absolute non-reciprocity, the place governed by the Other, the Law. This is a crucial difference that transforms the functioning of the tale altogether. One consequence is the vivid contrast between the rather gloomy atmosphere of the English text and the stifling ambience of *Ami et Amile*, where imaginary exclusivity paves the way for what the reader perceives as paranoid saturation. The lack of real reciprocity or exclusivity allows for the level of tension between the heroes and the other characters to drop considerably. The steward, who stands for Hardré, is still gratuitously and even automatically¹⁰¹ victimised and turned into a scapegoat but in general the romance allows for multiple elements to intervene. To illustrate this point, I would like to draw attention to an incident that does not appear in the OF text. Early in the text, Amiloun has to leave the duke's court to claim his lands after his parents' death¹⁰². Amis asks permission to accompany him in these terms:

¹⁰¹ The evil steward or seneschal is a stock figure in the Middle Ages. Margaret Schlauch devotes a whole section of her book to this type, showing its traditional participation in many medieval tales across Europe. See Margaret Schlauch, *Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens* (New York: New York University Press, 1927)

¹⁰² The mention of the parents' death is interesting in its own right and does not appear in the OF text where everyone, even parents, are left out of the picture. Here, such recognition of his inheritance and duties by the young man is an early sign that the Other has a place in the narrative.

[...] ‘Sir, par charité,
 Yif me leve to wend the fro,
 Bot yif y may with mi brother go,
 Mine hert, it breketh of thre!’ ll.261-4

[Sir, for charity, give me leave to travel from you for unless I go with my brother, my heart will break in three!]¹⁰³

The duke declines for, as he says, all his joy would depart were the two knights gone away from him. The fact that Amis’ heart would break in three is worthy of comment: this line is the graphic, almost tangible image of the relationship, materialising its position in the symbolic order. Here, the Law prevails and friendship is subordinated to it — a remarkable fact, for such will not always be the case. In the logic of the OF text, the duke could not possibly have got away with such an authoritative way of separating the heroes simply to satisfy his own pleasure. This is why this short scene *cannot* exist in *Ami et Amile* — or if it did, it would need to be followed by the paranoid transformation of the Duke into a villain of some description. Another element that *cannot* figure in *Ami et Amile* is the inclusion of another character at the heart of the story. Where Ami had two slaves at his disposal, Amiloun has Owain and Owain gains increasing significance as the text progresses. Most importantly for our purposes Owain’s name changes: it becomes none other than Amoraunt (ll.1635-41), a name that sounds remarkably close to Amis and Amiloun. The symbolical charge of the change of name is evident and testifies to the metamorphosis in the protagonists’

¹⁰³ The translation, based on the editor’s notes, is my own unless otherwise stated.

relationship. That other characters are allowed to get involved with one of the central characters in such a way is a particularly striking evolution for the tale.

Another example would be the much more active part allocated to the Duke's wife in comparison with the queen in *Ami et Amile*; here, it is her suggestion that Amis ask Amiloun to fight in his stead in the *judicium Dei* (ll.961-72). This somewhat conveniently transfers the responsibility for the dishonest idea onto a woman rather than one of the heroes and provides yet another illustration of women's guilefulness¹⁰⁴ — always a favourite of medieval authors. Besides, the ruse by which Amiloun replaces his friend in the fight against the steward¹⁰⁵ is supposed to be kept secret in the French text but such is not the case here: back at home, Amiloun confesses the whole story to his wife. By letting her in on the secret, he shows that he trusts a third party. She turns out to disapprove totally of his behaviour for she is faithful to one law, one that condemns treacherousness, and this makes her a stranger to the sometimes unreasonable ethics of friendship. That, however, does not change the fact that she is entrusted with the secret. Her disapproval, I believe, is used to turn her into a foil for the successful

¹⁰⁴ When Amis is devastated at the idea of being forsworn and Belisaunt's mother tries to help, her words correspond only too well to that model: 'No mai ther go non other gile / To bring that traitor down?' (ll.950-1). [Is there no other guile to fell that traitor?]

¹⁰⁵ The trial by combat takes place because the steward has caught Belisaunt and Amis in a compromising situation, just like in the Old French.

conversion of Belisaunt, who, on the contrary, endorses the discourse of friendship. Not even named, the character of Amiloun's wife is less developed than its French counterpart, in which the name of Lubias figures prominently. The main difference between them is obvious in that this fairly elusive character does not try to destroy her husband's companionship with Amis and yet she is treated with no clemency at all for rejecting her ill husband. This prompts a reading of the two women's fates in the light of what is considered a crime in the two texts. In *Ami et Amile*, harm done to the dyad is *the* crime, so Lubias and Belissant are both punished, as we saw earlier; now, in *Amis and Amiloun*, it is harm done to the individual that constitutes a crime. As a result, only Amiloun's wife is chastised.

Belisaunt, on the other hand, is later perceived as an accomplice and not an intruder, despite the fact that she causes immense trouble by obliging Amis to sleep with her. Indeed, her conversion is rather incredible for she is more cunning than Belissant and altogether vicious in her 'seduction' of Amis: the lovesick maiden goes as far as to threaten to accuse him of raping her if he does not oblige! This of course would not have been tolerated in *Ami et Amile* for the same reason that made the episode involving the Duke's refusal to let Amis leave impossible. Yet Belisaunt's 'weakness' is rapidly forgiven here. Soon after the incident Amis, who clearly bears no grudge against her, agonises over the possibility that his dear hostage might die if the

steward wins the *judicium Dei*. Later on when Amiloun, afflicted by leprosy is brought back into her castle after his long wanderings, her reaction (motivated by gratitude) mirrors exactly her husband's joy. Even more surprising is the fact that she is the one who takes care of the sick Amiloun (ll.2170-83). Belisaunt's successful inclusion, utterly unthinkable in the French text, finally attains near-absurdity in the response she gives after she is told her children were killed to restore Amiloun's health:

'God may sende ous childer mo,
 Of hem have thou no care.
 Yif it ware at min hert rote,
 For to bring thi brother bote,
 My lyf y wold not spare.
 Shal noman oure children see,
 Tomorow shal they beryed bee
 As they faire ded ware!
 Thus the lady faire and bright
 Comfort hur lord with al hur myght,

ll.2393-2401

[‘God may send us more children, do not lament over these. If my heart had to rot for the benefit of your brother, I would not spare my own life. No-one must see our children. They will be buried tomorrow, as if they had died naturally!’ The beautiful lady comforted her lord thus, with all her might,]

Belisaunt is therefore not only happy with her husband's crime but also provides a solution for the discarding of her children's bodies! She certainly differentiates herself from the horror-stricken Belissant who, in the same situation in the French text, is said to ‘hurry towards the room before anyone else, crying and weeping, tearing at her hair, bewailing her bitter loss’¹⁰⁶ (laisse 165). By comforting her husband and solving what has now become

¹⁰⁶ The editors' translation.

their problem, she acts as a mediator. By taking the initiative, and in a way sharing responsibilities with Amis, the English heroine proves able to assume as well as endorse the discourse of perfect friendship, a discourse in which, theoretically, there should not be any room for her. This short scene becomes the pinnacle of the opening to the other in the heroes' relationship. Belisaunt's reply is certainly the best illustration of the revolution in the nature of the protagonists' relationship. What is barely comprehensible here would be absolutely unimaginable in the economy of *Ami et Amile*, where men and women alike are rejected¹⁰⁷.

Alongside the opening up of the heroes' relationship to the outside world, an important imbalance in the relationship permeates the text. This most notable alteration of the rapport between Amis and Amiloun will have decisive structural implications. The dyad has faded; its intensity has deteriorated correspondingly and to such an extent that it becomes a challenge for the narrator still to try and tell us the story of a 'perfect friendship'. Otherness is still problematic but in a totally new way. The first example of (this) disparity can be noted when Amiloun leaves the Duke's

¹⁰⁷ The fact that women do not occupy prominent roles in *chansons de geste* could partly account for the leaving aside of Belissant and Lubias in *Ami et Amile* and would add force to the argument that the text *is* a *chanson de geste* — although as I explained earlier, the text does not really fit into any ready category.

court. We are first informed of the Duke's sadness at Amiloun's departure and then of Amiloun's feelings:

Than was Sir Amiloun ferli wo
 For to wende Sir Amis fro,
 On him was al his thought. ll.241-3

[Sir Amiloun was very sorry to go away from Sir Amis and he devoted all his thoughts to him.]

A sorrowful Amiloun proceeds to have two identical cups made, one of which he will give his friend when he leaves. The cups here take on a sentimental significance they did not have in the OF text¹⁰⁸ as they are meant to symbolise each friend personally:

And bothe thai weren as liche, ywis,
 As was Sir Amiloun and Sir Amis,
 Ther no failed right nought. ll.250-2

[And they were both identical, as were Sir Amiloun and Sir Amis; that is certain. Nothing went wrong with that.]

Amiloun is also the one who speaks, the one who recalls their pledge and warns his friend¹⁰⁹. Although Amis' sorrow is evoked immediately after that, it is obvious that if the two characters *look* alike, they are not alike in essence. They act in different ways and one cannot help already discerning a noteworthy discrepancy here. The point is that nothing comes along to

¹⁰⁸ In *Ami et Amile*, the identical cups are given to the boys by the pope on their joint christening.

¹⁰⁹ It is interesting to note that in the ME version, Amiloun does not warn his friend against women because they would make him forget about their friendship. Danger, he says, comes from being untrue to one's lord and trusting the steward.

dismiss that impression later in the romance and Amiloun's portrayal becomes — problematically — that of a saintly man when Amis' clearly is not. I would tend to agree with the editor's view that 'when Amis returns ostensibly vindicated, marries Belisaunt, and eventually inherits the kingdom, we cannot escape our sense that vice is its own reward — happily for Amis but disastrous for Amiloun'¹¹⁰. This could elucidate why the leprous Amiloun does not immediately think about taking refuge at Amis' castle (a fact left unexplained in both redactions). Eventually, as Amiloun sits at the entrance to Amis' castle after long wanderings, the juxtaposition of the two friends' situations suggests more than mere imbalance by enhancing Amiloun's exemplarity in contrast with Amis' ingratitude:

That riche douke [Amis], withouten les,
 As a prince served he wes
 With riche coupes of gold,
 And he that brought him to that state
 Stode bischet withouten gate,
 Wel sore ofhungred and cold.

ll.1903-8

[That rich duke, without lies, was served like a prince, with rich gold cups and he who brought him up to that state was standing outside the gates, suffering from hunger and the cold.]

II READING IMPERFECTION

The descriptions of Amis' court contrast very vividly and painfully with the immediately preceding depictions of Amiloun's sufferings and what would appear to be his saintly acceptance of God's punishment. Such discrepancy is

¹¹⁰ Foster, *Amis and Amiloun*, p.6.

the materialisation of the imperfection of the main characters' friendship, where one cannot part with an ideal while the other can and quite comfortably at that. The difference between Amiloun and his friend is situated in their rapport with the symbolic order, an order that demands certain sacrifices. Hence, entering the symbolic order means being exiled from the Thing, the sublime object the subject conceived of as part of himself and that the pleasure principle (a defence mechanism) endeavours to keep at bay. Amiloun, in a similar manner, refuses to be exiled from an ideal that is constitutive of his character, an ideal that defines him, as it were. In other words, Amiloun refuses to be exiled from the Thing and seeks to return to this mythical home. Home for him is not to be found in a relationship with Amis but in the reunion with the Thing. To this end, he performs an act which is a transgression of the pleasure principle, a self-sacrifice that is, literally, a 'path towards death'¹¹¹. What Amiloun experiences can be identified as what Lacan terms *jouissance*: a glimpse of the real that is pleasurable to such a point that it reaches pain, something at once fascinating and horrifying. Being the indefectible friend to the point of self-denial is immensely satisfactory but it has a very dark side indeed in the form of leprosy. This is all the more severe since leprosy effectively equals death¹¹² in

¹¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XVII. L'envers de la psychanalyse, 1969-70*, ed. by Jaques Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1991) p.17, quoted in Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary*, p.92.

¹¹² 'The religious ceremonies which initiated their [the lepers'] sequestration were usually a veritable office for the dead, expressing the principle that lepers did not belong to the ranks of the living;' in Rosenberg and Danon, '*Ami and Amile*', p.21.

the shape of a rejection from society, as well as an actual exile in this case since Amiloun is cast off by his wife. By becoming a leper, Amiloun comes into contact with the real via *jouissance* and conceives of himself as being in touch with an ideal of perfection as something that eventually puts an end to his separation from this empty ideal, the Thing he longs for. In the end, there is something masochistic about this behaviour since even more satisfaction can be drawn from leprosy in the awareness of being the better friend, the one who suffers for the sake of an other, an ideal, an Other. 'Jouissance is a sacrifice made at the altar of more or less obscure gods; it is the malefic jouissance of stripping the other of the goods he holds dear. Jouissance is linked to the law and so to its transgression.'¹¹³ Amiloun's sentence must therefore be construed as a form of reward as it offers him the opportunity to prove his loyalty to Amis and to go as far as breaking the Law, or defying the symbolic order.

The discrepancy between the two protagonists, as Amiloun glides closer and closer to an ideal, has never been greater at any other stage in the text. It has previously been present throughout the text yet it was implicit for it appeared to be at odds with the ostensible subject matter of the romance: ideal friendship, or in psychoanalytic terms, placement in relation to the

¹¹³ Néstor Braunstein, 'Desire and Jouissance in the Teachings of Lacan' in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan* ed. by Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge University Press: 2003) pp.102-115 (p.108).

Other. The gap between the ideal and its attempted realisation is not addressed. It is only alluded to when Amiloun justifies possessing the golden cup. Amis, who significantly does not recognise him, accuses him of stealing the cup from his friend, to which Amiloun answers:

It was his in his cuntry,
 And now it is fallen so;
 Bot certes, now that icham here,
 The coupe is mine, y bought it dere
 With right y come ther to.

II.2084-8

[It belonged to him, in his country, and now it is in my hands; for sure, now that I am here, the cup is mine for I bought it dear. I have every right to be here.]

I think that we can read in this passage a covert reference to Amiloun's downfall and to the heavy price of friendship. A more direct accusation — yet not one coming from Amiloun — finally emanates from his nephew as he reveals Amiloun's identity to Amis: 'For the of blysse he ys bare'¹¹⁴ (I.2119). Direct accusation, in that it points to the void in the Other, is not possible. As a consequence, allusions only are permitted and they are so enigmatic that they are lost on Amis. Although Amis expresses feelings of guilt, they are only related to the fact that he has just almost killed his friend for the second time: after the social death of leprosy Amiloun is severely beaten up by Amis, who believes that he has stolen the cup and who rather aptly (although

¹¹⁴ Paraphrased by the editor as 'because of you he is without happiness'.

without knowing to what extent) calls him 'traitour' (l.2077)¹¹⁵. His subsequent asking for forgiveness is the occasion for perfecting the portrayal of Amiloun's saintly behaviour and exemplary patience:

'O brother,' he seyde, 'par charité,
 This rewely ded foryif thou me,
 That ichave smitten the so!
 And he forgave it him also a swithe,
 Wepeand with eighen tuo. ll.2143-8

[*'Oh, brother,' he said, 'for charity, forgive me this rueful deed, when I beat you so hard! And he forgave him immediately, shedding tears with his two eyes.'*]

In short, while Amiloun combines perfect friendship and admirable Christian behaviour, at this point Amis has little to show in return.

In order to redress this imbalance, God soon sends him what seems to be a chance to match his friend's goodness: in a dream an angel suggests that he should slaughter his children to save his friend. Suspense begins with his hesitations when the situation is really quite pressing. Unlike Amile (OF), he has a symbolically charged deadline by which to (quite literally) bring his friend back to life: Christmas. This is an attempt by the narrator to offer the murder of the children as a counterbalance for Amiloun's earlier sacrifice. It is furthermore an attempt to ignore the flaw in the Other, an attempt to prove the perfection of the protagonists' union — a union which, as we have seen, is

¹¹⁵ Amiloun is indeed a traitor in that he fought against the steward in his friend's stead, thus deceiving his feudal lord and the spectators of the judicial combat. In this sense, he is as cunning as the villain of the piece but more successful.

not exactly exemplary. In spite of appearances, in spite of narratorial efforts to depict what should be depicted (namely, flawless friendship), the two acts are not equivalent and this can be shown from two complementary points of view: the psychoanalytic and the religious.

III LEPROSY VERSUS INFANTICIDE

If we consider them in the light of the divinity, it will become even clearer that the protagonists' ordeals are not comparable. Indeed, Amiloun's self-sacrifice proves more remarkable, as it constitutes a total *submission* to the ethics of friendship that cannot be seen in Amis' act, however horrible. This is because whereas Amiloun challenges God, Amis follows the words of His messenger. In addition, much more is at stake in Amiloun's decision-making because he risks losing Amis:

Over al this world, fer and hende,
Tho that be thine best frende
Schal be thi most fon,
 And thi wiif and alle thi kinne
 Schu fle the stede thatow are inne
 And forsake the ichon.

ll.1267-72
 (my emphasis)

[Throughout the world, far and near, those who are your best friends shall become your worst enemies; and each one, your wife as well as your kin, will flee the place where you are and forsake you.]

Sacrificing himself might well lead to sacrificing friendship — i.e., what is responsible for the sacrifice as well as its goal. In short, perfect friendship, as

Amiloun advocates it, is self-destructive — just as orthodox Christianity is, as I mentioned earlier. The angel assures him that his act will cause the dissolution of his relationship with his companion but the hero carries on nonetheless. This provides further evidence that the individual is privileged over the relationship — the major difference between this text and the OF text. Importantly, when Amiloun dismisses this message before the battle he shows that God's threat is no deterrent (ll.1282-4), thus presenting himself as the ultimate threat to God's power. But he also indicates his choice of an orthodoxy centred on friendship over the traditional Christian system of values, thus putting the two at odds. The laws of friendship are therefore made to appear superior to God's. To illustrate this point, let us recall Amiloun's warning to Amis on his departure:

Be nought ogain thi lord forsworn,
 And yif thou dost, thou art forlorn
 Ever more withouten ende.
 Bot ever do trewthe and no tresoun ll.304-7

[Do not be forsworn for if you are, you are utterly lost for eternity. Always be true and loyal.]

These words must be paralleled with Amis' words of anguish after suggesting a trial by combat which he cannot win and which also puts his hostages' (Belisaunt's and her mother's) lives at risk:

For y mot swere, withouten faile,
 Al so God me spede in bataile,
 His speche is falshede;

And yif y swere, icham forsworn,
 Than liif and soule icham forlorn;

ll.943-7

[For I must swear, without lies, as God gives me assistance, that his words are false; and if I swear, I am forsworn and my life and soul I have utterly lost.]

The situation can be summarised thus: Amiloun knows the moral perils of perjury as lines 304-7 show. His decision to lie is an active and conscious one: he would rather be forsworn, that is deceive the duke and take no heed of feudal and Christian law, than betray his ideal. He deems the rules he subjects himself to as more important than any other. Amis on the other hand, although equally aware of the consequences of perjury, would much rather (ab)use his friend than be forsworn. He also fears damnation, while Amiloun shows disregard for the consequences of his act, that is for God's punishment. The difference is easy to see.

Amis is true to Amiloun in that he welcomes him when he is ill. Since the latter was told he would lose all his friends it is surprising that Amis should still be his host. Later, as he is about to murder his children, he carefully thinks the situation through and it is finally friendship that prevails: committing what would otherwise be called a deadly sin weighs less in the equation. God's authority *seems* to be undermined for the second time as the narrator tries to equate two extraordinary deeds. Yet a major difference persists and stops the equation short. In fact, Amis has based his gesture on what God's messenger has told him to do. He therefore demonstrates faith in

Him, like Abraham in the biblical tale, in an act that confers an archetypal quality to the text. He does not challenge Him for friendship's sake because there is simply no impending divine threat: luckily for him, committing infanticide (a crime in any law, not solely Christian law) is supported by God. Amis' hope that the crime will be useful confirms God's power in the form of the protagonist's submission to God's will. Amis' act does not compare with Amiloun's self-sacrifice and, in spite of the narrator's endeavour to portray the ideal partnership, an irrepressible impression of witnessing a simulacrum of faultless friendship insinuates itself into the reader or listener.

Amiloun, in his excesses, obviously does not fit in the phantasy that the two acts are equal in value, although he can be wrongly construed as the one who tries hardest to save appearances. I would argue instead that Amiloun is following what Lacan saw as the very opposite path, that of perversion. The pervert is essentially the one who thinks that he is what is lacking in the Other. Since the Other's lack is a source of anxiety, the solution for the pervert is to become an object that will provide the Other with jouissance. Judith Feher-Gurewich explains:

Perverts excel in exposing the fantasy of the other and various social lies that such fantasy necessarily enforces. This peculiar situation explains, on some level, why perversion has been perceived as a threat to the social bond. [...] While the neurotic keeps devising ways to

avoid its realisation, the pervert succeeds in living out the desire of the neurotic at the cost of sacrificing himself or herself in the process.¹¹⁶

This is what happens to Amiloun, who by striving to be the perfect friend makes the fantasy collapse. By outshining Amis, he lets the lack in the Other be seen and fashions a new law, that of extreme friendship. Exposing flaws in the Other, he endangers the functioning of society by predicating extreme friendship, a move which almost claims his life. Feher-Gurewich's further developments complete the picture:

Their [the perverts'] only recourse will be to defy whatever law presents itself to them, transgressing this law in the hope of finally discovering an order of reality stronger and more stable than the lies and deceptions that organized the psychic realities of their childhood. Perverts will therefore need to enact a scenario that will enable them to *expose such deceptions*, in order to impose a law thanks to which the Other can remain all-powerful. However, because this law cannot be dictated by the signifiers of the desire of the Other, perverts are forced to *create a law of their own making*, a law that appears to them to represent *an order superior to the one accepted by the common run of mortals*.¹¹⁷

(my emphasis)

This description of the functioning of perversion fits Amiloun's behaviour very well. Amiloun violates the law by lying to his lord and challenging God. The new law he creates, that of perfect friendship, is clearly superior to any other law (feudal or divine). At the same time, this new set of values does not seem to emanate from Amiloun. It rather looks like he is following the rules

¹¹⁶ Judith Feher-Gurewich, 'A Lacanian Approach to the Logic of Perversion' in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. by Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.181-207 (p.192).

¹¹⁷ Feher-Gurewich, 'A Lacanian Approach to the Logic of Perversion', p. 202.

that were dictated by society, the Other. Yet the Other is in fact undermined by these rules, even though it is supposed to have lodged these rules in Amiloun's head. This confusing phenomenon recalls the functioning of a specific type of perversion, namely masochism. I briefly evoked the masochistic aspects in Amiloun's depiction earlier, referring to the satisfaction that helps rationalise the moral ambiguities in the text. The opposition between Christian law and the ethics of indefectible friendship eventually make more sense to the reader when Amiloun blends them together towards the end of the text. It also explains why God rewards the men and is always on their side despite the fact that they do not abide by his rules, being untrue to their feudal lord and committing infanticide. The notion of divine reward is quite crucial in the text and this is clear from the lines that frame it:

And trew weren in al thing,
 And therfore Jhesu, hevynking,
 Ful wel quyted her mede. ll.34-36

And for her trewth and godhede
 The blisse of hevyn they have to mede,
 That lasteth ever moo.
 Amen. ll.2506-9

[They were true in all things and therefore Jesus, king of Heaven, rewarded them accordingly.

And for their truthfulness and goodness, the bliss of Heaven that lasts for ever they received for reward. Amen]

What is God making return for? Why would God recompense them?

Because in the logic of *Amis and Amiloun*, he is the manipulated Other of the

masochistic framework, the one who must look as if he was 'laying down the law'. This is also, I would argue, the answer to the question: What kind of God offers the murder of innocent children as a solution? The persevering Amiloun, epitome of patience and forgiveness, performs a *tour de force* in bringing Christian law and the 'law of his own making' together. His final departure with Amis and their deaths conclude this initially improbable reconciliation. As René Girard has said, 'la légitimité du dieu se reconnaît non pas au fait qu'il trouble la paix mais qu'il restaure lui-même la paix qu'il a troublée'.¹¹⁸

IV THE QUESTION OF SANCTITY

To the question, 'is Amiloun a saint?' the answer is a categorical 'no'¹¹⁹. A saint chooses to be poor, sells all his belongings, performs miracles and good deeds and when persecuted is martyred for his faith. Yet the suffering Amiloun endures, his fortitude, his patience and his forgiveness all seem to point in the same direction. It is the way the story ends that makes the situation more complicated. The morning after the murder of the children Amis privately informs Belisaunt of the assassination and the two subsequently witness the miracles of the children's resurrection and

¹¹⁸ René Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris : Grasset, 1972) p.190.

¹¹⁹ The tale is 'strongly influenced by the pattern of a saint's legend because it attempts to interpret the story within the framework of faith' says Ojar Kratins. This cannot be denied but, as we just saw, it does not quite follow that the protagonists are saints. Kratins argues, in fact, that the text could be called a 'secular hagiography'. See 'The Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*: Chivalric Romance or Secular Hagiography?', *PMLA*, 81 (1966), 347-54 (p.354).

Amiloun's sudden revival. When he is fully recovered he decides to pay his wife a visit for, as he says somewhat ambiguously, she supported him so much that he wishes to give her her due (ll.2434-5). He departs accompanied by Amis and five hundred knights and finds his wife celebrating her remarriage that very day. They come into the great hall and assault the guests, very few of whom manage to escape. Vengeance is accomplished when the lady of the house is shut away and given nothing but water and bread until she dies. Soon after, Amis and Amiloun leave to enjoy their lives together. They have an abbey built in Lombardy and then they die and are buried together. In these final episodes, little evokes a saints' life, unless we venture the notion that Amiloun could be seen as a saint in *his own religion*, ideal friendship. If so, his total lack of clemency for his wife does not even cloud his aureole. All that can be said about this kind of two-gear mercy is that, despite its inconsistency, it is characteristic of dozens of saints' lives, in which whoever criticises the saint is ruthlessly chastised¹²⁰.

Neither the French heroes nor the English ones are saints. Yet one should not go as far as to say that 'the hagiographic [elements in the text] are intrusive'¹²¹ for they are an integral part of the texts. They add to their

¹²⁰ One example, among many others, would be that of St Ambrose: 'En la ville de Carthage, trois évêques étaient à table et l'un d'eux ayant dit du mal de St Ambroise, on lui rapporta ce qui était arrivé au prêtre qui l'avait calomnié ; cet évêque se moqua de cela ; mais aussitôt il fut frappé à mort et expira à l'instant.' in *Jacques de Voragine* p.292.

¹²¹ MacEdward Leach, *Amis and Amiloun*, p.20.

fascinating complexity and all the more so in *Amis and Amiloun*. The number of hagiographic elements in the text is far from negligible and is reinforced by the possible identification of elements related to monasticism, though without the ideological touch. The obsession with friendship, for instance, recalls monotropy¹²², the essence of monasticism; but of course it tends to the wrong aim, that is not God but an ideal featuring mere men¹²³. The heroes' decision to sort out their inheritance and leave their families also evokes, to a certain extent, the foundations of monastic celibacy. The tradition finds its origins in a biblical and Jewish conception of the rapport between the sexual and the sacred. This is based on the story of Moses who, after the divine visitation, renounces all relations with his wife, for no manifestation of the sacred is compatible with sexual activity¹²⁴. Renouncing your family and homeland's 'charms' is another monastic principle echoed in the texts. This involves emotional as well as physical detachment and also applies to pilgrimages, during which one makes oneself foreign (by going to another land) and

¹²² 'Est *monotropos* celui qui, au lieu de se conduire tantôt d'une façon, tantôt d'une autre, a un comportement toujours identique [...] en d'autres termes celui dont toute l'activité est orientée vers une seule fin.' in 'Monachisme et éthique judéo-chrétienne', in Antoine Guillaumont, *Aux origines du monachisme chrétien : Pour une phénoménologie du monachisme* (Bégrolles en Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1979) p.51.

¹²³ Such isolation of ideals is, in Albert Taylor's view, responsible for the ethical conflicts in *Amis and Amiloun*: 'The Church was responsible for this isolation of ideals which led to these distortions in literature. And morality could not be placed upon a sound footing until the teaching of the Church embraced all aspects of life in one survey, instead of isolating individual virtues and vices. The ideal here isolated is that of friendship, but the example chosen is unfortunate.' See *An Introduction to Medieval Romance* (London, Cranton Limited: 1930) p.141.

¹²⁴ See Guillaumont, *Aux origines du monachisme chrétien*, pp.16-7 and 22. The manifestation of the sacred is the resurrection of the children and the leprous hero's recovery here.

available to God, since one is not disrupted by a daily routine¹²⁵. Having a change of scenery, as it were, being uprooted from one's original milieu, is considered to be a decisive element in a monk's religious life: the change of life is related to a geographic change and this is at the source of the notion of pilgrimage¹²⁶. This idea, inherited from stoicism, is fundamental to monasticism and is found at the end of our two texts, especially in the OF one, since the protagonists are said to be going to Jerusalem¹²⁷.

The reason why the editor chose to classify *Amis and Amiloun* (and *Ami et Amile*) as a romantic version of the tale¹²⁸ is that it still contains less saints' lives material than other redactions. For example, in some versions the heroes are buried separately and their tombs move towards one another so that they are reunited in death and post-mortem miracles are performed¹²⁹. Still,

¹²⁵ See Guillaumont, *Aux origines du monachisme chrétien*, pp.32-33.

¹²⁶ See Guillaumont, *Aux origines du monachisme chrétien*, pp.89 and 91.

¹²⁷ In the ME text, what they do is unsure; they are said to simply 'lead their lives together until God sent for them' (l.2495-6), though they do build an abbey.

¹²⁸ See page 2.

¹²⁹ This happens in the Latin *vita*, which can be found in Eugen Köbling's edition of *Amis and Amiloun*. See Köbling, Eugen, *Amis and Amiloun: zugleich mit der altfranzösischen Quelle* (Heilbronn: Gebr. Henninger, 1884). In her article on the romance and hagiographic features in the Amicus and Amelius story, Kathryn Hume identifies the principal hagiographical elements that make certain versions of the story hagiographies thus: 'Much is made of the boys' births: Amicus' pious parents vow to take him to Rome; Amelius' father has a dream-vision portending his son's sanctity. [...] Likewise, Amicus' father's deathbed is laden with pieties relevant to the didactic content. When Amicus becomes a leper he goes to Rome and again sees the Pope. When he is cured, bells ring without ringers. When Amelius and his wife learn of their sons' recovery, they bind themselves with vows of continence in thanksgiving. [...] The purpose of a hagiography is to show them to be saints. Hence the Lombard campaign, which would be irrelevant in the romance, does have a place in the *Vita*: it allows the men to fight for Christ and to end their lives as martyrs in a holy war. [...] That they are saints is demonstrated by the miracle of their tombs.' in Kathryn Hume, 'Structure

hagiographic elements do not need to be so extravagant to be identifiable and to serve the purpose they are assigned, that is the elevation of the relationship to a higher ground. To those who still wish to read the tale as hagiography though, Jacques de Voragine offers an alternative tale. He begins with the story of a Christian maiden who, preferring that her body be defiled rather than her soul, chooses to be prostituted rather than adore pagan gods. At the brothel, as she anxiously awaits dishonour, a soldier comes in. Is he her persecutor or a soldier of Christ? He reveals that he has come to help her escape untouched by exchanging his clothing with her. Having thus thwarted the pagans' plans, he is condemned to death. The maiden rushes to his execution and pleads with him to take his place but both are happily martyred. Voragine, wishing to emphasise the virtues of these two characters, compares their story to that of Damon and Pythias in these terms:

L'un d'eux, condamné à mort, demanda le temps de mettre ordre à ses affaires. Or, le tyran plein d'astuce, pensant qu'on ne pourrait plus le retrouver, demanda une caution qui serait frappée à sa place, s'il tardait à revenir. Je ne sais ce qu'on doit le plus admirer, ni quelque chose de plus noble, de l'un qui trouve quelqu'un s'obligeant à le représenter, ou de l'autre venant s'offrir. Mais comme le condamné tardait à se présenter au supplice, son répondant vint avec un visage calme, et ne refusa pas de subir la mort. On le conduisait au lieu de l'exécution quand son ami arrive ; celui-ci vint se substituer à l'autre et offrir sa tête au bourreau. Alors le tyran, voyant avec admiration que les philosophes estimaient plus l'amitié que la vie, demanda être admis en tiers dans l'amitié de ceux qu'il avait condamnés à mort. Tant de vertu a d'attraits, puisqu'elle gagna un tyran ! Ces faits méritent des louanges, mais ne l'emportent pas sur ceux que nous venons de

and perspective: romance and hagiographic features in the Amicus and Amelius story', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 69 (1970), 89-107 (pp.95-6).

raconter. Car dans ce dernier exemple, ce sont deux hommes, dans l'autre on voit une vierge qui, tout d'abord, avait même son sexe à vaincre. Ceux-ci étaient deux amis, ceux-là ne se connaissaient point : ceux-ci se présentèrent devant un seul tyran : ceux-là devant beaucoup de tyrans, et de plus cruels encore. Le premier pardonna, les seconds tuèrent. Entre les premiers, il y avait solidarité, dans les seconds, la volonté était libre. Il y eut plus de prudence dans ceux-ci, parce qu'ils n'avaient qu'un but, la conservation de l'amitié, ceux-là ne tendaient qu'à avoir la couronne du martyr. Ceux-ci combattirent pour les hommes ; ceux-là pour le Seigneur.¹³⁰

CONCLUSION

The two texts' narrative structures bear enlightening resemblances to the two clinical structures we have been discussing: psychosis in the case of the OF *Ami et Amile* and perversion in the ME *Amis and Amiloun*. Fundamental to these structures are the problematic consequences of the protagonists' relations to the other and ultimately to the Other, or more specifically the absence of such relations. These relations in turn determine a number of elements in the texts, especially the notions of home and exile. In the OF, home is found in an indissoluble unity and the exterior is experienced as exile insofar as it is conceived of as an exposure. Any endeavour to further separate the heroes is ruthlessly brought to a violent end. In the ME on the other hand, exile concerns Amiloun alone and home is a mythical reunion with an Other, an Other that dictates an ideal union with Amis, the other. Exile is therefore a constant, whether psychical or physical. Only the end of the text seems to bring some form of solace, by reconciling Christian and

¹³⁰ Jacques de Voragine, 'Une vierge d'Antioche', pp.311-6, (p.316).

'home-made' law, i.e. in bringing Amiloun back into contact with the sublime object he coveted: 'a law thanks to which the Other can remain all powerful, [...] an order superior to the one accepted by the common run of mortals'¹³¹.

From another perspective, the OF and the ME redactions are not so different as I have been arguing. In Bruce Fink's terms: 'the pervert and the psychotic engage in an attempt to supplement the paternal function [the Other] that brings along the symbolic into existence'. What distinguishes them is the technique they use since 'the pervert [attempts to solve the problem] by staging or enacting the enunciation of the law, the psychotic by fomenting a delusional metaphor.'¹³² This delusional metaphor prompts an often violent defence of the protagonists' narcissistic unity and is rationalised in the OF text in the form of some narrative necessities (such as, in this case, turning a character into a seemingly unambiguous villain). This only throws light on the paranoid structure of the text itself. It simply reflects the paranoid structure of the relationship between the two men or, as we have argued, the ego and its specular image. Usually referred to as tales of exemplary friendship, *Ami et Amile* and *Amis and Amiloun* would be better qualified as tales of destruction under divine auspices for the sake of one over-privileged relationship. The complex role played by God raises

¹³¹ Feher-Gurewich, 'A Lacanian Approach to the Logic of Perversion', quoted in full p.32.

¹³² Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, p. 193.

legitimate questions as to the genre of each text, questions that cannot find an easy answer. Vesce's otherwise useful and promising essay bears witness to that difficulty: discussing the epic quality of the OF redaction it ends, disappointingly, with the suggestion that the text is basically a *Te Deum*¹³³, a solution which does not address the problems raised by this 'véritable énigme littéraire'¹³⁴. Classifying a text in a certain literary genre has its attractions: it creates a whole horizon of expectations for the reader and directs the reading to a certain extent. However it also has its limitations and I believe that in the case of *Ami et Amile* little is to be gained by forcing the text into a specific genre. The importance of the religious in the two works has endowed the texts with a didactic usefulness, though one has to question what the texts really teach given the complex moral and religious issues they bring to their audience. I think the two texts provide interesting adaptations of Christianity to their own needs, even when these needs, ironically, have their place in Christian orthodoxy. In both *Ami et Amile* and *Amis and Amiloun*, God, however vengeful, is never too cruel or too supportive of some subjects/protagonists at the expense of others. If God were overtly unfair, then perfect friendship would also appear, accordingly, very imperfect and that, in the ethical structure of the texts, would not do at all.

¹³³ Vesce, 'Reflections', p. 145.

¹³⁴ Ribard, '*Ami et Amile*: une œuvre-carrefour', p.155.

Chapter two

Ambiguous identity, elusive Otherness and Christian discourse in *Robert le Diable* and *Sir Gowther*

Part one: *Robert le Diable*

I INTRODUCTION

*Robert le Diable*¹³⁵: the title of the French version of one of the most popular of medieval tales, found in a wide range of European languages. This title is deceptively simple in that it indicates with precision and concision the identity of the protagonist. Compare it, for instance, with the much more anodyne title given to the Middle English adaptation of the tale, *Sir Gowther*, which this chapter will put in a parallel with *Robert le Diable*. In the French text, we are given the name of the protagonist and his (inhuman) nature in terms that could scarcely be clearer. However, a few pages into the text, this unequivocal title starts to prove problematic and dangerously simple. It lures the reader or listener into a false sense of assurance, the assurance that they know what Robert *is*, that is, the devil. The title creates assumptions that mask the elaborate nuances of the text. Contrary to what the title implies, the

¹³⁵ All references are to E. Löseth (ed.), *Robert le Diable; roman d'aventures*. Publications de la Société des anciens textes français; no. 48 (Paris: Firmin Didot et cie., 1903). Löseth gives two versions of the text (A and B), A being the earlier one and that consistently referred to here.

foundations of the text are in fact particularly unstable and the text is, as a result, marked by ambiguity throughout. That Robert *is* the devil is actually the most uncertain fact in his story. If the protagonist's identity is so elusive, otherness becomes proportionally difficult to grasp since frontiers between the human and the inhuman are so blurry. These hesitations give *Robert le Diable* its specific texture: part romance, part *chanson de geste* and part hagiography: all indistinct frontiers. Establishing identity and otherness is challenging, and only one of the attractions of this remarkable story that has yet to attract much attention from scholars.

Ambivalence pervades the text from the very beginning. The first and most crucial illustration of this can be observed at the opening of the text, when the background of the story, so determinant in the establishment of the edifying message of the text, is laid. That the premises of *Robert le Diable* are as vague and non-committal as possible stems from the fact that the exact role played by the devil in Robert's mother's pregnancy is particularly obscure in the French text. After the duchess' complaint that she cannot become pregnant and therefore does not trust God to give her an heir, Robert's conception is narrated thus:

Diable, fait el, 'je te proi
 Que tu entenges ja vers moi:
 Se tu me dones un enfant,
 Chet e proi dès ore en avant.'

A tant chiet sor le lit pasmée.
Al relever s'est mout blamée.

ll. 45-49

[Devil, she said, 'I pray you to hear me: if you give me a child, I will, from now on, address my prayers to you.' She then fell on the bed, having lost consciousness. When she woke up, she blamed herself a lot.]

In hardly any other context imaginable is the expression 'original sin' more fitting. The duke comes back from hunting and, overwhelmed by his wife's beauty:

Lors se li prist tel volenté
De lui faire et d'a lui gesir;
Tant en ot li dus grant dessir
Que il l'enporte sor son lit
Tantost, et en fait son delit.
E! las, tant i fist mal deduit,
Qu'en la ducesse a mis tel fruit,
Et un tel oir i engendra
Dont ja bien ne li avendra.
Diables, qui le sot bien faire,
Fu conseillieres de l'afaire.

ll. 58-68

[And then he so wanted to do with her as he wished and to lie by her; his desire was such that he carried her to his bed and took his pleasure with her. Unfortunately, this was bad pleasure indeed for he planted such fruit in the Duchess, such an heir was engendered out of which no good will come. The Devil, who knew how to do this, had interfered in this business.]

According to the above lines, then, the devil is not Robert's father, contrary to the shortcut explanation so often used by critics¹³⁶, nor did the devil impersonate the duke to seduce the duchess, as happens in certain versions (the ME version, notably); if this were the case, Robert's nature would be easily determined. That Robert was begotten by the devil is sometimes

¹³⁶ Surprisingly, even Elisabeth Gaucher, editor of a recent bilingual edition of the text, uses that misleading shortcut in her introduction to the text, referring to Robert as 'un héros né du diable' in Elisabeth Gaucher, *Robert le Diable, édition bilingue. Publication, traduction, présentation et notes par A. Gaucher* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006) p.11.

inferred from what we read in lines 67-8, but there is no transparent statement: suggesting the unspeakable is the closest one gets to what is beyond description. We are never offered any more substantial or definitive account of what happened, even when the event is evoked again later in the text. Instead, the narrator offers more of the same noncommittal statements: for instance, the devil 'gave the duchess Robert' ('moi li dona par son pooir' l.598) after she solicited the devil's intervention in order to have a child. Elsewhere, we are simply told that God had nothing to do with the young man's conception¹³⁷. As a result of this enigmatic engendering, determining who or perhaps more appropriately *what* Robert is, is a thorny problem that must be discussed as the basis of our continuing discussion of otherness. I shall start by analysing the portrait of the eponymous hero in the first part of the text in an attempt to clarify his nature. Success in this enterprise can only be limited, as the premises of the tale would allow us to expect. This in itself is telling, and serves as a springboard to the examination of the hero's and the text's hybridity, in all its senses. Here of course, we could not do without a consideration of Homi Bhabha's groundbreaking conception of the notion. An exploration of the causes of this deeply unsettling phenomenon with the

¹³⁷ See the passages where the Duchess reveals the secret of Robert's birth (l.432-41), Robert's confession (ll.597-603), and the final disclosure of his identity (ll.4857-62). No passage offers a clear and satisfying account of what happened. (ll.440; 455; 833; 913 and 4937). Of course, I am not denying the significance of the devil's intervention but merely putting the record straight. The sole fact that the mysterious event is conjured up again and again shows how much it matters in the economy of the text, despite no actual textual evidence that the Devil did the deed.

help of selected psychoanalytical notions — indispensable when discussing paternal issues — will, I hope, highlight the hermeneutic richness of the text.

II ROBERT THE DISJOINTED HERO

The narration of Robert's childhood is the occasion for a few hints at that foundational episode but nothing, despite some rather titillating allusions, dispels the original mist of uncertainty that surrounds his unnatural conception. Because it is acknowledged that the supernatural played a role, however obscure, in Robert's conception, it is not surprising to learn that the child's behaviour is characterised by attitudes and traits traditionally attributed to the devil or showing signs of demonic influence according to popular medieval belief. As a small child, for example, Robert screams continually and is very agitated; he bites his wet-nurses or kicks them and terrifies them. This behaviour, combined with his exceptional size and strength and the fact that he grows incredibly fast, must be understood as the result of the supernatural character of his origin: the narrator does not mention or encourage any other interpretation of these facts. By the age of fourteen, Robert has grown into a very tall, most handsome and agile young man but his mischief has increased accordingly. The narrator, of course, influences our belief that this mischief is the work of the devil. We are later told that Robert also refuses to learn anything, no matter how hard he is

beaten. When he is fifteen, the intensity of his violence increases further and he starts killing almost anyone he encounters, with a preference for members of the clergy. To everyone's concern, he becomes even stronger, and taller:

Hon ne trovast en nul parage
 Si grant home, si com moi samble,
 S'il et Robers fuissent emsamble,
 Que Robers ne fust un piet graindre,
 N'a sa forche ne pot ataindre
Riens qui ainc fust de mere né;

ll.174-9
 (my emphasis)

[No one could find, in any family, a man as tall as Robert, and it seems to me that if a tall man and Robert were together, Robert was a foot taller than the other man and his strength could not be equalled by anything that was born of a mother.]

This way of alluding to other people as 'born of a mother' indirectly suggests the inhuman character of Robert's strength and size. Such a reference, however formulaic, casts further doubt on Robert's lineage: not only is it impossible to determine who his father is, but now his humanity is altogether questioned. Those who were born of a mother simply do not look or act like him. As a result, Robert inspires fear in those who behold him.

If Robert inspired fear only, our task would be a lot easier, for his situation would be clear-cut. However, that would not reflect the uncertainty that envelops the protagonist: the reactions he provokes are as contradictory as the elements that constitute him. It is unsurprising, therefore, to find, early on, a much more subtle depiction of Robert than the monolithic description

given above. In fact, Robert's physical appearance illustrates his multiplicity as well as his complexity. If Robert frightens those around him, he is also paradoxically attractive to them. Indeed, his striking beauty charms everyone:

Si estoit biaux a desmesure
De cors, de vis et de stature;
S'ert meruelle que mal faisoit
Car a toute gent [mout] plaissoit. ll.185-8

[So, his body, his face, his shape were beautiful beyond measure. That he acted badly was incredible for all thought that he was very attractive.]

Introducing the concept of beauty, one of the most ambiguously charged of notions, suggests Robert's duality very aptly, however how out of place it seems to be¹³⁸. Beauty is traditionally believed to be at once a reflection of a person's inner goodness¹³⁹ (which is why people find Robert's appearance and actions irreconcilable) and the potential embodiment of the seductive devil. On the one hand, Robert's beauty brings together the conflicting sides of the notion: somehow, his beauty attracts people despite his evil deeds, in a typically demonic fashion. On the other hand, his future excellence is no

¹³⁸ The lines also introduce the foundational issue in the text namely, *démésure*, which is reiterated:

Trop par ert fors a desraison; l.184
Tant par est faus a desmesure,
Que sa derverie le paist. ll.1068-9

Hubris, an epic motif *par excellence*, is effectively at the origin of the tale, with Robert's mother's challenging of God. The emperor, the seneschal and Robert all show signs of hubris at some point.

¹³⁹ As is the case, for example, for Florence in *Florence de Rome*.

doubt foreseeable beyond his appalling deeds¹⁴⁰. Uncertainty as to the cause for this unreasonable liking of Robert is, in itself, the perfect illustration of his own, and the text's, ambivalence.

This ambivalence is easily accounted for in that two opposed elements have influenced the creation of the young Robert: the devil's interference and the child's christening. His christening, it would seem, acts as a form of indefinite protection or obstacle (an inoculation, perhaps) against the full development of the demonic influence on Robert. This, also, could account for people's senseless attraction to him. Perhaps this strange phenomenon is better dissected thus: what is human about Robert, his appearance (however big he is, he is never considered a monster), induces a positive reaction, while what is inhuman about him, his actions provoke horror. Robert, in a word, is only partly human: he is a hybrid. Nothing, at any point in the text, contradicts this statement. Rather, this fact is perpetually emphasised and renewed throughout. Robert's only ambition is to get rid of the devil that is 'part of him' — a recurring expression confirming Robert's hybrid status¹⁴¹. To this end, he leaves Normandy for Rome where he is directed to a hermit.

¹⁴⁰ A closely similar contrast between the hero's appearance and who he actually is is found in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, ll.932-6: 'Nus ne l'ot qui lo taigne a saige, /Mais tuit cil qui lo regardoient / Por bel et por gent lo tenoient.' (No one who heard him speak would have considered him sensible but those who looked at him found him good looking and noble.) Here is an example of the young hero's beauty anticipating his future perfection. Chrétien de Troyes, *Le conte du Graal ou le roman de Perceval*, ed. by Charles Méla, *Lettres gothiques* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1990).

¹⁴¹ See, for example, ll.440; 455; 833; 913 and 4937.

This hermit, who communicates directly with God, is the only one who can help Robert re-enter Christianity and save his soul. Interestingly however, what remains to be de-demonized to free his soul will be conquered via a succession of humiliating ordeals; ordeals that, ironically, bring him physically closer to the non-human — thus always endangering what was uncontestedly human about him. Indeed, the forms of punishment that his penance involves do not allow Robert to enter the realm of the human. All three aspects of his punishment have this in common that they command a form of abnormal behaviour that reflects Robert's previously inhuman behaviour. His tripartite penance, which includes his pretending to be a madman, prompts the following description:

Par les maistres rues de Rome
 S'en cort a loi de dervé home.
 Une fois court, autre sautele,
 Henist et brait, hue et beele,

ll.1277-80

[He runs in the main streets of Rome like a madman. Sometimes he runs, sometimes he hops, neighs and brays, yells and bleats,]

Robert would sooner be taken for a beast than a penitent. The second part of his penance necessitates his remaining silent, which brings him closer to animals again in a shared deprivation of speech¹⁴². The third part requires

¹⁴² It is also a symbolical opposition to the mother, who spoke too much and conjured up the Devil through careless use of speech. Women's lack of restraint of their tongues is a classical accusation in the Middle Ages — see, for instance, Andreas Capellanus' opinion on the subject in the *Art of Courtly Love*, published in: *Woman Defeated and Woman Defended, An Anthology of Medieval Texts* ed. by Alcuin Blamires with Karen Pratt and C. W. Marx (Oxford:

him to eat only what he can take from dogs, which again accentuates the animal characteristics of the hero. Later, when Robert fights the Turks, he is likened to a sparrow-hawk (l.1894), a wolf (ll.2298; 3360) and a lion (l.3360)¹⁴³. Although these are common images used to emphasise a hero's prowess, they take on a very particular resonance here in that they add a further stroke to Robert's already hybrid portraiture.

III HISTORY, GENRE AND THE CHARACTER OF ROBERT: FURTHER DEBATE ON THE HERO'S HUMANITY

I have discussed at length Robert's human or inhuman nature, basing my argument on textual evidence and trying to make the author's portrait of the protagonist more legible. This discussion may be enriched by taking into account external evidence, that is, by taking into consideration historical elements. In *Chivalry and violence in medieval Europe*, Richard Kaeuper evokes research conducted by Georges Duby and Volker Trempler on actual medieval youths and their behaviour:

These young men often formed into bands, and wandered, gambled, philandered, and fought in tournaments and wars. [...] Gowther [the hero of the Middle English adaptation of the tale, who behaves just like Robert] seems a parodic exemplar of these turbulent, wandering, violent youths.¹⁴⁴

Clarendon Press, 1992). Silence as a way of avoiding sin is of course reminiscent of St Benedict's rule, which sees speech as a source of sin.

¹⁴³ That these animals are predators is not irrelevant. The comparison contributes to the depiction of a violent, ruthless hero.

¹⁴⁴ Richard W. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford University Press, 1999) pp.266-7.

This description brings to mind Robert and his group of thieves and murderers, committing all sorts of crimes in the woods outside Rouen; of course, it also recalls his catastrophic early career as a knight. If one wishes to pursue this approach, it is always possible to have a sceptical reading of the text and to see in the narration of Robert's infancy the depiction of a very agitated child, but that would be of limited interest. What is more useful is to consider historical evidence as one reads about Robert, the knight. Indeed, documents show that knights enjoyed a very bad reputation because of their tendency to loot, rape, and attack everyone. The image of the knight was consequently very ambiguous, at once idealised in many literary works and pronounced evil by the clergy (Bernard of Clairvaux and Alain de Lille, for instance, wrote virulent critiques of knights' violent behaviour¹⁴⁵). In the light of this evidence, Robert's early portrait, I would suggest, is a faithful mirror held to reality and shows a protagonist that is, in this respect, more human-like before he becomes a romance, *chanson de geste*¹⁴⁶ and even a hagiographical hero. Beneath the version of the story that the narrator tells us is a counter-narrative that allows us to read the story of Robert's early life as that of a particularly disorderly child/young man who, thanks to his high

¹⁴⁵ See Kaeuper, *Chivalry*, pp.76-7. An obvious example of a well-known literary work that does mention knights' bad behaviour is Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*. The hero's mother is horrified when she realises that her son, whom she had tried to protect from the outside world, reports with enthusiasm that he has just seen some knights in the forest: 'Tu as veü au mien espoir/ Les angles don les genz se plaignent, / Qui ocient quant qu'il ataignent ' ll.370-2.

¹⁴⁶ The detailed descriptions of the three battles Robert as white knight fights against the Saracens in defence of Rome do evoke epic, but it should be noted that the narration of his excellence on the battlefield is also remarkably similar to the depiction of his earlier crimes.

birth becomes a 'privileged practitioner[s] of violence'¹⁴⁷, like many other young men of his time. This counter-narrative is very appealing and is probably at the origin of the desire for many critics to identify the historical Robert¹⁴⁸. All attempts have been vain and at best, Robert could be a mixture of different historical figures. This is not the place to discuss the matter further but what this interest in identifying a real Robert brings out is how very life-like (I would go so far as to say, human) the character is¹⁴⁹.

Critics' endeavours to find a historical match for our protagonist should not, however, veil the romance elements about the character. The interest of Robert's character is certainly due to the fact that it is multi-layered. At the beginning, Robert is very much like the real knights and far from the ideal of knighthood because he attacks indiscriminately and without any concern for honour or prowess or the defence of the Church. However, as Richard Kaeuper points out, some of the most highly praised romance heroes also act very badly indeed:

We can only wonder at the way in which, with or without conscious intent, authors give us curiously shaded descriptions of Lancelot and other heroes in full battle fury. Lancelot is not only compared to a raptor, a wolf, or lion, but more than once to an 'evil demon', 'the Devil himself', 'Death itself'. Bors and even Perceval can likewise be

¹⁴⁷ Kaeuper, *Chivalry*, p.130.

¹⁴⁸ Elisabeth Gaucher recapitulates the different attempts to locate a real Robert in '*Robert le Diable*', *histoire d'une légende* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2003) pp.64-9.

¹⁴⁹ The same will be said of the heroine of *Le bone Florence of Rome* in chapter three. Florence too has been linked to different historical figures.

termed 'demon'. William of Palerne is described by enemies who feel the force of his chivalry as 'sum devel degised þat doþ al þis harm' (some disguised devil who does all this harm!)¹⁵⁰.

The difference is that the heroes mentioned above do have redeeming features, while Robert has none. It is only much later in the text that he eventually uses his knightly skills to do good. But in the early stages of the story, which interest us here, Robert displays much *malitia* and no *militia*¹⁵¹. Of course, he later redeems his sins, after a long period of humiliating penance before becoming a hermit. That too, interestingly, connects Robert with the most celebrated heroes of the Middle Ages. Kaeuper stresses the fact that

[...] many heroes themselves end their lives as hermits. Perceval becomes a hermit at the end of *The Quest of the Holy Grail*; Lancelot, Bleoberis, Girflet, Hector [...] are all hermits in the closing pages of the *Mort Artu* and again, in Malory's great book. William of Orange [...] in *William in the Monastery*, hears the voice of God telling him in a dream [...] to become a hermit.¹⁵²

To bear in mind how Robert relates to other medieval heroes is to start appreciating the immense complexity of the character and to acknowledge the impossibility and undesirability of labelling the multi-faceted character in one way or another. The ambivalence of the protagonist is the ambivalence and the richness of the text itself.

¹⁵⁰ Kaeuper, *Chivalry*, p.158

¹⁵¹ Kaeuper cites the two terms as used by clerics to discuss the conduct of knights in *Chivalry*, p.64.

¹⁵² Kaeuper, *Chivalry*, p.61.

IV THE PENITENT, THE MADMAN,
THE KNIGHT AND THE HERMIT

I have explored the premises of the text and shown how slippery Robert's nature is. Analysis of the developments of the character emphasises rather than attenuates the elusiveness of his identity. Robert's identity, in the first part of the text¹⁵³, is constituted of a succession of failures: failure to be a man, (as the lack of clarity surrounding his conception indicates) and failure to be a knight, in that he does not comply with the rules of chivalry. In the second part of the text, his ambivalent nature is maintained: he is the fool, the knight in white armour¹⁵⁴ and the penitent at the same time before becoming a hermit. I would argue that his sudden sanctity is, after all, yet another form of hybridity since the hero is half way between man and God. The distinguishing feature is still the same (violence) but is now used towards what we are to understand is the right end — i.e. in the service of God. Some new characteristics are added: his excellence and his prowess¹⁵⁵ isolate him to such a point that no one is prepared to believe that he is a mere man. All speculate but no one is certain of exactly what he is. The emperor, for

¹⁵³ By 'the first part of the text', I mean until he decides to do penance.

¹⁵⁴ I would suggest that the colour white, usually synonymous with the other world, the supernatural, could also be taken as a metaphor for his non-identity: he/it is a blank that awaits an inscription.

¹⁵⁵ His prowess is the object of recurring praise; see for instance ll.1858; 2173; 2362; 3800. Yet, as Kaeuper reminds us in *Chivalry*, using the example of Balain in the *Merlin Continuation*, prowess can sometimes 'produce deep ambivalence': Balain is highly praised but observers call him a demon or a supernatural being (pp.158-9).

instance, when devising a way to capture the white knight, expresses this doubt plainly by starting his sentence thus: 'Et se il est hon teriens...'¹⁵⁶ (l.3079). Generally he is presumed to be of divine origin or to have a connection with God ('Dieu amis' l.2125): he is either recognised as knight of Christ just after the first battle ('Chevaliers est Dieu Jhesu Crist' l.2130) or as Saint George during the second (l.2612).

Even though this type of existence at the limits of the human is desirable in accordance with the religious message of the text, it nonetheless makes Robert non-human and perpetuates his hybridity. His inaccessibility in particular sets him even more effectively apart from the rest of the world: from the point of view of the Romans, his prowess makes him stand out and his dazzling white armour makes him visually distinct. For the reader, it is an appreciation not only of his prowess but, more to the point, of his pious achievement and exemplarity, all that distinguishes him from the common run of mortals. His miraculous transformation and his immense patience make him an unattainable ideal: from being the most evil, he turns into the most perfect man. This is a model that no-one can truly emulate: indeed it is stated that Robert should be the object of a cult, just like a saint. The Romans' wish will come true: after Robert has renounced the world, God performs

¹⁵⁶ If he is a simple mortal...

miracles in his name and, after his death, his bones are stolen by a lord from Le Puy who brings them back home to found the abbey of St Robert.

The protagonist's unmatched perfection is commensurate only with his physical inaccessibility: when he changes into the white knight who *'ne se vault faire connoistre/ A home qui soit nés de mere'*¹⁵⁷ (l.3804-5), he is so elusive that the emperor has to prepare an ambush in the hope of catching and rewarding him. The most striking illustration of his elusiveness and the effect it has on the Romans comes when the seneschal, trying to impersonate the white knight, enters Rome: *'[...] sa venue mout lor plaist:/ S'il veïssent Nostre Signor,/ N'eüssent il joir grignor.'*¹⁵⁸ (ll.4194-6). Neither human being nor actual saint, Robert spends his life trapped between two states.

This limbo state is obviously correlated with Robert's ill-defined, if not ever-changing affliction: at times referred to as an illness (ll.603; 823), it is often described as a physical invasion (the devil is or claims a part of him) and even as a form of madness¹⁵⁹ (perpetuated during his penance). This inconsistency may be construed as the expression of medieval uncertainty in

¹⁵⁷ ...does not want to be known by any man born of a mother.

¹⁵⁸ His arrival made them very happy: had they seen our Lord, they would not have been happier.

¹⁵⁹ For example: *'en une forest se devoie'* (l.208); *'quant la fole vie mena'* (l.627). Version B is more explicit and mentions his *'derverie'*. The fact that he lives in the woods recalls Yvain, of course, and aptly conveys the ambivalence of the situation: the woods near Rome are the place where the hermit lives. The locus of perdition is also the locus of redemption.

matters supernatural. Its effect (whether intentional or not) is very interesting for our purposes: indeed, this hesitation enhances the worrying mystery at the origin of the story and gives it more credibility. Is not what one cannot grasp, the unknown or the uncanny far more alarming than an identified foe? Is not an enemy much harder to fight when his nature and, subsequently, his functioning and potential weaknesses are unknown? This basic principle, so often applied to the construction of horror films and thrillers pertains to *Robert le Diable* as well. In a word, the dangerous and mysterious affliction threatens us all: we could all fall victim to the devil... Fortunately, the text tells us, we are not helpless and there is an antidote: faith in God.

V HYBRIDITY AND CHRISTIANITY

One would expect more precision in order for the text to acquire a stronger, firmer, edifying message but the absence of the much-wanted details suggests, at least, the following (practical) lesson: not trusting in God but instead encouraging the devil to take part in one's life is a very bad idea. Through Robert's story, which demonstrates the redeeming power of confession and penance at a time when these notions were newly encouraged by the Church, the author displays his moral objective, making the text a materialisation of Christian discourse. As such, *Robert le Diable* has its own ambitions and therefore its limitations too: not a sermon, it probably did not cause infidels to convert to Christianity, for example. The author

acknowledges and embraces those limitations by having the Saracens die on the battlefield, rather than being offered the option of conversion. The focus of the text is not on the mass conversion of Saracens; it is elsewhere, very much concentrated on the individual rather than on the large picture: the interest in Christian propaganda is entirely limited to the protagonist and has no universal pretensions. Why a lack of interest in centring the text on the repeated defeat of the Saracens? One could suggest that the Saracens are considered such a lost cause that their case is not even taken into consideration and actually seems irrelevant. *Robert le Diable* is not a proselytizing text; it is not at all concerned with the empire-like spread of Christianity to the whole known world. The only person that matters, whose invasion by faith is important, is Robert. In this sense, the narrative is very much about one individual, a hybrid who comprises the other, who is other to all, and whose aim is to be united with God. The real enemy is not the infidel but is in reality more all-pervading: the enemy lies in Hubris, in the past, in the shape of sins galore and, more importantly, within the self in the constant tests of Robert's determination to save his soul. Placing emphasis on the battles — by referring to them as 'Crusades', as some do¹⁶⁰ — is tempting but amounts to misreading the text for there is no such redundant emphasis: Robert is the centre, a microcosm in which the ubiquitous struggle for the purity of the soul is enacted. By showing how Robert can turn into a saintly

¹⁶⁰ Elisabeth Gaucher, for instance, consistently refers to them as crusades.

figure, the narrator emphasises God's goodness and his capacity to *conquer* even the most evil, blasphemous and rebellious creature. In other words, the monolithic Christian 'solution' comes to be applied to an ill-defined problem.

However, the consequences of Robert's unclear nature are far-reaching. Most importantly, they affect the didactic impact of the text. I should like to problematize Robert's relationship to Christianity in the light of Bhabha's elaborations on the concept of hybridity. Bhabha uses this term as part of his description of the relationship between the colonised subject and the coloniser: he contends that hybridity challenges the coloniser's authority, stability and authenticity (i.e., purity). For this discussion, I would like to liken Christian discourse to a colonial power, a parallel justifiable by the frequent association of Christianity with colonisation. Robert, because he is a hybrid, is a challenge to the dominant power in that he resists its influence¹⁶¹ for a long time before finally beginning to mimic it. According to Bhabha, such mimicking could also be seen as a form of (probably unconscious) resistance. The colonised, he explains, can reveal in the coloniser the defects that he most wanted to eliminate in the colonised. The colonised will allow colonial discourse's inconsistencies and double standards to surface, which

¹⁶¹ Bhabha does not consistently argue that resistance is conscious or not: both seem conceivable. In this text, of course, there is no question that resistance is conscious at all. In other contexts, however, Bhabha's indecision is evidently problematic. For a clear discussion of the implications of this problem and an exploration of Bhabha's most important ideas, see Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices and Politics* (London: Verso, 1997.) pp.114-151.

will in turn unsettle the dominant power. Here, violence or cruelty can be proved to illustrate this double standard in that both are condemned when called a sin but praised when labelled the 'fight for Christianity'. Of course this discourse might have been regarded as normal in the Middle Ages but the modern reader will not fail to perceive this two-gear system. Mimicry is always unsuccessful, suggesting that the colonised is almost as good as the original but not quite. And because the relation between the two parties is deeply ambivalent — nurturing and threatening at the same time — it is unsettling for the dominant order. The consequence of this state of affairs is that colonial relationships bear the seeds of their own destruction — a particularly shattering argument when applied to *Robert le Diable*, and one that calls into question its religious lesson. Mimicry is 'at once resemblance and menace'¹⁶² because it is not in the coloniser's interest to let the colonised become a replica: what would happen to that necessary difference that justified colonisation? Things, however, do not always go according to plan:

The problem for colonial discourse is that it wants to produce compliant subjects who reproduce its assumptions, habits and values — that is, 'mimic' the colonizer. But instead it produces ambivalent subjects whose mimicry is never far from mockery. Ambivalence describes this fluctuating relationship between mimicry and mockery, an ambivalence that is fundamentally unsettling to colonial dominance. [...] because the colonial relationship is always ambivalent, it generates the seeds of its own destruction.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994. repr.2004) p.86.

¹⁶³ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London: Routledge, 1998.) p.13.

I would like to suggest a reading of Robert as comparable to the colonised subject who is asked to imitate the dominant power. Discussing Robert's hybridity and ambivalence, I have shown how he was expected to comply with certain rules and to reproduce certain models (act like a knight) and how he failed on each occasion. When he was identified as a child or adolescent, for instance, he failed to show all the attributes of those stages and defied inadvertently the classification (he was too tall, too strong, too violent). This is continued and reinforced when he is knighted and presents himself at his first tournament: this time, he has the appearance of a knight but subverts the rules of the tournament, showing no understanding of the social role of the game. He knows only that going to tournaments is what knights are expected to do and his inability to adopt the prescribed behaviour sets him apart as an impostor. When the imposture is deliberate (when he pretends to be mad, when he secretly takes on the guise of the white knight or decides to emulate the hermit's lifestyle) Robert is even more clearly caught up in mimicry. What he mimics is always part of Christian discourse: he imitates the warrior saint, a 'Christ aux outrages' (*mockery* of Christ) when the people of Rome shower blows on him, or a holy hermit. Nevertheless, as I have shown earlier, Robert does not stop being a hybrid, even when that hybridity becomes obvious, because no matter how far mimicry goes, a difference between the two terms of the equation must be sustained in order to maintain colonial power/God's ascendancy. This is why Robert is only a part-time white

knight, for example. This is also why, even if he keeps up the pretence that he is a madman, an outsider, he is still, at the same time, a penitent. Finally, as he gradually turns into a saintly figure, one cannot help thinking that this achievement is still a form of mimicry; for in the end, God is unattainable and no matter how hard one tries to live according to His rule, it remains impossible to equal him. Remaining a pale and inaccurate copy of Him has to keep one content.

Mimicry has some undesired effects that are of great interest for this discussion in that it 'acts like a distorting mirror'¹⁶⁴ and is, in this respect, a way of resisting the coloniser¹⁶⁵. We can argue that saintly figures like Robert should be construed as non-exact replicas of the divine, just as the colonised can never be as good as the coloniser. In their mimicry of Christ or other saints, saintly figures can be quite amusing: the mockery then lies in the extravagance of their ordeals and sufferings¹⁶⁶. This is directly applicable to Robert, whose near-sanctity is gained via a series of humiliations that necessitate his entertaining everyone around him— he is the *fol* whom all find

¹⁶⁴ Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory*, p.121.

¹⁶⁵ There are two ways of resisting: the colonised can return the coloniser's gaze (i.e., comply with his orders and yet hijack them. For example, the colonised is taught the Bible but interprets it in a way that unsettles the colonial power by indicating the text's contradictions) or refuse to return it (that is, by refusing to confirm the coloniser in its dominant position). Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory*, pp.131-2.

¹⁶⁶ The fact that the saints are so hard to kill, for example, is often grotesque and could be seen as parodic.

so funny. Still, his case remains rare in that few saints actually earn their haloes by deliberately behaving like madmen.

It is perhaps possible to read then, against all odds, the story of Robert as an illustration of a challenge to the highest authority, even when this authority is depicted as victorious in the end — this victory also being subject to questioning, as we shall see. This reading, in fact, would not contradict what the narrator has to say about power in general.

VI IMPOTENT POWER FIGURES: THE FATHER, THE POPE AND THE EMPEROR

God's success is powerfully put into perspective in the text by what Gaucher calls 'la faillite des institutions'¹⁶⁷. In other words, the story of Robert's miraculous turn to God and the success of this enterprise is also the story of the failure of temporal power, or the Other. Like *Ami et Amile*, *Robert le Diable* shows the problems created by the absence or collapse of the Other; but if in the former nothing can occupy the ultimate authoritative position, in the latter, Robert eventually finds and recognises an Other: the hermit and obviously, through him, God. This is not, however, a straightforward affair. I have previously mentioned that Robert, even as a child, was untameable. He proved dangerously violent, but also rejected any form of authority. By the

¹⁶⁷ Gaucher, '*Robert le diable*': *histoire d'une légende*, p.27.

age of twenty, when his propensity for crime and blasphemy was fully asserted, he was excommunicated by the pope and banished from his father's land, sanctions that did not affect him at all. This, of course, is the first and most crucial example of the 'faillite des institutions' and the beginning of a succession of such events, because the duke, whose paternity is already in question, does not in any way fulfil the paternal function. As his son grows up, the Duke may be angry, grieved and ashamed because of Robert's evil deeds, but he is totally incapable of stopping the young man and protecting his people. It never occurs to this naive figure of the father that there might be more to Robert's bad behaviour than meets the eye. Since he never blames his wife¹⁶⁸, however, as if even this fault-finding would be objectionable, he never even learns of her prayer to the devil prior to the conception of the baby. *Robert le Diable* is, then, a story of paternal failure and the need to establish an Other, create a genealogy and, at the same time, a place for oneself in the world — a process that appears in Robert's questioning of his mother regarding his origins and his desire to leave behind his outlaw status to re-enter the Christian community.

¹⁶⁸ Note the duke's 'weakness' here: in many other texts (the Constance cycle, for instance), and in medieval society at large, the mother was immediately (and often unjustly) the object of suspicion if anything went wrong with the child. Robert's father, surprisingly, is never mistrustful and never accuses his wife.

The acknowledgement of the father's failure to represent a form of authority for his son comes after the Duke has heard too many complaints about Robert. He openly considers killing Robert with his own hands when his wife makes the following proposition:

'Se le volés bien, ceste noisse
 Poés esraument abaissier,
 Tout sans ochire ne quassier.
 Faites vo fil chevalier faire,
 Adont le verés [vous] retraire
 Assés tost de ces[t] grant malisse:
 Tout en laira son malvais visse,
 Sa cruauté et ses mesfais
 Puis qu'il sera chevaliers fais.'

ll.236-44

'If you wish, you can appease this tumult immediately without resorting to violence. Have your son dubbed a knight and you will soon see him abandon his very wicked ways: he will leave his evil vices, his cruelty and his bad deeds behind because he will have been knighted'.]

The suggestion is not extravagant for as Maurice Keen explains, knighthood was believed to improve a man¹⁶⁹; Robert is therefore soon knighted. What is most striking here is the couple's evident faith in chivalry and the transformative power of the act of dubbing. Somehow, becoming a knight makes one good. Robert, however, remains unchanged. Chivalry has failed. The first tournament he attends, at the Mont Saint Michel, is the renewed occasion for a display of his uncontrollable violence and 'li commencement

¹⁶⁹ Keen says that 'On the eve of battle or the storming of a city, [...] men seek knighthood "in order that their strength and virtue may be greater".' in Maurice H. Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) p.79.

de ses chevaleries males'¹⁷⁰ (l.280-1). Robert acts 'com che fust mortel guerre'¹⁷¹ (l.302), unconscious, it seems, that a tournament is only a game, the social value of which he ignores. This failure of chivalry is the first significant sign of a crisis of power in this story.

The second important crisis concerns the pope and is particularly disturbing because of the text's strong edifying ambitions. When Robert arrives in Rome to see the pope, he is distraught to find that unless one offers an extravagant gift to the pontiff, one has no hope of talking to him. This explicit criticism of the papacy¹⁷² is soon reinforced when the pope eventually hears Robert's confession before admitting that he is utterly unable to help. The pope's uselessness is very strongly underlined by the repetition in the text of the phrase, 'ne set que faire'¹⁷³. Eventually, all he can do is send the sinner to a hermit who he thinks will be able to find a solution to Robert's problem. For Elisabeth Gaucher, 'l'idéalisation de l'état érémitique traduit une crise de confiance envers l'apostolat, au profit de la contemplation

¹⁷⁰ The beginning of his bad knighthood.

¹⁷¹ As if it were a serious war.

¹⁷² The word simony does not appear but it is obvious that the Pope is guilty of this sin. The commercial aspect of religion is also present in the other version of the text given in Löseth's edition: Robert's mother, before she turns to the devil for help, complains to God that he has not given her a child despite her generous gifts: 'Les ausmones et li loier/ Que t'ay donné petit me valent.' l.55 (I am not getting much in return for the alms I gave and the gifts I made in your honour). Elisabeth Gaucher reminds us that 'la curie romaine fut, à l'époque, largement critiquée pour sa corruption et sa pratique du clientélisme.' In 'Robert le Diable', p.31.

¹⁷³ He does not know what to do; ll.616; 621 and 630.

mystique.¹⁷⁴ The pope's weakness is all the more problematic since he is supposed to have received his power from Christ himself¹⁷⁵. The ending of the text leaves no doubt as to the way in which the author wished to depict Church potentates. Robert's remains are stolen by a man from Le Puy en Velay and 'the saintly body, transported to its new provincial home, a specially constructed "abbey of St Robert", continues to be no less efficacious than in Rome. It is hard not to see in this a final thumbing of the nose to the greatest powers in Christendom.'¹⁷⁶

The third crisis concerns the emperor, as easily fooled as Charlemagne in *Ami et Amile*. He is duped by the seneschal (who pretends to be the white knight), by the knight who wounded Robert after the third battle, and is generally impervious to the truth even when it is right in front of him¹⁷⁷. Moreover, the emperor proves unable to defend Rome, which is highly problematic: Rome, the centre of Christendom, is repeatedly under attack and each time it is clearly stated that without the white knight's help, the Turks would have been victorious. These attacks can be paralleled with, if not

¹⁷⁴ Gaucher, 'Robert le Diable', p.31.

¹⁷⁵ Michael Prior reminds us that according to medieval Christian theologians, 'le pape est le Seigneur de la Terre; le Christ lui a confié tous les pouvoirs, au ciel et sur la terre (*Papa dominus orbis*).' in *Bible et colonialisme: Critique d'une instrumentalisation du texte sacré*, translated by Paul Jourez (L'Hamarttan ; Paris 2003.) p.55. I shall return to the important implications of this statement later in this chapter.

¹⁷⁶ Judith Weiss, 'Ineffectual monarchs: portrayals of Regal and Imperial power in *Ipomedon*, *Robert le Diable* and *Octavian*', p.62.

¹⁷⁷ Three times, the emperor rejects his daughter's indications that Robert is the white knight that he so wishes to reward for his help against the Saracens.

matched by, the devil's attacks that Robert fears so much. Both point to a constant danger inside and outside, in a paranoid blurring of the limits of the body: the fates of Rome and Robert are intimately linked as Elisabeth Gaucher underlines:

Ainsi, les victoires remportées par Robert à Rome contre les Sarrasins peuvent s'interpréter à la fois comme une participation au salut de la chrétienté et un acte de réhabilitation individuelle.¹⁷⁸

In this logic, the emperor's failure to protect Rome is paralleled with his inability to protect his fool, Robert, who, he laments, is repeatedly beaten. He is even more ridiculous when he fails to recognise that the hauberk marks on Robert's face are not the result of a joke but a clue as to his identicalness with the white knight. What kind of king is unable to identify such marks? As Micha puts it, with considerable understatement, 'l'empereur manque plus d'une fois de caractère et de grandeur'¹⁷⁹. There is no better illustration of the failure of temporal power than Robert's resistance in the revelation scene: asked in turn by the emperor, his daughter and the pope to disclose his identity, he remains silent until the hermit invites him to speak up. Only then — according to the rules of his penance — does he open his mouth. Following the disclosure of Robert's identity, Norman lords who had been

¹⁷⁸ Elisabeth Gaucher, *'Robert le Diable' : histoire d'une légende*, p.52. Kaeuper goes even further, contending that '[both imaginative literature and historical accounts of their lives] suggest that [knights] found in their exhilarating and fulfilling fighting the key to identity.' in *Chivalry*, p.143

¹⁷⁹ Alexandre Micha (tr.), *Robert le Diable, roman du XIIème siècle* (GF-Flammarion, Paris, 1996) p.18.

looking for him inform him of the duke's death and ask him to return to Normandy and claim his lands. Unsurprisingly, he refuses this heritage in an ultimate rejection of his father. The emperor subsequently offers Robert his empire and daughter in a particularly interesting fashion:

'Amis Robert,' dist l'enperere,
 'Se mors est li dus vostre pere,
 Qui tant pot en ses jors valoir,
 Ne vous en peut gaires chaloir ;
Que mout boins pere vous serai :
 Ma fille espouser vous ferai,
 Et vous donrai tout mon enpire.
 Avant moi voilg que soiés sire,
 Maistre et regars et commandere,
 Et justichiere et enperere.'

ll.4915-24
 (my emphasis)

['My dear Robert', the emperor said, 'if the Duke your father is dead, who was of such worth when he was alive, you must not feel down; I will be a good father to you and will make you marry my daughter and will give you my whole empire. I want you to be the sovereign before me, the master, the administrator and the commander, the one who gives justice and the emperor.']

Robert declines the offer. This is contrasted by the hermit's words as he persuades the emperor to allow Robert to live a eremitic life:

[...] 'Sire enperere,
 Puis que *Robers a fait son pere*
De Dameldieu le roi chelestre
 Et o moi veut hermites estre,
 Laissiés l'ensamble o moi venir,
Que vous nel poés detenir,
 Puis c'a Jesu Crist s'est donés.

ll.4999-5005
 (my emphasis)

[Lord emperor, since Robert has made God, the king of heaven, his father, and since he wishes to stay with me, the hermit, let him come with me, for you cannot keep him since he has given himself to Jesus Christ.]

Power crisis is intimately linked with paternity crisis, as this last excerpt shows. From a suspicious conception to the struggle to find a suitable Other, resolution comes when a father figure is eventually put in place, thus bringing Robert peace and solace. Christian discourse is this Other that was lacking. Psychoanalysis, of course, has a lot to say about the role of the father; Lacan, in particular, put special emphasis on the importance of the father for the establishment of the structure of the psyche. He also distinguishes between the imaginary, symbolic (or paternal function¹⁸⁰) and real father. The first one is

an imago, the composite of all the imaginary constructs that the subject builds up in fantasy around the figure of the father. [...] The imaginary father can be construed as an ideal father [who is] the prototype of God-figures in religions, an all-powerful protector.¹⁸¹

Robert's choice of the heavenly father can be likened to the process of creation of the imaginary father as described by Lacan: unsure of his origins, Robert selects the most prestigious father, God, in order eventually to receive the protection no one else was able to provide, but more importantly, in order to stabilise the new starting point on which he founded his understanding of

¹⁸⁰ This means that the existence of a flesh-and-blood father is not necessary and that the absence of such a character does not necessarily imply that the function will not be occupied by something else.

¹⁸¹ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary*, p.62.

everything — and especially his own creation. Robert designates a delusional genealogy that goes with the new order his encounter with the hermit had set. The hermit is the only one who manages to soothe the crisis in Robert's life by providing him with a contract with God. This contract constitutes the establishment of a special and exclusive relationship between God and Robert that verges on megalomania.

This succession of failures to change Robert into either a normal man/Christian or a normal knight effectively highlights the limitations of temporal power. If the incompetence of mere men prepares the terrain for God's all the more spectacular victory over the devilish influence on Robert, there remains, nonetheless, a question: how does this miracle happen?

VII THE QUESTION OF CONSCIENCE AND EXOGENOUS MANIPULATION: PARANOIA AGAIN?

Interestingly, Robert's sudden change of attitude and desire to atone for his crimes (they are not yet described as sins) are concomitant with the first occurrence of his conscience and his desire to acknowledge a form of authority, which he feels can only be God. Prior to that, Robert, whose humanity rested merely on his physical appearance, showed no sign of awareness of what he was doing, a lacuna that powerfully highlighted the

inhuman within him. He took pleasure in his evil deeds but in a kind of amoral way, without a conception of acting badly for the sake of it. Robert was essentially conscience-free: as he later explains to the Pope, the devil ‘m’a l’arme del cors tolue’¹⁸² (l.601). First insensitive to the benefits of Christianity, Robert destroys everything without distinction (although his crimes against nuns and members of the clergy are emphasized) until he unexpectedly experiences an epiphany after one of his ritual massacres: Robert has just destroyed an abbey and personally slaughtered the vast majority of the nuns who resided there ‘si com li fist faire diables’¹⁸³ (l.350). This completed, he returns home only to notice with genuine astonishment that everyone has disappeared, utterly terrified of him. As the following passage makes clear, conscience means awareness of one’s sins, good and bad, and of one’s position outside Christianity. By this time, Robert has already been excommunicated. The passage describes how Robert violently discovers his alterity as it suddenly dawns on him that he is unlike everyone else and that he terrorises people¹⁸⁴:

Robers pense profondement.
 Mervelle soit mout durement
 Que chou est et de coi li vient
 Que on le doute tant et crient;
 Car quant le bien a faire pense

¹⁸² has removed my soul from my body.

¹⁸³ as the devil made him do.

¹⁸⁴ To pursue the analogy with postcolonial theory started earlier in this chapter, I want to stress the parallel between this passage and the scene in Frantz Fanon’s *Peau Noire Masques Blancs* where the narrator discovers that he is black.

Sans contedit et sans desfense
 Une autre pensée li *saut*
 Qui par *estриф* et par *asaut*
 De bien faire si le devoie
 Que leus *est mis* en autre voie.
 Celle pensée felenesse
 Li fait haïr Dieu et sa messe
 Et escarnir par le diable,
 Dont il heit Dieu l'esperitable;
 Pense que cele mesestanche
 Li soit venue de naissanche
 Et que coupes i ait sa mere
 Qui oncques ne fu vers lui clere :
 Bien set l'aventure et la teche
 Et l'ochoisson por coi tant *peche*.
 Lors dreche le cief contremont
 Car Sains Esperis l'en semont
 Qui en tel pensée l'*a mis*
 Qu'encor peut estre Dieu amis.

ll.369-392

[Robert is in deep thoughts and wonders why he is feared so much; for when he thinks about doing a good deed, another thought assails him, powerless and defenceless, and, violently turns him away from doing good and immediately leads him in another direction. This felonious thought makes him hate God and his mass and subjects him to the devil's spell, which makes him hate celestial God; He thinks that this terrible situation had its origins in his birth and that his mother, who was never very honest with him, is the culprit.: she knows well what happened and the circumstances that make him sin so much. So, he looks up because the Holy Spirit, who has put the idea in his head that he can still be God's friend, commands him to do so.]

The most striking feature of the above lines is the recurrent idea that Robert is not directly responsible for his acts or, as Alexandre Micha put it, that he is 'absent à lui-même'¹⁸⁵. Robert projects his culpability outside himself, in a direct claim (in this passage and elsewhere) that an exterior force makes him do certain things: 'de coi li vient', the use of the passive form ('Que leus *est mis* en autre voie')

¹⁸⁵ Alexandre Micha, p.15.

indicate his vulnerability and his incapacity to act otherwise¹⁸⁶. Robert is ambivalently depicted as a conscience-free, murderous devil ('in modern terms, we might consider him a sociopath', says Sylvia Huot¹⁸⁷) and a victim, in the first instance of his mother's folly¹⁸⁸ and later, of the devil's repeated attacks. Earlier in the text, a short remark had already anticipated this fully-fledged account of Robert's manipulation by the devil: the narrator had mentioned in passing: 'Eins Robert ne *pot* bien faire'¹⁸⁹ (l.117, my emphasis). A corollary point of great importance here is the representation of Robert's mind as open to exterior influence, a trait that of course recalls paranoid hallucinations and delusions: Robert feels that he is, as it were, not in possession of himself, that some powers outside his reach command his actions. First it is the devil who exercises his influence, then it is God's turn to lodge ideas in Robert's head and govern him: 'Car Sains Esperis [...] Qui en tel pensée l'a mis' (ll.390-1, quoted above). If we accept this interpretation, we can pursue the argument further and suggest that the messenger who lends

¹⁸⁶ This recalls, in René Girard's words, this 'illusion ancestrale qui pousse les hommes à poser la violence hors d'eux-même, à en faire un dieu, un destin, ou un *instinct* dont ils ne sont pas responsables et qui les gouverne du dehors' in Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris : Grasset, 1972) p.204.

¹⁸⁷ Sylvia Huot, *Madness in Medieval French Literature: Identities Found and Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p.91.

¹⁸⁸ Although no explicit statement allows us to affirm that Robert subsequently needs to expiate his mother's sin as well as his own, we can probably presume that he does. It is often the case in medieval literature that a child must expiate a sin committed before his or her birth by a close family member.

¹⁸⁹ Thus Robert was unable to do good deeds. As Gaucher explains, this powerlessness corresponds to 'la représentation médiévale des possédés, incapables de maîtriser leur corps' in '*Robert le diable* : histoire d'une légende, p.25.

Robert his military equipment is comparable with a visual hallucination that makes the protagonist do certain things (i.e., dress in white and fight).

Despite the presentation of Robert's soul as for auction, the tale cannot turn into a psychomachia insofar as the devil is totally absent from the text. We have neither his answer to Robert's mother's plea, nor any form of intervention on his part, despite the importance of his role in the story. In a word, the devil in *Robert le Diable* is a remarkably uninterested rival for God, making no unsolicited appearance and never disrupting the penitent's determination. When Robert shows awareness of his vulnerability by explaining how much he fears that the devil might succeed in overtaking his soul again, there are in fact no threats at all in the text. This renders God's 'triumph' very ambivalent: on the one hand, this victory is emphasized by the remarkable impotence of temporal lords while on the other hand, it is not so spectacular because the enemy is effectively absent. Nonetheless, this absence can be rather disquieting, in the same way as Robert's suspicious birth: it reminds us that an invisible, perhaps absent entity can possess us. Like Robert, the audience or the reader must therefore live in fear¹⁹⁰.

¹⁹⁰ Hence Robert's recurring disclosure of his anxiety. For instance: 'Mout redoute de l'arme lasse/ Que diables a lui nel traie;/ Ce est la riens dont plus s'esmaie.' (l.610-2). See also ll.765-8 ; .4936-9 ; 4953-5.

CONCLUSION

Robert le Diable represents the most comprehensive illustration of otherness, at all levels: it presents an ambivalent hero who experiences otherness within the self, and who is other to all. Hybridity defines him and it provides a definition that proves applicable to almost all of his characteristics: everything about Robert is ambivalent: his beauty, his violence; close reading shows that the difference we are expected to see between the evil Robert and the saintly Robert is not as obvious as the author seems to have wanted us to think. His early madness finds an acceptable reflection in the second part of the text and so does his violence. The forest, at first the place where he gives free rein to his mad behaviour, is later the place of his redemption. This continuous coexistence of one thing within another does not characterise the protagonist alone, but also very aptly describes the nature of the text itself. A combination of genres (hagiography, epic) enables the story to appeal to all without ever losing sight of the didactic value. Christianity plays a major role in the narrative, and one that is reinforced by the hagiographic turn of the story. The narrator promotes confession and penitence, showing how they can save a soul and potentially even lead to sanctity. There is no doubt, therefore, that the narrative has a clear function — to encourage the reader or listener to be a better Christian. In order to achieve that goal, the hero's personal struggle for his own soul occupies, in a strange combination of free

will and determinism, the centre of the stage. *Robert le Diable* has come to us as the story of the unexpected emergence of a Christian conscience.

Yet a Christian conscience is not everything when there is no authority figure upon whom one can rely. The narrator does not attempt to disguise or conceal the fact that power, in all its forms, is in a deep state of crisis in this text. As Huot reminds us, 'rather than embedding himself in the interlocking structures of marriage, feudal lordship, and lineage, Robert remains apart.'¹⁹¹ So when God emerges unscathed and even strengthened from this crisis, we are still left with reason to question this perfect resolution. Lacan and Bhabha help unveil the unsettling flickering of God's presence, with their models of otherness and subjectivation, but what if hagiographic romance went even further in allegorising the need for the Other? What if it turned out to bear the seeds of its own destabilisation and *Robert le Diable* were to prove more central to that destabilisation than has ever been acknowledged?

¹⁹¹ Huot, *Madness*, p.94.

Part two: *Sir Gowther*

[...] the structural and thematic changes made to the story of *Sir Gowther* are radical, purposeful, and skilful and [...] they serve the poet's didactic aims in an artistically successful way.¹⁹²

I. NEW BEGINNINGS: WHY THE ORCHARD SCENE MATTERS

These are Andrea Hopkins' words, acknowledging the individual merits of *Sir Gowther* at the beginning of the chapter that she devotes to it in *Sinful Knights*. Such words are a pleasant change from what often seem to be eternal and ubiquitous judgements of quality that reach the same conclusion: ME texts cannot sustain comparison with the original French poems¹⁹³. Hopkins' merciful statement is all the more welcome since it departs from the all too common claim that scholars of medieval English literature seem compelled to make when, in order to praise an English text, they have first to debase its French counterpart¹⁹⁴. *Sir Gowther* is a fourteenth-century text written in the Northeast Midlands. Of the two copies that remain, I have chosen to focus on

¹⁹² Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: a Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) p.145.

¹⁹³ See the introduction to *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance* where Jane Gilbert explains that ME romances have been deemed 'substandard' pp.19-20.

¹⁹⁴ See, for example, the beginning of chapter three on *Florence de Rome*.

the earlier one (found in the Auchinleck manuscript)¹⁹⁵ for the second one (British Library Royal MS 17.B.43) seems to be just a rewriting of the first with small differences. *Sir Gowther* is clearly an analogue of *Robert le Diable*, but it differs from the OF text to a larger extent than *Amis and Amiloun* did from *Ami et Amile*, essentially because both the beginning and the ending of the texts are completely different. Most importantly, the foundational episode, on which much of our understanding of *Robert le Diable* was based, is profoundly altered in the ME text. The premises are similar: a Duke and his wife are unable to have children, yet what follows is quite remarkable. After ten heirless years, the Duke considers repudiating his wife so the anxious lady subsequently prays to God and the Virgin Mary, hoping that they will give her a baby, by any means possible ('On what maner scho ne roghth'¹⁹⁶, 1.66). Her prayers are heard, but not by the one to whom they were addressed:

In hur orchard apon a day
 Ho meyt a mon, tho sothe to say,
 That hur of luffe besoghth,
 As lyke hur lorde as he myght be;
 He leyd hur down undur a tre,
 With hur is wyll he wroghthth.

When he had is wylle all don
 A felturd fende he start up son,
 And stode and hur beheld;
 He seyde, "Y have geyton a chylde on the

¹⁹⁵ All references will be to *Sir Gowther*, ed. by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, originally published in *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995) in *TEAMS Middle English texts*. The editor discusses the two surviving versions of the text in the introduction.

<<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/CAMELOT/TEAMS/gowthfrm.htm>> [accessed 10th November 2008].

¹⁹⁶ In what manner, she did not care.

That in is yothe full wylde schall bee,
 And weppons wyghtly weld."
 Sche blessyd hur and fro hym ran,
 Into hur chambur fast ho wan,
 That was so bygly byld.
 Scho seyde to hur lord, that ladé myld,
 "Tonyght we mon geyt a child
 That schall owre londus weld."

"A nangel com fro hevon bright
 And told me so this same nyght,
 Y hope was Godus sond;
 Then wyll that stynt all ovr stryfe."
 Be tho lappe he laght his wife
 And seyde, "Dame, we schall fonde."
 At evon to beyde thei hom ches,
 Tho ryche Duke and tho Duches,
 And wold no lengur wonde;
 He pleyde hym with that ladé hende,
 And ei yode scho bownden with tho fende,
 To God wold losse hur bonde.

ll.67-96

[One day, in her orchard, she met a man, to tell the truth, who sought her love, and who looked just like her lord; he laid her down under a tree and he took his pleasure with her. When he had worked his will on her, he jumped to his feet, a shapeless fiend, he stood and looked at her; he said: 'I have begotten a child on you who, in his youth, will be completely wild and who will wield weapons mightily.' She crossed herself and ran away from him. She went quickly to her chamber that was firmly built. She said to her lord, this lady mild: 'Tonight we may beget a child who will rule our lands. An angel came from Heaven bright and told me so this very evening. I believe he was sent by God; our strife will be resolved.' He seized his wife by a fold of her dress and said, 'lady, we shall make love.' In the evening the rich Duke and the Duchess made their way to bed and did not wait any longer; he enjoyed the beautiful lady, who was ever burdened with the fiend's child until God released her of her burden.]

With the premises of the text altered to such an extent, close analysis promises to reveal other deep differences between the two texts. This surprising and unique episode (it features in the English text only) constitutes a radical shift: unlike the irremediably guilty Duchess of Normandy, the Duchess of Austria is a victim of her nonchalantly phrased prayer, a prayer she uttered out of total desperation. In her defence it should perhaps be

stressed just how similar literary portrayals of evil apparitions impersonating angels appear to the portrayal of actual angels¹⁹⁷. Here, it is only the fiend's words, uttered too late to reverse the action, that betray his allegiance. The Duchess makes the sign of the cross: she suddenly realises that whoever lay by her is neither her lord nor God's envoy. Surely an angel would not have needed to touch her: he could simply have impregnated her miraculously. Nonetheless, her committing of what amounts to adultery makes her culpability problematic, even though her understanding of what happened is debatable¹⁹⁸. It does appear that she is guilty, at the very least, of having lied to her husband: there is no doubt that the Duchess covers up her unintentional adultery or, more precisely, her rape by an incubus¹⁹⁹. Corinne

¹⁹⁷ Robert Bartlett devotes the first chapter of *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* to the difficult definition of both terms and stresses that 'it was thus not always a simple matter to spell out the difference [...] between true miracles and the marvellous feats of magicians and demons' in Robert Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) p.23. The story of St Nicolas, as told by Jacques de Voragine, also provides an excellent example of this problem. See *La légende dorée*, p.49. Richard Kieckhefer has also written a particularly useful article on the difficulty and importance of telling saints from witches in the late Middle Ages: Richard Kieckhefer, 'The Holy and the Unholy: Sainthood, Witchcraft and Magic in Late Medieval Europe' in *Christendom and its Discontents: Exclusion, Persecution, and Rebellion, 1000–1500*, ed. by Scott L. Waugh and Peter Diehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) pp.310-337.

¹⁹⁸ Louise M. Sylvester, for one, thinks that 'it is impossible to tell where these sexual encounters lie on the twin axes of wish-fulfilment and rape' in *Medieval Romance and the Construction of Heterosexuality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) p.61

¹⁹⁹ Jeffrey J. Cohen makes a very interesting point on the subject of incubi in *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters and the Middle Ages*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) p.123. First, he recalls that 'Patristic exegesis connected these airy demons to the fallen angels and the birth of the giants, tracing their history to an ambiguous passage in the Vulgate Genesis (6:4).' He then argues that the episode of the incubus in *Sir Gowther* is part of a 'localizing movement': 'From the Annunciation we have moved back to the iniquitous days preceding the Flood. But we also recede to a specifically English history, [...] the Albina myth. According to this popular prehistory of England, the island was settled by women who were impregnated by bodiless demons and gave birth to giants. [...] the duchess in *Sir Gowther* is

Saunders, putting the question of intercourse with an incubus into context, recapitulates St Thomas Aquinas' ideas on the subject, ideas which are of great interest for our discussion: 'those who are born of incubi, he argues, are still redeemable, since their fathers have to take human form, and thus conception occurs *per semen hominis*.²⁰⁰ If we follow this reasoning, Gowther is strangely better off than Robert, even though he was directly conceived by a demon. I would therefore agree with Joanne Charbonneau when she argues that

Gowther's dilemma then is not a typical human one, but rather the playing out of that tricky theological question of whether despite unintentionally fulfilling his devilish patrimony and committing the most heinous sins, he can be forgiven.²⁰¹

Furthermore, demons were believed to have no substance and to steal men's semen to impregnate women, which meant that their offspring were human²⁰². Besides, the demon is referred to as 'a man' (l.68) in this text. Gowther might not be the simple hybrid monster that we expected to find and, if he is, his clear-cut hybridity is in any case an advantage in comparison

replaying a particularly English scene that wholly transforms the French romance on which *Gowther* is based, giving it "local habitation" along with a new name.' Cohen argues that this 'local habitation' 'finds its best expression in the Royal MS, which conflates Gowther and "Seynt Gotlake" [St. Guthlac], the heroic hermit who fought legions of airy spirits' in note 8, p.203.

²⁰⁰ Corinne J Saunders, ' "Symtyme the fende": Questions of rape in *Sir Gowther*' in *Studies in English Language and Literature, 'Doubt wisely': Paper in Honour of E. G. Stanley*, ed. by M.J. Toswell and E.M. Tyler (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.286-303 (p.294).

²⁰¹ Joanne Charbonneau, 'From Devil to Saint: Transformations in *Sir Gowther*' in *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance*, ed. by Philippa Hardman (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), pp.21-8 (p.25).

²⁰² Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights*, p.166.

with Robert's never-resolved ancestry. Because Gowther's father is not unknown to us as readers, the question of paternity is less complex in the Middle English text. There is no vague interference this time as there was in the French text. On the contrary, the hero is begotten on his mother by a fiend in a very straightforward manner²⁰³. As Cohen points out, the actual orchard scene and the Duchess' later account of it 'expose[s] the vulgarity of Gowther's conception as the vulgarity of *all* conception'²⁰⁴. In other words, 'the scene of the no-longer-immaculate conception [...] reduces Gowther to a genital outcome.'²⁰⁵ Recalling the scene in which Gowther's mother reveals the secret of her son's conception, Cohen concludes: 'Gowther has just been faced with the stark reality of his *human* birth into Original Sin.'²⁰⁶ (my emphasis). Paradoxically, the one figure who seems most properly hybrid turns out to be the one more easily redeemable, the one most indubitably *human*. If Gowther's spectacular conception announces, as is traditionally the

²⁰³ The passage draws quite clearly on Aristotelian conception theory, 'in which the mother contributes only the basic matter, the material, fleshy substance, from which the child will be made. *Mater* (mother), as we are often reminded, was thought in the Middle Ages to be etymologically derived from *materia* (matter). The father, through his seed, supplies 'life or spirit or form', that vital principle which transforms the matter into a human child and animates it', Jane Gilbert explains. Such understanding of conception explains why Gowther acts badly: a devil 'animated' the 'matter' produced by his mother. In Jane Gilbert, 'Putting the Pulp into Fiction: The Lump-child and its Parents in the *King of Tars*' in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England*, p.105. On conception theory, see: Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1991), pp.46-51; Joan Cadden, *Meanings of sex difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.117-30.

²⁰⁴ Jeffrey J. Cohen, 'Gowther Among the Dogs: Becoming Inhuman c.1400' in *Becoming male in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Jeffrey J. Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York; London: Garland Publishing, 1997), pp.219-44 (p.228).

²⁰⁵ Cohen, 'Gowther Among the Dogs', p.228.

²⁰⁶ Cohen, 'Gowther Among the Dogs', pp.228-9 (my emphasis).

case, the birth of a truly uncommon being, there is nonetheless something very mundane, something quite common about it. This is crucial for, as Hopkins points out, 'the essential humanity of Gowther is important when it comes to his chances of salvation and his potential to do great harm and great good.'²⁰⁷

Whether we consider Aquinas' arguments as directly applicable to the poem or not does not change the fact that Gowther's ancestry is simply not as complicated as Robert's. The hero's comparatively simple paternity is an essential modification of the Robert story, and is all the more worthy of our attention since the incubus scene is not to be found in any other version of the legend. Unsurprisingly, this significant addition to the story has far-reaching implications. First of all, it means that *someone* bears the label of father. Whoever this someone is is almost irrelevant as long as someone occupies that symbolic position²⁰⁸. Against those who argued for the very brief

²⁰⁷ Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights*, p.167.

²⁰⁸ Because the Name-of-the-Father is a symbolic function, it is not attached to anyone specifically. In particular, it does not necessarily correspond to the 'biological' father. Moreover, this someone 'must remain unidentified for the Symbolic father is strictly unrepresentable' (Jane Gilbert, 'Unnatural Mothers and Monstrous Children in *The King of Tars* and *Sir Gowther*' in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain. Essays for Felicity Riddy*, ed. by J. Wogan-Browne, R. Voaden, A. Diamond, A. Hutchinson, C. Meale and L. Johnson (eds.) (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), pp.329-44 (note 8 p.332). The father remains unidentified indeed: the demon is but a vague entity that cannot be traced and the Duke is no more than a title without a proper name. In my view, demon and Duke, in their presence-absence, are both candidates to the function of symbolic father. Other father figures subsequently appear: the Old Earl and later, the Emperor of Germany.

appearance of the Name-of-the-Father in *Sir Gowther*²⁰⁹, I would say that Gowther rather has a succession of father figures instead of none at all. This, as I will demonstrate, implies that the story of Gowther is one that privileges the Other (the Symbolic order) with all of its corollaries. Emphasizing the overarching presence of the temporal order and giving in to its seductions, Sir Gowther's story lies in opposition to the imaginary relationships that triumphed in *Robert le Diable*. Because paternity is no longer an insoluble issue, God, the imaginary Father, has been replaced over a hundred years later and in the subsequent versions of the tale, by chivalry and its all-encompassing codes. This is why I will argue that in this text mimicry is remarkably successful: Sir Gowther manages to integrate into society and tries to live in accordance with the Other's desires, that is, according to its prescribed rules; and this he does so well that he himself acquires a symbolic status after having been transformed 'into the type of the Good Knight'²¹⁰. Let us now see how the details found in *Sir Gowther* affect the message of text.

²⁰⁹ Jane Gilbert argues that until Gowther is confronted with the narration of his conception and the father is identified as dead, no-one assumes the paternal function. Following Freud's arguments in *Totem and Taboo*, Gilbert contends that the late Duke can occupy that function precisely because he is dead. She then argues for a return to the Imaginary order when the text makes 'an ideological move which identifies the father with the Christian God.' (p.344). This reading seems to me to be more applicable to *Robert le Diable*. By demonstrating the important change of focus that occurs in the English text, I shall provide a reading that departs significantly from Gilbert's.

²¹⁰ Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights*, p.170.

II PARADOXICAL HYBRIDITY: THE QUESTION OF THE FATHER ANSWERED

From the account of Gowther's conception, it would seem, at first glance, that the protagonist has more reason to be called a hybrid than did Robert, and all the more so if one does not accept Aquinas' thesis. Gowther would even be a literal hybrid insofar as the presence of an other within the self would now be palpable, even material. However, this hybridity, although possibly authentic, is not remotely as problematic as Robert's because the existence of a father is indicated and discussed: there is the fiend, whose interference is revealed later, and there is the Duke of Austria, the *official* father figure. In other words, the Name-of-the-Father is not absent; it is the identity of the one who occupies this function that changes throughout the tale. The Duke is always dismissed by critics (probably because of his early disappearance) as if he had no role to play, while the seductive devil attracts all the attention. This neglect can lead to an analysis that disregards an essential difference between the Old French and the Middle English poem: a dramatic shift in focus, aim and perhaps even genre of the text. Psychoanalytical readings of the texts are a double edged sword: as will become clear, they render this shift from unknown to identifiable father very visible, and yet, they can make the consequences of potential omissions particularly vivid. Jane Gilbert, for example, comes to quite different conclusions from mine. Having read her thought-provoking article on *Sir Gowther* after I had composed my analysis of

Robert le Diable, it seemed that her Lacanian reading of the poem, which dealt essentially with the premises of the text, could have been more successfully applied to the OF, rather than ME text. Even if our arguments sometimes concur, I disagree with her treatment of the end of the text, a conclusion which she feels marks the end of the brief period of the authority of the Symbolic. Gilbert omits the impact of Gowther's choice to receive a wife and an empire instead of entering the Church as Robert did. This omission does away with what is the most important differences between the two texts. In order to develop this argument further, I would like to start by discussing the function of the Duke of Austria.

The role of the Duke is, in my view, crucial in that it allows for triangulation to take place, which is a most substantial and interesting variation. Triangulation is, as we have seen before, the key to symbolic, as opposed to binary, imaginary relations. It implies that a third party intervenes and operates a mediation between two beings that allows for the symbolic order to be acknowledged. I believe that this mediation takes place earlier in the text than previously thought, within the hero's family history. Early in the text we are told of a tournament that took place as part of the festivities following Gowther's parents' wedding. This tournament is the occasion for the groom to show off his knightly skills. His ability to bring down many a worthy man and to crack skulls galore (l.47-8) is rewarded by

the acquisition of ten steeds. This little vignette is highly significant for several reasons: firstly, it sets up a (symbolic) background for the story, a context in which knightly prowess is praised. Secondly, it presents the Duke as successful in upholding the values of the society he belongs to and in which Gowther is later born. In other words, if he is not a very efficient genitor, he is at least a good knight²¹¹. Then, when the boy is born, it is the Duke who has Gowther baptised and who chooses his heir's name. This detail matters because it indicates a level of personal involvement on the Duke's part and because the naming of a child has deep implications: it is an act that allows the child to be inscribed in the symbolic order, insofar as he can now be referred to and enter his family's religious community. Later, like the duke of Normandy before him, the Duke dubs Gowther. He dies of sorrow soon after because of the young man's behaviour. He is gotten rid of very early on, but from his achievements to his premature disappearance he has set a basis for his son's life and his influence on that life outlives him²¹². Because of this, I cannot agree with Jeffrey Cohen's judgement that there is 'no possibility of inheriting any identity-giving history from someone who has been, all along, a nonentity'²¹³. That the Duke was not a nonentity is most

²¹¹ Note that the same later applies to Gowther, who is a successful knight but who is not said to have any children. Without going as far as to interpret this as an imitation of the father, the repetition of this pattern is nevertheless intriguing.

²¹² Because of this, I cannot agree with Ilan Mitchell-Smith who sees Robert's behaviour as 'the result of a lack of paternal influence', in 'Defining Violence in Middle English Romances: *Sir Gowther and Libeaus Desconus*', *Fifteenth-century Studies*, 34 (2009), 148-62 (p.151).

²¹³ Cohen, *Of Giants*, p.122.

obvious right after his death: in line 154 we learn that 'for sorro tho Duke fell don ded'²¹⁴ and the next time the narrator talks about 'the Duke', we have to understand that it is now Gowther he is ironically referring to as 'Duke of greyt renown'²¹⁵ (l.169). The fact that Gowther is immediately (and confusingly, at first) called 'Duke' is, to me, the most potent form of recognition of the (symbolic) father; it is a social recognition insofar as Gowther is identified as the Duke's son and heir. 'Duke' is the name of his father and he adopts this name. Actual 'great renown' will follow.

Discussing the paternal metaphor in *Sir Gowther* Jeffrey Cohen explains that

the Name-of-the-Father is the illusory coherence sutured around a name that binds the symbolic into a genealogical identity-system with individuated, historical, familial subjects. Its nearest equivalent in the Middle Ages is the ancestral title (e.g., "Duke of Gloucester") in its mythy existence outside of particular bearers.²¹⁶

Gowther being referred to as 'Duke' on multiple occasions, the acknowledgement of the paternal metaphor can only be considered successful, even before the Old Earl's intervention²¹⁷. Rather than showing the Duke and 'his society's inadequacies'²¹⁸, I believe that Gowther's early life

²¹⁴ With the Duke dying of sorrow, it cannot be said that his relations with Gowther are 'terribly out of joint' as Francine McGregor argues in 'The Paternal Function in *Sir Gowther*', p.71. It points rather to the Duke's immense care for, yet disappointment in, his son. Just because the affection is not requited does not mean that the relations do not exist. See F. McGregor's otherwise interesting article, 'The Paternal Function in *Sir Gowther*', *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 16 (1999), 67-78.

²¹⁵ Duke of great renown.

²¹⁶ Cohen, 'Gowther Among the Dogs', note 5 p.240.

²¹⁷ An intervention that Gilbert nevertheless calls the end of 'Gowther's rampaging assault on the Name-of-the-Father' in 'Unnatural Mothers', p.341.

²¹⁸ Gilbert, 'Unnatural Mothers', p.339.

displays the immense power of the chivalric order: it is my contention that, against the influence of the devil, chivalric society is neither defeated nor questioned, but victorious.

III THE SECULARISATION OF THE HERO AND THE POWER OF CHIVALRY

The way Gowther is referred to provides some interesting information, as we just saw. It essentially highlights an obsession with feudal society: Robert remains Robert all along, when he is not 'la sainte chose', 'le pecheor', 'le boin penant' or 'le fol'. Gowther, on the contrary, is often referred to in a way that makes his social status a priority: often called 'knight', and almost always 'Sir Gowther', the protagonist is also 'the Duke', as we have just seen. What this clearly indicates is the importance of the nobiliary title; it stresses the value of perpetuation and lineage. This omnipresence of the title is one of many indications of the imprint of the symbolic. Power and its structures are everywhere, from the authority of a very brave Earl to that of the competent Pope²¹⁹ and the valiant emperor. Also noticeable is the absence of embarrassment regarding the question of paternity in the text: Gowther is instantly treated as the son and heir of the Duke of Austria, even if he is a demon's son. His ultimate humanity, his belonging to the world of humans is also stressed thus. Finally, the consistency in the way he is referred to indicates that there is no loss of identity throughout his life. Paradoxically, the penitential period does not challenge what Gowther is inside and his nobility shines through. The three battles act as a reminder of this ultimate unity for even when everyone believes that three different knights had

²¹⁹ The pope, in *Robert le Diable*, was so remarkably incompetent that the depiction of a pontiff who knows how to help the protagonist in *Sir Gowther* is a noticeable, meaningful shift.

intervened²²⁰, there was only one knight and he was Gowther. His 'nature', then, is equated with his social rank: it is inherent and is sustained throughout the text via the narrator's consistent use of 'Duke' or 'Sir' to refer to Gowther. The title irons out physical hybridity (if indeed Gowther is a hybrid) and stresses instead a sense of continuity and unitedness with regard to the protagonist. Nothing could promote the unifying, cohesive effectiveness of chivalry better than Gowther's remarkable improvement.

This, of course, means that the victor in *Robert le Diable*, God, is no longer the key to the hero's redemption. This is most prominent in the evident secularisation of certain key passages²²¹. For instance, the choice of the Old Earl over the hermit as agent in the hero's conversion is revealing. The end of the poem, which we will discuss shortly, is another example. Before that, the battles had allowed us to foretell the conclusion of the story. The three battles, which have been repeatedly likened to the three-day tournament motif, are a way of illustrating the pervading manifestation of

²²⁰ The colour of the equipment that appears on Gowther's doorstep changes: before the first battle, it is a suit of black armour that he finds, before the second, it is red, and for the third, it is white. Because of this, everyone believes that three different knights came to the emperor's help. The significance of the change of colour has been much discussed. Shirley Marchalonis in particular provides a detailed analysis of its symbolism in 'Sir Gowther: The Process of a Romance', *Chaucer Review* 6 (1971), 14-29.

²²¹ The secularisation of the material is what makes Margaret Bradstock contend that, like *Amis and Amiloun*, *Sir Gowther* is a 'secular hagiography'. See Margaret Bradstock, 'Sir Gowther: Secular Hagiography or Hagiographical Romance or Neither?' p.41.

feudal values in the text. Even before they begin, they mark the ideological shift between *Robert le Diable* and *Sir Gowther*:

Syr Gwother went to a chambur smart,
 And preyd to God in his hart
 On Rode that boghtt Hym dere,
 Schuld sende hym armur, schyld and speyr,
 And hors to helpe is lord in weyr
 [...]
 He had no ner is preyr made,
 Bot hors and armur bothe he hade,
 Stode at his chambur dor;

ll.403-11

[He went to a nice room and in his heart he prayed to God, who redeemed him dearly on the cross, that he should send him an armour, a shield and a spear and a horse so he could help his lord in war. [...] He had hardly finished his prayer that he found a horse and armour outside the door of his room.]

After the battle,

To chambur he went, dysharnest hym sone,
 His hors, is armur away wer done,
 He ne wyst wher hit myght bene.

ll.439-41.

[He went to the chamber and soon disarmed himself, his horse, his armour were dealt with, he did not know where they were taken.]

And after the second battle, similarly:

When his armur of wer don,
 His hors and hit away wer son,
 That he wyst not whare.

ll.505-7

[When his armour was taken off, it disappeared together with his horse; he did not know where.]

The author does not make it clear at first who provides the hero's equipment and we should not presume that its sudden materialization is the fruit of divine intervention. After all, a prayer addressed to God is no guarantee that it is God that will respond, as the Duchess of Austria discovered at very heavy cost. The author makes the origin of the paraphernalia clearer at the second battle but the mystery that surrounds its appearance and evaporation and, most significantly, the absence of a direct exchange with an angel, tend to make God's involvement in the battles fade considerably. Also, the purpose of Gowther's intervention is clearly stated: he wishes to fight to help the man he regards as his feudal lord and is not concerned with who his lord's enemies are. In other words, the fact that they are Saracens is as good as irrelevant; the motif has been kept but its significance considerably lessened. Finally, with Gowther's armour changing from black to red to white, the battles are undoubtedly envisaged as a progression, the channel for the display of Gowther's improvement and prowess. The battles are, in a word, more concerned with feudal achievement than anything else. The end of his life, marked by good deeds galore, also celebrates his chivalric talent: he had become 'Of all Cryston knyghttus tho flower'²²² (l.713) and all Saracens feared him. He reigned a long time, and wisely; he supported the poor and the rights of the rich; and if anyone asked him to do something for the love of God, he would never refuse (ll.713-23). Commenting on the end of Gowther's

²²² The flower of Christian knighthood.

life, Hopkins rightly points out that ‘the coincidence of these last good deeds with the traditional vows of knighthood is not by chance.’²²³ Gowther has become the ideal knight and a perfect, pious emperor, not a holy hermit like Robert, who was so anxious to escape the World and find shelter in a relationship with God. The last two stanzas, that evoke the miracles God performed *for him* after his death, do not change the general focus of the text. Gowther is dead and the life he chose was never orientated towards an absolute devotion to the Church.

IV POTENT FIGURES AND THE TRIUMPH OF THE SYMBOLIC

Long before becoming a model knight and potentate, Gowther, of course, behaved appallingly and, like Robert, he did not suddenly become a better man just because he had become a knight. The situation seemed to be worse since his newly-acquired right to bear arms was used to ends that were far from the ideal of chivalry — i.e., protecting women and the Church. Like Robert, Gowther killed and raped and was depicted as a predator: the narrator mentions his passion for hunting and his attacking of a procession of nuns in the same breath (ll.178-91). In Jane Gilbert’s words, it still looked as though ‘the symbolic structures [had] fail[ed] to imprint themselves on Gowther’²²⁴. Yet does it follow that, ‘Gowther’s conversion cannot be brought

²²³ Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights*, p.170.

²²⁴ Gilbert, ‘Unnatural Mothers’, p.339.

about by institutional and authoritarian means, but results from a personal revelation'?²²⁵ There is a very fine line between perversion of the dominant establishment and the seeds of chivalry awkwardly 'taking' in a nobleman not responsible for his crimes. Yet this line exists and I think that it definitely distinguishes *Robert le Diable* from *Sir Gowther*. Just as being baptised acts as an invisible yet permanent protection, Gowther's high birth acts as a safety net that guarantees his ultimate belonging, his perpetual membership of the world of chivalry.

The hero, as we have seen, was born in a society saturated by knights. I have already evoked his father's prowess but more details complete the picture. Knights generally pepper the text: they attend in great number the ducal wedding, people the Emperor of Germany's castle and, significantly, it is their wives who are the wet nurses Gowther suckles to death. This last point is particularly relevant. It has been interpreted in different ways, sometimes unhelpfully as the hero's rejection of woman. Jane Gilbert, for her part, rightly argues that in *Sir Gowther*, maternity is represented as 'a cultural mechanism for transmitting social qualities and values from one generation to the next'²²⁶. She feels, however, that the wet-nurses' death and Gowther's

²²⁵ Gilbert, 'Unnatural Mothers', p.343.

²²⁶ Gilbert, 'Unnatural Mothers', p.340.

early wickedness show the failure of the mother and wet-nurses 'to transmit to him their own nobility of character'²²⁷. She explains:

Both the blood and the milk that the child ingested were thought to carry in them qualities of character from the person feeding to the child fed. Hence the great concern in this period for the social and moral status of wet-nurses.²²⁸

If this is true, it equally follows that Gowther sucking the ladies to death can only indicate that he absorbs every ounce of nobility that is contained in their bodies and that this is what saves him. Because he was suckled by ladies directly associated with the world of chivalry, he is all the more likely to embrace chivalry later on, which he does with great success. This specific episode, then, can be called a secular baptism in that it recalls most vividly the enduring protective influence of the religious ceremony.

It is certainly easy to argue that in his youth, the protagonist was impervious to the effects of social institutions such as chivalry on the grounds that he continues to act reprehensibly even after he has become a knight. Yet, some elements indicate that Gowther's misuse of chivalry does not mean that he is totally obdurate to the charms of the institution: his passion for hunting — a typically aristocratic activity — and his attachment to his falchion, the symbol of his social status, show that he does not reject chivalry altogether.

²²⁷ Gilbert, 'Unnatural Mothers', p.341.

²²⁸ Gilbert, 'Unnatural Mothers', p.340.

Instead, I would argue that chivalry shines through despite the hero. This, in my view, is an illustration of the conquest of Gowther by the paternal metaphor, the Other. More evidence comes to pave the way to the completion of this conquest and the intervention of the Old Earl, in particular, is a major step in that direction. The role played by the Old Earl illustrates, by perpetuating and strengthening the paternal metaphor, just how successfully it was put in place. The Old Earl is the one who bravely intimates that the young man's behaviour is due to the fact that he was sired by a demon. His words, which trigger the hero's conversion, make the short episode highly significant because it constitutes an important departure from the unfolding of events in the Old French poem. As we saw earlier, Robert becomes aware of his otherness on his own and receives a communication from God shortly afterwards, informing him that He is willing to give him a chance to re-enter Christianity. In the Middle English text however, it is not only an exterior, mortal agent that sparks off Gowther's epiphany, but 'a character with chivalric associations'²²⁹. As Shirley Marchalonis interestingly argues, the Old Earl's 'sudden appearance [...] may seem contrived unless we can see in him a representative of the whole knightly standard'²³⁰. More importantly, the Old Earl is depicted as trustworthy: before leaving for Rome, Gowther, aware of his ducal duties, puts him in charge of the country; much later, after

²²⁹ Shirley Marchalonis, '*Sir Gowther: The Process of a Romance*', p.18. For the word earl, the OED gives: 'In ME. often used as the *typical* designation of a great noble.' (my emphasis).

²³⁰ Shirley Marchalonis, '*Sir Gowther: The Process of a Romance*', pp.18-9.

Gowther has accepted to marry the princess and agreed to be the emperor's successor, he goes back to Austria and marries his widowed mother to the Old Earl and makes him Duke. This marriage illustrates very well the perfect functioning of the paternal metaphor, which, it must be recalled, is not attached to one man in particular. With the Earl inheriting the Duke's title, the paternal metaphor could not be proved to work better, one father figure following another without disturbance under a symbolic title.

The figure of the Pope continues to enhance the dominance of the symbolic in its turn. He too acts as a mediator and is presented as a powerful, efficient figure that has nothing to do with the impotent and corrupt pope we saw in *Robert le Diable*: he knows instantly what penance corresponds to Gowther's sins and does not need to refer the repentant hero to a hermit who then requires God's help. He knows how to recognise a miracle when he witnesses one. Unlike the ubiquitous pontiff of the OF text, here the pope keeps away from the battle, does not interfere in earthly matters and only appears when summoned by the emperor for what all believe is the princess' funeral. There is a particularly interesting episode, often commented on by critics, which I would also like to discuss as well. It is the scene in which the protagonist meets the Pope for the first time to confess his sins and ask for help in redeeming his soul. The Pope gives Gowther the terms of his penance and requests that he relinquish his falchion. The narrator clearly wishes to

signal the importance of the falchion, one that Gowther made when he was fifteen, an object that no one else can wield, and from which he has never been parted. Gowther's retention of his falchion, Marchalonis suggests, is part of the same chivalric reshaping of the original material, for a knight's sword is not a mere weapon; it is also emblematic of his class. In her view, Gowther's refusal to relinquish his falchion 'indicates that his redemption will be accomplished through the chivalric ideal'²³¹. Marchalonis does not interpret Gowther's desire to keep his weapon as a questioning of the pontiff's authority. Instead she sees the Pope, agent of the hero's conversion, as representing an aspect of the chivalric ideal: he epitomises the knight's duty towards God and the Church²³², which is why retention of the falchion can be unproblematic. Indeed it would be a mistake to read this episode as a rejection of authority (or the Other) in general because the Pope is otherwise strictly obeyed. Rather it should be interpreted as a dismissal of religious dominance through its representative. His absolute control of the situation is not endorsed and instead it is shown that he must stay in his place and limit himself to his realm. This confrontation summarises the conflicts that

²³¹ Shirley Marchalonis, '*Sir Gowther: The Process of a Romance*', p.19. This view is also supported by Andrea Hopkins in *The Sinful Knights*, p.159: 'Yet the sword as a symbolic object unites the structural and stylistic features with the deeper meaning of the poem, for Gowther is a knight and the medium of his sin and his salvation is knighthood.' This last point was earlier made by E.M. Bradstock in 'The Penitential Pattern in *Sir Gowther*', *Parergon*, 20 (1978), 3-10 (p.3): 'Gowther's heroic exploits, therefore, not only reverse the effects of his initial anti-heroic and anti-Christian activities, but are to be seen as an integral part of his penance.'

²³² Shirley Marchalonis, '*Sir Gowther: The Process of a Romance*', p.19. She also argues that the role played by the Duchess in her son's transformation can be similarly interpreted as a reminder of the knight's allegiance to ladies.

opposed the Church and the feudal world, a world that resisted the Church's ambition to interfere in its rituals.

As for the emperor, he is immediately adopted as feudal lord: Gowther rides side by side with him in battle and rescues him when he is briefly captured by the Sultan. The narrator presents us with a sovereign that deserves his title: authoritative and respected, he is not afraid of the Sultan's menaces. Married to a lady, however discreet she is, he cannot be accused of incest²³³. He is also understanding and allows his daughter to serve Gowther, while effectively protecting him, providing him with food and a comfortable shelter. He is valiant yet does not show hubris: he does not try to capture the knight(s) who help(s) him. Furthermore, he proves very insightful: when the hero first arrives at his court and rushes under the high table with the dogs, the emperor guesses from his behaviour that he is a penitent. This mark of perceptiveness on the part of the ruler is quite striking and contrasts sharply with the imperial figures we discussed earlier (Charlemagne in *Ami et Amile* and the emperor in *Robert le Diable* are both exceptionally gullible). The

²³³ Critics have argued that the emperor's daughter's affliction in *Robert le Diable* acted as a sign of the man's culpable (yet untold) actions towards his daughter. They use his refusal to let the steward marry her as proof of his extreme attachment to his daughter. There is no direct evidence in the text and I would say that his desire to give her to Robert contradicts this thesis. The author's claim that 'sa bele fille/ que li peres mie n'aville' (His beautiful daughter, who was never shamed by her father. ll.4105-6) seems to solve the problem. Some critics, however, argue a case of untold incest: see Agata Sobczyk, 'Encore un inceste occulté: l'épisode de la fille de l'empereur dans le *Roman de Robert le Diable*', *Etudes Médiévales*, 1 (1999), 221-34 and Elisabeth Gaucher, *Robert le Diable: histoire d'une légende*, p.34.

consequence of this unexpected discernment is that Gowther's situation at court is much improved: he is given a room and generally well treated because he is not perceived as other. He might be a stranger but *his humanity is recognised*. This concurs with the terms of Gowther's penance, which differ slightly but consequentially from Robert's. Gowther's contrition falls in only two parts: he will only eat what he can snatch from dogs²³⁴ and remain silent until a sign lets him understand that he is forgiven. In other words, his punishment is not as harsh as Robert's, for it does not require him to play dumb and provoke the crowds' ire. Robert needed to pretend to be mad; this was, as we saw earlier, the other side of his madness. He had to expiate his first deviance with further deviance. His intrinsic otherness was mirrored in this alienation. Because he is not fundamentally other, Gowther does not need any part of his penance to parallel his otherness²³⁵.

The emperor's good intuition also leads him to accept the truth when it is put in front of him: when his daughter eventually reveals Gowther's

²³⁴ Even the dogs can arguably be said to link penance and chivalry. David Salter notes that the dogs are greyhounds, animals that 'were prized for their innate nobility and came to be regarded as symbols of "the chivalric virtues (faith), occupations (hunting) and, more generally, the whole aristocratic way of life" ' in David Salter, *Holy and Noble beasts: Encounters with Animals in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), p.80. Greyhounds appear several times in *Sir Gowther*: first a greyhound brings him food following his departure from Rome, then he eats food taken from the mouths of the emperor's greyhounds and finally, the dogs are used by the princess to deliver food to Gowther after the battles.

²³⁵ The relatively mild punishment should also be linked to the way his actions are presented: he is said to be working his father's will (l.176), which is good in itself. This portrait of Gowther as an obedient son confirms, if this is still necessary, the existence and the acceptance of the paternal function.

performance, he believes her immediately, in sharp contrast with the emperor's stubborn ignorance in *Robert le Diable*. The princess is the epitome of the mediatrix: her feeding Gowther blatantly mimics the Eucharist²³⁶ and she is the one who announces the completion of his penance. If the existence of any mediation is the sign of the successful implantation of the Symbolic, then the princess' intervention is an effective illustration of this success. Such a portrait of the sovereign explains why the text ends differently. While Robert refused the offer made by the emperor, Gowther graciously accepts a new father (l.712). The existence of powerful and respectable emblems of power means that triangulation is not only possible but sought after and achieved. Its ultimate success comes with Gowther agreeing to marry the maiden and inherit the empire after the emperor's death. Gowther's embracing of all that is symbolic is the natural outcome of effective triangulation. This is how Gowther, unlike Robert, avoids getting trapped in an imaginary relationship with God. His acceptance of riches translates the triumph of the Other, i.e., society, with its powerful codes of representation and its all-encompassing systems: Gowther achieves redemption but in a different, and the only possible, way. The premises of the two texts dictated from the beginning their opposed endings.

²³⁶ The maiden washes the mouths of the hounds with wine before placing loaves in them. When she recovers from her fall outside her window (after Gowther is injured in battle), she conveys God's message to all and discloses the story of his life. The princess in *Robert le Diable* was denied this mediating position by her father who repeatedly refused to let her approach Robert and reveal what she knew. In the end, it was Robert himself who told his own story, after being prompted by the hermit.

CONCLUSION

Just as the title *Robert le Diable* showed an interest in the character as individual so *Sir Gowther* indicates the extent to which the protagonist cannot be envisaged without his social surroundings. The title of the English text is as telling as the title of the French was deceptive. *Sir Gowther* is very much focused on chivalry, society and earthly power. Gowther's decision to remain in the world acts as a powerful contrast between the two poems. Otherness does not pose any insurmountable problems and following the path designated by the Other becomes the uncomplicated, desired option. The human hero achieves salvation via the chivalric order. This ending, which is in accordance with the logic of the text and the object of the author's emphasis, is nevertheless the most vivid illustration of the fundamental differences between the OF text and its ME adaptation.

Examining the texts with otherness in mind helps uncover some underlying questions addressed in the poems, questions of power, earthly and heavenly. A coincidence which might not be one emerged: both of the French texts related stories where structures of power were seriously undermined and rejected. Both English versions, however, showed power structures as omnipresent and successful. This may be explained by the historical context in which the poems were written. Corinne Saunders,

summing up Susan Crane's argument in *Insular romance*, says that 'the development of a strong baronial class may have contributed to the production of a specifically English romance genre with a focus on national stability, and on the concrete rewards of chivalry.'²³⁷ This difference led directly to important changes that transformed the focus, the ambition, not to say the genre, of the English poems. Crane's line of thought was further investigated by scholars such as Thorlac Turville-Petre, who argued that the Auchinleck manuscript (which contains both *Amis and Amiloun* and *Sir Gowther*) was trying to promote Englishness²³⁸. On the basis of these findings, I would like to suggest that the extent to which the Other is involved in the telling of the story could perhaps be a useful touchstone to help differentiate texts generically: texts in which the imaginary order dominates would indicate a stronger hagiographical element, whereas texts pervaded by the symbolic order would indicate a rather secular approach and a tendency towards romance. What I effectively suggest is a correlation between literary genre and the Other. If this correlation does not exist, the results can still be seen as indicative of a linguistic divide: French texts take issue with power

²³⁷ Saunders refers to *Insular romance*, pp.13-24 in *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001) p.188. Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

²³⁸ See Turville-Petre, Thorlac, *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290-1340* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Hanna, Ralph, 'Reconsidering the Auchinleck Manuscript', pp. 91-102 in *New Directions in Later Medieval Manuscript Studies: Essays from the 1998 Harvard Conference*, ed. by Derek Pearsall (York: York Medieval Press, 2000); and also Hanna, Ralph, *London Literature, 1300-1380* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) pp. 104-47.

relations while English texts seem to be more conservative, conformist and reverent. This hypothesis is not surprising when we consider the French tradition of 'le cycle des barons révoltés'²³⁹, of which *Raoul de Cambrai* is thought to be the epitome and the masterpiece. *Robert le Diable* was written at the same time as the texts that are part of this cycle. This, I think, allows for an ideological parallel between the French poems. Let us now see if this theory can be applied to more texts and, in the first instance, to another pair of texts that combines hagiographical and romance elements: *Florence de Rome* and *Le bone Florence of Rome*.

²³⁹ Rosalind Field even says that 'there is little sign of insular interest in the [...] Rebellious Vassal Cycle'. See 'Romance' in *The Oxford History of literary translation in English* p.313.

Chapter three

From ultimate other to the end of otherness: From Florence the character to Florence the 'sympull woman'

Part one: *Florence de Rome*

I INTRODUCTION

Consider this first synopsis:

1. Oton is the highly respected and generous emperor of affluent and peaceful Rome. As the story begins, the widowed emperor is at war against Garsire, the very powerful but very old emperor of Greece. The origin of the conflict is Oton's only child Florence, a maiden of incredible beauty and learning, who has refused Garsire's marriage proposal. On the battlefield, two dispossessed Hungarian brothers fight with remarkable ardour. One of them in particular proves so brave that he is eventually offered the princess' hand and imperial crown. They get married and the groom inherits but the young woman requests that he capture Garsire *before* the marriage is consummated. Florence and Emere are thus separated. The new emperor's brother, however, is rather unhappy with this turn of events and devises treacherous plans in order to take possession of Florence. After a series of

failures, he manages to abduct her. Upon realising his brother's betrayal, Emere sets off to rescue Florence and bring her back to Rome. On his way, his prowess and determination are tested on numerous occasions. The hero faces the most challenging ordeals but remains steadily successful. In the meantime, Florence more or less disappears from the story. We only know that she patiently waits for her beloved hero to come and find her; eventually his wanderings lead him to the nunnery where she happens to live. A joyous identification scene is triggered by the mutual recognition of love tokens exchanged before Emere's departure in pursuit of Garsire. The couple immediately set out for Rome. Emere resumes his functions, the marriage is consummated and Florence bears a boy who will be a great emperor of Rome and Greece.

Now consider this second synopsis:

2. Same beginning. Florence is abducted by her husband's lecherous brother, only this time she is rescued by a passing nobleman who takes her home to his wife. During the time that she spends with his family she is accused of murder and banished. The calumniated empress travels down to a port where she saves a thief from the gallows on the condition that he will now serve her. He proceeds to sell her to a sailor who attempts to rape her as soon as they set sail. Florence prays ardently and escapes dishonour when a tempest cracks and then destroys the boat. She finds refuge in a nunnery and

one day discovers that she has healing powers. The news spreads that there is a nun who performs miracles. Florence's numerous persecutors, all of whom suffer from horrible diseases, make their way to the nunnery. Her husband, who was injured on the battlefield, also comes to see the famous nun in order that she may cure him. He recognises Florence and takes her back to Rome. They have a child, who will succeed Emere at the head of the empire.

Of these two stories, only one was written in France in the thirteenth century. If one had to guess which one of the two it was, it is very likely that a reader reasonably familiar with medieval literature would pick the first scenario because it corresponds to the narrative schema of the vast majority of medieval texts relating the adventures of a single male protagonist. Think of *Yvain*, of *Le Chevalier de la Charette*, even *Cligès*, to name but three of the more obvious. However, it is the second one that has come down to us under the title *Florence de Rome*²⁴⁰. This is a highly unusual text and quite a long

²⁴⁰ Axel Wallensköld, *Florence de Rome, chanson d'aventure du premier quart du XIII^{ème} siècle* (two volumes) Société des anciens textes français (Paris: Firmin-Didot et cie, 1907-1909). In his introduction, the editor explains that the poem was written either at the end of the twelfth or during the first half of the thirteenth century. All references are from Wallensköld's edition. The translations are mine unless otherwise stated. *Florence de Rome* is regarded as a version of the Crescentia story, which 'enjoyed a popularity which makes difficult the classification or even the enumeration of the various versions' says Laura Hibbard in *Medieval Romance in England: A Study of Sources and Analogues of the Non-cyclical Metrical Romances* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1924) p.12.

narrative as well (6410 alexandrines²⁴¹). It is not so much atypical because it focuses on a woman — even if such texts are not the norm, there are other surviving examples²⁴² — but rather because its length allows it to sway repeatedly from one literary genre to another. While other generically ambiguous texts usually combine just two genres, this one juxtaposes three: it starts with what could be called a *chanson de geste*²⁴³, then veers into resembling a romance and even a hagiographical romance. Sarah Crisler has spent the large part of a recent article on *Florence de Rome* explaining why the text cannot be a *chanson de geste*, a romance, or a saint's life, eventually suggesting that another genre be created for those texts that centre on a woman²⁴⁴. Crisler's struggle and her inconclusive suggestion are representative of a rather typical scholar's attitude to texts that represent a generic challenge. However arguing that it is impossible to affix the text to one or the other category is of very limited use since *Florence* is effectively all of those things, one or two at a time²⁴⁵. The juxtaposition of these generic

²⁴¹ *Ami et Amile* is 3504 lines long and *Robert le Diable* is 3504 lines long. Laura Hibbard deems *Florence de Rome* 'too long-winded' in *Medieval Romance in England*, p.16.

²⁴² For example, *La Mannekine*, *La belle Hélène de Constantinople* or *Berte as grans piés*.

²⁴³ The French text (and its derivatives) is the only one 'where we find the introductory section which tells us of the wars between the emperors of Rome and Constantinople and describes how, as a result of his services in these wars, Emere marries Florence.' This, Walker argues, 'enables the text to be classified as a *chanson de geste*'. See Roger M. Walker, 'The *chanson de Florence de Rome* and the International Folktale', *Fabula, Journal of Folktale Studies*, 23 (1982), 1-18 (p.5 and 6 note 11).

²⁴⁴ Sarah Crisler, 'Epic and the Problem of the Female Protagonist: The Case of *Florence de Rome*', *Bulletin of the Modern Language Society*, 106:1 (2005), 27-33.

²⁴⁵ Sarah Kay's appreciation of the text, for example, is more nuanced: 'Although undoubtedly a *chanson de geste* in form, *Florence de Rome* is a limit text of the genre, having much in

shifts is also quite obvious and can give the impression that the story was written by two different people, even if, according to Roger Walker, the poet 'has linked the two halves of his composition so successfully that, far from being swamped by this new material, the story of Florence is in many ways enhanced by it'²⁴⁶. Walker argues that 'the long epic-style introduction heightens the drama of the original folktale of the persecuted princess'²⁴⁷. This juxtaposition, however successful, is nonetheless worthy of note and will enable me to talk about the first or second part of the text without feeling that I am imposing another form of arbitrary partition on the poem²⁴⁸. The first part can be said to end with the heroine's wedding; it functions well as a unit that contains a stable initial situation, a disruptive element and a return to a stable situation. The text could have come to an end there: the young knight has found a bride and a territory and the beautiful lady has achieved marriage — a typical happy ending.

Structurally then, this recalls the miniature romance at the beginning of *Ami et Amile*. One detail allows the story to make a fresh start: Florence sends her husband on a mission. This new element is the opening of a new series of adventures, a series of adventures that centre on Florence and no longer on

common with hagiography and romance.' see Kay, *The Chanson de Geste in the Age of Romance: Political Fictions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.158.

²⁴⁶ Walker, note 11 p.6.

²⁴⁷ Walker, note 11 p.6.

²⁴⁸ In her article on *Florence de Rome*, Kathy Krause calls the two parts hagio-epic and hagio-romance. In 'Generic space-off' p.115.

Emere. Emere is, in fact, strangely absent from the second part of text and the new emperor, so admirable and perfect in the first part of the text, now fails even to wonder where his wife might be when he comes back to Rome with Garsire! The centre of the text shifts from the hero on horseback, finding encouragement in the eyes of a beautiful maiden who watches the battle from her tower, to the vulnerable and naïve heroine submitting to ordeals galore. This is a strange shift; a departure from the sort of perfectly predictable story that generally satisfies audiences and it sparks a number of questions for which I will try to provide answers within the scope of this chapter. Why depart from the successful, respectable pattern of the male hero seeking to prove himself? Why choose a female protagonist? What does Florence the new heroine bring to the story?

Florence de Rome is a titillating text; in fact, it is so rich and atypical that it can even be a bit intimidating. The impressive array of exciting episodes and stylistic prowess can feel overwhelming for the critic looking for a dynamic perspective on the text. I have found, however, that for this set of texts otherness, exile and home once again provide the key to a successful reading of the tale. First of all, for the obvious reason that the second part of the story is explicitly the story of Florence's exile; an exile that is physical, unlike the type of emotional exile encountered in *Ami et Amile* or the spiritual exile of *Robert le Diable*. Home and exile take on their most literal meaning

here but this does not imply that they are devoid of symbolic value, as we shall see. Secondly, because we witness in *Florence* a decisive departure from more usual or expected forms of literature and not just because the protagonist is a married woman: *Florence* is simply another type of text and Florence another type of heroine.

II WRITING ABOUT WOMAN: THE 'PROBLEM' OF THE HEROINE

Choosing to write a story about a woman is not completely uncommon in the Middle Ages but the number of narratives with a male protagonist far outweigh those with a female protagonist. Some critics appear to be perturbed by such works, especially when they try to make them fit into rigid classifications that only seem to apply to male-centred stories. In her short discussion of the genre of *Florence de Rome*, Sarah Crisler finds that 'if we examine alternate generic categories, however, we are still *hampered* by our secular heroine'²⁴⁹ (my emphasis). It seems that modern scholars are as uneasy about the notion of the female protagonist as most authors were many centuries ago. Authors certainly saw that writing about a woman limited their creative options. This is simply because, due to social, religious and literary norms, there are a restricted number of actions that a woman can conceivably and respectfully be described as doing. In *Florence de Rome*, the

²⁴⁹ Crisler, 'Epic and the Problem of the Female Protagonist', p.30.

author sets himself a further challenge by choosing to talk about a *passive* heroine²⁵⁰.

This might sound like an oxymoron but only if one understands the word heroine as one that designates an active main character. Florence is, in a large part of the text, the central figure but she certainly cannot be qualified as active. Rather, she is always depicted as a recipient, one who undergoes torture, obeys orders and waits for things to happen to her. Some have clearly succumbed to the temptation of a feminist reading of the text. Just because the principal character is female and the Middle Ages is renowned for its misogyny, it does not follow that the author has depicted a powerful, emancipated woman, as the rest of this chapter will show. Krause, for one, goes to great lengths to fabricate an obscure link between Florence and Charlemagne, claiming that the similarities between the two 'inscribe' [Florence] into the epic lineage of Charlemagne'²⁵¹.

²⁵⁰ Diana T. Childress has argued that passivity of the protagonist was a trait of, among others, *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, *Amis and Amiloun* and *Sir Gowther*. She sees this passivity as the result of the genre of the texts, which she labels 'secular legends'. She defines secular legends thus: 'they are biographies — albeit fictional — intended to edify, to provide models for imitation, and to make manifest the power of God.' (p.320). The protagonists' passivity is, in Childress' view, found in their ability to invoke divine succour, which means that the feats are 'not performed by the hero at all but by God through Him.' (p.319). See Diana T. Childress, 'Secular Hagiography in Middle English Literature', *Philological Quarterly*, 57 (1978), 311-22.

²⁵¹ Krause, 'Generic space-off', pp.103-4. Marijane Osborn talks about the 'feminist aspect of the medieval plot' while discussing the ME Florence and heroines of 'woman adrift' romances: 'strengthened by their optimism, faith, and staunch determination, these women who are victims of their male relatives in the beginning achieve control over their lives by the end; they become the authors of their own life stories.' In Marijane Osborn, *Romancing the*

Now, if a protagonist is defined by his or her agency, we are at pains to describe Florence as a protagonist; at best she could be summarised as ‘the one who avoids rape because she prays’. Corinne Saunders has studied the depiction of female abuse and its consequences on narration in medieval literature. In her book, *Rape and ravishment in the literature of medieval England*, she explains how in later female-centred narratives, ‘the practical possibilities of escaping rape become important: from tales founded in the firm belief that God will preserve the deserving virgin, and that, indeed, to be raped would demonstrate a lack of merit, we move to a type of story that upholds female inventiveness. The focus on the physical aspect of virginity leads to an interest in action rather than passivity’²⁵². She also cites the example of Christina of Markyate, who saves herself from rape and does not await God’s help. In Christina’s case, the ‘miracle is to a great extent replaced by intelligence and providence appears as the chance favouring of courageous action.’²⁵³ *Florence de Rome* would be an illustration of the earlier works, where keeping her body intact has nothing to do with the woman’s intellect. Resourcefulness or inventiveness are not qualities Florence possesses in the OF or ME version of the story. The latter also puts greater emphasis on the

Goddess: Three Middle English Romances about Women, (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1998) all p.18.

²⁵² Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001) pp.150-1.

²⁵³ Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, pp.149-150.

physical aspect of virginity and the fact that incest was avoided. On the other hand, the eponymous character is the epitome of more traditional, much valued qualities such as patience and trust, though trust, here, is a double-edged sword. For example, when Florence rescues a thief on the gallows on the provision that he will serve her, the thief betrays her as soon as he can.

One possible explanation for Florence's inactive stance might be the fact that her wedding occurs quite early in the text (l.2382). In other words, marriage is not a goal in this text and the ceremony is not even described. This is quite surprising given the author's propensity for describing just about everything else that occurs. Florence married Emere shortly after her father was killed so that the empire would not be left without a man at its head. It is made clear that Florence cannot rule on her own and needs to choose a husband as soon as possible. Thus, the only significant point made about the wedding is that it actually took place. One event, then, changes everything²⁵⁴ and not just for Florence: Emere, the wandering knight, becomes emperor. In other medieval texts, such as the so-called *romans réalistes* (for instance, the *Roman de Silence*), texts that do have proactive heroines,

²⁵⁴ The wedding ceremony is also relevant to Emere since it is at that point that the wandering knight becomes emperor. This achievement means that the character loses his interest for the author, who does not mention Emere at all in the second part of the text, until the moment that he comes to Beau Repaire to be cured after being injured in battle. There is no detail on the said battle and this shows the author's blatant change of narrative focus.

adventures precede marriage²⁵⁵. Marriage is the logical aim, a point of certainty and security that comes after danger and upheavals. The implication of this difference is that once marriage is secured there is nothing else a woman needs to strive for. This, I think, is why Florence is such a passive character. Though her virginity might be threatened at times, Florence is not a single woman and the empire is safely in the hands of her husband. In other words, the most important things such as the empire and the succession have been sorted, at least provisionally, that is until the need for a male heir surfaces again.

Since marriage cannot be the driving force, the solution to all problems, the author therefore needs to find another way to make the protagonist worth writing about. Telling or reading the story of a woman (and a married one at that) could be very tedious, especially so if the author is keen to ban “*le merveilleux*”, as is the author of the Middle English adaptation of the tale²⁵⁶. Talking about the beginnings of the “*courant réaliste*” in the twelfth century,

²⁵⁵ According to Regina Psaki, the *romans réalistes* include *Le roman du châtelain de Coucy*, *Le roman de la poire*, *Guillaume de Dole*, *Le roman de Silence* and *Le roman de la violette*. See her introduction to *Le roman de Silence*, p.18. Psaki explains that the texts were ‘dubbed romans réalistes simply because they are not romans merveilleux ; they do not dabble excessively in the archetypal, the magical, or the Arthurian; they use proper names and place-names of recognizable provenance if uncertain identity.’ (p.18). See: Regina Psaki (translator), *Heldris de Cornuaille: Le roman de Silence*, Garland Library of Medieval Literature Number 63. Series B (New York; London: Garland, 1991).

²⁵⁶ This point will be discussed in more detail in the second part of this chapter.

Anthime Fourrier explains the difficult position in which the author of *Florence de Rome* has put himself:

Un reflet fidèle du vécu aboutirait, en effet, à une diminution, à un appauvrissement de la vie telle que doit l'exprimer l'œuvre littéraire. Cette vie, il faut, au contraire, la multiplier, l'enrichir et, par voie de conséquence, tempérer l'une par l'autre la raison et l'imagination. Les événements, sinon les caractères, ne tiendront le lecteur ou l'auditeur en haleine que dans la mesure où, le sortant de la grisaille de ses habitudes journalières, sans toutefois le plonger en des conjectures inconcevables, ils garderont quelque chose d'exceptionnel. L'art vit d'exceptions.²⁵⁷

The solution is thus to depict a remarkable woman and Florence is indeed remarkable from the moment she is born into the world and in every possible way. Here is the passage describing her extraordinary birth:

Quant Florence naqui, con Deus l'ot destiné,
 La roïne en fu morte dedens tierz jor passé.
 Quant la dame ot son cors de l'enfant delivré,
 Granz miracles lor a nostre sires mostré,
 Car il virent dou sanc sur terre a grant plenté,
 Les bestes se combatent de par tot le regné,
 Et li oiseil volant se sunt entreplumé :
 Ce fu senifiance de la mortalité
 Que por lé fu si grant, con dient li letré,
 Que plus de cent mile homes en furent mort gité. Il.37-46

[When Florence was born, as God had fated, the queen died within three days. When the lady had delivered the child, then Our Lord made a show of great miracles, for they saw much blood upon the earth: the beasts fight throughout the realm, and the flying birds plucked each other. This was a sign of the number of deaths, which was so high because of her, as the letters say, that over a hundred thousand men died.]²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Anthime Fourrier, *Le courant réaliste dans le roman courtois en France au Moyen Age, Tome 1, Les débuts (XII^{ème} siècle)* (Paris : Librairie Nizet, 1960). p.487.

²⁵⁸ Translation based on Krause, 'Generic space-off', p.107.

Tragedy and chaos accompany her birth as titillating suggestions of the exciting narrative that will follow. What this passage shows us is that the heroine must be all the more special since God has taken an active interest in her. Florence's relationship with God develops, however, only in the second part of the poem, when she is under attack and prays to avoid sexual assault. Bizarrely, God answers her prayers but never prevents other bad things from happening to her. Rape and death are avoided, to be sure, but extreme anguish and violence however are otherwise her lot. She undergoes frequent torture, humiliation and exile. In other words, there has to be another very important point if the tale is to be worth telling: God will not and must not protect the heroine infallibly. There can be no story otherwise. In other words, Florence may be remarkable but there is something very human about her plight.

III HAGIOGRAPHY AND THE WEDDED VIRGIN

To my knowledge, no other secular medieval text centres to this degree on a married maiden. If the protagonist is female, she is either married with children before her misfortune begins or she is single and looks forward to getting married.

If having a female protagonist was not an obvious choice, opting for a married virgin can seem altogether like creative suicide! Yet this is a choice

that makes the text more interesting for the critic and, paradoxically, one that allows for more exciting developments. In one sense, there is something rather reassuring for a traditional audience in the fact that Florence is married because she would otherwise be a single woman wandering on her own. Sharon Farmer has argued that Christian authors found it difficult to make single women part of their description of the world²⁵⁹; woman was perceived as a threat if she was not under male supervision. The necessity for the early occurrence of Florence's union with Emere becomes clear. Florence might wander unaccompanied but, strictly speaking, she is still under male guardianship. There is one other significant aspect about Florence that I wish to underline here: this woman is persecuted and forced to leave her home but without having lost her virginity. Florence finds herself in an uncommon situation where her hymen is put in danger only *after* she marries. As Felicity Riddy put it:

The plot is shaped to allow Florence a period in which she is neither daughter, because her father is dead, nor wife because she has not consummated her marriage. By having her tell Emere that she will not sleep with him until he has captured or killed Sir Garcy, Florence herself is made to create a narrative space in which she will occupy

²⁵⁹ Sharon Farmer explains that 'according to Genesis 2.18, God initiated the creation of Eve with the following observation and promise: "It is not good that man should be alone; let us make him a helper resembling him" [...] Because ancient and medieval male Christian authors took this explanation of women's existence seriously, they had difficulty incorporating singlewomen into their description of the world.' See Sharon Farmer ' "It is not Good that [Wo]man should be Alone": Elite Responses to Singlewomen in High Medieval Paris' in *Singlewomen in the European Past 1250-1800*, ed. by Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), pp.82-105 (p.86).

the ambiguous status of the virgin wife, and in which her 'maydenhedd' will be constantly under attack.²⁶⁰

The married maiden is an intriguing concept that raises the question of chastity and the protection of the woman's virginity: because Florence was married, her chastity mattered in reality very little to the Church and, if she were indeed raped, the act would be considered fornication²⁶¹, not rape. The motivation behind her vigorous defence of her virginity becomes very interesting. Florence's married status gives the whole fight to preserve her virginity a new stance. Traditionally, the virgin who fends off men is one who has dedicated her life to God and who sees herself as the bride of a much worthier groom: Jesus Christ²⁶². The virgin's rejection of suitors is what triggers her torture and often her death. Saints Agnes, Barbara and Euphrosina, for example, all refuse marriage and meet a dreadful fate as a result. All three have healing powers, while they are alive and/or posthumously: this illustrates their intercessory power — a power that Florence also shares. The heroine, then, has a lot in common with female saints. The parallels appear clearly in the second part of the text, which eventually centres on Florence. Alone in the forest, Saint Catherine of Alexandria has light emanating from her, like Florence. Christina is hung by

²⁶⁰ Felicity Riddy, 'Temporary Virginity and the Everyday Body: Le Bone Florence of Rome and Bourgeois Self-making' in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England, Essays in Popular Romance* ed. by Nicola McDonald (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), 197-216 (pp.204-5).

²⁶¹ Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, p.118.

²⁶² See the story of St Agnes discussed in chapter I, p.45.

her hair and beaten. Elizabeth of Hungary is troubled by an evil brother-in-law. Juliana is hung by the hair and beaten as well. Like so many saints, who provoke their torturers, Florence challenges Milon to cut her head off (ll.3707 and 3725). And, of course, it is Florence's constant prayers and her sudden ability to call on God to cure everyone who comes to see her that give the text its strongest religious aftertaste.

Such conspicuous, factual resemblances have now been compiled by Kathy Krause²⁶³. They cannot escape the attention of the reader but they are also of limited use. In this text, the elements that recall saints' lives are consistently put into perspective as the narrator ensures that the story remains a secular one. When Florence refuses to marry Garsire, therefore, it is neither because she wishes to be a consecrated virgin nor because he is a pagan, both commonplaces in hagiography. Rather, she finds her suitor much too old and dreads intimacy with him. Florence's disgust for him is depicted in particularly vivid terms in both versions of the tale, thus stressing the absence of a religious motive for Florence's rejection of the emperor of Greece:²⁶⁴

²⁶³ See Krause, 'Generic space-off'.

²⁶⁴ Such rejection is all the more remarkable if we compare the above passages to a very similar episode in *The King of Tars*, where the young woman refuses to marry because her foreign suitor is not a Christian. She eventually marries him to spare the lives of her people and he later converts to Christianity. The ME Florence does consider marrying Sir Garsy to spare lives but her father does not allow her to sacrifice herself.

Sire, ce dist Florence, merci vos vuel crier:
 Tote nuit me feroit sa char detatoner
 Et sa barbe pignier et son menton grater.
 Ainçois me faites vos toz les membres coper !

ll.296-9

[Sire, Florence said, I beg your mercy: he will make me touch his flesh all night and comb his beard and scratch his chin. I would sooner ask you to have all my limbs cut off!]

Sche seyde, 'Be God þat boght me dere,
 Me had leuyr þe warste bachylere.
 In all my fadurs thede,
 Then for to lye be hys bresyd boones,
 When he coghyth and oldely grones,
 I can not on hys lede.'

ll.244-9

[She said, 'by God who redeemed me dearly, I would prefer to marry the lowliest knight in my father's realm than to lie by his shattered bones, when he coughs and groans like an old man. I cannot live under his direction.']

Similarly, in the second part of the text Florence is not persecuted because of her religious beliefs but because of her beauty. A little later in the text another episode, which does not figure in *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, illustrates my point well. When Florence follows Milon out of Rome, believing that he is leading her to Emere when he is in fact abducting her, she is wearing her richest attire, which includes a very interesting brooch:

Que fu de riches pierres porprise et aornee,
 De jaspes, de safirs par leus enluminee ;
 En l'or ot une pierre enz ou mileu plantee
 Que fu dedens la teste d'une serpent trouvee.
 Il n'a malaide ou siecle, ce est choze esprovee,
 Se l'en avoit la pierre a sa char adesee,
 Que la ou tocherait ne fust sempres senee ;
 Ne femme que la porte n'iert ja desvirginee
 Ne outre son voloir par nul home adesee,
 Por ce qu'elle ait o lui compaignie privee.

ll. 3641-51

[... that was bordered and adorned by gems and brightened by jasper and sapphires. In the gold a stone was set that was found in the head of a snake. There is not a sick person in the world (and this was proven) who would not be healed if he had it against his skin or if he

touched it. No woman who wears it was ever shorn of her virginity, nor was she ever touched sexually against her will by any man simply because she was alone with him.]

The passage could come straight out of a romance or *lai*, were it not for one interesting yet unexpected detail: 'Mout fu riche la noche et de grant renomee, / L'apostole de Romme l'ot Florence donee' ²⁶⁵(ll.3652-3). The brooch was given to Florence by the Pope. Strangely though, this brooch is more akin to a talisman found in a romance than to a precious relic. What the Pope has to do with this magical object is not clear so the detail seems gratuitous. Only a few lines later does the brooch come into use. Florence is wearing it and prays aloud every time Milon attempts to rape her. As readers, we cannot miss the connection between the brooch, the prayers and Florence's incredible success in avoiding rape. Milon, for his part, does not know about the brooch; he only hears her insistent prayers. When he finds himself unable to carry out his plans, he still does not believe it a miracle. Instead, he assumes that his unnatural and sudden exhaustion is the result of an enchantment. Why he should think that his inability to perform is due to witchcraft rather than to a miracle is not explained. Even the narrator does not say whether the brooch and/or her prayers saved Florence. Moreover, the brooch is never mentioned again²⁶⁶. There is no real commitment on the poet's part. The one thing that

²⁶⁵ The brooch was richly wrought and was of great renown; the apostle of Rome had given it to Florence.

²⁶⁶ This is clearly problematic, of course, but the fact that it effectively prevents incest (and not just any sexual attack, in spite of what the text says) can be a clue to the interpretation of the brooch. In an article entitled 'La représentation de la féminité dans les *chansons de geste*', Sarah Kay makes the following suggestion: 'Une lecture audacieuse du motif de l'objet

we can deduce is that he simply does not want to write something that would be directly comparable to hagiography. Instead we get a passage that is both religious in tone and resorts to elements usually fit for fairy tales and romances. This is secular literature with a religious twist.

Throughout the text, in fact, one finds that any passage that could be read as too religious is balanced by what I can only call a disclaimer, that announces: 'this is not a saint's life'. There are many examples to choose from but a particularly potent one follows immediately upon the mention of the fabulous brooch. A furious Milon starts beating Florence with a thorny stick ('une branche [...] qui fu de leus en leus par trestot espinee' ll.4093-4)²⁶⁷ to such an extent that 'sa blanche char fu trestote ensanglantee' (l.4098)²⁶⁸. He

magique empêchant l'union illicite pourrait y déceler le reflet lointain du triangle œdipien. La magie, évocatrice d'un temps reculé, rappellerait la prohibition de l'inceste que l'enfant n'ose pas enfreindre mais qui provoque chez lui des sentiments de colère et de culpabilité. Que le corps de la femme, désiré, refusé, et pourtant martyrisé, symbolise en quelque sorte le corps maternel, est peut-être le plus évident dans *Florence de Rome*. [...] Que la femme dans ces chansons représente la mère ou non, le fait qu'elle a la possibilité de se fier à une protection magique montre bien qu'elle conserve une certaine autorité. L'objet en question — ceinture, bijou, herbe — garantit son autonomie et incarne son désir, même si ce désir constitue un refus. Son caractère magique souligne l'étrangeté, pour le public médiéval, de la notion que c'est la femme elle-même, et non pas l'homme, qui dispose de son corps' p.233. Given the emphasis put by the author on the failures of the young men's mother, Kay's suggestion might not be as audacious as she first claims. Sarah Kay, 'La représentation de la féminité' in *Charlemagne in the North, Proceedings of the Twelfth International Conference of the Société Rencesvals, Edinburgh 4th to 11th August 1991*, ed. by Philip E. Bennett, Anne Elizabeth Cobby and Graham A. Runnalls (Edinburgh: Société Rencesvals, British Branch, 1993), pp.223-40. Finally, a perfectly reliable and constantly available brooch would impede literary creation for, as Albert Booth Taylor said, 'an invincible hero is too unhuman to stir the imagination'. Taylor, *An Introduction to Medieval Romance* (London, Cranton Limited 1930) p.10.

²⁶⁷ A stick that was covered in thorns.

²⁶⁸ Her white flesh was covered in blood.

believes that torture will make her undo her 'charaudes' (spells). Eventually he decides to hang Florence from the branch of a tree by the hair:

Par les tresces l'i pent, tant forment la pena
 C'onques pié qu'elle eüst a terre ne tocha
 Fors seul l'ortoel devant, ou elle s'apuia. ll.4115-7

[He hangs her by her plaits and torments her so much that her feet could not touch the ground except for her big toe, on which she leaned.]

After describing a scene that is very strongly reminiscent of saints' lives, charged with traditional religious imagery, the ridiculous detail of the toe deflates the whole situation very efficiently; the narrator may as well be saying 'please do not take this too seriously!' In just one line the author jeopardises the potential didactic value of the entire passage: the discrepancy between the subject matter (torture) and the way the episode is told serves as its own disclaimer.

Another important element that supports my interpretation is the role played by miracles in the text. That the miracles that take place are always natural phenomena is not a problem in itself²⁶⁹. Aquinas, after all, viewed miracles as 'an acceleration of nature', that is, something that could be explained by reason²⁷⁰. Nevertheless, the 'natural' or naturalistic character of

²⁶⁹ For instance, monkeys, a serpent and lions disrupt Milon during his attempts to rape Florence; later, a tempest separates her and Escot-the-sailor under similar circumstances.

²⁷⁰ Michael Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders: The Development of the Concept of Miracle, 1150-1350* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007) p.21.

the miracles performed in *Florence de Rome* attracts the critic's attention because it is combined with the fact that miracles are not used to further the right — that is, religious, didactic or inspirational — ideological aim. Indeed, the miracles never serve as signs to those who do not believe, which is normally considered the primary purpose of a miracle. Here, miracles are no more than narrative instruments, empty signs whose function is to allow a return to secular order; in other words, they allow Florence to assume the position she was meant to occupy as wife and procreator. When Florence develops healing powers she does not convert anyone and there is no mention of her abusers suddenly being in awe of God. The healing of the men has no symbolic value and all of them just walk away when they are cured²⁷¹. Nothing however, indicates that she retains those healing powers throughout her life²⁷²; instead, it looks as though they were given to her by God just so that she can return to the life that was designed for her. The miracle is empty; it has no meaning, just a very limited function that is not religious. Finally, it is significant that the time spent in God's hands, under divine 'aegis', corresponds directly to the time that Florence spends in exile. The association is reasonable: as long as the young woman has an earthly protector she does not need to appeal to God. Such a correlation stresses very

²⁷¹ In the ME version of the story, they are cured and then burnt at the stake by Florence's husband. I will return to this point later in the chapter.

²⁷² I share Nancy Black's opinion that this contributes to the notion that Florence's 'religious experiences lack depth.' See Nancy Black, *Medieval Narratives of Accused Queens* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003) p.150.

powerfully that religion is only a temporary solution and that a prompt return to a less spiritual form of protection is what Florence really wants. Florence is not a saint with a vocation. That kind of exile from the world is never her ambition.

So, how to explain this disclaimer? Is the author undecided as to what kind of text he is producing? Or is he trying to give the story subtle nuances? Are we dealing with an author who is aware of his pretensions and does not step out of certain boundaries, as if he were uncomfortable going all the way and writing according to a certain model? Is he trying to blend a bit of everything to satisfy a large audience and give his work extra dimensions by using elements audiences associated with different types of literature?²⁷³ Or is he showing off? Demonstrating that he is familiar with all sorts of generic conventions and happy to juggle them in order to create a more varied, original text? Whatever the answer, the author certainly plays with our horizon of expectations in a clever and stimulating way.

²⁷³ R. Walker thinks so: 'The main object of the composer of the chanson is to entertain and uplift his aristocratic audience. He has a good story to tell and he tells it superbly well, but he is in no hurry [...]. The poet's appeal is thus to the senses and emotions rather than to the intellect; he is concerned to arouse and to move his audience, not merely to instruct them.' In Roger M. Walker, 'From French verse to Spanish prose: *La chanson de Florence de Rome* and *El cuento des enperador Otas de Roma*', in *Medium Aevum* 49.2 (1980), 230-43 (p.240).

IV THE RESTORATION OF ORDER
AND THE END OF ULTIMATE OTHERNESS

The author's vacillation from hagiography-like to non-hagiographical material reaches a climax towards the end of the text, when Florence becomes a nun at Beaurepaire. As she asks to become part of the religious community we are told in no uncertain terms that Florence still hopes to see her husband again and consummate her marriage and that she is very confident this will happen: 'Oncor quide el gesir en ses bras toute nue'²⁷⁴ (l. 5583 and also ll.5612-5 and ll.6126-8). It is made clear to the reader that she stays at Beaurepaire because it is convenient for her and that 'tant con ses plasirs iert, ilec sejournera'²⁷⁵ (l.5611). The time spent at the nunnery is on hold, as it were, in the same way that the time she spends under God's supervision corresponds to her exile: that time is the time of otherness, of strangeness, of distance from home and from what Florence is meant to be. It is a time of constant longing and admirable patience. Florence needs a shelter until she can resume her life as an empress with the man she loves. Somehow, her reasoning is tacitly understood and surprisingly accepted by the abbess. She allows her to leave Beaurepaire with the emperor without any question when Emere eventually appears and takes her back to Rome. In a highly symbolic gesture, Emere undoes what the abbess had done: 'Li rois a pris le voil, de son chief l'a osté'²⁷⁶

²⁷⁴ She still believed that she would lie naked in his arms.

²⁷⁵ As long as she finds pleasure in it she will stay there.

²⁷⁶ The king took the veil and took it off her head.

(l.6380) — a gesture that represents and anticipates the consummation of the marriage. The symbolic metamorphosis is highly charged: Florence, the veiled nun becomes a bride once again and this time her change of status will be realised. Emere's action brings back the wedding ceremony in a way that annihilates everything that has happened since the original nuptials. Emere and Florence are simply resuming where they left off and the emperor is back in charge. No scene illustrates more powerfully the tension between the secular and the religious in the text.

With this emblematic gesture, Emere brings an end to Florence's limbo condition; she may have the authority to make her tormentors confess their crimes but she has to wait for recognition by her husband. Donald Maddox describes a similar scene that takes place in the thirteenth-century generic hybrid, *La fille du comte de Ponthieu*²⁷⁷. He calls the recognition scene a specular encounter in a fiction of lineage²⁷⁸. The scene in *La fille*, however, allows the heroine (albeit in the persona of a Muslim woman, unrecognisable to her family) to voice her side of the story, however briefly. She can thus explain her point of view and her reactions to the events that led her to marrying the emir of Andalucía, so that this confession episode can serve as

²⁷⁷ Donald Maddox, *Fictions of Identity in Medieval France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.167-77.

²⁷⁸ A specular encounter is a situation in which a character hears about their lives, often through a letter or an encounter. Maddox argues that the encounter or letter often acts as mediation between two segments of the text, and that the second segment works as a corrective of the first.

both a reunion and reconciliation. There is no such thing in *Florence*, however, where the main character remains almost entirely silent while she listens to the men in her life give a summary of what has happened to her since her abduction. Throughout the confession scene, for example, we are not told anything about how she feels. We do not even know how Emere suddenly recognises her right after she has cured him. In the Middle English version the recognition scene can only be assumed to have taken place. If it occurs, it occurs off stage. Clearly then, neither the French nor the English writer deemed the scene particularly important or worth writing about, which is surprising since it has the potential to be the climax of the text. Instead, what the authors choose to focus on is a rather long scene entirely about men (Florence's tormentors) enacting the denouement.

The heroine's future and her chance to go back to Rome and fulfil her symbolic titles (empress, bride) thus depend solely on this small group of men. Without their confessions and her husband's validation she would remain an incomplete bride. Indeed, it is even fair to say that throughout the text Florence was what we might call an empty bride: a title without any meaning, an empty signifier. Emere makes her whole, gives her a function with all of its components. With him, the word 'bride' regains its meaning. With him, she goes back to Rome, her home, and re-establishes her contacts with the most powerful metaphor of power.

Why she does not try to go back to Rome much earlier, as soon as she possibly could, defies common sense. However, one episode successfully explains the heroine's symbolic annihilation and her inability to enact, on her own, the symbolic journey back home, back to Rome, back to what she was or should have been all along. The significant moment takes place after Milon kidnaps her. In a sense, he not only takes her away from Rome but also from the place where her status was recognised. Milon obliterates her social status even further when he makes her take an oath never to disclose her identity or origin to anyone. Total, perfect exile can only be achieved in this way. By pronouncing this unreasonable oath, Florence locks herself into nothingness. The oath is an effective cancellation of her being. It is the materialisation of the empty signifier. With just a few words she lets Milon tie her to a situation that seals her otherness until the end of the text. The oath is as good as a condemnation. It is a cloak of silence that signs her painful exile by preventing her escape from the land of otherness, in which she lives until her identity and origin can be revealed through the mouths of others. In short, she respects the symbolic value of the oath she has taken since it never occurs to her to break it. Such impressive patience is rewarded and she can eventually be reunited with her social identity as wife of the emperor and future mother of an heir. Performative words signed her exile. In a *mise en abyme*, more performative words (the men's confessions) end her otherness by pronouncing her story. This enables Florence to return to her social rank, thus

allowing her status to take on its full meaning: Florence is still a wife who will consummate her marriage and produce an heir to her father's throne. The Other does more than just name her, the Other gives her an existence, an existence with all of its dimensions. Before this encounter, she was a married maiden: an incomplete woman, trapped between two stages. If *Florence* is a romance and the protagonist is on a quest, her mission is to pursue a wholeness that enables her to break out of her limbo state. Her position as the ultimate other was untenable.

V A WOMAN CANNOT BE ON HER OWN: PATRIARCHY AND DISSENT

We could therefore conclude that Florence is a heroine but a heroine with a difference. This does not mean that her portrayal does not conform to certain models. In fact, the poet describes a conventional heroine when he makes the exquisite Florence responsible for the outbreak of a terrible war²⁷⁹ between her father and Garsire (see lines 44-6 and 1281-4) and when he describes her supernatural, literally radiant beauty. The latter is important because it is

²⁷⁹ I would like to point to the fact that the author also chose *not* to make the war a religious conflict, which supports my argument that the text exposes empty signifiers, such as the heroine and the miracles. In a recent book, *The Orient in Chaucer and medieval romance*, Carol Heffernan devoted a chapter to *Le bone Florence of Rome* and raised a similar point: 'it is not one of the familiar wars of religion. This is interesting since the impressions of Constantinople that *Le bone Florence's* original audience had would have encouraged the romance author to turn *almost automatically* to religious conflict for at least some of his material.' (my emphasis) p.108. I believe that such an obvious, decisive departure from expectations is another way of avoiding the road that leads to a religious meaning for the action. See Carol Heffernan, *The Orient in Chaucer and Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003).

what triggers the former: her beauty stirs such desire in men that it drives them to crime. If her physique gets her into trouble, then it is not helped by Florence's unsound judgement. The maiden may be learned but she certainly is not 'streetwise'. She consistently listens to bad advice and trusts the wrong people. For example, after her father dies Florence expresses her need to look for a suitable husband who can rule over and save Rome. There is never any question that Florence can rule on her own. A lot is at stake when she asks her maid Audegon for advice on the matter. Because she believes Emere to be dead, the maid recommends to Florence that she propose to his evil brother Milon, even though his treachery has already been exposed! Shortly thereafter, Milon proves deceitful again and is imprisoned. Still Florence lets him out and follows him into the woods; incredibly, it is only when it is too late that she remembers his felony (l.3664 and 3690-1). Hardly judicious choices! In fact, the author draws our attention to a parallel he makes between the recently orphaned Florence and her mother-in-law. The parallel constitutes a very powerful warning. The poor example of Emere and Milon's mother and her lack of judgement acts as a specular reminder of the catastrophic consequences of a queen's inability to decide wisely. Her husband died when the boys were still young and she remarried, allowing the legitimate heirs to the throne of Hungary to be thrown out of their land while her tyrannical new husband took over the country. The powerful example of the mother's story is recounted on two occasions, pointing to only one

conclusion: a woman may be extraordinary but she must remain under close supervision, all the more so when her social status is high.²⁸⁰

A woman might be imprudent and unwittingly put order at risk but the author makes it clear that this female protagonist never challenges authority; she is not an excuse to write a controversial, defiant piece of work either. It would be easy to think that the choice of a female protagonist is somewhat of a statement, a bold decision that is heavily charged with meaning. The truth is that while the heroine is indeed a very unusual concept, an oddity in medieval literature, Florence is here at the centre of a work that gives her no liberties and sometimes leaves her out of the action for large portions of time while it focuses on the exploits of a knight. The long battle scenes are a chance to highlight Florence's father's qualities, Emere's courage and loyalty and his brother's prowess and dishonesty. The length of these passages describing the war shows that their purpose is not really to give a young woman the opportunity to choose a suitable groom. The text is about much more than Florence and her ordeals. It has higher ambitions, seeks to show everything and please everyone. Florence is not a female equivalent of the wandering knight, as she has no active quest at all:

²⁸⁰ Here I agree with Nancy Black who stressed that 'the male authors' interest in royal women was no plea for equality under the law. Rather, it was recognition that even the noblest, wealthiest, most virtuous woman needed male protection'. See Black, *Medieval Narratives*, p.11.

her hope to see Emere again is as close as she gets to going on a quest. Florence merely hopes that she can resume her Roman life at some point and the sooner the better. She might prove virtuous but that is practically in spite of herself. Before her ordeals, she was actually a rather ordinary female character (one that refused to marry an emperor because he was too old). So, what can we learn from the text? Perhaps the most evident messages that we can find in *Florence de Rome* are that a woman must not be on her own and that she cannot make good decisions, even if she is exceptional in many ways. This lesson, expressed so bald-facedly, appears more simplistic than it actually is.

If woman should not be on her own, for her own good, it does not necessarily follow that she is better off accompanied by a man. After all, Florence is always in the hands of a male figure and that does not make her life easier at all, to say the least. Quite importantly, after her father dies male protection proves ineffective to say the least. Normally, a woman is handed to her husband by her father so that, at any given time, she is under some supervision and never alone. This type of (literal and figurative) chain appears repeatedly in *Florence*: Florence is a daughter, her father dies, she promptly marries; her husband leaves and entrusts her to his brother, who kidnaps her. He later abandons her when he fears that he might get caught beating her. She is rescued by Thierry, then sent into exile. She does not

remain solitary for long: she entrusts herself to the first man she comes across, a criminal about to be hanged called Clarembaut, who agrees to become her servant on her request. With the help of his accomplice Peraut, he betrays her and sells her to a sailor. At sea (under God's protection) a tempest miraculously separates Florence from the sailor. She finds refuge in a nunnery, where God gives her healing powers. When the rumour spreads that a certain nun has healing powers all the men in her life, suffering from a variety of ailments, travel to the nunnery to meet her. She leaves the nunnery with her husband. This schematic summary of the story shows that Florence is never on her own but always at the mercy of either a man or God (a male figure in these accounts). She may be passed on from Emere to Milon or Thierry but the male characters either cause her harm or are unable to ensure her safety²⁸¹. Male inadequacy is a recurring theme in the text and is inextricably linked with Florence's vulnerability and powerlessness. It is powerfully denounced in a touching vignette found in both French and English versions: Clarembaut the thief takes Florence to his accomplices' house. There, his accomplice's wife, Soplise, suspecting that the two men have sinister plans, succeeds in protecting Florence for the night, inviting her to sleep in her bed and locking the bedroom door. Showing Soplise's moral

²⁸¹ A schematic account of this passing round of the heroine would be: Oton – Emere – Milon – Thierry – Clarembault – Escot – God – Emere. Where precisely God comes in is debatable, although it can be argued that he is there from the moment she commends herself to him as her ordeals begin. Emere is supposed to be there from the moment they are married. Even though he is not physically present, he is the one to whom Florence officially, legally, belongs.

integrity and goodness shining in the midst of male corruption is a strong statement. This is an effect that the author was probably trying to create, thus inscribing his text in a certain religious tradition: indeed, it is not surprising that the author chose to depict a woman able to perform miracles. Caroline Walker Bynum has explained that:

... the male hagiographers of Christina of Markyate in the 12th century, Juliana of Cornillon in the 13th century and Angela of Foligno in the 14th century stress explicitly that God chose to act through the weak vessel, the woman, as a condemnation of male religious failure, so that the last comes first and the first last.²⁸²

Florence de Rome may not have launched a controversy by depicting a female protagonist but it certainly used her sex to make a point about men's disappointing performance as protectors. The text shows without ambiguity that men do not have better judgement than Florence and that they are mostly ruled by their physical desires.

It is hardly surprising then to find that the few moments of peace that Florence encounters are secured by other women: Soplise shields Florence to the best of her abilities and the Abbess of Beaurepaire welcomes Florence into

²⁸² Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemptio: Essays in Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991) p.37. The author also gives the example of Catherine of Sienna, who was sent to preach and teach by God, as a woman, 'in order to shame immoral men.' p.39. By acting through the "weak vessel", God therefore allows women to redeem themselves as well as the men around them. See Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1995) p.28.

her community. Florence's radiant beauty, her learning, her impeccable manners and her admirable devotion never arouse jealousy in other women. On the contrary, her qualities elicit empathy. Other medieval authors have described similarly remarkable and persecuted women falling prey to female jealousy but there is no such thing in this text.²⁸³ This would indicate that the author's interest lies in Florence's capacity to express something about the men around her.

VI TORN CONCLUSIONS

All men but her father either seek to hurt her or fail to protect her. To a certain extent then, this should indicate the failure of a (patriarchal) society that is unable to protect a woman, and an empress at that. Furthermore, the text follows a metaphorical chronology that emphasizes an uneasy presentation of patriarchy: it opens with the great emperor Oton who is loved by all, a good, trusted ruler whose only fault is to neglect to secure a suitable husband for his daughter before he goes to war²⁸⁴. For a time, Oton's negligence does not appear to be a problem, insofar as a very good candidate

²⁸³ I am thinking of texts such as the ME *Emare*, Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, or the French *La Manekine*. For other stories of victimised queens and the origins of the theme, see Margaret Schlauch, *Chaucer's Constance and accused queens* (New York: New York University press, 1927) as well as Nancy Black, *Medieval Narratives of Accused Queens*, cited above.

²⁸⁴ Simon Gaunt refers to a similar example from the life of St Gregory where the father dies having made no arrangements for his daughter's wedding, thus leaving her defenceless. According to Gaunt, the 'implication is that feudal marriage practice is liable to abuse' (p.204) since that fault of the father makes it possible for incest to take place between his children. See Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

for his succession is at hand: a brave knight who comes to the emperor's rescue and even saves his life on the battlefield. When the excellent knight Emere succeeds Oton, it is obvious, yet very surprising to see, that he is not a very good king: he cannot protect his wife and does not even attempt to look for her after she disappears. Let us not forget that Emere has already achieved completion of what he was supposed to become in that he has secured a territory for himself. As Elizabeth Archibald has rightly pointed out 'it is hard to go on telling stories about a knight once he is happily married, because the motive of impressing or winning his lady is no longer effective.'²⁸⁵ Finally, he is on the same plane as the evildoers at the end of the text; like them he comes to see Florence to be cured and arrives at Beaurepaire at the same time as her persecutors. Simon Gaunt has offered an explanation for this portrayal of faulty monarchy:

As kings became stronger in the real world, in literature they became weaker, in some cases simply bad. This is true of both romance and epic [...]. This equivocal portrayal of the monarchy and the concomitant heroic status of knights in texts would therefore represent an attempt to invest with value a class whose power was declining. [...] The chivalric heroism of chansons de geste is thus part of an escapist fantasy in which kings need knights [...]²⁸⁶.

This is certainly true of *Ami et Amile*, a text that ridicules a gullible Charlemagne. Gaunt's point applies to *Florence de Rome* too but there is a

²⁸⁵ Elizabeth Archibald, 'Women and romance', in *Companion to Middle English Romance*, ed. by Henk Aertsen and Alasdair A. MacDonald (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1990), pp. 154-170 (p.159).

²⁸⁶ Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre*, p.43.

caveat: with the birth of Florence's son, also named Oton, there is an obvious effort to bring hope for future generations; hope for a proper, trustworthy, reliable ruler like the ones of generations past. The father figure is definitely still a very potent one in *Florence de Rome*, albeit charged with a certain hint of nostalgia.

Hope is tangible in that Florence chooses to go back to a secular existence without hesitation, fitting nicely into the role she should have assumed from the start — empress and mother of the next emperor. It should be noted that of all the three sets of hagiographical romances I have studied in the scope of this dissertation, *Florence de Rome* is the only one where geographical locations and returning home matter. This is certainly because the geographical home in this case is also a very potent symbol²⁸⁷. Return from exile is a return to the epitome of patriarchy, a site where an heir can be born and given the name of Florence's father. The heir in question, however, can only be born because Florence is no longer resting in God's hands alone. Effectively, her return marks the end of a double exile. *Florence de Rome* highlights a crisis but also encourages faith in the future. It is not a text that bows down unconditionally at the feet of the patriarchal order but it is not a

²⁸⁷ Heffernan even thinks that 'Rome is a symbol of Florence', stating that 'Rome is almost destroyed in the war in the romance, and Florence is almost destroyed by her adversaries. Rome is a symbol of Florence and Constantinople a symbol of all that threatens her.' See Heffernan, *The Orient*, p.109. The point should not be taken too far but can make sense if we see the character's physical return to Rome as coinciding with her social fulfilment.

subversive text either. The bottom line is that a woman on her own is always in danger and cannot make wise decisions, which in turn represents a risk for social order. Active criticism of the system would have had her leave the world for good, when in fact she longs to go back to her destined secular life. This undecided perspective, both critical and supportive, is the direct result of the gender and status of the heroine.

Part two: *Le Bone Florence of Rome*

I INTRODUCTION

The Middle English adaptation of *Florence de Rome* was written in the late fourteenth century. To my knowledge, Florence is the only French heroine whose story was adapted into English. Whether the *romans réalistes* I mentioned earlier were not adapted into English, or whether no copy of any possible adaptation no longer exists, this is still intriguing. If such adaptations/translations ever did exist, they cannot have been terribly popular or they would have likely left some trace. *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, as the sole example of this sub-genre, survives in only one manuscript and some critics might argue that this is due to English authors' lack of interest in female characters²⁸⁸.

The author of this text is the exception that proves the rule. With only 2187 lines, *Le Bone Florence of Rome* is, like most English renditions of a French

²⁸⁸ With reference to the most famous of medieval English authors, (i.e., the *Gawain* poet, Chaucer and Malory) Sheila Fisher asserts that 'with the qualified exception of Chaucer, all three of these writers, for all their differences, have just this in common: they seem less interested in women than do their continental counterparts, the Nun's priest's flagging of romance as a "female genre" notwithstanding.' In Sheila Fisher, 'Women and Men in late medieval English romance', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. by Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; repr. 2004), pp.150-64 (p.151). On the other hand, see Larissa Tracy's comment that 'in medieval England, the ME *Gilte Legende* (i.e., a vernacular collection of female saints' lives) was one of the most popular collections of hagiography. These legends were widely circulated and widely read by a secular society as well as those in religious communities.' In *Women of the Gilte Legende. A selection of Middle English Saints' Lives Translated from the Middle English with Introduction and Interpretative Essay* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003) p.103.

text, significantly shorter than its continental analogue²⁸⁹. The obvious question that immediately springs to mind is: what did the English writer leave out and why?

We have seen in the previous chapters how two similar accounts of a given story could convey very different messages. Here we are presented with a new situation in that the OF and the ME *Florence* are very closely related. Even the smallest details have been preserved. For instance, Emere's coat of arms and the name of Oton's horse are the same in both versions. Even the mention of birds fighting after Florence was born remains. A close reading reveals that the English poet was either remarkably familiar with the version of the story that has come down to us or that he actually had the manuscript in front of him while 'translating' the text.

When two texts are so similar it can be difficult to know where to begin comparative work. The respective lengths of the text are, nonetheless, a first hint that in spite of similarities there are variations that only authorial agenda can explain. The poet compressed his source by doing away with many descriptions and also by deleting the sometimes lengthy passages where a character swears and gives a précis of the Bible. As we shall see, this does not indicate his lack of interest in things religious but is part of a determined plan

²⁸⁹ All references will be to Heffernan's edition, *Le Bone Florence of Rome* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976).

of action. Without what the poet must have considered interruptions to the action, we are presented with a fast moving, efficient narrative. According to Marijane Osborn, the form of the text also contributes to this effect²⁹⁰.

There is something particularly striking in the English poet's version of *Le Bone Florence de Rome*: despite its swiftness, it is incredibly coherent and meticulous and this is all the more noticeable because the story of Florence is very eventful. The narrative inconsistencies that are so often encountered in Middle English texts that derive from continental sources have no place here. For example, the poet remembers to tell us what happens to Garsire after Emere brings him to Rome as his prisoner, a detail neglected by the French author: Garsire becomes homesick and dies (stanza 133). Such attention to detail proves that this is not banal, mindless copying or translating. *Le Bone Florence* bears the trace of an author at work, an author who 'produced a

²⁹⁰ 'The twelve-line "tail-rhyme" used by the poets of *Emaré* and *Florence* contains four sets of triplets rhyming aab-ccb-ddb-eeb, with the rhyming couplets in tetrameter and the link-rhyme lines in trimeter. [...] These stanzaic forms enhance the rapidity of the narrative [...]. It may be that those who dislike these romances are incapable of grasping the liveliness of the verse form. Someone in that predicament might find it a help to read with the rhythms of musical comedy in mind.' Osborn, *Romancing the Goddess*, note 3, p249-250. Marianne Ailes and Phillipa Hardman also note the following: 'there seems to have been a degree of experimentation in how to "translate" the form of French texts into English narrative verse; but one perceived effect of the choice of English rhymed couplets or stanzas, with their much more frequent changes of rhyme compared with French *laissez*, is an increase in narrative pace. This accords with the well-documented English preference for short, fast-paced narratives.' In 'How English are the English Charlemagne romances?', in *Boundaries in Medieval Romance*, p.47.

version that shows a remarkable degree of independence'²⁹¹. This surely makes the scholar's investigation even more stimulating. Unfortunately, the only one who has compared the two texts until now, Anne Thompson Lee, seems to have found it necessary to aggressively criticise the French text in order to stress the qualities of its English counterpart.²⁹² Her article is a testimony to the pointlessness of ranking texts when working comparatively. As the two previous chapters have shown, my aim is to observe the similarities and differences that connect two related texts. Close analysis will emphasize each time the respective merits and ambitions of their authors.

II ERASING *LE MERVEILLEUX*

As pointed out earlier, the French author was not shy about turning to the *merveilleux*. He resorted to it, if not heavily, at least regularly, as illustrated by the example of the magical brooch, an object that epitomised his reluctance to employ hagiography in a direct manner. Though he was hesitant to let the text take on a hagiographic turn, he used *le merveilleux* several times and

²⁹¹ Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the 13th and 14th Centuries* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1969) p.140.

²⁹² Anne Lee Thompson, 'Le Bone Florence of Rome: A Middle English Adaptation of a French Romance' in *The Learned and the Lewed, Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, ed. by Larry D. Benson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 343-354. The author's point is that 'many English romances are worthy of acclaim as original artifacts.' [sic.] (p.343). This, of course, is true, but to make her case, it seems that she needs to point to what she thinks are weaknesses in the OF text. Her main concern is for the length of the French text: 'we must once again curb our impatience' (p.348), a fault which, she feels, makes it lacking in dramatic realism. She concludes that because the English author is more focused, 'he appears to cater more nearly to the tastes of the modern reader, as well as those of his own time' (p.354). Clearly, Lee is a modern reader.

always in the same way, in order to attenuate the religious message of the text, and perhaps even to question it. On the other occasions that the supernatural appears in the French text, it is to protect Florence's sexual integrity though; and, as with the brooch, each occurrence can be thoroughly confusing.²⁹³ We never know for certain, for example, whether fate is at work or miracles are being performed. We are left to make our own connection between Florence's prayers and the sudden arrival of a group of monkeys, a lion or a 'serpent' to save her. As remarked earlier, these are all natural means to stop Milon's assault, in that his battling of the animals leaves him too weary to fulfil his sexual urges.

The problem with these episodes is, therefore, that they are neither obviously religious nor just entertaining. In other words, they remain ambiguous and this, I would argue, is why the English author did away with them. There was no point in trying to give a bunch of monkeys some sort of Christian meaning. Simply saying that Florence was saved by prayer and nothing else was a much more effective strategy. In this respect, the brooch was a particularly weak element because, as Anne Thompson Lee has rightly pointed out, it is 'used to protect Florence only from [Milon], the first of her

²⁹³ There is one exception: the only episode that exclusively displays *le merveilleux* with no conjunction with religion is a very short passage that the modern editor called 'la chambre merveilleuse'. The room is question in a place in Oton's palace where Florence is taken after she learns that her father has died. The room has the power to cure anyone's grief. This episode does not figure in the ME text.

many persecutors, and our practical author may have felt that there was little point in retaining an item of such limited value.²⁹⁴ Furthermore, Florence's virtues appear less admirable if she is aided by magic. For the edifying and didactic purposes of the text it is therefore better just to do away with the brooch.

In short, the English text was stripped of all supernatural events that could not be directly associated with the work of God. Astrology, practised by Florence's maid to help her choose a husband in the OF *Florence*, disappears as well. The dreams that do not contribute to the action have no place in the English writer's agenda either.²⁹⁵ In choosing not to keep such elements, the poet was not just trying to shorten a text that some may find has been stretched to its limits. Although he did not add any adventures to Florence's story, such systematic erasure of the marvellous is not uncommon in medieval English literature. Helen Cooper, in *The English Romance in time*, summarises the relation between English romances and their French counterparts thus:

Although many of the romances have French antecedents, they take a characteristically different angle on their material. They are generally

²⁹⁴ Thompson Lee, '*Le Bone Florence of Rome: A Middle English Adaptation*', p.351.

²⁹⁵ The English poet keeps one premonitory dream: that of Thierry. The reason is that Thierry's terrible nightmare is what makes him get up and check on his daughter in the middle of the night. As he discovers that she has been killed, he finds Florence sleeping next to her with a bloody knife in her hand. The episode is essential to the text as it explains why Florence is subsequently accused of murder and exiled.

more compatible with orthodox Christianity (adultery is out; pre-marital sex is just that, pre-marital, and even that is rare); quite a number are overtly pious, stressing the Job-like endurance of God-given trials before restoration and a Providence-assisted happy ending. They tend to indicate emotion more by action or statement than by soliloquy or formal analysis. They avoid the more extreme flights of fantasy of continental European romance. They tend, in fact, to show many of the qualities often described as being associated with the rise of the bourgeois novel: a parallel that may be connected with their choice of the English language, and therefore with the downward social penetration from the French-reading aristocracy to the gentry and to townsmen.²⁹⁶

Although Cooper's overview is generally accurate, it does not really account for the disappearance of the *merveilleux*. Indeed, Cooper, perhaps in an impulse to underline the unique qualities of English romances (as opposed to French ones, of course), later attributes the phenomenon to 'English pragmatism or sophistication'²⁹⁷. I am not claiming to provide an explanation for English authors' or audiences' disregard of the *merveilleux* in the whole corpus of medieval English romance. However, I believe it serves a simple, obvious purpose in *Le bone Florence of Rome*. What the author achieved was to clear some space for what he felt should occupy the centre of the stage.

III ENFORCING THE RELIGIOUS

The English author transformed *Florence de Rome* in a very important way by redistributing the religious elements in the text. As we just saw, by removing

²⁹⁶ Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004) p.30.

²⁹⁷ Cooper, *English Romance*, p.131.

ambiguous passages he actually strengthened the religious overtones of the story²⁹⁸. He did this not just to get rid of parts of extraneous material; he changed what he kept as well. His treatment of the episode where Florence and Millis come across a hermit in the forest is a good illustration of his clever manipulation of the original text. The scene takes place a few days after the abduction. Florence and Millis have not had a chance to eat when they come across a hermit. The man offers them some bread which, in both versions, makes Florence's abductor choke. The French poet makes a real effort to secularise the scene, explaining that 'la paille estoit grose'²⁹⁹ (l.3896) and that, as a result, a voracious Milon choked because 'li pains fu mout aispres'³⁰⁰ (l.3899). In the Middle English text, however, we find that the scene has been given a definitively religious meaning. The hermit brings them a loaf of barley. Their subsequent reactions convey a very explicit message: Florence thinks that she has never eaten such wonderful bread while Millis practically suffocates. In other words, eating a piece of bread turns into an ordeal trial. Millis demands better bread but because the hermit cannot produce anything else he sets him on fire. Three stanzas later, he hangs Florence to a tree and beats her while she evokes the 'grace of Hym þat dyed on rode'³⁰¹ (l.1511) and lets out 'rewful' (rueful) cries. Violence against Florence in this passage

²⁹⁸ Laura Hibbard considered that 'the ME redactor of *Le Bone Florence of Rome* was of a strongly religious cast of mind', *Medieval Romance in England*, p.15.

²⁹⁹ The bran was coarse.

³⁰⁰ The bread was very coarse.

³⁰¹ Him who died on the cross.

loudly echoes the Crucifixion. The scene thus departs very markedly from its antecedent, where the religious charge of the scene was, as previously argued, totally deflated by the addition of the ridiculous detail of Florence balancing on one toe.

Consistent with his project, the fourteenth-century poet altered another episode that was of particular relevance in the French *Florence*, that is the moment when the protagonist takes the veil. In *Le bone Florence*, the heroine does not become a temporary nun and she does not take the veil thinking about her husband, hoping that she can eventually lie naked in his arms. This time, taking the veil is a serious commitment and Florence genuinely abandons her former life. There is strictly no mention of her potentially hoping to get back to Rome and Emere. This is made plain in the denouement: whereas the French Florence is delighted to see Emere, the English Florence's reaction is not mentioned at all³⁰². By embracing her new role as a nun she brings an end to her exile (physical and otherwise) in that she wholeheartedly adopts a new status. What this means is that, unlike her French predecessor, she will not need men to give her an identity or to reinstate her in a social place. She already has a place in society and an

³⁰² 'Mout bien il se conurent quant se sont regardé; / Grant joie demenerent, si se sont acolé. [...] / Grant joie ont il au cuer, ce sachiez de verté' (*Florence de Rome*, ll.6378-82)

acceptable, laudable one at that. Where there is no longing, no lack, she has found validation.

Such a change does not come as a surprise because the author has carefully prepared his audience by emphasizing Florence's goodness throughout the text, often in the depiction of her extraordinary endurance. For instance, when the heroine is accused of killing her host's daughter she does not claim her innocence like the heroine of the French text does. Instead she heroically suffers in silence, thus displaying the much-valued quality of patience. Later on, when she cures a nun, Florence wants the miracle to be kept secret, thus offering herself as an example of humility but also indicating that she has accepted her new religious life and that she does not hope to go back to Rome or her husband. Also, she twice forgives the men who assaulted her: first Millis, then the thief (stanza 154). All this obviously supports the portrayal of Florence as a typical saintly woman.

Yet it is the personalised passages that really capture our attention by building a relationship between the audience and main character and I will turn to them now. On several occasions, the author opts for tailored didactic passages that help individualise the character, making her less generic and

more authentic³⁰³. I would like to use the following excerpt to illustrate my point. This passage comes just after Florence is made to believe that Emere has passed away. Millis tells her that before dying his brother said that he wanted them to get married. Florence's response is apparently typical of female saints:

Sche seyde, 'Y wyll weddyd bee
To a lorde that neuyr schall dye,
That preestys schewe in forme of bredd.

Furste þen my fadur slayne,
And now my lorde ys fro me tane,
Y wyll loue no ma,
But hym þat boght me on þe rode,
Wyth hys swete precyus blode

ll.1099-06

[She said: I will marry a lord who will never die and whom priests show in the form of bread. First, my father was killed and now my lord is taken away from me. I will never love another again but Him that redeemed us on the cross with his sweet, precious blood.]

These are particularly interesting lines because they show the author's ability to adapt a hackneyed formula — that of the girl who refuses a man's advances, claiming she has found a far better suitor in Christ — to Florence's situation. He refreshes the formula with much appreciated human, down to earth and realistic features. Florence, who lost her father and then her beloved, yearns for a protector who will not leave her, who will not die. The author grafts a religious response onto Florence's very natural, lifelike reaction of grief and her desire never to expose herself to emotional suffering

³⁰³ This is why Florence is such a fascinating character. John Edwin Wells admitted that 'the author was more interested in the heroine than the hero' in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1400*. (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1916) p.124.

again. His contribution makes his character multi-dimensional, thus encouraging empathy and a certain degree of identification³⁰⁴. Such clever use of familiar material is, as Helen Cooper has argued, the unmistakable sign of excellent literature:

... whereas the quality of universality has been widely regarded, ever since Aristotle, as what marks out great literature, what distinguishes the best within formulaic literature is the unique: the ability to give the sharpness of the individual to a variation on a known and recognized theme.³⁰⁵

In response, I would like to consider a few particularly interesting modifications. They might be small alterations but they convey important messages. Both the French and the English *Florence* give the name of the founder of the nunnery of Beaurepaire. The French text gives Julius Caesar, while the English text claims that Sir Lucius Ibarnius established the convent. This is a very interesting detail because Ibarnius was 'the first pagan in England to be converted to Christianity, according to Bede in the year 167 C.E.'³⁰⁶

³⁰⁴ Ducan Robertson has explained the evolution of saints' lives, showing how once Christianity became a state religion the lives became more and more extravagant, turning the saints into supernatural creatures whose total insentience was not only akin to heresy but also could not encourage sympathy. He demonstrates the lives' 'emotional impoverishment' which 'diminishes their spiritual value'. If this is true, then the value of a text like *Florence* is very much increased by its author's consistent effort to make his main character more life-like. See *The Medieval Saints' Lives: Spiritual Renewal and Old French Literature* (Lexington, Kentucky: French Forum, 1995) p.41-2.

³⁰⁵ Cooper, *English Romance*, pp.14-5.

³⁰⁶ Osborn, *Romancing the Goddess*, note 1888, p.264.

Another important addition to the text is the claim, in the penultimate stanza, that ‘Pope Symone thys story wrate, in þe cronykyls of Rome is þe date, who sekyth þere he may hyt fynde’³⁰⁷ (l. 2173-5). Of course, it is very common for medieval authors to claim reliable sources for their work and I am not arguing that this particular claim is valid. However, the choice of a Pope is noteworthy and bears witness to the author’s project to give the text a markedly hagiographical cast³⁰⁸.

The last remarkable change is subtle yet powerful. It comes at the end of the text, when Florence’s antagonists confess their crimes in order to be cured of their various ailments, thus recounting Florence’s story publicly and proving her innocence. When the sailor’s turn comes, he begins by admitting that he attempted to rape Florence. She did not let him have his way and he explains how: ‘Sche brake my schypp with a tempeste’³⁰⁹ (l.2101). Now if we turn to the actual episode (l.1852-75) we read that as the sailor’s violence increases and Florence’s ribs start to crack, she begs the Virgin Mary to allow her to avoid dishonour and keep her ‘maydynhede’. An incredible tempest suddenly breaks and the sailor is interrupted because he must help his men

³⁰⁷ Pope Simon wrote this story; the date can be found in the *Chronicles of Rome* by whoever looks there.

³⁰⁸ Dieter Mehl also lists the following elements: ‘Florence is welcomed back to Rome by a solemn procession of the Pope and his Cardinals [...]; the brief description of the painting in the Emperor’s palace representing the Seven Deadly Sins, the references to the doctrine of transubstantiation (ll. 1004-5) and the mention of St Hilary’s day (ll. 1894-6)’ in *The Middle English Romances of the 13th and 14th Centuries*, p.144.

³⁰⁹ She broke my ship with a tempest.

on the deck. Florence is relieved since she would much rather die than lose her virginity. The ship is destroyed in the storm and all the men die except for the sailor. The immediate juxtaposition of Florence's appeal to the Virgin and the subsequent tempest shows that the Virgin who 'has never failed Florence thus far' (l.1854) sent the violent squall³¹⁰. However, when the sailor tells this story there is a very important shift: he says that it is Florence who broke the ship. It is not uncommon for characters, especially bad ones, to fail to identify a miracle when it takes place and to attribute it to witchcraft. Yet there is no such accusation here. The ascription of the tempest to Florence is a shortcut that creates an amalgamation of the heroine with the Virgin. The conflation is discreet but its understated casualness shows how obvious the situation is. In brief, the English author successfully effected a literal conversion of the original material.

IV THE END OF OTHERNESS AND THE QUESTION OF IDENTIFICATION

What is the effect of this culmination of the religious? Does it further estrange the heroine from being recognisable? Just as religious life could offer medieval women a little more control over their lives, introducing

³¹⁰ 'The Virgin's miracle here is particularly fitting for her, because she was worshipped by medieval seafarers as *Stella Maris* who grants safe voyage.' says Masaji Tajiri in the chapter she devotes to *Le Bone Florence of Rome* in *Studies in the Middle English Tail-rhyme Romances* (Tokyo: Eihōsha, 2002) p.118.

hagiographical elements into the story opens up new possibilities. Hagiography allows for developments that could otherwise not take place in the realm of romance or epic. As Simon Gaunt rightly stressed: ‘one obvious difference between hagiography and epic or romance is that saints’ lives can be devoted to women as subjects [...] which is true of neither epic nor romance, both of which require a hero.’³¹¹ In other words, the religious is what allows Florence to be the main character in the second part of the text. If it were not for that Florence, as perfectly beautiful and learned as she may be, would be stuck in a rut originating in perfection itself. Elizabeth Archibald has argued against the possibility of female character development in medieval literature, asking her readers: ‘What female activity or accomplishment is comparable to winning your first tournament, or rescuing your first damsel in distress, or sending your first prisoner home to Camelot?’³¹² If this parallel is justified at all, the answer to Archibald’s question has to be hagiography. Only saints’ lives can open up a comparable hierarchy, which is why *Le Bone Florence of Rome* can show off a progression in the eponymous character.

The heroine starts out as a rather conventional character but also as one who acquires more lifelike features little by little. I have already discussed

³¹¹ Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature*, p.187.

³¹² Archibald, ‘Women and Romance’, p.157.

the convincing depiction of her grief; now I would like to draw attention to the fact that Florence only turns to God when she cannot resort to anyone else. Unlike other similar female characters who display exemplary piety from an early age, Florence, in a typically human fashion, calls on God only because she needs Him³¹³. Another interesting touch in Florence's saintly portrait is the author's adaptation of the virtue of patience to his character. St Augustine, in *De patientia*, defines patience thus:

2. The patience of man, which is right and laudable and worthy of the name of virtue, is understood to be that by which we tolerate evil things with an even mind, that we may not with a mind uneven desert good things, through which we may arrive at better. Wherefore the impatient, while they will not suffer ills, effect not a deliverance from ills, but only the suffering of heavier ills.

He later gives an example of patience particularly relevant to us here:

8. By this patience, holy David bore the revilings of a railer, and, when he might easily have avenged himself, not only did he not, but he even refrained another who was vexed and moved for him; and more put forth his kingly power by prohibiting than by exercising vengeance.³¹⁴

A saintly Florence might be the epitome of patience but when she finds herself in the same position as David the outcome is very different because Florence does not stop her husband punishing the men who attacked her.

³¹³ I am thinking, in particular, of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, book 2, ll. 592-610.

³¹⁴ Both passages can be found on:

<http://www.episcopalnet.org/READINGS/Hippo/Patience.html>.

Consulted on 25.10.08.

That way she only embodies patience as far as is humanly possible and certainly within the limitation of her sex³¹⁵ and this is another very authentic trait. By her own admission, Florence is 'a sympull woman' (l.577).

This last major change is arguably the most substantial one. At the end of *Florence de Rome*, in the midst of great celebrations, the persecutors are forgotten. Emere orders that a fire be lit and, from what follows, we understand that the fire will be used to prepare an enormous banquet. His English successor commands as well that a fire be kindled but this time it is to burn his wife's persecutors at the stake. The difference is crucial and has repercussions on several levels. Firstly, this change fits the general didactic purpose of the text by bearing in mind the need for retribution after confession. Moreover, their deaths give the men a meaning in the scheme of the text. In the French *Florence*, they were, like the miracles, empty ploys. Once their narrative use came to an end they were never heard of again. Here, however, in the English version, their histories are complete, like that of Garsire. They convey a systematic lesson absent in the French version: sinners are punished in the end. The morality that the English author added after the end of story exactly supports this, warning that if one is 'false' one will meet a 'fowle ende' (l.2178). The execution of the evildoers is two-sided

³¹⁵ Amy Hollywood stressed that 'women attempt to follow Christ in his poverty, suffering and humility *within the confines open to them* in the thirteenth century' (my emphasis). Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, p.51.

though: at once conforming to religious orthodoxy and also showing a mere mortal overwriting God's miracles.

Secondly, this change affects the portrayal of the main character. When the execution takes place, Florence has been a successful nun for some time and her privileged relation with God has taken the form of healing powers that she has used on many people, including the men who persecuted her. In other words, she has become a mediator, in the same way that the Virgin Mary was often regarded in the Middle Ages³¹⁶. Because of this, the killing of the evildoers can be read as marking the end of her mediating powers. We may assume that this change is permanent since there is no indication that she retains her powers throughout her life. Moreover, although she may, like the Virgin Mary, mediate between God and men, like the Virgin, she is unable to intercede between the emperor and his subjects³¹⁷. What is noteworthy here is the sudden change of hierarchy, where the emperor, not God — let alone Florence — has the last word. The author reintroduces the secular at the end of the text. After all, the 'fowle end'

³¹⁶ Caroline D. Eckhardt goes as far as to claim that the role of woman as intercessor in Middle English romance is as good as a convention (p.97). She goes on to argue that this role 'would have extended, without violating, women's normal expectations of themselves. [...] it provided a heightening of normal expectations without threatening any fundamental principle of the established relationships between men and women' (p.105). See 'Woman as Mediator in the Middle English Romances', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 14 (1980) pp. 94-108.

³¹⁷ This is noteworthy since, as Kim Phillips has argued, the virgin's 'primary medieval role [was] as royal intercessor, who shared in Christ's power over heaven and earth and could be called upon by believers in earthly affairs.' See Kim M. Phillips, 'Maidenhood as the Perfect Age of a Woman's Life' in *Young Medieval Women*, ed. by Katherine J. Lewis, Noel J. Menuge and Kim M. Phillips (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), pp.1-24 (p.15).

promised in the morality is not eternal damnation but a cruel death at the hand of civil authorities. The killing looks like some sudden chivalric or authoritative burst on Emere's part, which is hard to reconcile with his long inertia. Interestingly, however, Emere's surprising stance is also his very first act as Emperor. This, to me, implies that the reconstitution of the family unit (the couple) is as essential to Emere's actualisation as emperor as it was to the French Florence becoming whole. This does not imply some kind of emancipation for the heroine. On the contrary, the fulfilment of his status relies on her abandoning her place at the nunnery, as well as the freedom of development her self-acquired status had allowed her. Such return to more secular matters gives the story a somewhat cyclical aspect; it seals a circle around the heroine, containing her in a reasonable, earthly enclosure.

Nothing illustrates the text's blend of religious and secular matters better than its concluding stanzas³¹⁸. The persecutors' confessions, in so far as they provide a summary of Florence's life away from Rome, also act as a testimony to her chastity. The emphasis placed on her virginity is exclusive to the English text. Not only do the men assert that the young woman has always managed to fend off amorous advances (ll.2100 and 2163) but Millis

³¹⁸ See A. Burke Severs' comment: 'The hagiographic tone, the delineation of the Seven Deadly Sins on the walls of the palace (ll.329-333), the patient endurance of the heroine and her limitless kindness and good nature, the pointed moralizing of the concluding lines blur the distinction between saint's life and romance.' *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500* (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967) Fascicule 1, p.132.

also attests that no incest ever took place between Florence and himself (ll.1070 and 2055). These are very real concerns that would have crossed the minds of those who listened to or read the tale. Florence's virtue and the security of her dynasty were of crucial importance. The religious and the secular integrate here to show how a balance has been achieved: excellence and authentic experiences do not exclude one another, thus making it possible for the audience to identify or empathise with the heroine. The refashioning of the text gives the didactic more strength; the limitations that Florence encounters are what make her more real: 'An invincible hero is too inhuman to stir the imagination'³¹⁹. After all, as in most medieval texts that deal with women, 'the lady is respected and admired so long as she stays within her boundaries.'³²⁰

VI CONCLUSION

I ended the last chapter by asking if my conclusions could be carried any further. At that point, I was wondering if it was possible to find a systematic ideological divide between French and English versions of the same story. After having finished this discussion, the answer is definitely yes, even when the two texts in question are as closely related as are *Florence de Rome* and *Le*

³¹⁹ Albert Booth Taylor, *An Introduction to Medieval Romance* (London: Cranton Limited, 1930) p.10.

³²⁰ Shirley Marchalonis, 'Above Rubies: Popular Views of Medieval Women' in *Journal of Popular Culture*, 14 (1980) p.93.

bone Florence of Rome. The OF text provided a unique opportunity for a gifted English author to remodel his source. The French author arguably gave birth to 'the first secular female protagonist in Old French'³²¹ but he made her hollow, just like he made his miracles and persecutors hollow and meaningless and the new emperor almost completely useless. Despite its taking place in a world of crumbling institutions, the OF *Florence* is not ardently critical of patriarchal order. Yet, like the other French texts I have studied in this dissertation, it definitely points to the Other's weaknesses and potential failures. The author clearly could not afford to compose a poem that was too critical, or it would have run the risk of coming across as a defence of women against men, an unheard of and potentially disastrous argument to put before his medieval audience.

Florence de Rome is certainly a very rich text and one that has an incredible potential but it does not fulfil it. The English author saw what great promise the text held and took the story a step further. He left the virtuoso approach behind in order to help focus the story. As a result, the English text bears no frills and is effective as well as riveting. Its stronger emphasis on piety can be linked to what Frances McSparran has called 'the spread of religious education and the cultivation of the spiritual life among

³²¹ Krause, 'Generic space-off', p.136.

the laity in the fourteenth and the fifteenth century [in England].'³²² In such historical circumstances, showing a respectable woman mattered. It is easy to overlook the fact that didactic purposes are also very practical purposes. Mary C. Mansfield makes this point in arguing that 'if the priest could induce at least the most conspicuous and responsible members of the community to obedience, then perhaps some of the servants could be tempted to imitate the good behaviour of those whose favour and whose bread they desired.'³²³ This is what describing an empress' trials is all about. This author's achievement lies in the portrayal of a woman who is admirable but who does not accomplish too much either. Thus, while the French Florence is the absolute other until she is given back her identity by her husband, the English Florence, despite her saintly behaviour, is a character whose authenticity means that one can still empathise, if not identify, with her. The English Florence has a position in society and so she has a meaning as well, regardless of whether the pendulum swings more heavily towards romance or hagiography and this may be because 'neither genre is completely subordinated to the other'³²⁴.

³²² Frances McSparran, *Cambridge University Library MS Ff.2.38* (London: Scolar press, 1979) p.VII

³²³ Mary C. Mansfield, *The Humiliation of Sinners: Public Penance in Thirteenth-century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell university press, 1995) p.71

³²⁴ Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances*, p.146.

In the end, changing the sex of the protagonist does not really affect the ideology of the texts I have looked at. Writing about a woman does, however, make one important difference. As a medieval literary practice it may have its limitations but it also stimulates creativity in the unique way that obstacles prompt ingenuity in whoever it is who wants to overcome them. The French poet was a precursor, there is no doubt about that, but it is also fair to say he opened a 'creativity' door for his English counterpart.

Conclusion

He went owt of that ceté
 Into anodur far cuntré,
 Tho testamentys thus thei sey;
 He seyt hym down undur a hyll,
 A greyhownde broght hym meyt untyll
 Or evon yche a dey.
 Thre neythtys ther he ley.

Sir Gowther, l.307-12

[He went out of the city [i.e., Rome] and travelled to an other, faraway country, as witnesses say. He set himself under a hill and a greyhound brought him food regularly before evening every day. He lay there for three nights.]

This short passage could be taken as a symbolical expression of the journey that led to the completion of this thesis. I deliberately chose to move away from the most celebrated texts and authors of the Middle Ages in favour of lesser known poems of the period, hidden gems obscured beneath the imposing hill of prominent texts usually revered by scholars. I see my work as akin to that symbolical greyhound, someone who found those hidden gems and nurtured them every day and night to bring their best to light. There is, however, one major difference that should be acknowledged: it took a few more than three nights to complete this dissertation.

The aim of this work was to compare versions of the same tales written first in France and then in England around a century later. For some reason,

such work is rarely pursued, even though the links between the texts are self-evident. Why so few people think that comparing related texts is worthwhile is a mystery, especially as it is clear to me that this is the way forward if we are ever to understand the obvious cultural exchanges that took place between France and England in the Middle Ages. I have found this work fascinating as well as rewarding, and felt throughout that the texts were just yearning to be brought to light to deliver their meaning.

I first suggested to approach the texts with the theme of Otherness in mind in order to establish, first of all, that these texts are themselves different, 'other': they were not written by Chaucer or Chrétien de Troyes and were unknown to more than a handful of scholars. More importantly, they all display a wealth of embodiments of thematic otherness, either through physical or emotional exile or through hybridity and the focus on a female protagonist. *Ami et Amile*, *Amis and Amiloun*, *Robert le Diable*, *Sir Gowther*, *Florence de Rome* and *Le bone Florence of Rome* are all linked, thematically, and generically. Otherness is not just a theme in these sophisticated texts, it is an organisational principle. Otherness characterises the texts' intricate blend of romance, hagiography and epic. Otherness is also evident in the physical presence of other, later versions of each of the tales. For these reasons, I set out to make Otherness the conceptual tool that would reveal the meaning and complexities of these medieval poems.

Medieval romances are sometimes regarded as a bit naïve or crude, perhaps because they are a popular genre but scholarly interest attests to their success. I did not embark on a mission to 'redeem' the whole corpus but can only attest, through the completion of this work, to the profundity of the six texts that I studied over the last few years. I challenge those who see in the tale of *Ami et Amile* nothing but a story about male friendship. I show them, through resorting to some Lacanian concepts, that the French pair is powered by destructive paranoia and that the English heroes are more estranged from one another than meets the eye. At the very least, they are certainly much keener to uphold the establishment than their French ancestors. I argue that the differences between the beginning and the end of *Robert le Diable* and *Sir Gowther* are far from incidental but testify to their authors' opposite views on chivalry and the power of religion. These conclusions come from a detailed examination of the heroes' nature and cultural roots based on Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and related questions of power and cultural dominance. I show that *Florence de Rome* is more than the story of a woman; that the heroine and the miracles performed in her name are only empty signifiers; that the gender of the protagonist is not all that important; that the heroine, in any case, is not an early feminist emblem; and that the blend of three genres does not just create ideological puzzles but serves as a way of fashioning a rich, intellectually stimulating, multidimensional poem.

In every chapter, otherness and genre intermix to make sense of otherwise obscure episodes. The discussion does not, however, aim to put a definite label on the texts. As stated in the introduction, precise generic labels should not be applied to medieval literature unless we deliberately seek to deprive the texts of part of their meaning or ignore that medieval authors were quite flexible in this domain. Rather, I show how genre and otherness, when correlated, can help us understand how French and English authors adapted stories to their audience, its tastes and cultural background. This research shows that on the one hand, French poems tended to be rather critical of the establishment, of emperors and kings and their world. On the other hand, English renderings of the same stories, were much more attached to the Other and willing to depict a successful feudal society in which religion comes second. The former tended to give more space to hagiography while the later privileged romance elements.

It would have been impossible to make such finds without the theoretical framework centring on the Other that I used to examine the poems. Unveiling the shape taken by the o/Other in the texts turned that o/Other into an efficient interpretational tool: a revealing o/Other that could easily be used to study more texts of the period. It would be worth testing out the viability of my findings in a broader context. Do they apply to

different literary genres as well or are they only relevant to hagiographical romances? Are the differences we see between the texts the result of a 'French'-'English' divide? Or are they the result of a 13th–14th century divide? Can my findings be applied to later versions of the tales? Whatever the answer to these questions may be, it would be a step forward in our understanding of medieval attitudes to literary genres.

By now, it should be (all the more) evident that comparative literature, particularly in the field of medieval literature, is a worthwhile pursuit. Roberta Krueger has recognised the exciting possibilities of such work by praising romance authors' ability to fashion and refashion tales through space and time:

Romances of all national origins are remarkable for their authors' capacity to remake their shared histories anew in different contexts and to reposition their ethical systems as they respond to particular audiences, in distinct geographic locations and social contexts — often with a critical perspective that calls social ideals and practices into question.³²⁵

I would encourage anyone who is thinking of a research project to open up perspectives and look beyond modern frontiers to think in terms of areas of cultural influence. My work has been limited by the scope of a PhD thesis and by my inability to read other medieval languages. Clearly, much more

³²⁵ Krueger, R. L., *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p.1

could be learnt if scholars of other medieval languages could sit down and compare notes on this subject. Would we still be able to see clear patterns? Would we learn more about each 'country's' (for want of a better word) cultural and ideological positions? Would we be able to cast more light on artistic exchanges during the Middle Ages? Undoubtedly. This would require extensive collaboration between intellectual communities that are not necessarily accustomed to working together but I do not see that as an insuperable obstacle. In order to study the Middle Ages, it would be beneficial to try to mimic the period's fluidity and to emulate the circulation of ideas and poems that characterised it and that makes our work so fascinating.

Appendix :

Summaries of the medieval texts

I *Ami et Amile* (13th c.)

Ami et Amile tells the story of two men, conceived at the same time and born on the same day. An angel announces to their parents the extraordinary friendship that will link the two boys. The pope baptises them and gives them identical cups. They grow up separately but when they reach fifteen, each leaves his house in order to find the other. They finally meet in an idyllic meadow and swear eternal friendship before going to Charlemagne's court. There Hardré, jealous of their bond, plots against them but is defeated and as a sign of peace consequently gives his niece Lubias to Amile, who recommends that she should be given to Ami. Ami leaves with his wife. In the meantime, Belissant, Charlemagne's daughter, falls in love with Amile but is rejected by him on two occasions. So, one night, the determined young woman slips into his bed. Believing in the dark that she is only a chambermaid, he lets her seduce him when Hardré hears them and happily denounces them. The immediate consequence is the proposal of a trial by combat in which Amile is supposed to clear his name. Of course he cannot

win since he is in the wrong. Ami dreams of his friend in difficulty and departs for Paris. In the meantime, Amile gets Charlemagne to agree that the trial by combat will take place seven months later. Belissant and her mother will serve as hostages and will be executed if he does not come back to fight Hardré on the agreed date. He then leaves Paris to find his friend. They meet again in the meadow and Ami offers to take Amile's place and fight against Hardré. While Ami is in Paris, Amile will be with Lubias in Riviers, pretending to be her husband Ami. In Paris, Ami decapitates Hardré and challenges Charlemagne. As a result, the ruler offers him Belissant. An angel gives Ami the following warning: if he marries Belissant, he will become a leper. Ami considers that he has no choice, marries a second time. He leaves Charlemagne's court and Amile goes back to Paris to be Belissant's husband. Ami is struck by leprosy as soon as he gets home. Lubias rejects him completely and even tries to get the bishop to dissolve their marriage. Ami suffers from hunger and is taken care of by his young son and two slaves. Lubias puts her son into jail but allows the two slaves to take Ami to the pope. When the latter dies, Ami tries to take refuge with his brothers, who reject him. He ends up outside Amile's castle and is identified thanks to his cup. An angel informs him that he can be cured if Amile washes him with the blood of his own children. The following morning Amile laments his dear friend's illness and wishes he could help him. Ami repeats what the angel told him and Amile decides to sacrifice his sons, the oldest of which happily

cooperates. Ami's health is immediately restored and the children miraculously resurrected, after which Ami and Amile go to Jerusalem and die in an odour of sanctity together near Mortara, where their tomb is.

II *Amis and Amiloun* (end of 13th c)

Amis and Amiloun tells the story of two men, conceived at the same time and born the same day. They grow up separately but meet at a Duke's court, where they are encouraged to be friends because they look alike. It follows that they pledge absolute faithfulness to each other for all time. Equally notable for their beauty, courtesy and strength, they are soon knighted by the Duke. The steward, jealous of their bond, plots against them but is defeated. Amiloun's parents die and he has to leave to claim his lands. He has identical cups made for himself and Amis and warns him about potential dangers: never be forsworn and do not trust the steward. Amiloun marries. In the meantime, Belisaunt, the Duke's daughter falls in love with Amis and is rejected by him. She threatens to accuse him of raping her if he doesn't oblige. She finally manages to convince him but the steward overhears their conversation and denounces them. The immediate consequence is the proposal (by Amis) of a trial by combat which of course he cannot win since he is in the wrong. Belisaunt's mother understands that Amis is guilty and devises a plan to save her daughter's beloved: Amiloun will fight in Amis' place. Amis takes Amiloun's place at home and sleeps with his friend's wife, a sword between them. Meanwhile, Amiloun impersonates Amis and kills the steward. The Duke's daughter is then married to Amis, and bears two children. When the duke dies, Amis becomes the ruler. Amiloun is stricken

with leprosy, is cast out by his wife and becomes a beggar. But he is cared for by a youth called Owain (whose name Amiloun later changes to Amoraunt), who bears him in a cart. They wander for a while until they eventually reach the gates of Amis' castle. There Amis sends out for wine in his token-cup. The similarity of the two cups is reported to Amis, who assumes that his friend has been robbed and slain by the leper so he beats the sick man. Learning his error, Amis and his wife care for Amiloun. Amis is warned from Heaven that if the blood of his two children is used to bathe the leper, he will be healed. Agonised, Amis cuts his children's throats and restores Amiloun. Amis' wife approves. When they visit the nursery, they find the children alive and well. When Amiloun is fully recovered, he decides to pay his wife a visit for, as he says somewhat ambiguously, she supported him so much that he wishes to give her her due. He departs, accompanied by Amis and finds his wife celebrating her re-marriage that very day. They come into the great hall and assault the guests, of whom very few manage to escape. Vengeance is accomplished when the lady of the house is shut away and given nothing but water and bread until she dies. Amis and Amiloun leave to enjoy their lives together. They have an abbey built in Lombardy and then die and are buried together.

III Robert le Diable (13th c.)

The Duchess of Normandy and her husband fail to conceive so, out of desperation, she prays to the devil to help her have a child. She becomes pregnant and gives birth to Robert, who proves extremely and increasingly violent. His father is so appalled by his crimes that he considers killing Robert but the Duchess suggests that they should have him knighted instead. Unfortunately Robert's criminal behaviour does not stop and he is even excommunicated. One day he suddenly realises that everyone is terrified of him and so goes to see his mother to find an explanation for his horrible behaviour. She tells him what happened. As a result, he goes to Rome to meet the Pope, who, he hopes, will help him redeem himself.

When Robert arrives in Rome to see the pope, he is distraught to find out that unless one offers an extravagant gift to the pontiff, one has no hope of talking to him. Yet Robert manages to see him. The Pope is lost for words when he hears of Robert's crimes and sends the young man to a hermit who provides the following penance: Robert must act like a madman and provoke and endure the population's anger, he must eat only what he can snatch from dogs and he must remain silent until the hermit allows him to speak again. Robert accepts all three conditions and soon becomes the (widowed) emperor's fool.

Later, Rome is invaded by Turks with the support of a rebellious Seneschal who would like to marry the emperor's daughter. Robert wishes he could help his master the emperor when an angel comes down from heaven and gives him a white horse and armour that allow him to help the Romans in battle. The emperor's daughter witnesses the scene but because she is mute, she cannot tell anyone the fool is not a fool after all. Two battles ensue and each time Robert helps the Romans. The emperor wishes to reward the white knight who disappears after every battle. His daughter tries to explain to him who the mysterious knight is but the monarch will not listen. Prior to the third battle, the emperor asks his men to capture the white knight but he escapes with an injury to his thigh. When the emperor announces that he will give his daughter to the white knight, the Seneschal presents himself, complete with white armour, horse and wound. The emperor is deceived but his daughter miraculously speaks to reveal that Robert and the white knight are one and the same person. Robert is offered the princess and the hermit brings an end to his penance. Four Norman barons arrive and ask Robert to return to Normandy to claim his land and his parents are dead and war is raging. Robert refuses the princess and Normandy but becomes a hermit. When he dies Robert is buried in Rome but a man steals his remains and builds an abbey of St Robert near Le Puy.

IV *Sir Gowther* (14th c.)

The Duke of Austria and his wife are unable to have children. After ten heirless years, the Duke considers repudiating his wife so the anxious lady immediately prays to God and the Virgin Mary, hoping that they will give her a baby, by any means possible. Moments later, as she sits in her orchard, a man she believes to be her husband appears and demands her favours. When the deed is done, he reveals himself to be the devil and tell her she will bear him a child. The Duchess goes to see her husband and initiates sexual intercourse, telling him that an angel announced that she would become pregnant that day. When the baby is born, he is cared for by noble wet nurses whom he suckles to death. When his mother breastfeeds him, he bites off her nipple. He too is dubbed but like Robert, he is physically impressive and uncontrollably aggressive. His father dies of sorrow and his mother flees in terror. Gowther is not aware of his destructive actions until an old earl points out his wild behaviour. He finds his mother and holds her at knifepoint until she reveals what happened in the orchard. Gowther sets off to Rome to do penance. The pope asks him to eat only what he can snatch from dogs and to remain silent. Gowther leaves Rome and is looked after by a greyhound for three days. He then goes to the emperor's court. The emperor and his wife have a daughter who is loved by a sultan. Because the emperor refuses to give his daughter to the sultan, war begins. Gowther would like to help the

emperor in battle. After a short prayer, a horse and full equipment appear. They disappear right after the battle. This happens three times and the armour is first black, then red and finally white. The emperor's daughter watches every battle from her window. During the third battle, Gowther is wounded, which causes the princess to fall out of her window. She appears to be dead but she wakes up and reveals Gowther's identity to all. She also announces that his penance is over. Gowther marries the princess and returns to Austria and gives his land and his mother to the old earl. He builds an abbey and a nunnery and goes back to Rome. His father-in-law is dead and he becomes emperor and reigns for a long time. When he dies, he is buried at the abbey he built. God performs miracles in his name.

V Florence de Rome (13th c.)

Oton is the highly respected and generous emperor of affluent and peaceful Rome. Very soon however the widowed emperor is at war against Garsire, the very powerful but very old emperor of Greece. The origin of the conflict is Oton's only child Florence, a maiden of incredible beauty and learning, who has refused Garsire's marriage proposal on the grounds that her suitor is too old. Oton is killed on the battlefield, but not before witnessing two dispossessed Hungarian brothers fight with remarkable ardour. From her window, Florence notices one of them and falls in love. When her father dies, she is told to choose a husband as soon as possible. Unfortunately, the man she loves is believed to be dead so she proposes to Milon, his brother. In an inexplicable act, Milon replies he wishes to think about the proposal. Emere his brother is freed by Garsire and Florence can now marry the man she loves. Yet on the young woman's request, the groom has to capture Garsire *before* the marriage can be consummated. Florence and Emere are thus separated. Milon, however, is rather unhappy with this turn of events and devises treacherous plans in order to take possession of Florence. After a series of failures, he manages to abduct her. Milon attempts to rape her on several occasions but Florence avoids his sexual assaults. Florence is severely beaten but rescued by a passing nobleman called Thierry who takes her home to his wife. During the time that she spends with his family, she is accused of

murdering Thierry's daughter and banished. The slandered empress travels down to a port where she saves a thief called Clarambaut from the gallows on provision that he will now serve her. Unfortunately, he proceeds to sell her to a sailor who attempts to rape her as soon as they set sail. Florence prays ardently and escapes dishonour when a tempest cracks and then destroys the boat. She finds refuge in a nunnery and, one day, discovers that she has healing powers. The news that there is a nun who performs miracles spread. Florence's numerous persecutors, all of whom suffer from horrible diseases, make their way to the nunnery. Her husband, who was injured on a battlefield, also comes to see the famous nun in order that she may cure him. Florence gives one condition to the cure: every man must confess his sins aloud, in public. Her aggressors talk in turn, thus reconstructing the story of her exile and attesting to her innocence and chastity. All men are cured, Emere recognises Florence and celebrations follow. The couple go back to Rome and have a child called Oton who will succeed Emere at the head of the empire.

VI *Le Bone Florence of Rome* (14th c.)

The story is exactly the same. The differences are:

- That Florence changes her mind and is prepared to sacrifice herself and marry Sir Garcy to prevent the war. Her father dismisses her attempt to avoid conflict.

- That Emere has his wife's persecutors burnt at the stake after they are cured.

The text is much shorter because descriptions and certain episodes that were not directly essential to the action (dreams, scenes involving the supernatural) have been edited out.

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