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by

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Performing Class, Performing Genre:

The Squire of Low Degree as Fifteenth-Century Drag

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by

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Report

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I Mett a courier riding on the plaine,
Well mounted on a brave and gallant steed;
I sat a jade, and spurred to my paine,
My lazy beast, whose tyred sides did bleede,
He sawe my case; and then of courtesie,
Did reyne his horse, and drewe the bridle in
Because I did desire his company:
But he corvetting way of me doth win.
 What should I doe, which was besteded so?
 His horse stoode still faster than mine could go.

– Thomas Bastard
Book 2, Epigram 22 (1598)

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Abstract

Performing Class, Performing Genre: *The Squire of Low Degree* as Fifteenth-Century Drag

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Despite the expansion of Judith Butler's theories of performativity which have proliferated since the publication of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* in 1990, few scholars have examined the implications that performativity may have for social class. Fewer still have considered how social class might be performed in the premodern text. In this thesis, I examine how the economic language which pervades the little-studied fifteenth-century romance *The Squire of Low Degree* enacts a socioeconomic iteration of Butler's theory of performativity. This performance of social class occurs primarily in the speeches of this romance's courtly characters and at the site of the squire's body, as he attempts to rise above his ascribed social class to become a knight and qualify as a suitable partner for his beloved, born of royalty. Finally, this thesis demonstrates not only the social performativity within the poem's narrative, but also the classed performance enacted by the genre of the romance itself, producing a medievalist fantasy of social mobility for the increasingly prominent late medieval gentry classes.

Table of Contents

Text.....	1
Bibliography.....	37
Vita.....	40

“The squyer sone in armes they hent,
And of they did his good garmente,
And on the stewarde they it did,
And sone his body therin they hydde.
And with their swordes his face they share
That she should not know what he ware.”

– *The Squire of Low Degree*, 651-656¹

A lowly squire finds himself in an impossibly difficult position: as he is beset by a traitorous steward's henchmen, he begs his beloved to open the door to her bedchamber so he might be saved. But rather than acquiesce, the lady launches into a catalogue of knightly deeds by which the squire should render himself worthy of being admitted to her bedchamber. In the meantime, the squire manages to kill the steward, but is captured by the steward's men, who inexplicably mutilate the dead steward's face and dress the bloodied body in the squire's clothes. When the lady finally opens her door, she finds what appears to be her dead, brutalized lover at her feet, while the real squire is carted off to prison. She then proceeds to mourn her ostensible loss by embalming the corpse and keeping it as a grotesque relic in her chamber for seven years.

The Squire of Low Degree is a fifteenth-century verse romance, surviving in one manuscript and two printed editions, which depicts a squire-servitor employed at court, who “love[s] the kings daughter of Hungré” (2). In order to attain his beloved, he must engage in deeds of knightly chivalry which meet the stereotypical conventions we expect of chivalric romance. In the romance, the King of Hungary seems to evince an extraordinary tolerance

¹ All citations and line references to the poem come from *The Squire of Low Degree*, in *Sentimental and Humorous Romances*, ed. Erik Kooper (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 2006). References to the poem shall be parenthetical hereafter, and throughout this piece, I follow Kooper's standardization of the title's spelling.

for social class mobility: “For I have sene that many a page / Have become men by marriage. / Than it is semely that squyer / To have my doughter by this manere” (373-376). Eventually sending the squire abroad to engage in chivalrous acts which the text never explicitly shows, the king also allows his daughter to mourn the wrong corpse in the meantime. However, when the king realizes that his daughter cannot be cheered by his efforts to tempt her with recreations and material indulgence, he reunites the lovers and blesses their wedding. Finally then the squire is crowned “kyng among them al” (1120).

A fantastic spectacle of unfettered social ascent thus constitutes the poem’s essential narrative: a squire becomes a king and gets the girl. We see thus that this romance is marked by a particular obsession with identities in flux, and also, specifically, with an embodied experience of social class mobility. Moreover, the narrative constantly breaks down, recreates, and reinscribes the identities of its characters and their social standing explicitly through the lexicon of economics. These performed identities serve to create tensions and incongruous moments in the poem which produce a comedy aware of its own genre, and characters aware of their own commitments to ceremony and romance conventions. *The Squire of Low Degree* seems to inspire more questions than it answers: What does it mean for one servant in a royal court to attack another? Why do the men switch the steward’s and the squire’s clothes, confusing the identities of the two servitors? Why would a chivalric romance celebrate a successful social aspirant’s journey? Finally, is *The Squire of Low Degree* an example of generic incompetence, as the romance has been traditionally treated by critics? Is *The Squire of Low Degree* a romance, or is it a parody of one?

The Squire of Low Degree provides the perfect touchstone for an exploration of embodied social class performance in the premodern text. My examination of *The Squire*

here aims to contribute to the responses elicited by Judith Butler's call for increasingly subtle treatments of identity as a complex, elusive intersection. In the 1999 preface of her reissued *Gender Trouble*, she writes, "The aim of the text was to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized."² The features of *The Squire* which have stymied critics are best elucidated by theorizing a socioeconomic consideration of Butler's notions of performativity. Moreover, *The Squire of Low Degree* presents its straightforward social fantasy with such humor and irreverence that its treatment by critics, while sparse, seduces scholars into reading the poem as parody or satire. A reading of this kind, however, betrays our often unconscious commitment to modern valuations of medieval romance, and insufficiently considers the poem's printing history and readership.³ Instead, adapting Butler's understanding of gender performance and the comedy of gendered drag gives us the tools with which to examine the embodied performance of social class in *The Squire of Low Degree*, and the humor which a body in classed drag can catalyze in late-medieval English romance.

Rather than depict the chivalric deeds the squire undertakes, much of the text focuses on the actual expense of traveling to earn one's knighthood, on how to dress and act as a knight. Given the emphasis in the romance, I will argue that the poem demonstrates a marked awareness of the economic means urgently necessary in order to achieve class

² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990, 1999), viii.

³ Derek Pearsall, "The English Romance in the Fifteenth Century," *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association* 29 (1976), 66. Pearsall responds to K.S. Kiernan's reading in "'Undo Your Door' and the Order of Chivalry," *Studies in Philology* 70, no. 4 (1973): 105-110. Brian Rivers offers another such reading in "The Focus of Satire in *The Squire of Low Degree*," *English Studies in Canada* 7 (1981): 379-87. While Rivers directly engages Kiernan by extending his argument, he fails to engage Pearsall's accusation that satire is an "insensitive modern reading of the poem" entirely.

mobility. The poem's painstaking awareness of the fanfare and conventions of romance and the typically elided-over monetary values which undergird many of the necessary tasks a knight must undertake, demonstrates a keen interest in the underlying costs that circumscribe one's social standing. This suggests that *The Squire* is a work that operates as a hinge between the medieval and early modern periods, between the last gasps of feudalism and the developmental beginnings of capitalism, and between fixed and flexible social strata.⁴ By deploying the generic conventions of chivalric romance to unique ends, this small, often-overlooked story achieves a much different effect from that of the romances on which it bases its structure and content. *The Squire of Low Degree* demonstrates that the idealized Middle Ages of courtly and chivalric romance are fading and giving way to something new in cultural creation and imagination. Just as Butler troubles the "reality of gender," *The Squire of Low Degree* problematizes reified social strata.⁵ While *The Squire* celebrates a waning literary genre, the obsession with money, expense, and status in this romance also highlights and *others* the conspicuous consumption of courtly practices and chivalric ethics synonymous with the romances of the "high" Middle Ages, and renders the reified social classes of the Middle Ages laughably unnatural.

Romance and the Chivalric Economy

Scholars of medieval literature are all too familiar with the nebulous character of "romance" as a generic designation. Disagreements on how to identify medieval romances

⁴ These designations are heuristic categories for the purposes of this essay's discussion of late-medieval social mobility. Such social movement, coined "bastard feudalism" by Victorian historian Bishop William Stubbs, can be found as early as the thirteenth century. See Michael Hicks, *Bastard Feudalism* (New York: Longman, 1995).

⁵ Butler, xxiv, emphasis original.

carry over from early nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship which sought a definitive way to characterize medieval romance as part of an overarching attempt to characterize what constituted “the medieval.” But as the corpus of medieval romance has diversified and more and more multifarious narratives are considered to qualify as romance, scholars have realized that there are in fact few generic markers which securely identify medieval romances. Rhiannon Purdie argues that scholars are “so helplessly attracted to the problem of generic classification”⁶ that theories of structure, plot, subject matter, character, narrative style, language, and geography abound, but the genre continues to elude finite definition, especially through taxonomic descriptions.⁷ Some scholars argue that romances tell stories of lost and recovered identities, while others posit that they are unified by interest in familial preservation. John Finlayson dubs this unending quest to find consistent generic markers romance’s “literary baggage,” and emphasizes that it detracts overall from the actual experience of reading medieval romances.⁸ One single feature does appear in almost every extant *chivalric* romance, however: chivalric romances almost always take place in a courtly setting, and are largely aimed at an audience which travelled in the circle of the court.⁹

It is because of the interminable critical debate on what constitutes romances—and

⁶ Rhiannon Purdie, “Generic Identity and the Origins of *Sir Isumbras*,” in *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance*, ed. Philippa Hardman (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), 114.

⁷ For example, see Dorothy Everett, “The Characterization of the English Metrical Romance,” in *Essays on Middle English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955); Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (1969); Paul Strohm, “The Origin and Meaning of Middle English Romance,” *Genre* 10 (1977); John Finlayson, “Definitions of Middle English Romance,” *Chaucer Review* 15 (1980); W.R.J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (1987), to name a few foundational studies.

⁸ John Finlayson, “Definitions of Middle English Romance,” in *Middle English Romances*, ed. Stephen H.A. Shephard (New York: Norton, 1995), 428.

⁹ For designations other than chivalric romance (familial, popular, historical, etc.), see Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), in which each chapter examines a distinct subgenre of medieval romance.

how flexible or capacious that generic category might be—that I choose to focus specifically on the conventions most often contained within chivalric romance. What identifies most chivalric romances is their distinct emphasis on an upper-class courtly ethos. Chivalric romance as a generic description is thus an amalgam of disparate narratives, containing and treating different subjects and tensions,¹⁰ with the only thing these far-flung texts have in common being the social class of their characters. Chivalric romance is, therefore, an inherently *classed* narrative form. One need only look at our text in question, *The Squire of Low Degree*, to understand what the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century reader might have recognized as hallmarks of a chivalric romance. It is no surprise that all critical treatments of *The Squire* emphasize the poem's employment of the most expected and stereotypical chivalric romance conventions: a young man and woman in a courtly milieu fall in love in a *hortus conclusus*; the lovers are overheard; a treacherous steward hatches a plot to undermine them; the young man must then depart on quest to attain honors and prove worthy of the woman's love; and long lists of aristocratic excess and luxury litter the poem.

In their consistently courtly settings, chivalric romances are often viewed as reinscribing aristocratic cultural dominance, confirming for audiences and readers the importance and desirability of courtly status, and inviting the audience to attain that status, or temporarily inhabit it through the act of reading. As Susan Crane urges, “[T]he pleasure of imagination these romances offered was locked to their ideological function in the world, as markers of class status and value, or as agents of change,” and she argues that Middle English romances were far more concerned with social practice, and “ideological function,”

¹⁰ Finlayson, 430.

rather than the escapism of their continental forebears.¹¹ For the aristocracy, romance reasserts the dominance and idealized supremacy of their classed lifestyle. For gentry readers in the fifteenth century—the context of *The Squire of Low Degree*—chivalric romances thus provide a model of upward social mobility as well as a badge of status: to own and read romances was a symbol of the cultivated gentry reader, someone with a developed taste for the pastimes and practices of the social elite of the recent past.¹²

This tension, or distinction, between readers from the gentry and the aristocracy, is a particular social feature of the later Middle Ages. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw a rise in individualistic ambition and the development of what we might tentatively conceptualize as a proto-middle class that is reforming in the post-plague economy in an emerging social structure.¹³ With the advent of print in the fifteenth century, readers and their habits began to morph. The gentry started to accumulate wealth, and with newfound capital, began consuming cultural forms which had been previously reserved for the leisure classes of the aristocracy. Printing reduced the cost of book production, and low-cost pamphlets and books began to proliferate, as the three extant copies of our poem indicate. To read and own a romance was in and of itself an act of social mobility, status, and

¹¹ Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 139, 134-135.

¹² Pearsall, 80.

¹³ At the time of the first outbreak of the Black Death in 1348-9, it has been estimated that about 40% of the overall population of England fell victim. After the subsequent outbreaks in 1361, 1369, 1372, 1375, and 1390, the estimated population in England dropped from 5 million at the beginning of the fourteenth century to 2.5 million by the start of the fifteenth century. These figures are courtesy of Chris Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages: The Fourteenth-Century Political Community*. He goes on to elaborate on plague's economic results: "a labour surplus became a labour shortage, land-hunger turned gradually into land-plenty. For those who survived, the Black Death ushered in what has sometimes been described as the 'golden age of peasantry'." (114). See also K.B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* and Christopher Dyer, *The Standards of Living in the Middle Ages: Social Change in England 1200-1520*.

accomplishment.¹⁴ The tradition of London printing—begun by Caxton’s translation and transmission of continental romances and other French texts—made available a defined chivalric ethos not only to the aristocracy of England, but to those in the developing and stratifying middle classes.

Critics have been quick to assert that *The Squire* exemplifies generic ineptitude,¹⁵ seeing the poem as a valiant literary effort fallen short.¹⁶ Critics agree that the poem produces comedy at its core, but the source of that comedy is less certain in the critical history. Glenn Wright goes to great lengths to establish the mechanics of the comedy in *The Squire*, which he deems parodic, but stops short of suggesting how those mechanics function in the negotiation of class and social mobility. Theorizing readership of the poem, he writes: “*The Squire of Low Degree*’s inside/outside relationship with romance anticipates a broad audience eager to be entertained but with differing ideas as to what is entertaining.”¹⁷ He argues that the prolixity of the lady’s long speeches in the poem—which shape the customary knightly narrative that guides the squire’s quests—are parodies of romance conventions, appealing to a wide audience: those who would enjoy the poem’s celebration of

¹⁴ Myra Seaman, “The Waning of Middle English Chivalric Romance in ‘The Squyr of Lowe Degre,’” *Fifteenth Century Studies* 29 (2004): 192.

¹⁵ This may be due to *The Squire*’s critical history of being compared unfavorably to Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas*. Mead, for example, works against assumptions of some contemporary continental scholars, who hoped to show that Chaucer was working from/alluding to *The Squire of Low Degree* when composing *Sir Thopas* (lii-lxvi). For studies of parody and *Sir Thopas*, see William W. Lawrence, “Satire in Sir Thopas,” *PMLA* 50, no. 1 (1935): 81-91; J.A. Burrow, “Chaucer’s Sir Thopas and La Prise de Nueville,” in *English Satire and the Satiric Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 44-55; Glenn Wright, “Modern Inconveniences: Rethinking Parody in the Tale of Sir Thopas,” *Genre* 30, no. 3 (1997): 167-94.

¹⁶ Indeed, in the first definitive scholarly edition of the poem (1904), W.E. Mead states, “We can praise the *The Squyr of Lowe Degre* only with considerable reservations, and do not seek a place for it among the great creative poems of the world” (lxxii).

¹⁷ Glenn Wright, “‘Other Wyse Then Must We Do’: Parody and Popular Narrative in The Squyr of Lowe Degree,” *Comitatus* 27 (1996): 15.

an upper-class narrative, and those who would vicariously enjoy the squire's social ascent. Wright's portrait of the poem's audience is apt, and allows to complexity the question of the poem's wide appeal. I suggest that the complex work enacted by the humor of the lady's "verbal indulgence" in this romance is overlooked when that humor is simplified by denoting it merely as parody.¹⁸ Instead, the lady's speeches serve to encode the narrative with the trappings of chivalric romance within the limited space of a truncated romance, necessitating the imagistic density which renders the scene hilarious.

Myra Seaman has demonstrated how a certain literary self-awareness inheres in late medieval romance. Seaman argues for *The Squire's* place among late medieval romances, and suggests how the genre changed as its popularity and cultural influence began to ebb, especially considering the genre's "quintessential characteristic" of "ideological buttressing of aristocracy."¹⁹ The world preserved in *The Squire* is one which contemporary readers would have recognized was no longer thriving. Seaman writes, "In its stable, oft-repeated forms, in its deliberate distancing of heroes and events from the historical moment of the audience, romance has come to be understood as working to confirm contemporary constructs, and insisting on those concepts' inherent universal truth."²⁰ The generic conventions invoked by the long speeches in *The Squire* disclose an awareness of the chivalric romance tradition, if only to reveal how the poem fulfills certain expectations while neglecting others. Without becoming preoccupied by the poem's humor, Seaman finely sets up the historical context for the poem, wherein we can see both the burgeoning gentry readership of the poem—with

¹⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹⁹ Seaman, 174, 176.

²⁰ Ibid., 174.

that readership's interests being refracted in the poem's content—and an obsession with upward social mobility evidenced by the text.

I aim to extend Seaman's work, in order to fully examine the lexicon of economics and fiscal calculation which pervades the work, and the consequences of the romance's engagement with the economic. Seaman marks the paradox at the heart of the phenomenon of middle-class English romance readers: "The chivalric ideology promoted by romance typically insists upon a naturalization of class distinctions that precludes the possibility of social advancement; yet the gentry clearly strove to imitate their social superiors—in their ownership of chivalric romances, if not as they were represented within the romantic narrative."²¹ This central tension is played out by moments of "verbal indulgence" which provide the opportunity of a vicarious gaze by the middle-class reader, and the complex drag enacted in the poem—to which I will return later—serves to lampoon social class hierarchy altogether. Scholars have discussed at length the tone and intention of this poem, an understanding which will be augmented by a close examination of the poem's language of economics and its portrayal of flexible social class designations.

Of course, the economics of the poem have not been ignored by scholars, but they are usually employed critically, to characterize the squire as a transgressive upstart. K.S. Kiernan argues that the text damns the eponymous squire with a reading of the first couplet of the poem—"It was a squyer of lowe degree / That loved the kings daughter of Hungré" (1-2)—a reading that assumes the opening couplet to refer not to the squire's geographic location, Hungary, but to his avarice and possible financial dishonesty.²² For Kiernan, the

²¹ Ibid., 192.

²² K.S. Kiernan, "'Undo Your Door' and the Order of Chivalry," *Studies in Philology* 70, no. 4 (1973):

squire is the “butt of the humor” in a text which renders social mobility ridiculous.²³ He points out that the capitalization of “Hungré” is an editorial intervention which may obscure the connotations of the Middle English word “hungré,” one of whose meanings may be “avarice.”²⁴ This squire of “low degree,” in Kiernan’s interpretation, loved the king’s daughter by reason of the his avarice, not passion. Kiernan’s reading, apt in highlighting editorial intervention, overlooks the more straightforward—and far more likely—allusion in the Middle English word “hungré” to the squire’s passionate desire for the lady, his “hunger” for her, as it were.

Fourteen years later, Carol Fewster goes to great lengths to deny a class-consciousness in the poem altogether, working against Kiernan’s negative reading of the squire’s class-mobility-as-greed, and noting instead that it is the lady alone who mentions monetary amounts: “There is little evidence of the squire’s interest; in spite of the lady’s repeated offers of money, at the squire’s departure money is not mentioned.... Money and reward are not a part of the plot of the story, so much as a part of its elaboration.”²⁵ Therefore, Fewster concludes, economics are the lady’s focus, not her lover’s, and the text shows no evidence that the squire even accepts his lady’s repeated offers. I argue that critical suppositions like Kiernan’s and Fewster’s have both under- and overstated how economics function in the text.

The Squire is a romance—from its first lines to its last scene—that focuses squarely

349.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *The Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “hungry(e).” <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED21505>.

²⁵ Carol Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987), 146.

on the economic underpinnings of knighthood, chivalry, and chivalric romance. Money, and the opportunities it affords, constitute the first words in the poem uttered by the lovelorn squire:

And sayd, "Alas, that I was borne!
That I were ryche of golde and fe
That I might wedde that lady fre,
Of golde good, or some treasure,
That I myght wedde that lady floure!
Or elles come of so gentyll kynne
That ladyes love that I myght wynne.
Wolde God that I were a kynges sonne,
That ladyes love that I myght wonne!
Or els so bolde in eche fyght
As was Syr Lybius that gentell knight,
Or els so bolde in chyvalry
As Syr Gawayne, or Syr Guy;
Or else so doughty of my hande
As was the gyaunte Syr Colbrande,
And it were put in jeopardé
What man shoulde wynne that lady fre,
That should no man have her but I,
The kinges daughter of Hungry."
But ever he sayde: "Wayle a waye!
For poverté passeth all my paye!" (68-88)

The squire's speech starts *ab origo*: he laments his very birth by crying "Alas that I was borne!" However, this is not simply due to his love-longing, but also bears an implicit reference to the social class into which he "was borne" (68). He wishes for "golde and fe" (69) or "some treasure" (71): status markers which come as a result of "gentyll kynne," (73) or being a "kynges sonne" (75). Finally, the squire's fantasy of non-possession recognizes that even if he was not born of noble blood, he could earn her hand by acting as a "gentell knight...so bolde in chyvalry" (78-9). The squire wishes he were genteel, like those famous heroes of Arthurian romances: "Syr Gawayne, or Sir Guy" (80) or even "the gyaunte Syr Colbrande" (82). Our squire is so desperate to be a character in a chivalric romance that he

even envies the villain of one. But of course, he knows that he cannot undertake these chivalric deeds without funds, and concludes hopelessly, “For poverté passeth all my paye!” (88, cf. 70). The squire here acknowledges that only via economic plenitude and land ownership can he even imagine himself a possible suitor for his beloved, and he agonizes that someone born into his lady’s class will likely win his lady’s hand in marriage: “And it were put in jeopardé / What man should wyne that lady fre” (83-4).

The economics of the squire’s desire extend beyond simply having capital: he expresses a distinct consciousness of his low birth, “alas,” the absence of a storied, romantic lineage. In his speech, his mentions of poverty alongside allusions to Arthurian romance demonstrate that high birth and the conventions of the literary genre of chivalric romance prove inextricable. Were he a knight in the romance tradition—of which he demonstrates a clear awareness in this speech—the squire would prove more suitable for his lady. The passage I quote above constitutes not only the squire’s first speech, but also the compleynt which both the lady and the king’s steward overhear, setting the events of the poem in motion: thus the squire’s specifically economic expression of desire drives the plot of the romance.

The squire’s desires and his economics remain entangled throughout the rest of the poem. Interestingly, when other characters speak, they also engineer fiscal arrangements. The word “gold” in various forms appears 22 times throughout the 1132-line poem, while mentions of specific amounts of currency appear at six different points in *The Squire*. For example, the lady offers her love “A thousande ponde to your spendinge; / I shall you geve hors and armure, / A thousand ponde of my treasure, / Where through that ye may honoure wynn” (252-255). Finally, mentions of “land” or “fe” appear nine times throughout

the romance, demonstrating the importance of the increased prominence of the landed gentry in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.²⁶ Very palpably, money, and the lack thereof, remains the central focus for both our protagonist and the characters who surround him in a way notably absent from the corpus of chivalric romance. But despite the startling infusion of fiscal vocabulary throughout the poem, scholars have not yet given the economic preoccupation in the poem its critical due. *The Squire* is undoubtedly a poem about social and class mobility, and the economics of genre. Recognizing this, we find that a changing relationship with economics dictates the concerns of the poem's characters, as *The Squire of Low Degree* explores the embodiment of social class identities and how those identities may alter with the sudden influx of capital, ambition, and mobility.

Pursuit and Performance of "Gold and Fe"

Many of the most peculiar moments in *The Squire* can be investigated at the site of body: how the body is articulated by actions, speech, and clothing. It seems, from the poem, that our squire cannot be dressed in armor completing knightly deeds if he has not first fulfilled his occupational duties wearing the livery of his lord, the king of Hungary. In fact, after the squire first declares his love for his lady, he returns to his employment in the king's court, and proceeds to fulfill his responsibilities as marshal to the king:

There he araied him in scarlet reed,
And set his chaplet upon his head,
A belte about his sydes two,
With brode barres to and fro;
A horne about his necke he caste,

²⁶ As shown by Sylvia Thrupp's exhaustive research on the merchant and gentry classes in urban London, middle class merchants, lower-ranking esquires, and the like were moving into the upper ranks of gentry by way of landownership. See *The Merchant Class of Medieval London 1300-1500* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 270-278.

And forth he went at the last
To do hys office in the hall
Among the lordes both great and small. (305-312)

Characters within this text are marked by their duty within their social milieu, and the text visually emphasizes this social demarcation with long passages dedicated to the description of physical adornment. We encounter a blazon-esque description as the squire readies himself for service, a description driven by syntactical emphasis on the squire's own actions in clothing himself: he "arraied him in scarlet reed" (305); he "set his chaplet upon his head" (306); he "caste" his "horne about his necke" (309). He then leaves this self-reflexive process of arraying his body head-to-toe and goes forth into the hall, "among the lordes" (312). We see the squire return to "hys office" (311), and he must be dressed first according to his position and status at court in order to serve the king. His livery class-marks his role by "designating" his body appropriately. Not only does the squire supervise the feast at hand, he does so by demonstrating a strong awareness of the class hierarchies of the guests, serving each person "[h]ye and lowe in theyr degré" (330). The squire is not only dressed to fulfill his servant's role, but he also knows his place among his social superiors and their ranks in relation to one another. Everyone in the squire's company adores him for his services ("Eche man him loved in honesté" [329]), even the king, who is suddenly struck by the appearance of the squire in his livery: "So dyd the kyng full sodenly, / And he wyst not wherfore nor why. / The kynge behelde the squeyer wele, / And all his *rayment* every dele" (331-334; emphasis mine).

For the king and all in his court, the squire upholds the social hierarchy and serves as the object of the entire hall's admiration, both for his exemplary service as well as for his striking appearance. The squire wears his servitor's livery so well that the king fancies him

“the semylyest man / That ever in the worlde he sawe or than” (335-336). Notably, the king and the courtiers find the sight of the squire and his actions pleasurable as he fulfills his duties and upholds the social hierarchy: the very social structure which the poem constructs for the squire subsequently to transcend. The king and his courtiers are subject to the squire’s bodily display, however briefly. Bodily performances and social inversions pervade *The Squire*, augmenting Butler’s theories of performativity, suggesting that if the “culturally sustained temporal duration” of the process of performance constructs both race and gender, then *social class*—a feature so public and externally demarcated—must be constructed and performed as well, constituting another valence to the “repetition and ritual” of bodily performance.²⁷

Thus, within the logic of the romance, the squire cannot ascend socially unless he first performs his servant’s duties—his occupational “repetition and ritual”—graciously and properly. The text places this figure of the valorous servant in direct opposition to the treacherous steward, who notices the king’s enthrallment with the squire in the feast hall, and immediately sets to plotting against the squire’s success: “Anone the stewarde toke good hede, / And to the kyng full soone he yede. / And soon he told unto the kyng / All theyr wordes and theyr woynge” (339-342). As a jealous and disloyal servant and negative foil, the deceitful steward cannot transcend his position, while the squire—executing everything expected of his station—constitutes a prime candidate for upward social mobility.

Consequently, the processes of taking off and putting on of clothing can also suggest the shedding and donning of new social aspirations in the poem. When the squire and lady

²⁷ Butler, xv.

first confess love for each other, she provides him with a strategy: what he must accomplish in order to be a worthy spouse for her and a worthy heir for her father. Simultaneously, as she tells the squire what he needs to do, the lady also performs her own class and her awareness of class markers and chivalric romance conventions. Her speech reads like a “laundry list” for the outfitting of a chivalric hero:

And to bere armes than are ye able
Of gold and goules sete with sable;
Then shall ye were a shelde of blewe,
In token ye shall be trewe,
With vines of golde set all aboute,
Within your shelde and eke without,
Fulfylled with ymagery
And poudred with true loves by and by.
In the myddes of your shelf ther shall be set
A ladyes head, with many a frete;
Above the head wrytten shall be
A reason for the love of me:
Both O and R shall be therin,
With A and M it shall begynne.
The baudryke, that shall hange therby,
Shall be of white sykerly;
A crosse of reed therin shall be,
In token of the Trynyté.
Your basenette shall be burnysshed bryght,
You ventall shal be well dyght,
With starres of gold it shall be set,
And covered with good velvet.
A corenall clene corven newe,
And oystryche fethers of dyvers hewe.
Your plates unto your body enbraste
Shall syt full semely in your waste,
Your cote armoure of golde full fyne,
And poudred well with good armayne. (203-230)

The lady proposes that the squire be clothed in a uniform of “gold and goules” (204), and bear a blue shield painted with lovers’ knots (“poudred with true loves by and by” [210]) and the image of a beautiful woman with ornamented hair and emblazoned with the word

“Amor.” His baldric (a sash worn across the body, meant for holding a sword and sheath) should be white and embroidered with a red cross, “In token of the Trynyté” (220). Details of this kind indicate our poet and audience’s familiarity with the rites of knighthood and traditional dubbings, often quite religious, within liturgy and ceremony, from the eleventh and twelfth centuries: a white baldric, signifying chastity, was a hallmark of the knightly ensemble.²⁸ Crane writes, “For late medieval courtiers, the category of honor is large and central, encompassing not just courage for men and chasteness for women, but many behaviors relative to personal comportment and social standing, everything indeed that distinguishes courtly status from vulgar.”²⁹ The clothes the lady imagines are “talking garments” which “bear significant social weight”³⁰ by conveying a rhetoric of self-presentation and passing within a higher social class.³¹ The lady completes the imagined outfit with ermine and sable, sumptuous furs worn only by the elite,³² and “armoure of golde full fyne” (229) which—while impractical for martial purposes—showily signifies the great wealth of his lady and chivalric patron.

This passage—only a small section of her 127-line “flow chart”³³ for how the squire might attain knighthood—presents the poem’s first preoccupation with the squire’s body

²⁸ Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 64. Keen goes on to painstakingly trace the secular and religious dubbing traditions, as well as the rhetorical similarities they share with contemporaneous coronation ceremonies. See *Chivalry*, 65-77.

²⁹ Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

³¹ For the mercantile and technological advances which gave way to the textile supply-and-demand proto-fashion industry in the late Middle Ages, see Crane, *Performance of Self*, 12-15.

³² Indeed, sumptuary legislation increased in frequency, specificity, and enforcement in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in order to regulate which social classes could legally wear such furs. See Alan Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions: A History of Sumptuary Law* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996).

³³ A.C. Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur: Looking and Listening in Medieval Love-Narratives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 180.

and the outward appearance to which he must aspire in order to achieve his goal of upward social mobility and marriage to the king's daughter. The speech seems designed to recall the tradition of rhetorical blazon, as well as to demarcate the squire's body in classed terminology. Not only has the lady enumerated the necessary chivalric actions earlier in her speech, but she also emphasizes here what the squire must wear, crafting his "rhetoric of appearance."³⁴ She assigns him appropriate clothing and armor and a heraldic device, without which a knight cannot publicly proclaim his identity. Critics have often emphasized the lady's long speeches for this performance and self-awareness in providing the necessary romance conventions of the poem in a limited space. For Fewster, her position in the poem "is of generic importance—she encodes the norms of romance as a reader of previous romances, and directs the poem from within to follow these earlier texts."³⁵ Pearsall argues that through these moments, the poem is "a loving re-creation of the form with all its charm and absurdities."³⁶ The humor stems from the poem's awareness of its own genre, and—in some ways—its own socioeconomic distance from the typically aristocratic mode of that genre. Fewster notes that this generic self-awareness produces a temporal dissonance, suggesting that *The Squire* "presents itself as a late and displaced romance narrative...its characters quote and allude to the norms of past romance."³⁷ Speeches like these in *The Squire*—always from the lady or the king—cement the poem's inherent self-awareness of medieval romance and acknowledge with humor and overstatement that its narrative of social mobility is playfully anachronistic.

³⁴ Crane, *Performance*, 2.

³⁵ Fewster, 142.

³⁶ Pearsall, 66.

³⁷ Fewster, 149.

Not only does the lady's speech demonstrate her power over the squire's body—and her complicit agency in elevating the squire's social rank—it also functions as a speech act wherein the squire is unofficially dubbed: his body is adorned, and an honor and new social class are conferred upon him. As Seaman reminds us, “[L]anguage, rather than physical actions, offers the central means of agency” in the poem.³⁸ The text always defines him by his (ascribed) social position, and the poem notably lacks a formal dubbing ceremony under the auspices of the king, even in the final triumphant marriage scene, after which the squire becomes simply “that yong man” (1127). While not a sanctioned and explicit dubbing ceremony, the lady's long speech serves the poem as a flexible and informal dubbing, notably altering the squire's “economy of representation.”³⁹ The absence of an actual ceremony and of the word “dub” itself indicate that cultural expectations for the establishment of knighthood have changed, and perhaps, that knightly actions and outfitting supersede the necessity for a formal knighting. Echoing Butler's performativity, Crane observes that the medieval elite's self-representative performances are “heightened and deliberately communicative behaviors.”⁴⁰ The ease with which the lady performs this *de facto* dubbing contributes to the humor evident in this scene, the same humor which has captivated critics for so long. By way of her speech—and the money she promises therein—the lady not only displaces the masculine institutional authority usually necessary in conferring knighthood, but she also renders the prestige of ceremonial dubbing, as Heng says, “quaintly irrelevant.”⁴¹

³⁸ Seaman, 178.

³⁹ Crane, *Performance*, 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴¹ Heng, 132.

If we take the squire's body as the performance site of his soon-to-be minted new social class—as a knight, or the princess's consort—then the supplementary meanings of “dub” confirm this association. Traditionally, a dubbing ceremony would be necessary to elevate the squire to his desired social position. While the most common and well-worn definition of the word denotes the act of ceremonially conferring knighthood, additional meanings of “dub” appear elsewhere and earlier, connoting, in certain turns, the renovation of old cloth, the girding of a body with armor, or simply clothing a body. The connection between the squire's ensemble and his social class is predicated on the inference that dubbing can mean both to confer a social honor upon someone, and also simply to adorn their body.⁴²

In addition to the clothing and arming of the squire's body, the lady even creates for him a chivalric emblem. The design which she envisions for his shield would be an identifying marker, using the symbolic rhetoric of heraldry, and emphasized by her use of the specific heraldic term “goules” (gules) for the color red. Here the poem once more plainly displays its contemporary context and urban gentry interests. In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century London, the growing merchant and gentry “middle class,” with their newfound wealth, “sought to impress their importance on the noncommercial world, and perhaps, to heighten their standing in their own communities by borrowing the symbolic code that was used by noblemen and gentleman, the language of heraldry.”⁴³ The facility with which the lady composes so specific and vivid an iconography for the squire's coat of

⁴² *The Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v.

“dubben.” <https://quod.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED12759>. Maurice Keen traces this back to the Old French *adouber*, “to equip a man with martial arms” (67).

⁴³ Thrupp, 249.

arms indicates an increased fascination with upward social mobility and flux, despite the poem's fictional setting in the earlier "high" Middle Ages of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when chivalric romance was at its apogee. Simultaneously, the lack of the specific term and the pomp that dubbing implies suggests the once honorable and revered status of knighthood no longer requires the ceremonial and religious rites it once did. The squire can fulfill the deeds and wear the trappings of knighthood without ever actually becoming a knight, and this satisfies for the lady and her father the king.

The performance of social class through a genre like romance requires a classed stylization that meets cultural expectations for outward evidence of a particular standing and position. Furthermore, because the divestment and reinvestment of clothing and identity here is, in a sense, done *to* the squire and not *by* him—i.e., the squire does not himself remove his trappings of servitude and then depart on a knightly quest—he is absolved of any possible culpability as a transgressive and over-ambitious servitor. The lady's thorough enumeration of the squire's chivalric costume, in particular, contradicts Kiernan's supposition of the squire's greed. The squire does not upset the natural order: it is the lady who is responsible for realizing his dreams of upward social mobility. While the squire's love for the lady is his own experience, he passively undergoes the means by which he attains knighthood and proves worthy of that love. The poem insists that the squire does not benefit from his own maneuvering. Rather, the squire benefits from the maneuvering of those around him and the text thereby absolves him of any possible accusation of greed or class ambition. It is his passionate love for a woman that drives him, not personal upstart greed.

Judith Butler reminds us that “clothes articulate the body,”⁴⁴ and at this point we need to ask why the puzzling clothes-swapping scene in *The Squire of Low Degree* occurs. To answer the question, we must return to the passage which opened the discussion at the beginning of my essay. As he leaves to perform the quests that will enable him to win knighthood and his lady, the squire suddenly decides to return to the lady’s door, after realizing that he has forgotten to bid her goodbye. There, the steward lies in wait, hoping to catch the squire and his lady *in flagrante delicto*. In defiance of the king’s earlier direct orders to his steward to leave the squire unharmed, the steward attacks the squire as the squire begs the lady to open her door. Since the lady does not comply, the squire has no choice but to defend himself:

So harde they smote together tho
The stewardes throte he cut in tow,
And sone he fell downe to the grounde,
As a traitour untrew with many a wound.
The squyer sone in armes they hente,
And of they dyd his good garmente,
And on the stewarde they it dyd,
And sone his body thein they hydde.
And with their swordes his face they share
That she should not know what he ware.
They cast hym at her chambre dore,
The steward that was styffe and store.
Whan they had made that great affraye
Full pryvely they stale awaye. (647-660)

This central scene is usually found to be the most ludicrous in the poem, and therefore the most humorous. Modern and medieval readers alike cannot deny the slapstick comedy of the lady’s refusal to admit the squire, despite the immediate threat to his life. What’s more, the lady takes this opportunity to describe her devotion for the squire at length, for she

⁴⁴ Butler, xxiv.

thinks that the rude man pounding at her door is some other potential beau. Meanwhile, the melee between the servitors unfolds right outside her door. Despite the fact that the squire kills that “traitour untrew” (650), he is still outnumbered and he is ultimately captured by the steward’s men. The men forcibly remove the squire’s clothes—so carefully described and assigned earlier by the lady—and use the clothes to dress the steward’s corpse: “And of they dyd his good garment / And sone his body thein they hydde” (653-4). They proceed to brutalize the face of the corpse (“with their swordes his face they share” [655]), obscuring its features, and carry the squire off to prison. After the squire has been carried away, the lady finally opens her door and finds what appears to be the grisly corpse of her lover. The heraldry which she had assigned him becomes her downfall: it serves to code the wrong body as her lover, a body which she proceeds to embalm and mourn for seven years. We note that by killing the only other servitor/middle-class character in the poem, the squire severs all remaining ties he might have had to his assigned social class. There must be a dramatic change in not only the squire’s outward signifiers of class, but also in his association with his similarly-classed peers.

To understand this scene better, we must return to the moment when the king observes the squire performing his duties in his servitor’s livery. The poem employs the word “envy” three times when describing the steward or his actions, partaking in the “treacherous steward” trope frequently found in chivalric romance. When the steward first appears in the poem, having just overheard the squire and lady declare their love for each other, he plots against the squire “For he her loved pryvely, / And therefore dyd her great envye” (297-8). Therefore, we learn that the steward also loves the lady, and this motivates his malicious intentions toward the squire. The king warns the steward, however, when the steward

proposes a trap to test the lovers' honor, that should the squire come to harm in any way, the steward will be thrown in prison: "For yf it may be founde in thee / That thou them fame for envyté, / Thou shalt be taken as a felon, / And put full depe in my pryson" (391-394). Like the squire, the steward also desires upward social mobility and the eligibility for the lady's hand that upward mobility entails. However, unlike the squire, the steward is damned from the start by the poem's generic conventions. The king however, a hawkish observer of his servants, immediately recognizes the steward's ill will and envy and warns him against the temptations of his competitive desire. By switching the clothing, the steward's men attempt to curtail the lady's desire for someone below her station, and fool the king into thinking the steward killed the squire and therefore the steward must be sent to prison.

Therefore, the swapped clothing is a grotesque joke at the wayward servitor's expense: only in death is the steward's body clothed in trappings of wealth and station, and only in death is he able to spend time in the lady's innermost sanctum, as she embalms and mourns his body for seven years. The steward's men also engage in actions that attempt to reinforce the squire's original social status when they capture him and bring him before the king, ostensibly to be punished for his suspected sexual and socioeconomic aspirations. The steward's men are thus a necessary plot mechanism—the poem's agents in its narrative plotting. The surplus—or *aporia*—in this scenario, of course, is the princess's grief: she thinks her beloved is dead and mourns him for seven years.

As this scene shows, clothing as object and action takes on an entirely new cultural importance in the late Middle Ages. The first traces of sumptuary laws⁴⁵ in western Europe

⁴⁵ Sumptuary laws constituted a set of legislations in Western Europe which sought to regulate what members of certain classes and genders could appropriately wear and eat, starting with the 1337

occur during the reign of Charlemagne, but “it is only with the decline of feudalism that the emergence of the ‘bastard feudalism’ that succeeds the monetization of land rents and the long rise of merchant capitalism, gives rise to what may be regarded as the high period of sumptuary law.”⁴⁶ It is often assumed that sumptuary laws were a hallmark of the entire feudal era, but they in fact largely arose as a result of anxieties over social mobility and the external demarcation of social class after the plague, in the later Middle Ages. Alan Hunt, in his global history of sumptuary laws, emphasizes that they appear in England during this late period “marked by competitive struggles between social interests,”⁴⁷ and the rise of what I have called the proto-middle class. It thus needs to be emphasized that clothes are not simply what the characters wear or want in *The Squire of Low Degree*, they serve to communicate social status, association, and desire.

As it makes its case, the poem’s language is precise and nuanced throughout: another feature that resists the belief of some critics that the poem displays generic ineptitude. Despite the informal dubbing which the squire undergoes, and despite the chivalric opportunities he obtains, and the actions he eventually performs, our protagonist is still referred to as “the squire” until the very end of the poem. Therefore, despite the bodily rhetoric communicated by clothing throughout the poem, there seems to be a recognition that the squire has remained the same individual beneath his clothing. He is still the squire who oversaw “Both ussher, panter, and butler” (461) and served the king so well in the feast-

statute, which sought to regulate furs. Subsequent acts occurred in 1363, 1463, 1483, 1510, 1514, 1515, 1533, and 1553. See Hunt, *Governance*, in which he also traces the history of such laws in China and Japan.

⁴⁶ Hunt, 22.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

hall, even after he has traveled throughout Christendom performing knightly deeds. This underlying awareness of the squire's original socioeconomic status and its tension with his performed social status enacts a kind of class-based drag throughout the poem. Drag—the impersonation of the other through coded behaviors, speech patterns, and clothing—hinges on the tension highlighted between the performed identity and the performer. The squire has adopted the persona of an honorable knight, but he remains the eponymous “squire” dressed in the trappings of knightly wealth. He has undergone an informal dubbing, but the religiously-inflected language of transformation which usually accompanies a formal dubbing remains absent from the text, once more emphasizing that “knighthoods became increasingly flexible” in this late stage of the era.⁴⁸ Actually obtaining knighthood seems not to be necessary for the squire en route to becoming a knight, but he also cannot do away completely with his original social class until he *does* take part in a formal ceremony that seems indispensable: marriage.

I suggest that the text engages in class drag, and clothed bodies function to produce the poem's humor. Rather than by virtue of generic ineptitude or other shortcomings, the text's comedy hinges on the acknowledgement that social class can change with dazzling quickness and ease; all we need is a costume change legitimated by marriage. Working against feminist readings of gendered drag as a denigration of the female, Judith Butler argues that:

In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency. Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of casual unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism

⁴⁸ Ibid., 296.

of their fabricated unity.⁴⁹

As gendered drag parodies the perceived inextricability of sex and gender, so too does class drag lampoon the idea of rigidly—naturally—delineated social stratifications. Our squire moves flexibly between social stations, as his lady provides the means by which he can change his exterior in order to perform a different, more appropriate social class, to meet with the “cultural configurations” of the upper class. By deploying classed drag as part of its narrational strategy, the text denaturalizes the “casual unities” of social class: the comedy of *The Squire of Low Degree* hinges on the mockery of the belief in a “natural order,” and an inherent, necessarily stratified social order.

Generic Nostalgia, Gentry Medievalism

Despite the fact that the protagonist in *The Squire of Low Degree* evinces a desire for knighthood, in practice, that desire manifests itself differently from what we might expect. The text dwells on the trappings of knighthood for the squire, but eschews the official dubbing altogether, and our protagonist goes from “squyer” (1117, the last occurrence of the word in the poem) to “yong man” (1127) in the last five lines of the poem. The squire has performed a classed embodiment of drag throughout the poem and accomplished honorable deeds off-stage. These deeds, in pursuit of knighthood, eventually grant him a wife and a kingdom: a far superior result to simply being knighted.

This elision of knighthood is consonant with the growing lack of interest in knighthood in the late Middle Ages. As Sylvia Thrupp tell us, “[T]here was no general desire for the title. It was very generally felt that the burdens attached to it, in the shape of liability

⁴⁹ Butler, 187-88.

for military service and for service on public commissions, were out of all proportion, in tedium and expense, to the honor that was involved.”⁵⁰ It is better to look like a knight and eventually become a king, as *The Squire* shows us, than to actually become a knight, and fulfill the expensive martial and ceremonial obligations of knighthood. The economy of symbolic power had moved from ceremonial investments and institutional validation to the personal ambition and “affective individualism”⁵¹ of the burgeoning middle class. This nascent middle class reappropriated the visual rhetoric of the bygone elite—such as heraldry—for the purposes of upward social mobility and the establishment of an urban gentry. Bypassing the status of knighthood altogether might have delighted the gentry readership of *The Squire*, providing a fantasy of upward social mobility achieved via actions and economic capital, rather than by quasi-religious ceremonial authentication.

Appropriately, the printing records in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (as seen in the extant printed copies of *The Squire*) indicate that certain printers had hoped to produce materials which would appeal to the growing proto-middle class reader. While still maintaining a commitment to the cult of chivalry evidenced in William Caxton’s *oeuvre*, printers like Wynken de Worde and Robert Copland had moved their presses from Westminster to Fleet Street, and “in so doing began to bring books close to the needs and pockets of the ‘ordinary’ reader.”⁵² De Worde consequently produced the first printed version of *The Squire of Low Degree* in 1520⁵³ and William Copland, younger brother to

⁵⁰ Thrupp, 275.

⁵¹ Harriet Hudson, “Construction of Class, Family, and Gender in Some Middle English Popular Romances,” in *Class and Gender in Early English Literature*, ed. Britton Harwood and Gillian Overing (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 82.

⁵² Pearsall, 83.

⁵³ Wynken de Worde, “Here begynneth vndo your Dore.” San Marino, CA, The Huntington Library, Rare Books 62181. STC 23111.5. Carol Meale emphasizes de Worde’s role in maintaining the

Robert Copland, produced the second printing of our poem in 1560.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Helen Cooper suggests that “readers in the troubled fifteenth century seem to have looked to romance as a stabilizing model to hold as an ideal even while their own society egregiously diverged from the romance pattern.”⁵⁵ The gentry reader could enjoy literature like *The Squire*, replete with nostalgic descriptions of the luxuries of the aristocracy while entertaining the idea of upward social mobility.

These late romances begin to depict “a social imaginary for the gentry”⁵⁶ more and more explicitly, manifested in our poem with scenes and long commitments to displays of aristocratic excess. The vicarious gaze of the gentry/proto-middle class reader could enjoy scenes of highly detailed ekphrases of upper-class life. With a scene which emphasizes the gaze of everyone present in the hall upon the squire and his dutiful service, the text also invites the gaze of the reader into the feast-hall to conspicuously consume culinary delights alongside those whom the squire serves:

With deynnty meates that were dere,
With partryche, pecoke, and plovere,
With byrdes in bread ybake,
The tele, the ducke, and the drake,
The cocke, the curlewe, and the crane,
With fesauntes fairy, theyr were no wane;

popularity of verse romances after Caxton’s death while also trying work against assumptions of de Worde as unlearned in “Caxton, de Worde, and the Publication of Romance in Late Medieval England,” *The Library* XIV, no. 4 (1992).

⁵⁴ William Copland, “The Squyr of Lowe Degre,” or “Here begynneth vndo youre dore.” London, British Library, C.21.c.58. STC 23112. This edition serves as basis for Erik Kooper’s 2006 TEAMS critical edition. A.S.G. Edwards argues that William Copland recognized the market potential for the revival of verse romance produced in cheap copies in “William Copland and the Identity of Printed Middle English Romance,” in *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003).

⁵⁵ Helen Cooper, “Romance after 1400,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 695.

⁵⁶ Michael Johnston, *Romance and Gentry in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 48.

Both storkes and snytes ther were also,
And venyson freshe of bucke and do,
And other deyntes many one,
For to set afore the kynge anone. (316-325)

These foods constitute things which the squire is not consuming, but rather serving—and also decadent and expensive “deynty meates” (316) rarely enjoyed by anyone outside royalty. The “venyson freshe of bucke and do” (323) emphasizes not only an element of a sumptuous meal, but also a spatial reality of social division. Forest lands were protected in the Middle Ages, exclusively allocated for the use of the aristocracy, and the animals therein were designated “for to set afore the kynge anone” (325).⁵⁷ Any person who attempted to hunt within protected forests might be found guilty of poaching. A description like the one above tempts the eye of the gentry reader into a space normally forbidden, while rendering the excess of the aristocratic lifestyle a distant object which can be visibly and imaginatively consumed. The poem partakes in descriptive display to an even greater degree later in the text: when the king tries to tempt the grieving princess—and the reader, vicariously—with diversions of aristocratic luxury and leisurely pastimes:

To-morowe ye shall on hunting fare,
And ryde, my doughter, in a chare,
It shal be covered with velvet reede,
And clothes of fyne golde all about your hed,
With damaske, white and asure blewe,
Well dyapred with lyllyes newe;
Your pomelles shal be ended with gold,
Your chaynes enameled many a folde,
Your mantel of ryche degré,
Purpyl palle and armure fre...” (739-748)

⁵⁷ For more on classed allocations of land in the Middle Ages and the ecological readings thereof, see Gilliam Rudd, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

The king's speech, intended to lure the princess out of her mourning—and perhaps to test her devotion to her supposedly dead lover—amounts to 113 lines in all, about 9% of the entire poem. The poem details the “clothes of fyne golde” (742) the lady will wear when “hunting fare” (739), unrestricted by any kind of sumptuary legislation; it tells how she will go about hunting, unfettered by any kind of poaching laws; it expatiates on the leisurely pastimes she can engage in, being the daughter of a landed member of royalty; and finally, it itemizes the sumptuous tent embroidered with precious stones and expensively-dyed fabrics where she might sleep after a long day of hunting. Again, for such a short poem, the length of the king's speech creates an opportunity for readers of any status to enjoy temporarily fantastic wealth, ease, and pleasure. Not only can the reader sample aristocratic extravagance, he or she is also able to partake of the most enjoyable of chivalric romance conventions: a listing whose indulgent length and detail contribute to the comedy of the poem, but also evince how romance expectations are fulfilled in the limited space of a late-medieval truncated version of the genre, marketed toward the gentry.

The fact remains that the period in which *The Squire of Low Degree* enjoyed its popularity was very different from the idealized high Middle Ages typified by the poem's chivalric romance setting. During the “high” Middle Ages, when chivalric romance as a genre was at its apogee, a story that foregrounded social stratification and upward mobility could not have enjoyed popularity, because the squire's status as an impoverished squire and his distance from the aristocracy whom he serves would have disqualified him from marrying the king's daughter and inheriting the crown. As Harriet Hudson reminds us, “The differing social ideas espoused by the characters of the romances [of the late Middle Ages] are all implicit in the gentry ethos. By a complex process of descent from the older baronage,

development of urban and administrative occupations, and multiplication and stratification of social ranks, the gentry had emerged as a distinct class toward the end of the Middle Ages.”⁵⁸ As the “high” Middle Ages receded into the distance, poets and printers recognized the developing middle class as potential customers and readers. This distancing may also account for the poem’s setting in Hungary, despite being written in English: its setting spatially others the story, and in so doing, addresses the problem of upward mobility without acknowledging its social immediacy.

The longing for and celebration of the chivalric romance conventions we see in *The Squire* enacts a temporal drag—one simultaneously generic, economic, and chivalric. Just as our squire performs class drag by donning the costume of his desired social rank, so too does our poem wear the raiments of a medieval genre. However, just like the squire, the display the text enacts is one of performance, of drag. The poem’s tensions—those which have been read as generic incompetence by its critics—stem from the distance between the time when it was written and the temporal milieu of its narrative, the distance between the poem’s characters and its readers. *The Squire* portrays a desire for the past via contemporary praxis. We move further and further from an actual medieval reality and toward an idealized *medievalist* picture of the past. No matter how recent this past, it has already become distorted by the lens of nostalgia, combined with contemporary concerns. *The Squire of Low Degree* gives us a narrative of temporal and class drag, resulting in a medievalist performance of the high Middle Ages.

In suggesting that *The Squire* performs a kind of medievalism, I do not seek to

⁵⁸ Hudson, 81.

engage with the burgeoning field of medievalism which studies retrospective post-Enlightenment representations and interpretations of “the medieval” beginning, as David Matthews⁵⁹ argues, with the eighteenth century. However, Matthews’s clear assertion that “Medievalism is the study of the Middle Ages after the Middle Ages”⁶⁰ does ring true for periods much earlier than the eighteenth century. Acknowledging the difficulty of pinpointing a moment when the Middle Ages ended, Matthews asserts that “the moment of retrieval, and the moment of recognition of a middle age, amount to almost the same thing.”⁶¹

It would be myopic not to argue that the bygone past acknowledged, appropriated, performed, and adjusted by *The Squire of Low Degree* thus constitutes a mode of medievalism. The idealized medieval past within the poem—the setting which typifies chivalric romance—provides a time in which the architecture of the aristocracy was solid, desirable, and just. The honorable social aspirant wins his lady’s hand. The treacherous steward is punished for his dishonesty. Civic structure is upheld and perpetuated, with the implication of a continued honorable royal line. Stories of the past which would likely have come down to the late medieval Londoner, are rife with these elements, as Pearsall argues: “[Romances] are the means by which a particular view of medieval chivalry is transmitted to later ages and so becomes an integral part of the experience of history.”⁶² The complex performative temporalities at play in *The Squire of Low Degree* push back against neat periodic designations.

⁵⁹ Matthews’s incredibly thorough and lively recent work, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2015) examines the beginnings to medievalism, its multi-media iterations, and its future as a discipline distinct from medieval studies.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 10

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶² Pearsall, 83.

Can certain kinds of medievalisms appear directly after the “end” of the Middle Ages? Can rhetorical medievalism exist during a time which is still roughly considered the Middle Ages?

I would like to call attention to *The Squire*'s inherent nostalgia for a (recent) past which has already become distorted by an idealism influenced by both economics and genre. While Matthews's examination of medievalism and how it functions proves useful to the growing field of medievalism and its place in relation to medieval studies, it is difficult to imagine that *The Squire*, which demonstrates such generic self-awareness and performs classed drag could not be considered a medievalist text. Well before the institutional advent of medievalism studies, Derek Pearsall asserts: “[N]ostalgia for the world of romantic chivalry is not necessarily a late phenomenon: it is the twin of romantic chivalry itself.”⁶³ To acknowledge a mode or a time period is already to acknowledge its passing away. *The Squire* schematizes romance conventions while simultaneously advocating for contemporary gentry interest in social mobility, and therefore can be said to fit the working definition of a “medievalist” text.

Just as the Squire's body serves as the performance site for his social ascent, so too does the poem dress in the trappings of a waning genre and social structure. Judith Butler acknowledges of *Gender Trouble* that, “This text does not sufficiently explain performativity in terms of its social, psychic, corporeal, and temporal dimensions.”⁶⁴ The classed examination of our squire's corporeality adduces an economic dimension to Butler's theorizations. *The Squire* must constitute one of the earliest exponents of outright medievalism in English literature. Demonstrating an awareness of the distance between the

⁶³ Ibid., 66.

⁶⁴ Butler, xxv.

ideal subject matter its contents express and the reality of the present-day now of the poet and poem, the text's queer temporalities negotiate all at once humor, nostalgia, desire, and economic aspiration. *The Squire of Low Degree's* displays of temporal and class drag thus constitute a medievalist performance of the "high" Middle Ages, creating for its audience a Middle Ages where upward social mobility constitutes a heroic quest parallel with those undertaken in Middle High German *Parzival*, the Old French *Roman de Silence*, or the Middle English *Gawain and the Green Knight*, and rendering the ambitious servitor a knightly and worthy aspirant.

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