Nobility in Middle English Romance

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Summary of Thesis

Medieval nobility was a compound and fluid concept, the complexity of which is clearly reflected in the Middle English romances. This dissertation examines fourteen short verse romances, grouped by story-type into three categories. They are: type 1: romances of lost heirs (*Degaré*, *Chevelere Assigne*, *Sir Perceval of Galles*, *Lybeaus Desconus*, and *Octavian*); type 2: romances about winning a bride (*Floris and Blancheflour*, *The Erle of Tolous*, *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, *Sir Degrevant*, and the Amis–Belisaunt plot from *Amis and Amiloun*); type 3: romances of impoverished knights (Amiloun's story from *Amis and Amiloun*, *Sir Isumbras*, *Sir Amadace*, *Sir Cleges*, and *Sir Launfal*). The analysis is based on contextualized close reading, drawing on the theories of Pierre Bourdieu. The results show that Middle English romance has no standard criteria for defining nobility, but draws on the full range on contemporary opinion; understandings of nobility conflict both between and within texts. Ideological consistency is seldom a priority, and the genre apparently serves neither a single socio-political agenda, nor a single socio-political group.

The dominant conception of nobility in each romance is determined by the story-type. Romance type 1 presents nobility as inherent in the blood, type 2 emphasizes prowess and force of will, and type 3 concentrates on virtue. However, no romance text offers just one definition; implicitly or explicitly, there are always alternatives. This internal variety indicates that the romances imagine nobility scene-by-scene; even a text seemingly committed to one perspective is liable to abandon it temporarily if there is another better suited to the narrative moment. Ideological expression always comes second to effective story-telling. This means the texts are frequently inconsistent and sometimes illogical, but that multiplicity is of their very essence.

Contents

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Finally, I thank my parents, Jenny and David Roberts. You alone know how much you have done, and I can only hope you also know how much your support has always meant. This dissertation is dedicated to you.

Introduction

This thesis springs from the observation that Middle English romances define nobility in many different ways, and that those definitions often conflict. From this I argue that the genre serves neither a single socio-political agenda, nor a single socio-political group. The Middle Ages entertained a wide range of ideas about nobility and class, and sustained close reading shows the texts in this study contain all of them. Ideological consistency is seldom a priority. The dominant conception of nobility is usually determined simply by the kind of story being told, so romances about lost heirs present nobility as inherent in the blood, romances about winning a bride emphasize prowess and force of will, and romances about impoverished knights concentrate on virtue. However, no romance text offers just one view of nobility; implicitly or explicitly, there are always alternatives. This variety would have helped the texts appeal to the diverse audience indicated by the manuscript record, and perhaps also testifies to the number of hands and voices involved in their composition, translation, and oral and scribal transmission. Meanwhile, close reading identifies internal inconsistencies that show romances imagine nobility scene-by-scene. Even a text seemingly committed to one perspective is liable to abandon it temporarily if there is another better suited to the narrative moment. Ideological expression always comes second to effective story-telling.

Defining Nobility

The medieval terms 'nobility' and 'noble' conflate social description with value judgements. Isidore of Seville's influential *Etymologies* (early seventh century) defines noble (*nobilis*) as meaning 'not base, one whose name and family are recognized'.[1] To be base (*degener*) is to be 'ignoble, either because one is of an inferior lineage or because, although born of the best lineage, one lives

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[1]   Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 224.

dishonourably'.[2] Nobility indicates social and moral status – high birth, and honour or goodness. That overlap carries through from Isidore's Latin to the Middle English of the romances. Among the definitions of *nobilite* in the Middle English Dictionary are: 1a. 'high birth or rank […] ancestry'; 2a. 'honor, renown; majesty, grandeur'; 2b. 'splendor, magnificence, glory'; 3a. dignity, degree of excellence'; 3b. 'high or noble quality or attribute'; 3c 'superiority of physiological status'; 3d. 'superiority of breed or kind'. *Noble* as an adjective has similar meanings: 1a. 'of high rank or birth, highborn, noble'; 2a. 'of high rank in the hierarchy of created things […] superior'; 3a. 'worthy of honor or respect, noble, honourable; admirable, excellent, praiseworthy'; 3b. 'illustrious, distinguished; renowned, celebrated […] valuable, useful'. Both noun and adjective have a primary social meaning that shades off into qualitative assessment and quickly conflates aristocracy with goodness. The words also have material resonances ('splendor, magnificence, glory'), and functional ones ('useful'). Middle English romances draw on all these senses. Their heroes start with a firm grasp on one aspect of nobility – high birth, for instance, or military capability, or moral excellence – and over the course of the story they accumulate the others as well. By the end of his adventures the romance hero is universally recognized as a good and rich man of high social standing. He is noble in the fullest sense.

In discussing this process of accumulation I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's theory that an individual's status is made up of several different kinds of what he calls 'capital'. Capital can be economic, but comes in other forms too – for example cultural, symbolic, social, and intellectual.[3] These types might be connected (as when intellectual capital from a qualification brings economic capital from employment), or they might be distinct: hedge-fund managers are

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2   Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, p. 217.

3   On capital and its forms, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984; rept. 2010), pp. 108–13; Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in *Education, Globalisation, and Social Change*, ed. H. Lauder *et al.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 241–58. See also Robert Moore, 'Capital', in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, ed. Michael Grenfell (Durham: Acumen, 2008; rept. 2010), pp. 101–17, especially pp. 103–6.

often wealthy, but since the 2008 financial crisis they have lacked social and symbolic capital; a war veteran might struggle to subsist on a meagre pension, but he has considerable symbolic capital. Applying this concept to medieval romances, one can say that a lost heir begins with high symbolic capital thanks to his noble blood, but that his social and economic capital are both low (such children are generally raised in humble obscurity). A knight who loses his fortune begins with high social and economic capital, then proves his symbolic credentials by suffering virtuously, and is eventually rewarded when that symbolic capital converts back into social standing and material wealth. Bourdieu's terms provide a convenient vocabulary and framework for considering these shifts. As those two examples suggest, romances generally make symbolic capital constant, and social and economic capital variable. The hero's challenge is to use his symbolic capital to acquire the other forms; ours, to determine the root of that symbolic capital, and to identify how he effects the conversion.

Though I have adopted 'noble' and 'nobility' as my key terms, Middle English also uses *gentil* and its cognates. Scholars have sometimes attempted to distinguish between *noble* and *gentil*, as when Maurice Keen argues that his mid-fourteenth-century sources make gentility a matter of breeding, and nobility one of individual virtue.[4] However, Arlyn Diamond follows Christopher Dyer and Kate Mertes in claiming that 'in the late middle ages, despite an overwhelming concern with rank and birth, in cultural and ideological terms, gentle, noble and aristocratic are roughly equivalent labels'.[5] That is the impression given by the *Middle English Dictionary*, which defines *gentil* as: 1a. 'of noble rank or birth, belonging to the gentry, noble'; 2a. 'having the character or manners prescribed

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[4] Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 143–61.

[5] Arlyn Diamond, '*Sir Degrevant*: What Lovers Want', in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 82–101, at p. 93. See also Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England, c. 1200–1520* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 47; Kate Mertes, 'Aristocracy', in *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*, ed. Rosemary Horrox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 42–60, at p. 44.

by the ideals of chivalry or Christianity; noble, kind, gracious'; 3a. 'belonging to a person of rank; also, suitable to a nobleman; noble, gracious, refined, graceful, beautiful'. The romances use the terms interchangeably, so *Amis and Amiloun*'s Belisaunt considers Amis a worthy lover because he is 'gentil' (l. 577), and in the same situation *Sir Eglamour*'s Christabel uses the word 'nobyll' instead (l. 158). Chaucerian usage also suggests equivalence: Chaucer uses *gentilesse* more often than *noblesse*, but *noble* more often than *gentil*.[6] Interestingly, Dante's *Convivio* records that the terms *gentilezza* and *nobilitade* were similarly interchangeable in fourteenth-century Italian.[7] I therefore consider *noble* and *gentil* synonymous throughout what follows. In sum, nobility is that special quality that makes a man worthy of romance treatment (in that it makes him an aristocrat), that sustains him through his adventures and hardships, and that finally achieves its fullest realization in the combination of personal achievement, public renown, and material prosperity with which the story ends.

Romance Audience and Class Ideology: Formations and Issues

Romance and class have often been discussed together, but my project is distinctive both for its subject matter and its approach. So far as I know, this is the first full-length study to make nobility and class the main topics of discussion – the first to ask such direct questions as 'What distinguishes the hero as a nobleman?' or 'How does this text describe merchants?' My answers to those questions are informed by two core principles: first, that Middle English romance's audience stretched from kings to kitchen boys; second, that an individual's socio-economic background is no reliable guide to his or her ideological orientation. This sets my dissertation apart from previously published work, which usually connects Middle English romances with a very

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[6]   Larry D. Benson, *A Glossarial Concordance to the Riverside Chaucer*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Garland, 1993).

[7]   Dante Alighieri, *Il Convivio*, ed. Maria Simonelli (Bologna: Riccardo Pàtron, 1966), IV.xiv.8. For an English version, see Dante Alighieri, *The Banquet*, trans. Christopher Ryan (Saratoga, CA: Anma Libri, 1989), p. 159.

specific audience, and/or assumes a predictable link between a person's social status and his or her attitudes.

For example, Felicity Riddy's 'Middle English Romance: Marriage, Family, Intimacy' begins by associating the genre with a 'bourgeois-gentry' audience, then explores how that audience might have related to the texts' representations of family, dynasty, and domesticity.[8] Riddy's essay identifies an audience and then uses the texts to discover what that audience valued. An alternative approach begins with features of the text and then seeks an audience to match, as when Edward E. Foster argues that the focus on money in *Sir Amadace* indicates a middle- or lower-class readership preoccupied with acquiring wealth.[9] Both methods can yield valuable and insightful results, but they are necessarily partial in that they restrict the texts to a single social level, and confine the people at that level to a single set of objectively conditioned ideological and aesthetic preferences. This dissertation is built to avoid both restrictions, for it is intrinsic to the thesis that romances and their audiences consistently evade such neat classification.

Different scholars have associated romances with different audiences. In 1960 Arthur Bliss imagined *Sir Launfal* being recited 'for simpler, less sensitive listeners in market square or inn-yard', and since then scholars have visited every level of medieval society in search of Middle English romance's core following.[10] Several have joined Bliss in the belief that the audience was lower or middle class – an audience aware of sophisticated courtly culture, but unable either to grasp its complexities or to appreciate its *mores*; this was taken to explain the genre's failure to match the quality of Continental romance, and its so-called 'bourgeois absurdities in setting forth knight-errantry'.[11] The attitude

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8   Felicity Riddy, 'Middle English Romance: Marriage, Family, Intimacy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 235–52.

9   Edward E. Foster, 'Simplicity, Complexity, and Morality in Four Medieval Romances', *Chaucer Review* 31 (1997), 401–19, at pp. 406–8.

10   *Sir Launfal*, ed. A. J. Bliss (London: Thomas Nelson, 1960), p. 1.

11   Laura Hibbard (Loomis), 'Sir Thopas', in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales'*, ed. W. F. Bryan and G. Dempster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), pp. 486–559, at p. 491.

was perhaps most famously expressed by Derek Pearsall in his 1965 essay on 'The Development of Middle English Romances', but it appears also in the writing of Donald B. Sands, John Halverson, Karl Brunner, and in the article by Foster cited above.[12] However, that view was never universally accepted and is now much maligned.

As early as 1967, just two years after Pearsall's essay appeared, Dieter Mehl argued for an 'audience of fairly well-educated people [...] of wide interests and from many walks of life'.[13] In 1986 Susan Crane assigned a baronial audience to the Middle English texts in her *Insular Romance*, and argued that they join their Anglo-Norman forebears in addressing the particular concerns of England's upper class.[14] W. A. Davenport takes a similar view when he writes that *Sir Degrevant* reflects clearly 'the actual concerns of the landowning class of the time'.[15] W. R. J. Barron, meanwhile, imagined a different audience: 'the newly literate bourgeoisie' and perhaps the country gentry.[16] By 2011 Pearsall's essay had been so frequently attacked that he issued a retraction. In 'The Pleasure of Popular Romance' he revisits his earlier argument (which was then nearly fifty

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[12] Derek Pearsall, 'The Development of Middle English Romance', *Medieval Studies* 27 (1965), 91–116; Donald B. Sands (ed.), *Middle English Verse Romances* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1986), pp. 201–2; John Halverson, '*Havelok the Dane* and Society', *Chaucer Review* 6 (1971), 142–51, at p. 150; Karl Brunner, 'Middle English Metrical Romaces and their Audience', in *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honour of Professor A. C. Baugh*, ed. MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), pp. 219–28, especially p. 223.

[13] Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 13.

[14] Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 8–10.

[15] W. A. Davenport, '*Sir Degrevant* and Composite Romance', in *Medieval Insular Romance: Translation and Innovation*, ed. Judith Weiss, Jennifer Fellows, and Morgan Dickson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 111–31, at p. 114.

[16] W. R. J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (Harlow: Longman, 1987), pp. 54–5.

years old), tempers much of his criticism, and revises his views on the audience in the light of more recent scholarly findings.[17]

Those findings concentrate on the people Riddy terms the 'bourgeois-gentry' – prosperous families who occupied the lower end of the late-medieval upper class. Arlyn Diamond, Carol Meale, and Ad Putter all join Riddy in considering this the most likely audience for Middle English romances, and they do so with considerable support from the manuscripts themselves.[18] The integration of manuscript studies and literary criticism has been one of the most significant developments in recent romance scholarship, and we now know that the Thornton, Findern, and Auchinleck manuscripts, the British Library's MS Cotton Caligula A.ii, and the Bodleian's idiosyncratic Codex Ashmole 61 all seem to have belonged to the rural gentry and urban élite.[19] But the evidence is still not conclusive. While scholars once believed that the Auchinleck manuscript was produced for the London bourgeoisie in a commercial 'bookshop', that theory has now been abandoned.[20] Thorlac Turville-Petre's *England the Nation* argues

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17 Derek Pearsall, 'The Pleasure of Popular Romance', in *Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts*, ed. Rhiannon Purdie and Michael Cichon (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), pp. 9–18, especially pp. 9–10.

18 Riddy, 'Marriage, Family, Intimacy', pp. 235–8; Diamond, '*Sir Degrevant*: What Lovers Want', pp. 82–3; Carol Meale, '"Gode Men, Wives, Maydnes and Alle Men": Romance and its Audiences', in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Carol Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), pp. 209–25; Ad Putter, 'Gifts and Commodities in *Sir Amadace*', *Review of English Studies* 51 (2000), 371–94, at p. 371; Ad Putter, 'Arthurian Romance in English Popular Tradition: *Sir Percyvell of Gales*, *Sir Cleges*, and *Sir Launfal*', in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. Helen Fulton (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 235–51, at pp. 243–4.

19 Meale, 'Gode Men, Wives, Maydnes and Alle Men', pp. 212–13; Rossell Hope Robbins, 'The Findern Anthology', *PMLA* 69 (1954), 610–42, at pp. 622–6; John J. Thompson, 'Collecting Middle English Romances and Some Related Book-Producing Activities in the Later Middle Ages', in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), pp. 17–38, at pp. 17–22; Lynne S. Blanchfield, 'The Romances in MS Ashmole 61: An Idiosyncratic Scribe', in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), pp. 65–88, at p. 79.

20 The theory was originally posited by Laura Hibbard (Loomis) in 'The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop', *PMLA* 57(3) (1942), 595–627. On its demise, see Rhiannon Purdie, *Anglicising Romance:*

that such a large and expensive volume could only have been commissioned by an extremely illustrious patron.[21] He suggests the Beauchamps, and thus moves one of our largest collections of metrical romances back towards the baronial milieu advocated by Crane in the 1980s; there is even a version of *Ipomedon* existing in a manuscript signed by Richard of York, Duke of Gloucester, and future King Richard III.[22] At the other end of the scale, Michael Johnston has recently written on manuscripts of *Amis and Amiloun* and *Sir Isumbras* that were apparently owned and read by fifteenth-century household servants.[23]

Besides suggesting a disparate pattern of ownership, the surviving texts also bear many hallmarks of memorial transmission and oral recitation.[24] Romance's apologists rightly cite the texts' literariness, but at some stage these stories undoubtedly circulated orally.[25] That argument is strengthened by Nancy Mason Bradbury and Linda Marie Zaerr, who have both shown that the romances work well in an oral context.[26] This means that although most scholars now

Tail-Rhyme and Genre in Medieval English Literature (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 107–25.

[21] Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290–1340* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 134–7.

[22] Carol Meale, 'The Middle English Romance of *Ipomedon*: A Late Medieval "Mirror" for Princes and Merchants', *Reading Medieval Studies* 10 (1984), 136–91, at pp. 138–9.

[23] Michael Johnston, 'New Evidence for the Social Reach of "Popular Romance": The Books of Household Servants', *Viator* 43(2) (2012), 303–32.

[24] See discussions in *Sir Degrevant*, ed. L. F. Casson, EETS o.s. 221 (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. xvii–xxvii; Stephen Knight, 'The Oral Transmission of *Sir Launfal*', *Medium Ævum* 38 (1969), 164–70; Maldwyn Mills, 'A Medieval Reviser at Work', *Medium Ævum* 32 (1963), 11–23, at pp. 20–3; Nancy Mason Bradbury, *Writing Aloud: Storytelling in Late Medieval England* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), pp. 15–20.

[25] For instance Mehl, *Middle English Romances*, p. 13; Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, pp. 55–6; Rosalind Field, and Judith Weiss, 'Introduction', in *Romance Reading on the Book: Essays on Medieval Narrative Presented to Maldwyn Mills*, ed. Jennifer Fellows *et al.* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), pp. 11–21, at pp. 12–19. See also Ad Putter, 'A Historical Introduction', in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 1–15, at pp. 4–7.

[26] Mason Bradbury, *Writing Aloud*; Linda Marie Zaerr, *Performance and the Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012).

reject the once-favoured idea that these are specifically minstrel texts, they also acknowledge that a comprehensive reconstruction of romance's audience and circulation must admit the travelling entertainer/inn-yard scenario as a possibility.[27] This oral connection opens the romances to an even wider audience, and suggests an extra-textual existence we can only guess at. To focus on a specific romance milieu is therefore to consider only part of the picture. It furthers our understanding of how romances functioned at a particular social level, but does not explain their apparently universal appeal. Such narrow focus also sidelines people outside the particular group being discussed, for it implies they were incidental to the 'main' audience; at worst, it can even exclude those other readers/listeners altogether. By contrast, eschewing precise definitions of audience frees criticism to address how romances succeeded in so ignoring and transcending social categories, rather than how they might have slotted into them.[28]

Behind the idea that romance caters for a specific audience lies the belief that ideological and aesthetic preferences are determined by socio-economic position. Harriet Hudson aligns romance with the gentry, and then analyses her chosen texts in terms of how the gentry are supposed to have thought about marriage and property.[29] Ad Putter infers a gentry audience from the manuscripts of *Sir Amadace*, and uses this as contextual background for what he sees as the story's dismissal of 'bourgeois' commercialism in favour of a more

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[27] For the latest instalment of the minstrel debate, see Zaerr, *Performance and the Middle English Romance*, pp. 6–11; see also discussion in Putter, 'A Historical Introduction', pp. 7–11.

[28] A similar approach is taken in Phillipa Hardman's 2010 essay on 'The Role of Household Miscellanies', notable for looking beyond specific social ascriptions and instead addressing how manuscript miscellanies were 'designed to meet the different needs of a range of readers within the household [...] in a variety of reading situations': 'Domestic Learning and Teaching: Investigating Evidence for the Role of "Household Miscellanies" in Late Medieval England', in *Women and Writing, c. 1340–c. 1650: The Domestication of Print Culture*, ed. Anne Lawrence-Mathers and Phillipa Hardman (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2010), pp. 15–33, at pp. 28–9.

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

'noble' gift economy based on *largesse* and reciprocation.[30] Simpson finds in *Sir Amadace* and *Sir Degaré* the claim that nobility is innate and that society is ordered by God, and so deems the texts tailored to appeal to aristocratic readers who believed nobility flowed in their blood.[31] By contrast, *Sir Launfal*, *Sir Cleges*, and *Havelok the Dane* have all been considered characteristically bourgeois texts because of their various interests in money, piety, and 'getting-on'.[32] At one level this is common sense: Davenport is surely correct in thinking that fifteenth-century landowners would have related to Sir Degrevant's efforts to protect and manage his estates; and at first glance it seems obvious that a successful man of business has less to gain from the ideology of blood than a gentleman to the manor born. And yet despite its apparent logic, this approach is fraught with problems.

Some modern scholars argue convincingly that ascribing texts to hypothetical audiences is an outdated practice often based on aesthetic and social preconceptions. Too often, argues Stokes, 'popular' in the literary sense has been taken to mean 'lower-class'.[33] If a text is action-driven and largely non-reflexive, if it exhibits a black-and-white morality and some sort of wish-fulfilment, then scholars for centuries assumed it could only have appealed to the unsophisticated. As Nicola McDonald writes in her brilliant 'Polemical Introduction' to *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England*, this invidious conflation of class and aesthetics has become deeply engrained:

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30 Putter, 'Gifts and Commodities in *Sir Amadace*'.

31 James Simpson, 'Violence, Narrative, and Proper Name: *Sir Degaré*, "The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney", and the *Folie Tristan d'Oxford*', in *The Spirit of English Popular Romance*, ed. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 122–41; James Simpson, *The Oxford English Literary History*, vol. 2: *1350–1547, Reform and Cultural Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 266–70.

32 See Bliss (ed.), *Sir Launfal*, pp. 42–6; Pearsall, 'Development of Middle English Romance', p. 30 (on *Sir Cleges*); Halverson, '*Havelok the Dane* and Society', p. 150.

33 Myra Stokes, '*Lanval* to *Sir Launfal*: A Story Becomes Popular', in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 56–77, at pp. 59–60.

it so pervades academic discourse, whether in print or informal conversation, that the identification of 'the general run' of romance as 'rustic', 'primitive', or 'amateurish', the product of (and for) 'social aspirants' who 'lack understanding of their social superiors', is commonplace.[34]

But, as McDonald and Stokes both point out, it is simply not true that lowbrow literature is the preserve of lower-class audiences.[35] Popular culture is popular because it appeals to all levels of society, then and now.

Much earlier work on romance and its audiences suffers further because it assumes medieval classes were clearly defined, and particularly that courtly and mercantile populations were distinct. Social and cultural historians have since discovered that was a mistake. Writing of fourteenth-century London, Ralph Hanna argues that 'it is difficult to conceive of mercantile-industrial City and royal Westminster as anything other than interconnected, not oppositional', while Spufford bluntly rejects the traditional dichotomy between courtly and bourgeois mentalities as the construct of 'historians whose class-consciousness has run to excess'.[36] This more nuanced understanding of medieval society is reflected in the recent shift towards using compound phrases like 'bourgeois-gentry' when describing romance's audiences. However, old habits die hard. In 2008 Michael Johnston could still invoke the familiar divisions and claim the knights and merchants in romance typically 'speak different "economic languages"'.[37] Though romance scholarship is moving away from the old paradigms, it is not yet free of prejudiced assumptions, and could do more to

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[34] Nicola McDonald, 'A Polemical Introduction', in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 1–21, at p. 9 (the internal quotations are from Pearsall, 'Development of Middle English Romance').

[35] McDonald, 'A Polemical Introduction', pp. 4–10; Stokes, '*Lanval* to *Sir Launfal*', pp. 59–60.

[36] Ralph Hanna, *London Literature, 1300–1380* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 124; Peter Spufford, *Power and Profit: The Merchant in Medieval Europe* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), p. 181.

[37] Michael Johnston, 'Knights and Merchants Unite: *Sir Amadace*, the Grateful Dead, and the Moral Exemplum Tradition', *Neophilologus* 92(4) (2008), 735–44, at p. 736.

assimilate recent developments in social and cultural history.[38] This dissertation finds little evidence that Middle English romances maintain the supposed dichotomy between town and court. It is time that particular chimera was driven out.

Knowing an individual's socio-economic status does not amount to knowing his or her thoughts and feelings. Ideological processes are more subtle than that, for instance when they lead people to subscribe to value systems that are intrinsically hostile to them, and thus to become willing participants in their own subordination. According to Stephen Knight's 'The Social Function of the Middle English Romances' that is precisely what these texts do. Knight observed that 'romances confront problems seen from the viewpoint of a landowning, armed class', while 'the majority of the audience would have been people who were not in positions of power but accepted the values of those who were'.[39] From this, Knight used theories of false consciousness and the 'ideological imaginary' to address how partisan cultural attitudes replicate across classes, and thus offered a more subtle approach than that which seeks simply to match beliefs with particular socio-economic groups.

However, the approach in Knight's essay is itself problematic. The basic principle is that the dominant class sets the agenda and everyone else is duped into following meekly. The trouble with this premiss is that it assumes the dominant class had a unified and consistent outlook, whereas the aristocracy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries actually espoused a number of conflicting views about nobility, society, and its own legitimacy (as I show in Chapter 1). Moreover, the cultural hegemony is always unstable – it contains emergent features of new ideologies, residual features of old ones, and is always coloured by the proclivities of the individual speaking/writing, and of his or her imagined

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[38] Sharon Kinoshita sets a precedent for using the newest historical evidence in 'Feudal Agency and Female Subjectivity', in Zrinka Stahuljak *et al.*, *Thinking through Chrétien de Troyes* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), pp. 111–38. This essay is notable for rejecting George Duby's theories in favour of more recent, revisionist perspectives from historians such as Theodore Evergates (discussed further in Chapter 1, below)

[39] Stephen Knight, 'The Social Function of the Middle English Romances', in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History*, ed. David Aers (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986), pp. 99–122, at pp. 101–2.

audience.[40] Ideologies are never passively replicated, but always actively reshaped and reappropriated at each new articulation.

Knight later came to recognize these issues. Many years after writing 'The Social Function of the Middle English Romances', it was he who introduced me to the work of Bourdieu. This he admired because it synthesizes the subjective and objective factors that shape an individual's attitudes and disposition (what Bourdieu calls *habitus*), and thus provides a more sophisticated framework for thinking about the relationship between individuals, societies, and the cultures that mediate their relations. While Bourdieu accepts that people are entirely conditioned by their surroundings, he sees that their responses to those surroundings often defy prediction.[41] To be a middle-class Parisian businesswoman opens some doors and closes others, but it does not dictate which she will go through, which she will ignore, and which she will attempt to force. Back with medieval literature, this means that, as Glenn Wright puts it, 'actual social position can hardly have been as dependable a barometer of an individual's attitude toward romance as many commentators on the subject would like to assume'.[42] Wright points out that the gentry might have aspired to match romance's standard of living, or been cynical because its ideals are so far removed from practical living. He continues:

> A man grown rich through trade or other means might scoff at the
> irrelevance of the chivalric code or espouse it in flattery of his own
> upward mobility. The un-free auxiliaries of a manor or abbey might

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40   I am thinking here of the arguments put forward in Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 121–35.

41   Bourdieu formulated and refined his theory of *habitus* over many years and publications: see, for example, *Distinction*, pp. 166–8; *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 72–95; 'Codification', in Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), pp. 76–86, at pp. 76–8. The concept and its development are lucidly set out in Karl Maton, 'Habitus', , in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, ed. Michael Grenfell (Durham: Acumen, 2008; rept. 2010), pp. 49–65.

42   Glenn Wright, 'Comic Ambivalence in *Sir Perceval of Galles*', *Allegorica* 21 (2000), 47–61, at p. 49.

balk at romance's elitism or exult in the depiction of an elevated and fantastic life.[43]

Wright does not actually use Bourdieu's work, but he offers a model example of how Bourdieu's theories might play out in romance criticism. Ideological constructs like 'nobility' are never class-specific; people may hold contradictory views simultaneously, and even a 'false consciousness' is true and meaningful to the person who experiences it. False or not, individuals usually hold their beliefs with conviction and affection. My Chapter 1 shows that all classes automatically respected old blood and inherited privilege, and might also resist them, while simultaneously crediting the symbolic capital of virtue and the social cachet attached to material ostentation. When one or other of those elements comes uppermost in a romance, we learn a lot about the text itself, but nothing reliable about who it was addressing.

Nevertheless, despite all these problems, history and context remain vital components of literary scholarship. Though some scholars read romance as addressing universal human urges that transcend social and temporal divisions, I am not one of them.[44] *Sir Eglamour*'s Christabel and the heroine of *Bridget Jones's Diary* both want a man, but the desire of an earl's daughter in the fifteenth century is very different from that of a middle-class woman in the twenty-first. That is why the first chapter of this dissertation discusses medieval ideas about nobility as we can reconstruct them from theology, literature, and historical research. It is true we cannot know precisely who read/heard these romances, or how and why they enjoyed them, but it is equally true that understanding romances is impossible unless we try also to understand the culture they were part of. Taken by themselves the romances describe nobility and class in a manner that is jumbled, inconsistent, and contradictory; knowing how nobility and class were constructed in the culture at large does not change that impression, but it does help to explain how the situation came about. And yet one

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[43] Wright, 'Comic Ambivalence in *Sir Perceval*', pp. 49–50.

[44] This approach particularly appeals to those interested in psychology and psychoanalysis; for examples, see Derek Brewer, *Symbolic Stories: Traditional Narratives of the Family Drama in English Literature*, 2nd edn (Harlow: Longman, 1988), pp. 1–14; Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, pp. 1–11.

of this study's most important conclusions is that Middle English romances must be read first and foremost as *stories*, for my Chapters 2–4 find them repeatedly abandoning ideological consistency in favour of narrative felicity. No romance is so awed by noble blood that it cannot joke at the hero's expense, and none is so deeply pious that it can resist the opportunity for occasional violence and revenge. These are social and historical documents, of course, but they are always more concerned with narrative than commentary.

Developing the Project: Hypotheses and Research Questions

As these opinions developed they shaped a dissertation very different from the one I set out to write. I was initially much influenced by Auerbach's seminal discussion of Chrétien's *Yvain*, 'The Knight Sets Forth', which demonstrates how a text's specific subject matter and general aesthetic might both be explained using a single socio-contextual framework. Auerbach argued that *Yvain*'s hero-centric environment, avowal of love and adventure, and dismissal of everything that is not aristocratic and courtly, all reflect the beliefs and anxieties of a social élite convinced of its natural superiority, careless of the world below, and yet unsettled by the birth of bourgeois/mercantile commercialism.[45] Naively, I planned my dissertation to do something similar. If Auerbach had described the *habitus* encoded in Old French romance, I was going to describe the *habitus* of the Middle English ones.

That scheme rested on the belief that Middle English romance came after Anglo-Norman, replaced it, and rewrote the genre in line with the experiences and beliefs of a later, lower audience. With one foot in historical context and the other in Bourdieu's theory of cultural distinction, I intended to compare romances in Anglo-Norman and Middle English, and thereby discover how the aristocratic *habitus* described by Auerbach mutated into a bourgeois-gentry one proper to the Middle English texts and their audience. However, this idea

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[45] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), trans. Willard R. Trask, 15th anniversary edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 131–41, especially p. 138. Spufford points out that, far from being threatened by commercialism, the French nobility was actually much involved with it: *Power and Profit*, p. 146.

crumbled, for the conceptual and methodological assumptions that supported it proved false.

New analyses of Anglo-Norman literature have shown that the critical paradigms Auerbach developed for Continental romance do not translate to Insular texts. Marianne Ailes and Melissa Furrow demonstrate that Anglo-Norman romance has a greater affinity with *chanson de geste* than with Continental *roman cortois*;[46] Susan Crane and Rosalind Field discuss how, far from retreating into aristocratic fantasy, Anglo-Norman romance engages directly with real-world problems of society, governance, and law.[47] This confirms Crane's earlier argument that the significant distinction is actually not between Anglo-Norman and Middle English literature, but between Insular and Continental.[48] Furthermore, Middle English and Anglo-Norman literature are now known to have existed simultaneously, with influence going both ways.[49] Most Anglo-Norman romances survive in fourteenth-century copies,[50] while the numerous polyglot manuscripts and macaronic texts indicate an Insular literary culture that was widely bi-lingual, even tri-lingual (manuscripts such as Bodleian

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[46] Marianne Ailes, 'What's in a Name? Anglo-Norman Romances or *Chansons de geste*?', in *Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts*, ed. Rhiannon Purdie and Michael Cichon (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), pp. 61–76; Melissa Furrow, '*Chanson de geste* as Romance in England', in *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance*, ed. Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjević, and Judith Weiss (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), pp. 73–89.

[47] Crane, *Insular Romance*, pp. 13–91; Rosalind Field, 'Romance in England, 1066–1400', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 152–76, at pp. 161–2; Rosalind Field, 'Pur les francs homes amender: Clerical Authors and the Thirteenth-Century Context of Historical Romance', in *Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts*, ed. Rhiannon Purdie and Michael Cichon (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), pp. 175–88, at pp. 180–3, 187.

[48] Crane, *Insular Romance*, pp. 5–6.

[49] For the two-way traffic between Anglo-Norman and Middle English romance, see Rosalind Field, 'Patterns of Availability and Demand in Middle English Translations *de romanz*', in *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance*, ed. Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjević, and Judith Weiss (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), pp. 73–89, at pp. 75–9.

[50] See catalogue listings in Ruth Dean, *Anglo-Norman Literature: A Guide to Texts and Manuscripts*, compiled with the collaboration of Maureen B. M. Boulton (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1999)

Library, MS Digby 86; British Library, Additional MS 46919; and British Library, MS Harley 2253).[51] Chronological and social distinctions between Middle English and Anglo-Norman romance have thus proved untenable, and this weakens the authority of comparative readings.

A more fundamental problem with comparative reading is highlighted in Ivana Djordjević's essay '*Guy of Warwick* as a Translation'.[52] This begins by quoting parallel passages from the standard edition of the Anglo-Norman *Gui de Warewic* and from the widely available Auchinleck text of the Middle English translation *Guy*. Djordjević notes the many minor differences between the two, and offers a dummy analysis that explains them in terms of social and historical change. Then she quotes the same passage from a different branch of the Anglo-Norman manuscript tradition – one that has not been edited. All the apparent 'changes' in the Middle English version are present in this unedited manuscript, and the clever socio-historical analysis of changing cultural attitudes collapses.[53] After that, there can be no going back. It is futile to speculate on what translators did or did not change, and why, for the so-called differences might result from nothing more than gaps in the manuscript record. As Djodjević puts it:

> this makes it very hard to separate Anglo-Norman from Middle English redactions and to distinguish between interventions that are due to translators and those that are not – or; perhaps more accurately, revisions that happen to involve a change in language and those that do not.[54]

Adding to this the astonishing breadth of Middle English romance's audience, and the dubious assumptions implicit in reconstructing class ideologies (especially those of many centuries ago), it became clear that my original hypothesis had proved false.

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[51] See the discussion of these manuscripts and of England's tri-lingual culture in Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, pp. 181–220. See also Field, 'Patterns of Availability and Demand', p. 74.

[52] Ivana Djordjević, '*Guy of Warwick* as a Translation', in *Guy of Warwick: Icon and Ancestor*, ed. Alison Wiggins and Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), pp. 27–43.

[53] Djordjević, '*Guy of Warwick* as a Translation', pp. 30–5.

[54] Djordjević, '*Guy of Warwick* as a Translation', p. 36.

Phoenix-like, a new project immediately rose from the ashes. Nobility and class had featured prominently in my research so far, but I had consistently failed to impose order upon them. Teasing out their complexities now became my primary goal, and this demanded a robust methodology that embraced textual inconsistencies and acknowledged the cultural diversity that produced them. Where theoretical and historical master-narratives had failed, text-based research questions and close reading were set to succeed. First I ask what Middle English romances consider the source of nobility: is it blood and ancestry, as Duby and Bloch write of Old French romance?[55] Is it prowess – the cornerstone of aristocratic identity in Richard Kaueper's *Chivalry and Violence*?[56] Do they join with Dante's *Convivio* and Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale, and favour virtue? Or do they look at contemporary social and economic changes, and realize cynically that nobility can be bought?

Most definitions of medieval romance specify that the heroes and heroines are always knights and ladies.[57] Similarly, few would disagree with Northrop Frye's observation that the romance hero is a man 'superior in *degree* to other men and to his environment […] whose actions are marvellous but who is himself identified as a human being' (i.e. not divine, semi-divine, or an everyman).[58] This means the genre has a latent aristocratic bias, for it is always possible to make the hero's high birth the direct cause of his exceptional

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[55] Georges Duby, *The Chivalrous Society*, trans. Cynthia Postan (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 59–80, 134–48; R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 64–127.

[56] Richard W. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), especially pp. 129–60.

[57] See, for instance, McDonald, 'A Polemical Introduction', p. 15; Putter, 'A Historical Introduction', p. 1; Kevin S. Whetter, *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 64–5; Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 10; Roberta L. Krueger, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 1–9, at p. 2.

[58] Northrop Frye, 'Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes', in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957; reissued 1971), pp. 33–67, at p. 33.

qualities. The second strand of my research asks to what extent that possibility is realized, and how the romances depict other classes and cross-class interactions. Do they consistently favour the upper class? Can characters without a noble ancestry display noble qualities? Do the texts really maintain the oft-cited divide between courtly and bourgeois mentalities? Drawing all this together, I ask finally whether there are any patterns: do Middle English romances have a consistent ideological orientation, or do they not? I conclude they do not, but that there is a pattern even so. The ideological inconsistencies all stem from the texts' being primarily concerned with story-telling, and disinterested in socio-political manœuvring; this helps to explain how they achieved such extraordinary popularity over at least two centuries.

The texts discussed here have been selected according to the following principles. They are all in Middle English verse, and all are under 2,500 lines long, so as to avoid false comparisons between texts of wildly different lengths (between *Guy of Warwick* and *Chevelere Assigne*, for example). To keep the discussion away from print culture, all exist in manuscripts from before 1500. Finally, I avoid romances with female protagonists (such as *Emaré* and *Le Bone Florence of Rome*) because I wished to avoid discussing femininity and gender. This project has raised some interesting questions about women's place in the nobility debate, and these require further research; here, though, the focus is on the male hero. Having chosen fourteen texts that meet all these criteria, I split them into three broad story-types. Over the years there have been many attempts to subdivide the large body of Middle English romance, some scholars favouring formal classification, others preferring to go by date, still others by tone and/or subject matter.[59] Since none has yet proved definitive, the options

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[59] Pearsall, 'Development of Middle English Romance' goes by date and verse-form, though the two do not always match up; Mehl, *Middle English Romances* groups the romances by length, but has a separate category for 'homiletic romances'. John Finlayson distinguishes between *roman d'aventure* and *roman courtois*, then creates sub-categories (e.g. the 'romanticised folktale') to accommodate the texts his narrow definitions exclude: 'Definitions of Middle English Romance', *Chaucer Review* 15 (1980), 44–62, 168–81. J. Burke Severs groups the romances by their main subject (Charlemagne, Troy, Arthur, etc.), with a large group of 'miscellaneous romances' at the end: *Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050–1500*, vol. 1: *Romances* (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967).

remain open, and for this dissertation it made most sense to go by plot: different kinds of story, I found, favour different representations of nobility.

Overview

Chapter 1 establishes the romances' general cultural background. Evidence from literature, history, theology, and scripture shows that nobility was a compound ideal that drew on several value systems. The idea that it inhered in the blood had significant symbolic power, but was neither the sole means of understanding nobility, nor even the main one. No single definition held sway, either in a particular class or in society as a whole. Chapters 2–4 discuss a selection of romances in the light of those findings, and find they reflect nobility in all its many guises, often simultaneously.

Chapter 2 discusses romances about lost heirs – noble children who are raised in obscurity and eventually return to an aristocratic milieu. The texts are *Degaré*, *Lybeaus Desconus*, *Sir Perceval of Galles*, *Chevelere Assigne*, and *Octavian* (Northern and Southern versions). They usually present nobility as a quality inherent in the blood, but not altogether consistently. The texts all comment on the importance of nurture as well as nature, often to comic effect, and credit non-courtly environments with a dignity and validity of their own. Though it has a strong conservative element, this story-type does not favour the upper-class unequivocally.

In Chapter 3 we turn to romances in which the main action sees the hero fall in love and eventually marry his lady: *Floris and Blancheflour*, *Sir Degrevant*, *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, *The Erle of Tolous*, and the Amis–Belisaunt plot in *Amis and Amiloun*. The partners are seldom of equal status, and their eventual union suggests outstanding personal merit can outweigh inferiority of birth. But that meritocratic principle is not made explicit. The texts usually lose sight of it, and concentrate instead on a sequence of adventures in which the hero's main quality seems to be prowess. This illustrates tensions inherent in romance's comprehensive vision of nobility, which always includes elements of contradiction and paradox.

The romances in Chapter 4 all involve prosperous knights who lose everything, suffer physically, materially, and emotionally, and are eventually restored to health, wealth, and happiness. They are Amiloun, Sir Isumbras, Sir Cleges, Sir Landevale/Launfal, and Sir Amadace. Though these men suffer for different reasons (sometimes at their own hands, sometimes at God's), their stories share some broad similarities. Events tend to devalue noble blood, and present nobility as a hybrid civil and spiritual state, derived equally from personal virtue and material wealth. Theoretically anyone could acquire it, though the texts do not fully realize that possibility. However, there are still traces of biological and functional principles – nobility derived from birth or warrior prowess – often introduced when common romance episodes are spliced into an existing story. Scenes and motifs appear to have been chosen in answer to the immediate narrative situation, regardless of their wider ideological impact.

This leads to the conclusion that Middle English romances do not have any consistent class position, and espouse no particular definition of nobility. Each type of story suggests a particular view in theory, but in the narrative moment those suggestions are often ignored. The resulting texts are frequently inconsistent and sometimes illogical, as one might expect from such composite, collective creations. Indeed, I contend that was an important part of their appeal. By embracing so many conflicting ideas they run the gamut of contemporary opinion, and so succeed in appealing to the broadest possible audience.

CHAPTER 1

Nobility in the Later Middle Ages

To begin our discussion, here are four contrasting medieval statements about nobility and its foundations. The first is from Ramon Llull's *Llibre de l'ordre de cavalleria* (1274–6):

> Paratge e cavaylaria se covenen es concorden, cor paratge no és àls mas continuada honor ansiana […] tu no pots aver poder en fer cavayler home vil de linatge.[1]

> [Nobility and Chivalry are joined and belong together, for nobility is nothing less than a continuance of ancient honour […] you cannot have the power to make a man of base lineage a knight.][2]

The second is from Dante's *Convivio* (1304–7):

> Tale imperò che gentilezza volse,
> Secondo 'l suo parere,
> Che fosse antica possession d'avere
> con reggimenti belli.
>
> > (*Convivio*, canzone 3, ll. 21–4)

> [One ruler of the empire described nobility as consisting, in his view, of age old wealth, together with pleasing manners.]
> > (*Banquet*, p. 119)

The third from Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale (1380s):

> But for ye speken of swich gentilesse
> As is descended out of old richesse,
> That therfore sholden ye be gentil men,
> Swich arrogance is nat worth an hen.[3]

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[1] Ramon Llull, *Llibre de l'ordre de cavalleria*, ed. Albert Soler i Llopart (Barcelona: Barcino, 1988), III.8–9.

[2] Ramon Llull, *The Book of the Order of Chivalry*, trans. Noel Fallows (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), III.8–9.

[3] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), III.1109–12.

And the fourth is a proverb, supposedly used by John Ball to inflame the English
Rising of 1381:

> Whan Adam dalf, and Eve span,
> Wo was thenne a gentilman?[4]

These are just a few of the opinions expressed in the long-running medieval
debate on true nobility. They give a sense of the wide variety of interpretations
available, and the wide variety of causes to which those interpretations could be
harnessed. Llull wrote to codify chivalric behaviour and praise knighthood, and
had an explicit didactic intent. Nobility is a secondary theme for him, and he
simply assumes that knights come from well-established and wealthy families.
He concedes that a 'novel' ('new') lineage might produce a worthy individual, but
thinks it unlikely (III.10); that such a man would possess 'tanta de riquesa que
pusca mantenir cavaylaria' ('sufficient wealth to be able to uphold chivalry')
seems to him still less probable (III.15). Llull also writes repeatedly that sexual
liaisons between noble and base people should be avoided, so as to maintain the
purity of noble blood.[5] Llull's opinions were shared by the emperor Dante quotes
in the *Convivio*, who says nobility is about blood and polish, though Dante himself
rejects that view. Book 4 of his *Convivio* is devoted to the argument that true
nobility can only come from personal virtue, and he writes passionately that 'la
stirpe non fa le singulari persone nobili, ma le singulari persone fanno nobile la
stirpe' ('It is not a family-line that makes individuals noble, but individuals who
ennoble a family-line').[6]

The old lady in the Wife of Bath's Tale agrees, drawing much from the
Convivio and even citing Dante by name at l. 1126. She develops the argument,
too, and is still more determined to sever quality from birth:

> Al were it that myne auncestres were rude,
> Yet may the hye god, and so hope I,

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[4]   Proverbial, printed as 'John Ball's Sermon Theme', in *Medieval English
Political Writings*, ed. James M. Dean (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute
Publications, 1996), p. 140.

[5]   As in III.7, III.9, VII.6; see also Fallows's introduction to *The Order of Chivalry*,
p. xxi.

[6]   Dante, *Convivio*, IV.xx.5; in English, *Banquet*, p. 172.

> Grante me grace to liven vertuously.
> Thanne am I gentil [...]
>
> <div align="right">(Wife of Bath's Tale, ll. 1172–4)</div>

Thus the ill-bred and ugly hag vigorously defends her right to gentility, in a manner that meshes with the egalitarian sentiment of John Ball's radical sermon. His theme levels all people by reducing humankind to its shared ancestry in Adam and Eve, and its universal burden of sin. However, though his theme was radical in the sense of its appeal to origins (radical, from Latin *radix*, meaning 'root'), and was particularly apposite to the so-called Peasants' Revolt, it was not a new coinage. The phrase was proverbial, and expresses a sentiment much older and much more widespread than the disturbances of July 1381.[7]

This chapter sets the scene for the discussion of Middle English romances in Chapters 2–4 by exploring some of these ideas in more depth, and in relation to their context in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. I draw on literary sources in English and French from the late twelfth century to the late fourteenth, and on the work of modern economic, social, and cultural historians. Since faith and religion were vital parts of medieval culture, we begin with Christianity and the evidence from scripture and the Church Fathers. On the one hand, Christianity preaches equality; on the other, the Bible offers ample justification for social hierarchy. Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory the Great all agree that power and subjection are inevitable, defensible facts of life on earth.

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[7]   See George Kane, 'Some Fourteenth-Century "Political" Poems', in *Medieval English Religious and Ethical Literature: Essays in Honour of G. H. Russell*, ed. Gregory Kratzmann and James Simpson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1986), pp. 82–91, at p. 90; J. R. Maddicott, 'Poems of Social Protest in Early Fourteenth-Century England', in *England in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. W. M. Ormrod (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1986), pp. 130–44, at pp. 140–2. For the proverbial, conventional aspects of other literature associated with the Revolt, see Richard Firth Green, 'John Ball's Letters: Literary History and Historical Literature', in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 176–200. On the existence of a 'clerical proletariat' preaching Christian equality throughout the fourteenth century, see J. R. Maddicott, *The English Peasantry and the Demands of the Crown, 1291–1341* (Oxford: Past & Present Society, 1975), p. 65.

Social hierarchy was commonly imagined according to one of two patterns: the three estates and the body politic. These are the subjects of the next two sections, which relate the two forms of social description to contemporary socio-economic circumstances. Though the estates model seems naturally hierarchical, and the body politic corporate, both actually combine rigid stratification with co-operative principles, and neither is antithetical to the idea that nobility inheres in the blood. In the face of fourteenth-century social change, the body politic proved the more flexible of the two. However, the estates model did still flourish as a conservative response, harking back to a past imagined as being simpler, more secure, and in closer accordance with the natural order ordained by God.

Beside hierarchical social descriptions there flourished another idea: that true nobility comes from personal virtue. The third section discusses that principle, and some of the ways in which it was squared with the apparently incompatible theory of nobility by birth. Although medieval writers often present the argument from virtue to refute the idea that nobility comes from ancestry, the hereditary principle was remarkably tenacious, and proved well able to counter the challenge.

There was also a more cynical, pragmatic approach that said nobility was mainly a matter of public recognition. This is the topic of the final section. It is a view codified by lawyers and jurists in the fourteenth century, and recognizes the contemporary practice of ennobling individuals and families through letters patent or grants of arms. It makes nobility a civil state and an effect of public esteem, and recognizes that status is often more about material wealth than inner worth. This section also acknowledges the sheer complexity of social relations in the medieval upper class, which comprised a wide range of people with a wide range of occupations, who drew symbolic and social capital from several sources at once. Though the documentary record makes ever finer distinctions between different ranks and occupations, in practice those categories overlapped and merged. The chapter concludes that nobility was a composite, fluid concept and that status was always relative. Each of the areas discussed supports arguments both for and against inherited, blood-based

nobility, while social changes could encourage both conservative and liberal attitudes.

Equality and Hierarchy in Scripture and Theology

The nobility debate was conducted in a Christian context, so the Bible and writings of the Church Fathers are important sources. Few romance readers would have been able to study the Latin texts, but Eamon Duffy has shown the medieval laity had ready access to the liturgy and tenets of the faith by other means.[8] They heard the ideas discussed in sermons and readings, and encountered them at second or third hand everywhere in the general culture – the vernacular, non-specialist environment that C. S. Lewis once called the 'backcloth for the arts'.[9] The quotations in this section are therefore to be taken only as examples of the kinds of ideas which were generally available, and which could claim scriptural authority. Though it is possible that romance audiences did know the actual texts, particularly the ones from the Bible, the argument does not rely on their having done so.

Some aspects of Christianity weigh heavily against the hereditary principle and the idea that nobility inheres in certain bloodlines. This is a faith which embraces all people and promises everyone salvation.[10] Christ spent his time on earth among the poor and the reviled, chose his disciples from among them, and preached universal love in such terms as 'loue ye youre enemyes, do ye wel to hem that hatiden you' (Matthew 5:44), and, 'Therfor alle thingis, what

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8   Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400–c. 1580*, 2nd edn (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), especially pp. 53–89.

9   C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 14.

10   These distinctive features of Christianity are discussed in Henry Chadwick, 'Christian Doctrine', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c. 350–c. 1450*, ed. J. H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 11–20, at pp. 11, 15. R. N. Swanson notes that medieval Christianity was slow to accept that laypeople might attain salvation, but that by 1300 Purgatory was well established as a lay route to Paradise: *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c. 1215–c. 1515* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 36.

euere thingis ye wolen that men do to you, do ye to hem' (Matthew 7:12).[11] The New Testament emphasizes time and again that all believers are equal in the eyes of God, so Galatians 3:26–9:

> For alle ye ben the children of God thoruȝ the beleue of Jhesu Crist. For alle ye that ben baptisid, ben clothid with Crist. Ther is no Jewe, ne Greke, ne bond man, ne fre man, ne male, ne female; for alle ye ben oon in Jhesu Crist.

And Acts 10:34–5:

> And Petre openyde his mouth, and seide, In trewthe Y haue foundun, that God is no acceptor of persoones; but in eche folk he that dredith God, and worchith riytwisnesse, is accept to hym.

Verses like these express an essential human equality, and connect with the loving message of Christ's ministry as it is usually understood today. That humanitarian, egalitarian understanding had some purchase on medieval minds, too, as shown by their emphasis on *caritas*. Swanson places *caritas* at the heart of medieval Christianity, and defines it as 'charity in its widest sense […] an assurance of fraternity and co-operation which in theory prevented exploitation and imposed mutuality on relationships to prevent excess'.[12]

The medieval concern for the so-called 'monstrous races' betrays a similar attitude. These creatures were believed to inhabit the ends of the earth, and included a race with dog's heads, one with faces in their chests, and another who subsisted solely on the scent of apples because they had no mouths. Recent critics have been much exercised by these medieval 'monsters', especially in the context of how western Christianity constructed alterity, and hence how it constructed itself. In such analyses monsters, Saracens, and Jews become ghastly but fascinating doppelgängers, and their cultures a kind of imaginative black hole or hell-mouth, sucking in all that is horrifying, sensational, repulsive, or illicit, and acquiring a deadly attraction by so doing.[13] But there is another side to

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[11] I quote from the Wycliffe Bible as the vernacular translation of the Latin Vulgate closest to the medieval experience.

[12] Swanson, *Religion and Devotion*, p. 18.

[13] Important discussions of medieval monsters include Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of

medieval monstrosity. Block Freidman demonstrates that commentators who wrote on the monstrous races (or on the monstrous beings who occasionally appeared within the home culture) were often most anxious to ascertain whether these extraordinary creatures should be considered human. If they were, the commentators felt Christians had a duty to bring them the Good News and to clear the path to their salvation. It says much for the sensitivity and enterprise of these men that they often decided the 'monsters' were indeed human, and that missions were actually planned to effect their conversion.[14]

However, to interpret Christ's ministry and verses like Galatians 3:26–9 as expressions of universal equality is more in line with modern thinking than medieval. Loving one's neighbours does not require thinking of them as equals, and all being equal in the eyes of God is not the same as all being equal here on earth. Perhaps more convincing in the post-scholastic age was the logical argument seized upon by John Ball: there cannot logically be two breeds of human – one noble and one not – for humanity all descends from Adam and Eve. John Ball was by no means the first to notice this; the same objection appears in the Prose *Lancelot* over a century earlier, where the young hero says:

> Et len me fet entendant que dun homme & dune feme sont issus toutes gens. Ie ne sai pas par quel raison li vn one plus de gentilleche que li autre, so on ne la conquert par proeche.][15]

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14 John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 59–86. A similarly moderate attitude sometimes comes through in the *Alexander* romances – *Le Roman de toute chevalerie* and *Kyng Alisaunder*. They have been edited as Thomas of Kent, *Le Roman de toute chevalerie*, ed. Brian Foster and Ian Short, 2 vols (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1976–7); *Kyng Alisaunder*, ed. G. V. Smithers, 2 vols, EETS o.s. 227, 237 (London: Oxford University Press, 1952, 1957).

15 *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, ed. H. Oskar Sommer, vol. 3: *Le Livre de Lancelot del Lac, Part 1* (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1910), p. 89.

[I've been taught that all people have come from a single man and woman. I don't know on what grounds some are more noble than others, unless they gain nobility through prowess.][16]

Nature makes a similar point during her confession in *Le Roman de la rose*:

> Je les faiz touz semblables estre,
> Si cum il apert a lor nestre.
> Par moi naiscent semblable et nu,
> Fort et foible, gros et menu.[17]

> [I make them [people] all alike, as is apparent at their birth. Through me they are all born alike in their nakedness, strong and weak, high and low.][18]

The repetition of *semblable* ('alike') emphasizes Nature's point, and a little later she says again that she bestows nobility 'sor touz ygaument' ('equally upon everyone').[19]

For a final example we turn to Dante's *Convivio*, which also dwells on the logical consequences of humankind's shared origins. Dante shows that it is absurd to say that some bloodlines are intrinsically noble, because:

> tale quale fu lo primo generante, cioè Adamo, conviene essere tutta l'umana generazione [...] se esso Adamo fu nobile, tutti siamo nobili, e se esso fu vile, tutti siamo vili.
>
> (*Convivio*, IV.xv.4–5)

> [The whole human race must have the same condition as that of the first male parent, Adam [...] if Adam was noble, we are all noble; if he was base, we are all base.]
>
> (*Banquet*, p. 161)

The proverbial, logical argument made by John Ball thus goes back to the courtly literature of thirteenth-century France, appears in one of the most successful

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16 *Lancelot–Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, ed. Norris J. Lacy, vol. 2: *Lancelot, Part 1*, trans. Samuel N. Rosenberg (London: Garland, 1993), p. 46.

17 Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la rose*, ed. Daniel Poirion (Paris: Garnier-Falmmarion, 1974), ll. 18595–8.

18 Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Frances Horgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 286–7.

19 In French, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Roman de la rose*, l. 18874; in English, *The Romance of the Rose*, p. 291.

vernacular poems of the Middle Ages, and convinced one of the finest minds of the Italian quattrocento; it was an argument with a long and distinguished running as a serious obstacle to the principle that nobility inhered in the blood.

Meanwhile, scripture and theology could also be used to defend social distinctions. Although all people descend from Adam, the Bible still describes moments when the human race could be seen to have split into noble and less noble branches. One is the split between Cain and Abel, invoked by the *Beowulf* poet in describing Grendel as one of 'Cain's clan'; another, postdiluvian this time, is when Noah curses Ham and his descendents (Genesis 9:25).[20] Augustine certainly saw that as a significant event in the history of human society, for he observes that 'we do not read of a slave anywhere in the Scriptures until the just man Noah branded his son's sin with this word' ('nusquam scripturarum legimus servum, antequam hoc vocabulo Noe iustus peccatum filii vindicaret').[21] Both episodes split the tree of Adam and Eve's descendents into branches that are qualitatively distinct.

Despite maintaining the fundamental equality of human beings, the Church Fathers generally resign themselves to earthly inequality, and consider it an inevitable consequence of sin. According to R. A. Markus, Ambrose's political views adhere to three core principles: 'men's equality by nature', 'the loss of equality brought [...] by the fall from innocence', and the need for a government that will make people 'collaborate for the common and indeed for their own individual good'.[22] Augustine writes similarly that God 'did not wish a rational creature, made in his own image, to have dominion save over irrational creatures: not man over man, but man over the beasts' ('rationalem factum ad imaginem suam noluit nisi inrationabilibus dominari; non hominem homini, sed

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[20] *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*, trans. Seamus Heanry, ed. Daniel Donoghue (New York: Norton, 2002), l. 106. See further the discussion in Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races*, pp. 87–107.

[21] Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. William Chase Green, vol. 6 (London: Heinemann, 1960), book 19, chapter 15, pp. 186–7.

[22] R. A. Markus, 'The Latin Fathers', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c. 350–c. 1450*, ed. J. H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 92–122, at pp. 98–9.

hominem pecori').[23] But, he continues, humankind lost its right to equality when it fell into sin, and so now 'it is understood the condition of slavery is justly imposed on the sinner' (condicio quippe servitus iure intellegitur inposita peccatori').[24] Moreover, given humanity's fallen state, Augustine argued that social and political hierarchy might even do some good: it cannot attain right order, for that is forever lost to the world beneath the moon, but it can help to reduce chaos and conflict, and thus to make life more bearable.[25] Gregory the Great adopted a similar stance in the *Regulae pastoralis*, and specified that inequality is ratified by God:

> omnes homines natura aequales genuit, sed variante meritorum ordine alios aliis culpa postponit. Ipsa autem diversitas, quae accesst ex vitio, divino judicio dispensatur, ut quia omnis homo aeque stare non valet, alter regatur ab altero.
>
> [nature made all men equal; but, through the variety in the order of their merits, guilt putteth one behind another. And this very diversity which hath come from sin is regulated by the divine judgement; so that, forasmuch as every man is not able equally to stand, one is guided by another.][26]

The consensus is that subjection is unfortunate but necessary, even just, and that government and hierarchy are acceptable despite humankind's essential equality.

That opinion is backed by the Bible, for it too authorizes traditional power structures. The Old Testament unfolds in a world of pharaohs, kings, and princes, while the New several times endorses human institutions and asserts the Christian's duty to obey them:

> And Jhesus answeride and seide to hem, Thanne yelde ye to the emperour tho thingis that ben of the emperours; and to God tho thingis that ben of God.

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23   Augustine, *The City of God*, book 19, chapter 15, pp. 186–7.

24   Augustine, *The City of God*, book 19, chapter 15, pp. 186–7.

25   Augustine's political views changed over his life; the opinion described here is that of his maturity, outlined in *The City of God*: see Markus, 'The Latin Fathers', pp. 110–11.

26   Gregory the Great, *Regulae pastoralis liber (Saint Gregory on the Pastoral Charge)*, ed. and trans. H. R. Bramley (London: James Parker, 1874), pp. 74–5.

(Mark 12:17)

Be ye suget to ech creature, for God; ethir to the kyng, as to hym that is hiyer in state, ethir to duykis, as to thilke that ben sent of hym to the veniaunce of mysdoers, and to the preisyng of god men.

(1 Peter 2:13–14)

Euery soule be suget to heiyere powers. For ther is no power but of God, and tho thingis that ben of God, ben ordeyned. Therfor he that ayenstondith power, ayenstondith the ordynaunce of God.

(Romans 13:1–2)

These verses show that hierarchical society and social inequality were in no way antithetical to Christian doctrine. Indeed, even serfdom and slavery could be authorized by scripture (explicitly in 1 Corinthians 7:21).[27] What could not be defended was cruelty, a point which returns us to Swanson's emphasis on *caritas* and fellowship.

And yet even *caritas* could be fitted to hierarchy, as in this passage from Giordano da Pisa (a Dominican theologian), written in 1304:

God has ordained that there be rich and poor so that the rich may be served by the poor, and the poor may be taken care of by the rich [...] Why are the poor given their station in life? So that the rich might earn eternal life through them.[28]

The rich show their *caritas* by giving to the poor, thus narrowing their purses so as to be better able to squeeze through the narrow gate of heaven. The poor, for their part, bear the cross of earthly hardship for the sake of the souls of their wealthier brethren. This vision of earthly inequality offers a token consolation to the disenfranchised, but is more effective as a reassurance for the privileged. It tells them their wealth is acceptable, provided they remember to give alms, and that no one should feel guilty for living comfortably; inequality is proper to life on earth, and an important condition for practising faith. If there was no poverty, the symbiotic relationship between rich and poor would collapse, and one of society's strongest ties would be broken. The reasoning is perverse, and none of

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[27] Swanson notes that some medieval writers do express unease about slavery, but that most of them find ways to justify it: *Religion and Devotion*, pp. 299–303; see also Markus, 'The Latin Fathers', p. 98.

[28] Quoted in Swanson, *Religion and Devotion*, p. 211.

these arguments necessarily justifies *hereditary* privilege; in practice, though, that would not matter. Endorsing hierarchy endorsed the status quo, and that included the inherited rights and powers of the nobility.

Heaven was also believed to be hierarchical, and this provided yet another justification for hierarchy on earth. God, of course, was the Lord of Hosts, and Christ the Prince of Peace, ruling in majesty over their kingdoms of heaven and earth (e.g. Isaiah 9:6–7). Beneath them in heaven were the angels, arranged into nine ranks according to a scheme set out in the late fifth century by *The Celestial Hierarchy* of Pseudo-Dionysius. This was a hugely influential work, and by the twelfth century clerics were of the opinion that 'society on earth should conform to the organisation of the nine orders of angels in heaven in order to facilitate its absorption into eternity'.[29] Below the angels, the blessed were ranked as well. Vernacular literature describes it vividly, as in the concentric circles of heaven and hell in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Similarly, one of Dante's final, climactic visions in the *Paradiso* is of the court of heaven figured as a beautiful white rose, among whose petals he sees 'mirrored *in more than a thousand tiers*, all those of us who have returned on high' ('vidi specchiarsi in più di mille soglie / quanto di noi là sù fatto ha ritorno').[30] This hierarchical arrangement is emphasized in the following canto when Dante notices angels moving among the souls 'di banco in banco' ('row on row').[31]

However, Dante's heaven is hierarchical without inequality:

Presso e lontano, li, nè pon nè leva:
chè dove Dio sanza mezzo governa,
la legge natural nulla rileva.

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[29]   D. E. Luscombe and D. R. Evans, 'The Twelfth-Century Renaissance', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c. 350–c. 1450*, ed. J. H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 306–40, at p. 308; see also Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, pp. 70–4.

[30]   Dante Alighieri, *Divina Commedia: Paradiso*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, rept. edn (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994), xxx.113–14. Translation from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, trans. Robert and Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor, 2007).

[31]   Dante, *Paradiso*, xxxi.16.

[There, near and far do neither add nor take away, for where God, unmediated, rules, natural law has no effect.]

(*Paradiso*, xxx.121–3)

The same idea appears in the Middle English *Pearl*, where the child explains to her father that in heaven 'is vch mon payed inlyche, / Wheþer lyttel oþer much be hys rewarde'.[32] Whereas earthly hierarchies are the result of inequality, and both part of the natural order, Dante and the author of *Pearl* assume that Paradise will be different. But they do not envision total equality, for there are still ranks, even if all the ranks are the same. Such an order defies comprehension, but it was apparently easier for the poets to imagine that than a Paradise without any structure at all.

Heaven in *Piers Plowman* resembles human society even more closely, and has ranks just like those on earth. The only difference is that heaven is truly meritocratic. The blessed are arranged according to their merits like guests at a feast, with the apostles on the dais and the thief who was crucified beside Christ sitting like a beggar on the floor. In the words of Imaginatyf:

Ac thogh the theef hadde heuene he hadde none hey blisse
As seynt Iohan and oþer seyntes þat haen serued bettere.
Riht as sum man ȝeueth me mete and sette me amydde þe flore,
Ich haue mete more then ynow ac nat with so muche worschipe
As tho þar sitten at þe syde table or with þe souereyns in halle,
Bote as a beggare bordles be mysulue on þe grounde.
So hit ferde by þe feloun þat a Goed Fryday was saued;
A sit noþer with seynte Iohn ne with Simond ne Iude
Ne with maydenes ne with martires ne with mylde weddewes [...]
And for to seruen a seynt and such a thef togyderes,
Hit were no resoun ne riht to rewarde both ylyche.[33]

Descriptions like these show that hierarchical structures were ingrained in medieval culture. Although John Ball's sermon theme was proverbial, it was set against a massive body of tradition that rooted hierarchy deep in the conscious and subconscious imaginary.

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32 *Pearl*, ed. E. V. Gordon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), ll. 603–4; see also the discussion of this section in Gordon's introduction, pp. xxi–xxv.

33 William Langland, *Piers Plowman: An Edition of the C Text*, ed. Derek Pearsall (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), passus 14, ll. 135–53.

To sum up, Christianity could legitimately support both sides of the debate on nobility. Scripture and dogma could challenge hereditary privilege by arguing that all people were equal and that 'God is no respecter of persons', and fourteenth-century social reformers and radicals used them to do just that. Conservative people, on the other hand, could use those same sources to authorize ecclesiastical and secular power, and even to split humanity into higher and lower branches. In practice the conservative interpretations usually won out, though vernacular literature shows that courtly and intellectual audiences also entertained more liberal ideas, at least in principle, throughout the Middle Ages.

The Three Estates

The best-known medieval social theory is probably that of the three estates (or orders) – the system that divides men into those who pray (*oratores)*, those who fight (*bellatores*), and those who labour (*laboratores*). This model meshes with the hierarchical element of Christianity, for each of the orders was thought to be divinely appointed.[34] This tri-part system has been thoroughly explored by Georges Duby, whose *Three Orders* made it the core of an elaborate reconstruction of medieval *mentalités*.

Duby believed that the three orders structure crystallized in France around the year 1000, and begins his book with quotations from two high-ranking French clerics: Adalbero of Leon, who wrote that 'here below, some pray, others fight, still others work', and Gerald of Cambrai, who wrote that 'from the beginning, mankind has been divided into three parts, among men of prayer, farmers, and men of war'.[35] Duby dated these statements to 1027–31 and 1024, respectively, and considered them the first expressions of the estates model. Since then, historians have discovered the model is actually much older – it appears in England in the mid-890s, in King Alfred's translation of Boethius's

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[34] David Crouch, *The Birth of Nobility: Constructing Aristocracy in England and France, 900–1300* (Harlow: Pearson, 2005), p. 226.

[35] Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, with a foreword by Thomas N. Bisson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 13.

Consolation of Philosophy.[36] In an interpolation Alfred observes that a king needs

three kinds of subject – 'praying men, fighting men and working men'.[37] Alfred's

formation has been described by Nelson as 'precocious', but Crouch writes that,

on the contrary, 'it is usually suggested that he did have a source, and that he was

drawing on ideas in circulation in the Frankish realms a generation or so

earlier'.[38] (Indeed, the idea that humankind divides into three distinct types can

be found as far back as Plato's *Republic*, though this text was not known in the

medieval West.)[39] Crouch goes on to list a number of other tenth-century

references, concluding that the estates model was 'common intellectual

currency' well before 1000.[40]

The estates model meshes well with the hereditary principle, since it sets

the nobility apart as a distinct group. Duby casts nobility and serfdom as 'genetic

categories [...] two species, two "races"'.[41] Paraphrasing Adalbero, he argues

their respective functions were seen as

> a consequence of reproductively determined distinction, an effect of
> 'race'. The blood that flowed in the veins of noblemen – the source of
> their beauty, their impetuosity, their martial qualities – qualified them
> to undertake the defense of the church, first of all, and, secondarily, of

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[36] Historians have overturned many aspects of Duby's thesis in recent years, in developments that are set out in Crouch's *Birth of Nobility*. Two examples of such revisionary approaches are Theodore Evergates, *The Aristocracy in the County of Champagne, 1100–1300* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), which responds particularly to Duby's ideas about family structures; and Daniel Power, *The Norman Frontier in the Twelfth and Early Thirteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[37] Alfred the Great, 'Translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*', in *Alfred the Great: Asser's 'Life of King Alfred' and Other Contemporary Sources*, trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (London: Penguin, 1983), pp. 131–7, at p. 132.

[38] Janet Nelson, 'Kingship and Empire', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c. 350–c. 1450*, ed. J. H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 211–51, at p. 239; Crouch, *Birth of Nobility*, pp. 226–7.

[39] The formulation is at III.415a–c: see Plato, *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 119.

[40] Crouch, *Birth of Nobility*, p. 227.

[41] Duby, *The Three Orders*, p. 51.

the vulgar [...] it was due to their genetic qualities that the nobles were warriors, *bellatores*. The 'office' of the serfs, on the other hand, was to do whatever was appropriate to the servile condition.[42]

Although the estates model is essentially functional, Duby's argument shows how easily it could slip around to justify the hereditary principle. Here members of the second estate are not noble because they are warriors, but instead are warriors because they are nobly born. Such emphasis on blood is specially characteristic of Duby's writing, but he is supported by other historians too.[43] Keen also finds evidence that biological class boundaries hardened during the thirteenth century, as the number of knights fell and the few who remained gathered themselves into a super-élite. The noble order was increasingly 'defined by blood', and high birth – 'the childbirth pangs of a noblewoman' – became the main entry requirement.[44] According to Rigby, England's hereditary peerage (which emerged during the late fourteenth century) was equally determined to construct itself as a distinct biological group.[45]

Crouch confirms this general emphasis on blood, and provides a contemporary physiological justification:

Medieval scholars acquired the view from Classical medical texts that blood was a vital element in the process of human genesis [...] it carried

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[42] Duby, *The Three Orders*, p. 51.

[43] Cf. Duby's similar claims in *The Chivalrous Society*, encapsulated in the statement that 'Nobility was transmitted by blood' (p. 98).

[44] Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 146. On the decline of knighthood in the thirteenth century, see Kathryn Faulkner, 'The Transformation of Knighthood in Early Thirteenth-Century England', *The English Historical Review* 111 (1996), 1–23; Peter Coss, 'Knighthood, Heraldry and Social Exclusion in Edwardian England', in *Heraldry, Pageantry and Social Display in Medieval England*, ed. Coss (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2002), pp. 39–68, at pp. 43–4, 65; Peter Coss, *The Origins of the English Gentry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 69–108. Their arguments revisit the classic presentation of evidence in Noel Denholm-Young, 'Feudal Society in the Thirteenth Century: The Knights', *History* 29 (1944), 107–19.

[45] S. H. Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages: Class, Status and Gender* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p. 196.

the dispositions and characteristics of the parent to the child, not least of course, his nobility.[46]

Burnley's studies of courtliness add a further physiological argument, based on Aristotle's theory that all knowledge comes from sensory perception, and particularly from the sense of touch. People with soft and sensitive bodies – i.e. the nobility – were therefore thought able to gather more accurate information, from which they could come to more sophisticated intellectual conclusions about the cosmos and their place within it.[47] Here we have two explicit assertions of the hereditary principle – two firm, scientific, philosophical justifications for social closure. These are the intellectual foundations that underpinned the widespread prejudices found in so much courtly and chivalric literature (typified by Llull in the first quotation of this chapter), and that buttressed the historical trends traced by Duby, Keen and Rigby.

However, this apparent fixing of hereditary barriers is just one half of the picture – an ideological response to a very different reality. Narratives of social closure may have flourished in the later Middle Ages, but they were basically fictions. Keen observes in another of his books that the English social hierarchy remained relaxed in comparison with the French, despite thirteenth-century developments, and Holt directly counters the suggestion that the nobility grew more exclusive.[48] He writes that even in the thirteenth century, the English upper class

> was not yet so rigid that it attempted to exclude the nouveau riche, the soldier or the administrator by laying down strict qualifications of blood and birth as conditions of entry.[49]

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[46] Crouch, *Birth of Nobility*, p. 127.

[47] David Burnley, *Courtliness and Literature in Medieval England* (London: Longman, 1998), pp. 80–5; David Burnley, *Chaucer's Language and the Philosophers' Tradition* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1979), pp. 160–1.

[48] Maurice Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages, 1348–1500* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 1.

[49] J. C. Holt, *Magna Carta*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 31. On the varied origins of the Anglo-Norman nobility, see Judith A. Green, *The Aristocracy of Norman England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 25–47, 126–40; Brian Golding, *Conquest and Colonization:*

This important observation reminds us that innate nobility was always an ideological dressing for a situation that was in reality much more flexible. The 'traditional nobility' existed more in theory than practice.

Nevertheless, historical circumstances up to *c.* 1300 did favour the nobility, and might well have encouraged them in conceiving themselves as a breed apart. England went through a long period of population growth and economic expansion between 1100 and 1300, and this worked to landlords' advantage.[50] The big population increased demand for productive land, pushing people to cultivate marginal areas and keeping rents and grain prices high, while the abundance of labour kept wages low. Lords profited considerably, as marshes were drained, woodlands assarted, and the area under cultivation increased from about 8 million acres in 1086 to about 10 million in 1300.[51] Some estate incomes doubled between 1200 and the early 1300s.[52] In these economic conditions, it would be easy to imagine the upper class totally detached from, and careless of, a disenfranchised and downtrodden peasantry – an upper class living the dream offered in the *roman cortois*, and wholly absorbed in élite

The Normans in Britain, 1066–1100 (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2001), pp. 62–3, 190. Henry I was particularly known for promoting 'new men', as discussed in Katherine Keats-Rohan, 'The Bretons and Normans of England, 1066–1154: The Family, the Fief and the Feudal Monarchy', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 36 (1992), 42–78, at pp. 56–9.

[50] The situation summarized in this paragraph is described in detail in Christopher Dyer, *An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp. 86–95; see also Bruce M. S. Campbell, 'The Land', in *A Social History of England, 1200–1500*, ed. Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 179–237, at pp. 182–3.

[51] The figures are from Dyer, *An Age of Transition?*, pp. 19–20. See also S. H. Rigby, 'Introduction: Social Structure and Economic Change in Late Medieval England', in *A Social History of England, 1200–1500*, ed. Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 1–31, at pp. 13, 25–7. On the cultivation of marginal land generally, see Christopher Dyer, *Everyday Life in Medieval England* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1994), pp. 13–26.

[52] Dyer, *An Age of Transition?*, pp. 88–9.

matters such as its tempestuous relationship with the Crown and internal competition for favours and titles in the emerging peerage.[53]

The ideology of the three estates should have checked that attitude. Although it endorses the hereditary nobility, it condones neither arrogance nor exploitation. It is a co-operative ideal in principle, emphasizing mutual dependence, and was designed to help people to live together. Its goal is to capture the proud but violent warrior ethos (an ethos expressed in *Beowulf* and *La Chanson de Roland*), and to lock it into a sustainable vision of a peaceful society.[54] It was not always successful, but the ambition is there all the same. That ambition was neatly expressed for the fourteenth century in passus 8 of *Piers Plowman*, where knights protect the church and the people 'fro wastores and fro wikked men' (l. 27), and the husbandman volunteers in return to 'swynke and swete and sowe for vs bothe' (l. 24). Common women will sew sacks for corn, noblewomen with 'longe fyngres [...] selk and sendel' (ll. 9–10) will make chasubles, and widows will spin cloth 'for profit of the pore' (l. 14). Thus all the world will be served. Everyone has a vital role, and society can be well only when everyone does his or her duty. The evidence from Insular romance is that the nobility took that duty seriously, was very interested in government and the community of the realm, and generally sought to organize the people (and the king) in the interests of the common weal.[55]

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[53] On the relationship between the nobility and the Crown, see Holt, *Magna Carta*, pp. 188–236; Alan Harding, *England in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 269–320; Coss, *Origins of the English Gentry*, pp. 165–201.

[54] For a discussion of the warrior ethos and its implications for social structure, see Eleanor Searle, *Predatory Kinship and the Creation of Norman Power, 840–1066* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). For analysis of how medieval commentators tried to rework it in the interests of social harmony, see Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence*, pp. 63–88, 155–60, 273–97.

[55] See Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, p. 85; Crane, *Insular Romance*, chapters 1 and 2, pp. 13–91; Field, 'Romance in England', pp. 161–2; Field, 'Pur les francs homes amender', pp. 180–3, 187.

This ideal was not restricted to literature and theory; the Toronto School of historians trace similar patterns in the historical record of real life.[56] They oppose the idea that medieval classes split antagonistically, and offer an alternative perspective in arguing that people are more likely to co-operate and compromise than to live in permanent conflict.[57] Campbell, for instance, observes that what is 'most striking about landlord–tenant relations is the rarity with which resentment ignited into violence', and that the respective parties generally favoured 'mutual co-operation'.[58] This makes sense. Though some lords must have been exploitative, treating their tenants little better than beasts, others were presumably humane, taking to heart the Christian principle that everyone has a right to dignity and respect. The majority were probably something in between: moderately good, moderately bad, and sharing a hotch-potch of contradictory opinions on their fellow human beings. Individual attitudes would change continually in response to mood and circumstance, too: a landlord might good-naturedly manage and support his tenants at home, and then speak of them with quite immoderate scorn when next among his peers and superiors at court.

It is also worth remembering that in a land-based economy even the nobility remains relatively close to the soil (relative by today's standards), and that true detachment can have been a luxury available only to very few. Admittedly, the great magnates who travelled between many estates and left the day-to-day management to their stewards and bailiffs would have had little

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[56] For instance Edward Britton, *The Community of the Vill: A Study in the History of Family and Village Life in Fourteenth-Century England* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977); J. A. Raftis, *Peasant Economic Development within the English Manorial System* (Stroud: Sutton, 1997).

[57] The Toronto School's approach is analysed in John Hatcher and Mark Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages: The History and Theory of England's Economic Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 101–2; Rigby, 'Introduction: Social Structure and Economic Change', p. 7.

[58] Campbell, 'The Land', pp. 225–6.

personal contact with their tenants and the earth they tilled.[59] However, even magnates would have interacted with the lower classes in carrying out their judicial and administrative duties, and there is ample evidence of their involvement in land-management and developing infrastructure.[60] Moreover, most of the country was actually held by smaller lords: by 1300 the lesser gentry was responsible for a larger area than the Crown, earls and barons combined.[61] These people typically took an active involvement in their estates – it was, after all, in their economic and spiritual interests to foster reasonably contented and healthy tenants, and to take seriously those tenants' complaints and suggestions.[62] Their desire to understand and monitor their holdings would have demanded close and regular consultation with workers, and a detailed understanding of agricultural methods and challenges. Such lords could still have believed themselves qualitatively superior, of course, but the line between *bellatores* and *laboratores* cannot have been maintained absolutely, for the two estates had too many common interests.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries social and economic conditions changed dramatically, reversing the trends of previous years and forcing the upper class to loosen its tight hold on the rest of society. The Black Death was an important agent in that process. Some historians (David Herlihy, for example) have even seen it as the most decisive moment in European history.[63] Most now

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[59] Cambell gives the example of Roger Bigod, Earl of Norfolk, who had almost 100 manors spread over eighteen counties, plus further holdings in Wales and Ireland: 'The Land', p. 193.

[60] Cambell, 'The Land', p. 200. In a similar vein Michael Prestwich notes the enthusiasm with which the aristocracy took to breeding horses: 'The Enterprise of War', in *A Social History of England, 1200–1500*, ed. Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 74–90, at p. 82.

[61] Campbell, 'The Land', p. 205.

[62] Campbell, 'The Land', pp. 193, 204–5. Dyer also notes that lords were generally reasonable in *An Age of Transition?*, pp. 83–5, and discusses the gentry as estate managers on pp. 97–110. Coss echoes his views in *Origins of the English Gentry*, p. 83.

[63] This is the thesis of David Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*, ed. and introd. Samuel K. Cohn Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard

think that an exaggeration, and believe the epidemic only accelerated and accentuated changes that had begun long before, and would probably have happened anyway.[64] The first half of the fourteenth century already presents as a period of shortage and contraction in almost every area of the society and economy. Population stagnated and went into decline, and successive wet summers destroyed crops and caused massive food shortages. Famine swept northern Europe between 1315 and 1317, and the dearth continued throughout the 1320s as sheep and cows fell victim to epidemics of murrain.[65] European mines produced less gold and silver, while money continued to flow out of England in trade; this led to a bullion shortage and forced a return to bartering and payment in kind.[66] The problem was exacerbated by periods of heavy taxation to fund Edward III's French and Scottish wars, and added to the general sense that society was sliding backwards.[67] When the Black Death eventually came in 1348 it killed perhaps half the population in just a few months, and was

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University Press, 1997); it is evaluated in Cohn's introduction. Jim Bolton gives a general overview of social change 1350–1500 in '"The World Upside Down": Plague as an Agent of Economic and Social Change', in *The Black Death in England*, ed. W. M. Ormrod and P. G. Lindley (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1996), pp. 17–78; he concludes that 'plague remains central to the whole debate' (p. 78).

[64] See the several essays in Bruce M. S. Campbell (ed.), *Before the Black Death: Studies in the 'Crisis' of the Early Fourteenth Century* (Machester: Manchester University Press, 1991). See also Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain 850–1520* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 228–50.

[65] For these points on weather and agriculture, see Dyer, *Standards of Living*, pp. 266–7. The loss of animals meant not only the loss of meat and dairy products, but also of wool (for clothing and sale), and of the draught animals and manure vital for arable farming.

[66] On the bullion crisis and its effects on the mercantile economy, see Pamela Nightingale, 'Monetary Contraction and Mercantile Credit in Later Medieval England', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series 43 (1990), 560–75, at pp. 561–2; Peter Spufford, *Money and its Use in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 339–62. Bolton has reservations about the impact of the bullion shortage on the general economy: see Bolton, 'The World Upside Down', pp. 40–2.

[67] R. H. Britnell, *The Commercialisation of English Society, 1000–1500*, 2nd edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 179–81; Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, p. 254.

then followed by over a century of further outbreaks, both regional and national.[68]

With population so severely reduced, the demand for land and grain fell and labour grew scarce.[69] Rents and prices dropped, and wages rose, reversing the balance of power to favour the lower orders. Landlords found their incomes falling, and labourers took advantage of the turn-around and migrated to find the best terms of employment. They demanded higher wages and flexible, short-term contracts in place of lifetime bondage, and often moved to towns and cities.[70] Those who stayed behind profited from the newly leased demesne lands and from the death or departure of their neighbours by amassing larger and more coherent holdings than they could before, and sometimes became employers and landlords in their own right.[71] Serfdom withered, replaced with cash rents and wage-labour.[72] As the consumer economy recovered and more people moved beyond subsistence, cottage industries began to flourish (industries ranging from weaving cloth to breeding rabbits); the peasant diet improved; and general spending power increased.[73] It was a period of social and

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[68] For a list of all epidemics known to have struck England between 1257 and 1530, see the appendix to Carol Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies: Communal Health in Late Medieval English Towns and Cities* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013).

[69] The situation described in this paragraph is compiled from Campbell, 'The Land', p. 207; Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, pp. 273, 278–81; Bolton, 'The World Upside Down', p. 18; Rigby, 'Introduction: Social Structure and Economic Change', p. 15. The changes are discussed in depth in M. M. Postan, *Medieval Economy and Society: An Economic History of Britain, 1100– 1500* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), especially pp. 41–4, 154–9, 194–202, 217–30. For the effects on, and responses of, ecclesiastical landowers, see Christopher Harper Bill, 'The English Church and English Religion after the Black Death', in *The Black Death in England*, ed. W. M. Ormrod and P. G. Lindley (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1996), pp. 79–124, at pp. 99–102.

[70] Dyer, *Everyday Life in Medieval England*, pp. 167–89.

[71] Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, pp. 278, 356; Dyer, *An Age of Transition?*, pp. 32–3, 75–6, 195–208.

[72] Campbell, 'The Land', pp. 212–13; Dyer, *Standards of Living*, p. 147.

[73] On cottage industries, see Cambell, 'The Land', pp. 208, 221; Dyer, *An Age of Transition?*, p. 32 (cottage industry). On spending power: Maryanne Kowaleski, 'A Consumer Economy', in *A Social History of England, 1200–1500*, ed. Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge

physical mobility, economic possibility, and social unrest, all of which found their most dramatic expression in the 1381 Rising – a flashpoint which scholars currently attribute to the middle and lower classes' perceiving both that new opportunities had opened up to them, and that the upper class was doing everything in its power to keep those opportunities out of reach.[74] By the late fourteenth century the nobility had received many reminders that it was not an autonomous élite, and that the classes were as interconnected as the estates model said. Moreover, those reminders were coming in ways that suggested the 'proper' social order was in fact coming apart.

That sense must have been heightened by social and military changes that undermined the nobility's functional definition as an order of warriors. It has been suggested that the upper class in the later Middle Ages became gradually 'demilitarized': Malcolm Mercer writes that by *c.* 1400 'the military community within a shire was usually a distinct element within gentle society', and that military service was largely a matter of choice.[75] The successful professionals and traders on the margins of the late-medieval upper class were not principally fighting men, and could not claim to belong on the battlefield as did the warrior-élite of earlier periods. There was, indeed, a 'clear distinction' between military and non-military functions: one fourteenth-century London custumal specifies that, should the city need to defend itself, the mayor and aldermen would organize and finance the operation, but the fighting force would be led by the

University Press, 2007), pp. 238–59; Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, pp. 296–7. On diet: Peter Hammond, *Food and Feast in Medieval England*, revised edn (Stroud: Sutton, 2005), pp. 25–37; Cambell, 'The Land', p. 186; Dyer, *Everyday Life in Medieval England*, pp. 77–99.

74 Campbell, 'The Land', p. 218; Dyer, *Everyday Life in Medieval England*, pp. 191–219; Dyer *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, pp. 288–9. Bolton recognizes several causes, but concludes that the Rising was essentially 'a revolt against the exercise of lordship': 'The World Upside Down', pp. 45–9, quotation on p. 48.

75 Malcolm Mercer, *Medieval Gentry: Power, Leadership and Choice During the Wars of the Roses* (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 36–41, quotation at p. 36. Mercers's work draws on that of I. Denton, *The East-Midlands Gentleman, 1400–1530* (unpublished PhD thesis, Keele University, 2006).

city's banneret.[76] Even so, both banneret and mayor would have been accounted prominent members of the upper class, and the mayor would in all likelihood have ranked higher than the banneret in sumptuary laws and tax gradations.[77] In this case, the idea of the secular upper class being synonymous with 'those who fight' would need to be abandoned, since there were distinguished members of lay society who did not bear arms.

However, not all historians agree with this model of declining military activity and narrowing participation. Mercer actually reserves judgement on the extent of demilitarization, while Andrew Ayton fields the opposite view entirely, writing that the fourteenth century was actually a time of extensive 're-militarization'.[78] Coss also subscribes to that opinion, arguing that the Hundred Years War increased military activity in all ranks of the upper class.[79] From that perspective, the connection between nobility and military function was enjoying considerable practical reinforcement. But increased military activity brought its own problems, for it also widened access to military culture. Technological improvements in armour and weaponry made the designers and manufacturers vital participants, alongside the soldiers themselves, while those who did not contribute practically could still take part vicariously in organizing, financing, or watching tournaments. They might even be ennobled by doing so: Edward III and Richard II both knighted merchants who helped fund the Hundred Years War (though the knighthoods were probably little consolation if the merchants subsequently found themselves bankrupt).[80] Warfare was increasingly a

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[76] Caroline Barron, 'Chivalry, Pageantry and Merchant Culture in Medieval London', in *Heraldry, Pageantry and Social Display in Medieval England*, ed. Peter Coss (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2002), pp. 219–41, at p. 226.

[77] The gradations are given in Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 9–10.

[78] Andrew Ayton, 'English Armies in the Fourteenth Century', in *Arms, Armies and Fortifications in the Hundred Years War*, ed. Anne Curry and Michael Hughes (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1994), pp. 21–38, at p. 29.

[79] Coss, *Origins of the English Gentry*, pp. 242–3.

[80] On such knighthoods, see K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 29; on the risks of lending to the Crown, see Prestwich, 'The Enterprise of War', pp. 85–6.

corporate venture, and no longer the preserve of a select group of supposedly blue-blooded warriors.

Most significant of all was the rise of the mercenaries and free companies – a development which directly challenged estates ideology.[81] These soldiers-for-hire changed the face of medieval war, and made a mockery of the venerable feudal ideal of loyalty to one's lord. Reasonably enough, mercenaries were more likely to defect or abscond than to die fighting in a heroic and hopeless last stand.[82] Old forms of retaining and allegiance survived, of course, but now they had competition from a wage-based, self-interested model that commodified loyalty and turned war into business.[83] The mercenaries also shattered the image of the knight as the decorous man of chivalry, fighting on horseback and supported by loyal men drawn from his household and estates (a fanciful idea, always, but a powerful one). Apparently, anyone could fight now, and this new kind of soldier had methods to which the traditional cavalry was ill matched. Warfare had moved on, and the victorious armies now attacked from a distance, using technologically advanced bows, arrows, and bolts that could pierce a knight's armour before he drew close enough even to shout a challenge.[84] Even

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[81] Terry Jones gives a detailed and lively description of mercenaries in *Chaucer's Knight*, but he has a very specific axe to grind and his account is not unbiased: *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980), pp. 4–30. For briefer, yet more balanced discussions, see Christopher Allmand, *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War, c. 1300–c. 1450*, revised edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 73–6; Keen, *Chivalry*, pp. 228–32.

[82] As do the mercenaries in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, sadly too long for this study. See *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition*, ed. Valerie Krishna, preface by Rossell Hope Robbins (New York: Franklin, 1976), ll. 2916–39.

[83] For an intriguing analysis of this 'transformation of social relations', see Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 15–21. The weakness of Strohm's argument, I think, is that it takes twelfth- and thirteenth-century feudal ideology at face value as an accurate reflection of practice, apparently ignoring the fact that it is in the nature of such ideological expressions to be highly selective in their representation of reality, and that they are therefore unreliable bases for comparison.

in its most traditional arena – the battlefield – the upper class was losing ground, and the estates model was powerless to regain it.

Many noblemen and women responded to these changes with hostility, even panic. Dyer paints a gloomy picture of a beleaguered but intransigent upper class. He uses the language of decline – incomes dropping, families slipping down the ranks, falling into debt – and imagines the nobles looking out from their castles and manors in despair at a world gone to ruin and a society turned upside down.[85] Evidence to support this includes the savage crack-down on social freedoms – notably sumptuary laws and labour legislation that confirmed lords' ancient privileges and forced workers to accept unfavourable terms[86] – and the thriving estates literature, in which writers appealed to traditional social ideology even at the moment of its eclipse, and lamented a past they imagined to have been more simple and secure.[87] Langland's use of the estates model is part of that tradition.[88] One could see such writing as nothing more than partisan ideological justification for the new socio-economic legislation: the nobility wanted to defend its privileges, and the idea of there being three divinely appointed orders gave them an excuse for doing so.

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[84] Developments discussed in Robert Hardy, 'The Longbow', in *Arms, Armies and Fortifications in the Hundred Years War*, ed. Anne Curry and Michael Hughes (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1994), pp. 161–82.

[85] Dyer, *An Age of Transition?*, pp. 30–3; cf. Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, p. 341. This perspective comes from a methodology which bears traces of Marx in its tendency to see classes in conflict.

[86] That legislation, and its futility, is discussed in Dyer, *Everyday Life in Medieval England*, pp. 167–89. See also Bolton, 'The World Upside Down', pp. 47–8.

[87] On medieval estates writing, see Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the 'General Prologue' to the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); on its fundamental conservatism, see David Aers, '*Vox Populi* and the Literature of 1381', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 432–53, at p. 440; Kane, 'Some Fourteenth-Century "Political" Poems', pp. 82–3.

[88] See David Aers, *Community, Gender and Individual Identity: English Writing, 1360–1430* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 20–72; the main points are also summarized in Aers, '*Vox Populi* and the Literature of 1381', pp. 438–9.

However, it is also worth remembering that the labour legislation benefited peasants as well as lords, for many of them relied on being able to hire paid help (especially those who were old and infirm).[89] Indeed, these peasants stood to benefit from the legislation still more than the lords did, since they were the employers least able to keep pace with the rising cost of labour. Moreover, the ideals and anxieties that rejuvenated estates writing probably did not belong to the nobles alone: conservative respect for traditional order is not unique to those in power, and many peasants and yeomen must have looked askance at the pretensions of those who used to be their neighbours, and observed with misgivings the general sense of chaos and decay recorded in the period's literature.[90] Ideologies can appeal even to those they exclude, and vigorous affirmations of innate nobility can certainly appeal to audiences who are not nobly born.

Nevertheless, fourteenth-century estates literature does often seem most closely aligned with the interests of the upper class. Gower's *Vox Clamantis* is one example, particularly vituperative in its response to the 1381 Rising. In the prologue to Book 1 the narrator imagines the protestors as grotesque beasts marauding the countryside bent on slaughter and destruction – hideous hybrids that reflect Gower's sense that the natural social order has been perverted.[91] Having described his nightmare of a world upside-down, Gower goes on to condemn the social failings that led up to it. He uses the estates model to structure his work, beginning Book 3 with the confident assertion that people should fall into three categories: 'sunt clerus miles cultur, tres trina gerentes' ('there are the cleric, the knight, and the peasant, the three carrying on three

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[89] Bolton, 'The World Upside Down', pp. 46–9; Campbell, 'The Land', p. 220.

[90] Prestwich cites the example of Robert Salle, a low-born soldier who returned from the wars a knight of property. He was murdered by rebels during the 1381 Rising, apparently because his new-found wealth sparked resentment: 'The Enterprise of War', p. 88.

[91] See discussions in Aers, '*Vox Populi* and the Literature of 1381', pp. 441–3; Winthrop Wetherbee, 'John Gower', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 589–609, at pp. 594–7.

[different] things').[92] However, that structure soon founders, because it was hopelessly inadequate for describing fourteenth-century society. Gower has to split the third estate into four groups: regular farmers (V.ix), casual labourers (V.x), merchants (V.xi), and urban craftsmen (V.vi), and even then still needs to assign lawyers and officials a fourth category of their own (Book 6). Even those most deeply committed to the estates model could surely see that it was outdated, and that society would perhaps be better described in some other image. One such was the body politic.

The Body Politic and the Common Weal

In Book 6 of the *Vox Clamantis* Gower likens a weak ruler to a weak brain, observing that 'caput infirmum membra dolere fecit' ('a weak head makes the members suffer').[93] This invokes the idea that human society is like the human body, composed of distinct parts with specific roles, which together constitute a functional whole. The different physical members represent different kinds of person (usually distinguished by occupation), all united under the head/ruler. The image was well established by 1300, having received one of its earliest medieval expositions in John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* (1159). In Book 5 John describes the commonwealth as 'a sort of body' ('corpus quodam'), and in Book 6 he says his discussion will descend 'from the head of the republic [the prince] all the way to the feet [husbandmen]' ('a capite rei publicae [...] ad pedes').[94] On the way down John describes many other ranks and occupations, including the heart

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[92] John Gower, *Vox Clamantis*, in *The Complete Works of John Gower: The Latin Works*, ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), III.i.1. For the English translation, see John Gower, *The Voice of One Crying*, in *The Major Latin Works of John Gower*, trans. Eric W. Stockton (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962), p. 115.

[93] Gower, *Vox Clamantis*, VI.vii.498. In English: *The Voice of One Crying*, p. 231. Cf. VII.xxiv.1297–300, where Gower associates his own well-being with that of the realm. The ideas about social order expressed in the *Vox* are discussed in Wetherbee, 'John Gower', pp. 591–7.

[94] Quotations from book 5, chapter 2, and the prologue to book 6, respectively: for the Latin text, see Ioannis Saresberiensis, *Policraticus*, ed. Clemens C. I. Webb, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909); for the English translation, see John of Salisbury, *The Statesman's Book*, trans. Cary J. Nederman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)

(the 'senate'), the eyes, ears and tongue (judges and governors), the hands – one armed and one not (soldiers and officials, respectively) – and even the stomach and intestines (financial officers and lawyers). The model is essentially co-operative, as was that of the three estates, for 'all are members of one another' ('alter alterius membra', VI.i):

> Tunc autem totius rei publicae salus incolumis praeclaraque erit, si superiora membra se impendant inferioribus et inferiora superioribus pare iure respondeant, ut singula sint quasi aliorum ad inuicem membra et in eo sibi quisque maxime credat esse consultum in quo aliis utilius mouerit esse prospectum.

> [Then and only then will the health of the commonwealth be sound and flourishing when the higher members shield the lower, and the lower respond faithfully and fully in like measure to the just demands of their superiors, so that each and all are members one of another by a sort of reciprocity, and each regards his own interest as best served by that which he knows to be most advantageous for the others.]

> (*Policraticus*, VI.xx)

The hierarchical structure remains, but with added flexibility and a strong community aspect. This gave the body politic considerable appeal in the later Middle Ages, for it allowed commentators to accommodate recent social developments while still maintaining a sense of order, cohesion, and propriety.

John describes his source for this section of the *Policraticus* as 'a letter of Plutarch, written for the instruction of Trajan, which expounds the meaning of one sort of political constitution' ('epistola Plutarchi Traianum instruentis, quae cuiusdam politicae constituonis exprimit sensum', V.i). No such letter survives, but the idea of the commonwealth and the organic analogy between human society and the human body do certainly have Classical connections. In a section of *Social Chaucer* devoted to medieval social description, Paul Strohm writes:

> If hierarchical descriptions [of the three estates] sought support in the vertical and transcendent Pseudo-Dionysian cosmology, these alternative texts reasserted more horizontal and organic metaphors, deriving ultimately from classical ideas of the body politic and the 'corporate' state.[95]

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[95] Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, p. 3.

The idea of subordinating the individual's interests to the common good is particularly characteristic of Stoicism as developed by the Roman jurists, who gave Stoic ethics 'a distinctly collectivist colouring'.[96] It was also important to Cicero, leading Quillet to observe 'the idea of the commune is everywhere in Cicero's writings'.[97] From Cicero it travelled by various direct and indirect paths into the Middle Ages, one of the more tortuous being its passage from the *De republica*, through Macrobius's commentary on the portion known as the *Somnium Scipionis*, and into Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, where its core message appears in the injunction 'look ay besily thou werke and wisse / To comun profit' (ll. 74–7).

Strohm argues that this collectivist, organic metaphor for society 'came to maturity in the fourteenth century'.[98] He cites a sermon by Bishop Thomas Brinton, where the many ranks between the princely head and the labouring feet include doctors (the tongue), clerics (ears), knights and merchants (the hands), and, interestingly, citizens and burgesses at the heart.[99] Having reached maturity, the corporate view of society then enjoyed considerable longevity. Quillet comments on the 'persistence of the communitarian vision of society' and gives evidence of its international currency: in fifteenth-century France, for instance, Christine de Pizan uses the image of the human body for her *Livre de corps de policie*, and Philippe de Mézières imagines French society as the various members of a ship's crew.[100] This broad distribution in both space and time

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[96] John Procopé, 'Greek and Roman Political Theory', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c. 350–c. 1450*, ed. J. H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 21–36, at pp. 23–4.

[97] Jeannine Quillet, 'Community, Counsel and Respresentation', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c. 350–c. 1450*, ed. J. H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 520–72, at p. 520. See also the overall sense of Cicero's opinions in Neal Wood, *Cicero's Social and Political Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

[98] Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, p. 4.

[99] Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, p. 4.

[100] Quillet, 'Community, Counsel and Respresentation', pp. 538–43; quotation at p. 538.

shows the corporate model's success, and that binding classes together could be just as important as distinguishing between them.[101]

The body politic was such a successful image because it could accommodate the increasingly complicated social reality (in a way the estates model could not), while maintaining a sense of natural hierarchy and God-given order. In particular, it could accommodate the new breed of lay professionals – the doctors, men of business, and government and legal officials – whose numbers and status increased markedly over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The craft guilds and merchant companies flourished in this period, and the number of crafts enjoying merchant status grew steadily (the ironmongers, haberdashers and salters joining the established roll of goldsmiths, skinners, mercers, drapers, tailors, grocers, fishmongers, and vintners).[102] International trade and finance became so sophisticated that many merchant and banking enterprises could establish offices in several countries.[103] The legal and medical professions also expanded, as did the machinery of government.[104] Like most of the processes mentioned in this chapter, that growth began back in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but after 1300 it accelerated. As commerce and administration grew ever more complex and prestigious, became self-aware, and strove for respectability, so social descriptions had to find ways to accommodate them.

The body politic was also a more adaptable and versatile model than the three estates. Depending on who was placed at the head, it could describe the

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[101] For further examples of medieval writing on the Body Politic, see *Medieval Political Theory, A Reader: In Quest of the Body Politic, 1100–1400*, ed. Cary J. Nederman and Kate Langdon Forhan (London: Routledge, 1993).

[102] The seminal study of the guilds and their members is Sylvia L. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London, 1300–1500* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948). For the list of merchant companies, and an explanation of how they were distinct from other crafts, see pp. 6–7.

[103] Spufford, *Power and Profit*, p. 22.

[104] On the development of the legal profession, see Anthony Musson, *Medieval Law in Context*, pp. 36–50. On the medical profession, see Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies*, pp. 299–313. See also Harding, *England in the Thirteenth Century*, pp. 149–79.

community of the realm under the king, all of Christendom under the emperor (in which case it paralleled the ecclesiastical image of the body of the Church), or a single town or guild, headed by a mayor or master.[105] Indeed, the image was often used by town authorities, and formed an important part of the emerging civic mentality in a period when many of England's towns and cities flourished.[106] Though the number of town-dwellers fell because of the Black Death, leaving streets and sometimes whole settlements abandoned, the proportion of the population that was urbanized stayed the same – around 20 per cent.[107] As England recovered through the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, many urban settlements grew and prospered, particularly those in the southeast.[108] Labourers migrated from the surrounding countryside, many nobles and clerics kept lavish urban residences, and a distinct urban élite came into being.[109]

This group had its own set of standards and ideals, sometimes influenced by courtly models but often entirely independent. Thrupp believed that merchants were as likely to compare themselves with each other as with the traditional landed nobility, and Barron outlines a civic culture in London which

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[105] On the parallel between the body of the State and the body of the Church, see Ernst H. Kantorowitz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 207–31. See also Quillet, 'Community, Counsel and Representation', p. 539.

[106] See A. R. Bridbury, *Economic Growth: England in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1962), pp. 25–38, 70–82.

[107] Dyer, *An Age of Transition?*, p. 24; Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, p. 304.

[108] Other settlements struggled, notably York, Colchester, and Coventry, but Jim Bolton insists that 'towns were emphatically not in general decline': 'The World Upside Down', p. 65. Historians have now discovered that patterns of urban growth and decline were intensely regional. For summary of the ongoing debate, see Bolton, 'The World Upside Down', pp. 64–70; Alan Dyer, *Decline and Growth in English Towns, 1400–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 37–50; D. M. Palliser, 'Urban Decay Revisited', in *Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. John A. F. Thomson (Stroud: Sutton, 1988), pp. 1–21, at pp. 8–13.

[109] Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, p. 196; Spufford, *Power and Profit*, pp. 76–7.

drew on courtly chivalry but adapted it to suit a very different, civic worldview.[110] Rawcliffe's most recent work shows how towns competed with one another in civil engineering projects and displays of civic pride.[111] Literary and cultural scholars are perhaps more used to citing the Corpus Christi plays and processions as expressions of urban identity, but Rawcliffe's book suggests that fresh piped water, covered markets, clean streets, and effective rubbish collections could be just as significant. Town-dwellers both living and dead often gave money for just such schemes, along with bequests for hospitals, schools, *leprosaria* and alms.[112] These reflect the corporate mentality of late-medieval townspeople – hierarchical, yes, but also imbued with a sense of collective obligation, at least to those deemed to deserve it.[113] However, as Hanna observes in *London Literature*, we must be careful not to over-emphasize the divide between town and court, for there was always significant overlap between them.[114]

All this must have seemed very worrying to the more conservative elements of the nobility. According to Strohm, the body politic was fundamentally opposed to élitist social structures, and in the quotation above he introduced it as an 'alternative, nonhierarchical, even antihierarchical tradition'.[115] Commercialism and administrative and professional service all opened new routes to wealth and status, undermining the hereditary principle

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[110] Thrupp, *Merchant Class of Medieval London* pp. 143–4; Barron, 'Chivalry, Pageantry and Merchant Culture', pp. 228–30.

[111] See Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies*, pp. 131–40 (on cleaning and paving streets), 211–16 (on providing fresh water), 264–5 (on providing covered markets).

[112] There are many examples throughout Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies*, including those at pp. 84, 181, 302, 334, 358.

[113] Writing of the thirteenth century, Harding notes towns were the first places to implement legislation made for the good of the community as a whole (e.g. laws against engrossing and forestalling): *England in the Thirteenth Century*, p. 133; cf. Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies*, pp. 271–90, which discuss measures taken to protect the poor. The selectivity of late-medieval charity is discussed in Harper-Bill, 'The English Church and English Religion', pp. 115–16; Swanson, *Religion and Devotion*, pp. 210–12.

[114] Hanna, *London Literature*, p. 124.

[115] Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, p. 3.

that emphasized breeding. Meanwhile, the civic mentality challenged the nobility's monopoly on symbolic capital by establishing an alternative value system. By acknowledging that there were many people outside the three traditional estates, the body politic makes those other roles legitimate, and formally codifies the existence of a middle class. The way the occupations are assigned in the body politic is also less flattering to the nobility: in the estates hierarchy they ranked with royalty as a class of *bellatores*; here the fighting men are usually restricted to a single hand, separated from the head by a battery of clerical, administrative, and judicial middlemen.

Strohm connects this with his idea that knights' status dropped significantly during the fourteenth century, a suggestion based on their being elected to parliament as representatives of the commons, rather than receiving hereditary summons as peers.[116] However, to be depicted as one of the hands of the body politic was not necessarily a demotion. Traditionally imagined as the strong arm of the church and/or the state, identification with the hands (as opposed to the other sensory organs assigned to intellectuals and clerics) may simply perpetuate the venerable distinction between the active and the contemplative lives.[117] And though the hands are perhaps not as illustrious as the eyes or tongue, it is certainly more flattering to be represented by them than the bowels, as were financial officers. In this connection it is interesting that Coss interprets late medieval knighthood very differently from Strohm, arguing that it actually became *more* prestigious, not less. Many eligible men eschewed the privilege because knighthood was expensive and carried unwelcome administrative responsibilities, but, according to Coss, knights' status rose as their numbers fell.[118] They eventually became a very small élite comprising only those wealthy enough to possess and maintain the increasingly sophisticated

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[116] Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, p. 5, n. 14 (on p. 189).

[117] On the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, see I. S. Robinson, 'Church and Papacy', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c. 350– c. 1450*, ed. J. H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 252–305, at pp. 263–6; Swanson, *Religion and Devotion*, pp. 105–6.

[118] Coss, 'Knighthood, Heraldry and Social Exclusion', pp. 43–4, 65; Coss, *Origins of the English Gentry*, pp. 69–108.

and expensive body of knightly equipment, so it was a matter of considerable pride for a family to support even one knight, let alone two or three.[119] Such high-status knighthood is represented in the florescence of chivalric orders – Orders of the Garter, the Star, the Golden Fleece, and so on – and in the splendour of the Edwardian and Burgundian courts.[120] The emergence of the hereditary peerage and the relegation of most knights to the commons does not necessarily mean that knighthood itself lost its status, and the corporate vision of society does not necessarily challenge traditional hierarchies.

Indeed, many noblemen would have had hybrid identities as both peers and knights. Their identities could include other elements too, for the developing bureaucracy and professions were open to old blood as well as new. Men of the established upper class entered law, politics, government, even finance and trade, and most of the highest legal and governmental offices were filled by trusted scions of old families.[121] The image of society as a body politic is thus not intrinsically opposed to biological, inherited privilege, for the offices it accommodates were not necessarily filled by people newly risen from obscurity. Furthermore, the corporate model was still strictly hierarchical, as were the towns and guilds themselves; John of Salisbury in fact paired his exposition of the body politic with an admiring analysis of the hierarchical monarchy favoured by bees.[122] Similarly, Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* drifts from the common weal

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[119] Coss, 'Knighthood, Heraldry and Social Exclusion', p. 65.

[120] For discussion of Edward III's passion for chivalry, and its context, see Richard Barber's twin essays, 'Why Did Edward III Hold the Round Table? The Political/Literary Background', both in *Edward III's Round Table at Windsor: The House of the Round Table and the Windsor Festival of 1344*, ed. Julian Munby. Richard Barber, and Richard Brown (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), pp. 77–83, and pp. 84–99, respectively.

[121] Holt, *Magna Carta*, p. 31. On knights in government and law, see Coss, *Origins of the Gentry*, pp. 146–61. Musson notes that by the fourteenth century any judge who was not already a knight was dubbed on promotion to the bench: *Medieval Law in Context*, p. 47.

[122] John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, VI.xxi. Medieval commentators often cite the exemplary social organization of bees, among them Ambrose (whose ideas are given in Markus, 'The Latin Fathers', p. 99), and the anonymous author of *Mum and the Sothsegger*: see *'Richard the Redeless' and 'Mum and the*

of the *Somnium Scipionis* to the natural hierarchy of the various classes of birds, with Nature as their supreme ruler.[123] The two images were complementary, not mutually exclusive. In its sense of order and regulation, and its idea that people all have their appointed place, the corporate vision of society could easily co-exist with the hereditary principle and the hierarchies it maintained.

There are further complications in that people with more than one role could have put themselves in more than one place inside the body politic – as hands *and* eyes, for instance, if a man was both knight and judge. Identities are composite, and status comes in many different forms. Rigby points out that the division of parliament into hereditary peers and elected commons crossed conventional estates divisions, uniting the lords temporal and spiritual (*bellatores* and *oratores*) in one group, and conflating knights and burgesses (*bellatores* and *laboratores*) in the other; a man's parliamentary identity thus differed from his traditional, functional one.[124] In a similar vein, Strohm draws out the Weberian distinction between 'class' and 'status group' – the one measured in economic terms, the other in terms of social honour.[125] A great magnate could have more in common with the poorest knight than the richest merchant in that both magnate and knight lived off money from rents rather than commerce. In other ways – gross capital and material luxury, for example – the magnate was obviously more like the merchant, but economic capital did not necessarily convert into symbolic. Sylvia Thrupp found that fifteenth-century England supported many yeomen who were considerably richer than some knights, but who were never considered gentle.[126] By contrast, landed and

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Sothsegger', ed. James M. Dean (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), pp. 75–170, at ll. 696–1086.

[123] The hierarchical social allegory is discussed in Aers, '*Vox Populi* and the Literature of 1381', pp. 445–7; Stephen Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 23–31.

[124] Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 193.

[125] Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, pp. 8–9, drawing on Max Weber, 'Class, Status, Party', in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1970), pp. 180–95, at pp. 181, 187.

[126] Thrupp, *Merchant Class of Medieval London*, pp. 237–8.

landless *esquiers* were all counted as gentlemen, and thus stood on a par with even the greatest dukes and earls;[127] but no landless squire would ever sit higher than the mayor of London at a feast. Their social capital as gentlemen was outweighed by the mayor's as a city official, even though the mayor's background would most likely have been in trade.

These examples show that no social model could adequately describe the complexity of social relations, or people's actual experience and perceptions of social status. Though the three estates and the body politic were always available as theoretical models, and though the idea of bloodworthiness remained powerful, in practice people judged status on more flexible and pragmatic grounds. I shall discuss some of those in the final section of this chapter, but first I will address one other theory, perhaps the most idealistic of them all: the idea that true nobility comes from virtue.

Nobility and Virtue

The argument that true nobility stems from virtue often appears as the antithesis to the hereditary principle and the hierarchical structures it supported. Medieval commentators observed that distinguished families sometimes produce churls and scoundrels, and came to the conclusion that ancestry was no guarantee of individual quality. Taken to extremes, this worthy attitude states that even base-born peasants are noble if they behave virtuously. However, the connection between birth and nobility was so strong that medieval poets and commentators often found ways to perpetuate it despite the challenge.

Crouch traces an interest in personal conduct back through the early medieval period into the Dark Ages, and identifies virtue as a key quality already in the pre-chivalric *preudomme*.[128] And when fourteenth-century writers rediscovered the Classical sources, they found that they too preferred virtue to ancestry. Dante quotes Juvenal's eighth satire:

> Avvegna – dice esso poeta satiro – nobile per la buona generazione
> quelli che de la buona generazione degno non è? Questo non è altro che
> chiamare lo nano gigante.

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127 Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, p. 9.

128 Crouch, *Birth of Nobility*, pp. 29–80.

[The satirical poet [Juvenal] continues: 'Is a person to be called noble because of his good birth, even though his life belies his birth? This is nothing other than calling a dwarf a giant.']

(*Banquet*, p. 199)

In both Classical sources and early medieval thought, the argument from virtue thus had a distinguished history as a corrective to the idea of a closed noble 'race' defined by blood.

One of the most important sources for the connection between nobility and virtue was Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. Lady Philosophy makes a strong case against ancestry, which Chaucer translated like this:

> yif the name of gentilesse be referred to renoun and cleernesse of linage, thanne is gentil name but a foreine thing, that is to seyn, to hem that glorifyen hem of hir linage. For it semeth that gentilesse be a mener preysinge that comth of the deserte of auncestres [...] yif thou ne have no gentilesse of thy-self, that is to seyn, preyse that comth of thy deserte, foreine gentilesse ne maketh thee nat gentil.[129]

Philosophy returns to her theme in the following section of verse, rendered as prose in Chaucer's version:

> Al the linage of men that ben in erthe ben of semblable birthe [...] Thanne commen alle mortal folk of noble sede; why noisen ye or bosten of youre eldres? For yif thou loke your biginninge, and god your auctor and your maker, thanne nis ther no forlived wight, but-yif he norisshe his corage unto vyces.
>
> (*Boece*, book III, metrum 6, ll. 1–14)

This links the argument from virtue with scriptural ideas about human equality (a connection made again in the *Convivio*), and recalls Isidore's comment that a high-born person might become base through ill living. It also provides the germ of the hag's philosophy in the Wife of Bath's Tale, quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Between Boethius and Chaucer, the same ideas also appear in Nature's confession in *Le Roman de la rose*:

> Et se nus contredire m'ose

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129 Geoffrey Chaucer, *Boece*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 395–470; quotation from book III, prose 6, ll. 34–46.

> Qui de gentillece s'alose,
> Et die que li gentil homme,
> Si cum li peuples les renomme,
> Sont de millor condicion
> Par noblece de nation
> Que cil qui les terres cultivent
> Ou qui de lor labor se vivent,
> Je respont que nus n'est gentis
> S'il n'est a vertus ententis,
> Ne n'est vilains fors par ses vices.
>
> (*Rose*, ll. 18607–17)

> [If anyone, piquing himself on his nobility, dares contradict me and say
> that noblemen, as the people call them, are superior in condition, by
> virtue of their noble birth, to those who till the ground or work for their
> living, then I will reply that no one is noble whose mind is not set on
> virtue, nor is anyone base except on account of his vices.]
>
> (*Rose*, p. 287)

Nature goes on to say that if a man behaves badly, showing wickedness, cruelty,
laziness, or pride, then:

> Tout soit il nes de tex parens,
> Ou toute vertus soit parens,
> Il n'est pas drois, bien dire l'os,
> Qu'il ait de ses parens le los,
> Ains doit estre plus vilz tenus
> Que s'il ert de chetis venus.
>
> (*Rose*, ll. 18821–6)

> [Even though such a man may be born of parents in whom every virtue
> shone, I make bold to say that it would not be right for him to have the
> praise due to his parents, and that he ought instead to be considered
> more base than if he had come from a line of paupers.]
>
> (*Rose*, p. 290)

These passages are all remarkably similar in theme and even in phrasing,
showing continuity from Boethius's Philosophy in the sixth century to Jean de
Meun's Nature in the thirteenth and Chaucer's Wife of Bath/hag in the
fourteenth. It might have been pleasant for the rich to consider themselves
qualitatively superior to everyone else, but that idea did not go unchallenged
even in the most civilized courtly circles; these are texts for the intellectual and
social élite, yet they deny the validity of ancestral privilege in the most explicit
terms. No doubt their sympathy with egalitarian principles was sometimes
superficial – an entertaining mental exercise for people who were actually firmly

convinced of their genetic superiority – but sometimes it must also have sparked and reflected a genuine humanism. Meanwhile, by emphasizing personal qualities, these texts also legitimize the position of those who had risen through personal industry and service, assuring them that they were in no way inferior to their blue-blooded peers.

Book 4 of Dante's *Convivio* goes into these issues in great detail, but the thrust of the argument is plain from the start: the emperor was wrong to say that nobility comes from 'antica possessione […] con reggimenti belli' ('age old wealth, together with pleasing manners'), for the truth is that 'è gentilezza dovunqu'è vertute' ('wherever virtue is present so, too, is nobility').[130] Dante does not claim that virtue is the *cause* of nobility; quite the opposite. He defines the terms precisely: '« nobilitade » s'intende perfezione di propria natura in ciascuna cosa' ('*nobility* […] signifies in any being the perfection of its own particular nature'); while 'vertute […] è, secondo che l'Etica dice, / un abito eligente, / lo qual dimora in mezzo solamente' ('virtue […] is, as the *Ethics* says, a habit of choice that keeps invariably to the mean').[131] Nobility is the more general concept, and thus the more fundamental (the reasoning is given in chapter xviii); it is the single root from which all other goodness grows, and the sky in which virtues shine like stars.[132] But Dante is also adamant that nobility does not inhere in certain lineages: 'la stirpe non fa le singulari persone nobili, ma le singulari persone fanno nobile la stirpe' ('it is not a family-line that makes individuals noble, but individuals who ennoble a family-line').[133] The most complex chapter of Book 4 explains that the capacity for nobility is given to each person individually by God,

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[130] Dante, *Convivio*, canzone 3, l. 101; in English, *Banquet*, p. 121.

[131] For the definition of nobility, see Dante, *Convivio*, IV.xvi.4–5 (in English, *Banquet*, p. 164); for virtue, see *Convivio*, canzone 3, ll. 85–7 (in English, *Banquet*, p. 120). Dante explains his Aristotelian idea of virtue further in chapter xvii.

[132] Dante uses these conceits in canzone 3, and develops them in chapters xxii and xix, respectively.

[133] Dante, *Convivio*, IV.xx.5; in English, *Banquet*, p. 172.

and that it has nothing to do with ancestry.[134] Dante's argument is more self-consciously intellectual than the ones in *Boethius* and the *Rose* (partly because it is so much longer), but the general message is much the same.

Chaucer knew all three of these texts, and he repeats their familiar claims in the Wife of Bath's Tale: *gentilesse* comes from Christ and cannot be bequeathed by one's ancestors (ll. 1117–24); 'men may often finde a lordes sone do shame and vileinye' (l. 1150), thus proving that 'genterye / Is nat annexed to possessioun' (ll. 1146–7); the fame of one's ancestors is 'a strange thyng to thy persone' (l. 1161 – 'redeth Boece' for proof!); history gives many examples of people who 'out of povert roos to heigh noblesse' (l. 1167). All this culminates in the triumphant egalitarianism mentioned at the start of this chapter:

> Al were it that myne auncestres were rude,
> Yet may the hye god, and so hope I,
> Grante me grace to liven vertuously.
> Thanne am I gentil
>
> (Wife of Bath's Tale, ll. 1172–4)

Chaucer's poem seems more radical than its predecessors, for it puts these words in the mouth of a poor and downtrodden old woman, who gives them a political piquancy which the elegant discourses of Lady Philosophy and Dame Nature never achieve. The Wife of Bath's Tale can well stand alongside John Ball's polemical sermon theme as a subversive challenge to the dominant order. However, given what we know of Chaucer's style and milieu, the tale's closest affiliations are probably with the courtly and scholarly literature to which it makes so many references. Those texts had exposed the nobility to egalitarian principles for so long that the ideas had probably ceased to be challenging, and grown comfortably settled as a cultural *donnée*. But in the social unrest of the later fourteenth century, perhaps on the very eve of the Peasants' Revolt, Chaucer's dramatic innovation must have made them seem startlingly fresh.

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[134] This is chapter xxi, which Dante introduces as 'questo speziale capitolo' (this special chapter', p. 174). His theory is explained and discussed further in Jay Rudd, *Critical Companion to Dante: A Literary Reference to his Life and Work* (Facts on File: New York, 2008), pp. 275–6.

It would not be right to excerpt these arguments without acknowledging their place in the texts as wholes. The old peasant in the Wife of Bath's Tale eventually becomes a lovely courtly lady, and this partially restores the hierarchy and values so challenged by her earlier lecture. Moreover, the whole story is ostensibly told by the Wife of Bath, herself a figure of uncertain authority.[135] The *Rose* is notoriously ambiguous, and Nature perhaps not its most authoritative figure; Boethius was writing a philosophical treatise to help him come to terms with ruin and imprisonment, so it is unsurprising if he takes solace in asserting the vanity of worldly things. We must be careful not to take their arguments out of context, nor to make them more subversive than the surrounding text allows. However, the argument from virtue is always presented so as to be convincing, and its stability across repeated retellings testifies to its being well respected. Furthermore, Dante does definitely speak in his own voice, and clearly wants his *Convivio* to qualify as a text people can learn from (I.i). The speaker in the Wife of Bath's Tale likewise uses impeccable and characteristically Chaucerian authorities – Boethius, Dante, Seneca, Valerius, Juvenal – so despite all the narrative layers it certainly sounds like the man himself, from what we can tell.[136] The evidence suggests that the argument from virtue was more serious than simply an intellectual or rhetorical exercise, and was not merely a case of poets playing the devil's advocate. It has a real social function in exhorting the nobility to behave appropriately, defending the position of those newly risen, and moderating cruel class stereotypes.

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[135] On authority and the Wife of Bath, see Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 72–3; Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp. 48–55, 70–86; Lee Patterson, '"For the Wyves Love of Bathe": Feminine Rhetoric and Poetic Resolution in *Le Roman de la rose* and *The Canterbury Tales*', *Speculum* 58 (1983), 656–95; Helen Phillips, *An Introduction to 'The Canterbury Tales': Reading, Fiction, Context* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 89–102.

[136] Nigel Saul considers Chaucer's argument in the Wife of Bath's Tale to be 'an expression of his own views […] a statement of his personal conception of gentility': 'Chaucer and Gentility', in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 41–55, at p. 45.

Though the Wife of Bath's Tale is unusually forthright, egalitarianism was always latent in the debate about nobility and virtue. Plato might have divided humankind into three essential categories, but even he did not say they were hermetically sealed: 'sometimes a silver child might be born to a gold parent, a gold one to a silver parent, and so on', so the governors must watch carefully for anomalies if they are to assign everyone an appropriate occupation.[137] The most courtly vernacular literature could be similarly open-minded, as when young Lancelot says to the Lady of the Lake:

> Il mest auis que tex puet auoir les bontes del quer, qui ne puet pas auoir cheles del cors. Car tex puet estre cortois & sages & deboinaires & loiaus, preus & larges & hardis [...] les teches del cuer mest il auis que chascuns les poroit auoir se pereche ne li toloit ; car chascuns puet auoir cortoisie deboinairete & les autres biens qui del cuer mueuent che mest auis.
>
> (*Lancelot del Lac*, p. 113)

> [It seems to me that a man without bodily virtues can still have virtues of character. He can be refined and reasonable, gracious, loyal, fearless and generous and bold [...] traits of character, it seems to me are in the grasp of anyone who is willing to make an effort; everyone, I'd say, can develop courteousness and graciousness and the other qualities that stem from the heart.]
>
> (*Lancelot*, p. 59)

Bodily virtues like the ability to run fast or jump high are decided at birth, but the virtues of character are different. This confirms what we learn from chivalry books, for the virtues they so value are not class specific either – all people can be generous, loyal, moderate, and brave, though they must be so in their own way and within their own means.[138]

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137 Plato, *Republic*, 414a, p. 119. The Middle Ages of course did not know the *Republic*, but the parallel is interesting all the same.

138 Such are the virtues praised in Ramon Llull's, *Llibre de l'ordre de cavalleria* (and the anonymous French translation, *L'Ordene de Chevalerie*), Raoul de Houdenc's *Le Roman des eles*, and *The Book of Chivalry* of Geoffroi de Charny: see Llull, *Llibre de l'ordre de cavalleria*; *'Le Roman des eles' and the Anonymous 'Ordene de chevalerie'*, ed. and trans. Keith Busby (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1983); Geoffroi de Charny, *The Book of Chivalry*, ed. Elspeth Kennedy, in *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny: Text, Context and Translation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp. 84–200

Dante makes the same point in more technical terms:

> là dove questo seme dal principio non cade, si puote inducere nel suo processo, sì che perviene a questo frutto; ed è uno modo quasi d'insertare l'altrui natura sopra diversa radice.
>
> (*Convivio*, IV.xxii.12)

> [anyone into whom this seed [of nobility] did not descend at the beginning of life can make it part of himself during the course of his development, so that he does attain the fruit. This process may be described as the engrafting of a new nature onto something whose root is of a different kind.]
>
> (*Banquet*, p. 178)

Nobility is an acquirable trait, available to all who are willing to apply themselves. That echoes the *Rose*'s Nature, whom we have already heard arguing 'nul n'est gentis / S'il n'est a vertus ententis, / Ne n'est vilains fors par ses vices' ('no one is noble whose mind is not set on virtue, nor is anyone base except on account of his vices').[139] She later observes that she knows 'plusors […] Qui furent nez de bas linage / Et plus orent noble corage / Que maint filz de rois ne de contes' ('many whose birth was low but whose hearts were nobler than those of many a king's or count's son').[140] There are even hints that acquired nobility is *better* than the inherited kind, as the common man suggests to the common woman in Andreas Capellanus's *De Amore*:

> […] Nam ille ab antiquo stipite maiorique parente sibi nobilitatem accipit et illam ab eis quasi ex poudam traduce sumpsit, a quibus sementivam traxit originem; iste vero ex ipso tantum suam habet nobilitatem et eam sibi a nullo stipite derivatam assumpsit, sed ex sola suae mentis optima dispositione retinuit ortam. Magis ergo istius waum illius est nobilitas approbanda.

> [The man of noble birth receives his nobility from ancient stock and from a father greater than himself, obtaining it as a sort of inheritance from those from whom he derived his physical origins. But the other [i.e. 'he whose sole glory is nobility of character'] gets his nobility from himself alone, obtaining it from no stock but maintaining it after its

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139 In French, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Roman de la rose*, ll. 18615–17; in English, *Romance of the Rose*, p. 287. This idea prefigures Chaucer's 'vileyns synful dedes make a cherl': Wife of Bath's Tale, l. 1158.

140 In French, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Roman de la rose*, ll. 18734–8; in English, *Romance of the Rose*, p. 289.

emergence from the ordered excellence of his mind alone. Hence his nobility deserves more praise than the other's.][141]

These are bold statements, but their regular occurrence shows that their high-class audiences (and authors) felt sufficiently secure to be able to absorb them. The reason for this is suggested in the texts themselves, for the argument from virtue is invariably introduced as a corrective to the more widespread opinion that nobility comes from wealth or birth – as when Dante contradicts the emperor, or when Nature criticizes those who think people are noble merely because 'il ont et cienz et oisiaus / Por sembler gentis damoisiaus, / Et qu'il vont chaçant [...] Et qu'il se vont oiseus esbatre' ('they have dogs and birds and therefore look like young noblemen, and they go hunting [...] and indulge in leisurely diversions').[142] These complaints acknowledge the reality that made them possible: in practice, blood and wealth still reigned supreme.

Indeed, the hereditary view of nobility was so deeply ingrained that it coloured the rhetoric even of those arguing against it. Though Andreas's common man appears to prefer acquired nobility to inherited, the noble women both rebuff their common suitors on the grounds that cross-class romances are unseemly.[143] The polyphonic *De Amore* would have it both ways, supporting personal merit one moment, and old blood the next. The *Rose* and The Wife of Bath's Tale are still more conflicted, and contradict themselves in their very language. For all her egalitarian sentiments, the *Rose*'s Nature uses an élitist discourse in which paupers and beggars have strongly negative associations. The degenerate nobleman 'doit estre vilains clamés / Et vilz tenus et mains amés / Que s'il estoit filz d'un truant' ('should be called base and considered vile, and loved less than if he were the son of a beggar'), or alternatively, 'plus vilz tenus / Que s'il ert de chetis venus' ('considered more base than if he had come from a

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[141] Andreas Capellanus, *On Love*, ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh (London: Duckworth, 1982), pp. 50–1.

[142] In French, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Roman de la rose*, ll. 18859–63; in English, *Romance of the Rose*, p. 291.

[143] Andreas Capellanus, *On Love*, pp. 58–87.

line of paupers').[144] Even Chaucer falls into the trap, for when he writes that 'Vileyns sinful dedes make a cherl' (Wife of Bath's Tale, l. 1158), his language conflates villeins and sin just as it is trying hardest to separate them. Such phrases and comparisons seem to be automatic, entering the texts unbidden because they are so natural to the poets' language and thought. This parallels the inevitable sense of hierarchy in medieval descriptions of Heaven and the body politic, and is further evidence that the patterns of thought attached to hereditary nobility were almost universal.

There are various ways of reconciling the argument from virtue with the dominance of a hereditary nobility. Descriptions of society in three estates or as a body politic suggest that the virtue of the peasant differs from that of the nobleman. All people can be virtuous and 'noble' in their way, but that means behaving in a manner appropriate to one's station. There is also a strong sense that noble/virtuous parents *ought* to produce noble/virtuous offspring, and that the people most likely to be virtuous are those who are noble born and bred. Keen describes a 'commonsense point in the background' of medieval writing on nobility:

> that wealth and nurture inevitably have their part to play in forming the noble [...] if a youth is to acquire the habits of virtuous living apposite to nobility he must be brought up in circumstances that will foster their formation. That is to say he must have a noble upbringing, and the easiest and most natural avenue to this was obviously through noble parentage.[145]

There is also a moral aspect to this, in that the children of noble parents have a duty to live up to expectations. As Chaucer puts it in his translation of Boethius:

> yif ther be any good in gentilesse, I trowe it be al-only this, that it semeth as that a maner necessitee be imposed to gentil men, for that they ne sholden nat outrayen or forliven from the virtues of hir noble kinrede.
>
> (*Boece*, book III, prose 6)

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[144] In French, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Roman de la rose*, ll. 18759–61, 18825–6, respectively; in English, *Romance of the Rose*, pp. 289, 290.

[145] Maurice Keen, *Nobles, Knights and Men-at-Arms in the Middle Ages* (London: Hambledon Press, 1996), pp. 201–2.

As we might by now expect, the same ideas feature in the *Rose* and the *Convivio*. The *Rose*'s Nature comments that:

> il est plus granz hontes
> D'un fil de roi, s'il estoit nices
> Et plains d'outrages et de vices,
> Que s'il ert filz d'un sçavetier,
> D'un porchier ou d'un charretier.
>
> <div align="right">(Rose, ll. 18886–90)</div>

> [It is more shameful for a king's son to be foolish and wild and vicious
> than for the son of a carter, a swineherd, or a cobbler.]
>
> <div align="right">(Rose, p. 291)</div>

Dante writes similarly that 'ma vilissimo sembra [...] / cui è scorto 'l cammino e poscia l'erra' ('the basest type of all is the man who is shown the right path [i.e. is well born], and then goes astray').[146] Nobility may not be exclusive to illustrious lineages, but it is certainly proper to them.

Another way of reconciling hereditary nobility with meritocratic principles was to conflate them in the distant past, as in the myth of knighthood's origins told by Llull:

> Al començament, con fo en lo món vengut menyspreament de justícia
> per minvament de caritat, covenc que justícia retornàs en son
> honrament per temor. E per aysò, de tot lo poble foren fets milanaris e
> de cascú .M. fo elet e triat .I. home pus amable, pus savi, pus leyal e pus
> fortz e ab pus noble coratge, ab més d'enseynaments e de bon
> nodriments que tots los altres.
>
> <div align="right">(Llibre de l'orde de cavalleria, I.2)</div>

> [In the beginning, when contempt for justice had come into the world
> because of the diminution of charity, justice sought to recover its
> honour by means of fear. And thus the entire populace was divided into
> groups of a thousand, and one man – more kind, wise, loyal and strong,
> and with nobler courage, a better education and better manners than
> all the rest – was picked and chosen from every thousand.]
>
> <div align="right">(The Order of Chivalry, I.2)</div>

These were the first knights, the noblest men mounted on the noblest beasts and equipped with the noblest arms (I.4). The story is a brilliant synthesis of breeding, virtue and savagery, deriving from the *Prose Lancelot* and appearing

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146 Dante, *Convivio*, canzone 3, ll. 38–9; in English, *Banquet*, p. 119. Dante explains the metaphor in chapter vii.

again in the chivalry book written by Geoffroi de Charny in the fourteenth century.[147] Knights and nobles descend from these first paragons of virtue, who defended charity and justice 'by means of fear'. That provides the contemporary nobleman with both a mandate for violence and a justification of his power.

There were still more devious ways around the argument from virtue, too. The determined advocate of a closed society could turn the egalitarian sentiments around so as to condemn anyone who fell short of the courtly ideal. Lancelot thinks that 'len nel pert se par pereche non a estre preus' ('if a man fails to become worthy, it is only for his own lack of will'),[148] and Dante comments shortly that 'nullo è che possa essere scusato; chè, se da sua naturale radice uomo non ha questa sementa, ben la puote avere per via d'insetazione' ('there is no excuse for anyone: if a man's natural root leaves him bereft of this seed [of nobility], he can obtain it by way of engrafting').[149] People who remain ignorant, uncouth, or *vilain* deserve to be subject to others, for they have been too lazy or stubborn to better themselves. Worse still was the idea that the lower orders were inherently vicious and incapable of regulating their bestial natures – an idea explored by Burnley in *Courtliness and Literature* and by Moffat in an essay called 'Fearful Villainy'.[150] Moffat gathers evidence from proverbs, Malory, Lydgate, and the *Vox Clamantis*, from which he quotes the following passage:

> Nam fera rusticitas nullo moderatur amore.
> Corde set aduerso semper amara gerit:
> Subditus ipse timet nec amat seruilis arator,
> Fedat et hunc cicius qui magis ornat eum.
>
> <div align="right">(Vox Clamantis, I.xxi.2101–4)</div>

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[147] See Sommer (ed.), *Le Livre de Lancelot del Lac*, pp. 113–14; in English, Lacy (ed.), *Lancelot*, p. 58; Geoffroi de Charny, *The Book of Chivalry*, 25.6–16. The relationship between these three texts is discussed in Richard W. Kaeuper, 'Geoffroi de Charny and his Book', in Richard Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy, *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny: Text, Context and Translation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp. 3–66, at p. 28.

[148] Sommer (ed.), *Le Livre de Lancelot del Lac*, p. 113; in English, Lacy (ed.) *Lancelot*, p. 59.

[149] Dante, *Convivio* IV.xxii.12; in English, *Banquet*, p. 178.

[150] Burnley, *Courtliness and Literature*, pp. 77–8, 89–90; Douglas Moffat, 'Fearful Villainy', *Essays in Medieval Studies* 11 (1994), 119–36, at pp. 127–30.

[For his [the peasant's] rough, boorish nature was not tempered by any affection, but he always had bitterness in his hateful heart. In his subjection the lowly ploughman did not love, but rather feared and reviled, the very man who provided for him.]

(*The Voice of One Crying*, p. 95)[151]

Lydgate's contribution is equally pejorative:

What thyng mor cruel in comparisoun
Or mor vengable of will and naht off riht,
Than whan a cherl hath domynacioun.[152]

Such thinking makes virtue an attribute of breeding, and reduces the egalitarian ideas of men like Dante and Chaucer to hypothetical speculation. The image of the noble peasant becomes no more than an intriguing intellectual experiment, with little real-world application. And though these views are extreme, they are really only more explicit expressions of the ingrained patterns of thought we have seen repeatedly affecting the language and imagination of even the most innovative poetic minds.

To sum up, the idea that nobility is an effect of virtue was commonplace throughout the Middle Ages, and presented itself as a serious, potentially radical challenge to the assumption that nobility inhered in blood or wealth. The relevant texts were widely known, and few cultured readers can have been unaware of their contents. The ideas they promote must have appealed particularly to those who had risen to prominence only recently, but the frequency with which egalitarian themes appear suggests that they had an audience in the traditional upper class as well. Meanwhile, another view of nobility persisted at both conscious and subconscious levels. Many writers and commentators sought ways of triangulating birth, nobility, and virtue so as to

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[151] Moffat quotes this passage in 'Fearful Villainy', p. 127, but does not give the Latin text.

[152] John Lydgate, *The Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen, part 3, EETS o.s. 123 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), book 6, ll. 778–80. The same prejudice colours Lydgate's early poem 'The Chorle and the Birde', which appears immediately before the Southern *Octavian* in British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii (1446–60). It is published in John Lydgate, *A Selection from the Minor Poems of Dan John Lydgate*, ed. James Orchard Halliwell (London: The Percy Society, 1840), pp. 179–83.

exclude the lower orders, while élitist patterns of thought and speech appear even in the challenges. Authors writing about nobility and virtue usually reject blood and wealth outright, while those writing anti-peasant polemic in the wake of the 1381 Rising attacked the lower orders as incapable of virtuous thought; most people probably espoused both views, believing that in principle nobility required virtue, and that a peasant's jerkin could cover a noble heart, while also feeling an instinctive deference for old blood (and perhaps an instinctive aversion to social climbers and churls). They probably also realized that, in practice, status was usually determined by more visible, worldly things.

Princely Authority, Public Recognition, and Wealth

That realization gave rise to yet another way of looking at nobility, one that was grounded in experience of the real world and theorized by the fourteenth-century lawyers and jurists, who saw that, practically speaking, nobility was not a matter of birth, or of occupation, or of virtue; what really counted was public recognition. Their pragmatic contributions to the nobility debate have been discussed several times by Keen, who gives particular attention to Bartolus of Sassoferrato, a fourteenth-century professor who wrote commentaries on the Justinian *Codex*, and the first academic treatment of heraldry: *De insigniis et armis*.[153]

Bartolus knew Dante's *Convivio* well, and in his commentary on *Codex* 12 he reconsiders Dante's opinions on nobility. Bartolus' innovation is to split nobility into three kinds: theological, natural, and civil. The first of these is the God-given grace described by Dante, and the second is what makes some individuals natural leaders; but it is the third kind that commands most of Bartolus' attention, for he was interested in nobility as a civil status – as it appeared in people's daily lives.[154] This civil nobility cannot be defined in terms of divine grace or virtue because, as Keen puts it, there would then be 'no clear means of recognizing it, of translating it out of internal, moral, or theological

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[153] Keen's discussions appear in his *Chivalry*, pp. 148–51, and *Nobles, Knights and Men-at-Arms*, pp. 199–203, 215–21. All three are supported with extensive Latin quotations from the 1562 Basle edition of Bartolus's commentaries.

[154] See Keen, *Nobles, Knights and Men-at-Arms*, pp. 217–19.

terms into external and social ones'.[155] The jurists' practical solution to this problem is to decide that 'the claim to be noble, civilly speaking, must rest ultimately on recognition by the constituted authority, the lawgiver – on an external, legal and recognizable standard, not on internal virtue or imparted genes'.[156]

This pragmatic approach codified, and so validated, contemporary practice. In the *Convivio* Dante laments that people are easily impressed by wealth:

> perchè veggiono fare le parentele e li alti matrimonii, li edificii mirabili, le possessioni larghe, le signorie grandi, credono quelle essere cagioni di nobilitade.
>
> <div align="right">(Convivio, IV.viii.9)</div>

> [For when they see kinships and high marriages being made, marvellous buildings, extensive possessions, powerful lordships, they believe these to be the causes of nobility.][157]

This pained and outraged him, hence the *Convivio*'s vigorous argument. Bartolus, by contrast, accepted this reality, and tried to make sense of it. As Keen puts it, he 'admitted riches […] not as a criterion of nobility, but as a possible *causa remota* thereof, and admitted inheritance of privilege, not because of the worth of blood, but because the law recognized it'.[158]

By the fourteenth century it was well established that kings and princes could grant nobility. Indeed, the *De Amore* had already recognized the principle in the 1170s. The woman of higher nobility observes:

> Quamvis probitas possit nobilitare plebeium, ei tamen ordinem mutare non potest, ut plebeius procer efficiatur sive vavassor, nisi per principis ei forsan potentiam tribuator, qui potest quibuslibet bonis moribus nobilitatem adiungere.

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[155] Keen, *Nobles, Knights and Men-at-Arms*, p. 219.

[156] Keen, *Nobles, Knights and Men-at-Arms*, p. 200.

[157] This is my own translation, as Ryan's drifts from the Italian at this point. His edition reads: When people see family connections being made through high marriages, when they see wonderful buildings, large estates and great lordships, they believe that these are the source of nobility (*Banquet*, p. 141).

[158] Keen, *Nobles, Knights and Men-at-Arms*, p. 220.

[Integrity can lend nobility to a commoner but cannot change his rank to make him a lord or a vavasour, unless the award happens to be made by the power of a prince, who can confer nobility on any persons of good character.]

(*On Love*, pp. 78–9)

Rulers used this power more and more as time went on. By the end of the thirteenth century French princes were granting nobility by letters patent, which conferred noble status on the receiver and his progeny, and usually entitled them to assume knighthood and a coat of arms.[159] English monarchs did not follow suit until the second half of the fourteenth century, when Richard II began granting patented or chartered baronies (the first is from 1387).[160] These were even more specific and prestigious titles than those granted in the Continental documents. Meanwhile, the English heralds could also ennoble individuals by making grants of arms, which they did fairly regularly.[161]

If the prince could grant nobility, he could also take it away. A man who had transgressed (for instance by committing treason, murdering one of his peers in cold blood, or assaulting a noblewoman) could be stripped of his status in a ceremony just as elaborate as that which granted it – a kind of secular excommunication involving rituals such as striking off his spurs or inverting his arms. Not only humiliating in itself, this also made the man a commoner, subject to the most degrading punishments available under law. For less serious offences (malfeasance in a tournament, for instance), the knight could be expelled from his order by his peers.[162] If a nobleman were to marry too low, or to demean himself with base occupations, he could suffer *dérogeance* – less dramatic, but still a formal demotion acknowledging that he had sullied himself in the eyes of the world.[163] The implications of all this are complicated. If a man can cease to be noble, or can become noble through a specific grant, then nobility

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[159] Keen, *Chivalry*, pp. 145–6.

[160] This was the beginning of the English hereditary peerage: see Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 196.

[161] Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 164.

[162] Keen, *Chivalry*, pp. 174–6.

[163] Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 148.

cannot be an intrinsic quality. This argues against essentialist principles based on blood and birth. On the other hand, the idea that certain occupations are by definition antithetical to nobility does suggest a qualitative difference between nobles and commoners. One could also maintain that public recognition and demotion provide a way for the social order to recognize individual virtue regardless of ancestry, as literature so often demands. There was certainly a sense that it was better to be a modest person formally elevated for good conduct than a born noble who lived viciously.[164] Cultural attitudes thus pulled in several directions at once – a peculiarity that testifies to their complexity.

In theory, princes and heralds honoured virtue. The *De Amore* does not say the prince can ennoble anyone, but anyone of 'good character'. The jurists felt likewise that 'the prince ought to recognize natural virtue [...] the social hierarchy ought, in its way, to mirror the hierarchy of heaven by rewarding the virtuous here on earth'; but they also knew that was seldom the case.[165] In practice, worldly concerns usually took over: Henry I secured his place on the throne by surrounding himself with an administration of grateful 'new men', and Richard II is notorious for having promoted his favourites.[166] Indeed, almost all the medieval English kings expanded the nobility by creating titles – Edward IV alone was responsible for thirty-five – titles which were handed out according to agendas more political than moral.[167] As for the heralds, they had to rely on what they saw and were told; if the consensus among respectable people was that the applicant was worthy, then the herald would agree and the arms would be

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[164] See Anne J. Duggan, 'Introduction: Concepts, Origins, Transformations', in *Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe: Concepts, Origins, Transformations*, ed. Duggan (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000), pp. 1–15, at p. 1; see also Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 150.

[165] Keen, *Nobles, Knights and Men-at-Arms*, p. 220.

[166] On Henry I, see Keats-Rohan, 'The Bretons and Normans of England', pp. 56–9. On Richard II, see Michael Bennett, *Richard II and the Revolution of 1399* (Stroud: Sutton, 2006); the factionalism in Richard's court is a recurring theme throughout the book, but see especially pp. 21–3, 27–32, 86–7, 113, 159–61.

[167] Discussed in Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 197.

granted.[168] The deciding factors were thus the applicant's personal style and demeanour, and the public opinion they generated. This makes the public response to Richard II's favourites particularly revealing. One expects old families to feel threatened if the king promotes new men too highly, and objecting to the low birth of such persons is an obvious line of self-interested defence. But Richard's reign saw a storm of complaint from all levels, ranging from the tactful plea in Chaucer's 'Lack of Steadfastness' to explicit pieces such as 'Ther is a Busche that is Forgrowe' and *Richard the Redeless* (this last from Henry IV's reign, retrospectively justifying the deposition).[169] This outpouring expresses a popular conservatism which held that the barons really were the proper counsellors, and that Richard really was wrong to allow his favourites such influence. Rapid or extreme social mobility caused widespread suspicion and alarm, which again suggests widespread deference to old blood and traditional structures.

Nevertheless, some noblemen were made by wealth alone. There were the merchants ennobled for funding the Hundred Years War, and Keen quotes the case of a fifteenth-century herald who, when accused of ennobling unworthy persons, replied that he only granted arms to men 'having lands and possessions of free tenure yearly to the value of ten pounds sterling, or moveable goods three hundred pounds sterling'.[170] His defence shows not only that wealth was an acceptable practical standard, but also that chattels were an acceptable form for that wealth to take; nobility was not restricted to people with land. This correlates with the evidence from the 1363 sumptuary law, which grants

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[168] On how heralds determined whether or not to grant arms, see Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 164.

[169] Some of this material is printed in Dean (ed.), *Medieval English Political Writings*. For discussion of medieval ideas about who should, and who should not, advise the king, see Geraldine Barnes, *Counsel and Strategy in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), pp. 1–28. Interestingly, Gower revised this theme in *Vox Clamantis* – the original version blames Richard's counsellors for the state of the realm; the revision blames the (deposed) king himself: VI.545–80, discussed in Eric W. Stockton, 'Introduction', in *The Major Latin Works of John Gower*, trans. Stockton (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962), pp. 3–46, at pp. 13–15.

[170] Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 164.

different kinds of wealth equivalent status: for example, people with property worth over £1,000 ranked alongside people with £200 *per annum* from lands and rents.[171] The scale is not equal (£1,000 in property as against £200 in rents) and this could reflect a belief that land was more prestigious than goods.[172] But then again, land was customarily valued at ten or even twenty times the annual income it generated; on that scale of reckoning, the legislation should demand portable property to the value of at least £2,000 – twice what it actually stipulates.[173] This suggests that the uneven scale might be more practical than ideological. Movable property is less permanent than land, and more easily lost, so people needed more of it to be considered secure.

By contrast, distraint to knighthood was always tied to the land, though the required income varied wildly over the years. In 1242 everyone with lands generating over £20 per year had to be dubbed; in 1282 it was £30; in 1285, just three years later, £100.[174] Assessing people for distraint on the basis of landed income shows that knighthood and landholding remained theoretically connected throughout the thirteenth century (despite there being many landless knights in noble retinues), and that only certain kinds of wealth qualified a man for the so-called privilege of being dubbed. Even so, the assessment is still done financially. Moreover, the connection's apparent endurance might be a mere accident of history, for distraint of knighthood had fallen out of favour by the

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[171] Similar 'scales of equivalence' feature in the assessment for the gradated poll tax of 1379. Both are discussed in Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 8–11; Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, pp. 5–8.

[172] A point made in Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, p. 7.

[173] Ten years rent was the customary price in the thirteenth century: Richard Goddard, *Lordship and Medieval Urbanisation: Coventry, 1043–1355* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), pp. 205–7. In the fifteenth century prices could be as high as twenty years rent: J. M. W. Bean, 'Landlords', in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vol. 3: *1348–1500*, ed. Edward Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 526–86, at p. 567.

[174] These figures come from Coss, *Origins of the English Gentry*, pp. 95–6; Harding, *England in the Thirteenth Century*, pp. 189, 193–4; Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 33, which comments that the figure usually settled around £40 p.a.

fourteenth century.[175] Had the practice continued, it might have evolved scales of equivalence similar to those in the sumptuary laws and graduated taxes of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. That said, wealth was never the sole measure of status, and the conversion of economic to symbolic capital was not 100 per cent efficient. Other factors always came into play as well, hence Thrupp's categories of poor but gentle knights, and rich but non-gentle yeomen.

However, if managed carefully, a family could rise gradually by informal routes which demanded neither official grants, nor detailed assessments of wealth, and so be ennobled by default. Lay people of modest family climbed the social ladder through the guilds, the professions, and/or by holding office in local or central government.[176] Many of them grew wealthy as they did so, achieving a comfortable lifestyle and even assuming arms on their own initiative and without heraldic approval.[177] Having done so, they became indistinguishable from the born gentility, particularly since there were many people among the esquires, franklins, and *valetti* who were eligible for knighthood but were deliberately avoiding the honour.[178] This old-blood contingent added to the group's collective prestige, not least by displaying their families' traditional arms regardless of their sub-knightly status as individuals. Meanwhile, as professional and bureaucratic roles grew increasingly well established, formalized, and respected, so they developed a distinguished patina of their own, and became sources of symbolic capital in their own right.

This brings us to another practical consideration relevant to people's day-to-day perceptions of nobility: class divides were not as clear as medieval and

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[175] Harding, *England in the Thirteenth Century*, p. 194; Prestwich, 'The Enterprise of War', p. 78.

[176] Coss, *Origins of the English Gentry*, pp. 24–7.

[177] On the spread of heraldry, see Barron, 'Chivalry, Pageantry and Merchant Culture', pp. 231–5; Thrupp, *Merchant Class of Medieval London*, pp. 252–5. See also Coss, 'Knighthood, Heraldry and Social Exclusion', which emphasizes how the upper class used heraldry to mark itself off from the rest of society. On the movement from commerce to gentry status, see Thrupp, *Merchant Class of Medieval London*, pp. 191–205.

[178] The phenomenon is discussed in Coss, *Origins of the English Gentry*, pp. 69–108, and further at pp. 216–38. See also Keen, *Chivalry*, pp. 144–5

modern commentators sometimes make them sound. Social descriptions necessitate splitting society into clearly defined groups, but in reality those groups tend to overlap, blurring class divides and obviating distinctions based on blood or occupation. The professions, for instance, attracted people from both noble and non-noble backgrounds, who studied and practised alongside one another in the universities, Inns of Court, and royal and shire courts. The effect must have been particularly pronounced in the younger generation: as highly and more lowly born youths met, mingled, studied, and shared ideas and experiences, they came together in ways their grandparents might have found it hard to imagine, and in contexts where essential distinctions based on ancestral status might be bridged, even if they could not be forgotten. Nigel Saul's *Scenes from Provincial Life* suggests that the horizontal bands of the gentry and nobility might have blurred similarly in the provinces. He describes Sir William de Etchington IV as a

> rich, well connected knight, a man in his later years summoned to parliament as a lord. He knew the earl of Surrey; and he had attended the funeral of Lady Tregoz. There is no denying his standing in society. Yet the men with whom he went hunting in 1308/9 were not these grander sort but his tenants and immediate neighbours Alan and Thomas Buxhill.[179]

Interactions, one might even say friendships, like these correlate with the Toronto school's co-operative view of medieval society, and show that convenience and the desire for company could sometimes outweigh class distinctions.

One of the most familiar social divisions invoked in relation to romance is that between land and trade, between 'courtly' and 'bourgeois' values.[180] But

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[179] Nigel Saul, *Scenes from Provincial Life: Knightly Families in Sussex, 1280–1400* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 64. Coss quotes this same passage in *Origins of the English Gentry*, p. 206, during his discussion of county society and regional networks.

[180] See, for instance, Johnston, 'Knights and Merchants Unite', p. 736; Putter, 'Gifts and Commodities in *Sir Amadace*, p. 379; Earl R. Anderson, 'The Structure of *Sir Launfal*', *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature* 13 (1977), 115–24, at p. 116.

Peter Spufford argues vigorously that this divide has been overstated.[181] Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century merchants were sophisticated, refined individuals, often running complex international businesses.[182] In northern Italy and the Low Countries burgesses jousted alongside noblemen in tournaments, and nobles took part in banking and trade with no fear of impropriety or *dérogeance*.[183] There was a firmer divide in England, and Spufford admits that the English were occasionally surprised by such relaxed Continental practices.[184] The sumptuary laws and tax assessments perhaps reflect that English conservatism. But there is also ample evidence of interaction between merchants, nobles and gentry even in England. Successful merchants in the provinces were at the top of local society: Thrupp, Hudson and Meale have all noted that merchant and gentry families intermarried, and that their ideals and cultural preferences overlapped.[185] As for London, Hanna has argued cogently that the greater merchants would have been perfectly comfortable at court, and that the urban élite and court circle were essentially one and the same.[186] It is also important to remember that the mayors, aldermen and merchants who rubbed shoulders with the barons and gentry were not usually scions of long-established trade dynasties. Few families remained in trade for more than two or three generations before buying land and becoming country gentlemen, and very few boys took up the trade of their fathers.[187] This further weakens the case for

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[181] Spufford, *Power and Profit*, p. 81.

[182] On the evolution of the merchant between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, see Spufford, *Power and Profit*, pp. 12–59, especially pp. 19–22.

[183] Spufford, *Power and Profit*, pp. 57–8, 81; Barron, 'Chivalry, Pageantry and Merchant Culture', pp. 219–20; John Larner, 'Chivalric Culture in the Age of Dante', *Renaissance Studies* 2(2) (1988), 117–30, at pp. 128–9.

[184] Spufford, *Power and Profit*, p. 79. See also Barron, 'Chivalry, Pageantry and Merchant Culture in Medieval London', pp. 220–2.

[185] The argument for interaction is presented in Thrupp, *Merchant Class of Medieval London*, pp. 247–87. See also Hudson, 'Construction of Class, Family, and Gender', pp. 81–2; Meale, 'Gode Men, Wives, Maydnes and Alle Men', p. 224, n. 52.

[186] Hanna, *London Literature*, p. 124.

[187] Thrupp, *Merchant Class of Medieval London*, pp. 191–205.

an essential divide between inherited and acquired wealth: many of the respected urban potentates were self-made men, while many of the gentry families with whom they interacted (in marriage, leisure, government, and as testators) had themselves been in trade within living memory.

Practically speaking, then, the late medieval nobility was far from being a closed caste. Traditional ideas about breeding and ancestry were remarkably tenacious, but by the later fourteenth century it would have been impossible to ignore the power of money. Although economic capital had always underwritten the other narratives of nobility, the connection might have been less apparent in the twelfth century, since a higher proportion of the wealthy people then really were warriors (or clerics), born to privilege. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the prominence of people such as the guild masters, local justices, mayors, and aldermen meant that other routes to nobility were much more obvious – chief among them wealth, lifestyle, and the public and princely recognition that went with them.

Finally, it is important to remember that status is always relative, and changes according to the company a person keeps. At home on his estates, a man like John Paston or Robert Thornton could rightly see himself as a significant member of county society, and a part of the traditional landed class; he was of the second estate. When in London, however, his identity might have been rather different. Surrounded by the landless but urbane *esquiers* of royal and magnate retinues, by the lavish display of the civic dignitaries, and the obvious wealth and refinement of the great merchants, such a man might have chosen to perceive and present himself as a lawyer (or a trusted friend of the Crown, or a parliamentary representative, or whatever else he happened to be) rather than a country gentleman, shifting to an alternative source of symbolic and social capital. His tastes, attitudes, and even his language would have changed accordingly, as he adjusted his identity so as to negotiate his status to his best advantage in the immediate context.

*   *   *

Men and women in late-medieval England could imagine nobility in any number of ways. Keen has listed its core elements as 'princely recognition, vocation,

wealth and style of life, virtue, and descent in blood', but one did not need to enjoy all those qualities to be considered noble.[188] Only in an ideal situation (such as the end of a romance) could they all be expected to come together. It is to the romances that we now turn, where the happy endings celebrate nobility imagined as the conjunction of symbolic, social, and economic capital. But before we move on, I shall reiterate a point that is central to my analysis: social ideologies do not map neatly onto the sectors of society whose interests they best serve. There is an important difference between accepting an ideology and being served by it, of course, but one does not need illustrious ancestors to ascribe symbolic value to ancient titles and families, nor is the praise of virtue exclusive to a pious, aspiring, middle-brow bourgeoisie. For one thing, the classes themselves are not so clear cut. For another, we have seen repeatedly that traditional hierarchy and a deference for blood were deeply rooted in medieval thought and language, while even the most elevated audiences could be sympathetic to egalitarian principles. The social and economic changes of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries encouraged both perspectives. Daily experience proved that status, birth, and moral quality were not always connected, so people used alternative theories to explain the society around them: they measured nobility according to a person's behaviour or, more cynically, according to wealth and public recognition. At the same time, *and for the same people*, the idea of innate nobility and ancient quality still carried great imaginative and ideological force.

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[188] The list is from Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 151.

CHAPTER 2

Lost Heirs: Nobility by Blood

From the long Matter of England narratives to the short lay *Sir Degaré*, lost heirs are a mainstay of Insular romance. Their stories generally involve a sequence of exile and return, with a circular structure and sense of providential justice that are extremely powerful both mythically and politically. W. R. J. Barron focuses on the mythic element, describing the 'basic folklore pattern of the exile of a charismatic hero who, through personal maturation and the development of powers of body and soul, returns to his birthright';[1] Rosalind Field concentrates more on the political, and characterizes the typical Insular hero as 'a landless "bachelor" often unjustly exiled from his own lands and thereby from his rightful place in society, who in the course of the action wins back his lands and with them his social position'.[2] Helen Cooper's *Romance in Time* develops and synthesizes these two perspectives as 'the concern of the genre with true inheritance, the rightful passing on of land and power underwritten by Providence'.[3] Her chapter continues:

> The insistence of romance that there was such a thing as a *true* heir,
> however – that one person, and one person only, carried the right to
> the crown, and with it the approval of God – bore an ideological charge
> that might be at odds with *realpolitik* but which was very widely
> subscribed to, and which carried immense judicial, ethical, and
> theological weight […] romance is the myth of the ideology of
> primogeniture.[4]

One would therefore expect romances of lost heirs to be profoundly committed to the idea that nobility inheres in the blood, and to make the hero's 'superiority of degree' the direct consequence of his natal aristocracy.[5] The texts discussed

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[1] Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, p. 85.

[2] Field, 'Romance in England', p. 161, discussing the Anglo-Norman romances that preceded and then coexisted with Middle English ones.

[3] Cooper, *Romance in Time*, p. 324.

[4] Cooper, *Romance in Time*, p. 326.

[5] Frye, 'Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes', p. 33.

here – *Sir Degaré*, *Chevelere Assigne*, *Sir Perceval of Galles*, *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Octavian* – broadly meet those expectations. Their heroes generally do have innate nobility. By exploring the distinction between innate and learned behaviour these romances also demonstrate the importance of upbringing, but that never really challenges the supremacy of blood. However, none of the poems is wholly consistent in its representation, and none promotes blood as the single source of symbolic capital to the exclusion of all others. Non-noble people and attitudes are also given ample narrative space, sometimes complementing and sometimes challenging the dominant courtly or chivalric ethos. Moreover, in *Chevelere Assigne* and *Lybeaus Desconus* the story of the lost heir fizzles out without proper resolution, suggesting that the plot's 'ideological charge' was not always active. These features muddy the waters and distort the clear reflection of innate nobility the story-type could otherwise display. These romances thus pull in two directions. The vitality of the lost-heir motif shows that blood-based nobility still had popular currency, and therefore meshes with the widespread deference to title and ancestry that we saw in Chapter 1. Meanwhile, the specifics of each particular text suggest that the story-type's aristocratic affinities were seldom developed on purpose.

Signs and Portents: The Hero Marked by Birth

The evidence for these heroes having innate nobility includes their physical excellence, their instinctive attraction to knighthood, and the instinctive attraction other nobles feel towards them. The texts strengthen this position by harnessing the natural and supernatural realms to the hero's cause, while implying in their very structure a social hierarchy that is providentially ordained. However, it seems that position was not consciously maintained, since the texts also include motifs and scenes that undermine it.

In the Middle English poem *Émare* the exiled prince Segramour is born with 'a doubyll kyngus marke' as a sign of his right to inherit two kingdoms.[6] None of our heroes is so obviously labelled, but they are physically distinctive

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[6]   *Emaré*, in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), pp. 145–200, l. 504.

nonetheless, and their bodies show their quality. Even as a baby Florent stands out, so the outlaws in the Northern *Octavian* (northeast Midlands, *c.* 1350) see at once that he 'es comyn of gentill blode'.[7] They believe he would sell for a good price, and so take him to market. Once there, 'It was no man þat it seghe / Þat þay ne wepid with þaire eghe: / So faire it was of syghte' (ll. 571–3). By the time Florent is seven 'All þe rewme wyde and longe / Worde of þe childe spronge, / So was he faire to syghte' (ll. 637–9). The hero of *Sir Degaré* (southeast Midlands, early fourteenth century) is a similarly striking youth. At ten he is 'a fair child and a bold, / Wel inorissched, god and hende; / Was non betere in al that ende'.[8] By twenty, 'staleworth he was, of swich pouer / That ther ne wan man in that lond / That o breid him might astond' (ll. 290–2). The heroes of *Sir Perceval of Galles* (northeast Midlands, 1300–1350) and *Lybeaus Desconus* (southeast Midlands, 1325–50) are also distinguished physical specimens. Perceval is 'burely of body, and therto right brade' (l. 269), and Arthur is immediately taken with him (ll. 543–4).[9] Similarly, on Lybeaus's arrival at court Arthur comments that 'seþen Y was y-bore, / Ne fond Y me be-fore / Non so fayr of syȝt' (ll. 46–8;

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7   *Octovian*, ed. Frances McSparran, EETS e.s. 289 (London: Oxford University Press, 1986), l. 565. This edition gives parallel texts of both surviving manuscripts of the Northern version: Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91 (*c.* 1440, the Thornton manuscript); Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.2.38 (1420–50). I quote from Thornton, unless otherwise stated, because that is the fuller text. On the manuscripts' relative claims to authority, see McSparran's introduction, pp. 10–21.

8   *Sir Degaré*, in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), pp. 89–144, ll. 276–8. *Degaré* survives in five manuscripts: National Library of Scotland, Advocates MS 19.2.1 (*c.* 1330, the Auchinleck manuscript); British Library, MS Egerton 2862 (late fourteenth century); Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.2.38 (1420–50); Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson F.34 (late fifteenth century); British Library, Add. MS 27879 (*c.* 1650, the Percy Folio). Laskaya and Salisbury base their edition on Auchinleck, with the final passage supplied from Rawlinson because Auchinleck is incomplete. On the relative authority of the manuscripts, and the superiority of Auchinleck, see William C. Stokoe Jr., 'The Double Problem of *Sir Degaré*', *PMLA* 70(3) (1955), 518–34.

9   *Sir Perceval of Galles*, in *'Sir Perceval of Galles' and 'Ywain and Gawain'*, ed. Mary Flowers Braswell (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), pp. 1–76. The only manuscript is Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91 (*c.* 1440; the Thornton manuscript).

an idea repeated at l. 60).[10] Like Havelok the Dane, the Anglo-Norman Horn, and Malory's Sir Tor, these boys are so big, strong, and beautiful that they are obviously out of place in their humble childhood homes.[11] Such bodies are only made for great things.

It is not only Perceval's good looks that recommend him to Arthur. He also puts the king in mind of the old Sir Perceval (Arthur's brother-in-law and the hero's father), leading him to reflect:

> And thou were wele dighte,
> Thou were lyke to a knyghte
> That I lovede with all my myghte
> Whills he was one lyve.
>
> (*Perceval*, ll. 545–8)

Indeed, Arthur only needs to look at Perceval to identify him correctly:

> The Kyng biholdes the vesage free,
> And ever more trowed hee
> That the childe scholde bee
> Sir Percyvell son.
>
> (*Perceval*, ll. 585–8)

There is a similar attraction between Florent and the Emperor Octavian. The first time they speak together in the Northern text, Florent shyly tells Octavian that 'of alle the men that ever sawe I, / Moste lufes myn herte yowe sekirly / Syr, takes it to none ille' (ll. 1265–7). Octavian, meanwhile, has already decided that Florent must be gentleman:

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10 *Lybeaus Desconus*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, EETS o.s. 261 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969). This is a parallel text edition of British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii (1446–60) and Lambeth Palace Library, MS 306 (1450–1500). I quote from Cotton, unless otherwise stated, because it features elsewhere in this study and Lambeth does not. There are also four other manuscripts: Lincoln's Inn Library, MS 150 (fragmentary; late fourteenth–fifteenth century); Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale, MS XIII. B.29 (1457); Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61 (late fifteenth century); British Library, Add. MS 27879 (*c.* 1650, the Percy Folio). On the relationships between all these versions, see Mills's introduction, pp. 1–28.

11 *Havelok*, in *Medieval English Romances*, ed. Diane Speed, 3rd edn, 2 vols (Durham: Durham Medieval Texts, 1993), I.25–121, at ll. 791–5, 983–91; Thomas, *The Romance of Horn*, ed. Mildred K. Pope, 2 vols (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1955–64), vol. 1, ll. 2360–8; Sir Thomas Malory, *Complete Works*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 61.

> The emperoure gan þe childe byholde,
> He was so curtayse and so bolde,
> Bot he ne wiste what he was;
> And euir he thoghte in his mode
> The childe was comen of gentill blode,
> Hym thoghte righte als it was.
>
> (Northern *Octavian*, ll. 1095–1100)[12]

They are in fact father and son, and the recognition scene is not long in coming. On a similar note, it is significant that no one ever accuses Lybeaus of being base born, though Elene and her dwarf insult him in every other way imaginable before he wins their respect. They scorn him for youth, wildness, and inexperience, but his appearance seems to put his breeding beyond question. Such moments imply that noble blood calls out to those who share it, and that noble lineaments shine through all the veils and shrouds of Fortune.

Writing of romance foundlings, Helen Cooper notes the 'dominant maxim […] is that nobility will out'.[13] These texts confirm that view, for these young men have knighthood in their blood and most of them sense its presence. *Octavian*'s Florent is drawn to the high life despite being raised by a burgess, as shown by the lively scenes in which he squanders his foster-father's resources on a hawk and a horse.[14] Critics have demonstrated that this fiasco proves Florent pathologically ill-suited to trade and commerce, while his naive self-justifications and Clement's righteous exasperation highlight the gap between noble and non-

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12 Cf. Northern, ll. 1049–51, describing an earlier feast: 'He was so curtayse and so bolde / Þat alle hym louede, ȝonge and olde, / For his doghety dede'.

13 Cooper, *Romance in Time*, p. 338.

14 These scenes have been so thoroughly analysed that it seems unnecessary to repeat the familiar arguments here. See the discussions in *Octovian*, ed. McSparran, p. 65; *Octavian*, in *Four Middle English Romances*, ed. Harriet Hudson (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), pp. 45–114, at pp. 48–50; Moffat, 'Fearful Villainy', pp. 122–4; Denise C. White, *BL Cotton Caligula Aii: Manuscript Context, The Theme of Obedience, and a Diplomatic Transcription Edition* (unpublished PhD dissertation, Georgia State University, 2012), pp. 193–4; Glenn Wright, 'The Fabliau Ethos in the French and English *Octavian* Romances', *Modern Philology* 102 (2005), 478–500, at pp. 487–8 (Wright is actually discussing the French *Octavian*, but his comments apply broadly to the English texts as well).

noble dispositions – a gap so wide that Moffat has termed it a 'chasm'.[15] Possessing a horse is also important to Perceval, who is raised in even greater obscurity than Florent but still determines to become a knight as soon as he sees one. Having met Gawain in the forest he promptly sets about catching himself a mount, demonstrating a precocity that his mother interprets as the pricking of his innate nobility, or *kynde*:

> Scho saw hym horse hame brynge;
> Scho wiste wele by that thynge,
> That the kynde wolde oute sprynge
> For thynge that be moughte.

<div align="right">(Perceval, ll. 333–5)</div>

Lybeaus follows Perceval's lead. Coming across a dead knight in the forest his instinctive reaction is to don the armour himself and travel in it to Arthur's court:

> Þat chyld dede of þe knyȝtes wede
> And anon he gane hym schrede
> Jn þat ryche armur.
> Whan he hadde do þat dede,
> To Glastyngbery he ȝede,
> Þer ley þe Kyng Arthor.

<div align="right">(Lybeaus, ll. 31–6)</div>

Middle English romance's swift, matter-of-fact narration is particularly effective here, conveying clearly Lybeaus's ineluctable sense of purpose. As it turns out, he too is following a path determined by his *kynde*: he is destined to rescue the lady of Synadowne by breaking an enchantment that only one of Gawain's blood can lift (Lybeaus is Gawain's son). Other people sense that blood in his veins, much as Arthur senses Perceval's, and Octavian Florent's. Having been defeated by Lybeaus, the lady's giant porter Lambert is so impressed that he asserts confidently 'þou art com of Gawenys kynne' (l. 1646). Lybeaus's identity comes through in his actions, even though he has no inkling of it himself.

It takes a little longer for Degaré to yield to the spur of chivalric ambition (the delay is discussed below), but once he learns his history he suddenly begins to think and act like the nobleman he is. Lineage and honour become all

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[15] Moffat, 'Fearful Villainy', p. 123. I discuss the class relations in *Octavian* further in final section of this chapter.

important, and immediately 'he swor he nolde stinte no stounde / Til he his kinrede hadde ifounde' (ll. 309–10). He also shows an intuitive appreciation for knighthood's symbolic and moral aspects by disagreeing when the hermit who has raised him says he should have a 'hors and god armure' for his adventure (l. 322). He takes a simple club instead, as though he feels he is not yet worthy of knighthood's finery. This reveals a sensitivity to chivalric ideals that sets Degaré apart from his peers in *Perceval*, *Lybeaus* and Southern *Octavian* (southeast England, *c.* 1350), all of whom eagerly adopt arms and masquerade as knights well before they have proven their ability. Degaré, by contrast, only assumes arms after defeating a dragon and winning the respect of an earl. Then, physically capable and properly equipped to boot, he discovers in himself the hunger for honour and worldly renown that are the medieval nobleman's true inheritance.[16] On hearing about a king who meets and defeats his daughter's every suitor, Degaré muses:

> Ich am a staleworht man,
> And of min owen ich have a stede,
> Swerd and spere and riche wede;
> And yif ich felle the Kyng adoun,
> Evere ich have wonnen renoun;
> And thei that he me herte sore,
> No man wot wer ich was bore.
> Whether deth other lif me bitide,
> Agen the King ich wille ride!
>
> (*Degaré*, ll. 458–66)

It has not taken much for the seeds of nobility to sprout, and already Degaré is prepared to risk all in pursuit of public recognition to cement his status. His strapping physique and burning drive prove that despite his slow start, nobility was smouldering within him all along.

We saw in Chapter 1 that medieval physiology supposed parents passed moral and spiritual qualities to their children as well as physical ones, particularly via the blood (this perhaps explains why the lady in *Lybeaus* does not need Gawain himself to free her, but merely one of his relatives). In *Chevelere*

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[16]   On public reputation in the chivalric and courtly ethos, respectively, see Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence*, pp. 129–60; Burnley, *Courtliness and Literature*, pp. 37–75.

Assigne that is a dominant assumption held by the characters, the narration, and (implicitly) the audience. Queen Bewtrys condemns the poor-woman who has given birth to twins because she believes twins to be an 'unsemelye þynge' (l. 30) and a sign that the mother has known two men.[17] Her husband Oryens is unconvinced, but he is prepared to believe that a woman who fornicated with dogs could bear puppies, the unnatural birth being both a logical consequence of cross-species coupling and a token of the woman's bestial nature. The story proves both Oryens and Bewtrys mistaken, but that does not mean the moral significance of progeneration is to be abandoned. On the contrary, the poem is clear that the royal septuplets should be interpreted precisely as a sign of their parents' moral quality. On the one hand they fulfil Oryens's desire for an heir, thus rewarding him for pitying the poor-woman; on the other they punish Bewtrys for being judgmental – the angel says they are born 'at ones / For a word on þe wall þat she wronge seyde' (ll. 196–7). Births are telling, and children literally embody the qualities of their parents.

Chevelere Assigne even carries that hereditary principle beyond the text, into the real world. The story is part of a much bigger narrative known as the Godfrey of Bouillon cycle, but was apparently added late (*c.* 1250) to provide Godfrey with a remarkable family history.[18] The story's dynastic credentials increased over time, and by the fifteenth century several noble families were claiming descent from Godfrey and the Swan Knight. They included the Staffords, Bohuns, Beauchamps, and even kings Henry V and Henry VI.[19] This ties the poem still more tightly to the ideology of blood: Godfrey's brilliance is explained by his illustrious ancestor, and, through them, the contemporary aristocracy asserts the prestige of its own lines. Though the Middle English poem survives as a stand-

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17   *Chevelere Assigne*, in *Medieval English Romances*, ed. Diane Speed, 3rd edn, 2 vols. (Durham: Durham Medieval Texts, 1993), I.149–70. The only manuscript is British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii (1446–60).

18   W. R. J. Barron writes that the story was added to the cycle in the thirteenth century: '*Chevalere Assigne* and the *Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne*', *Medium Ævum* 36 (1967), 25–37, at p. 25. Speed mentions that Godfrey is first associated with the Swan Knight in the 1170s: *Chevelere Assigne*, ed. Speed, p. 149.

19   See *Chevelere Assigne*, ed. Speed, p. 153.

alone narrative, ostensibly stripped of that dynastic context, medieval audiences presumably knew its cyclic connections. Indeed, the pseudonym Chevelere Assigne makes no sense otherwise, for Enyas does nothing in our poem to warrant it. The romance speaks of (and for) innate nobility both within and beyond the realm of story.

Lost heirs' innate nobility is not demonstrated solely through their own behaviour and the responses of other people. Frequently it receives external endorsement from the natural, supernatural, or spiritual realms as well. Young Octavian, for instance, is nurtured by a lioness. This surrounds his childhood with the mystery and marvel proper to important foundlings, and also shows the natural world's instinctive and willing submission to high-born humans.[20] In the Northern version this lioness comes with the added kudos of being guided by God (mentioned at ll. 363, 371, 382), while both versions invoke the well-established affinity between lions and royalty:

> Hyt ys well fern, men seyden so,
> That bestyn kyng
> Hys kynde may he noȝt forgo
> For no lykyng;
>
> A chyld, þat ys of kynges blood,
> A lyoun ne struyd hyt for no good;
> Therfor hyt louede with mylde mood
> The lyonesse,
> And whan sche by hym sat oþer stood,
> Sche gan hyt kysse.
>> (Southern *Octavian*, ll. 477–86; cf. Northern, ll. 349–51)[21]

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[20] Lee C. Ramsey considers being raised by animals 'an emblem of [a hero's] natural and noble heritage': *Chivalric Romances* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 170. Helen Cooper writes similarly that 'It is almost one of the anthropological definitions of the hero that he should be raised outside his own family, in peculiarly special or unpromising circumstances': 'Good Advice of Leaving Home in the Romances', in *Youth in the Middle Ages*, ed. P. J. P. Goldberg and Felicity Riddy (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2004), pp. 101–21, at p. 102. Lord Raglan also lists being 'raised by foster-parents in a far country' as one of the typical stages of a hero's life: *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama* (London: Methuen, 1936), p. 179.

[21] I quote the Southern text from *Octavian: Zwei mittelenglische Bearbeitungen der Sage*, ed. Gregor Sarazzin (Heilbronn: Gebr. Henninger, 1885). It survives in one manuscript, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii (1446–60),

The lioness is gentle with Octavian because he is of her *kynde*. The ordinary sailors who stray onto their island are not, and so, according to *kynde*, she kills them. But the lioness does not just recognize Octavian's status; she embodies it by making his inner quality visible to other characters and to the audience, as David Salter has shown.[22] The lioness therefore signifies the same thing as does Florent's penchant for horses and hawks, though this time with the added symbolic power of religion and myth. That the distinction between nobles and commons is drawn in regard to *both* children suggests that the boys' innate qualities were important to the various poets' conceptions of the story.

God recognizes royal children through the natural world again in *Chevelere Assigne*. When the hermit first finds the hungry and 'cheverynge' children (l. 107) he immediately prays for aid and is quickly answered:

> Thenne an hynde kome fro þe woode, rennynge full swyfte,
> And fell before hem adowne; þey drowȝe to þe pappes.
> The heremyte prowde was þerof, and putte hem to sowke.
> Sethen taketh he hem up, and þe hynde foloweth,
> And she kepte hem þere whyll our Lorde wolde.
>
> (*Chevelere Assigne*, ll. 113–17)

The hind is a double sign of the children's status: she comes from God, and she brings wonder in her own right. Later in the story Enyas receives still further endorsement. He fights as God's champion (before the fight the region's bells herald his baptism by ringing of their own volition), and enjoys the enthusiastic support of his noble steed Feraunce. During the battle Feraunce blinds his opponent, and the narrator comments 'The fyrste happe other hele was þat þat þe chylde hadde / Whenne þat þe blonk þat hym bare blente hadde his fere'

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alongside *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Sir Launfal*. Scholars have speculated that all three were written by the 'Thomas Chestre' who signs off at the end of *Sir Launfal*, the main proponents of the idea being Trounce and Mills; Everett is more hesitant, but eventually she too concludes that this is 'the most satisfactory explanation' for the texts' similarities. See A. McI Trounce, 'The English Tail-Rhyme Romances', *Medium Ævum* 2 (1933), 34–57, 189–98, at pp. 194–8; Maldwyn Mills, 'The Composition and Style of the 'Southern' *Octavian*, *Sir Launfal* and *Libeaus Desconus*', *Medium Aevum* 31 (1962), 88–109; Dorothy Everett, 'The Relationship of Chestre's *Launfal* and *Lybeaus Desconus*', *Medium Aevum* 7 (1938), 29–49 (quotation on p. 47).

[22] David Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts: Encounters with Animals in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), pp. 82–95.

(ll. 324–5). Critics have generally assumed that 'his fere' refers to the other horse, partly because both animals are riderless at this point and seem to have galloped off, and partly because Malkedras (the villain) is blinded later in the fight by a flame spurting from Enyas's shield.[23] However, it is hard to see how Enyas is helped by having the other horse disabled when Malkedras is no longer riding it, as Speed comments in her note.[24] A better interpretation would be that Feraunce's flying hooves blind Malkedras, making for an unambiguous demonstration of the horse's sympathy with his inexperienced yet just and noble rider.[25] Directed by instinct and by God, both hind and horse feel the quality of the young people they serve, and respond accordingly.

In *Holy and Noble Beasts* David Salter discusses how romance and hagiography use animals to manifest the nobility and/or saintliness of their heroes and heroines.[26] *Chevelere Assigne* supports that view, for while Enyas and his siblings are repeatedly associated with noble horses, hinds, and swans, Malkedras's avatar is a snake:

> 'Kepe þy swerde fro my croyse!' quod Chevelere Assygne.
> 'I charge not þy croyse,' quod Malkedras, 'þe valwe of a cherye,
> For I shall shoppe it full small ere þenne þis werke ende.'
> An edder spronge out of his shelde, and in his body spynneth;
> A fyre fruscheth out of his croys, and rapte out his yen.
>
> (*Chevelere Assigne*, ll. 328–32)

The pronouns are confusing in these lines, and editors and critics usually interpret them as though both the adder and the flame come from Enyas's

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23 E.g. Tony Davenport, 'Abbreviation and the Education of the Hero in *Chevalere Assigne*', in *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance*, ed. Phillipa Hardman (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), pp. 9–20, at p. 18; Diane Speed, '*Chevelere Assigne*: Notes', in *Medieval English Romances*, vol. 2, p. 298.

24 Speed, '*Chevelere Assigne*: Notes', p. 298.

25 It does not matter that this reading would have Malkedras blinded twice. Significant events are often repeated in combat scenes, and the loss of Malkedras's sight is a highly symbolic moment: it avenges the good servant Markus, who has his eyes put out for refusing to kill the royal babies.

26 Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts*, pp. 55–110, with a summary of the argument at pp. 55–71.

shield.[27] But the episode is improved if we read the snake as coming from Malkedras's – a dirty trick against which Enyas's flame is a justified defence. This reading fits the pattern described by Salter by giving a low serpent to the man doing the devil's work, thus correlating with the natural hierarchy presented elsewhere in the poem, and in other examples of the story-type.

Perceval also enjoys mastery over the natural world, though in a more modest fashion than Enyas and Octavian. He is such an accomplished hunter that 'ther was no beste that welke on fote / To fle fro hym was it no bote, / When that he wolde hym have' (ll. 222–4), and he is also an intuitive horseman. When he comes upon the herd of wild horses the narrator is quick to tell us that 'Never one was tame' (l. 328), yet Perceval manages his ride easily:

> Kepes he no sadill-gere,
> Bot stert up on the mere:
> Hamewarde scho gun hym bere,
> Withowtten faylynge.
>
> (*Perceval*, ll. 345–8)

Like Feraunce, the wild mare responds to Perceval by instinct, thus providing an early recognition of the innate qualities he demonstrates in the rest of the poem.

Whereas *Perceval*, *Octavian* and *Chevelere Assigne* use the natural world to invest their noble heroes with symbolic capital, *Degaré* turns to the world of faerie. Faeries are always glamorous and powerful, and any humans they favour are special by association. It is telling, then, that in *Degaré* the faeries mimic the nobility. When Degaré's father-to-be approaches the princess in the forest, he tells her:

> Iich am comen here a fairi knyghte;
> My kynde is armes for to were,
> On horse to ride with scheld and spere.
>
> (*Degaré*, ll. 100–2)

We have already come across the word *kynde* in this section, and it is worth pausing here to note its rich associations: propriety, nature, and inner essence,

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27   E.g. Speed, '*Chevelere Assigne*: Notes', p. 298; Russel Edgar Stratton, '*Cheuelere Assigne*: Simplicity with a Purpose?', *American Notes & Queries* 18(8) (1980), 118–21, at p. 120.

race, family, and tribe.[28] Gawain expresses his failure in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as being against his *kynde*, confessing that fear made him 'acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake'.[29] The choice of words in *Degaré* thus shows that the faerie has a very deep affinity for the lifestyle of noble mortals, a connection maintained throughout the story as the two realms consistently overlap. Degaré is a faerie–mortal hybrid who recognizes his mortal mother by a pair of faerie gloves, and his faerie father in mortal combat. His wife lives in a castle with a distinctly magical aura, and may be (or once have been) a fay herself.[30] And, of course, the poem's resolution requires that a faerie knight and a mortal princess marry and rule together. Nobles and faeries thus belong to one another in a way that nobles and merchants clearly do not: the hermit and merchant who foster Degaré in his youth simply drop from the narrative, and do not even reappear for a token reward at the end.[31] The nobility is therefore distinguished as superior to other mortals yet again, specially favoured by the faerie otherworld and bathed in its reflected glamour.

Providence is also at work in these texts. As Helen Cooper explains in *Romance in Time*, the very structure of the lost heir narratives reveals 'the overt intervention of Providence, a divine order that endorses the social hierarchy and the inherent superiority of noble blood'.[32] All five of our romances fit that pattern; indeed, *Degaré* is one of Cooper's examples. Having left his childhood home he follows a smooth path towards his parents and future wife, apparently

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[28] *MED* definitions include: (1a) the aggregate of inherent qualities or properties of persons, animals etc.; (2a) the natural disposition or temperament of a person or animal; (6a) action natural, habitual or customary to a person; (10) a tribe, clan, family; (11) Parentage, lineage, ancestry, stock, birth.

[29] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. and trans. W. R. J. Barron (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), l. 2381.

[30] Stokoe makes this suggestion: 'The Double Problem of *Sir Degaré*', p. 526.

[31] It is just possible, though unlikely, that they featured in the lost Auchinleck ending. Nicolas Jacobs calculates about forty-four lines are missing, whose contents remain a mystery; none of the extant manuscripts matches the decipherable letters on Auchinleck's surviving stub: 'The Lost Conclusion of the Auchinleck *Sir Degarre*', *Notes & Queries* n.s. 37 (1990), 154–8, at pp. 155–7.

[32] Cooper, *Romance in Time*, p. 329.

according to a universal order in which everyone has a proper place. This sense of propriety has been described by James Simpson as the key to the text: 'the premise of the story (impossible in bourgeois fiction) is, then, that the world does indeed have a place ready for the hero, to which he will return'.[33] Degaré moves according to 'a genetically pre-given order of things' and, once that pre-given path has been followed to its end, the narrative halts.[34] Degaré – the thing that was lost, 'that not never what hit is' (l. 256) – has been found, the social order has been providentially endorsed, and nothing remains to be said.[35] At the deepest structural level, this story-type assumes that nobility is innate and inalienable, and insists that narrative only stops when everyone has been recognized and replaced where he or she belongs.

That structure is particularly clear in *Degaré* because the poem is so condensed; short and streamlined, it seems to embody the essence of the genre.[36] *Perceval* is more elaborate and self-conscious, but it shares that same providential circularity. Because he was born to be a nobleman Perceval has to fulfil his destiny and leave the forest; and because his mother is a noblewoman, she has to come out as well. So, while many critics praise the poem's circular, symmetrical plot when discussing Perceval's search for his mother, it is

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[33]   Simpson, 'Violence, Narrative, and Proper Name', p. 131.

[34]   Simpson, 'Violence, Narrative, and Proper Name', pp. 131–2 (quotation on p. 131).

[35]   On the etymology of the name 'Degaré', from Old French *esgaré* (abandoned) and Middle English *deswarre* (destitute), see Nicolas Jacobs, 'Old French *Degaré* and Middle English *Degarre* and *Deswarre*', *Notes and Queries* n.s. 17 (1970), 164–5.

[36]   This simplicity makes the poem particularly susceptible to schematic readings. For the story as an archetypal myth of growing-up, see Brewer, *Symbolic Stories*, pp. 66–71. For a Freudian approach, see Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances*, pp. 159–62; Cheryl Colopy, '*Sir Degaré*: A Fairy Tale Oedipus', *Pacific Coast Philology* 17 (1982), 31–9 (Colopy's reading is limited by its making much of Degaré's encounter with a giant, which does not happen in the Auchinleck version). For a folkloric interpretation, see George Patterson Faust, *'Sir Degaré': A Study of the Texts and Narrative Structure* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1935); Bruce A. Rosenberg, 'The Three Tales of *Sir Degaré*', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 76 (1975), 39–51. These various lines are synthesised in Henry Kozicki, 'Critical Methods in the Literary Evaluation of *Sir Degaré*', *Modern Language Quarterly* 29 (1968), 3–14, especially p. 3.

important to remember that the circle begins and ends in society: the poem runs not from forest to forest but from court to court, beginning with Acheflour's wedding and ending with her restoration.[37] Recently the emphasis has been very much on Perceval's return to the wild, and the anti-chivalric implications of his laying aside his horse and armour to resume his boyhood identity.[38] However, Glenn Wright has contributed a counter-argument by suggesting that Acheflour's return to society is actually the more important element.[39] Mother and son do not remain in their woodland retreat, and Acheflour does not stay wild. Instead she is systematically resocialized – put to bed, tended, washed, dressed, and taken to live in civilization with her son and his new wife. The reunion is one of the poem's highlights, but it is more significant as a *return* to society than an escape, marking Providence's final move in bringing everyone back into the fold.[40]

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[37] The structure is praised in Cooper, *Romance in Time*, pp. 60–2; Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, p. 158; Mehl, *The Middle English Romances*, p. 105; Ad Putter, 'Story Line and Story Shape in *Sir Percyvell of Gales* and Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte du Graal*' in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 171–96, at p. 189. Though most of these accounts do mention the final return to society, their points about circularity are always made in connection with Perceval's journey back to the woods, and seldom mention the initial setting of marriage and tournament. This suggests a tendency among critics mentally to privilege the wilderness–wilderness cycle, which actually unfolds within the wider cycle court–court. Susan Wittig is an exception, but her points on Perceval's united structure are made in analysing the poem's formulaic composition rather than its themes: *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in Middle English Romances* (Austen: University of Texas Press, 1978), pp. 108–9.

[38] As in F. Xavier Baron, 'Mother and Son in *Sir Perceval of Galles*', *Papers on Language and Literature* 8 (1972), 3–14, at p. 5; Aisling Byrne, 'The Intruder at the Feast: Negotiating Boundaries in Medieval Insular Romance', *Arthurian Literature* 27 (2010), 35–58, at p. 49.

[39] Glenn Wright, '"Þe Kynde Wolde Oute Sprynge": Interpreting the Hero's Progress in *Sir Perceval of Galles*', *Studia Neophilologica* 72(1) (2000), 45–53, at p. 48.

[40] On the simple poignancy and symbolism of the search and reunion sequence, see Putter, 'Story Line and Story Shape', pp. 188–92 (Putter is another critic who focuses on the psychological aspect of Perceval's return to the wild). See also the comments in Maldwyn Mills, '*Sir Percyvell*', in *The Arthur of the English: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Life and Literature*, ed.

So far it seems that all five romances are strongly committed to the idea that nobility is innate. Their heroes are different from common men, they feel a deep yearning for noble life, and as they go about achieving their destinies, Nature, the faeries, and God himself all smile on their progress. The poems thus provide popular cultural expressions of the hierarchical thinking we saw so often in Chapter 1. Simpson may consider this ethos 'impossible in bourgeois fiction', but cultural history and the manuscript record suggest it received widespread support across society nonetheless.[41] That would seem to imply an aristocratic ideology presented to the lower orders and embraced as false consciousness, and therefore that the lost-heir narrative performs the 'social function' identified by Stephen Knight.[42] However, this potent message is not consistently maintained, and nor is innate nobility consistently endorsed.

Florent's 'gentil blode' might be manifest even in his infant body, but Degaré's is certainly not. His mother sends her baby into the world with a profusion of signs to ensure his nobility does not go unnoticed. He is wrapped in a cloth and placed in a cradle with four pounds of gold and ten pounds of silver at his feet, and a pair of magic gloves under his head (ll. 186–99). In *Lay le Freine* symbolic tokens like this suffice to safeguard the baby's nobility, but in *Degaré* they do not.[43] His mother thus fastens a letter around his neck, which assures whoever finds the child that 'hit is comen of gentil blod' (l. 199), and beseeches the reader to raise him carefully. Degaré is thus surrounded with a surplus of material and written signs, as though this is the only way his nobility can be assured. Sure enough, the hermit who finds him needs the literal message to interpret the situation: 'he tok the letter and radde wel sone / That tolde him that he scholde done' (ll. 245–6). Though Degaré does grow into a fine

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W. R. J. Barron (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), pp. 136–41, at p. 140.

[41] Simpson, 'Violence, Narrative, and Proper Name', p. 131.

[42] Knight, 'Social Function of Middle English Romances', pp. 101–2.

[43] *Lay le Freine*, in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), pp. 61–87, ll. 137–44.

youth, he is not yet physically distinctive, and his blood does not speak for itself.[44]

Were it not for the letter, Degaré's nobility really could have been lost. He has no inkling of it until he is told, and is quite happy in his foster family:

> He wende wel that the gode man
> Had ben his fader that him wan,
> And the wif his moder also,
> And the hermite his unkel bo.

(*Degaré*, ll. 279–82)

This contentment contrasts with the restlessness of those romance foundlings who feel their ancestry in their veins, but has a parallel in *Chevelere Assigne* where Enyas is similarly oblivious to his heritage. Nobility does not belong to these two quite as it does to the other boys. Indeed, Enyas is even less invested in his parentage than Degaré, and the news of his destiny leaves him completely unmoved. Whereas Degaré is immediately seized by the desire to know his parents and to win a name for himself, Enyas seems more influenced by his eremitic past. He shows no interest in worldly concerns, and merely surrenders himself to God with the comment 'Go we forth, fader [...] upon Goddes halfe' (l. 219). Interestingly, he still calls the hermit 'father' – an appropriate name for a religious man, of course, put perhaps also a sign that Enyas is not yet ready to think of himself as anyone else's son. His upbringing is more important than his bloodline, and his spiritual family influences him more strongly than his biological one.

Octavian is not totally committed to blood either. Though nobility might come from birth in this poem, there are plenty of other ways to rise besides. In the Northern text Florent actually comes to prominence by defeating a giant, thrusting into the courtly circle by dint of prowess and earning a battlefield

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44 Unlike the lost heirs Horn and Havelok, who are always clearly marked. Havelok has a royal birthmark, and a light shines from his mouth when he sleeps. In the Anglo-Norman *Horn* King Gudreche instantly recognizes the exiled hero, despite his trying to hide his identity: *Havelok*, ed. Speed, ll. 589–95, 1251–7 (the light), ll. 1958–67 (the birthmark); Thomas, *The Romance of Horn*, vol. 1, ll. 2360–8.

promotion.[45] Bartolus's other route to nobility – princely favour – also appears. In both texts the unfortunate kitchen boy is lured into the Empress's bed with the promise of social advancement, and near the beginning of the Northern version there are two maidens who tell Octavian Senior that his sons have been born safely; lucky to have been in the right place at the right time, they are rewarded handsomely: 'Withowttyn gyftes ȝede þay noghte: / Aythire hadde townnes three' (ll. 95–6). Southern Clement, a butcher, is eventually 'made knyȝt / For hys er dedes wys and wyȝt' (ll. 1878–9), while his Northern counterpart, a burgess, receives 'welthis fele, / To lyfe in reches and in wele, / Aye nowe and euiremore' (ll. 1158–60). The upper class is not presented as a closed caste, but rather as an economic élite comprising people from various backgrounds who have risen by a combination of talent, luck, and judgement. This balances the sense of inherited quality that comes from the descriptions of the two children.

Sir Perceval's irreverence issues a more serious challenge to innate nobility. The nature of the parody and the associated question of the hero's development (or lack of it) have attracted much critical comment, and I shall engage more fully with those themes in the following section. Here I wish to discuss Perceval's magic ring, the treatment of which seems to confirm the opinion that this is a subversively comic text that critiques aristocratic and/or romance pretensions.[46] Though Perceval acquires his ring at the beginning of his adventure and carries it with him throughout, its talismanic properties only become clear towards the end, when the Black Knight tells him it has the power to protect its wearer in combat. This reverses the usual romance pattern whereby heroes are given magic objects only to forget about them later, or to discover that they do not work, and so fall back on their own marvellous

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[45] Such battlefield promotions were common in the later Middle Ages: Coss, 'Knighthood, Heraldry and Social Exclusion', p. 67; Prestwich, 'The Enterprise of War', p. 88.

[46] Ideas put forward in Caroline Eckhardt, 'Arthurian Comedy: The Simpleton Hero in *Sir Perceval of Galles*', *Chaucer Review* 8 (1974), 205–20; Siân Echard, 'Of Parody and Perceval: Middle Welsh and Middle English Manipulations of the Perceval Story', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 40 (1996), 63–79. (Both discussed further below).

capacities.[47] Are we to believe in the ring's power? It is certainly consonant with the poem's parody, and Perceval himself believes firmly – when the Black Knight warns him against fighting the giant, he smartly replies 'Tolde ye me noghte lang ere / Ther solde no dynttis me dere, / Ne wirke me no woo?' (ll. 1894–6). If the ring really is magic, Perceval loses all claim to the innate prowess enjoyed by his peers in other lost-heir narratives. Add to this his lack of courtesy, and he is left with almost no birthright at all.

However, this makes the story deeply unsatisfying and almost meaningless. Human agency is fundamental to romance, and it seems unlikely that even mischievous *Perceval* should intend so completely to negate itself. To my mind it is better provisionally to place Perceval's ring in the same category as the girdle from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the protective ring in *King Horn* – Cooper's category of magic objects that might *not* work.[48] We know that Perceval acquires the ring and then enjoys success, but, given magic's reputation in romance, the correlation does not prove causality. Giving Perceval the benefit of the doubt like this makes both hero and story much more satisfying, but the audience must make a conscious decision to do so. The text does not push either interpretation, so the ring plot remains ideologically neutral.

On balance, these five romances do present their heroes and the worlds they occupy in a manner consonant with innate nobility; there is plenty here to appeal to and consolidate the period's instinctive deference to blood. The physiological principles we saw in Chapter 1 determine the heroes' impressive physiques and sense of genetic vocation, while the providential structure realizes the hierarchical system put forward in scripture and theology and in the social models of the three estates and body politic. Meanwhile, the external support of Nature or Faerie adds a mythic potency and a touch of romance glamour. But it remains moot whether all this is the result of deliberate strategy. The conventional episodes and structure of the story-type lend themselves to expressing innate nobility, but their specific realization in the actual texts includes enough conflicting evidence to foster doubt that these romances are

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[47] The usual pattern is explained in Cooper, *Romance in Time*, pp. 142–51.

[48] This category is the subject of extensive discussion in Cooper, *Romance in Time*, pp. 137–72.

especially or exclusively invested in the ideology of blood. Perceval's ring is only a particularly obvious example of a common ambiguity. It undermines the providential narrative because we cannot be sure that Perceval is not just lucky, and that scepticism is increased by his continual blunders and excruciating lack of *norture*. This lack runs through all five of our romances, all of which examine how nature and nurture interact in creating a nobleman. As we shall see, nurture sometimes seems considerably more important than nature, but the hero can always claim *something* as his birthright, so innate nobility generally survives the ordeal.

Nature, Nurture, and the Sources of Capital

The opposition between nature and nurture had been a feature of stories about lost heirs and unrecognized youths at least since Chrétien wrote his *Conte du Graal*. By the fourteenth century it was an established literary cliché (in the technical, not the pejorative, sense), and hence, no doubt, its appearance in the majority of our romances. The theme has inherent comic and critical potential and, though our texts use it primarily for comic effect, they often undermine the notion of innate nobility in the process. Despite this, it does not seem that any of the poems seriously doubts that symbolic capital resides principally in the blood – a view that was, after all, deeply rooted in the form and structure of the story-type.

Some of our heroes are so profoundly noble that they know instinctively how they ought to behave. Florent's prowess and his courtly urbanity come to him by nature, in despite of his tradesman's upbringing. Lybeaus arrives at Arthur's Glastonbury equally well formed. Though he grows up in seclusion, the Cotton text reading that 'Hys modyr kepte hym yn close' (l. 16), and the Lambeth one adding that she did so in order 'that he shulde se no knyght / J-armyd in no maner' (ll. 17–18), Lybeaus easily manages the technical challenge of disarming a corpse and arming himself, and goes on to demonstrate full command of both prowess and *cortoisie*. Mehl comments that he makes none of Perceval's ludic *faux pas*, and Mills observes that he is 'unfailingly respectful and "courtly"' in his

dealings with Arthur.[49] Shuffelton adds that he seldom offends anybody else, either.[50] Without any training or acculturation, Lybeaus seems to have an innate feel for the noble game.

Before beginning his adventure Lybeaus claims 'To fyȝte wyth spere or swerd / Somdell Y haue y-lerde, / Þer many men were y-slawe' (Cotton, ll. 184–6). This is either textual inconsistency or boyish bravado, for it is incompatible with the secluded childhood described at the beginning of the poem and generally associated with the fair-unknown motif.[51] Moreover, Lybeaus also admits to being just ten years old, so even if he had an exceptionally martial upbringing he could still only be at the start of his training.[52] At this point other romances describe the hero's education in some detail, for example *Guy of Warwick*, *Ipomadon*, the Anglo-Norman *Horn*, and the French *Bel Inconnu*.[53] But in *Lybeaus Desconus* there is no such learning process. Although Arthur assigns

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[49] Mehl, *The Middle English Romances*, p. 76 (for representative passages in *Perceval*, see ll. 493–6 and 569–80); Maldwyn Mills, '*Lybeaus Desconus*', in *The Arthur of the English: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Life and Literature*, ed. W. R. J. Barron (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), pp. 124–9, at p. 126.

[50] George Shuffelton, '*Lybeaus Desconus*: Introduction', in *Codex Ashmole 61*, ed. Shuffelton (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), available online through http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams [accessed 11 September 2013].

[51] Mills writes that heroes in fair unknown narratives have one of two kinds of upbringing: *les enfances humaines*, during which the child is kept away from chivalry, and *les enfances féeriques*, which provide him with a full education (like Lancelot's with the Lady of the Lake): *Lybeaus Desconus*, ed. Mills, p. 49, n. 2.

[52] Davenport writes that a boy might have had to learn to fight by the age of twelve, but that he would not normally begin military training before he was fourteen: 'Abbreviation and the Education of the Hero', p. 16.

[53] *Guy of Warwick* (couplets), ll. 45–52 (from the digitized version of the Auchinleck Manuscript, available at http://auchinleck.nls.uk; accessed 12 September 2013); *Ipomadon*, ed. Rhiannon Purdie, EETS o.s. 316 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), ll. 151–5; Thomas, *The Romance of Horn*, ll. 2400–20. For a description of the hero's education in *Le Bel Inconnu*, see Mills, '*Lybeaus Desconus*', in *The Arthur of the English*, p. 125. For an assessment of childhood education in several Middle English romances, see Phillipa Hardman, 'Popular Romance and Young Readers', in *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*, ed. Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), pp. 150–64, at pp. 153–4.

Lybeaus to Gawain 'For-to teche hym on þe playn / Of ech knyȝtes play' (ll. 83–4), Lybeaus embarks on his quest that very day, so his lessons never begin. Nevertheless, throughout his journey he behaves just like a fully educated, fully grown knight. His first opponent, Wylleam Celebronche, even says outright that 'To fell his fone in fyght / He nys noþinge to leren' (Lambeth, ll. 424–5; the stanza is defective in Cotton). For Gawain's son courtly manners and knightly fighting come as naturally as breathing.[54] Whether by chance or design, the poem implies that such refinement is inherited, and that noblemen are born, not made.[55]

Lybeaus and Florent are exceptional. The heroes of *Degaré*, *Perceval* and *Chevelere Assigne* are less perfectly formed, and they all have much to learn about proper noble conduct. Indeed, even in *Lybeaus* there is an alternative discourse that describes knighthood not as a quality of birth but a craft to be learnt. Arthur expects Lybeaus to need tuition, and by commenting that the hero 'nys noþinge to leren' (Lambeth, l. 425), Wylleam clearly assumes that some learning has already taken place. Lambert sets out to fight Lybeaus saying he is going to discover if he 'kan craft' (Cotton, l. 1601), which might be craft in the general sense of cunning or ingenuity but in the Lambeth manuscript is clearly intended in the sense of a learnt occupation, for the scribe has included a pronoun: Lambert says he will discover if Lybeaus 'con *his* crafte' (l. 1663). In *Degaré* we see this learning process in action, as the hero has natural talent and strength in abundance, but learns how to use them only gradually. He enters the lists against his grandfather knowing nothing of jousting – he 'can nowt theron' (l. 510, cf. l. 520) – and has to pick it up as he goes; the next time he fights he understands the joust, but his enemy has to tell him when it is time to draw swords and that it is unsportsmanlike to strike an opponent's horse (ll. 942–7); only when Degaré meets his father for his last battle is he able to announce

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[54] In this Lybeaus is like the heroes of twelfth- and thirteenth-century French romance, who demonstrate their noble potential in precocious displays of violence as mere children: see Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence*, pp. 148–9.

[55] The mismatch between Lybeaus's experience and his skill could, of course, be down to Chestre's somewhat slapdash approach to composition and continuity. The effect is the same either way, and such carelessness on Chestre's part would actually support my overall argument that social ideology comes low on the poem's agenda. On Chestre's authorial style, see Mills, 'Composition and Style'; see also *Lybeaus Desconus*, ed. Mills, pp. 64–8.

himself as 'an aunterous knight' (l. 1008), and to go at the whole combat with aplomb.[56] Degaré's heroism thus contrasts with Lybeaus's in that his natal potential is not necessarily matched by his technical ability. However, though nature and nurture are both acknowledged here, nature is still the primary force. This is made plain in Degaré's first fight, when he kills a dragon armed only with an oaken club. It is a symbolic moment that suggests his hybrid parentage (half faerie, half royal) gives him raw power over both natural and supernatural realms.[57]

Chevelere Assigne's Enyas knows less even than Degaré, and is presented as being quite astonishingly ignorant of the world beyond the forest. He does not know what a horse is (a problem he shares with Perceval), nor even what is meant by the word 'mother'. Since he is destined to ride a horse to rescue his mother, he comes in for some hurried teaching, and this impromptu education occupies a significant portion of the poem – about an eighth in Davenport's calculation.[58] Davenport also notes that the teaching scenes have been abbreviated much less than has the rest of the story, rendering the didactic theme so prominent that Lumiansky once suggested *Chevelere Assigne* could be an instruction manual for boys about Enyas's age (i.e. twelve).[59] However, Davenport objects to that suggestion on the grounds that Enyas's questions are

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[56] There is further discussion of Degaré's gradual improvement in Stokoe, 'The Double Problem of *Sir Degaré*', pp. 524–5, where the discussion demonstrates the superiority of Auchinleck over the other witnesses.

[57] The symbolic resonances in this scene are discussed in *Sir Degaré*, ed. Laskaya and Salisbury, p. 136 (on the Celtic and Christian significance of oaks); and in *Middle English Metrical Romances*, ed. Walter H. French and Charles B. Hale, vol. 1 (New York: Prentice Hall 1930; rpt. Russell and Russell, 1964), p. 299 (on the use of natural weapons against monsters).

[58] Davenport, 'Abbreviation and the Education of the Hero', p. 11.

[59] R. M. Lumiansky, 'Legends of Godfrey of Bouillon', in J. Burke Severs *et al.*, *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050–1500*, vol. 1: *Romances* (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967), pp. 101–3, at p. 103; see also Stratton, '*Cheuelere Assigne*: Simplicity with a Purpose?', pp. 118–21.

so very basic.[60] Here he has just learnt that he is to encounter a thing called a 'horse':

> 'What beste is þat,' quod þe chylde, 'lyonys wylde?
> Or elles wode, or watur?' quod þe chylde þanne.
> 'I seyȝe nevur none', quod þe hermyte, 'but by þe mater of bokes.
> They seyn he hath a feyre hedde and fowre lymes hye.'
>   (*Chevelere Assigne*, ll. 214–17)

Davenport interprets this naivety as an authorial strategy to make Enyas's victory seem all the more miraculous – a part of the poem's inheritance from exemplum, analysed elsewhere by Speed.[61] That is a convincing reading, and I shall return to Speed's essay later on. But these absurd questions, which include 'what is a mother?' (l. 210), and, 'are horses born wearing saddles?' (l. 291), also threaten to tip the poem into travesty or burlesque. That has a knock-on effect on the vision of nobility: the hero is certainly not immune to mockery, and if so much has to be learnt, surely one might ask whether anything is really inherited, after all.

Nevertheless, *Chevelere Assigne* does not truly endorse such scepticism. Though Enyas is comical, his is not the bluff and gung-ho ignorance of Perceval. Instead, he is earnest and enquiring, particularly when gathering advice in preparation for his combat. Having asked about his armour and weapons, Enyas continues with queries such as 'what yf grace be we [i.e. he and his opponent] to grownde wenden?' (l. 302), or, 'woll not he smyte aȝeyne, whenne he feleth smerte?' (l. 308). This naive seriousness allows Enyas to preserve his dignity even in his innocence, and moves *Chevelere Assigne* away from the disruptive, potentially subversive comedy to be found in other Middle English romances, including *Perceval*.[62] Moreover, between the two question-and-answer dialogues

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60 Davenport, 'Abbreviation and the Education of the Hero', p. 18; see also Cooper, 'Good Advice on Leaving Home', p. 108.

61 Davenport, 'Abbreviation and the Education of the Hero', pp. 11–17; Diane Speed, 'The Pattern of Providence in *Chevelere Assigne*', in *Romance Reading on the Book: Essays on Medieval Narrative Presented to Maldwyn Mills*, ed. Jennifer Fellows *et al*. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), pp. 143–54.

62 On the subversive potential of popular romance, see Thomas Hahn, 'Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain', in *The Cambridge Companion to*

in which Enyas features as a pupil, there is another one in which he is the voice of authority. Meeting the court on its way to Bewtrys's execution, Enyas hails his father and asks what is happening. Oryens explains, and Enyas passes judgement in a speech that condemns the verdict, denounces his father's weakness, and reveals an intuitive feel for justice and the duties of a ruler:

> 'Thenne were þou noȝt ryȝtlye sworne,' quod þe chylde, 'upon ryȝte juge,
> Whenne þou tokest þe þy crowne, kynge whenne þou made were,
> To done aftur Matabryne, for þenne þou shalt mysfare.
> For she is fowle, fell and fals, and so she shall be fownded,
> And bylefte with þe fend at here laste ende.'
>
> (*Chevelere Assigne*, ll. 236–40)

Lines 236–7 are slightly strange because of a mistranslation from the French, but the general sense is perfectly clear: Matabryne is evil, and Oryens has failed.[63] Enyas appears as a preternaturally wise child who, although knowing nothing of the accidental attributes of nobility (fighting, armour, and so on), yet claims an innate, God-given understanding of the essential principles of lordship and government.[64] That ability to see and to rule is his birthright, reminding us of the old story that the first nobles were those best suited to governing and protecting the people. This capacity outweighs all Enyas's shortcomings, pares nobility down to its symbolic core, and is all the more powerful as a result; despite Lybeaus's intuitive grasp of chivalric and courtly practice, it is Enyas who commands gravitas. Though the poem plays on the comic potential of the unschooled youth, he is nonetheless solemnized by the quality of his blood.

The relationship between nature and nurture is explored most extensively in *Perceval*, which Phillipa Hardman has described as 'offering an analysis of the educational process, weighing the relative effects upon the child

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Medieval Romance, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 218–34, at pp. 225–30.

[63] The French reads 'tu ne l'as pas a droit jugie coume rois loiaument' (you have not judged her properly as a true king); given in Speed, '*Chevelere Assigne*: Notes', p. 295.

[64] Davenport draws a parallel between Enyas and the wise child Ypotis, who in the Middle English *Ypotis* eventually reveals himself to be Christ: Davenport, 'Abbreviation and the Education of the Hero', p. 16.

of nature and nurture'.[65] Perceval's lack of schooling is a prominent theme – indeed, he is notorious for being an idiot. He is rudely spoken, he understands his mother's advice in crudely literal terms, and he is frequently called a 'fool'.[66] The narrator, other characters, and critics all comment repeatedly on his 'wilde gerys' (l. 1353) and 'lytill nurtoure' (ll. 397, 1568).[67] Moreover, Perceval's naivety is treated with unusual consistency, much more so than that of his peers in our other romances: whereas Enyas switches between total ignorance and intuitive wisdom, and Lybeaus is supposed to be an *enfant sauvage* but never really behaves like one, the *Perceval* poet sticks to his theme, and even draws attention to it through narratorial asides and conversations between other characters, and by returning to old jokes at Perceval's expense many lines after they first appear.[68] Whereas an audience could easily fall into reading Lybeaus as another well-tutored and upcoming young gentleman (like Eglamour of Artois or Guy of Warwick), there is no chance of that happening with Perceval.

Some critics have argued that the poem emphasizes Perceval's roughness so as to stop the audience from thinking he has matured (usually contrasting him with his counterpart in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, who develops spiritually, morally, and socially).[69] According to Caroline Eckhardt, 'the hero remains a

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[65] Hardman, 'Popular Romances and Young Readers', pp. 161–3, quotation at p. 161

[66] E.g. at ll. 289, 505, 660, 674, 681, 686, 1498. I have summarized Perceval's shortcomings so briefly because they are already well known.

[67] Among them Echard, 'Of Parody and Perceval'; Eckhardt, 'Arthurian Comedy: The Simpleton Hero'; Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances*, pp. 191–6; Wright, 'Comic Ambivalence in *Sir Perceval*'; David C. Fowler, '*Le Conte du Graal* and *Sir Perceval of Galles*', *Comparative Literature Studies* 12 (1975), 5–20, at pp. 11–12; Norris J. Lacy, 'Perceval on the Margins: A Pan-European Perspective', *Arthurian Literature* 24 (2007), 1–14, at p. 10.

[68] On the comments of the narrator and other characters, see Wright, 'Comic Ambivalence in *Sir Perceval*', pp. 53–4; on returning to old jokes, which sometimes becomes 'too much of a good thing', see Eckhardt, 'Arthurian Comedy: The Simpleton Hero', pp. 209–10, quotation at p. 217.

[69] Scholars still debate the relationship between Chrétien's text and the Middle English poem. Arguments in favour of a direct connection include, Fowler, '*Le Conte du Graal* and *Sir Perceval of Galles*'; Keith Busby, '*Sir Perceval of Galles*, *Le Conte du Graal*, and *La Continuation-Gauvain*: The Methods of an English Adaptor', *Études anglaises* 31 (1978), 198–202; Keith Busby, 'Chrétien de

comic rustic from beginning to end [...] his rusticity is not superseded and seems to be his true and essential trait.'[70] Sîan Echard takes a similar view:

> the text seems determined to make it clear that no such shift [from ignorance to understanding] ever comes about [...] Perceval makes little apparent progress in his journey from rustic simpleton to member of Arthur's court.[71]

These critics see Perceval as a farcical and irreverent figure who undermines all that romance, chivalry, and knighthood usually stand for. Echard, particularly, considers *Perceval's* comedy incendiary: to her, the text shows a savage succeeding in the chivalric world without once having to reform his behaviour, a success which implies moral critique and encourages audiences to question what makes a knight a knight. Is inner refinement – nobility – really essential? Or is knighthood more a matter of having 'a horse, armour and miniver'?[72] As Echard points out, Perceval himself goes largely on appearances:

> He luked doun to his fete,
> Saw his gere faire and mete:
> 'For a knyghte I may be lete
> And myghte be calde'.
>
> > (*Perceval*, ll. 801–4)[73]

Satisfied with his appearance, Perceval loses interest in the symbolic aspect of knighthood conferred in the dubbing ceremony. When Gawain asks him to return to King Arthur, he refuses, declaring, 'I am as grete a lorde als he / To-day ne schall he make me / None other gates knyghte' (ll. 814–16). Echard argues that this shows Perceval is ignorant of knighthood's ethical dimension – to him it is all about appearances. In this pessimistic interpretation blood is drained of

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Troyes English'd', *Neophilologus* 71 (1987), 596–613. For the opposing view, see Mehl, *The Middle English Romances,* p. 101; Griffith, *Sir Perceval of Galles: A Study of the Sources of the Legend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1911), pp. 130–1.

[70] Eckhardt, 'Arthurian Comedy: The Simpleton Hero', p. 205.

[71] Echard, 'Of Parody and Perceval', pp. 77–8.

[72] Echard, 'Of Parody and Perceval', pp. 74–9.

[73] See also Achefleur's advice that Perceval will be able to recognize knights by the miniver lining their hoods (ll. 409–12), advice which serves him well in ll. 881–4.

symbolic capital: a nobleman needs neither nature nor nurture, only finery and the power of his arm (or a magic ring).

However, though *Perceval* certainly enjoys its hero's misadventures, it does not consistently deny the symbolic capital of noble blood and the validity of the order it supports. In contrast to Echard and Eckhardt, who find Perceval's character static, several critics have argued that he does mature after all. Maldwyn Mills reads Perceval's eventual readiness to lay aside his finery as a sign that he comes to see beyond material ostentation, and to understand that knighthood and nobility are really internal attributes.[74] Glenn Wright develops that theme, beginning his essay on a similar note to Echard's by describing 'Perceval's conception of the entire chivalric cosmos as an arena of role-playing', but arguing that the hero then develops: 'The amoral self-centredness fuelling his early actions […] is tempered over the course of the romance' so that, 'in the end, though Perceval does not display the refined sensibility of a Gawain, neither can he be said to have covered no ground in that direction.'[75]

Moreover, despite its many gestures to the contrary, the poem does credit Perceval at least some natural charisma. Regardless of whether one finds him static or dynamic, his success is predicated on an innate quality that, as the poem understands it, can only come from birth. His bravery, good looks, and irrepressible *kynde* all suggest this, as does his intuitive response to courtesy. Though seldom courteous himself, Perceval is receptive to Gawain's 'softe' speech, (l. 292), while Kay's 'prowde wordes' rankle (l. 306); had Kay been a deer, Perceval would have killed him (ll. 301–4).[76] The poem returns to this theme just as often as to its jokes. Both Perceval's uncles cool his ardour with good manners: Arthur speaks to him 'so faire' that he meekly 'lyghtes doun in the haulle' (ll. 597–8; cf. ll. 943–4: 'So faire he spake hym withalle / That he es doun lyghte'). Likewise, Lufamour's porter greets Perceval 'hendely' having 'knelid

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74 Mills, '*Sir Percyvell of Galles*', in *The Arthur of the English*, p. 140.

75 Wright, 'Þe Kynde Wolde Oute Sprynge', pp. 49–50; see also Wright, 'Comic Ambivalence in *Sir Perceval*', pp. 54–5.

76 For a long time ll. 301–4 were a stubborn textual crux, but the meaning seems now to have been explained by Ad Putter, 'The Text of *Sir Perceval of Galles*', *Medium Ævum* 70(2) (2001), 191–203, at pp. 193–4.

doun on his kne' (ll. 1274–5), at which 'so kyndly takes he that kyth / That up he rose and went hym wyth' (ll. 1281–2). Such repetition indicates a desire to emphasize that Perceval knows the value of courtly manners long before he can actually exhibit them – another clear sign of his inborn potential.

More significantly, Perceval also has an intuitive ability to govern. Like Enyas, he has what Bartolus called 'natural nobility' – those special qualities of character from which nobility originally sprang, and which have been passed down ever since. Having defeated the sultan, Perceval is universally acknowledged as 'beste worthy to be kyng' (l. 1738), and, unlikely as it seems, he is a good king:

> Wele weldede he that lande
> Alle bowes to his honde;
> The folke, that he byfore fonde,
> Knewe hym for kyng.
>
> (*Perceval*, ll. 1765–8)

The people say he is 'beste worthy to be kyng', because he 'helde that he highte' (l. 1740, repeated at l. 1874). His reliability and integrity demonstrate an inborn aptitude for kingship, just as did Enyas's innate sense of justice.[77] Glossy manners are all well and good, but it is more important for a monarch to be constant and to have a strong arm – essential qualities that Perceval has in abundance. Lee Ramsey's comments are interesting in this connection. He reads the poem similarly to Mills and Wright, as a traditional growing-up story in which the hero overcomes 'faults in himself […] gradually learning chivalric behavior in the process'; but Ramsey goes on to demonstrate that the transformation comes at the moment of Perceval's dubbing.[78] After being dubbed Perceval kills the sultan, wins a bride, redeems a maiden, delivers the land from a giant, and restores his mother. Before accepting Arthur's authority he only steals a ring, skewers and burns a witch, and massacres what must be one of the most ineffectual armies in romance. (Killing the Red Knight is the one

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[77]   Keeping one's word is also a recurring theme in the preceding fight with the sultan, emphasized by links between stanzas: see ll. 1600–1, 1664–5. Perceval's reliability is also noted by Wright, 'Þe Kynde Wolde Oute Spryng', p. 53, n. 8.

[78]   Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances*, pp. 191–2, 194–5.

exception to this pattern, and significant as the deed that starts Perceval's career and presages his coming greatness.) This means the hero's latent potential is apparently realized through Arthur's royal touch. That credits royalty with an almost mythic potency, and testifies again to the poem's general acceptance of the symbolic capital of blood, and of the social order that ideology maintains.

Finally, it seems *Perceval* does not expect nobles to be perfect anyway. Though Arthur is the source of value in the poem, he is also hyper-sensitive and prone to bouts of melancholy and lassitude. He makes himself ill worrying about young Perceval, and is too sick to move when Lufamour's messenger arrives asking for help. His feeble reply is that 'The mane that es seke and sare, / He may full ill ferre fare / In felde for to fyghte' (ll. 1078–80). Of course, *pité* is a fine courtly trait, but Arthur takes sensitivity too far, as perhaps does Acheflour in her extreme reaction to her husband's death at the beginning. Perceval's other uncle is admirably conscious of dynasty and careful of family, for he is anxious to protect and promote his sons, and bitterly angry at his brother's murder (ll. 905–32); but he is also a coward, and runs away from the Red Knight (as he believes Perceval to be) instead of fighting or allowing his sons to. The Red Knight himself was proud and powerful, but lacked *mesure*; Perceval is effective and honest, but uncouth; Kay, refined but arrogant. Gawain alone is consistently polite and *proz* – the true flower of chivalry, as so often in English romance. Everyone else has the potential to be like him, but without managing fully to realize it. Perceval is therefore not alone in questing to come into his own, for the whole society embodies the same search for a nobility that is hard to define but instantly recognizable when it appears. As the comedy encourages its audience to step back from the poem and reflect on its issues from a position of 'aesthetic distance', that audience will discover that true nobility requires a beautiful body and appropriate trappings, impeccable manners and a certain *hauteur*, respect for one's superiors, unrelenting self-belief, bravery, integrity, and prowess.[79] This is the sum total of all the strands of thought present in the wider culture, so

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[79] The concept of 'aesthetic distance' is applied to *Perceval* in Wright, 'Comic Ambivalence in *Sir Perceval*'. Wright takes the idea from Peter Haidu, *Aesthetic Distance in Chrétien de Troyes: Irony and Comedy in 'Cligés' and 'Perceval'* (Geneva: Droz, 1968).

it is not surprising if most people fall short. What matters most, therefore, is an individual's noble *potential.* And in this story-type, that comes at birth.

From all this it seems clear that Perceval is not to be read simply as an uncouth savage who tears through the chivalric world; he may be rough around the edges, but his achievements stem from his good breeding. This limits the possibilities of its social critique. However, there is something unsettling about *Perceval* all the same. The parody goes so far, and is used so insistently, that we are often left thinking Echard might be right; it seems that the 'ethical courtly code' might indeed be little more than a 'frill', even if the poem itself does not think so.[80]

Perceval also adds a different kind of complication, active alongside its commentary on nature and nurture. Though it respects blood above all, the poem also admits a material aspect to nobility – the 'horse, armour and miniver' of which Echard writes, and which are so irrelevant to nobility as imagined in *Chevelere Assigne.* Developing Echard's observation, we see that people begin to take Perceval for a knight as soon as he dresses like one: his paternal uncle, Lufamour's messenger, and the lady herself are all fooled by his appearance long before he is actually dubbed. This shows that social capital is not necessarily connected to symbolic, and might derive from material possessions instead. *Octavian* makes a similar observation. While the Northern version admits that one does not always need old blood to rise to prominence, the Southern version goes further still by admitting that status might be *bought.* Here we move away from 'natural' nobility and towards the pragmatic 'civil' nobility granted by princes, heralds, and public recognition. And because *Octavian* unfolds in a much more complex world than *Perceval*, it explores the consequences of this observation with more subtlety.

After finally realizing that Florent might be a prince, Clement and his wife Gladwyn agree to give him special treatment. Clement puts Gladwyn in charge, and

> That wyf hym [Florent] tauȝt markes and poundes;
> He purveyde haukes and houndys;
> To hounty yn ech mannys boundys,

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[80] The quotation is from Echard, 'Of Parody and Perceval', p. 79.

> Hyt was hys wone.
> Men blamede the bochere ofte stoundys
> For hys sone.

<div align="right">(Southern Octavian, ll. 889–94)</div>

Gladwyn gives Florent money, and he *buys* the appearance of a young nobleman. The irony is that Florent's appearance (like Perceval's) is entirely appropriate, but no one else knows that, so his behaviour rankles. There is tension here, as the poem makes the pragmatic observation that the trappings of nobility are available to all who can purchase them, while the people's muttered, alliterative resentment shows that such obvious social posturing is still not quite proper.[81] Commercial aspiration and traditional conservatism here come into direct conflict, recalling those overly successful social climbers we saw in Chapter 1, who were resented both by the people they left behind, and by those they wished to join. We do not know the rank of the men 'blaming' Clement, but they obviously feel Florent is getting above his station, consuming too conspicuously, and taking too many liberties; his showy hunting crosses symbolic boundaries as well as physical ones. Interestingly enough, this is also the first time since l. 667 that Clement has been called a butcher, and thus labelled firmly as a tradesman. In sum, the episode shows the difficulty of converting one kind of capital into another, particularly where people know you for what you are/were. While *Perceval* and *Octavian* both suggest nobility may be little more than surface bling, *Octavian* does so with the proviso that economic power does not necessarily equate to social and symbolic value. Florent does not actually receive acclaim until he has proved his usefulness as the city's champion. This indicates a broadly conservative attitude that reserves honour for people of blood, only extending it to others occasionally, and even then only to those who can serve the nobleman's traditional military purpose.

　　While all five of our romances ultimately ascribe symbolic capital to the same biological source, they do not all realize it in quite the same way. In

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[81]　The foppish, pampered young bourgeois was a familiar type throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, whose indulgent parents received censure from sources as diverse as William Langland and Edmund Dudley: Langland, *Piers Plowman*, passus 5, ll. 131–40; Edmund Dudley, *The Tree of Commonwealth*, ed. D. M. Brodie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), p. 68.

Perceval and *Chevelere Assigne* the heroes have a special ability to lead and govern – the natural nobility of which Bartolus wrote. They fight too, of course, but that martial ethic is tempered with capacities that belong more to the peaceful ordering of a community, especially integrity and justice. In *Degaré*, by contrast, the hero's abilities are predominantly military. He wins his wife and identity by brute strength alone, a physicality for which the poem prepares us when it introduces him by saying 'ther ne wan man in that lond / That o breid him might astond' (ll. 291–2). Lybeaus's virtues, too, are those of a practising warrior: prowess, bravery, and loyalty to his lord. But Degaré does at least use his strength legitimately to slay dragons and rescue ladies from unwelcome suitors, whereas Lybeaus uses his with an uncompromising belligerence that seems more to threaten than reassure. His zeal for combat verges on recklessness and often alarms his companions. When he insists on fighting Sir Gyffroun le Flowdous, for instance:

> Þe dwerk [dwarf] seyde, 'Be Jhesus!
> Gentyll Lybeaus Desconus:
> Þat wer a greet peryle.
> Syr Gyffroun le Flowdous
> Jn fyȝtyng he haþ an vs
> Knyȝtes to be-gyle.'
> Lybeaus answerede þar,
> 'Þer-of haue þou no kar,
> Be God and be Seynt Gyle!
> J woll y-se hys face,
> Er Y westward pace
> From þys cyte a myle.'

(*Lybeaus*, ll. 748–59)[82]

This is how Lybeaus shows his nobility: when other men would withdraw, he thinks only of honour. Though this may seem foolhardy, it is actually the key to his success, for everything he acquires comes directly or indirectly from his fighting skill. As George Shuffelton observes, 'in this competitive and demanding world, Gyngeleyne's [i.e. Lybeaus's] fearless aggressiveness becomes a social

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[82] For similar expressions of recklessness/bravery, see ll. 182–92, 272–6, 307–12, 467–8, 592–7, 740–7, 1043–77, 1108–16, 1255–66, 1286–9, 1508–15, 1651–3, 1730–4, 1824, 1841–2.

asset rather than a liability.'[83] The story does not test the hero's honesty, generosity, or piety; instead it propels him from one mortal battle to another in a relentless show of prowess. Nobility manifests itself in never hesitating, and always winning.

The episode involving the brachet shows how single-mindedly *Lybeaus* connects symbolic capital with strength of body and will. Having once commandeered the dog, Lybeaus absolutely refuses to give it up. When its owner asks him to let it go he replies:

> Þat schall neuer be-tyde:
> For wyth myn handes two
> J hym yaf þat mayde me fro
> Þat houeþ me be-syde.

(*Lybeaus*, ll. 1053–6)

He then insults the dog's owner, dares him to do his worst, and coolly rides off. When the aggrieved huntsman musters his friends to attack the thief, Lybeaus routs them. Surprisingly, this cements his right not only to the man's dog, but also to his hospitality, allegiance, and fief. Stephen Knight describes this as a 'startling moment [that] cuts through the cultural coding of tournaments and royal presents as the source of feudal authority. Feudality', he continues, 'was based on violence and self-interest'.[84] Such is the brutal reality romance ostensibly sets out to conceal, and recognizing it in this way automatically presents an alternative to the ideology of blood. Is Lybeaus so successful because he is Gawain's son, or simply because he can kill and maim his opponents? This is a question posed more urgently in the next chapter's bride-winning romances, where prowess and breeding are divorced. Here they go together – Lybeaus can kill and maim his opponents because he is Gawain's son – so the poem generally avoids the subversive potential of its hero's relentless violence. Indeed, it treats the encounter with Sir Otes as a straightforward demonstration of Lybeaus's vigorous spirit, and seems rather to admire him as a strong-minded gentleman who does what he pleases and gets what he wants. In this poem even more than

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[83]   Shuffelton, '*Lybeaus Desconus*: Introduction'.

[84]   Knight, 'The Social Function of the Middle English Romances', p. 107.

in *Perceval* noble blood realizes itself through prowess, beneath which other virtues cower in relative insignificance.[85]

These romances of lost heirs thus rate noblemen according to how they look, what they wear, and what they do. Despite the story-type's natural affiliation to the ideology of blood, the texts also draw on many other ways of constructing nobility: urbanity, possessions, prowess, and virtue all have a place here alongside breeding. The romances thus reflect a diversity of opinion that correlates with what we know of their broad audiences and the complex socio-historical context that produced them. Nevertheless, despite their surface complexities all five texts think of blood as the basic source of symbolic capital. They differ on how that capital is realized, but generally agree that well-born youths look and behave differently from non-noble people, and that they have a deep, largely untaught affinity for noble principles.

That belief is manifest structurally as well as through content, as the heroes move inexorably towards the positions to which they were born (positions in which the symbolic capital of blood is externally realized in social and economic terms), with their progress repeatedly endorsed by God or other symbolically significant beings. And yet there is also a persistent counter-narrative running through these romances. Some heroes feel no instinctive calling, and some are not even recognized; occasionally the poems admit other ways of rising to prominence besides birth, and other kinds of capital besides the symbolic. Meanwhile, the comedic sub-plot of the untutored hero often complements the principle of blood, and sometimes challenges it too, so brilliantly do the poets exploit the nature–nurture dichotomy that had by this stage attached itself firmly to this story-type. Such inconsistency suggests that these texts are not devoted to any particular ideology, while the exaggeration of the *ingénu* theme implies they are more interested in entertaining their audience

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[85] Again one is struck by how well *Lybeaus* illustrates Kaueper's arguments in *Chivalry and Violence.* Concentrating on twelfth- and thirteenth-century French culture, Kaueper observes 'an utterly tireless, almost obsessional emphasis placed on personal prowess as the key chivalric trait. Not simply one quality among others in a list of virtues, prowess often stands alone as a one-word definition of chivalry' (p. 135).

than presenting it with a picture of a perfect and dignified noble hero. These suspicions are confirmed by the poems' treatment of other classes.

Other Classes, Other Interests

Discussing the conventions of literary composition in *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams observes:

> the selection of characters almost always indicates an assumed or conscious class position [...] Without formal ratification, all other persons may be conventionally presented as instrumental (servants, drivers, waiters), as merely environmental (other people in the street), or indeed as essentially absent (not seen, not relevant).[86]

Thirty years earlier, Erich Auerbach made a similar comment in his discussion of twelfth-century courtly literature as represented by Chrétien's *Yvain*:

> Courtly realism offers a very rich and pungent picture of the life of a single class, a social stratum which remains aloof from the other strata of contemporary society, allowing them to appear as accessories, sometimes colourful but more usually comic or grotesque; so that the distinction in terms of class between the important, the meaningful, and the sublime on the one hand and the low–grotesque–comic on the other, remains strictly intact in regard to subject matter. The former realm is open only to members of the feudal class.[87]

This description does well for *Degaré*, but is less adequate for our other four romances: in *Chevelere Assigne*, *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Octavian* we encounter sub-courtly characters who are much more than environmental accessories, while *Perceval* is properly exclusive but transfers comic and grotesque elements onto the hero himself. Here we consider how this treatment of other classes shifts the romances away from the purely aristocratic or conservative perspective described by Auerbach, and indicates an 'assumed or conscious class position' that is much more loosely conceived. Social divisions come and go according to the needs of the narrative moment.

Perceval has no encounters with sub-courtly characters (the possible exceptions of the giant's porter and the Red Knight's mother notwithstanding),

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[86] Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 175.

[87] Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 132.

and moves entirely among upper-class people. Degaré's world is less exclusive in that it includes a hermit and a merchant, but they are instrumental figures with no significance of their own. Once Degaré has been found, fostered, and sent on his way, both merchant and hermit drop from the narrative, which suggests that the poet has no interest either in them or in their influence on the hero (as opposed to *Havelok*, say, where the hero rewards his foster-family at the end, and where his legitimacy as a ruler is assured not only by his blood, but also by his formative experiences among his future subjects).[88] This means that although the old king in *Degaré* seems liberal when he says that anyone may joust for his daughter, 'be he baroun, be he erl, / be he burgeis, be he cherl' (ll. 479–80), it is really a false liberalism; churls do not defeat noblemen in this world. *Chevelere Assigne* can be equally dismissive of sub-courtly characters. The lowly mother of twins at the beginning is merely a narrative device:

> As þey wente upon a walle, pleynge hem one,
> Bothe þe kynge and þe qwene hemselfen togedere,
> The kynge loked adowne, and byhelde under,
> And seyȝ a pore womman at þe ȝate sytte
> With two chylderen her byfore were borne at a byrthe;
> And he turned hym þenne, and teres lette he falle.
>
> (*Chevelere Assigne*, ll. 19–24)

The woman starts the plot rolling and gives Oryens the chance to show his courtly *pité*.[89] That there are beggars at the gates at all also suggests the poet has some interest in painting the world outside the court. But the poor-woman is still not allowed to become, as it were, a real person. She is something to be looked at and discussed, then forgotten. The king turns away instead of helping her, which would be to recognize her as a fellow human being, and she certainly never gets the chance to speak for herself about who fathered her twins. The king and queen remain literally above everyone else, 'upon a walle'. To this extent the principles of selection in *Chevelere Assigne*, *Perceval*, and *Degaré* all accord with the conservative bias already evident in their ideology of blood.

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88 This aspect of the Havelok story, particularly evident in the Middle English version, is discussed in Crane, *Insular Romance*, pp. 47–51.

89 On *pité* as a mark of good breeding, see Burnley, *Courtliness and Literature*, pp. 64–8.

However, *Chevelere Assigne* becomes more complicated when it comes to the other sub-courtly characters, particularly the goldsmith and his wife, and the evil queen's accomplice Malkedras. Having used one of the children's magic chains to make a cup for Queen Matabryne, the goldsmith 'wendeth to bedde' (l. 161), where he tells his wife how the metal strangely increased so that he was able to complete the job without finishing even one of the six chains he was given. She replies, 'I rede þe […] to holden hem stylle. / Hit is þorowe þe werk of God, or þey be wronge wonnen' (ll. 169–70). The smith wisely follows her counsel, so the remaining chains are saved to restore their proper owners to human form. This exchange between the smiths is unique to the English poem, and Barron considers it 'inexplicable'.[90] It is significant, though, in that it shows the craftsman's wife to be more astute than any of the high-class characters, and better able than they to discern the hand of God. Moreover, the couple's collaboration contrasts sharply with the disastrous interactions between people in the court, where Matabryne browbeats Oryens into giving her what she wants, and Oryens, apparently *redeles*, allows Bewtrys to be incarcerated without giving her a chance to defend herself.[91] The smiths' exchange occupies just eleven lines (ll. 161–72), but those eleven lines open a small window onto another sector of society, and show it to compare very favourably with the sick court.[92] In this way

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[90] W. R. J. Barron, 'Alliterative Romance and the French Tradition', in *Medieval Alliterative Poetry*, ed. David Lawton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982), pp. 70–87, at p. 83.

[91] On the importance of *rede* in medieval politics and Middle English romance, see Barnes, *Counsel and Strategy*, especially pp. 1–29, 60–90. Calumniated queens obviously must not defend themselves successfully, but they might at least be given the chance to try. In Chaucer's 'Man of Law's Tale' Custance's future husband sets up a full court trial for her, but God renders his efforts unnecessary by intervening to slay her accuser (ll. 659–79 in *The Riverside Chaucer*). On the folk tradition of the calumniated queen, see Margaret Schlauch, *Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens* (New York: New York University Press, 1927); for her discussion of the queen in the Swan Children story, see pp. 78–82.

[92] Several Middle English romances involve a co-operative husband and wife team like this one: e.g. *Amis and Amiloun*, *Sir Cleges* and *Sir Amadace*. In a fascinating study Mary S. Hartman has recently argued that such marital co-operation was the single most important factor in the history of the north-western world: Mary S. Hartman, *The Household and the Making of History: A*

the poem admits a parallel ideology that whispers of qualities more important than blood: honesty, integrity, justice, and co-operation – all of them qualities of virtue and community that stand in opposition to the divisive, essentialist principle of biological nobility.

Chevelere Assigne therefore gives substance to the trenchant remarks made by the old woman in the Wife of Bath's Tale, while simultaneously upholding innate nobility in its presentation of Enyas. The treatment of Malkedras is similarly inconsistent. Introduced as a forester in l. 120, he has by l. 262 become Matabryne's chivalric champion, and by l. 309 acquired a reputation in knightly combat: when Enyas asks if Malkedras will fight back, his new tutor replies, 'Ȝys, I knowe hym full wele, both kenly and faste' (l. 309). Malkedras thus slides between classes, which suggests that the poem is not concerned either with maintaining class divisions, or holding a particular class position. Social agendas come second to story-telling, as the separation between commons and nobles pales into insignificance beside the artistic desire to concentrate villainy in Matabryne and a single accomplice.

Lybeaus Desconus both invokes and ignores familiar class differences, again according to the local needs of the story. The line between nobles and churls is drawn twice: first when Elene apologizes to Lybeaus and begs forgiveness 'Þat hy spak vylanye' (l. 449); as so often in courtly literature, to speak badly is to speak like a peasant.[93] The second incident occurs between Lybeaus and Sir Otes, who owns the stolen brachet. Lybeaus calls Sir Otes a 'chorle' (l. 1088), and Otes denies the accusation vehemently:

> Quod Syr Otys de Lyle,
> 'Syr, thi wordis ar wile [vile],
> Chorle was neuer my name.

Subversive View of the Western Past (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[93] On this feature of romance diction, and its socio-cultural significance, see Peter Coss, 'An Age of Deference', in *A Social History of England, 1200–1500*, ed. Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 31–73, at pp. 34–5.

> My ffader an erle was awhile,
> and the countesse of Carlehille,
> For-sothe, was my dame.'

<div align="right">(Lybeaus, ll. 1089–94)</div>

Otes's response is illuminating in that it shows he takes Lybeaus's accusation literally. Common insults tend to lose their literal significance, but this one apparently has not. It is also interesting that Otes chooses to respond in kind, telling Lybeaus that his words are 'wile'. Arguments normally build, so this decision to adopt the same frame of reference – class/blood – suggests that there can be no more damaging slur than to label a nobleman base.

Though conventional class divisions are maintained in these episodes, there are others in which they are not. *Lybeaus* ignores the familiar critical dichotomy between court and town, and presents Lybeaus and his companions as belonging in an urban environment:

> And euer þey ryden west
> Jn þat wylde forest
> To-warde Synadowne;
> Þey nyste what ham was best:
> Taken þey wolde reste
> And myȝt not com to toun.

<div align="right">(Lybeaus, ll. 544–9)</div>

The forest might be 'an archetypal romance landscape', but these courtly figures are at a loss when night draws in and finds them out in the open.[94] Indeed, the town is such an integral part of this romance that the marketplace doubles as an arena for chivalric contests:

> Þan seyde Gyfroun, 'Gentyll knyȝt,
> 'How scholl we preue þys syȝt
> Whych of hem feyrer be?'
> Libeus answerede aplyȝt,
> 'In Cardeuyle cyte ryȝt,
> Þer ech man may hem se,
> And boþe þey schull be sette
> Amyddes þe market,
> To loke on boþe bond and fre.'

<div align="right">(Lybeaus, ll. 796–804)</div>

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94   Corrine Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arden* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), p. ix.

This urban setting is no incidental detail, for the poem refers to it several times: Lybeaus rides with Elene 'Jnto þe market' (l. 849), and Gyffroun's lady then comes 'Amydward þe chepyng' (l. 893); 'Folk com fer and wyde' (l. 871) to participate in the judging, and are, as Lybeaus has already said, 'boþe bond and fre'. All this is presented as being quite proper, showing that courtly activities are perfectly adaptable to urban spaces. Moreover, since Lybeaus never challenges the people's verdict against Elene, he obviously accepts them as adequate judges of courtly beauty. The class-consciousness used in constructing the argument between Lybeaus and Otes here drops out of the text. Instead, chivalry and commercialism are closely aligned, reflecting the experiences of a diverse readership in a society where urban and courtly interests, values, and personnel often overlapped. That the poem can mirror this experience so clearly suggests it is comfortable with it. While *Lybeaus* is not the kind of romance scholars consider 'bourgeois' (it is too exclusively martial for that), it is not a purely aristocratic defence of blood and soldiery either.[95] Unsurprisingly, given what we know of Middle English romance's multi-layered audience, the 'class position' is somewhere between the two.

The relationship between court and town is explored more thoroughly in *Octavian*, where it is a central theme. The story of Florent's inevitable return to his origins is complemented by the sub-plot involving the (mis)adventures of Clement – a sub-plot so vibrant and interesting that it threatens completely to overshadow the main story. This extended treatment makes Clement, his family, and their world important and meaningful in their own right, indicating a class position still further removed from the romance classic; though there is a general sense in *Octavian* that nobility is innate and blood will out, that is not part of a strictly conservative agenda that reduces all non-courtly characters to the level of accessories. Meanwhile, the fact that all three Middle English manuscripts handle Clement differently, and that the texts are internally inconsistent as well,

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[95]   So-called 'bourgeois' romances include *Sir Launfal* and *Sir Cleges*, marked by materialism and moralism respectively: see for example Sands (ed.), *Middle English Verse Romances*, p. 202 (on *Launfal*); Pearsall, 'The Development of Middle English Romance', p. 30 (on *Cleges*). For my reservations regarding this label, see Chapter 4.

shows that the translators, redactors and scribes had not decided (or felt the need to decide) just what this class position should be.

Octavian paints the non-courtly world in lively detail, with town life featuring prominently. In the Northern version the Parisian streets and community are particularly well realized. When Clement returns from pilgrimage, for instance, everyone comes out to welcome him:

> The burgesche of Paresche wer ful fayne;
> Full many went Clement agayne:
> A slavyne was his wede.
> Thay haylsed Clement and kyssed hym alle,
> And broghte hym till his awen haulle;
> His wyfe was glade and blythe.
>
> (Northern *Octavian*, ll. 601–6)

This shows a cohesive urban community with established rituals which, though similar to courtly customs, are still distinct from them.[96] The welcome procession is a standard scene in romance, but it usually goes to the palace, whereas Clement is escorted to his own home.[97] Paris's geography is also reasonably accurately sketched: on the way to begin his apprenticeship, Florent passes 'ouir þe bryge' (l. 647), a bridge McSparran identifies as the Grand Pont – the main thoroughfare into medieval Paris's trading quarter.[98] Later there are vivid scenes in which the pagan giant leans over the city walls to parley with the citizens, and in which people of all ranks mock the ill-armed Florent as he rides out to do battle. Simons argues for class prejudice in this last, commenting that 'it is the "folke" who mock his appearance'.[99] His point is that the rabble cannot appreciate nobility even when it rides out to rescue them. However, the word 'folke' appears only in the Thornton manuscript (l. 834; Cambridge has 'people'

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[96] Medieval London was similar in that its citizens had their own processions and traditions, which drew on courtly models but preserved a unique civic identity of their own: Barron, 'Chivalry, Pageantry and Merchant Culture', pp. 228–30.

[97] On the formulaic nature of the welcome procession, see Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures*, pp. 62–4.

[98] *Octovian*, ed. McSparran, p. 190, note to ll. 646–57.

[99] John Simons, 'Northern *Octavian* and the Question of Class', in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows and Carol Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), pp. 105–12, at p. 110.

instead, l. 919), and Simons omits to mention that a few lines earlier Florent is mocked by 'kyng and knyght' (Thornton, l. 829), who also express their 'mekill wondir' in 'many a skornefull worde' (ll. 830–31). The significant point here is not that the classes keep separate, but rather that they all mix in the general urban bustle.

The Southern *Octavian* lacks these Parisian scenes, but describes the urban household with more energy instead. Clement is an irascible father who threatens and beats his children, but mellows having 'gladede hys herte with noble wyn' (Southern, l. 758); thus softened, he forgives Florent for buying the hawk and cautions him to care for it properly. Earlier, Florent and his foster-brother argued in the street, which dragged their mother out to quieten them down (ll. 715–24); and on finding a nobleman's hawk in his house Clement seemed immediately to suspect he had been cuckolded, and went in search of his wife (ll. 733–44). All this lends Florent's foster-home a lively verisimilitude more common in fabliau than romance, and means it is presented as a rounded and valid alternative to the world of the court.[100] There is comedy and grotesquery here, but not in the conventional manner. To appreciate the difference one need only compare Clement with such figures as the animalistic herdsman in *Yvain*, or the stupid and gullible peasant described in Lydgate's 'The Chorle and the Birde'.[101]

Nonetheless, though a text's principles of selection are often a good indicator of its class position, vivid representation does not necessarily mean respect.[102] Clement is made the butt of jokes, and shown to be money-grubbing, incompetent with armour, and hopelessly unable to comprehend noble

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[100] On the fabliau element in *Octavian* (including Clement's suspicions), see Wright, 'The Fabliau Ethos in the French and English Octavian Romances'.

[101] Chrestien de Troyes, *Yvain: Le Chevalier au Lion*, ed. Wendelin Foerster, corrected edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), ll. 288–369; Lydgate, 'The Chorle and the Bird', in *A Selection from the Minor Poems*, pp. 179–83. The peasant catches the bird, which tricks him into releasing it in exchange for a great reward. This turns out to be such valuable pearls of wisdom as 'don't believe everything you're told', and 'watch out for tricksters'.

[102] As shown by Per Nykrog's analysis of fabliaux, *Les Fabliau: Etude d'histoire littéraire et de stylistique médiévale* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1978).

largesse.[103] Moffat and Simons both read this as a sign of the poem's aristocratic orientation, interpreting Clement as a boorish figure designed to allay upper-class fears about social mobility in the years after the Black Death. Moffat's language is extreme (he imagines that the mercantile and artisanal classes inspired aristocratic 'loathing'), whereas Simons writes more moderately of 'fear and doubt'.[104] But their arguments are actually very similar, as shown by their both describing *Octavian* as an 'ideological defence'.[105] This suggests that the poems allow room for Clement and his world only to reinforce a divide between courtly and bourgeois mentalities.

But Glenn Wright takes a different approach. He compares the French, Northern, and Southern versions of the story, and argues that the Southern one tones down the class conflict so as to allow Clement to keep his dignity (an argument that has also been made by William Fahrenbach).[106] That reading harmonizes with Mills's earlier observation that Southern Florent has 'come down in the world in some respects, as his original *gentryse* is at time abandoned for a rough naïvety very like that of Libeaus'.[107] The Southern version thus seems to rewrite both hero and anti-hero so as to blur class boundaries that the Northern versions are content to maintain. Such differences show that the producers of medieval romances recast material according to their own agendas, and that the lost-heir story could be told from a number of different

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[103] The comic scenes are discussed in Martha Fessler Kreig, 'The Contrast of Class Customs as Humor in a Middle English Romance: Clement and Florent in *Octavian*', *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 9 (1984), 115–24.

[104] Moffat, 'Fearful Villainy', p. 125; Simons, 'Northern *Octavian* and the Question of Class', p. 111.

[105] Moffat, 'Fearful Villainy', p. 125; Simons, 'Northern *Octavian* and the Question of Class', p. 110.

[106] Wright, 'The Fabliau Ethos in the French and English *Octavian* Romances'; William Fahrenbach, 'Rereading Clement in Thomas Chestre's *Octavian* and in BL Cotton Caligula A.II', *Essays in Medieval Studies* 26 (2010), 85–99.

[107] Mills, 'Composition and Style', p. 104 (Mills does not clearly explain his reasoning here, but he seems to be thinking of a reference to Florent's horse as being 'ragged and hegh and long of swere' (l. 839), and to have interpreted this as perjorative, and hence a sign of Florent's poor taste).

perspectives, despite its basic attachment to innate nobility. Though the story-type suggests an outlook, individual romancers could always adapt it.

Still more interesting is the fact that each version is *internally* inconsistent too. Despite the convincing cases made by Wright and Fahrenbach, the Northern texts are sometimes kinder to Clement than the Southern, while the class comedy in the Southern version occasionally has a piquancy lacking in its Northern cousins. In particular, it marks Clement's low rank more clearly, and makes him more overtly interested in his own advancement. Northern Clement has no specific occupation, whereas Southern Clement is a butcher, and this lowly occupation manifests itself continually in his thought and speech.[108] He encourages Florent to fight by drawing parallels between fighting and butchering:

> Hery to me yn þys wyse,
> Bocherys sone:
> Ley on strokes with good empryse,
> As þy fader ys wone;
>
> And denk, boy, þy fader hath keld
> Well many a bole and doun yfeld!
>
> (Southern *Octavian*, ll. 1059–64)

> He cryde, 'Boy ley on with yre
> Strokes, as ys woned þy syre!
> He ne fond neuer boon ne lyre
> Hys ax withstent,
> Þat he ne smot þorȝ ech a swyre
> Ryȝt at oo dent.'
>
> (Southern *Octavian*, ll. 1117–22)

These exhortations could perhaps be subversive: Clement claims the principles of lineage and the language of combat for mere commoners, while also suggesting that swordplay is no more distinguished than the slaughter of beasts. But these speeches also push Clement down into Auerbach's category of 'low–grotesque–comic', so just as Florent reveals his nobility by thought and speech, so Clement reveals his lack of it.

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[108] McSparran notes the high status of Parisian butchers, but a recent study by Rawcliffe shows that in England they were more commonly perceived as trouble-makers and rule-breakers whose business practices caused a public nuisance: *Octovian*, ed. McSparran, p. 190, note to ll. 646–57; Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies*, pp. 147–53, 241–46.

Worse still, though marked as a workman, Southern Clement yet has high social aspirations. He dresses up his son with airs (just as Miller Symkin does his daughter in Chaucer's Reeve's Tale), and is quite clear that 'Thorȝ hym y hope to wynne prys / More, than any man yn Parys / And all our kende' (ll. 884–6). When Florent says his dreams tell him to fight as Paris's champion, Clement agrees immediately and hustles him off to be dubbed, saying 'Ȝyf our kyng wyll her my steuene, / Þou schalt be made knyȝt' (ll. 995–6; cf. l. 1003). Seen in this light, Southern Clement looks more like the 'nightmare' bourgeois imagined by Moffat than the admirable old sort outlined by Wright, so it is interesting that Nola Jean Bamberry once read the Southern text as the version in which Florent's innate nobility is thematically strongest.[109] That suggests the classes are polarized in this text, just where other scholars think they come together.

Turning to the Northern versions now, we notice that the two manuscripts are not consistent in mocking Clement: the scene in which he unnecessarily commandeers the nobles' mantles does not appear in the Cambridge manuscript (though it is in the supposedly recuperative Southern version). Moreover, the Northern texts burden Clement with neither the butcheryness nor the social aspirations of his Southern counterpart. Instead he is presented as a firm but loving father with a genuine affection for his foster-son. He is horrified when Florent suggests fighting the giant, and tries to forbid it by threatening 'And þou þerof speke, / I trow I sall thyn hede breke' (ll. 762–3). And when Florent insists on going, 'For sorowe Clement herte nere braste / When he on him an actone caste' (ll. 792–3).

During the combat Clement saves Florent's life by shouting (unbutcherly) exhortations that galvanize him in the same way as other knights are encouraged by words from their ladies: 'als ill als the childe ferde, / When he þe speche of Clement herde, / His herte began to bolde' (ll. 885–7), and he wins soon afterwards. This shows that Florent returns Clement's affection, a reciprocity already suggested by their conversation before the battle, in which Florent calls Clement 'fadir' at the beginning of each of his four speeches (ll. 756, 768, 778, 780), while Clement calls him 'my dere sone' (l. 747). Although Florent does later

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[109] Nola Jean Bamberry, 'Evolution of the Popular Hero in the English *Octavian* Romances', *Modern Language Quarterly* 51(3) (1990), 363–88, at pp. 367–71.

disown Clement, claiming that 'lufe hade I neuir hym too / Als I solde to my fadir doo' (ll. 1119–20), his claim is belied by these earlier interactions.[110] Moreover, because the early reunion between Florent and Octavian Senior is not properly integrated, Florent appears to go on living with Clement even after he has discovered his biological father.[111] After one of his later skirmishes he goes straight 'home to Clement […] His awntirs for to saye' (ll. 1405–6), indicating Clement's approval to be that which he is most eager to win. Finally, the Northern versions also imagine Clement as a skilled horseman, who manages the Sultan's animals 'full faire' (l. 1448) and is three times said to be a 'joye' to watch (ll. 1441, 1444, 1449). This is inconsistent with the general tone of his character (Wright is quite correct that the *gyn* of the Southern version is more fitting), but the inconsistency itself shows the poet was not conducting a deliberate anti-bourgeois smear campaign.

The fact that no version of *Octavian* has a consistent approach to courtly–bourgeois relations suggests that consistency was unnecessary. As with the treatment of Malkedras in *Chevelere Assigne*, the desire to make a good job of the story-telling outweighs any putative desire for clear statements of specific social ideologies. At this point it is useful to draw on an interpretive framework developed by Wright in his essay on 'Comic Ambivalence in *Sir Perceval*'. There Wright outlines how *Perceval* strips away social and ethnic markers so as to make room for as many interpretations as possible, arguing that the poem cultivates

> an imagined system of social relations whose analogy to lived experience is so abstract that the personal circumstances of individual readers or auditors are unlikely to intervene powerfully in the act of reception.[112]

Octavian is obviously different in that it is full of specific social details, but its plenitude works in the same way as *Perceval*'s paucity: both poems leave the

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[110] Scholars occasionally criticize Florent for saying this, but I would point out that there is an important difference between not loving someone *at all*, and not loving them *as a father*, which is all Florent confesses to.

[111] The Northern version has two recognition scenes between Florent and Octavian, one at a feast relatively early in the story, the other at the very end.

[112] Wright, 'Comic Ambivalence in *Sir Perceval*', p. 52.

reader to decide what matters (Clement's lowness *versus* his integrity; Perceval's roughness *versus* his development), as each 'gestures one way, then another, surrendering the construction of interpretive stability to the prejudices of the individual receptor'.[113] *Octavian* and *Perceval* encode numerous attitudes and numerous class positions, but they enforce none.

Lybeaus Desconus and *Chevelere Assigne* modify the conservative leanings of the lost-heir story in a different way. According to both Derek Brewer and Susan Wittig, the connected motifs of exile and the fair unknown ought to signal to the audience that the coming story will be an exploration of identity and patrimony.[114] However, though both these texts use the motif of the boy from the woods, neither develops it in the conventional manner. Once again, the social narrative implicit in the story-type seems not to have registered, for *Lybeaus* gets so distracted by its adventures that the initial theme is abandoned and the hero's identity left unresolved, while *Chevelere Assigne* metamorphoses into a moral tale whose themes are universal.

Wittig herself comments on the 'narrative compactness' of *Lybeaus*'s opening moves, pointing out that 'the two components *irregular birth* and *expulsion* are so reduced that we cannot call them scenes at all'.[115] Developing that observation we discover that the themes of exile and namelessness begin to fade almost as soon as they appear. Most stories of this kind begin with an injustice that is eventually righted by the hero, who might in the process overcome personal difficulties, gain social acceptance, and discover who he is. By contrast, Lybeaus has no murdered family to avenge (unlike Perceval), and no calumniated mother to vindicate (as do Florent and Octavian and Enyas). It is possible that his mother was raped, but the phrasing is so ambiguous that we cannot be sure; though there is certainly something disquieting about Lybeaus's having been conceived 'be a forest syde' (l. 9) and brought up in obscurity, the

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[113] Wright, 'Comic Ambivalence in *Sir Perceval*', p. 50.

[114] Brewer, *Symbolic Stories*, pp. 69–70, 100–2; Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures*, p. 134.

[115] Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures*, pp. 122–3. See also Blanchfield's observation that 'the marital and parental relationship [in *Lybeaus*] are nominal': 'The Romances in MS Ashmole 61', p. 67.

poem makes nothing of it, and Lybeaus is certainly not out to avenge any wrongdoing. Moreover, whereas Perceval and Enyas have to learn how to be noblemen, and Degaré searches deliberately for his parents, Lybeaus has no trouble joining chivalric society, and expresses no interest in establishing his identity. His only comment on this score is the breezy observation that 'J not what ys my name: / J am þe more nys' (ll. 50–1). To have everything so easy denies the opening motifs any thematic significance; they are convenient tools for getting the story started, but their customary associations – identity, *arrivisme*, paternity – are not central concerns.

This is confirmed by the fact that the two best manuscripts eventually abandon the fair-unknown narrative entirely. The Cotton and Lambeth texts end with Lybeaus knowing no more about himself than he did at the beginning, still without a proper name, and still unaware that Gawain is his father. There is a passing comment from his bride-to-be that his ability to disenchant her means he must be related to Gawain, but this is a single couplet (ll. 2030–1) and Lybeaus never comments on the revelation. It can hardly stand as the triumphant climax of a main theme. By contrast, the other manuscripts add stanzas after Cotton's l. 2118, in which these mysteries are resolved. This shows that some people noticed the omission and thought it important to make Lybeaus's identity fully public, thus closing the circle opened at the beginning. However, Mills does not consider these additions authoritative; he attributes them not to a better copytext, but to a redactor with 'considerable knowledge of other vernacular romances' and 'a rationalizing disposition'.[116] Therefore, a good proportion of the story's audience was apparently content for the fair-unknown structure to remain incomplete, with its ideological potential unrealized. After the wizards, fighting, enchantments, seductions, friendships, rivalries, and chivalric competitions, the question of the hero's paternity simply drops from the picture.

Chevelere Assigne also strays from the lost heir's customary themes. Diane Speed has argued that the poem is best read as an exemplum illustrating the 'universal truth' that 'Allweldynge God, whenne it is his wylle, / Wele he wereth

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116 *Lybeaus Desconus*, ed. Mills, pp. 18 and 19.

his werke with his owne honde' (ll. 1–2).[117] Her essay enumerates the many signs that Enyas is God's agent on earth, the most obvious being that the angelic messenger says he is: he tells the hermit that 'Criste hath formeth þis chylde to fyȝte for his moder' (l. 200). Although Cooper's 'Good Advice on Leaving Home in the Romances' has a different stance, arguing that the rediscovery of Enyas's royalty is indeed the main point of the story, I find Speed's reading more apt.[118] As Davenport puts it, 'the poem has changed its nature in the process of being retold as a short self-contained romance, rather than a prelude to a family history'.[119] God's explicit and continuous intervention reorients everything, and Enyas's identity as a lost heir is all but forgotten in the poem's focus on his being an instrument of divine justice.

We have already seen that Enyas responds to the news of his parentage with unheroic complacency. From that point on the romance narrative gradually fades away as the poem concentrates on the shape of the exemplum instead. When Enyas wins his battle it is neither because of his teaching, nor because of his own abilities, but because God wills it. Degaré defeats knights and dragons on his own merit, achieving chivalric rites of passage that demonstrate his belonging to noble society. For Enyas the story is different. He receives no glory from his battle, and the victory does nothing to show his prowess or status; indeed, his inferiority is the whole point (as in the battle between David and Goliath).[120]

Enyas is not, then, a hero in the conventional romance sense. Nor is the ending a conventional romance ending, for the reunion and restoration – the climax of the romance plot – are barely mentioned (compare *Octavian*, where the desire for reunion is so strong that Florent and Octavian discover one another twice). There is neither celebration at Bewtrys's salvation and restoration, nor rejoicing at the rediscovery of the children; there are neither marriages, nor gifts

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[117] Speed, 'The Pattern of Providence', p. 143.

[118] Cooper, 'Good Advice on Leaving Home', pp. 108–9.

[119] Davenport, 'Abbreviation and the Education of the Hero', p. 10.

[120] Speed notes the similarity between Enyas's fight and David's: 'The Pattern of Providence', p. 154, n. 14. So does Henry H. Gibbs: *The Romance of the Cheuelere Assigne*, ed. Gibbs, EETS e.s. 6 (London: Trübner, 1868), p. xii.

of land. Instead, the story ends with the brief observation that 'þus þe botenynge of God browȝte hem to honde' (l. 370), bringing the exemplum back round to its opening lines. But it is not a perfect circle, for there are two matters that remain forever unresolved: the honest Markus is still blind, and one child is still trapped in the form of a swan. The poem even emphasizes that child's misery, and how 'There was ryche ne pore þat myȝte for rewthe / Lengere loke on hym, but to þe courte wenden' (ll. 363–4). Such miserable loose ends are emphatically not part of a romance conclusion, and even challenge the closure of the exemplum. As Speed observes, the poem's ultimate message seems to be that 'all is not right with the world, that the *harmes* caused by evil, though *ofte* removed by God, may sometimes remain to be endured'.[121]

In this way *Chevelere Assigne* takes the apparatus of romance and uses it to tell a different kind of story. Although we might expect a plot like this to be closely connected with the idea of innate nobility, and to affirm social hierarchies by claiming everyone has his proper place in the world, this poem gradually shrugs off specific social ideologies to focus instead on more universal principles – justice, good and evil, and the inscrutability of Providence in an apparently imperfect world. The poem does in some ways suggest that blood will out and that nobility is innate, but these are incidental details. Like all the romances in this chapter, *Chevelere Assigne* testifies to the automatic deference so ingrained in medieval culture, but not to a conscious programme of ideological exposition, nor even to one of subconscious complicity.

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There is undoubtedly an intimate connection between lost-heir narratives and a conservative belief in innate nobility. The former assumes the latter, and by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the story-type had a well-established catalogue of themes and motifs that romancers used for discussing, analysing, and ultimately affirming that underlying principle. However, if it suited their purpose as entertainers or didacts, Middle English story-tellers would also

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121 *Chevelere Assigne*, ed. Speed, p. 157. The unsatisfactory ending is also discussed in Davenport, 'Abbreviation and the Education of the Hero', pp. 17–22. Both these wrongs are eventually righted in the full Continental story.

manipulate the narrative's traditional associations to rather different ends. None of these five romances makes expounding innate nobility its main business; they all do so occasionally, but each of them also has undercurrents that run against the main stream. Though peasants are sometimes reviled there are also occasions on which non-courtly characters are dignified and validated. The poems invest symbolic capital in qualities of character as well as blood, and even in military prowess and material possessions. This variety and inconsistency reflects the diversity of opinion available in the culture at large, and suggests the texts do not consciously side with any particular socio-political ideology, conservative or otherwise.

Literary criticism is, of course, well used to texts having internal contradictions; the entire school of deconstructionist theory is devoted to discovering and explaining them. Pierre Macherey, for instance, suggests they indicate ideological 'fissures' that are opened unbidden by the creative process, and thus mark the limits of the dominant ideology's power and success.[122] But that is not what I see happening in these romances. Macherey's fissures appear in ideologies that are otherwise deliberately formed, thereby realizing a kind of subliminal creative and cultural ambivalence; in these romances I see neither deliberate formation nor unconscious ambivalence. The contradictions and inconsistencies are just too obvious, and too pervasive, to be so conceived. The image of the 'fissure' presents texts as solid ground that is occasionally cracked, but these romances are more like shifting islands on an open sea. Neither dumbly complicit in perpetuating false consciousness, nor consciously resistant in challenging it, these texts appear unconcerned with the specifics of nobility and class. Thematic consistency and socio-political manoeuvring are less important than local narrative interest.

Maybe because so many people had a hand in their production and transmission, the texts remain gleefully various. Rather than encoding any single position, they speak only of the multiplicity of medieval ideas about nobility and class, and in doing so perhaps testify to the transcendence of story-telling. Nevertheless, though the ideological charge of the lost-heir motif is perhaps

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[122] Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 82–90.

weak in these texts, it has certainly not been neutralized. It is in the nature of the material to connect worth with birth, and, whether deliberately or not, that connection is reiterated simply by the act of telling. Meanwhile, a primary focus on momentary, non-reflective diversion certainly does little to encourage radicalism or agitate for change. Middle English narration and renarration of this material *could* therefore be construed as false consciousness in action, but it would be false consciousness of a rather feeble kind. The producers and audiences of these texts were by no means slaves to the idea that nobility is innate, and combined that background principle with others drawn from the wide range of alternative definitions that were readily available in the wider culture.

CHAPTER 3

Winning a Bride: Nobility by Prowess

Love and marriage are quintessential romance themes, so important that they were for a long time considered the key to distinguishing *roman* from *chanson de geste*.[1] Though our understanding of genre is now more nuanced, and the lines between genres rather more blurred, recent definitions of romance continue to fix upon 'the role and prominence of ladies [and] the role and prominence of love'.[2] Cupid still holds court, while the concept of 'courtly love' is as hotly debated now as it was in the Middle Ages themselves. From reading the troubadour lyrics, the Tristan poems, Chrétien's *Lancelot*, and Andreas Capellanus's *De Amore*, courtly love's founding fathers defined it as an intense passion between a man and a married woman of higher status.[3] Standing on the shoulders of such giants as Gaston Paris and C. S. Lewis, subsequent critics noticed that *fin amor* can burn without the fuel of adultery and social disparity: the lovers might marry, as in *Yvain*, and can be of equal rank, as in Marie's *Guigemar* (though their parity may be obscured, as in *King Horn*).[4]

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1   See for example Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050–1200* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972; rept. 1987), pp. 34–5; R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn (London: Pimlico, 1993), pp. 230–4. Romance's love-interest is an important part of the distinction between epic and romance that structures Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies*. More recently scholars have recognized that there is no such firm divide between romance and *chanson de geste*: the key text is Sarah Kay, *The Chansons de geste in the Age of Romance: Political Fictions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); see also Ailes, 'What's in a Name? Anglo-Norman Romances or *chansons de geste*?'.

2   Whetter, *Understanding Genre*, p. 64. (Whetter also cites adventure and a happy ending as defining features, and is at pains to point out that the ladies are not always lovers, and that the love is not always romantic.)

3   The genesis of the phrase 'courtly love' (*amour courtois*) is Gaston Paris, 'Études sur les romans de la Table Ronde', *Romania* 12 (1883), 459–534. Another key text is C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), pp. 1–43.

4   The debate from the 1960s to the end of the twentieth century is clearly summarized, and developed, in Sarah Kay, 'Courts, Clerks and Courtly Love',

The texts discussed here – *Floris and Blancheflour*, *The Erle of Tolous*, *Sir Degrevant*, *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, and the Amis–Belisaunt plot in *Amis and Amiloun* – fall between those two poles. On the one hand, the brides are often of higher status than their prospective husbands, and the lovers are always hampered by something structurally analogous to adultery; on the other, that apparently star-crossed love always leads eventually to marriage. This gives the poems something of the 'conservative worthiness' Field detects in Anglo-Norman romance, while allowing them also to accommodate social mobility and hints of a social order founded on meritocratic rather than ancestral principles.[5] The heroes come to enjoy nobility in its fullest sense (the conjunction of symbolic, social and economic capital) not so much because they are born to it as because they deserve it.

Nevertheless, those meritocratic leanings only go so far. The poems are chary of emphasizing the difference in rank between the lovers, which is never very great anyway, and usually either ignore it or explain it away. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, blood and birth still command significant symbolic capital, and all five poems demonstrate some invidious class prejudices. They also conform to a second set of élitist principles in that their idea of merit basically equates to the effective use of violence: the hero wins his bride and status by proving his ability to force his will on others. The marriage itself only confirms what he has already proved through prowess. This reflects the conception of the nobility as a class made superior by its function as *bellatores*. But fighting is not the nobleman's sole function here, and each text complements the hero's prowess with virtues associated with responsible lordship. Sometimes class distinctions are even allowed to collapse, if that suits the story. Nevertheless, the story-type invariably uses thwarted love and social disparity as a gateway to adventure, so the bellicose aspect of nobility is what comes through most strongly. That sits rather uneasily beside the praise of temperate lordship, for an ideal that combines violence with restraint is intrinsically unstable; *Sir*

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in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 81–96.

[5] Field, 'Romance in England', p. 158.

Degrevant in particular undermines its warrior ethos in the very act of expressing it.

Meanwhile, by simultaneously lauding force, accepting social mobility, and maintaining the value of blood and title, these poems inevitably (though probably unwittingly) rub against some uncomfortable truths both about the nature of nobility and the implications of social rise. They show that even within the circle of the élite, strength usually counts for more than breeding, and thus that biological and functional concepts of nobility do not mesh perfectly, despite their many affinities. Another problem is that hardline attempts to maintain social stasis appear only to encourage mayhem, for they incite violent behaviour that debunks the ideology of blood by revealing the pre-eminence of force. Like all theories, the principle of innate nobility is open to falsification, but these romances remain deeply committed to it all the same. Thus we see that theories of social closure can only go so far before they have to bend, and that flexibility is often their greatest source of strength.

Social Mobility, Merit, and Marriage

All these romances work towards marriages between persons of different ranks, so they all have a meritocratic element. In these poems it is perfectly acceptable to aspire to social advancement; the dangerous people are the kings and fathers who resist mobility, not the lovers who strive to achieve it. However, the poems never set out to present a meritocratic vision of nobility, and their meritocracy certainly never extends to egalitarianism. All the heroes and heroines are well born, while merit is judged according to highly traditional, élite standards of breeding, devotion, and military ability. Only *The Erle of Tolous* suggests an interest in more universal virtues. Moreover, each text tends to obscure what mobility it does contain, so none reads as a barefaced narrative of social rise. The theme is either be masked by other interests (principally adventure), or the text stresses that, in one way or another, the lovers were equally matched all along. None of these romances allows marriage to stand alone as the agent of social change. Though the hero's campaign to better himself is invariably initiated by a woman, he always gains the recognition of his erstwhile superiors well before

marrying one of their ladies. This reflects the manner in which this story-type conceives nobility – a martial, masculine quality realized primarily on the battlefield, albeit one recognized by men and women alike.

These romances do not just accept social mobility; they expect it. In *The Erle of Tolous* (northeast Midlands, 1350–1400) people are routinely motivated by the desire to better themselves. Beulybon's bodyguards lure the hapless young Antor into their scheme by telling him that if he joins in their 'play':

> Thou schalt make hur [Beulybon] to lagh soo,
> Thogh sche were gretly thy foo,
> Thy frende schulde sche bee.[6]

Dyoclysyon promises a similar reward to anyone who will champion his accused wife:

> Yf any man durste prove hys myght,
> In trewe quarell for to fyght,
> Wele avaunsed schulde he bee.
>
> (*Erle of Tolous*, ll. 910–12)

He keeps his word, announcing after the duel that he intends to promote the victorious 'monk' to a bishopric (l. 1114). Most spectacularly, Barnard rises from earl to steward to emperor, having been chosen by the imperial electors after Dyoclysyon's death. *The Erle of Tolous* thus describes a world in which social capital is distinct from ancestral inheritance, and something an individual can legitimately strive to acquire.

Sir Degrevant (northeast Midlands, 1385–1410) is similar.[7] Degrevant's squire and Melidor's maid advance through service to become property-holders in their own right, as did the maiden messengers in *Octavian*. Their rise parallels

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6   *The Erle of Tolous*, in *Of Love and Chivalry: An Anthology of Middle English Romance*, ed. Jennifer Fellows (London: Dent, 1993), pp. 231–65, ll. 715–17. This edition is based on Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.2.38 (*c.* 1420–50). The other manuscripts are Lincoln Cathedral, MS 91 (the Thornton manuscript, *c.* 1440); Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61 (late fifteenth century); Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 45 (sixteenth century).

7   *Sir Degrevant*, ed. L. F. Casson, EETS o.s. 221 (London: Oxford University Press, 1949). This is a parallel text edition of both manuscripts: Lincoln Cathedral, MS 91 (the Thornton manuscript, *c.* 1440); Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.1.6 (the Findern manscript, *c.* 1446–1550). Casson favours the Cambridge text, so that is the one I quote from (p. xvi).

that of the hero himself, in a poem that is acutely aware of rank and uses titles carefully: Degrevant is a 'baneret' (l. 1033; the Thornton manuscript reads 'baron'), his enemy an earl (a higher rank), and his rival in love a duke (higher again).[8] The poem also refers to squires, kings, and emperors, and to an ecclesiastical hierarchy of archbishops, cardinals, and pope. We thus know that Degrevant begins as a persecuted provincial lord, then vanquishes two social superiors, and finishes by making an excellent marriage and inheriting an earldom.[9] In *Amis and Amiloun* (east Midlands, late thirteenth century) and *Sir Eglamour of Artois* (northeast Midlands, *c.* 1350) young squires marry their lord's daughters and inherit a duchy and an earldom, respectively. By making such ascents these men all continue a long-established literary pattern whereby love disguises naked social ambition, and which allows audiences an imaginative escape from the restrictive marriage practices they encountered in real life.[10] Contrary to much in medieval thought, these poems reward social ambition and make the aspiring individual a hero rather than an aberration. That implies they have departed from the idea that nobility inheres in the blood, and decided that it should be awarded on merit instead.

The exception is *Floris and Blancheflour* (southeast Midlands, *c.* 1250),[11] where the marriage is not really uneven at all. Some critics have considered this

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[8] To be a knight banneret (as opposed to a knight bachelor) meant one could lead one's own battallion on the battlefield, united under one's own squared (as opposed to tapering) banner: Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 168. The rank of duke was a fairly recent honour in England *c.* 1400, though it had been used for centuries on the Continent: Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 197.

[9] Though barons/bannerets and earls were roughly equivalent in the thirteenth century, the upper nobility had become much more exclusive by the fifteenth. In *Degrevant*'s time the earls were counted among the peers of the realm, while those who had once claimed the title banneret were relegated to the lesser nobility: Coss, 'An Age of Deference', pp. 35–6, 41–2.

[10] The tradition and its motivations have been discussed from varying perspectives in Duby, *The Chivalrous Society*, pp. 112–22; Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures*, p. 189; Hudson, 'Construction of Class, Family, and Gender'; Stephen Knight, *Arthurian Literature and Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1983), pp. 68–104.

[11] Though this date means a Middle English *Floris and Blancheflour* existed at least a century before many of the other romances in this study, the extant

poem transgressive in that it subordinates everything to the sexual passion between a Christian slave and an Islamic prince;[12] others have thought it a piece of charming escapism.[13] And yet, underneath all the sentiment and flowers lies a very traditional fair-unknown story with a providential structure that assures us blood will out and Christianity will triumph. Blancheflour is the granddaughter of a count, so not a princess but certainly not servile either, and her good breeding neutralizes any threat she might otherwise have posed to the social order. Floris's parents object to the attachment not because she is base, but because she is Christian and they want Floris to 'wyfe after the lawe'.[14] They are

manuscripts are all from the fourteenth century. I thus feel justified in considering it alongside them as a fourteenth-century poem. The same goes for *Amis and Amiloun* – another thirteenth-century poem existing only in later versions.

[12] John A. Geck, '"For Goddes Loue, Sir, Mercy!": Recontextualizing the Modern Critical Text of *Floris and Blancheflor*', in *Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts*, ed. Rhiannon Purdie and Michael Cichon (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), pp. 77–89, at p. 89. See also L. Shutters, 'Christian Love or Pagan Transgression? Marriage and Conversion in *Floire et Blancheflor*', in *Discourses on Love, Marriage and Transgression in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. A. Classen (Tempe: Arizona Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004), pp. 85–108, at pp. 85–6. Block Friedman, Giacone, and Metlitzki all discuss cultural difference, too, though they all emphasize the poem's healing potential – transcendence more than transgression: Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races*, pp. 164–5, 174–6; Dorothee Metlitzki, *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 250; Roberto Giacone, '*Floris and Blauncheflur*: Critical Issues', *Rivista di studii classici* 27 (1979), 395–405, at p. 404.

[13] For instance, George Kane, *Middle English Literature: A Critical Study of the Romances, the Religious Lyrics, 'Piers Plowman'* (London: Methuen, 1951), pp. 47–8; Douglas Gray, 'An Early English *Entführung*: A Note on *Floris and Blauncheflour*', in *From Anglo-Saxon to Early Middle English: Studies Presented to E. G. Stanley*, ed. Malcolm Godden, Douglas Gray, and Terry Hoad (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). pp. 206–13, at p. 206. Geraldine Barnes comments the story has 'most often been interpreted as an artless treatment of youthful devotion, a springtime idyll': 'Cunning and Ingenuity in the Middle English *Floris and Blauncheflur*', *Medium Ævum* 53 (1984), 10–25, at p. 10.

[14] *Floris and Blancheflour*, in *Sentimental and Humorous Romances*, ed. Erik Kooper (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005), pp. 1–52, l. 40. This edition is based on National Library of Scotland, Advocates MS 19.2.1 (the Auchinleck manuscript, *c.* 1330), with some opening lines supplied from British Library, MS Egerton 2862 (*olim* Trentham–Sutherland,

obviously wrong, just as Blancheflour's enslavement is wrong, since the poem believes without question that Islamic law and faith are false. Both social and religious orders thus need to be righted as the poem moves towards its end. Therefore, as Blancheflour is restored to her rightful place in society, so Floris and the emir are converted to Christianity, and God's order prevails in all things.

The providential theme is not much emphasized (some manuscripts even leave the conversion to go unsaid), and Patricia Grieve actually contrasts the Middle English poem with others in which this hagiographic strand (as she calls it) is more developed.[15] She describes Italian and Spanish versions that realize divine order at cosmic and spiritual levels rather than social; Floris's search becomes a pilgrimage, and the lovers' eventual union an apotheosis of devotion and religious enlightenment.[16] Our poem does not go so far, but the spiritual theme and providential structure are present nonetheless, and add deep symbolic resonances that are all the more powerful for being *felt* rather than clearly heard.

Even so, *Floris and Blancheflour* remains at the surface the story of a cross-class, cross-cultural love affair in which an Islamic prince falls in love with, deflowers, then marries a Christian slave. In many texts the match would be scandalous, so the poem has to work hard to make their love seem right and proper (compare Middle English *Ipomadon A*, in which La Fere would rather kill herself than marry the pagan Lylolyne, or the Anglo-Norman *Amys e Amillyoun*, where the Duke would prefer to see his daughter dead than dallying with a poor

late fourteenth century). The other witnesses are British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius D.iii (pre-1300); Cambridge University Library, MS Gg.4.27 (*c.* 1300). All are acephalous.

[15] The Auchinleck and Cambridge manuscripts specify that Floris and the Emir convert, but the British Library ones do not. Conversion and marriage between Christians and Muslims was apparently not unusual: Metlitzki, *The Matter of Araby*, p. 161; Jennifer Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe, 1200–1500* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 27.

[16] Patricia E. Grieve, '*Floire and Blancheflor*' *and the European Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 3, 54–6, 85.

knight).[17] Floris and Blancheflour's relationship is intense, faithful, and, above all, sweet:

> Love is on his [Floris's] hert steke.
> Love is at his hert roote,
> That nothing is so soote;
> Galyngale ne lycorys
> Is not so soote as hur love is,
> Ne nothing ne non other flour.

<div align="right">(Floris and Blancheflour, ll. 116–21)</div>

Ginger, liquorice and flowers – the appealing imagery is typical of this poem, while the repetition and multiple negatives all emphasize sweetness and supreme devotion. This conditions the audience to side with the young lovers and to accept that Floris's parents are wrong to object to their union.

In fact, the poem never dwells on the differences between Floris and Blancheflour, but focuses on their similarities instead. They are born on the same day, they have cognate names, they are both clever, passionate and sensitive ('Wonder it was of hur lore, / And of her love wel the more', ll. 27–8), and the one forever puts people in mind of the other. As the inn-keeper's wife says to Floris:

> Thou art ilich here of alle thinge,
> Of semblant and of mourning,
> But thou art a man and she is a maide.

<div align="right">(Floris and Blancheflour, ll. 419–21)</div>

The poem insists that social and cultural differences are insignificant in relation to love. All that matters is that Floris and Blancheflour are right for each other, and that they conform to the poem's exacting but idiosyncratic standards of merit. This is all very lovely, but it reveals an interesting tension too. Social *mores* are seldom thrown so completely to the winds as they are here, even in the totalizing passion of courtly love.[18] *Floris and Blancheflour* avoids being immoral only by becoming amoral instead, which indicates that the liberal,

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[17] *Ipomadon*, ed. Purdie, l. 8275; *Amys e Amillyoun*, ed. Hideka Fukui (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1990), ll. 355–66.

[18] Consider the obsessive interest in class, propriety, and social performance in Andreas Capellanus' *De Amore*, or *Le Roman de la rose*.

transcendent, transgressive story was in fact deeply problematic despite (or perhaps because of) its faith in blood and Providence.[19]

Our other romances also elide the differences between lovers, thus obscuring the social mobility they chart. The change in status is never the main theme, either because the poem fails to develop it clearly (*Sir Degrevant*, *The Erle of Tolous*), or because it denies that the hero is inferior after all: *Amis and Amiloun*, and *Sir Eglamour* acknowledge the heroes' lack of social and economic standing but credit them with ample symbolic capital instead. The hero's social rise is little more than a sideline to the main interest, which is the sequence of adventures itself, and this limits the extent to which the poems can be considered meritocratic. They do conceive nobility as a matter of individual worth, but most of them still measure worth according to exclusive criteria.

The poem most open to a genuinely meritocratic reading is *The Erle of Tolous*. Even so, Barnard's rise from earl to emperor is hardly a prominent feature; so far as I know, no one has interpreted this poem as a tale of social advancement.[20] That is presumably because *The Erle of Tolous* dwells much more on the theme of virtue rewarded, presenting Barnard and Beulybon as a perfectly matched pair who stand together as 'the embodiment of *trowthe* and *tryste*'.[21] This theme *has* attracted critical attention, notably from Reilly, who

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[19] The story's amorality has often been noted by critics, among them Kane, *Middle English Literature*, p. 48; Barnes, 'Cunning and Ingenuity in the Middle English *Floris and Blauncheflur*', p. 11; M. Lot-Borodine, *Le Roman idyllique au moyen âge* (Geneva: Droz, 1972), p. 63 (discussing the French versions).

[20] Instead scholars have focused on the unusual choice of subject, the poem's exploration of the no-man's-land between seriousness and play, the sources and analogues, and the manuscript context: see, respectively, Kane, *Middle English Literature*, p. 35; Victoria L. Weiss, 'Blurring the Lines between the Play World and the Real World in *The Earl of Tolouse*', *The Chaucer Review* 31(1) (1996), 87–98; Laura Hibbard, *Medieval Romance in England: A Study of the Sources and Analogues of the Non-Cyclic Metrical Romances* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1960), pp. 35–44; Carol Meale, '"Prenes: Engre": An Early Sixteenth-Century Presentation Copy of *The Erle of Tolous*', in *Romance Reading on the Book: Essays on Medieval Narrative Presented to Maldwyn Mills*, ed. Jennifer Fellows *et al.* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), pp. 221–36.

[21] Robert Reilly, '*The Earl of Tolouse*: A Structure of Honor', *Medieval Studies* 37 (1975), 515–23, at p. 520.

argues that the romance propounds 'justice, fidelity, trust and truth', and from Diamond, who thinks it advocates prudence.[22] I shall return to the poem's concept of virtue in the following section; my current point is that emphasizing virtue implies nobility is indeed a matter of individual integrity rather than breeding. On occasion that implication becomes explicit, particularly through the negative presentation of the emperor's court.

Dyoclysyon's court severs all links between social status and nobility of soul. Commenting on the characters' frequent injunctions to one another to 'holde counsayle' (keep mum, l. 581), Diamond has described it as an oppressive place of secrets and factions:

> [It is] not a cohesive community, but a divided court where shifting alliances based on mutual self-interest make oaths a matter of verbal emphasis, or expedient formulas which only fool the naive or trusting.[23]

Trylabas, for instance, is 'a man of grete renowne' (l. 180) whom the emperor 'lovyd, sekurly' (l. 179), yet he is also vilified as an oath-breaker who double-crosses the hero and tries to kill him. Similarly, Dyoclysyon chooses Beulybon's two bodyguards specifically because they 'were hym dere' (l. 481) – as one of them remarks to Beulybon, 'y have servyd hym longe, / And wele he hath qwytt mee' (ll. 593–4). However, the emperor's favours have been ill bestowed, for his honoured courtiers repay his trust by hatching repulsive schemes against his wife, and tricking and murdering one of their peers. *The Erle of Tolous* thus goes out of its way to specify that the villains have all won their lord's respect, and all command significant social capital. This suggests a deliberate attempt to disconnect status from moral worth, and to reject the traditional romance tactic of making the court the source of symbolic value (as it is in *Perceval*).

The treatment of young Antor furthers this scheme. *The Erle of Tolous* is unusual in making a young nobleman the foil to the villains' plot, since calumniated queens are usually accused of adultery with people much beneath

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[22] Reilly, '*The Earl of Tolouse*: A Structure of Honor', p. 522; Arlyn Diamond, '*The Erle of Tolous*: The Price of Virtue', in *Medieval Insular Romance: Translation and Innovation*, ed. Judith Weiss, Jennifer Fellows, and Morgan Dickson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 83–92.

[23] Diamond, '*The Erle of Tolous*: The Price of Virtue', p. 86. For examples of injunctions to hold counsel, see ll. 503, 538–41, 580–1, 629–30.

them.[24] This is intriguing not only because the change means the poem declines to exploit the class prejudices traditionally attached to the calumniated-queen motif, but also because its innovation further emphasizes the court's immorality. Antor is a likeable and good-hearted young man of twenty, introduced as 'a feyre chylde and a bolde' (l. 710). As he hides behind the curtain in Beulybon's chamber we are made privy to his thoughts:

> Lorde, mercy! How may thys bee?
> Y trowe they have forgeten me,
> That me hedur broght;
> Yf y them calle, sche wyll be adredd,
> My lady lyeth here in hur bede,
> Be Hym that all hath wroght!

<div align="right">(Erle of Tolous, ll. 749–54)</div>

Clearly the audience is encouraged to sympathize, and his deception and murder by his peers underlines what Shuffelton has aptly described as this court's 'moral turpitude'.[25] Against all this depravity Barnard and Beulybon shine still brighter as twin beacons of integrity in an otherwise dark society, while the fact that he is an earl and she is an empress is disguised by their shared qualities of character.

    Sir Degrevant has also been interpreted as a meritocratic poem. Diamond reads it as a refreshing text engaged in 'rewriting nobility in ways which value individual worth'.[26] However, despite its use of specific titles, *Sir Degrevant* does not consistently present its hero as Melidor's inferior, and does not demand to be read along those lines. Apart from the mention of Degrevant's being a banneret, social disparity features only once – when Melidor's maid is trying to dissuade the hero from pressing his suit. She says Degrevant is a fool to desire Melidor because:

> Hyr proferrys par amoure
> Boþ dukes and emperoure,

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24 Diamond, '*The Erle of Tolous*: The Price of Virtue', p. 86.

25 George Shuffelton, '*The Erle of Tolous*: Introduction', in *Codex Ashmole 61*, ed. Shuffelton (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), available online through http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams [accessed 11 September 2013].

26 Diamond, '*Sir Degrevant*: What Lovers Want', p. 92.

> Hyt were hyr disonowre
> For to taken þe.
>
> <div align="right">(*Sir Degrevant*, ll. 857–60)</div>

Degrevant lacks the capital to be a worthy suitor for Melidor, who is apparently intended to effect her family's own advancement by marrying into the very highest echelons of the nobility. But Degrevant defies the maid's closed views on society, and his personal qualities eventually allow him to burst through the barriers, marry his lady, and assume her father's title. The maid's pessimism is thus an important springboard for Diamond's meritocracy thesis, especially given that other evidence for Degrevant's low status is rather scarce.

By contrast, Casson considers the maid's speech inconsequential. In his view the disparity between Degrevant and Melidor is merely 'alluded to (in a passage of only subsidiary importance) but is not insisted upon'.[27] Diamond's reading is certainly attractive (and surely would have appealed to the aspiring gentry audience she has in mind), but I consider the weight of the evidence to be with Casson. Degrevant is introduced as a knight of the Round Table and nephew to Arthur and Guinevere, while his arms associate him with the royal house of Scotland.[28] He has ample property, maintains a sizeable retinue, and is no mere bachelor, but a knight banneret entitled to ride into battle at the head of his own body of men, marching under his own standard. He can also afford to entertain the idea of marrying Melidor without a dowry, and to believe that even then she would be worth more to him than 'all þe gold in þe Reyn, / Fausoned on floren' (ll. 542–3). Of all this only the Arthurian connection is easily forgotten – it appears in the Cambridge manuscript alone, and Lincoln actually offers a better reading. Having introduced the hero as a companion of Arthur, Guinevere, Perceval and Gawain, the Cambridge manuscript reads:

> He was dowghty and der,
> And ther nevew full ner,
> Þer he of dedys myght y-her
> By days or by nyght;

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27   *Sir Degrevant*, ed. Casson, p. lxiv.

28   See *Sir Degrevant*, ed. Casson, p. 134 (note to ll. 1045–55).

> For-þy they name hem þat stounde
> A knyght of the Tabull Round.

<div align="right">(Sir Degrevant, ll. 25–30)</div>

'Ther' in l. 26 and 'they' in l. 29 must refer back to Arthur and Guinevere (introduced at ll. 18–19), but ll. 27–8 are left hanging. Lincoln makes much more sense:

> He was doghety and dere,
> Euer he drewe hym full nere,
> Whare he of dedis myghte here
> Be daye or be nyghte;
> For-þi þay named him þat stownde
> Knyghte of þe Table Rownde.

<div align="right">(Lincoln Degrevant, ll. 25–30)</div>

Lines 25–8 make a coherent group, and 'þay' in l. 29 becomes a general pronoun that needs no specific referent. Since the two manuscripts are of roughly equal authority, and there is no further reference to Arthur and the Round Table, Diamond is justified in considering the connection insignificant (as Mehl and Davenport also do).[29] But the other marks of Degrevant's status are more strongly developed, and therefore harder to ignore. The meritocratic interpretation remains a possibility, but the poem reads just as well as affirming the need for *both* personal excellence *and* breeding, thus combining a basic deference for blood with the commonplace opinion that inherited privilege ought to induce good conduct.

Degrevant and Melidor can therefore be read as either unevenly or evenly matched, according to preference. Whether one reading or the other was originally intended is moot, and if there was once a clear agenda, it has since been lost in transmission. Telling and retelling Degrevant's adventures was apparently about exploiting a glamorous and exciting story, not presenting a particular social outlook. By contrast, *Amis and Amiloun* and *Sir Eglamour of Artois* discuss social disparity more openly, and the question of whether symbolic capital resides in wealth, blood, or action engages even the lovers themselves. Both poems de-emphasize social mobility by arguing that the heroes

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[29] Diamond, '*Sir Degrevant*: What Lovers Want', p. 88; Mehl, *Middle English Romances*, p. 95; Davenport, '*Sir Degrevant* and Composite Romance', pp. 115–16.

and their ladies are in fact equally matched all along. They claim their capital from different sources, but the overall quantity is roughly equivalent.

When Belisaunt first propositions Amis he tries to discourage her by drawing attention to his low rank:

> Madame, for him þat dyed on rode,
> Astow art comen of gentil blode
> & air of þis lond schal be,
> Biþenke þe on þi michel honour;
> Kinges sones & emperour
> Nar non to gode to þe;
> Certes, þan were it michel vnriȝt,
> Þi loue to lain opon a kniȝt
> Þat naþ noiþer lond no fe.[30]

This is a truly uneven match, and Amis feels keenly his lack of social and economic capital (compare ll. 745–56, where the economic lack is even clearer). He also fears the consequences of dallying with his lord's daughter – their love would make him a 'traitour' to the Duke (l. 608), he says, thus stripping him even of his symbolic capital as a loyal retainer. Belisaunt sees things differently. She has nothing but scorn for Amis's objections, and thinks it sufficient that they are both *gentil*:

> 'Þou art', sche seyd, 'a gentil kniȝt,
> & icham a bird in bour briȝt,
> Of wel heiȝe kin ycorn.'
>
> (*Amis and Amiloun*, ll. 577–9)

Whereas Amis is constrained by social anxieties stemming from his relatively low status, Belisaunt ranks sufficiently highly to transcend petty distinctions and bestow her love where she pleases. This somewhat confirms the difference between them, for the aristocratic Belisaunt does display liberty and *fraunchise* lacking in the more humble Amis (and when they fail she can always pull rank and force him). At the same time, Belisaunt's blithe insistence on Amis's worthiness unites the *gentil* classes through their shared quality of blood,

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[30] *Amis and Amiloun*, ed. MacEdward Leach, EETS o.s. 203 (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), ll. 592–600. This edition is based on the earliest witness: National Library of Scotland, Advocates MS 19.2.1 (the Auchinleck manuscript, *c.* 1330). The other manuscripts are British Library, MS Egerton 2862 (late fourteenth century); British Library, MS Harley 2386 (*c.* 1500); Bodleian Library, MS Douce 326 (also *c.* 1500).

countering and ultimately defeating Amis's urge to distinguish between them on economic grounds.

The same questions are debated in *Sir Eglamour*. When Eglamour tells his squire that he loves Christabel, the squire responds as follows:

> Þe sqwyere seyde, 'So mote I the,
> Ʒe haue tolde me ʒour pryuyte;
> I schall ʒou gyf answere.
> Ʒe are a knyʒt of lytyll lond:
> Take not to euyll, I vndirstond,
> For mykyll wolde haue more.
> Ʒif I went to ʒat lady and told her so,
> Peraunter on skorn take hit wold scho
> And lyʒtly lett me fare.
> Syr, a mon þat hewyth ouyr hye
> Lyʒtly þe chyppus fallen in his eye –
> Thus happis hyt ofte aywhare.
>
> Syr, beþynke þe of þys þynge:
> Ther wowes here emperour and kynge
> And dukes þat ar bolde;
> Erles, barouns and knyʒtis also –
> Ʒit wyll sche none of all þo
> But euer in goodnes her holde.
> Sche wold neuer a kyng forsake
> And a sympull knyʒt take,
> Butt ʒif ʒour lyfe wer olde.
> I swere be God, heuen Kynge,
> Wyste her fadyr of sych a thyng
> Full dere hytt scholde be solde!'[31]

This long outburst combines all the objections raised in *Degrevant* and *Amis and Amiloun*: Eglamour is poor and over-reaching himself, Christabel can make a

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[31] *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, ed. Frances E. Richardson, EETS o.s. 256 (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), ll. 61–84. This is a parallel text edition of two manuscripts: Lincoln Cathedral, MS 91 (the Thornton manuscript, *c.* 1440); British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii (1446–60). I usually quote from Cotton because the Lincoln text has been damaged in several places. The other complete manuscripts are Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.2.38 (1420–50); British Library, Add. MS 27879 (*c.* 1650, the Percy Folio); Bodleian Library, MS Douce 261 (1564, transcribing an early print). There is also a fragment in British Library, MS Egerton 2862 (*olim* Trentham–Sutherland, late fourteenth century), and another in University of Michigan, MS 255.

much better match, and her father would be furious.[32] There is also the added possibility that she is committed to virginity and will take no man but Christ (ʒit wyll sche none of all þo / But euer in goodnes her holde). Eglamour, however, is having none of it:

> The knyʒt answered with wordes mylde,
> 'My sqwyer, sethen þou was a chylde
> Thow hast ben lened with me:
> In dede of armes, in many a stowre,
> Wher saw þou euer my dyshonowre?
> Sey on, so God saue the!'
> 'Nay, syr, by Ihesu bryʒth!
> ʒe ar on of þe noblest knyʒth
> That ys knowen in cristyante:
> In dede of armes, be God on lyue,
> ʒe ar counted worth oþur fyue!'
> 'Gramercy, syr', seyde he.

<div align="right">(Eglamour, ll. 85–96)</div>

Like Belisaunt, Eglamour privileges symbolic capital over economic and social, but whereas Belisaunt locates that capital in the blood (she and Amis are equally *gentil*), Eglamour refers instead to his prowess. Christabel recognizes both, considering Eglamour a worthy suitor first because he is 'a nobyll knyʒhte / And comen of gentyll blode' (ll. 158–9), and second because 'euer trewe vndur þy schylde / Þou wynnes þe gre in euery fylde' (ll. 160–1). This again draws the upper classes together, this time under the aegis of shared gentility *and* military function, and says that a squire can indeed deserve to marry a duchess. However, that meritocratic principle is ever circumscribed by a staunchly conservative belief in the quality of noble/*gentil* blood and the functional superiority of the fighting classes.

These romances thus dally with meritocratic principles, but will only take them a little way. They are certainly not medieval equivalents of the rags-to-riches story so beloved of the nineteenth-century bourgeois novel. All the lovers

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[32] There is also the surprising comment about Eglamour's age in l. 81 (Butt ʒif ʒour lyfe wer olde), which is unique to the Cotton manuscript. The Thornton one reads 'lufe' (love, l. 84), and others 'lyuf'. Richardson's note considers 'lyuf' a 'strange form', and believes Thornton makes the best sense: Christabel would only marry Eglamour if they had loved for a long time (*Sir Eglamour*, p. 100).

are courtly gentlefolk, so mobility is only ever *within* classes, never between them. Moreover, most of the texts take pains to say that the pair are really equal all along; rather than amassing more capital over the course of their adventures, the heroes simply convert one form (symbolic) into others (economic and social). Nobility, where all three kinds of capital meet, is still the preserve of a select few, privileged either by blood or by their skill in shedding it. Violence is the subject of the next section, but it only warrants a section of its own because of the way the texts handle marriage. Although the heroes all begin unmarried and with low social capital, and finish married with high social capital, only *Sir Degrevant* allows the marriage itself to effect the change. In all the other poems the hero is spurred by the love of a woman, and ultimately rewarded with marriage to the woman he chose (or who chose him), but he hacks down social barriers for himself. His new status is conferred on him for prowess and by men, not his bride.

This structure is least obvious in *Floris and Blancheflour*, since Floris is a prince throughout and the marriage is not really uneven. However, in light of what happens in our other poems, it is significant that the Babylonian emir first pardons and knights Floris, making him 'formast of his mené' (l. 1183), and only afterwards agrees to release Blancheflour to him. Having been the cause of so much strife, Blancheflour is only brought back into the picture once the men have restored their own relationships, at which point she becomes the object of a transaction to seal the new agreement.[33] Something similar happens in *Amis and Amiloun*, where 'Amis' renders good service to the Duke and is rewarded spectacularly by being made his heir and granted Belisaunt's hand. Belisaunt causes the rift and is then passed from father to husband as a symbol of its having been healed, but the marriage only cements a rise Amis has supposedly effected for himself. There are all kinds of complications in this episode, of course – the service is not really rendered by Amis, and the slander he refutes was not really slander – but the basic pattern is clear nonetheless. Likewise in

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[33] According to Kathleen Coyne Kelly this is merely the final stage of an ongoing commodification of the heroine: 'The Bartering of Blancheflur in the Middle English *Floris and Blauncheflur*', *Studies in Philology* 91 (1994), 101–10, at p. 109 (discussed further below).

The Erle of Tolous Barnard is elected emperor just before he marries Beulybon, so does not become her husband until he has made himself her peer; as in *Floris and Blancheflour*, the couple who seemed unequal for most of the story actually turn out to be equals after all – the difference being that Floris and Blancheflour were both born to their estate, whereas Barnard achieves his by dint of exemplary conduct.

  Sir Eglamour follows a similar pattern. When Eglamour returns to Artois to be told Christabel is dead, her cowardly father retreats to a tower and the hero appears to stage a *coup*. In the Earl's castle he announces:

> 'Gentyllmen, so God ȝou saue,
> All þat odure or knyȝt woll haue,
> Ryde vp and take at me!'

> Gentyllmen come hym tyll –
> They were fayn to do his wyll;
> He gaf þem orders sone,
> And in þe halle when he was stad
> Fyue and þretty knytes he mad
> Be þat oþur day at none.

<div align="right">(Eglamour, ll. 1000–8)</div>

Having given his men orders he then retires to the Holy Land for fifteen years, and the wicked Princeamour does not actually die until his return. But Eglamour has clearly seized power nonetheless: he occupies the hall, issues summons, dubs knights, commands the loyalty of the people, and enjoys international backing. He does not marry Christabel for another 350 lines, so he too effects his change of status well before his marriage. Degrevant is thus unusual in that his marriage is the direct cause of his rise (assuming he does rise, that is). But even here it is clear almost from the beginning that Degrevant is in the ascendant, and that the Earl's social and symbolic capital are waning. Degrevant has even won a tournament for Melidor's hand, though her intransigent father still fails to acknowledge him. In all our romances, therefore, the conversion of symbolic to social capital is necessitated by women, but effected by men. The woman chooses or accepts a suitor, then there is a hiatus while the men around her reorganize themselves and realize her choice is acceptable, and eventually the selected man is rewarded with the woman who desires him.

Although these stories are primarily about how the hero wins the woman he loves and the land she holds, all five are reluctant to allow marriage to be an independent agent of social change. By focusing on the lovers' similarities and/or ignoring their differences they often deny that any significant change happens; they also tend to ensure that the hero battles his own way to prominence independently of the woman who symbolizes his eventual achievement. This might indicate a psycho-social anxiety about masculine dependence on women;[34] certainly humble gentlemen did seek to marry wealthy women at this period, and such uneven marriages were growing ever more frequent. In particular, impoverished noble families married into prosperous merchant or professional ones so as to effect a union of symbolic and economic capital, though of course romance is still too exclusively courtly and martial to accommodate that phenomenon.[35] By obscuring the active role of women and marriage in social mobility the poems thus avoid what could have been a rather sensitive social issue. But Middle English romances are not often wary of touchy subjects (compare the bald discussions of wealth and bankruptcy we are going to encounter in Chapter 4), so I favour an alternative explanation.

This treatment of marriage is, I think, an effect first of medieval romance's preference for social resolutions, and second of the way the story-type constructs nobility and the noble hero. The desire for a social resolution means the hero cannot simply seize his lady and carry her off to live happily ever after, so he has to reach a consensus with his opponents. That means proving his worth, which he does principally by fighting. That martial focus might itself suggest a desire to make the standard of nobility exclusively masculine and patriarchal, again raising the issue of male anxiety in the face of female power and desire. But here we risk straying into the labyrinthine discussions of

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[34] Stephen Guy-Bray identifies a similar anxiety in *Sir Launfal*: 'Male Trouble: *Sir Launfal* and the Trials of Masculinity', *English Studies in Canada* 34(2–3) (June–Sept. 2008), pp. 31–48.

[35] Thrupp, *Merchant Class of Medieval London*, pp. 247–87; Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe*, pp. 35–6. See also Hudson, 'Construction of Class, Family, and Gender', pp. 81–2; Meale, 'Gode Men, Wives, Maydnes and Alle Men', p. 224, n. 52.

romance and gender, to which I cannot do justice here.[36] Instead, I shall simply refer to Arlyn Diamond's argument that overemphasizing the gender divide can be just as misleading as ignoring it. In her essay on *Sir Degrevant* she argues perceptively that the men and women in romances often want and value exactly the same things; the only difference is that women are rather better at recognizing those who can achieve them.[37] Just what those things are – what it is that gives a suitor the symbolic capital he needs to win his bride and gain social and economic prosperity – is the subject of the next section.

The Worthy Suitor: Violence and Virtue

We have already touched on the root of the hero's quality in discussing *Sir Eglamour* and *Amis and Amiloun*, where the ladies voice the authoritative opinion that nobility is a mixture of good blood and military might, and reject outright the possibility of measuring worth on a purely economic scale. Their attitude echoes the basic message of the lost-heir stories, but in reverse: where lost-heir stories prioritize birth and include prowess, these prioritize prowess and include birth. Their heroes compensate for their relatively low status with violence. This may be either symbolic or actual, and can be directed at foreigners, monsters, neighbours, or even at the self, but in every case the lover wins the respect of those around him by proving his ability to force his will upon them. Meanwhile, each text complements the hero's prowess with other qualities, usually more peaceable ones associated with fair, responsible lordship. The success of the synthesis varies from text to text, but all five come together in describing an ideal that combines aggression with moderation and restraint.

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[36] The vast literature on gender and romance includes Crane, *Gender and Romance*; Hudson, 'Construction of Class, Family, and Gender'; A. S. G. Edwards, 'Gender, Order and Reconciliation in *Sir Degrevant*', in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Carol Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), pp. 53–64; Roberta L. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Judith Weiss, 'The Wooing Woman in Anglo-Norman Romance', in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows and Carol Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), pp. 149–62.

[37] Diamond, '*Sir Degrevant*: What Lovers Want', pp. 83–97.

They are very close to the image of the aristocracy in the three estates and body politic, where noblemen are paradoxically defined as harbingers of war and governors of peace.

That definition is inherently conflicted, but nonetheless extremely potent, and its presence in Middle English romances suggests it was endorsed across society. Though emphasis on prowess would speak directly to an aristocracy that defined itself as a military élite, while the emphasis on fairness and temperance addresses the interests of the governed, it is unlikely that the texts were received in such a class-specific manner. The compound ideal apparently had a universal currency that willing audiences bought into regardless of their class position. However, in so lauding prowess the texts also introduce tensions in their conception of nobility. In particular, though they present functional and biological definitions as equivalents, the two ultimately do not match. When all else is equal, prowess trumps breeding every time: the man who claims the bride, and the social and economic capital she embodies, is always the one who is best able to seize her.

The link between prowess and merit is most openly demonstrated in *Sir Eglamour*, which uses the traditional motif of a father who sets his daughter's suitors supposedly impossible challenges. Normally he demands they fight with the hero, who earns the love of both father and daughter by dealing 'sore buffettys' to all comers (l. 47). But Princeamour's love does not extend to allowing Eglamour to marry Christabel himself, so, when Eglamour broaches the topic, Princeamour sets him three challenges of his own: to do battle with a giant, a great boar, and a dragon. We notice that the tests are purely physical, and that Eglamour passes by brute strength and endurance, with no luck or cunning involved (unlike Bevis of Hampton, who defeats his dragon with the help of a holy well; Perceval, who thinks to chops off his giant's legs so as to be able to reach his neck; or Guy of Warwick, who brings Colbrond's neck within reach by making him stoop). The sheer physicality of Eglamour's enterprise is well illustrated when the King of Sydon goes to meet him just after he has defeated the boar:

Be þat hadde Syr Eglamour
Ouyrcomyn þat styf stowre,

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And ouyrtwart þe bore he lay.
The kyng sayde, 'God reste with the!'
'Lord, wellcome,' he seyde, 'mote ȝe be!
Of pees I ȝow pray.
I haue so fowȝtyn with þis bore
That, be my feyth, I may no more –
This ys þe fowrthe day.'

<div align="right">(Eglamour, ll. 433–41)</div>

Eglamour expects the king to be hostile, which itself indicates a militaristic bent, while the image of the hero collapsed helpless across the enormous swine epitomizes what this romance requires of him: repeated demonstrations of extreme physical ability, even to exhaustion. As if to emphasize the point, it turns out that even these three successes are not enough: Eglamour still has to fight for Christabel once more, this time in a tournament against his own son, and the text also throws in a second giant for good measure.

      Violence is also instrumental in bringing hero and heroine together in *Amis and Amiloun* and *The Erle of Tolous*. Belisaunt gets the man she wants because he impresses her father in a single combat (that her champion is not Amis but Amiloun is here beside the point), and Barnard earns Dyoclysyon's respect by proving himself a capable commander and an able warrior. In *Sir Degrevant* the love of prowess is even stronger. Indeed, *Sir Degrevant* is one of the most violent romances in this study, with a bellicose hero who proves his worth by fighting in a battle, a tournament mêlée, an individual joust, and an ambush. Having once been denied legal redress, he becomes an implacable foe. Here are his words to the Earl's wife, spoken the morning after he has routed her husband in pitched battle:

Madam, takes not agreue
A thyng that Y you say;
Gret well þe Eorl þy lord,
And sey we shall not a-cord
Tyll my thyng be restored
That he hath don a-wey.
Her afore myght he eyth
Son haue made me aseyth;
Nowe schall he, magre his tyeth,
For all is grete arey.

<div align="right">(Degrevant, ll. 483–92; cf. his similar speech at ll. 454–64)</div>

Cheerful gallantry here masks genuine menace, and this is Degrevant's default mode henceforth. In the orchard he coerces Melidor into keeping quiet first by informing her that she would be sorry to see him dead (in spite of her vehement words to the contrary), and then by warning that he will kill anyone whom she summons to capture him:

> [...] er I be ton,
> Þe geyest of hem shal gron [...]
> Þo þat lepeþ now ful lyȝth,
> Shal be fay, and he fyȝth.
>
> (*Degrevant*, ll. 765–71).

Nor is Degrevant any more restrained in the chamber, where he boasts to Melidor's maid of his victory over her master, and brags 'I shal schak hym by þe berd / Þe nexte tyme we mete' (ll. 836–7).

This belligerence is presented as a virtue – a domineering and impressive charisma similar to Lybeaus's in refusing to return the stolen brachet. Melidor is won over by Degrevant's prowess, shifting her allegiance from the Duke of Gere only when it becomes clear that he has been vanquished. She watches Degrevant defeat him, sees him fail to rise to her goading, and that night receives the triumphant hero in her chamber. For his part, Degrevant exults in his physical power. The six stanzas describing the first battle have a furious energy akin to the passage describing Bertilak's first day's hunting in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; indeed, Degrevant harries his enemies just like a hunter, and 'feld hom faste in the fen, / As the deer in the den' (ll. 338–9). The next day he travels to the Earl's castle to crow over the defeated, and after the unsuccessful ambush he jokes over the corpses of those he has killed: passing the place on his ride home he reflects approvingly on his own prowess and comments 'soufft, on his play, / Ȝondur was stout hyne' (ll. 1727–8).

The narration shares Degrevant's exultation of physical strength, and is just as virile and intolerant of weakness as he is. When the Earl declines Degrevant's challenge the narrator is scornful, commenting with a curled lip that 'it semes as that dowghty / Sir Degreuaunt drede' (ll. 415–16). The vanquished are also derided, so in the first battle:

> Þe knyghtus of þe Eorlus hous
> Þat wer y-halden so chyualerus

> And in batell so bountyveus,
> Þey deyden all þat stond.
>
> <div align="right">(Degrevant, ll. 325–8)</div>

And during the ambush:

> Þe styward Syre Eymere
> Com a lytyl to nere;
> Hys hede by þe coler
> He kerues a-way.
> Þe body syttys opon þe hors
> (Hyt was vncomely to þe cors);
> Þe stede stert ouer a fosse,
> And strykys a-stray.
>
> <div align="right">(Degrevant, ll. 1649–56)</div>

The first passage works bathetically, building up the Earl's knights so as then to cut them down; the second plays with comic understatement and the same black humour Degrevant shows on his ride home. Both mock the weak from the perspective of the strong.

Such enthusiastic participation from the narration precludes ambiguity; the poem is not interested in critiquing Degrevant's violent *mores*. Rather, it presents a vigorous, martial chivalry closely akin to the warrior ethos described by Kaeuper's *Chivalry and Violence*, a chivalry that values war over peace and revels in battle and bloodshed.[38] The value system is not even tempered with the peaceful virtues of Crouch's *preudomme*, and has no place either for courtly refinement or Christian morals.[39] There is no sense of moderation or modesty, little display of courtesy, and no self-doubt; Degrevant even woos like a soldier, vowing that he will love Melidor 'Acheue how hit wold' (l. 480, repeated in l. 481). After a few hours' dalliance he loses patience and gets straight to the point, demanding 'When wylt þou bryng me to rest?' (l. 1526). His exemplary qualities are chiefly supreme strength and arrogant self-assurance. But whereas Kaeuper associates this ethos with the aristocratic audience of twelfth- and thirteenth-century francophone texts, *Sir Degrevant* suggests it had a much

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38   Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence*, pp. 11–29, 129–60. A similar ethos is described in Peter Haidu, *The Subject of Violence: The 'Song of Roland' and the Birth of the State* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 44–9.

39   Crouch, *Birth of Nobility*, pp. 29–80.

wider currency, thriving even among the supposedly pious and peaceable bourgeois-gentry of the fifteenth-century English provinces.

The Earl is described from the same perspective. Sometimes the poem emphasizes his moral failings, particularly at the beginning where there is much talk of the harm he does to Degrevant's estate. Degrevant's squire is righteously indignant in telling the Earl he has 'don ylle' (l. 202), and when the Earl returns from battle his wife asks in exasperation 'Haue ye nat parkus and chas? / What schuld ye do at is [Degrevant's] place / Swych costes to kythe?' (ll. 378–9). At the end she reminds him that he started the feud, and that Degrevant was the injured party to begin with (though the Earl's losses are now incomparably greater) (ll. 1765–72). However, this unwarranted aggression is not the Earl's greatest flaw. The poem reviles him most for his weakness, his inability to keep what he has taken, and repeatedly makes him look pathetic. So there is a gleeful contrast in the stanza after the first battle, where Degrevant and his men 'daunsed and revelide' (l. 371), while the Earl goes home 'wonded to scham' (l. 374) to be berated by his angry wife. Then there is the scornful comment about his being scared to accept Degrevant's challenge, and the maid's mocking description of his subsequent fear (given while she is entertaining Degrevant in her chamber):

> Seþþe hys chyualry was slayn
> He passed neuer out on þe playn
> Haluendel a myle;
> Hys hurtus has hym so y-deryd
> He has byn gretely afferyd;
> Þe ʒatus has byn ay y-speryd
> For dred of þi gyle.
>
> (*Degrevant*, ll. 826–32)

Her derision has a similarly violent spirit to Degrevant's and Melidor's, supporting Diamond's point that men and women share the same values. Through weakness the Earl loses the respect of his neighbour, his wife, his child, and his servants. The scene is set for the final insult, which comes at the end when he realizes his enemy has seduced his daughter and that he can do nothing but sweat in paralysed rage (l. 1787). In this bristling atmosphere impotence and cowardice are the only unforgivable sins. Vaunting language and arrogance are acceptable, admirable even, provided one has the muscle to make them good.

The violence is less obvious in *Floris and Blancheflour*. Floris does not fight with anyone in his quest to rescue his love, and his primary tactics are to seek good advice and devise cunning schemes.[40] However, time and again these schemes operate a kind of symbolic violence that forces the hands of those who oppose him just as would an actual sword.[41] He begins 'with wepyng' (l. 15) so as to persuade his parents to let Blancheflour be tutored alongside him, and then to make them promise that she be allowed to follow him to Mountargis (l. 83). Next he takes the route of many a victim and seizes power by turning on himself, first by withdrawing from people, refusing food, and pining away, and then by threatening actual self-harm. Tricked by his parents into thinking Blancheflour is dead, he grows suicidal:

> His knyf he braide out of his sheth,
> Himself he wolde have doo to deth,
> And to hert he had it smeten,
> Ne had his moder it underyeten.
>
> (*Floris and Blancheflour*, ll. 289–92)

This is too much for his parents, who capitulate at the prospect of losing their only heir, and reveal the truth. After this Floris turns to more displaced forms of violence in his dealings with the porter and the emir.

The emir's greedy porter he tricks into a deadly bind, pretending to be rich and stupid so as encourage him to swear allegiance, then announcing his real intention of penetrating the emir's harem. When Floris demands assistance from his new retainer, adding the curt reminder that 'thou art mi man' (l. 764), the porter has no choice but to comply; knowing that it is impossible to serve these two masters, he henceforth counts himself doomed: 'of mi lif', he says, 'ich am desmaid' (l. 777). Soon afterwards Floris has the emir backed into a similar corner and faced with a boy who has won a symbolic victory by entering his supposedly impenetrable tower and deflowering one of his women. Vanquished, he is ostensibly left with the choice of killing Floris and remaining ignorant, or

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[40] The importance of *gyn* is emphasized in Barnes, 'Cunning and Ingenuity in the Middle English *Floris and Blauncheflur*', pp. 16–18.

[41] I take the idea of 'symbolic violence' from Bourdieu, who understands it as 'the gentle, hidden form which violence takes when overt violence is impossible': *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, pp. 190–7, quotation at p. 196.

pardoning him and learning the secret. In the circumstances, though, that is not really a choice at all; he is as trapped as is the Earl at the end of *Sir Degrevant*. Floris's prowess is of a different kind from that of our other heroes (though it bears a close resemblance to Belisaunt's), but they are all very much alike in that they all get their way by force. A large part of their so-called merit resides in this ability to compel others to fall in with their wishes.

The prominence of violence in these stories creates the impression that the worthy suitor is first and foremost an effective warrior. If the poems do judge a man on his merits, they nonetheless understand merit in a very limited sense as the ability effectively to discharge the function of the second estate (or of the sword-wielding hand of the body politic). Even Floris's *gyn* has a useful military application, since Vegetius, the key medieval authority on warcraft, is clear that a soldier must have the cunning of Odysseus as well as the strength of Achilles.[42] It is striking, too, how little difference there is between these worthy suitors and the frightening sex-pests that romance so abhors. As Degrevant and Eglamour muster their men outside the gates, longing for the chatelaine's daughter and threatening violence, they look very like many another aggressive suitor, from Bradamond in *Bevis of Hampton* to the lady's unnamed persecutor in *Degaré*. Interestingly enough, the ladies made prey to those unwanted advances invariably marry the men who relieve them (for example *Bevis*'s Josian, *Perceval*'s Blancheflour, *Ipomadon*'s Fere, and the lady in *Degaré*). Violence and force are essentially good and noble things in these stories, only turning bad when they are ill used, and with ill-use a matter only of narrative perspective. Though one might expect non-martial, non-élite audiences to be unsettled by bald displays of force and coercion from the upper class, these texts suggest that

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[42] Among Vegetius's 'general rules of war' are statements such as 'it is preferable to subdue an enemy by famine, raids and terror than in battle', and 'opportunity in war is usually of greater value than bravery': see *Vegetius: Epitome of Military Science*, translated with an introduction and notes by N. P. Milner (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), pp. 108–9. Milner's introduction notes that the *Epitome* was 'one of the most popular Latin technical works from Antiquity' known in the Middle Ages (p. 1). For a detailed account of Vegetius's medieval reception, see Christopher Allmand, *The 'De Re Militari' of Vegetius: The Reception, Transmission and Legacy of a Roman Text in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

was not the case.[43] As Wright argues for *Sir Perceval*, romance is so far removed from reality that their spheres need not overlap.[44] However, none of our romances, not even *Sir Degrevant*, makes prowess the hero's only virtue.

The most successful synthesis of coercive and conciliar virtues is in *Floris and Blancheflour*, where the job is made easier because prowess has already moved off the battlefield. Floris's key quality is his devotion to Blancheflour, and this unwavering love is the first and final cause of all his efforts (clever ruses are merely the efficient cause of his success). The poem also makes much of the need to heed counsel: both Floris's father and the emir almost commit the unforgivable crime of killing the hero and heroine, but are saved when they receive good advice at the crucial moment – Floris's father is advised by his queen, and the emir by his barons. Floris likewise takes counsel from his various hosts and from the emir's porter, showing that he too has the co-operative mentality it takes to be a just and prudent ruler.[45] Moreover, he also proves himself to be an exemplary lord, fully prepared to meet his half of the feudal contract. When the emir offers to spare Floris if he explains how he gained access to the tower, we suddenly remember the despairing words of the porter and discover that his fears have been realized. His life now hangs in the balance. Will Floris sacrifice his vassal to save himself? No:

> 'That', quath Florice, 'ne schal I nevere do,
> But yif hit be forgiven also
> That the gin me taughte therto;
> Arst ne schal hit never bi do.'
>
> (*Floris and Blancheflour*, ll. 1162–5)

Manipulative and scheming when the occasion demands, Floris also has an openness and decency that are most beguiling. To emphasize the former traits to the exclusion of the latter would be to go against the spirit of the story, for Floris's quality of character, his nobility, springs from his constancy more than

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[43] For an example of that assumption, see Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence*, pp. 11–29.

[44] Wright, 'Comic Ambivalence in *Sir Perceval*', p. 52.

[45] The need for a ruler to seek and heed counsel is discussed in Barnes, *Counsel and Strategy*, pp. 1–29; there is a discussion of *Floris and Blancheflour* on pp. 111–15, but it emphasizes strategy rather than counsel.

anything. Though his adventures are brilliantly orchestrated by 'intriguers well versed in the art of deception', his eventual success rewards integrity as much as it does wit and force.[46]

In that steadfast loyalty Floris is paralleled by Eglamour, who is faithful to Christabel even though he has ample opportunity to dally with other women (thus winning one over on such easily distracted heroes as Bevis of Hampton and Guy of Warwick). He also seems extremely unwilling to fight his lord, despite Princeamour's manifold abuses. When he could attack Princeamour and cement his lordship in Artois, Eglamour chooses instead to abscond to the Holy Land, leaving the men who have just sworn allegiance to him with instructions only to pray for the souls of his supposedly drowned lady and child (Lincoln, ll. 1010–11; the half stanza that includes the instruction to pray is missing from the Cambridge manuscript). The poem eventually gets around the problem by having the wicked Princeamour fall from a tower. It thus seems reluctant to involve Eglamour in direct hostilities with another Christian gentleman, particularly one he has promised to serve, however unchristian and ungentlemanly the other's actions. This extends Eglamour's loyalty beyond his passion for Christabel, and contrasts markedly with both *Sir Degrevant* and *The Erle of Tolous*, where oppressors can be attacked without a qualm.

Like *Floris and Blancheflour*, *The Erle of Tolous* manages an effective synthesis of its hero's several qualities. We have already touched on Barnard's moral virtues – 'justice, fidelity, trust and truth', to cite Reilly again. Blanchfield likewise comments on the 'theme of fidelity: to marriage vows, to sworn word, to God, to friends and to duty'.[47] Barnard's violence complements those moral themes. He goes to war out of a sense of public obligation because he 'sawe the emperour dyd hym wronge, / *And other men also*' (ll. 32–3, emphasis mine). This puts God on his side. After a miraculous victory in which he massacres the emperor's army at the cost of just twenty of his own men, we are told that 'Soche grace God him sende, / That false quarell cometh to evell ende' (ll. 131–1). That interpretation is endorsed by Beulybon, the most authoritative voice in the

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[46] The quotation is from Barnes, 'Cunning and Ingenuity in the Middle English *Floris and Blauncheflur*', p. 14.

[47] Blanchfield, 'The Romances in MS Ashmole 61', p. 66.

poem, who similarly describes Barnard's cause as 'the ryght quarell' (l. 143). But Barnard also boasts some less rarefied virtues, and these are just as important to the poem's conception of his worth. They are brought out by contrasting Barnard with Dyoclysyon, who is associated with fear and dearth, while Barnard appears as an understanding lord and all-round good fellow.

The emperor Dyoclysyon is a short-sighted bully who 'dysheryted many a man, / and falsely ther londys wan' (ll. 19–20), promotes undeserving courtiers, lacks an heir, lashes out when things do not go his way, threatens the abbot, and denies his men their customary rights. Before the battle with Barnard he stipulates that there are to be no prisoners, and hence no ransoms either:

> Loke that none raunsomyd bee,
> Nothyr for golde ne for fee,
> But sle them wyth swerde and knyfe.
>
> (*Erle of Tolous*, ll. 79–81)

This is a gross and bloodthirsty breach of etiquette, and deprives the soldiers of a prime source of income, as Barnard knows well.[48] He approaches battle very differently, observes military etiquette, and reaps the benefits:

> The erle Barnard of Tollous
> Had fele men chyvalrous
> Takyn to hys preson.
> How moche gode of them he hadd
> Y can not telle, so God me gladd,
> So grete was ther raunsome!
>
> (*Erle of Tolous*, ll. 169–74)

Barnard also benefits from taking live prisoners by getting custody of Trylabas, who organizes Barnard's meeting with the Empress in exchange for his release. On hearing that the meeting has been arranged, Barnard gives the jovial command to 'fylle the wyne wyghtly [...] Thys goyth to my pay!' (ll. 314–15), indicating a personability already suggested by his going hunting with his prisoner, and later confirmed by his talking amiably with a passing merchant and establishing a friendly rapport with an abbot (Beulybon's uncle), with whom he dines, chats, and strolls in an orchard. Barnard's is also an enquiring nature, and he repeatedly asks for and acts upon the advice of those he befriends (*pace*

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48 On the importance of ransoms and booty to soldiers, see Prestwich, 'The Enterprise of War', pp. 81–2.

Floris). He is consistently associated with conviviality and plenty, and his people are understandably fond of him. When he returns from Almayn

> Of hys comyng hys men were gladd.
> 'Be ye mery, my men!', he badd.
> 'For nothyng ye spare!
> The emperour, wythowte lees,
> Y trowe, wyll let us be in pees,
> And warre on us no mare.'
> Thus dwellyd the erle in that place,
> Wyth game, myrthe and grete solase,
> Ryght os hym levyst ware.

<div align="right">(Erle of Tolous, ll. 466–74)</div>

This contrasts markedly with Dyoclyson's return later in the poem:

> Wythowt the cyte lordys them kepyd;
> For wo in herte many oon wepyd –
> There teerys myght they not blynne.
> They supposyd wele yf he hyt wyst,
> That hys wyfe had soche a bryste,
> Hys yoye wolde be full thynne.

<div align="right">(Erle of Tolous, ll. 829–34)</div>

The grief is partly for Beulybon, of course, but there is also a sense of foreboding in these lines, and a fear of what the emperor will do when his joy is worn so 'thynne' – a fear that is well founded, since Dyoclysyon's response is try to stab the messenger (ll. 865–7).

There is, then, a clear contrast between the two men: Barnard's vigour, bounty, and fecundity (he will go on to father fifteen children), against Dyoclysyon's futile and sterile tyranny. Barnard's rude personal qualities are just as important as his moral and military ones in making him worthy of Beulybon and the empire, while his breeding seems relatively unimportant. This contrasts with our other bride-winning narratives, all of which still tend to connect worth with birth despite being tales of social ascent. Christabel and Belisaunt are explicit about the value of blood, *Degrevant* implies it, and *Floris and Blancheflour* describes a hero and heroine who bear all the hallmarks of good breeding in their beauty, sensitivity, and valour, and whose story hums with the providential notes sounded by Floris's royalty and Blancheflour's breeding and

faith.[49] By contrast, *The Erle of Tolous* credits blood but little symbolic capital, and its spirit is encapsulated in the election of a new emperor at the end – an election decided on the immediate brilliance of a living man, not the fading afterglow of his dead ancestors. And yet even here there is an enduring respect for biological inheritance. When Barnard disguises himself as a hermit the narrator automatically observes that he does so in spite of his birth – 'thogh he were of ryche kynne' (l. 246); the old knight who recommends trial by combat assumes likewise that the champion will be 'a man that were gode of kynde' (l. 893); and the abbot seems drawn to Barnard on account of his being 'a feyre man and an hye' (l. 994) – an attraction reminiscent of Arthur's to Lybeaus and Perceval, where beauty is unquestionably a sign of breeding. But nonetheless, in its ardent support of virtue and its trenchant critique of Dyoclysyon and his court, *The Erle of Tolous* still offers a more thoroughly meritocratic and personal image of nobility than any of the others in this story-type.

Though Amis and Belisaunt initially seem most to value money and gentle birth, they both learn over the course of their lives to value other things. Symbolic capital in *Amis and Amiloun* is really about quality of character (see the discussion of Amiloun's story in Chapter 4), and Amis eventually gets the chance to show this deepened understanding. Towards the end of the romance one of Amis's knights informs him of a foul leper who waits outside, attended by a beautiful youth who refuses to be lured from his master's service (Amiloun and Amoraunt, of course). The knight thinks the boy must be mad, or perhaps that the leper 'hadde ben a man of heiȝe parage / & of heiȝe kinde ycorn' (ll. 1949–50), but Amis can offer other explanations:

> Þan sayd þe douke, 'þei his lord be lorn,
> Par auentour, þe gode man haþ biforn
> Holpen him at his nede,
> Oþer þe child is of his blod yborn,
> Oþer he haþ him oþes sworn
> His liif wiþ him to lede.

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49 On sensitivity as a characteristic particular to the nobility, see Burnley, *Courtliness and Literature*, pp. 64–8, 80; on beauty, see pp. 37–52.

> Wheþer he be frend or of his blod,
> Þe child,' he seyd, 'is trewe & gode,
> Also god me spede.'
>
>   (*Amis and Amiloun*, ll. 1993–2001)

This contrasts with the other man's interest in 'heiȝe parage' and 'heiȝe kinde', showing it to be narrow minded and ill judged. Though violence is often the best means to an end (and also the best form of trial), loyalty is what this poem most values; it has already shown that in the foregoing tests, and will do so again in the harrowing ordeals to come.[50]

    Floris and Blancheflour, *The Erle of Tolous*, *Amis and Amiloun*, and *Sir Eglamour* all just about achieve the synthesis of prowess and more peaceful qualities. They can do so because of the way the violence is handled – directed against monsters in *Sir Eglamour*, either made symbolic or directed against the self in *Floris and Blancheflour*, and directed against ill-doers in *The Erle of Tolous* and *Amis and Amiloun*, though the arrangement in this last is very fraught.[51] *Sir Degrevant*, by contrast, totally fails to blend the two aspects of its hero's character; indeed, it does not even appear to try.

    Before the violence is unleashed in the second part of the poem, Degrevant appears very different. Diamond describes him as:

> a peculiar mix of romance hero and prudent landowner whose wealth comes from carefully guarded possessions […] rooted in a particular

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[50] On loyalty and testing in this poem, see *Amis and Amiloun*, ed. Leach, pp. xxv–xxvi; Mehl, *The Middle English Romances*, p. 107; Dean R. Baldwin, '*Amis and Amiloun*: The Testing of *Treuþe*', *Papers on Language and Literature* 16(4) (1980), 353–65.

[51] The morality in *Amis and Amiloun* has sparked much critical debate: for defences of the poem, see Ojars Kratins, 'The Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*: Chivalric Romance or Secular Hagiography?', *PMLA* 81 (1966), 347–54; Kathryn Hume, 'Structure and Perspective: Romance and Hagiographic Features in the "Amicus and Amelius" Story', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 69 (1970), 89–107. For an atttack, see Edward E. Foster, 'Simplicity, Complexity, and Morality in Four Medieval Romances', pp. 416–17. For the middle ground, see Foster's TEAMS edition, which suggests the undeserved happy ending 'is not a narrative flaw but the ultimate moral complexity that the poem proposes': '*Amis and Amiloun*: Introduction', in *Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle, and Sir Amadace*, ed. Foster (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), pp. 1–7, at p. 1. See also the discussion in Chapter 4, below, and works cited there.

landscape and set of material practices. [...] his first instinct seems to be to conserve and to 'werke be lawe' (151).[52]

Davenport similarly comments on the poem's realization of

the actual concerns of the landowning class of the time – property, fences, hunting rights, being just to one's tenants, seeking proper legal redress for wrongs, and eventually, after much harm done, compromise and reconciliation.[53]

The Earl's outrages are described accordingly, in terms of the damage done to land and 'tenantrie' (l. 141), while Degrevant proves to be the kind of hands-on landlord we met in Chapter 1.[54] He has a keen interest in maintaining his estates and fostering his tenants:

He closed hys parkes ayen
(His husbondus þey were fyen),
He lent hem oxon and wayn
Of his own store;
And also sede for to sowe,
Wyght horse for to draw,
And thought werke be lawe
And wyth non oþer schore.

<div align="right">(Degrevant, ll. 145–52)</div>

Perhaps unique among romance knights, Degrevant's food does not materialize as if by magic; it has to be grown, and on land that has be to worked. Unlike his peers at the Round Table, therefore, Degrevant's stable contains draught horses as well as destriers, and his stores hold seed as well as paindemain.

These details are oddly realistic, and all contribute to a highly idealized paternal image of nobility. Degrevant is the head of a miniature body politic, and a model representative of the second estate, who protects the common people 'fro wastores and fro wikked men', as Langland says.[55] This is still a functional

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52 Diamond, '*Sir Degrevant*: What Lovers Want', p. 91.

53 Davenport, '*Sir Degrevant* and Composite Romance', p. 114.

54 There is an interesting parallel here with *The Tale of Gamelyn*, where the antagonist's villainy is described in very similar terms. Both *Degrevant* and *Gamelyn* show their heroes resisting with vigorous physical force, though whereas Degrevant abandons law in favour of violence, Gamelyn moves from violence (and by violence) to law. In all other respects the poems are very different.

55 Langland, *Piers Plowman*, passus 8, l. 27.

definition of nobility, but with wild bellicosity tamed to peaceful lordship. The distance it takes us from romance convention is neatly conveyed by Diamond's calling Degrevant's estate management 'stewardship' – it is not often in romance that it is a compliment to be likened to a steward.[56] Added to all this, Degrevant is generous, charitable ('He lovede well almosdede, / Powr men to cloth and fede', ll. 81–2), and he respects the law. His first response to being wronged is to write a letter and summon the Earl to make legal redress.[57] This is consonant with the expansion of literacy and legal action in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and with Crane's characterization of the Insular barony as peculiarly bureaucratic and legalistic.[58] But when this fails, *Degrevant* suddenly switches into another mode; the pragmatic landowner disappears and, as we have seen, the poem joins high chivalric texts in what Kaeuper has evocatively termed 'worship of the demi-god prowess'.[59]

The problem is that the violence is not unleashed on villains or Others, but on Degrevant's Christian peers. The graphic descriptions of death and destruction (and the poet excels at these) thus have the potential to be extremely troubling. Here are two examples, the first from the early battle, the second from when Degrevant is ambushed later in the poem:

> Þe Eorl fley and was wo.
> On a stede gan he spryng;
> He laf slawe in a slak
> Forty scor on a pak,
> Wyd open on her bake,
> Dede in the lyng.
>
>   (*Degrevant*, ll. 347–52)

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[56] Diamond, '*Sir Degrevant*: What Lovers Want', p. 91.

[57] Literacy and letter-writing in *Sir Degrevant* are the subjects of an essay by Sheryl L. Forste-Grupp, which makes them part of a pronounced generational divide between Melidor/Degrevant and the earl: '"For-thi a Lettre has he Dyght": Paradigms for Fifteenth-Century Literacy in *Sir Degrevant*', *Studies in Philology* 101(2) (2004), 113–35.

[58] On legal expansion, see Musson, *Medieval Law in Context*, pp. 36–50; on the Insular barony, see Crane, *Insular Romance*, pp. 7–8.

[59] Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence*, p. 129.

Þe panter, þe boteler
Þe Eorlus cheff sqwyer –
Þer lyes slay y-fer
In þe schawe schene.
Þan þe remenaunt fles
On þe sort þat þei sees,
And some lorkus vnder tres
In slowes vnshene.
Þonkede be Godes grace,
He has venkest hys face,
And made a chyualrous chace
Þat crewel and kene.
Nouȝth fourty fot fram þe wal;
He slowe þe marchal of þe hal,
And oþer gode sqwyers withal
Mo þen fyftene.

<div align="right">(Degrevant, ll. 1665–80)</div>

I quote at length to illustrate the extent of the mayhem, and the clarity of its
realization – gashed bodies in the heather, terrified men hiding in shadows and
ditches, desperate youths cut down even as they think they have reached safety.
Though the narration lauds Degrevant's violence, in its savage joy it almost
forces us to ask whether all this is really as glamorous as is claimed. Is
slaughtering one's fleeing neighbours really such a 'chyualrous' pursuit? Should
one really attribute it to 'Godes grace'? The belligerent warrior ethos is
fundamentally incompatible with the domestic values expressed earlier in the
poem, for an ideal of moderate, law-abiding, virtuous husbandry cannot be
squared with one of reckless and self-aggrandizing violence. These two elements
of Degrevant's nobility are harder to reconcile even than the familiar romance
poles of prowess and courtesy, violence and love. But the poem does not register
the issue. It simply accommodates two value systems – the one practical, judging
the nobleman on the way he handles his estates; the other shaped by a centuries-
old tradition of glamorizing chivalric violence for the benefit of a warrior élite.
Both are equally valid, and the poem apparently needed neither to resolve nor
even to recognize their differences.

  Commenting on *Sir Degrevant*'s abrupt transitions, Davenport has praised
the poem for its 'intriguing clashes of mood, shifts of register, modulations of

pace and tone'.[60] He describes it as a 'composite romance' that demonstrates an eclectic and sophisticated authorial technique, and suggests this hybrid quality might explain its appearance in two collections so different as are the Thornton and Findern manuscripts.[61] Those same magpie tendencies have also resulted in a text that shows particularly clearly several features characteristic of all our bride-winning romances. There is a contradiction inherent in their conception of the noble hero, for he can only prove himself worthy of the woman he loves by combining peaceful, corporate virtues with anarchic, individualist military prowess – by being both a savage *bellator* and a quiet lord of the people. That draws two very different mentalities into one charismatic but conflicted ideal – the same ideal by which Chaucer creates his 'verray, parfit, gentil knight' as a man who is meek and brutal in equal measure.[62]

But whereas Chaucer's knight appears in the context of peace, using his skills of governance and arbitration rather than his skill with a weapon, our texts privilege violence. They are all quite clear that it is the hero's bellicose characteristics that count for most. Other virtues are admirable, but irrelevant if he has not the muscle to defend them and get them noticed, and while these romances usually give the hero's symbolic value an implicit wellspring in noble blood, they do not always. Winning a bride is about realizing individual potential rather than ancestral destiny, and these men do so in worlds where nobles enjoy their status not because of who they are, or even who they marry, but because of the violent things they do. The primary source of social, symbolic, and economic capital is therefore the sword, not the blood in the arm that wields it. That creates an unsettling image of nobility and heroism, but its presence in these

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[60] Davenport, '*Sir Degrevant* and Composite Romance', p. 131.

[61] See Davenport, '*Sir Degrevant* and Composite Romance', p. 113. The character of these two manuscripts is discussed in the introductions to their respective facsimilies: *The Thornton Manuscript: Lincoln Cathedral MS 91*, introduced by D. S. Brewer and A. E. B. Owen (London: Scolar Pres, 1975; rev. edn 1977); *The Findern Manuscript: Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6*, introduced by Richard Beadle and A. E. B. Owen (London: Scolar Press, 1977).

[62] The quotation, of course, is from the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, I.72

romances testifies to its popular acclaim among people far removed from the lifestyle it valorizes, and even among those it threatened.

Class Struggle: Tolerance, Prejudice, and Paradox

It remains for us to investigate how these texts present non-noble characters and cross-class interactions. We have already discovered that they do not make the hero's quality a symptom of his good breeding (though that is often the implication), and that they therefore elide the social élitism latent in the genre. In *The Erle of Tolous* and *Floris and Blancheflour* that elision is matched by harmonious cross-class relations and a general disinterest in barriers between 'courtly' and 'bourgeois' mentalities, while all five texts criticize people who harp on the social disparity of the lovers. Here modest birth does not preclude a good marriage, and refined, civilized living is not exclusive to the world of court and chivalry. However, looking deeper we discover that all five poems also share some deeply rooted class prejudices in their principles of selection and representation. This suggests an aristocratic class position encoded deep in their conventions, and matches their partisan conception of nobility. The audience becomes tacitly or unconsciously complicit in a mentality that says noble people are the only ones who matter, and that defines nobility in narrowly aristocratic terms. Nonetheless, these texts also show that, despite its tenacious grip on the imagination, the principle of innate nobility is actually rather fragile, and open to falsification. Those who apply it too rigorously succeed only in hastening its demise, for it can only stand if it is allowed sometimes to bend.

In *The Erle of Tolous* Barnard's language and actions are shaped by market forces and economics. He profits from taking ransoms, offers payment to both Trylabas and the merchant, and conveys the enormity of his love for Beulybon by claiming that it defies financial measure. If she could be his love, he says, 'All the golde that evyr God made / To me were not so dere!' The poem thus arranges and expresses chivalric elements in typically 'mercantile' terms, which suggests it sees no conflict between them (compare the similarly friendly coexistence between knights and townspeople in *Lybeaus Desconus*). This is confirmed by Barnard's meeting with the merchant. The two men comfortably

occupy the same discourse when talking about the market for horses, and the merchant does not seem at all surprised to discover a nobleman with a hand in trade (although Barnard disguises himself to travel with the merchant, they meet and discuss business when he is in his usual dress; we know the merchant recognizes Barnard's status because he addresses him as 'lorde' in l. 934). The merchant, for his part, is actually one of the poem's most admirable characters, who boasts both refined manners (he speaks 'wordys hende' in l. 955) and moral integrity (he is approvingly described as a 'trewe gyde' in l. 979, truth being one of the poem's core values). The two men are certainly not equal, but the text does not dwell on their differences, either, and it certainly does not draw a qualitative distinction between them. This supports Spufford's argument that such cultural divisions have been overstated by modern commentators.[63]

The same thing happens in *Floris and Blancheflour*, where all the world seems keenly aware of the market, and out for profit. Coyne Kelly discusses this in detail in 'The Bartering of Blauncheflur', where she sets out 'the poet's many references and allusions to literal and metaphorical trades, gifts, rewards, thefts, and merchandise'.[64] Everyone is buying and selling, not only the merchants but the nobles too. The queen sways the king by pointing out that selling Blancheflour may bring them 'muche catell and goode' (l. 150), and the king later expects Floris to buy his beloved back. Having met his son's demand for a baggage train including two horses 'ycharged with moonay / for to spenden by the way' (ll. 345–6), he hands over the precious Trojan cup for which Blancheflour was sold, saying:

> Have this, soon [...]
> Herewith thow may that swete thing
> Wynne, so may betyde.
>
> <div align="right">(Floris and Blancheflour, ll. 359–61)</div>

Unfortunately, the cup alone will not be enough: the merchants made a handsome profit selling Blancheflour on, and the poem says three times that the emir buys her for 'sevyn sythes of gold her wyght' (ll. 196, 508, 1035). Coyne Kelly notices that he mentions this expense to his barons during the lovers' trial,

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[63]   Spufford, *Power and Profit*, p. 81.

[64]   Coyne Kelly, 'The Bartering of Blauncheflur', p. 104.

and thus 'expresses his anger with reference to his financial loss'.[65] The barons share his concern for economic capital, for the poem describes their desire to spare the lovers by saying that they would 'with grete garisoun hem begge', if only the emir would listen (l. 1094). Here the word 'garisoun' (ransom) could be associated with the battlefield – the nobleman's traditional arena – but the Egerton manuscript stays firmly in the marketplace, replacing 'garisoun' with 'catell' (goods).[66] Even in times of great emotional trauma, these noblemen think about property.

As if to balance these mercantile attitudes among the nobility, the bourgeois characters in *Floris and Blancheflour* are all rather courtly. From emir to inn-keeper, everyone is well mannered and wealthy, and the classes merge so as to be almost indistinguishable. The burgess who sells Blancheflour is 'hende and curtayse' (l. 156), and a little later the Spanish queen is described in exactly the same way ('hende and curteis', l. 372); Floris's first host is 'wel hende' (l. 391), his second 'wel riche' (l. 464) and well able to provide fair lodging 'ase men scholde to a kinges sone' (l. 462); Dayres, another burgess who also becomes Floris's friend and confidante, is likewise a 'fair man and hende' (l. 542). These townspeople all live in luxury and, moreover, are sufficiently discerning both to sense Floris's quality through his disguise, and to intuit the cause of his grief. Noticing this, Coyne Kelly comments that 'the merchants are kindly, perceptive, and helpful', and that they therefore counter the estates stereotype that paints them as 'generally avaricious and dishonest'.[67] That is because the poem is not invoking estates models, but realizing the much more flexible reality in which landed, professional, and mercantile élites merged, united by their wealth and the lifestyle to which it gave access.

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[65] Coyne Kelly, 'The Bartering of Blauncheflur', p. 109. In the emir's defence, he later says that he spares the lovers partly because 'he hadde so mochel loved the mai' (l. 1144), so he is not entirely money-minded.

[66] *Florys and Blauncheflour*, in *Of Love and Chivalry: An Anthology of Middle English Romance*, ed. Jennifer Fellows (London: Dent, 1993), pp. 43–72, l. 990.

[67] Coyne Kelly, 'The Bartering of Blauncheflur', p. 107. This stereotype is discussed, with examples, in G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England: A Neglected Chapter in the History of English Letters and of the English People*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), pp. 352–61.

The exceptions to all the profiteering are Floris and Blancheflour themselves, who are the only characters not to think about money. Blancheflour is an object of trade, but commerce is not part of her mentality; Floris does use cash, but does not grasp its value. He spends huge amounts securing the porter's loyalty, having already rewarded all his hosts with copious gifts and paid handsomely for his passage to Babylon:

> To the mariners he gaf largeliche
> That broughten him over bletheliche
> To the londe thar he wold lende,
> For thai founden him so hende.
>
> (*Floris and Blancheflour*, ll. 339–42)

This cynical comment on the mariners prefigures Dayres's disparaging appraisal of the porter (it is Dayres who predicts that the porter will swear allegiance if he believes Floris wealthy and simple), and suggests this is a mercenary world in which respect and service are easily bought. But Floris does not belong to that world, and is really just as innocent of its ways as Dayres would have him pretend. Admittedly he refers to Blancheflour twice as his 'marchaundise' (ll. 484, 564), but that is merely a ruse – a linguistic masquerade equivalent to his physical disguise, and intended to be transparent to those in the know. This could be taken to mean that he has an innate nobility to which commercial dealings are anathema (as they are to Florent's nobility in *Octavian*), and that he is no better at thinking like a merchant than he is at looking like one. Certainly, indiscriminate *largesse* is a traditional chivalric virtue. However, given the way the other nobles behave, that seems unlikely. Nobles and non-nobles share a mercantile ethos in this poem, and Floris is different from all of them. Only Blancheflour shares his disposition, and their obliviousness to the value of money makes them unique, and contributes to their characterization as pure, innocent, and totally governed by passion. The poem includes commercialism only to contrast it with a romantic ideal in the modern sense, that true love is heedless of everything. The significant distinction is between the lovers and the world, not between nobles and merchants.[68]

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[68] Having cited Coyne Kelly's article several times, I should acknowledge that she reads the poem's commercialism very differently. She argues that *everyone* treats Blancheflour as a commodity, including Floris, and that this

Like *The Erle of Tolous*, *Floris and Blancheflour* has little time for a courtly–bourgeois dichotomy. Neither romance allows an élite monopoly on symbolic and moral value, for worthy traits appear frequently outside the court, and burgesses and merchants routinely merit courtly epithets. This broadens the definition of nobility and is in keeping with the two texts' emphasis on devotion and loyalty. Both pull away from narrow functional/biological understandings of quality by recognizing the importance of virtue, and *Floris and Blancheflour* even hints at the importance of wealth. The presentation of the burgesses casts refinement as an adjunct of riches, so civilization demands resources rather than breeding or moral character. This raises the possibility of interpreting nobility as something one could slowly acquire by converting economic capital into symbolic, and thus looks towards to the frank and candid appreciation of wealth that characterizes the romances of impoverished knights to be discussed in Chapter 4.

Floris and Blancheflour also disrupts class stereotypes in its presentation of the porter. He is introduced pejoratively as the kind of *vilain* Gower describes in his *Vox Clamantis* (quoted in Chapter 1):

> He nis no fol ne no coward;
> Yif ther cometh ani man
> Withinne that ilche barbican,
> But hit be bi his leve
> He wille him bothe bete and reve.
> The porter is proud withalle,
> Everich dai he goth in palle.
>
> (*Floris and Blancheflour*, ll. 634–40)

Shrewd, suspicious, violent, and proud, the porter is also treacherous and grasping. Dayres describes him as 'feloun' (l. 705), and this scornful portrait plays to the idea that servile men are inherently base. However, when Floris actually meets the porter he proves rather different. His response to Floris's demand for assistance is unexpectedly noble-hearted:

> The porter that herde and sore sighte:
> 'Ich am bitraied thourgh righte;
> Thourgh thi catel ich am bitraid,

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reflects a system in which women are valued primarily as objects for exchange between men: 'The Bartering of Blauncheflur', pp. 101–7.

And of mi lif ich am desmaid.
Nou ich wot, child, hou hit geth:
For thee ich drede to tholie deth.
And natheles ich ne schal thee nevere faile mo,
The whiles I mai ride or go.
Thi foreward ich wil helden alle,
Whatso wille bitide or falle.'

(*Floris and Blancheflour*, ll. 774–83)

The 'feloun' porter is going to risk his life to keep faith with his new lord, fulfilling his feudal duty with exemplary diligence (a loyalty Floris later requites). Having once encouraged the audience to make assumptions about *vilains*, the poem here challenges it to reconsider. Nevertheless, the revisionary process only goes so far, for the porter can only show his quality by sacrificing himself to serve his superior. There is dignity in doing so, but it is a dignity which comes from doing one's duty and knowing one's place. This brings us back into the arena of stereotype and prejudice, and onto ground *Floris and Blancheflour* shares with our other romances.

Sir Eglamour reveals its prejudices in its exclusivity, imagining a world in which there is nothing outside upper-class experience: no beggars, no merchants, not even a helpful forester. Such people are, in Raymond Williams's phrase, 'essentially absent (not seen, not relevant)'.[69] Silently, but firmly, the text adopts an aristocratic class position. *Sir Degrevant* is somewhat different, for its secondary characters fall into Williams's 'instrumental' and 'environmental' categories instead. Degrevant's tenants are used principally to flesh out the estate that the Earl damages. Though it is refreshing to see Degrevant helping them, in presenting him as a bountiful lord of the manor the poem still skews the picture to flatter the landholding class. Literature purporting actually to give the lower orders a voice tells a rather different story, grumbling that lords are more likely to commandeer their tenants' ploughs, livestock and seed than they are to lend of their own.[70] *Sir Degrevant* does at least accommodate tenants and 'husbondes', but keeps them at a distance and never allows them to speak.

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[69] Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 175.

[70] As in the fifteenth-century *Tale of King Edward and the Shepherd*: see *Ancient and Metrical Tales*, ed. Charles Henry Hartshorne (London: William Pickering, 1829), pp. 35–80, at p. 36. On the presence and absence of lower-class voices

By contrast, the maid and squire are 'instrumental' characters who have an important role to play in bringing hero and heroine together. They often speak, and even voice opinions contrary to those of the protagonists. But the handling of their marriage marks the limit of the text's respect for them. Degrevant arranges the match on an autocratic whim, foisting them on one another without a thought and simply assuming they will be happy with the arrangement:

> And, damesel, for þi chere,
> And for my god sopere,
> Þou shalt haue my squiere,
> Lok yf þe paye.
> Here I gyf ӡow be band
> An .c. pownd worþ of land;
> Do tak hyr by þe hond
> And do as Y þe saye.
>
> (*Degrevant*, ll. 881–8)

This contrasts with the poem's firm avowal that Melidor should be free to choose her husband herself.[71] The implication is that personal choice is only for the highest ranks, while everyone else will be pleased with any union that provides a material leg-up. This proves to be the case, as the maid later cites Degrevant's behaviour here as a sign of his merit. The poem, and by extension the audience, thus participates in the hero's double standards. Class prejudices are maintained and perpetuated.

Surprisingly, *The Erle of Tolous* opens with an even more invidious example of class prejudice, which features as part of Barnard's war with Dyoclysyon. Ramsey considers Barnard's retaliation here excessive, and that he treats the emperor rather badly. He reads the poem in Freudian terms as a

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in complaint/protest literature, see Stephen Knight, 'The Voice of Labour in Fourteenth-Century English Literature', in *The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England*, ed. James Bothwell, P. J. P. Goldberg, and W. M. Ormrod (York: York Medieval Press, 2000), pp. 101–22. See also Firth Green, 'John Ball's Letters'; Kane, 'Some Fourteenth-Century "Political" Poems'; Maddicott, 'Poems of Social Protest'.

71 The emphasis on Melidor's right to choose has been noted by several scholars, including Edwards, 'Gender, Order and Reconciliation', pp. 59–60; Diamond, '*Sir Degrevant*: What Lovers Want', pp. 88–9; Forste-Grupp, 'For-thi a Lettre has he Dyght', pp. 130–3.

rationalized and comedic retelling of archetypal Oedipal urges, and argues the reshaping has made Barnard seem too much like a usurper.[72] This makes the poem testify against itself, for Barnard is clearly presented as a model hero; but Ramsey is right to see something unsettling about this war, and it is indeed possible to prise the poem open at this point and discover something darker between the lines. Donna Crawford argues that romance uses victims of violence to consolidate its ideological position. In her words, romance's casualties 'stand for values and ideals that would remain intangible without the presence of the wounded body to give them substance'.[73] That is certainly true in *The Erle of Tolous*.

In the initial war the text makes its moral point by describing heavy losses on the emperor's side. The dead men realize Barnard's rectitude, which would otherwise remain 'intangible'. The problem is that this war, like the one in *Sir Degrevant*, has innocent victims, and that it is the lower classes who must pay the price of ideological expression. Barnard arrives in the emperor's lands and immediately instigates the scorched earth policy favoured by medieval war-leaders:[74]

> He ordeyned hym for batayle
> Into the emperours londe, saunsfayle,
> And there he began to brenne and sloo.
>
> (*Erle of Tolous*, ll. 34–6)

The torched villages, ruined crops, and slaughtered peasants are passed over without comment, but an alert reader cannot help but notice the implications of this single line. A modern one, who enjoys privileged access to many texts, might note the similarity to episodes in Chaucer's Knight's Tale (Theseus's sack of

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[72] Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances*, pp. 173–6.

[73] Donna Crawford, '"Gronyng wyth Grysly Wounde": Injury in Five Middle English Breton Lays', in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Carol Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), pp. 35–52, at p. 39.

[74] As described by Helen Nicholson, *Medieval Warfare: Theory and Practice of War in Europe, 300–1500* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 128–35; John Gillingham, 'Richard I and the Science of War in the Middle Ages', in *Medieval Warfare, 1100–1300*, ed. John France (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 299–312, at p. 305. See also Prestwich, 'The Enterprise of War', pp. 77, 82; Catherine Hanley, *War and Combat, 1150–1270: The Evidence from Old French Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), p. 21.

Thebes and the surrounding country) and the *Alliterative Morte Arthur* (Arthur's attack on the people of Tuscany), where the audience is supposed to notice the unsettling behaviour and to evaluate the perpetrators accordingly.[75] That does not seem to be the case in *The Erle of Tolous*, for all the other evidence suggests Barnard is to be read as a paragon of virtue.

The killing does not stop at that one line, either. There follows a fight-scene that is one of the poem's longest and most exhilarating episodes, and 'the most extended account of the consequences of battle found in any of the lays'.[76] When Barnard fights the emperor there is such bloodshed 'that the felde was ovyr hylte, / Os hyt were a flode' (ll. 101–2). However, in providing this stirring, action-packed and alliterative picture of battle, the poem also perpetuates some deeply discriminatory assumptions:

> There were slayne in that batayle
> Syxty thousand, wythowte fayle,
> On the emperours syde;
> Ther was takyn thre hundred and fyfty
> Of grete lordys, sekyrly,
> Wyth woundys grymly wyde.
>
> (*Erle of Tolous*, ll. 121–6)

If the important men are captured and ransomed, the blood that floods the field must belong to 60,000 of the ordinary people previously summoned from 'felde and towne' (l. 63) to fight for Dyoclysyon's unjust cause. The grace God sends to Barnard is such that women up and down the land are left to mourn husbands and sons who will not return: 'many a wyfe may sytt and wepe, / That was wonte softe to slepe' (ll. 103–4). But that pathetic image is almost lost amid the swirling action, and the poet reports the 60,000 deaths without compunction. Indeed, they are a sign of divine favour. Soon the story passes on to the courtly intrigues that occupy the rest of the narrative, in which Barnard is the epitome of all that is

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75 See Chaucer, 'The Knight's Tale', in *The Riverside Chaucer*, I.989–1008; line 1004 is particularly ominous in its veiled comment that Theseus 'dide with al the contree as hym leste': see dicussion in Jones, *Chaucer's Knight*, pp. 175–6. For Arthur and Tuscany, see *Alliterative Morte*, ed. Krishna, ll. 3150–61, where the description of Como shows peaceful agricultural and urban activity shattered by the ravages of Arthur's knights.

76 Crawford, 'Gronyng wyth Grysly Wounde', p. 49.

good and just. As the story concentrates on the fate of the Empress, the audience is apt to forget the thousands of ordinary people lying dead on burnt and blood-soaked ground, and becomes involuntarily complicit in a mentality that says such people do not matter. That even *The Erle of Tolous* can do this – a poem otherwise so strongly principled and so nearly meritocratic – shows how deeply that injustice was lodged in the conventions of romance and the psyches of those who employed them. Despite occasionally blurring class boundaries and demonstrating the artificiality of a nobility narrowly defined by blood, these romances are still shaped by the aristocratic class position latent in their customary material. This recalls the ingrained sense of hierarchy in *Pearl*, *Piers Plowman*, and Dante's *Paradiso*, and the class inflections rooted in the language of the *Rose* and the Wife of Bath's Tale.

Class struggle is also central to these romances in that all five show worthy men and women straining against repressive superiors: Floris's parents and the emir in *Floris and Blancheflour*, the earls in *Sir Degrevant* and *Sir Eglamour*, the emperor in *The Erle of Tolous*, and the Duke in *Amis and Amiloun*. None of these can see past the lovers' social disparity, but their exclusionist perspective is presented by the texts as wrong-headed. Writing of the Earl in *Sir Degrevant*, Diamond observes that 'his unmotivated disdain for his neighbour, his aggressive contempt, seems to identify social rigidity, the aristocratic desire to maintain social exclusivity, with social destructiveness'.[77] The same applies to the rigid authorities in our other romances, who are all similarly prejudiced and destructive. In contrast, the other characters (and implicitly the audience) are more flexible; they allow other qualities to make up for humble birth, and work on the assumption that biological and functional nobility are analogues. Prowess and/or qualities of leadership claim equivalent symbolic capital to noble ancestry.

This recalls Bartolus's 'natural nobility', which manifests as an instinctive ability to lead and govern, and the way breeding and martial skill get mixed up in definitions of the second estate. In the wider culture biological and functional definitions usually complement one another in describing the aristocracy as an

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[77] Diamond, '*Sir Degrevant*: What Lovers Want', p. 92.

élite group whose special aptitude for warfare and government is transmitted down the generations in the blood. These texts draw on that familiar idea, so that exemplary prowess on the battlefield can compensate for the hero's lack of breeding. However, these romances cannot help but demonstrate that hereditary and military élites are actually different – the main thrust of the story is that selection by birth yields different results from selection by ability. As the heroes battle through obstacles and hack their own exciting and adventurous paths to the top, they show that force is more significant than either breeding or virtue, while encountering men of blood who often prove base and cowardly.

Bride-winning romances therefore undermine the very principle on which they are based, though a willing and engaged audience is unlikely to register the contradiction. Here we have a genuine ideological fissure – a disunity in a supposedly united concept of nobility that fragments on articulation, yet remains fundamental to the text's structure and meaning. And there is a further paradox in that the principle of innate social distinction is actually most damaged by its most ardent defenders. Unyielding élitism seems ultimately self-defeating, for when faced with social barriers the heroes simply crash through them. That shows rather too plainly how superior strength cancels out inferior birth, and so risks falsifying the theory of inherited quality altogether. By contrast, the looser definition of nobility articulated by Belisaunt, Melidor, Christabel, and their allies saves the face of innate ancestral quality by sparing it the rigours of testing. It seems that if the ideology of blood is to stand, it must graciously bend to accommodate the alternatives. And stand it must, for all the evidence suggests the texts and their audiences were still deeply committed to it.

We have seen repeatedly that innate nobility persisted in late-medieval culture, even if in some senses it was also resisted and threatened. Though that conservative orthodoxy limited individual potential and failed to describe social reality, it also promised stability and certainty, and was widely held to reflect the order in heaven and God's designs for fallen humanity. Thus, for all their emphasis on heroic self-assertion, these texts broadly uphold the élitist attitudes of their antagonists, criticizing their methods but not their principles. The heroes who gain acceptance and convert their symbolic capital into social status and

economic prosperity are exceptions to a basic rule that endures, and it is significant that the men who oppose them are seldom killed for their misdemeanours, but usually live to see and acknowledge the hero's achievement. Their survival contrasts with the fates of those who act out of malice – the chamber knights in *The Erle of Tolous* and the steward in *Amis and Amiloun* – who all come to grizzly and retributive ends. The only exception is the Earl in *Sir Eglamour*, who dies a villain's death by falling from a tower; this is a fitting punishment for his treatment of Christabel and Degrebel, but even then is still carefully distanced from Eglamour himself. Though the poems criticize men who would keep social barriers forever unbreached, they cannot condemn them, because deep down they share their values.

In these romances the border between the 'important–meaningful–sublime' and the 'low–grotesque–comic' might not be heavily policed, but it still exists in principle.[78] The texts acknowledge that noble people are not above seeking to turn a profit, that profiteering can itself be conducive to civilized existence, and that good characters can appear at all levels of society. However, behind all that they maintain an orthodox respect for aristocracy in its most traditional forms. *Floris and Blancheflour* is the exception that proves the rule – an apparently liberal or even commercial text that is also a conservative demonstration of how Providence favours inborn quality and princely force. But in holding that position these romances also turn on a pair of nice ironies. They have the heroes prove their worthiness to marry into old blood by excelling in the very arena that the principle of blood aimed to mystify, and they maintain an ideal of innate nobility that falsifies itself at every turn.

<div align="center">*   *   *</div>

Bride-winning romances have meritocracy and mobility woven into their fabric, so the genre's potential for making high birth the cause of the hero's quality remains unrealized. The important thing is how the hero behaves, and exemplary conduct thus compensates for deficiencies of birth. However, none of these romances actually makes social mobility its main theme. The stories focus

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[78]   Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 132.

on adventures and love, with the hero's rise in status either obscured or ignored. If this is a conscious bid to make nobility meritocratic, it is put too tentatively to be successful. Moreover, like the lost-heir narratives, these texts usually imply that aristocratic blood has qualities all of its own. To be born a gentleman, to ride on horseback, and to bear costly arms gives an individual an abundance of symbolic capital that cannot be achieved in any other way. Though the audience extended well beyond the upper class, and the upper class engaged in much more than fighting, the ideal nobleman is still seen as a titled warrior descended from a line of similarly titled warriors. Those who fail on either count feel their lack acutely. Even though the heroes are all already gentlemen (the disparity is always one of degree rather than essence), they only overcome their relatively humble origins by meeting all nobility's other criteria – they are exemplary courtiers, brilliant soldiers, and kind lords; they are possessed of both admirable virtue and indomitable powers of will. This mirrors the romances of lost heirs, where the hero needs nothing but his birth to succeed. Both story-types, while condescending to recognize other elements, assume that ancestral nobility is the most valuable and true.

Although the texts expect the audience to join them in accepting innate nobility, they also draw on alternative definitions – much as people jostled for position in real life by juggling multiple forms and sources of capital. That juggling act inevitably involves risks. Again like the romances of lost heirs, these texts contain ambiguities, inconsistencies, even blatant contradictions. They show that one can win social and economic capital through deeds as well as breeding, and therefore that nobility is not exclusive to a few bloodlines; pronounced qualities of leadership and determination effectively supplement a modest ancestry, but in fact success ultimately comes down to force. That forcefulness is possibly intended to signify something deeper, some kind of mythic potency that qualifies an individual for nobility and heroism, but the link is tenuous and the audience has to be complicit for it to come through. A co-operative audience will play along, but it is also possible to see 'nobility' reduced in these texts to little more than dominance and rapacity.

That is a danger inherent in the bride-winning plot, which appears to have been intimately associated with adventure and derring-do even in the

twelfth century, when Marie and Chrétien were writing.[79] However, the tensions in these Middle English texts read more like incidental features than core themes or deliberate subversions. Here multiple definitions of nobility are simply accepted rather than debated or critiqued, and the texts show no apparent interest in resolving the resulting contradictions. Nor do they seem alert to how their ideals might play out in the real world. Regardless of its unsettling implications, their model of gallant and heroic brutality evidently transcended social boundaries and was popular with a wide audience. That suggests it appears in imaginative literature without having any direct ideological function, and that the stories pursue no particular ideological motive. One of the strengths of Middle English romance is that it exists on an alternative plane where reality is either not reflected at all, or reflected in so many ways that the possibilities for interpretation are limited only by the perspective of the individual reader or listener.

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[79] R. W. Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 54–5; D. H. Green, *The Beginnings of Medieval Romance: Fact and Fiction, 1150–1220* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 126.

CHAPTER 4

Impoverished Knights: Nobility by Wealth and Virtue

Practically speaking, the power and influence of the late-medieval upper class sprang not from blood, nor even from chivalric prowess, but from wealth. The romances of impoverished knights acknowledge this. Romances of lost heirs might rest on the quality of noble blood, and bride-winning romances on the symbolic value of violence, but romances of impoverished knights recognize and mythologize nobility's root in economic capital. Together, they cut across other sub-categories of the genre, forming a diverse group that includes *Sir Launfal*, a fairy-tale cum adventure story adapted from several earlier lays;[1] *Sir Cleges* and *Sir Amadace*, often considered in the context of folk-tale and homily;[2] the tale of Amiloun from *Amis and Amiloun*, a legendary story that Kratins labels 'secular hagiography', and Childress 'secular legend';[3] and *Sir Isumbras*, another of Childress's secular legends, and one of Hopkins's 'penitential romances'.[4] I have grouped these texts together because they are all superficially related in that their heroes fall from prosperity, display extraordinary virtue through extremes

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[1] On *Sir Launfal*'s several sources, see *Sir Launfal*, ed. Bliss, pp. 24–31.

[2] For *Sir Amadace*, see Gordon Hall Gerould, *The Grateful Dead: The History of a Folk Story* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000; originally London: D. Nutt, 1908), pp. 37–9, 153–8. For *Sir Cleges*, see Diane Speed, '*Sir Cleges*: Introduction', in *Medieval English Romances*, ed. Speed, vol. 1, 3rd edn, (Durham: Durham Medieval Texts, 1993), pp. 171–6, at pp. 171–2; Sherwyn T. Carr, 'The Middle English Nativity Cherry Tree: The Dissemination of a Popular Motif', *Modern Language Quarterly* 36 (1975), 133–47.

[3] Kratins, 'The Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*'; Diana T. Childress, 'Between Romance and Legend: "Secular Hagiography" in Middle English Literature', *Philological Quarterly* 57 (1978), 311–22, at pp. 318–19.

[4] Childress, 'Between Romance and Legend', pp. 317, 319; Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 12–23. On the connection between *Sir Isumbras* and the legend of St Eustace, see Laurel Braswell, '*Sir Isumbras* and the Legend of Saint Eustace', *Mediaeval Studies* 27 (1965), 128–51; Rhiannon Purdie, 'Generic Identity and the Origins of *Sir Isumbras*', in *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance*, ed. Phillipa Hardman (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), pp. 113–24.

of physical, material, and emotional hardship, and are eventually restored to health, wealth, and happiness by a higher power (either God or Faerie). The reasons for the hero's fall vary considerably from text to text, but all five stories share these basic features. From that simple narrative connection, this chapter demonstrates that the five texts' perspectives and values are also similar – an affinity hitherto unnoticed, which proves the value of considering Middle English romances in the very broad, narrative-based categories I have used.

The ideology of blood features less in these romances than in either of our other story-types. Whether the hero suffers at his own hands or at God's, they often describe detailed economies of credit and debt, and show that without money the nobleman will go unrecognized. So, while romances of lost heirs present nobility as part of the hero's physiological essence, here it seems simply a material accident. Moreover, these texts often maximize their narrative impact by emphasizing the hero's humanity. Descriptions of emotional and physical suffering lead audiences to relate to him as an ordinary man, whereas the other story-types present their heroes first and foremost as *noble*men – members of an élite caste who exist at a higher level of being. The difference comes mostly because this story-type's structure and plot naturally illustrate a correlation between economic and social capital, and emphasize an aspect of nobility that is purely civil – nobility as the social status accorded to the wealthy.

That civil definition is complemented by another, more idealistic and edifying view. While the world recognizes only riches, the heroes and the superhuman figures who assist them present the case for virtue. The heroes' key quality is complete devotion to an absolute moral standard, which wins them the support of Heaven or Faerie. Their rewards and restorations are always facilitated by one of those higher powers, which lends the materialistic view of status a symbolic legitimacy it would otherwise lack. In this way civil and spiritual definitions of nobility are reconciled. However, this hybrid concept is neither without problems, nor consistently maintained. The moral absolutism presents both ethical and logical challenges in a genre more accustomed to evasion and equivocation, so the conclusions often seem strained or unjustified. Meanwhile, biological and functional definitions of nobility also creep in, as the romances yield to generic pressure and compromise the story's basic emphasis

on virtue by including vigorous battle scenes, or suggesting their heroes might indeed be biologically superior after all.

While the basic concept of nobility is that most naturally realized by the plot, it is overlaid with elements from other definitions, usually more conservative, that slip in over the course of the narration. Therefore, though the story-type conceives nobility in a way that could be socially levelling, the texts seldom realize that possibility. They are like our other romances – neither properly conservative nor consciously subversive, allowing ideological consistency to take a back seat as they concentrate on using all the available materials to engage the audience, minute by minute and scene by scene.

Nobility and Public Recognition

Romances of impoverished knights focus on changes in the hero's social status. The romances discussed in the previous chapter made social mobility seem incidental to the main action of love and adventure, but here the movement from prosperity to poverty and back is central. As the hero's experience of the world changes according to his fluctuating social and economic capital, the texts make nobility in some ways synonymous with public recognition. Once the hero ceases to be rich and respected, he ceases also to be a nobleman. This recalls the jurists' and heralds' understanding of nobility as a civil state, and works against the hereditary principle by making nobility a matter of material accident rather than inner essence.

Whereas lost heirs stand out from their humble surroundings, impoverished knights generally go unrecognized. These men to do not enjoy the physical distinction of a Perceval or a Lybeaus, and are judged by their material circumstances alone. Fowler has described Isumbras's destitution as 'a civil death' that marks his 'translation into an utterly different category of person', and her observations can be broadened to apply to all five of the heroes we are

discussing.[5] Sir Cleges (north Midlands, late fourteenth century) undergoes a similar translation:

> Syr Cleges than a staff he toke;
> He had no hors, so seyth the boke,
> To ryde hys jorneye,
> Nether sted ne palferey,
> Bot a staff was his hakney,
> As maner in poverté.[6]

Cleges has sunk so low he has even sold his horses – the definitive symbol of the chivalric cavalryman. The poem thus highlights the destruction of his former identity, and emphasizes his new condition as a pauper. He travels to Cardiff 'as maner in poverté', and arrives 'in pore clothyng […] in a symple aray' (ll. 260–1). This makes the porter treat him 'spytously' (l. 262), telling him to get back with the other beggars where he belongs:

> Thow schall withdraw the smertly,
> I rede, withoute deley,
>
> Els, be God and Seynt Mary,
> I schall breke thi hede smertly,
> Go stond in begers route.
>
> <div align="right">(Cleges, ll. 263–7)</div>

The porter's judgement is echoed by the usher and steward, who both call Cleges a churl (ll. 296, 331), and by King Uther, who refers to him as 'the pore man' (ll. 400, 491). Far from being marked by an innate and biological nobility, Cleges's loss of economic capital has rendered him like Isumbras – 'an utterly different category of person'.

Fowler's idea of civil death is repeated in *Sir Amadace* (northwest Midlands, late fourteenth century) and *Sir Launfal* (southeast England, also late

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5   Elizabeth Fowler, 'The Romance Hypothetical: Lordship and the Saracens in *Sir Isumbras*', in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 97–121, at p. 101.

6   *Sir Cleges*, in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications: 1995), pp. 367–407, ll. 247–52. *Sir Cleges* survives in two manuscripts: National Library of Scotland, Advocates MS 19.1.11 (1450–1500); Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61 (late fifteenth century). The texts are only slightly different; for discussion of the differences, see Blanchfield, 'The Romances in MS Ashmole 61', pp. 72–9. Laskaya and Salisbury's edition uses the Ashmole text.

fourteenth century), where both men semi-voluntarily exile themselves from society for fear of shame. Having spent the last of his money burying a merchant, Amadace slips alone into the forest and confesses he would rather die than have people know his poverty. Praying aloud, he asks Jesus:

> Thou lette me nevyr come in that syghte
> Ther I have bene knauen for a knyghte,
> Butte if I may avoue hit thanne […]
> Or ellus, Lorde, I aske the rede,
> Hastely that I were dede.[7]

Launfal similarly hides from the community, refusing to attend the Pentecost festivities and even avoiding church. As he explains to the mayor's daughter:

> Þre dayes þer ben agon,
> Mete ne drynke eet y noon,
> And all was for pouert.
> Today to cherche y wolde haue gon,
> But me fawtede hosyn & schon,
> Clenly brech & scherte.
> And for defawte of clodynge,
> Ne myȝte y yn wyth þe peple þrynge.[8]

So complete is this transformation, it can even disrupt romance's clichéd diction. The formulae do not cover such a man as this, so while springing is usually a vigorous, fulsome activity, and the common phrase is 'mekyll pryde', here it is 'pouerly þe knyȝt to hors gan sprynge' (l. 217), to ride 'wyth lytyll pryde' (l. 213).[9] Further proof of Launfal's translation comes from a boy in the market-place – the kind who would usually welcome the hero to the town, or warn him

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[7]   *Sir Amadace*, in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Maldwyn Mills (London: Dent, 1973; rept. 1988), pp. 169–92, ll. 400–7. *Sir Amadace* survives in two manuscripts: National Library of Scotland, Advocates MS 19.3.1 (1475–1500); and Princeton University Library, MS Taylor 9 (1450–60, the Ireland manuscript). Mills's edition is based on the latter.

[8]   *Sir Launfal*, ed. Bliss, ll. 196–203. *Sir Launfal* survives in a single manuscript: British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii.

[9]   For example: 'And on her stedes thai gun spring' (*Amis and Amiloun*, l. 329); 'Into his saddle wightilye he sprent' (*The Grene Knight,* l. 194); 'Out of here sadles thai gonne springe' (*Bevis of Hampton*, l. 4161); 'With joye and mekyl pryde' (*Sir Isumbras*, l. 201); 'My dowghtyr that ys so mykyll of pride' (*Sir Eglamour*, l. 473); 'For all hys/her mechell pryd' (*Sir Degrevant*, ll. 298, 772); 'With knightes fele and miche pride' (*Stanzaic Guy of Warwick*, l. 47).

about the evil customs of its castle. Here his role is to direct Gyfre and the baggage train to Launfal's lodgings, and to express the popular opinion of the poverty-stricken hero: 'Nys he but a wrecche! / What þar any man of hym recche?' (ll. 394–5). No one recognizes Launfal as a man of quality, for beneath his finery the nobleman is indistinguishable from the commoner.

This point is made with particular finesse in *Amis and Amiloun*. One midwinter's day the leprous Amiloun stands with 'al oþer pouer men' outside Amis's gate (l. 1882). Then Amis arrives:

> Þat riche douke wiþ gamen & play
> Fram chirche com þe riȝt way
> As lord & prince wiþ pride.
> When he com to þe castel-gate,
> Þe pouer men þat stode þer-ate
> Wiþdrouȝ hem þer beside.
> Wiþ kniȝtes & wiþ seriaunce fale
> He went in-to þat semly sale
> Wiþ ioie & blis to abide.
>
> In kinges court, as it is lawe,
> Trumpes in halle to mete gan blawe,
> To benche went þo bold.
> When þai were semly set on rowe,
> Serued þai were opon a þrowe,
> As men miriest on mold.
> Þat riche douke, wiþ-outen les,
> As a prince serued he wes
> Wiþ riche coupes of gold,
> & he þat brouȝt him to þat state
> Stode bischet wiþ-outen þe gate,
> Wel sore of-hungred & cold.

(*Amis and Amiloun*, ll. 1884–908)

The poem vividly contrasts the two friends: Amis comfortable, surrounded by good and beautiful things, Amiloun hungry, sick, and shivering outside.[10] But though they are so different now, Amis and Amiloun were once indistinguishable – not even their mothers and lovers could tell them apart. All that separates them is fortune and a castle wall. The materiality and sheer arbitrariness of social

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[10] This profound contrast is also noted by Kathryn Hume, but she focuses on the scene's structural function rather than its social and ideological implications: '*Amis and Amiloun* and the Aesthetics of Middle English Romance', *Studies in Philology* 70 (1973), 19–41, at p. 32.

status are thus realized with devastating clarity, making biological accounts of nobility and privilege totally unsustainable.

Sir Isumbras (northeast Midlands, pre-1320) usually conforms to type and denies its hero any genetic superiority. Fowler has shown that it stresses the visual, accidental aspect of Isumbras's various social personas – the scrip and sclavin of the pilgrim, the armour of the knight, the robes of the king. Each time Isumbras changes state there is a 'scene of investiture', and these 'consistently describe accession to social persons as a process of performance, piety, and recognition by authority'.[11] The smiths see him as a scrounging, sturdy beggar, so they refuse charity and bid him 'com swynke' if he wants food (l. 389). In the battle with the sultan Isumbras fights like a knight, so a friendly earl donates the appropriate equipment (ll. 440–4). The king, who then sees Isumbras's success, reasonably assumes him to be the 'nobull knyghte' he looks like (l. 460). Identity is awarded by public recognition and is materially constructed, which means social and symbolic capital are not innate, but in the gift of others. Isumbras's mistake is to forget that, grow proud, and consider himself the author of his own being. As God's messenger puts it, 'thow haste foryete what thou was, / For pryde of golde and fee' (ll. 49–50).[12] This is surely a reference to Genesis 3:19, in which God reminds Adam 'thou art dust, and thou schalt turne ayen in to dust'. Isumbras receives the same warning: his origins are in clay, and he is wrong to prize his manhood.[13] That is a levelling doctrine that works against the idea that the upper class is qualitatively superior.

It is because they are essentially no different from other people that the destitute hero and his family can initially travel unrecognized 'thorow two

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[11] Fowler, 'The Romance Hypothetical', pp. 105–6.

[12] On the theological principle that penance ought to be appropriate to the particular sin committed, see Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights*, pp. 65–6.

[13] The verse was also part of the liturgy for Ash Wednesday, so would have been familiar to medieval audiences. Critics have not always noticed the allusion, for example Samara P. Landers, '"And Loved He Was with All": Identity in Sir Isumbras', *Orbis Litterarum: International Review of Literary Studies* 64(5) (2009), 351–72, at pp. 361–2.

kynges londes', just like any other group of paupers or vagrants.[14] This anonymity is particularly appropriate to Isumbras's sinful pride, allocating him and his family a fitting penance and providing them with an object lesson in the common baseness of humankind. It would be appropriate for the text to maintain this attitude throughout. However, when the family tries to beg food from a group of Saracens the poem slips back into envisioning the noble body as inherently distinctive:

> Thenne sayde a knyght to the kyng,
> Ser, this is a wondyr thyng,
> Yone pore man to see.
> Hys lemes are longe, hys bones grete,
> Hys eyes are graye and over stepe.
> A knyght he semes to be [...]
> His wyff is whyt so whales bon,
> A fayrere sawgh I nevere non,
> Bryght so blosme on bree.
> He is a fayr man and hyge,
> A fayrere sawe I never with yye,
> A gentyl man is hee.

<div align="right">(Isumbras, ll. 232–43)</div>

The heathen knights recognize the family's quality simply by looking. This is inconsistent with the text's earlier attitude, while it seems unlikely that we are to credit Saracens with powers of perception denied to the Christian people through whose lands Isumbras has just travelled. The scene apparently developed to suit only the local demands of the story, at the expense of global ideological consistency.

Viewed in isolation this scene is very effective. The image of the beautiful, noble family reduced to begging from invading pagans makes for a powerful and emotive vignette to seize the audience's attention and encourage imaginative engagement. The couple's self-evident quality also serves a practical purpose in

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[14]   *Sir Isumbras*, in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Maldwyn Mills (London: Dent, 1973; rept. 1988), pp. 125–47, l. 167. *Sir Isumbras* survives in nine manuscripts and fragments, among them Cambridge University Library, Gonville and Caius College MS 175 (early fifteenth century); Lincoln Cathedral MS 91 (*c.* 1440, the Thornton manuscript); British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii (1440–60); National Library of Scotland, Advocates MS 19.3.1 (1475–1500); and Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61 (late fifteenth century). Mills's edition is based on the Cotton text.

that it attracts the sultan and initiates the next episode (when the sultan tempts Isumbras with riches if he will convert to become a soldier for Islam, then offers to buy his wife, and finally abducts her). These immediate benefits to the story outweigh the larger logical and ideological inconsistencies (Isumbras is never recognized again in fourteen years of poverty), indicating that the primary concern is with narrative, and with engaging the audience moment by moment.

This should caution us against reading too much into the hero's loss of estate in the other poems. There is in this story-type a latent resistance to the ideology of blood, for by emphasizing the role of public recognition in creating and sustaining a nobleman these texts have the potential to demythologize nobility and refute the hereditary principle. However, *Sir Isumbras* shows realizing this potential was not necessarily high on the agenda. Moreover, when considered from another angle, these apparently incisive social commentaries become perfectly conventional meditations on the fickleness of friends and fortune. That theme is especially strong in the heroes' laments, which all dwell on loss and the contrast between past and present. In *Sir Cleges*:

> Syre Cleges fell in swownyng sone;
> Wo bethought hym that tyde,
> What myrth he was wonte to hold,
> And he, he had hys maners solde,
> Tenandrys and landes wyde.
> Mekyll sorow made he ther;
> He wrong hys hondes and wepyd sore,
> Fore fallyd was hys pride.

(*Cleges*, ll. 89–96)

Amis and Amiloun:

> 'A, god help!' seyd þat gentil kniȝt,
> 'Whilom y was man of miȝt,
> To dele mete & cloþ,
> & now icham so foule a wiȝt
> Þat al þat seþ on me bi siȝt,
> Mi liif is hem ful loþ.'

(*Amis and Amiloun*, ll. 1681–6)

And *Sir Amadace*:

> Quen he thoghte on his londus brode,
> His castels hee, his townus made,
> That were away evyrichon,

That he had sette and layd to wedde,
And was owte of the cuntray for pourté fledde,
Thenne the knyghte wexe wille of wone.

<div align="right">(Amadace, ll. 379–84)</div>

The theme here is mutability, and the sentiment similar to that expressed in the story of the Three Living and the Three Dead, or in images of the *danse macabre* or Fortune's wheel. Nothing is constant, life and wealth both slip away, the only certainties are change and death. That is itself an argument against classing people as intrinsically superior or inferior, so could be taken to further the story's latent social critique. Certainly these laments make clearer than ever the connection between status and circumstance. However, the theme of mutability was by this time so well established that it could no doubt be articulated without its specific social resonances being activated. Thus, though these texts can be read as challenges to innate nobility, the two are not altogether incompatible, for their subversive potential could easily be contained by traditional, conservative frameworks.

Even so, these texts do problematize innate nobility more often than not, and in general capitalize on the social commentary suggested by the story-type. *Sir Launfal* even contrasts the hero's sense of intrinsic superiority with the opposing views of those around him, making the former seem unhelpful and even faintly ridiculous. Though most of the heroes accept that they have no inherent right to status, and resign themselves to fate, Launfal resists strongly. He remains adamant that he deserves respect whatever his circumstances, and rages against his ill treatment. When his new riches suddenly make the mayor friendly, Launfal is so indignant that he creates a public scene:

'Syr Meyr, God forȝelde þe!
Whyles y was yn my pouerté
Þou bede me neuer dyne:
Now y haue more gold & fe
(Þat myne frendes han sent me)
Þan þou and alle dyne.'
The meyr for schame away ȝede;
Launfal yn purpure gan hym schrede,
Jpelured wyth whyt ermyne.

<div align="right">(Launfal, ll. 409–16)</div>

This is the second time Launfal has mocked the mayor (compare his speech at ll. 115–20), and his behaviour in both encounters indicates a hero who deeply resents the way he has been treated; meanwhile, his ostentatious sartorial display seems intended to soothe and consolidate his bruised sense of self-worth. As Stokes puts it, 'Launfal "shows 'em", and the success must be public.'[15] Other aspects of the poem complement this impression of the hero's self-image. He is always rude to people who fail to honour him (not only the mayor, but also the queen, at ll. 691–9), and he proves so anxious to hide his poverty that he avoids church and charity, and persuades his erstwhile companions to lie to Arthur when explaining the poor state of their robes. As Hirsch puts it, Launfal is always committed to 'maintaining a sense of individual honour'.[16]

Hirsh also notices that in rearranging *Landevale* Thomas Chestre removed the following lament:

> Who hath no good, goode can he none! –
> And I am here in vncuth londe,
> And no gode haue vnder honde;
> Men will me hold for a wrech.
> Where I become, I ne reche![17]

Here the hero waxes lyrical on the material, public aspect of his identity, and punningly accepts that he is no good without goods. In *Launfal* there is no such admission, though the wrecche/recche rhyme is reassigned to the boy in the marketplace. Hirsch points out that this omission is probably deliberate, since the undignified outburst 'would hardly become a knight of Launfal's nobility'.[18]

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[15]   Stokes, '*Lanval* to *Sir Launfal*', p. 70. Stokes' article observes that the public world is much more vividly realized in *Launfal* than Marie's *Lanval* (pp. 61–70). Anderson also notices that change, writing that Chestre has added to Marie's lay 'an internal audience that comments on Launfal's changing fortunes […] and helps contrast Launfal's public life with his private affair': 'The Structure of *Sir Launfal*', p. 123.

[16]   John C. Hirsch, 'Pride as Theme in *Sir Launfal*', *Notes and Queries* n.s. 14 (1967), 288–91, at p. 290.

[17]   *Sir Landevale* is printed in the appendix to Bliss's edition of *Sir Launfal*. These are lines 26–30. The poem comes from southern England and is dated 1400–50. It survives in three manuscripts, the only one from before 1500 being Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson C.86 (late fifteenth century).

[18]   Hirsch, 'Pride as Theme in *Sir Launfal*', p. 290.

Finally, we notice that Launfal would apparently rather starve than surrender his chivalric identity: though he wears rags and goes three days without food and drink, he still does not sell his horse. All the time, he behaves as though his knighthood is inalienable from him.

This sense of innate nobility is shown to be self-defeating and ultimately unsustainable. No one but Tryamour shares Launfal's essentialist ethos, for court and town both have a more pragmatic take on personal identity and social relations. We notice that none of the other knights leaves court because of Guinevere's infidelities, though plenty are said to dislike her (ll. 44–5), while the boy's words to Gyfre suggest public opinion in Caerleon is with the mayor. Even when Launfal is universally esteemed, it is his wealth that brings the social capital, not his personal charisma. The mayor comes fawning when he 'seyʒ þat rychesse' (l. 400); Arthur invites Launfal back to court because he 'cowþe of largesse' (l. 624); and the lords who recommend acquitting Launfal at his trial do so mainly because they know he is 'hende & fre' (l. 843). This is a mercenary, self-interested world that judges by appearances, and in which there is no place for assertions of inner essence and innate quality.

Launfal's ideology therefore ostracizes him from both courtly and Christian communities, and is part of what finally makes his social integration impossible. As Anderson and Edwards both point out, his absolutism is proper to Faerie, not human societies (see further below).[19] That is not to say the compromised, compromising world Launfal rejects is made preferable to his staunch principles: the text's final verdict on this is unclear, and I discuss below how Launfal's personal ideology is his main strength as well as his main weakness. However, compromise and pragmatism are at least shown to be workable, which Launfal's position is clearly not.[20] Though admirable in principle, absolutist views on identity and morality repeatedly prove obstructive in practice.

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[19] On the absolutism of Faerie, see Anderson, 'The Structure of *Sir Launfal*', p. 118; A. S. G. Edwards, 'Unknightly Conduct in *Sir Launfal*', *Notes and Queries* n.s. 15 (Sept. 1968), 328–9, at p. 329.

[20] A point also made by Myra Seaman, 'Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* and the Englishing of Medieval Romance', *Medieval Perspectives* 15 (2000), 105–19, at pp. 117–8.

So, the heroes of these romances bear no distinct physiological signs of status, and mutability is a central theme of their stories. Nothing is constant, certainly not one's rank, and this emphasis on transient status highlights the aspect of nobility that is determined by public recognition. This is the nobility that Bartolus called 'civil', such as can be granted by princes and heralds, and then confiscated should the bearer transgress (as does Isumbras). It is an accident of fortune rather than a quality of birth, and most of the heroes accept that. Launfal does not, but his attitude is shown to be flawed and unhelpful. Occasionally a text goes against the tide in the interests of story-telling, as when the Saracens see nobility shining through the family's poverty on the beach in *Sir Isumbras*, but otherwise the message is consistent. However, to discount breeding and prioritize public recognition only raises another question: what is it the public recognizes? These texts have two answers: the first pragmatic, making nobility spring from wealth; the second idealistic, that nobility and wealth are both attracted to virtue.

Nobility and Wealth

Erich Auerbach once made the following observation on Chrétien's *Yvain*:

> the colourful and vivid pictures of contemporary reality seem, as it were, to have sprung from the ground [...] The geographical, economic, and social conditions on which they depend are never explained.[21]

It would be hard to exaggerate the influence that statement had on subsequent criticism of medieval romance. Even today, over seventy years after Auerbach's book appeared, there is still a feeling that money and economics are alien to romance's true or typical aesthetic.[22] But Auerbach was writing only of the very

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[21]   Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 133.

[22]   As, for instance, when Ramsey considers the smiths' work ethic in *Sir Isumbras* 'an unusual thing to find in a chivalric romance' (*Chivalric Romances*, p. 221), or when Foster thinks Amadace's financial motivations make him 'too middle class to be a romance hero' ('Simplicity, Complexity, and Morality in Four Medieval Romances', p. 408). For an alternative perspective that finds a commercial exchange mentality embedded deep in even Chrétien's romances, see Pater Haidu, *The Subject Medieval/Modern:*

particular kind of romance represented by *Yvain*, and his observation is ill suited to the Middle English texts. Here the economic conditions of later medieval life appear with relative frequency, with money, markets, and materialism all featured as a matter of course. We saw in Chapter 3 that there is a commercial backdrop to *Floris and Blancheflour*, and that financial problems feature in both *Amis and Amiloun* and *Sir Eglamour*. Critics have often noticed the vivid material environment described in *Sir Degrevant*, too – Arlyn Diamond, for instance, comments on the poem's 'lovingly itemised enumeration of the possessions which define a noble life'.[23] In Chapter 2 we saw the sub-courtly world in *Octavian* realized and developed for its own sake, and noted the shallow, materialistic impression of knighthood given at the beginning of *Sir Perceval*.

We might also have discussed the careful accounting in *Sir Degaré*, whose protagonist lives not in a world that meets his needs *ex nihilo*, but in one where they must be financed. His mother recognizes this when she equips the baby hero with gold and silver 'for swich thing hit mighte hove' (l. 193), and when she draws attention to this treasure in her letter (which begs the recipient to 'helpeth hit [the child] with his owen god, / With tresor that under his fet lis', ll. 210–11). The poem keeps a scrupulous account of this parting gift. The silver goes to Degaré's foster-family; the gold florins he receives back when he is twenty, at which point the poem explains again that 'the ten pound of starlings [sterling] / Were ispended in his fostrings' (ll. 299–300). Half the florins Degaré takes on his quest; the rest he gives to the hermit in an early display of chivalric *largesse* (ll. 317–18). Even prayers have to be bought: before fighting his grandfather Degaré offers three florins in the church, which, the poem comments rather cynically, encourage the priest to pray for him 'ful yerne' (l. 492). This parallels how Floris is able to buy support from the sailors and the porter, while

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   Text and Governance in the Middle Ages (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 100–11.

23 Diamond '*Sir Degrevant*: What Lovers Want', p. 91. This quality of *Sir Degrevant* is also discussed in the introduction to Casson's edition, p. lxxiv; Edwards, 'Gender, Order and Reconciliation', p. 56; Kane, *Middle English Literature*, p. 91; Lillian Herlands Hornstein, 'Miscellaneous Romances', in J. Burke Severs *et al.*, *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050–1500*, vol. 1: *Romances* (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967), pp. 144–74, at p. 148.

the need to pay one's way complements the need to grow food and work the land in *Sir Degrevant*.

Economics and finance, then, are the common stuff of Middle English romance, so there is nothing surprising about their presence in our romances of impoverished knights. But this subgroup *is* distinctive in that it uses those elements to create a causal link between wealth and social status. Southern *Octavian*, *Floris and Blancheflour*, and *Sir Perceval* all hint that nobility might come from wealth, but romances of impoverished knights make it plain. This section begins with some of the balder statements of that connection, then considers the particular way in which these romances realize wealth. They emphasize its quantitative nature as something to be manipulated, won, and lost, rather than a quality that is simply possessed. This has an effect on the presentation of nobility, which becomes similarly measurable, thus pushing the poems still further from the biological principle. Finally, I suggest this fiscal consciousness has an impact even on narrative itself: credit and debt permeate to the bedrock of plot and structure, while the suggestion that there is no natural élite qualifies a wider range of human experience for romance treatment. Instead of being restricted to the aristocratic concerns of aristocratic persons, these texts see beyond their heroes' high birth and subject them to a different type of trial, more fundamental to the late-medieval human condition.

Launfal's companions tell him they are leaving because 'our robes beþ torent, / And your tresour ys all yspent' (ll. 139–40). Economic self-interest rides rough-shod over chivalric duty, as it did in Launfal's earlier encounter with the town mayor. The mayor is an old servant of Launfal's, and the hero reminds him of their past acquaintance when he requests hospitality:

> Syr Meyr, I pray þe, par amour,
> May y take wyth þe soiour? –
> Somtyme we knewe vs, yore.
>
> (*Launfal*, ll. 106–8)

But Launfal also makes the mistake of admitting that he has absconded from court, so now 'neþer þar no man, beneþe ne above, / for þe kyng Artours loue / Onowre me neuermore' (ll. 103–5). The mayor takes him at his word and, reluctant to harbour a renegade of diminishing resources, fobs him off with a

lame excuse. Launfal discovers that 'a lord of lytyll pryse' commands neither respect nor loyalty (l. 119), and that without financial and social backing his appeals to chivalric principles are in vain. It is therefore no accident that Tryamour mentions the bottomless purse before any of her other gifts (l. 319), or that Launfal's first thought on having broken his vow is to check whether that purse still works (l. 733). He has been left in no doubt that money is the root of status, and of the civil nobility that status confers.

Guy-Bray has considered this one of *Sir Launfal*'s 'most original aspects'. As he puts it:

> one of the strengths of Chestre's poem is his insistence on the material basis of privilege (both class privilege and masculine privilege), a factor that is typically ignored in romances [...] We can see the emphasis on materiality as indicating that the knightly system, which purports to be based on merit, is really decided chiefly on material conditions.[24]

However, though many romances certainly do elide the 'material basis of privilege' – the ones discussed in my Chapters 2 and 3, for instance, which make nobility an effect of blood or prowess – the story-type to which *Sir Launfal* belongs generally does not. Rather than being 'typically ignored', the connection is here acknowledged and even emphasized. Launfal is not alone in having his companions desert him when times get tough, for Cleges's men similarly 'weste awey onne every syde' (l. 80), and Amiloun finds that as soon as he becomes leprous 'al þat were his best frende, / & nameliche al his riche kende, / Bicom his most fon' (ll. 1552–4).

Sir Isumbras likewise emphasizes the material basis of nobility, as we have seen from Fowler's analysis. Her argument is complemented by Landers, who points out that at the beginning of the text Isumbras's wealth and quality of character are 'intertwined so that we cannot determine which came first or which comprises a more essential aspect of Isumbras's persona as a nobleman'.[25] Nor, she continues, can he. When God's messenger tells him 'in yowthe or elde thou schall be wo' (l. 53), Isumbras automatically equates emotional suffering

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24 Guy-Bray, 'Male Trouble', p. 39.

25 Landers, 'And Loved he was with All', p. 356.

with material privation, and replies 'In yowthe sende me poverté, / And welthe in myne elde' (ll. 65–6). As Landers says:

> Isumbras has to frame his punishment in terms of material items in order to comprehend what it means; even as he is told that he cares too much for his possessions [his punishment is partly 'for pryde of golde and fee', l. 51] he cannot conceive of himself as separate from them.[26]

Sir Isumbras and *Amis and Amiloun* thus mirror *Sir Launfal* in making possessions crucial to a nobleman's identity, and all recall Landevale's lament that 'who hath no good, goode can he none!' *Sir Amadace* matches *Landevale* still more closely, as at one point Amadace observes how 'a mon that litul gode hase, / Men sittus ryghte noghte him bye' (ll. 386–7). This prompts Foster to see in *Sir Amadace* 'a peculiar reduction of ideals to wealth'.[27] However, that reduction is no more peculiar to *Sir Amadace* than materialism is specific to *Sir Launfal* – all our romances demonstrate the connection between wealth and status, and all demonstrate the truth of Amadace and Landevale's claims.

These five romances are also distinctive for placing their heroes in unusually detailed economic environments that emphasize finance, and for imagining riches in peculiarly quantitative terms. Most romances present wealth as a quality, possessed either *in totum* or not at all – like charisma, you either have it or you don't. This is the effect of the all the superlatives and uses of rhetorical *occupatio* that describe celebrations in Old French and Anglo-Norman texts:

> Les noeces unt puis tenues,
> Plus riches ne furent mes veues
> Ne de rei ne d'empereur,
> Car faites erent a grant honur.[28]

> [Then the bridal celebrations were held, and more gorgeous ones have never, ever been seen – not even those of a king or an emperor – for they were conducted in high style.][29]

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[26] Landers, 'And Loved he was with All', p. 361.

[27] Foster, 'Simplicity, Complexity, and Morality in Four Medieval Romances', p. 408.

[28] *Gui de Warewic: Roman du 13è siècle*, ed. Alfred Ewert, vol. 2 (Paris: Champion, 1932), ll. 6801–4.

[29] This translation and the next are my own.

Mout i ot joie et mout leesce,
Mout i ot jant e mout richesce,
Plus que conter ne vos savroie,
Quant lond tans pansé i avroie.[30]

[There was much joy and much happiness; there were many people
and there was much richness – more than I would be able tell you even
after thinking about it for a long time.]

And in other kinds of Middle English romance:

Thy myrrour of that brydale
No man myght tell with tale,
Jn ryme nor in geste:
Jn that semely saale
Were lordys many and fale
And ladies full honeste.
There was riche service
Bothe to lorde and ladyes
To lese and eke to moste;
Thare were gevyn riche giftis
Euche mynstrale her thriftis,
And some that were vnbrest.

(*Lybeaus*, ll. 2181–92)

I knewe neuere man so wys
Þat couþ tell þe seruise;
Ne scrye þe metys of prys
Was seruyd in þat sale.
Mynstrallus hade in halle
Grete gyftys with-alle –
Ryche robus of palle
With garnementus hale.

(*Degrevant*, ll. 1873–80)

Such wealth is not quantified or counted, but simply enjoyed. The winning and wasting of our impoverished knights seems different, occurring in a world where money is acquired, counted, spent, and manipulated in a manner all too realistic and familiar.

Sir Cleges, for instance, begins with a grim description of economic decline. Cleges and Clarys are initially renowned for their goodness and charity, and particularly for their gorgeous Christmas celebrations:

Every yere Sir Cleges wold
In Crystynmes a fest hold

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30   Chrestien de Troyes, *Yvain*, ll. 2159–62.

In the worschype of that dey.
As ryall in all thynge,
As he hade ben a kynge.
For soth, as I you saye.

<div align="right">(Cleges, ll. 37–42)</div>

But like the merchant in *Sir Amadace*, who 'cladde mo men agaynus a Yole / Thenne did a nobull knyghte' (ll. 158–9), Sir Cleges is spending above his station.[31] After ten years of exemplary *largesse* the family's 'gode began to slake' (l. 58). Nevertheless, Cleges will not be deterred:

To hold hys feste he wold not lete;
Hys rych maners to wede he sete;
He thought hymselve oute to quyte.
Thus he festyd many a yere
Both gentyll men and comenere
In the name of God allmyght.

<div align="right">(Cleges, ll. 61–6)</div>

Unsurprisingly, he fails 'hymselve oute to quyte', and so the downward spiral continues:

So at the last, soth to sey,
All hys gode was spendyd away;
Than he had bot a lyte.
Thoff hys god were ne hond leste,
In the wyrschyp he made a feste;
He hopyd, God wold hym quyte.

Hys ryalty he forderyd ay,
To hys maners wer sold awey,
That hym was left bot one,
And that was of lytell valew,
That he and hys wyfe so trew
Oneth myght lyfe therone.
Hys men, that wer so mych of pride,
Weste awey onne every syde;
With hym ther left not one.
To duell with hym ther left no mo
Bot hys wyfe and his chylder two.
Than made he mekyll mone.

<div align="right">(Cleges, ll. 67–84)</div>

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[31]   The pressure to spend and live lavishly was intense in this period, and merchants and gentles really did ruin themelves in this way: see Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, p. 148; see also Putter, 'Gifts and Commodities in *Sir Amadace*, p. 383, n. 25.

Middle English romance's repetitive diction is particularly effective in this sequence, mapping and matching the family's incremental decline from owning estates, to mortgaging them, to selling. The first lines of the poem are filled with images of 'plenté' (l. 24), particularly feasting, richness, and gold, but then the semantic field gradually changes. 'Goods' begin to feature, (ll. 58, 68, 70), interspersed with phrases about spending and loss (ll. 68, 73). These slowly take over (ll. 73, 74), until they too are superseded by scarcity and lack: 'bot one' (l. 75), 'lytell valew' (l. 76), 'not one' (l. 81), 'no mo' (l. 82). Where there was 'mekyll myght' in line 12, by line 84 there is only 'mekyll mone'. There is a very similar passage in *Sir Amadace*, where the merchant's widow describes in painful detail first the reckless generosity that meant her husband 'toke so mycul opon his name / That I dar notte telle yo, lord, for schame, / The godus now that he aghte' (ll. 166–8), and second how her creditors stripped her of all she had – merchandise, livestock, even her dowry (their mixed domestic economy is again entirely realistic).[32] Although Middle English romances often admit money, romances of impoverished knights are distinctive in that they create unsympathetic and verisimilar economic environments in which riches can be frittered away.

Sir Amadace, *Amis and Amiloun*, and *Sir Launfal* all share in this quantitative understanding of wealth. The acephalous *Sir Amadace* opens at the point where we have just left *Sir Cleges*, with the steward explaining that Amadace is hopelessly in debt and must prepare for austerity:

> The stuard sayd, 'Sir, ye awe wele more
> Thenne ye may of your londus rere,
> In faythe this sevyn yere.
> Quoso may best, furste ye mun pray,
> 'Abyde yo till anothir day' –
> And parte your cowrte in sere,
> And putte away full mony of your men,
> And hald butte on quere ye hald ten,
> Thagh thay be nevyr so dere'.
>
> (*Amadace*, ll. 4–12)

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[32] On such mixed domestic economies, see Thrupp, *Merchant Class of Medieval London*, pp. 103–30; Dyer, *An Age of Transition?*, p. 24.

But the poem's well-developed economic setting affords Amadace an alternative, and he decides he would prefer to raise the immediate capital by mortgaging his lands, and then go abroad while his estates slowly repay the loan (ll. 29–36). *Amis and Amiloun*, meanwhile, demonstrates the quantitative aspect of wealth in a painful description of Amiloun and Amoraunt's suffering. Before they leave home Amiloun sends Amoraunt to ask that they be given 'so michel of al his [Amiloun's] gode, / as an asse to riden opon' (ll. 1772–3), indicating that the quality 'prosperity' is already beginning to fragment into countable 'goods'. As times get harder the pair is eventually forced to sell that ass for 'fiue schilling' (l. 1821), thus converting goods into money that gradually melts away until they are down to their last 'tvelf pans' (l. 1856). By this time Amoraunt is too exhausted to carry Amiloun any further, so they use their last pennies to buy a cart, and then turn to Amis's gates in a last attempt at survival. It is a pitiful tale of diminishing resources, vividly described and clearly measured.

In *Sir Landevale* and *Sir Launfal* the importance of wealth and quantities is realized on two levels – intertextually as the versions grow increasingly materialistic, and extratextually in an intriguing feature of the manuscripts themselves. I shall discuss each in turn, beginning with the inter-textual evidence. The materialism in *Sir Launfal* has often attracted comment, but much of the poem's money-consciousness is present in *Sir Landevale* too.[33] Both heroes get into trouble because they spend too much (whereas Marie's Lanval is simply ignored), and we have already heard the materialistic tone of Landevale's laments. The love talk between Landevale and his lady also reads like a commercial *quid pro quo*:

> Wilt thow truliche the to me take,
> And all other for me forsake? –
> And J will yeue the grette honoure,
> Gold jnough, and grete tresour.

<div align="right">

(*Landevale*, ll. 127–30)

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[33] On materialism in *Launfal*, see Guy-Bray, 'Male Trouble', p. 39; Seaman, 'Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*', pp. 114–18; A. C. Spearing, 'Marie de France and Middle English Adapters', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 12 (1990), 117–56, at pp. 152–5.

The fairy makes a simple 'profer' (l. 138) – his loyalty in exchange for her wealth. The deal is still plainer in *Sir Launfal*, where it is introduced with an if-clause, and the rhythm emphasizes the key word 'ryche':

> Yf thou wylt truly to me take
> And alle women for me forsake,
> Ryche I will make the.

<div align="right">(Launfal, ll. 316–18)</div>

The lady's gifts also become more materialistic with each version, so that by the time we reach *Sir Launfal* they are nothing less than the public embodiment of economic, social, and symbolic prosperity –'triumphant tangibilities', to use Myra Stokes's phrase.[34] *Lanval* and *Landevale* speak only obliquely of silver and gold, whereas the proffered wealth in *Launfal* is manifest specifically as currency and objects. As well as the infinite riches of the other versions, Launfal receives invincibility, a pennon, a horse, and a valet.[35] The first of these enhances Tryamour's supernatural credentials, which are made more explicit in *Sir Launfal* than either *Lanval* or *Landevale*, but the others are all concerned with the public display of wealth, status, and military function; the horse alone could have been worth a knight's entire annual income.[36] The gift of unlimited riches, meanwhile, has assumed physical form as a magic purse from which Launfal can draw not just the general 'gold and syluer' of the earlier versions (*Landevale*, l. 154), but *coinage*: 'a mark of gold' (*Launfal*, l. 323; though the mark was actually a unit of account, and not a coin, the text envisages something one can hold).[37] The fairy mistress had been associated with opulence and wealth since Marie's lay, but there she also has a psychological aspect as private fantasy; by contrast, the publically oriented *Sir Launfal* describes primarily the accumulation

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[34] Stokes, '*Lanval* to *Sir Launfal*', p. 63.

[35] Chestre brings these gifts into the Lanval story from the anonymous Old French lay *Graelent*, which is available in *Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), pp. 349–412.

[36] Prestwich, 'The Enterprise of War', p. 85.

[37] Philip Grierson, *Coins of Medieval Europe* (London: Seaby, 1991), p. 223.

of money and things, culminating in the high-profile procession of goods to the hero's orchard residence.[38]

Now for the manuscripts themselves. *Sir Launfal* only survives in one manuscript, and that text preserves a well-known oddity. Marie's lay records Lanval's return to prosperity by repeating his name over and over:

> Lanval donout les riches duns,
> Lanval aquitout prisuns,
> Lanval vesteit jugleürs,
> Lanval feseit les granz honurs.[39]

> [Lanval gave rich gifts, Lanval acquitted prisoners, Lanval dressed jesters, Lanval did great things.][40]

Though it is done 'with a knowing smile' and perhaps only 'semi-serious applause', the anaphora nonetheless speaks of the triumph of self-sufficiency and personal glory.[41] Restored to riches, Lanval the knight and *Lanval* the poem both exult in a moment of apotheosis, and in the power their shared name now wields. *Sir Landevale* follows suit, but *Sir Launfal* changes the emphasis. Although the anaphoric device is translated intact, the poem now stresses not the quality of the hero, but the quantity of his wealth:

> Launfal helde ryche festes,
> Fyfty fedde powere gestes

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38 Several Middle English romances apart from *Sir Launfal* also refer to coins and currency where there is no mention of them in the extant francophone versions. Examples include *The Lyfe of Ipomydon* (*Ipomydon C*), which has unique references to money at ll. 546, 1350, 1450, 1924, 2270; *Bevis of Hampton*, with unique or expanded references at ll. 2995–8, 3900–16, 3994; *Amis and Amiloun*, where Amis's sense of financial inadequacy is unique to the Middle English text. It is possible that such references were routinely added in the course of translation and dissemination, which would accord well with the mental shift I am suggesting. But then again, the apparent pattern may be no more than an accident of the manuscript record.

39 Marie de Frace, *Lanval*, in *Lais*, ed. Alfred Ewert, introduced by Glyn Burgess (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1995), ll. 208–11.

40 The translation is my own.

41 'Marie here grants her hero with a knowing smile the ideal self-image wistfully pictured by most: interlinked sexual/romantic and economic success, and a "name" to be repeated with admiration and warmth – a name bestowed by Marie herself in semi-serious applause': Stokes, '*Lanval* to *Sir Launfal*', p. 66. Stokes's emphasis is psycho-social, mine socio-political.

Þat in myschef wer;
Fyfty bouȝte stronge stedes,
Fyfty yaf ryche wedes
To knyȝtes & squyere;
Fyfty rewardede relygyons,
Fyfty delyuerede pouere prysouns,
And made ham quyt & schere;
Fyfty clodede gestours:
To many men he dede honours
Jn countreys fer & nere.

(*Launfal*, ll. 421–32)

The passage stands out both on the page and to the ear, revelling in the sheer joy of having and giving 'fyfty'. But it is also an ungainly piece of writing that barely makes sense, threatening to oust the hero and replace him with a new character called Fyfty. Something odd happened in transmission, and in an old article for *Modern Language Notes* Julian Harris suggested what that might have been. He hypothesized that somewhere in our text's history there was a manuscript that abbreviated the hero's name to 'L' (indeed, the extant manuscript of *Sir Landevale* does just that), and that someone at some stage mistook that 'L' for a Roman numeral and expanded accordingly – 'L' becomes 'fyfty'.[42] Though conjectural, this is a sensible explanation for a strange textual quirk. Such a mistake speaks volumes about the mindset of the person who made it: that person was thinking of amounts rather than qualities, and understood the nobleman's potency not by reference to who he is, but to how much he has. This is the logical conclusion of all we have been saying. If nobility is synonymous with status, status basically a matter of wealth, and wealth subject to quantitative measure, then nobility likewise ceases to be a quality – innate, inherited, and inalienable – and becomes instead a matter of quantity, and something an individual might win and lose.

This change in attitude has far-reaching effects, indicated by the structural significance accorded the cycle of credit and debt. *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Chevelere Assigne* show that Middle English romances are not always assiduous in tying off loose ends, but when a knight gets into debt, the narration *always* goes back to say those debts are eventually cleared. In *Sir Amadace* 'alle

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[42] Julian Harris, 'A Note on Thomas Chestre', *Modern Language Notes* 46(1) (1931), 24–5.

that evyr his lond withheld, / Frithe or forest, towne or filde, / With tresyr owte boghte he' (ll. 820–2); *Sir Cleges* assures us 'upon the dettys that they hyght, / They payd als fast as thei myght, / To every man wer content' (ll. 562–4); and in *Sir Launfal* 'all þat Launfal hadde borwyþ before, / Gyfre, be tayle & be score, / Ʒald hyt well and fyne' (ll. 418–20). It is not sufficient for the hero simply to recover his wealth – he must also settle his accounts. That is because the cycle of debt and credit is these poems' equivalent of the more familiar romance cycles of injustice and justice, or of loss and recovery (though the two may occur together). Paying one's debts is structurally analogous to the settling of old scores in combat, for both provide an initial imbalance which is eventually resolved through the quitting of what is 'owed'. The only difference is that financial worth has replaced worth accorded to blood or prowess. That indicates the variety of the structures and paradigms informing romance's several plots, and strengthens the case for studying the texts according to story-type.

The distinctive features of the impoverished-knight story could be considered socially determined, as symptoms of a bourgeois outlook. The materialism, the quantitative understanding of status and wealth, the structural role of credit and debt all seem the epitome of a bourgeois mentality that either rejects or simply misunderstands the noble and courtly world-view proper to romance. *Sir Launfal* and *Sir Amadace* have been interpreted in precisely those terms, the former as an 'appeal to the shameless wish-fulfilment of the petty tradesman', and the latter as a 'commercial romance' written 'from the perspective of the underclasses who might mistake the bourgeois for the noble'.[43] I resist that association for the reasons given in the Introduction and Chapter 1: literary critics now realize it is indefensible to make such class-based assumptions about how people think, and historians have shown the divide between gentle and mercantile audiences was not as strong as once thought. Moreover, this revised opinion of wealth, status, and nobility must have been intruding on even the most conservative late-medieval consciousnesses. As estate finances were squeezed by falling revenues and rising costs, as families

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[43] Sands (ed.), *Middle English Verse Romances*, p. 202 (on *Launfal*); Foster, 'Simplicity, Complexity, and Morality in Four Medieval Romances', p. 406 (on *Amadace*).

waxed and waned, and as fortunes were won and lost on the markets or the battlefields of France, the practical role of money in determining status must have been apparent to all but the most wilfully blinkered of observers. These romances provide a general reflection on their socio-economic context that is not class-specific, but is nevertheless considerably more accurate than that in the other romances we have discussed, which tend not to acknowledge contemporary reality and choose instead to restrict themselves to the realm of story.

However, though it is tempting to feel the winds of social change blowing in these five texts, there is also a very basic narrative reason for their distance from the ideology of blood. Though the settings and conventions of romance demand a high-class hero, this story-type is most effective if that hero can also be a kind of everyman. To appreciate fully the misery, wonder, and joy of these narratives, the audience must identify with the heroes and heroines as ordinary human beings, not look up to them as members of an élite caste. That is not so necessary in the other story-types, where one can admire or support the heroes as men who exist on a different plane. By contrast, romances of impoverished knights lose their impact if their heroes are so viewed. The texts thus ignore the characters' high birth and encourage the audience to identify with them as human beings, often by including affecting domestic or family scenes: the audience hears Amadace, Amiloun and Cleges longing for their past happiness; witnesses the tearful partings between Isumbras and his wife, or between Amadace and his companions; sees Cleges and Clarys playing with their children, and Isumbras entertaining his son with a flower. They are encouraged to sympathize with Launfal when his horse slips in the mud and the people laugh at him, and with Cleges as he stands in the cold and hears everyone else celebrating Christmas; and though it is impossible to comprehend Amadace's horror at having to murder his wife, or Amis's at having to sacrifice his children, the poems describe those scenes in pathetic and affecting detail to help audiences imagine.

Most simply, and perhaps most significantly, these are people who get tired, hungry, and cold. *Sir Isumbras* emphasizes the family's physical privation:[44]

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[44] The emphasis on Isumbras's physical suffering is also noted in Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights*, pp. 132–7, where it is related to the nature of his former sin.

> Sex deyes were come and gone,
> Mete ne drynke hadde they none,
> For hongur they wepte sore.
>
> <div align="right">(Isumbras, ll. 163–5)</div>

The following day Isumbras observes 'mete nor drynke ne have we none, / not these dayes sevenn' (ll. 224–5). While labouring as a miner Isumbras 'wroghte his body mykyll wo' (l. 399), and when he is a palmer he does not change his 'pore wedes' either night or day for seven years (ll. 513–15). *Amis and Amiloun* is similar, describing vividly the economic and social effects of famine, and subjecting Amiloun and Amoraunt to some of the most mundane challenges ever faced by romance heroes. There is nothing sensational or exciting here, just hunger, bad weather, and worse roads:

> Þat winter com so hard and strong,
> Oft, 'Allas!' it was his song,
> So depe was þat cuntray;
> Þe way was so depe & slider,
> Oft times boþ to-gider
> Þai fel doun in þe clay.
>
> <div align="right">(Amis and Amiloun, ll. 1840–5)</div>

The lost heirs master the natural world with their innate charisma, and the heroes attempting to win their ladies all glide through life untouched by the elements; but poor Amiloun lives in a world that is harsh and inhospitable, and coloured by the general hardships of famine, winter, and illness in pre-modern society. The hero's vulnerability to loss of status is thus part of a wider scheme to bring the hero down to a more basic level of existence, thereby enhancing the narrative by accentuating his suffering and making his eventual happiness all the sweeter.

Nonetheless, though this narrative technique aims primarily to extract from the story the maximum emotional impact, it also implies a lack of interest in the ideology of blood and birth. It makes the hero's basic characteristics and experiences common to his species rather than specific to his class, and removes him from the rarefied, hero-centric world Auerbach found in *Yvain*; that world that does extend some way into Middle English romances about lost heirs and aspiring lovers, but is not relevant here. This is not because these romances had a different audience, or because aristocracy was losing its symbolic cachet. (The

other evidence is all against that.) Instead, the difference comes from the difference in perspective suggested by the plots: whereas romances about winning an identity, a kingdom, or a bride tend to demonstrate the potency of the noble spirit, the experience of the impoverished knight lends itself to celebrating the indomitability of the human one. Job-like, the heroes retain their integrity in the face of hardship, do not despair, and eventually ride Fortune's wheel back to the heights of renown and prosperity.

'Nobility' is a key part of that worldly gratification – a civil state defined as public recognition of material substance, and technically distinct from inherited privilege. But that is not all there is to it. These heroes are not genuine everyman figures, and their nobility is not composed entirely of economic and social capital. Instead, they maintain the superiority of degree proper to a romance hero by being extraordinarily virtuous. By making virtue the ultimate cause for the heroes' restoration, the texts actually present that as the true wellspring of nobility. Meanwhile, by having these restorations orchestrated by divine or supernatural figures, the texts solemnize their conclusions as something more profound than the simple recovery of earthly good fortune. Here they depart from the pragmatic definitions of nobility adopted by men of law and politics, and join with the likes of Chaucer and Dante in saying that *true* nobility is a state of grace achieved through personal good conduct. Moreover, these two aspects of nobility are not simply juxtaposed, as in the romances in the previous chapter; instead, the public response to wealth and the divine response to virtue are synthesized into a single powerful ideological construct.

Virtue, Nobility, and Wealth

Though the world judges the hero by his appearance, the audience knows better and understands that he is always worthy of noble status, whatever his circumstances. The situation is similar to that in the romances of lost heirs, where the audience is again aware of the hero's nobility even when no one else is. This has prompted James Simpson to see in both types of story a single 'deeply conservative ideology' according to which 'everyone has a place to which they

will eventually and rightly return'.[45] He argues the key to this providential order is genetics: *Degaré* follows 'a genetically pre-given order of things', and in *Sir Amadace* 'success is genetically programmed'.[46] However, to conflate the two types of story in this way is to miss an important difference between them. The nobility of the impoverished knight comes from his virtue rather than his lineage, and the audience knows where he belongs because it has privy access not to his genealogy, but to his soul.

This distinction between external appearances and internal truth is particularly strongly developed in *Sir Isumbras*, which encapsulates relationships between nobility, wealth, and virtue that characterize all five of the romances we are discussing. The other characters treat Isumbras according to his manner of dress, but after his initial fall he judges himself according to a spiritual standard verified by God. At the beginning of the story Isumbras is spiritually base because he has been seduced into pride by his material wealth. He no longer merits the external signs of nobility, so God confiscates them and brings appearances and reality momentarily back into line. However, the gap soon opens again, for Isumbras is immediately contrite:

> With carefull herte and sykynge sore,
> He fell upon his knees thore;
> His hondes up he helde.
> 'Worldes welthe I woll forsake;
> To Jesu Criste I wyll me take,
> To hym my sowle I yelde.'

<div align="right">(Isumbras, ll. 55–60)</div>

This contrition constitutes a significant step towards regaining a state of grace, and signals to the audience that Isumbras is still a worthy, 'noble' character.[47] His poverty is an appropriate penance, but not a reliable indication of his moral

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45   From the discussion of *Sir Amadace* in Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, p. 268. Compare the identical argument in Simpson, 'Violence, Narrative, and Proper Name', discussed in Chapter 2.

46   Simpson, 'Violence, Narrative, and Proper Name', p. 131; Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, p. 268.

47   The evolving connection between grace and contrition in medieval theology is discussed in Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights*, pp. 49–53.

condition. Even so, Isumbras avoids all signs of status until an angel confirms that he has been forgiven:

> Palmere, wellcome thou be;
> Hevenne kynge thus greteth the,
> And foryeveth the synnes thyne.
> And wele the greteth hevenne kynge,
> And yeveth the his blessynge,
> He byddeth the turne ayeyne.

<div align="right">(Isumbras, ll. 526–31)</div>

With his soul now washed clean, Isumbras unquestionably deserves external finery. His inner nobility is assured and can be justly realized in material, public form. But because Isumbras still looks like a filthy beggar nothing much changes: 'Yette wyste he nevur what to do, / But forto lyve in care and wo; / In sore pyne he yode' (ll. 535–7). Recognized by God, he has yet to be recognized by the world, and the story does not end until that finally happens.

Sir Isumbras thus shows that neither internal nor external nobility is enough to resolve the story, and that the hero does not achieve full self-realization until he is considered noble on both counts. The romance pulls in two directions. On the one hand it promotes Christian virtue as the only true measure of worth, which prompts Landers to argue that Isumbras loses worldly possessions so as to demonstrate their insignificance – qualities of character are 'the more essential aspects of his identity and being'.[48] On the other hand, the text also demonstrates what Crane describes as 'fundamental commitments to the importance of worldly achievement, the value of earthly life, and the centrality of the hero's power'.[49] The other romances of impoverished knights all do the same thing, each synthesizing the pragmatic nobility of the jurists with the idealistic nobility of Boethius and Dante. In each poem the idea that nobility is a consequence of wealth is balanced with the argument that wealth (and the public recognition it buys) is itself a consequence of virtue.

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[48]   Landers, 'And Loved he was with All', p. 360.

[49]   Crane, *Insular Romance*, p. 133.

In *Sir Isumbras* the key virtue is humility – the antidote to his former pride.[50] The other romances privilege similar virtues, particularly selflessness, generosity, and collective action. In *Sir Cleges* society is imagined as a genuine body politic in which each member has a duty to the others. Cleges and his wife Clarys are introduced as 'grete almusfolke' who 'cheryd many a wyght' (ll. 31, 33), and their compassion contrasts with the callous greed of the officials Cleges meets at Uther's court. The text condemns rapacity, and presents a pious community spirit as a key component of nobility. At the domestic level, the text again dramatizes and praises solidarity. It seems God rewards the couple principally for their constancy and co-operation, as just before the unseasonable fruit appears each prays for the other in church: Cleges asks, 'Graysos Lord [...] My wife and my chylder two, / Kepe us out of stryffe (ll. 172–4), while Clarys kneels beside him and begs, 'God, kepe my lord fro payn, / Into everlasting lyffe' (ll. 176–7). The parallel prayers are synchronic, and their efficacy is manifest shortly afterwards through the gift of the midwinter, midnight cherries.

But while the cherries are a reward for selflessness, they are also a test of ongoing familial commitment. Cleges misinterprets the sign, fearing 'that mour grevans is ny' (l. 222), and it is only after consulting with Clarys that he understands the message is actually of 'mour godness' (l. 224). It is together that they decide to give the fruit away to Uther, and the next morning Cleges travels to Cardiff together with his son. Uther's gifts include things for Clarys and the children as well as Cleges himself (a cup for the lady, and a place in the king's household for the youth), and the poem finally closes not at court, but with the domestic group back together at home. The last word, indeed, goes to Clarys, who 'thankyd God of all maner / Fore sche had both knyght and squyre' (ll. 559–60). The happy ending is unquestionably communal, and is achieved by patience, quick-thinking, and collective action. The symbolic capital the family converts into economic and social standing therefore derives from its members' exemplary qualities of character. If they are also born to nobility, that is incidental to the story's main drive.

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[50]   The theology of penance considered sin most effectively cleansed by practising the opposite virtue: Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights*, pp. 65–6.

Sir Cleges is most distinctive for its touching family scenes. As Speed points out, 'the Cleges who performs knightly deeds remains a remote figure; it is the domestic Cleges who is more closely observed'.[51] One such scene is when Clarys comforts her husband in his misery:

> Als he stode in mournyng so,
> And hys wyfe com hym to,
> In armys sche hym bente.
> Sche kyssed hym with glad chere
> And seyd: 'My trew wedyd fere,
> I here wele what ye ment.'

(*Cleges*, ll. 121–6)

She tells him to cheer up, takes him in for supper, and as they eat 'sche comforth hym ever mour' until Cleges eventually begins to 'wex blyth' (ll. 149, 151). This is followed with a homely scene unparalleled in Middle English romance:

> When thei had ete, the soth to sey,
> With myrth thei drofe the dey awey,
> The best wey that they myght.
> With ther chylder pley thei dyde
> And after evensong went to bede
> At serteyn of the nyght.

(*Cleges*, ll. 157–62)

Sequences like this have given critics cause to wonder whether *Sir Cleges* is really a romance at all, and whether it would not be better classified as some kind of homiletic tale.[52] But while the text certainly does combine elements from several genres (as do many romances), it also takes pains to establish from the beginning the horizon of expectation proper to a romance.[53] It is set in the time

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[51] Speed, '*Sir Cleges*: Introduction', p. 172.

[52] Pearsall considers the romance setting wholly circumstancial, and Hornstein hedges by describing the poem as 'a pious tale, a humorous tale, and a minstrel's tale': Pearsall, 'The Development of Middle English Romance', p. 30; Hornstein, 'Miscellaneous Romances', p. 170. See also Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, p. 200, where *Sir Cleges* is characterized as a pious, secular saint's legend.

[53] The combination of elements is discussed in *Sir Cleges*, ed. Laskaya and Salisbury, pp. 367–8; Speed, '*Sir Cleges*: Introduction', pp. 171–2. On the folkloric, hagiographic, and scriptural resonances of the unseasonable fruit, see Carr, 'The Middle English Nativity Cherry Tree'; C. Grant Loomis, 'Unseasonable Growth in Hagiology', *Modern Language Notes* 53(8) (1938), 591–4. On romance's habitual dialogue with other genres, see Simon Gaunt,

of King Uther, its hero is a renowned knight ('a doughtyere man was non at nedys', l. 8), and its stated business is to recount to an imagined audience of 'lordynges' the adventures of 'ansytores, that before us were, / Bothe herdy and wyght' (ll. 1–2). Moreover, though *Sir Cleges* is particularly single-minded in developing its moral and domestic theme, those ideas do also feature in other romances of impoverished knights.

One of those is *Sir Amadace*, where the reward again becomes a test of family virtue. This time, though, the stakes are higher. Elizabeth Williams has shown that at his second coming the White Knight is best read not as one of the grateful dead, but as an otherworld figure similar to Gawain's Green Knight, who has come to test the integrity of the human hero.[54] Amadace passes that test, not only when he welcomes his 'fere' and expresses his readiness to share his wealth as agreed, but also, more significantly, in his desperate attempt to save his wife:

> 'Alas!' sayd sir Amadace than,
> 'That evyr I this woman wan,
> Or any worldes gode.
> For his lufe that deet on tre,
> Quatsever ye will, do with me
> For him that deet on Rode.
> Ye, take all that evyr I have
> Wyth the, that ye hur lyfe save.

<div align="right">(Amadace, ll. 709–16)</div>

He offers himself; he offers everything he has; he laments that ever he came to riches if the cost is to be so high. Amadace thus proves himself as selfless as ever in his new prosperity, while his obvious devotion to his lady makes his eventual readiness to keep his word still more remarkable and painful. But it is not only

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'Romance and Other Genres', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 45–59. The phrase 'horizon of expectation' was coined by Hans Robert Jauss in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, but it has now entered the critical vernacular.

[54] Elizabeth Williams, 'Sir Amadace and the Undisenchanted Bride: The Relation of the Middle English Romance to the Folktale Tradition of "The Grateful Dead"', in *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance*, ed. Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), pp. 57–70, at pp. 68–9. On the folk motif of the grateful dead, see Gerould, *The Grateful Dead* (*Sir Amadace* features on pp. 37–9, 153–8).

Amadace whom the White Knight has come to test. He also tries the lady's virtue, and she proves her credentials spectacularly:

> Then the lady undurstode anon
> The wurd that was betwene hom,
> And grevyt hur nevyr the more.
> Then sayd, 'For his luffe that deut on tre,
> Loke yore covandus holdun be:
> Goddes forbotte ye me spare!'
>
> Thenne bespeke that ladi brighte,
> Sayd, 'ye schalle him hold that ye have highte,
> Be God and Sayn Drightine!
> For his lufe that deet on tre,
> Loke yaure covandus holdun be,
> Yore forward was full fyne.
> Sithun Crist will that hit be so,
> Take and parte me evun in toe;
> Thou wan me and I am thine.
> Goddus forbotte that ye hade wyvut,
> That I schuld yo a lure makette,
> Yore wurschip in londe to tyne!'
>
> Still ho stode, withoutun lette,
> Nawthir changet chere ne grette
> That lady myld and dere.

(*Amadace*, ll. 730–47)

I quote the entire speech to demonstrate the lady's total conviction and lack of self-regard. Amadace made a promise, and she determines that he shall keep it even if it costs her her life. She expresses no regret, and Amadace does not even have to ask her to make the sacrifice, for she grasps the situation and volunteers herself.

Though Amadace is ostensibly the hero of this romance, just as Cleges is ostensibly the hero of his, this test is really much more about the lady. The White Knight makes no comment on Amadace's exemplary behaviour, but is full of admiration for his wife. When issuing the reprieve he observes to Amadace:

> I con notte wite the gif thou were woe,
> Suche a ladi forto slo,
> The wurschip thus wold save.

(*Amadace*, ll. 781–3)

And as he leaves he cautions him:

> But loke thou lufe this lady as thy lyve,
> That thus mekely, withouten stryve,
> Thi forwardus wold fulfille.

<div align="right">(Amadace, ll. 796–8)</div>

The lady is the centre of attention, and acknowledging her centrality helps to explain an episode that is otherwise difficult to comprehend. Critics have objected to the ordeal the White Knight puts Amadace through (it seems so unfair when Amadace has been so kind), but it does make sense when seen as a test of his wife.[55] He proves himself worthy of her, she proves herself worthy of him, and they both prove themselves worthy of the economic and social capital they are eventually left to enjoy. As in *Sir Isumbras*, the resolution comes with the assurance that external, civil nobility is matched by, and predicated on, inner nobility of character.

Amis and Amiloun does the same thing, and privileges similar virtues. Amiloun, Amoraunt, Amis, and Belisaunt all struggle towards their happy ending by making sacrifices for one another, and each of them is tested before the resolution can be finalized. Belisaunt's reaction to the death of her children might seem shocking, but is actually the final stage in this sequence of trials:

> Þan was þe leuedi ferly wo
> & seiȝe hir lord was al-so;
> Sche comfort him ful ȝare,
> 'O lef liif', sche seyd þo,
> 'God may sende ous childer mo,
> Of hem haue þou no care.
> Ȝif it ware at min hert rote,
> For to bring þi broþer bote,
> My lyf y wold not spare.'

<div align="right">(Amis and Amiloun, ll. 2389–97)</div>

We do not yet know whether the grim cure has worked, and we certainly do not know that the children will be resurrected. That is because, as in *Sir Amadace*,

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55 Published work that struggles with the White Knight's behaviour includes Kane, *Middle English Literature*, p. 14; Maldwyn Mills, 'Introduction', in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Mills (London: Dent, 1973; rept. 1988), pp. vii–xxxiii, at pp. xix–xxi. Corrine Saunders seeks to explain it as 'the apparent injustice that masks beneficent providence': *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), p. 234.

the happy ending is contingent on the behaviour of *both* husband *and* wife. Amiloun, Amoraunt, and Amis have all proved themselves, but before either cure or resurrection can come about, Belisaunt has to pass her test – a harrowing test of fidelity and altruism, as in *Sir Amadace*. Once again, earthly prosperity is the reward for inner virtue, and nobility presented as a hybrid civil and spiritual state. Biology has little to do with it, for though the high-class setting is a *donnée* of the genre, it is incidental to the ethos of the story.

In *Sir Amadace* and *Amis and Amiloun* virtues are absolute. Loyalty between family and friends outweighs all other concerns, without exception.[56] *Sir Launfal* shares this moral absolutism, and again places fidelity above all other values. At one point Launfal tells Guinevere 'J nell be traytour, þay ne nyȝt' (l. 683), and this would make him a fitting personal motto. Even against his own best interests, he remains staunchly faithful to himself, his lover, and his lord.[57] When Guinevere's extramarital affairs come to light we learn that 'Launfal lyked her noȝt / Ne oþer knyȝts þat wer hende' (ll. 44–5), but those other knights all overlook the queen's behaviour. Only Launfal actually leaves as a matter of principle. Later his unbending principles mean he is unable to equivocate to get around Guinevere's proposals and accusations. In *Graelent* (one of *Launfal*'s apparent sources), the hero avoids insulting the queen by making lengthy, indirect excuses, begging her forgiveness, and explaining why he cannot accept her love – he is sworn to her husband, love is too weighty a commitment for him, and he knows too little about it.[58] Launfal just rebuffs Guinevere by telling her he refuses to be a traitor: 'J nell be traytour, þay ne nyȝt, / Be God þat all may stere' (ll. 683–4). This is a step backwards in terms of narrative subtlety, but Launfal's curt rejoinder also makes more of a feature of his simple integrity (whereas Graelent seems admirable more for his urbanity and tact).

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[56] The primacy of friendship and *treuþe* is discussed in Baldwin, '*Amis and Amiloun*: The Testing of *Treuþe*'; Mehl, *Middle English Romances*, p. 107; *Amis and Amiloun*, ed. Leach, pp. xxv–xxvi.

[57] On the thematic centrality of l. 683, Launfal's loyalty, and the problems it causes him, see also Peter J. Lucas, 'Towards an Interpretation of *Sir Launfal*, with Particular Reference to Line 683', *Medium Ævum* 39 (1970), 291–300.

[58] *Graelent*, ed. Burgess and Brook, ll. 83–137.

That same integrity comes through in the trial, where Launfal frankly admits guilt or vigorously defends himself, as appropriate:

> Þe knyȝt answerede wyth egre mode,
> Before þe kyng þer he stode,
> Þe quene on hym gan lye:
> 'Sethe þat y euer was yborn,
> I besofte her herebeforn
> Neuer of no folye! –
> But sche seyde y nas no man,
> Ne þat me louede no woman,
> Ne no womannes companye;
> And I answerede her, & sayde
> Þat my lemannes lodlekest mayde
> To be a quene was better wordye.

<div align="right">(Launfal, ll. 769–80)</div>

No equivocation, no excuses, just the truth. Similarly, though Gawain offers Launfal two opportunities to save himself by claiming one of the visiting damsels as his beloved (ll. 855, 893), Launfal refuses them both (ll. 857, 896). He is therefore justified in considering himself something special, but it is qualities of character that count; when Tryamour comes to save him, it can only be because he has proven himself against all temptation. The evidence from all five texts is conclusive. The heroes are intrinsically noble, as Simpson suggests, but the romances are not calculated to realize 'a deeply conservative ideology' of blood. Nobility here is not about genetic superiority, but moral qualities of character, and as the Vulgate *Lancelot*, the *Convivio*, and the Wife of Bath's Tale all make clear, that is a nobility to which anyone can aspire.

Nonetheless, the focus on virtue is neither wholly consistent, nor without problems, and the romances of impoverished knights can seem just as ideologically conflicted as those about lost heirs or winning a bride. Some of them, for instance, include outbreaks of violence that clash with the principle that nobility comes from virtue by reintroducing the association between nobility and prowess. Fighting does not have a natural place in this story-type, as the treatment of *Sir Amadace*'s tournament suggests. Amadace wins his bride by fighting in true romance style, but the combat itself is conspicuously absent:

> Be then the justing wase all cryed,
> There was no lord ther besyde
> Had halfe as many men os he [Amadace].

Ther he wanne so myculle honoure,
Fild and frithe, towne and toure,
Castell and riche cité;
A hundrithe stedis he wan and moe,
And gave the king the ton halve of thoe,
Butte the othir til his felo keput he.

Quen the justing was al done,
To unarme hom thay wente anone,
Hastely and belyve.

(*Amadace*, ll. 592–603)

As the narration skips 'hastely and belyve' over the fighting to focus on Amadace's material gains and generosity, it leaves a hole in the conventional romance pattern. We expect a description of jousting, but that expectation is defeated.[59] The skill involved in winning is irrelevant, indicating that the text has shed the military aspect so prominent in the romances in Chapter 3, replacing it with the selfless virtue discussed above.

Sir Isumbras, *Sir Cleges*, and *Sir Launfal* all contain more detailed scenes of violence, each counteracting the emphasis on virtue. Hopkins observes that Isumbras takes 'time out from his penance' to kill the sultan 'in the context purely of ambition and worldly aspirations', and Thompson that 'the vengeance pattern interrupts the penitence pattern, and *vice versa*, without any attempt on the poet's part to explain or integrate the two'.[60] Other critics have objected to the blanket slaughter of the Saracens in the final scenes, for that too seems to belong to a different narrative register from the patient suffering in the rest of the text.[61] In *Sir Cleges* the hero who rains blows on the palace officials is again very different from the kind husband and father we have watched hitherto; and though Thomas Chestre adds two violent episodes to *Sir Launfal* – a tournament

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[59] On romance's conventional and formulaic treatment of combat scenes, see Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures*, pp. 64–70.

[60] Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights*, p. 141; Anne B. Thompson, 'Jaussian Expectation and the Production of Medieval Narrative: The Case of "Saint Eustace" and *Sir Isumbras*', *Exemplaria* 5(2) (1993), 387–407, at p. 393.

[61] E.g. Stokes, 'The Romance Hypothetical', pp. 110–11, 115–19; Stephen D. Powell, 'Models of Religious Peace in the Middle English Romance *Sir Isumbras*', *Neophilologus* 85(1) (2001), 121–36. Both critics would like the poem to be straining or drifting towards an incipient religious tolerance, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

in Caerleon, and a single-combat/mêlée in Lombardy – neither episode features in *Lanval*, in *Graelent*, or in *Landevale*, and neither quite gels with the tale of a loyal knight and his fairy mistress.

As if to prove that prowess does not belong in this story-type, critics have often felt the need to explain or justify these martial excrescences. Bliss posits an episode in Andreas Capellanus's *De Amore* as the source for the scenes in *Sir Launfal*, and suggests they were included to extend the timeframe and give the love-affair longer in which to blossom.[62] Neither point is convincing, for the similarities between *Launfal* and the *De Amore* are very general (amounting to little more than a fight in honour of a lady's beauty), and romance affairs do not need time to develop because in a romance one falls passionately in love on the instant. Speed's explanation for the disjunction in *Sir Cleges* seems stronger, for she sees *Sir Cleges* as a compound text interweaving two distinct folk motifs (the 'impoverished knight' and 'strokes shared'), and says the change in tone results from the transition between the two. That seems reasonable, until Speed labels the former plot 'chivalric' and the latter 'bourgeois', thus pushing her explanation back onto an assumed distinction between class aesthetics.[63] Better is Hopkins's interpretation of *Sir Isumbras*. Having acknowledged the hero is on 'morally dubious' ground when he goes in quest of vengeance, Hopkins points out that romances invariably equate Saracens with evil, the devil, and the desire to destroy Christianity; in this context, she suggests, 'the frustration of this aim, whether or not it is accompanied by personal ambition or the desire for revenge, is a good and desirable thing'.[64] This explanation is appealing because it is true to the general tone of Middle English romance (in a way that Bliss's recourse to psychological realism is not). But nonetheless, there is also an even more basic reason for *Sir Isumbras*'s violence, a reason that applies equally well to the other texts too.

While *Sir Isumbras*, *Sir Launfal*, and *Sir Cleges* ostensibly consider virtue the true source of symbolic capital, they also warm to the conventional image of

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[62] *Sir Launfal*, ed. Bliss, pp. 24–5, 30.

[63] Speed, '*Sir Cleges*: Introduction', p. 172.

[64] Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights*, p. 142.

the hero as a warrior. The violent outbursts cater for a sense that romance heroes ought to be vigorous men of action. Spearing and Seaman both consider *Sir Launfal*'s battle scenes intended to give the hero a more active role in the story; indeed, Seaman thinks prowess is the most important of all Launfal's qualities, writing that Chestre 'values military success as superior to generosity, nobility, or refinement'.[65] But *Sir Launfal* and the others do not seem interested in ranking heroic qualities, but rather in embracing as many as possible. This occasionally leads to the story-type and romance setting working against each other, for the former demands passive virtue, the latter displays of prowess. That the texts attempt to satisfy both urges indicates two things: first, that it is difficult to create a convincing romance in which virtue is the sole source of symbolic capital (a difficulty highlighted by the critical tendency to redefine the most successful examples as other kinds of writing, such as 'secular hagiography' or 'narrative homily'); second, that the people responsible for these romances were not seeking ideological uniformity. Though the impoverished-knight theme suggests a nobility divorced from both blood and prowess, the romancers do not develop that suggestion to the exclusion of all else. Instead, they used romance's familiar stock of incidents and motifs despite their incompatibility with the basic story. The tensions and contradictions evident throughout Chapters 1 and 2 appear here as well, reinforcing the sense that Middle English romances do not realize any specific socio-political agenda, aristocratic or otherwise.

A further set of problems derives from the texts' constructing virtue in such absolute terms. Theirs is not the Aristotelian ideal of a mean between two extremes (the principle so praised in the *Convivio*), but virtue imagined as an uncompromising devotion that is often carried to excess. Amiloun knows he will be stricken with leprosy if he fights for Amis, but he does it anyway; Launfal's experience of poverty does nothing to curb his lavish spending later on, and his absolute moral principles ultimately make a social resolution impossible; Cleges, Amadace, and *Sir Amadace*'s dead merchant all carry on giving and spending until they are quite ruined. This presents both ethical and logical challenges, but

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[65] Spearing 'Marie de France and the Middle English Adapters', p. 151; Seaman, 'Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*', p. 115.

is also, paradoxically, the key to the texts' synthesis of idealistic and pragmatic definitions of nobility.

Given Launfal's integrity, his sense of self-worth is quite legitimate, but his absolutism also puts him at odds with the rest of human society (where values are more relative) and eventually forces him to leave it. His ethos belongs in Faerie, where morality is black and white, as Guinevere discovers to her cost: If I am lying, she says, 'put out my eeyn gray' (l. 810), and Tryamour duly obliges.[66] Among the faeries one makes and breaks oaths at one's peril, and Launfal's inflexible honesty is a genuine asset; in human society, its worth is debatable. As Dinah Hazell observes:

> the Lanval narrative poets pose the dilemma of whether rejection of an inevitably flawed world is the right choice, or whether social integration through struggle, compromise and acceptance is part of the human challenge.[67]

That dilemma is particularly urgent in *Sir Launfal* because, while Launfal's absolute integrity is more prominent here than in the sources, *Sir Launfal* also creates a stronger sense of the public, social world (as in the scenes in Caerleon, the materialism and public display that characterize Tryamour's gifts, and the internal audience that comments on Launfal's changing states). This means Launfal's departure is more troubling here than in the dreamy lays, for the asocial resolution stands out as a failure to meet that central 'human challenge'. Is a virtue that makes social living impossible really such a good thing? The story answers yes, but its answer does not quite ring true, and the nature of workable, sociable, human virtue remains unclear.

If *Sir Launfal*'s concept of virtue is problematic, that in *Sir Amadace* and *Amis and Amiloun* is still more so. We have seen how critics balk at the horrendous test of Amadace's wife, while in *Amis and Amiloun* the characters prosper through blackmail, deception, and murder. Foster condemns the whole

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[66] This characteristic of Faerie is discussed in Anderson, 'The Structure of *Sir Launfal*', p. 118; Edwards, 'Unknightly Conduct in *Sir Launfal*', p. 329. For discussion of Guinevere's blinding, see Dinah Hazell, 'The Blinding of Gwennere: Thomas Chestre as Social Critic', *Arthurian Literature* 20 (2003), 123–43, especially pp. 124–5.

[67] Hazell, 'The Blinding of Gwennere', p. 143.

text as morally depraved, and writes 'this poem is simply a matter of God snatching the corrupt from destruction [...] Here are mean people continually rescued from their own immorality'.[68] Further critical debate rages around the significance of Amiloun's leprosy in relation to the trial by combat (in which he poses as Amis so as to be able to swear innocence, and thus kills the steward on a technicality). The Middle Ages could interpret leprosy as either a curse or a blessing, so some critics see Amiloun's affliction as a punishment, and others as a sign of divine approval.[69]

Part of the reason for all this uncertainty is that moral absolutism is not part of romance's customary code. Writing on *Amis and Amiloun*, Kratins argues that romance naturally negotiates between competing value systems, while the elevation of one cause above all others is a technique proper to hagiography, where the saint's devotion to God justifies behaviour that would otherwise be totally unscrupulous.[70] Kratins considers *Amis and Amiloun* to be 'secular hagiography' because it justifies a succession of murders and deceptions on the principle that the friends' loyalty to one another is all that really matters, and is divinely endorsed throughout. Though less dramatic, *Sir Launfal* can be read in similar terms: like a saint's *vita*, it narrates the experience of a protagonist who devotes himself to a non-human being, finds life increasingly difficult, and is eventually released into the kingdom of the beloved.

Nonetheless, *Sir Launfal* and *Amis and Amiloun* are both romances, not saints' lives. *Sir Launfal*'s romance credentials are beyond dispute, and Kathryn

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[68] Foster, 'Simplicity, Complexity, and Morality in Four Medieval Romances', p. 418.

[69] For the argument that the leprosy *is* a punishment, see *Amis and Amiloun*, ed. Leach, pp. lxiii–lxiv; Dale Kramer, 'Structural Artistry in *Amis and Amiloun*', *Annuale Mediaevale* 9 (1968), 103–22, at p. 110. For the argument that it is *not*, see Baldwin, '*Amis and Amiloun*: The Testing of *Treuþe*', p. 360; Kratins, 'The Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*', pp. 350–1. See also Ivana Djordjević, 'Rewriting Divine Favour', in *Boundaries in Medieval Romance*, ed. Neil Cartlidge (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 161–73. On medieval attitudes towards leprosy more generally, see Carol Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), pp. 44–63; David Marcombe, *Leper Knights: The Order of St Lazarus of Jerusalem in England, c. 1150–1544* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), pp. 135–41.

[70] Kratins, 'The Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*', pp. 348, 351.

Hume has shown that *Amis and Amiloun* also has the structure and perspective of a romance, particularly when compared with other versions of the same legend.[71] In fact, the absolutism that Kratins considers characteristic of hagiography is actually typical of romances of impoverished knights – not just *Amis and Amiloun* and *Sir Launfal*, but also *Sir Amadace* and *Sir Cleges*. *Sir Amadace* demands hero and heroine sacrifice even life itself just to keep an oath. Meanwhile, by any rational standard, the generosity in *Sir Cleges* and *Sir Amadace* is excessive, self-destructive, and unsustainable. Ramsey notes that one cannot give unstintingly without the money eventually running out, and Putter that the tendency to reward profligacy with yet more wealth seems 'hopelessly quixotic'.[72] Mills, however, notices that while *Sir Amadace* appears to give its hero a dire warning in the merchant's stinking corpse, it is a warning he must actually ignore completely.[73] That is the key, for though this absolute charitable zeal is logically flawed, the texts construct it as noble and good. The heroes must not change, but rather remain constant to the ways that ruined them. If they do, upholding their principles even when reason says they should not, someone always intervenes to save and reward them.

Standing alone and destitute at Christmas, Cleges thanks God for giving him the opportunity to bankrupt himself:

> He knelyd adoun in that tyde
> And prayd to God verament.
> He thankyd God with all hys hert
> Of all desesyd in poverte,
> That ever to hym He sente.
>
> (*Cleges*, ll. 188–92)

And as he rises from his knees, he discovers the miraculous cherries. *Sir Amadace* repeats that pattern, for Amadace likewise wins Christ's favour by promising never to mend his ways. As he prays to Christ for 'summe of thi sokur' (l. 418), he also observes that 'yette I schuld ful gladely spende / On all that mestur hase' (ll. 419–20). As a result, the White Knight appears as soon as he

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71   Hume, 'Structure and Perspective', pp. 89–107.

72   Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances*, pp. 221–2; Putter, 'Arthurian Romance in English Popular Tradition', p. 245.

73   Mills, 'Introduction', in *Six Middle English Romances*, pp. xix–xx.

finishes speaking. In both poems, material reward comes in direct response to an affirmation of the hero's ongoing commitment to giving. Despite their detailed economies and financial perspicacity, these texts ultimately escape the usual laws of financial exchange and claim that someone, God or a faerie, will always provide.[74] As the faerie says to Landevale, 'Hardely spende largely! / Yife yeftys blythely! / Spend and spare not, for my loue! / Thow shalt jnough to thy behove' (ll. 131–4).

In this way the texts synthesize idealistic and pragmatic definitions of nobility. They present heroes who display the extreme devotion and absolute principles beloved of higher powers, divine or fay, and then appeal to those higher powers to intervene on the heroes' behalf. Romances of impoverished knights thus draw on the hagiographic structure described by Kratins, and then make it their own. When the intervention comes, it both confirms the hero's inner nobility, and provides, or at least paves the way to, social and economic capital – the outward prosperity that equates to civil nobility, and is equally vital for a romance conclusion. As Susan Crane has shown, even the so-called hagiographic romances are deeply committed to secular, earthly values, and even the most pious romances always imagine success as achievement in this world.[75] However, by putting those earthly things in God's gift these romances of impoverished knights also solemnize them and invest them with added symbolic meaning.

Therefore, through skilful handling of human and superhuman agency, all five texts negotiate conclusions akin to that in *Sir Isumbras*, with which we began this section. The hero's material circumstances ultimately reflect his spiritual condition, and earthly success reflects true symbolic value. Only *Sir Launfal* deviates from that path, thwarted by an asocial resolution inherited from *Lanval* and *Graelent*. But even *Launfal*'s ideal of nobility conforms to this pattern more or less, for when Launfal departs it is to a life of luxury that rewards his integrity,

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[74] See further the discussion in Putter, 'Gifts and Commodities in *Sir Amadace*', pp. 387–92.

[75] Crane, *Insular Romance*, pp. 92–133, especially pp. 101–4. See also Susan Dannenbaum (Crane), 'Guy of Warwick and the Question of Exemplary Romance', *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 17(4) (1984), 351–74.

and leaves society in little doubt as to his quality. Most importantly, by making supernatural figures reward virtue in this way, the romances clearly depart from the idea that symbolic value can be a function of genetics, or of military action. Those definitions of nobility do come through in the conventional episodes with which the stories are interspersed, but the underlying tendency is to present nobility as a hybrid spiritual and civil construct. We will now turn to the class position that implies.

Class Position and Core Values

The synthesis of wealth and moral virtue is in some ways very conservative. It validates the power of the wealthy by making material good fortune a consequence of moral superiority, and thus recalls the aristocratic origin myth told by the Lady of the Lake in the Vulgate *Lancelot*, and repeated by the hermit in Ramón Llull's *Order of Chivalry*. But those texts use moral superiority in the past to validate biological nobility in the present. The argument in our romances is different, for they derive nobility (spiritual and civil) from virtue in the here and now. In the former case a man who makes his own fortune is an aberration and a sign that the social order is breaking down; but in the latter, where God showers blessings on those who are noble in *spirit*, that man can be as much a nobleman as anyone else. Rather than restricting nobility to a blood élite, these romances make it theoretically available to anyone.

That view correlates with the romances' treatment of burgesses and merchants, and perhaps helped shape it. In *Sir Amadace* a knight and a merchant come together, united by their common generosity. Putter has used this to show that the divide the text draws is not between courtly and mercantile characters, but between generous and mean ones – on the one side Amadace and the dead merchant, on the other the dead man's unfeeling creditor.[76] The distinction is moral rather than social. The same is true of *Sir Cleges* and *Sir Launfal*, though there is a persistent critical tendency to read the moral divide in social terms.

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[76] Putter, 'Gifts and Commodities in *Sir Amadace*', pp. 376–9.

For instance, when Johnston argues that the affinity between knight and merchant in *Sir Amadace* is very unusual, he supports his case as follows:

> merchants figure as stock characters in a number of romances, particularly *Sir Launfal*, *Sir Cleges*, *Havelok the Dane*, *Ipomadon*, and *Octavian*; however, the consistent implication in those texts is that merchants and knights speak different 'economic languages', that the economy of capital exchange and the economy of aristocratic gift-giving are mutually excusive.[77]

But there are no merchants in *Sir Cleges*, only three corrupt courtiers (porter, usher, and steward). Blind to Cleges's moral value but alert to the economic value of the cherries, they are certainly greedy and materialistic, and display the stereotypical flaws of merchants from estates satire. But they are not merchants themselves. The text does not invoke that social stereotype, but is more interested in the distinction between virtue and vice. Nonetheless, the principle that romance routinely denigrates merchants is so ingrained in academic consciousness that neither Johnston nor his peer reviewers noticed the error.

Sir Launfal has been similarly misrepresented, and read a number of times as a piece of class satire. Most such readings focus on the mayor of Caerleon (whom Johnston also mistakenly describes as a merchant): Bliss condemns him as 'typical of the man in subordinate authority [...] a hypocrite and a sycophant';[78] Stokes writes that he is 'hypocritical and snobbish';[79] and according to Anderson he represents the grubby duplicity of 'bourgeois self-interest'.[80] But that mistakes the nature of mayoralty. We saw in Chapter 1 that civic offices carried considerable social and symbolic capital, and that the men who held them were respected members of society. A mayor is not an outsider to courtly culture, and looking at *Sir Launfal* more closely reveals this mayor has many courtly attributes. He was a courtier before he became a civic dignitary (l. 90), knights seek his hospitality (ll. 112–14), he is a man of property with an

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[77] Johnston, 'Knights and Merchants Unite', p. 736.

[78] *Sir Launfal*, ed. Bliss, p. 42.

[79] Stokes, '*Lanval* to *Sir Launfal*', p. 70.

[80] Anderson, 'The Structure of *Sir Launfal*', p. 117. See also the similar readings in Putter, 'Arthurian Romance in English Popular Tradition', p. 246; A. C. Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur: Looking and Listening in Medieval Love-Narratives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 106–14.

orchard and spare tack for horses (ll. 124, 206), he attends feasts and parties to which Launfal wants to be invited (ll. 181–90), and he has a well-mannered and generous daughter (ll. 191–211). The man is flawed, but the flaws are not class-specific; indeed, the courtly figures are just as corrupt, sycophantic, and self-interested as he is.

Money buys Arthur's friendship as well as the mayor's, for he too extends Launfal a long-overdue invitation as soon as his fortune returns (ll. 613–18). Arthur is also rash and weak – manipulated and misled not only by his wife, but also by his nephews (who lie to hide Launfal's poverty), and even by the hero himself (who deserts on the pretence that his father has died). In the interests of self-preservation Arthur's other knights overlook Guinevere's infidelities, and at Launfal's trial the barons cannot decide whether to humour Arthur by condemning Launfal, or to win Launfal's gratitude by acquitting him. The Earl of Cornwall comments it would be 'greet schame […] / Forto dampny þat gantylman, / Þat haþ be hende & fre' (ll. 841–3), but others recommend a harsh sentence 'har lord þe kyng to queme [please]' (l. 880). Justice therefore comes a poor second to personal gain.[81] Far from satirizing the town from the perspective of the upper class, or debunking chivalric pretensions for the benefit of the bourgeoisie (*Sir Launfal* has also been considered a characteristically bourgeois production), this poem conflates the two groups so as to highlight the hero's difference from both.[82] As in *Sir Cleges* and *Floris and Blancheflour* (discussed in Chapter 3), the contrast is not between knights and merchants, or

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[81] The court's failings are discussed further in Hazell, 'The Blinding of Gwennere'; Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, '*Sir Launfal*: Introduction', in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Laskaya and Salisbury (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), pp. 201–9, at p. 203. On the malign influence of Guinevere in particular, see Guy-Bray, 'Male Trouble', pp. 34–6, 43–5; Anderson, 'The Structure of *Sir Launfal*', pp. 117–9; Edwards, 'Unknightly Conduct in *Sir Launfal*', p. 329.

[82] For *Sir Launfal*'s being a lower-class poem, see *Sir Launfal*, ed. Bliss, pp. 1, 42–6; Sands (ed.), *Middle English Verse Romances*, pp. 201–2; Guy-Bray, 'Male Trouble', p. 39; Spearing, 'Marie de France and Middle English Adapters', p. 153. A similar class position is implied in the aesthetic judgements of Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, pp. 193–4; Mehl, *Middle English Romances*, pp. 44–8.

even court and town, but between the idealistic hero and the corrupt world that surrounds him.[83]

If we shed our preconceptions about romance's class position and look at the Middle English texts afresh, we discover very little anti-bourgeois sentiment. In all three of our story-types, nobles, merchants, and burgesses occupy a common discourse. Class boundaries blur in *Sir Cleges*, *Sir Launfal* and *Sir Amadace*, and also in *Perceval*'s materialism, the profiteering of the king and queen in *Floris and Blancheflour*, the easy communication between Barnard and the merchant in *The Erle of Tolous*, and the use of urban spaces for chivalric contests in *Lybeaus Desconus*. The easy interaction is hardly surprising. We know romances appealed to both groups, and that they flourished in a time when artisans became merchants, bought land, and held office, and when all but perhaps the very highest families trained their sons in the professions or invested in trade. The strange thing is that the old critical paradigm, which was anyway established from reading earlier French romance, has yet proved so tenacious in criticism of Middle English ones.

While the treatment of merchants and burgesses is consistent across all three story-types, the romances of impoverished knights are distinctive for their handling of the lower classes. Since the hero becomes a beggar, these texts all give considerable narrative space to the plight of the poor, and often place a strong moral emphasis on charity and the redistribution of wealth. The community spirit in *Sir Cleges* and the feeling description of suffering in *Amis and Amiloun* were discussed above. *Sir Amadace* likewise ruins and redeems himself through charity, and even Launfal's self-aggrandizement includes feeding the hungry, delivering prisoners, and donating to Holy Church. Isumbras shares his own clothing with his naked wife and children (parting his cloak in the manner of St Martin), and regrets that he cannot help his stricken tenants: 'of myselfe have I no thowghte, / But that I may yeve my menn noghte, / For hem is all my kare' (ll. 124–6). The texts emphasize that members of the upper class have a

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83 Lucas also comments on this contrast between Launfal and the rest of the world, reading Launfal and Tryamour as moral characters opposed to an otherwise universal 'amorality': 'Towards and Interpretation of *Sir Launfal*', p. 292. Where Lucas sees amorality, I see pragmatism.

duty to those beneath them, and their virtue-based nobility fosters a sense of community and collectivism and that the narrower biological or functional definitions in the other romances do not.

In this way the impoverished-knight story recalls not only the nobility envisaged by Dante's *Convivio* and Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale, but also nobility as it appears in the estates model and body politic. Though those social models could be distorted to legitimize aristocratic powers and abuses, when properly conceived they describe the nobles as just one part of a greater whole – exalted, perhaps, but still bound by duties and responsibilities to the rest. That is the understanding of these romances. This is therefore the most egalitarian story-type we have discussed, not only because it detaches nobility from prowess and lineage and presents it as something to which anyone can aspire, but also because it maintains that no individual or class is an island. The rarefied fantasy existence of the aristocrat in certain other Middle English and Old French romances is here transformed into a much fuller reflection of contemporary society, and of the ideal nobleman's place within it.

And yet, though romances of impoverished knights include poor people and praise those who are kind to them, they still discriminate against them. While *Sir Isumbras*, *Sir Cleges*, and *Amis and Amiloun* all flesh out their worlds with tenants, townspeople, workers, and beggars, those characters seldom speak or interact with the hero in any meaningful way. Furthermore, when the hero passes the castle gates to begin his restoration the poems never look back at those left in 'begers route', who remain what Williams terms 'environmental' or 'accessory' figures, abandoned once their purpose is served. Here it is worth requoting the words of Giordano da Pisa from Chapter 1:

> God has ordained that there be rich and poor so that the rich may be served by the poor, and the poor may be taken care of by the rich […] Why are the poor given their station in life? So that the rich might earn eternal life through them.

In some ways these romances share that view, and acknowledge the lower classes only to give the protagonist an outlet for charity. Alternatively, paupers or workers feature to show how miserable it is to be one of them. *Sir Isumbras* presents work as demeaning, with mining iron ore from a 'fowll depe slowghe'

(l. 396) the hero's darkest hour before the light begins to break on his spiritual dawn. In admitting the lower classes these romances are less selective than some of the others we have discussed, and are better able to express a sense of community and civil duty, but they do so from an upper-class perspective nonetheless.

This defeats the arguments of those who read a lower-class orientation into these texts' materialism and emphasis on charity.[84] The praise of charity does work to the advantage of the disenfranchised, but it does not seek to change their lot. It therefore appeals to a false consciousness that accepts inequality and seeks only the occasional handout, whereas an ideology that truly worked for the people would express an empowering and resistant ideal of equality and universal dignity. Beneath these romances' community spirit there is a social distinction after all: on the one hand they reflect, promote, and perpetuate the shared interests and ideals of a broad upper class that bridges the old knight–merchant dichotomy; on the other they maintain a clear line between this commodious but privileged élite and the rest of society. The logical outcome of deriving nobility from wealth and virtue is to collapse class distinctions on the premise that anyone could in theory become noble; but that is not a conclusion these texts are equipped or inclined to realize.

Our other two story-types contain the same pattern of social distinctions: the merchant in *The Erle of Tolous* is 'hende' and 'trewe' (ll. 655, 979), but the common folk of 'felde and towne' feature only to be slaughtered (l. 63); burgesses and courtiers mingle gladly in *Lybeaus Desconus*, but the word *vilain* is a stinging insult. Therefore, though we know Middle English romances enjoyed a very wide audience, they are most closely aligned with the interests of the rich and powerful. However, they define that group according to a bewildering array of contrasting standards, while their discrimination against the lower classes usually seems more careless than calculated. It is not a deliberate strategy, for that would suggest a degree of socio-political self-awareness the texts' general inconsistencies testify against. Instead, it should be read as ideological residue

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[84] As in Sands (ed.), *Middle English Verse Romances*, pp. 201–2; Foster, 'Simplicity, Complexity, and Morality in Four Medieval Romances', p. 408.

buried in romance's conventions. Sometimes that residue comes to the surface, but that happens by default rather than design.

To finish I shall discuss one final episode, in which *Sir Isumbras* almost escapes those conventions to glimpse the final logical outcome of defining nobility by wealth and virtue. It is the episode where Isumbras meets the smiths and is put to work. On the face of it the smiths are simple accessories no different from any others; as Landers observes:

> The blacksmiths from whom Isumbras learns his craft are never named, nor given more attention than is necessary to state that they exist. As far as Isumbras is concerned, they are there only to show him how to forge armour and weapons. Beyond that function, he has no use for them and does not interact with them at all.[85]

But there is another way of looking at them, too. Isumbras finds the smithy having lost everything, asks the workers to give him 'som mete for charité' (l. 388), and is curtly told to 'com swynke as don we' (l. 389). Up to this point it has never occurred to anyone that Isumbras could work for a living. Both as a lord and as a pauper he has simply assumed he can live off the labour of others. That seemed reasonable at the start, when he cast himself and his family upon the world and trusted to Jesus to 'sende us our lyves fode' (l. 138). There is, indeed, a good scriptural authority for doing so, since Matthew's gospel instructs the Christian to seek only the kingdom of God, and to have faith that food, drink, and clothing will all be provided (Matthew 6:31–3). But now the smiths expose that sense of entitlement as unjustified and impractical. They articulate an incipient work ethic that cuts through the abstraction of Christianity and romance, and reveals Isumbras's outlook as sheer presumption.

That work-ethic itself is not unprecedented – *Havelok the Dane*, *Octavian*, and *Emaré* all contain noble characters who voluntarily work to support themselves. The difference is that this order to 'com swynke' comes from actual labourers speaking to a temporarily disenfranchised nobleman. The effect is similar to Chaucer's revitalizing the well-worn argument that nobility comes from virtue by putting it in the mouth of an (apparently) base-born hag. That lady delivers a lengthy polemic, whereas the smiths in *Sir Isumbras* speak for

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85   Landers, 'And Loved he was with All', p. 365.

only two lines and perhaps express nothing more than the later fourteenth century's dislike of sturdy beggars. The poem certainly does not expound the dignity of labour. But even so, by including these two lines, and by assigning them to *laboratores* in dialogue with a member of the second estate, *Sir Isumbras* gives us a glimpse of what it might mean truly to divorce nobility from inherited privilege. It is only for a moment, and actually follows the episode in which the Saracens discern Isumbras's nobility simply by looking – an aristocratic motif if ever there was one. Yet in this moment we catch a breath of something altogether new, with the potential to be truly revolutionary.

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A nobility defined by wealth and virtue seems particularly well suited to the moderately well-to-do bourgeois-gentry audience suggested by many romance manuscripts. That class position is to some extent supported by the way the texts align courtly, mercantile, and urban characters while discriminating against the lower, labouring classes. However, the texts do not doggedly pursue the interests of that group (so far as those interests can be gathered), and they certainly were not exclusive to it: *Amis and Amiloun* and *Sir Isumbras* both appear in manuscripts read by household servants.[86] Moreover, should the specific ideological impulse of the story clash with the more general conventions of romance, it is usually romance that wins. While the texts are fairly consistent in promoting wealth and virtue over breeding and prowess, there are also sufficient gestures towards both biological and martial nobility to show yet again that they are not promulgating a consistent ideological position, either consciously or unconsciously.

Finally, though this anti-élitist definition of nobility may well have appealed specially to the bourgeois-gentry in the later Middle Ages, it was nothing new. The awareness that wealth and status are transitory, and people fickle, goes back beyond Boethius to the Stoic philosophers of the Ancient World. It connects with the well-established medieval theme of mutability and *contemptus mundi*, and only escapes that theme's conventional pessimism and

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86   Johnston, 'New Evidence for the Social Reach of "Popular Romance": The Books of Household Servants', pp. 303–32.

asceticism because it is integrated with romance's equally conventional focus on earthly wellbeing. The connection between nobility and virtue was similarly venerable. It, too, stretched back to Boethius and beyond, and coloured even the most exclusive, courtly literature of the High Middle Ages. Therefore, we should not think this story-type rewrites nobility or romance to suit a particular audience, ideology, or period. It differs in many ways from the story-types discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, but shares their ideological variety, and its methods and materials are just as conventional as theirs.

However, of the three story-types considered in this dissertation, it is the romances of impoverished knights that provide the most comprehensive expression of their time. In using romance's traditional structures, characters, and motifs these texts perpetuate the later medieval period's deep-seated respect for tradition, order, and aristocracy. By emphasizing their heroes' physical and emotional vulnerability they reflect the culture's broader sense of a universal human condition, and correlate with the affectivity of contemporary piety, which dwelled similarly on the humanity of Christ and the bonds between members of the Holy Family.[87] Finally, by placing virtue and wealth on an equal footing, and making each the consequence of the other, these stories elegantly reflect, and even synthesize, the irresistible attractions of Messiah and Mammon.

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[87] On affective piety, see Charles F. Briggs, *The Body Broken: Medieval Europe, 1300–1520* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 200–8; Vincent Gillespie, 'Religious Writing' in *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*, vol. 1: *To 1500*, ed. Roger Ellis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 234–83, at pp. 256–60, 264–7; Kathleen Kamerick, *Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages: Image Worship and Idolatry in England 1350–1500* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 129–35, especially pp. 139–40; Caroline Walker-Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 129. On the humanism and community spirit of late-medieval piety more generally, see the first part of Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars.*

Conclusions

Literary criticism is well used to modern readers' being free to interpret texts as they please: modern readers recreate meaning at each new reading, and respond to texts idiosyncratically, as prompted by their own ideas, beliefs, and moods. Medieval readers deserve the same freedom. For several centuries Middle English romance engaged people from all levels of society, with each audience member responding to the stories according to an individual agenda that we can only guess at. Indeed, the medieval reader's freedoms are in some ways even greater than the modern's, for medieval audiences recopied, renarrated, and reshaped their romances, whereas modern ones are restricted by copyright and the stability of print. To free the medieval reader in this way also liberates the critic: more prescriptive readings require the obvious inconsistencies and contradictions of Middle English to be explained away or (dare one say it?) judiciously overlooked, whereas my approach is able to embrace them.

All fourteen of the romances discussed here bear traces of the idea that nobility is synonymous with breeding. The connection may be made in no more than passing references and conventional phrases, but sometimes it is the story's guiding principle (as in the romances of lost heirs). Either way, the main characters are always of high birth, while non-noble people are usually expendable – they might not feature at all (e.g. *Sir Eglamour*), or they might feature only to be sacrificed once they have served their purpose (as with the hermit and merchant in *Degaré*, and the emperor's doomed army in *The Erle of Tolous*). Some romances describe the conditions of sub-courtly living in unusual detail (*Octavian*, *Amis and Amiloun*), but even those ultimately revert to an exclusive, élite setting. On the whole, there is a marked preference for high-class people and pursuits. This all perpetuates the idea that the upper class was qualitatively superior, and reflects the overlap between social, moral, and material meanings of the Middle English word *noble*. The romances thus record and prolong the deference ingrained in medieval society, and complement the grand myth that the medieval nobility was descended from a special group elected shortly after the Fall to protect and govern the people. In many ways they

endorse the belief that nobility was the preserve of a moral and physical élite whose supremacy was biologically transmitted, divinely endorsed, and confirmed by nature, by tradition, and by right.

Of course, that myth of social closure was always a cover for a more fluid reality, particularly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when social mobility increased in the wake of new professional and economic opportunities. Social mobility is a common feature of the romances, in which people routinely move both up and down the ranks. However, such movement is often viewed (or viewable) through a conservative lens. If a member of the nobility declines, he or she always rises again; people who are born to the upper class always return there in the end. The role of blood in effecting that change is most prominent in the romances of lost heirs, but both lost-heir and impoverished-knight plots can (and have) been read as lending structural endorsement to the hereditary principle. None of our texts tells of a commoner entering the nobility. If there is upward mobility, as in the bride-winning romances, it is only within a single class, and even then it is either de-emphasized or obscured. When compared with the fixed hierarchy realized by lost-heir stories, romances about winning a bride do imply a relatively open society in which a man can succeed on merit; however, they do not insist on it.

That equivocation is characteristic of all fourteen romances. Despite the aristocratic bias latent in their structures and conventions, these texts do not speak consistently of nobility as a quality of birth. They do not despise all non-noble people and environments, and sometimes seem even to prefer them. The smiths in *Chevelere Assigne* and Clement's household in *Octavian* are in many ways preferable to the morally depraved courts that appear beside them, and the merchants and burgesses in *Floris and Blancheflour* understand *fin amor* in a way the Spanish king and queen cannot. Even lost-heir stories often undermine innate nobility, either by illustrating the hero's manifold inadequacies, or by drifting into other narrative territories and thus rendering his ancestry irrelevant (as happens in *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Chevelere Assigne*). Most often Middle English romances contain a number of unconscious, automatic references to biological nobility, but seem more overtly committed to a different definition: the Saracens recognize Isumbras as a nobleman despite his poverty, and the

abbot is drawn to the disguised Barnard of Toulouse because of his good looks, but in the main *Sir Isumbras* and *The Erle of Tolous* derive nobility from virtue and vigour rather than blood. Such deliberate articulation of alternative definitions means the background acceptance of innate nobility should not be taken as ideological complicity or false-consciousness. The romances do not seek simply to shore up aristocratic power by presenting the upper class as inherently superior by right of blood and birth.

The connection between nobility, aristocracy, and prowess is another common feature of these texts, and one that spans all three story-types. Lost heirs demonstrate their noble ancestry by shedding the blood of others; the men who win their ladies do so by forcing others to recognize their demands; even the impoverished heroes fight on occasion, despite their main virtues being passive and peaceful. This emphasis on prowess restricts nobility to those able to afford and use a knight's horse and weapons, but is also potentially subversive in that it demystifies social status and debunks the myth of blood. Scholars have argued that courtly culture evolved to civilize a warrior élite, and the ideology of blood to legitimize aristocratic dominance by grounding power in qualities more exclusive than strength.[1] In dwelling over-long on prowess these later romances risk reversing that process. However, the connection between nobility and fighting also reflects the venerable image of the nobleman as a warrior – an image that drew on traditional social models in which people were classed by function. Those models made warfare the nobility's defining occupation, and apparently that idea continued to find an appreciative audience throughout the later Middle Ages, despite the arguments of some scholars that the upper class was becoming gradually demilitarized, and that the wider population of late-medieval England cared little for war.[2] And yet, Middle English audiences do seem always to have required more from a nobleman than brute strength, for

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[1] These ideas are commonplace in romance criticism, with typical examples in Auerbach, *Mimesis*, pp. 123–42; Knight, *Arthurian Literature and Society*, pp. 68–104; Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence* (where they shape the entire discussion).

[2] E.g. Mercer, *Medieval Gentry*, pp. 36–41; Denton, *The East-Midlands Gentleman*; Crane, *Insular Romance*, p. 44. Their arguments were discussed in Chapter 1.

none of the romances make this the hero's sole asset. The lost heirs and aspiring lovers both complement prowess with the ability to lead and govern, and thus prove themselves qualified for peace as well as battle; and among impoverished knights prowess is a sideline to moral qualities that strengthen the social body as a whole, particularly generosity, loyalty, and humility.

This is a symptom of romance's desire to create ideal heroes who encompass every aspect of nobility – every definition of *noble* from 'high-born' to 'praiseworthy' to 'useful'. Though they arrive at their conclusions by very different routes, all fourteen texts end in the same way. The narrative does not rest until the hero is happily enjoying a full quota of social, symbolic, and economic capital won by proving his ability to discharge a social function. That is nobility at its acme, but in this comprehensive definition there are many contradictions – for instance between prowess and peace, or self-assertion and self-abnegation. These the romances often illustrate, for as the narrative progresses scene by scene nobility's various aspects are rudely juxtaposed. However, the texts seldom register the resulting tensions, rather pressing on with the story with little pause for reflection. This suggests that while they gave credence to many conflicting definitions of nobility, negotiating between them was not part of the agenda.

I must acknowledge that is only the masculine ideal, for this study was never intended to discuss how romances conceive the noble woman. I suspect feminine nobility is just as diverse and inconsistent as masculine, varying likewise according to story-type, and with some plots drawing a much firmer gender divide than others. For instance, bride-winning romances use women as passive tokens of exchange between men, and their martial nobility would seem exclusively masculine; however, the women often take an active role in the beginning of the story, prove far superior to the men in judging prowess (which they value as much as their male counterparts do), and occasionally adopt violent strategies of their own. By contrast, the virtuous nobility in the impoverished-knight story is open to both genders. Women often assume an active role in the resolution, and husband and wife are tested according to the same moral standard. These are only initial observations, but they suggest some

starting points for further research that would complement, and in some senses complete, the findings presented here.

The most ideologically coherent romances are those that prioritize peaceful virtues such as humility, fidelity, and altruism. All three story-types gesture at moral qualities in their heroes, but in the romances of impoverished knights those qualities take centre stage. Though they have their share of inconsistencies, and a keen eye for the social influence of wealth, these texts make a convincing case for true nobility's coming from good personal conduct. Echoing the arguments made by Nature in *Le Roman de la rose*, by Dante in the *Convivio*, and by the old woman in the Wife of Bath's Tale, they make nobility a matter of spiritual integrity and social responsibility, and affirm that it is best measured and rewarded by God (or by Faerie). The hero's high birth, vital to the lost-heir narratives and an important prerequisite in the bride-winning ones, is here incidental – a requirement of the genre, to be sure, but not part of the specific story's value system. It is therefore tempting to see this story-type as rewriting nobility and romance in the interests of a new and self-made reading/listening public. However, the correlation between nobility and virtue was nothing new, nor was it peculiar to the bourgeois-gentry, so while that group perhaps welcomed these texts with a special warmth, the story's ideals are not specific to any single class or period.

From all this variety and equivocation two firm conclusions present themselves. The first is that Middle English romances do not consistently express any one view of nobility, and therefore do not promote any single socio-political ideology. They are not firm expressions of the aristocrat's supposedly biological supremacy; nor are they anxious to promote the cause of an emergent and aspiring bourgeois-gentry. Rather, they reflect every aspect of contemporary thinking about nobility, continually shifting focus to emphasize one view after another in a kaleidoscope of contrasting images. The second conclusion follows from this. These romances seem so detached from social agendas because they are so devoted to the narrative one – that of telling a story, and keeping the audience's attention.

In *Stylistic and Narrative Structures*, Susan Wittig shows how Middle English romances are constructed from a stock of established phrases, motifs,

scenes, and episodes. Each of these narrative building blocks suggests or requires others, so if a romance begins with 'death of the father', for instance, it is likely to continue with 'exile of the hero'.[3] Wittig focuses on the mechanics of composition, but my findings indicate something similar happening at the level of attitude and affect. One of the clearest patterns to emerge from this study is that certain plots implied or required certain attitudes towards nobility. Romances of lost heirs invest heavily in the symbolic capital of blood; if the hero's primary aim is to win his lady, his symbolic capital is most likely to reside in his sword-arm; if he is to suffer poverty, his key qualities are probably humility, patience, and generosity. These trends are constant despite differences in their specific realization in individual texts: Floris's winning of Blancheflour is different from Degrevant's of Melidor, but both texts emphasize the hero's personal force of will; though Isumbras suffers for pride, and Cleges for profligacy, both romances essentially describe virtue tried and rewarded. Meanwhile, specific story-types appear also to have brought with them specific themes: audiences apparently expected the lost-heir story to play on the contrast between nature and nurture, while romances of impoverished knights typically explore contrasts between an individual's inner and outer states. Of course, social commentary may come out of this, but only as a side-effect of a compositional technique whose primary field of reference is not the real world, but rather the literary conventions established in other romances.

In outlining Middle English romance's formulaic composition, Wittig also observes that romancers are nonetheless free to improvise. Each conventional element suggests a particular line (or lines) of development, but the story does not have to unfold as expected.[4] The relationship between story-type and social outlook is equally flexible. No romance's orientation is totally prescribed by its story-type, and the texts frequently reimagine nobility with each new scene or episode. Thus it is that at one moment a foundling's nobility is in danger of being lost for ever, and at the next it appears absolutely unmistakable; thus it is that Degrevant can be a bureaucratically minded estate manager in the opening

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[3] Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures*, pp. 103–21.

[4] Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures*, pp. 114–16.

scenes of his story, and an anarchic guerrilla fighter in the later ones. This compositional freedom also means that genre and story-type occasionally work against each other, as romancers sometimes included episodes or motifs that, though quite proper to romance in general, are ill suited to the particular story being told. One example is when violence and prowess get into the story of a virtuous impoverished knight; another, when material luxury becomes especially prominent in shaping the identity of a lost heir. Such inconsistencies have been discussed briefly by Elizabeth Williams in 'Sir Amadace and the Undisenchanted Bride', where she ascribes them to the particular aesthetic of folktale.[5] I believe they are actually part of Middle English romance's own aesthetic, where the primary focus is always on the narrative present – on what would be best in the current episode, rather than what would be most appropriate to the story as a whole.

At a similar, but more sophisticated level, we also find familiar romance ideas appearing in unexpected textual situations, and being put to unexpected uses. This happens when the lost-heir motifs in *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Chevelere Assigne* become detached from their customary themes of identity and patrimony; it happens again when Sir Launfal thinks his noble birth ought to be self-evident (as it would be in a lost-heir narrative), and then discovers he is in a story where it is not; and when *Floris and Blancheflour* takes the theme of a young man winning his lady by force, but has him turn his violence on himself, or translates it into symbolic violence and force of will. These are all instances of romances using conventional material in unconventional ways, and in a manner that introduces ideological inconsistency because of a desire to make something unusual out of things that are familiar – in short, in the interests of storytelling. This again shows where Middle English romance's priorities lie. We are accustomed to accepting their mechanical inconsistencies, as when episodes are needlessly repeated (Florent's reunion with his father in *Octavian*, Malkedras's blinding in *Chevelere Assigne*) or poorly motivated (Lambert's hostility in *Lybeaus*, Guinevere's sudden attraction to Launfal); I suggest we should see

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5   Williams, 'Sir Amadace and the Undisenchanted Bride', p. 69.

inconsistencies of attitude in the same light – as a persistent feature of the genre, symptomatic of a focus that is local rather than global.

This plurality is also consistent with what we know of Middle English romance's production, transmission, and reception. In many ways these are collaborative projects – stories that have been told and retold, copied and recopied by many different people, each with the opportunity to alter and adjust what he or she received and passed on. Even if a romance is the product of a single creative individual (as *Sir Perceval* may be, judging by its unity of tone and style), it still draws on materials and techniques that have been collectively fashioned;[6] the poet may think he knows his mind, but the stock of motifs and incidents with which he worked was compiled by many others. In cultural artefacts so produced one would expect to find diversity and inconsistency of tone and attitude, particularly on such a large and contested subject as nobility. Indeed, it would be remarkable if we did not, for that would suggest a level of ideological coherence and subjection that is simply not credible in a society without mass media and the methods of censorship and surveillance available to the modern totalitarian state. The romances were woven out of everything that was available to them, everything their authors and audiences carried consciously and unconsciously, from the fierce ethos of a warrior élite to the passive humility of domestic piety. This was no doubt one of the keys to the genre's broad and lasting success, for it allowed the texts to make very few demands of their audiences. One could come to them from any walk of life, with almost any ideological preferences, and not be repulsed. Middle English romances ask just one thing of those who hear them, and that is to sit quietly, relax, and enjoy the story. *Now lithe and listen* …

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6   That *Sir Perceval* is the product of a single mind is implicit in Mehl, *Middle English Romances*, pp. 100–5 (emphasizes literary style); Eckhardt, 'Arthurian Comedy: The Simpleton Hero' (emphasizes the tone of the comedy); Wright, 'Comic Ambivalence in *Sir Perceval*' (emphasizes the narrator's social and ethnic neutrality).

APPENDIX

Summaries of the Stories

CHAPTER 2   Lost Heirs

Degaré
(*c.* 1,000 lines, in couplets)

A widowed king stipulates that anyone who wants to marry his daughter must first defeat him in a joust. So far he has vanquished every suitor. Each year, king and princess ride to visit the queen's tomb (she died in childbirth), but on this occasion the princess gets lost on the way. She ends up alone in a forest, where she is raped by a knight who claims to be a faerie. He tells her that she is now pregnant with a son, then departs, leaving her with a tipless sword to give to the unborn boy; by this sword, father will recognize son should they ever meet. The princess fears that the people will accuse her and her father of incest. She therefore hides the pregnancy and has a maiden deposit the baby outside a hermitage, along with various tokens of his identity. Among them is a pair of gloves sent from Faerie, which will fit no one but her; by these, son will recognize mother. The hermit finds the child, christens it Degaré, and gives him to his (the hermit's) sister, who has married a wealthy merchant. When Degaré is ten he goes back to the hermit to begin schooling; when he is twenty, the hermit tells him his history and hands back the identity tokens. Degaré then sets out to find his family, arming himself with an oak sapling. With this he kills a dragon who is attacking an earl, and the grateful earl takes him home to be dubbed. He offers Degaré all his lands, but Degaré refuses because the gloves will not fit any of the women he finds there. He rides on and comes to his grandfather's country; he unhorses the older man, and thus wins the right to marry his own mother. The ceremony goes ahead, but Degaré remembers to try the gloves just in time to save the pair from incest. The princess gives Degaré his father's sword, and he sets out again. He spends the night in a strange castle of huntresses. He eats well, and the lady of the castle lulls him to sleep with her harp, but no one speaks. In

the morning the lady tells him that she is persecuted by an unwelcome suitor who has killed all her knights (in all manuscripts except Auchinleck this suitor is also a giant). Degaré fights and kills him, winning the lady as his bride. Promising to return and marry her within the year, he continues on his quest to find his father. In the forest, he meets a rough knight who accuses him of trespass and challenges him to fight. When they draw their swords the rough knight recognizes Degaré's tipless weapon and reveals himself to be its original owner. (Auchinleck breaks off here.) Father and son return to Degaré's mother, whom the former marries. Finally the whole family goes to the castle of huntresses, where Degaré marries his lady.

Chevelere Assigne
(370 alliterative long lines)

The story begins with King Oryens and Queen Bewtrys (who lack an heir), and Matabryne his mother (who is in league with Satan). One day Oryens and Bewtrys see a poor-woman with twins; Oryens is sympathetic but Bewtrys is not, for she believes a woman can only conceive twins by sleeping with more than one man. That night she conceives seven children, and we later discover that this is a punishment from God for judging the poor-woman harshly. Oryens is delighted by the pregnancy, which he discovers in due course, and thanks God for providing him with an heir. When the children are born (six boys and one girl, each wearing a silver chain round its neck) Matabryne determines to be rid of them. She sends a servant, Markus, to drown them, and shows Oryens seven puppies instead, claiming that these are the queen's offspring and demanding her death. Oryens refuses, but consents to her being imprisoned. Bewtrys languishes for eleven years, sustained by food from God. Meanwhile, the servant has not drowned the children, but left them to be found by a hermit. They are suckled by a hind, and grow up in the woods. Unfortunately they are eventually spotted by a forester, Malkedras, who tells the evil Matabryne. She sends him to kill them, and to bring their chains back as proof, and has the good Markus blinded for disobeying her.

Malkedras finds only six children at the hermitage; the seventh is out foraging with the hermit. When he removes their chains they transform into swans and take refuge in the river. He returns to the queen, who instructs a goldsmith to make the chains into a cup. As he works, the metal miraculously increases so that he makes the vessel using just half of one chain. The others he keeps. Matabryne now turns her attention back to Bewtrys, and bullies Oryens into commanding her execution. That night an angel appears to the hermit, telling him that the seventh child is to fight for his mother and must be christened Enyas. The hermit tells the boy and, after he explains what a 'mother' is, they set off. They come upon the royal procession making its way to the pyre, and the lost prince offers to fight for Bewtrys. Oryens agrees, and Matabryne nominates Malkedras as her champion. Enyas is christened, knighted, and armed with a shield sent by God, while all the nearby bells ring of their own volition. After a crash-course in combat, Enyas kills Malkedras and vindicates Bewtrys, and Matabryne is burnt on the pyre instead. Enyas explains who he is, and about the swans. The goldsmith produces the five remaining chains, and five of the children are restored and christened. The sixth remains a swan, grieving pitifully.

Sir Perceval of Galles
(2,288 lines in sixteen-line tail-rhyme stanzas)

When Perceval's father is killed by the Red Knight (in vengeance for having once unhorsed him in a tournament), Perceval's mother retreats to the forest with her young son. He grows up ignorant of courtly and chivalric life, but is a proficient hunter. When he is fifteen he meets a group of knights, determines to become a knight himself, and sets out for Arthur's court. His mother is devastated, but accepts his decision; she gives him a ring when he leaves, which he swaps *en route* for that of a sleeping lady. Already it is clear that Perceval is uncouth and naïve, ignorant of his identity, and that his story is being told in a comic vein. Arthur (who is Perceval's maternal uncle) agrees to knight the boy, but does not get a chance because the Red Knight reappears (he has been tormenting Arthur ever since killing Perceval's father), and steals a cup from the high table. Perceval gives chase, kills the Red Knight with a hunting dart, and, with Gawain's help,

acquires his armour. He then kills a witch (the Red Knight's mother), meets his paternal uncle and cousins, and goes to liberate Dame Lufamour of Maydenland from the attentions of an unwanted heathen suitor. He wins her for his bride by single-handedly slaughtering the *sowdane* and his army. Arthur arrives at Lufamour's castle during this episode, and Perceval is finally knighted and given a name. (Arthur was previously sick with worry about his young nephew, but recovered on learning that he was alive, and quickly rode to help him against the pagans.)

A year passes, in which Perceval proves a good king in Maydenland. He then returns to the forest to find his mother. He comes across a lady bound to a tree – she whose ring he took the year before. That ring, it turns out, was magic, able to protect its wearer from harm, and the lady is being punished by her lord (the Black Knight) for, as he thinks, giving it to a lover. Perceval vindicates her and offers to swap back, but the Black Knight has given Perceval's ring away to a giant, who is lord of that country and also happens to be the dead *sowdane*'s brother. Perceval fights and kills him, then learns from the porter that his (Perceval's) mother has gone mad with grief having once seen Perceval's ring in the giant's possession. Perceval dons goatskins such as he wore when he left home, and goes in search of her on foot. He finds her after nine days and carries her back to the giant's castle, where he and the porter drug her into sleep. She wakes restored to her senses, bathes, and then goes with her son to Maydenland. Perceval eventually dies fighting in the Holy Land.

Lybeaus Desconus
(*c.* 2,200 lines in twelve-line tail-rhyme stanzas)

The hero is Geynleyn, Gawain's son, who is conceived in mysterious circumstances and brought up by his mother in seclusion. One day he finds a knight lying dead, takes the knight's armour, and goes to King Arthur to be dubbed. When asked his name, Geynleyn realizes that he does not know it; his mother simply called him Beau-fyʒ. Arthur announces that he is to be called Lybeaus Desconus (the Fair Unknown), then knights him and hands him over to Gawain for training. Lybeaus asks Arthur to let him have the next adventure, and

Arthur agrees. A pretty maiden and a dwarf arrive (their names are Elene and Teandelayn), seeking a champion for their mistress, the Lady of Synadowne. Lybeaus claims the quest, and Arthur supports him, much to Elene's disgust. However, Arthur will not budge, and Lybeaus is duly armed by Gawain, Perceval, Oweyn, Agravain, and Lancelot. Elene and Teandelayn ride with Lybeaus for three days, taunting him continually. Lybeaus then fights and defeats Wylleam Celebronche, and sends him captive to Arthur. Elene revises her opinion of him, apologizes, and they are friends henceforth.

The companions travel on, meeting various adventures as they go. Lybeaus rescues an earl's daughter from two giants, then enters Elene in a beauty contest for a hawk. She loses, but Lybeaus fights and defeats the hawk's owner anyway, thus ending the evil custom of the town (all previous challengers had been defeated and killed). After all these encounters, Lybeaus sends a trophy back to Arthur, who eventually rewards him with 100 lb of florins. The companions next find and adopt a multicoloured hunting dog, and, when its owner appears, Lybeaus refuses to return it. This causes another fight, in which Lybeaus defeats multiple opponents single-handed and wins considerable property. He kills another giant at the Yle d'Or to free La Dame d'Amore, who promptly enchants him and keeps him captive for nearly a month. Elene reminds him of his mission, they depart, and finally arrive at Synadowne.

There Lybeaus fights Lambert, the lady's steward, and learns from him that her gaolers are two sorcerers. He fights them in the enchanted hall where they keep her, and kills one of them. He is then confronted by a Lamia-like creature, who kisses him and immediately changes into a beautiful woman; this, at last, is the Lady of Synadowne, freed from enchantment by having kissed one of Gawain's relatives. She thanks Lybeaus, and offers to become his wife. Lybeaus then goes in search of the surviving clerk, kills him, and returns to his friends. They send the lady clothes, and she returns with pomp to her own dwelling. A week later everyone goes to Arthur's court, where Lybeaus and the lady are married. (In the some manuscripts Lybeaus's mother comes to the wedding feast and reveals her son's identity; in the others, this is left unresolved).

Octavian

(Northern version *c.* 1,650 lines in twelve-line tail-rhyme stanzas;
Southern version 1,962 lines in six-line tail-rhyme stanzas)

The Emperor of Rome, Octavian, has twin sons by his wife. Immediately afterwards his jealous mother engineers a scene whereby the Empress is apparently caught *in flagrante* with a kitchen knave, and is thus condemned to burn at the stake. At the last minute Octavian commutes her sentence to exile, along with the children. As the Empress rests in a forest, her children are stolen – one by an ape, the other by a lioness. Lioness and child are both then carried off to an island by a griffin, whom the lioness kills on landing. She then suckles the infant prince. The distraught Empress resolves to visit the Holy Land, and secures passage on a ship. Stopping for water at an island, the sailors discover a lioness with a human child. The Empress realizes this is her son and reclaims him from the lioness, who immediately becomes tame and follows her aboard. The three arrive safely in Jerusalem and live many years in the king's court. Everyone admires the boy (who is also called Octavian), and he is knighted in due course. Meanwhile the other child has been rescued from the ape by a passing knight, stolen again by a band of outlaws, and sold to a passing palmer, Clement. Clement takes the boy, christened Florent, home to Paris and raises him as his own. Florent proves woefully inadequate as a burgess's son: given the resources to establish himself in trade, he squanders them on a hawk and a horse. However, when Paris is attacked by a pagan king, Florent redeems himself by defeating the pagan's champion – a giant – and saving the city (all the while dressed in filthy, rusty armour belonging to Clement). He is knighted and universally fêted, and he and the pagan king's daughter fall in love. The lovers arrange for her escape to him, after which she suggests that it would help the Christian cause if someone stole her father's special horse. Although the abduction is successful, and Clement manages the theft in fine style, the Christian army is still defeated soon afterwards. Florent and the French king are taken prisoner along with many of their allies, among them the Emperor Octavian himself, who had come to help.

The news reaches Jerusalem, and young Octavian resolves to rescue his father and liberate Christendom. He sets off with his mother and his lioness, and

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soon routs the pagans. At the celebratory feast the family is reunited. The Empress introduces herself and her son to her estranged husband, and Florent is recognized by his similarity to his twin (the Northern text actually reunites Florent and his father twice, once here and once earlier, when father and son are drawn instinctively to one another after Florent's defeat of the giant. But the earlier reunion is not properly worked in: Florent continues to live with Clement after the initial discovery, and his true identity is forgotten until the later scene). With everyone back together, Florent marries his princess. The wicked old queen either kills herself (Northern text), or is burnt (Southern), and everyone thanks God.

CHAPTER 3   Winning a Bride

Floris and Blancheflour
(*c.* 2,000 lines in couplets)

[A pregnant noblewoman is captured by non-Christians while on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, and given to the heathen queen, who is also pregnant. They become friends and give birth on the same day, the queen to a boy, Floris, and the captive Christian to a girl, Blancheflour.] The children grow up together, and fall in love. This alarms the king, who fears that Floris will refuse to marry 'after the lawe' (line 40). He suggests having Blancheflour killed, but the queen balks at murder. She proposes they send Floris away to visit his aunt (her sister), in the hope that he will forget his infatuation, but the plan fails: Floris simply pines away. The king threatens Blancheflour again, and again the queen intercedes, advising the king to sell her instead. The king consents, and Blancheflour is exchanged for thirty marks of red gold and a cup, the latter a great Trojan treasure once owned by Aeneas, decorated with scenes from the story of Paris and Helen. Blancheflour is taken to Babylon (Cairo), sold to the Emir, and put into his harem. Meanwhile the king and queen build a tomb, and everyone pretends Blancheflour is dead. Floris returns, hears the news and determines to kill himself. The queen then persuades the king to relent. They confess their deception, and Floris determines to search for his beloved,

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disguised as a merchant. His parents reluctantly equip him, and also give him the Trojan cup and a magic, protective ring.

Wherever Floris stays, his hosts notice his unhappiness and comment that he reminds them of Blancheflour, who passed the same way. Floris thus tracks her to Babylon, where he secures help from a burgess called Dayres. Dayres describes the impregnable tower where the ladies are kept, the strange annual custom by which the Emir tests their virginity and chooses a new queen, and the beautiful but enchanted garden where the rituals take place (he does not say that the old queen is killed, but death does await any woman found not to be a virgin). Dayres advises Floris to disguise himself as a master builder and befriend the tower's porter, who has a weakness for gambling. The two play chess three days running. Floris deliberately loses, even forfeiting the Trojan cup, and thus appears both extremely wealthy and extremely dim. The porter apparently thinks this a promising combination in a lord, and swears homage to him; Floris then reveals his true colours and demands access to the tower; dismayed, the porter nevertheless keeps faith and smuggles Floris into the tower in a basket of flowers. Floris is discovered by Blancheflour's friend Claris, who reunites the lovers and tries to cover for them. But the Emir grows suspicious, and the lovers are eventually found in bed together and thrown in jail to await trial. The Emir plans to burn them. As they travel to the trial, the lovers try to give one another the magic ring, but neither wishes to be spared without the other. A king sees them discard the ring, and later whispers it to the Emir, suggesting sparing the lovers if they will explain both what was going on, and how Floris got into the tower. The Emir agrees, but Floris will only tell if the Emir promises not to punish anyone involved. Everyone urges the Emir to consent, for they have all been moved by the lovers' beauty and fidelity. The Emir consents, and Floris recounts the story, which so touches the Emir that he surrenders Blancheflour, presides over her marriage to Floris, and marries Claris instead. Floris and Blancheflour stay in Babylon until news comes of the Spanish king's death. They then convert the Emir and depart. In Spain Floris is baptized and crowned, and the pair rule together until death (the conversion only happens in the Auchinleck manuscript).

The Erle of Tolous

(c. 1,200 lines in twelve-line tail-rhyme stanzas)

The Emperor Dyoclysyon is abusing his power and attacking his neighbours, despite the protests of his beautiful and virtuous wife Beulybon. Earl Barnard of Toulouse retaliates and wins a decisive victory, slaughtering Dyoclysyon's army and taking many of his nobles prisoner. Among them is Sir Trylabas, with whom Barnard strikes up a friendship. While out hunting, Barnard asks Trylabas about Beulybon, who is famous for her beauty. Trylabas confirms that she really is as lovely as people say, and Barnard determines to see her for himself. He frees Trylabas on condition that the latter arrange for him to meet Beulybon. Trylabas agrees, and swears an elaborate oath of fealty. The two men then travel to Almayn, with Barnard disguised as a hermit. Trylabas intends to double-cross the earl, and tells Beulybon of his scheme. She is horrified, and tells him that he must keep faith. He is to bring Barnard to see her at mass, where she duly arrives and, in a highly charged scene, allows herself to be admired. Barnard is smitten and, still disguised, approaches her to beg alms. She gives him forty florins and a ring, which he treasures. Aware that she is married, Barnard then leaves for his own land. On the way home he is ambushed by Trylabas and two henchmen, but he kills them all and escapes.

Meanwhile, Beulybon's two bodyguards have also fallen for her, though they are motivated by lust rather than love. They hatch a scheme to force Beulybon to become their mistress, but she is outraged and repulses their advances. However, both men make her promise to keep their secret before revealing their intentions, so she does not report them to her husband. But the knights do not trust her, and so plot her ruin. They arrange for her to be caught with a young knight naked in her chamber, tricking the hapless youth into thinking he is part of a game and then murdering him before he can protest his innocence. Beulybon is thrown in prison. Dyoclysyon then has a dream warning him that his wife is in trouble, so hastens home only to be met with the news of her infidelity. He is devastated. Beulybon is put on trial, but an old knight expresses doubts about the charges and suggests trial by combat. The word is put out, and a champion sought.

Barnard hears the call, and resolves to save Beulybon if he can be sure of her innocence. While out hunting he meets a merchant from Almayn, who is convinced that Beulybon has been slandered. Barnard enlists him as a guide, on the pretence that he has horses to sell in Almayn, and that he hopes to see the spectacle of the Beulybon's trial. On arrival they lodge with an abbot, Beulybon's uncle. He also testifies to her innocence, having heard her confession; her only sin was once giving a ring to the Earl of Toulouse. Barnard then reveals himself and his intention, much to the abbot's delight. On the day of the execution, Barnard goes to the court disguised as a monk. He hears Beulybon's confession and, finally convinced of her integrity, he steps up as her champion (still in disguise). He conquers the two slanderers, who confess and are burnt on the pyre they had intended for the lady. Barnard then slips away, but Dyoclysyon has the abbot bring him back. However, the abbot only does so once he has revealed Barnard's identity and secured Dyoclysyon's assurance that he will not harm his erstwhile enemy. The two men are reconciled and Barnard becomes Dyoclysyon's steward. Three years later Dyoclysyon dies and Barnard is elected emperor in his stead. He marries Beulybon, and they have many noble children.

Sir Degrevant
(1,904 lines in sixteen-line tail-rhyme stanzas)

The good knight Sir Degrevant is away fighting the heathen when his estates are attacked by a neighbouring earl. Apprised of the situation by letter, he returns home, helps his tenants to recover, and writes the Earl a letter asking him to explain himself and/or make amends. The Earl laughs, and launches another raid on Degrevant's hunting-ground. Degrevant musters his household and trounces the Earl in a pitched battle. The next day he visits the Earl's castle and requests a joust, which is declined. The Earl's wife and their daughter Melidor appear on the castle walls. The lady asks Degrevant to consider himself avenged, but he refuses and departs to ravage the Earl's lands. As he does so, he confesses to a squire that he now loves Melidor. Hero and squire sneak into the Earl's orchard, where they surprise Melidor with her maid. Degrevant confesses his love, and is furiously rebuffed. The ladies then flee, but the maid asks Melidor a boon: she

wants to receive Degrevant in her chamber. During the ensuing supper
Degrevant secures the maid's assistance in his suit, betroths her to his squire,
knights him, and settles a marriage portion on the new couple.

The Duke of Gere (Melidor's preferred suitor) arrives to fight for her hand
in a tournament, but he is roundly defeated by a disguised Degrevant. Still
disguised, Degrevant intrudes on the post-tournament supper and claims his
lady. The Duke offers to fight him for her the following day. Degrevant agrees
and departs, having been recognized by no one but Melidor. He triumphs again
over the Duke, and Melidor tells her maid that she is now ready to hear his suit.
He visits her secretly in her elaborately described chamber, where they spend an
evening eating, making music, and fooling around in bed; Melidor refuses to give
Degrevant all that he wants, but they do plight troth. These visits continue for
about eighteen months, until Degrevant is spotted by a forester, who tells the
steward, who arranges an ambush. Degrevant and his erstwhile squire fight off
the Earl's entire household and visit their ladies as usual. The following morning
the Earl confronts his daughter. She is spirited and unrepentant, countering her
father's threat to kill her by saying that she will starve herself to death anyway if
she is denied her lover. Her mother intervenes: it was ungentlemanly to arrange
the ambush, she says, and anyway the Earl wronged Degrevant first by attacking
his lands; it is high time they stopped fighting. Over-ruled by the women, the Earl
grudgingly backs down. Melidor writes Degrevant the good news, the men make
peace, and there is a fabulous wedding attended by all the secular and
ecclesiastical dignitaries in Europe. Melidor and Degrevant live together for
thirty years and have seven children; then she dies, he goes back to crusading,
and soon follows her to heaven.

Sir Eglamour of Artois
(*c.* 1,350 lines in twelve-line tail-rhyme stanzas)

Sir Eglamour is a knight in the household of Princeamour, Earl of Artois, whose
daughter, Christabel, he champions against all suitors. Eglamour and Christabel
fall in love, but she says they must have her father's blessing. Eglamour broaches
the issue while out hunting, and Princeamour sets him three challenges. The first

is to slaughter a deer in a neighbouring forest, and to fight the giant who guards them. Christabel equips her lover, and Eglamour passes the test. Next he has to slay a mighty boar in Sydon. Again he succeeds, thus befriending the king whose land the animal occupied. This king is also being harried by a giant who wants the princess Organate, so Eglamour fights and kills the giant too. He is offered Organate as a reward, but says he cannot accept. He goes home, much to Princeamour's consternation, and prematurely consummates his union with Christabel. Eglamour's final test is to vanquish a dragon dwelling in Rome; he succeeds, but is so badly wounded that it takes a whole year for him to recover. He spends the time being nursed by the Emperor's daughter, but there is no suggestion of impropriety. Meanwhile, Christabel has given birth to a son, Degrebel, and been put to sea in a rudderless boat by her angry and increasingly villainous father. She drifts to an island, where the baby is stolen by a griffin, and then on to Egypt, where she is rescued by the king, her uncle. Baby Degrebel is carried to Israel, rescued by the king there, and raised as his son. Eglamour now returns to Artois and hears the terrible news. Princeamour promptly withdraws to a tower and Eglamour appears to take over, receiving homage and dubbing knights, then mysteriously absconds for the Holy Land.

Fifteen years pass, and the king of Egypt arranges a tournament for Christabel's hand. Degrebel (who is now fifteen) travels to Egypt, wins the tournament, and marries his mother. But before they get any further Christabel notices her husband's distinctive arms (a child borne by a griffin), and questions him about them. The truth comes out and incest is avoided. Another tournament is arranged, and this one attracts Eglamour. He fights and defeats Degrebel, though he does not hurt him, and so wins the right to marry Christabel (again). Christabel asks him about his arms (a drowning lady and child), and there is a joyous reunion. The king of Israel confirms his promise to make Degrebel his heir, and the king of Sydon (who is also at the tournament) suggests Degrebel should marry Organate, whom Eglamour saved from the giant fifteen years earlier. Everyone then goes back to Artois, and Princeamour falls ignominiously from a tower (backwards) when he sees them coming. There is a joyous and lavish double wedding, and then everyone goes home, presumably to live happily ever after.

Amis and Amiloun

(*c.* 2,500 lines in twelve-line tail-rhyme stanzas)

Amis and Amiloun are born on the same day and look exactly alike. As youths they are committed to the care of the Duke of Lombardy, who knights them and gives them official positions in his household. They become sworn brothers, each promising to be loyal to the other whatever may come of it. Amiloun's parents die, so he goes home, claims his inheritance, and gets married. Amis wants to go too but the Duke will not let him. Before leaving, Amiloun commissions a pair of gold cups, keeping one and giving the other to Amis as a parting gift.

The Duke's steward tries to replace Amiloun in Amis's affections, but is politely rebuffed. He takes umbrage and seeks an opportunity to exact revenge. Meanwhile the Duke's daughter Belisaunt has fallen hopelessly in love with Amis. Meeting him by chance in an orchard, she declares her love and threatens to accuse him of rape if he will not have her. Amis succumbs to pressure and they consummate their love a week later, watched by the steward. He tells the Duke, and Amis only escapes with his life by swearing that the steward is lying and offering trial by combat. Belisaunt and her mother act as his guarantors. Amis goes to Amiloun for help, and Amiloun offers to fight in his place. They look so similar that no one will know the difference, but Amiloun can swear truthfully whereas Amis cannot. They successfully swap identities, and Amis places a drawn sword between himself and Amiloun's wife each night (much to the lady's surprise). *En route* to the combat, a voice from heaven warns Amiloun that he will become a leper if he proceeds. Amiloun is undeterred – prepared to sacrifice himself for Amis – and kills the steward. The Duke offers him Belisaunt's hand as a reward, Amiloun accepts, quickly switches back with Amis, and the lovers are married. Amiloun then tells his wife what has happened, and she berates him for killing an honest man.

The Duke dies and Amis succeeds to the duchy and lives in bliss with Belisaunt. Meanwhile Amiloun contracts the promised leprosy, and his wife turns him out of their home. He is reduced to begging, but a young kinsman called Owain (and known as Amoraunt) keeps him constant company. Years pass and times grow hard. Eventually the pair arrives at Amis's castle gate one

midwinter, but Amiloun is determined to remain incognito. A knight spots handsome Amoraunt and tries to secure his service; Amoraunt refuses to leave Amiloun. The knight reports the odd encounter to Amis, who sends wine to the pair in his special cup. Amiloun receives the wine in *his* cup (carefully preserved through all his adversity). On hearing this Amis flies into a rage, convinced that the leper has killed or robbed his friend. He beats him and demands an explanation, but in the end it is Amoraunt who sets the record straight. Chastened, Amis welcomes Amiloun into his court, and Belisaunt lovingly tends him.

Three times Amis dreams that he could cure Amiloun by killing his two children on Christmas eve and washing his friend with their blood. Amiloun has the same dream, and this confirms Amis's fears. While everyone else is at church he sneaks into the nursery and performs the sacrifice. Amiloun is horrified, but consents to be covered in the blood and put to bed. Amis spends time in prayer, then tells Belisaunt what he has done. She accepts that he had no choice. They visit Amiloun and find him healed, then visit the nursery and find the children sleeping peacefully as though nothing had happened. A little while later Amiloun returns to his country, with Amis, in time to find his wife about to remarry. They attack the wedding party, kill the groom, and incarcerate the lady. She lives out her days as an anchoress, while Amiloun transfers his lands to Amoraunt and returns to live with Amis and Belisaunt in the ducal palace. The friends die on the same day and share a grave in an abbey they had built for the purpose.

CHAPTER 4   Impoverished Knights

Sir Isumbras
(*c.* 800 lines in twelve-line tail-rhyme stanzas)

The fine and wealthy knight Sir Isumbras grows proud and forgets God. He goes hunting one day and a bird speaks to him, warning that his pride has angered the Almighty, and he must make amends. The bird gives him the option of suffering hardship now, while in his prime, or when he is older. Isumbras chooses the former, and the bird flies off. Isumbras's horse now drops dead under him, his

hawks and hounds run mad into the forest, his tenants are attacked, his estates ravaged, and his house burns down. His wife and three sons escape the blaze, but they are naked so Isumbras dresses them in his own clothes. Cutting a cross into his shoulder in the manner of the crusaders, he departs with his family for the Holy Land. As they travel the three children are stolen by a lion, a leopard, and a unicorn, and Isumbras's wife is abducted by an invading sultan who ships her to his own land to await his return. In exchange for his wife the Saracen abductors leave Isumbras with a sum of gold wrapped in a mantle, but that is soon stolen by a griffin. Isumbras spends the next seven years working as a smith, and is eventually able to make his own armour. He rides the pit pony into battle against the sultan (who has been harassing Christendom all this time), fights well, and is re-equipped part-way through by an earl. Now properly armed, he returns to the fighting and kills the sultan. This makes the king determine to knight him when his wounds have healed, but Isumbras slips away as soon as he is well. He goes to the Holy Land and lives there in miserable poverty for a further seven years. Then an angel comes to him at midnight, offers bread and wine, and tells him all is forgiven. Nothing changes, though, until Isumbras arrives outside a castle whose lady is renowned for charity. She takes him in and makes him part of her household, where he distinguishes himself fighting in tournaments.

One day out hunting Isumbras sees a cloth dangling from a tree. On further investigation it proves to be the mantle and gold stolen from him by the griffin. He reclaims it and keeps it in his chamber, but is plunged into misery every time he sees it. This makes the other courtiers suspect him of something, so they search his chamber, find the gold, and take it to their lady. She is amazed to see it, for she is of course Isumbras's wife and recognizes this gold for her husband's. Husband and wife are finally reunited, restored to fabulous riches, and able to set about converting their heathen subjects. But those subjects take against forced conversion; there is a war and Isumbras's household deserts him. Only his wife remains at his side, and she dresses in armour and prepares to fight and die beside him. They ride out, and just as all seems lost three knights appear riding on a lion, a leopard, and a unicorn – the lost sons of course. The battle is won, the family reunited, and together they begin a campaign of holy war so

successful that each son soon has a crown of his own. Then they all live happily, die, and go to heaven.

Sir Cleges
(570 lines in twelve-line tail-rhyme stanzas)

Sir Cleges is an exceptionally generous knight living in the time of King Uther. He and his wife Clarys are particularly renowned for their charity, hospitality, and their wonderful Christmas celebrations. But they are living beyond their means, and after a decade find themselves in debt, without servants, and scraping an existence on a single meagre manor. Cleges finds this decline particularly hard to bear on Christmas Eve, and wanders alone listening to other people's festivities taking place all around him. Clarys arrives, comforts him tenderly, and they go indoors for dinner before playing with their children and going to bed. They rise for Midnight Mass, where Cleges and Clarys each pray for one another. On the way home Cleges lingers again in the garden, kneeling to pray and tell God that he has accepted his new condition. He puts his hand on a branch to help himself up, and feels it covered in fruit. Cherries, in midwinter. He takes them to Clarys in amazement and fear; she interprets them as a good omen and suggests he take them to the king in the morning. On Christmas Day Cleges and his son set out for the court in Cardiff, on foot and looking for all the world like beggars. The porter refuses them entry to the castle, but when Cleges shows him the cherries he agrees to let them pass on condition that he be given a third of whatever reward the king grants. The same thing happens with the usher and steward, and each time Cleges agrees with a sinking heart. Uther is thrilled by the fruit, which he sends to a certain Cornish lady, and promises Cleges anything he asks. Much to his surprise and anger, Cleges requests the right to dole out twelve strokes to his enemies at court. This having been reluctantly granted, Cleges issues each of the officials four goodly wallops. Meanwhile Uther is entertained by a minstrel, and here the manuscripts diverge. The Advocates manuscript has the minstrel sing of Cleges, prompting Uther to ask what has happened to him. The minstrel seems not to know, but laments his disappearance. Uther supposes him dead and is sorry. Cleges returns to his presence, and Uther asks him to explain his

behaviour, and who he is. Cleges does so, and there is a happy reunion. The Ashmole manuscript handles the revelation differently in that there is no mention of Cleges until Uther asks the minstrel if he knows the poor man's name. The minstrel says yes, it is Sir Cleges, so Uther is already in the know when he asks the hero who he is. The two texts then come back together for the conclusion. Uther makes Cleges steward of the realm, retains his son as a landed squire, and sends them both home with a cup for Clarys. The family pays its debts, and thanks to God.

Sir Amadace
(*c.* 800 lines in irregular twelve-line stanzas)

The manuscripts are both acephalous, and begin as Amadace's steward is telling him he is deeply in debt and must reduce his household and expenses dramatically. Amadace determines to give one final feast, then mortgage his lands and go abroad to give his domestic finances time to recover. He sets out with a squire, a knave, and his final £40. They pass a chapel in the woods, from which there comes a foul smell. Amadace sends his knave to investigate, and then his squire. They are both repulsed by the stench, but report a rotting corpse and a lady sitting beside it. Amadace discovers that the corpse is that of an over-generous merchant who has been refused burial because he has outstanding debts. The lady is his wife. Amadace lodges with the intransigent creditor, pays the £30 debt, and spends the £10 he has over on a lavish burial for the merchant. Destitute, Amadace sorrowfully dismisses his companions and wanders back into the forest to lament his fate. A White Knight appears, tells him not to despair, and offers to help Amadace recover his riches in exchange for a half share in the profits. Amadace agrees, so the White Knight directs him to a rich shipwreck, and then to a castle where a tournament is being held for the princess's hand. The White Knight promises Amadace will win the tournament, which he does. Amadace and the lady promptly fall in love and are happily married. Time passes. A son is born. Then one day the White Knight appears at Amadace's gates. Amadace is delighted, welcomes him, and offers hospitality. The guest replies he wants only what he is owed. No, not even that. Amadace can

keep all his land and property, the White Knight will take only half of his wife and half of his son. Amadace is horrified and begs for mercy, but the White Knight insists. So, too, does the lady – she is adamant that Amadace must keep his word. The sacrifice is prepared, and Amadace raises the blade. Then the White Knight cries halt. All is over. He reveals that he is actually the merchant whom Amadace buried, and that he has been allowed back to earth by God to repay Amadace's kindness. Satisfied that all is well, and that Amadace and his wife are both worthy of one another, he melts away and leaves the couple to kneel and thank God. Amadace pays his debts, reclaims his mortgaged estates, recalls his dismissed household, and eventually inherits his father-in-law's crown.

Sir Launfal
(1,044 lines in twelve-line tail-rhyme stanzas)

Launfal has been King Arthur's steward for ten years, but all goes awry when Arthur marries Guinevere (here described as Rion's daughter). Launfal takes against the new queen because she is rumoured to take lovers, so, claiming that his father has died, he leaves the court. Arthur sends him off with plenty of money, and his own two nephews for company. Arriving in Caerleon, Launfal explains his situation to the mayor (and erstwhile servant) and requests hospitality. The mayor is reluctant at first because Launfal is out of favour, but relents when Launfal mocks him for being self-interested and ungracious. Launfal proceeds to spend so liberally that he ruins himself within a year, and his companions leave him. They return to Arthur but, at Launfal's request, do not let on about his poverty. Launfal lives miserably in Caerleon, too poor even to attend church, and scorned by all. One day the mayor's daughter invites him to accompany her to a feast being given by her father, but Launfal refuses because he is too ashamed of his shabby appearance. He asks her to lend him a saddle and bridle for his horse instead. This she does, and Launfal rides out. Resting beneath a tree he is approached by two beautiful maidens, one carrying a basin, the other a towel. They take him to their mistress Dame Tryamour, daughter of the king of Faerie, who has decided to make Launfal her partner. They become

lovers, and Tryamour gives her knight a purse providing unlimited riches, a horse, a pennon, a supernatural squire, and invincibility. Then she sends him home, promising to come to him whenever he is somewhere secluded, and cautioning him never to speak about her.

Launfal now lives in luxury, spending as a knight should. He triumphs in a tournament, defeats a Lombard giant who challenges him to battle, and receives an invitation to return to court. He accepts, and catches Guinevere's eye. She propositions him, but he refuses because he does not want to be a traitor (whether he is thinking of Arthur or Tryamour is unclear). Guinevere taunts and reviles him, and he is goaded into retorting that he does, in fact, have a lady and that her plainest maiden would make a worthier queen than Guinevere. Guinevere flounces off in a rage and accuses Launfal to Arthur. Meanwhile Launfal has discovered that Tryamour will no longer come to him, and that all his wealth and finery have melted away. Then he is arrested and tried. The lords dismiss Guinevere's claim that he propositioned her – they can see through that – so only the matter of the handmaiden remains. Launfal is given a year in which to produce evidence that he told the truth, a year which he passes in misery because Tryamour still keeps away. The day of judgement comes, and the lords wrangle about whether or not to condemn Launfal (Arthur tells them they must, but they are reluctant to do so because Launfal is so generous and *hende*). Two maidens arrive to herald their lady's approach. They are stunningly beautiful, much more so than Guinevere. The deliberations go on, and another group of maidens arrives, even more beautiful than the first pair. Guinevere begins to get edgy, but before anything can happen Tryamour herself appears. She stuns the court with her beauty, declares Launfal innocent, and breathes into Guinevere's eyes to blind her. Launfal's fairy squire returns with his special horse, and the whole party rides off to Avalon. But if anyone should wish to encounter Launfal, they still can: once every year he returns to this world to joust.

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