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Generic Juxtapositioning in Malory's Morte D'Arthur

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***GENERIC JUXTAPOSITIONING IN
MALORY'S MORTE DARTHUR***

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MALORY'S MORTE DARTHUR**

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Abstract

Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur is usually classified as a romance. This is due in part to the fact that the dominant concerns in Malory scholarship of the last two generations have been source study and the unity debate rather than genre criticism. Neither of these approaches, however, answers the questions raised by the Morte's inconsistencies or genre. Vinaver argues these problems away by treating the Morte as eight separate romances, others treat it as quasi-history, and Brewer and Field both classify it as romance with some unusual features, but none of these studies adequately explains the fact that the Morte's essentially tragic ending contradicts one of the primary characteristics of mediaeval romance. This thesis thus contends that the Morte Darthur is currently misunderstood because its genre is misinterpreted. Before examining genre in the Morte Darthur, however, it is necessary to establish what genre is, how it operates and how it is recognised in literary texts. Since the Morte is usually taken to be a romance, I also examine the romance genre in general, and offer a definition of mediaeval romance in particular: for despite the efforts of Ker, Everett, Kane, Finlayson, Barron and Burlin, the defining characteristics of mediaeval romance remain contentious. Having established paradigms for genre and romance, I then analyse genre in the Morte Darthur itself, especially the generic features which show that, instead of a romance, Malory has created a generic mixture best termed epic-romance.

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Whatever merit these pages possess I dedicate to Mom and Nanny.

Introduction

When, in “the ninth yere of the reygne of Kyng Edward the Fourth,” Sir Thomas Malory completed the work known to us as Le Morte Darthur but which he himself entitled The Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table,¹ he finished what “was to become the starting-point of a great tradition of imaginative prose and poetry,”² arguably the most influential of any English Arthurian text, mediaeval or otherwise.

When Eugène Vinaver in 1947 published his august edition of Morte Darthur, based on the Winchester manuscript discovered thirteen years earlier,³ he contentiously presented it as a succession of independent romances.⁴ While two generations of critics have established the Morte's essential unity, they have largely accepted its classification as a romance.⁵ It has even been called the last romance proper of the

¹ Sir Thomas Malory, The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, ed. Eugène Vinaver, rev. P. J. C. Field, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) 1260.25-26 and 1260.16-19 respectively.

² Eugène Vinaver, “Sir Thomas Malory,” Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959) 552.

³ See the account of the discovery of the MS by W. F. Oakeshott, “The Finding of the Manuscript,” Essays on Malory, ed. J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963) 1-6.

⁴ Vinaver, ed., Works ix and xxxv-li, esp. xxxix. All references to Vinaver's apparatus criticus are to the third edition, cited in n. 1 supra.

⁵ See, e.g., John Finlayson, “Definitions of Middle English Romance,” Chaucer Review 15 (1980-81): 171, who considers “parts of Malory [to be] . . . fully achieved courtly romanc[e],” Derek Pearsall, “Language and Literature,” The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval England, ed. Nigel Saul (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 276, who classifies it “as the supreme example of the . . . prose romance cycle” in English; and

Middle Ages.⁶ As we shall see, however, there are events, characters, structuring and themes which suggest that this generic characterization is incorrect: not the least of these indications is the unhappy ending, the strength of which causes one critic temporarily to question the Morte's romance status, and another to present the Morte as the most famous of a number of problematic romances which, for this and other reasons, demand a reassessment of the genre.⁷

Before we can examine the genre of the Morte Darthur, however, it is necessary to examine the concept of genre itself; for despite the fact that critics have been discussing genre and genre theory since Aristotle, it remains a difficult and controversial concept. Further, while literary theory has ostensibly opened a number of new doors and avenues of exploration, it is largely uninterested in genre theory; when it does express an interest it is usually only to note the connexion—which is, for the purposes of actual genre-study, of very little use—between genre and gender,⁸ or even, in what has been called “the ideology of modernism,”⁹ to disparage genre

P. J. C. Field, “Sir Thomas Malory’s Le Morte Darthur,” The Arthur of the English, ed. W. R. J. Barron, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages 2 (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1999) 244, who notes that “Vinaver may have been wrong over the unity of the book, but he was right to insist that it is not a novel but romance.”

⁶ Michael O’Connell, “Epic and Romance,” Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism, ed. Martin Coyle et al. (London: Routledge, 1990) 179.

⁷ Respectively Terence McCarthy, “Le Morte Darthur and Romance,” Studies in Medieval English Romances, ed. Derek Brewer (Cambridge: Brewer, 1988) 173-74, and Helen Cooper, “Counter-Romance,” The Long Fifteenth Century, ed. Cooper and Sally Mapstone (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 141-62, esp. 148-55.

⁸ See, e.g., Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” Acts of Literature, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992) 221-52.

⁹ Fredric Jameson, “Magical Narratives,” New Literary History 7 (1975-76): 135.

altogether. As has recently been remarked, “If the death of the author has been a familiar refrain of modern literary theory, so too has the dissolution of genres.”¹⁰ As we shall, such a view of genre is a misconception, the correction of which requires the establishment of a paradigm for literary genres and genre-study.

Something similar can be said of mediaeval romance, for despite one hundred years of criticism, there is very little agreement about how best to define the genre. Indeed, “despite the number of books and articles . . . which have been written on the romances, there are very few definitions of romance, and not even the best of these is free from . . . confusion.”¹¹ Since the Morte Darthur is usually taken to be a romance, though, it is necessary to have some sense of how mediaeval authors and audiences perceived genres in general, and especially how they conceived of romance in particular.

Only when this is done can we turn to the genre of Le Morte Darthur itself. In doing so we shall see that, far from being a straightforward romance, it is actually a generic hendiadys best termed epic-romance.

¹⁰ David Duff, ed., Modern Genre Theory, Longman Critical Readers (London: Longman, 2000) 1.

¹¹ Finlayon 46.

Generic Kinds and Contracts

All forms of artistic mimesis, and perhaps all aspects of human communication in general, are subject to generic conventions. Our generic considerations may, like our use of language, be so thoroughly assimilated as to function unconsciously, but our presentation, understanding and interpretation of any mimetic and communicative act is affected by genre, whether the medium be speech, literature, music, film, dance or anything else. Genre is perhaps most often discussed in connexion with literature, and increasingly with film, but very little thought is needed to reveal its presence in a variety of other forms; even architectural and musical styles are recognized through generic conventions.¹ As Dudley North observed in the seventeenth century: “Mufick hath its Anthems, Pavens, Fantefies, Galliards, Courantoes, Ayres, Sarabands, Toyes, Cromatiques, &c. And Verfes have their Hymmes, Tragedies, Satyres, Heroiques, Sonets, Odes, Songs, Epigrams, Diftiques, and Strong lines, which are their Cromatiques.”²

Genre, then, is multi-disciplinary, multifarious and multiform. It is even said to be “part of the very metalanguage of interdisciplinarity.”³ This complexity has given rise to a number of different approaches, some of which are more concerned with the function of genre than its definition. For some linguists, for instance, genre is a type of

¹ Rosalie L. Colie, *The Resources of Kind*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Berkeley: U of California P, 1973) 5-7. Cf. Dudley North, *A Forest of Varieties* (London: Richard Cotes, 1645) 2-3, which may be Colie’s source.

² North 3; cf. Colie 6.

³ David Duff, ed., *Modern Genre Theory*, Longman Critical Readers (London: Longman, 2000) 16.

communicative event, a distinctive category of discourse of any type, spoken or written, with or without literary aspirations.⁴ Folklorists, on the other hand, may see genres as classificatory systems, or as quasi-permanent forms which still exist even if the myths from which they spring are reduced to nursery rhymes, or as indicators of social or cultural expectations, needs, composition and mores. Rhetoricians likewise use genre as a social indicator, a means of analysing types of discourse and their socio-historical implications,⁵ while structuralist critics like Tzvetan Todorov see genre as representing “a structure, a configuration of literary properties, an inventory of options.”⁶ Some literary theorists, on the other hand, have argued that genre is a way of grouping literary works based, theoretically, upon what we may call both inner and outer form, a combination of metrical and structural traits with elements such as tone and purpose which are usually associated with subject and audience.⁷ Many of these various approaches to genre have been said to share certain common assumptions, the

⁴ John M. Swales, Genre Analysis (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990) 33, 45-9 and 58.

⁵ Swales 34-6 and 42-4. For genres in folklore see Dan Ben-Amos, ed., Folklore Genres (Austin: U of Texas P, 1976). For genre as a social indicator see Bronislaw Malinowski, A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays, pref. Huntington Cairns (1944; New York: Galaxy, 1964), and Elliott Oring, ed., Folk Groups and Folklore Genres (Logan: Utah State UP, 1986) 121-46, esp. 134-35. For a more discourse-oriented approach see Carolyn R. Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 70 (1984): 151-67.

⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, The Fantastic, trans. Richard Howard, foreword by Robert Scholes (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975) 141. Cf. Thomas G. Winner, “Structural and Semiotic Genre Theory,” Theories of Literary Genre, ed. Joseph P. Strelka, Yearbook of Comparative Criticism 8 (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1978) 264-66.

⁷ René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, 3rd ed. (1962; San Diego: Harcourt, 1984) 231. Cf. Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, trans. Timothy Bahti, intro. Paul de Man, Theory and History of Literature 2 (1982; Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994) 82.

most important of which are a wariness of prescriptive classifications of genre and an awareness of genre's possible role in integrating past and present.⁸

Rather less convincing is Todorov's view that all genres result from speech acts, just as it is a simplification to see genre as always being produced by and reflecting a society's ideology.⁹ M. M. Bakhtin, for instance, attempts to equate literary genres with ideology in this sense, but having done so he immediately realizes the untenableness of this position, acknowledging that any generic style or example can reflect the views and opinions of an individual speaker or author who, it must be added, might be at odds with his or her society.¹⁰ Hence, genre may reflect the reigning ideology, but not, I think, always; it may be that a writer simply wishes to write in a certain way, one which may actually criticize rather than endorse the ideology of the time—as is the case in the writings of Aristophanes and Swift and Shaw.¹¹ Coleridge considered the poetic or literary work to be guided by a sense of “initiative,” a term which includes or can be defined as genre,¹² but this generic

⁸ Swales 44.

⁹ Tzvetan Todorov, “The Origin of Genres,” New Literary History 8.1 (Autumn 1976): passim, esp. 163-64.

¹⁰ M. M. Bakhtin, “The Problem of Speech Genres,” Speech Genres and Other Late Essays, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas: U of Texas P, 1986) 62-3 and 75; the emphasis on individual is mine.

¹¹ For an identification of Aristophanes' comic method and various of his victims see Ian Storey, “Poets, Politicians, and Perverts,” Classics Ireland 5 (1998): 85-134, online, Netscape, 1 February 2000.

¹² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Section the Second: On the Grounds of Morals and Religion, and the Discipline of the Mind Requisite for a True Understanding of the Same. Essay IV[:] Essays on the Principles of Method,” The Friend, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, vols. 4.I and 4.II, The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (London: Routledge; Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969) I: 455. Frye considers initiative to mean genre: Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) 245-46.

initiative belongs as much to the individual poet as to society. Further, it comprises a number of considerations, a “complex of factors,”¹³ and need not reflect a particular ideology. Moreover, since most of the theorists who claim that all literary genres and texts are ideologically determined also claim, implicitly or explicitly, to be themselves exempt from the dominant ideology,¹⁴ they must allow that other authors may also be exempt, even those who do not criticize the ruling class or classes. Thus, as one influential Marxist critic observes, not only should literature and culture be “approached in ways other than reduction, abstraction, or assimilation,” but ideology in whatever sense or form is probably insufficient to such a task.¹⁵

On the other hand, genre can function as a self-reflexive property, possibly one which suggests a certain type of interpretation: in film, Sam Peckinpah’s The Wild Bunch is fully understood only in relation to more traditional Westerns like Shane,¹⁶

Cf. Hirsch, who argues for the interaction of genre, genre purpose, authorial will and idea: E. D. Hirsch Jr, Validity in Interpretation (New Haven: Yale UP, 1967) 101.

¹³ Frye 246.

¹⁴ I realize that I may be guilty of simplifying the concept of ideology here, but while the relation of ideology and literature is a common topic amongst critical theorists at the moment, these same theorists cannot agree on what the term means. Even the argument that there are multiple ideologies is ultimately contradictory. Althusser, e.g., says both that there are multiple ideologies but that these are unified by and subjected to a reigning ideology, and that the individual is free to choose his or her own ideology, but that the individual’s identity is the result of being defined or hailed by ideology: Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideology State Apparatuses,” Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays (London: NLB, 1971) 121-73.

¹⁵ Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 71. Williams 55-6 draws attention to the plurality of senses and meanings of ideology, and concludes that there can be no single, correct definition.

¹⁶ Cf. Thomas Schatz, Hollywood Genres (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981) 9, 40 and 58-61. I am indebted to Derry Wilkinson for this reference.

just as Clint Eastwood's Unforgiven can be seen as looking back at and commenting upon both his own Westerns and the genre in general.

I would argue, however, that the most important consideration to bear in mind is that genre is an essential part of the medium of a work, without which, consciously or unconsciously, we can never fully understand its message.¹⁷ For "no work makes its meaning without to some extent depending upon the audience's recognition . . . that it belongs to a specific genre."¹⁸ To take an extreme example, parody can only function successfully when its audience is aware "of the standard elements of a convention."¹⁹ The close of Swift's "On Poetry: A Rapsody" pretends to be a royal panegyric and dramatization of Swift's advice to the poet about royal flattery, but it is actually a satire on critics, hack poets, and royalty. The curious spelling of "rapsody" in the subtitle indicates Swift's satiric intent, as "rapp" can mean both a counterfeit coin and a blow to the head.²⁰ Queen Caroline, however, missed this clue and failed to recognize the poem's true genre: she not only accepted the praise as genuine, she only realized that Swift should not be rewarded when her advisers pointed out her error. Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," in contrast, has been seen by one critic not as a

¹⁷ Cf. Hirsch 68-126, and Bakhtin, "Speech Genres" 60-102, esp. 76-81 and 85-8, both of whom similarly see genre as the key to communication and understanding.

¹⁸ John Finlayson, "Definitions of Middle English Romance," Chaucer Review 15 (1980-81): 44. Cf. Alastair Fowler, "The Life and Death of Literary Forms," New Literary History 2.2 (Winter 1971): 205.

¹⁹ Finlayson, "Definitions" 47; cf. Colie 24-6.

²⁰ Nora Crow Jaffe, The Poet Swift (Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1977) 50-1 and 44-5; the story about Queen Caroline occurs on 50-1.

carpe diem poem—as it surely is—but as a parody of such poems.²¹ Whether this is a simple truth recognized far too late, or, as it seems, a blatant misreading of both the poem and of generic conventions in general, it either way shows the vital importance of a proper understanding of genre. In a similar generic misreading, Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia regum Britanniae has likewise been said to be a parody,²² although it is more properly part of the pseudo-historical chronicle tradition with, moreover, little evidence of parodic or even comedic intent.²³

While some generic conventions are overlooked or blatantly misconstrued, other genres can suffer from a limited view of their conventions or potential. Shaw, for instance, lamented the comic success of his plays at the expense of their morality, complaining vociferously that people continually missed the serious moral message embedded in the humour.²⁴ Such misunderstanding presumably stems from a general failure to understand the comic genre, the restrictive belief that comedy cannot also be didactic and espouse a serious message. Amongst modern critics, at least, this

²¹ B. J. Sokol, "Logic and Illogic in Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress'," English Studies 71 (1990): 247-51.

²² Valerie I. J. Flint, "The Historia regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth: Parody and Its Purpose," Speculum 54 (1979): 447-68, and Christopher Brooke, "Geoffrey of Monmouth as a Historian," Church and Government in the Middle Ages, ed. C. N. L. Brooke et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976) 77-91.

²³ For a recent overview of critical views and comment on the nature of the Historia, as well as on its place in British and English historiography, see Rees Davies, The Matter of Britain and the Matter of England, Inaugural Lecture, University of Oxford, 29 February 1996 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) 2-17, esp. 5-9.

²⁴ George Bernard Shaw, "Man and Superman," The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw, ed. Dan H. Laurence, vol. 2 (London: Reinhardt, The Bodley Head, 1971) "Epistle Dedicatory," 525-30. A similar complaint has recently been made about criticism of Chaucer's Tale of Thopas, that it applauds the humour while ignoring the seriousness of the tale: Angela Jane Weisl, Conquering the Reign of Femeny, Chaucer Studies 22 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1995) 73.

misconception extends as far back as Greek Old Comedy, where the possibility that Aristophanes' plays could contain both great comic fantasy and a moral or didactic message was long denied.²⁵ Much of the difficulty and controversy surrounding our interpretation and understanding of Euripides' Alkestis is likewise genre-based, stemming from the fact that critics are unsure as to just what genre it is.²⁶

Surprisingly, even Paradise Lost has been the object of a spectacular generic misreading, one which construed the poem as a classical epic with Satan as the hero.²⁷

Judging one generic form by the features and conventions of another can lead to serious complications: one problem in trying to get concert bands to play swing or jazz arrangements is that most members of the band judge the music by the wrong conventions, consequently misplaying it. Orson Welles's 1938 American radio broadcast of H. G. Wells's War of the Worlds suffered from an even more serious generic misinterpretation, one made possible in part by Welles's manipulation of

²⁵ A. W. Gomme, "Aristophanes and Politics," Classical Review 52 (1938): 97-109, and G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "The Political Outlook of Aristophanes," The Origins of the Peloponnesian War (London: Duckworth, 1972) app. XXIX, 355-76, are the principal opponents in the critical debate as to whether or not Greek Old Comedy can be didactic. Most subsequent critics tend to side with one or the other of these influential arguments, although Douglas M. MacDowell, Aristophanes and Athens (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995) takes the line that Aristophanes intended to be both funny and serious. For a summary of seriousness in Old Comedy's personal humour see Storey, section VII.

²⁶ For an overview of—and proposed solution to—the problem see D. J. Conacher, Euripidean Drama (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1967) 333-39. See also A. M. Dale, ed., Alkestis, by Euripides (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954) xviii-xxii, and D. J. Conacher, ed. and trans., Alkestis, by Euripides (Warminster: Aris, 1988) 35-7. An excellent study of five specific aspects of the play, including that of its genre, is R. G. A. Buxton, "Euripides' Alkestis," Papers Given at a Colloquium on Greek Drama in Honour of R. P. Winnington-Ingram, ed. Lyn Rodley (London: Society for Promotion of Hellenic Studies, 1987) 17-31, esp. 27-9.

²⁷ William Empson, Milton's God (London: Chatto, 1961) passim, esp. 9-90. Cf. Fowler, "Literary Forms" 201.

various generic conventions and media: many Americans, failing entirely to recognize the story as science fiction, actually believed that Earth was being attacked by aliens! Genre, consequently, should be seen not as restrictive but as a communicative resource leading to understanding, albeit one which has often been misconstrued, and whose fluidity has often led to errors in communication and interpretation.²⁸

This conclusion is highly relevant to Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur, a text which has been much misunderstood because its genre has been misinterpreted. The Morte has traditionally been styled a romance, but romance itself has yet to be properly understood. Critics who label a work "romance" clearly often disagree about what the salient features of romance might be.²⁹ Moreover, as we shall see, there are indications in the Morte which suggest that it is not a romance at all. The misunderstandings that these factors have produced will continue until the generic complexities of both the Morte Darthur and romance as a whole are more clearly defined. But before we can examine either the incunabulum or romance in general, we must first establish what we mean by the term genre, particularly in the context of literary studies.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines genre as (i) "kind; sort; style," and (ii) "A particular style or category of works of art; esp[ecially] a type of literary work

²⁸ Colie 1-5 and 8, and Alastair Fowler, Kinds of Literature (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982) 37 and passim. Cf. Colie 29-30, and Hirsch 68-78.

²⁹ See Finlayson, "Definitions" 45-6 and passim for some of these problems. Cf. Geraldine Barnes, Counsel and Strategy in Middle English Romance (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993) xi, and Stephen H. A. Shepherd, ed., Middle English Romances (New York: Norton, 1995) xii, both of whom are unhappy with the appellation romance.

characterized by a particular form, style, or purpose.”³⁰ At least throughout the history of Western European literature, and probably throughout world literature in general, various kinds have always been recognized; although each period tends to be dominated by a certain kind or kinds, in another period these same kinds may be unimportant or even unknown.³¹ Despite such generic change and diversity, many scholars since Goethe, operating predominantly on the basis of a misreading of Platonic and Aristotelean styles of presentation, have attempted to suggest that all literature can be encompassed within a tripartite generic division of lyric, epic and dramatic.³² Yet the primary fictional literary kinds recognized by the ancients, epic, tragedy, comedy, lyric, ode and satire, had largely been replaced at the close of the Early Modern period by the novel. And the dominant medium of communication today is not literary at all, but cinematic: film and television, with their own generic distinctions of Western, comedy, musical, gangster, detective, adventure, even the advertisement.³³

³⁰ “Genre,” Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., 20 vols., 1989.

³¹ Cf. Fowler, Kinds of Literature 11.

³² Cf. Paul Hernadi, “Order Without Borders: Recent Genre Theory in the English-Speaking Countries,” Theories of Literary Genre 193, and Duff, ed., Modern Genre Theory 3-4. For Plato’s and Aristotle’s styles of presentation see Plato, The Republic, trans., Desmond Lee, 2nd ed. (rev.) (1955; London: Penguin, 1987) 149-52 (III, 392c-394c), and Aristotle, “Poetics,” ed. and trans. Stephen Halliwell et al., Aristotle: Poetics, Longinus: On the Sublime, Demetrius: On Style (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995) chs. I and III.

³³ For an argument in favour of studying film by kind and an analysis of various of Hollywood’s cinematic kinds see Schatz passim. For a collection of papers on kind and cinema see Film Genre Reader II, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: U of Texas P, 1995) 3-183. I am indebted to Steve Price for this reference.

Another viewpoint acknowledges the existence of a variety of historical kinds, but argues that those literary texts which do not fit an obvious or existing kind are either theoretical kinds or are predicted by theoretical kinds, as these predict all possible new developments.³⁴ A theoretical kind, of course, “need be exemplified by no existing text.” Such an argument, however, ignores the evidence and implications of the variegated historical kinds. The existence of a variety of kinds in a variety of media—literary or otherwise—is well attested, and since kinds are an essential part of the medium of an individual work, we do not need to explain their existence on any theoretical basis. Recognition of a literary work’s proper kind may well be less-than-obvious, but claiming that it therefore fits only a theoretical kind is as erroneous as the argument claiming that only three literary kinds exist, or that kinds are somehow akin to fetters and so are detrimental to artistic creation and understanding. A work’s kind may be one which the critic or reader does not recognize, or it may be an uncommon or even a relatively new kind, but it will nonetheless have a concrete rather than theoretical status.

Despite the astute observation that an exclusive, rigid system of kinds, “really, never existed in practice and barely even in theory,”³⁵ genre studies have long been bedevilled by the notion that kinds are restrictive entities which must not interact. The most ambitious and perspicacious of the recent attempts at genre study, those of Northrop Frye and Alastair Fowler, are partly concerned with remedying such

³⁴ Christine Brooke-Rose, “Historical Genres/Theoretical Genres,” New Literary History 8.1 (Autumn 1976): 152-54; the quotation is from 152. Brooke-Rose is expanding upon an argument made by Todorov in his critique of Frye: see Todorov, Fantastic 13-15.

³⁵ Colie 114; cf. 127-28.

misconceptions by emphasizing the fluidity of literary kinds.³⁶ Hence, from a critical perspective, the best means of approaching kind is to attempt to reconcile their comprehensive but very different accounts, particularly as most other genre studies—some of which we have discussed already—are either so specialized in topic or approach as to be of little use for a general study, or are simply less convincing than those of Frye and Fowler. Frye argues for an archetypal approach to kind in literature in which, according to “the hero’s power of action,” all fictions are divided into five modes: myth, romance, the high and low mimetic, and the ironic; his main concern is with the way these modes influence and interact with various forms of myth. He posits the existence of “four narrative . . . elements of literature” which comprise the basic archetypal structures or generic plots, the poetic mythoi: comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony or satire.³⁷ Although Frye calls these elements “pregeneric,” such a label is misleading, as they are not so much pregeneric as metageneric: not limited to any specific time or kind, they constitute the archetypal essence of all literary kinds, providing both general plots and generic features.

Fowler offers a diachronic survey of the various literary kinds and their subtypes and mixtures, emphasizing throughout that kinds are omnipresent yet ever-changing, and that far from being restrictive they provide an important communicative resource. As he wittily observes, “genre is much less of a pigeonhole than a pigeon.”³⁸

³⁶ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, and Fowler, Kinds of Literature.

³⁷ Frye 162. The mythoi of romance and irony are different from the modes of the same names.

³⁸ Fowler, Kinds of Literature 37.

Fowler is particularly interested in the literary as opposed to the historical or social reasons for generic change.

Both Frye and Fowler offer complex characteristics by which to recognize kind, though their approaches are quite different. Frye, however, perhaps places too much faith in elucidating all-encompassing archetypes, just as Fowler at times overemphasizes the difficulty of defining genres and also, precisely because of his thoroughness and presumably in a laudable effort to avoid being too restrictive, introduces unnecessarily complicated versions of generic mixture. While it is indeed often difficult to judge literary texts effectively, much of the difficulty frequently lies in readers' approaches.³⁹ As John Finlayson observes, it is rather facile to claim that "we can[no]t really define romance but we all know what it is," and thence proceed to call something like the Knyghtes Tale a romance "without considering in any but a superficial manner what consequences this has for artistic techniques and vision."⁴⁰ In reality, there are certain factors available to both audience and author which aid in such judgements, and we would thus "do better to examine more attentively the forms and conventions the author has chosen."

Kinds, like other aspects of literature, are in a constant state of flux, as Fowler notes, but without some sense of its kind we cannot properly judge a text at all.

Fowler himself says that the sine qua non, the "first phase of the critical act[,] should

³⁹ Jauss 80, e.g., claims that kinds cannot be defined, but then states that they can be "historically determined, delimited, and described," as well as understood in their generality. Hirsch 77 rightly observes that understanding may be problematic, but that it remains possible.

⁴⁰ John Finlayson, "The Knight's Tale: The Dialogue of Romance, Epic, and Philosophy," Chaucer Review 27.2 (1992): 127-28. The quotation which closes my paragraph also comes from these pages.

be . . . determining the features of the work intended,” the signs and signals originally sent.⁴¹ Some of those signals are encoded in the generic form, which provides a sense of the whole, a notion of typical meaning-components that helps to establish a literary and historical context for interpretation.⁴² Hence it is important to recognize the appropriate kind or kinds involved. This issue may be clarified by turning to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of language. Discussing the essence of language and language-games, Wittgenstein asserts the complex relationship between various linguistic features to be one of family resemblances, a view which may, *mutatis mutandis*, be adopted for generic features as well.⁴³ For while we cannot believe in permanent kinds discoverable in all literatures in all times, any experienced reader must acknowledge that sets of frequently occurring genetic features will be found in any particular literature at any given time. It is these that define kinds and their sub-types.

Before examining some of these features in detail it is necessary to observe that a kind can also be seen as a contract, creating criteria and expectations for writer and reader alike.⁴⁴ Such contracts can vary from the very simple to the very complex. Fielding is surely creating a complex contract when he defines *Joseph Andrews* as “a

⁴¹ Fowler, *Kinds of Literature* 256.

⁴² Hirsch 222.

⁴³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953) 31°.65-32°.67. Hirsch 68-71 and 93 uses Wittgenstein’s notion of language-games and familial resemblances to present kind as the primary means of understanding. Swales 49-52 is more cautious in equating generic features with familial resemblances.

⁴⁴ Cf. Fowler, *Kinds of Literature* 251; Colie 8; Todorov, “Origin of Genres” 163; and Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987) 20. For McKeon, kinds serve a further “explanatory function that is both epistemological and social. Genres provide a conceptual framework for the mediation (if not the ‘solution’) of intractable problems.”

comic Epic-Poem in Prose,”⁴⁵ thus establishing for his new work specific—albeit innovative—generic relations and expectations. By indicating how we might identify his work, Fielding obviously expects us not only to have some grasp of the new entity through its relation to comedy and epic and prose works, but also to realize the humour when he subverts epic conventions and features to serve his new purpose. In a situation like this, generic identity becomes a matter of degree—not unlike the heroic pattern—in that, if a work exhibits a sufficient number or variation of specific features, then we may expect it to be mostly of one kind rather than another. We must remember, though, that elements associated predominantly with one kind may be found in many other kinds, so that what distinguishes a kind is not only the presence of certain elements but the emphasis given to each of them.⁴⁶

The generic contract is thus fulfilled by a variable set of features whose presence and relationships allow us to recognize a specific kind or kinds. A number of typical features signalling the generic repertoire at large are discussed by Fowler, including subject, values, emotion or mood, occasion, attitude, setting, character, names, allusion, opening topics, style, structure and metre.⁴⁷ Even the size of a work

⁴⁵ Henry Fielding, Joseph Andrews, ed. Martin C. Battestin, The Wesleyan Edition of the Works of Henry Fielding (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 4.

⁴⁶ Stephen Neale, Genre (1980; N.p.: British Film Institute, 1992) 22-3. Cf. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, vols. 7.I and 7.II (London: Routledge; Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) II:11 (ch. 14). Cf. also Jauss 81-2, who discusses the notion of the generic dominant.

⁴⁷ Fowler, Kinds of Literature 59-105. On the importance of context—setting, time and purpose—for kind, see Bruce A. Rosenberg, “The Genres of Oral Narrative,” Theories of Literary Genre 154-55.

may be a factor in determining its kind, as may its form.⁴⁸ There is also the possibility of identifying kinds on the basis of “the hero’s power of action,” as Frye does in defining his fictional modes.⁴⁹ Another possible distinction is Frye’s “radical of presentation:” whether the literary word or work is acted, spoken, or sung before an audience, or written for a reader.⁵⁰ The more modern fantastic kind, in contrast, has been defined primarily on the basis of a certain type of reading, principally that the reader should identify with the main character, and be hesitant or uncertain about the verisimilitude of an uncanny event.⁵¹ Even manuscript decoration may be a generic feature: among mediaeval kinds, for instance, it has been argued that romances are generally more decorated than non-romances, especially in collections like the Auchinleck manuscript, and that this created a type of generic distinction obvious to mediaeval manuscript compilers and readers.⁵² There appears, then, to be no limit to the variety of component parts that may define a literary kind. If we could produce a list of all the elements of all the literary kinds that had ever existed, we would have to add at the end of this list that kinds might appear in the future that would be defined by elements not on the list.

⁴⁸ Colie 12 and 23-6.

⁴⁹ Frye 33. Cf. *supra*.

⁵⁰ Frye 246-47. Cf. Plato, *Republic* 149-52 (III, 392c-394c) and Aristotle, *Poetics* chs. I and III, and see *supra*.

⁵¹ Todorov, *Fantastic* 157.

⁵² Murray J. Evans, *Rereading Middle English Romance* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1995). Cf. Johannes A. Huisman, who argues that, in addition to generic references in literary works themselves, manuscript classifications and terminology offer insights into contemporary views of kinds and their labels: Johannes A. Huisman, “Generative Classifications in Medieval Literature,” *Theories of Literary Genre* 143.

That helps to make it more obvious that kind is created, in the strictest sense, not by any of the elements on a list individually or in combination, but by the recognition of those immediately involved—authors and initial audiences—that the works they are hearing, seeing, or reading are not unique, isolated and autonomous, but belong to a specific kind, whether it is the lost Anglo-Saxon oral epic which presumably preceded Beowulf, or the latest science-fiction film. I shall henceforth call this combination of authors, whether of oral or written compositions, and audiences, whether they are hearing, seeing or reading a work, the generic community of users, as it is their recognition of a kind which will normally and perhaps always influence the way in which authors compose and audiences understand the works in each particular kind. When scholars write about the literature of the past, moreover, their judgements as to whether individual works belonged to a kind at all, and if so to which one, will be historical judgements, with all the risks that that involves. Their judgements may be wrong, or they may be unable to make any judgement at all, because the available evidence is insufficient. Nevertheless, it is the duty of the scholar who tries to understand the literature of the past to make the best judgements possible about the generic identity of individual works, because to do otherwise is to risk gross misunderstanding.

As a matter of practical judgement, both the initial community of users and later scholars will in almost all cases recognize a specific kind not by a single determining factor, but by a combination of features. It is the combination that creates—to name but a few prominent examples—tragedy, the novel, or situation comedy. A text may sometimes fail to present certain features or fulfill its generic expectations, but we should see this not as cause for consternation, as has been known

to happen,⁵³ but rather as a source of information about that particular text, perhaps an indication of generic change. Indeed, at times it is precisely the variations in a kind's history that reveal its essence.⁵⁴ Generic change, furthermore, can produce new generic types. Thus, for Todorov, "A new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres."⁵⁵

While kinds are usually recognized by a combination of features rather than by a single determining factor, occasionally the generic features combine to produce a type of hero who in turn becomes associated with, and evocative of, a specific kind. Such an hero is much more important to the work he appears in than a simple stock character—who is another, albeit less important, generic feature. The wily slave is a stock character recognizable in both the Old Comedy of Aristophanes and the New Comedy of Menander and Plautus and Terence. While qualifying as a generic feature, however, the stock character does not share that singular dominance which makes a specific heroic type an essential part of the generic value, mood or setting which helps to characterize a kind. Achilles, on the other hand, epitomizes the heroic ethos in the Iliad so fully as to become an identifiable feature of Homer's text in and of himself. Indeed, not only can Achilles be seen as an epic paragon in general, but one classical

⁵³ See, e.g., Lucie Armitt, Theorising the Fantastic (London: Arnold, 1996) 18.

⁵⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, intro. Wayne C. Booth, Theory and History of Literature 8 (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984) 142.

⁵⁵ Todorov, "Origin of Genres" 161.

critic considers him the prototype of the Sophoklean tragic hero, and another scholar claims that “All tragic heroes in European literature are measured against Achilles.”⁵⁶

Frye's five fictional modes—myth, romance, the high and low mimetic, and ironic—are seemingly based on a similar notion, for he classifies “literary fictions . . . by the hero’s power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same.”⁵⁷ Contrary to Aristotle,⁵⁸ Frye takes character rather than plot or generic symptoms as his primary criterion, an indication of the role sometimes played by the hero in establishing such generic features as value, mood or setting. Although the hero by himself is not always a sufficient means of identification—Jonson's ode “To Penshurst,” for instance, lacks any sort of human subject at all⁵⁹—he is, I believe, an extremely important example and possibility of a dominant feature of kind. One of the primary differences between novel and romance, for example, lies in characterization.⁶⁰ It seems to me that this is equally true of epic and romance.⁶¹ Similarly, speaking of aspects of plot in general and not simply of forms of drama, Frye presents tragic

⁵⁶ Respectively Bernard M. W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1964) 50-3, and Reuben A. Brower, *Hero and Saint* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) 31.

⁵⁷ Frye 33. Cf. *supra*.

⁵⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics* ch. VI, esp. 1450a15-1450b, sees plot as the foremost dramatic element.

⁵⁹ Fowler, *Kinds of Literature* 154-55 considers “Penshurst” as beginning the country house poem genre. See also Alastair Fowler, “The Locality of Jonson’s *To Penshurst*,” *Conceitful Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1975) 114-34.

⁶⁰ Frye 304-05.

⁶¹ Cf. John Finlayson, ed., *Morte Arthure*, York Medieval Texts (London: Arnold, 1967) 7.

fictions as those “in which the hero becomes isolated from his society,” and comic fictions as those in which the hero is incorporated into his society.⁶²

It is not common for the combination of features to produce a pure or unmixed kind, of which there may in fact be relatively few instances. There are of course exceptions, especially in less complex kinds such as cheap crime stories, Harlequin and Mills and Boon romances, or 1950s dance and pop songs, in which the same formulae are repeated over-and-over again to produce instances of unmixed kinds whose purity reflects their generic simplicity and—perhaps—commercial popularity. Usually, however, the combination of features will result in a mixture of types or a generic sub-type. It is presumably the recognition of this fact which leads Fowler to distinguish between historical, diachronic literary kinds, synchronic modes, and mixtures such as sub-genres, hybrids and modulations.⁶³ In his terminology, modes subtract features from the dominant kind or kinds, and sub-genres add features. Modes are subsidiary to kinds, a type of generic intermingling that helps to identify the extraneous, synchronic aspects of kinds: a means also of marking the secondary or tertiary types found within the dominant kind. Although subject to mutation, kinds have limited “evolutionary possibilities,” and tend to be endemic to a specific time and place, whereas modes are even more malleable but also less fixed.⁶⁴ Hence, while modes are themselves incomplete, lacking sufficient features or form to qualify as specific kinds,

⁶² Frye 35; cf. 162. Knox 5, 32-4, and 44 considers the tragic hero to be an isolated figure whose tragedy and greatness are both linked to this isolation.

⁶³ Fowler, Kinds of Literature *passim*: esp. 55-60, 73-4, 106-14, 167-69, and 183 and 191.

⁶⁴ In addition to the idea of modes presented in Kinds of Literature, see Fowler’s “Literary Forms” 202 and 212-15; the quotation is from 214.

they often become the successors to kinds. Sub-genres, on the other hand, act as specific kinds-within-kinds, identifying and subdividing the common features of the dominant kind. Fowler makes a further distinction amongst types of generic mingling between a generic hybrid, dominated by none of its constituent types, and the more common modal abstraction or generic modulation, in which one or more modes simply add colour or effect to the dominant kind. Generic modulation is, according to Fowler, usually effected by and reflects current literary tastes and fashions.

Astute as these various complex divisions of generic mingling are, they can occasionally confuse rather than clarify the kind in question. The distinction between kind and mode in particular is over-precise and unconvincing. Ultimately, it simply substitutes for the more specific and recognized kind the concept of a vaguer and less precise mode, ignoring the complexity, mutability and versatility of kind which, as we have seen, Fowler himself elsewhere acknowledges. Something similar is true of Frye, who employs mode both as a literary archetype or kind, and as a specific, possibly thematic treatment of kind,⁶⁵ a contradictory confusion which, in one form or another, extends to scholars' use of mode in general.⁶⁶ In consequence, I will continue to speak of genres as kinds rather than modes, and will usually, for the sake of simplicity, group Fowler's modal abstractions, hybrids and modulations under the general heading of generic mixture.

⁶⁵ Frye, 33-5, 49-53, and Glossary, sv mode.

⁶⁶ On the use of mode in general see Duff, ed., Modern Genre Theory 17 and Key Concepts, sv mode, who argues further that genre-study tends to be bedeviled by "confusion[s] of terminology."

Whatever appellation we give to generic mixture, it is a possibility of which we must be aware, especially given the apparent paucity of instances of pure kinds. The plausibility of generic intermingling was implied long ago by Plato. At the close of the Symposium, Socrates, sharing a large cup with the only other revellers still awake, the comic poet Aristophanes and the tragic poet Agathon, makes the poets admit that the man who knows how to write a comedy can also write a tragedy, and that a skilful tragic writer is capable of being also a comic writer.⁶⁷ It follows that a tragic or comic poet might include elements from a contrary or different kind in his or her work—despite Jacques Derrida’s objections to generic intermingling.⁶⁸ Shakespeare, in fact, often mingles dramatic kinds, and Dr Johnson praises him for it. Having defended Shakespeare from the “censure which he has incurred by mixing comick and tragick scenes,” Johnson goes on to commend Shakespeare’s mixing of kinds, since not only does he thus achieve the aim of writing, instruction, as well as of poetry,

⁶⁷ Plato, The Symposium, trans. Walter Hamilton (1951; London: Penguin, 1988) 113-14. In practice, however, this does not seem to have occurred in the ancient world, and we know of no author who wrote both comedy and tragedy.

⁶⁸ Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” Acts of Literature, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992) 223-25. For Derrida, the law of genre stipulates that kinds must not be mixed. His subsequent notion of a counter-law which mixes kinds, far from contradicting this law, actually corroborates it, as the counter-law hinges upon and co-exists with the purity law. Derrida thus belongs to that group which believes in the purity of kinds. Although he does not acknowledge any sources, Derrida is surely following the misguided neo-classical tradition which disproves of generic mingling. See, amongst others, Cicero, “De optimo genere oratorum,” Cicero: De Inventione, De Optimo Genere Oratorum, Topica, trans. H. M. Hubbell, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1949) I.1-2; Horace, “De arte poetica,” Satires, Epistles and Ars poetica, ed. and trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. ed., Loeb Classical Library 194 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1929) the emphasis throughout on consistency and appropriateness, but esp. lines 14-23 and 73-92; and Boileau, “L’Art Poétique,” Oeuvres II, ed. Sylvain Menant (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1969) esp. II, 123-29 and 139-49.

instruction through pleasure, but Shakespeare's "mingled drama" has the further benefit of being truer to life, which always mixes good and evil, high and low, pleasure and melancholy.⁶⁹

Shakespeare himself seems to have been unconcerned by critical censure on this issue, for in addition to his own mixing of kinds, he satirizes those who believe that kinds must not be mixed. The pedantry of Polonius, for instance, extends to a strict belief in kind's purity, evident in his introduction of the players:

The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited.⁷⁰

Several of Polonius's kinds obviously are mixed, and the satire, I think, resides precisely in the fact that Polonius is attempting to make a pure kind out of generic mixture. Even so staunch a neo-classicist as Jonson defended the mixture of kinds. Deriding those who believe that "all Poesie had one Character," Jonson condemns the notion that Pastoral cannot include mirth, argues that kinds may be mixed if done properly, and implies that some occasions actually require generic mixture.⁷¹

Generic mixture involves the combination of two or more types. The result may be a simple comic interlude, like the grave-digger scene in Hamlet or the porter

⁶⁹ Samuel Johnson, "Preface 1765," Johnson on Shakespeare, ed. Arthur Sherbo, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, vols. 7-8 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1968) 7: 66-7; cf. too his comments in The Rambler, No. 156, ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, vols. 3-5 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1969) 5: 68-9.

⁷⁰ William Shakespeare, Hamlet, ed. Harold Jenkins, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1982) II, ii, 392-96.

⁷¹ Ben Jonson, "The Sad Shepherd," The Sad Shepherd, The Fall of Mortimer, Masques and Entertainments, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, Ben Jonson Vol. 7 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1941) Prologue 31-66.

scene in Macbeth,⁷² or more complex and contentious, like the tragic elements or brooding tone of Shakespeare's so-called problem comedies. Nor is generic mixture confined to the Renaissance. Euripides' Ion, Helen and Iphigeneia among the Taurians are examples of the mixed classical kind termed by D. J. Conacher "romantic tragedy," a form dominated throughout by the potential for tragedy, but in which the tragedy is ultimately averted.⁷³ Romantic tragedy—sometimes called tragi-comedy—resembles tragedy in form and metre, and was presented as one of the poet's three tragedies at the dramatic festival, but it also employs such features as exotic settings, escape, rescue, love, the marvellous, reversal and recognition scenes in a fashion uncommon to tragedy. Helen, for instance, is set in Egypt, while Iphigeneia among the Taurians closes with the marvellous escape of Orestes, Pylades and Iphigeneia who, as priestess, is to sacrifice all newcomers on the island but, recognizing her brother, instead aids in his—and her own—escape to Greece. Most importantly, in romantic tragedy, anagnorisis or recognition prevents rather than heralds the tragedy.⁷⁴ In this sense the

⁷² Frye 292 links comic interludes, including the grave-digger and porter scenes, to the satyr-play, a joining of the Apollonian and the Dionysian in what Frye calls the "epiphany, the dramatic apocalypse or separation of the divine and the demonic." Frye here has adopted Nietzsche's division of the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of tragedy: Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," Basic Writings of Nietzsche, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1966) 3-144. For an examination of Nietzsche's view of tragedy and its relation to Greek society, religion and drama see M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern, Nietzsche on Tragedy (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981).

⁷³ For detailed studies of this intriguing mixture see Conacher, Euripidean Drama 14 and 265-313; Anne Pippin Burnett, Catastrophe Survived (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971); and H. D. F. Kitto, Greek Tragedy (1939; London: Methuen; London: Routledge, 1990) 311-29, esp. 316: "the absence of a tragic theme is the direct explanation . . . of these plays." The best analysis of comic elements in tragedy in general is B. Seidensticker, Palintonos Harmonia (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck, 1982).

⁷⁴ This mixture has led some critics to conclude that what Aristophanes was reacting to with his caricature of Euripides is that Euripides was too comic. See Paul

mixed type is still recognized by the presence of features, but also by the addition, modification, opposition or even lack of certain other expected features. Naturally, while the examples I have chosen are all dramatic, generic mixture is not exclusive to any one form or kind—or period.⁷⁵

Furthermore, as Frye observes, much of our appreciation of the subtlety of great literature comes from generic mixture, what Frye terms “modal counterpoint.”⁷⁶ Such is the case in “The Argument” to Herrick’s Hesperides, which not only mixes and mocks kinds, but which relies, for its effect, on the audience’s awareness of the literary kinds and conventions being mixed.⁷⁷

I SING of Brooks, of Blossomes, Birds, and Bowers:
Of April, May, of June, and July-Flowers.
I sing of May-poles, Hock-carts, Wassails, Wakes,
Of Bride-grooms, Brides, and of their Bridall-cakes.
I write of Youth, of Love, and have Accesses
By these, to sing of cleanly-Wantonnesse.⁷⁸

Cartledge Aristophanes and His Theatre of the Absurd, Classical World Series (London: Bristol Classical P, 1990) 20, and A. M. Bowie, Aristophanes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) 217-25. Cf. Erich Segal, “‘The Comic Catastrophe’,” Stage Directions, ed. Alan Griffiths, Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies Supplement 66 (London: Institute of Classical Studies, U of London, 1995) 46-55, who sees Euripides as the originator of New Comedy.

⁷⁵ The interplay and harmony of Eliot’s three poetic voices are, I feel, but further types of generic mixture: T. S. Eliot, “The Three Voices of Poetry,” On Poetry and Poets (London: Faber, 1957) 89-102, esp. 95-6 and 99-101. Dostoevsky, too, not only operates within a tradition of generic mingling, he mixes genres: see Bakhtin, Dostoevsky’s Poetics 101-78, esp. 105-06; cf. 14-15. Although Bakhtin’s notion of carnival and the carnivalization of literature does not stand up to serious scrutiny, it includes and even encourages generic mixture: see Bakhtin, Dostoevsky’s Poetics 134-35.

⁷⁶ Frye 50-1.

⁷⁷ Colie 25-6.

⁷⁸ Robert Herrick, “Hesperides: or, The Works both Humane and Divine of Robert Herrick Esq.,” The Poetical Works of Robert Herrick, ed. L. C. Martin (Oxford:

Herrick's italics here help further to establish and emphasize just how incongruous his subject of birds, weddings and months traditionally associated with love and romance are to the epic subject and kind implied by the opening formula "I sing." Homer's subjects are of course eminently suited to epic, but Homer was admired by Renaissance theorists in part precisely because of his generic intermingling, the fact that the *Iliad* could be seen as the forerunner of tragedy, while the *Odyssey* was seen as the harbinger of comedy. Homer thus not only mixed kinds, his epics were the mixture of kinds: "In other words, Homer was the paideia, the model for education; and the way to education, even with only Homer as a textbook, was by kind."⁷⁹ Derrida's argument that kinds are not to be mixed, like its more traditional neo-classical counterpart, is thus refuted by the literary evidence, as well, as it happens, as by Derrida himself.⁸⁰ Sidney is closer to the truth, although his conclusion is not necessarily universally applicable or self-evident: "if severed they [the kinds] be good, the conjunction cannot be hurtful."⁸¹

Oftentimes generic features combine to form a sub-type. Sub-genres are, in essence, specific kinds-within-kinds, sharing characteristics with the original type but also adding features more peculiar to themselves.⁸² The sonnet, for instance, is a

Clarendon, 1956) "The Argument of his Book," 1-6.

⁷⁹ Colie 22-3.

⁸⁰ See Derrida 223-25 for the argument that kinds must not be mixed, and 229 for the statement that of course they do mix. For the neo-classical view of the purity of kinds and Derrida's relation to it see supra.

⁸¹ Sir Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. Jan Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1966) 43.10-11.

⁸² Fowler, *Kinds of Literature* 112-13 and 55-6. Cf. supra.

generic type, of which the love sonnet is a specific sub-type. Like kinds, sub-genres are identified by the presence of various features, including subject matter and motifs, or special emphases, particularly those attached to the additional features or sets of features. Part of the misguided belief in the superiority of the novel,⁸³ with its accompanying tendency to judge most literary fictions by novelistic standards,⁸⁴ stems no doubt from its relatively recent dominance, but also from the sheer number of its sub-types.

One such sub-genre of the novel, one which essentially begins with Sir Walter Scott's Waverley (1814) and the recognition that it differs from, say, Clarissa (1747-48) or Tom Jones (1749), is the historical novel. The novel has been defined in part by its naturalism and particularization of character, and the historical sub-type shares these features.⁸⁵ But the historical novel also adds its own distinctive features, notably an historical setting and characters and a sense of the differences between the past and

⁸³ E.g., M. M. Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," The Dialogic Imagination, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Holquist, U of Texas P Slavic Series 1 (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 5-8 and 38-9, who claims that the novel somehow stands in generic isolation and actually novelizes all other literary kinds. David Lodge, "After Bakhtin," The Linguistics of Writing, ed. Nigel Fabb et al. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1987) 97, styles this Bakhtin's "almost messianic view of the novel."

⁸⁴ Hubert McDermott, Novel and Romance (London: Macmillan, 1989) x, highlights and condemns the twentieth-century critical penchant for treating all fictional literary kinds as novels.

⁸⁵ Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (1957; London: Chatto; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) 9-37 sees realism and individuation of character as the defining characteristics of the novel; cf. Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" *passim*, esp. 38-40. For the novel's distinctive "projection of character" cf. George Saintsbury, The English Novel, The Channels of English Literature (London: Dent, 1913) 192. For the historical novel see Georg Lukács, The Historical Novel, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin, 1962); Avrom Fleishman, The English Historical Novel (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1971); and Harold Orel, The Historical Novel from Scott to Sabatini (New York: St Martin's, 1995).

present. In this sense the historical novel is not only a sub-genre but a mixture of literary and historical kinds; it “is unashamedly a hybrid,” mixing the rich and particular factuality of history with the Aristotelean poetic or fictional universal: “the kinds of things which it suits a certain kind of person to say or do, in terms of probability or necessity.”⁸⁶ As a recent editor of Waverley observes: “Each of Scott’s characters carries his burden, each acts under the pressures of history. . . . They are men and women for whom the present is unavoidably conditioned by the past, and whose actions will cause repercussions in the future. It is these qualities in Waverley that have gained it the title, the first historical novel.”⁸⁷ Mary Renault, who wrote a series of historical novels set in mythical and ancient Greece, takes this one step further, arguing that the historical novel should be as factually accurate as possible, and that any fictional additions to the historical setting should be as historically plausible as possible.⁸⁸

Although it is important to remember that the terms romance and novel—and occasionally history—were often synonymous in the eighteenth century,⁸⁹ the

⁸⁶ Fleishman 8, who quotes Aristotle’s Poetics ch. IX, 1451b9. Fleishman uses a different edition of the Poetics, but for the sake of consistency I have changed it and the translation to match that cited throughout the rest of this chapter.

⁸⁷ Claire Lamont, ed., Waverley: or, ‘Tis Sixty Years Since, by Sir Walter Scott (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981) xvii.

⁸⁸ Bernard F. Dick, The Hellenism of Mary Renault, preface by Harry T. Moore (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP; London: Feffer, 1972) xiv, quoting Renault in a 1970 letter to Dick, and Mary Renault, “Notes on The King Must Die,” Afterwords, ed. Thomas McCormack (New York: Harper, 1969) 81-7. Renault’s eight classical novels were written from the late 1950s to the early 1980s, and although they are some of the finest examples of the historical novel kind, her work is, unfortunately, largely under-appreciated. (On which sentiment cf. Fleishman xiii and 256-57.)

⁸⁹ Cf. McKeon 25.

connexions between the novelistic and romance kinds do suggest that the early novel might have been regarded as a sub-genre of the prose romance. Fielding, for instance, defined Joseph Andrews not only as a “comic Epic-Poem in Prose,” but as a “comic Romance.”⁹⁰ that is, as a new sub-genre of both epic and romance. Certainly the novel incorporates many aspects of romance, including, perhaps, the single name title: Clarissa, Emma or Shirley; Cliges or Lancelot.⁹¹ It quickly became apparent to the community of users, however, that Fielding, together with Richardson, had actually initiated a new kind: John Moore, for example, wrote at the close of the eighteenth century that “Richardson introduced a new species of romance.”⁹² Moreover, while the terms romance and novel were still used interchangeably, distinctions were beginning to be made between the natural and realistic novel, and the idealistic and fabulous romance.⁹³ Discussing the similarities between epic and romance, John Hawkesworth makes an implicit contrast between novel-romance and romance proper in his use of the term “Old Romance,” observing further how the novel is more limited and less entertaining than epic and romance because of its “narrower bounds of probability.”⁹⁴ Dr Johnson, too, speaks of the popular new contemporary kind of fiction, labels it the “comedy of romance,” and defines it as “such as exhibit[s] life in

⁹⁰ Fielding 4.

⁹¹ Fowler, Kinds of Literature 93; the romance examples are my own.

⁹² John Moore, “A View of the Commencement and Progress of Romance,” The Works of John Moore, M.D. with Memoirs of His Life and Writings, ed. Robert Anderson, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: Stirling, 1820) 58.

⁹³ Ioan Williams, ed. Novel and Romance 1700-1800 (London: Routledge, 1970) 5-6.

⁹⁴ Dr [John] Hawk[e]sworth, “No. IV: Saturday, November 18, 1752,” The Adventurer (London: Plummer for Peter Griffin, 1815) 10.

its true state.”⁹⁵ Johnson in fact uses the term romance in both of its eighteenth-century senses, but by the new “comedy of romance” kind he means what we think of as the novel, and by “heroic romance” or “romances formerly written” he means what we think of as romance proper. This is evident not only from the context and the distinction he makes between the new “comedy of romance” and the old “heroic romance” kinds, but also from his distinguishing the new, more natural kind from its more wondrous heroic romance predecessor, a form he characterizes by its knights, giants, castles, battles, hermits and woods. The new kind is also, says Johnson, more learned than old romance. Such recognition on the part of the contemporary and near-contemporary community of users led to the creation of the novel as a distinct kind in its own right rather than as a sub-genre, especially once the novel began to generate its own sub-types such as the historical novel. Ironically, due to its artistic success and commercial popularity, the novel kind eventually became more established than the original parent kind.⁹⁶

Given that sub-genres are identified on the basis of additional features which allow us to sub-divide a work, it is theoretically possible that we might have sub-sub-genres or sub-types within sub-genres. The sonnet, for instance, could conceivably contain one or more sub-types such as the love sonnet, some of which might contain sub-sub-types such as the Elizabethan love sonnet. We might even, says Fowler, have

⁹⁵ Johnson, *The Rambler* No. 4, 3: 19-25. Johnson is however concerned that the new kind have a greater care for virtue, as otherwise it might corrupt the young, who may not be able to recognize the virtuous from the vicious characters.

⁹⁶ For McKeon 28, 21 and 64, the novel also emerges as an epistemological revolution and critique of romance which itself is connected to the question of truth and virtue, a “contest between ‘romance’ and ‘true history’.”

generic mingling or a dominant sub-genre with one or more subsidiary sub-modes, just as for kinds in general.⁹⁷ However, although theoretically possible, sub-sub-genres do not really occur in practice because, as we have just seen with the history of the novel, the collective generic sense of the community of users will not bear it: a sub-genre which is important enough to generate sub-sub-genres will become, in the minds of those who deal with it, a kind in its own right.

We have seen, then, that one of the primary means of identifying kind is through the presence of the appropriate set of generic features, and have suggested that most literary fictions are actually mixtures of types or sub-types rather than pure kinds. It has been suggested, furthermore, that a specific kind only comes into existence once a community of users has recognized and emulated it as a distinct form comprised of various generic features.

For as long as kinds have been recognized, they have concurrently been given hierarchical status—at least until recently. Under the traditional hierarchy of kinds we see epic—or tragedy and epic—enjoying pride of place: Aristotle notes the connexions between epic and tragedy which, being serious and noble, are the highest forms of mimesis, and also debates as to whether epic or tragedy is the higher form; Scaliger considers epic to be chief; Sidney considers epic “the best and most accomplished kind of poetry;” and Dryden, translating Boileau, says that epic “claims a Loftier Strain” in which “fiction must employ its utmost grace.”⁹⁸ Coleridge, too, at least implies an

⁹⁷ Fowler, Kinds of Literature 112.

⁹⁸ Aristotle, Poetics chs. IV-V, esp. 1448b19-1449a5 and 1449b9-20, chs. XXIII-XXIV, and esp. ch. XXVI; Iulius Caesar Scaliger, Poetices libri septem, ed. Luc Deitz,

hierarchy of kinds in his statement that poetry in general is an higher sort than prose because it is more arduous and deliberate.⁹⁹ Voltaire, in contrast, is less discriminating, claiming that “Tous les genres sont bon, hors le genre envyeux.”¹⁰⁰ Epic, however, eventually fell from grace, to be replaced in the modern period by the novel, just as literature in general has latterly taken a second seat to film and television: an indication of one form of generic change.

Despite the importance of kind in an historical awareness of literature—and other media—and the role it continues to play in our understanding of texts, there is a trend amongst many modern critics and authors to rebel against tradition and kind in such a fashion as to make kind seem obsolete.¹⁰¹ Hence the extreme view that literary kinds have dissipated, that the book alone is real:

Seul importe le livre, tel qu’il est, loin des genres, en dehors des rubriques, prose, poésie, roman, témoignage, sous lesquelles il refuse de se ranger et auxquelles il dénie le pouvoir de lui fixer sa place et de déterminer sa forme. Un livre n'appartient plus à un genre, tout livre relève de la seule littérature, comme si celle-ci détenait par avance, dans leur généralité, les secrets et les formules qui permettent seuls

3 vols. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Verlag, 1994-95) III, 95, 144a-b [p. 20.3-12]; Sidney 47.18-19; and John Dryden, “The Art of Poetry,” The Works of John Dryden, vol. 2, gen. ed. H. T. Swedenberg, Jr., (Berkeley: U of California P, 1972) lines 587-90.

⁹⁹ Coleridge, Biographia Literaria II:142-43 (ch. 22). Many modern critics for long held a similar view: Stanley Fish, “Literature in the Reader,” Is There a Text in This Class? (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980) 30. I am indebted to A. P. Heath for the Coleridge reference.

¹⁰⁰ Voltaire, L’enfant prodigue, preface; qtd. in Adrian Marino, “Toward a Definition of Literary Genres,” Theories of Literary Genre 54, who feels Voltaire is correct.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Fowler, Kinds of Literature v; Todorov, “Origin of Genres” 159; and Swales 36. Jameson calls this movement against kind “the ideology of modernism.” Fredric Jameson, “Magical Narratives,” New Literary History 7 (1975-76): 135.

de donner à ce qui s'écrit réalité de livre.¹⁰²

Despite such trends in favour of breaking down kind, of ignoring or denying kind altogether, generic identification and definition is not only a possibility, but a necessity. Certainly the belief in kind's obsolescence is illusory, for even the most transgressive or open-ended form requires regulations or types to be transgressed. In order to understand or even recognize why and how the new, anti-generic form appears and functions as it does, the community of users—both authors and audiences—must have some knowledge of traditional kinds.¹⁰³ Even Derrida and his disciple admit that a literary text must belong to a kind or kinds.¹⁰⁴ Hence the most that can be said is that the traditional kinds may be on the wane,¹⁰⁵ but kinds themselves still exist, and new kinds arise in the place of and usually out of old. In this sense “There has never been a literature without genres,”¹⁰⁶ nor, I would argue, will there ever be one. Consequently,

¹⁰² Maurice Blanchot, *Le livre à venir*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1959) 243-44; my emphases.

¹⁰³ Cf. Todorov, “Origin of Genres” 160, and Ronald Hepburn, “Literature and the Recent Study of Language,” *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, ed. Boris Ford, vol. 8: The Present (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) 495-96.

¹⁰⁴ Derrida 228-31, esp. 230, and Derek Attridge, introduction, *Acts of Literature*, by Jacques Derrida (New York: Routledge, 1992) 15. Derrida’s qualification, that a text belongs to yet simultaneously disassociates itself from a literary kind is, frankly, unconvincing.

¹⁰⁵ Even if this is so, it is a simplification to argue, as Bakhtin does, that the prominence of the novel problematizes traditional genre theory: Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel” 8, a view supported by Duff, ed., *Modern Genre Theory* 9-10.

¹⁰⁶ Todorov, “Origin of Genres” 160-61. Cf. Jauss 79 and 87-90 and 92-5, and Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 106 and 141; cf. 121. For Bakhtin, kinds are based on traditional elements, but are always being reborn and reworked in new contexts and new works. Changes in literary or linguistic styles, moreover, can be separated neither from generic changes nor from understanding of generic norms: Bakhtin, “Speech Genres” 65-6 and 80.

the recent view of kind as a necessary evil, a restrictive force creating barriers which must be overcome,¹⁰⁷ is a misconception. It seems more of a reaction against restrictive and misguided structuralist criticism than against kind *per se*, for as the author herself acknowledges, “genre is one of the founding principles of fantasy forms.” Besides, the opening up of barriers which for this critic characterizes the fantastic is but a feature of that particular kind.

It is true, however, that restrictive views of genre—whether structuralist or post-structuralist, neo-classical or new critical—can detract from an understanding of literary kinds. The argument that kind ensures specific expectations and closure and that, however variable, these expectations are “never exceeded or broken,”¹⁰⁸ is misleading as well as untrue, and does little to promote a proper understanding of kind or its importance. Our generic expectations, even the generic contract itself, may well be manipulated or violated, but without some knowledge of the features which normally accompany a specific generic form, we will not be able to understand fully any kind, traditional or transgressive. Violation of the expected features of a generic contract may, for that matter, be the strongest indicator of a work’s proper kind.¹⁰⁹

Generic definition and identification is thus an essential task, but it can be no more than a beginning. As has been said of Milman Parry’s notion of oral tradition in relation to Homer, it is “a good working model for most purposes.”¹¹⁰ Even when

¹⁰⁷ Armitt 2-4, 18-20, and 33. The subsequent quotation is from 18.

¹⁰⁸ Neale 28.

¹⁰⁹ Schatz 17.

¹¹⁰ Richard Jenkyns, *Classical Epic*, Classical World series (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1992) 2-3. For Parry’s views on Homer and the oral tradition see Milman Parry, “Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making I,” *Harvard Studies in Classical*

kind has been identified, the actual work of literary criticism still remains to be done.

Frye very properly observed that “The purpose of criticism by genres is not so much to classify as to clarify [a work's literary] traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of literary relationships that would not be noticed so long as there were no context established for them.”¹¹¹ If Todorov means more than that when he says that “a work's inclusion within a genre still teaches us nothing as to its meaning,”¹¹² his complaint is simple-minded.

Philology 41 (1930): 73-147; “Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making II,” Harvard Studies in Classical Philology 43 (1932): 1-50; and The Making of Homeric Verse, ed. Adam Parry (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971). See also G. S. Kirk, The Songs of Homer (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1962), and his Homer and the Oral Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976).

¹¹¹ Frye 247-48; my emphasis. Cf. Fowler, Kinds of Literature 37, and Ralph Cohen, “Afterword: The Problems of Generic Transformation,” Romance, ed. Kevin Brownlee and Marina Scordilis Brownlee (Hanover, New England: UP of New England for Dartmouth College, 1985) 266.

¹¹² Todorov, Fantastic 141.

Mediaeval Kinds

Part I: A Question of Generic Awareness

A literary kind comes into existence when it is recognized and emulated as a specific type by a community of users, made up initially of authors and audiences, which may or may not come to include critics as well. As we have seen, the primary means of identifying literary kinds is by the presence of variable sets of generic features, whether the combination of features manifests itself as a pure kind, a generic mixture, or a sub-type. The dominant generic features and kinds vary both within and between different periods, but the principles of generic recognition are applicable to all literary kinds, situations and periods, including the Middle Ages. This, however, has been denied of the Middle Ages, perhaps because the great mediaeval philosophers were more obviously concerned with cosmological and theological matters than with literary criticism—or perhaps even with literature in general. Biblical exegesis in particular, which was much more important in the Middle Ages than secular literary criticism, has often been considered especially inimical to an awareness of kinds.¹ An extreme modification of this view links all mediaeval literary kinds to cultic, religious or social occasions, and then claims that there was no generic awareness apart from a very gradual process in which literary kinds were

¹ William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks, Literary Criticism (London: Routledge, 1957) 139-54, esp. 151 and n. 6 and 154.

eventually separated from these cultic roots.²

Furthermore, the paucity of mediaeval literary criticism, especially when compared with that practiced by classical, Renaissance and Restoration writers, has led some modern critics to consider the Middle Ages a generic wasteland.³ The reasoning seems to be that, where there are few poetical treatises, and no concern with genre theory, there can be little—perhaps no—understanding of genre. Thus it has been said that mediaeval poetry possesses no formal artes poeticae, and that it is fruitless to seek in the Middle Ages for “original and lasting contributions to literary theory, or for illuminating appreciations of literary works themselves.”⁴ Similar reasoning underlies comments made on the mediaeval lai, for it has been said of the relation and differences between the lai, chanson de geste, and saint’s life, that the mediaeval conception of literary kinds was so imprecise or unfocussed that the listener or reader, although recognizing some basic differences, would

² See Jauss, who both supports and ostensibly rebuts this idea: Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, trans. Timothy Bahti, intro. Paul de Man, *Theory and History of Literature 2* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982) 102-03. Althusser goes one step further, claiming that in the Middle Ages the dominant State ideology was that of the Church, which encompassed and largely dictated literary and cultural matters: Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1971) 143-44. Reckford makes a similar and equally unconvincing claim for Aristophanic Comedy, that it has its primary origins and meaning in relation to religious cult: Kenneth J. Reckford, Aristophanes’ Old-and-New Comedy, Vol. 1: Six Essays in Perspective (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1987) esp. 3-52 and 441-98.

³ Wimsatt and Brooks 140-41, 151 and note 6, and 154.

⁴ Respectively: Wimsatt and Brooks 141, and J. W. H. Atkins, English Literary Criticism (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1943) v.

be unlikely to distinguish between the various kinds per se.⁵ Even Alastair Fowler subscribes to this view, taking it to an extreme in the unequivocal statement: “It seems obviously true that awareness of genre was in abeyance in the Middle Ages.”⁶

This argument is at its strongest in what it has to say about the relative breakdown of the mediaeval awareness of classical learning, and the consequent ignorance of the classical genre theory practised by Aristotle or Horace. Since such genre theory plays so prominent a role in the literary criticism of classical and post-mediaeval criticism, this lack of knowledge has been seen as conclusive evidence of the mediaeval ignorance of literary kinds and criticism.⁷ Given the impact and severity of the barbarian invasions that brought down the Roman Empire in the West, such ignorance of classical texts and learning is unlikely to have been confined to genre theory: few mediaeval readers would have been in a situation that allowed them to be struck by a sudden and intense yearning for one of the great classical tragedians of the past, as Dionysos was in Aristophanes’ Frogs.⁸ Even

⁵ Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby, trans., The Lais of Marie de France (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) 23-4.

⁶ Alastair Fowler, Kinds of Literature (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982) 142.

⁷ This seems to be the underlying premise of those studies listed in notes 1 and 3-5, but see also Jauss 77.

⁸ For Dionysos’ initial yearning for Euripides and eventual choice of Aeschylus see Aristophanes, Frogs, ed. and trans. Alan H. Sommerstein, The Comedies of Aristophanes 9 (Warminster: Aris, 1996) 52-97 and 1411-71. All references to Frogs are by line number to this edition. For the mediaeval transmission of classical manuscripts in the Greek-speaking Eastern Roman Empire which include Aristophanic texts see K. J. Dover, Aristophanic Comedy (London: Batsford, 1972) 1-6, and his introduction to Aristophanes, Frogs, ed. Kenneth Dover (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 76-102; a few of the classical MSS are Western, including some from the early fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. For a more detailed history of the ancient and mediaeval preservation and transmission of Greek and

those readers—probably clergy—who had access to and enjoyed reading, say, an Horatian manuscript, might not have any further information, examples or manuscripts with which to recognize that the Horatian ode they were reading constituted a specific kind. Since such recognition is essential not only for the initial creation and development of a kind, but also for its survival and possible or eventual revival, for Fowler argues that literary kinds are dead when they are no longer widely or even relatively easily recognized,⁹ it follows that awareness of classical kinds at least could well have been “in abeyance in the Middle Ages,” or at least for considerable parts of it.

Conditions were obviously worse in this respect in the early Middle Ages, but even after the so-called Twelfth-Century Renaissance, Petrarch, who considered that the only important kinds were classical, could dismiss his friend Boccaccio’s Decameron as a mere youthful enterprise because in it Boccaccio presents trivial topics for an audience of ladies rather than promoting classical learning and kinds.¹⁰ For Petrarch felt not only that kind was the means to re-educating his generation, but that the only important kinds were

Latin literature, especially but not exclusively by the Byzantine Empire, see L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, Scribes and Scholars, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), and N. G. Wilson, Scholars of Byzantium (London: Duckworth, 1983).

⁹ Alastair Fowler, “The Life and Death of Literary Forms,” New Literary History 2.2 (Winter 1971): 209-10 and 215-16. Jauss 90 claims that all kinds inevitably die, though he does not say under what conditions.

¹⁰ Petrarch’s comments come from a letter to Boccaccio: “The Story of Griselda: to Boccaccio,” Petrarch, trans. James Harvey Robinson and Henry Winchester Rolfe, 2nd ed. (London: Putnam; New York: Knickerbocker, 1914) 191-92. Colie states that the trivial audience in question was one of ladies, though this is not explicit in the letter: Rosalie L. Colie, The Resources of Kind, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Berkeley: U of California P, 1973) 13-14. See also Glending Olson, “Petrarch’s View of the Decameron,” Modern Language Notes 91 (1976): 69-79.

classical. Although Petrarch and Boccaccio are not necessarily representative of mediaeval Europe in its entirety, they are representative of a select body of learned authors who had knowledge both of kinds in general and classical kinds in particular. The fact that a member of this select body was so consumed by the need to promote public awareness of classical kinds could be taken as evidence of the relative lack of knowledge of kinds in the Middle Ages.

If this is true of the high Middle Ages, a time when literature was being written and read, it is even more applicable to the early Middle Ages, when illiteracy was much more widespread and literature itself was still very largely in an oral phase. Given the relative paucity of written records, ignorance of classical learning and difficulty of communication over any sort of distance, we might suppose that there was no proper awareness of literary kinds in the mediaeval oral tradition; even the early literate tradition could have been ignorant of kinds. It would follow that the composition of, say, a Beowulf or Táin Bó Cuailnge, a Widsith or Wanderer, would be almost accidental, any similarities in the structure, theme and outlook of such poems a coincidence. It is at least true—and ironic—that, in contrast to later types of literature, heroic literature generally seems to occur as a result of a certain degree of social, political or cultural decay,¹¹ and such upheaval, if not actually detrimental to artistic and literary creation and awareness, could at least work against the development and sharing of a sense of literary kinds and

¹¹ John Finlayson, ed., Morte Arthure, York Medieval Texts (London: Arnold, 1967) 8-9. Kirk notes that oral poetry tends to thrive in a culture's Dark Age, and that heroic poetry in particular tends to benefit from adverse conditions: G. S. Kirk, Homer and the Oral Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976) 34-5.

traditions amongst the community of users. One such type of upheaval, the Viking invasions of the eighth and ninth centuries, certainly did have an inimical effect upon the monasteries and other centres of learning, driving King Alfred, for one, to lament the sad state of learning in his realm.¹² While the depredations of the Viking invasions were not confined to any one country, Alfred was particularly concerned with the loss of Latin learning and letters in England, complaining that, unlike in former days, England in his reign must import wisdom and learning.¹³ Alcuin, too, deplores the decline of learning in eighth-century England; more, his words suggest that, even if monasteries had access to one or more classical manuscripts, no one there was able to comprehend them anyway: Quid vero librorum copia prodest, si non erint legentes in eis, et intelligentes eos (“In truth, what use the abundance of books if none are able to read and understand them”)?¹⁴ Of course, King Alfred himself, an astute tactician in both martial and cultural matters, did much to restore learning, and both he and Alcuin may be exaggerating the decline of learning, but their complaints are indicative of a lessening of learning which could have contributed to a breakdown of an awareness of kinds. And if individual kinds die when

¹² See King Alfred’s preface to his translation of Pope Gregory’s Pastoral Care: King Alfred’s West-Saxon Version of Gregory’s Pastoral Care, ed. Henry Sweet, Early English Text Society 45 (London: Trübner, 1871) 2-9. Cf. Derek Pearsall, “Language and Literature,” The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval England, ed. Nigel Saul (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 251.

¹³ King Alfred’s West-Saxon Version 2-9, esp. 2-3.

¹⁴ Alcuin, “Epistola XV: Ad fratres Gyroensis ecclesiae,” Opera Omnia, ed. J. P. Migne, vol. 1, Patrologiae cursus completus, 2nd ser., vol. 100 (Paris, 1851) col. 167; my translation. Cf. King Alfred’s West-Saxon Version 4-5.

they are no longer widely recognized,¹⁵ perhaps the same might be true of a sense of kinds in general.

Nevertheless, the evidence does not support the notion that awareness of kinds in the Middle Ages was nonexistent or even waning. Mediaeval authors and critics may appear, in comparison to Renaissance and Restoration ones, to have been largely unaware of classical genre theory, but this does not mean that the mediaeval community of users (of literature in general) did not recognize, utilize and experiment with various kinds. Byzantine Eastern Europe of course maintained awareness of classical kinds through the Middle Ages until the fall of Constantinople in 1453,¹⁶ but even in the West there was some awareness of classical kinds throughout the Middle Ages. Both Gerald of Wales (d. 1223) and the great mediaeval humanist John of Salisbury (d. 1180) make numerous—and in John’s case, often obscure—allusions to classical authors.¹⁷ Presumably both Gerald and John expected at least some of their contemporaries to recognize their classical sources, as well as to realize that the Aeneid, say, constituted a different kind from the Descriptio Cambriae or Policraticus. John indeed possessed an extraordinary breadth and depth of classical learning, but he cites Bernard of Chartres, master of that school and in

¹⁵ Fowler, “Life and Death of Literary Forms” 209-10 and 215-16. Cf. Jauss 90.

¹⁶ On the Byzantine transmission of classical texts see Wilson, Scholars of Byzantium.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Giraldi Cambrensis, “Descriptio Kambriae,” Opera, ed. James F. Dimock, vol. 6 (London: Longmans, 1868) I, xii, p. 188. On John of Salisbury cf. Christopher Brooke, The Twelfth-Century Renaissance (London: Thames, 1969) 61, who also offers a good introduction to John: 53-74. See too the collection of essays: The World of John of Salisbury, ed. Michael Wilks (Oxford: Blackwell for the Ecclesiastical History Society, 1984). I am indebted to R. A. McDonald for bringing these references and the example of John of Salisbury to my attention.

whose footsteps he followed, as likening the moderns to a dwarf perched on the shoulders of the giant of the ancients: the dwarf can see farther if he keeps his seat, and the moderns (in the form of the twelfth-century schools) can advance learning if they base their studies on suitable classical authorities.¹⁸ While the extent of John's classical learning may be unusual, he and Gerald were not alone in such knowledge. William of Malmesbury was exceptionally well-read, but his Vergilian knowledge in particular was such that his prose has an unacknowledged—because instinctive—Vergilian quality.¹⁹ Henry of Huntingdon, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of studying literature, especially history, and draws attention to the width of his reading, including Horace and (in some form) Homer.²⁰

We also see some form of awareness of classical genre theory in works such as Servius's fourth-century commentary on the Aeneid or the sixth or seventh-century Exposition of the Content of Vergil According to Moral Philosophy by Fabius Planciades Fulgentius; nor should we dismiss such works because of their poor quality.²¹ Whatever their quality, these commentaries at least show the existence of mediaeval literary criticism based on some sense of kind, and that is more important to the present argument than

¹⁸ Ioannis Saresberiensis, Metalogicon, ed. J. B. Hall, *Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Mediaevalis* 98 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepolis, 1991) III, 4, especially lines 46-50, and Brooke, Twelfth-Century Renaissance 60-1.

¹⁹ Rodney Thomson, "John of Salisbury and William of Malmesbury," The World of John of Salisbury 119-20.

²⁰ Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, Historia Anglorum, ed. and trans. Diana Greenway (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) 2-7.

²¹ O. B. Hardison, Jr., "Toward a History of Medieval Literary Criticism," Medievalia et Humanistica ns 7 (1976): 5.

their success. Even today, when generic awareness is relatively widespread (if often woolly), we have no shortage of bad criticism. Nor was Aristotle's Poetics itself completely unheard of in the Middle Ages, albeit the version most widely available at the time—Hermann the German's 1256 Latin translation of the Arabian scholar Averroes's Middle Commentary on the Poetics—was an abridgement rather different from the version known to classical, Renaissance or modern critics.²² The Poetics is built upon a steady focus on kind,²³ and since Aristotle opens the inquiry by speaking of the divisions of various poetic kinds, conventions and components, distinguishing between epic, tragedy, comedy, the dithyramb and musical types, the barest knowledge of the Poetics would make the mediaeval reader aware of the existence of a number of generic features and kinds. The Averroistic Poetics, although less detailed, retains the opening acknowledgement of disparate kinds and conventions, and Hermann's preface advises the reader to compare it to Horace's Ars poetica.²⁴

It must be admitted, however, that most mediaeval people would never have heard of Greece, let alone Aristotle. Even those monasteries which possessed classical texts

²² A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott, ed., Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-c.1375 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) 3 and 277; for a commentary on and extracts from Hermann's Averroistic Poetics see 277-307. See also William F. Boggess, "Aristotle's Poetics in the Fourteenth Century," Studies in Philology 67 (1970): 278-94.

²³ Stephen Halliwell et al., ed. and trans., "Poetics," by Aristotle, Aristotle: Poetics; Longinus: On the Sublime; Demetrius: On Style (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995) 9-10. For Aristotle's opening division of kinds see Poetics I, 1447a-1448a, esp. 1447a.

²⁴ "The Middle Commentary of Averroes of Cordova on the Poetics of Aristotle," Classical and Medieval Literary Criticism, ed. Alex Preminger, O. B. Hardison, Jr., and Kevin Kerrane (New York: Ungar, 1974) 349.

often palimpsested such manuscripts to create space for works which, at the time, were considered to be of more importance.²⁵ Thus, if ever Fowler's words about the death of kinds were true,²⁶ it is in the Middle Ages, when knowledge of the great Greek literary kinds must have been lost to the vast majority of the community of users (in general).

It should however be borne in mind that a few members of the mediaeval community of users did have greater familiarity with the Greek language and kinds than is usually acknowledged, especially as the argument that the Middle Ages had little or no awareness of kind seems based to a large extent on misleading comparisons with the Renaissance and the assumption that they did not possess such knowledge. Thus the Franciscan scholar Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253) knew and wrote commentaries upon Aristotle's works and promulgated the learning of Greek,²⁷ while Boccaccio founded a Greek chair in Florence in 1360.²⁸ Nor was understanding of Greek confined to the high Middle Ages, for the Venerable Bede in the eighth century says of Abbot Albinus, one of Bede's researchers in compiling records for the Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum, that in addition to knowing Latin no less well than his native English, he possessed no small

²⁵ Reynolds and Wilson 76. Reynolds and Wilson are speaking here specifically of Latin texts, but there is no reason to assume that the same fate did not befall Greek manuscripts—where the monasteries possessed Greek texts.

²⁶ Fowler, "Life and Death of Literary Forms" 209-10 and 215-16, and supra.

²⁷ Pearsall, "Language and Literature" 262.

²⁸ Bernard Knox, introduction, The Iliad, by Homer, trans. Robert Fagles (1990; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991) 5.

understanding (*non parua ex parte*) of Greek.²⁹ Since Bede uses Albinus's learning as an illustration of the erudition of Albinus's teacher, Hadrian, we can assume that Hadrian too had considerable command of both Latin and Greek. St Bruno of Cologne (c. 925-65) was also noted for his study of Greek and collection of classical manuscripts, and was praised by his biographer for having himself renewed the seven liberal arts, long since blotted out (*Oblitteratas diu septem liberales artes ipse retexit*).³⁰ The tenth-century manuscript Pierpont Morgan 397 includes, amongst other items, Aesop's fables, a Life of Aesop and the Greek bestiary Physiologus,³¹ and Aristotle's Poetics was known in the original Greek by at least one western mediaeval scholar, for it was translated by the Dominican William of Moerbeke in 1278; although his translation seems to have been little used,³² it is one further example of the mediaeval knowledge of classical learning, one that might have been expected to foster generic awareness. William also possessed remarkable ability—or fortune—in locating classical texts which are now lost or fragmentary,³³ in

²⁹ Bede, Ecclesiastical History of the English People, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969) V, xx, p. 530; my translation. All references are by book, chapter and page number to this edition; unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

³⁰ Ruotgeri, "Vita Brunonsis archiepiscopi Coloniensis," Scriptorum 4, ed. George Henry Pertz, Monumenta Germaniae Historica (1841; Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1968) sections iv-vi, pp. 255-57, esp. v, 256.43; my translation. For Bruno's date see Ruotgeri 252, and "Bruno, St," Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, ed. F. L. Cross, 3rd ed. E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997).

³¹ Wilson, Scholars of Byzantium 211.

³² Boggess 278, and Minnis and Scott, ed., Medieval Literary Theory 279.

³³ Wilson, Scholars of Byzantium 226-27.

which activity he may have been following other twelfth and thirteenth-century scholars who searched for Greek knowledge and texts in Roger the Great's Sicily, Byzantium and even Greece itself.³⁴

More important than the question of the mediaeval awareness of classical languages, authors and kinds is the mediaeval awareness of contemporary vernacular kinds. For we must bear in mind that literary kinds and awareness of them can evolve independently of scholars and critics. Consequently, the absence of any mediaeval counterpart to the Poetics does not mean that vernacular literary kinds did not exist (or that they were not recognized) in the Middle Ages. On the contrary, it is just that they were not written about in a type of writing which itself constitutes a kind: literary criticism specifically concerned with kinds. Nor should we assume that knowledge of the Aristotelean or Horatian Poetics alone constitutes awareness of kind. Aristotle himself, it must be remembered, wrote the Poetics one hundred years or more after the works and poets comprising his general subjects; and the inquiry has possibly been given far greater emphasis as a result of its role in the Renaissance than the Greeks themselves gave to it.³⁵ Yet awareness of these kinds obviously existed well before Aristotle's commentary, and there is evidence within the dramatic texts alone which suggests that a type of "natural" or

³⁴ Brooke, Twelfth-Century Renaissance 35-6 and 187. The connexion between these scholars and William is my own.

³⁵ For the notion of the Poetics' pre and post-Renaissance importance and influence see Halliwell, ed. and trans., Poetics 3-4. Lucas emphasizes that the Poetics is actually incomplete and unedited, resembling lecture notes more than a finished product: D. W. Lucas, intro., commentary and appendixes, Aristotle Poetics, by Aristotle (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) ix-xi and xiv; cf. Halliwell, ed. and trans., Poetics 4-5.

intrinsic literary criticism based on a knowledge of kinds existed prior to Aristotle.³⁶

Consequently, even if the majority of the mediaeval community of users had little or no knowledge of Greek or Latin, of Aristotle or Horace or Longinus or more fictional classical kinds, there is no reason to suppose that they did not possess a comparable knowledge of the vernacular kinds of their own time, and we may also suppose that both such kinds and awareness of them existed prior to and independent of knowledge of either a classical or mediaeval Poetics.

The extant histories, riddles, sermons, epics, mystery plays, heroic poetry, hymns, beast-fables, exempla, romances and ballads show the existence of what modern critics recognize as a variety of kinds in the Middle Ages: the question is to what degree they also show that the mediaeval community of users recognized such kinds. Since some mediaeval authors wrote within what might be termed a classical or quasi-learned tradition, while others, especially poets of various oral and alliterative traditions and romance, did not, it is necessary to examine various literary traditions in both the early and late Middle Ages in order to answer this question, and to understand better mediaeval literary kinds in general.

Although it is possible to equate Cædmon's "Hymn of Creation" with the origins of English literate poetry, we must not see it as the origins of English poetry as such.³⁷

³⁶ See Appendix I.

³⁷ Pearsall, "Language and Literature" 248 seems to lose sight of this distinction; he observes further that the earliest extant Latin MS (737) of the Ecclesiastical History records the "Hymn" in the Northumbrian dialect.

The Venerable Bede records in his Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum (completed 731) how the “Hymn” originated in Cædmon’s initial unwillingness to take part in the singing of songs in accompaniment to the harp (IV, xxiii, 414-18). Bede does not elaborate on the types of songs sung on this occasion, but the context implies that they were traditional—albeit to Bede’s mind, perhaps, light—fare, heroic songs or folk ballads (IV, xxiii, 414-16).³⁸ The singing or recitation of songs, stories or hymns, especially in accompaniment to music, represents a very broad, primitive kind in its own right.³⁹ There seems, moreover, to be an implicit distinction in the Historia between these traditional types of songs and the religious or serious songs which Bede perhaps would have preferred, and this distinction, if it exists, constitutes an awareness of disparate kinds. The “Hymn” may even be, as has been suggested, the product of a long-standing Germanic tradition of poetry, with Bede’s account of Cædmon a partial history of an Anglo-Saxon oral singer.⁴⁰

The fact that Cædmon is said to have converted (IV, xxiii, 418: conuertebat) into verse stories and sacred history from Scripture likewise suggests an awareness of kinds, as conuertebat implies the involvement of two distinct kinds. Hence it is perhaps significant that Bede records or translates the “Hymn” in Latin rather than Anglo-Saxon, and that his

³⁸ Colgrave and Mynors, ed., Ecclesiastical History 416, n. 1.

³⁹ Such primitive kinds may eventually evolve into more complex ones, as seems to have happened in ancient Greece with the singing of dithyrambs and the development of tragedy.

⁴⁰ See Francis P. Magoun, Jr., “The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry,” Speculum 28 (1953): 447, and “Bede’s Story of Cædmon,” Speculum 30 (1955): 49-63.

summary of Cædmon's oeuvre probably, depending on just how Bede and his contemporaries interpreted Canebat and multa carmina faciebat, means both that Cædmon "sang" and "made poems" (IV, xxiii, 418). These things suggest that Bede and his contemporaries were aware of disparate styles of presentation as well as of disparate literary kinds. A clearer example of generic awareness comes at the close of his chapter condemning the Pelagian heresy, when Bede cites a poem in heroic verse (I, x, 38: uersibus heroicis), thereby showing the awareness of at least one literary kind; and since kinds are recognized in part by what they are not, by contradistinction with another kind,⁴¹ presumably revealing awareness of other kinds as well. It is thus probable that Bede's readers would also have recognized the differences between such songs and the Historia and the Bible.

Heroic poetry, singled out in this last reference by Bede, is in fact a prominent mediaeval secular kind which, during the Anglo-Saxon period in England at least, appears in a distinctive alliterative form. Heroic poetry stems from or reflects an oral tradition, and there is no reason to suppose that the English alliterative works of this period were not also part of such a tradition. Late mediaeval alliterative composition certainly bears witness to the vitality of a poetic tradition, but this tradition seems, on the basis of Beowulf and other heroic poems, to have been as well established in the eighth as the

⁴¹ Taplin feels that classical (fifth-century) tragedy and comedy define themselves by mutual opposition and contrast: Oliver Taplin, "Fifth-Century Tragedy and Comedy," Journal of Hellenic Studies 106 (1986): 163-74. The comment may be expanded to cover the relation (or relations) between various kinds in general.

fourteenth century.⁴² Indeed, Anglo-Saxon poetry in particular is evidence of a poetic and heroic tradition which is especially obvious in the horde of words, phrases, memories, themes and outlook embodying the heroic code or ethos, no doubt because heroic poetry especially is particularly well suited to the oral tradition and oral-formulaic composition.⁴³

It must be remembered, therefore, that literature itself does not depend on literacy.

“All peoples at all times have poetry, song, and storytelling, whether or not they have writing,”⁴⁴ and such songs and poems are indicative of at least the beginnings of generic awareness: for even if (and it is unlikely) all songs and poems in the preliterate and

⁴² Dorothy Everett, Essays on Middle English Literature, ed. Patricia Kean (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955) 23. Cf. A. C. Spearing, The Gawain-Poet (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970) 18-19.

⁴³ The well-spring of oral-formulaic study is of course the now famous work of Parry and Lord on Homer. See esp. Milman Parry, “Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making I,” Harvard Studies in Classical Philology 41 (1930): 73-147, and “Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making II,” Harvard Studies in Classical Philology 43 (1932): 1-50, both of which are now readily available with Parry’s other works in The Making of Homeric Verse, ed. Adam Parry (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971); and Albert B. Lord, “Composition by Theme in Homer and Southslavic Epos,” Transactions of the American Philological Association 82 (1951): 71-81, “Avdo Međedovic, Guslar,” Journal of American Folklore 69 (1956): 320-30, and The Singer of Tales, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 24 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1960). In Homeric studies, Parry’s and Lord’s findings and conclusions, although important, should not be accepted without qualification. The best caveats are probably those of G. S. Kirk: Homer and the Oral Tradition esp. 113-45, The Songs of Homer (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1962), and The Iliad: A Commentary, ed. G. S. Kirk, vol. 1: Books 1-4 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 1-37, esp. 10-16 and 24-30. Bearing in mind certain obvious differences, an oral-formulaic study of mediaeval literature can also be fruitful. Notable approaches here are: Magoun, “Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry” 446-67; Ronald A. Waldron, “Oral-Formulaic Technique and Middle English Alliterative Poetry,” Speculum 32 (1957): 792-804; and Finlayson, ed., Morte Arthure 24-30.

⁴⁴ M. L. West, “Homeric and Hesiodic Poetry,” Ancient Greek Literature, ed. K. J. Dover (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980) 10. The comment is as relevant to mediaeval literature as to Greek.

prehistoric past were sung or chanted to a single metre or chant, there must have been a difference between that and ordinary speech which would constitute a type of generic feature such as those discussed in Chapter One. In this sense it is as likely that the variegated Biblical kinds reflect such vernacular and occasionally oral kinds as secular and spiritual lyrics, aetiological, historical and heroic sagas, legends of martyrs, proverbs, riddles, fables and allegories as vice versa, as has been claimed.⁴⁵

This oral tradition is evident in part through the allusions in one work to figures or stories from one or more other works, and these allusions are common enough, and similar enough, to constitute a generic convention, as do the formulaic themes and language themselves. Furthermore, a knowledge of a shared stock of motifs, poetic traditions and various types of stories is one way in which the Middle Ages evinces an awareness of literary kinds. Even without other evidence, a sense of literary tradition is important in establishing awareness of kinds, for such a tradition is based on an history of varied conventions and types which allows for generic recognition; and recognition, as we established in Chapter One, is paramount.

The ninth or tenth-century Anglo-Saxon poem Deor, alluding as it does to heroic legend in general and figures such as Weland in particular, shows an awareness on the poet's part of various traditional tales—and perhaps kinds—as well as the expectation that the audience would understand these allusions. As is common in these types of allusions (more of which will be discussed below), those in Deor are not fleshed out, and are in fact very short. Part of the poem's interest, however, lies precisely in the fact that it refers to

⁴⁵ See Jauss 102.

tales and heroes which must have been well-known in England at the time, but which are, for the most part, no longer extant.⁴⁶ Furthermore, although Deor is lyric in form and tone, it depends for its subject matter on epic and the Heroic Age and various legendary figures such as Weland, implying a probable awareness and mixing of related but distinct kinds. Widsith, with its scop who gives a first-person account of his various experiences at numerous Heroic Age courts, presents us with a marked parallel to Deor, one which has often been remarked upon.⁴⁷ I think we can accept that this repeated use of types of generic conventions and features places both poems within a definite literary tradition, one which at the same time shows a knowledge of kinds. Widsith may actually contain traces of ancient oral verse, but the allusions themselves, both here and elsewhere, are cryptic enough, and casual enough, to testify for their origins in heroic songs and oral traditions.⁴⁸ Widsith in fact stands as a sort of poetic catalogue of stories and heroes, and some of the various figures and stories alluded to in the poem are also found in the Fight at Finnsburg,⁴⁹ just as there are similarities between Finnsburg and the later stages of the

⁴⁶ R. K. Gordon, trans., Anglo-Saxon Poetry, rev. ed. (London: Dent, 1954) 71. Malone gives summaries of what is known about the various legendary and historical figures to which the poem alludes: Kemp Malone, ed., Deor, 3rd ed. (London: Methuen, 1961) 4-14.

⁴⁷ Malone, ed., Deor 1-2.

⁴⁸ Pearsall, "Language and Literature" 247.

⁴⁹ For the notion of Widsith as a poetic catalogue cf. Gordon, trans. Anglo-Saxon Poetry 67; for the Finnsburg connexion see F. Klaeber, ed., Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, 3rd ed. (Boston: Heath, 1950) 234, who also notes the Nibelungenlied parallel. All references to Beowulf are by line number to this edition; unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

Nibelungenlied. As we shall see, the same allusive feature recurs throughout Beowulf, as when one of Hrothgar's scops sings of Sigemund, one of the heroes of the Volsung Saga, whose exploits make him wreccena wīde mærost (898: "far and wide hero most famous").

Nor is the role of tradition confined to Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry in the early Middle Ages, for both literary and oral tradition play a strong role in the Alliterative Revival. Despite its absence from written records for the better part of two and a half centuries, the alliterative metre suddenly reappears in the fourteenth century, to be utilized for most of the dominant literary kinds of the day: romance, chronicle, political satire, religious and moral allegory, and producing some of the best poems of that or any other age.⁵⁰ The best explanation for the Alliterative Revival is a very strong argument in favour of an awareness of kind in the Middle Ages, for the Revival is usually considered to be the result of a long-standing oral tradition of alliterative composition coupled with the gradual introduction of a variety of new features in accordance with the desires, knowledge and taste of the community of users.⁵¹ Although this theory has been disputed, a strong

⁵⁰ The list of kinds comes from Everett 46. Cf. that in Turville-Petre, who adds parody: Thorlac Turville-Petre, The Alliterative Revival (Cambridge: Brewer, 1977) 26.

⁵¹ In addition to Everett 46-7 and 50, and Spearing, Gawain-Poet 18-28, esp. 20 and 23, see Derek Pearsall, "The Origins of the Alliterative Revival," The Alliterative Tradition in the Fourteenth Century, ed. Bernard S. Levy and Paul E. Szarmach (Kent, Ohio: Kent State UP, 1981) 1-24, and "The Alliterative Revival: Origins and Social Backgrounds," Middle English Alliterative Poetry and Its Literary Background, ed. David Lawton (Cambridge: Brewer, 1982) 34-52; R. W. Chambers, "The Continuity of English Prose from Alfred to More and His School," Harpsfield's Life of More, ed. Elsie Vaughan Hitchcock, Early English Text Society OS 186 (London: Oxford UP, 1932 (for 1931)) lxxv-lxxviii; and J. P. Oakden, Alliterative Poetry in Middle English: The Dialectical and Metrical Survey (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1930), and Alliterative Poetry in Middle

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assumption of awareness of kind is no less evident in the principal alternative theory, that the fourteenth-century alliterative poets were consciously reworking the alliterative form available to them from written models.⁵²

Certainly some form of oral tradition must stand, immediately or remotely, behind the Alliterative Revival. The late fourteenth or early fifteenth-century alliterative Morte Arthure, for instance, bears striking resemblances to Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry which can hardly be the product of coincidence. Cador's speech exhorting his men to battle, especially in his reminder that the warriors think of the gifts that Arthur has bestowed upon them and, in doing so, fight the more fiercely, could easily have been transposed from The Battle of Maldon.⁵³ Gawain's speech when he and his men are outnumbered and facing death is similar, and perhaps even more heroic:

Bes dowghtty to-daye! 3one dukes schall be 3oures;
For dere Dryghttyn this daye dredys no wapyn;
We sall ende this daye alls excellent knyghttes,
.....
3ondire to 3one 3aldsonns he þat 3eldes hym euer
Qwhylls he es qwykke and in qwerte, vnquellyde with handis,

English: A Survey of the Traditions (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1935) passim, esp. 85-111.

⁵² Turville-Petre, Alliterative Revival 15-17 and 22-3 and passim.

⁵³ Morte Arthure, ed. Mary Hamel, Garland Medieval Texts 9 (New York: Garland, 1984) 1724-37. All references to Morte Arthure are by line number to this edition. Everett 62 relates the speech to Maldon. Cf. Finlayson, ed., Morte Arthure 11, and Spearing, Gawain-Poet 27-8, both of whom note connexions between the Morte Arthure and Maldon. Spearing does however feel that there is ultimately a contradiction in the Morte Arthure between Christian and heroic values, so that Arthur's downfall is in part a punishment for his conquests and "cirquytie" (3399), or arrogance; Finlayson 12-14 feels that Arthur is punished not for his conquests in general, but for his shift from just to unjust wars.

Be he neuer mo sauede ne socourede with Cryste—
Bot Satanase his sawle mowe synke into helle!
(3798-3800 and 3809-12)

These speeches evince little concern for the courtoisie so common in romance, instead each in its way echoes the famous lines from The Battle of Maldon which encapsulate the heroic ethos:

Hige sceal þe hearda, heorte þe cenre,
mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytað.⁵⁴

Mind must be the harder, heart the keener,
spirit must be the greater, as our strength grows less.

These echoes suggest a deliberate evocation of past values on the part of the alliterative poet, but they also show beyond doubt the conscious continuation of a literary kind. Regardless of which explanation we accept for the origins of the Alliterative Revival, then, there is nevertheless a strong element of literary tradition to the works composed under its influence, as well as some awareness of kind, particularly when the alliterative tradition begins to get modified to suit the desires of the community of users for a particular type of tale.

As we shall see in the next chapter, heroic values and kinds are ultimately markedly different from those of romance. Thus, because romance is much the more dominant type (of fictional narrative) in the fourteenth century, this creation in the form of the alliterative Morte Arthure of an heroic poem also argues for the conscious rejection of the romance

⁵⁴ The Battle of Maldon, ed. D. G. Scragg (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1981) 312-13; my translation.

kind,⁵⁵ a rejection based on an intricate understanding of literary conventions and kinds. The implication is that some members of the mediaeval community of users had a sense of disparate generic features, conventions and types, and that they were attempting to compose works which fitted such features. This conclusion is corroborated by the words of arguably the best poet of the Alliterative Revival, the fourteenth-century Gawain-poet, who records of the tradition of alliterative verse which he is following that it is:

stad and stoken
In stori stif and stronge,
With lel letteres loken,
In londe so hatz ben longe.⁵⁶

This statement of stories being exactly or correctly set down according to custom attests not only to the existence of a tradition of alliterative verse,⁵⁷ but also, and more importantly to my mind, to an awareness of specific generic features, of how to compose verse within such a tradition, and so to a detailed awareness of at least one mediaeval literary kind and its conventions. It is also the very same sentiment as that from Beowulf, discussed in more detail below, about the story of Beowulf's victory over Grendel being sōðe gebunden (871: "bound with truth") as demanded by poetic custom.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Finlayson, ed., Morte Arthure 6. Turville-Petre, Alliterative Revival 27-8, is thus surely mistaken to deny traditional thought or spirit to the works of the Revival.

⁵⁶ Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed., rev. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) 33-6; my emphasis. All references to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are by line number to this edition. Tolkien, Gordon and Davis n. to 35-6 gloss lel in this context as "correct" or "exact."

⁵⁷ Everett 23.

⁵⁸ Klaeber, ed., Beowulf n. to 870f. Cf. C. L. Wrenn and W. F. Bolton, ed., Beowulf, 5th ed. (Exeter: U of Exeter P, 1996) n. to 867-74.

One of many examples of Chaucer's awareness of various poetic conventions and styles comes in the Parson's statement that he is "a Southren man / [who] kan nat geeste 'rum, ram, ruf' by lettre."⁵⁹ Since Chaucer does use alliterative elements elsewhere, it is possible that he is not so much disparaging alliterative verse here as commenting on its provenance by saying that he felt alliteration to be foreign to the south.⁶⁰ Not only have the alliterative works of the Revival been associated with the North and Midlands, the poems are from provincial rather than urban areas, from areas not usually associated with or recognized as centres of culture. This is not to suggest that the alliterative works are always less learned than those of the city or royal court, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight especially seems to have been composed for a cultured audience, perhaps for one of the Western families in opposition to the king, "But we may suppose that, in the later fourteenth century, in the districts where it flourished, alliterative poetry was popular in more than one stratum of society."⁶¹ Piers Plowman, for instance, seems to have been intended for an audience different from that of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and although it was not necessarily written specifically for commoners, it was certainly familiar to them, being alluded to in John Ball's (1381) letter to the peasants of Essex; its general

⁵⁹ Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Parson's Prologue," The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1987) 42-3. All Chaucer references are by line number to this edition.

⁶⁰ Everett 47-8. Turville-Petre, Alliterative Revival 30 considers Chaucer's statement to be negative and dismissive. For Chaucer's use of alliterative verse see especially Knyghtes Tale 2602-16 and n. to 2601-16. I am indebted to Brooke Clark for first bringing the alliterative qualities of this passage to my attention.

⁶¹ Everett 48-9. Cf. Spearing, Gawain-Poet 5, who draws connexions between the Alliterative Revival and the great courts of the West Midlands.

popularity is further evinced by the fact that there are extant over fifty manuscripts.⁶²

Since the alliterative metre was employed in a number of different kinds and styles, and because various members of the alliterative community of users were aware of these different kinds and conventions, we can conclude from the disparity of the audiences that awareness of literary kinds and conventions was also relatively widespread.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from mediaeval romance. Although on the basis of written records romance antedates the Alliterative Revival, I have treated the Revival first because of its affinities with the style and heroic outlook of the oral tradition of the early Middle Ages. As a general rule, neither romance nor alliterative authors are considered part of the learned tradition, but romance authors show just as much of an awareness of kinds and conventions as their alliterative counterparts. One of the most famous of mediaeval romancers, Chrétien de Troyes, was aware not only of the natural rhetoric as well as of the traditions of romance, but also of the learned tradition. He informs us at the beginning of Cligés that he is the author not only of Erec and Enide and a number of other tales, but that he has translated various works by Ovid.⁶³ Indeed, Chrétien's prologues in general, like the body of his romances and his use of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia regum Britanniae and the Matter of Rome, testify to his learning and

⁶² "John Ball's Letter to the Peasants of Essex, 1381," Fourteenth-Century Verse and Prose, ed. Kenneth Sisam (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955) 160-61; Everett 48; and, for the number of manuscripts, Turville-Petre, Alliterative Revival 45.

⁶³ Chrétien de Troyes, Cligés, ed. Alexandre Micha, Les Romans de Chrétien de Troyes 2 (Paris: Champion, 1957) 1-7. D. D. R. Owen, William the Lion 1143-1214 (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1997) 29 and 137, links the rise of courtoisie and courtly love with the popularity and transmission of Ovid's amorous tales.

reveal his awareness of contemporary literary and rhetorical themes, topics, topoi and conventions.⁶⁴ Chrétien, as is well known, plays a pivotal role in the history and development of both romance in general and Arthurian romance in particular, establishing—if not also creating—the norms of the mediaeval romance kind;⁶⁵ yet it is not only modern scholarship, but the mediaeval community of users as well, both authors and audiences, who recognized Arthurian verse romance as a distinct kind, and Chrétien as its first great practitioner. More, they tended to judge subsequent romances by their relation to Chrétien's work,⁶⁶ a prime example of the role and importance played by recognition in the development and history of kinds.

Chrétien may thus have been regarded as the father of Arthurian verse romance, but he was not alone amongst romancers in his awareness of literary conventions. The author of the Suite du Merlin, discussing the difficulties of writing a cyclic work like the Roman du Graal, states how he has divided his work, evincing a concern to maintain a sense of proportion between each of its three parts—"la premiere aussi grande comme la seconde et la seconde aussi grant coume la tierche"—and explains that he has removed

⁶⁴ Tony Hunt, "Tradition and Originality in the Prologues of Chrestien de Troyes," Forum for Modern Language Studies 8 (1972): 320-23 and passim, and W. R. J. Barron, English Medieval Romance, Longman Literature in English Series (London: Longman, 1987) 32.

⁶⁵ Catherine Batt and Rosalind Field, "The Romance Tradition," The Arthur of the English, ed. W. R. J. Barron, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages 2 (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1999) 63. Cf. Robert W. Hanning, "The Social Significance of Twelfth-Century Chivalric Romance," Medievalia et Humanistica ns 3 (1972): 3-13.

⁶⁶ Keith Busby, forward, The Evolution of Arthurian Romance, by Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann, trans. Margaret and Roger Middleton, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 35 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) xii-xiii.

part of the Lancelot story, “ne mie pour chou qu’il n’i apartiegne et que elle n’en soit traite, mais pour chou qu’il convient que les .III. parties de mon livre soient ingaus, l’une aussi grant coume l’autre.”⁶⁷ The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnelle, which can be seen as a burlesque pastiche of generic elements and features common to a variety of Middle English romances,⁶⁸ shows an even greater concern with generic conventions. The poem in fact was deliberately designed for a comparative reading and context,⁶⁹ and such an intention depends upon and reveals a knowledge of literary kinds and conventions on the part of both poet and audience. Those romances which have little or nothing to do with King Arthur but which the authors associate with the Arthurian Legend by passing off the hero of the tale as one of Arthur’s knights likewise attest to the existence of kind in the Middle Ages, as well as, in their desire to place the stories within a specific aspect of the Arthurian tradition, to an awareness on the part of the community of users of different kinds.⁷⁰ All this concern with poetic or generic norms, styles and conventions is part of an awareness of literary kinds, and also shows a degree of what might be termed a natural rhetoric or intrinsic criticism.

⁶⁷ La Suite du Roman de Merlin, ed. Gilles Roussineau, 2 vols. (Genève: Droz, 1996) 173.9-10 and 239.19-22. Cf. Larry D. Benson, “Sir Thomas Malory’s Le Morte Darthur,” Critical Approaches to Six Major English Works, ed. R. M. Lumiansky and Herschel Baker (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1968) 106.

⁶⁸ Stephen H. A. Shepherd, “No Poet has His Travesty alone,” Romance Reading on the Book, ed. Jennifer Fellows et al. (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1996) 112-28.

⁶⁹ Shepherd, “Travesty” 120; cf. 121-22. At the risk of revealing myself as one of those who miss the joke, I cannot bring myself to agree that the ending of the poem, especially Ragnell’s death and Gawain’s grief, is as comic as Shepherd 121 claims.

⁷⁰ Cf. Finlayson, ed., Morte Arthure 4.

Part II: Signs of Sophistication

Both the early and late Middle Ages, then, possess what we have termed classical and vernacular traditions, but while historians such as Bede are part of the classical or learned tradition, authors of the Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition, fourteenth-century Alliterative Revival or mediaeval romance are not. Yet, whether it be in the literate, classical tradition of Bede, the historians and non-vernacular writing, or the secular or oral tradition of the vernacular, the evidence from the early and late Middle Ages does not support the argument that awareness of kinds suffered a labefaction in the Middle Ages. As might be expected, awareness of literary kinds seems to become more obvious the closer we get to the close of the Middle Ages, but this is probably because more evidence happens to survive from this period.

For the sake of clarity, the evidence that will be examined in the remainder of this chapter has been divided into categories representing tales told by or for the secular lower classes, the clergy and the nobility. Like some of the demarcations between various literary kinds themselves, the distinctions between these groups are not always firm, so that tales which, for instance, have been placed amongst the nobility might also appear amongst—and appeal to—the lower classes and clergy. Some degree of generic awareness is however present throughout both the Middle Ages as a whole and these various groups individually and collectively. We are thus free to examine what is perhaps the more interesting aspect of the mediaeval awareness of kinds, the ways in which such awareness reveals itself in more detailed and virtuoso expressions. Once again the

evidence has been selected from the entire mediaeval period, both vernacular and non-vernacular, but the focus, like the evidence, will be increasingly on the high Middle Ages. However, since it is more important for the present study to establish the existence, awareness and mastery of mediaeval literary kinds on the basis of the literature itself, the evidence selected does not extend to neo-Latin manuals on rhetoric or poetry. There are three principal reasons for this: (i) as noted above, literary kinds and awareness and mastery of them can exist independently of formal artes poeticae; (ii) the task of establishing the existence, awareness and mastery of literary kinds throughout the Middle Ages demands a particular interest in the non-Latinate, non-clerical tradition of vernacular composition; (iii) just as the authors of the manuals were not generally interested in such vernacular writings, so the vernacular authors were not generally interested in—and in many cases may not even have been aware of—the manuals.

In Book IX of the Iliad the Embassy arrive before the tent of Achilles to find him playing upon a lyre won from the spoils of battle and singing of the fame of men,⁷¹ and we have testimony from classical authors that similar actions were common amongst the bards

⁷¹ Homer, The Iliad of Homer, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1951) IX, 185-89. All references are by book and line number to this edition. The recent commentary, that “Akhilleus is whiling away the time,” misses the mark: Christopher H. Wilson, ed. and trans., Iliad: Books VIII and IX, by Homer (Warminster: Aris, 1996) commentary to IX, 186. Achilles’ actions and choice of song here are highly significant, indicative of his tragic dilemma and the cost of his withdrawal from battle. The Iliad: A Commentary, ed. Bryan Hainsworth, vol. III: Books 9-12 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) commentary to IX, 189 notes the song’s topic, but still seems to feel that Achilles has given in to tedium. More apt is the observation that Achilles’ choice of a martial and heroic topic is one part of his character, but that the simple playing of music also reveals the complexity of his character, especially his unequalled depth of emotion and perception: Jasper Griffin, ed., Iliad Book Nine, by Homer (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) commentary to 186ff.

of Gaul—and, we may assume, amongst British Celts as well.⁷² As we shall see, the various songs and fragments in Beowulf are evidence of the fact that the singing of songs, usually in accompaniment to the harp, was also a common occurrence amongst the Anglo-Saxons.⁷³ Such singing, moreover, need not be confined to any one social stratum.

Venantius Fortunatus, bishop of Poitiers from A.D. 599 to 609, attested in a different way to the existence of such songs when he wrote of various ways of praising a certain duke:

the Roman should sing praises with a lyre and the barbarian with a harp, while the Greek should sing songs of Achilles and Britons sing to the accompaniment of the crotta

(Romanusque lyra, plaudat . . . barbarus harpa, / Graecus Achilliaca, crotta Britanna

canat).⁷⁴ Fortunatus also evoked the same spirit as Achilles and the heroic tradition when

he consoled a grieving father with the words nec graviter doleas cecidisse viriliter ambos, /

nam pro laude mori vivere semper erit (“Do not grieve overmuch that the two of them

⁷² A. O. H. Jarman, ed. and trans., Aneirin, Y Gododdin (Llandysul, Dyfed: Gomer P, 1988) lxxv, and Patrick Sims-Williams, “Gildas and Vernacular Poetry,” Gildas, ed. Michael Lapidge and David Dumville (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1984) 169-92. Sims-Williams is concerned with the connexions between Celtic bards and Latin panegyric and Gildas’s comments on bards at courts.

⁷³ Magoun, “Bede’s Story of Cædmon” 56. Cf. Albert Bates Lord, “Cædmon Revisited,” Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period, ed. Helen Damico and John Leyerle (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993) 132-33.

⁷⁴ Venantius Fortunatus, “Carminvm epistvlarvm expositionvm,” Venanti Honori Clementiani Fortunati presbyteri italici opera poetica, ed. Friedrich Leo, Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Auctorum Antiquissimorum IV (Berlin: Weidmannos, 1881) VII, viii, 63-4; my translation. The crotta is a type of lyre: see Joan Rimmer, “Crwth,” The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments, 3 vols., 1984, and the obsolete form of “crowd sb¹,” Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., 20 vols., 1989.

have fallen like men, for to die for the sake of glory is to live forever”).⁷⁵ Although they are a later occurrence involving a less heroic subject, it is worth noting in this context that Breton lais were also sung in accompaniment to the harp, and that genuine lais were orally transmitted in this fashion.⁷⁶ Romances, too, may have been recited publicly in accompaniment to music.⁷⁷ This recurrence of various styles and features shows a type of generic awareness, as does the association of themes, subjects and styles with specific occasions.

The singing which Cædmon was so famously reluctant to participate in took place in an abbey, but although he eventually composed his “Hymn to Creation” on a suitably religious topic, heroic songs were another, perhaps even more popular, choice at such settings.⁷⁸ Such, at least, is the implication of Gildas’s mid-sixth-century complaint regarding his brethren’s interest in the foolish fables of secular men, and of Alcuin’s famous complaint at the close of the eighth century, Quid Hinieldus cum Christo (“What has Ingeld to do with Christ?”).⁷⁹ Derek Pearsall draws attention to this intermingling of

⁷⁵ Fortunatus, “Carminvm” VII, xvi, 51-2; my translation.

⁷⁶ Stephen H. A. Shepherd, ed., Middle English Romances (New York: Norton, 1995) 345. Burgess and Busby, trans., Lais of Marie de France 25 note that the lais of Marie de France seem not to have been designed for oral presentation.

⁷⁷ Gillian Beer, The Romance, Critical Idiom 10 (London: Methuen, 1970) 21.

⁷⁸ On Cædmon’s knowledge of traditional and heroic songs see Lord, “Cædmon Revisited” 132-35.

⁷⁹ See Gildas, “De excidio Britonum,” The Ruin of Britain and Other Works, ed. and trans. Michael Winterbottom, Arthurian Period Sources 7 (Chichester: Phillimore, 1978) 119 [ch. 66, sec. 4-5], and Alcuin, “Letter 124: Alcvinus Higbaldum episcopum Lindisfarnensem multa admonet,” Epistolae: Karolini Aevi, ed. Ernest Duemmler, 2nd ed.,

clerical and lay culture in the eighth century, and considers Alcuin's remonstrance to be a clear guide as to Beowulf's origins and initial audience.⁸⁰ While Pearsall's observation may be contentious, I believe that Gildas's, Bede's and Alcuin's comments show a clear awareness that such heroic songs and poems were different from religious ones. As for Cædmon's "Hymn" itself, seventeen surviving copies testify to the popularity of this sort of heroic-Christian hybrid, and that popularity surely implies recognition on the part of the community of users of the diverse traditions and kinds found in the poem. Certainly

the Hymn must be regarded (as it must have been at the time of its original recitation) as a great document of poetic revolution in early Anglo-Saxon England. Whoever first applied pagan traditional poetic discipline to Christian matter set the whole tone and method of subsequent Anglo-Saxon poetry.⁸¹

Pace the school of hermeneutics and the aesthetics of reception,⁸² it seems to me that such poetic innovation and achievement depends upon a knowledge and awareness, if not in every case mastery, of established literary traditions and kinds. The mediaeval awareness of literary kinds and conventions which we have been investigating suggests that

vol. 4.2, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Epistolarum* (Verlages: Nachdruck, 1974) 183.22. For a study of De excidio Britanniae's kind see François Kerlouégan, Le De excidio Britanniae de Gildas, *Histoire Ancienne et Médiévale* 4 (Paris: Sorbonne, 1987) 30-69.

⁸⁰ Pearsall, "Language and Literature" 249-50. Wrenn and Bolton, ed., Beowulf 25 and 29-33, and Klaeber, ed., Beowulf cxix-cxxiii posit a possible court origin for the poem.

⁸¹ C. L. Wrenn, "The Poetry of Cædmon," (Gollancz Memorial Lecture) Proceedings of the British Academy 32 (1946): 286; my emphasis. Cf. 287-88 and 291-92; also cf. C. L. Wrenn, A Study of Old English Literature (London: Harrap, 1967) 102-03, and Kevin Crossley-Holland, ed. and trans., The Anglo-Saxon World (1982; Woodbridge: Boydell; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) 194.

⁸² Jauss 93-5.

Cædmon's contemporaries recognized this; it is therefore not surprising that they saw his ability to invent a major new kind without evident mastery of the old ones as best explained by divine inspiration—but in any event Cædmon's is a unique case.

Although Bede himself wrote almost exclusively in Latin, he was also familiar with, appreciated and translated Anglo-Saxon poetry,⁸³ as the example of Cædmon's "Hymn" illustrates. Cuthbert says that Bede knew native Anglo-Saxon poems well,⁸⁴ and also quotes "Bede's Death Song," which, surprisingly, Bede composed in Anglo-Saxon rather than in Latin. The sentiments of the "Death Song" have even been claimed by one editor as echoing those of heroic poetry, in suggesting that it is good deeds which set us apart and win reward in the after-life.⁸⁵ If this is so, it is another example of the awareness on Bede's part of heroic songs and kinds—an awareness that other members of the clergy presumably shared.

Like the mediaeval secular poets, Bede too uses traditional tales in his sources, though these traditions tend to be religious or historical rather than heroic and poetic. In both the preface and the autobiographical note to the *Historia* Bede speaks of utilizing

⁸³ D. H. Farmer, introduction, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, by Bede, trans. Leo Shirley-Price, rev. R. E. Latham (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955) 34. Cf. Wrenn, *Study of Old English Poetry* 106.

⁸⁴ Cuthbert, "Epistola de obitu Bedae," *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors 580. Cuthbert's letter on Bede's death is itself another mediaeval literary kind, the deathbed letter of a saint, further examples of which include those of Martin of Tours, Hugh of Lincoln, Ailred of Rievaulx and Columba of Iona: Farmer, intro., "Cuthbert's Letter on the Illness and Death of the Venerable Bede, the Priest," *Ecclesiastical History* 355.

⁸⁵ Crossley-Holland, ed. and trans., *Anglo-Saxon World* 195.

reliable word of mouth and old traditions as sources (Praefatio 2-6 and V, xxiii, 566), and it is perhaps from these same traditions and recollections that he learned the Anglo-Saxon songs attributed to him by Cuthbert. Bede was at any rate familiar with vernacular and non-vernacular writings, perhaps with vernacular and non-vernacular kinds; certainly he knew the difference between the historical kind he was writing and heroic verse (see e.g. I, x, 38 and supra). It is therefore not surprising that he has been given especial praise for collocating such disparate sources by means of a fine understanding of history.⁸⁶

Many religious poems incorporate into a more Christian context the same style and even vocabulary as that of heroic poetry, suggesting an awareness, mixing and occasional mastery of disparate kinds in the Middle Ages, which are perhaps nowhere more brilliantly achieved than in the eighth-century Dream of the Rood.⁸⁷ Even a thirteenth-century Latin sermon incorporates a few alliterative lines from, and a reference to, an earlier story of Wade.⁸⁸ Although it incorporates a written rather than oral allusion, it is worth noting in this context that the relatively early thirteenth-century Ancrene Wisse,⁸⁹ a handbook for anchoresses, likewise incorporates an allusion from a secular literary kind into a religious work. Such allusions and borrowings by one kind to or from one or more different kinds does not generally change the generic identity of the kind doing the borrowing, instead it

⁸⁶ F. M. Stenton, Anglo-Saxon England, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1947) 187. Cf. Farmer, intro., Ecclesiastical History 22-3.

⁸⁷ Pearsall, "Language and Literature" 250-51.

⁸⁸ Everett 25.

⁸⁹ For the date of the Ancrene Wisse see Geoffrey Shepherd, ed., Ancrene Wisse Parts Six and Seven (London: Nelson, 1959) xxi.

offers the talented author an opportunity to gain knowledge, and possibly mastery, of a variety of literary kinds. At the very least, since kinds can be defined and understood in part by what they are not, such an author should be able to understand better his or her own kind.

Following a metaphor of Christ as a besieging king and knight wooing our soul we find a reference to tournaments in which knights prove their love and make manifest their worthiness for love “as weren sumhwile cnihtes iwunet to donne . . . i turneiment . . . for his leoues luue.”⁹⁰ One editor considers this to be a reference to tournaments of the past attended by ladies, to something, in other words, which convincingly resembles a love-tourney.⁹¹ Such a reference is rather problematic, as tournaments in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries were more mass *mêlées* than courtly-chivalric affairs presided over or inspired by ladies awarding prizes.⁹² By the early thirteenth century, it is true, the tournament had become an outstanding social spectacle and event, in which the presence of ladies was a given—even if their presence was often passed over in silence by the records. But since this courtly, socialized tournament emerges more or less at the same

⁹⁰ The English Text of the Ancrene Riwe: Ancrene Wisse, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien, intro. N. R. Ker, Early English Text Society 249 (London: Oxford UP, 1962 (for 1960)) 199.25-6; my emphases.

⁹¹ Shepherd, ed., Ancrene Wisse n. to 22.8.

⁹² For tournaments in general, and especially the development of the chivalric tourney and the question of the presence of ladies, see Richard Barber and Juliet Barker, Tournaments (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1989), and Richard Barber, The Knight and Chivalry, rev. ed. (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1995) 155-246. The sentence immediately following, about the thirteenth-century tournament, comes from both texts: Barber and Barker 206, and Barber, The Knight and Chivalry 216.

time as the Ancrene Wisse itself is being composed, the courtly tournament of the past mentioned in the poem is probably a literary rather than an historical occurrence. It is thus considered to be an idealization, an allusion to the mythical past of Geoffrey of Monmouth rather than to history proper.⁹³ In Geoffrey's account of Arthur's plenary crown-wearing in the Historia regum Britanniae (1135-37), for instance, the ladies are said to love only those knights who had proved themselves three times in battle, whereupon the knights, observed and encouraged by ladies from the castle walls, instigate a mock battle and equestrian game.⁹⁴

This episode in the Historia appears to be the first fictionalized version of a tournament,⁹⁵ and while it is also possibly the first record of ladies at tournaments, it more likely foreshadows the historical development of the tournament rather than mirrors contemporary practice; especially considering how events in literature, particularly

⁹³ Shepherd, ed., Ancrene Wisse n. to 22.8.

⁹⁴ Geoffrey of Monmouth, The Historia regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth, ed. Acton Griscom (New York: Longmans, 1929) IX, xiii, 457-IX, xiv, 458. All references to Geoffrey are by book, chapter and page number to this edition. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. Surprisingly, Geoffrey's chronicle here is more courtly than Wace's: Le Roman de Brut de Wace, par Ivor Arnold, 2 vols. (Paris: Société des Anciens Textes Français, 1938 and 1940) 10511-542.

⁹⁵ Barber and Barker 17-18. Benson feels that the episode does not refer to a tournament, for the Historia makes no mention of weapons or fighting. Rather, the scene is more an elaborate equestrian game not unlike the ludus Troiae in Book V of the Aeneid, which may actually be Geoffrey's source here: Larry D. Benson, "The Tournament in the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes and L'Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal," Chivalric Literature, ed. Benson and John Leyerle (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1980) 3-4.

romance, have been said often to anticipate rather than mirror historical fact.⁹⁶ Although romance generally looks back on and idealizes the past, this quasi-tournament in Geoffrey, like the courtly, socialized tourneys of Chrétien de Troyes, seems to do the opposite. As such, and given the time-frame of the socialized tournament and the composition of the Ancrene Wisse, it is likely that it is a literary scene which is being echoed in the Ancrene Wisse and not a contemporary tourney. Consequently, although it is a courtly and literate allusion rather than an heroic and oral one, perhaps indebted as much to Chrétien de Troyes as to Geoffrey of Monmouth, this reference to tournaments in the Ancrene Wisse is one further example of how the mediaeval community of users were aware of, utilized and mixed various literary kinds, both secular and religious, oral and written. As such, they would presumably have recognized the difference between the secular kind which stood behind this reference, and the more religious, didactic kind which constituted the Ancrene Wisse as a whole.⁹⁷

The twelfth-century chronicler-historians William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon—as Bede had done before them—likewise used old poems amongst their sources, and much of this material must have been known to these various authors through tradition;⁹⁸ and been recognized, as in the case of Bede, as distinct from the

⁹⁶ Barber and Barker 11 and 18. Cf. Finlayson, ed., Morte Arthure 8-9. Barber and Barker 18 note further that historical evidence does not bear witness to the presence of ladies at tournaments for another fifty years.

⁹⁷ For the Church's influence on literature see G. R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1933).

⁹⁸ Everett 25-6, who sees this use of traditional material as evidence of an oral tradition of alliterative verse which existed between Old English times and the Alliterative Revival.

historical kind which they were writing. Furthermore, twelfth-century historians considered historical writing to have a twofold purpose: to entertain as well as to enlighten.⁹⁹ Mediaeval historical writing in fact shared many generic features with epic and romance and other fictional kinds, notably a paratactic and episodic style and a penchant for entrelacement and amplificatio. Most importantly, these techniques were recognized and expected by the community of users, just as history was recognized as a distinct kind sharing these features with other kinds.¹⁰⁰ Because the episodic and paratactic style was so ubiquitous in the Middle Ages, we can conclude that “It was clearly the preferred form for narrative of all kinds, the form readers and auditors expected and enjoyed;” this is but one very specific example of the mediaeval awareness of generic features, conventions and kinds and the more advanced uses to which such awareness was put.

A slightly different sense of form, but one which shows an equally strong awareness of generic styles and conventions, is found in the late twelfth-century words of Gerald of Wales. Drawing attention to an alliterative tradition amongst both the Welsh and English, Gerald records how they utilize alliteration in all their exquisitely-crafted speech (annominatioe . . . in omni sermone exquisito).¹⁰¹ This observation implies that some members of the mediaeval community of users had a strong sense of generic

⁹⁹ Nancy F. Partner, Serious Entertainments (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1977). I am indebted to R. A. McDonald for this reference.

¹⁰⁰ Partner 194-211. The quotation immediately following is from 202.

¹⁰¹ Gerald of Wales, Descriptio Kambriae I, xii, p. 187; my translation. Everett 25 sees Gerald’s words as evidence of an oral tradition of alliterative verse.

features, conventions and types, and that they were attempting to compose works which displayed such features. It is the same sort of outlook (discussed in Part I) as that found in both Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, about poems being composed in accordance with certain poetic conventions and traditions. Gerald's frequent use of phrases and examples from classical authors also reveals that he possessed considerable knowledge of classical kinds, as in the illustration that classical authors too employed alliteration: In hunc modum Virgilius 'Tales casus Cassandra canebat' ("in this mode [alliteration] Vergil: 'Cassandra prophesied of such a kind of calamity'").¹⁰² Gerald may be guilty of misrepresenting or misunderstanding the finer points of classical poetic metre, which was not as a rule carried by alliteration, but he is nonetheless familiar with classical kinds and various of their generic features. Geoffrey of Monmouth, too, was familiar with and borrows from classical authors, including Ovid, Lucan, Juvenal, Apuleius and Vergil, and possibly Livy as well; he even has Hoel describe Arthur's speech in favour of defying Rome and denying tribute as Ciceronian (IX, xvii, 463-64: tulliano). The close of the double dedication which prefaces the Historia comes from the opening of Vergil's Eclogue I, Brutus's peregrinations before settling in Albion owe considerable debt to the Aeneid and Thebaid, and the quasi-courtly tournament mentioned above is possibly modelled on the ludus Troiae of Aeneid V.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Gerald of Wales, Descriptio Kambriae I, xii, p. 188, which comes from Aeneid III, 183, with Tales for Vergil's talis: see P. Vergili Maronis, "Aeneidos," Opera, ed. R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969). The translation is my own.

¹⁰³ Valerie I. J. Flint, "The Historia regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth," Speculum 54 (1979): 459-60, and, for the possible use of Aeneid V, Benson, "The Tournament in the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes" 3-4.

Given the evidence already presented for the mediaeval awareness and manipulation of various generic kinds and conventions, it is safe to assume that Geoffrey and some of his readers recognized Cicero and these different poems as distinct in kind from the history which Geoffrey was ostensibly writing. Moreover, although Geoffrey was not, as has sometimes been claimed, writing parody, he was occasionally humorous, especially in emphasizing his rustic style and claiming, in the same opening dedication which copies Vergil, that he had not gathered flowers from others' gardens (I, i, 219).¹⁰⁴ Since the joke would fall flat unless the audience realized that he had in fact gathered quite a few such flowers, he obviously expected the audience to recognize at least the occasional classical reference and allusion, including the flower from Vergil's garden. In this sense Geoffrey has inverted another common mediaeval generic convention, the translation topos; for while in this topos, prevalent in romance but used elsewhere in the Historia by Geoffrey, the author's claim to be following a source is usually false, Geoffrey here deliberately obfuscates his source.¹⁰⁵

It has been established that mediaeval historical writing shares many generic features with such vernacular kinds as epic and romance,¹⁰⁶ that Bede especially makes use of various oral traditions, and that all of these factors help to produce instances of generic

¹⁰⁴ Flint 459-60 and n. 67, and 462-63, who also considers Geoffrey to be parodying twelfth-century history and its practitioners, a view with which I disagree.

¹⁰⁵ On the translation topos and its use by Geoffrey see Christopher Brooke, "Geoffrey of Monmouth as a Historian," Church and Government in the Middle Ages, ed. C. N. L. Brooke et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976) 79. Cf. Hunt 325. The idea that Geoffrey has here inverted this convention is my own.

¹⁰⁶ Partner 194-211, and supra.

sophistication in the Middle Ages. Analysis of such sophistication has so far focussed predominantly on tales told by or for the clergy, but tales associated with the nobility offer similar evidence. Indeed, it is within the secular oral tradition especially that the various references and allusions to other cycles of songs and stories testify not only to the presence in both the early and late Middle Ages of a large catalogue or backdrop of various legendary, historical and mythical tales and figures, but also to the awareness on the part of the community of users that such tales existed. This type of knowledge, moreover, can be further expected to include or foster some degree of generic awareness, as well as providing the modern critic with examples of how such knowledge operates in a more virtuoso fashion within the poetic tradition.

Composed in the eighth century, Beowulf opens with a brief history of Scyld and the Scyldings, although the bulk of Scyld's story does not appear in the poem. While the story functions mostly as an introduction to Scyld's descendant Hrothgar, it is at the same time a probable allusion to another cycle of stories or songs which have in fact been lost to us.¹⁰⁷ On the basis of similar poems and cultures, however, particularly of works such as Beowulf which straddle the oral-literate divide and epitomize their culture's Heroic Age, we can posit that the figures alluded to by the poet would have been commonly known amongst the community of users.¹⁰⁸ Homer in the Iliad relates only a brief episode in the history of the Trojan War, but that episode as he tells it depends for its success partly on

¹⁰⁷ For Irving, the figure of Scyld also acts as an heroic paragon and model monarch: Edward B. Irving, Jr., "Heroic Role-Models," Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period 355.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Wrenn and Bolton, ed., Beowulf 49.

the audience's awareness of the tale in its entirety, including events and figures from both before and after the events that Homer relates.

Prominent throughout the Iliad is the death of Achilles, and to a certain extent the poem and poet look forward to and allude to this event, yet the Iliad closes not with Achilles' funeral, but with his promise to grant Priam a break in the fighting so that Troy can honour Hektor, and with Hektor's funeral itself: "Such was their burial of Hektor, breaker of horses" (XXIV, 804), ends the poem. Homer's audience knew, and Homer could rely on that knowledge, that the theme of the Wrath of Achilles would end in Achilles' own death. Part of the effect of the poem is achieved precisely because Homer and the community of users were aware of such stories from outside the version told by Homer, and this knowledge was the result of oral traditions. Yet while the simple fact of Achilles' death is not necessarily tragic, Homer manipulates the existing material and the generic features of epic in order to present Achilles as a tragic hero;¹⁰⁹ part of the effect of the poem lies in the realization of the community of users that such is the case.

The Scyld episode which opens Beowulf (4-52), like the lay of Finnesburh sung in Heorot (1068-1159), the Finnesburg Fragment itself, the reference to Offa and the proud Queen Thryth (1931-62), or the war between the Scyldings and Heathobards prophesied by Beowulf before Hygelac (2024-69), attest to a comparable tradition in mediaeval

¹⁰⁹ For details of Achilles' tragedy see Kevin S. Whetter, "The Tragedy's the Thing: Achilles and Cú Chulainn as Models of the Consummate Hero," Celebratio, ed. Janet P. Bews, Ian C. Storey and Martin R. Boyne (Peterborough, Ontario: Trent U, 1998) 134-43.

poetry.¹¹⁰ As the poet says at the opening of Beowulf, such stories and allusions as those of Scyld were gefrūnon (2) by the Anglo-Saxon community of users, and although wē . . . gefrūnon literally means “we have heard,” we might also consider it to mean “well learned.” Regardless of the precise meaning of gefrūnon, the repetition of such stories and songs (like the use of the formulaic wē . . . gefrūnon itself) constitutes a generic feature, albeit one which is far less easy to demonstrate than, say, metre. One indication of the Beowulf-poet’s generic mastery comes, like Homer’s, in his use of such conventions. For each of the allusions listed, each use of this feature, serves in part to emphasize various themes of the poem, especially the awareness of the fragility of life and the paramount importance of honour, and the potential for tragedy inherent in these notions.¹¹¹ One of the most famous mediaeval expressions of these themes, which tend to be linked in heroic poetry, is found in Beowulf’s words to Hrothgar:

Ūre æghwylc sceal ende gebīdan
 worolde līfes; wyrce sē þe mōte
 dōmes ær dēaþe; þæt bið drihtguman
 unlifgendum æfter sēlest. (1386-89)

Each of us must await the end of life in
 the world; he who is able should win
 glory before death. That is afterwards
 the best for a warrior whose life has passed.

Given the appropriateness of the allusions, we can conclude that the community of users recognized that such stories and songs and figures are suitable to specific types of

¹¹⁰ On the Finnesburh lay, which is sung commemorating Grendal’s defeat, cf. Pearsall, “Language and Literature” 247, who labels it the classic heroic allusion.

¹¹¹ For the role the allusions and digressions play in generating a tragic atmosphere cf. Wrenn and Bolton, ed., Beowulf 35, 47 and 68-74.

poetry— especially when, as in the case of Homer and the Beowulf-poet, they are used by the story-teller to emphasize and encapsulate various of his tale’s principal themes. Since generic features are one means of identifying kind, this evinces some sense of generic awareness, particularly when we consider that the Beowulf-poet at least begins to modify the standard generic features and formulae.¹¹² The wē . . . gefrūnon opening (1-2), for instance, is unique in the poem as an emphatic plural variation on what is normally otherwise a singular form: ic . . . gefrægn.¹¹³

There is another notable example from Beowulf which demonstrates how such songs evince advanced awareness in the early Middle Ages of various literary kinds and conventions. Following the death of Grendel and immediately before the reference to Sigemund and the subsequent lay of Finnesburh, one of Hrothgar’s thanes, a man well-versed in the old lays and traditions (869-70), composes a song commemorating Beowulf’s slaying of Grendel:

word oþer fand
 sōðe gebunden; secg eft ongan
 sīð Bēowulfes snyttrum styrian,
 ond on spēd wrecan spel gerāde,
 wordum wrixlan; wēlhwylc gecwæð. (870-74)

another lay arranged, he bound this song
 with truth; in turn that man [the poetic thane]

¹¹² Cf. Kemp Malone, “The Old English Period (to 1100),” A Literary History of England, ed. Albert C. Baugh (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1948) 94, who sees the Beowulf-poet as a great structural innovator and master of traditional poetic styles.

¹¹³ Klaeber, ed., Beowulf n. to 1-3, and Wrenn and Bolton, ed., Beowulf n. to 1-2, who observe further that the usual form is singular, but that the plural is used to open a tale. Klaeber lxvi-lxvii argues that the gefrægn- formulae are unmistakable indicators of the preliterate stage of Germanic or Anglo-Saxon oral poetry and transmission.

skilfully began to sing of Beowulf's accomplishment,
and with skill to utter his well-wrought story,
varying the words, every one in agreement.

There are two implications to be drawn from this passage. First, the existence and transmission of heroic lays within the Anglo-Saxon oral tradition is once again attested to.¹¹⁴ Second, perhaps more importantly, the statement that Hrothgar's poetic thane arranged his poem as it should be implies a knowledge of proper styles of composition, of the necessary components and conventions of various poetic kinds, and hence, it seems, an awareness in the early Middle Ages of various kinds. The generic sophistication is all the greater here for occurring on two levels: the Beowulf-poet, himself aware of the various features and traditions, reveals his own knowledge through this statement, and he also has the poetic thane within the poem reveal and utilize the same knowledge.¹¹⁵

A similar awareness is to be found in the gamut of Anglo-Saxon court poetry and poetic styles revealed in Beowulf's words about the types of songs sung at Heorot: strange tales or tales of strange adventures, true and doleful tales and tales lamenting mutability (2105-13).¹¹⁶ The same conclusion can be drawn from the argument that such stories, songs, traditions and literary conventions were particularly well learned by the Beowulf-poet himself, who was in fact manipulating the existing heroic tradition and

¹¹⁴ Cf. Klaeber, ed., Beowulf n. to 867-915.

¹¹⁵ I am indebted to M. A. Locherbie-Cameron for bringing this last point to my attention.

¹¹⁶ C. S. Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost (1942; London: Oxford UP, 1967) 15-16. Lewis cites a suggestion from J. R. R. Tolkien on the notion of this representing the gamut of court poetry.

poetic norms to work within that tradition while simultaneously criticizing it.¹¹⁷ Since such criticism depends for its success on the familiarity of both author and audience with one or more literary kinds, it seems to show not only an awareness of kind on the part of the mediaeval community of users, but also some degree of generic sophistication, if not, in some cases at least, mastery. Even if the Beowulf-poet is not so much criticizing the heroic tradition as epitomizing it,¹¹⁸ as is more likely, his mastery of the tradition still shows an intricate awareness of at least one poetic kind.

We have already seen instances of how various of these stories and songs operate within the poetic or literary tradition, how fragments or allusions or subjects from one or more songs get incorporated into another. Nor are such allusions to a common stock of heroic tales and traditions and the concomitant expectation that, as a type of generic feature, they show an awareness of kind, confined to Homeric or Anglo-Saxon poetry. The elegy-stanza in the Gododdin where a certain warrior is said to be a fearsome fighter,

¹¹⁷ See, e.g., Michael Lapidge, “Beowulf and the Psychology of Terror,” Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period, 373-402; Gillian R. Overing, Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1990), who simultaneously emphasizes that her study neither seeks nor provides definite conclusions; Harry Berger, Jr. and H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., “Social Structure as Doom,” Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope, ed. Robert B. Burlin and Edward B. Irving, Jr. (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1974) 37-79; John Leyerle, “Beowulf the Hero and the King,” Medium Aevum 34 (1965): 89-102; and David Williams, in conversation.

¹¹⁸ A similar, and equally unconvincing, view is put forward by some critics of the Iliad and Achilles. Goldhill, e.g., argues that the Iliad both glorifies and contests the notion of kleos (glory) and Achilles’ relation to it: Simon Goldhill, The Poet’s Voice (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 92-3, while Silk claims that Achilles is subverting or challenging the heroic code: M. S. Silk, Homer: The Iliad (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987) 96-8.

though he is not Arthur,¹¹⁹ well-known as the oldest surviving reference to King Arthur, is also one of the oldest mediaeval examples of the oral tradition of literature. The Gododdin is not about King Arthur, nor does he appear in it personally, but it uses Arthur here as a yardstick for other heroes; the reference thus “presupposes that Arthur was a recognized model of courage when these lines were written,”¹²⁰ and such recognition must be based on oral or written legend as well, perhaps, as on the realization that the incorporation of a figure from one kind—whether literary or legendary or historical—was well-suited to another kind. Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Prophetia Merlini (1134-35), subsequently incorporated into the Historia regum Britanniae (1135-37), belongs to the literate rather than oral tradition, but it too may allude to oral stories, for Geoffrey says of Arthur that his end will be uncertain, but his deeds and praises In ore populorum celebrabitur & actus eius cibus erit narrantibus (VII, iii, 385: “in the mouths of the people shall be celebrated, and his deeds shall be sustenance to those who tell tales”). According to Thomas Jones, we can conclude from the last phrase that Arthur’s deeds were already the stuff of story-tellers, and that they were being orally transmitted, when Geoffrey composed his tale.¹²¹ We thus have further evidence of a vigorously flourishing oral

¹¹⁹ See Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, trans., The Gododdin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1969) 112, item B.38. For a text with translation see Jarman, ed. and trans., Gododdin 64-5, stanza 99. In the monumental Welsh edition of Sir Ifor Williams: Canu Aneirin, gan. Ifor Williams (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1938), the allusion appears in lines 1239-44.

¹²⁰ Thomas Jones, “The Early Evolution of the Legend of Arthur,” Nottingham Medieval Studies 8 (1964): 12-13.

¹²¹ Jones 20-1.

tradition of story-telling, and it is difficult to believe that such a tradition existed without kinds; indeed, the rest of this chapter shows that vernacular kinds, even oral ones, thrive on a generic tradition, to the point where generic awareness is not merely present, but often used in complex ways. It is even sometimes possible, as we see here, for subject or content to be transgeneric.

Further evidence of the oral tradition is found in the very composition of the Gododdin, for it commemorates the battle of Catraeth, circa A.D. 600, although the version we have was not written down until several hundred years later. It survives in two versions, both in a unique manuscript of about A.D. 1250 known as the Book of Aneirin, with the older B text generally considered to reflect a source from probably the ninth or tenth centuries.¹²² Yet the poem existed prior to this in oral tradition, and was apparently “composed orally and handed on orally for two centuries or more.”¹²³ Furthermore, while the Gododdin is an heroic poem in the form of a series of heroic elegies,¹²⁴ the reference to Arthur must rest in part on stories from a different kind or kinds, and so suggests to me that the mediaeval community of users were capable of recognizing the various kinds

¹²² Jarman, ed. and trans., Gododdin xiii-xvi, and Jackson, trans., Gododdin 41-6 and 56-67, esp. 42-5 and 62-3.

¹²³ Jackson, trans., Gododdin 63. The Iliad and Odyssey are likewise the products of oral tradition and the Heroic Age, and appear to have been handed down within the oral tradition for the better part of two hundred years before being written down in Athens in the sixth century: Kirk, Homer and the Oral Tradition 124-25.

¹²⁴ Jarman, ed. and trans., Gododdin xxx and xl-xli considers it both elegy and eulogy.

involved. Since the reference is found in the more archaic B text,¹²⁵ it appears that such recognition was possible from quite early on. Certainly the community of users recognized the appropriateness of using Arthur as an heroic paragon in a poem otherwise unconnected to him.

Both oral and literary tradition, as we have seen, play an equally strong role in the fourteenth-century Alliterative Revival, the evidence from which likewise reveals some degree of generic sophistication. The sheer variety of alliterative works composed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is alone evidence of the existence of a number of different kinds in the Middle Ages: heroic chronicles such as the alliterative Morte Arthure, satirical-political works such as Wynnerre and Wastoure, exempla like Patience, dream-vision allegories such as Pearl or Piers Plowman and various alliterative Arthurian romances, to name but a few. As we have seen, some members of the community of users had an awareness of various generic features, and since we established in Chapter One that such features are one means of generic recognition, it is likely that they possessed a concomitant awareness of these different alliterative kinds: both factors can help to produce generic sophistication or mastery

Because many of the early works in the Revival are translations from French or Latin texts, it is also possible that the Revival came into being in part as a direct response to audience demand for vernacular literature.¹²⁶ Furthermore, while we must avoid

¹²⁵ On the uniqueness of the reference to Arthur see Jarman, ed. and trans., Gododdin lxxiii, and Jackson, trans., Gododdin 112. On Arthur's name being a reference to other story-cycles cf. Jackson, trans., Gododdin 19-21.

¹²⁶ Turville-Petre, Alliterative Revival 26.

succumbing to the danger of imagining connexions between poems and poets where none exists, the evidence does point to the existence of what might be termed a school of poets, albeit one concerned with a great variety of styles and subjects. Similarities in such generic features as metre, diction, phraseology, syntax, subject and theme abound, “suggesting that the poets knew the subjects at which alliterative poetry excelled and how they should be handled.”¹²⁷ Wynnere and Wastoure, The Parlement of the Thre Ages, Piers Plowman and Death and Liffe are all quite similar, essentially didactic or satiric, employing either the dream or allegorical debate frame.¹²⁸ Cleanness, on the other hand, is a religious exemplum which nonetheless includes sentiments more typical of the heroic ethos and kind: “Frendeȝ fellen in fere and faþmed togeder, / To dryȝ her delful deystyne and dyȝen alle samen,” as well as being similar to lines 1381-83 of the Wars of Alexander,¹²⁹ is the same heroic sentiment, minus the last-stand speech of defiance by a specific individual, as that of The Battle of Maldon or the Morte Arthure, discussed above.

Some of the poems also share an unusual sense of purpose and worth, a concern with the inferiority of the morals or truth of other poets,¹³⁰ and although this trait may be

¹²⁷ Turville-Petre, Alliterative Revival 27.

¹²⁸ Everett 52.

¹²⁹ Cleanness, ed. J. J. Anderson (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1977) 399-400, and The Wars of Alexander, ed. Hoyt N. Duggan and Thorlac Turville-Petre, Early English Text Society SS 10 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989). For the comparison between the two poems see Duggan and Turville-Petre, ed., Wars n. to 1381-84. All references to the Wars of Alexander are by line number to this edition.

¹³⁰ Turville-Petre, Alliterative Revival 27. Turville-Petre also cites the examples from the Morte Arthure and Destruction of Troy, though his ultimate conclusion is different from mine. On the moral consciousness of the alliterative works cf. Pearsall, “Language

more highly regarded in the twentieth than in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, it does serve as another generic feature, one which depends for its success on advanced generic awareness. The alliterative Morte Arthure, for instance, opens with an invocation to shield us from shameful deeds and especially to write morally instructive works:

And wysse me to werpe owte som worde at this time
That nothyre voyde be ne vayne, bot wyrchip till Hym selvyn,
Plesande and profitabill to the pople þat them heres. (9-11)

The author of the Destruction of Troy goes even farther, dismissing Homer as a spinner of falsehoods:

Homer was holden haithill of dedis.
Qwiles his dayes enduret, derrist of other
þat with the Grekys was gret & of grice comyn.
He feynet myche fals was neuer before wroght,
And tralet þe thruth, trust ye non other.
Of his trifuls to telle I haue no tome nowe,
Ne of his feynit fare þat he fore with:
How goddes focht in filde, folke as þai were,
And other errours vnable þat after were knowen.¹³¹

Given the role generic features play in the composition, development and recognition of literary kinds, this sharing and repetition of particular features amongst a variety of works is further proof that authors of the Alliterative Revival possessed a sound knowledge and awareness of kinds. Further, unlikely as it is that the author of the Destruction of Troy knew Homer's text directly, he obviously had knowledge of Homer and his tale, perhaps

and Literature" 269, who also notes a strong historical sense.

¹³¹ Destruction of Troy, Part One, ed. G. A. Panton and David Donaldson, Early English Text Society 39 (London: Trübner, 1869) 38-46.

through Latin commentaries or a peripatetic scholar,¹³² and such knowledge is further possible evidence of the type of literary tradition which includes an advanced sense of kinds. We also see such knowledge and features being used as part of an intrinsic literary criticism, and literary criticism depends in part on an awareness, if not mastery, of kinds.¹³³

This same generic awareness within a literary tradition is evident in a different way in A Talkyng of the Love of God and William of Palerne. The author of A Talkyng of the Love of God places its prose style within a tradition of others by showing an awareness of the audience and its desires: “Men schal fynden lithliche þis tretys in Cadence, After þe bigynninge, 3f hit beo riht poynted & Rymed in sum stude, To beo more louesome. to hem þat hit reden.¹³⁴ Not only does it seem to preserve an English tradition of rhythmic prose stretching ultimately back to the Anglo-Saxon period,¹³⁵ but this concern with proper types of composition is similar to that (discussed above) in Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, implying a shared knowledge of generic features and styles constitutive of both generic awareness and manipulation. A similar awareness of different poetic styles

¹³² The first printed edition of Homer appeared in a Greek font in Florence in 1488, but handwritten copies were in circulation in Italy at least for about one hundred years prior to the printing, and presumably in Byzantium and the Eastern Roman Empire from classical times: see Knox, intro., Iliad 5-6.

¹³³ Paul Hernadi, “Order Without Borders: Recent Genre Theory in the English-Speaking Countries,” Theories of Literary Genre, ed. Joseph P. Strelka, Yearbook of Comparative Criticism 8 (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1978) 192, and Mark E. Amsler, “Literary Theory and the Genres of Middle English Literature,” Genre 13 (1980): 389.

¹³⁴ A Talkyng of þe Loue of God, ed. M. Salvina Westra (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1950) 2.16-19; my emphasis, punctuation and spacing.

¹³⁵ Turville-Petre, Alliterative Revival 21.

and audience likes and dislikes is found in William of Palerne, in the author's closing words and apology for choice of metre:

In þise wise haþ William al his werke ended
as fully as þe Frensche fully wold aske,
and as his witte him wold serve, þouȝh it were febul.
But þouȝh þe metur be nouȝt mad at eche mannes paye,
wite him nouȝt þat it wrouȝt; he wold have do beter
ȝif is witte in eny weiȝes wold him haue served.¹³⁶

Although these lines have been seen as an apology for using the relatively new form of written alliterative verse,¹³⁷ they more likely suggest that the author feels himself to be unworthy of the alliterative tradition with which the audience would have been familiar; hence they also suggest the existence and awareness of a tradition of literature in general, and alliterative works in particular, which suggests a further awareness of both oral and written kinds. It is worth noting in this context that alliterative composition itself is not necessarily facile, and may, especially in the case of the alliterative Morte Arthure or Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, be the product of considerable tradition, application and learning.¹³⁸

The opening of the Wars of Alexander (circa 1350-1450) presents an audience listening to an oral presentation or public reading, and includes a descriptive list of various literary kinds which the audience admires, including tales of the lives, sufferings and redemptions of saints; stories of love; tales of courtesy, deeds of arms and knighthood;

¹³⁶ William of Palerne, ed. G. H. V. Bunt (Groningen: Bouma's, 1985) 5521-26.

¹³⁷ See Turville-Petre, Alliterative Revival 25.

¹³⁸ Larry D. Benson, ed., King Arthur's Death (1976; Exeter: U of Exeter P, 1995) xxxii.

stories of conquest; and tales of honour for the wise folk, who fain would hear of such matters, just as headstrong and foolish folk desire tales of violence and wantonness (1-22). The Wars itself, meanwhile, presents an historical chronicle.¹³⁹ It has been suggested that this passage (and others like it) is merely conventional, and so that it should not be used, as it has been, as evidence of oral recitation or public reading,¹⁴⁰ but the very fact that it is a convention shows that it, like the various types of stories listed in the Wars, is a member of an established literary kind. The opening of Sir Orfewe makes a similar distinction between tales of war, woe, joy, treachery or deceit, adventures of long ago, vulgarity, faerie and stories of love.¹⁴¹ These lists of various types of tales suggest that the mediaeval community of users amongst the nobility were just as aware of kinds as their counterparts amongst the clergy and lower classes, and that this was the case in both the early and late Middle Ages. Indeed, often such distinctions between various types of tales are made not by subject-matter, but by kind *per se*. Havelok, for instance, speaks explicitly of romances being read and gestes being chanted, and it is far from the only

¹³⁹ For a recent study of the poem's kind see W. R. J. Barron, "The Wars of Alexander: From Reality to Romance," Romance Reading on the Book 22-35, who emphasizes its affinities with history, epic, folktale and romance. For the Alexander legend in the Middle Ages see George Cary, The Medieval Alexander, ed. D. J. A. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1956). On the historical Alexander see J. R. Hamilton, Alexander the Great (London: Hutchinson, 1973), and Peter Green, Alexander the Great (London: Weidenfeld, 1970).

¹⁴⁰ Turville-Petre, Alliterative Revival 37-40. Once again much of Turville-Petre's evidence can be used to counter his argument, and although he cites some of the same primary examples as I do, I disagree with his conclusion.

¹⁴¹ Sir Orfeo, ed. A. J. Bliss, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966) 5-12 of the Auchinleck text.

example of such references to specific kinds.¹⁴² Given the relative popularity of such lists or distinctions of various kinds and subjects, we see here another example of the recurrence of a generic feature, one which also helps to show an advanced awareness of kinds.

As for oral presentation, conventional references to it are hardly evidence that public readings, performances and recitations never occurred. Certainly one such performance is implied by the well-known illustration of Chaucer reading from Troilus and Criseyde.¹⁴³ Even if such illustrations were dismissed as another convention, they would still suggest that the manuscript scribes and illustrators were familiar with the literary convention of oral performance. In fact, because these conventions appear in such a variegated number of works, it is difficult not to believe in an underlying reality. The Gawain-poet, for example, claims of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight that

If 3e wyl lysten þis laye bot on littel quile,

¹⁴² Havelok, ed. G. V. Smithers (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 2328-29 and 2985. For the notion that such references imply an awareness of kind cf. John Finlayson, "Definitions of Middle English Romance," Chaucer Review 15 (1980-81): 46.

¹⁴³ The Chaucer illustration, from Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 61.f.1,v, is briefly described and discussed by Gervase Mathew, The Court of Richard II (London: Camelot P for John Murray, 1968) 204-05, n. on plate 15. For individual and group audiences, public and private readings of Troilus and Criseyde, and Chaucer's juxtapositioning of oral and written traditions and signs, see D. S. Brewer, "Troilus and Criseyde," The Middle Ages, ed. W. F. Bolton, History of Literature in the English Language 1 (London: Barrie, 1970) 195-201. For a variety of late mediaeval illustrations of public readings see Joyce Coleman, Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) frontispiece and the illustrations between 112-13. Coleman is concerned throughout with what she calls the aurality [sic], the reading aloud of written texts in the High Middle Ages, as well as with the interaction of orality [sic] and literacy and the fallacy of the argument that orality died out relatively quickly after the realization of literacy.

I schal telle hit as-tit, as I in toun herde,
with tonge (30-2; my emphases),

while Froissart notes that ten weeks were required to read his Meliador to the court of Foix.¹⁴⁴ The recurrence of stock phrases and formulae in the alliterative poems is evidence, moreover, not of common authorship, as was once thought to be the case, but of oral delivery, further proof that the alliterative line in particular, with its “heavy, regular, onomatopoeic effect[,] . . . is eminently suited to public declamation.”¹⁴⁵

Given the strength of the widespread awareness of literary kinds and generic sophistication so far examined in various tales associated with the courts and nobility, including those of the Alliterative Revival, we expect the classical tradition of the high mediaeval period in particular to reveal a detailed awareness and mastery of kinds. Indeed, here especially we see evidence of generic mastery which emphasizes the untenableness of the notion that awareness of kinds in the Middle Ages was in abeyance. As we shall see, both Dante and Chaucer criticize courtly literature,¹⁴⁶ and their criticisms are based in part on an awareness and mastery of literary conventions and kinds. It has been claimed that some authors in the learned or classical tradition disparage secular

¹⁴⁴ Mathew 29; cf. Turville-Petre, Alliterative Revival 39, n. 30. The ten-week recital is one factor determining Mathew’s view that such public narratives were recited or read serially: 29.

¹⁴⁵ Finlayson, ed., Morte Arthure 24.

¹⁴⁶ See Chaucer, Nonnes Preestes Tale 3212-13, and Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, trans. Allen Mandelbaum, notes by Mandelbaum et al., drawings by Barry Moser, 3 vols. (1980-84; Berkeley: U of California P; New York: Bantam, 1982-86) Inferno, V, 127-38. All references to the Commedia are by cantica, canto and line number to this edition.

literature,¹⁴⁷ but Dante, Boccaccio and Chaucer—to name but three—certainly do not; all are involved in various forms of secular literary creation, didacticism and criticism.

Even if Epistola X: To Can Grande della Scala is not by Dante himself, as some have claimed, it still attests to a mediaeval tradition of literary criticism.¹⁴⁸ Further, “Whether or not Dante and the Epistle’s author are one and the same, . . . their conceptions of the enterprise of the Comedy (and of its historical moment) are commensurate.”¹⁴⁹ Epistola X discusses the form and meaning of the Commedia in its entirety, refers to both the literal and allegorical levels of the poem and defines tragedy and comedy in their general senses as well as in the context of the Commedia.¹⁵⁰ Dante (or his commentator) even uses the examples of Terence and Seneca in his history and illustration of the comic and tragic kinds, as well as making reference to Horace’s Ars poetica. We thus have not only a brief discussion of various literary kinds, but also a form of genre-study: especially as all forms of literary criticism entail, consciously or unconsciously, some consideration of kind.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ Wimsatt and Brooks 152-53.

¹⁴⁸ For the authorship debate see Minnis and Scott, ed., Medieval Literary Theory 5, 373-74, and 440-44. For a more sceptical view see Henry Ansgar Kelly, Tragedy and Comedy from Dante to Pseudo-Dante, University of California Publications in Modern Philology 121 (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989) 11-18 and 61-111, who also examines the Epistle’s genre-theory.

¹⁴⁹ Minnis and Scott, ed., Medieval Literary Theory 444.

¹⁵⁰ Dante, “Epistola X: To Can Grande della Scala,” Dantis Alagherii Epistolae, ed. Paget Toynbee, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966) esp. 172.110-177.231.

¹⁵¹ Hernardi 192, and Amsler 389; cf. supra.

Dante's sense of the history and criticism of various literary kinds extends to a sound knowledge of classical learning, authors, kinds and legendary figures; further, the references he makes to some of his classical sources and legendary figures suggest that he expects his audience to have a comparable knowledge. In the Purgatorio, for instance, Dante-the-Pilgrim is shown a variety of examples of the sins being purged. The sin of avarice is illustrated by seven exempla: Dido's brother Pygmalion, who killed her husband in the hope of securing his gold; Midas; Acan, who stole some of the spoils of Jericho; Sapphira and her husband, who attempted to steal from the Church and the Apostles; Heliodorus, who attempted to pillage the temple of Jerusalem; Polymestor who slew Polydorus; and Crassus, a Roman consul and member of the First Triumvirate, notorious for his cupidity (Purgatorio, XX, 103-17). It has recently been observed that Dante-the-Poet's technique of accumulating examples here emphasizes the lamentable commonality of avarice, showing that it truly is "the evil that possesses all the world" (Purgatorio, XX, 8).¹⁵² More important for our present purposes, "the economy of the references illustrates how the evocative use of names with minimal detail can conjure up entire incidents which Dante takes to be as familiar to the reader as to the characters themselves." Polydorus, for instance, was the youngest son of Priam and Hecuba and had been sent, together with certain treasures from Troy, to Polymestor of Thrace, who was supposed to guard the boy until after the War. Once the Fall of Troy became obvious however Polymestor betrayed

¹⁵² Janet P. Bews, "Virgilian Motifs in Dante's Purgatorio," Celebratio 150, who convincingly argues further that Dante here is following Vergil as much as Ovid: 150-51. The quotation immediately following is also from p. 150, as is the idea that Polymestor commits two sins. Bews, too, offers a short summary of the Polydorus story.

his trust, killing Polydorus for lust of the gold. He consequently both murders an innocent and violates the sacred bonds of xenia (guest-friendship). Dante-the-Poet, however, merely offers a list of sinners, with no detailed explication as to what the precise nature of their crimes might be. Since the point of the exempla would be lost unless their crimes were known, the implication is that Dante expects his audience to possess some knowledge of his sources; some members of the audience may even have recognized different kinds of stories and sources.

A similar effect is achieved, and a like conclusion can be drawn, from Chaucer's use of classical figures in the Book of the Duchess. Like the Seys and Alcyone story from Ovid (BD 62-214), the other classical figures and allusions are meant as parallels to the Black Knight's suffering, especially when he compares himself to Alkibiades, Herakles, Alexander, Hektor, Achilles and Antilochus (1056-69). However, apart perhaps from when the Knight says that his sorrow eclipsed that of Kassandra (1244-49), it is only with the words of Seys's shade that Chaucer makes the connexion explicit: "To lytel while oure blysse lasteth!" (211); for the rest, Chaucer relies upon his audience's awareness of the fates of the various figures and stories—and perhaps kinds—involved.¹⁵³ The Brahmins' sustained criticism of Alexander and the pagan gods worshipped by the Macedonians in the Wars of Alexander (4619-94) likewise depends in part on the audience's awareness of

¹⁵³ See also the figures from Troy and Jason and Medea in the Dreamer's window (326-31). On the Seys and Alcyone parallel cf. A. C. Spearing, Medieval Dream Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976) 58, and Helen Phillips, ed. The Book of the Duchess, by Geoffrey Chaucer, Durham and St Andrews Medieval Texts 3 (Department of English Language and Medieval Literature, Durham, and Department of English, U of St Andrews: Durham and St Andrews Medieval Texts, 1982) 29-31 and 48-9.

the classical gods being slandered and the stories which would support such a view of their behaviour. It would be difficult to be aware of these stories without being aware of them as some type of literary kind. In turn, Alexander's reply and criticism of the Brahmins, separating poetry from various other disciplines and pastimes such as natural science, philosophy, law and learning in general (4739-41), reveals a type of knowledge which could well include generic awareness and the division of disparate kinds. We also have an example of an alliterative author whose knowledge (and text) stands at odds with the usual notion of such authors being far removed from the learned tradition.

Like the author of Epistola X: To Can Grande della Scala, Boccaccio, too, who at the close of his life lectured on Dante and the Commedia,¹⁵⁴ expatiates at great length on the nature and function of poetry. In the Genealogia deorum gentilium, Book XIV, Chapter vii, "The Definition of Poetry, Its Origin and Function" (Quid sit poesis, unde dicta, et quod eius officium), he describes poetry as

Ceterarum rerum studia et doctrina et preceptis et arte
constare, poetam natura ipsa valere, et mentis viribus
excitari, et quasi divino quodam spiritu inflari¹⁵⁵

a practical art springing from God's bosom and deriving
its name from its effect, and that it has to do with many
high and noble matters.

¹⁵⁴ Minnis and Scott, ed., Medieval Literary Theory 456-58. For extracts from Boccaccio's Short Treatise in Praise of Dante and his lectures on the Commedia see 492-519.

¹⁵⁵ Giovanni Boccaccio, Genealogie deorum gentilium libri, ed. Vincenzo Romano, 2 vols. (Bari: Gius, 1951) XIV, vii, 144d (p. 701.10-12); cf. XIV, vii, 144c (p. 699.25). The translation is from Boccaccio on Poetry, trans. Charles G. Osgood (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1930) 41.

Chapter x speaks of the deep, hidden meaning of poetry; and Chapter xii concludes with advice scholars might heed today:

Et ut iterum dixerim, volentibus intelligere et nexus
ambiguos enodare legendum est, insistendum vigilandumque,
atque interrogandum, et omni modo premende cerebri vires! Et
si non una via potest quis pervenire, quo cupit, intret alteram,
et, si obstant obices, arripiat aliam, donec, si valiture sint
vires, lucidum illi appareat, quod primo videbatur obscurum.
Sanctum enim canibus dare divino prohibemur monitu, et
hoc eodem ante porcos proicere margaritas.¹⁵⁶

to those who would appreciate poetry, and unwind its difficult involutions, I repeat my advice. You must read, you must persevere, you must sit up nights, you must inquire, and exert the utmost power of your mind. If one way does not lead to the desired meaning, take another; if obstacles rise, then still another; until, if your strength holds out, you will find that clear which at first looked dark. For we are forbidden by divine command to give that which is holy to dogs, or to cast pearls before swine.

Mention has been made of Petrarch's dismissal of Boccaccio's Decameron as a youthful enterprise presenting trivial topics for an audience of ladies,¹⁵⁷ but this dismissal testifies to a possible desire for such stories amongst Boccaccio's audience, and so, perhaps, to an awareness of such kinds of stories amongst the community of users. In this connexion, even Petrarch's belief, likewise referred to earlier, that kind was the means to re-educating his generation and that the only important kinds were classical, should be seen positively as further evidence of an awareness of kind on the part of the mediaeval

¹⁵⁶ Boccaccio, Genealogie deorum XIV, xii, 148c (p. 717.19-26); translation, with some alteration by me, from Osgood 62.

¹⁵⁷ Petrarch, "The Story of Griselda" 191-92, Colie 13-14, and supra. The subsequent reference to Petrarch's belief in the palmary import of kinds is from Colie 13-14; cf. Olson 69-79.

community of users, rather than as a reflection of the relative loss of such knowledge.

Concomitantly, Boccaccio's division of the ^{Teseida} Decameron into twelve books mirrors, and is presumably based upon, Vergil's twelve-book division of the Aeneid.¹⁵⁸ Boccaccio thus reveals his own knowledge of the classics, but also perhaps the expectation that some of his audience would both recognize his inspiration and see the Aeneid as a different kind from the Decameron. We might say the same thing of Chaucer's five-book division of Troilus and Criseyde, which mirrors the five-act division of Senecan tragedy, a division insisted upon by Horace.¹⁵⁹ Presumably both Boccaccio and Chaucer evoked such classical kinds and conventions in part as a means of defining the kind and conventions of their own works.

In addition to some mediaeval authors' awareness of classical genre theory and kinds, as well as their individual literary and critical views, we have their references to mediaeval literary theory in general. Chaucer, in the House of Fame, is concerned that "Here art poetical be shewed" (1095), a reference to mediaeval artes poeticae, or manuals for writing poetry. Such writings were pedagogical devices designed to teach Latin rhetoric rather than a detailed method of analysing poetry, but they were obviously widely known and familiar, and included comprehensive accounts of literary style.¹⁶⁰ Moreover,

¹⁵⁸ I am indebted to John Finlayson for bringing this and the subsequent Chaucer-Seneca parallel to my attention.

¹⁵⁹ Horace, "De arte poetica," Satires, Epistles and Ars poetica, ed. and trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. ed., Loeb Classical Library 194 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1929) lines 189-90.

¹⁶⁰ A. C. Spearing, Criticism and Medieval Poetry, 2nd ed. (London: Arnold, 1972) 51-8. For a summary and discussion of the mediaeval artes poeticae see 51-75.

much mediaeval literary genre theory and criticism is connected to rhetoric, and is labelled, if at all, as rhetoric rather than criticism.¹⁶¹ As both Aristotle and Dante (or his commentator) inform us: “The exordium is the beginning of a speech, as the prologue in poetry and the prelude in flute-playing.”¹⁶² The most famous of the mediaeval artes poeticae is Geoffroi de Vinsauf’s Poetria nova, and in the Nonnes Preestes Tale Chaucer refers to Geoffroi and burlesques (if not parodies) the style of writing which he recommends. Explaining the various modes of amplification or delay, Geoffroi uses as one of his examples of apostrophatio or exclamatio a prolix lamentation on the death of Richard the Lionheart, killed on a Friday.¹⁶³ Chaucer laments the capture of Chauntecleer by the fox, which also occurs on a Friday, while at the same time making an apostrophe to Geoffroi:

O Gaufred, deere maister soverayn,
 That whan thy worthy kyng Richard was slayn
 With shot, compleynedest his deeth so soore,
 Why ne hadde I now thy sentence and thy loore,
 The Friday for to chide, as diden ye?
 For on a Friday, soothly, slayn was he. (3347-52)

As noted previously, parody depends for its success on the recognition on the part

¹⁶¹ On mediaeval rhetoric see James J. Murphy, Rhetoric in the Middle Ages (Berkeley: U of California P, 1974), and Richard McKeon, “Rhetoric in the Middle Ages,” Speculum 17 (1942): 1-32.

¹⁶² Aristotle, The ‘Art’ of Rhetoric, ed. and trans. John Henry Freese, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1926) III, xiv.1; qtd in Epistola X 180.299-300: prooemium est in oratione rhetorica sicut prologus in poëtica, et praeludium in fistulatione.

¹⁶³ Geoffroi de Vinsauf, The Poetria nova and Its Sources in Early Rhetorical Doctrine, ed. and trans. Ernest Gallo (The Hague: Mouton, 1971) 368-430. Spearing, Criticism and Medieval Poetry 52, argues that Chaucer is parodying Geoffroi.

of the community of users of specific generic conventions and features. This is true whether the parody takes the form of deliberate mockery, or simply uses the forms of a recognized kind, style, work or author for more broadly humorous purposes. Consequently, as Finlayson observes, “parody, because of its dependence on the recognition of conventions and their appropriate use, is a valuable witness to what a specific audience would have recognised as the characteristic features of a genre.”¹⁶⁴ The same is broadly true of burlesque, especially as burlesque satire and parodic satire are related kinds of writing. Concomitantly, each is a valuable witness to the existence of both a sense of kind and a type of implied literary criticism. Nor are parody and burlesque confined to the secular-vernacular tradition. Among religious writers, the Speculum Stultorum (circa 1190) of Nigel Wireker is a verse satire on monks telling the story of the ass Burnellus, while Lectio ewangelii secundum marcham argenti satirizes members of the clergy who ignore the gospels with such scriptural travesties as Dilige aurum et argentum ex toto corde tuo et ex tota anima tua (“Thou must love gold and silver with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul”), and Beati divites, quoniam ipsi saturabuntur (“Blessed are those with wealth, for they shall be satisfied”).¹⁶⁵ There was in fact a “peculiarly medieval genre of liturgical parody,” the best example of which is said to be de Condé’s

¹⁶⁴ Finlayson, “Definitions” 47.

¹⁶⁵ For the Speculum Stultorum see Pearsall 255. For a text and translation of the ewangelii secundum marcham argenti see Martha Bayless, “The Money-Gospel: The ‘Intermediate’ Version,” Parody in the Middle Ages (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996) 321-31; the quotations are from 322-23, lines 7 and 31; the translations are my own. I am indebted to Michael Cichon for the Bayless reference.

Messe des oiseaux (circa 1330).¹⁶⁶

More important than the mediaeval artes poeticae themselves, or even Chaucer's burlesque of the kinds of writing taught by them, is the fact that the Canterbury Tales as a whole is actually "a magnificent repertory of medieval narrative kinds"¹⁶⁷ from which we can discern Chaucer's views on contemporary literature and kinds. The absence of a mediaeval companion to the Poetics is thus of less significance than the words and works of vernacular mediaeval authors themselves, from which we recover, to borrow an apt phrase, "the unwritten poetics by which writers worked and which they themselves created."¹⁶⁸ The Canterbury Tales is also an impressive encyclopaedia and mixture of various mediaeval literary kinds, especially in Fragment VII and the Nonnes Preestes Tale, each of which are in many ways microcosms of the Canterbury Tales as a whole, and so of mediaeval kinds in general. Furthermore, as Helen Cooper observes, the story-frame of the Canterbury Tales offers Chaucer the chance to reveal his mastery of, comment upon, mix and experiment with various mediaeval kinds: "it is a kind of ars poetica that teaches by example rather than precept."¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ Helen Phillips, "Frames and Narrators in Chaucerian Poetry," The Long Fifteenth Century, ed. Helen Cooper and Sally Mapstone (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 74.

¹⁶⁷ Colie 4. See also Cooper's perspicacious and entertaining accounts of Chaucer and his use of mediaeval kinds: Helen Cooper, Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989) the sections on the genre of each of the tales, and her The Structure of the Canterbury Tales (London: Duckworth, 1983) 72-90.

¹⁶⁸ Colie 4. For a comprehensive account of the mediaeval commentary-tradition, including extracts from the mediaeval authors, see Minnis and Scott, ed., Medieval Literary Theory passim.

¹⁶⁹ Cooper, Oxford Guides to Chaucer 309.

Fowler's claim "that awareness of genre was in abeyance in the Middle Ages"¹⁷⁰ thus proves untenable in the tales associated with the nobility and the classical tradition of the high Middle Ages. As mentioned in the opening of this chapter, such an argument is much more plausible during the early Middle Ages, especially because of the years of Saxon and then Viking invasions and the widespread illiteracy of the time, but here too the evidence revealed a sound knowledge of literary conventions and kinds on the part of the mediaeval community of users. The derogatory comparison between mediaeval and Renaissance or classical genre theory, often cited as evidence of the mediaeval ignorance of kinds, has also proved ill-founded. However, although the mediaeval knowledge of the classics is one way of establishing the existence of awareness and mastery of literary kinds in the Middle Ages, the question of how widespread this knowledge was is ultimately of less importance to the present argument than that of the awareness of mediaeval kinds themselves. And not only did the mediaeval community of users possess an awareness of disparate generic conventions, features and kinds throughout the Middle Ages, but this awareness was present in the vernacular and non-vernacular and oral and literate traditions, and often extended to a mastery and manipulation of various generic features and kinds.

Consequently, the argument that, especially in the Middle Ages, great works of literature operate outside of generic tradition and established kinds in some sort of

¹⁷⁰ Fowler, Kinds of Literature 142.

aesthetic isolation proves equally unfeasible.¹⁷¹ Nor is it true—of the Middle Ages or any other period—that literary kinds are dead when they are no longer widely or easily recognized.¹⁷² As a general rule a kind still exists even if recognized by only a few members of the community of users or later critics. Difficulty of recognition might render a kind eremetical, but it does not necessarily kill it, provided that some members of the community of users continue to be aware of its existence. On the other hand, if no-one knows or responds to a kind, it is, temporarily at least, genuinely dead. There probably were literary kinds that were practised in, say, pre-Homeric Greece, mediaeval Ireland, Anglo-Saxon England or mediaeval China whose existence and knowledge is now completely lost to us, and these kinds are likewise truly dead. At the same time, it is possible for a kind to disappear for years or even centuries before being resurrected; for with literary kinds, extinct is not always forever.

It is also apparent, as might be expected, that mediaeval authors mixed kinds as much as writers of any other period,¹⁷³ including the mixing of secular and religious, and heroic and Christian kinds. A seemingly disproportionate amount of all of this evidence comes from the high Middle Ages, but this is an inescapable reflection of the fact that more evidence survives from this period, and that the pre-literate kinds in the early Middle Ages were much less likely to have been recorded. Nevertheless, we have seen instances

¹⁷¹ Pace Jauss 93-5.

¹⁷² Fowler, “The Life and Death of Literary Forms” 209-10 and 215-16. Cf. Jauss 90, who claims that all kinds inevitably die.

¹⁷³ Amsler 390.

of generic awareness and sophistication from the entire mediaeval period, and although the evidence has a predominantly English bias, it is fair to assume that it is representative of mediaeval Europe as a whole. The English examples also serve as an excellent backdrop for a study of Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur.

As we shall see, Malory, too, mixed generic kinds, but even if P. J. C. Field is correct to consider the end result of such mixture to be romance with tragic overtones,¹⁷⁴ this prose form is clearly distinct from the classical and dramatic romantic tragedy in verse discussed in Chapter One. On the basis of the foregoing discussion of the awareness of literary kinds and genre theory in the Middle Ages, we can assume that Malory shared at least some of his contemporaries' knowledge of literary conventions and kinds, especially if he is indeed the author of The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnelle.¹⁷⁵ Malory also seems, on the basis of his being able to read French and command books while in prison, to have possessed some culture, learning and reading, and this, combined with his unusual respect for the finer details of various past versions of Arthurian material,¹⁷⁶ might be expected to include or contribute to an awareness of kinds and a sense of generic

¹⁷⁴ P. J. C. Field, "Heroism from the Past, Heroism for the Future: Malory and the Genre of Le Morte Darthur," unpublished lecture, Tokyo 1997. Cf. Field, "Malory and The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell," Malory: Texts and Sources, Arthurian Studies 40 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1998) 289 and passim, where Field notes the tragic quality of the final tales of the Morte, but nevertheless refers to it throughout as a romance.

¹⁷⁵ See Field, "Malory and The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell."

¹⁷⁶ Margaret Malpas and P. J. C. Field, "French Words and Phrases in Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur," Malory: Texts and Sources 42-3, and P. J. C. Field, "Caxton's Roman War," Malory: Texts and Sources 140 respectively.

manipulation. At the same time, all the evidence suggests that Malory read vernacular romances and alliterative tales on Arthurian themes, not neo-Latin manuals on rhetoric or poetry.¹⁷⁷ As noted at the opening of Part II, I have largely ignored such manuals in the foregoing consideration of the mediaeval awareness and mastery of literary kinds, especially as it is equally unlikely that the majority of the mediaeval audience had any interest in—or even knowledge of—such manuals. It must also be remembered that literary kinds and awareness of them can evolve independently of scholars and critics, whether such critics be ancient or modern. At least until the Renaissance, moreover, there seems to have been little large-scale concern with extrinsic artes poeticae, the emphasis and knowledge being instead devoted to the intrinsic notions of kind inherent in the literary texts themselves. This is the speculum with which kind in Le Morte Darthur must be measured. However, because Le Morte Darthur is usually considered to be a romance, it is necessary to analyse mediaeval romance in general before turning to a discussion of romance in the Morte itself.

¹⁷⁷ For Malory's major sources see Eugène Vinaver, ed., The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, by Sir Thomas Malory, rev. P. J. C. Field, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) 1261-1663; for his minor sources see P. J. C. Field, "Malory's Minor Sources," Malory: Texts and Sources 27-31, and "Malory and Chrétien de Troyes," Malory: Texts and Sources 236-45.

Redefining Mediaeval Romance

Introduction: The Problem

Literary kinds and conventions are complex creatures whose often changeable characteristics tend to exasperate, baffle or even elude critics. This is particularly the case with mediaeval romance, where the generic contention is so great that some critics are unhappy with the very appellation “romance,” considering it an arbitrary or otherwise unsatisfactory classification which we employ for lack of a better word,¹ while others argue that the essential characteristics of mediaeval romance cannot actually be realized.² A slight modification of this view claims that romance is not a kind, and that we should instead conceive of it as a mode.³

¹ Geraldine Barnes, Counsel and Strategy in Middle English Romance (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993) xi; Stephen H. A. Shepherd, ed., Middle English Romances (New York: Norton, 1995) xii; and Joanne A. Charbonneau, “Romances, Middle English,” Medieval England: An Encyclopedia, ed. Paul E. Szarmach et al. (New York: Garland, 1998).

² See, e.g., A. C. Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances, York Medieval Texts (London: Arnold, 1966) 1; Gillian Beer, The Romance, Critical Idiom 10 (London: Methuen, 1970) 10; Robert M. Jordan, “Chaucerian Romance?” Approaches to Medieval Romance, ed. and intro., Peter Haidu, Yale French Studies 51 (1974) 232-34; and Kevin Brownlee and Marina Scordilis Brownlee, “Introduction,” Romance: Generic Transformation from Chrétien de Troyes to Cervantes, ed. Brownlee and Brownlee (Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1985) 1. The difficulties of definition, as well as a prescription for less rigid approaches, are also highlighted by Rosalind Field and Judith Weiss, “Introduction,” Romance Reading on the Book, ed. Jennifer Fellows et al. (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1996) 12 and 15.

³ Pamela Gradon, Form and Style in Early English Literature (London: Methuen, 1971) 269-70; W. R. J. Barron, “Alliterative Romance and the French Tradition,” Middle English Alliterative Poetry and Its Literary Background, ed. David Lawton (Cambridge:

Most critics to make this last argument fail to distinguish convincingly between kind and mode: in Chapter One we defined genre as kind, but while this is pretty straightforward, the concept of mode is confusingly elusive, especially because its meaning tends to vary from critic to critic. Of all critics to use the concept of mode, few are as comprehensive as Alastair Fowler, who, as we saw in Chapter One, sees mode as a less complete, more flexible version of kind. For Fowler, “genre tends to mode,” because modes, in the end, are more flexible and less fixed to a particular time and place than kinds.⁴ Northrop Frye, meanwhile, uses mode to designate his various types of “literary fictions”—myth, romance, high and low mimetic, and ironic—which are characterized “by the hero’s power of action,” but also as a thematic structure or aspect.⁵ In the first sense, mode here operates as a literary or generic archetype, in the second sense as a specific treatment of kind, so that mode might equal kind, or a given kind might have one or more of these modes inherent in or affecting it. In this second sense Frye is perhaps following Aristotle, for whom mode is not a substitute for or sub-type of kind, but simply the

Brewer, 1982) 70-1 and n. 2, and English Medieval Romance, Longman Literature in English Series (London: Longman, 1987) xii, 2, 8-9, 57-60, 177-78 and 208; Field and Weiss, “Introduction” 12; and Catherine Batt and Rosalind Field, “The Romance Tradition,” The Arthur of the English, ed. W. R. J. Barron, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages 2 (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1999) 60, who consider both romance and epic as modes.

⁴ Alastair Fowler, “The Life and Death of Literary Forms,” New Literary History 2.2 (Winter 1971): 202 and 212-15, and Kinds of Literature (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982) passim, esp. 55-60, 73-4, 106-14, 167-69, and 183 and 191; the quotation is from “Life and Death” 214. See further Chapter One, 22-3.

⁵ Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) 33-5, 49-53 and Glossary, sv mode; the quotation is from 33.

manner of representation by which a (mimetic) kind is presented; that is, “by combining narrative with direct personation, as Homer does; or in an invariable narrative voice; or by direct enactment of all roles.”⁶ As I have argued in Chapter One, however, Fowler’s distinction between kind and mode is over-precise, while the fact that Frye uses the same terms for mode and kind, as well as his own metageneric categories of poetic mythoi, is confusing. If the distinction between kind and mode is to be maintained at all, it seems to me that the best use and definition of the term is Aristotle’s, although on the whole I think that mode is a term that is better avoided.

Amongst critics of mediaeval romance, the term mode is too often used carelessly, with much less precision even than in Frye or Fowler. Pamela Gradon, for instance, concludes an otherwise fine chapter by claiming that, since romance is too variegated and flexible to be “regarded as a genre at all[,] . . . [i]t seems preferable to speak of a romance mode;”⁷ but she does not say how mode differs from kind. The variety of the Middle English romance kind and conventions, the difficulties of comprehensive definitions, and dissatisfaction with excessive and ultimately unhelpful sub-divisions and with excessive reliance on purely formal criteria as the principal means of definition all lead W. R. J. Barron to try to develop Gradon’s view. His own view, however, does little more than substitute the concept of mode for kind (or “genre” in Barron’s terminology), which he

⁶ Aristotle, “Poetics,” Aristotle: Poetics, Longinus: On the Sublime, Demetrius: On Style, ed. and trans. Stephen Halliwell et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995) ch. I, 1447a15-18 and ch. III, 1448a18-25; the quotation is from 1448a20-24. See further D. W. Lucas, intro., commentary and appendixes, Aristotle Poetics (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) commentary on [14]48a20-24.

⁷ Gradon 269-70.

(mistakenly) regards as restrictive entities comprising “a fixed canon of characteristics.”⁸ thus, for instance, the statements that Middle English romance ought to be approached without “preconceptions of how mode ought ideally to be embodied or what constitute the essential characteristics of the genre,” the three Matters make their “contribution[s] to the formation of the genre . . . by virtue of their common adherence to the . . . mode,” and “The conventions of the genre are the accidents of the mode.”⁹ This characterization of mediaeval romance as a mode has been increasingly popular of late, because it appears simultaneously to avoid over-restrictive generic classifications and to encompass the bewildering variety of the romance kind. As we have seen, however, such a categorization ultimately simply substitutes a vaguer term for a more precise one, which does not help in dealing with the complexity, mutability and versatility of literary kinds, which have both synchronic and diachronic aspects.¹⁰ We would thus do better to call a spade a spade, utilize fully kind’s complexities, and make use of the positive advantages of the more precise term. As was shown in Chapter One, the list of generic features by which we recognize a literary kind is not limited to purely formal criteria, but is potentially

⁸ Barron, English Medieval Romance 2; my emphasis.

⁹ Barron, English Medieval Romance 59, 177 and 178; my emphases. For similar examples see 60, 72-3, 209-12, 217, 219 and 226.

¹⁰ On the synchronic and diachronic aspects of kinds cf. Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, trans. Timothy Bahti, intro. Paul de Man, *Theory and History of Literature* 2 (1982; Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994) 76-109. Jauss does, however, go too far in his notion of the ahistorical nature of mediaeval kinds.

infinite.¹¹ Elements such as themes, motifs and characters, for instance, which are not (explicitly at least) characteristics of mode in any critic's definition, can be, as we saw in Chapter One, among the characteristics of kind. This gives kind (or "genre," if one prefers) a flexibility that is essential in any discussion of mediaeval romance.

"It is a sad—perhaps even a tragic—fact that advances in human thought tend to be bought at a price, which is the exchange of one set of difficulties for another."¹² This is especially true when studying mediaeval romance, for the classification by mode was intended to solve a number of difficulties: the fact that it fails to do so merely raises the old problem of just what does constitute the conventions of the romance kind. As John Finlayson reminds us in one of the best of the recent essays on this subject, "despite the number of books and articles in English which have been written on the romances, there are very few definitions of romance, and not even the best of these is free from . . . confusion."¹³ Finlayson also remarks, quite rightly, that it does not help to evade the issue with statements such as "'we can[no]t really define romance but we all know what it is' and thence proceed[, say,] to call the Knight's Tale a romance, without considering in any

¹¹ Barron especially complains of the tendency to focus purely on formal criteria when defining kinds: Barron, "Alliterative Romance" 70-1 and n. 2. For a detailed study of Middle English Romance's formal features see Derek Pearsall, "The Development of Middle English Romance," Mediaeval Studies 27 (1965): 91-116.

¹² R. P. Winnington-Ingram, "Tragedy and Greek Archaic Thought," Classical Drama and Its Influence, ed. M. J. Anderson (London: Methuen, 1965) 46.

¹³ John Finlayson, "Definitions of Middle English Romance," Chaucer Review 15 (1980-81): 46; original emphases. Cf. Dieter Mehl, The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries (London: Routledge, 1968) 30-6.

but a superficial manner what consequences this has for artistic techniques and vision.”¹⁴

Any assessment of the romance kind, however, is complicated by the fact that romance in general is the most mutable and protean of all recognized literary kinds. Such disparate works as Heliodorus’ Ethiopica and Apuleius’ The Golden Ass—even, occasionally, Homer’s Odyssey¹⁵—in the Classical period, Renaissance tales such as The Faerie Queene and Orlando Furioso, and novels such as Wuthering Heights,¹⁶ to say nothing of modern science fiction and fantasy,¹⁷ have all been classified as romance. Romance is obviously not only the most protean of literary kinds, it is also one of the most pervasive. Thus, in Frye’s perspicuous archetypal approach, “Romance is the structural core of all fiction” and a more humanized form of myth, tales in which the hero is

¹⁴ John Finlayson, “The Knight’s Tale: The Dialogue of Romance, Epic, and Philosophy,” Chaucer Review 27.2 (1992): 127-28. Cf. Robert B. Burlin, “Middle English Romance: The Structure of Genre,” Chaucer Review 30.1 (1995): 1-2.

¹⁵ Kitto’s astute observation that the romantic colouring of the Odyssey is nothing more than colouring has thus not been much heeded: H. D. F. Kitto, Poiesis, Sather Classical Lectures 36 (Berkeley: U of California P; London: [sic] Cambridge UP, 1966) 130. The classification of the Odyssey as a romance, however, is misguided. For a discussion of the Odyssey’s kind, see Appendix II.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Frye, Anatomy 50, 304, 309-114 and 319, and The Secular Scripture (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1976) 3-6, 28-31 and 68-74; Beer 4-8 and 33-8; and Fowler, Kinds of Literature 93, 233 and 266. Michael McKeon, The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987) 31-2, cites many of the same Classical romances, but includes, for reasons that remain unclear to me, the Oedipus Tyrannos of Sophokles!

¹⁷ The modern fantasy writer David Eddings labels his work “romance,” and claims it as a direct descendent of mediaeval romance: David Eddings, “Ring Bearer,” Interview with Stan Nicholls, Starlog (January 1995): 76.

“superior in degree to other men” but recognizably human.¹⁸ This is so despite the fact that the environment in which the romance hero operates, dominated as it is by the marvellous, is generally to some degree alien to the experience of the average person.¹⁹

Romance’s protean permanence is apparent in the fact that it has an often influential persistence and role in the development of the novel, despite some critics’ faith in the complete generic independence of the latter.²⁰ For instance, many of the features by which the novel is defined—its variety, individualistic orientation, originality, causation, particularity of environment, temporality and character, naming, and especially realism—are all conspicuous in romance.²¹ Ironically, one important critical history of the novel actually helps to demonstrate the permanence of the romance kind by revealing romance’s continuance alongside the novel during its birth and growth, as well as its persistence as a generic feature or mixture within the novel kind.²² Many critics consider this a problem, but it has recently been argued otherwise: “traditional categories” such as

¹⁸ Frye, Secular Scripture 15, and Anatomy 136-37 respectively. On the romance hero cf. Barron, English Medieval Romance 2.

¹⁹ Frye, Anatomy 33-4.

²⁰ See, e.g., M. M. Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel,” The Dialogic Imagination, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, U of Texas P South Slavic Series 1 (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 38-9. Bakhtin himself disproves his own argument (in these same pages) by acknowledging and then denying the role of folklore and tradition in the development of the novel.

²¹ McKeon 2-3. For the novel’s defining features see Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (1957; London: Chatto; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) esp. 9-37; Bakhtin 38-40 and passim cites many of the same features.

²² McKeon 3.

romance are not external intrusions into the new form but rather “are incorporated within the very process of the emergent [novel] genre and are vitally functional in the finely articulated mechanism by which it establishes its own domain.”²³ Thus romance plays an important role in the development of the novel. Indeed, the early novel was alternately labelled “romance” or “history,” and the Dedication to The History of Pompey the Little (1751) is addressed to Fielding as the fount “of novel-writing,” but also praises Marivaux and Fielding for perfecting “romance-writing.”²⁴ The Victorians, meanwhile, revived the term “romance” to describe the non-naturalistic novel.²⁵

One classical scholar defines romance as

an extended narrative published apart by itself which relates—primarily or wholly for the sake of entertainment or spiritual edification, and for its own sake as a story, rather than for the purpose of instruction in history, science, or philosophical theory—the adventures or experiences of one or more individuals in their private capacities and from the viewpoint of their private interests and emotions.²⁶

Another critic subsequently adopted this view for fiction as a whole because it could be applied equally to novel and romance,²⁷ thereby illustrating both some of the problems of

²³ McKeon 21.

²⁴ Francis Coventry, The History of Pompey the Little, ed. Robert Adams Day (London: Oxford UP, 1974) xli and xliv, and Fowler, Kinds of Literature 141 and 159; see also 167-68 n. 45. For a more detailed discussion and further examples of the connexions between novel and romance see Chapter One, 30-2.

²⁵ Fowler, Kinds of Literature 141.

²⁶ Ben Edwin Perry, The Ancient Romances (Berkeley: U of California P, 1967) 44; my emphases.

²⁷ Hubert McDermott, Novel and Romance (London: Macmillan, 1989) xi.

romance criticism as well as the potential malleability and size of the romance kind.

One problem with such definitions lies in the fact that, while these various features may be found in mediaeval romance, they also appear in—and have been applied to—Classical, Renaissance and post-Renaissance works.²⁸ Furthermore, while most of the disparate texts mentioned above have some claim to inclusion within the romance kind in its broadest sense, there are many subtle differences between mediaeval romance and romance in other periods. As Fowler observes, mediaeval romance is ultimately not the same as nineteenth-century romance, “and to proceed as if it were obscures more than it reveals of literature’s continuities.”²⁹ Unfortunately, much of the confusion surrounding mediaeval romance is exacerbated by critical tendencies to forget this distinction.³⁰ Even Frye’s astute and influential romance archetype cannot be applied without qualification to the mediaeval kind, for it is based on Classical and Renaissance models. On the other hand, even in the Middle Ages, where the tales of Chrétien de Troyes and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight have long been recognized as forms of romance, there is controversy, and a century’s worth of occasionally very penetrating criticism has to some extent merely emphasized the contentiousness of mediaeval romance’s primary features and definitions,

²⁸ The problems which Bakhtin (passim) sees in isolating the generic characteristics of the novel are thus even more pronounced in romance; indeed, much of what he sees as typical of the novel comes from romance, especially its generic malleability.

²⁹ Fowler, Kinds of Literature 111. On the recurrence of mediaeval romance themes in post-mediaeval romances see John Stevens, Medieval Romance (London: Hutchinson, 1973) 21-2.

³⁰ Finlayson, “Definitions” 48-9.

even within Middle English romance alone.³¹ I shall return to this later.

In 425 B.C. Aristophanes defined comedy and its role in part by its relation to tragedy (tragodia) when he coined the word trygodia (tryx “wine-lees” + ode “song”) for comedy (literally, trygedy), saying “comedy [trygedy] too knows what is right.”³² It has even been claimed that fifth-century tragedy and comedy defined themselves by opposition and contradistinction to each other.³³ Both of these approaches depend for their success on recognition by the community of users of the kinds and conventions involved (though the ongoing debate amongst modern classical scholars as to whether or not Greek Old Comedy can espouse a serious didactic message highlights the difficulties modern critics

³¹ Notable studies here include: W. P. Ker, Epic and Romance (1908; London: Macmillan; New York: Dover, 1957); George Kane, Middle English Literature (London: Methuen, 1951) 1-103; Dorothy Everett, “A Characterization of the English Medieval Romances,” Essays on Middle English Literature, ed. Patricia Kean (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955) 1-22; Stevens; Kathryn Hume, “The Formal Nature of Middle English Romance,” Philological Quarterly 53 (1974): 158-80; Finlayson, “Definitions;” and Barron, English Medieval Romance.

³² Aristophanes, Acharnians, ed. and trans. Alan H. Sommerstein, The Comedies of Aristophanes 1 (Warminster: Aris, 1980) line 500. I am indebted to I. C. Storey for Aristophanes’ use of the term trygodia, as well as for the etymology and translation of both trygodia and line 500 as a whole, though cf. O. Taplin, “Tragedy and Tragedy,” Classical Quarterly 33 (1983): 333. Sommerstein translates the line as: “Even comedy is acquainted with justice,” but he does not comment on the ingenuity of trygodia. Oliver Taplin, “Comedy and the Tragic,” Tragedy and the Tragic, ed. M. S. Silk (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) 188, quotes this line when he agrees with Aristophanes that comedy can espouse a serious message. Taplin uses the term tragedy [sic], but does not otherwise comment on its novelty. Critics have been unable to explain the significance of “wine-lees.”

³³ Oliver Taplin, “Fifth-Century Tragedy and Comedy,” Journal of Hellenic Studies 106 (1986): 163-64. Cf. Taplin, “Comedy and the Tragic” 188-89.

can have in recognizing—or agreeing on—those conventions³⁴). In the case of mediaeval kinds and conventions, Chapter Two established that there was a comparable awareness of literary kinds amongst the mediaeval community of users. The mention in various texts of gestes, romans, dits, contes and lais, for instance, indicates an advanced awareness of different mediaeval literary kinds,³⁵ and it goes without saying that this awareness extended to mediaeval romance. Consequently, as with similar examples discussed in Chapter Two, the allusions in Chaucer's Tale of Thopas (late fourteenth century) to

romances of prys,
Of Horn child and of Ypotys,
Of Beves and sir Gy,
Of sir Lybeux and Pleyndamour³⁶

show that both Chaucer and his audience had some awareness of the kind and its conventions.³⁷ The same is true of Chrétien de Troyes' imitators in the thirteenth century, and Chrétien himself in the twelfth.³⁸ Romance, however, has long been dismissed as

³⁴ The principal leaders in this critical debate remain A. W. Gomme, "Aristophanes and Politics," Classical Review 52 (1938): 97-109, who argues that comedy cannot also be didactic, and G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "The Political Outlook of Aristophanes," The Origins of the Peloponnesian War (London: Duckworth, 1972) App. XXIX: 355-76, who takes the contrary view. See further Chapter One, 9-10 and n. 25.

³⁵ Finlayson, "Definitions" 46.

³⁶ Geoffrey Chaucer, "Sir Thopas," The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1987) 897-900. All Chaucer references are by line number to this edition; subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

³⁷ Kane 54-6, and Barnes, Counsel and Strategy 27. See further Helen Cooper, Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 300-04.

³⁸ Keith Busby, foreword, The Evolution of Arthurian Romance, by Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann, trans. Margaret and Roger Middleton, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 35 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998). See also Chapter Two, 61-2.

popular literature unworthy of serious attention: even Spenser's Faerie Queene was condemned by some contemporaries for sacrificing Classical models and virtues to bourgeois appetites.³⁹ More relevant to our period is Caxton's prologue to his 1484 edition of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, in which Caxton emphasizes his efforts to secure an accurate consultation copy from which to print a "trewe and correcte" edition of the great poet's work.⁴⁰ He seems to have used the Winchester manuscript for similar purposes, correcting illegible readings in his copy-text of Malory's Morte Darthur before its printing;⁴¹ but in marked contrast to the Chaucer text, Caxton played very fast and loose with Malory's words.⁴² Yet even this evidence of the relatively low status shared by many romances in the Middle Ages shows an awareness and recognition of disparate kinds.

A comparable awareness is evident in the manuscripts in which romances are preserved. It has been pointed out that romances are generally more decorated than non-

³⁹ Frye, Secular Scripture 23-31. Cf. P. J. C. Field, "The Earliest Texts of Malory's Morte Darthur," Malory: Texts and Sources, Arthurian Studies 40 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1998) 3-4, commenting on the low status accorded vernacular romance in the Middle Ages.

⁴⁰ William Caxton, The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton, ed. W. J. B. Crotch, Early English Text Society OS 176 (London: Oxford UP, 1928 (for 1927)) 90-91.

⁴¹ P. J. C. Field, "The Choice of Texts for Malory's Morte Darthur," Malory: Texts and Sources 16; cf. Field, "Earliest Texts" 3-4. Field's argument in "Choice of Texts" in favour of the superiority of Winchester over Caxton seems convincing.

⁴² Field, "Choice of Texts" 16, and "Earliest Texts" 3-4. For details of some of these changes see Field, "Choice of Texts" 18-19 and 24, and Eugène Vinaver, ed., The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, rev. P. J. C. Field, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) xxxv-xli.

romances, and that this creates a type of generic distinction obvious to manuscript compilers and readers.⁴³ Even though the manuscript evidence does not really corroborate this view,⁴⁴ the contents and layout of manuscripts still help to reveal generic awareness. What is perhaps the most important collection of English secular poetry and lyrics, British Library MS Harley 2253 (circa 1330-40), is an anthology of English, Anglo-Norman and Latin lyrics and poems of religious, amatory and satirical and political nature; it also includes the romance of King Horn.⁴⁵ Because many of its secular lyrics are unique, Harley 2253 is the source for much of our knowledge of pre-Chaucerian secular and love-lyric, and is further significant as an indication of the rise of English as the principal literary language of England.⁴⁶ The manuscript is also important, I believe, as evidence of the awareness of various kinds on the part of the mediaeval community of users. A similar conclusion can be drawn from a comparison of the Vernon and Auchinleck manuscripts, the one predominantly religious, the other comprising mostly romances. It is noteworthy

⁴³ Murray J. Evans, Rereading Middle English Romance (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1995).

⁴⁴ Guddat-Figge's professional description of various English romance manuscripts suggests that they actually contained very little decoration: Gisela Guddat-Figge, Catalogue of Manuscripts containing Middle English Romances (München: Fink, 1976). See also Laura Hibbard Loomis, "The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-40," PMLA 57 (1942): 597.

⁴⁵ Derek Pearsall, "Language and Literature," The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval England, ed. Nigel Saul (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 265, and Guddat-Figge 46 and 199. For the contents and a professional description of Harley 2253 see Guddat-Figge 195-201.

⁴⁶ Pearsall, "Language and Literature" 265.

in this context that most English romance manuscripts actually are miscellanies,⁴⁷ suggesting not only the popularity of the romance kind, but possibly, given the generic awareness of the mediaeval community of users testified to in the last chapter, that some members of the audience recognized it as distinct from the historical or religious or secular pieces which accompanied it. It is said that “the context in which a romance is placed within a manuscript volume” can help to indicate “medieval perceptions of generic intertextuality,”⁴⁸ and this obviously depends upon generic awareness. Miscellaneousness in and of itself cannot prove generic awareness, but just as Herry Bailly tries to organize the Canterbury Tales into a juxtaposition of serious and jocund tales,⁴⁹ some members of the mediaeval community of users may have preferred the juxtapositioning within manuscripts themselves of disparate literary kinds.

Certainly this is the case with grouping, and within the earliest miscellany alone, the Auchinleck manuscript (National Library of Scotland MS Advocates’ 19.2.1, dated 1330-40), the arrangement of entries suggests some awareness of different kinds, for the first sixteen items are largely legendary or didactic texts—although this does include two romances, they may be there to emphasize their homiletic aspects—while the subsequent

⁴⁷ Guddat-Figge 22. Cf. Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 28.

⁴⁸ Elspeth Kennedy, “Intertextuality between Genres in the Lancelot-Grail,” Text and Intertext in Medieval Arthurian Literature, ed. Norris J. Lacy, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities 1997 (New York: Garland, 1996) 71; the connexion between generic intertextuality and generic awareness is my own.

⁴⁹ Alan T. Gaylord, “Sentence and Solaas in Fragment VII of the Canterbury Tales,” PMLA 82 (1967): 226-35.

texts are mostly romances.⁵⁰ The remaining fourteen romances, including one lai, are grouped relatively closely together, and the arrangement of Guy of Warwick as two separate romances is unique to this manuscript, suggesting that considerable care went into the manuscript's layout. The Lincoln Thornton manuscript (Lincoln Cathedral Library MS 91, dated circa 1430-40), which includes the alliterative Morte Arthure and Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne, likewise displays conspicuous collocation, suggesting some awareness of disparate kinds: the romances dominate the early leaves in the manuscript, while the remaining entries are given over to English and Latin mystical and religious tracts in prose and verse.⁵¹ Like is thus grouped with like. In the London Thornton manuscript (BL MS Add. 31042), on the other hand, disparate kinds are linked together as part of a religious theme on the life of Christ, a theme emphasized by the intended programme of decoration for the early items.⁵² This organization by subject is not quite the same thing as organization by literary kind, but the two go naturally together, for as we have seen in previous chapters, subject is a major component of many kinds.

We can also assume that, as was the case with other mediaeval kinds discussed in Chapter Two, the types of audiences that were aware of the romance kind in the Middle

⁵⁰ Guddat-Figge 38 and 121-26, which includes the contents and a professional description of the MS.

⁵¹ Guddat-Figge 38 and 135-42, which includes the contents and a professional description of the MS.

⁵² Phillipa Hardman, "Reading the Spaces," Medium Aevum 63 (1994): 257-69. For the contents and professional description of the London Thornton MS see Guddat-Figge 159-63.

Ages were very varied.⁵³ William of Palerne, to take a specific example, is thought to have been translated ~~not~~ ^{audience which did not understand French} for an aristocratic audience but for one of humbler social status, and Sir Perceval of Galles has also been associated with a popular audience.⁵⁴ Moreover, some romances written specifically for the aristocracy may also have been popular with members of the lower classes. Albert Baugh denied this, arguing for romance audiences of the same type, composed of the same social classes, as those depicted in the romances,⁵⁵ a view which long held sway but which has been increasingly recognized as untenable. The 1330-40 Auchinleck manuscript, as we have said, is well known as a key collection of romances featuring aristocratic characters, yet this miscellany was compiled in London for a non-aristocratic patron, and may even have been produced in a bookshop.⁵⁶ Certainly in the fifteenth century, but perhaps even in the fourteenth century, manuscripts had ceased to be the product of clerical scriptoria alone, and were instead increasingly produced in bookshops; indeed, most extant romance manuscripts seem to be the product of bookshops.⁵⁷ The circumstances of the Auchinleck manuscript's

⁵³ Barnes, Counsel and Strategy 19-28, speaking specifically of Middle English romance, reaches a similar conclusion for different reasons. Cf. Finlayson, "Definitions" 51, and Barron, English Medieval Romance 231-35.

⁵⁴ Respectively Thorlac Turville-Petre, The Alliterative Revival (Cambridge: Brewer, 1977) 41, and Everett 12-13.

⁵⁵ Albert C. Baugh, "The Middle English Romance: Some Questions of Creation, Presentation, and Preservation," Speculum 42 (1967): 12-17.

⁵⁶ Pearsall, "Language and Literature" 267. For the possibility that the MS was compiled in a bookshop see Loomis 595-627; cf. Guddat-Figge 123-24, who seems to accept this theory, and Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 28.

⁵⁷ Guddat-Figge 17-18.

production have also been connected with the rise of a new, middle-class reader,⁵⁸ which, together with its bookshop provenance, shows the widespread popularity (and hence presumably awareness) of romances. Further, the Auchinleck romances are extremely varied, designed to appeal to the widest spectrum of taste.⁵⁹

It is clear from this that, however little prestige vernacular romance was accorded in the Middle Ages, it was certainly popular. The output of much of Caxton's press at the close of the Middle Ages attests in a different way to the popularity of the English prose romance, for Caxton—however free he felt to modify his exemplars—would not have printed such a kind (or, for that matter, any other) without demand.⁶⁰

Not only was the mediaeval romance kind popular with the contemporary community of users, but its conventions were well-known. Chaucer's splendid parody of romance conventions in the Tale of Thopas has been well documented,⁶¹ and will be discussed in more detail below, but it should be noted here that parody depends for its

⁵⁸ Pearsall, "Language and Literature" 267.

⁵⁹ Loomis 606.

⁶⁰ On the popularity of the prose romance printed by Caxton see Larry D. Benson, "Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur," Critical Approaches to Six Major English Works, ed. R. M. Lumiansky and Herschel Baker (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1968) 109; cf. H. S. Bennett, English Books and Readers 1475 to 1557, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969) 9 and 17; and Hume 168.

⁶¹ See Cooper, Oxford Guides to Chaucer 300-08; Alfred David, The Strumpet Muse (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976) 217; Angela Jane Weisl, Conquering the Reign of Femeny, Chaucer Studies 22 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1995) 70-73; and especially Derek Pearsall, The Canterbury Tales (London: Allen, 1985) 161-65. The University of Toronto's ongoing annotated Chaucer Bibliographies series should eventually include, in whole or in part, a Thopas bibliography which, one expects, will detail aspects of the parody.

success on the audience's awareness of the kind and conventions being mocked.⁶² However, while the Middle Ages must thus have had considerable knowledge, and in some cases, mastery, of various literary kinds and conventions, including those of mediaeval romance,⁶³ modern criticism has consistently failed to agree on romance's generic features. Many studies ignore altogether the question of definition, while others suffer from vagueness or a tendency to consider anything focussing on aristocratic personae as romance.⁶⁴ This is even the case, to some extent, in the most authoritative bibliography of the subject, Severs's manual: "The medieval romance is a narrative about knightly prowess and adventure."⁶⁵ In another influential study romance is defined by its idealisms and distinguished by such traits as the "mysterious challenge or call; the first sight of the beloved; the lonely journey through a hostile land; the fight,"⁶⁶ but this is a rather haphazard collection of features and motifs, many of which are not necessarily specific to romance. Another critic argues that romance can be defined, yet fails to offer a

⁶² Finlayson, "Definitions" 47. Cf. Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 36-7.

⁶³ Kane 3-6 is surely correct to argue that the audience of Middle English romance was, in some quarters at least, more sophisticated than we allow.

⁶⁴ Finlayson, "Definitions" 45-6, and Burlin 1-2.

⁶⁵ Helaine Newstead, "Romances: General," A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500, ed. J. Burke Severs, vol. 1: Romances (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967) 11. Cf. Baugh 1-2.

⁶⁶ Stevens passim, esp. 16, 21 and 28; the quotation appears on 16; cf. Barron, English Medieval Romance 4-5, and Frye, Anatomy 186-87. Stevens has much of value to say about mediaeval romance, but it seems to me that what he sees as its defining feature, its idealisms, are rather consequences of the ways in which the elements of adventure, love and a happy ending unfold. This will be explored in more detail below.

definition: she mentions the dominance of the adventure element, but the bulk of her article emphasizes the diversity of subject matter and structure of various types of Middle English romance.⁶⁷ The argument (and for its proponents, solution) that romance is defined in part by its socio-political ideological agenda is hardly more tangible or indeed useful.⁶⁸

We shall see in the course of this chapter that Dorothy Everett was quite right to say that, however difficult the task of defining mediaeval romance may be, it is not impossible; it thus remains the task of the literary critic to make the most precise characterization viable.⁶⁹ It remains true, however, that “No approach has so far commanded general acceptance.”⁷⁰ This is largely because of the malleability of the romance kind and conventions. My approach to kind has emphasized, amongst other things, how it changes with time and circumstance, and I want to suggest in the first place that mediaeval romance may be easier to define once it is separated from romance of other periods; second, its characteristic features may emerge most clearly if we compare it to the kind whose social and historical place it took: epic. As the title of W. P. Ker’s classic

⁶⁷ Charbonneau, “Romances, Middle English,” Medieval England: An Encyclopedia.

⁶⁸ Burlin 2-3. Cf. Fredric Jameson, “Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre,” New Literary History 7 (1975-76): 138-40 and 161-62.

⁶⁹ Everett 3.

⁷⁰ Barron, English Medieval Romance 59. Cf. Michael O’Connell, “Epic and Romance,” Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism, ed. Martin Coyle et al. (London: Routledge, 1990) 180: “Although romance has been much discussed in late twentieth-century criticism, a comprehensive account of its nature is yet to be written;” cf. also 177 and 179.

study demonstrates,⁷¹ variations on such an approach have been tried before, but as the arguments already summarized show, we are no closer to agreement and definition now than we were one hundred years ago.

Aristophanes' ingenious definition of comedy, cited above, reminds us that, at its best, genre-study is inherently comparative,⁷² and the malleability and generic opacity of the romance kind notwithstanding, this approach appears to offer the best means of resolving the critical impasse which surrounds mediaeval romance. We noted in Chapter One that the hero can in some cases be a kind's most distinguishing feature, and that this is especially true of romance and epic. Consequently, critics have at times approached romance via its hero, and have asked whether that hero belongs more to the epic or romance kind, for the epic and romance heroes, although similar in many ways, are ultimately quite different.⁷³ Finlayson in particular is a strong proponent of this argument,

⁷¹ Ker, Epic and Romance. Other notable approaches in this vein are: Erich Auerbach, Mimesis, trans. Willard R. Trask (1946; Berne, Switzerland: Francke; Princeton: Princeton UP, 1968); Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 3-14; and John Finlayson, ed., Morte Arthure, York Medieval Texts (London: Arnold, 1967) 5-11, and "Definitions" passim, esp. 52-5 and n. 20 and 168-70. See also Batt and Field, "The Romance Tradition" 60. Each of these critics has valuable things to say about the nature of epic and romance, and I agree especially with many of Finlayson's arguments, but each seems to me ultimately to fall short of the mark.

⁷² Jameson 153 quite rightly observes that genre-study is—and always has been—inherently comparative. Hume 161 argues in favour of comparing Middle English romance to other, similar kinds, but fails to consider its relation to epic.

⁷³ Hume 161-63, 169, 172 and 177 argues in favour of studying Middle English romance via the concept, type and importance of its hero; Finlayson, ed., Morte Arthure 5-11 and "Definitions" passim, esp. 52-5 and n. 20 and 168-70, argues in favour of a comparative approach (as noted above), but particularly of one which compares the heroes of romance and epic. For the hero's possible importance to kind see Chapter One, 20-2.

concluding that “It is, in fact, in the concept of the hero that the greatest and essential difference is to be found between the [epic] and the romance” kinds.⁷⁴ There are, as we shall see, a number of further similarities between epic and romance, and since romance is generally agreed to be in some sense the successor or supplanter of epic, it is a promising approach, as some critics have realized, to consider what generic features are common to both of these kinds, and which are unique to one of them.⁷⁵ Such an approach has recently been objected to, but the objection ignores the merits of a comparative approach and fails to offer a convincing alternative.⁷⁶ Furthermore, not only does a detailed comparison of the two kinds illuminate romance’s characteristics, but some of the best romance studies consistently come to grief because of their misunderstanding of epic and the brevity of their accounts of its features. Finlayson, for instance, quite rightly argues for the necessity of distinguishing between, and hence comparing, chanson de geste and romance, but the comparison, both here and elsewhere, should be extended to epic in general, not just its French type.⁷⁷ A. C. Gibbs briefly does this, but mistakenly concludes that the epic hero must have a socio-political purpose,⁷⁸ an issue which will be taken up at more length

⁷⁴ Finlayson, ed., Morte Arthure 7.

⁷⁵ Cf. Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 3-6, and Finlayson, “Definitions” 52-3 and n. 20.

⁷⁶ Burlin 3 and n. 4. Cf. Barron, English Medieval Romance 178 and 209, and “Alliterative Romance” 70-1 and n.2, who confirms the similarity between the two kinds, and mentions the possible merits of a comparative approach, but who feels that ultimately the distinction between epic and romance is exaggerated.

⁷⁷ Finlayson, “Definitions” 52-3 and n. 20.

⁷⁸ Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romance 3-6.

below. Finally, those critics who do hazard a more specific generic definition for romance continue to disagree as to whether romance is characterized by the adventure motive or the love interest, especially in the case of Middle English romance, and this issue, too, can be clarified by a comparison of the two kinds.

An understanding of epic and its generic features has a special importance for a study of Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur, for it has been argued recently that the Morte Darthur "is the national epic of England," sharing features with other such national epics as the Iliad, Odyssey, Aeneid and Chanson de Roland.⁷⁹ Thus, since romance has been labelled "a variant form of Epic,"⁸⁰ and since, as we shall see, it grew out of and replaced epic, and because the two kinds share a number of features, it will be seen as this argument unfolds that the required definition will emerge from a comparative study of the epic and romance kinds. As a result, it will become obvious that mediaeval romance is a fictional kind best defined by the combination of some form of adventure and love,⁸¹

⁷⁹ Beverly Kennedy, "Northrop Frye's Theory of Genres and Sir Thomas Malory's 'Hoole Book'," The Spirit of the Court, ed. Glyn S. Burgess et al. (Cambridge: Brewer, 1985) 224 and 231 and *passim*. Cf. Elizabeth Archibald, "Beginnings: The Tale of King Arthur and King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius," A Companion to Malory, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards, Arthurian Studies 37 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1996) 133, who considers Tale II to be epic, but Tale I a mixture of epic and romance. Kennedy has many stimulating things to say about kind in the Morte Darthur, but I disagree with much of her reasoning and conclusions. I shall deal with this argument in more length in the next Chapter.

⁸⁰ Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 4.

⁸¹ Jameson 139 and 148 is thus surely mistaken to deny the adventure element in romance. On romance as fiction cf. Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 2-3, and Finlayson, "Definitions" 46.

culminating in an happy ending.⁸² We may note further that, within the story—though possibly in some cases by patronage as well—both of these features have been affected to a greater or lesser extent by women. Since epic is the earlier of the two forms, I will begin with it.

A Characterization of Epic

Although it has been argued that the Beowulf-poet knew and was influenced by the Aeneid,⁸³ I do not wish to suggest, in the following literary history and analysis, that classical epic had any direct connexion to or impact upon mediaeval epic. Concomitantly, it is nonetheless true that the early literatures and cultures of both the classical and mediaeval periods share features common to the Heroic Age, in which the dominate

⁸² Cf. Beer 4, 17 and 29, and Derek Brewer, “The Nature of Romance,” Poetica 9 (1978): 12-14, 24-5, 27-8 and 46, both of whom see love and adventure and especially an happy ending as the main features of mediaeval romance, and Everett 19-20, who observes of the distinction between epic and romance that romance has no concern with tragedy, and augments the adventure element with a marked interest in love. For the happy ending of romance see further Newstead 11, and Derek Brewer, “Escape from the Mimetic Fallacy,” Studies in Medieval English Romances, ed. Brewer (Cambridge: Brewer, 1988) 8, who sees it as an innate feature of the kind.

⁸³ Kemp Malone, “The Old English Period (to 1100),” A Literary History of England, ed. Albert C. Baugh (New York: Appleton, 1948) 93; F. Klaeber, ed., Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, 3rd ed. (Boston: Heath, 1950) cxviii; C. L. Wrenn and W. F. Bolton, ed., Beowulf with the Finnesburg Fragment, 5th ed. (Exeter: U of Exeter P, 1996) 54 and 79; Theodore M. Andersson, Early Epic Scenery (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1976) 5 and 145-59; and Barron, English Medieval Romance 110, who notes Vergilian echoes in Beowulf, though he does not mention the Aeneid per se. All references to Beowulf are by line number to Klaeber’s edition, and will be made parenthetically in the text; unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

outlook is martial and aristocratic, glorifying physical prowess and honour.⁸⁴ It is likewise true that the epic kind in general, whether classical or mediaeval, is marked by similar and even coterminous generic conventions. Chief among these are: an elevated style; a narrative of some length on a great and serious subject (epic need not be in verse, though many studies equate epic with poetry⁸⁵); the invocation of subject or Muse or both; the marvellous action or vast arena; the role of the gods or supernatural; the treatment, importance and interconnectedness of the themes of vengeance, honour and glory; and especially the focus on an heroic or semi-divine figure (the hero is generally seen as the saviour or representative of his nation, but this seems to me a simplification). Typical subjects include the anger and withdrawal of an hero, fights to the death between kinsmen or friends, and feudal loyalty or disobedience.⁸⁶ A distinction is generally made, on the basis of chronology rather than merit, between primary or oral epic, and secondary or literate epic, with secondary epic echoing and responding to primary epic in what would

⁸⁴ For the concept of the Heroic Age see the seminal studies of Ker; H. Munro Chadwick, The Heroic Age, Cambridge Archaeological and Ethnological Series (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1912); and H. Munro Chadwick and N. Kershaw Chadwick, The Growth of Literature, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1932-40); see also C. M. Bowra, Heroic Poetry (London: Macmillan, 1952). For Homer's relation to the Greek Heroic Age see G. S. Kirk, Homer and the Oral Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976).

⁸⁵ See, e.g., M. H. Abrams, "epic," A Glossary of Literary Terms, 5th ed. (New York: Holt, 1985); "epic," Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., 20 vols. (1989), s.v. epic 1; and Martin Gray, "epic," A Dictionary of Literary Terms, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Longman, 1992).

⁸⁶ Jasper Griffin, Homer (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980) 6.

nowadays be termed an intertextual (if not metatextual) fashion.⁸⁷ There are relatively few surviving epics, the most famous examples being the Epic of Gilgamesh (second millennium B.C.), the Iliad and Odyssey (circa 750-700 B.C.), the Aeneid (30-19 B.C.), the Mahabharata (final recension fourth century A.D.⁸⁸), Beowulf (eighth century A.D.), the Táin Bó Cuailnge (perhaps eighth century A.D.), the Chanson de Roland (early twelfth century A.D.), the Nibelungenlied (A.D. circa 1200⁸⁹), Poema de mio Cid (perhaps 1207⁹⁰) and, later than our period, Paradise Lost (A.D. 1667, revised 1674). A similar heroic ethos, however, underpins much shorter heroic poetry such as the Battle of Maldon (A.D. circa 991) and, I would argue, the alliterative Morte Arthure (late fourteenth or early fifteenth century A.D.).

The epic-heroic world is often but wrongly taken as being more barbaric than its

⁸⁷ For primary and secondary epic see especially C. S. Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost (1942; London: Oxford UP, 1967) 1-61. Richard Jenkyns argues that Vergil alone is responsible for most of secondary epic's characteristics—especially the notion that the hero's deeds be portentous—and that Milton picks this up from Vergil: Richard Jenkyns, Classical Epic (London: Bristol Classical P, 1992) 56. Fowler suggests that Paradise Lost may even be tertiary rather than secondary epic: Alastair Fowler, ed., "Paradise Lost," The Poems of John Milton, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London: Longman, 1968) 429.

⁸⁸ Jan de Vries, Heroic Song and Heroic Legend, trans. B. J. Timmer (London: Oxford UP, 1963) 100. As Frye, Anatomy 56, aptly phrases it: both "the Mahabharata and the Ramayana apparently went on distending themselves for centuries, like pythons swallowing sheep."

⁸⁹ A. T. Hatto, trans., The Nibelungenlied, rev. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) 293 and 365-69; cf. de Vries 46 and 266.

⁹⁰ Colin Smith, ed., Poema de mio Cid (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) xxxii-xxxiv, and Peter Such and John Hodgkinson, trans. and commentary, The Poem of my Cid (Warminster: Aris, 1987) 1-2.

successor because of its acceptance and promotion of such easily misunderstood traits as heroic flyting and blood-feuds. While the emphasis on glory (kléos; lof; los) and honour (timé) in epic leads to actions and values being condoned or even celebrated which are unacceptable, perhaps even incomprehensible, to modern audiences, the epic-heroic world celebrates these actions because they are seen as being the only way of eluding death.⁹¹

This raises an important point, that in reading and studying epic we must always remember that its values are “those of an age which judges everything by the standards of the heroic man who is equally notable in council and war.”⁹²

Epic, most especially but not only the Iliad, is characterized by a singular ethos, the continual recognition of the fragility of life and the connexion between life and death, glory and suffering.⁹³ Central to this ethos (the same really which underlines the heroic pattern) is a constant awareness that

Cattle die, kin die,
The man dies too.
One thing I know never dies,
The good name of the dead.⁹⁴

⁹¹ M. S. Silk, Homer: The Iliad (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987) 70. Hence Dodds’s comment, equally applicable to the epic hero in general, that “Homeric man’s highest good is not the enjoyment of a quiet conscience, but the enjoyment of timé.” E. R. Dodds, The Greeks and the Irrational (1951; Berkeley: U of California P; Beacon Hill, Boston: Beacon P, 1957) 17.

⁹² C. M. Bowra, Ancient Greek Literature (London: Oxford UP, 1967) 1.

⁹³ Jenkyns passim makes some very astute observations on the heroic ethos, and although he is speaking specifically of Homer, and particularly of the Iliad, the comments are relevant to the heroic world in general.

⁹⁴ From the Eddic poem Hávamál, quoted in R. I. Page, Chronicles of the Vikings (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1995) 138.

Death is everywhere and inevitable, but a glorious reputation secures a type of immortality that is a consolation in the face of death. Hence Sarpedon, one of the Trojan allies and a son of Zeus, says to his companion Glaukos as they prepare to attack the Achaean camp in the Iliad:

Man, supposing you and I, escaping this battle,
would be able to live on forever, ageless, immortal,
so neither would I myself go on fighting in the foremost
nor would I urge you into the fighting where men win glory.
But now, seeing that the spirits of death stand close about us
in their thousands, no man can turn aside nor escape them,
let us go on and win glory for ourselves, or yield it to others.⁹⁵

These words and the ethos they evoke are made all the more poignant if we remember that Glaukos earlier tells Diomedes:

As is the generation of leaves, so is that of humanity.
The wind scatters the leaves on the ground, but the live timber
burgeons with leaves again in the season of spring returning.
So one generation of men will grow while another
dies. (VI, 146-50)

Hence too the words and motivation of Beowulf:

Ūre æghwylc sceal ende gebīdan
worolde līfes; wyrce sē þe mōte
dōmes ær dēaþe; þæt bið drihtguman
unlifgendum æfter sēlest. (1386-89)

Each of us must await the end of life
in the world; he who is able should win
glory before death. That is afterwards

⁹⁵ Homer, The Iliad of Homer, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1951) XII, 322-28. Bowra sees in this passage the pre-eminent expression of the heroic ethos: C. M. Bowra, From Virgil to Milton (1945; London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's, 1967) 83. All references to the Iliad are by Book and line number to this edition; subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

the best for a warrior whose life has passed.

It is also significant that the last thing said of Beowulf, the last word of the poem, is that he was *lofgeornost* (3182: “the most eager for glory”). Here then we see the tragedy of the consummate hero, the tragedy inherent in the epic kind itself, for the hero knows that life is precious and fragile, and yet, paradoxically, the best means of celebrating and glorifying life is through deeds which run perilously close to doom.⁹⁶

By his very nature—the protagonist is generally male in this type of society and literature—the epic hero must seek adventure, but this primary motivation rests on his own confidence and sense of his own worth; glory, fame and honour are of the utmost importance. Not only his own, but his family’s reputation and honour are of the highest importance to the epic hero. Vengeance and blood-feuds are thus commonplace and acceptable in the epic or heroic world, but not in the courtly-romantic. Hence the criticism levelled at Gawayne for his feud with Launcelot.

Achilles and Cú Chulainn are perhaps the best examples of the epic hero, and both are willing to accept an early death provided that fate allows them a commensurate portion of glory. More than any other hero, Achilles is defined by his sense of honour and almost unique—for being so beyond the pale—awareness of the fragility of life;⁹⁷ yet he is willing to accept a short life so long as “Zeus of the loud thunder on Olympos should

⁹⁶ Jenkyns 15. I have argued more fully that the greatest heroes are also necessarily tragic in Kevin S. Whetter, “The Tragedy’s the Thing: Achilles and Cú Chulainn as Models of the Consummate Hero,” *Celebratio*, ed. Janet P. Bews, Ian C. Storey and Martin R. Boyne (Peterborough: Ontario: Trent U, 1998) 134-43.

⁹⁷ Cf. Silk 87-96.

grant [him] / honour at least” (I, 353-54).⁹⁸ Part of the reason for the Wrath of Achilles and the withdrawal from battle is because Achilles feels, justifiably on the level of human agency at least, that both Agamemnon and the gods have conspicuously “dishonoured” him (I, 171). Cú Chulainn, considered by many the Irish Achilles,⁹⁹ not only accepts a short life in return for glory, he deliberately seeks such a fate. Upon overhearing, on a certain day, a druid’s prophecy that the fame of the warrior who formally takes up arms for the first time that day will live forever, though the warrior will not, Cú Chulainn immediately “claim[s] his weapons” of the king. When the druid subsequently laments that: “he who arms for the first time today will achieve fame and greatness. But his life is short,” Cú Chulainn replies: “That is a fair bargain[.] . . . If I achieve fame I am content, though I had only one day on earth.”¹⁰⁰

As noted above, the complexity of honour involved in the epic-heroic world and the values it celebrates are often easily misunderstood. One recent commentary on the epic kind, for instance, admitting the complexity of the epic hero, nonetheless focusses on what the critic considers to be the hero’s misuse of his abilities and desire for fame. As a result, it is said, epics reveal a conflict between hero and society, and most epics therefore

⁹⁸ Achilles’ heightened awareness of the fragility of life is linked to his knowledge of his two possible fates. See esp. his words of IX, 400-16, XVIII, 79-126 and XXI, 106-13.

⁹⁹ See, e.g., Alfred Nutt, Cuchulainn, the Irish Achilles, Popular Studies in Mythology, Romance and Folklore 8 (London: David Nutt, 1900).

¹⁰⁰ The Tain: Translated from the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cuailnge, trans. Thomas Kinsella, drawings by Louis le Brocquy (1969; Dublin: Dolmen; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985) 84-5. All references are by page number to this edition; subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

actually criticize the idea of heroism.¹⁰¹ Thus the Iliad has been said to be both a celebration and condemnation of glory (kléos) and Achilles' relation to it, and Achilles himself has been said to subvert or challenge the heroic code.¹⁰² Similar arguments have been put forward regarding Beowulf.¹⁰³ These views, however, fail to grasp the complexity of the hero and the heroic code, complexities demanded both by the heroic character and the generic conventions involved. It is true that ultimately the epic hero is at odds with his fellows, leaders and society, and that his desire for honour and glory often secures suffering or even death for both himself and his fellows. But these are not, within the standards and conventions of epic, flaws; on the contrary, the selfsame qualities and values that bring about the potential destruction also secure the hero's character and greatness.

Isolation, conflict and destruction, moreover, are essential components of the paradoxical tragedy of the epic kind and hero, reminding us that "heroism does not bring happiness; its sole, and sufficient, reward is fame."¹⁰⁴ It may be added that this social estrangement and suffering are two of the principal reasons for being sceptical of the

¹⁰¹ Peter Toohey, Reading Epic (London: Routledge, 1992) 9-11.

¹⁰² Respectively: Simon Goldhill, The Poet's Voice (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 92-3, and Silk 96-8.

¹⁰³ See, e.g., John Leyerle, "Beowulf the Hero and the King," Medium Aevum 34 (1965): 89-102; Harry Berger Jr. and H. Marshall Leicester Jr., "Social Structure as Doom," Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope, ed. Robert B. Burlin and Edward B. Irving Jr. (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1974) 37-79; and Michael Lapidge, "Beowulf and the Psychology of Terror," Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period, ed. Helen Damico and John Leyerle (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993) 373-402.

¹⁰⁴ Dodds 29. Cf. Bowra, From Virgil to Milton 10, and Whetter 141-42.

notion that the epic hero is automatically representative of his society. Indeed, pace certain eminent studies,¹⁰⁵ the epic hero is often an isolated figure.¹⁰⁶

Another misconception regarding the epic kind is that it is inherently nationalistic, a critical fallacy perhaps arising from a misreading of Vergil's Aeneid. It is said of the Aeneid, for instance, that it "was conceived and shaped as a national and patriotic epic for the Roman's of [Vergil's] day," and that "Virgil's primary intention was to sing of his country's glories, past and present."¹⁰⁷ The same argument is made of epic in general, that it is defined in part by its privileging of one nation or ruler over another. Once again we are confronted with the dangers of over-restrictive notions of literary kinds and conventions, for while some epics may espouse nationalism, we should not conclude, as various literary handbooks and studies have done,¹⁰⁸ that the kind itself is always nationalistic, just as we should avoid invariably equating the hero with his society. Both of these interrelated issues, as we shall see, play a role in romance criticism; unfortunately

¹⁰⁵ Ker 20-1, and Stevens 75-7.

¹⁰⁶ Bernard M. W. Knox, The Heroic Temper (Berkeley: U of California P, 1964) 5 and 32-40, argues that the Sophoklean tragic hero is an isolated figure, an argument equally applicable to most of the consummate heroes—including the great epic heroes. See also Frye, Anatomy 35, who argues that a tragic fiction is the result of the hero's isolation from society.

¹⁰⁷ R. Deryck Williams, "The Aeneid," The Cambridge History of Classical Literature, ed. E. J. Kenney, advisory ed. W. V. Clausen, vol. II: Latin Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982) 333; my emphasis. Cf. T. S. Eliot, On Poetry and Poets (London: Faber, 1957) 126-30, and Bowra, From Virgil to Milton 13, 15 and 35-6.

¹⁰⁸ See, e.g., Abrams, "epic," A Glossary of Literary Terms; Gray, "epic," A Dictionary of Literary Terms; Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 5-6; and especially David Quint, Epic and Empire (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993).

that role is usually more vitiating than elucidating.

Homer's Iliad is undoubtedly the acme of the epic kind, yet Achilles' motivation is completely personal, based at first on a desire to win glory (kléos) and subsequently to avenge the death of his beloved companion Patroklos; Beowulf's motivation is not much different, nor is Cú Chulainn's. An epic may be set in the past of a specific people, but this does not make it nationalistic in the sense of serving a specific political or military agendum.¹⁰⁹ Even the Aeneid is punctuated by loss, suffering, sombreness and tragedy, so that the dominant chord is not so much nationalistic celebration as resignation and ambiguity. The ending of Beowulf, with the failure of Beowulf's retainers to offer any help and the threat of imminent invasion, is much the same, as is the ridiculous pettiness of Ailill's and Medb's quarrel in the Táin when measured against the deaths of so many warriors and both of the bulls which were supposed to settle the affair (52-8 and 251-53). These sombre and ambiguous tones in the Aeneid are especially apparent in the persons and scenes of Dido, Marcellus and Turnus, and in the exit from the Underworld through the false Gate of Ivory at the close of Book VI. Vergil thus balances empire and its cost in such a way that he neither blindly eulogizes nor overly denounces Augustan and Roman imperialism,¹¹⁰ reminding us of the fact that, as Aeneas admonishes his allies, humanis quae

¹⁰⁹ As Quint seems to argue.

¹¹⁰ E. J. Kenney, "Uncertainties," The Cambridge History of Classical Literature II, 299; Jasper Griffin, intro. and notes, The Aeneid, by Virgil, trans C. Day Lewis (1952 (trans.); Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986) xxiv, and his "Virgil," The Oxford History of the Roman World, ed. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin and Oswyn Murray (1986; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) 264-65; and Toohey 142-43.

sit fiducia rebus (“in the affairs of mortals there is little certainty”).¹¹¹ Thus, when the young Pallas is killed by Turnus, despite the wishes of Hercules, to whom Pallas prays for victory, Jupiter remarks that:

stat sua cuique dies, breue et irreparabile tempus
omnibus est uitae. (X, 467-69)

Each man has his day of destiny, fleeting and irretrievable
for all is the portion of life.

That Jupiter says this to Hercules, perhaps the greatest of the ancient heroes, makes it all the more poignant. In this Vergil recalls the “tragic moral” and close of the Iliad, that for the gods only there is happiness, while mortals are doomed to hardship and suffering (Iliad XXIV, 517-51, especially 525-26).¹¹² Beowulf’s words to Hrothgar, referred to above, convey essentially the same sentiment:

Ūre æghwylc sceal ende gebīdan
worolde līfes; wyrce sē þe mōte
dōmes ær dēaþe; þæt bið drihtguman
unlifgendum æfter sēlest. (1386-89; cf. 1534-36)

Each of us must await the end of life
in the world; he who is able should win
glory before death. That is afterwards
the best for a warrior whose life has passed.

And while the Beowulf-poet may at times merge pagan and heroic thought with Christian feeling, it is noteworthy in this context that the concept of glory (lof) espoused in the

¹¹¹ Vergil, “Aeneidos,” Opera, ed. R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969) X, 152. All references are by Book and line number to this edition, and will subsequently be made parenthetically in the text; unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

¹¹² For the “tragic moral” of the Iliad see Dodds 29, whose phrase this is. Lewis, Preface 16, characterizes epic by its gravity, sombreness and tragedy. Cf. Griffin, Homer 39-40.

poem is consistently heroic and sombre, unadulterated by Christian or nationalistic colouring.¹¹³

Nationalism, then, far from being epic's distinguishing feature, is more the exception than the rule. Epic's true subject, it seems to me, is not so much the fate of nations as of heroic individuals.¹¹⁴ There is considerable interest in humanity in general, and occasionally of Roman or French humanity in particular, but palmary focus is given to heroes, as well as to the connexions between life and death, glory and suffering. Consider the proem_α of the principal Western epics. The Iliad's primary concern and theme is the hero Achilles and his Wrath:

Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilleus [Achilles]
and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the Achaians,
hurled in their multitudes to the House of Hades strong souls
of heroes, but gave their bodies to be the delicate feasting
of dogs, of all birds, and the will of Zeus was accomplished
since that time when first there stood in division of conflict
Atreus' son the lord of men and brilliant Achilleus. (I, 1-7)

Similarly, the Odyssey opens by highlighting and foreshadowing the achievements and sufferings of Odysseus:

Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways, who was driven
far journeys, after he had sacked Troy's sacred citadel.
Many were they whose cities he saw, whose minds he learned of,
many the pains he suffered in his spirit on the wide sea,
struggling for his own life and the homecoming of his companions.
Even so he could not save his companions, hard though

¹¹³ J. R. R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," Proceedings of the British Academy 22 (1936): Appendix b: 'LoF' and 'Dom'; 'Hell' and 'Heofon'.

¹¹⁴ For Bowra, Heroic Poetry 48 "The first concern of heroic poetry is to tell of action."

he strove to.¹¹⁵

The same can be said of the Aeneid, for even with the concern with Rome, Aeneas is the paramount focus:

Arma uirumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris
Italiam fato profugus Lauiniaque uenit
litora, multum ille et terris iactatus et alto
ui superum, saeuae memorem Iunonsis ob iram,
multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem
inferretque deos Latio; genus unde Latinum
Albanique patres atque altae moenia Romae. (I, 1-7)

Of arms and the hero I sing, who in ancient times from Troy's plain
to Italy came fleeing, driven by Fate to Lavinian shores;
much tossed about that man on land and on sea
by divine powers, on account of the indignant memory of savage Juno,
and much likewise did he suffer in war, till he could found a city
and convey his gods into Latium; whence the Latin race,
the lords of Alba, and the towering ramparts of lofty Rome.

Beowulf opens by inciting the audience to:

HWÆT, WĒ GĀR-DENA in gēardagum,
þēodcyninga þrym gefrūnon,
hū ðā æðelingas ellen fremedon! (1-3)

Listen! We have heard of the Spear-Danes
in days of yore, of the glory of those rulers of the people,
how those heroes [lit. noble ones] performed valorous deeds.

Beowulf himself is not, as in the previous openings, the immediate focus, but he is still the principal subject of the poem as a whole. Further, these kings act as a type of introduction to Beowulf, who, like them, worked daring deeds and won fame,¹¹⁶ and while the opening

¹¹⁵ Homer, The Odyssey of Homer, trans., Richmond Lattimore (1965; New York: HarperPerennial [sic], 1991) I, 1-7.

¹¹⁶ Edward B. Irving, Jr., "Heroic Role-Models," Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period 347-72; cf. Leo Carruthers, "Kingship and Heroism in Beowulf," Heroes

may not explicitly concern Beowulf, the last word of the poem most certainly does, emphasizing that Beowulf is lofgeornost (3182: “the most eager for glory”). The same is true of the Táin Bó Cuailnge, which opens with a conversation between Ailill and Medb as to who has the most possessions, thereby instigating the cattle raid of the title. The success or failure of that raid, however, hinges upon the figure of the Ulster champion Cú Chulainn, and it is he who is the central focus of the Táin and much of its supporting cycle of stories.¹¹⁷ Admittedly Cú Chulainn fights in part to defend Ulster, but he does this in order to secure that glory for which he is willing to exchange his life.

In each of these cases, then, classical and mediaeval, the focus is on an individual hero. The Chanson de Roland, perhaps like the chansons de geste in general, admittedly possesses a particularly Christian and feudal colouring, evident in the refrain “Païen unt tort e chrestiens unt dreit,”¹¹⁸ which may generate a more partisan feel than is usual in epic, but this is not typical of epic generally; and this socio-political motivation

and Heroines in Medieval English Literature, ed. Leo Carruthers (Cambridge: Brewer, 1994) 20-2, who adds that the good kings in the poem would also serve as inspiration to actual Anglo-Saxon kings. Carruthers 19 argues further that the opening lines introduce the poem’s dual themes of kingship and heroism.

¹¹⁷ Irish mythology is divided into four main branches: the Mythological Cycle; Ulster Cycle; Fenian Cycle; and a cycle concerning various kings. The Táin, in addition to being Cú Chulainn’s finest hour, is the centre-piece of the Ulster Cycle.

¹¹⁸ The Song of Roland, ed. and trans., Gerard J. Brault, vol. II: Oxford Text and English Translation (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1978) 1015. All references are by line number to this edition; subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

notwithstanding, the centre-piece of French chanson de geste remains heroic character.¹¹⁹ Hence the crux of the Chanson de Roland is the betrayal at Roncesvalles and Roland's refusal to blow his horn. Roland's actions and motivations, moreover—and thus the ultimate subject of the poem—are the usual heroic ones of honour and glory, just as Roland's heroic outlook is ultimately at odds with that of the society around him; even Oliver ultimately disagrees with, and so fails to understand, Roland. Likewise, Ganelon's motive for treachery is personal vengeance, because Roland nominated him for a dangerous mission—though only after Roland's offer to undertake the mission himself is denied by Charlemagne (277-326, 3757-59 and 3768-78). In short, even here the focus of the tale is an individual hero, for all of the action looks forward to or back upon the anguish and death which is the heroic end of Roland.¹²⁰

Thus, while the importance of honour (timé) and glory (kléos; lof; los) and their recognition by society at large perhaps gives epic a more public sphere than the private emotions and loves common to the romance ethos and hero, this is hardly nationalism. The hero, by his very nature, exists to win glory, whether in battle or adventure, but the epic hero's primary motivation rests in his own private ideals of heroism and honour and his own confidence and sense of his own worth, not the inspiration of a lover, which so

¹¹⁹ On the socio-political, and especially feudal and Christian, nature of French and Spanish chansons de geste see the collection of essays Romance Epic, ed. Hans-Erich Keller (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1987); cf. Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 5. For an acknowledgment of this element and the astute argument that the focus remains character see Ker 292-93.

¹²⁰ Ker 294.

often characterizes the courtly hero.¹²¹ Women can play a prominent role in epic, notable examples being Dido in the Aeneid and Medb in the Táin, but glory invariably takes precedence over amorous love. Because the epic hero is often doomed to die an early or tragic death, glory, fame and honour are of the utmost importance. Paradoxically, the hero's life and reputation are often threatened, if not in the end destroyed, precisely because of his sense of honour and glory: such, for example, is the case with Achilles, Beowulf and Cú Chulainn; it is also the case with Gawayne at the dissolution of the Round Table. Epic itself is consequently notable for its sombre elements and tone.¹²² It has been said, perhaps rightly, that secondary epic alone is concerned with a great subject—the Foundation of Rome or Fall of Man¹²³—but the subject of both primary and secondary epic is no less grand: the principal focus is on a potentially tragic hero whose overriding wish is to establish a reputation which secures him a place in the songs “of men's fame” (Iliad, IX, 189), and on the concomitant questions of the nature and cost of heroism.¹²⁴ As Chapter One shows, other qualities and features may appear or be emphasized, and the

¹²¹ Cf. Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 11.

¹²² Lewis, Preface 16 correctly speaks of the gravity and “tragic quality” which characterizes epic. Just as Homer is the greatest epic poet, so too is he perhaps the most tragic, justifying his description as “a profoundly tragic epic poet.” Kitto 117.

¹²³ Lewis, Preface 27-32.

¹²⁴ Griffin sees the subject of the Iliad as not only the Wrath of Achilles but heroism itself, in all its aspects, particularly the question of what constitutes heroism and of its costs: Griffin, Homer 31-7 and 42-5, but this seems to me to be the focus of epic in general, classical or mediaeval. Cf. Ker 17-20, 292-95 and 297-98, and 308, who notes that this is the case even in the Chanson de Roland. For the focus on an individual hero cf. J. V. Luce, “Homeric Poetry and Its Significance for the Modern World,” Classics Ireland 4 (1997): n. pag., online version, Netscape, 21 March 1998.

same features might manifest themselves in different ways in different examples, but these two elements are essential to the kind.

A Characterization of Romance

We noted in Chapter One that it is possible to distinguish literary kinds on the basis of “the hero’s power of action,” as Frye does in defining his fictional modes,¹²⁵ and that, occasionally, the variegated generic features and kinds produce a specific heroic type who comes to be recognized as a kind’s dominant characteristic. Thus, it was also observed, characterization constitutes one of the principal differences between novel and romance, a distinction, I maintained, which can be made equally well of the epic and romance kinds on the basis of their respective heroes.¹²⁶ Indeed, as a generic description a fictional kind focussing upon a specific type of hero might apply as much to romance as to epic, and as noted above, a comparison of the epic and romance kinds has often been based on a study of their respective heroes. It has even been argued that romance is, to some extent, “a variant form of Epic.”¹²⁷ All of which explains why it has been necessary to dwell on epic

¹²⁵ Frye, Anatomy 33.

¹²⁶ On distinguishing between novel and romance on the basis of characterization see Frye, Anatomy 304-05. On using the hero to distinguish between epic and romance cf. Finlayson, ed., Morte Arthure 7, and “Definitions” 53-4 and 168. Jameson 139 and 148-49 is thus surely mistaken to deny the possibility of the hero as a generic marker in any but dramatic kinds.

¹²⁷ Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 4. Cf. D. M. Hill, “Romance as Epic,” English Studies 44 (1963): 95-107, esp. 105.

at such length. Furthermore, the tendency amongst romance critics to judge all epic heroes as well as the epic kind itself exclusively on the basis of the Chanson de Roland has bedevilled criticism, leading to the erroneous conclusion that the epic hero must be representative of his society and motivated by socio-political ends, while the romance hero is motivated by more private ideals.¹²⁸ It should be clear by now that this is at best a simplification, ignoring the complexities of the epic kind and hero, and the epic hero's often equally private, ultimately self-isolating motivation. As Finlayson urges, the distinction between the two related kinds is based to a considerable degree on emphases;¹²⁹ what has so far been unacknowledged is that the distinguishing emphases lie more in individual heroic values and motivation than in politics. The epic hero's desire for glory demands public recognition and so a public arena, but his motivation is usually just as individualistic as that of the romance hero—often, in fact, it is more so. The epic hero's acts may also happen to benefit society, but this is not the principal concern; and at any rate it could also be said that the romance hero's encounters with ^{hostile} inimical giants and knights likewise benefits and serves both his lord and the society in which he lives. Certainly the challenge to the court, which is a standard feature of Arthurian romance, results in the hero's undertaking adventures for at least partially socio-political reasons.

While it is recognized that heroic epic, and with it the old heroic ethos, were

¹²⁸ Thus, e.g., Auerbach, 133-34; Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 5-8; Beer 24-5; Brewer, "Nature of Romance" 37 and 41; Finlayson, ed., Morte Arthure 6-9, and "Definitions" 53-4 and 169-70; and Batt and Field, "The Romance Tradition" 60.

¹²⁹ Finlayson, ed., Morte Arthure 5-7, and "Definitions" 52.

displaced by romance in eleventh and twelfth-century France,¹³⁰ the reasons for such changes in literary kind are more problematic. Traditionally, the birth and ascendancy of the new kind has been attributed to a rise in stories about the interests and everyday lives of the nobility.¹³¹ There is also a possible socio-political purpose, with the new kind supporting feudal monarchies and laws in its portrait of knights working and fighting together under a great king like Arthur rather than for their own personal notions of honour.¹³² In this way romancers and their audiences were attempting to integrate personal desires with public demands.¹³³ On the other hand, it goes much too far to suggest that romance has its origins in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia regum Britanniae (1135-37) as a kathartic narrative designed to heal the cultural wounds generated by the cannibalistic atrocities of the First Crusade.¹³⁴

It is also argued that romancers themselves realized the audience's desire for a new type of tale and that some members of the community of users recognized the differences between epic and romance.¹³⁵ At the same time, it is suggested, people were felt no longer to understand or desire the extreme pathos (in the Greek sense) and tragedy of the old

¹³⁰ Most recently by Batt and Field, "The Romance Tradition" 59-60.

¹³¹ de Vries 264-65. Cf. Robert W. Hanning, "The Social Significance of Twelfth-Century Chivalric Romance," Medievalia et Humanistica ns 3 (1972): 4.

¹³² Barron, English Medieval Romance 38-9; cf. Burlin 2-3.

¹³³ Hanning 3-4, 12-13 and 25.

¹³⁴ Geraldine Heng, "Cannibalism, the First Crusade, and the Genesis of Medieval Romance," differences 10.1 (1998): 98-174.

¹³⁵ Ker 323-26.

tales; manner or form became more important than content, understanding more significant than pathos or impressiveness.¹³⁶ This is especially likely in the relative peace and prosperity of the late Middle Ages as contrasted with the years of unrest epitomized by the Saxon and Viking invasions in the early Middle Ages, prosperity which would allow for less sombre tales in which heroes sought adventure rather than having it forced upon them by marauding invaders.¹³⁷ Hence the view of romance as myth displaced in an anthropocentric direction,¹³⁸ tales evoking a golden world.

There is also the increased popularity and influence of Ovid, especially the Ars amatoria, and the consequent role of love in the mediaeval stories, the connexion between love, chivalry and prowess. Indeed, another explanation for the rise of romance is the decision of the poets of the romans antiques (circa 1150-60) to adopt stories and themes from classical rather than contemporary epic: for by focussing on ancient rather than recent history or pseudo-history, they could take greater liberties with their material, notably the introduction of a specific type and treatment of love.¹³⁹ As we shall see, even the so-called roman d'aventure evinces a marked concern with love and ladies, and this connexion is foreign to epic.

Prominent amongst romance's sundry generic features are its penchant for verse

¹³⁶ de Vries 258, and Eugène Vinaver, The Rise of Romance (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) 14, 30-4 and 68. De Vries is speaking specifically of changes in types of heroic poetry, but the concept seems more appropriate to the shift from epic to romance.

¹³⁷ Cf. Hill 105.

¹³⁸ Frye, Anatomy 136-37.

¹³⁹ Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 6-7; cf. Hanning 4-9.

narratives, ^{especially} ~~even~~ amongst English redactions, although many late romances are in prose,¹⁴⁰ a lack of fixed length, with tales ranging from several hundred to several thousand lines (hence part of the definition problem); entrelacement; the division between secular and religious romances; the role of the marvellous (long, as we shall see, taken as a definitive feature),¹⁴¹ the invocation of authority, as opposed to Muse; the quest,¹⁴² the favourite forest setting;¹⁴³ the role and prominence of ladies; the role and prominence of love; and the role and prominence of adventure. Although “The dominant image in the iconography of chivalric romance is the figure of an armed knight riding in a forest,”¹⁴⁴ thereby seeking or perhaps even generating the adventure, we must allow for other manifestations of the adventure element. Whether or not he intended it (and Chapter Two has show that he might have possessed a sound enough grasp of generic kinds and conventions to realize what he was doing), Lydgate encapsulates the essence of the mediaeval romance paradigm:

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Baugh 2. For English romance’s various verse forms and their relation to their French counterparts see Barron, English Medieval Romance 222-26.

¹⁴¹ For a recent assessment of the role of the marvellous in Middle English Romance see John Finlayson, “The Marvellous in Middle English Romance,” Chaucer Review 33.4 (1999): 363-408.

¹⁴² For Burlin 5-6, romance is defined in part as a quest narrative. Cf. Frye, Anatomy 187 and 192-94.

¹⁴³ For the role of the forest in mediaeval romance see Muriel Whitaker, Arthur’s Kingdom of Adventure, Arthurian Studies 10 (Cambridge: Brewer; Totowa, NJ: Barnes, 1984) 53-68, esp. 53-5, and Corinne J. Saunders, The Forest of Medieval Romance (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993).

¹⁴⁴ Whitaker 53.

The myghty famous werriours,
Lovede the dayes paramours,
Gentilwymmen of high degre,
Nat but for trouthe and honeste,
And hem self to magnyfye
Put her lyf in Iupartye
In many vncouth straunge place,
For to stonde more in grace
Of ladyes, for ther high emprise.¹⁴⁵

There is considerable merit in considering Chrétien de Troyes as the father not only of Arthurian verse romance in particular, but of mediaeval romance in general, not least because, as noted in Chapter Two, the mediaeval community of users considered him in that light and judged subsequent romances by their relation to Chrétien's work.¹⁴⁶ Chrétien also "seems to be the first to identify 'romans' as genre," just as he established its norms.¹⁴⁷ Le Chevalier de la charrete (circa 1177), arguably Chrétien's most famous work, is a classic example of how, at least in early French romance, the defining generic features are adventure and love and the connexion between them. Le Chevalier de la charrete opens with a typical romance feature, the challenge. When Kex loses both the challenge and the Queen, the Queen's abduction by and rescue from Meleaganz become the principal cause of adventure.¹⁴⁸ The Queen is rescued by Lancelot who, it turns out, is

¹⁴⁵ John Lydgate, Reson and Sensuallyte, ed. Ernst Sieper, Vol. 1: The Manuscripts, Text, Glossary, Early English Text Society ES 84 (London: Oxford UP, 1901) 3179-87.

¹⁴⁶ Busby, foreword, The Evolution of Arthurian Romance, by Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann xii-xiii.

¹⁴⁷ Batt and Field, "The Romance Tradition" 63.

¹⁴⁸ All references are by line number to Chrétien de Troyes, Le Chevalier de la Charrete, ed. Mario Roques, Les Romans de Chrétien de Troyes 3 (Paris: Champion,

also her lover, and here we see the connexion between love and adventure in early romance, for all of Lancelot's actions and adventures are a direct result of his love for the Queen. Lancelot is driven on by Love, which urges him to enter the cart (360-77), just as he crosses the perilous Sword Bridge into Meleaganz's realm by sustaining himself with thoughts of Guenievre (3110-15); likewise his love of Guenievre and the knowledge that she is watching the battle subsequently help him to defeat Meleaganz (3622-3755). The romance ends happily with Lancelot killing Meleaganz and the king and court leading him away "a grant joie" (7097).

Romances like this made Ker and his followers claim that love is the principal characteristic and interest of romance, just as the best examples of the kind are those which portray love; in Chrétien especially even adventure is seen as secondary to the erotic psychology and sentiment.¹⁴⁹ This type of romance has been labelled the roman courtois or courtly romance because of its manifest if much-disputed relation to the mediaeval phenomenon of courtly love and its essential tenets of "Humility, Courtesy . . . and the Religion of Love."¹⁵⁰ In courtly romance there is a symbiotic connexion between love and martial prowess and adventures, so that "feats of arms and love . . . are

1975), and will be made parenthetically in the text.

¹⁴⁹ Ker 328, 333-34, 345-47 and 359. Cf. Finlayson, "Definitions" 49; for Finlayson 56-7, however, even courtly romance is driven by adventure.

¹⁵⁰ C. S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love (1936; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992) 2. Despite the recent scholarly penchant for disparaging Lewis's study, it remains one of the best examinations of courtly love. Adultery, however, perhaps plays less of a role than Lewis claims, which is why I have left it out of the quotation. Cf. Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 12-14; and see further Roger Boase, The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love (Manchester: Manchester UP; Totowa, NJ: Rowman, 1977).

permanently connected with the person of the perfect knight, they are part of his definition.”¹⁵¹ Such views were justifiably influential, but Finlayson has recently argued that Ker’s essay was biased towards French courtly romance at the expense of English romance, that love actually plays a relatively insignificant role in most Middle English romances, and that the dominant romance type and paradigm is actually the adventure romance.¹⁵²

Chrétien’s Chevalier au lion (also circa 1177) has been used not only to express this paradigm of the knight riding forth to seek adventure, but also the notion that romance is ultimately concerned with a self-portrait of knighthood, its ideals and customs.¹⁵³ Love and adventures are still linked, but adventure leads to self-awareness. However, since the adventures, if not life, of the hero in general can also be seen as being in some sense didactic or self-discovering,¹⁵⁴ the immediate importance of the Chevalier au lion is that it too supports the characterization of courtly romance on the basis of love and adventures and an happy ending:

Or a mes sire Yvains sa pes;

¹⁵¹ Auerbach 140. Cf. Hanning 3-4.

¹⁵² Finlayson, “Definitions” *passim*, especially, for the discussion of Ker and his thesis, 48-50. On adventure as the crux of romance see also Auerbach 133-36.

¹⁵³ Auerbach 131. Gibbs, too, following Auerbach and also presenting different evidence, sees self-realization as the central crux of romance: Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 7-8 and 14. Cf., for different reasons again, Hanning 3-4, 7, 9-19 and 21-4, and Finlayson, “Definitions” 56-7, discussing only courtly romance.

¹⁵⁴ The same argument is made, e.g., of Beowulf’s heroism: Guy Bourquin, “The Lexis and Deixis of the Hero in Old English Poetry,” Heroes and Heroines in Medieval English Literature 7.

et poez croire c'onques mes
ne fu de nule rien si liez,
comant qu'il ait esté iriez.
Molt an est a boen chief venuz
qu'il est amez et chier tenuz
de sa dame, et ele de lui.¹⁵⁵

Chrétien's status as a (perhaps the) key figure in the origin and development of French roman courtois makes his romances the norm for that type. Partly as a result of this, there is considerable agreement about the nature of French romance. This is not the case, however, for Middle English romance, and most of the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to it.

Because of its status as one of the few English courtly romances,¹⁵⁶ but also because of its abbreviation of Chrétien's excessive sentiment, the most interesting place to begin is with the early to mid-fourteenth-century Middle English adaptation-translation of Le Chevalier au lion, Ywayne and Gawayne. It is a critical commonplace that Ywayne and Gawayne, the only extant Middle English adaptation-translation of a Chrétien romance, shortens and steers away from Chrétien's concern with emotion, psychologizing and courtly love.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, this is the view taken of Middle English romance as a whole;

¹⁵⁵ Chrétien de Troyes, Le Chevalier au Lion (Yvain), ed. Mario Roques, *Les Romans de Chrétien de Troyes* 4 (Paris: Champion, 1975) 6789-95.

¹⁵⁶ Such is the classification of Finlayson, "Definitions" 171.

¹⁵⁷ See, e.g., the editions of Friedman and Harrington and Shepherd: Albert B. Friedman and Norman T. Harrington, ed., Ywain and Gawain, Early English Text Society 254 (London: Oxford UP, 1964 (for 1963)) xvi-xxii and xxv; and Shepherd, ed., Middle English Romances 333; as well as Erik S. Kooper, "Ywain and Gawain," The New Arthurian Encyclopedia, ed. Norris J. Lacy et al. (London: St. James, 1991). All references to Ywayne and Gawayne are by line number to the Friedman and Harrington edition, and will be made parenthetically in the text.

so much so that it is suggested of Ywayne and Gawayne that Ywayne's relationship with Alundyne is more inimical than congenial to the focus on adventure, quests and glory.¹⁵⁸ The poem is also said to contain a "bipartite" meaning and plot structure.¹⁵⁹ None of these arguments, it seems to me, is entirely accurate. Rather, this poem, like its French source, is best characterized by a combination of the romance features of adventure and love culminating in an happy ending. As with any generic categorization, though, we must remember that a certain amount of mixture and movement are to be expected.

Following the proem, the principal action begins with Colgrevice seeking adventure—or at least relating to the court his search for adventures (155 and 237)—including his encounter with the marvellous shepherd and fountain. Here we see that, contrary to popular opinion, the marvellous is not so much the primary characteristic of mediaeval romance as a subsidiary element of adventure (though of course it is still one of several romance features),¹⁶⁰ for as Colgrevice explains to the marvellous shepherd, he seeks "aventurs" and begs to be told of "sum mervayle" (314-18). Not only do the two elements go together, but for Colgrevice and Ywayne the marvellous is essentially an

¹⁵⁸ Maldwyn Mills, "Chivalric Romance," Arthur of the English 113.

¹⁵⁹ John Finlayson, "Ywain and Gawain and the Meaning of Adventure," Anglia 87 (1969): 329. Cf. his "Definitions" 171 and 179.

¹⁶⁰ Auerbach 134-36; Beer 9-10 and 26-8; and Finlayson, "Definitions" 57-8, and his "Marvellous" passim, esp. 364 and 405. Cf. Everett 10-12, who notes that, although the marvellous occurs more in romance than in other kinds, it occurs so often that it loses its sense of mystery or surprise. Heng's characterization of romance on the basis of gender, the marvellous and cultural concerns with fantasy and reality is thus at least partly misguided.

enabling condition of the search for adventure.¹⁶¹ This suggests that we can consider the marvellous more an aspect of the adventure element than a primary feature in its own right. In addition, Ywayne is seeking to avenge his cousin Colgrevance's shame (457-65 and 585-87), and to vindicate himself against the abusive words of Kay (1319-20).¹⁶² Vengeance, especially on behalf of one's family, is particularly common as an epic-heroic feature, and its presence here is another example of the similarities between epic and romance.¹⁶³ At the same time, Ywayne's desire to avenge Colgrevance requires him to undertake the same adventure of the Fountain, and so it too helps to promote the pre-eminent adventure element.

With the achievement of the adventure of the fountain, however, both Ywayne's and the poet's attention turn to love and ladies, thus suggesting that love is as prominent as adventure in this Middle English romance. One feature which romance shares with comedy is the marriage (often at the dénouement) of two or more of the protagonists, and in typical romance fashion Ywayne soon catches sight of, and immediately falls in love with, the Lady of the Fountain (871-78, 903-18 and 1161-68); shortly thereafter he marries her, and however much the marriage may initially be one of convenience on her

¹⁶¹ See further Finlayson, "Marvellous" 399-401, who considers Ywayne and Gawayne to be one of the very few Middle English romances in which the marvellous is actually essential to the adventure, though he overlooks Ywayne's vengeance motive.

¹⁶² In Le Chevalier au lion Yvain's pursuit of the Knight of the Fountain is inspired as much by Kay as by Calogrenant (890-99).

¹⁶³ Cf. Mills 114, who sees revenge as a typical feature of chivalric romance.

part,¹⁶⁴ it is Ywayne's whole desire. Alundyne is thus, again in typical romance fashion, both all of Ywayne's joy and all of his sorrow (1486-88 and 2681-82); this is so much the case that, by his own admission, he is no longer a man for having lost her love (2108-24):

I was a man, now am I nane;
.....
Mi maste sorow als sal þou here:
I lost a lady þat was me dere. (2116 and 2123-24)

Consequently, the English poet's excision of Chrétien's concern with courtly love and explicit sentiment notwithstanding, Ywayne and Gawayne remains as much a tale "of love and . . . adventure" as its source.¹⁶⁵

Significantly, all actions of the poem subsequent to the marriage centre, however loosely, around Ywayne's relationship with the Lady Alundyne, especially with his ongoing attempt in the second half to regain her favour. Even when, at Gawayne's behest, he initially leaves her to go tourneying (a form of adventure), more lines are spent on—and considerably more emphasis is given to—her stipulation that he return and, when he fails, the damsel's denunciation of him, than on the actual tournaments and adventures themselves (1449-1636). Ywayne's actions are thus instigated by or performed in atonement for his relationship with Alundyne, so that, at least in this Middle English romance, the dominant characteristics are a combination of love and ladies and adventure, culminating in the happy ending when he at last wins her back.

¹⁶⁴ In the beginning, Alundyne considers marriage only because she needs someone to protect her lands for her (especially in light of the apparent connexion between the fountain and her holdings): see 940-72; 1021-32; 1079-86; and 1169-74.

¹⁶⁵ Friedman and Harrington, ed., Ywain and Gawain xvii, though n.b. that they are here elucidating the differences between the French and English poems.

þus þe knyght with þe liown
Es turned now to Syr Ywayn
And has his lordship al ogayn;
And so Sir Ywain and his wive
In joy and blis þai led þaire live. (4020-24)

Even in King Horn (circa 1225), we see a combination of love and adventure dominating the plot to such a degree that it has been described as “a typical story of love and adventure.”¹⁶⁶ Although these features are employed in what is, in comparison to French courtly romance, an unusual fashion, their presence in this, the earliest of the extant Middle English romances, suggests that Middle English romance was always characterized to a significant extent by these features. Unlike the typical romance convention that we see in either version of the Yvain story, it is not, in Horn, the knight who falls instantly in love with the Lady, but vice versa:

And mest him louede Rymenhild,
þe kynges o3ene do3ter:
.....
Heo louede Horn so on mode
þat heo gan wexe wode.¹⁶⁷

Meeting Horn alone at last, Rymenhild declares that he shall have her to wife (413-14), whereupon, in an even more unusual inversion of romance conventions, Horn objects to

¹⁶⁶ Anne Scott, “Plans, Predictions, and Promises: Traditional Story Techniques and the Configuration of Word and Deed in King Horn,” Studies in Medieval English Romances 37.

¹⁶⁷ King Horn, ed. Rosamund Allen, Garland Medieval Texts 7 (New York: Garland, 1984) 252-56. See further the amusing scene at 299-312 where she declares her love for Horn to Aþulf, believing him to be Horn. All references are by line number to this edition; subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text. I do not reproduce Allen’s square brackets denoting emendation, nor her use of asterisks denoting “editorial excision of scribal additions:” Allen 118.

their union. He initially insists that he is too low-born for such a marriage (423-30), and then, when Rymenhild secures his knighthood and reiterates her nuptial demand, he is the one who defers their union by insisting that he first ride forth in search of adventure to prove his knighthood and worth (547-66). The usual adventures follow, but it is significant that (i) Horn is knighted through Rymenhild's influence (439-510), the knighthood allowing him to undertake adventure, and (ii) that he seeks these adventures in part to render himself worthy of her love. As he says in delaying their union:

Ihc wulle do pruesse
For þi luue in felde
Mid spere and mid schelde. (562-64)

Horn's first adventure, a battle against a group of pagans, is won in part because he, like Lancelot in *Le Chevalier de la charrete*, is inspired by thoughts of his love (619-22). His battle against the pagan giant in Ireland is likewise won partly by thinking about Rymenhild (892-96); he is also driven, however, by familial vengeance, for the giant had earlier slain Horn's father and exiled Horn from his rightful kingdom (883-91). Similarly, having saved Rymenhild (and so himself) from enforced marriage to another, Horn once again delays their union, this time so he can regain his realm and avenge his father (1303-18). In both of these cases we have not only a combination of love and adventures, but a desire for vengeance and what must be termed, according to the reasoning of those critics who misrepresent (mediaeval) epic, a socio-political motivation on the part of the hero.¹⁶⁸ However, despite the argument that *Horn* is not a true mediaeval romance and that love is

¹⁶⁸ On Horn's socio-political motivation cf. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* 73, 85 and 226.

ultimately marginal to the story,¹⁶⁹ Horn wishes to regain his kingdom in part so that he will at last be a suitable match for Rymenhild, appropriately famous and high-standing:

Þat lond ischal ofreche
And do mi fader wreche;
Ischal beo king of tune
And lere kinges rune.
Þanne schal Rymenhilde þe 3inge
Ligge bi Horn þe kinge! (1313-18)

A number of features and motives operate simultaneously here, but the combination of love, ladies, adventure and the happy ending are prominent and significant.

Another very early Middle English romance is Floris and Blancheflour (circa 1250). In many ways closer to the basic meta-romance or ur-romance form best exemplified by the Greek romances Daphnis and Chloe or An Ephesian Tale, Floris and Blancheflour is an unusual mediaeval romance in that there are almost no knights, no jousts and no forests.¹⁷⁰ What we do get are a pair of lovers who are separated, undergo adventures, are reunited and eventually married, the tale ending happily with multiple marriages.¹⁷¹ Florys does eventually get dubbed a knight, but only at the end of the tale (1263-68), and he uses guile (and a great deal of luck) rather than force to reunite himself

¹⁶⁹ Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 29-31.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 32-3.

¹⁷¹ Florys marries Blancheflour and, at her suggestion, the Ameral marries Clarice: see Floris and Blancheflour, ed. A. B. Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927) 1269-79. All references are by line number to this edition; subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

with Blauncheflour.¹⁷² Floris and Blauncheflour is thus an atypical mediaeval romance, but also an early one; it consequently provides some insight as to what the community of users perceived the pre-eminent romance characteristics to be, and suggests that those characteristics are dominated by the ubiquitous ones of love and ladies and adventure. Certainly Florys's adventures stem from his love of Blauncheflour, taking the form of his quest to find her:

Ne schal y rest nyȝt ne day,
Nyȝt ne day ne no stound,
Tyl y haue my lemon found;
Hur to seken y woll wend
Pauȝ it were to þe worldes ende. (342-46)

Admittedly in mediaeval romance the adventure element usually manifests itself in the form of chivalric encounters, which is presumably why some critics see romance as a self-portrait of mediaeval chivalry, but this need not be the only form of adventure. Thus, just as we must avoid over-restrictive notions of generic kinds and conventions, so must we be wary of dismissing Floris and Blauncheflour from the canon of mediaeval romance because of its lack of chivalric concerns or knightly "self-realization."¹⁷³ The same principles apply to the complaint that the love and lovers depicted in the poem are not courtly. The theme

¹⁷² On the prominence of guile in the poem see Geraldine Barnes, "Cunning and Ingenuity in the Middle English Floris and Blauncheflur," Medium Aevum 53 (1984): 10-25.

¹⁷³ As does Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 33; the phrase "self-realization" comes from 34. Gibbs 33 is also the source for the courtly love argument rebutted in my next sentence.

may not be courtly love, but it is certainly amor vincit omnia.¹⁷⁴

Sir Orfewe (circa 1300) has also been criticized for its lack of chivalric concerns or knightly self-perfection.¹⁷⁵ In this context it is worth remembering that the list of various types of tales and possible kinds which opens Sir Orfewe is not only a generic feature typical of various mediaeval kinds (see Chapter Two), but that the most common tales are said to be those of love:

Sum beþe of wer & sum of wo,
& sum of ioie & mirþe al-so,
& sum of trecherie & of gile,
Of old auentours þat fel while,
& sum of bourdes & ribaudy,
& mani þer beþ of fairy;
Of al þinges þat men seþ
Mest o loue, for-soþe, þai beþ.¹⁷⁶

Also mentioned is a propensity for tales “Of auentours” and “meruailes” (15 and 18). The prologue to Sir Orfewe is actually a composite from analogous texts, but by common editorial consent and generic convention and probability these lines are almost certainly a true if not identical reflection of the lost prologue itself. Hence, it soon turns out, love is also the principal motivation in Orfewe, which, like Floris and Blancheflour, contains relatively little in the way of the usual chivalric adventures.

¹⁷⁴ For the theme of amor vincit omnia see Barron, English Medieval Romance 183-84. Cf. Barnes, “Cunning and Ingenuity” passim, esp. 23, who feels that the theme of amor vincit omnia is made possible by the emphasis on guile, so that wit allows for love.

¹⁷⁵ Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 34.

¹⁷⁶ Sir Orfeo, ed. A. J. Bliss, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966) 5-12. All references are by line number to the Auchinleck text of this edition; subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

When told of his Queen's dream-inspired fear that they will very soon be separated Orfeo declares that he would rather die than lose his love (175-78; cf. 120-31 and 330-36), thus furthering the prologue's suggestion that love will play a strong role in the tale. This suggestion is soon born out, for following Heurodis's abduction unto Faerie, Orfeo gives up his kingdom into his steward's keeping because of his great grief for his lost love (191-218). Just as Ywayne goes mad in a wood after violating his Lady's stipulation that he return at the end of year's tourneying (Le Chevalier au lion 2806-3028; Ywayne and Gawayne 1637-1796, esp. 1650-52), and Launcelot goes mad when rebuked by Gwenvere for his liaison with Elayne in Le Morte Darthur,¹⁷⁷ Orfeo, in a minor twist to the usual convention, voluntarily exiles himself to the wood because of his grief (209-14): he retains his sanity, but has nothing but his harp for company. The convention may take a different shape, but the cause of it—and adventure—in the tale is the same: love and ladies.

Sir Orfewe (like Floris and Blancheflour and Havelok) displays little concern with the usual chivalric adventures or pursuits, but it is perhaps significant that, after ten years in the wood (264), Orfeo first catches sight of his beloved by following a faerie hunt (314-24), for hunting can be a type of or preface to adventure. Just as the initial loss of Heurodis instigates the sylvan exile, which acts here as a type of adventure, so this second loss, when Heurodis and the hunting party leave, causes the second adventure, in which Orfeo defies death and enters the Faerie King's realm and palace. Unlike Horn, who

¹⁷⁷ Sir Thomas Malory, The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, ed. Eugène Vinaver, rev. P. J. C. Field, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) 806.3-8 and 817.22-824.27.

disguises himself as an harper to gain entry to the tower where Rymenhild is imprisoned but who then draws his sword and kills her captors and his foes (King Horn 1493-1526), Orfeo enters the magnificent and marvellous faerie castle by claiming he has come as an harper to entertain them (377-86; 419-20; and 429-34); and like the protagonist in the classical legend of Orpheus (the romance's ultimate source), he reclaims Heurodis through his musical charms (435-79). Unlike the protagonist of the classical legend, however, the hero of the mediaeval story does not lose his wife a second and final time. This may be seen as a generic transformation to bring the original tragic ending into conformity with the recognized and expected norms of mediaeval romance, one which highlights the happy ending romance shares with comedy.¹⁷⁸

It seems to me, therefore, that love is a more dominant characteristic in Middle English romance than Finlayson (and others) allows, for it is present as a prominent feature even (but by no means exclusively) in early Middle English romance, though it is quite true that courtly love and romance are not necessarily the palmary types.¹⁷⁹ Even in Sire Degarre (early fourteenth century), which opens by stating how

Kniȝtes, þat were some tyme in londe,
 Ferli fele wolde fonde
 And sechen auentures bi niȝt and dai,
 How ȝhe miȝte here strengthe asai,¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ For some connexions between comedy and romance see Brewer, "Nature of Romance" 28-9.

¹⁷⁹ Finlayson, "Definitions" *passim*.

¹⁸⁰ Sire Degarre, ed. Gustav Schleich (Heidelberg: Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1929) 3-6. All references are by line number to this edition; subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text. I do not reproduce the

the action is instigated by the King's daughter, either through the King's insistence that her husband prove his worth and mettle by defeating him in combat (26-36), or as a result of her being raped by a faerie knight (105-13). However unpalatable it be, and whatever else it may imply, the rape brings about that supernatural or marvellous birth common to the heroic pattern and a variety of heroes; that birth is followed, here and in many similar instances, by the leaving of tokens by which an abandoned or unborn child will subsequently be recognized. Thus, although the driving force may initially be lust rather than love, the plot of Degarre still depends to a considerable extent on a lady.

Furthermore, contrary to the ethos and motivation established by the proem and many romance critics, Degarre does not seek adventures for their own sake, nor even "for his own los et pris."¹⁸¹ Rather, any adventures he encounters, such as the fight with the dragon, are subsidiary to his quest for "his kinrede" (310). Initially, Degarre even eschews horse and armour in favour of a stout quarterstaff (320-27), although he adopts more chivalric arms when he is subsequently knighted (416). Degarre does, like Horn, postpone his union with his would-be lover while he seeks "More . . . hauntours" (982; cf. 970-84), but this adventure, like the one which led to his being loved by the (Faerie) Lady in the first place, is part of his quest for his father (714-15). And of course all of Degarre's actions, like his very existence, stem from the faerie knight's initial rape of Degarre's mother so that, while much in the tale is unusual, the principal motivation, in

editor's square brackets denoting emendation.

¹⁸¹ Finlayson, "Definitions" 55. Finlayson is discussing what he sees as the essential romance paradigm rather than Degarre per se.

some form or other, is love and ladies and adventures. Although the conclusion is missing, at the point at which the text ends everything seems to be heading towards an happy ending and multiple reunions, not only that of Degarre and his father, but of Degarre and his faerie lover as well as of his parents.¹⁸²

The same features and motives operate, in somewhat different form, in Thomas Chestre's Launfal (close of the fourteenth century). Launfal's adventures are not initially instigated by love, but they are the result of a lady's—Gwenore's—penchant for taking lovers, and especially of her dishonouring of Launfal at the wedding feast.¹⁸³ Further, although it appears that Chestre emphasized—and was more concerned with—earthly adventure and action over the more marvellous elements of his sources,¹⁸⁴ it is significant that Launfal's subsequent adventures also stem from an encounter with a lady, for the tourney at Karlyoun is a direct result of his new wealth and status, both of which are themselves dependant upon the gifts of his faerie mistress (318-33). Similarly, the giant Valentyne's challenge includes the traditional idea of fighting “for þy lemmanes sake” (538; cf. 523), and while such a challenge probably stems more from generic convention than Valentyne's knowledge of Launfal and Tryamour's secret relationship (361-62 and 499-504), it is telling that the convention itself links love and “justes” (539). The climax

¹⁸² Cf. Walter Hoyt French and Charles Brockway Hale, ed., “Sir Degaré,” Middle English Metrical Romances (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1930) the footnote on 320.

¹⁸³ Thomas Chestre, Sir Launfal, ed. A. J. Bliss, Nelson's Medieval and Renaissance Library (London: Nelson, 1960) 44-8 and 70-2. All references are by line number to this edition; subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

¹⁸⁴ See Elizabeth Williams's discussion of the poem in “Chivalric Romance,” Arthur of the English 134.

of the romance takes the form of an extended Potiphar's Wife scene, which also serves as both Launfal's lowest and finest hours, and here again the action, and especially the fate of the protagonist, are inextricably linked to love and ladies: Launfal's life is endangered by Guenevere's calumnies (705-26, 756-803 and 835-37), and only Tryamour's arrival at court saves him (992-1020). The tale ends happily with Launfal and Tryamour's departure into Faerie, whence Launfal returns annually to joust with whosoever wishes (1024-32).

The evidence of a variety of romances covering approximately a two-hundred year period thus suggests that a combination of some form of love and ladies and adventures, culminating in an happy ending, are the palmary characteristics of mediaeval romance.

It has been emphasized throughout this thesis that parody affords the literary critic an important perspective on what the community of users perceived the essential features of a literary kind to be,¹⁸⁵ and the same is true of what has been termed intrinsic criticism within the primary sources themselves. It has been said of parody, moreover, that its most successful practitioners are those most in command of the conventions and kinds being mocked,¹⁸⁶ and we might say much the same of intrinsic literary criticism. It will be useful, therefore, to examine some mediaeval parodies and criticisms of romance to see if they

¹⁸⁵ This is the case even if the parody is more ironic play and constructive criticism than outright belittlement. For the argument that parody is not inherently negative see Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (London: Methuen, 1985) *passim*.

¹⁸⁶ Siân Echard, *Arthurian Narrative in the Latin Tradition*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 36 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 211; cf. Hutcheon 19 and 32-4.

corroborate our characterization of mediaeval romance.

Chaucer's Canterbury Tales can be viewed as a sort of repository of and commentary on the various literary kinds employed in the Middle Ages,¹⁸⁷ this is especially true of Fragment VII, which in many ways is a microcosm of the Canterbury Tales as a whole. The dominant focus of Fragment VII itself seems to be literature,¹⁸⁸ and although various of Chaucer's works employ, subvert, burlesque and even parody elements which are generally considered typical of romance, the parody is nowhere more pronounced than in the Tale of Thopas. For the purposes of the current romance characterization it is significant that Thopas is "a knyght auntrous" (909) who decides to "out ride . . . thurgh a fair forest" (750/1940 and 754). As one editor aptly remarks, part of the parody resides in the fact that the catalogue of things encountered in the forest is more akin to items from a grocery than a romance forest,¹⁸⁹ but we can assume from the prominence of the adventure element that, ostensibly at least, Thopas seeks adventure. Because the birds are singing, Thopas falls in love (772-73), but unlike the usual romance knight, who falls in love with a specific Lady whom he actually sees or at least knows of—as, for instance, do Ywayne or Palamon and Arcite—Thopas simply falls "in love-longynge" (772). He then decides that, since no earthly woman is worthy of him, he will love "An elf-queene"

¹⁸⁷ Cooper, Oxford Guides to Chaucer 309.

¹⁸⁸ Gaylord 226-27. Benson is surely mistaken to argue that VII "lacks any very clear unifying theme." Larry D. Benson, ed., The Riverside Chaucer, n. to Fragment VII.

¹⁸⁹ Gibbs, ed., "Sir Thopas," Middle English Romances n. to l. 44 of Gibbs's line numbering (corresponding to 756 of The Riverside Chaucer). For the role of the forest in mediaeval romance see Whitaker 53-68, esp. 53-5, and Saunders.

(790/1980, 795 and 799). Chaucer has again inverted the convention, for it is usually the Lady who is haughty, not the knight, especially in courtly romance. While in Sire Degarre the hero's adventures result from his quest for his parents, and in Floris and Blancheflour from his quest for his lost love, Thopas's lack of adventures preface his quest for his elf-queen, which in turn leads to his non-adventure with the three-headed (842) giant Olifaunt. Once again love and adventures are linked, as they are in the song Thopas has his minstrels sing whilst arming (845-850/2040), and in Chaucer-the-Pilgrim's explication that his tale is "Of bataille[s] and of chivalry, / And of ladyes love-drury" (894-95).

Thopas has been seen as both a burlesque of and a critical commentary on the romance kind,¹⁹⁰ but the consistency and occasional severity with which Chaucer inverts romance's conventions (here and elsewhere) suggest that it is a parody rather than a burlesque—although neither form is mutually exclusive of intrinsic literary criticism. In order for this parody to be successful, however, both Chaucer and his audience need to have been aware of the typical generic features and conventions. Further, the parody within Thopas

is achieved, not by the simple mention of the stock elements (if this were true, then The Rape of the Lock would be a parody of epic, not mock-heroic), but by, first, their superfluity—in a short space Chaucer has crammed in almost more stock elements than are to be found in any but the worst Middle English romance—and, second, their lack of function. As in mock-heroic, it is the non-functional display of rituals which generates the parodic humour, not simply the rituals themselves.¹⁹¹

Since metre and manuscript layout and decoration can, as we saw in Chapter One, be

¹⁹⁰ Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances 36-7.

¹⁹¹ Finlayson, "Definitions" 47.

generic features, it may be added here that in the Ellesmere and Hengwrt manuscripts the metrical parody is emphasized by the fact that the lines run off the edge of the page.¹⁹²

The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnelle (circa 1450) has similarly been seen as a burlesque or satiric pastiche of typical romance conventions, one intended, as we saw in Chapter Two, for a comparative reading and context.¹⁹³ It too should thus be a fair indicator of what the community of users perceived to be the standard romance conventions; its doggerel metre aside, the dominant features, which manifest themselves in the question of what women most desire, are an intricate connexion between love, ladies and adventure. The adventure and poem end happily for Arthoure, who evades Gromer's threat to his life, but not for Gawen, who mourns for evermore Ragnelle's early death.¹⁹⁴ Yet, regardless of whether or not one accepts that Ragnelle's death is merely part of the satiric humour, a deliberate travesty of the felicitous marriage which should close a

¹⁹² See "Thopas," The Ellesmere Manuscript of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, intro. Ralph Hanna III (Cambridge: Brewer, 1989) n. pag., and Geoffrey Chaucer, "Chaucer's Tale of Thopas," The Canterbury Tales: A Facsimile and Transcription of the Hengwrt Manuscript, with Variants from the Ellesmere Manuscript, ed. Paul G. Ruggiers, intro. Donald C. Baker et al. (Norman, Oklahoma: U of Oklahoma P; Folkestone: Dawson, 1979) 213^v-215^f. Cf. Cooper, Oxford Guides to Chaucer 300, who argues that the layout is Chaucer's own, and notes further that the same layout occurs in Cambridge Dd.4.24 and Gg.4.27.

¹⁹³ See John Withrington's discussion of the poem in "Folk Romance," Arthur of the English 209-10, and Stephen H. A. Shepherd, "No Poet has His Travesty alone: The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell," Romance Reading on the Book 112-28, and Shepherd, ed., Middle English Romances 379-80.

¹⁹⁴ The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell, ed. Laura Sumner, Smith College Studies in Modern Languages 5.4 (Northampton, MA: Smith College; Paris: Champion, July 1924) 55-7, 97-8 and 106-08 for Gromer's threats, and 820-22 and 832-34 for Gawen's grief.

romance,¹⁹⁵ the very unusualness of the ending draws attention to the normal convention.

The complexity of romance in the Middle Ages is reflected in the fact that it has been divided into a number of sub-genres.¹⁹⁶ There are other sub-divisions, notably that of the religious and secular romance, but courtly romance and adventure romance seem to attract the most attention.¹⁹⁷ While the adventure type is said to be identifiable by the knight's riding forth to seek adventures, courtly romance is said to be identifiable because of the emphasis given to the symbiotic connexion between love and prowess and the exaggerated emotions of the principal lovers—especially those of the knight. I would argue, however, that all these types, including the religious type, are really much closer than these distinctions suggest: each is ultimately characterized to a considerable extent by love and ladies and adventures, it is just that the courtly poet chooses to privilege certain features over others, and the religious poet privileges still others. This does not mean that the other features are absent or less important; rather, as is the case with the distinction between epic and romance, it is more a case of degrees of emphasis.

Nevertheless, within certain types of mediaeval romance the courtly love element is so strong as to become recognizable as a specific generic feature in its own right. Nor is it only modern criticism which recognizes the presence of courtly love as a recurring generic

¹⁹⁵ Shepherd, ed., Middle English Romances 379, and “No Poet has His Travesty alone” 120-21, and Withrington 209.

¹⁹⁶ Finlayson, “Definitions” 55-7 and 170-80, esp. 170-71. Finlayson examines the adventure, courtly and religious romances at some length here, but feels that the adventure type is the most prominent.

¹⁹⁷ See, however, the recent sub-division of dynastic romance, chivalric romance and folk romance: Arthur of the English 71-224.

feature in the Middle Ages, for Dante in the Commedia and Chaucer in the Nonnes Preestes Tale criticize not only courtly romance but perhaps the most famous exponent of it: “the book of Launcelot de Lake, / That wommen holde in ful greet reverence” (NPT 3212-13).¹⁹⁸ Dante’s suggestion is that the lovers Paolo and Francesca are condemned to hell in large part because of the prose Lancelot (Inferno, V, 127-38), while Chaucer's Nun's Priest asserts ironically that his tale of a cock and hen is just as true, as important, as that of Lancelot and Guinevere (3211-13). The way in which Dante and Chaucer feel it necessary to criticize a specific courtly text and courtly conventions is evidence of the popularity, and therefore of course of the existence, of courtly love as a prominent generic feature in mediaeval romance.¹⁹⁹ As in the case of parody, criticism of courtly conventions depends in part on the audience’s awareness of examples of courtly literature itself, as well as of the conventions and topoi it expresses.²⁰⁰ Something similar is apparent in other

¹⁹⁸ Chaucer’s use of the term book implies the prose Lancelot, but even if he is also referring to Chrétien’s Chevalier de la charrete, his attitude to either text—or both—is far from complimentary. Dante’s reference to “Gallehault,” on the other hand, makes it clear that the book Paolo and Francesca read is the first section of the prose Lancelot: Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, trans. Allen Mandelbaum, notes by Mandelbaum et al., drawings by Barry Moser, 3 vols. (1980-84; Berkeley: U of California P; New York: Bantam, 1982-86) Inferno, V, 137. All references to the Commedia are by cantica, canto and line number to this edition; subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

¹⁹⁹ Thus giving the lie to those who deny the existence of courtly love even as a literary phenomenon: D. W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1962) 391-450 and 460-63, and E. Talbot Donaldson, “The Myth of Courtly Love,” Speaking of Chaucer (1970; London: The Athlone Press University of London, 1977) 154-63. For a variety of mostly sceptical approaches see: F. X. Newman, ed., The Meaning of Courtly Love (Albany: State University of New York P, 1968).

²⁰⁰ D. D. R. Owen, William the Lion 1143-1214 (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1997) 137 and 151. Owen is speaking specifically of the Romance of Fergus and what he considers

cases too: for instance, the author of the Romance of Fergus, who is said to be reacting against courtly conventions in general, and the courtly romances of Chrétien de Troyes in particular.²⁰¹ Fergus may not be quite as parodic as has been suggested, for some of its obvious references to Chrétien are more akin to humorous intertextual nods than to any kind of reductio ad absurdum, but such humour and parody aside, it too is dominated by the combination of love, ladies and adventure.

However, while the Paolo and Francesca episode in Inferno V seems to condemn courtly romance as much as the two lovers,²⁰² courtly love itself plays a greater role in the Commedia than Dante admits. Despite those critics who question the existence of courtly love even as a literary phenomenon, we must recognize it as a key element of one mediaeval literary kind, one which is, moreover, recognized and criticized, if not also created, in the Middle Ages. Indeed, so dominant is courtly love in some aspects of mediaeval literature and society that even Dante, who constantly emphasizes that he is creating a new, superior type of poetry, who denigrates all but his own poetry, ultimately

to be its criticism of Chrétien, but the comment is equally appropriate here.

²⁰¹ Owen, William the Lion 118, 123-25, 129-30, 136-38 and 151. Owen also considers the criticism to be directed against Scottish courtly society under William the Lion. See also D. D. R. Owen, trans., Fergus of Galloway, by Guillaume le Clerc (London: Dent, 1991) vii-ix, xiii-xiv and 164.

²⁰² Susan Noakes considers the romance to be blameless: Susan Noakes, "The Double Misreading of Paolo and Francesca," Philological Quarterly 62 (1983): 237, and her "Dante Alighieri," The New Arthurian Encyclopedia, ed. Norris J. Lacy et al., (London: St James P, 1991). Renato Poggioli argues that Francesca herself seems to both excoriate and exculpate the Lancelot, but that Dante-the-Poet definitely condemns it: Renato Poggioli, "Tragedy or Romance? A Reading of the Paolo and Francesca Episode in Dante's Inferno," PMLA 72.3 (June 1957): 339, 344-47 and 357-58.

utilizes the courtly romance tenet of the Religion of Love in a manner very similar to that found in courtly romance.²⁰³ This is not to suggest that the Commedia is a full-blown romance, merely that it employs and criticizes various romance features, and such generic mixture and intrinsic literary criticism further testify to the popularity of the romance kind, as well as to the presence in that kind of certain prominent elements.

The locus classicus of mediaeval romance is the forest, the ideal environment for adventures.²⁰⁴ The Commedia opens with Dante-the-Pilgrim lost in a dark wood, and while we are meant to view this allegorically rather than literally, the romance convention—a marked convention—is nonetheless present. It is significant, too, that Vergil comes to guide Dante out of his dark wood because of the request of “a lady . . . so blessed, so lovely / that [he] implored to serve at her command” (Inferno, II, 53-4). The Lady's beauty and the lover's desire to do her bidding are further mediaeval romance commonplaces. As C. S. Lewis observes, “Obedience to his lady's lightest wish, however whimsical, and silent acquiescence in her rebukes, however unjust, are the only virtues [the lover] dares to claim.”²⁰⁵ Even though Beatrice is not Vergil's Beloved, his desire “to serve at her command” is typical of the courtly topos, entirely in accordance with the essential tenets of humility and courtesy. Dante's own relation with Beatrice is also primarily that of a courtly lover and his Lady, though unlike the love of, say, Tristan and

²⁰³ The phrase “Religion of Love” comes from Lewis's definition of courtly love: Lewis, Allegory of Love 2.

²⁰⁴ Whitaker 53 goes so far as to say that “the forest . . . exists to provide [the knight] with adventures;” cf. 55.

²⁰⁵ Lewis, Allegory of Love 2.

Isode, it is an idealizing rather than adulterous affair. For instance, just as Lancelot crosses the Sword Bridge by thinking of love and Guinevere (Chevalier de la charrete 3110-15), Dante-the-Pilgrim passes through the Ring of Fire separating Purgatorio from Paradiso by thinking of Beatrice (Purgatorio, XXVII, 34-54). Even when Dante is fully intent on God, Beatrice has but to smile for his attention to become “divided” (Paradiso, X, 55-63); likewise, at the Empyrean Rose, his eyes are constantly drawn to where Beatrice sits (Paradiso, XXXI, 43-93; XXXII, 7-8). Finally, like Gareth and Lady Lyones,²⁰⁶ Dante reaches Beatrice but to be sent away again, returning only after the completion of a seemingly impossible task: benefitting the world with the record of his journey (Purgatorio, XXXII, 100-08; also XXXIII, 52-7). The suggestion, then, is twofold: first, the Commedia is more courtly than Dante allows; second, we thus have another testament of the existence of a connexion between adventure and love and ladies, implying that these were the most prominent features of at least one prominent mediaeval literary kind.

Somewhat surprisingly, this view is corroborated by the very uncourtly and rather atypical Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Watheleyne (first quarter of the fifteenth century).²⁰⁷ The poem opens with Arthur and his court hunting, itself a type of adventure which in turn often leads, as here and in The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnelle,

²⁰⁶ Malory, Works 327.7-11.

²⁰⁷ The poem has recently been dated circa 1424-25, as a celebratory piece for the Neville family, in the context of Anglo-Scottish relations and the Hundred Years War: Rosamund Allen, “The Awntyrs off Arthure: Jests and Jousts,” Romance Reading on the Book 129-42, and her discussion of the poem in “Chivalric Romance,” Arthur of the English 152.

to more elaborate (and perhaps mystical) adventures. Despite one recent view to the contrary,²⁰⁸ this romance expectation-convention is fulfilled in the Awntyrs when the ghost appears to Gaynour and Gawayn; ghostly apparitions may not be the usual adventure form of armed combat or quests, but they are still a form of adventure, and just as we must avoid restrictive views of genre-study in general, so must we avoid assuming that generic features can only manifest themselves in one or two limited ways. Besides, the more typical knightly-combat adventure does eventually occur in the Galeron episode. The fact that both of these adventures seek out Gawayn (and Gaynour) rather than vice versa, albeit atypical, suggests nothing more than that the knight need not always ride forth to find adventure: it does not otherwise undermine the prominence of the adventure element. Indeed, a large number of romances actually begin with a knight riding into Arthur's court to deliver some sort of challenge.

For the purposes of the current romance characterization it is significant that the ghost turns out to be Gaynour's mother, that it appears and speaks to Gaynour and Gawayn, and that Gawayn confronts it because it has frightened Gaynour.²⁰⁹ Thus, however unusual both the romance and the adventure may be, there is even here an

²⁰⁸ J. O. Fichte, "The Awntyrs off Arthure: An Unconscious Change of the Paradigm of Adventure," The Living Middle Ages, ed. Uwe Böker, Manfred Markus and Rainer Schöwerling (Stuttgart: Belser, 1989) 131-33.

²⁰⁹ The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne, ed. Ralph Hanna III (Manchester: Manchester UP; New York: Barnes, 1974) 83-160. All references are by line number to this edition; subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

intimate relation between ladies and adventure.²¹⁰ Since the ghost is Gaynour's mother, it is possible that the admonition "to mende thi mys" (193) is inspired by love; even if it is not, the ghost is allowed to make its warning through the grace of God (140), which does constitute love. Once again the generic characteristic takes unusual form, but it is nonetheless present. Considering that the poem also ends happily, with the reconciliation of Gawayn and Galeron, Galeron's marriage and Gaynour's orders "To al þe religious to rede and to singe" (704), thereby assuaging the ghost's pain and saving its soul (197-230), The Awntyrs off Arthure employs all the principal features of mediaeval romance.

This does not of course mean that the poem cannot also employ other features and echo or even contain mixtures of other kinds, for as we established in Chapter One, instances of generic mixture are much more common than pure kinds. Hence the poem has been seen as a dark comedy, a quasi-parodic inversion of the Loathly Lady story.²¹¹ At the same time, it is illicit love, long if contentiously maintained as one of the tenets of courtly love,²¹² which has—quite literally—excoriated the ghost (213-14), just as it is Pride, a typical characteristic of the courtly Lady, which most offends God (238-39). The ghost likewise appears to be warning Gaynour against taking illicit lovers and breaking God's bond when she advises: "þerof be þou bolde; / Ðat makes burnes so bale to breke His bidding" (241-42). Moreover, if the ghost's words condemn one prominent feature of

²¹⁰ On the other hand, there is little in the poem to support the suggestion of Allen et al. that Gawayn and Gaynour are guilty of an illicit intrigue: see Allen's discussion of the Awntyrs and the critics she cites in "Chivalric Romance," Arthur of the English 154.

²¹¹ Allen, "The Awntyrs off Arthure: Jests and Jousts" 138.

²¹² See, e.g., Lewis, Allegory of Love 2.

romance, Gawain's own words to the ghost seem to condemn another, the adventure ethos:²¹³

How shal we fare, . . . þat fonden to fight,
And þus defoulen þe folke on fele kinges londes,
And riches ouer reymes withouten eny right,
Wynnen worshipp and wele þorgh wightnesse of hondes?
(261-64)

The first part of the Awntyrs is thus not only unusually sombre for a romance, it also seems to censure, or at least comment on, the two palmary elements of the mediaeval romance kind. This is not to say, however, that we can or should classify the Awntyrs as an exemplum.²¹⁴ Rather, such intrinsic criticism within the primary sources themselves is another important indicator of how the mediaeval community of users perceived various literary kinds; and the Awntyrs points, albeit unusually, to a penchant in romance for love, ladies and adventure, culminating in an happy ending.

The undisputed masterpiece of Middle English romance, if not also of mediaeval romance in general, is Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (perhaps close of the fourteenth

²¹³ There is considerable merit in the argument that the dominant theme here, as in the Dream of Fortune's Wheel in the alliterative Morte Arthure, is mutability (and lordship) rather than outright censure of courtly-chivalric values. See Helen Phillips, "The Awntyrs off Arthure: Structure and Meaning," Arthurian Literature 12 (1993): 74-9. Cf. Echard 175-76, who sees the Awntyrs as being concerned with royal and noble abuses of power and questions of legal rights to land ownership. At the same time, it is striking that such an apparent denunciation comes from Gawain, in the English tradition at least perhaps the ideal romance knight. In either case, however, the adventure element plays a prominent role.

²¹⁴ As does David N. Klausner, "Exempla and The Awntyrs of [sic] Arthure," Mediaeval Studies 34 (1972): 307-25. As Phillips 83 observes, Klausner overemphasizes the exemplum connexion. Cf. Klausner with Echard 176, who sees it as a partial exemplum decked out in the trappings of romance.

century), and the final question must be to what extent it corroborates this characterization. The poet promises “an outrage aventure of Arthurez wonderez,” and the expectations raised by this statement are furthered by Arthur’s habit of not eating until an adventure or marvel presents itself or until “hym deuised were / Of sum auenturus þyng an vncouþe tale, / Of sum mayn meruayle.”²¹⁵ Being “oueral enker-grene” (150), the Green Knight is something of a wonder himself, and although the “gomen” (283) which he seeks is not in itself marvellous, its results definitely are:

þe fayre hede fro þe halce hit to þe erþe,
þat fele hit foyned wyth her fete, þere hit forth roled;
þe blod brayd fro þe body, þat blykked on þe grene;
And nawþer faltered ne fel þe freke neuer þe helder,
Bot styþly he start forth vpon styf schonkes,
And runyschly he raʒt out, þere as renkkez stoden,
Laʒt to his lufly hed, and lyft hit vp sone. (427-33)

The marvellous thus introduces and secures the adventure,²¹⁶ for as a result of this marvellous knight and game, Gawayn rides forth to seek adventure, as the close of Fitt I emphasizes:

Now þenk wel, Sir Gawan,
For woþe þat þou ne wonde
þis auenture for to frayn
þat þou hatz tan on honde. (487-90)

Like Chrétien’s Chevalier de la charrete, the adventure in Gawain and the Green Knight stems from a Challenge, but here, as in the Awntyrs off Arthure, Gawayn is sought by

²¹⁵ Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed., rev. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) 29 and 92-4. All references are by line number to this edition; subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

²¹⁶ On the role and nature of the marvellous in the poem see further Finlayson, “Marvellous” 400-04.

adventure rather than vice versa. But this does not affect the prominence of the adventure element, merely the way in which that element manifests itself.

Women, too, play a prominent role in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Although the Green Knight eventually reveals to Gawayn that his challenge was designed by Morgne la Faye in the hope of frightening Gawayn to death (2446-62), this feature is most obviously filled by Lady Bertilak. Her testing of Gawayn, which is intimately bound up in the Beheading Game, centres in part around Gawayn's reputation for courtesy and as a lover (1292-1304 and 1481-1507), thus suggesting a connexion between love, ladies and adventure. Indeed, the Lady herself makes this explicit when, castigating Gawayn for his lack of amorous intentions, she explains that

of alle cheualry to chose, þe chef þyng alosed
Is þe lel layk of luf, þe lettrure of armes;
For to telle of þis teuelyng of þis trwe knyȝtez,
Hit is þe tytelet token and tyxt of her werkkez,
How ledes for her lele luf hor lyuez han auntered,
Endured for her drury dulful stoundez,
And after wenged with her walour and voyded her care,
And broȝt blysse into boure with bountees hor awen. (1512-19)

The Lady's paradigm also argues that adventures end in bliss, and the fact that Gawayn, despite his fears that he is doomed to die (see, e.g., 563-65, 666-69, 1750-52, 1991-92), survives the Green Knight's game satisfies the happy ending element. Gawayn's return to Arthur's court likewise "wakned wele" (2490).

In all of this Sir Gawain and the Green Knight confirms the characterization of mediaeval romance by the combination of adventure, love and ladies culminating in an happy ending. However, the poem is simultaneously the greatest and one of the most

unusual of romances, and if everyone around Gawain, including the Green Knight (see, e.g., 2361-65), feels that ultimately he has successfully passed the test inherent in the Beheading Game, he himself manifestly does not, adopting the girdle as a “token of vntrawþe” (2509; cf. 2429-38). Indeed, so great is his self-loathing that some critics consider him to remain in a state of sin at the poem’s close, which would undermine any possibility of the happy ending.²¹⁷ Similarly disturbing and unusual is the abrupt manner in which the poet skips over the adventures, monsters and hazards Gawain encounters en route to the Green Chapel.²¹⁸ In the wake of “the most elaborate” arming scene of any mediaeval romance, we expect an equally detailed account of adventure.²¹⁹ Instead, we are told simply that he encountered so many foes, including “wormez,” “wodwos,” “And etayne,” that “Nade he ben duȝty and dryȝe, . . . Douteles he hade ben ded and dreped ful ofte.” (713-25). The adventures on the return journey are even more abbreviated (2479-83). This is but one example of how the poet constantly raises themes, conventions and expectations only to subvert or disappoint them.²²⁰ Indeed, so great is the generic manipulation in the poem that its precise nature and meaning are likely to remain

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²¹⁷ J. A. Burrow, A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (London: Routledge, 1965) 156, and Barron, English Medieval Romance 172-73 and his discussion of the poem in “Chivalric Romance,” Arthur of the English 179.

²¹⁸ J. Finlayson, “The Expectations of Romance in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” Genre 12 (Spring 1979): 12.

²¹⁹ Finlayson, “Expectations of Romance” 9 and 12; the quotation is from p. 9.

²²⁰ Finlayson, “Expectations of Romance” *passim*, and Barron, English Medieval Romance 167 and 230-31, and his discussion of the poem in “Chivalric Romance,” Arthur of the English 167 and 180-82.

elusive.²²¹ However, because this generic play depends to a considerable extent upon the recognition on the part of the community of users of the various conventions and themes being exploited,²²² any conventions which do appear in the poem help to characterize both it and the kind as a whole. And here, as elsewhere, those conventions are, albeit more masterfully and unusually, dominated by the combination of love, ladies, adventure and the happy ending.

Conclusion: Love, Ladies and Adventure

It is said of Classical tragedy and comedy that “They are fascinatingly related yet opposed ways of approaching through art the world and the truth,”²²³ and we might say the same thing of mediaeval romance (or even romance in general) and epic. The two kinds share a number of features, especially the focus on a specific type of hero, but romance constantly works towards a successful and felicitous resolution, whilst epic is inherently sombre, darker and ultimately more tragic than romance. Thus, one defining characteristic of mediaeval romance is its happy ending.²²⁴ Consequently, romance’s various idealizations,

²²¹ Barron, in his discussion of the poem in “Chivalric Romance,” Arthur of the English 183; cf. 165-67.

²²² Finlayson, “Expectations of Romance” passim, and “Definitions” 179-80, and Barron, English Medieval Romance 167 and 230-31.

²²³ Taplin, “Fifth-Century Tragedy and Comedy” 173.

²²⁴ See n. 81 supra.

considered by some to be its defining feature,²²⁵ may be viewed partly as a contrast to the sombreness of epic and partly as a corollary of the happy ending.

Romance has long been defined by its use of the marvellous,²²⁶ but it is increasingly recognized that, although the marvellous plays a prominent role in mediaeval romance, it should not be considered the pre-eminent feature. The presence of the gods and supernatural in epic, for instance, testifies to the importance of the marvellous in at least one related kind, and it is equally important to various folktales. Unlike in epic, the marvellous in romance tends to be preternatural rather than supernatural, a reflexion of magic rather than the gods or God, though of course this changes in the Vulgate Queste del Saint Graal and, to a lesser extent, in Malory's Tale off the Sankegreall. In either case, however, the marvellous should be considered a feature of romance, often one which instigates the action or adventure, as in the marvellous Green Knight's challenge to Arthur's court, but not the defining characteristic.²²⁷ Romance has also been defined as the paratactic kind,²²⁸ but since parataxis is especially strong in oral composition,

²²⁵ Stevens passim. Cf. Barron, English Medieval Romance 8-9, 25, 59, 167, 177-78 and 209-11, for whom the mingling of the ideal and real is an important facet of the romance mode.

²²⁶ See, e.g., Newstead 11, and Brewer, "Nature of Romance" 29, for whom it is "the next leading characteristic" after the happy ending.

²²⁷ Finlayson, "Definitions" 57-8, and his "Marvellous" passim, esp. 364 and 405, where he emphasizes further that the marvellous manifests itself in a variety of ways. Cf. Beer 9-10 and 26-8.

²²⁸ Bonnie Wheeler, "Romance and Parataxis and Malory," Arthurian Literature 12 (1993): 109-10 and 132.

particularly Homeric epic,²²⁹ it cannot be taken as the defining characteristic either, especially since kinds comprise a complex of features rather than a single feature, as I argued in Chapter One. Parataxis can, however, like the marvellous, serve as one possible feature, if a less important one.

This issue of what features are merely important or recurring and what are dominant serves both as another example of the difficulty of defining mediaeval romance and also reminds us that any such definition should not be restrictive. One attempted solution has been the division into various sub-types, not merely the broad distinction of secular and religious romance, but more specific divisions into adventure, courtly or religious romance or, more recently, chivalric, dynastic and folk romance.²³⁰ As we have seen, it is only partly the case that the only truly dominant feature in all of these types is adventure.²³¹ On the other hand, it is true that the various types share largely the same features, the main difference being one of emphases. Maldwyn Mills observes that the distinction made in The Arthur of the English between chivalric romance and dynastic romance is neither inviolable nor pellucid,²³² a reminder that excessive sub-divisions may

²²⁹ Kirk 78 and 167; for Homer's particular use of parataxis see 78-81, 152-55 and 167-71, and J. A. Notopoulos, "Parataxis in Homer," Transactions of the American Philological Association 80 (1949): 1-23.

²³⁰ Frye, Anatomy 34, and Finlayson, "Definitions" 50, 55-7 and 170-80; cf. Ker 4 and 324, who talks of the various types, but does not name them, and Stevens 227. See also the divisions of dynastic romance, chivalric romance and folk romance comprising chapters 3-6 of Arthur of the English 71-224.

²³¹ Pace Finlayson, "Definitions" passim, esp. 55-7.

²³² Maldwyn Mills et al., "Chivalric Romance," Arthur of the English 113. The idea that we should thus be wary of excessive sub-divisions is my own.

be as harmful as over-restrictive definitions. As we saw in Chapter One, the community of users (of literature in general) tends not to favour division into sub-sub-types, and the same might be said of a string of parallel sub-types; it is thus more likely that, despite the value of such sub-divisions for modern critical and pedagogical purposes, the mediaeval community of users would distinguish more between secular and religious romances and non-romances than folk or chivalric ones, especially because of the ubiquity of generic mixture.

It is thus more to the point to consider that each of these sub-types of mediaeval romance can, mutatis mutandis, be characterized by the same principal complex of features, so that, in the end, whether an individual romance chooses to privilege love or adventure or religion or various idealizations, it is ultimately much less sombre, less tragic than epic; together with the happy ending, it is this lack of tragedy combined with love, ladies and adventure which defines mediaeval romance (and the romance hero) in all its protean guises. These need not be the only features which appear in romance, for as we saw in Chapter One, the list of features by which a kind is recognized is potentially infinite, but they are the palmary elements.

Malory's Epic-Romance

“The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know what it is—what it was intended to do and how it was meant to be used.”¹ As we saw in Chapter One, knowledge of what a literary work is is based to a considerable extent on knowledge of its kind (genre), and in order to be successful literary criticism must begin, implicitly or explicitly, with the recognition and understanding of a work's dominant kind or kinds. We have also seen that pure kinds are relatively rare, whilst generic mixture is ubiquitous, that the mediaeval community of users possessed knowledge, and in some cases mastery, of various literary kinds, and that one of those kinds, mediaeval romance, is usefully defined in relation to epic, which is itself much more sombre and tragic than romance, focussing on heroes and their concern with honour and glory. As a necessary caveat however it must also be remembered that generic definitions have to allow for the malleable and complicated nature of literary kinds, comprising and identified by a potentially infinite complex of features which can, and very often do, manifest themselves in a variety of ways. Thus, although the last chapter established that mediaeval romance's essential characteristics are love, ladies and adventure culminating in an happy ending, it also concluded that these are not necessarily its only features.

All of this has, to some extent, served as a prolegomena to Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur.² In the case of Le Morte Darthur, however, genre study

¹ C. S. Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost (1942; London: Oxford UP, 1967) 1.

² This title is Caxton's, not Malory's. Malory called his work The Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table, that whan they were

seems to have been obfuscated by other issues; for although the beginning of this century saw the Morte classified as a sort of proto-novel,³ the dominant critical questions of the past two generations, sparked by Eugène Vinaver's monumental edition of The Works of Sir Thomas Malory,⁴ have centred around source study and the unity debate, not identification of kind.⁵ Partly, as we shall see, this is due to qualified acceptance of Vinaver's conception of the Morte as a combination of romances.⁶ Indeed, not only is the Morte Darthur generally considered a romance, but this classification is usually understood rather than explained.⁷ Even the account of Malory in the most authoritative bibliography of Middle English literature includes nothing in the way of generic analysis apart from simple recognition—with no details

holé togyders there was ever an Hondred and Forty. See Sir Thomas Malory, The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, ed. Eugène Vinaver, rev. P. J. C. Field, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) 1260.16-19. All references to Malory will subsequently be made parenthetically in the text of my chapter, referring by page and line number to this edition.

³ George Saintsbury, The English Novel, The Channels of English Literature (London: Dent, 1913) 8, 25 and 28-31, and Ernest A. Baker, The History of the English Novel, vol. 1 (London: Witherby, 1924) 193.

⁴ See Eugène Vinaver, ed., The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, by Sir Thomas Malory, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1947). All references to Vinaver's apparatus criticus are to the third edition (cited in n. 2 supra), subsequently referred to as Works.

⁵ The recent publication of P. J. C. Field's Malory: Texts and Sources, Arthurian Studies 40 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1998) testifies to the abiding fascination and importance of source study.

⁶ Works ix and xxxv-li. See further his "Sir Thomas Malory," Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959) 543-46.

⁷ E.g. Roger Sherman Loomis, The Development of Arthurian Romance (1963; New York: Norton, 1970), who never really addresses the issue of kind, referring to the Morte at one point as a "prose epic," and most often simply as "book;" his title and generic silence, however, suggest that he considers its romance status to be self-evident. See, for these references, 15, 167, 169 and 175.

or argument—of the fact that it has been labelled epic in the past, and the statement, in the section on Caxton rather than Malory, that Caxton did not “publish any other Arthurian romances.”⁸ In this sense the comment that the Morte’s “real power and grasp . . . have yet to be fully evaluated” is as true today as it was thirty years ago,⁹ especially, but not exclusively, when applied in a generic context.

Almost from the outset critics have maligned or been put off by Malory’s apparently fragmentary, artless and shoddy form, a form exacerbated by the Morte Darthur’s supposed lack of unity and the fact that “Malory’s work fitted into none of the familiar genres.”¹⁰ Vinaver felt that he had solved this problem by revealing that the Morte’s fragmentary nature was not Malory’s fault but Caxton’s, for Malory himself had intended and produced not a single badly unified whole, “but . . . a series of eight separate romances.”¹¹ The oddities and inconsistencies that marred Malory’s work and kind when considered as a cohesive entity were consequently reduced, if not rendered irrelevant, for the “most significant feature [of these incongruities] is that

⁸ Robert H. Wilson, “Malory and Caxton,” A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500, ed. Albert E. Hartung, vol. 3 (New Haven, Connecticut: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1972) 768 and 806 respectively; my emphasis. The classification of the Morte as epic will be discussed in more detail below.

⁹ D. S. Brewer, ed., The Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight, by Sir Thomas Malory, York Medieval Texts (London: Arnold, 1968) 2; cf. 17. Brewer however does not seem to be thinking in generic terms when he makes this comment.

¹⁰ Larry D. Benson, “Sir Thomas Malory’s Le Morte Darthur,” Critical Approaches to Six Major English Works, ed. R. M. Lumiansky and Herschel Baker (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1968) 81-6; quotation from 82. For a convenient collection of early Malory criticism from Caxton through to the nineteenth century see Marylyn Jackson Parins, ed., Malory: The Critical Heritage, The Critical Heritage Series (London: Routledge, 1988).

¹¹ Works ix and xxxv-li, esp. (for the quotation) xxxix. This is reiterated in his “Thomas Malory,” Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages 543-45.

they are never found within any one of Malory's romances, but invariably between two different works separated by at least one of the explicits."¹² This last comment is conspicuously untrue, and as noted above, Vinaver's argument instigated decades of debate about the Morte's unity; but while critics are now agreed that his conception of unity was wrong,¹³ they seem content to accept his definition of the Morte as a romance, albeit one rather than eight. Hence P. J. C. Field's recent comment: "Vinaver may have been wrong over the unity of the book, but he was right to insist that it is not a novel but romance."¹⁴

The solution of the unity debate, though, did not solve the problem of the Morte Darthur's form or kind.¹⁵ On the contrary, the realization that the Morte is a single entity merely served to reconfront critics with its apparent artlessness and haphazard arrangement. Statements such as "Our difficulty in discussing the form of the Morte Darthur is partly due to the lack of satisfactory descriptive and critical terms

¹² Works xxxviii.

¹³ Chief among Vinaver's opponents are: Robert H. Wilson, "How Many Books Did Malory Write?" Studies in English 30 (1951): 1-23; D. S. Brewer, "Form in the Morte Darthur," Medium Aevum 21 (1952): 14-24, and "'the hoole book'," Essays on Malory, ed. J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963) 41-63; the series of essays in R. M. Lumiansky, ed., Malory's Originality (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 1964); Charles Moorman, The Book of Kyng Arthur (Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1965); and Murray J. Evans, "The Explicit and Narrative Division in the Winchester MS," Philological Quarterly 58 (1979): 263-81. Although the evidence is against them, both M. C. Bradbrook, Sir Thomas Malory, Writers and Their Work 95 (London: Longmans, 1958) 19, and Felicity Riddy, Sir Thomas Malory, Medieval and Renaissance Authors 9 (Leiden: Brill, 1987) esp. 29, 30, 40 and 139, support Vinaver's view.

¹⁴ P. J. C. Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur," The Arthur of the English, ed. W. R. J. Barron, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages 2 (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1999) 244.

¹⁵ Cf. Benson, "Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur" 102-07.

for the kind of literary experience that Malory gives us,” and “our ideas of narrative unity do not comprehend [Malory’s] form,” show that this problem is in large part (and is recognized by some critics to be) a generic one.¹⁶ This is because, just as our concepts of unity—especially the rigid neo-classical interpretation of Aristotelean unity, which deems Malory’s Tale V a blundered middle section—do not match the Morte Darthur, neither do our concepts of kind.¹⁷ Nowhere is this more evident than in the problematic and sometimes contradictory nature of the relatively few arguments which do tackle the issue of the Morte’s kind.

As we have seen, the Morte was at one point classified as a proto-novel, a classification made in part because of the dissatisfaction with the claims by early editors and critics that it was an epic.¹⁸ Like one of these arguments,¹⁹ the introductory essay to H. Oskar Sommer’s study of Malory’s sources emphasizes Malory’s affinities with Homer, especially the fact that both mingle the mysterious and supernatural with a focus on humanity and the ultimate finiteness of humanity’s achievements, but concludes that the Morte is instead ultimately a romance because

¹⁶ Respectively Brewer, “the hoole book” 42, and Benson, “Thomas Malory’s Le Morte Darthur” 105; my emphases. Cf. Benson 111; Brewer, “Form in the Morte” 16-17; and Elizabeth S. Sklar, “The Undoing of Romance in Malory’s Morte Darthur,” Fifteenth-Century Studies 20 (1993): 310, who argues that the biggest stumbling block in understanding the Morte is its “generic indeterminacy.”

¹⁷ Benson, “Thomas Malory’s Le Morte Darthur” 102-05. On the Morte’s failed unity cf. R. T. Davies, “The Worshipful Way in Malory,” Patterns of Love and Courtesy, ed. John Lawlor (London: Arnold, 1966) 157.

¹⁸ For the classification of the Morte Darthur as epic see Sir Edward Strachey, ed., Le Morte Darthur (London: Macmillan, 1897) ix and xi-xiv.

¹⁹ Strachey, ed., Morte Darthur ix-x and xiii-xiv.

epic is a lost form.²⁰ Sommer himself similarly sees it as romance, invoking and echoing Sir Walter Scott's appraisal of the Morte as "indisputably the best Prose Romance the language can boast."²¹

The view of the Morte as an epic has however recently been revived in light of Northrop Frye's theory of genres, in which "The basis of generic distinction[is] . . . the radical of presentation:" whether a literary work is acted, spoken or sung before an audience, or "written for a reader."²² Thus it has been argued that, because it was intended for oral recitation and possesses an episodic structure, the Morte Darthur "is the national epic of England," sharing affinities with other such "national epics . . . [as] the Iliad, the Odyssey and the Aeneid; the Chanson de Roland and Dante's Divina Commedia."²³ There are several problems with this argument, not least of which is the apparent acceptance of the fallacy, rebutted at some length in my previous chapter, that epic always serves a political and national purpose, and the denial and subsequent

²⁰ Andrew Lang, "Le Morte Darthur," Le Morte Darthur, by Sir Thomas Malory, ed. H. Oskar Sommer, vol. 3: Studies on the Sources (London: Nutt, 1891) xiii-xxv, esp. xiv and xxv. Field points out that Sommer's edition is the fount of "modern textual scholarship on Malory:" P. J. C. Field, "The Earliest Texts of Malory's Morte Darthur," Malory: Texts and Sources 4 n. 9.

²¹ H. Oskar Sommer, ed., Le Morte Darthur, by Sir Thomas Malory, vols. 2 and 3 (London: Nutt, 1890-91) vol. 2 p. v, and vol. 3 pp. vii and 1-4. For Scott's classification see Sir Walter Scott, "Essay on Romance," Essays on Chivalry, Romance, and the Drama, The "Chandos Classics" (London: Warne, n.d.) 106.

²² Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) 246-51, presents epos as any work recited before an audience; epos is also presented as episodic. The quotations are from 246-47.

²³ Beverly Kennedy, "Northrop Frye's Theory of Genres and Sir Thomas Malory's 'Hoole Book'," The Spirit of the Court, ed. Glyn S. Burgess et al. (Cambridge: Brewer, 1985) esp. 224-27 and 231-32; the quotations appear on 224 and 231.

affirmation of the Morte's tragic qualities.²⁴ The critic responsible similarly treats the Morte at one point as drama, only to deny the fruitfulness of her own comparison.²⁵ In the end, as we shall see, the classification of the Morte as epic may well be partially correct, but not because of its oral or episodic character, both of which features can just as easily be found in romance,²⁶ and one of which is not employed in its usual sense. The romance feature of entrelacement, for instance, naturally promotes episodic narratives, while various romances testify to the convention of "Romanz-reding on þe bok."²⁷

If the Morte Darthur is not, for these reasons at least, epic, neither is it for any reason a novel, although some critics have treated it a one, even if they have not used that name.²⁸ Surprisingly, although Vinaver refers to and treats the Morte Darthur as a collection of romances, and expends considerable effort elucidating just how much it is not a novel, he at times presents it as a quasi-novella straddling the divide between

²⁴ Kennedy, "Frye's Theory of Genres" 229-30.

²⁵ Kennedy, "Frye's Theory of Genres" 228-30.

²⁶ Wheeler, e.g., defines romance in part by its episodic narrative, and sees the Morte as a romance precisely because of its polysemous, episodic structure: Bonnie Wheeler, "Romance and Parataxis and Malory," Arthurian Literature 12 (1993): 110-11 and infra.

²⁷ Havelok, ed. G. V. Smithers (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 2328. See further Joyce Coleman, Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) who is concerned throughout with the reading aloud of written texts in the high Middle Ages.

²⁸ See, e.g., the collection of essays in Lumiansky, ed., Malory's Originality, and Moorman, Book of Kyng Arthur, who also occasionally treats the Morte as a novel. Sklar 310 notes that one of the pitfalls of studying the Morte is the temptation to treat the last tales especially as some sort of quasi-novel.

mediaeval and modern prose fiction;²⁹ a view, equally surprisingly, endorsed by one of his fiercest opponents.³⁰ For another prominent critic the solution lies in classifying the Morte as “a fifteenth-century English [prose] romance” whose peculiarities are explained by the differences between English and French romance, especially the fact that English romance is more modern for being more realistic.³¹ In what appears to be a variation on Vinaver’s unity scheme, meanwhile, the Morte has recently been classified as a single romance, but one whose inconsistencies are explained away as essential aspects of romance’s (and Malory’s) paratactic and open-ended style, a style in which the reader creates meaning out of the text’s or author’s deliberate lack of meaning and polysemousness.³²

D. S. Brewer, on the other hand, opens his introduction to his edition of Tales VII and VIII by labelling the Morte “the essence of medieval romance,” goes on to note its mingling of romance and history, and then comments on (and does much to highlight) its “tragic structure,” stating that the “Morte Darthur tells the story of a

²⁹ Works viii and l-li.

³⁰ Moorman, Book of Kyng Arthur xii, 2-3, 80 and 89.

³¹ Benson, “Thomas Malory’s Le Morte Darthur” 107-23; quotation from 123. See further his Malory’s Morte Darthur (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1976) 3-36. On the classification of the Morte as a prose romance cf. Derek Pearsall, “The Development of Middle English Romance,” Mediaeval Studies 27 (1965): 92, and his “Language and Literature,” The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval England, ed. Nigel Saul (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 276. Cf. also Ann Dobyns, The Voices of Romance (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1989) 11.

³² Wheeler 109-32, esp. 109-14. As we shall see below, Malory’s narrative is more structured than Wheeler allows. For Malory’s paratactic style see P. J. C. Field, Romance and Chronicle (London: Barrie, 1971) 38-46.

tragedy.”³³ Despite this, Brewer conceives of the Morte as a romance, so that, like Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde, it is in the end a “romance in a tragic mode.”³⁴

Another argument begins with the statement that the Morte Darthur not only reveals Malory’s “disappointment with the [romance] genre,” it “constitutes a movement away from romance, or [at least] presents that genre in a new light.”³⁵ This critic then points out that Malory’s concern in the Morte is more historical than romantic, a fact emphasized by the focus on the public rather than private world; questioning whether “Le Morte Darthur is a romance at all,” he nonetheless concludes that it is.³⁶

Elsewhere too Malory’s style and kind have been defined as historical, especially when compared to fifteenth-century French—particularly Burgundian—historical compendia; puzzlingly, though, the conclusion to an argument which throughout presents the Morte as history quite suddenly, and without explanation,

³³ Brewer, ed., Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight 1, 9, 12 and 31; my emphases.

³⁴ Brewer, ed., Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight 33, adopting for the Morte Shepherd’s description of Troilus: G. T. Shepherd, “Troilus and Criseyde,” Chaucer and Chaucerians, ed. D. S. Brewer (London: Nelson, 1966) 86. For the Shepherd quotation and its application to Malory cf. Terence McCarthy, “Le Morte Darthur and Romance,” Studies in Medieval English Romances, ed. Derek Brewer (Cambridge: Brewer, 1988) 173. See further P. J. C. Field, “Heroism from the Past, Heroism for the Future: Malory and the Genre of Le Morte Darthur” (unpublished lecture, Tokyo, 1997), who similarly concludes that the Morte Darthur is a romance in “a tragic form.”

³⁵ McCarthy, “Le Morte Darthur and Romance” 148. Cf. Sklar 310-12, who argues that the Morte fluctuates between romance and history and tragedy so that, ultimately, romance “comes undone in Malory’s hands.” Sklar does not, however, suggest an alternative classification.

³⁶ McCarthy, “Le Morte Darthur and Romance” 148-56 and 176 for Malory’s historical, public outlook; 173-74 for the questioning and corroborating of the Morte’s romance status. Cf. McCarthy’s An Introduction to Malory, Arthurian Studies 20 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1991)169-71.

defines it as “tragic history.”³⁷ Finally, Field, in what is presumably meant to be the definitive word on the subject written in what is intended as the authoritative guide to mediaeval English Arthurian Literature, highlights the unusual romance elements of the Morte Darthur—notably its tragedy—yet concludes that, while the type of romance may vary from tale to tale, the Morte itself is ultimately a romance.³⁸

The best of these studies all do much to highlight the Morte Darthur’s near or essential tragedy. Curiously, though, each insists in the end on labelling it either history or, most commonly, romance—evidence of an occasional critical tendency to let sleeping dogs lie, the lack of understanding of the Morte’s proper kind, and the importance of genre-study to successful criticism. While the tragedy of the Morte Darthur will be explored in detail as this chapter progresses, it should be noted here that this critical trend simultaneously to emphasize and downplay the tragedy stems from the belief that Launcelot’s and Gwenyvere’s saintly and expiatory ends mitigate, if not repudiate, the tragedy.³⁹ A slight modification of this view claims that the Morte as a whole works towards the tragedy of the final tale, but that the tragedy is both

³⁷ Ruth Morse, “Back to the Future: Malory’s Genres,” Arthuriana 7.3 (Fall 1997): 100-23; the quotation is from 117. On the Morte’s historical affinities cf. Benson, Malory’s Morte Darthur 4, 23-5 and 28.

³⁸ Field, “Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte Darthur” 232-46, esp. 244-46.

³⁹ See Brewer, ed., Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight 31-5; Field, “Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte Darthur” 241 and 246, and “Heroism from the Past;” Joseph M. Lenz, The Promised End (New York: Lang, 1986) 45-53; and Robert L. Kelly, “Penitence as a Remedy for War in Malory’s ‘Tale of the Death of Arthur’,” Studies in Philology 91 (1994): 111-35. Both Lenz and Kelly discuss only the final tale, and Kelly, who sees penitence in both Malory’s Tale VIII and the fifteenth century as a natural companion and counterbalance to war, focusses on Launcelot and the Archbishop of Canterbury rather than Gwenyvere.

heightened and rendered insignificant by Malory's religious focus.⁴⁰ It is likewise said of Arthur's own death that the marvellous return of Excalyber to the Lady of the Lake, in which "there cam an arme and an honde above the watir, and toke [the swerde] and cleyght hit, and shoke hit thryse and braundysshed, and than vanysshed" (1240.4-7),⁴¹ removes any semblance of tragedy from the king's passing by placing the scene firmly in the fabulous realm of romance.⁴²

Such, however, is not really the case, for Malory's final tale, the "Morte Arthure" itself,⁴³ ends not on a note of joy, but on the deaths of those few knights still left alive, knights, moreover, who have returned to the secular world. They may die on Good Friday in the Holy Land, but their horses are no longer roaming free, as they do when Bors and his fellows first join Launcelot (1255.8-9), and the knights are once

⁴⁰ Wilfred L. Guerin, "'The Tale of the Death of Arthur,'" Malory's Originality 233, 258, 261 and 269-74. Guerin thus seems to me comprehensively to contradict himself.

⁴¹ In this and all subsequent Malory quotations I have dispensed with Vinaver's denotation of his emendations by square, half, or caret brackets, and instead reserved square brackets for my own modifications to any quotation.

⁴² Pamela Gradon, Form and Style in Early English Literature (London: Methuen, 1971) 231-33. Cf. Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur" 246.

⁴³ I use quotation marks rather than italics to denote the Morte's component tales because, despite the tendency amongst critics for italicization, the latter procedure implies that Vinaver is correct and the various tales are independent of one another. I have also dropped Vinaver's uniform capitalization of the Morte Darthur's various explicits in favour of initial capitalization alone because, as Evans, "Explicit" 263-81 has shown, Vinaver's procedure sometimes corresponds to a different script in the MS and sometimes does not. The explicits can be found in The Winchester Malory, intro. N. R. Ker, Early English Text Society SS 4 (London: Oxford UP, 1976) 22^r, 34^r, 44^v, 70^v, 96^r, 113^r—which is not, as Vinaver's layout suggests, split between Tales III and IV—148^r-148^v, 187^r, 346^v, 409^r and 449^r. On the ways in which Vinaver's presentation of the text affects meaning see further Derek Brewer, "The Presentation of the Character of Lancelot," Arthurian Literature 3 (1983): 39.

again knights at least partly of this earth, not religious hermits.⁴⁴ It may be added that, for Frye, tragedy occurs when the hero is isolated from the community,⁴⁵ and Gwenvivere and Launcelot, like Ector, Bors and their fellows, all die isolated from the most important community in the Morte Darthur, that of King Arthur and the Round Table. The Vulgate Queste del Saint Graal suggests that there is a more important community to strive towards but, as we shall see, Malory downplays this both in his “Tale off the Sankegreall,” and especially in the Morte Darthur as a whole. Both of these crucial points are overlooked by one significant study, which concludes by emphasizing the individual religious end of each of the principals, but then effectively contradicts itself by acknowledging the importance and tragedy of the Round Table community: “The various individuals may find the triumphant path to salvation, but for the noble order of the Round Table it is the tragic death of a mighty world.”⁴⁶

Furthermore, although Launcelot may be Malory’s favourite knight, he is not Malory’s sole focus. Indeed, Malory so considerably alters his sources’ conception of Arthur that “The high point of characterization in the Morte Darthur, on the side of creative originality if not on that of the total number of variants [from the sources], is reached in the case of King Arthur himself.”⁴⁷ This is but one indication of the degree of focus on Arthur and secular concerns, reminding us that Malory seems to juxtapose

⁴⁴ On the return of Ector et al. to the earthly and chivalric fold see further Benson, Malory’s Morte Darthur 245-47.

⁴⁵ Frye 35 and 208. Cf. Bernard M. W. Knox, The Heroic Temper (Berkeley: U of California P, 1964) 5, 32-4 and 44, and Chapter One, 21-22, where it was observed that the tragic hero is often an isolated figure.

⁴⁶ Guerin 269-74; quotation from 274.

⁴⁷ Robert Henry Wilson, Characterization in Malory (Chicago: U of Chicago Libraries, 1934; N.p.: Folcroft Library, 1970) 65 and 79.

the religious expiation with a very secular tone and theme of tragic lamentation. Thus, while Launcelot's and Gwenyvere's spiritual ends are perhaps sufficient to palliate their own tragedies, they do not palliate Arthur's, nor the destruction of the realm. Chaucer's *Troilus*, together with *Troilus and Criseyde's* Narrator, look back at the sufferings of this mortal coil and laugh, emphasizing "the inadequacy of [earthly] action" while rendering void the earlier themes and concerns of the poem,⁴⁸ but this is not the response of Launcelot, and it is even less the response of Malory.⁴⁹ Indeed, Malory takes pains to modify the traditional close of the legend by dwelling on the finality of Arthur's end, and one effect of this is to exacerbate the sense of loss.⁵⁰

Ector's famous threnody for Launcelot likewise focusses entirely on this world and Launcelot's abilities as earthly knight, not saint:⁵¹

thou sir Launcelot, there thou lvest, . . . thou were never
matched of erthely knyghtes hande. And thou were the
curtest knyght that ever bare shelde! And thou were the
truest frende to thy lovar that ever bestrade hors, and thou
were the trewest lover, of a synful man, that ever loved
woman, and thou were the kyndest man that ever strake
wyth swerde. And thou were . . . the sternest knyght to
thy mortal foo that ever put spere in the reeste. (1259.10-21)

It is significant that this last word on Launcelot, which amounts to a summary of his

⁴⁸ Shepherd 85-7.

⁴⁹ Pace Guerin 269-74.

⁵⁰ Helen Cooper, "Counter-Romance: Civil Strife and Father-Killing in the Prose Romances," *The Long Fifteenth Century*, ed. Helen Cooper and Sally Mapstone (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 155; cf. 145.

⁵¹ A fact Brewer, ed., *Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight* 33-4 himself realizes in the midst of claiming otherwise (see supra). On the secular nature of Ector's threnody and Launcelot's end cf. C. David Benson, "The Ending of the *Morte Darthur*," *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards and A. S. G. Edwards, *Arthurian Studies* 37 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1996) 237-38.

career and character, for which there is no direct source and which Malory has chosen to put in Ector's mouth, makes no mention of repentance.⁵² Malory's final explicit, moreover, emphasizes not penitence but the destruction of Arthur and his one hundred and forty knights (1260.16-19).⁵³ At the very least this violates the happy ending towards which, as we saw in the last chapter, romance usually builds. And although there may be some debate as to whether or not Theseus' words of consolation at the close of Chaucer's Knyghtes Tale are enough to offset Arcite's death and speeches on the bleakness of human existence,⁵⁴ the destruction in Malory is too great for consolation. Malory's own principal focus and concern, then, despite the occasional spiritual passage, is firmly earthly.⁵⁵ Consequently, as Field himself observes, the so-called spiritual and penitential tone of the conclusion "cannot entirely negate the sense of loss created by the sight of a potentially ideal society built up and then destroyed."⁵⁶

⁵² Wilson, Characterization 38-9; the idea of Ector as Malory's spokesman is my own. Wilson considers the passage to be original, but it may be inspired by Mordrede's lament for Gawayne in the alliterative Morte Arthure: see Works 1662, n. to 1259.9-21; Terence McCarthy, "Beowulf's Bairns: Malory's Sterner Knights," Heroes and Heroines in Medieval English Literature, ed. Leo Carruthers (Cambridge: Brewer, 1994) 159; and Morte Arthure, ed. Mary Hamel, Garland Medieval Texts 9 (New York: Garland, 1984) 3872-84. All references to the alliterative Morte are by line number to this edition.

⁵³ Both Malory's explicit and Ector's threnody are missing from the Winchester MS.

⁵⁴ See John Finlayson, "The Knight's Tale: The Dialogue of Romance, Epic, and Philosophy," Chaucer Review 27.2 (1992) 139-44 and 144 n. 23.

⁵⁵ Benson, "The Ending of the Morte Darthur" 235, and Bradbrook 31, who considers the religious end of Launcelot and Gwenyvere something "in the nature of a coda."

⁵⁶ Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur" 246; cf. his "Heroism from the Past." See also Brewer, ed., Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight 33-4. Both Field and Brewer thus essentially contradict their arguments of n. 39 supra.

Because generic mixture is ubiquitous and romance the most protean of all literary kinds, it is conceivable, if not likely, that one might have a romance with minor elements of tragedy in it, the occasional tragic scene. This seems to be what Brewer and Field are claiming by elucidating and subsequently steering away from Malory's tragic structure. In the Morte Darthur, however, the tragedy is too common and pervasive, the romance too atypical, for the story to be classified as a straightforward romance. This conclusion is supported by a perceptive study from Helen Cooper in which she locates the Morte Darthur amongst a number of other fifteenth-century prose romances all notable for their disastrous, bleak and sombre subjects and unhappy endings.⁵⁷ Such in fact is the inimical violence of these tales that "they demand a rethinking of our conception of the genre," especially—and most famously—in the case of Malory, whose work represents a "generic shift away from romance, to civil war, treachery, and murder."⁵⁸ Although Cooper is to be applauded for arguing that the Morte Darthur is so atypical a romance as to affect the very nature of the kind itself, the civil strife and kin-killing in the Morte, far from being the principal focus, are only the more obvious signs that something more serious is rotten in the state of Camelot. Similarly, Mordred's incestuous origin is not as significant as Cooper makes out:⁵⁹ on the contrary, despite the prominence of this theme in the sources, Malory consistently downplays the notion that Arthur's end is a result of divine retribution for

⁵⁷ Cooper, "Counter-Romance" 141-62.

⁵⁸ Cooper, "Counter-Romance" 142 and 150; my emphasis.

⁵⁹ Cf., with Cooper, "Counter-Romance" 148 and 150-53, Strachey, ed., Morte Darthur xi-xii, who explains Arthur's tragic end by his guilt, and Thomas C. Rumble, "'The Tale of Tristram'," Malory's Originality 166-71 and 179-80, who gives pride of place in Arthur's destruction to the "incestuous begetting of Mordred."

Mordred's inception.⁶⁰ Nor is the tragedy confined to the last tale or two, despite the fact that those critics who do focus on the sombre tragedy of the Morte tend to base their comments on—and generally confine them to—the figure and story of Balyn and Tales VII and VIII.⁶¹ Nevertheless, it is true that it is in the final tales especially that we notice that combination of free-will and predestination which the foremost scholar of Greek tragedy of the last generation sees as “essential to the tragic paradox.”⁶² It is thus time to examine how this occurs, and how it affects Le Morte Darthur's kind. In doing so, we will discover that Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur, far from being a straightforward romance, is closer to a generic hendiadys coupling epic and romance.

From the very beginning the Morte Darthur mixes typical romance features with something different and darker: thus, for example, the mingling and contrast of the role of love and ladies with the importance of honour and the tragic foreshadowing—particularly, but not exclusively, that of the figure of Merlyon—in the “Tale of King Arthur.” The “Tale of King Arthur” opens with marvels, ladies and wars, but it is noteworthy that Uther's actions and sickness both stem from his “grete love of fayr

⁶⁰ I owe the degree and consistency, though not the idea itself, of Malory's suppression of this theme to Wilson, Characterization 65-6.

⁶¹ Wilson, “Malory and Caxton” 771; an observation supported by the approaches of, amongst others, Bradbrook 23-5 and 32, and, most recently, Ralph Norris, “The Tragedy of Balin,” Arthuriana 9.3 (Fall 1999): 52-67.

⁶² R. P. Winnington-Ingram, “Tragedy and Greek Archaic Thought,” Classical Drama and Its Influence, ed. M. J. Anderson (London: Methuen, 1965) 50. On the combination of free-will and predestination in Tales VII and VIII, which will be explored in more detail below, see further Field, “Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur” 246, and “Heroism from the Past.”

Igrayne” (8.8; my emphasis; cf. 8.12),⁶³ thus suggesting a prominent role for love and ladies, two of the typical romance features. We are similarly introduced at the wedding of Uther and Igrayne to Morgan le Fey and her knowledge of “nygromancye” (10.8-12), another prominent lady in the Morte Darthur.

Arthur’s first act, on the other hand, is to show concern for his “broder sir Kay,” preserving, in different ways, his own and his brother’s honour by securing Kay a sword (13.27-37; quotation from 13.30). The same love of family and honour is evident in Arthur’s vow to treat Ector with all due respect in return for his upbringing at Ector’s hands and, in accordance with Ector’s wishes, to promote Kay to the position of seneschal (15.3-17). This serves to introduce the themes of familial loyalty and honour which (as we shall see) will be so important throughout the Morte and which, it turns out, mark some of its epic or tragic strands. Further, despite the indication at the opening of the tale that love and ladies will dominate, the bulk of the “Tale of King Arthur” focusses on Arthur’s wars with the rebel kings and with Arthur’s own prowess and honour (e.g. 29.3-23; 30.28-34; 33.33-34.19; 35.16-17). These themes are continued in “The Noble Tale Betwyxt Kynge Arthure and Lucius the Emperour of Rome” (or “The Tale of the Noble Kynge Arthure that was Emperoure Hymself Thorow Dygnyté of His Hondys”),⁶⁴ where Arthur’s martial magnanimity is so great that he challenges Emperor Lucius to single combat to end their war, for “that is more worshyppe than thus to overryde maysterlesse men” (206.10-14). The opening tale also looks forward to Arthur’s death, both in Arthur’s

⁶³ The leaves containing this and the following three quotations are missing from the Winchester MS.

⁶⁴ Henceforth referred to as “Arthure and Lucius” or, occasionally, Tale II.

dream of the “gryffens and serperntes [that] . . . dud hym grete harme and wounded hym full sore” (41.23-30), as well as in Merlyon’s prophecy that Arthur will die honourably in battle (44.17-30). This prelude to the hero’s death is in itself highly unusual for romance, but the essential tragedy of the final state of affairs, as well as a foreboding sense of fate, are here suggested and interwoven in the fact that even Merlyon, for all his great powers, wisdom and foresight, emphasized throughout the early sections of the Morte Darthur, will “dye a shamefull dethe” which he knows of but is unable—or unwilling—to prevent (44.28-29; see also 125.10-22).⁶⁵

In a sign of generic mixture, however, we move immediately from the sombreness of anticipating Arthur’s and Merlyon’s deaths back into the world of romance as signalled by the reunion of Arthur and Igrayne and the standard Arthurian adventure motif in a which a stranger (whether squire, knight, maiden or dwarf) enters the court announcing, prefacing or instigating an adventure which is subsequently—as it is here—taken up by one of Arthur’s knights (44.33-48.14).⁶⁶ Interlaced with this is the Roman Embassy claiming homage to Rome which, in “Arthure and Lucius,” will take the form of epic, before Arthur himself takes up the interrupted romance adventure, further establishing his prowess (see esp. 50.4-5). Arthur’s greatness and popularity in the eyes of his knights are also here explained in part, for “all men of

⁶⁵ Wheeler 115-16 goes too far in questioning Merlyon’s motives and honesty, and fails to realize that his inability or reluctance to avert his own fate is but an early indication of the sense of fated loss and tragedy which permeates the Morte as a whole.

⁶⁶ For a study of various manifestations of Arthurian adventure and their use by Malory see Joy Wallace, “Transposing the Enterprise of Adventure,” Shifts and Transpositions in Medieval Narrative, ed. Karen Pratt (Cambridge: Brewer, 1994) 151-67.

worship seyde hit was myrry to be under such a chyffayne that wolde putte hys person in adventure as other poure knyghtis ded” (54.18-20). Significantly, however, the “Merlin” section of this tale ends, not with Arthur’s completion of the adventure, but with the very disturbing slaughter of the May-Day babes in an attempt to slay Mordred and avoid fate. For as Merlyon says, one of these babes will “destroy [Arthur] and all the londe” (55.22). Because of “fortune” (55.28), though, Mordred survives, is fostered, and then sent to court “as hit rehersith aftirward and towarde the ende of the Morte Arthure” (55.32-33).⁶⁷ Even if Malory is here referring to one of his sources rather than his own subsequent tale,⁶⁸ the scene establishes a foreboding tragic link between early and late events in the Morte Darthur as a whole. The irony of the situation further exacerbates the tragedy: of all the innocent babes on the ship, Mordred alone survives, just as he will later be the only one of Launcelot and Gwenvere’s fourteen accusers to escape Launcelot’s hands. We also see Arthur, who has thus far in the Morte conducted himself with great nobility and heroism, inciting and countenancing an atrocity in an attempt to secure what is perceived to be a public and personal boon. This too is something which will be repeated throughout the Morte Darthur.

It is surely no accident that the “Tale of Balyn” and its very tragic hero follow

⁶⁷ For reasons explained in n. 43 supra I have not reproduced Vinaver’s uniform capitalization of Morte Arthure here, which occurs in the Winchester MS 22^r.

⁶⁸ Works 1303, n. to 52.32-33, tentatively suggests that Malory was thinking of the alliterative Morte Arthure, the only one of his sources to mention Mordred’s arrival at court as a young boy; P. J. C. Field, “Malory’s Mordred and the Morte Arthure” Malory: Texts and Sources 94-7 and 100-01, is more certain, seeing it not only as a reference to the alliterative Morte, but to a longer version of the poem, now lost to us, which comprised Malory’s source.

fast on this reference to the destruction of Arthur “and all the lond,” for Malory devotes a great deal of usually tragic unity and foreshadowing to this sombre tale.⁶⁹ In doing so he reveals not only a unified vision for the Morte Darthur as a whole, but the fact that, as is especially the case in the “Tale of Balyn,” that unifying vision is tragic. This episode’s lack of typical romance features, moreover, is evident from the very beginning, when Balyn, having won the Lady of the Lake’s sword, decides to keep it, defying the sword’s curse and assaying whatever “aventure” accompanies it (63.30-64.19; quotation from 64.12).⁷⁰ The story encourages us to endorse his decision, though it is also a tale in which rational explanations and causation are often lacking. Two signs of Balyn’s epitomizing the Morte’s epic rather than romance threads are his concern with honour and revenge, and he is justified in keeping the sword because it symbolizes, and indeed proves to the court at large, his heroic reputation, something, as we saw in the last chapter, with which the epic hero is especially concerned. And while the epic hero may seek a different type of adventure from his romance counterpart, he too is concerned with action, something apparently guaranteed by the

⁶⁹ See, e.g., 77.18-22; 78.9-14; 78.28-79.6; 81.16-18; 81.30-82.14; 85.21-23; 91.24-25; and 91.33-92.7. There is, however, nothing to support the suggestion of Norris 62 that Balyn absorbs Arthur’s guilt for the slaughter of the May-Day babes. Norris claims to be following Robert L. Kelly, “Malory’s ‘Tale of Balin’ Reconsidered,” Speculum 54 (1979): 87, but the only time Kelly sees Balyn as somehow paying for Arthur’s guilt is on p. 97 [sic], where he argues that Balyn “atone[s] for the communal guilt” of Columbe’s death, a death for which Arthur is, according to Kelly 94 and 97, partly responsible.

⁷⁰ Balyn’s statement that he “shall take the aventure” is original to Malory: see Jill Mann, “‘Taking the Adventure’: Malory and the Suite du Merlin,” Aspects of Malory, ed. Toshiyuki Takamiya and Derek Brewer, Arthurian Studies 1 (Cambridge: Brewer; Totowa, NJ: Rowman, 1981) 75. The argument of Kelly, “Malory’s ‘Tale of Balin’” 90, that Balyn’s acceptance of adventure is an hubristic challenge of Fate, however, suggests that he is guilty and deserving of punishment, thereby unfairly criticizing Balyn’s heroic character and kind.

sword. Balyn's decision to keep the sword and assay its adventures also reflects Malory's concern with questions of destiny and the degree to which an individual's actions and choices influence his or her fate.⁷¹

The first such adventure, however, is also the Morte Darthur's first prominent example of blood-feud and the conflicts it creates: for when the Lady of the Lake arrives seeking Balyn's head, he cuts off hers in reply, explaining that she is his greatest foe and a "destroyer of many good knyghtes" (66.1-27; quotation from 66.12-13). Since Arthur is already indebted to the Lady of the Lake for Excalyber (52.28-53.6), and since she herself is under Arthur's "saffconduyghte" (66.8), Balyn's vengeance, however justified, creates a rift between himself and Arthur. The personal and public, as so often in the epic-heroic world, have come into conflict.⁷² This conflict between personal and public demands, or between conflicting duties or honours, becomes increasingly commonplace and causal as the Morte Darthur builds towards its tragic close, and will be explored in more detail below; it is also one the Morte's most prominent epic themes and features. As for Balyn, in defending himself against Launceor, who considers Balyn's achievement of the sword an insult but who claims to be avenging Balyn's beheading of the Lady and shaming of Arthur, he unwittingly causes the death of Columbe, Launceor's lady, an act which causes further

⁷¹ Kelly, "Malory's 'Tale of Balin'" 90. On the other hand, the insistence of Norris 57-8 that, subsequent to this, "Balin's fate is sealed and all of the tragic events that occur . . . are now . . . inevitable," effectively—and mistakenly—denies Balyn any free will.

⁷² Works 1621-22; Brewer, ed., Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight 25-31, esp. 26 and 30-31; and McCarthy, "Le Morte Darthur and Romance" 160-74, esp. 160 and 172, all note this conflict, and emphasize the essential tragedy it creates, but none is speaking of Balyn in particular, and none seems fully to grasp its generic significance.

personal sorrow for Balyn and also brings about the Dolorous Stroke (67.7-72.32). By epic-heroic standards at least Balyn's actions are all honourable, and also derived from the best of intentions—he would, for instance, rather kill himself than strike the Dolorous Stroke (73.1-3)—and yet they secure only suffering. This is the case even, and especially, with the Dolorous Stroke itself, which stems from Balyn's pursuit of honour and attempt to avenge himself and others by putting an end to the dishonourable felonies of the invisible knight Garlon (79.9-85.15).

There is little need to dwell on Balyn's prowess, achievements and loyalty to Arthur, but it is noteworthy that he proves himself “a passynge good man of hys hondys and of hys dedis, and withoute velony other trechory and withoute treson” not only by drawing the Lady of the Lake's sword (61.34-62.2; cf. 62.20-23 and 64.1-4), but also by his words, arguing that nobility is not necessarily synonymous with birth or dress; deeds, not blood, are virtuous (63.23-27). Yet this truly noble knight is the unwilling fount of considerable tragedy, one further indication that both he and his tale belong more to the epic-heroic world than to romance.⁷³ Deeds such as the pursuit and killing of the invisible knight Garlon, for instance, are performed not in search of adventure or love, but out of a sense of honour, obligation and vengeance.⁷⁴ Balyn's

⁷³ Failure to recognize this has caused a number of critics to misunderstand Balyn, seeing in his disastrous career and person a symbol of the darkness and chaos against which Arthur and his knights battle. See, e.g., Norris 62; Jerome Mandel, “The Dark Side of Camelot,” *Chaucer Yearbook* 2 (1995): 81-2 and 91; and Eugène Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) 60. Cf. Mann 77 and 84, who implies that Balyn's actions, though not his intentions, at times border on the treacherous, and Deborah S. Ellis, “Balyn, Mordred and Malory's Idea of Treachery,” *English Studies* 68 (1987): 67-70, who likewise sees Balyn as treacherous.

⁷⁴ See esp. 79.20-80.18; 81.3-14; 82.28-32; 83.4-5; 83.21-84.18; and the constant variations therein of the refrain: “thys ys nat the first despite that he hath done me” (my emphasis).

unsuitability to and lack of involvement with the romance kind are made painfully clear in his response to the amorous suffering of Garnysh of the Mownte, whom Balyn tries to help first by locating Garnysh's lady (86.28-30 and 87.13-18), and then by showing Garnysh where she lies with another knight (87.19-23). As he says, and the text gives us no reason to doubt his word, Balyn does this only with the best of intentions:

I did it to this entent that it sholde better thy courage, and
that ye myght see and knowe her falshede, and to cause
yow to leve love of such a lady. God knoweth I dyd none
other but as I wold ye dyd to me. (87.31-34; my emphasis)⁷⁵

The spectacular lack of success of Balyn's deed, however, resulting in the deaths of all three lovers, shows just how foreign are his thinking and motivation to the romance ethos. It is also a further example of how tragic events are often brought about by the best of intentions, a theme which becomes increasingly dominant as the Morte Darthur progresses.

The greatest heroes also tend to be tragic, belonging more to the world of tragedy or epic than romance. Typically, it is the same qualities that make the hero great which also secure his destruction—or which, in Balyn's case, make him the cause of destruction. Merlyon's praise of Balyn, for instance, emphasizes Balyn's great glory, but also his short life and tragedy (68.8-15 and 75.8-17), all qualities, as we saw in the last chapter, associated with the epic hero and kind. Further, "The words 'dole' and 'dolorous' recur throughout the story like the tolling of a bell."⁷⁶ Moreover, Balyn's leave-taking of Merlyon after striking the Dolorous Stroke (85.31-32), his statement

⁷⁵ The leaf containing this part of the text is missing from the Winchester MS.

⁷⁶ Loomis, Development of Arthurian Romance 176.

that he would gladly die fighting the knight on the island (88.27-28),⁷⁷ and especially his recognition that “That [horne] blast . . . is blowen for me, for I am the pryse, and yet am I not dede” (88.11-12),⁷⁸ all seem to show that, like so many tragic epic heroes, he realizes that he goes to his death. Achilles, for instance, knows that in killing Hektor he seals his own doom;⁷⁹ Cú Chulainn knows that the battle he goes to is a mystical trap in which he will die,⁸⁰ and Gawayne, as we shall see, seeks his own death as much as Launcelot’s. Finally, the deaths of Balyn and Balan occur because they fail to recognize one another until it is too late. Romance is supposed to work towards an happy ending, and reunions and reconciliations are part of this. In the case of Balan and Balyn, however, unlike say Yvain and Gauvain in Le Chevalier au lion and Ywayne and Gawayne, or Gareth and Gawayne in the “Tale of Sir Gareth,” and Launcelot and Trystrams in the “Boke of Syr Trystrams,” the knights’ realization that they fight someone they love comes too late, securing only tragedy, not joy (89.33-

⁷⁷ Mann 86 argues that Balyn’s I wold be fayne ther my deth shold be has two possible meanings (“I would be content [if] my death were destined to occur in that place,” or “I would gladly be in the place where my death were destined to be”), but both interpretations show his weariness with life and, possibly, awareness of the imminence of death. Given the context of the statement, it seems likely that fayne here means “gladly.” Cf., in this sense, Kelly, “Malory’s ‘Tale of Balin’” 95-6, who sees in Balyn’s recognition of the horn blast “an expression of guilt [for striking the Dolorous Stroke] and a desire to pay his debt.” The passage occurs in one of the Winchester MS’s lacunae.

⁷⁸ The leaf containing this part of the text is missing from the Winchester MS.

⁷⁹ Homer, The Iliad of Homer, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1951) XVIII, 79-126; cf. IX, 410-16.

⁸⁰ See the accounts of Cú Chulainn’s death in T. W. Rolleston, trans., “The Madness of Cuchulainn” and “The Washer at the Ford,” Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race (London: Harrap, 1911) 229-31, and Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, trans., “Cú Chulainn in the Valley of the Dead,” A Celtic Miscellany (London: Routledge, 1951) 42-8.

91.5).⁸¹ This too shows that Balyn and his tale belong more to epic than romance.

Since “Malory is particularly interested in the early books of the Morte Darthur in establishing forward links with the later ones,”⁸² we can assume that such markedly tragic elements will continue and that their presence is deliberate. It is possible, furthermore, to see in the “Tale of Balyn” a microcosm of the Morte Darthur as a whole, particularly its tragedy.⁸³ Much of this is Malory’s doing, for “Malory . . . sharply emphasized the concept of Balin as a man bold, impetuous, well-meaning, but doomed, like the Greek Orestes, to disaster.”⁸⁴ The significance of this, and of Balyn’s true kind, however, are generally overlooked. Hence the complaint that, in Balyn’s “adventure[,] typical romance responses will not do.”⁸⁵ The critic to make this complaint has done much to emphasize the unity of the Morte, consequently seeing in Balyn connexions with Galahad and further examples of Malory’s unification and significatio, the unity he makes us look for and the comparisons he asks us to draw between the age of Arthur and our own age—and Malory’s.⁸⁶ This is certainly true to

⁸¹ The leaf containing this part of the text is missing from the Winchester MS.

⁸² Field, Romance and Chronicle 91. Murray J. Evans, “Ordinatio and Narrative Links,” Studies in Malory, ed. James W. Spisak (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1985) 31-2 and 52, Table 2, locates a number of these links and the question of their originality.

⁸³ Cf. Mann 75, and Norris 62. Norris is correct to treat Balyn as tragic, but wrong to present him as a guilty, sinful character in the throes of an “inevitable” fate: see esp. 57-8 and 62.

⁸⁴ Loomis, Development of Arthurian Romance 176. Cf. Evans, “Ordinatio” 33-6, and Norris 60.

⁸⁵ Evans, “Ordinatio” 34; cf 36: “Balin’s supreme chivalry is out of joint with a hostile world in which the adventure ethic is utterly beside the point.”

⁸⁶ Evans, “Ordinatio” 36-8 and 44-6.

an extent, but it seems to me that the real significance and effect of Balyn's so-called atypical status is not to make comparisons with and highlight Galahad's subsequent romance characteristics and redemption of such failed knights as Balyn, but rather to elucidate the Morte's predominantly tragic qualities, reminding us that, in the epic-heroic world, men's lives are potentially as evanescent as leaves,⁸⁷ though this does not render them cheap or unsuccessful. It should be clear by now that this view of Balyn as failed is itself a striking example of generic misinterpretation in the Morte.

As noted above, much tragic unity in the Morte Darthur as a whole is supplied in and around this very unromance-like tale; not least of the possible examples is the statement that "Launcelot with thys swerde [of Balyn's] shall sle the man in the worlde that he lovith beste: that shall be sir Gawayne" (91.24-25). Further, just as the "Merlin" section closes on a sombre note before "Balyn" opens, "The Weddyng of Kyng Arthur," following the close of the "Tale of Balyn," begins with the tragic foreshadowing inherent in Merlyon's warning to Arthur "that Gwentyver was nat holsom for hym to take to wyff. For he warned hym that Launcelot scholde love hir, and sche hym agayne" (97.29-31). Regardless of whether or not they mark the climax of the tale, weddings in romance should, eventually at least, secure happiness: that Arthur's does not is one further indication of the Morte Darthur's generic peculiarity when considered as a straightforward romance. The fact that this tragic foreshadowing follows the very tragic story of Balyn is both further indication of unity in the Morte as a whole, and proof that that unity is tragic. Indeed, throughout the opening sections of the "Tale of King Arthur," whenever straightforward romance

⁸⁷ See Iliad VI, 146: "As is the generation of leaves, so is that of humanity."

elements do appear they seem to be twisted to something generically darker.

The adventures of Gawayne, Tor and Pellinore at Arthur's wedding, for instance, are all instigated or influenced by a lady, partly by the abduction of the noisy lady from Arthur's hall (103.4-16). This typical romance feature, however, unfolds in a relatively atypical fashion:⁸⁸ Gawayne accidentally decapitates a lady (106.18-21); Torre encounters a lady who demands the head of a knight or else she shall shame him (112.13-113.9); and Pellynore fails to succour a lady and her wounded lover, whereupon the knight dies and the lady, having cursed Pellynore, kills herself (114.10-23). Taken on their own these events may not be that unusual for romance, but in the context of the more sombre elements of the "Tale of King Arthur" and the Morte Darthur's overall tragedy, they take on a darker note. In Pellynore's case the adventure element actually conflicts with the role of ladies, for he is "so egrir in hys queste" (114.17; cf. 118.35-36 and 119.26-27) that he refuses to stop,⁸⁹ a fact he regrets all the more when Merlyon reveals that the lady is his daughter (119.29-30). Even the lady Pellynore saves in his quest later causes grief and potential destruction, for she is the Lady of the Lake Nenyve who seals Merlyon away "undir a grete stone" (125.1-126.27; quotation from 126.23). In this context the Oath of the Round Table, which closes this episode and "The Weddyng of Kyng Arthur" as a whole (120.15-27), takes on a less promising and less ideal note; for while the vow remains honourable, we are reminded that the intentions of Gawayne and Pellynore—like Balyn's before

⁸⁸ Cf. Elizabeth Archibald, "Beginnings: The Tale of King Arthur and King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius," Companion to Malory 141. Her statement that each knight fails to complete his quest is however misleading.

⁸⁹ Cf. Beverly Kennedy, Knighthood in the Morte Darthur, 2nd ed., Arthurian Studies 11 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1992) 66.

them—were also honourable, but that their quests ended in partial disaster. It is recognized that the Oath is largely original to Malory, that it represents his conception of the nobility and duties of the chivalric order;⁹⁰ what is overlooked is that, while the Oath contributes to and highlights the nobility of Arthur's dream and achievement, it concomitantly contributes to the tragedy by reminding us of the loss of that nobility. It also highlights the potential for destruction inherent in even the best knights by suggesting their susceptibility to "outrage[,]. . . mourthir, and . . . treson" and the adoption of "wrongfull quarell[s]" (120.17-24) unless sworn otherwise.⁹¹ Once again Malory is foreshadowing the tragedy by emphasizing that conflict of ideals or loyalties which will become so prominent in the Fall of the Round Table.⁹²

The opening "Tale of King Arthur," then, is a far cry from the typical romance, or romance with elements of history, it is usually taken to be;⁹³ even its adventures tend to reveal or foreshadow tragedy. It is only with the tale's close and the adventure of Arthur and Accolon, where the adventure is both prefaced by a hunt and instigated by Morgan le Fay, and where Accolon fights for love of Morgan, that we get a more

⁹⁰ Works 1335, n. to 120.11-28; Brewer, ed., Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight 27; and Archibald, "Beginnings" 141. The Oath is original in that it does not come from the source, but neither did Malory invent it; rather, he modelled it on the actual "exhortation to the Knights of the Bath:" Richard Barber, "Malory's Le Morte Darthur and Court Culture under Edward IV," Arthurian Literature 12 (1993): 148-49.

⁹¹ Cf. Guerin 273. It goes too far, though, to claim with Guerin that this exemplifies Malory's focus on "the tragic shortcomings of earthly life."

⁹² W. R. J. Barron, English Medieval Romance, Longman Literature in English Series (London: Longman 1987) 151 notes the tragic clash of loyalties of Tale VIII, but as we have seen, this conflict is far from endemic to the final tale alone.

⁹³ Pace, e.g., Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur" 232 and 245; Archibald, "Beginnings" 133 and 145; and McCarthy, Introduction to Malory 5-6.

straightforward romance episode, while the connexion between ladies and adventure is exemplified when Gawayne, Uwayne and Marhaus encounter, in “a grete foreste . . . of stronge adventures,” three ladies whose purpose it is “arraunte knyghtes to teche hem unto stronge adventures” (162.22-163.3). For the rest, as we have seen, Tale I’s concern with battles and kingship, and particularly its tragic focus and connexions, render it ultimately more epic than romance.⁹⁴

Like its source, the late fourteenth or early fifteenth-century alliterative Morte Arthure,⁹⁵ Malory’s “Arthure and Lucius” is more concerned with war and honour than love, ladies and adventure, and is thus more epic-heroic than romantic.⁹⁶ Arthur, for example, is concerned that the Roman Embassy be treated well at his court, for “thoughe they have greved me and my courte, yet we muste remembir on oure worshyp” (187.10-11; my emphasis). The response of Cador to the challenge, who is

⁹⁴ Cf. McCarthy, “Beowulf’s Bairns” 152, who reaches a similar conclusion, though partly on the basis of different evidence and reasoning. McCarthy gives especial emphasis to the focus on battles and kingship.

⁹⁵ It has been suggested that Malory’s source was actually a fuller version of the alliterative Morte than that extant in the Thornton MS: Field, “Malory’s Mordred and the Morte Arthure” 95-7, 100-01 and supra, n. 68, and less explicitly in his “‘Above Rubies’: Malory and Morte Arthure 2559-61,” Malory: Texts and Sources 197. On the possibility of a more complete version of the alliterative poem see also E. V. Gordon and E. Vinaver, “New Light on the Text of the Alliterative Morte Arthure,” Medium Aevum 6 (1937): 81-98, esp. 86-90, and Tania Vorontzoff, “Malory’s Story of Arthur’s Roman Campaign,” Medium Aevum 6 (1937): 102-13. This is cautiously accepted by Hamel, ed., Morte Arthure 4-14, who goes on to detail the reliability of Winchester’s readings against those of the Thornton MS.

⁹⁶ Cf. Bradbrook 32, and McCarthy, “Beowulf’s Bairns” 151. Archibald, “Beginnings” 133 likewise classifies Tale II as epic, but she does so largely because of the notion, rebutted in the last chapter, that epic always has a public and political focus.

pleased because Arthur's men (in Caxton and the alliterative Morte idle men⁹⁷) "now shall . . . have warre and worshyp" (187.21), is likewise heroic, as is Arthur's paying of the tribute with the bodies of Lucius and his fellows (225.17-226.8). Arthur's battle with the giant could be seen as either epic or romantic, though in both Malory and the alliterative Morte the scene possesses a certain grim humour in the running joke that the giant is an unfriendly saint.⁹⁸ The striking off of the giant's head and sending it to his allies as proof that "his enemy is destroyed" (204.16-21), on the other hand, is much more of an heroic than romantic sentiment, as is Arthur's offer to heal Gawayne's wounds by a similar tactic (211.25-28). Malory here has kept the bloodthirsty tone and scene of his source,⁹⁹ but as this chapter reveals, the heroic spirit of the alliterative Morte Arthure is not as alien to Malory's Arthuriad as some would claim. Arthur's offer to heal Gawayne with the heads of their enemies, to take a

⁹⁷ Caxton's text of the Roman War is printed in Works below the Winchester text; Caxton's Morte is edited in its entirety in Caxton's Malory, ed. James W. Spisak, with a Dictionary of Names and Places by Bert Dillon, 2 vols. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983); and appears in facsimile in Le Morte Darthur, ed. Paul Needham (London: Scolar, 1976): for Cador's response see Works C 187.17-20, and Morte Arthure 247-58. It is usually accepted that the so-called Caxton Roman War section is either by Caxton or by Malory, and that modern editors must choose one or the other accordingly. However, Field has recently suggested, to my mind convincingly, that a combination of the Winchester and Caxton texts can bring us closer to Malory's original: P. J. C. Field, "Caxton's Roman War," Malory: Texts and Sources 126-61, esp. 144-47 and Appendix II, where an example of the suggested reconstruction can be found by starting with the Winchester text and reading down its column, alternating to the parallel Caxton column, and back again at the appropriate sections.

⁹⁸ Works 199.24-200.2, 200.14-15 and 204.8-15, and the alliterative Morte 896-99, 937-40 and 1162-71. On the humour of this episode, Tale II as a whole, and the adoption of the source's humour, cf. Celia M. Lewis, "'Lawghyng and Smylyng Amonge Them': Humor in Malory's Morte Darthur," Poetica 51 (1999): 12 and n. 4.

⁹⁹ See, for the treatment of the giant, alliterative Morte 1178-83. Pace William Matthews, The Tragedy of Arthur (Berkeley: U of California P, 1960) 172-77.

specific example, seems original to Malory,¹⁰⁰ and it is significant that the last and most famous speech in the story as a whole, Ector's threnody for Launcelot, is strikingly similar to Mordrede's threnody over Gawayne in the alliterative poem. Indeed, if Ector's lament is not actively modelled on Mordrede's, it is surely strongly influenced by it.¹⁰¹ In this sense the alliterative Morte Arthure is not only a greater influence on Malory than critics have realized, but Tale II itself "represents . . . the spirit of much of the whole book."¹⁰²

Like Tale I, the predominantly epic "Arthure and Lucius" is marked by generic mixture, notably in Gawayne's more romantic encounter with Pryamus (228.20-234.24),¹⁰³ but also in the greater role given to Launcelot than in the source and in the brief romance aside in which Malory explains how, at the beginning of the war, Arthur left Trystrams "with kynge Marke of Cornuayle for the love of La Beale Isode, wherefore sir Launcelot was passyng wrothe" (195.8-10; my emphasis). We are thus reminded that the "Tale of King Arthur" ends, and "Arthure and Lucius" opens, with

¹⁰⁰ The closest parallel would appear to be Arthur's threat to the Emperor that "Thare sall no siluer hym saue bot Ewayn [fytz Henry] recouer." alliterative Morte 1572. See further Works 1384-85, n. to 211.19-31.

¹⁰¹ See alliterative Morte Arthure 3872-84; Works 1662, n. to 1259.9-21; McCarthy, "Beowulf's Bairns" 159, and his "Malory and His Sources," Companion to Malory 94; and P. J. C. Field, ed., Le Morte Darthur: The Seventh and Eighth Tales, by Sir Thomas Malory, The London Medieval and Renaissance Series (New York: Holmes, 1977) n. to "Le Morte Darthur" 2458, and his "The Source of Malory's 'Tale of Gareth'," Malory: Texts and Sources 250. See also n. 52 supra.

¹⁰² McCarthy, "Beowulf's Bairns" 151 for the quotation, and passim for the greater influence of the alliterative Morte. On this last point see further his "Malory and His Sources" 84 and 94-5; Brewer, "Character of Lancelot" 35-6; and Vorontzoff 114.

¹⁰³ This episode is perhaps not as incongruous here as in the alliterative Morte Arthure 2513-2716, for Malory's Morte, as we shall see, is more obviously a mixture of romance and heroic elements than its source, which is more consistently heroic.

the statement that Launcelot and Trystrams at this time came to Arthur's court (180.18-19 and 185.4-5).¹⁰⁴ It is unclear if Launcelot is angry here because Trystrams is left with the traitorous Marke, because so noble a knight is left behind in a situation likely to demand his talents or, quite possibly, because Launcelot himself does not get to stay with Gwenyvere.¹⁰⁵ In any event, Malory seems to be establishing both the generic mixture of the Morte Darthur as a whole, as well as the dichotomy between its principal kinds, represented and epitomized by, amongst others, Launcelot and Trystrams on the one hand, and by Balyn and Gawayne on the other.¹⁰⁶

These romance aspects aside, "Arthure and Lucius" is predominantly epic. The "Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake," in contrast, is from the outset primarily romance, replete with love, ladies and adventure. The tale opens by explaining how Launcelot's worship increased so much that "quene Gwenyvere had hym in grete favoure aboven all other knyghtis, and so he loved the quene agayne aboven all other ladyes[,] . . . and for hir he dud many dedys of armys" (253.15-18). We are thus presented with what amounts to a "character sketch" of Launcelot, perhaps original to

¹⁰⁴ For Mary E. Dichmann, "'The Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius,'" Malory's Originality 74-9 and 90, and R. M. Lumiansky, "'The Tale of Lancelot,'" Malory's Originality 91 and 93, the Roman War introduces Launcelot and the "Tale of Sir Launcelot" proper.

¹⁰⁵ Lumiansky, "'Tale of Lancelot'" 96, and "'The Tale of Lancelot and Guenevere,'" Malory's Originality 207, is more certain, attributing Launcelot's anger to his love of Gwenyvere. Brewer, "Character of Lancelot" 40 is equally certain, arguing instead that Launcelot does not love the Queen, and that Malory is simply using Trystrams as a foil to emphasize Launcelot's loyalty, though the evidence for this is not as clear as Brewer suggests.

¹⁰⁶ Kennedy, Knighthood makes a threefold division of knighthood in the Morte, and correctly identifies Gawayne as heroic, but she misinterprets both the heroic ethos in general and Gawayne in particular.

Malory, emphasizing his great martial talents and his great love of the Queen,¹⁰⁷ both of which features are endemic to romance. Immediately hereafter Launcelot sets out through a forest “hymself to preve in straunge adventures” (253.21-24), and when Ector sets out after him, he, too, rides “in a grete foreste” asking after “adventures” (254.27-33). These early examples set the tone and kind for the entire tale, which comprises a series of loosely related adventures—as perhaps Malory intended to imply in the explicit of “Arthure and Lucius:” “Here Folowyth Afftir Many Noble Talys of Sir Launcelot de Lake” (247.6-7; my emphasis).

Yet even in the romance sections of the Morte Malory is concerned to remind us of his overall tragic unity and theme.¹⁰⁸ One of Launcelot’s adventures thus emphasizes the great friendship between himself and Gawayne. Having released Gaherys and the other prisoners from Terquyn, for example, Launcelot advises Gaherys:

Sir, my name is sir Launcelot du Lake that ought to helpe you
of ryght for kynge Arthurs sake, and in especial for my lorde
sir Gawayne his sake. (268.4-6)

Taken as an isolated incident this means little, but in the context of the Morte as a whole it is one of several scenes which, in retrospect, exacerbate the final tragedy of the blood-feud between Launcelot and Gawayne.¹⁰⁹ Their friendship and Gawayne’s

¹⁰⁷ Wilson, Characterization 21; the connexion between this characterization and the romance kind is my own. On the originality of the passage see further Brewer, “Character of Lancelot” 41-2.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Barbara Nolan, “The Tale of Sir Gareth and the Tale of Sir Lancelot,” Companion to Malory 153-81, esp. 154-56 and 178-81; Nolan is speaking specifically of Tales III and IV. Less convincing is her notion that III and IV are separate, “individual tales” which nonetheless contribute to the Morte’s overall unity.

¹⁰⁹ Works xlix-1 and 1621 points out further that the final tragedy depends for its effect on the great friendship between Launcelot and Gawayne.

insight (explored in more detail below) are also suggested when Launcelot, disguised in Kay's armour, jousts with Gawayne and three other fellows of the Round Table. Launcelot overcomes all four "with one spere" (278.8-9), and Gawayne alone sees through the disguise (278.12-14). Malory highlights the mistaken-identity humour by making Launcelot's adoption of Kay's armour deliberate rather than accidental, as in the source,¹¹⁰ but while nothing disastrous happens in this case, the potential for disaster in a world where men play with swords and lances is never far from the surface. It may be added that Malory here drops from his source the fact that Lancelot seriously wounds two of his fellows.¹¹¹ Partly he does this to emphasize the humour, but partly—and more importantly to my mind—it is because the threats of disaster and tragedy are so constant in the Morte that, in this case, he can afford to focus on the humour and leave the tragedy implicit. But this is only temporary; for although Launcelot's final adventure in this tale, that with Sir Pedyvere, offers no threat to his own life, a lady under his protection is killed (284.15-285.12). So outrageous is the act that Launcelot feels himself "shamed . . . for evir!" (285.14); even Gwennyvere concludes that the act is "a grete rebuke unto sir Launcelot" (286.5).¹¹²

¹¹⁰ For Malory's alteration of the scene from the Prose Lancelot see Works 1423, n. to 272.33-278.17; Nolan 173; and Lancelot, ed. Alexandre Micha, 9 vols., Textes Littéraires Français (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1978-83) V, xcix, 18, pp. 285-86. All references to the Prose Lancelot are by volume, chapter, section and page number to this edition. For the humour of the scene see further Lewis, "Lawghyng and Smylyng" 16-17.

¹¹¹ Nolan 173-74. For the original scene see Prose Lancelot V, xcix, 23-24, pp. 289-91.

¹¹² Lewis, "Lawghyng and Smylyng" 18-19, goes too far in her claim that this scene, too, has comic potential. Rather better is her observation that the trick which allows Pedyvere to slay his wife appears to be original to Malory. On this latter notion see further Works 1425-26, n. to 284.15-286.18.

Something similar can be said of Launcelot's famous aspersion of lovers and ladies (270.28-271.4) when—not for the first time in this tale—a damsel throws his affair with Gwenyvere in his face. Despite Malory's (in one later case notorious) reluctance to corroborate the truth of the affair, and Launcelot's own continual fervent denials, the fame of Launcelot's relationship with Gwenyvere is something of a mediaeval commonplace. In this sense the community of users, both mediaeval and modern, are perhaps justified to see the affair as already underway,¹¹³ especially given the (intertextual) nature and sharing of Arthurian traditions, knowledge and tales as a whole amongst the mediaeval community of users.¹¹⁴ So strong is this convention that it is argued that we are meant to hold up the tradition of the affair as a backdrop to Malory's "Hoole Book" (1260.16), including the "Tale of Launcelot."¹¹⁵ And although it is possible that, in Malory's version, nothing has yet happened,¹¹⁶ it is certainly not the case that Malory's Launcelot is merely a great warrior uninterested in love.¹¹⁷ On the contrary—as Brewer so aptly puts it—Launcelot's response is neither

¹¹³ In the Prose Lancelot the affair has progressed so far that when Lancelot is captured by Morgan le Fay he consoles himself by painting pictures of their relationship on the walls of his prison. See Lancelot V, lxxxvi, 20-23, pp. 51-54.

¹¹⁴ For a study of this intertextual phenomenon in mediaeval Arthurian literature see the collection of essays in Norris J. Lacy, ed., Text and Intertext in Medieval Arthurian Literature, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities 1997 (New York: Garland, 1996).

¹¹⁵ Derek Brewer, "Malory's 'Proving' of Sir Launcelot," The Changing Face of Arthurian Romance, ed. Alison Adams et al., Arthurian Studies 16 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1986) 124-26, and Nolan 174.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur" 234, and McCarthy, Introduction to Malory 22.

¹¹⁷ McCarthy, "Beowulf's Bairns" 156. Works 1407-12 and 1413, n. to 253.8-19 does not go as far as McCarthy, but Vinaver too (mistakenly) downplays the extent to which Launcelot's actions are motivated by the Queen. Mandel 84-5, on the other

an inconsistency nor a dismissal of love, but a falsehood.¹¹⁸ Further, regardless of how far the relationship has progressed at this point, the events of this tale form a sort of preface to the affair,¹¹⁹ which will become a major theme of the Morte as a whole. Consequently, the “uncertainty makes us aware by contrast of the lovers’ part in the coming destruction of Arthur’s kingdom, an awareness that hangs ominously over Launcelot’s exhilarating chivalric achievements.”¹²⁰

There is, moreover, considerable dramatic irony in Launcelot’s conclusion that “who that usyth paramours shall be unhappy, and all thyng unhappy that is aboute them” (271.2-4). This tragic irony serves to emphasize the sombre foreboding which is never far from the surface even in what are usually considered the more straightforward romance parts of the Morte. The fact that this scene is original to Malory may not actually add to the tragedy, but it certainly highlights Malory’s artistry by revealing that (i) he had a unified and tragic conception for the work as a whole and (ii) that he is capable of making subtle additions to or alterations from his sources in order to emphasize that conception.¹²¹ We must therefore question Vinaver’s argument that Malory’s artistry and originality here reveal themselves in but a few

hand, takes Launcelot’s words at face value, a preference for bachelorhood. Nolan 175 similarly claims that “No hint in this passage suggests that Lancelot is dissembling,” thus contradicting her earlier assertion (174, cited in n. 115 supra) that we are meant to keep the relationship in mind.

¹¹⁸ Brewer, ed., Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight 29, and his “Character of Lancelot” 42-3.

¹¹⁹ For III as a “Prelude to Adultery” see Lumiansky, “Tale of Lancelot” 91-8, and “Tale of Lancelot and Guinevere” 207-08.

¹²⁰ Field, “Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte Darthur” 235.

¹²¹ For the passage being original to Malory see Works 1407-08, 1412 and 1420, n. to 270.15-271.4, and Lumiansky, “Tale of Lancelot” 95 and 97.

sporadic and “unrelated additions.”¹²² Likewise, while Malory’s changes to his sources at this point may well succeed “in concealing from us the essential character of the work from which he borrows his material,”¹²³ we have yet to realize how these changes also reveal the Morte Darthur’s own character, one markedly different from that of his sources.

“The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkeney” is also, on one level, a typical romance characterized by love, ladies and adventure, one presented in the specific form of a Fair Unknown-Younger Brother Type.¹²⁴ The prominence of adventure in the tale is suggested by Arthur’s habit of not eating until he sees or hears of an adventure (293.7-12 and 296.11-17); the adventure itself is announced by a lady seeking a knight to rescue her sister (296.14-30); and Gareth loves and is inspired by Lyones. A rather humorous example of the connexion between love, ladies and adventure, one worthy of the amorous playboy tradition of the French Gauvain, comes when Gareth and Lyones twice attempt to consummate their love, and are twice interrupted by an enchanted knight who injures Gareth—despite the fact that Gareth concludes their first encounter by chopping off his mysterious opponent’s head (332.35-335.30). By Gareth’s own admission, even the continual abuse of his guide Lyonet inspires him

¹²² Works 1412.

¹²³ Works 1408. Field is more intriguing than convincing when he argues that Malory based Launcelot’s speech on the central theme “of marriage and chivalry” in Chrétien’s Chevalier au lion, combined with Erec’s forsaking arms for the marriage-bed in Erec et Énide: P. J. C. Field, “Malory and Chrétien de Troyes,” Malory: Texts and Sources 243-45.

¹²⁴ On IV’s type see Wilson, Characterization 12-13 and 60; Nolan 156-69; and Field, “Source of Malory’s ‘Tale of Gareth’” 246-60. Sklar 312 goes so far as to label “Gareth” “arguably the most perfect courtly romance in the entire corpus of Middle English literature.”

(312.35-313.20),¹²⁵ although this is not the erotic inspiration usually offered by ladies in romance. In more typical romance fashion, “Gareth” ends happily with multiple marriages; but while this tale is one of the obvious romance strands of the Morte Darthur,¹²⁶ it is significant that in the romance tales of Launcelot, Gareth and Trystrams, only Gareth’s love is ultimately a happy one, and Gareth’s own ending is famously unhappy. Thus even as a romance “Gareth” not only shows just how woeful are the relations of Trystrams and Isode and Launcelot and Gwennyvere, but more important to our present argument, exemplifies how the Morte Darthur as a whole should end if it truly were a romance.

“Gareth” also presents us with an excellent illustration of romance’s tendency to aggrandize one hero over and at the expense of others. Gawayne’s role as the original exemplar of the tale is attested both by its type and by its opening, where he is the one to see Gareth approach and announce the adventure (293.13-20).¹²⁷ Furthermore, Gawayne alone of Arthur’s knights has any knowledge of and experience with the Rede Knyght of the Rede Laundys (296.28-35), suggesting that Gareth’s adventure should be measured against his brother’s status. Unlike epic, which focusses predominantly on one hero but allows for the aristeia (special show of valour) of one or more other, if slightly lesser heroes,¹²⁸ romance tends ultimately to undermine, if not denigrate, all knights but the principal hero. This is more obvious in

¹²⁵ Cf. Sklar 316.

¹²⁶ Sklar 313 sees in “Gareth” a model for the Morte’s romance features and tales, but if this is true, it is rather a model which serves but to highlight just how unromantic the Morte really is.

¹²⁷ Cf. Nolan 164.

¹²⁸ I have adopted Lattimore’s translation of aristeia: Lattimore, trans., Iliad 32.

the shorter verse romances, but is still sometimes true of longer romance cycles. Thus, especially in the French tradition, Lancelot's rise to the greatest Arthurian hero includes, if indeed it is not predicated upon, the fall from grace of earlier heroes such as Gauvain or Keu. Perhaps the most famous example of this is the "gradual perversion of the Arthurian universe," in which the French Lancelot and his clan become the mainstays of Arthur's kingdom, while Arthur himself becomes an enfeebled and petty king.¹²⁹ Even in Malory it is noteworthy that all of Launcelot's potential equals, Lamerok, Trystrams, Gareth, Galahad, are eventually killed off, leaving Launcelot in the spotlight alone. Consequently, in this tale, although Gareth is allowed centre-stage with Launcelot, Malory occasionally transfers acts or status from Gawayne to Launcelot,¹³⁰ and while Launcelot's generosity towards the incognito Beawmaynes is praised, Gawayne's is belittled (295.27-35).¹³¹

Like the tales of "Launcelot" and "Gareth" which precede it, the "Boke of Syr Trystrams de Lyones" is largely a romance. Accordingly, "Trystrams" opens with a marked preference for love and ladies, evident in the emphasis on the great love between Trystrams' parents (371.20-23); the unidentified lady's imprisonment of Trystrams' father because she loves him (371.24-31); Trystrams' mother's setting out into the forest in search of her husband, where she gives birth and dies (371.32-372.27); the attempt of Trystrams' stepmother to slay Trystrams and his rescue of her

¹²⁹ Rosemary Morris, "King Arthur and the Growth of French Nationalism," France and the British Isles in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, ed. Gillian Jondorf and D. N. Dumville (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1991) 122-26; quotation from 122.

¹³⁰ Field, "Source of Malory's 'Tale of Gareth'" 248-50, and "Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur" 235.

¹³¹ Cf. Wheeler 128.

(373.14-375.4 and 375.32-36); all of which, of course, serves but to introduce the great love between Trystrams and Isode (after whom Vinaver named the first section of this tale). The “Boke of Syr Trystrams” has been called the “royaulme aventureux,”¹³² for adventure, too, plays a prominent role in this tale, as in the episode surrounding La Cote Male Tayle, or in Palomydes’ remark that he “fonde never no knyght in [his] queste of this glatissynge beste but, and he wolde juste, [Palomydes] never yet refused hym” (684.16-18). Similarly, at the opening of the section which Vinaver has entitled “Tristram’s Madness and Exile,” Trystrams leaves Isode le Blaunche Maynys and others at the edge of the Foreyste Perelus because, as he says, “in thys foresyte ar many strange adventures, as I have harde sey, and som of hem I caste to preve or that I departe” (481.22-24). A classic example of how a knight’s adventures and prowess are influenced by love and ladies comes in Trystrams’ battle with the Sessoyne captain Sir Elyas; when Trystrams is nearly overcome he

remembird hym of his lady, La Beale Isode, that loked uppon hym, and how he was never lykly to com in hir presence. Than he pulled up his shyld that before hynge full lowe, and than he dressed hym unto sir Elyas and gaff hym many sad strokys, twenty ayenst one, and all to-brake his shyld and his hawberke, that the hote bloode ran downe as hit had bene rayne. (625.28-33)

Indeed, so great is Trystrams’ love of Isode that, despite the treachery and falsehood of King Marke, Trystrams desires to leave Arthur’s court in Marke’s company in order to return to Cornwall and Isode, “for without the syghte of her syr Tristram myght not

¹³² Field, “Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte Darthur” 237. Cf. Works 1443-44, where Vinaver notes that Malory retains much of the episodic adventure nature of his original, the French Prose Tristan (circa 1230).

endure” (609.16-610.20; quotation from 610.19-20; cf. 626.12-16).¹³³

The “Boke of Syr Trystrams” is by far the longest of Malory’s tales, romance or otherwise, and its episodic adventures are so haphazard and unrelated as at times to descend into near narrative anarchy. This, the consequent disparagement of the tale and its romance status, can be considered critical axioms, though there has been a trend recently to attempt to redeem it.¹³⁴ What is generally overlooked, however, is that, like the tales of “Launcelot” and “Gareth” which precede it, Malory’s Tale V is marked by constant reminders of the Morte’s sombre theme and kind;¹³⁵ and while such elements of generic mixture do not perhaps change the overall tenor of “Trystrams” itself, they do remind us that the Morte Darthur as a whole is not a straightforward romance. This is the case even from the outset of the tale, with the death of Trystrams’ mother following his birth and his consequent name: “the sorowfull-borne chylde” (373.10-11; cf. 372.24-26). This also serves as an early reminder that his end, too, in spite of the usual romance convention, will be distinctly

¹³³ The quotation occurs near the beginning of another lacuna in the Winchester MS.

¹³⁴ See, e.g., Riddy 86-112; Ginger Thornton, “The Weakening of the King: Arthur’s Disintegration in The Book of Sir Tristram,” Arthurian Yearbook 1 (1991): 135-48; Kevin T. Grimm, “Fellowship and Envy: Structuring the Narrative of Malory’s Tale of Sir Tristram,” Fifteenth-Century Studies 20 (1993): 77-98; and D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., “Malory’s Book of Sir Tristram: Focusing Le Morte Darthur” Quondam et Futurus 3 (1993): 14-31, each of whom argues, in different ways, for the thematic, and in some cases unifying, importance of Malory’s “Trystrams.”

¹³⁵ Two exception are Sklar 318 and 322, who notes that V juxtaposes tragedy and romance, and Helen Cooper, “The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones,” Companion to Malory 188, who observes that “the stories of Lamorak and Tristram belong with the larger tragic movement of the history of Arthur.” Cooper does not, however, pursue this idea. On the other hand, the sombre elements of “Trystrams” do not mean that the book is one of “moral degeneration” paralleling and highlighting the degeneration of the Arthurian world as a whole, as is claimed by Rumble 145-47 and 180-83 (quotation from 181), and Sklar 317.

unhappy.

Similarly, “Trystrams” provides one of several reminders throughout the Morte of how tragedy is often secured as a result of honour, for despite the great love that exists between Trystrams and Isode, manifest in the fact that everyone around them wishes that Trystrams might marry Isode himself, Trystrams claims Isode as King Marke’s bride because he would not be seen to break his word (411.14-35). There are also some indications of “grete love” and “grete fantasy” between Trystrams and Isode well before they drink the potion (385.6-386-14; quotations from 385.6 and 9),¹³⁶ and while this does not prevent Trystrams’ subsequent affair with Segwarydes’ wife, it adds to the tragedy by increasing the human element. Even the romance elements of love and ladies lead to unhappiness, and Marke’s and Trystrams’ falling out over Isode is prefaced by a minor scene in which “there befelle a jolesy and an unkyndenesse betwyxte kyng Marke and sir Trsytrames, for they loved bothe one lady, and she was an erlys wyff that hyght sir Segwarydes” (393.12-15). Indeed, it is because of this lady that Marke decides to wed Isode in the first place, partly to spite Trystrams, and partly in the hope that Trystrams will be destroyed in Ireland (403.12-19).¹³⁷ Palomydes and Trystrams are likewise driven apart by love of Isode, a fact made worse by Palomydes’ nobility and the fact that, as he himself at times realizes, his rivalry with Trystrams causes him to dishonour himself to the point that he exclaims: “I wote nat what eylyth me” (697.15).¹³⁸ In this sense Dynadan’s words to Isode, that “the joy of love is to

¹³⁶ Cf. Rumble 149-51. For an examination of Malory’s treatment of the potion as it relates to the sources see Rumble 136-43 and 149-51.

¹³⁷ Cf. Rumble 159-60.

¹³⁸ For Palomydes’ realization of his actions see further 763.19-25; 770.5-35; 775.32-776.7; and 778.11-14; and cf. Cooper, “The Book of Sir Tristram” 191-92.

shorte, and the sorow thereof and what cometh thereof is duras over longe” (693.33-35), serve as a stark reminder that the four most famous lovers in the Morte Darthur—perhaps in the Middle Ages as a whole—end, not happily as lovers in romance should, but in sorrow.¹³⁹

Another highly unusual sentiment for romance comes when Palomydes unhorses Trystrams and Lamerok, and Malory remarks:

Here men may undirstonde that bene men of worshyp
that man was never fourmed that all tymes myght
attayne, but somtyme he was put to the worse by
malefortune and at som tyme the wayker knyght put
the bygger knyght to a rebuke. (484.18-22; my emphasis)

Trystrams himself says much the same thing to Lamerok (429.22-24) and to Palomydes (700.14-20), and Dynadan echoes the thought back to Trystrams (516.3-6). Such a recognition of potential, if not ultimately inevitable, defeat is much more in keeping with the epic-heroic than romantic ethos, and serves as yet another example of generic mixture within the Morte Darthur. The sentiment also foreshadows Trystrams’ death at the hands of the ignoble and callous Marke, further emphasizing that even so great a knight as Launcelot or Trystrams, so noble a king as Arthur, will in the end be destroyed. Something similar occurs in the tournament at the Castle of Maidens. When Launcelot accidentally injures Trystrams, Arthur comes close to castigating Launcelot for his acts, whereupon Launcelot remarks that “whan men bene hote in

¹³⁹ Pace Works 1445, where Vinaver argues that Malory insists on making Trystrams and Isode happy and ignoring—if he ever knew—the tragedy of the original, pre-romance version of the story. On the unhappiness of lovers in this tale cf. Cooper, “The Book of Sir Tristram” 190-91, though love is more prominent than she allows. E.g., the very fact that Malory can afford, in Cooper’s words, to treat Trystrams’ and Isode’s love “largely . . . as a given” is, oddly enough, a sign of its presence.

dedis of armys, oftyn hit ys seyne they hurte their frendis as well as their foys” (537.17-18). Considering how the final collapse of the Round Table is caused in part by just such an act on Launcelot’s part, his words are once again rife with tragic irony. These tragic scenes and reminders in the “Boke of Syr Trystrams” are given added pathos and sombreness by the flashback to the “Tale of Balyn” and the deaths of Lancelot and Columbe and Merlyon’s prophecy of the battle betwixt Launcelot and Trystrams (71.19-72.11) which accompany Trystrams’ and Palomydes’ arrangement to fight “in the medowe by the river of Camelot, where Merlyon sette the perowne” (562.10-11 [for the quotation] and 568.10-20).

Another recurring and unromantic theme—as well as another echo of the “Tale of Balyn”—in the “Boke of Syr Trystrams” is that of blood-feud, notably in the case of Gawayne’s pursuit of Lamerok, but also that between Dynadan and Dalan, and also Dynadan and Aggravayne and Mordred (614.32-615.8). It was noted above that Launcelot tends to be associated with and evocative of the Morte’s romance strands, but even Launcelot’s kin are willing to involve themselves in blood-feud, as when Ector threatens Palomydes: “Sir Palomydes, . . . wyte thou well there is nother thou nothir no knyght that beryth the lyff that sleyth ony of oure bloode but he shall dye for hit” (687.26-28; my emphasis). Similarly, Launcelot’s brethren later “wolde have slayne sir Trystram bycause of his fame,” which had eclipsed that of Launcelot (784.32-785.4). The fact that even the romance knights, including those associated with Launcelot, operate by the same values as Gawayne does much to mitigate Gawayne’s supposed guilt,¹⁴⁰ though it should be emphasized that, however

¹⁴⁰ See, e.g., Hanks 20-1, who presents the Gawayne of “Trystrams” as an “anti-knight,” and Cooper, “The Book of Sir Tristram” 184-85, 189 and 196, who

unpalatable it be to modern sensibilities, and however much Gawayne is consequently criticized for it, the blood-feud is, as we shall see, based on what Gawayne considers to be the demands of honour. Simultaneously, it helps to show that the Morte Darthur's values and kind are not entirely those of romance. Indeed, in the mixed and sombre kind of the Morte Darthur as a whole, even something as innocuous as a song has the potential for damage, as when Arthur and Launcelot and Dynadan disparage King Marke by means of "the worst lay that ever harper songe with harpe or with any other instrument" (618.18-19).¹⁴¹

It has been necessary to dwell on the "Boke of Syr Trystrams" at some length in order to show that it has greater relevance to and unity within the Morte Darthur as a whole than is generally understood,¹⁴² concomitantly revealing that it is not merely a straightforward—if at times discordantly episodic—romance. "Trystrams" is indeed "a reflexion of the major themes of [Malory's] whole book;"¹⁴³ what is overlooked, I would argue, is the degree to which this tale mixes romance and epic-heroic conventions, and especially the fact that the Morte Darthur's ultimate theme and reflexion are, even here, tragic. It has been claimed that the dominant motif of "Trystrams" is one of strife and bloodshed, exemplified by the "appalling image of

labels him villainous, and presents Gawayne's pursuit of Lamerok as the beginning of the end of the Round Table and a major cause—and example—of its destruction.

¹⁴¹ Cf., e.g., the englyn which Arthur foolishly sings of Cei in Culhwch and Olwen, thereby earning Cei's enmity for dishonouring him: "Culhwch and Olwen," The Mabinogion, trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London: Dent, 1949) 128.

¹⁴² See, e.g., McCarthy, Introduction to Malory 20 and 27-8, who denies any real relevance, and Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur" 237, who claims that "The Fifth Tale hardly promotes the coherence of Malory's 'whole book'."

¹⁴³ McCarthy, Introduction to Malory 26.

Morgawse, decapitated in her bed by her own sons [sic],”¹⁴⁴ but the potential for destruction in this tale is inherent even in the best knights, as when Lamerok first rescues and subsequently jousts with and kills Sir Froll (447.16-450.8). Both the rescue and the ill-fated joust are performed out of a sense of honour, and the destruction is emphasized by the casual brevity of its reckoning. Malory does not even clarify whether or not Lamerok recognized Froll, although we can perhaps assume that he did, since Malory usually points out when knights fail to recognize one another. Nor is such potential for disaster limited to the more secular adventures, for a similar sombre note runs throughout “The Noble Tale off the Sankegreall.”

I claimed at the end of the last chapter that we need not distinguish overmuch between types of romance, for even religious romance is dominated by love and adventure, and occasionally by ladies, and this is corroborated by the opening of the Grail Quest, which is instigated when “a full fayre jantillwoman” rides into Camelot seeking Launcelot, who she then leads to Galahad (853.1-854.28). This sets the tone for the prominence of ladies throughout the tale, especially but not uniquely in the person of Percyvale’s sister, without whom, as Galahad himself remarks, Galahad would not have met Bors and Percyval on board the Grail ship (984.10-13). It is also in the Grail Quest that Launcelot highlights the connexion between love, ladies and adventure by admitting that: “all my grete dedis of armys that I have done for the moste party was for the quenys sake, and for hir sake wolde I do batayle were hit ryght

¹⁴⁴ Riddy 84; the idea that the best knights, too, are prone to destruction is my own. Riddy 87-98 argues further that the destructive elements of V are, in the end, temporarily contained. Although the image is no less frightful, Morgawse is not killed “by her . . . sons,” only by Gaherys, for which—and for letting Lamerok escape—he is upbraided by Gawayne (611.33-613.11).

other wronge” (897.17-19; my emphasis). Yet Launcelot suffers not only because of his love of the Queen, but also because of his usual desire to win earthly glory; for while adventure, too, remains commonplace here, the type of adventure is not the same as that of the earlier tales. Because the Grail Quest is not the place for earthly glory, Launcelot’s habitual tactic of fighting against the stronger party is misguided; thus, in the tournament of the white and black knights, he is, for the first time in a tourney, overcome (931.14-934.23). Something similar happens to Gawayne, who in this quest finds “nat the tenthe parte of adventures as [he was] wonte to have” (941.3). Unlike most of his companions, though, Gawayne, here and elsewhere, reveals considerable insight into the characters and events around him, a reflexion (as we shall see) of his heroic status. He knows, for instance, that Bors, Percyvale and Galahad “have no peerys. And if one thyng were nat in sir Launcelot he had none felow of an erthely man; but he ys as we be but if he take the more payne uppon hym” (941.19-22; my emphases). That insight is given more emphasis by the fact that, apart from the statement that Launcelot is one of the four most likely to achieve the Grail, Gawayne’s words are original to Malory.¹⁴⁵

“The Noble Tale off the Sankegreall” is Malory’s least original tale, though it is significant that “he change[s] its mystical and severely ascetic ethos into a more humane spirituality,”¹⁴⁶ thereby incorporating its material more fully into his own theme. Like the “Boke of Syr Trystrams,” Tale VI is marked by a sombreness and

¹⁴⁵ On the originality of the passage see Wilson, Characterization 35, who sees it as one indication of Malory’s more sympathetic portrait of Launcelot, as opposed to his condemnation in the French Queste.

¹⁴⁶ Field, “Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte Darthur” 238.

generic mixture unusual in romance, both of which elements look forward to the final tragedy of the closing tales. This is evident from the outset, when Galahad achieves the adventure of the sword-in-the-floating-stone only to remind us of the tragic history of the sword's first owner, Balyn (863.3-8).¹⁴⁷ And while Galahad may consider his own death a glorious success, Arthur presumably does not, since he laments before the Quest even begins that his noble Knights of the Round Table will never again be seen wholly together, for which reason he delays the Quest for one final tournament, "that aftir [their] dethe men may speke of hit that such good knyghtes were here, such a day, holé togydirs" (864.10-12; cf. 866.16-868.2). Not only is such a realization far from the successful resolution towards which romance works, it echoes eerily the epic-heroic recognition, discussed in the last chapter, of the fragility of life and need for glory. Arthur's lament also looks forward to his threnody, in the wake of Gareth's death, for the imminent destruction of his knights (1183.32-1184.7).¹⁴⁸

Unlike Galahad and Percyvale, Bors at least survives the Grail Quest to return to Arthur's court. Yet his adventures, too, highlight some of the tragic threads of the Morte Darthur as a whole. One such theme is that of the conflicting demands of duty or honour which often secure the hero's tragedy. In Bors' case his dilemma comes when he is forced to choose between saving a maiden or saving his brother Lyonell (960.21-961.17). Familial relations and blood-feuds play a major role throughout the Morte, especially in the final tales, and although Bors' decision to rescue the maiden does not, as "the fynde . . . in lyknesse of a man of religion" (967.32-33) claims, secure

¹⁴⁷ This passage, too, is original to Malory: Works 1547, n. to 863.3-9.

¹⁴⁸ McCarthy, "Beowulf's Bairns" 157.

Lyonell's death (962.33-963.3), it leads, perhaps more pathetically, to a feud with his own brother. The tragedy is heightened by Bors' initial sorrow at leaving his brother and his subsequent joy at finding him alive, contrasted with Lyonell's hatred of and desire to kill Bors. So strong is Lyonell's hatred, in fact, that he slays both an hermit and a fellow Knight of the Round Table when they attempt to prevent him from murdering his brother (970.20-973.14). This is a far cry from the felicitous reunions typical of romance, and while Bors may have made the right decision in Grail terms, Arthur's reaction to the Quest, mentioned above, presents us with a markedly different perspective. And in a story where earthly, human fellowship, symbolized by the Round Table, is so important, this killing of one's brother knights, and attempted murder of one's actual brother, is rendered all the more disturbing. The emphasis on humanity, conflicting loyalties, and tragedy throughout the Morte, like Malory's toning down of the Vulgate Queste del Saint Graal's condemnation of earthly affairs, likewise highlights that what qualifies as a victory in the source is not necessarily so in Malory; certainly it is not in this case.

If the Morte Darthur were a proper romance it could end either at the end of the Grail Quest, which, in the Vulgate Cycle at least, is a happy ending of sorts, or with the reunion of Launcelot and Galahad, who make great joy of one another, dwell together for six months on the ship with Percyvale's dead sister, and encounter "many straunge adventures and peryllous" (1012.1-1013.7)—about which, however, like the Gawain-poet with Gawayn's adventures en route to the Green Chapel, Malory fails to elaborate. The Morte Darthur does not end here however, or even with the returns of Bors and Launcelot to Arthur's court, but rather with the tragic dissolution of the Round Table and the death of Arthur and all his knights. Even Launcelot's return

from the Grail Quest, for all the joy it brings,¹⁴⁹ is marred by the fact that “many of the knyghtes of the Rounde Table were slayne and destroyed, more than halff” (1020.20-21). The general unhappiness of this mortal coil is exacerbated by the fact that two of the Grail Knights and the Grail itself leave England and the world altogether. This emphasis on the contemptibility of earthly affairs and man’s isolation from the divine is unusual in romance, unique, as far as English romance is concerned, to Chaucer’s Knyghtes Tale, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Malory,¹⁵⁰ and is further evidence that the Morte Darthur is not a straightforward romance. Galahad, through Bors, does try to help Launcelot at least by exhorting “hym [to] remembir of this worlde unstable” (1035.11-12; cf. 1036.27-32), but the warning fails. Immediately, as the opening of “The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere” makes clear, “Launcelot began to resorte unto quene Gwenivere agayne and forgate the promyse and the perfeccion that he made in the queste” (1045.10-12). While the sombre adumbration inherent in this is not much strengthened by the fact that the message from Galahad is Malory’s addition,¹⁵¹ the difference between Malory’s ethos and that of the French Queste certainly is, further establishing Malory’s tragic vision and kind.

It is significant in this context that “The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere” opens by foreshadowing the coming tragedy, not only in the fact that Launcelot and Gwenvyvere return to their old ways, for which Aggravayne begins to

¹⁴⁹ The contention of Lumiansky, ““Tale of Lancelot and Guenevere”” esp. 205 and 209-14, that Launcelot upon his return confesses his adultery to Arthur is, as Works 1583-84, n. to 1036.19-1037.7 claims, rather spurious.

¹⁵⁰ Finlayson, “The Knight’s Tale” 133.

¹⁵¹ Field, “Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte Darthur” 238. Field sees this only as a connexion between Tales VI and VII, not as an indication of the tragedy.

plot and make “noyse” (1045.19-21), but in Launcelot’s own realization of the tragic consequences of their love, evident in his complaint to Gwennyvere that “the boldnesse of you and me woll brynge us to shame and sclaudir” (1046.25-26). Furthermore, not only does the tragedy become more pronounced as the Morte Darthur draws to a close,¹⁵² so too, for the moment, does the generic mixture, for the romance elements of love, ladies and adventure become twisted to harbingers of tragedy, while the usually epic and masculine blood-feud element, seen here in the opening section of the Poisoned Apple, centres around Gwennyvere and her rescue by her estranged lover, Launcelot. Similarly, romance—and by association, love in romance—should work towards harmony and happiness, however many pitfalls it must pass first, but the “Fayre Maydyn off Ascolot . . . keste such a love unto sir Launcelot that she cowde never withdraw hir loove, wherefore she dyed” (1067.31-1068.2).¹⁵³ This recalls the French princess in the “Boke of Syr Trystrams” who, when she “undirstoode that Trystrams wolde nat love hir, as the book seyth, she dyed for sorou” (378.16-17).¹⁵⁴ Elayne of Ascolat’s love is even more disastrous, securing suffering for Launcelot and Gwennyvere as well as herself. Elayne’s death-bed defence of her very secular love (1093.3-1094.3), meanwhile, looks forward to Launcelot’s final favouring of secular over divine love, simultaneously paralleling—and indicating—Malory’s own secular

¹⁵² Cf. Field, “Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte Darthur” 239-40.

¹⁵³ Cf. Benson, “The Ending of the Morte Darthur” 224-25. For Ascolat instead of Astolat see Toshiyuki Takamiya, “‘Ascolat’ in the Winchester Malory,” Aspects of Malory 125-26.

¹⁵⁴ Riddy 99-100 sees in the French princess and her death tokens of the disjointedness of “Trystrams,” further evidence that many people and actions do not belong. Such discordant elements, however, are much less out of place when the Morte is not judged as a romance.

focus. Even in the “Knight of the Cart” episode, which is for the most part a classic example of the romance connexion between love, ladies and adventure, and in which all of Launcelot’s actions are inspired by love, there is the tragic irony of Gwenyvere’s initial desire to spare Mellyagaunce because “bettir ys pees than evermore warre, and the lesse noyse the more ys [hir] worshyp” (1128.16-17).

“Launcelot and Guinevere” also provides evidence of how the hero’s rise and fall—and tragedy—are usually predicated upon the same abilities, virtue and character which secure his greatness. Unlike the Vulgate Cycle, the Morte Darthur presents Arthur throughout as both noble and proficient, worthy leader of a worthy host and “the man of greatest honour in the kingdom.”¹⁵⁵ A prime example of his magnanimity comes in his response to Sir Urry’s mother:¹⁵⁶

wyte you welle, here shall youre son be healed and
ever any Crystyn man [may] heale hym. And for to
gyff all othir men off worshyp a currayge, I myselff
woll asay to handyll your sonne, . . . nat presumyng
uppon me that I am so worthy to heale youre son be
my dedis, but I woll corrayge othir men of worshyp
to do as I woll do. (1146.22-29)

Paradoxically, it is this same concern with propriety, honour, and justice, with being “a ryghtfull juge” and “a ryghteous kynge” (1050.6 and 1050.33) which, in the episode of the Poisoned Apple, forces Arthur to threaten Gwenyvere with death even though he believes her to be innocent (1050.4-16 and 1052.26-27).¹⁵⁷ Not only does Malory

¹⁵⁵ Brewer, ed., Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight 30; the contrast with the Vulgate Cycle is my own.

¹⁵⁶ The Urry episode appears to be largely Malory’s invention: see Works 1591, and Field, “Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte Darthur” 239.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Stephen J. Miko, “Malory and the Chivalric Order,” Medium Aevum 35 (1966): 216, who sees this as part of the Morte’s dichotomy of appearance and reality.

present his Arthur as more sympathetic, just and truly noble than his sources, thereby revealing “the greatest originality in characterization which can be attributed to Malory,”¹⁵⁸ but in doing so he makes Arthur’s largely undeserved fall all the more tragic.

It is significant to the Morte Darthur’s overall theme and kind that Tale VII, whose subject is two of the most famous of mediaeval lovers, which testifies throughout to the importance and interconnectedness of love and ladies and adventure in romance, should contain so much foreshadowing of the final tragedy. It is consequently no accident that Malory waits till this point of celebrating the love of Launcelot and Gwennyvere while simultaneously emphasizing the coming doom to inform us of the tragic conclusion of the love of Trystrams and Isode, how

that traytoure kynge [Marke] slew the noble knyght sir
Trystram as he sate harpyng afore hys lady, La Beall
Isode. . . . And [how] La Beall Isode dyed sownyng
uppon the crosse of sir Trystram, whereof was grete
pit . (1149.28-1150.4; cf. 1173.16-18)

Nor does “The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere” itself end happily.

Despite its ostensible romance subject, including the healing of Sir Urry and the marriage, at the denouement, of Urry’s sister and Sir Lavayne (1153.22-24), Malory emphasizes the generic mixture of this tale and the Morte Darthur as a whole by ending on a sombre note: “But every nyght and day sir Aggravayne, sir Gawaynes brother, awayted quene Gwentyver and sir Launcelot to put hem bothe to a rebuke and a shame” (1153.32-34; my emphasis). Not only does this refrain recall Aggravayne’s

¹⁵⁸ Wilson, Characterization 65-79; quote from 79, who traces and lists Malory’s various changes to his sources. The connexion between this characterization and the tragedy is my own, though cf. Wilson 3.

plotting at the beginning of the tale, it is essentially repeated in the opening of the final tale (1161.11-14), and both this opening and Tale VII's explicit (1154.14-15) mention the consequences of Aggravayne's acts. Like Galahad's final message to Launcelot (discussed above), which links Tales VI and VII, this backwards and forwards echo highlights the connexions between the final tales;¹⁵⁹ more important to the present argument, these echoes, some of which are original,¹⁶⁰ also emphasize Malory's tragic vision and kind. Even the magnificent catalogue of knights in the "Healing of Sir Urry" (1146.30-1150.34) evokes, in its midst, "a sense of loss for those who were once of the fellowship and who[, like Trystrams,] have been killed by treachery."¹⁶¹

It is consequently no surprise when, like the Canterbury Tales, "The Moste Pyteuous Tale of the Morte Arthure saunz Gwerdon" opens with an inversion of the romance topos of in May folk turn to love. The inversion, which seems to be original to Malory,¹⁶² is made all the clearer by its echo of the typical topos at the opening of the "Knight of the Cart" episode. Hence:

And thus hit passed on frome Candylmas untyll after
 Ester, that the moneth of May was com, whan every
 lusty harte begynnyth to blossom and to burgyne. For,
 lyke as trees and erbys burgenyth and florysshyth in
 May, in lyke wyse every lusty harte that ys ony maner
 of lover spryngith, burgenyth, buddyth, and florysshyth
 in lusty dedis. For hit gyvyth unto all lovers corrayge,
 that lusty moneth of May. (1119.1-7)

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur" 239-40.

¹⁶⁰ The opening of the final tale is original: Works 1628, n. to 1161.15.

¹⁶¹ Cooper, "The Book of Sir Tristram" 188. The account of Trystrams' death also provides further proof that, pace Works 1445, Malory did know about and relate Trystrams and Isode's unhappy end.

¹⁶² Works 1628, n. to 1161.15: "The two preceding paragraphs[are] untraceable to M's sources."

And:

In May, whan every harte floryshyth and burgenyth
(for, as the season ys lusty to beholde and comfortable,
so man and woman rejoysyth and gladith of somer
commynge with his freyshe floures, for wynter wyth
hys rowghe wyndis and blastis causyth lusty men and
women to cowre and to syt by fyres), so thys season
hit befelle in the moneth of May a grete angur and
unhappe that stynted nat tulle the floure of
chyvalry of alle the worlde was destroyed and slayne.
(1161.1-8)

This makes it clear that what follows is anything but a typical romance. Indeed, as Field observes, Tale VIII unfolds “with a seeming tragic necessity.”¹⁶³ The final tale is, moreover, the culmination of all the tragic characters, echoes, themes and events which have occurred previously and which, as we have seen, look forward to the final destruction of the Round Table and “the Ende of the Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table, that whan they were holé togyders there was ever an Hondred and Forty” (1260.16-19).¹⁶⁴ The very title, like that for the final tale which Caxton applied to the whole story, emphasizes Malory’s tragic theme and outlook.

Further, just as Sophokles’ Oedipus and Antigone do nothing genuinely wrong in the tragedies which bear their names, so here the tragedy is secured in part, and hence made all the more pathetic, by best intentions run amok coupled with ominous anticipations of future events.¹⁶⁵ Gawayne, for instance, knows what will come of the lovers’ denunciation, and vehemently advises against it (1161.24-1162.33); Gareth and

¹⁶³ Field, “Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte Darthur” 240; cf. “Heroism from the Past.”

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Guerin 234-35.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Miko 218-21.

Gaherys express their dissatisfaction with being part of Gwenvyvere's escort by bearing no arms, and are slain as a result; Arthur has "a demyng of" the affair but has long refused to hear of it because of his great love for both Launcelot and Gwenvyvere (1163.20-25); Bors warns Launcelot against visiting the Queen because of an unparalleled fear of a trap (1164.20-33); and Launcelot himself, in another display of profound tragic irony original to Malory,¹⁶⁶ is initially reluctant to rescue the Queen for fear he "shall there destroy som of [hys] beste fryndis" (1172.23-32), a sentiment and irony echoed by Gawayne when informing Arthur that Gareth and Gaherys will be reluctant to escort Gwenvyvere "bycause of many adventures that ys lyke to falle" (1176.26-27). This last scene, too, is Malory's own.¹⁶⁷ The great love between the principals, especially that of Arthur and Gawayne and Launcelot, but also that between Gareth and Launcelot, likewise increases the pathos.¹⁶⁸

Although Tales VII and VIII are, as noted above, the culmination of various tragic events and themes from throughout the Morte Darthur, it is in the final tales especially that we notice "the compulsions of progressive cause and effect" and narrowing of choices in the face of the repercussions of earlier acts which accentuate the Morte's sombre kind,¹⁶⁹ and show just how little much of it has to do with

¹⁶⁶ For the originality of the passage see Works 1631, n. to 1170.1-1173.31.

¹⁶⁷ Works 1633, n. to 1174.30-1177.7 and n. to 1176.25-29, and Kennedy, Knighthood 321.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Works xlix-xl and 1621. Vinaver sees the degeneration of Gawayne's and Launcelot's friendship to bitter enmity as central to the overall tragedy, but elsewhere, as already discussed, presents the Morte as a collection of romances.

¹⁶⁹ Brewer, ed., Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight 20; cf. Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur" 239-40 and 246. Both Brewer and Field, however, as already noted, feel that the tragedy does not change the Morte's romance status.

romance. This sense of fate and tragic mutability is highlighted by Launcelot's lamenting the changeability of Fortune when he is banished, citing the examples "of noble Ector of Troy and Alysaunder, the myghty conquerroure, and many mo other: whan they were moste in her royalté, they alyght passyng lowe" (1201.14-19). Launcelot adds himself to the list of those who have been cast aside by Fortune, but the concept, again original to Malory,¹⁷⁰ is applicable to all of the principal characters of "The Moste Pyteuous Tale of the Morte Arthure saunz Gwerdon."¹⁷¹ Launcelot also evokes a sense of Fate in labelling himself "unhappy," born in "an unhappy owre" for the slaying of Gareth, Gaherys and Gawayne (1249.23-28), thereby echoing the description of Gareth's and Gaherys' deaths (1183.25 and 1189.20), as well as that of Aggravayne and Mordred as "two unhappy knyghtis" (1161.9; cf. 1236.28).¹⁷² What he echoes even more, in a recollection that emphasizes the Morte's overall sombreness by comparing its greatest knight to one of its worst, is his own dismissive words to the wretched grovelling Pedyvere: "In a shamefull oure were thou borne" (285.36).

Arthur's Dream of Fortune's Wheel (1233.11-21), too, testifies both to the sense of doom as well as to Arthur's imminent Fall, further emphasizing the tragedy by reminding us that even so noble a king as Arthur, so great an achievement as the

¹⁷⁰ For the originality of the scene see Works 1639, n. to 1199.5-1202.16.

¹⁷¹ For Morse 101-02, Launcelot in his comparison deliberately highlights the tragedy of all three stories, Ector's, Alysaunder's and his own, thereby "elevat[ing] Arthur's history to tragedy." As noted above, however, she for the most part treats the Morte as history.

¹⁷² Speaking of Malory's description of Mordred in particular, Cooper, "Counter-Romance" 154, observes that unhappy means almost "doomed" or "accursed." Cf. the Middle English Dictionary (1954-) hap sb 1 and 3, and unhappi; Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., 20 vols. (1989) unhappy, sb 2, and hap, sb 1, 2, and 4; and Benson, Malory's Morte Darthur 240.

Round Table, must in the end be destroyed. Such a sombre reflexion is not appropriate to romance; it accords perfectly well, on the other hand, with the epic-heroic awareness of the fragility of life and constant threat of death. The dream in Malory is less detailed, though only slightly less powerful, than in either the alliterative or stanzaic Morte,¹⁷³ but it still shows that tragic sombreness typical (as we saw in the last chapter) of epic. And by separating this dream and Arthur's Fall from the end of the Roman War, as in the alliterative Morte Arthure, and placing the Roman War early and the Dream late in his own Arthuriad, Malory makes the tragedy all the more pathetic by emphasizing the nobility, "glory and complexity of what is destroyed."¹⁷⁴

This discussion of Fate in the Morte Darthur's close is not meant to suggest that the final destruction of the Round Table is simply a foregone conclusion, fated from the outset. On the contrary, for if this were the case the tragedy would be greatly, perhaps irreparably, reduced, since "neither puppets nor human beings who are in complete control of their destinies can be the subjects of tragedy."¹⁷⁵ Happily (for both readers' enjoyment and the present argument), however, as noted above, Malory combines Fate with heroic character and honour to achieve that "tension between freedom and necessity which seems essential to the tragic paradox."¹⁷⁶ Perhaps

¹⁷³ See the alliterative Morte Arthure 3218-3455, and the stanzaic Le Morte Arthur, ed. P. F. Hissiger, Studies in English Literature 96 (The Hague: Mouton, 1975) 3168-91. All references to the stanzaic Morte are by line number to this edition.

¹⁷⁴ Brewer, ed., Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight 8. I also am indebted to Brewer for the connexion between this particular alteration to Malory's source and Malory's focus on the nobility of what is destroyed.

¹⁷⁵ Winnington-Ingram, "Tragedy and Greek Archaic Thought" 50. Cf. Karen Pratt, "Aristotle, Augustine or Boethius? La Mort le roi Artu as Tragedy," Nottingham French Studies 30.2 (Autumn 1991): 106-07.

¹⁷⁶ Winnington-Ingram, "Tragedy and Greek Archaic Thought" 50.

because such tension is foreign to romance, though, and also because the Morte has long been classified as a romance, its presence and significance in Malory's Arthuriad have been either largely unrecognized or completely misunderstood. Even those few critics who do elucidate the essential tragedy of the Morte Darthur, including Brewer and Field, ultimately conclude, as noted above, that it is still a romance, while Cooper's argument for a reassessment of the fifteenth-century prose romance kind seems rooted, at least in Malory's case, predominantly in the civil strife and familial bloodshed of the final tale. Another view which acknowledges and even emphasizes the tragedy of the final tales erroneously argues that the tragedy is counterbalanced by its ironic presentation, the fact that Malory is both aggrandizing and criticizing chivalry.¹⁷⁷ Such a view is similar to that often advanced for the epic kind and hero—especially Achilles and Beowulf—but is, as we saw in the last chapter, based on generic misreading. The generic misreading in this case is all the greater for claiming that the Morte Darthur is “tragic emulsion” rather than tragedy proper because it lacks such dramatic and Aristotelean generic features as anagnorisis and a hero with a tragic flaw.¹⁷⁸

The complaint has been made that in Malory's final tale, the “Morte Arthure” itself, destruction reigns because honour is forgotten,¹⁷⁹ that Gawayne's blood-feud especially is primitive and vindictive, privileging “adherence to blood above adherence

¹⁷⁷ Miko 218-29, esp. 218.

¹⁷⁸ Miko 214 and 229-30. Guerin 259-62, on the other hand, claims Launcelot as “Malory's tragic hero” precisely because, for Guerin, he experiences peripeteia and anagnorisis.

¹⁷⁹ McCarthy, Introduction to Malory 46.

to principle.”¹⁸⁰ Such notions, however, are far from the truth, and fail to recognize the pre-eminent role honour plays in the final destruction,¹⁸¹ the connexion between honour and tragedy, and especially the fact that for Gawayne maintaining the blood-feud is itself a principle.¹⁸² Although the tragic demands of honour are, as we shall see, most extreme in Gawayne’s case, they are not unique to him. Arthur, for instance, for the sake of the “greater good” in preserving the Round Table and so the realm itself, would be willing to turn a blind eye on the affair,¹⁸³ but his will and hand are forced by those “two unhappy knyghtis whych were named sir Aggravayne and sir Mordred” (1161.9-10; my emphasis); for once the affair becomes public knowledge, Arthur is honour-bound to burn Gwennyvere. Hence his lament: “I may nat with my worshyp but my quene muste suffir dethe” (1174.17-18; my emphasis).¹⁸⁴ Launcelot, too, is constrained by honour to participate in the war between his followers and Arthur’s, for when Gawayne calls him “traytoure” (1215.11), which is technically true, Launcelot feels obliged to defend himself “othir ellis . . . be shamed” and “recreaunte” (1215.18-19 and 25).

¹⁸⁰ Mandel 89, adopting and corroborating the description of Gawayne as primitive and vindictive from Miko 222.

¹⁸¹ On the pre-eminent role played by honour in the final tragedy cf. Brewer, ed., Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight 25-31, and Benson, “The Ending of the Morte Darthur” 231-32.

¹⁸² Cf. Benson, “The Ending of the Morte Darthur” 232, who is one of the few critics to recognize this; see further his excellent “Gawain’s Defence of Lancelot in Malory’s ‘Death of Arthur’,” Modern Language Review 78 (1983): 267-72.

¹⁸³ Cf. Guerin 263-64, from whom I borrow the phrase “greater good.”

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Brewer, ed., Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight 29-30; Benson, “Gawain’s Defence of Lancelot” 270-71 and n. 14, and his “The Ending of the Morte Darthur” 231; and Miko 218-19.

Although causation in the final tales “is multiple and complex,”¹⁸⁵ Gawayne garners more than his share of critical censure for the final destruction of the Round Table.¹⁸⁶ With the notable exception of the Pelleas and Ettarde episode, however, Gawayne’s actions throughout the Morte Darthur are generally guided by an heroic, if occasionally misplaced, sense of honour, one evident from his very first adventure. It was noted above that in his adventure after Arthur and Gwenyvere’s wedding, Gawayne accidentally decapitates a lady. This unhappy affair occurs because Gawayne refuses to grant mercy to the lady’s knight on the basis that this knight has, in killing Gawayne’s hounds, employed in Arthur’s quest and following their own nature, dishonoured Gawayne (105.18-106.21). Even in this early stage of the Morte Darthur, then, Gawayne is guided by that potentially destructive sense of honour which is an innate part of his physis (character). Yet this same sense of honour had previously stopped two brothers from fighting, an act which also shows Gawayne’s sense of familial propriety and obligation (103.33-104.15).¹⁸⁷

Similarly, when Arthur banishes Uwayne for fear that he is in collusion with his mother Morgan le Fay, Gawayne accompanies Uwayne into exile, stating that whoever banishes his cousin also banishes him (158.14-16). Malory here emphasizes Gawayne’s honour and sense of family loyalty by changing his source, in which

¹⁸⁵ Mark Lambert, Malory: Style and Vision in Le Morte Darthur, Yale Studies in English 186 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1975) 160. Cf. Benson, Malory’s Morte Darthur 238, and Brewer, ed., Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight 28.

¹⁸⁶ See, e.g., Brewer, ed., Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight 11; Kennedy, Knighthood passim, esp. 290; Cooper, “Counter-Romance” 154; and, to a lesser extent, Benson, Malory’s Morte Darthur 241, essentially ignoring the merits of his own observation, cited in n. 185 supra.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Kennedy, Knighthood 61.

Uwayne asks Gawayne to accompany him.¹⁸⁸ While on this adventure he chastises a group of ladies slinging mud on Marhaus' shield because his sense of honour "woll abyde no lenger to se a knyghtes shelde so dishonoured" (158.24-159.17), just as he rebukes Marhaus for fighting from horseback when he himself is on foot—a lesson in courtesy and honour for which Marhaus thanks him (160.27-35), which Gawayne had earlier utilized himself (105.3-15), and which again is Malory's addition.¹⁸⁹ It is thus no surprise when, during Trystrams' madness, Gawayne saves Trystrams from the treachery of Morgan le Fay, going so far as to offer to fight with Trystrams against the thirty knights Morgan has lying in ambush (510.18-512.9). Similarly, during the Great Tournament, when Arthur's side are losing because of the efforts of the disguised Launcelot and Gareth, who are fighting against him, Gawayne penetrates his friend's and brother's disguises, and advises Arthur to stop for the day, as the only way to defeat them would be by shameful means, and they should not act shamefully (1112.20-1113.15).

It may be added here that even his blood-feud with Lamerok, although unpalatable to modern sensibilities, and made worse in the light of those sensibilities by Lamerok's own honourable and noble stature, is but a reflexion of this same sense of honour, a continuation of his revenge on Pellynore for slaying Lot, and exacerbated by what Gawayne perceives to be Lamerok's deliberate dishonouring of Gawayne by dishonouring his mother (608.13-20). Gawayne's pursuit of Lamerok is thus consistent with his sense of honour and familial obligation. Considering that revenge is not only

¹⁸⁸ For Malory's alteration of his source see Works 1355, n. to 158.14-16.

¹⁸⁹ On the originality of the scene see Works 1356, n. to 160.34-35.

expected but honourable in the epic-heroic world, it is one further suggestion that Gawayne's own values and character belong to that world rather than to romance. At the same time, the slaying of Lamerok is one place where the reader generally thinks, perhaps with Malory, that Gawayne should have sacrificed his personal honour to the greater knight and greater public good. In this light Gawayne's dominant characteristic becomes not that of a vengeful and indeed "definitely evil" feudist,¹⁹⁰ but rather that of an honourable feudist who at times goes too far; it is a fine but important distinction, especially in the epic-heroic world, and especially in Malory's Morte Darthur, where it is possible for Launcelot to be simultaneously the greatest of Arthur's knights as well as the Queen's lover, an act which technically, though not, significantly, in Malory's eyes, makes him the worst possible traitor. In this light too Gawayne's betrayal of Pelleas, far from typifying his character, is much closer to one of Malory's minor inconsistencies than has yet been recognized.¹⁹¹

Although Malory thus does much to emphasize Gawayne's sense of honour throughout the Morte Darthur, the tragic conflict of loyalties created by this honour is nowhere more apparent than in the final tale; for in the "Morte Arthure" itself Gawayne is bound by honour even more fiercely than Arthur or Launcelot. Gawayne's honour is evident not only in his castigating Aggravayne and Mordred for their plot (1161.25-1162.33), but also in his arguing for the potential innocence of the liaison

¹⁹⁰ Wilson, Characterization 41-53; quotation from 41. As Wilson 41 observes, though, Malory also emphasizes Gawayne's noble qualities.

¹⁹¹ Wheeler 122-27 makes the interesting observation that, in damning Gawayne, critics overlook the fact that he does exactly as promised. He says that he will make Ettarde love him, so it is possible, though Wheeler does not suggest this, that had Pelleas not interrupted his relation with Ettarde, he would eventually have caused her to love Pelleas, as he claimed.

between Launcelot and Gwenyvere, refusal to escort Gwenyvere to the flames, and noble refusal to “meddyll . . . nor revenge” himself for the deaths of Aggravayne and his sons (1174.31-1177.11; quotation from 1176.5-6). Much of this is, again, original to Malory,¹⁹² just as most of it is overlooked by those critics who place “The whole weight of blame” for the final destruction of the Round Table primarily on Gawayne’s shoulders.¹⁹³ Furthermore, while Malory—like most readers—may feel that Gawayne’s sense of honour at times leads him astray, his portrait of Gawayne in the final tales is once again that of a noble and honourable knight,¹⁹⁴ one whose ghost appears to Arthur on the eve of the final battle surrounded by those ladies for whom he “ded batayle . . . in ryghteous quarels” (1233.28-1234.20; quotation from 1234.3). Gawayne’s honour, as well as his sagacity and insight, are best evinced by his initial response to Launcelot’s rescue of the Queen:

full well wyst I . . . that sir Launcelot wolde rescow her,
othir ellis he wolde dye in that fylde; and to say the
trouth he were nat of worshyp but if he had rescowed
the queene, insomuch as she shulde have be brente for
his sake. And as in that, . . . he hath done but knyghtly,
and as I wolde have done myselff and I had stonde in
lyke case (1184.18-24; my emphases)

This too is Malory’s addition,¹⁹⁵ and is certainly not the response of a man motivated,

¹⁹² Wilson, *Characterization* 50-1, and *Works* 1633, n. to 1174.30-1177.7.

¹⁹³ As, e.g., does Cooper, “Counter-Romance” 154, whose phrase this is. Cf. her “Book of Sir Tristram” 184-85.

¹⁹⁴ For Wilson, *Characterization* 41, Malory in VIII so emphasizes Gawayne’s noble qualities together with the bad, that the resultant character has a degree of inconsistency.

¹⁹⁵ Wilson, *Characterization* 50-1, and Benson, “Gawain’s Defence of Lancelot” 268 and n. 4, and his “The Ending of the *Morte Darthur*” 232.

as one critic claims,¹⁹⁶ by a long-standing envy and hatred of Launcelot.

It is true that “my lorde Arthure wolde accorde with sir Launcelot, but sir Gawayne woll nat suffir hym” (1213.3-4),¹⁹⁷ but it is equally true that Launcelot, despite his protestations, is in fact now openly proven to be the traitor Gawayne calls him (1200.19-20 and 1215.11). Consequently, as both Gawayne and Arthur realize, and as Gawayne tells Launcelot’s messenger, “hit ys to late” (1213.28) for any happy or peaceful resolution,¹⁹⁸ especially as Arthur too is, as Gawayne reminds him, bound by honour: “Woll ye now turne agayne, now ye are paste thys farre uppon youre journey? All the worlde woll speke of you vylany and shame (1213.14-17; my emphasis). Gawayne himself, moreover, is bound not only by the obligation to avenge Gareth, the best and noblest of his brothers and the one who was essentially also a de facto member of Launcelot’s family,¹⁹⁹ but also by his heroic vow of vengeance, one made all the more binding by its opening formality:

My kynge, my lorde, and myne uncle, . . . wyte you
well, now I shall make you a promyse whych I shall
holde be my knyghthode, that frome thys day forewarde
I shall never fayle sir Launcelot untyll that one of us
have slayne that othir. . . . For I promyse unto God, . . .
for the deth of my brothir, sir Gareth, I shall seke sir

¹⁹⁶ Kennedy, Knighthood 321-22 and 331; cf. Cooper, “Counter-Romance” 150 and 154. Kennedy is surely, and mistakenly, employing unspoken novelistic criteria here.

¹⁹⁷ The statement is original to Malory: see Wilson, Characterization 69, and Le Morte Arthur 2608-2707.

¹⁹⁸ The statement is original to Malory: see Works 1643-44, n. to 1212.24-1214.13, and Le Morte Arthur 2608-2707.

¹⁹⁹ Although Kennedy, Knighthood 321-22 correctly identifies Gawayne’s loyalty to family and desire for vengeance, there is nothing to support her argument that Gawayne would “kill a beloved brother ‘in the despite of’ [Works 1189.23] a bitter enemy.”

Launcelot thorowoute seven kynges realmys, but I
shall sle hym, other ellis he shall sle me.
(1186.1-12; cf. 1199.5-7 and 1213.28-31)

Not only does this vow accord with the strict demands of both Gawayne's personal honour and the complex honour of the epic-heroic world,²⁰⁰ it is also understood, if not condoned, by Arthur himself, who knows that Gareth's death "woll cause the grettist mortall warre that ever was" (1183.27-28), and who, having offered Gawayne the details of Gareth's death, is the first to broach the subject of vengeance (1185.15-35, esp. 1185.34-35).

As we have seen, Gawayne throughout the Morte Darthur displays and is defined not only by this complex code of honour, but also by a notable sagacity and insight. As he says to Aggravayne and Mordred, he "know[s] . . . what woll falle of" of a split between his clan and Launcelot's (1161.33-34), just as he is aware that Launcelot, for all his potential, will in the end fail in the Grail Quest (see supra). Despite this wisdom, the demands of honour render him in the end central to the Round Table's collapse, reminding us that Merlyon's foresight, too, proved incapable of preventing the final tragedy. Gawayne is thus in a tragic dilemma, and "in . . . tragic circumstances, there is no mode of conduct which can be truly salutary and truly laudable."²⁰¹ It is in the light of this that we must measure Gawayne's taunting

²⁰⁰ Wilson, Characterization 51 and 53 is nearly unique amongst critics in realizing the heroic potency and honour of this vow, though cf. Benson, "Gawain's Defence of Lancelot" 272. Miko 222-23, on the other hand, erroneously sees the vow as rife with that ironic portrait of the final destruction which for him partially offsets the tragedy.

²⁰¹ R. P. Winnington-Ingram, Sophocles (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980) 246. Winnington-Ingram is here discussing Sophokles' Elektra, the justice or injustice of the heroine's actions, and the ways in which she typifies the Sophoklean hero and the meaning of the play, but the comment is equally applicable to Malory's Gawayne.

challenge of Launcelot, occurring not once but twice, and issued when he is wounded to the point that he cannot stand: “Turne agayne, false traytoure knyght, and sle me oute! For and thou leve me thus, anone as I am hole I shall do batayle with the agayne” (1217.33-1218.3; repeated at 1220.32-1221.13).²⁰² Given his honour and insight, ironically evident in the statement that “oftyntymys we do many thynges that we wene for the beste be, and yet peradventure hit turnyth to the warste” (1175.12-14),²⁰³ it seems that Gawayne realizes the consequences of his blood-feud with Launcelot and seeks his own death as the only honourable solution to the tragic dilemma created by the conflicting demands of personal and familial honour as opposed to friendship with Launcelot and loyalty to Arthur and the good of the realm.

In this sense the complaint that, “Although Gawain’s opposition to Lancelot begins as honourable revenge, he becomes increasingly nihilistic and seems less interested in victory than in self-destruction,” like the belief that at the close of the Morte Gawayne’s sense of honour especially (but also that of others) is transfigured,²⁰⁴ fails to recognize the complexity of Gawayne’s honour and situation.²⁰⁵ Certainly he knows that “there [i]s no boote to stryve with sir Launcelot” (1176.7), and in his death-bed letter of reconciliation he admits that he “soughte” his death (1231.15-17). Further, while some of this is inherited from the sources, Malory himself must be

²⁰² The challenge is essentially foreign to the French Mort Artu, and although it occurs in the stanzaic Le Morte Arthur, Malory’s version is much more emphatic and detailed: Wilson, Characterization 51-3.

²⁰³ Again largely or entirely Malory’s doing: Works 1633, n. to 1174.30-1177.7.

²⁰⁴ Benson, “The Ending of the Morte Darthur” 233-34.

²⁰⁵ The same can be said of the argument of Guerin 266-67, that Gawayne’s pursuit of Launcelot is monomaniacal madness.

responsible for the continual emphasis throughout the Morte Darthur on Gawayne's honour and wisdom,²⁰⁶ an emphasis which increases the tragedy. It is true that the close of "Gareth" labels Gawayne "vengeable" and prone to "murther" (360.34-5), but such a comment is, as two of the most distinguished Malory scholars agree, unsupported by and inconsistent with Gawayne's actions in the rest of this Fair Unknown-Younger Brother tale.²⁰⁷ This is hardly surprising, since the disparate images of Gawayne which Malory inherited from his sources were "not merely differing from each other, but violently contradictory."²⁰⁸ Similar small inconsistencies occur throughout the book as a whole. At the same time, as we have seen, Malory for the most part presents a unified portrait of Gawayne as a man whose loyalty and honour ultimately lead him to a tragic dilemma.²⁰⁹

A futile prescience of death similar to Gawayne's happens in other cases, too, for Merlyon accepts his doom, Balyn knows that he goes to his death, and Arthur, if he does not realize that his death approaches, certainly knows what will happen once he is wounded unto death.²¹⁰ The tragic pathos of Arthur's situation is made all the worse

²⁰⁶ On the consistency and originality of Malory's characterization, see Wilson, Characterization. As the preceding pages show, I believe that Wilson over-emphasizes Gawayne's negative traits. Malory's consistency and originality of characterization have been recently emphasized by Cooper: Helen Cooper, "Indexing Malory," Twenty-First Branch Meeting of the British Branch of the International Arthurian Society, University of Wales, Bangor, 4-6 September 1998.

²⁰⁷ Wilson, Characterization 13 and 46, and Field, "Source of Malory's 'Tale of Gareth'" 248-50.

²⁰⁸ Wilson, Characterization 40.

²⁰⁹ Guerin 263-68 is thus correct to present Gawayne in a tragic conflict, but wrong to see the conflict as between his nobler and baser selves.

²¹⁰ Cf. Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur" 245.

by the fact that he is forced “to threaten to kill his last surviving knight[, Bedyvere,] with his own hands” in order to return Excalibur to the waters whence it came (1239.27-35).²¹¹ It is presumably scenes like this which led to another comparison with Homer in the very unromance-like characterization of “the high and solemn close of the whole bloody tale in tenderness and inexpiable sorrow.”²¹²

As the preceding analysis of the Morte Darthur shows, then, it is hardly the case that “All Malory’s tales are generically romance.”²¹³ Because of the continual juxtapositioning throughout the book as a whole of romance features and successes with sombre and tragic elements, it is also untrue that “Vinaver could have made a better case for the eight tales being distinct works if he had argued from genre rather than from plot and explicits.”²¹⁴ The unhappy ending of the final tale alone is so unromantic that it has caused one critic to question the Morte’s romance status, and although he then concludes that it is a romance,²¹⁵ my analysis has proven otherwise.

I established in Chapter One that pure kinds are relatively rare, while generic

²¹¹ Field, “Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte Darthur” 245. This, too, is largely Malory’s doing: Works 1653, n. to 1239.27-31.

²¹² Lang xix.

²¹³ Field, “Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte Darthur” 245; cf. his “Heroism from the Past.”

²¹⁴ Field, “Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte Darthur” 245; cf. his “Heroism from the Past.”

²¹⁵ McCarthy, “Le Morte Darthur and Romance” 173-74. Cf. P. J. C. Field, “Malory and The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell,” Malory: Texts and Sources 284-94, who notes that “The Morte Darthur is predominantly tragic, at least in its final tales,” but who otherwise refers to it throughout as a romance; the quotation is from 289.

mixture is ubiquitous. Generic mixture itself, moreover, can take a variety of forms, from the simple incorporation of a few scenes, echoes or allusions of a disparate kind or kinds in a work of predominantly another kind, through to a more equally mixed generic hybrid, to something much more complicated. As an example of generic mixture I cited Euripides' romantic tragedies, plays in which the potential for tragedy is emphasized throughout but where, in the end, the tragedy is averted.²¹⁶ As we have seen, Malory's Morte Darthur is rife with generic mixture, prompting on the one hand a comparison with Polonius' catalogue of mixed kinds,²¹⁷ and on the other Field's conclusion that its ultimate romance status is an amalgam of various types of romance comprising a "generic pattern."²¹⁸ It has also been classified as an epic on the basis of its historical tone and affinities, but one which begins in the realm of marvellous romance, moves into epic in Tale II, progresses to more courtly romance in the tales of individual adventure, and concludes in the epic focus on battle and death in the closing books.²¹⁹ In the light of this we might, though the mediaeval community of users could not, contrast the Morte with Euripides' plays of mixed reversal and classify it as a tragic romance, since in it the potential for romance is from the outset perverted by tragic overtones which, at various times, spring fully to life, culminating in the tragic dissolution and Fall of the Round Table.

Generic mixture can also, though, be so strong as to affect the very nature of a

²¹⁶ On Euripides' romantic tragedies see D. J. Conacher, Euripidean Drama (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1967) 14-15 and 265-313, and Chapter One, 26.

²¹⁷ McCarthy, "Le Morte Darthur and Romance" 174.

²¹⁸ Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur" 245-46; cf. his "Heroism from the Past."

²¹⁹ Bradbrook 12, 23-25 and 32. Cf. Barron 149-52.

work's dominant kind, especially where antithetical kinds come into collision, as is obviously the case in the Morte Darthur; for despite Field's claim that, in Malory, the "tragedy is yet another form of romance,"²²⁰ the tragic elements are so strong that they cannot be contained in a romance frame. Nor, as we have seen, is it even the case that Malory's frame is largely romance. This provides another contrast with Malory's sources, for while the Vulgate or Lancelot-Grail cycle includes epic elements throughout, notably (but not only) conflicting loyalties, familial ties and Gauvain's feud at the cycle's close, such elements of generic mixture do not ultimately affect the essentially romance character of the cycle as a whole.²²¹

It is argued that, in Malory's Morte Darthur, the tragedy is ultimately mitigated by the holy and expiatory deaths of Launcelot and Gwenyvere, but this is only partially the case, for the focus here remains, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, on the secular rather than divine world. Even Gwenyvere's dismissal of Launcelot and hope to reach Heaven centres around—and is overshadowed by—her acknowledgement of the disastrous consequences of their earthly love and their role in the destruction of "the floure of kyngis and knyghtes" (1252.8-29; quotation from 1252.25).²²² The secular focus is even more pronounced in Launcelot's case, who only becomes religious in the end through love of Gwenyvere, as is evident in the fact that, having

²²⁰ Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur" 246; cf. his "Heroism from the Past."

²²¹ Elspeth Kennedy, "Intertextuality between Genres in the Lancelot-Grail," Text and Intertext in Medieval Arthurian Literature 84-89. Kennedy emphasizes that the epic elements are not confined to the Mort Artu, but also occur early in the Lancelot proper. On this last point see further her "Social and Political Ideas in the French Prose Lancelot," Medium Aevum 26 (1957): 90-106.

²²² Benson, "The Ending of the Morte Darthur" 236, who observes that "It is her earthly not heavenly lord whom she has injured."

just renounced worldly affairs, he then asks Gwenyvere for a kiss (1252.30-1253.26).²²³ As one critic aptly remarks, “Jesus is mentioned, but he seems decidedly secondary.”²²⁴ Furthermore, despite his denial to the Bysshop of Canterburye, Launcelot’s swooning over the grave of Arthur and Gwenyvere seems very much the result of secular feeling, as witness the fact that, unlike in the sources, he subsequently starves himself to death “grovelyng on the[ir] tombe[s]” and thinking “of hir beaulté and of hir noblesse” (1256.21-1257.11).²²⁵ We must also remember that the isolation of the hero from the community is often a tragic occurrence,²²⁶ and both Gwenyvere and Launcelot die isolated from the Morte Darthur’s palmary community, that surrounding Arthur himself. In this sense Launcelot’s and Gwenyvere’s religious ends are manifestly marked and affected by that concern and love for, interaction and potential conflict with, other people which, for one critic, constitutes the shift from “The Noble Tale off the Sankegreall” to “The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere.”²²⁷

The Morte Darthur does occasionally possess a dual focus, bifurcating between

²²³ The Winchester MS breaks off about two-thirds of the way through this speech (from 1253.17ff).

²²⁴ Benson, “The Ending of the Morte Darthur” 236. Cf. Works xcvi; Bradbrook 7; and Mandel 92. On the other hand, Benson’s insistence that Launcelot and Gwenyvere’s love is largely platonic is not supported by the evidence.

²²⁵ Works 1622-23 and 1659, n. to 1255.14-1257-11, and McCarthy, “Beowulf’s Bairns” 158.

²²⁶ Frye 35 and 208. See also supra, n. 45.

²²⁷ Riddy 143-44; Launcelot’s and Gwenyvere’s relation to this shift is my own. Riddy’s argument in favour of the Morte Darthur’s disunity, while masterful, overlooks the ubiquity of generic mixture, as well as the fact that Malory’s continual juxtapositioning of seemingly disparate themes is itself, in its very patterned consistency, a form of unity.

earthly and heavenly concerns, and although the focus is at times evenly balanced, it ultimately, unlike Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, swings in favour of earthly concerns. The destruction of Arthur and his entire realm, emphasized in Malory's final explicit, is not sufficiently palliated by flights of angels heaving "Launcelot unto heven" (1258.9), for Launcelot, although a prominent figure, is only one of the "Hondred and Forty" knights whose "Ende" we have come to (1260.16-19); and the end for most of them has been conspicuously bloody. Particularly unsuitable to romance is the grim horror of the last battle,²²⁸ in which Mordred, hanging impaled upon Arthur's spear,

threste hymselff with the myght that he had upp to the
burre of kyng Arthurs speare, and ryght so he smote hys
fadir, kynge Arthure, with hys swerde holdynge in both
hys hondys, uppon the syde of the hede, that the swerde
perced the helmet and the tay of the brayne. And
therewith Mordred dayshhed downe starke dede to the
erthe. (1237.17-22)

The moonlit looting of the dead after the battle, including killing those "that were nat dede all oute" (1237.29-1238.4; quotation from 1238.3), is equally disturbing.²²⁹

Ultimately, then, "so grim and primitive is the picture of [knight]hood failing, and of

²²⁸ Cf. Cooper, "Counter-Romance" 155. 1237.17-18 are Malory's addition: Works 1651, n. to 1237.16-18. On the grimness of the scene cf. Miko 227; Miko does not, however, comment on the unsuitability of the scene to romance.

²²⁹ Works 1651, n. to 1237.29-1238.9 observes that this scene has no source in the French Mort, but is modelled on a similar scene in the stanzaic Morte. What Vinaver fails to mention is that the bloodiest detail, the murdering of the wounded for their wealth, again seems original to Malory, the stanzaic Morte saying only that Lucan "sey folk uppon playnes hye. / Bold barons of bone and blode, / They refte theym besaunt, broche, and bee" (3417-19). P. J. C. Field tells me that he has a forthcoming essay, "Malory and the Battle of Towton," suggesting that this may be a reminiscence of Malory's own experience of Towton, the bloodiest battle ever fought in these islands.

the anguish of death, even after the promise of Christian redemption,²³⁰ that for the world of Malory's Morte Darthur, neither penitence nor the Grail offer more than temporary reassurance.

Furthermore, it is not even the case that Malory's frame is predominantly romance, for all of his tales are generically mixed, and while the middle sections are arguably more romance than anything else, they still contain significant sombre elements which either recall the epic-heroic qualities of the opening tales or presage the tragic-epic qualities of the final tales. Indeed, Malory's choice, use, and treatment of his sources consistently emphasize the tragedy, including denying the "possibility of Arthur's healing and return" from Avalon.²³¹ Even Malory's conception of adventure is darker and more significant than that of his sources, emphasizing humanity's subjection to chance or destiny,²³² though we should not see his knights as being bereft of free-will. By the same token, it is hardly the case that Malory is criticizing adventure or chivalry.²³³ On the contrary, part of the Morte's tragedy resides in its focus on humanity and the potential for even the best of kings and knights to destroy themselves. The tragedy is all the more striking for occurring in such a potentially ideal society, and is a sign, not of that society's failures, as one prominent critic

²³⁰ John Pitcher, "Tudor Literature (1485-1603)," The Oxford Illustrated History of English Literature, ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987) 63; cf. McCarthy, "Beowulf's Bairns" 157.

²³¹ Cooper, "Counter-Romance" 146 and 150-55; quotation from 155.

²³² Mann 89-91. Mann's conclusion, however, that in accepting adventure a knight essentially accepts defeat, goes too far, suggesting a loss of free-will.

²³³ Pace Wallace 152 and 160-67; Barron 148; and Miko 218-29.

claims,²³⁴ but rather of Malory's human focus.²³⁵ Indeed, another problem in locating the tragedy in society's failings is that it simplifies what in Malory tend to be complex, and occasionally paradoxical issues. Thus Gawayne is an honourable feudist who at times degenerates to a murderer, but also a noble knight and one of the principal bulwarks of the kingdom, just as the other bulwark, Launcelot, is both the best of Arthur's knights and the best—and thereby most treacherous—of lovers, “at once the loyal servant, the loyal lover, and the supreme traitor.”²³⁶

In this sense it is not quite the case that the Morte begins as romance but builds towards destruction and epic,²³⁷ for the epic qualities are present from the outset. Consequently, since the last chapter elucidated a number of similarities between the epic and romance kinds, as well as the principal difference of epic's penchant for tragedy as opposed to romance's drive to an happy ending, I propose that in the final analysis Malory's Morte Darthur is not only a generic mixture, but a specific type of mixture: epic-romance.²³⁸ Recognizing it as such goes a long way to explaining those

²³⁴ Moorman, Book of Kyng Arthur passim, and A Knyght There Was (Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1967) 96-112. Cf. Guerin 269-74, and Rumble 145-47 and 180-83, who locates the tragedy in “the moral degeneration” and “essential inadequacies of [the Morte's] chivalric society;” quotations from 181 and 180.

²³⁵ On Malory's human focus and its contribution to the sense of the nobility of what is achieved and lost cf. Works 1621 and 1625-26 and, in a comment which should have disproved his notion of a failed society, Moorman, A Knyght There Was 107.

²³⁶ The phrase is Brewer's: Brewer, “Character of Lancelot” 33; cf. 38 and 46.

²³⁷ Bradbrook 12, 23-5 and 32, and see n. 219 supra.

²³⁸ I coined this term independently of Guerin 269, who also uses it, though he does not explain it. More importantly, as we have seen, I disagree with his argument that the Morte's tragedy results from sin, failure and religion; particularly untenable is his claim that the religious focus both palliates and heightens the tragedy: see 233, 258, 261 and 269-74.

inconsistencies which so puzzle critics when they treat it as a romance, with all the—in this case misleading—expectations that that entails.

However, since literary kinds depend for their existence and development on the recognition on the part of the community of users of their primary generic features, it follows that there cannot really be a unique instance of a kind—though there might be a unique mixture. Thus, if the Morte Darthur is an epic-romance, with all of the changes to its romance aspects that suggests, notably epic's tragic affinities, the next question is whether or not it stands alone. Cooper's study of various late romances argues that the fifteenth-century English prose romances are not straightforward romances at all, but are rather so disastrous, bleak and sombre as to “demand a rethinking of our conception of the genre.”²³⁹ Although I have not examined them all, the combination of Cooper's study with my own leads me to conclude that the Morte Darthur's tragic epic-romance kind is not unique.

It was noted above that the alliterative Morte Arthure's influence on Malory is not confined to Arthure and Lucius. Further, while the alliterative Morte Arthure is an heroic, if not also tragic poem,²⁴⁰ the stanzaic Le Morte Arthur is generically closer to Malory. The resolution of the poisoned apple episode in the stanzaic Morte, for instance, could be considered the happy ending of a shorter romance, with the crisis averted, malefactors punished, opponents reconciled and lovers reunited. As in Malory, however, things immediately turn sombre again, reinforcing various darker

²³⁹ Cooper, “Counter-Romance” 141-62; quotation from 142.

²⁴⁰ Cf. John Finlayson, ed., Morte Arthure, York Medieval Texts (London: Arnold, 1967) 11-14, and Mary Hamel, ed., Morte Arthure ix-x. Matthews 94-114 sees it as a tragedy of fortune.

elements from earlier in the tale, including the opening stanza's foreshadowing of "wo."²⁴¹ And as in Malory, not only does the stanzaic Morte not end happily, but the love of Launcelot and Gaynour secures destruction, not joy, the best intentions again come to nothing, and the principal characters realize but cannot avert the tragic consequences of their actions.²⁴² The French Mort Artu has likewise been classified as a romance tragedy, while Chaucer's Knyghtes Tale has been deemed "a romance which becomes a tragedy," and Troilus and Criseyde "a romance in a tragic mode."²⁴³ It has been argued recently that Arthurian Literature in general is generically problematic, that the stanzaic Morte in particular is not a straightforward romance, the alliterative Morte not entirely a chronicle, and the situation in Malory even less clear.²⁴⁴ Thus, the argument concludes, scholars should pay more heed to the complexity of these works and less to their literary kind. That conclusion, however, overlooks the benefits of genre-study, which makes it possible to appreciate the complexity of literary works fully by recognizing their generic identity and sophistication. The present study has attempted to show that this is especially the case with Sir Thomas Malory's epic-romance, Le Morte Darthur.

²⁴¹ Le Morte Arthur 8.

²⁴² Le Morte Arthur esp. 1688-1711; 1816-19; 1886-87; 1920-2029; 2142-49; 2509-23; and 3638-50.

²⁴³ Respectively Pratt 81-109, Finlayson, "The Knight's Tale" 147, and Shepherd 86.

²⁴⁴ Fiona Tolhurst, "The Alliterative Morte Arthure and the Stanzaic Morte Arthur: Complementing Conceptions of Time and History," 19th International Arthurian Congress, Toulouse, 25-31 July 1999. I am much obliged to Dr Tolhurst for allowing me to read and refer to a copy of her paper. On the difficulty of defining the alliterative Morte's kind, cf. Edward Donald Kennedy, "Generic Intertextuality in the English Alliterative Morte Arthure," Text and Intertext in Medieval Arthurian Literature 41 and 52.

Conclusion

It is said that “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.”¹ As we have seen, one aspect of the tradition or traditions within which a poet or prose author works is generic. This is equally true of the literary critic, whose task begins, consciously or no, with identifying a work’s dominant kind or kinds. However difficult such a task might be, it is made easier by the fact that literary kinds comprise a variety of features, from which readers can and in fact routinely do identify kinds, despite the problems that might be thought to be posed by the relative rarity of pure examples of kinds. Literary kinds have sometimes been seen as a restrictive threat to the appreciation of literature, but this is a misconception; as both Northrop Frye and Alastair Fowler have pointed out, genre-study is intended to clarify meaning, not to classify,² and a full appreciation of kinds paves the way for sundry other interpretations.

Although the mediaeval community of users—the combination of literature’s authors and audiences—did not discuss literary kinds and conventions as explicitly as their Classical and Renaissance counterparts, this does not mean that they failed to recognize, use, experiment with and sometimes master various literary kinds. The opposite is in fact the case. Generic mixture, too, is as common in the Middle Ages as in other periods. The

¹ T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” The Sacred Wood (London: Methuen, 1920) 49.

² Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) 247-48, and Alastair Fowler, Kinds of Literature (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 37.

most protean mediaeval kind is romance, and as we have seen, its defining generic features are love, ladies, adventure, and an happy ending. Romance stands in sharp contrast with epic, which is best characterized, whether in its classical or mediaeval guise, by its focus on a potentially tragic hero and his concern with honour and glory, and the accompanying questions of the nature and cost of heroism. Although Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur has long been considered a romance, it is more properly an epic-romance, a classification which explains many of the Morte's so-called inconsistencies.

It explains many, not all. Malory famously can kill off characters in one scene only to bring them back to life in another, attribute actions to the wrong character, and even, in the final explicit, misnumber the Round Table.³ In addition to these factual errors, the Morte Darthur ultimately cannot in any case always be rationally explained because Malory juxtaposes paradoxes as much as literary kinds. Arguably the best example of this comes in Ector's famous threnody for Launcelot, which includes such contradictory praises as "thou were the curtest knyght that ever bare shelde!" (1259.12-13), and "the kyndest man that ever strake wyth swerde" (1259.16).

All of these things, however, are not necessarily failings so much as characteristics, especially when we remember not to judge the Morte by novelistic criteria. Further, such factual faults as the resurrection of characters and misattribution of events should be seen

³ Sir Thomas Malory, The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, ed. Eugène Vinaver, rev. P. J. C. Field, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) 1260.18-19, with "an hondred and forty" instead of the usual one hundred and fifty. P. J. C. Field, "Author, Scribe and Reader in Malory," Malory: Texts and Sources, Arthurian Studies 40 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1998) 88, and his "Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur," The Arthur of the English, ed. W. R. J. Barron, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages 2 (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1999) 244, notes that "The error may well be scribal."

more as minor missteps than as damnable failings, and are understandable enough in an author writing without the aid of proofreaders and editors and modern word processors, especially perhaps in one writing in prison.⁴ The reader is also the more willing to overlook such superficial errors because Malory as narrator “presents himself . . . as distinctly fallible,” and because even when he gets facts wrong, he gets the overall nobility of his subject correct, and that is more important.⁵ Malory’s complexities are likewise the more easily explained and understood if we remember that he “has a three-storeyed mind” and scale in which sometimes a character or quality is good and in the next instance bad, possibly with no real contradiction in Malory’s view.⁶ Launcelot, for instance, can thus be Arthur’s greatest knight despite the fact that he is also Gwennyvere’s lover, and so technically a traitor, just as Gawayne can be governed by a complex sense of honour which nonetheless occasionally brings him to dishonour himself.

Perhaps because complications such as these remain even after the realization of the Morte’s true kind, the general critical trend, exacerbated by the tendency to judge the Morte by the wrong conventions, seems to be to praise Malory’s achievement while belittling his artistry. “Condescending remarks about Malory’s materials and his lack of

⁴ For Malory’s life see P. J. C. Field, The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory, Arthurian Studies 29 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993).

⁵ Field, “Author, Scribe and Reader” 88, and his “Malory’s Morte Darthur” 244; on the fallibility of Malory as narrator see further P. J. C. Field, Romance and Chronicle (London: Barrie, 1971) 142-59.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, rev. of Sir Thomas Wyatt and Some Collected Studies, by E. K. Chambers, Medium Aevum 3 (1934): 239.

art have [consequently] not been uncommon.”⁷ Hence the near apologia of: “I have often been compelled to speak as if the literary characteristics of the Morte Darthur were the result of conscious art. . . . It is no part of my contention that [Malory] was a conscious artist: rather the reverse.”⁸ While I do not wish to suggest that Malory was aware of his art and artistic process in a way approaching that of Chaucer, the Gawain-poet, Shakespeare or Milton, the evidence strongly suggests that he had some idea of what he was doing. Robert H. Wilson has elucidated Malory’s consistency and originality of characterization,⁹ P. J. C. Field has shown how Malory’s style is not simply a reproduction of that of his sources,¹⁰ and Chapter Four of the present argument reveals how he juxtaposes kinds in a way not merely resulting from the amalgamation of those disparate sources; the end result of this must surely be an attempt at conscious production. That the project sometimes eludes him is obvious, as is the fact that it involves a number of seeming contradictions, but the creation of the Morte Darthur and its overall thematic and generic consistency required artistry.

⁷ Robert H. Wilson, “Caxton and Malory,” A Manual of Writings in Middle English 1050-1500, ed. Albert E. Hartung, vol. 3 (New Haven, Connecticut: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1972) 771. The comment remains true today.

⁸ Field, Romance and Chronicle 7; cf. 72. This was also the predominant tone of Elizabeth Edwards, “Malory and Psychoanalytic Theory,” and Catherine Batt, “Malory’s Arthurian Traditions,” International Medieval Congress, University of Leeds, 13 July 1999.

⁹ Robert Henry Wilson, Characterization in Malory (1934; Chicago: U of Chicago P; N.p.: Folcroft Library, 1970); “Malory’s Naming of Minor Characters,” Journal of English and Germanic Philology 42 (1943): 364-85; and his “Addenda on Malory’s Minor Characters,” Journal of English and Germanic Philology 55 (1956): 563-87.

¹⁰ Field, Romance and Chronicle passim, esp. 9-10.

In this sense it is hardly an exaggeration to claim of Malory that “He has built a great, rambling, mediaeval castle, the walls of which enclose rude and even ruinous work of earlier times, and not a Greek Parthenon nor even an Italian palace of the Renaissance. Still, it is a grand pile, and tells everywhere of the genius of its builder.”¹¹ Malory studies in the future would consequently do well to remember both the Morte’s generic status, as well as Malory’s artistry: let us celebrate the wheat and let the chaff be still.

¹¹ Sir Edward Strachey, ed., Le Morte Darthur (London: Macmillan, 1897) xiii-xiv.

Appendix I: Pre-Aristotelean Intrinsic Literary Criticism

Although Aristotle might well be regarded as the father of literary criticism and genre theory,¹ a type of intrinsic commentary and understanding of literary texts based on knowledge of generic kinds and conventions existed well before the Poetics. We have extant, for instance, a version of the Elektra-story by each of the three tragedians: Aeschylus' Libation Bearers (Choephoroi), part of his 458 B.C. Oresteia trilogy; Euripides' Elektra, once assigned to 413 B.C. but now dated on metrical evidence to about 420-18; and Sophokles' Elektra, which is more of a mystery, although 413 B.C. has been suggested.² The Oresteia seems to have been revived in the late 420s, and it is probable that this sparked the versions by Euripides and Sophokles, although even without this revival the Oresteia's place within classical Athens—and especially amongst the dramatic community of users—was pre-eminent. We know from Euripides' parody of the

¹ Cf. Stephen Halliwell, ed. and trans., "Poetics," Aristotle: Poetics; Longinus: On the Sublime; Demetrius: On Style, Loeb Classical Library 199 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995) 3-4, who notes further the contingencies which made this so.

² Good overviews of the Elektra-theme and the question of the priority of the Sophoklean or Euripidean version are given by H. C. Baldry, The Greek Tragic Theatre, rev. ed., Ancient Culture and Society (London: Chatto, 1981) 109-28, and Marion Baldock, Greek Tragedy, Classical World Series (Bristol: Bristol Classical P, 1989) 96-110. Notable studies which also address the question of the date of and relation between the Elektras are those of D. J. Conacher, Euripidean Drama (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1967) 199-212, esp. 202-03 and n. 9; and M. J. Cropp, ed. and trans., Electra, by Euripides (Warminster: Aris, 1988) xxix-li, esp. xlvi-li, both of whom favour Sophoklean priority; and Winnington-Ingram, for whom Aeschylus' Oresteia is always in the background of Sophokles' Elektra, and who feels that this relationship is more important than that between Sophokles and Euripides: R. P. Winnington-Ingram, Sophocles (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980) 209, 215-47 and 342-43.

recognition scene in Aeschylus' Libation Bearers that Euripides is commenting upon the story and its themes and presentation in the earlier play,³ and it is likely that Sophokles was aware of Euripides' attempted criticism and rewriting of the story, and is himself subsequently responding to, criticizing and challenging Euripides' presentation and views, though the question of whether or not Euripides' Elektra predates Sophokles' is contentious.⁴

Aristophanes, too, is constantly offering his views on both comedy and tragedy, and Frogs (405 B.C.) especially, with its agon between Aeschylus and Euripides as to what constitutes good poetry, about the function of the poet, and analyses of their individual works,⁵ presents us with a very early, if highly jocular, example of literary criticism based on a sound awareness of generic features and conventions. Indeed, this contest between Aeschylus and Euripides can be considered "the earliest sustained piece of literary criticism surviving in the Western tradition." Even in his first extant play, Acharnians (425 B.C.), produced under Kallistratos' name, Aristophanes is concerned with literary kinds. Re-defining comedy by its role and its relation and opposition to

³ See Euripides, Electra, ed. and trans. Cropp ll. 512-45, and Aeschylus, The Libation Bearers, trans. and commentary Hugh Lloyd-Jones (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970) ll. 168-232.

⁴ See n. 2 supra

⁵ Aristophanes, Frogs, ed. and trans. Alan H. Sommerstein, The Comedies of Aristophanes 9 (Warminster: Aris, 1996) 830-1410. Notable studies of the literary debate in Frogs are those of K. J. Dover, Aristophanic Comedy (London: Batsford, 1972) 183-89, and his intro. to Frogs, ed. Kenneth Dover (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 6-37 and notes to ll. 830-1478, and Sommerstein, ed. and trans., Frogs 14-18 and notes to ll. 830-1478. The subsequent quotation is from Sommerstein 14.

tragedy (tragodia), Aristophanes coins the new term trygodia (tryx = “wine-lees” + ode = “song”), and maintains that “comedy [trygedy] too knows what is right.”⁶

The poets composing these plays and making such criticisms obviously had a sound command of various generic features and kinds, but the criticisms depend for their success on the audience’s recognition of the features involved—especially in classical drama, where the poet, whatever his didactic intent, was also concerned with entertaining the audience and winning the prize, something he could not do by talking (too much) over the audience’s head. Moreover, because of the importance of poetry in the Greek world at both private and public levels, its links with religious festivals and its use in both entertainment and education, conversation even outside the theatre must frequently have turned to literature and its various conventions and kinds.⁷

These are but a few prominent examples of pre-Aristotelean intrinsic literary criticism. Something similar occurs in other periods as well, including, as we see in Chapter Two of the present study, amongst the mediaeval community of users, but that is

⁶ Aristophanes, Acharnians, ed. and trans. Alan H. Sommerstein, The Comedies of Aristophanes 1 (Warminster: Aris, 1980) line 500. I am indebted to I. C. Storey for the etymology of trygedy as well as the translation of l. 500 itself, though cf. O. Taplin, “Tragedy and Trugedy,” Classical Quarterly 33 (1983): 333, and his “Comedy and the Tragic,” Tragedy and the Tragic, ed. M. S. Silk (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) 188, who considers the line as evidence of the didacticism of classical drama. Taplin also sees l. 500 as an example of Old Comedy’s self-referentiality, a feature that differentiates it from classical tragedy, which is never self-referential: Oliver Taplin, “Fifth-Century Tragedy and Comedy,” Journal of Hellenic Studies 106 (1986): 168. The point behind the “wine-lees” etymology joke or allusion remains unclear.

⁷ D. W. Lucas, intro., commentary and appendixes, Aristotle Poetics (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) xv, to which I have added the explicit reference to literary kinds and conventions. For further examples of pre-Aristotelean intrinsic criticism see G. M. A. Grube, The Greek and Roman Critics (London: Methuen, 1965) 1-65.

explored elsewhere.

Appendix II: A Generic Characterization of the Odyssey

In Chapter Three the Odyssey was treated and classified as an epic, but it was also noted that it is often seen as a romance, and there are many who take this or a similar view.

Thus, despite the astute observation that the romantic colouring in the Odyssey should be considered as merely secondary,¹ the question of the Odyssey's true kind demands some attention.

One of the most famous and widely accessible generic classifications of the Odyssey is that of E. V. Rieu, who, in the introduction to his extremely popular Penguin translation, called the poem a proto-novel.² This view has recently been endorsed by one eminent classical scholar because, unlike the Iliad, the Odyssey is seen essentially as an adventure story with an happy ending, centred around a travelling, often disguised hero who encounters adventures and love affairs.³ The same theme, in fact, which underlies first Greek romance and, subsequently, such early English novel-romances as Tom Jones. By the same token, many critics consider the Odyssey the first and greatest romance, perhaps because, as noted in Chapters One and Three, there are many similarities between

¹ H. D. F. Kitto, Poiesis, Sather Classical Lectures 36 (Berkeley: U of California P; London [sic]: Cambridge UP, 1966) 130.

² E. V. Rieu, trans., The Odyssey, by Homer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1946) viii. All references to the Odyssey, however, are by Book and line number to Homer, The Odyssey of Homer, trans. Richmond Lattimore (1965; New York: HarperPerennial, 1991). References will be made parenthetically in the text.

³ Jasper Griffin, Homer (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980) 46 and 65, which is also the source of the subsequent comparisons to Greek romance and Tom Jones. This definition suffers, however, from the typical generic vagueness surrounding the romance kind.

the early novel and romance; indeed the novel form grew out of romance. It is thus the same elements which make the Odyssey a novel as a romance: the love-story, sea voyages, episodic adventures, recognition and reunion scenes, and happy ending.⁴

This classification of the Odyssey as a proto-novel, comedy or romance, however, is erroneous. While the Odyssey is a classic model of the quest theme, which does occur in romance, it is also much darker, more tragic than a typical romance. The Helen and Menelaos episode in IV, for instance, is very disturbing for a couple reputed to live together forever in the Elysian Fields, and while their relationship serves in part as a contrast to that of Penelope and Odysseus, it is also one of the indications that all is not happy in the Odyssey. The fates or homecomings of Menelaos (Book IV), the lesser Ajax (IV, 499-511), Nestor (Book III) and especially Agamemnon (I, 35-44; III, 193-205 and 232-310; IV, 512-47; XI, 387-453) as told in Books I-IV all serve as a backdrop to that of Odysseus, as has been claimed,⁵ but what is overlooked is the manner in which these various returns also establish that sombre, brooding tone more appropriate to epic than romance. The Shield of Achilles, with its juxtapositioning of pastoral and martial scenes,

⁴ See, e.g., Hubert McDermott, Novel and Romance (London: Macmillan, 1989) 12-23; Joseph M. Lenz, The Promised End (New York: Lang, 1986) 8-13; and Michael O'Connell, "Epic and Romance," Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism, ed. Martin Coyle et al. (London: Routledge, 1990) 182. Even so distinguished a figure as Frye sees the Odyssey as a comedy and romance: Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) 319, and The Secular Scripture (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1976) 66-70, 80, 139-40, and 173.

⁵ McDermott 21-2, who comments on the importance of these returns, but misses their ultimate significance.

serves as a microcosm of the world of the Iliad in all its glory and suffering;⁶ the beneficent and inimical fates, happy and unhappy homecomings in the Odyssey serve much the same purpose. Moreover, while the emphasis throughout is on Odysseus' overwhelming desire to return to Penelope and Ithaca—he even refuses Calypso's offer to make him immortal and her lover (V, 203-24), surely no loathsome fate—we know that their reunion will be short-lived. Odysseus never wanted to go to Troy in the first place, and having spent ten years there and another ten attempting to return home, he will finally achieve his desire only to depart on another quest. For as Teiresias explains to Odysseus in Hades, and as Odysseus explains to Penelope, having reached home at last, punished the Suitors and finally been reunited with Penelope, Odysseus must set out on yet another “unmeasured labor . . . both difficult and great” in order to appease Poseidon's wrath (XI, 119-34 and XXIII, 247-81). As was the case in the Iliad, the Odyssey is thus marked by a constant contrast between the sufferings of mortals and the happiness which is the surety of the gods alone.

We should consequently consider the romance elements as indicative of generic mixture, the paucity of pure kinds, and the notion that epic is perhaps the most inclusive of literary kinds,⁷ so that, while the Odyssey is perhaps not a typical heroic poem, it is nonetheless ultimately more epic than romance. This raises the related notion of the

⁶ Oliver Taplin, “The Shield of Achilles within the Iliad,” Greece and Rome 27 (1980): 1-21, esp. 1-15. For the Shield itself see Homer, The Iliad of Homer, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1951) XIII, 478-607.

⁷ Cf. W. P. Ker, Epic and Romance (1908; London: Macmillan; New York: Dover, 1957) 16, and Alastair Fowler, ed. “Paradise Lost,” The Poems of John Milton, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London: Longman, 1968) 422.

disparate kinds found in various parts of the poem, not only the so-called romance aspects, but especially folktale or fairytale elements: the sea voyages; the giant Cyclops; bag of winds; success against impossible odds; Nausicaa as beautiful and beneficent princess; Odysseus as trickster; wife courted or besieged by suitors; even, perhaps, recognition, which is common to various types of stories.⁸ We also get decidedly pastoral elements such as Laertes amongst his vines and plants (XXIV, 226-47) and the description of the island adjacent to that of the Cyclopes—which is also more specific geographically than is usual in epic:⁹

a wooded island that spreads, away from the harbor,
 neither close in to the land of the Cyclopes nor far out
 from it; forested; wild goats beyond number breed there,
 for there is no coming and going of human kind to disturb them,
 nor are they visited by hunters, who in the forest
 suffer hardships as they haunt the peaks of the mountains,
 neither again is it held by herded flocks, nor farmers,
 but all its days, never plowed up and never planted,
 it goes without people and supports the bleating wild goats.

.....
 [I]t is not a bad place at all, it could bear all crops
 in season, and there are meadow lands near the shores of the gray sea,
 well watered and soft; there could be grapes grown there endlessly,
 and there is smooth land for plowing, men could reap a full harvest
 always in season, since there is very rich subsoil. Also

⁸ G. S. Kirk, “Homer,” *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, ed. P. E. Easterling and B. M. W. Knox, vol. 1: Greek Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 85-8. On the disparate kinds in the *Odyssey* cf. Charles Rowan Beye, *Ancient Epic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993) 144-52; also cf. West, who see the *Odyssey* as predominantly a folk-tale set against the epic backdrop and tradition of the Trojan War: M. L. West, “Homeric and Hesiodic Poetry,” *Ancient Greek Literature*, ed. K. J. Dover et al. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980) 19-20. For a comprehensive survey and study of folktale motifs see Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, rev., 6 vols. (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde; Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1955-58).

⁹ Kirk 80 and 82-4.

there is an easy harbor, with no need for a hawser
nor anchor stones to be thrown ashore nor cables to make fast;
one could just run ashore and wait for the time when the sailors'
desire stirred them to go and the right winds were blowing.
(IX, 116-39)

These various elements are interesting to one eminent Homeric scholar as examples of how the oral poet weaves together and reuses a certain number of themes to create a long narrative.¹⁰ Beyond the observation that “the Odyssey as a whole is not really a heroic poem,” however, he does not comment on the generic significance of these disparate elements. This is either a glaring oversight or, more likely, a reflection of the fact that he does not consider such folktale elements particularly out of place in the epic. And undoubtedly this is the case, for all these disparate elements and adventures are subsumed under the dominant focus of Odysseus’ return and vengeance—a focus, as in the Iliad, made clear in the opening lines:¹¹

Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways, who was driven
far journeys, after he had sacked Troy’s sacred citadel.
Many were they whose cities he saw, whose minds he learned of,
many the pains he suffered in his spirit. (I, 1-4)

In other words, it is more true to say that the Odyssey is not a typical heroic poem, but that it is nonetheless heroic or epic, and that perhaps these various elements of other types of stories do actually belong to epic because epic is not only one of the most serious but one of the most all-encompassing of literary kinds. As was observed at the opening of the century: “tragical, comical, historical, pastoral are terms not sufficiently various to denote

¹⁰ Kirk 84-8. The quotation immediately following is from Kirk 79.

¹¹ Cf. Kirk 89-91.

the variety of the Iliad and the Odyssey.¹² Epic, on the other hand, is more than sufficient.

¹² Ker 16.

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