

THE PEN AND THE PENNON: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL COMMENT
INSCRIBED WITHIN CHIVALRIC ROMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Study of the Medieval English romance has burgeoned in recent years, with a focus on the world outside of the texts being central to the resurgence. I offer in this dissertation a reading of four of these works (*Athelston*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Cleges*, and *Sir Gowther*) that considers each of them in the environment in which they are presented. Utilizing the contexts of manuscript placement, contemporary social and legal issues, and sociological changes affecting the audience, this work explores an analytical reading of each work that establishes possible meanings for each romance and possible motivations for their unnamed authors. Each work is ascribed its own chapter, focusing on a particular issue of English knighthood being interrogated. Chapter three suggests that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* repurposes the character of Gawain to observe the importance of oath taking and the bonds formed by knights from the practice of such. Chapter four focuses on the message of *Athelston* and argues that the work repositions the power of the crown beneath

that of a regularized judicial system in which knights function as jurists. Chapter five engages *Sir Cleges* and the economic lesson of creating bounds for the practice of *largesse* in the knightly social structure. Chapter six looks at *Sir Gowther* and supposes a reading of the work that inscribes lessons regarding legal inheritance and social mobility amongst the knightly class.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies, have examined a dissertation titled “The Pen and the Pennon: Political and Social Comment Inscribed Within Chivalric Romance,” presented by Larry Michael McCloud, candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Of all spatial practices, literary representation is arguably the most potent. In the literate and densely urban Low Countries, cities possessed the power of the pen, and with it, the authority to inscribe a space of distinct moral and cultural practices.¹

The Power of the Pen

Bruce Hall states that: “The structure of social identities consistent with Christian theology engendered the constitutive, hieratic principles of feudal social organization.”² In his estimation, the entirety of the feudal hierarchy underpinning medieval society was based in a theological perspective of hierarchical systems drawn from doctrinal views of the universe in which the English people of the Middle Ages existed. In this deceptively simple statement, Hall begins an argument articulating the idea that the entire structure of medieval English society was based in an interpretation of biblical text, which was reconstituted from that text into the physical world via inscription into another textual tradition entirely. That tradition, is the Middle English Romance.

The medieval romance has undergone a renaissance of sorts during the last ten years of study. What was once considered light fare baring little worthy of study by the literary scholarly establishment has risen anew, read through a series of lenses that has given the

¹ Herman Pleij, “Restyling ‘Wisdom,’ Remodeling the Nobility, and Caricaturing the Peasant: Urban Literature in the Late Medieval Low Countries,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 32, no. 4 (Spring, 2002), 689.

² Rodney Bruce Hall, “Moral Authority as a Power Resource,” *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (Autumn 1997), 600.

genre an importance once considered impossible. This study aims to enter into that conversation by placing the romance as a window into history, not just a fiction to be enjoyed. The arguments framed within this work will investigate four key works along the continuum of the time from 1330, when the first original works of romance were written in the English vernacular, to the mid-fifteenth century, when the form solidified, reaching its crescendo in 1485 with the publication of Thomas Malory's *Complete Works*. I will focus on four works in particular: *Athelston*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Cleges*, and *Sir Gowther*. Each of these romances, originally considered by scholars as simply entertainments, belie that minimization by harboring deeper issues that can be read by contextualizing the work within its manuscript context. Where previous scholars have looked at these works with an eye primarily toward the concerns of literary interpretation, such as meter, grammatical structure, and use of common literary tropes, my approach will be couched in interdisciplinary studies, utilizing literary analysis alongside a manuscript history approach, framing each romance as a contextualized tool by the compiler of the manuscript within which each survives. This will be tempered further with a comparative historical approach that places the stories within a cultural milieu to analyze the employment of the manuscript frame. The ultimate synthesis of these approaches, it will be posited here, creates an extra-textual meaning for each work, and argues for the romances themselves as cultural tools that were being used by the manuscript compilers in their time to both reflect the political and social positioning of knights within the social structure (as framed by the authors), and to shape the idea of what knights should be, (and how they should behave) as knighthood evolved from a martial endeavor into an administrative one across the era.

These four works have been selected for this study because they each focus on an eponymous knightly figure whose movement through the plot provides an entrée through which to interrogate the figure of the knight within the society. Issues of loyalty, family, marital contracts, oath taking, and social status are reflected in these works. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Cleges*, and *Athelston* were selected because they each have as their protagonist a knightly hero who does not engage in entering the field in warfare. This action being missing in each plot skews the character of the knight away from the purely martial character often attributed to the archetype, making available different interpretations for the deployment of the character. While each involves a “quest,” none of them bring the trope to the resolution anticipated by many modern audiences, the rescue of the damsel in distress. While the fourth work, *Sir Gowther*, actually does end with this trope, the uniqueness of the eponymous hero’s demonic heritage makes this character enough of an outlier from the field to make him worthy of investigation. Because the knight, as we shall see, is writ large within a context of monolithic Christianity, finding a “demon knight” in play bears consideration. Gowther fits within this study because his quest is actually designed to help him define himself, something that he shares with the heroes of the other three works.

The approach that will be taken in making the arguments is a simple one: each work will be observed through a tripartite lens. The first lens will focus on the overall message of the tale, with the intent that those unfamiliar with the work will have a basic understanding of the plot so as to follow the accompanying analysis. The second will focus upon literary analysis of the tale, with a view toward character development, story design, use of metaphor, and/or other particulars of the tale. The third and final lens will center on the

manuscript's socio-historical placement. What might we be able to surmise about the purpose of the manuscript compilers responsible for each collection, utilizing each tale as a foil for, and focus of, the world that spawned it? This question will be where we begin, as the argument behind its utility is important for framing the overall purpose for this work.

The Middle English Romance Tradition as a Genre

Romance is one of the most abused generic terms of medieval literature. For a good many scholars it serves as a commodious bottom drawer which will hold almost anything that could not be stored elsewhere. Having been enlarged to mean nothing less than "imaginative fiction," the term *romance* communicates very little, especially when it is applied to such a conglomerate body of works as "The Middle English Romances."³

In order to interrogate the Middle English romance it is instructive to begin by placing the genre in its proper historical framework. Romance has taken many forms and shifted its shape considerably as it has evolved over time. However, the core thematic elements that mark the genre boundaries of romance are few and reasonably simple. They are: (1) the undertaking of a quest/adventure, (2) the importance of courageous action/heroism on the part of the protagonist, (3) the insertion of some element of magic/miracle, (4) the thematic focus of piety/loyalty, and (5) the underlying motive of love in some form.⁴ Corrine Saunders argues that "Romance...is situated in and speaks of timeless moments." She further states that, "These romance moments have a powerful appeal, not just because they are visually compelling, but because they convey fundamental human emotions: they are trans-

³ Ojars Kratjins, "The Middle English Amis and Amiloun: Chivalric Romance or Secular Hagiography", *PMLA* 81, no. 5 (October 1966), 347.

⁴ The issue of love is a main focus of romance, but its myriad forms can involve courtly love, sexual passion (*eros*), brotherly affection (*fraternus*), numerous forms of loyalty to a liege lord, a code, or a community (*fidelis*). Each will come into play as we move through the discussion.

historical.”⁵ It is interesting that Saunders sees romance as trans-historical, as it can be argued that the elements that define the genre have existed in world literature for thousands of years and that, in spirit if not in fact, romance did not come into being, it has always existed and has simply been finally categorized as such.

To describe the place of the romance within the construct of literary history, many scholars begin with the heroic epic poetry of ancient Greece and Rome. The structure of the epic, as analyzed by Joseph Campbell, includes the elements of quest, magic, and heroism as fundamental principles upon which the genre is built.⁶ Elizabeth Archibald agrees that the romance begins here, arguing that there are, in fact, ancient romances from the Greek and Latin worlds that form an initial corpus for the genre. She states that this corpus consists of “...a group of five Greek prose narratives by Chariton, Xenophon, Achilles Tatius, Longus, and Heliodorus, which are all concerned with love, travel, and adventure, in various combinations.”⁷ These texts do not often appear in the context of a discussion of romance, as it usually assumes a focus on medieval variations on these themes, but it can be argued that Archibald is both correct and incorrect in the ways in which she lays out her argument for the origins of romance in the ancient world. While her discussion of these texts brings into focus their place in the corpus of romance, she ignores the fact that the greater portion of the body of what we consider mythological literature falls within her parameters of “love, travel and adventure.” If we are to take these basic ideas as the core of the genre, then we would be

⁵ Corinne Saunders, ed. *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 1.

⁶ For more on Joseph Campbell’s view of the archetype of the epic hero see his classic, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

⁷ Elizabeth Archibald, “Ancient Romances.” *A Companion to Romance*, 10-25.

forced to admit *The Odyssey* of Homer, *The Voyage of the Argo* by Apollonius of Rhodes, and the tales of Bellerophon, Perseus, and Orpheus (this last work is in fact transformed into a Middle English romance as *Sir Orfeo* circa 1330, the oldest extant version being found in the Auchinleck Manuscript), as well as numerous others from this tradition. In these tales the quest serves to frame lessons on the power of love, faith in one's god, the power of the warrior spirit to overcome, and the need for adventure in the growth and maturation of a hero. Gregory Heyworth speaks to Saunders' issue of timeless moments by creating an analog between these moments and the concepts he takes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. He argues that:

If the *Metamorphoses* teaches one lesson, it is that the defining moment of humanness realizes a reversion to animalism. As the bodies of Ovid's protagonists devolve, so too do the associational bonds that limn our collective humanity... this anxiety of flux and metamorphosis in social and generic forms [is] an existential condition of romance.⁸

Heyworth deals with what he calls the sociology of romance. He touches on the physical transformations of characters, such as the eponymous werewolf of Marie de France's *Bisclavret*, arguing that much of romance is designed to question whether the fundamentally predatory nature of man can be overcome by Reason, which makes him human and thus fit to take a place in society.⁹ Heyworth's discussion of the baser instincts in romance characters focuses on how these impulses affect the internal world of the romance and reflect back upon the external world of the audience, the explicit context in which the works were conceived being used to interrogate the sociology inside and outside the texts comparatively.

⁸ Gregory Heyworth, *Desiring Bodies: Ovidian Romance and the Cult of Form* (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 2009), ix-x.

⁹ Heyworth, 31-38.

Heyworth's technique provides an example of one of the underlying lessons of romance, which is to learn one's place in society despite the urges that make humans "animal" in nature.

As stated earlier, many works of the Greek and Roman mythological canon fit the confines of the romance genre, and many of the heroes of these works undergo maturation and change. In the case of Bellerophon, however, the lessons of maturation cost him his life. This sets up an important understanding of a shift which will be discussed more in depth later, the death of the romance hero. While an overwhelming number of heroes and heroines of later medieval romance survive at the end of their trials, the ability for such figures to die tragically in earlier traditions connects us to the next step in its literary evolution, the Biblical (and subsequently hagiographic) text. Northrup Frye, in his text *The Secular Scripture*, takes up this tragic aspect as being a fundamental undercurrent of romance:

At the heart of all literature is what I have called the cycle of *forza* and *froda*, where violence and guile are coiled up within each other like the yin-and-yang emblem of Oriental symbolism. Here the imaginative center is clearly in tragedy, the heroic dimension being the one that makes the greatest emotional impression on us. The heroic is associated with an often invulnerable strength, yet the heroism ends in death and the strength is not after all invulnerable... With the rise of the romantic ethos, heroism comes increasingly to be thought of in terms of suffering, endurance, and patience, which can coexist with such [physical] weakness, whatever other kinds of strength it may require. This is also the ethos of the Christian myth, where the heroism of Christ takes the form of enduring the Passion.¹⁰

Frye's use of this particular analogy acknowledges the shift from the tradition of ancient myth into the tradition of Biblical narrative, beginning in the fifth century and continuing into the Middle Ages and beyond.

¹⁰ Northrup Frye, *The Secular Scripture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 87-8.

The growth and spread of the Christian church through the West brought with it both scriptural heroics, which Frye alludes to, and the traditions of Church orthodoxy that attended the creation of heroic stories joining the power of theology and the sacred with human lives in the secular realm. These tales came in the form of the second precursor to the romance, the tradition of hagiographies, or lives of the saints.

Hagiography has a direct literary link to romance in the Anglo-Norman tradition, subsequently affecting the birth and growth of the Middle English tradition. The heroic martyrdom of Christ is reflected in hagiographies, but is often coupled with the exotic travels, miracles, and foreign foes that help to categorize the genre of romance. William Calin characterized the heroes of these texts falling within two categories, the martyr and the confessor. The martyr acts as a warrior who confronts paganism, pulling down false gods and converting heathens through the example of his or her death. The confessor draws apart from the world to live an ascetic life, converting others by the example of his or her representative life. These archetypes correspond to specific stages in church history, exemplifying a period of persecutions and a period of consolidation of the faith. Calin contends that the most famous and often utilized of these two is the figure of the martyr.¹¹ The notion that the martyr is a much more interesting character highlights two conventions of the Anglo-Norman romance that appear prominently in the English adaptation of the tradition. First is the concept of personal hardship and sacrifice, and second is the miraculous piety that gives the characters greater powers than normal men. Susan Crane posits that these facets of the work

¹¹ William Calin, *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1994), 89.

become the calling cards of the hagiographic tradition's effect on Anglo-Norman romance (and eventually Middle English romance). She states that the presence of moralistic sermons within Middle English romance highlights direct ties to Anglo-Norman literature which carried similar overtones. Crane further points out that studies of Middle English romance over the years have increasingly argued that some of the sermonizing romances are so heavily laden with these messages as to justify a subgenre in the field that might be called "secular hagiography," which contrasts directly with continental romances, which rarely if ever incorporate hagiographic motifs of this sort.¹²

One of the earliest examples of this influence shared from hagiography through Anglo-Norman and into Middle English is the romance *Amis and Amiloun*. This work tells the tale of two knights, identical in appearance though not related, who swear allegiance to one another, endure a series of trials together, and are eventually buried together in a single grave. Sheila Delany speaks of this work as having all of the earmarks of paired-saint hagiography, pointing to the tale of saints Serge and Bacchus, who were said by one writer to "resemble each other in size, appearance, greatness, and youth of body and soul."¹³ She further elaborates on similarities between the plot of the romance and the hagiography, in the structure of the adventure, and in the position and actions of the antagonists. She draws the works together closely, but never goes so far as to call the legend a direct source for the romance. The English version of the romance, written circa 1330, seems to have existed as a

¹² Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1986), 92.

¹³ Sheila Delany, "A, A and B: Coding Same-Sex Union in *Amis and Amiloun*," in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, Ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 70.

twelfth century *vita* in Latin, and moved thence to “an Anglo-Norman romance, *Amis e Amilun*, which can be dated circa 1200, [and] a French *chanson de geste* from the same time span.”¹⁴ The idea expressed by William Calin is that the Anglo-Norman romance was most likely based on a *chanson de geste* version of the work (he argues that it is possibly the extant version he mentions), and that the subsequent Middle English version is the result of an adaptation of the Anglo-Norman. The direct links to the Latin legend of saints Serge and Bacchus draw a direct line that is the most likely progression of the romance as it evolved from the hagiographic tradition.

The romance is versatile, and is used in myriad ways. Chaucer’s *Canturbury Tales*, written from 1392 to 1400, utilizes romance to create the heroic exemplar of *The Knight’s Tale*, the social/secular epistle of *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, and the almost comic tail-rhyme of *The Tale of Sir Topas*. *The Canterbury Tales* survives as an important milestone among the works that capitalize on the romance tradition, playing on the socio-political dialogue of romances like *Athelston*, which will feature in chapter three of this text. It is important to mention these works here, however, because Chaucer gives way to Edmund Spenser, who elaborates the style of Middle English tail-rhyme into the complexity of Spenserian verse and capitalizes on the themes and archetypes of medieval romance to create his opus, *The Faerie Queene*, in 1590. Spenser focuses each of the books of his work on a quest undertaken by a knight representative of a great virtue. In so doing, he takes the central character figure of the earlier romance tradition and imbues him with a single virtue that his antecedents would have held, thus focusing on each single aspect of the heroic code of earlier romance, while

¹⁴ Calin, 484.

working within a framework built to resemble the popular genre of a bygone era. His nostalgia for romance serves two purposes: (1) to frame what can be argued to be a very plain didactic/celebratory text within an adventure story to better energize his audience, and (2) to provide a familiar popular structure for less/newly literate audiences to be able to follow the narrative with more ease and precision. Romance was designed to convey deeper social meanings from its inception, making it a perfect style to benefit authors like Spenser in making political and social statements at these later dates. The general popularity of romance at its height became a tool with which later writers could play with history, public nostalgia, style, and message.

Major Aspects of Genre Development, 1100 to 1500

To properly frame these four romances it is important to highlight the romance tradition as it pertains specifically to the era from 1100 to 1500 and to place the manuscripts in which the works appear within this context. While the French (and even Anglo-Norman) tradition of romance precedes and is utilized by Middle English authors, there are actually reciprocal activities, once the Middle English tradition develops, that reflect across that linguistic divide. As such, it is difficult not to muddy the waters in this discussion when I speak of how the French sources are acted upon by the English later. To this end I have decided to separate this section into two parts, one French, and one English, which will allow easier observation of how they interact.

Anglo-Norman Romance

The French tradition of romance comes together in three very distinctive parts, the *chanson de geste* tradition, which fed and took from the tradition of the *lai*, and both of which led to the creation of the French romance. The *chanson de geste* of Old French is the

beginning of the tradition that we would call medieval romance. The term, meaning “song of deeds,” is used to refer to Old French poems written after the eleventh century and usually having to do with the glorification of Carolingian lords and monarchs, many dealing with Charlemagne himself. What is most distinctive about the *chanson de geste* style is that it is characterized by being constructed of “chanted decasyllabic or alexandrine stanzas.”¹⁵ This complexity meant that the work was either designed in ten syllable lines, generally making use of assonance, as in *The Song of Roland*, with no fixed stanza length, or twelve syllable lines of iambic hexameter in stanzas of indeterminate length. This verse style is one of the precursors to the conventions of romance, as the lyrical quality of the *chansons* helped to create the metrical quality assumed by early French romance. The matter of the *chansons*, usually dealing with warfare between Carolingian knights and Saracens, or with the betrayals that took place at court between lords and vassals (also usually ending in armed warfare) set the stage for foreign quests and deeds of arms that would become the heart of the romance tradition.

The French *lai* tradition, the oldest of which dates to the early 1200s, bridges the gap between the lyrical styles of the *chanson de geste* and the later narrative formation of the prose romance. The *lais* adopt a simpler formula, though they too were meant to be sung. *Lais* are generally written in octosyllabic couplets, the style that would later characterize the Breton *lai* subgenre of Anglo-Norman and Middle English romance. The *lais* represent a serious shift from the epic in size and scope. Written as stand-alone, short, narrative tales,

¹⁵ Laurence Harf-Lancner, “Chrétien’s Literary Background,” in *A Companion to Chrétien De Troyes*, Ed. Norris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbert (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 28.

they were not intended to be combined into a larger work, but rather represented a short story form that encompassed the same types of adventure tales and battles that were part of the *chanson* tradition. However, the other major shift was the change in the matter pursued by the *lai*. The focus of *lais* was not Charlemagne or Carolingian lords in particular, but issues of love alongside those of chivalry and prowess. *Lais* utilized magic a great deal, making them more fanciful and less historical in focus than *chansons*. Harf-Lancner argues that the octosyllabic couplet also had the great benefit of being “the most neutral metre, [and] the closest to prose.”¹⁶

From these two traditions was born what clerics would dub “*romanz*.” Lee Ramsey codifies the term as meaning, “...originally...the vernacular or spoken language as opposed to Latin, the language of culture. Applied to a book, “romance” meant one that was written for ordinary people in their own language.”¹⁷ Harf-Lancner offers that the first French romance, *Le Roman de Thebes* (circa 1150), is a showcase for some of the basic features that would become the standards of romance for the next 350 years. The work moves away from the third person voice used by the early jongleurs in *chansons* and begins using the narrative “I”, a hearkening back to the presentations of the epic works of Greece and their call to the audience in asking for the blessings of the Muses. This change was aided by the introduction of *fin amor*, a conception of love praised and patronized by Guillaume IX of Aquitaine, known as the troubadour duke,¹⁸ in court poetry in 1100. His granddaughter, Eleanor, has

¹⁶ Harf-Lancner, 28.

¹⁷ Lee C Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances: Popular Literature in Medieval England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 5.

¹⁸ Ralph V. Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen of France, Queen of England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 17.

been credited with embracing this concept of fine love and bringing it to England when she became queen in 1155.¹⁹ In 1155 Wace brings the ideas of ancient stories full circle with the Matter of Britain and courtly love in his updated *Roman de Brut*, which capitalizes on the earlier Latin Brut tradition of Geoffrey of Monmouth, penned in 1138.²⁰ It is here that Arthurian romance truly begins in terms of the genre as we know it.

Chrétien de Troyes, considered the father of the French romance genre, created an amalgam of these traditions in 1170.²¹ Forging together the Matter of Britain and *fin' amor* with characters, storylines, and topoi taken from the other traditions, he created his first work, *Erec and Enide*.²² Chrétien began to compile a series of romances built around King Arthur's court, a decision of story design that would become the single most defining feature of the subgenre of Arthurian romance, which has outstripped the general genre of romance in terms of popularity in both the academy and general readership. This tradition became the hub of what we think of as French Romance, and its proliferation would lead to the Middle English romance's emergence, some 160 years later.

Middle English Romance

When Chrétien joined the Matter of Britain with the concept of *fin' amor* and constructed the resulting works in the verse style that had become the popular spoken word tradition of the early French romance, he set in motion a cultural movement in England that

¹⁹ Harf-Lancner, 28-29.

²⁰ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, Trans. Lewis Thorpe, (London: Penguin Books, 1966).

²¹ David Staines, *The Complete Romances of Chrétien de Troyes*, by Chrétien de Troyes, Trans. David Staines (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), xii.

²² June Hall McCash, "Chrétien's Patrons," in *A Companion to Chrétien De Troyes*, Ed. Norris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbert (Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 16. Here McCash speaks to Chrétien as the first author to fuse *fin' amor* to the Matter of Britain.

would slowly gain steam until the 1300s, when authors would revolutionize the genre for a second time, shifting away from French and bringing the poetic style into the language of what was then the lower class, Middle English. A tradition of vernacular texts, Old English alliterative verse, characterized by alliterative couplets with varying stresses, syllable counts, and rhyme schemes, already existed and provided one of the models. Rhiannon Purdie shows examples of works like “the *Awyntyrs off Arthure, Gologros and Gawane*, and the *Pistel of Susan* all of which have stanzas of the pattern *abababab-c-dddc* in which the final *dddc* is a segment of much shorter lines.”²³ She also explores the pattern of the *zejal* form of Arabic poetry, which follows an “*AA, bbba (AA) ccca (AA), ddda (AA)*, etc” form.²⁴ Her examples are intended to question the origins of the English tail-rhyme stanza that came to characterize the Middle English romance (usually thought to be French), but she does not come to a definitive statement on this. What is known for certain is that the form that finally comes to characterize the Middle English tail-rhyme is *aab ccb ddb* etc. A connection here must be made to the issue of how hagiography affects the Anglo-Norman romance and through it the Middle English. Susan Crane alluded to the fact that the religious undertones often seen in these two traditions do not touch the continental French tradition at all. Purdie finds an interesting connection between tail-rhyme and religious sermons in the English Church around this time that, when connected with Crane’s point, give us some understanding of the change in pattern and style:

Anglo-Norman Literature produced no tail-rhyme fabliaux, romances, epic tales or comic pieces apart from those which are unambiguous moral satire... Occasionally,

²³ Rhiannon Purdie, *Anglicising Romance: Tail-Rhyme and Genre in Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 16.

²⁴ Purdie, 20.

tail-rhyme is even used to contrast a morally superior standpoint with a less virtuous one expressed in a contrasting form. Such is the case with an Anglo-Norman verse sermon by Simon of Caermarthen...which uses tail-rhyme specifically for a section describing the narrow path of virtue.²⁵

Taken alongside saints' lives written in this form, an argument could (and should) be made that the adoption of tail-rhyme by Middle English romance authors was an attempt not only to differentiate their work from the couplet style popular in France, but also to sanctify it as more upright and virtuous than the French works. This could also be a reason to look to Crane's assertion that the style of these works differs from the tradition of their Old French roots by taking on the morality of hagiography in these secular works. There is a question then of whether some of these authors might have gone so far as to almost copy hagiographic texts into secular romance, as is suggested by Ojars Kratjins in his look at the Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*.²⁶

A number of subgenres developed within the corpus of Middle English romance. Already mentioned is the subgenre of Arthurian romances, created by connecting *fin' amor* to the Matter of Britain. Three further subgenres, the Breton *lai*, chivalric romance, and penitential romance, developed away from this Arthurian tradition. The Breton *lai* follows the same form as *lais* in the Old French tradition save for three caveats: (1) they were generally set in Brittany, (2) they usually self-identify as Breton *lais*, and (3) they show signs of convergence between Celtic legends and French traditions, most likely intermingled in

²⁵ Purdie, 32-33.

²⁶ Kratjins, like Crane, sees parallels to specific *vitae* as too noticeable to be ignored, stating that when a work such as *Vita sanctorum Amici et Amelii* is argued to be a hagiography that it admits hagiography as a literary genre and that can be copied as others, defusing the ability to set it apart because of doctrinal theology or the need for a cult to form around the legend. "The Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*: Chivalric Romance or Secular Hagiography," *PMLA* 81, no. 5 (October 1966), 347-354.

England and carried back across the channel to Brittany. Elizabeth Archibald adds to this definition that the complaint of the work was actually a fundamental part of Breton *lai* that is overlooked, saying:

I wonder if Chaucer thought of complaint as a characteristic part of the Breton lay, especially complaints by women. They certainly occur in a number of Marie's lays—*Yonec*, *Chaitivel*, *Eliduc*. And it is striking that in the final stanza of *Emaré*, when the story is said to be a Breton Lay, the writer says it was called 'Playn the Garye' (line 1032)—the complaint of Egare, the pseudonym used by the heroine while she is separated from her husband. The lyric lays which lie behind the Breton lays seem to have been crystallizations of intense emotions, joy or grief.²⁷

Lee Ramsey states that the chivalric romances are “in form, length, and even subject matter... similar to the *chansons de geste*, but their attention shifts away from the military society and military virtues, their battles tending to be stylized into the form of jousts and single combats.” He further insinuates that there is a shift in the overall theme of the work from the *chansons*, saying that, “Instead of the defense of Christendom, their subject is the search for individual identity within an already established society.”²⁸ This search for identity is a cornerstone of the method at work in this treatise, as the four works examined make statements about the identity and “place” of the knight within society. Ramsey further delineates the two by analyzing what each thematic movement suggests about the audience for the works, suggesting that the variances between *chansons de geste* and romances indicate that they were designed for two different sectors of the society and highlight changes in the nature of these groups. Considering the similarity that the focus characters of each

²⁷ Elizabeth Archibald, “The Breton Lay in Middle English: Genre, Transmission and The Franklin’s Tale,” in *Medieval Insular Romance: Translation and Innovation*, Ed. Judith Weiss, Jennifer Fellows and Morgan Dickson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 70.

²⁸ Ramsey, 3.

genre is the warrior class, Ramsey lays out an argument that the *chanson de geste* speaks to those who desire to define themselves through physical combat, and nationalist and religious sentiment, while the romance appeals more to those who seek to establish a firm place for themselves in the society.²⁹ He goes on to argue that the replacement of the epic form represented by the *chanson de geste* with romance could signal that the anxiety about the continued existence of the French empire by outside forces had lessened, but had been replaced by anxieties about personal rank and function within the existent society. Such a transition is also visible in Middle English romance, as the martial existence of the knight was replaced with ceremonial and administrative functions during the 150 years, from 1330 to 1485, during which the form dominated. Siobhain Bly Calkin would probably quibble with this line of reasoning, arguing that the portrayal of Muslim Saracens in both traditions fails to represent a foreign Other at all. Calkin argues that the Saracen knights share so much in common with the Christian in most texts (aside of course from calling attention to the fact that they do not worship the same gods) that this is a manifestation of anxieties concerning the mixing and distrust between English and French knights, who are both Other and similar.³⁰

The third of these subgenres is the penitential romance: Middle English romance is laden with issues of piety that echo hagiographic legend. One of the facets of this that has built a critical corpus around itself is the issue of penance. Andrea Hopkins posits that the genre is the end result of a 1200 year arc within the Christian church extending from doubts

²⁹ Ibid, 4.

³⁰ Siobhain Bly Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity: The Auchinleck Manuscript* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 13-60.

that there could be a second forgiveness after baptism to the church urging believers to undertake penance and earn the redemption required to be enter heaven.³¹ The penitential romances focus on this concept, that the redemption required to get into heaven is severe for those who have broken with their faith, and is designed so that the exemplar of the knight in his attempt to re-inscribe himself within the bounds of Christian society can be taken as an object lesson by the audience. Each of the four exemplars analyzed in this work have plots built around this need for repositioning in the society, so the works we study here fit best within this substrata of romance

Penitential romances all share two important characteristics: (1) the sin which the knight commits must move him to self-administer immediate public penance without pausing for self-examination, and (2) the penance must place the knight, at the close of the romance, back within the confines of a secure secular role. Hopkins comments on these two topoi:

It is not in the nature of [this] kind of romance...for the hero to indulge in minute self-examination or analysis of motive. Even at the moments when the hero is forced to come face to face with the fact of his sins and to do a certain amount of soul-searching prior to his decision to do penance, it is clear that an altogether different mental process is at work...The penances which the heroes...undertake, therefore, can be seen to reflect strongly the influence of religious ideas, but not to follow these ideas to their proper conclusion. The heroes feel the sentiments of self-reproach and contrition for their sins, but instead of turning from the world to God, their penances fit them for their places in the world, and it is only through the world that they reach God.³²

The penitential romance thus focuses on penance, but, in accordance with Ramsey's assertion, even a romance that is built upon moral assertions of the church has at its core an

³¹ Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 34-39.

³² Hopkins, 67-68.

anxiety about where one fits in the society, and (ironically) how to fit that paradigm into garnering a place in heaven. Alcuin Blamires proposes that one of these exemplars, *Sir Gowther*, actually argues not about righteousness, but about concern for dynastic succession in the society and proper breeding and behavior of gentlemen.³³

These traditions, alongside the Middle English adaptations of Arthurian romance, create the body of Middle English romance. They feed off of the precedents set by the French tradition, shifting character, meaning, symbolism, and story design in recrafting the tradition into new paradigms. The shifts in the genre, however, also hearken back onto the *chanson de geste* tradition in two distinct ways: (1) the creation of Middle English Charlemagne romances, and (2) the addition of distinctly English subplots and scenes to works that existed first in French.

The first issue is addressed by Robert Warm in, “Identity, Narrative and Participation.” Warm raises the question of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century romances:

Why was it that during a period of prolonged Anglo-French hostility, in a conflict which many commentators have identified as being instrumental in establishing a sense of English national identity, romances which dealt with French heroes, and French military successes, were being composed, copied, circulated and read throughout England?³⁴

The answer to the question is deceptively simple. Warm argues that the works are not written to celebrate France, but have taken the best of the *chanson de geste* tradition and adjusted it

³³ Alcuin Blamires, “The Twin Demons of Aristocratic Society in *Sir Gowther*.” in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*. Ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 45-62. I take some liberty here with Blamires’ words which are in fact “failure of heredity and arrogance.” My paraphrasing takes into account the entirety of the argument alongside a reading of the work that will be presented in chapter six.

³⁴ Robert Warm, “Identity, Narrative and Participation: Defining a Context for the Middle English Charlemagne Romances,” *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance*, Ed. Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 87.

to celebrate Christianity. The focus is not the great strength and nobility of the Carolingian dynasty, but the effort of the Crusader against the Saracen in the name of God. This fails, just as the hagiographic and penitential romance, to be purely romance in the original sense of the Old French form, but becomes about religiosity and its place within secular society and vice-versa. Warm argues that “Kings, [in these romances,] despite claiming autonomy from religious authority, remain subject to it.”³⁵ This concept is on display most vividly in *Athelston*, and is central to the analysis of the romance in chapter three of this work.

The second issue, which focuses on adding subplots, is easily found by looking at the Anglo-Norman *Boeve de Haumton* and the Middle English *Bevis of Hampton*. When comparing the works, two entire scenes are extant in the Middle English version but absent from the Anglo-Norman. In the bridge between the third and fourth episodes of the work, lines 2597-2898, Bevis battles a dragon in the motif of St. George, patron saint of England.³⁶ During the battle he even calls on St. George and is delivered a miracle of healing water that restores his strength, heals his wounds, and allows him to emerge victorious. At another juncture of the work there is street to street fighting through “Cheapside” in London, naming streets and landmarks as the battle progresses. The inclusion of an extended digression in the Middle English version of the work to underscore Bevis as an avatar of St. George cements him as a distinctly English hero, despite his roots as an Anglo-Norman creation. This shows

³⁵ Warm, 93.

³⁶ *Boeve de Haumton and Gui de Warewic: Two Anglo Norman Romances*, Trans. Judith Weiss (Tempe: Arizona State University Press, 2008). “Bevis of Hampton.” *Four Romances of England*. Ed. Ronald Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), TEAMS Online Texts, 6 May 2016.

The version of *Bevis* used here is the A version of the text, taken from the Auchinleck Manuscript. There are six extant manuscript copies of the Middle English *Bevis* story in the world, each unique in some way to the others.

the deliberate use of the romance as a nationalist entity that compounds its power with religious fervor and the sanctity of the church. The distinctive details of place utilized in the scene of battle in London serve the same sort of purpose, personalizing and localizing the work for an English audience. The heroism of the work is, in a quite literal way, brought home. This distinct formation of English details to draw the audience into a nationalist frame of mind is visible in each of the four works examined here, tying them together in a distinctly English mold designed to resonate with a “local” audience.

The Story as Mirror

Middle English romance has often been looked upon as an interesting sideline in the study of both history and literature, providing little in the way of true historical information. Julie Nelson Couch argues that, for many scholars, this form of romance is of little importance because it is “not being composed in a status language, [and because] the English poem does not concern itself so persistently with aristocratic exclusivity.”³⁷ This idea, that only the elites and those connected to them are historically important, held sway throughout the 1970s through the work of such scholars as Georges Duby, but has been rewritten substantially over the last two or so decades, through the work of such scholars as Maryanne Kowaleski, Felicity Riddy, and Michael Sheehan, who have delved into the daily history of the urban citizen. There is now an emerging view of the romance as a piece of didactic literature. Just as Aesop left behind fables easy to digest, with explicitly stated morals at the end of the story, so too does romance often function as a clearinghouse and convenient

³⁷ Julie Nelson Couch, “The Vulnerable Hero: *Havelok* and the Revision of Romance,” *The Chaucer Review* 42, no. 3 (2008), 331.

portmanteau for the lessons and ideas that manuscript compilers and/or their patrons wished to impress upon the society. Read closely, we can find in romances a number of interesting and important historical issues. Some speak to concepts of loyalty, some to matters of legal standing, and still others to issues of piety and faith. While these issues are not explicitly stated when read in our current frame of reference, it can be said that during their time Middle English romances would have been as simple to decode as the pop culture references hidden in images and characters deployed in the film and literature of our day. Just as a vision of Captain America became a touchstone for American propaganda and consciousness during the 1940s, making an overt statement that could be easily interpreted, so too would the knights of romance have been recognizable avatars of class, culture, and societal concept to their original audiences.

It is with these ideas in mind that I embark upon the current study. This study does not suppose that all previous readings of the texts have been wrong; the work of R. W. Hanning³⁸ and others on the historical audience of the works has helped unpack and reorient the idea that romance was enjoyed only by the nobility, shedding light on the usefulness of understanding the broader social structure and historical moments in which the works were penned. A second facet of the field includes the work of scholars like Norris Lacy concerning the textual traditions that they draw from, work that utilizes French romance to argue for cultural associations that underlie subtle shifts in the content, tone, and approach of authors

³⁸ R.W. Hanning, "The Audience as Co-Creator of the First Chivalric Romances," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 11 (1981): 1-28.

as the stories were written.³⁹ These ideas underpin my approach here. It is however, possible for entirely new questions to emerge if we approach the reading of the romances not by looking at these styles of study and their foci separately, further elaborating on answers that already exist, but also by mixing them to create a new viewpoint and thereby establish new and more intriguing questions. As an example of this synthesis of disciplines, I posit two ideas that weave through this work: (1) that the reading of romances as didactic *or* entertainment texts is too limiting in its exclusiveness, and (2) that the meaning of many of the “chivalric romances” has been misunderstood as martial when they are much more concerned with legal and social status than they are with warfare or the training attending such endeavors.

The Society and What the Romances Meant

Before embarking upon the analysis of the texts it is important to explain the historical and socio-political milieu of English society during the period in which the romances discussed in this treatise were compiled. This will provide a context within which to view the romances. Since the texts may be sometimes strictly classified as chivalric romances, it is important to examine first the figure of the knight and the importance of his identity in making romance what I believe to be a powerful and universally effective social tool during its time.

To begin, let us examine the state of the knight and why he is the perfect character to give the chivalric romance its social latitude. John Gillingham asserts throughout his

³⁹ The work that spurred these thoughts is actually a collection that Lacy assisted in editing, *The Old French Fabliaux*.

monograph *The English in the Twelfth Century* that the Norman Conquest is the point at which we can begin to say that chivalry exists in England.⁴⁰ While this is hardly an earth shattering supposition, the reasons for his presumption are what make Gillingham's discussion useful here.⁴¹ The code of chivalry, routinely a plot point throughout the romance tradition, has many concerns, but there is one component of it upon which Gillingham's argument hinges: the *gentillesse* (courtesy) associated with the rules of courtly combat. It takes only a cursory reading of the Middle English romance tradition to note the prominence of two of the basic rules of battle that Gillingham uses to place chivalry historically into England:

It is unworthy of a knight to fight with an unfair advantage.⁴²

A knight must always give mercy to an honorable knight who asks it of him, though it is within the rights of the knight to demand a ransom in exchange for such mercy.⁴³

To argue that these concepts come with the French in 1066, Gillingham goes back to the turn of the first millennium and gives us a historical look at English combat. Drawing on the chronicles and other records of the kingdoms, we are treated to the assassinations, cold-blooded murders, tortures, mutilations, and maiming of aristocratic enemies at every court

⁴⁰ John Gillingham, *The English in the Twelfth Century* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2000).

⁴¹ This is far from shocking because we have already come to place the birth of the romance genre with the French. Thus it is only logical that if the style originates with this nation that they should be credited with taking it with them to all other nations that their culture affected.

⁴² We can see this made much of throughout the tradition, an example of the fair and even exchange of arms being the main premise and challenge in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where this equality of arms would have a knight willingly submit himself to an axe stroke. *The Quest of the Holy Grail* goes even further with this idea, marking the knights of the castle of captured maidens as evil because they ignore the laws of chivalry and fight in a mass attack against a single knight instead of engaging in honorable single combat one at a time *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, Trans. P. M. Matarasso, (London: Penguin Books, 2005): 67-76. Such instances can be found throughout the tradition.

⁴³ Such figures as Sir Gareth and Sir Perceval enhance the reputation of Arthur's court immensely through the practice of this rule of chivalry. With these knights it is often servitude that is demanded of the defeated, and defeated knights must ransom themselves with service to/at Arthur's court.

from Aethelred II in 1006 and Cnut in 1016, through the claim in the *Vita Edwardi* in 1051 that “had Godwin and his sons been caught..., they would have been killed.”⁴⁴ This is all juxtaposed with the coming of William the Conqueror and what is noted by Gillingham as the act that brought chivalric rules to battle in England: the sparing of Harold and his retainers, despite the fact that his ascension to the throne was contested by William, and that, as a show of power, William could have publicly executed Harold. While this act is a marker of the advent of chivalry as it is known in the romances, it is even more important in that we know already that William’s court brought with it the connections to continental French culture that would eventually bring the troubadours and the French romance tradition to England. These men and their stories would eventually instruct the English poets of later generations. William’s actions began a shift in public perception that would later shape the practice of knights through the concept of chivalry woven through this tradition. Such behavior (as it is seen later, through the career of William the Marshal and the chronicling of tournament and joust) would become what was emulated in the feats and basic outline of the great characters of the tradition. Future rulers and knights would be continually compared to these characters to judge their worthiness, and thus the romance has been considered not only entertaining, but also instructive for knights.⁴⁵ It is also important to state the obvious here that as a hero and a royal figure William would have been emulated by all men who aspired to power, position, and favor. His choice of action would have affected the chivalric tradition by shaping the attitudes of those at the upper end of the society. Hence the basic foundations

⁴⁴ Gillingham, 215.

⁴⁵ For a more full view of how knightly life was steered by association with the tradition of these stories see Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

of what would become romance chivalry would have suddenly carried great weight, much like the sudden popularity of Christianity among the upper classes of Rome after the conversion of Constantine.

As scholars have studied the lives of commoners, especially from the mid-twelfth century, the importance of stories as learning tools has become more significant.⁴⁶ This shift has challenged ideas like the one discussed by Julie Couch, that Middle English romance is inferior because of its use of the vernacular. Such work also undermines Georges Duby's famous discussion of the *juvenes* as the main audience of romances, and subsequent arguments that place romance as the milieu for courtly women and their reading circles.⁴⁷ It is true that authors such as Chrétien de Troyes acknowledged the importance of patrons of the noble and knightly classes as audiences for their works, but we also have reason to believe that the works would have been important among the lower ranks as well.⁴⁸ Looking to a theoretical framework on the social diffusion of cultural patterns can assist us in making this supposition.

Duby's work is most useful in the current field because it has spawned so many challenges: his method was overly exclusive of women, which taints many of his findings, and he fails to include different or varied kinds of historical sources that might contradict his

⁴⁶ Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Schools* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). This work considers the teaching of medieval children at home and at school, highlighting the use of vernacular texts for education.

⁴⁷ This idea is even supported within the texts of the romances themselves, as is in evidence in the character of Isolde, who is described as reading books of romance to her ladies-in-waiting in just such a private setting.

⁴⁸ The question is taken up by many scholars. Some key examples are: Albert C. Baugh, "The Middle English Romance: Some Questions of Creation, Presentation, and Preservation," *Speculum* 42, (January 1967): 1-31. Robert William Hanning, "The Audience as Co-creator of the First Chivalric Romance," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 11 (1981): 1-28 and Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 2001.

findings. Duby's most succinct presentation of his position is that "cultural patterns of the upper classes in society tend to become popularized, to spread and to move down, step by step, to the most deprived social groups."⁴⁹ Taken at face value this would seem an obvious interpretation of the history, asserting the generalization that the romance must have been shaped by the upper classes alone. What Duby actually argues, however, is that there is a balance to social diffusion of beliefs that must be observed. Thus it is not that romance, or any other cultural object in England, would be influential in only one direction in the society. Within Duby's argument is hidden an idea that actually undermines his thesis. As he attempts to prove a top-down diffusion of culture, he actually argues that the ideals, morals, and beliefs of the lower classes would have also been accepted and adopted by the upper classes in a reciprocal fashion. To make this argument, Duby elaborates a point that is instructive here, namely that "In the course of the development of medieval Christianity culture and propaganda were one: to educate was to convert."⁵⁰

If such a position is to be taken as part of this study we must look to the intersections of literature and religious studies. What have been some of the most successful proselytizing mechanisms of the fledgling Christian church in converting those of "pagan" religions? The overlaying of Christian images and meanings onto symbols connected to other early faiths was an important factor in the success of conversion of many cultures by the Christian church fathers. How better to work with a mass of people in bringing them to belief than by convincing them that there is little change actually being asked of them in the process?

⁴⁹ George Duby, "The Diffusion of Cultural Patterns into Feudal Society," *Past and Present* 39 (April 1968), 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

According to this model, a modern conception of social commerce, the masses will always “buy” (both monetarily and ideologically speaking) what seems to reflect their current cultural norms and beliefs.⁵¹

This concept explains why we have characters such as Perceval, introduced by Chrétien in *The Story of the Grail* (circa 1170), who was born of the nobility (as the knightly tradition required) but reared in a farming commune, with all of the accompanying morals, manners, and attitudes of the common farmer that is the majority population of medieval England.⁵² Such characters are important because they can give us an opportunity to consider how the audience at the bottom of society had as much influence on and control of the romance tradition as those at higher ranks. During the late fourteenth century Perceval is a character whose origins the average worker could understand and connect with, unlike a character like Lancelot or Gawain. These two were great warriors who inspired national pride and whose traditions predate most others, with Lancelot originating in Old French in 1220⁵³ and Gawain appearing in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* in 1136, but whose position in the society would have made them less accessible to this new audience as the bards would try to draw in this newly interested segment of society.⁵⁴ We can indeed look to Chrétien’s claim in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* that the work is driven by the demands of

⁵¹My grandfather’s old saying “...if nobody was buying they wouldn’t keep selling” comes to mind here. It speaks directly to the nature of any commercial enterprise; there must be a demand for a product to continue production.

⁵²Chrétien de Troyes, “The Story of the Grail”, in *The Complete Romances of Chretien de Troyes*. Trans David Staines (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 339.

⁵³Carol Dover, ed. *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003).

⁵⁴Gawain’s character, because of the bawdy nature of many of his adventures in minor tales can be considered an earthier one whose exploits would have been fit for a tavern telling as his tradition grew. Lancelot never achieved that same transition in his character. See Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, Trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1966).

his intended audience; because we can also infer that the mass audience was accorded the same type of shaping power.⁵⁵ In Maurice Keen's observation:

Chivalry was nurtured in France, but took its [true and lasting] shape in a European context. It gained currency as the sustaining ethos of warrior groups, identified on the one hand by their martial skill as horsemen, on the other by a combination of pride in ancestry and status and in traditions of service.⁵⁶

While the idea of horsemanship and position would appeal to gentry and nobility, this concept of service would have spoken not only to those groups, but also to the peasantry. For them servitude was a way of life, and service to one's betters, whether because one did not have the power to fight back or out of loyalty, would have been a given. Hence the concept of knighthood could have both noble and agricultural incarnations. His appeal would be widespread, and the traditions of characters like those of Perceval (Wales), Gawain (Midlands), and Lancelot (France), would unite various nationalist articulations of chivalric ethos throughout Europe and reach across social boundaries for audience acceptance.

The power of the textual or fictional knight was consistently reinforced by the appeal of his real world counterparts, men who emulated the deeds of chivalry, *largesse*, and courtly love found in the pages of romance. A much later example of that popularity would be the love for Edward the Black Prince among the English people during the 1360s. He has been called the "flower of the world's knighthood at that time and the most successful soldier of his age" and stands among the most storied figures in English history.⁵⁷ A man mythologized

⁵⁵ Chrétien de Troyes, "The Knight of the Cart," in *The Complete Romances of Chretien de Troyes*. Trans David Staines (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 170.

⁵⁶ Keen, *Chivalry*, 42.

⁵⁷ Juliet Vale and Malcolm Vale, "Knightly Codes and Piety," in *Age of Chivalry*. Ed. Nigel Saul (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 24.

for his tournament skill and his piety, Edward differentiated himself from the rough practical knighthood of his time by following the more formalized example of Arthur and his knights and other romance figures, aligning himself with the concept of the Round Table and knightly brotherhood as a member of the Order of the Garter, founded by his father Edward III. The popularity of the Order, and (arguably) of Arthurian style chivalry fueled by national adherence to the stories, lasted long beyond Edward. It “remained essentially the sovereign’s order and the Crown’s monopoly over England’s ‘national’ chivalry” into perpetuity, even being bestowed today.⁵⁸ This connection, noted above, of the nation as a whole to the knight gave the knight of romance a position of power that allowed him to set some of the boundaries of acceptability and social/martial primacy for the kingdom. It is this ability that made the romance the perfect place to embed messages intended to influence the broader society, which consumed the works as entertainment, and that attempt was important because of a fear of change within the society, which affected all levels, that became inexorable as the role the knightly class underwent a shift away from a martial profession to one that denoted an administrative and mercantile existence.

With the price of livestock climbing from 1160 on, monetary inflation became a fact of life in England.⁵⁹ As most landed gentry and aristocrats were dependent upon the produce of the lands that they held for income, the fact that “...the price of oxen and plough-horses, that had been reasonably constant, [began] a steep climb...” became somewhat problematic. The prices became so precipitous that “Between the 1190s and the 1220s the price of oxen

⁵⁸ Ibid, 35.

⁵⁹ Robert Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075-1225*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 373-76.

increased by 125 percent, that of plough-horses by slightly more.”⁶⁰ The families that took advantage of this inflation made out well in trade, suddenly having the opportunity to make substantially more money than they had dreamed from livestock, crops, goods, and labor. While the abundant wealth of the baronial class was largely untroubled by this, market volatility produced serious problems for the middle and lower gentry. Possessed of few, if any, lands in many cases, this group suffered from a dual challenge: (1) the need to make their estates profitable, and (2) the lack of capital on hand to accomplish the task. Robert Bartlett makes the point that the increase in the amount of currency in circulation symbolized increasing commercialization in England. Asserting that more transactions began to be conducted using cash, including peasant rents, which had historically been paid in labor or produce, he points out that moneylending became an industry, and it became possible for some to engage in monetary exchange as a profession, citing forty-two men being listed in Domesday Book who lived on trade and no other enterprise.⁶¹ Suddenly families that had been comfortable before were rich and capable of gaining positions of importance in the kingdom, the result of the authority of their money. We see the opposite scenario presented in *Sir Cleges*: a knight whose wealth is poorly shepherded and managed, Cleges loses his wealth and subsequently his place in the society. His standing was never secured by any marketable skill other than warfare, and during peacetime he stayed relevant only through the ability to fund a seemingly never ending feast from the wealth of the lands he holds from the king. As the society shifted away from placing great importance on the abilities of warriors,

⁶⁰ Ibid, 374.

⁶¹ Ibid, 375.

the story of Cleges illustrates that knights could find themselves unable to marshal the skills to manage their lands to maintain their position, slowly squandering their lands and falling into decline. As we shall see below, the narrative calls the audience to examine the boundary between those gentry with titles and their merchant neighbors being called into question and, in some cases, wiped away. Two historical examples of this are pointed out by David Crouch in his monograph, *The Birth of Nobility*, in his discussion of the rise of Robert fitz Harding in the mid-1100s and the foundation of the Blunt dynasty, cemented in the early 1200s:

Urban financiers often found favor with princes, and, for a very few, favour and money might take them to the very heights of society...Robert's family had been on the fringes of the court of Edward the Confessor (his grandfather was Ælboth the Staller), but he began his career as a local landowner in and around Bristol in the reign of Stephen. Using his property base in Bristol, and, we must assume, a high level of financial acumen, Robert accumulated a mass of country estates in the 1150s and 1160s. By the favour of Henry II as duke and king, Robert came to control a castle at Berkeley in Gloucestershire, to found an abbey in his native town and to begin a long-lived baronial lineage.⁶²

There is no doubt that the success of the fitz Harding family was not wasted on the other members of the mercantile community. The parlaying of business acumen and money into a place in the society continued to be a calling card of the merchant class; this can be seen by the slightly longer trajectory toward power taken by the Blunt family of London. Sir Andrew Blunt was the son of city merchants and financiers. Blunt's grandfather, Bartholomew Blunt, began trading as a furrier and served as a primary provisioner of Henry II in the 1160s. The connection to the crown netted Bartholomew's son, Robert, a seat as alderman and a stint as a royal sheriff. These positions were parlayed into land and family status during the next

⁶² David Crouch, *The Birth of Nobility: Constructing Aristocracy in England and France, 900-1300* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), 213-14.

sixty years, and found Andrew knighted by the 1220s and a member of the landed gentry, title and all.⁶³

Examples like Andrew Blunt and his family's climb into the ranks of knights, became indicative of the changes in what it meant to be a knight by the mid-thirteenth century. No longer were martial deeds and bloodlines the standard measure of one's ascent, but instead financial and legal success became important. The upward social mobility evinced by the success of merchants made them all too dangerous to the ambitions of the lower aristocracy, who saw themselves in danger of being passed up in favor of men of lesser stock. The merchants even began to intrude into the world of courtly literature, something that usually on presented aristocratic characters. *Athelston* highlights this new ease of social mobility, featuring a trio of lower gentry messengers, whose association with a member of the royal family places them in some of the most powerful positions in the kingdom. Crouch points out the mention of merchants alongside knights in the work of Andrew the Chaplain, circa 1180:

Andrew was keen to describe what made a man or woman "noble" and engaged directly therefore with what was noble in behavior. At one point he even presented a list of twelve rules for the model lover: they include precepts such as being honest, modest, decent in speech, urbane and courtly. This was to be expected of any noble knight. Elsewhere in [his] book, Andrew has much to say of what it is that made behavior noble, even amongst the "lower orders," as he called the urban merchants.⁶⁴

However, not all merchants had the connections to gain royal favor. It is these men of trade whom the gentry saw as useful to their own ambitions, as they could provide money and business contacts to stabilize the fortunes of a gentry strapped for cash and pressed to maintain their status. Reciprocally, however, these businessmen saw the gentry as useful, for

⁶³ Ibid, 215.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 54.

the gentry could provide an entrée into the halls of power where they could share the company of more socially important men. *Sir Gowther* plays with this concept, showing the disinherited Gowther as a beggar who is able to raise himself back into the aristocracy through marriage, after finding himself in the good graces of an emperor. Peter Coss sees the transformation of the merchant slightly differently. He argues that what some of these merchants wanted were the trappings of the gentry without the formal title of “gentleman.” His argument is that “many wealthy merchants who did not hold office preferred not to take up the title, possibly because it retained service connotations... If Londoners are anything to go by, merchants...remained aloof from chivalric culture until well into the fifteenth century.”⁶⁵ Romance narratives, however, indicate that, the desire for upward mobility was emergent in the merchant class, whether it was social or purely financial.

The argument is not whether merchants sought social rank or merely financial position. What is at issue is that any desire for upward movement diluted the martial aspirations of the knightly class, recasting what it meant to be a member of that group. Inflation was hardest on the lower gentry. Sylvia Thrupp indicates that earlier historians surmised that younger sons “thrown on their own resources, with nothing to boast of but their status as gentlemen of birth” might have invested that status with as much importance as they could.⁶⁶ Thus there would have been a group who used their birthright to attempt to maintain their place in the society. Whereas such men could have maintained their livelihood and

⁶⁵ Peter Coss, “An Age of Deference,” in *A Social History of England, 1200-1500* Ed. Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.), 72.

⁶⁶ Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London, 1300-1500* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1948), 235.

status through martial exploits in earlier times, by the 1300s, this was not so viable an approach. These men would have been invaluable to the merchants because of their connections, as noted above, but would not necessarily have come with the skills to be useful businessmen. On the other hand, the need for money brought with it a need from this group to find training, skills, and comradeship among men of trade. There is some evidence that knights and merchants shared much during this time, stopping only at the point of fostering one another's offspring. In point of fact, there is some argument that the two were so closely aligned that many already saw these two competing social elites as similar. Thrupp indicates that economic criteria did not, in fact, affect rank in the social order. In her estimation the usefulness of the man himself, and what service he could provide to his lord, were significant in the decision-making about filling positions of importance within the superstructure of the lord's administration that afforded him value. In her examination, whether the service was martial or administrative was of no consequence, as it was the worth of the service in any field that was important.⁶⁷

We see the formal coming together of these two groups in trade guilds in the 1400s. Gentry families helped enhance the social position of the guilds, even as the families helped open doors and expand possibilities for business deals among the merchants; the gentry likewise benefitted reciprocally from guild proceeds and prestige in the cities and towns. Thrupp points out that "gentlemen of high connections were much sought after," and describes the guild of mercers taking in thirty-two members of gentle rank between the 1430s

⁶⁷ Ibid, 245-46.

and the end of the century.⁶⁸ This reciprocity led to a seat of honor for merchants in the halls of the young gentry males, whose estates they helped to build. Manuals of manners of the time noted that merchants considered worthy were to be seated beside gentlemen and esquires at table, so long as the delineations between them and exceptional men such as mayors of London were always observed, placing merchants always lower than such high ranking political figures.⁶⁹

This cooperation between the two social groups bred similar tastes between them, and each sought the same two markers of social status, though sometimes to different ends: the gaining of a coat of arms and an estate, mostly country but sometimes urban, became an anachronistic characteristic of both groups. Thrupp indicates that, “The interpenetration of culture between the merchant class and gentry was further expressed by their adoption, by the older and wealthier families in each, of armorial bearings; these served a double purpose in identifying families and individuals and in asserting a claim to status.”⁷⁰ The romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* places a premium on the assumption of a coat of arms, spending much of the famed arming scene describing the heraldry of Gawain’s shield and the meaning of each facet of the designs on both the inner and outer halves of the shield. Christopher Dyer argues that the use of estates to show pride of place goes all the way back to the first blush of the mercantile class in the thirteenth century, saying that “the thirteenth century marked the heyday of moat digging: minor gentry—and some people even who hoped to be counted as gentry—thought that this basic fortification around their houses

⁶⁸ Ibid, 256.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 260.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 249.

would give them claim to aristocratic status...”.⁷¹ Maryanne Kowleski investigates the later 1400s, stating that “the urban housing of wealthy merchants also witnessed a shift towards greater privacy and comfort [paralleling gentry estates of the time] with the multiplication of bedrooms, parlours, fireplaces and glazed windows from the fifteenth century onwards.”⁷²

This similarity of purpose and commonality of taste showed in the deep bonds of friendship (and sometimes intermarriage) that grew between merchant families and the gentry patrons for and with whom they made so much money. A prime example of this would be the dealings between Sir John Fastolf and his business associate, John Paston. H.S. Bennett writes:

John Paston was primarily a calculating, shrewd man of affairs, and most probably only a servant of the County... The zeal and capacity he showed were not wasted, for he early attracted the attention of just such a man as his growing fortunes most needed... John Paston was the intimate friend and confidant of Sir John Fastolf... we can see he had a great respect for Paston’s business ability... [and] the old knight soon found that he was frequently seeking the advice and local knowledge of Paston.⁷³

While this relationship did not yield a marriage, as in many cases such alliances did, it nonetheless resulted in the wealth and power of a landed knight falling into the hands of a merchant family. The sudden raising and lowering of men, though not explicitly merchants, is a trope that appears in each of the romance exemplars considered below, and this trope

⁷¹ Christopher Dyer, “The Economy and Society,” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval England*. Ed. Nigel Saul (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 157.

⁷² Maryanne Kowaleski, “A Consumer Economy,” in *A Social History of England, 1200-1500*. Ed. Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 252.

⁷³ H.S. Bennett, *The Pastons and Their England: Studies in an Age of Transition*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 9.

significantly shapes the action in each text. A brief recounting of each's plot will help cement this claim.

The plot of *Athelston* is deceptively simple. Athelston becomes king, elevating three men whom he has sworn himself to into various posts. One becomes jealous over the favor that he perceives the king shows another and accuses the favored man of treason. The king believes him, throwing the accused and his family into prison and setting a date for their execution. The fourth "sworn brother" comes to the rescue of the accused, using his ecclesiastic legal power to assert the innocence of the accused and proving that the traitor is in fact the accuser. On its face this is patently a tale of courtly wrangling over the favor of a monarch by men recently raised to power and position.

Sir Cleges depicts a knight who has fallen on hard times returning to social status owing to a mercantile transaction. Cleges squanders the wealth of his family on extravagant feasts for any who would care to join them, but fails to recoup anything from his lands. Destitute, he is blessed with a miracle, an unseasonable growth of fruit in his house garden. His wife, convincing him to go and give the fruit as a gift to the king, hopes that the exchange might bring in return some gift that can save the family. Arriving at the court, Cleges finds that he is unable to gain access to the king, as the men who guard each level of access into the castle seek a portion of whatever Cleges might gain in return for letting him make his appeal. Cleges eventually makes his way to the king, who grants him whatever he would ask for in return for the miraculous fruit. Cleges, recognizing that he has promised all of his profit to the men who barred his path, asks the king for twelve mighty strokes that he might dole out without question or consequence. The king is intrigued, grants the request,

and then watches as Cleges doles out furious punishment on the men who sought to take his earnings. The king enjoys the shrewdness with which Cleges handles his retribution while staying on the right side of the deals that he struck to gain entry, and raises the man back into society as his chamberlain.

Sir Gowther is the tale of an illegitimate son, fathered by an incubus, being charged with false inheritance of the property of the man he believed to be his father. Cast out as a bastard, Gowther wanders as a homeless wretch who is eventually taken in at the court of an emperor as an act of charity. While in residence there the emperor is attacked by a Muslim sultan who demands to take the emperor's daughter as a prize. Gowther, after renouncing his demonic heritage and begging for a means to help those who were kind to him by taking him in, takes to the field in armor brought to him by magic horses. He defeats the sultan's armies and is finally raised to legitimacy through marriage to the emperor's daughter.

Finally, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, provides a counterbalance to the successes of the knights in the other works: it is a romance about a heroic knight losing face by failing to keep a contract in an attempt to make a transaction more profitable for himself. Gawain seeks to protect the honor of King Arthur's court by accepting the challenge of beheading the Green Knight. When the knight's headless body raises the still living head from the floor to pronounce the time of their second meeting, Gawain realizes that he is required to keep his contract or lose the honor he sought to protect. Travelling to meet the Green Knight, where it will be Gawain's turn to receive a stroke, he happens upon the realm of Lord Bertilak, a kind ruler who allows him to stay a few days as his guest. During his stay, Gawain seals a contract with Bertilak, to trade with him whatever each might win during each day that Gawain is a

guest. The contract is kept, until Gawain finds himself in possession of a trinket purported to have the magical power to help him survive his meeting with the Green Knight's axe. Gawain breaks his contract with Bertilak, keeping the artifact for himself and travels to meet the Green Knight. Upon arriving he finds that the Green Knight is actually a persona of Lord Bertilak, who admonishes Gawain for his fear and dishonesty. Gawain returns to Arthur, contrite and unhappy at having lost his honor because his act of self-preservation goes against all that his armorial symbols are meant to stand for, devaluing the man metaphorically. It is not enough that Gawain returns alive, which is the best possible outcome of a martial encounter, but he is lowered in status for having failed to fulfill his contracts.

Chapter Overviews

The four selected works at issue, *Athelston*, *Sir Cleges*, *Sir Gowther*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, form a specific corpus based on the three specific tenets laid out earlier. (1) Each work has a main character whose "quest" within the work is designed to establish a proper "place" in the society for him. This is one of the primary functions of "chivalric" romance as described by Lee Ramsey.⁷⁴ (2) Each main character undertakes his journey as a form of penance for flaws that are unexamined in himself, finding himself reestablished within the society at the end of the work, which is the major descriptor of the "penitential" romances as discussed by Andrea Hopkins. *Athelston* and *Gawain* are both forced to deal with the consequences of their pride, *Cleges* must face his inability to curb his enthusiasm for merriment and feasting, and *Gowther* is brought low by the need to temper his

⁷⁴ The term quest is here used to indicate a journey, however it is a journey that is as much focused on the interiority of the character as it is on the physical journey into the world. In point of fact, *Athelston* the king does not journey outside of London in his tale, but he is still reeducated about his place within the society.

savagery and anger. (3) Finally, the interpretation of each work lends itself not to the martial role of the knight, as is the classical approach to analysis of romance, but to the role of the knight within a more administrative realm bounded by definitions of place couched in legal roles.

Chapter two will look at the period over which knighthood shifted from its original martial flavor to a more administrative reality, and how Middle English romance framed this transition. How does the placement of these four romances within their respective manuscripts shade their meanings? Correspondingly, out of what social context did each manuscript emerge, and how might this knowledge help us understand these shadings?

Chapter three studies the importance of contracts and oaths through a primary focus on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*). In looking at these four romances, there is a distinct undercurrent to be observed in the taking and breaking of oaths. Each of the main characters finds himself bound to other characters in closely defined ways, some by oaths of office, some by mercantile dealings, and others by the social rules of governing honor and personal promises. These contracts shape Gawain's actions, as well as defining the reactions to the main characters by the other actors within the tale, creating a well-defined set of expectations for the characters to be interpreted by the audience. Further, *SGGK* highlights the importance of contracts by creating a series of contractual oaths designed to hedge in the main character. This initial contract sets in motion a series of events that lead to smaller contracts with Lord and Lady Bertilak, Gawain's hosts, as he awaits the final meeting regarding his original oath/contract, which puts Gawain in a delicate position. Should he fully live up to any of these contracts he is in danger of failing to fulfill the others, creating a

severe legal problem that reflects on his honor and status as a knight. Gawain's highlights the importance of oath taking and contractual obligations within the strata of knights and the commerce that they have with one another and the greater court and public outside their group.

Chapter four considers the place of the knight within the legal system through a primary focus on *Athelston*. Having established the boundaries of oaths and contracts in chapter three, I then consider the social and legal expectations were placed upon the knights who existed within this system. How were knights responsible for the maintenance of the checks and balances of this system, and how far did their power extend in enforcing this system? *Athelston* addresses these questions through a plot that leverages the role of the knight as jurist and enforcer of the law against the loyalty that knights must have in enforcing the royal prerogative. King Athelston is tricked into believing that one of his greatest barons is plotting to depose him. In his fury he orders the man sentenced to death, but fails to provide for a trial or gather any evidence. Understanding the law of the land, the Archbishop of Canterbury demands a trial and influences the authority of the knights who populate London to force the king to allow a trial or suffer being violently overthrown by the knights. The romance highlights the role of knights as a civil authority, showing clearly that one of the tools in the shift to administrative knighthood was the threat of martial force as a way of enforcing legal rights as designed by the laws of England. In effect the romance presents the oaths of the monarch create a social contract that the knightly constituency is responsible for maintaining.

Chapter five examines the economic and social issues surrounding the knightly concept of *largesse*, as presented in *Sir Cleges*. I first discuss the position of the knight with respect to legal power and public authority, asking these questions: what is the knight required to “give” to others? Is a fiduciary responsibility to thrive part of a social obligation to judge and protect the greater good? *Sir Cleges* is a knight who takes the social codes of knighthood to their extremes. He lives by a single one of these concepts, *largesse*, so obsessively that he bankrupts his family and loses all of his lands save a single struggling property. *Sir Cleges*, therefore, illuminates the financial realities that upended the lofty theoretical ideals of knighthood and brought knights into a more direct commerce with the merchant class that had risen to the status of gentry. The changing economic superstructure of the kingdom was a major factor in reshaping the knight into an administrative identity where once a martial identity had sufficed, and the lessons of that transfer of ideals are highlighted here.

Chapter six focuses primarily on *Sir Gowther* to observe how issues of inheritance and succession were framed as the final transition of knighthood away from the primacy of bloodlines. I consider how a knight becomes “legitimate” in this new landscape as England enters a period where the title of *sir* could be seen as a commodity of social mobility, not social elitism. *Sir Gowther* is built around the life of a knight sired by a demon. His mother hides his lineage, allowing both Gowther and his father to believe that he is the legitimate heir to the duchy in which he grows up. When he is revealed as a bastard, Gowther must undertake an ostensibly religious penance to atone for the sins he has committed in his treatment of lands and chattels to which he had no legal rights. While his actions are horrific

early in the work, until it discovered that he does not legal have any command of the people he has mistreated or the cruel decisions he has made there is no retribution or attempt to stop his activities. The remainder of the work focuses on Gowther's process for reconnecting himself to the social structure of England, using a minor "crusade" against a Muslim sultan to establish a connection to the church, and a subsequent marriage to an heiress to reestablish himself in a role in the political and legal structure of the nation. *Sir Gowther* highlights the issues of inheritance and legal/social positioning that affected one of the most significant changes in knighthood during the move away from a martial identity, as the social mobility of knights and their families became a practical concern, with families earning knightly status through non-martial activities.

Chapters three through six focus on analyzing the chosen corpus of works as exemplars. As these romances represent an intersection of two specific romance traditions, the placement of each romance within its manuscript context will be important in understanding what facets of the romances are being highlighted by compilers, which will be highlighted in chapter two.

CHAPTER 2

THE PERIOD AND THE MANUSCRIPTS

This chapter addresses the manuscripts that house the texts under study, in order to interrogate the thematic focus of each manuscript and circumscribe each romance within the bounds of that thematic focus, setting up the analysis of each work in the chapters that follow.

The Manuscripts and their Historical Context

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

One of the most heavily studied Middle English romances is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*) whose 2532 lines have been more translated, discussed, and analyzed than any other poem of the tradition. Epic in its scope, the work is extant in only one manuscript, British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x. The exact dating of the work has been the subject of much scholarly debate, with the latest possible date being circa 1400.¹ Considering that the manuscript closes with the motto of the Knights of the Garter inscribed as the final line of the final poem, the earliest that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* could have been written is 1348, when the Order was founded.² General agreement is that, based on details of costume, armor and architecture, *SGGK* must have been written between 1377 and 1399, during the reign of Richard II.³ The manuscript itself is religiously themed, with the three other works in the manuscript, *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*, overtly discussing religious

¹Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds. *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999).

²Keen, *Chivalry*, 179.

³William Vantuono, ed. and trans. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University Notre Dame Press, 1999), xviii.

topics. *Pearl*, the first work in the manuscript, is a dream vision poem that tells the tale of a father whose young daughter has died. In his endless mourning, she comes to him from heaven to reassure him of the beauty of her life in the New Jerusalem of heaven, where she has become a virgin bride of Christ. The second work is *Cleanness*, a homiletic poem that takes up the issue of what it means to be “clene” before God, utilizing exemplars from the Christian Bible. The third piece, *Patience*, is also homiletic in nature, and focuses on the Old Testament story of Jonah, retelling the tale with connection and allusion to the beatitudes and the medieval female personifications of them.

The final poem in the manuscript is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The placement of this romance alongside these works focused on themes of patience, cleanness, and fortitude highlights these aspects of religious life in *SGGK*, where they are all brought together as themes that affect Gawain throughout the work. These themes shape the narrative, giving a context to the meaning of Gawain’s actions and interactions that might not be as noticeable without this carefully shaped lens.

The manuscript was designed to create this lens with a deliberateness that has been noted by scholars Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron as “an unbroken consistency of thought throughout; a group of favoured themes (e.g. patience and humility set against pride, earthly and heavenly courtesy, purity, perfection) is woven into a variety of patterns, often in language which is immediately reminiscent of other contexts.”⁴ What Andrew and Waldron allude to, but never fully flesh out, is the connectivity that the manuscript builds from work to work, more clearly defining through the exemplars of each poem the usage of terms and

⁴ Andrew and Waldron, eds. *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 16.

expectations of characters in the next work. *Pearl* focuses on a father's loss, and his fervent desire to be with his daughter, the pride of his life, immediately. Her lesson to him to live his life in happiness until he is called to heaven is both melancholy and hopeful, with a hint of admonition to wait patiently on God's timing and not rush to his death. The work further highlights the purity of spirit, thought, and action that the father taught his daughter, teachings that paved the way for her ascent into heaven, and yet which his current melancholy existence fails to live up to. This lesson is highlighted in *Cleanness*, where the poem focuses on what it means to be pure in thought and deed, and what punishments have been visited on the earth for our failures to live up to these ideals. *Cleanness* treats each destruction as a miniature Armageddon, with the idea that we are continuously given an opportunity to restart our world and reframe our existence in line with a more ideal purity. *Patience* then presents these ideas using personified virtues to highlight the tale of Jonah. This style would become increasingly popular in the morality plays of the fifteenth century and was contemporary to the reign of Richard II, being used heavily William Langland's much studied *Piers Plowman*, which was used in the preaching that fomented the Peasant's Revolt of 1381.

Athelston

The 812 lines that comprise the Middle English romance *Athelston* are extant in a single manuscript, Gonville and Caius MS 175 (c. 1450).⁵ Paleographical study of the manuscript identifies two hands, with sections denoted by illuminated initial letters. The scans from which I worked show no discernable marks of manufacture. Framed as a religious

⁵ This manuscript is currently housed in the collection of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge.

work by its manuscript context, its eponymous title character is Athelston, an Anglo-Saxon king who was crowned at Kingston in 925. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Athelston was a mighty warrior who solidified the rule of England.⁶ He is described as a pious king who collected and distributed religious relics.⁷ Also in the Caius MS are *Richard Coer de Lyon*, *Sir Ysumbras*, *A Life of St. Catherine*, *Matutinas de cruce*, and *Bevis of Hamptoun*. Elaine Treharne argues that “there is little doubt that, in the mind of the manuscript compiler at least, this codex is contextually unified by an emphasis on both the religious (*St. Catherine* and *Matutinas*, for instance), and the politico-didactic (by illustrations of the ultimately pious knight/king).”⁸ The religious works in the manuscript are built upon the concept of sacrifice for the good of others. The figure of St. Catherine is giving, despite the fact that she takes from her own family to give to those less fortunate. Her sacrifices result in the well-being of all, but she must sacrifice her own standing and comfort to make it so. This religious position is mirrored by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in *Matutinas* and this theme sets the stage for the knightly characters of the other works. Richard spends the ten years of his kingship in constant pilgrimage and battle, seeking the Holy Land first as a pilgrim and then as a conqueror who will give the land back to the Christian church. Isumbras is a knight who is punished with trials at every turn because he places too much importance on fame and money. He can find peace only by subsuming himself in the role of the knight as pious figure, giving up all of his greatness and becoming a holy beggar for

⁶ Michael Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 104.

⁷ James Campbell, Eric John, and Patrick Wormald. *The Anglo-Saxons* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), 81, 164-65 and 178; and Elaine M. Treharne, “Romanticizing the Past in the Middle English *Athelston*,” *The Review of English Studies* 50, no. 197 (February 1999), 1-21.

⁸ Treharne, “The Middle English *Athelston*,” 10.

seven years to earn his penance and have his family reconstructed around him. All of these works share a theme of subsuming one's own personal safety, security, and comfort for a higher cause that benefits more than oneself. It is into this frame that *Athelston* is presented.

Chief among the questions raised by this work are the historical analogues and antecedents of the *Athelston* romance. In reviewing the scholarship on the romance, Helen Young states that some argue that the work remarks upon the great quarrel between Henry II (r. 1154-1189) and Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, which began in 1162 and culminated in Becket's death in 1170, while others see in its plot a veiled conversation regarding the quite public argument between Thomas Arundel, Bishop of Ely, and Richard II (r. 1377-1399), which did not take place until the 1380s.⁹ The most compelling argument in the field has been made by Young herself, who utilizes the details of the work to highlight the parallels between the character of the Archbishop Alryke and Bishop Arundel.¹⁰ Since the Caius manuscript was written after both events—and no other extant copies can be found to rule out the later dates—it is possible that either conflict between the crown and the church could be an inspiration for the work, but Young's close interrogation of the characters and the fact that dating of the manuscript copy more closely follows the reign of Richard II, compels me to believe that the latter influenced the work. However, because *Athelston* appears in only the one manuscript we cannot with certainty rule out that it was originally penned earlier than the beginning of Richard's reign in 1377.

⁹ Helen Young, "Athelston and English Law: Plantagenet Practice and Anglo-Saxon Precedent." *Parergon* 22, no 1 (January 2005): 100-101.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Sir Cleges

The Middle English romance *Sir Cleges*, circa 1400, encompasses a concrete lesson about the attributes of loyalty, physicality, and business savvy and their importance in the aristocracy, knightly gentry, and administrative servant classes. Understatedly described by Laura Hibbard Loomis as a “pleasant little poem,” about a “...spendthrift knight” that is touched with “...homely tenderness in the picture of Cleges, grieving over his ruined state (and) being comforted by his gentle wife and little children,”¹¹ *Sir Cleges* survives in two manuscripts, Edinburgh, NLS MS 19.1.11, which we will refer to hereafter as the Advocates manuscript, and Oxford, MS Bodleian 6922, also known as Ashmole 61. The Ashmole version of the work is the more complete of the two, including nuances of phrase and extra details absent from the Advocates manuscript, such as the full name of Uther Pendragon, which sets the pseudo-historical placement of the work in lines four and five. A similar and yet more important shift in wording between the two occurs in line 19, where the Advocates manuscript uses the language “the pore pepull he wold releve” arguing that Cleges is indeed a benefactor of the poor. The wording in line 19 of Ashmole states that “hys tenantes feyre he wold rehetete,” establishing not just the charity of the man, but his status as a landholder entitled to rents from tenants. This establishes a social standing for Cleges that bolsters the title of *sir* with which he is invested by drawing solidly on his position in the feudal hierarchy as a landholder to set the stage for the story.

Codex Ashmole 61 is an interesting mix of works dispersed across 162 folios. The manuscript itself is thought to have possibly been copied by an amateur scribe more used to

¹¹ Laura Hibbard Loomis, *Medieval Romance in England: A Study of the Sources and Analogues of the Non-cyclic Metrical Romances* (New York: Franklin Press, 1960), 79.

keeping ledgers than writing literature, because of “the tall, narrow format” of the pages, which would have been the correct size to match the ledger books so often associated with manuscript finds from the late 1400s.¹² The works themselves span at least four genres, though other researchers argue that the tales fit within five. The four genres that we can readily articulate within the manuscript are: romance, didactic texts, hagiographies, and prayer/meditative texts. The fifth suggested is the genre of exempla, though I argue that such tales fit loosely within the realm of didactic texts, as they are all designed to teach lessons. Shuffleton notes that the evidence is solid, based on the scribe’s use of catchwords written at the end of each quire, that the works in Ashmole 61 were indeed intended to be a composite grouping, and are currently in what would have been their original order. Original ownership of the manuscript is uncertain, and a regional codification has not been identified.

The works in the codex lean toward an overall didacticism that focuses heavily on the martial caste of knights. This common thematic thread helps to shed some light on the flexibility of the knight. The knight, by the late 1400s, had become a stock character with a finite set of expected attributes, such as stoic honor, unassailable courage, and impeccable courtly manners, that could be either denied or affirmed in the design of a tale, prayer, or other piece. The knight served as a building block of meaning, as much as the 1950s conception of the high school star athlete in his letter sweater can be called upon in the creation of modern tales. An archetype of such clarity and conciseness could be mobilized for almost any purpose, and such is the case in the depictions in Ashmole 61 and the

¹²George Shuffleton, ed, *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse*, TEAMS Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008), 1.

consistent presence that the image seems to have throughout so many of the works in the manuscript. What is at issue for us here, however, is the provenance and meaning of the specific story of Sir Cleges, of which the validation and design of the manuscript is only a beginning. This tale can be observed as didactic in two very important ways. *Cleges* serves to teach its audience the roles of *largesse*, valor, piety, and personal pride in the knightly class, as well as making an object lesson of loyalty to the king, reinforcing that always giving absolutely to one's liege will result in reward and honor. This final focus shows a definite shift from the attitude of Athelston and *SGGK*, which focus respectively on duty to the church above the crown, and on how personal pride can undermine the commitment of a knight to the ideals of his faith.

Sir Gowther

The Middle English romance *Sir Gowther* exists in two late fifteenth-century manuscripts, British Library Royal MS 17.B.43 and Edinburgh National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.3.1. According to Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, both versions share a dialect, despite some small variations, arguing that both manuscripts were produced in the Northeast Midlands, suggesting a regional origin for the story.¹³ This linguistic placement has been supported by Phillipa Hardman in her introduction to the manuscript facsimile of Edinburgh NLS MS 19.3.1.¹⁴ There is but one truly fundamental difference between the two manuscripts, and that is the omission in the Royal MS of what occurs as lines 181-192 in the Advocates, the rape and pillaging of a nunnery committed by Gowther before the pivotal

¹³ Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, eds. *The Middle English Breton Lays*, TEAMS Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995).

¹⁴ *The Heege Manuscript: A Facsimile of National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.3.1*, Leeds Texts and Monographs New Series 16 (Leeds: University of Leeds, 2000).

transition of the character. As highlighted by Amanda Hopkins, where a woman is deployed in these texts, the works "...frequently depict her as vulnerable in ways peculiar to her biological and sociopolitical identity."¹⁵ While this particularly graphic passage is not instrumental in framing Gowther as a devil-figure --he kills priests and refuses to attend any services in the preceding stanza-- the over-the-top sexualized violence of this act is important in situating him as a character who poses a sociopolitical question in the work. Thomas McAlindon's thesis, that in Middle English works the most villainous and diabolical character is most often imbued with the intelligence and wit of the author and serves to chastise the audience, describes *Sir Gowther* succinctly.¹⁶ The character must thus be as broadly outrageous in his villainy as possible to truly distinguish him as a locus of negative emotion for the audience. Thus, it is important that we recognize that the more foully the early Gowther is portrayed, the greater the power of the redemptive action of the story becomes in reinforcing the social meaning of the work. I will address this further in my discussion, but for now the inclusion of this mass-rape story serves as the reason why I will be focusing upon the Advocates MS.

Advocates 19.3.1 is also known by the name "The Heege Manuscript," so called because the manuscript, which contains thirteen quires, is written primarily in a single hand, signed in that same hand by a scribe who identifies himself as Richard Heege. The manuscript can be dated to circa 1478, as one of the visible watermarks on the manuscript

¹⁵ Amanda Hopkins, "Female Vulnerability as Catalyst in the Middle English Breton Lays," in *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance* Ed. Phillipa Hardman (Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 43.

¹⁶ T. McAlindon, "Comedy and Terror in Middle English Literature: The Diabolical Game," *The Modern Language Review* 60, no. 3 (July 1965): 323-332.

has been identified as Briquet 22, which is tied to this date.¹⁷ The manuscript consists of thirteen quires, comprising a total of 51 identifiable texts. The framework of the Heege manuscript lends support to McAlindon's proposition that Gowther must be seen as a character who encodes a lesson to the audience, as the work itself is set physically among a collection of didactic texts. The major works of the Heege MS include, a parodic sermon, *The Prose Life of Saint Katherine*, the knightly romances *Sir Isumbras* and *Sir Amadace*, a series of religious lyrics, *The Vision of Tundale*, a work called *The Complaint of God to Sinful Man*, and a series of didactic verses. *The Prose Life of Saint Katherine* is a hagiographic text detailing the life of the same saint as is found in Gonville and Caius MS175. Both manuscripts also contain the romance *Sir Isumbras*, showing a similar shaping of the contextual frame for this romance. Continuing to highlight the theme of subjugating oneself to the greater good, *The complaint of God to Sinful Man* highlights the flaws with which men live, detailing the many sins that man shows in not returning the love that is given to him. *The Vision of Tundale* tells the tale of a man who dies and is allowed to see up close the punishments of Hell and glimpse the joys of Heaven, learning how he must reform himself to secure a place among the blessed and avoid damnation. *Sir Amadace* completes the setting of the framework here. This tale features a knight who cannot control his spending and is unable to pay his debts, though his oaths bind him to honorably deal with his creditors. Again, the romance is designed to offer a lesson on acting within the bounds of legality, honoring one's contracts and living within the bounds of legally acceptable behavior. Thus,

¹⁷ Phillipa Hardman, "Introduction," in *The Heege Manuscript*, 1.

Sir Gowther fits into a thoroughly didactic schema that can be inferred from its placement in this manuscript.

The Temporal Framework

The manuscripts under analysis here create a timeline of only seventy-eight years—from the reign of Henry IV (r. 1399-1413) through that of Edward IV (r. 1461-1483). What creates the larger temporal framework of this analysis however, is not the physical manifestations of the manuscripts themselves, but the social issues being played out within their pages and the trajectory of knighthood as a social institution in the society in which the manuscripts were compiled. The previous chapter highlighted the issues in English society that led to the birth of the gentry as a mercantile force, and the subsequent changes that their emergence precipitated in the knightly class. These shifts in English economic and social structures began around 1160, setting the front end of our temporal window not in 1400, when the first of the four manuscripts is thought to have been compiled, but at this earlier date in the mid-twelfth century, when the issues that would be commented on by the later Middle English romance began to occur. The closing of our temporal frame then will be 1478, when the latest of the manuscripts is thought to have been compiled, since it would not be possible to argue that the compilers or their patrons would seek to comment on later issues that they could not have foreseen. Using, then, a temporal framework of 1160 to 1478, this work will seek to utilize the social and cultural milieu of this 300 year span as the locus of historical events from which to draw analogues in order to connect the evolution of the English knightly class with the depictions of knights in the four texts chosen.

Each of these manuscripts create a specific context for the romances to be discussed here, because of the juxtaposition of them to the other pieces in their respective manuscripts. The analysis of each romance that follows is built upon the premise that when read within the manuscript context that frames it, each tale teaches a lesson concerning an important issue of English knighthood relating to the transformation of that archetype in the real world from martial to administrative.

CHAPTER 3

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

This chapter addresses a fundamental aspect of English knighthood: knights' use of contracts and oaths as a changing phenomenon as the administrative structure of knighthood shifted. It focuses on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in order to investigate the nature of oath making and contracts and how audiences in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century were to understand them. This romance demonstrates that one's oath was binding in English knighthood, and yet flawed. Sir Gawain fails at keeping his oath and meeting the required bonds of multiple contracts. In order to set this romance in its historical context I begin with a legal and social consideration of oath making as a form of contract and use this historical information as a means to think through the social and historical statements being made in the romance itself.

Judith Bennett and C. Warren Hollister argue that "Roman law was backed by the power of the Roman state, [and was] administered by the work of judges and lawyers, and applicable to all."¹ This is given as a roundabout definition in relation to the law of the so-called "barbarian" tribes outside of Rome, which functioned by social custom and tradition and was enforced by general agreement of tribal members and lords. Legal decisions for many barbarians were decided by oaths sworn by witnesses of standing in the community or by combat, the idea being that "right makes might" and the winner of a judicial combat was obviously in the right to begin with as God sided with that individual in battle. While

¹ Judith M. Bennett and C. Warren Hollister. *Medieval Europe: A Short History*, 10th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), 37.

judicial combat had fallen out of favor by 1100, oaths retained significant legal weight. A document surviving from the rule of Baldwin I of Jerusalem (r. 1100-1118), states, with respect to legal collection of debts:

If it happens that a Frank makes a claim against a Syrian in court to have what the Syrian owes him, and the Syrian denies owing it, and the Frank has no guarantor for it, the law decrees that the Syrian must swear on the holy cross that he owes him nothing; and by way of this ceremony the Syrian must be acquitted by the court.²

Clearly, great importance was placed on the concept of oath taking as a binding legal element in the twelfth century, having the force of creating and/or nullifying contracts. The importance of the oath as a construct is considered here using *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, although the concept also occurs in the other texts under study here.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (SGGK) frames a way to understand how knightly codes of conduct highlight the importance of oath and contract even before the idea that a code of law could make such binding. Sir Gawain is a knight who fails to adhere to the contractual obligation of oath taking as he prefers his own survival --a sensible move during the martial era of knighthood-- over the responsibilities of his contract-- a more important standard in the post-martial paradigm that knighthood was moving into as knights become more administrative in their duties.

SGGK differentiates itself from other exemplars immediately. Unlike many other romances, whose introductory stanzas position the text through requests for the blessing of God, or by means of the calendar of court and Arthurian geography,³ *Sir Gawain* opens and

² S. J. Allen and Emilie Amt, ed, *The Crusades: A Reader*, Readings in Medieval Civilizations and Cultures: VIII, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 93-94.

³ See the tales of Chrétien de Troyes, the works of Thomas Malory, assorted tales of Gawain, or the *lais* of Marie de France. What we see in the most studied romances are variations on two specific openings: (1) a call

closes with the story of the Trojan War, connecting itself to historical analogues that established nationalist sentiment in previous civilizations.⁴ When considered alongside the religious poems that make up the rest of the manuscript in which it is contained, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which is focused on a knight's quest, is a sharp departure for a reader. That the work is designed as a romance is interesting in this context, because popular literature to forward politico-social ideals, as examined in previous chapters, gives us an interesting vantage point from which to analyze the meaning and purpose of the work. J. M. Leighton argues that opening with a reference to the siege of Troy serves multiple purposes. The reference serves to provide a clear context for the action and the values displayed in the poem, where the hero, like so many of the heroes associated with tales of the Trojan war.⁵

In *The Iliad* Achilles loses his life in exchange for the immortality of fame.⁶ The implication of this framing of the work is that Gawain will gain immortality, but that he will lose something vital to him in the process. Leighton uses Gawain as a singular, exemplary character, much like Jonah or Abraham in the biblically focused stories that precede *SGGK* in the Pearl manuscript. This is where Leighton makes his mistake. Gawain functions on a higher plane for the knightly reader, as his character represents both the ultimate knight of

to God to give strength to the story, mimicking the calling of the muses in ancient mythology and (2) a setting of the scene within the halls of Arthur or his father, denoting the season the castle hosting the revels, and the nature of the players.

⁴ *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Aeneid* are all myths of empire building, creating national pride and common mythological origin for their respective civilizations. All are connected to the Trojan War in the same way as *Sir Gawain*.

⁵ J.M. Leighton, "Christian and Pagan Symbolism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 43 (December 1974), 50.

⁶ Homer, *The Iliad*, Trans. Robert Fitzgerald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

courtesy, the perfect temporal knight, but never the perfect knight of Christ.⁷ The true complexity of the character of Gawain would have been easily understood by an audience in the late fourteenth century, though Richard Moll argues that modern readers have lost the true understanding of him. Moll points out that most studies focus strongly on the game of courtesy played between Gawain, Lady Bertilak, and her husband, designed to test the reputation that Gawain has built as a knight of sexual dalliance. He alludes, however, to the fact that there is more to Gawain:

Modern critics recognize that “Gawain’s name raises expectations which are not always fulfilled” [in interaction with other characters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*], but by focusing on a single aspect of Gawain’s reputation, his courtesy, these studies deny the multivalent nature of the hero which the poem clearly recognizes.⁸

What Moll alludes to is the “historical” heroic presence of Gawain, which predates all of his romance exploits, in the twelfth-century chronicle *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth. Geoffrey’s Gawain is a character driven not by lustful passion for women, as the character is portrayed in many of the more popular romances such as *Dame Ragnell*, but a character driven by bravado, personal reputation, and nationalist pride. In fact, in his role in the *Historia* Gawain is a consummate warrior, holding the pride of the British people. In one of his earliest eponymous works, *The Rise of Gawain, Nephew of Arthur*, which dates to the late twelfth century, Gawain does what no other knight can do, beheading a king whose army has put the Knights of the Round Table to flight. When he brings the head to Arthur he

⁷ This view of Gawain is built over generations of works but is highlighted nowhere more faithfully than in chapter five of Malory’s *Tale of the Sankgreal* wherein Gawain is specifically told that he has served king and country but never truly has he served God. His sin is in counterpoint to the purity of Galahad and Perceval and he is forbidden the Grail Quest and turns himself homeward. See Thomas Malory, *Complete Works*, 2nd ed. Ed. Eugene Vinaver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 559-63.

⁸ Richard J. Moll, “Frustrated Readers and Conventional Decapitation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *The Modern Language Review* 97, no. 4 (October 2002), 802.

questions the king, asking where the courage of the kingdom can be found.⁹ The question is rhetorical, as he is designing a boast meant to point out that the true strength of the British people was harnessed only within himself, with his feat as an example of what he is that the other knights are not.

These early incarnations of Gawain contradict his role as lover, showing him as a fierce warrior, protector of British pride, and greatest of the knights of Britain. He again takes up that role at the close of the Arthurian cycle, serving as Arthur's champion during the fall of Camelot, as he faces Lancelot for the king's honor. These multiple valences converge at a later date to create in Gawain the embodiment of *English* might. As such, his rash action in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not unexpected. His beheading of the Green Knight in defending Arthur and his court against the jibes and japes directed at them by the Green Knight recalls his role in the *Historia*, where he beheads Gaius Quintillanus for a similar set of insults against the British, showing a pattern of behavior that shifts his character for the remainder of the work into the track of Gawain-warrior and not the expected Gawain-lover that modern critics expect.¹⁰

Serving in this multifaceted role, the didacticism of this text is different from that in other Gawain stories. He serves here as an analogue for the pride of his entire nation, of English knighthood in its grand sense, and therefore of all who would aspire to the rank of knight in the English culture. This interpretation of the character sets the stage for us to

⁹ Mildred Leake Day, ed. and trans. *The Rise of Gawain, Nephew of Arthur (De ortu Waluuanii nepotis Arturi)* (London: Garland, 1984), 115-21.

¹⁰ Geoffrey of Monmouth. *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 241.

examine *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a text that focuses on what it means to be an English knight.

The Plot is Seeded

The basics of the tale are simple. During the Christmas feast, Arthur's court is interrupted and challenged by the Green Knight. A man of gargantuan stature, he insults the courage of the court at large and challenges the king to a "game." The game involves a trading of blows. He will allow Arthur to strike at his neck with an axe, provided that Arthur allow him to have a return strike in one year's time. Before Arthur can accept the deal, Gawain rises and asks if he can serve as his champion. When Arthur accepts him as a proxy, Gawain cleanly removes the head of the knight with a single blow. However, the body does not fall. The Green Knight's body strides over to where his head has rolled, picks it up and holds it aloft, and the mouth then declares that he will take his turn in one year's time at a place called the green chapel. The body then mounts its horse and rides out of the hall, bearing its head in hand.

Gawain waits out his year, until All Saint's Day arrives, at which time he arms himself and leaves in search of the green chapel, knowing that he must find the place and be present at the appointed hour to live up to his oath. He travels far and wide, unable to find anyone who has even heard of the place he seeks. He is utterly lost and despairing, when a prayer to his patron saint, Mary, mother of Christ, grants him the blessing of finding a fair castle. Upon entry into the castle, the lord of the surrounding lands, Sir Bertilak, tells him that the green chapel is quite near, so close in fact that Gawain can get there in but a few hours ride. He then invites Gawain to rest with them during their holiday revels and offers to

provide the knight with a guide to take him to the chapel on the required day. Gawain accepts, and Bertilak treats him as a welcome guest in his hall. Upon finding out that his new guest is the famous Sir Gawain, Sir Bertilak offers Gawain a game of trades to liven up the holidays. He says that he will go abroad to hunt each day for the next three days, and that he will trade Gawain whatever he manages to catch during his outings if Gawain will give to him whatever he catches while he enjoys the hospitality of the castle. Gawain accepts the terms, thinking it poor to turn down his host, though he sees no way that he will come by anything worthy of trade while lounging about the premises.

Each day Bertilak goes on a marvelous hunt, bringing back magnificent game to trade. Gawain, meanwhile, is pursued each day as a hunted thing by none other than the wife of his host, Lady Bertilak. Knowing Gawain's fame as a lover, she determines that she will have him for her paramour, each day trying new tactics to get him to agree to bed her. Gawain, for his part, brushes off her advances politely the first two days, escaping with only giving her a kiss each time. He then "trades" those kisses to Bertilak each evening, who is astounded each time at what Gawain has "caught" each day. On the third day, Lady Bertilak finally gives up her attempts to bed the knight, asking that he at least take a favor from her in the manner of courtly lovers, so that he might have something to remember her by when he is gone. He refuses to take anything from her, knowing that his oath would simply have him turn it over to her husband that evening. Finally, she offers him her "girdle": a garter which, when worn, has an enchantment upon it that prevents the death of the wearer, and will allow him to walk away from bodily injury. Gawain is immediately entranced at the idea, since he

has determined that he is but a day away from death, believing that he has no chance of surviving the blow of the Green Knight's axe.

Thinking to save his own life, Gawain accepts the garter, and breaks his word to Bertilak by keeping it, when he should have given it to him. In breaking his oath Gawain, who should be the greatest of the knights based on his standing as a nationally unifying character, acts in a way that is lesser than all other knights.

The following morning Gawain rides to the green chapel to meet his fate, meeting the Green Knight as appointed. The Green Knight has Gawain kneel, giving him two feints with the axe, the first causing Gawain to flinch. The Knight questions Gawain's courage each time, reminding him that when he took his turn there was no flinching to be seen by the court. On the third swing he nicks Gawain's neck, causing him to bleed. Gawain is furious, and leaps away, drawing his sword. The Green Knight then reveals himself to be none other than Sir Bertilak, and tells Gawain that he never truly intended to harm him, but that the scar that he will carry upon his neck will forever be a reminder of Gawain having broken his oath, a physical reminder of shame before the court to which he will return. Gawain faithfully kept his vow in passing along the kisses from Bertilak's wife, but in keeping the "magical" garter, he failed to honor his word and thus betrayed his host and shamed himself. He then tells him that the entire game had been set in motion through the magic of Morgan Le Fey, who sought to embarrass Arthur and his court through a test of their courage and honor. Gawain bitterly bemoans his fear and confesses his failings, riding back to Camelot in shame, to report how he failed in his test of honor out of fear for his life. To Gawain's surprise, the court rejoices

at his story, and instead of shaming him they throw him a feast and ordain that every knight of the order also wear a baldric of green in brotherhood with Gawain.

Why Gawain?

And quy þe pentangle apendez to þat prynce noble
I am in tent yow to telle, þof tary hyt me schulde.
Hit is a syngne þat Salamon set sumquyle
In bytoknyng of trawþe, bi tytly þat hit habbez;
For hit is a figure þat haldez fyue poyntez
And vche lyne vmbelappez and loukez in oþer
And ayquere hit is endelez (and Englych hit callen
Oueral, as I here, 'þe endeles knot')
Forþy hit acordez to þis knyzt and to his cler armez,
For ay faithful in fyue and sere fyue syþez,
Gawan watz for gode knawen and, as golde pured,
Voyded of vche vylany, wyth vertuez enourned
In mote. (ll 623-35)

And why the pentangle was suited to that noble prince
I am intent to tell you, though it should causes me to tarry
It is a sign that Solomon set up some while ago
Signifying the truth, by the way it is known;
For it is a figure that has five points,
And each line overlaps and lockes with the other
And everywhere it is endless (and the English call it
Overall, as I do here, 'the endless knot')
For this reason, it pertains to this knight and to his clear coat of arms,
For he is always faithful in the five ways and in each of them in five ways,
Gawain was known as good and, as gold is purified,
So was he devoid of every villainy, and was inured with virtues
Among men. (ll 623-35)

So begins the description of Gawain's character as reflected by his armorial symbols as he sets out on his quest to discover the green chapel and keep his oath to the Green Knight. The work at this point presents Gawain as faultless in physical form, mentality, spirituality, and noble purpose. Scholarship on this particular work is both wide and deep, encompassing queer theory, material culture, legal, and many other academic views. In seeking to carve out

a place among the scholarship available on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in this chapter I focus on a meaning of the work triangulated from (1) the place of Gawain within the structure of medieval romance as the multivalent face of English knighthood and nationalist pride, (2) the design of MS Cotton Nero A.x, and (3) the internal framing of Gawain in the text that encompasses lines 623-65.

We have already seen the role of the “historical Gawain” as a warrior of renown, and acknowledged his role as courtly lover in other tales. What is special about his character as constructed in this work is that we see Gawain depicted as a holy figure, something that is completely outside his character in the rest of the tradition, especially in the texts relating to the quest for the Holy Grail.¹¹ Gawain is a hothead, rash in his actions and his words before striking off the head of a Roman imperial family member in the *Historia*. He is brash, taunting the knights of Arthur’s court and questioning the courage and strength of English knighthood in *The Rise of Gawain* (twelfth century). He is vain and sexually promiscuous in *The Weddyng of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* (late thirteenth century).¹² He is a trickster and a man of great boasts in *The Carle of Carlisle* (which survives only in a mid-seventeenth century manuscript).¹³ He is unworthy of the blessings of the grail and a man bound to the world of the court and the temporal experience in *The Sankgreal* (1485).¹⁴ All of these depictions can be seen as connected, as all emphasize physical strength, skill with weapons,

¹¹ Thomas Malory, “The Tale of the Sankgreal Briefly Drawn out of the French,” in *Complete Works*, 558-63.

¹² Thomas Hahn, ed. “The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell,” *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, TEAMS Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 41-80.

¹³ Thomas Hahn, ed. “The Carle of Carlisle,” *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, TEAMS Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 373-91.

¹⁴ Thomas Malory, “The Tale of the Sankgreal,” in *Complete Works*: 558-63.

and knowledge of the games of courtly love. Yet in *SGGK*, Gawain's character is unlike any of these depictions: he is discussed in terms more befitting hagiography than romance, and placed at the head of the court by his actions in the opening scene of the work so that he might be used as an exemplar. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* we see him in the exact opposite light of other textual depictions. The poet presents Gawain as undoubtedly pure, and creates for him a symbolic place that would be envied by even the most renowned of saints.

In defining Gawain, the pentangle that adorns his armor symbolizes the man himself. Each of the points is tied to a specific virtue that he holds, as the poet lays his virtues thus:

Fyrst he watz funden fautlez in his fue wyttez,
And efte fayled neuer þe freke in his fyue fynGRES,
And alle his afyaunce vpon folde watz þe fyue woundez,
þat Cryst kazt on þe croys, as þe Crede tellez;
And queresoeuer þys mon in melly watz stad,
His þro þoʒt watz in þat, þurʒ alle oþer þyngez,
þat alle his forsneshe fong at þe fyue joyez
þat þe hende Heuen Quene had of hir Chylde.
(At þis cause þe knyʒt comlyche hade
In þe inore half of his schelde hir ymage depaynted,
þat quen he blusched þerto his belde neuer payred.)
þe fyft fyue þat þe frek vused
Watz fraunchyse and felaʒschyp forbe al þyng,
His clannes and his cortaysye croked were neuer,
And pité, þat passez alle poyntez — þyse pure fyue
Were harder happed on þat haþel þan on any oþer. (ll 640-55)

First, he was found faultless in his five wits,
And likewise the man never failed in his five fingers,
And all his trust was placed in the five wounds,
That Christ took on the cross, as the Creed tells;
And wherever this man was placed in a melee
His earnest intent was that in that (moment), through all other things,
That all his strength he held because of the five joys
That the clever Queen of Heaven had from her Child.
(For this reason, the comely knight had had delicately fashioned
Upon the inner half of his shield, her painted image,

That Queen, so that when he glanced thereat his courage was never impaired.)
The fifth five that I find that the man used
Was giving and fellowship with all things,
His cleanness and his courtesy were never false,
And pity that surpassed all bounds; these pure five
Were more heavily heaped on that man than on any other. (ll 640-55)

This version of Gawain is heralded as a model of wisdom, prowess, faithfulness, piety, and charity. This figure is well defined, arguing that the poet seeks to inscribe this version of Gawain very carefully for his audience. Considering previous representations of Gawain, what is done here is important, as the author takes a well-known and understood figure and ties his knightly prowess firmly and unmistakably to the teachings of the church in a detailed and intimate way. Nowhere in the work is this same care taken to craft Gawain's relationship to his earthly king and uncle, Arthur. The author uses in his description of Gawain the five wounds of Christ, the five joys of the Virgin Mary, the patronage of the Virgin, and fellowship with all of creation as designators of Gawain's persona. The character, thus construed is as close to religiously perfect as possible.

In this way we see the poet creating a subtle tie between the church and the nationalist sentiment of England. This molds a national hero in a new way, forming him into an ideal model different from other incarnations. Christine Chism helps to define the nationalist in medieval romance using *Athelston*, arguing that:

When *Athelston* and the Robin Hood ballads situate themselves concretely (if sometimes confusingly) in particular regions and the connections between them, they draw on and participate in the larger historiographical traditions that construct and contest the meaning of the English landscape. One influential tradition in particular illuminates the roadworks of these two romances: the *Brut* romances and their ultimate source in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*. The link between road building and national consolidation in Britain is mythologized early in

Geoffrey's *Historia*... Belinus's road system binds the fractious regions and individuated cities into a phantasmatic unity.¹⁵

What Chism denotes as a nationalist unification is the mythologizing of a character to create a common pride among a group sharing a central landscape but differing views. Just as Belinus is used to rewrite the history of Roman roadmaking, recasting it as the legacy of a local ruler, so is Gawain used to unify the shared ideals of English knighthood despite the internecine squabbles among the knightly class.¹⁶ Utilizing what the audience would already have known about the character, the poet chooses Gawain as his protagonist because he already serves as a didactic figure for young knights who would seek glory through either battle or the wooing of ladies at court. The poet, however, reinvents the character so as to elevate him even further through holy perfection. He creates a character who cannot be expected to ever fail, as he represents every tenet of the chivalric ideal perfectly. It is this figure who rides forth from Camelot to keep the honor of the court. This elevation of Gawain's character is purposeful within the design of the story and the manuscript, as it creates a particularly violent fall from grace when he eventually fails to live up to this ideal at the close of the work.

To be certain that the audience is aware of the need to shift their understanding of the character, the poet has Gawain even deny to Lady Bertilak that he is the Gawain of so many other tales. The wording of the passage is so exact, in fact, that it can be read that Gawain

¹⁵ Christine Chism, "The Romance of the Road in *Athelston* and Two Late Medieval Robin Hood Ballads," in *Roadworks: Medieval Britain, Medieval Roads*, Ed. Valerie Allen and Ruth Evans, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 220-248.

¹⁶ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 93.

both acknowledges and denies his extra-textual self and simultaneously acknowledges and denies the way that he is written in the work. During the first attempt of Lady Bertilak to seduce Gawain, she questions the stories that she has heard of him as a lover. Gawain states:

“In god fayth,” quoth Gawayn, “gayn hit me þynkkez
þaʒ I be not now he þat ʒe of speken
To reche to such reuerence as ʒe reherce here
I am wyʒe unworþy, I wot wel myseluen” (ll 1241-44)

“In all truth,” quoth Gawain, “rightly it is that I think
That I am not now he that you speak of
To obtain such reverence as you reference here
I am an unworthy man, I myself well know” (ll 1241-44)

The author speaks to multiple concerns in this passage and encapsulates both the intra-textual and the extra-textual Gawain, as well as breaking the fourth wall, speaking simultaneously to Lady Bertilak and to the audience. In the first two lines, Gawain warns the lady that he is not who she believes him to be from stories, a sentiment which, by acknowledging the redesigning of the character as a holy figure, the poet is also sharing with his audience. In the second two lines, Gawain appears to humble himself before the lady, arguing that he cannot reach the levels to which she has raised him in her esteem. Likewise, the poet foreshadows Gawain’s ultimate failure. In stating that he is not worthy of such reverence and praise and that he knows that he is unworthy Gawain looks at himself and admits that he has failings. In the context of the entire work, Gawain shows false modesty here, accentuating his role as the smooth-tongued courtly lover. He is the Gawain of whom everyone has heard, but it is courtlier to deny his accolades than it would be for him to enjoy the boast.

Gawain's Failure, or Why Praise a Loser?

Having built the character of Gawain so carefully, the poet is patient in tempting him and bringing about his ultimate downfall. The intricate game of gifts winds its way through the work, taking up 1397 lines, from the time that Gawain arrives at Hautdesert until he approaches the chapel. The poet rushes to his conclusion at a feverish pace in the final 340 lines, but in no way does he disappoint in his symbolic design. Gawain's meeting with the Green Knight is not the clash of arms and martial strength that is often expected in romance, but becomes a kind of elaborate destruction of the character on the metaphysical level. Again playing carefully with words, the poet takes Gawain to the "chapel" and in the end has him deliver a stirring "confession" of the sins that he has committed.

When Bertilak reveals himself as the Green Knight he tells Gawain that he has proven himself nearly without blemish, but that his fear for his life drove him to break his oath, showing his weakness and that he sadly fell just short of the man that he was touted to be. Being magnanimous, he excuses Gawain somewhat, however, saying:

"Bot þat watz for no wylyde werke, ne wowyng nauþer
Bot for 3e lufed your lyf---þe lasse I yow blame." (ll 2367-68)

"But that was for no wild workings, nor for wooing neither
But because you loved your life---- (and so) the less I may blame you."
(ll 2367-68)

Gawain, however, laments what he predicted himself in his first dalliance with Lady Bertilak. He has proven himself not the man that his reputation has made him. Again, he is neither the reckless, fearless, womanizing extra-textual Gawain, nor the intra-textual near saint of this work. Gawain's painful confession is short, encompassing only eleven lines, and yet it is a

powerful monologue that cuts to the heart of the design of the work. Gawain cries out, throwing the garter away from him:

“Lo! þer þe falssyng—foule mot hit falle
For care of þy knobbe, cowardyse me tazt
To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake
þat is larges and lewte, þat longez to knyztez
Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer
Of trecherye and vntrawþe—boþe bityde sorze
And care
I biknowe yow, knyzt, here style
Al fawty is my fare
Letez ne ouertake your wyll
And efte I schal be ware” (ll 2378-88)

“Lo, there be the false thing---may misfortune befall it
For fear of your stroke, cowardice took me
And brought me to accord with avarice, forsaking my nature
Which is largess and good faith, such as belongs to knights
Now I am faulty and false, I who have always feared
Treachery and lies---- for both betide sorrow
And care
I know you knight and honor you still
All guilty is my behavior
Let me overtake your will
And forever I shall beware (of my failings) (ll 2378-88)

Gawain’s monologue brings him to his lowest point, showing that he recognizes how he has failed not only himself, but all of knighthood. He recognizes that he has broken his covenant, and that he did so for personal gain, in this case the perceived gaining of longer life. He realizes too late, however, that the breaking of his oath only places his life further in the debt of the knight, as he now has to live forever with the broken oath attached to him. In this way Gawain creates a lesson that to fail in keeping an oath evokes a worse social punishment when weighed against the cost of living up to one’s word. He lives, but he must forever live in shame, when death in keeping his word would have been noble and placed

him among those who would be forever lauded for their bravery and honor. In light of his reputation as the ideal of English knighthood, his actions are an indictment of all knighthood in England. But what is Gawain's failure here? He has failed in being true to his word to Bertilak, breaking his oath to his host, a cardinal sin of chivalry. Maurice Keen argues that the oath of a knight "affected his honour, his fortune and his emotional entanglements."¹⁷ However, this is not the true focus of Gawain's failure. In the building of this complex structure, the poet actually creates a greater failing for Gawain, one that is not acknowledged in the text, but that has an underpinning in the redesigning of his character into a holy man: Gawain fails in his faith. However here the term faith has a double meaning. Gawain has failed to be true to his faith in the power of the Blessed Virgin Mary to see him through the ordeal, which breaks the careful detailed illusion of him as a near saint. More egregious, however, is that he has failed in this good faith in keeping an oath that bound him to a legal contract with Bertilak.

Gawain, described by the pentangle, as tied to the holiness of Mary, mother of Christ, and seen as spotless and flawless, in his moment of greatest fear focuses not on his pious love of the Virgin, but on a symbol of earthly magic that is promised to save him. In the first third of the work, when he is lost in the wilderness and in fear of dying, he calls upon Mary to guide him to a chapel where he might pray and hear the Christmas Mass in honor of her son. He is immediately blessed with a path that leads him to the castle of Bertilak, his patron saint answering his call and caring tenderly for him.¹⁸ Why then does Gawain, who has ample

¹⁷ Maurice Keen, *Nobles, Knights, and Men-At-Arms in the Middle Ages* (London: Hambledon Press, 1996), 45.

¹⁸ This episode encompasses lines 713-84.

evidence of the protection that he has been provided, and who, even in the press of heavy combat, is said to think on his commitment to Mary and his faith, place his faith in the magic of a garter and not in Mary or Jesus? This is the hidden question of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the answer to such lies within a conjecture regarding the purpose of the work.

The Shame of Administrative Knights

Sir Gawain works in the same way as *Athelston* to address the question of where the true loyalty of knighthood should lie, and to highlight the importance of being bound by legal responsibilities. Utilizing the extra-textual social symbolism with which Gawain would be associated, this work reminds all knights of both the spiritual fealty that each owes to the church, and the importance of honoring oaths and contracts. Gawain's complete devotion to Mary, along with numerous invocations of saints (in particular St. Peter, St. Giles, and St. Julian) and to Jesus highlight the oath of absolute devotion to the church required of knights. Much like the requirement of a king to maintain the goodwill of his barons, as will be highlighted by *Athelston*, Gawain must preserve his relationship with his saintly patrons if he is to maintain his position as the foremost knight of the faith. The blessings of strength, wisdom, protection, and spiritual beauty that Gawain gains from his spiritual patrons are washed away through the game of courtly love when he fails to trust in their protection. He commits two sins simultaneously in that moment. There is an act of heresy in trusting his life to the pagan magic represented by the garter, and act of "theft" and oath breaking when he fails to give the garter to Bertilak, shattering his contract with the lord of the castle. As the representative of the entirety of English knighthood in this work, his actions condemn all knights as fearful and unfaithful when the time of sacrifice is upon them, and he marks them

as false in the keeping of contracts, a major indictment of gentry knights, whose work as administrators makes them responsible for the handling of contracts and legal matters in ever increasing numbers from 1100 forward.

Fourteenth-century preachers were trained specifically to speak to the weaknesses shown in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. A preacher's handbook from the time of Richard II, entitled *Bundle of Morals* speaks of the way to address such weakness, saying:

If we patiently endure adversity from our enemies who inflict on us hard words and harder strokes, we will be like those who in time of war put up cushions or straw or anything soft of this kind against the battering rams, so that their walls and towers may not be broken down;... To a knight it is the greatest honor if his sword breaks in battle, his horse is felled and killed, and yet he himself has won and is not overcome...¹⁹

Even in the throes of defeat a knight must persevere and keep his faith. To truly be what he represents, what Ramon Lull believed was a martial priesthood who stood favored by God, a knight would have to be unswerving in his dependence on God and his saints.²⁰ Gawain's failure highlights that knights cannot rise to such a lofty pinnacle, because they are, in the end, human. The fear of death, which is rarely discussed in medieval romance, makes all men vulnerable, and Gawain, the perfect knight of romance, raised to epic heights of greatness in this work, fails when confronted with his own mortality, and in fact the denouement of the work highlights the acceptance of that frailty by the flower of knighthood. Gawain breaks faith with Bertilak, with the church, and with his own courage in attempting to save his life through the use of the garter. If Gawain, blessed by a cadre of saints, fails to be worthy of his

¹⁹ Emilie Amt, ed. "A Preacher's Handbook," *Medieval England 1000-1500: A Reader*, Readings in Medieval Civilizations and Cultures, VI (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2001), 360-61.

²⁰ Ramon Lull, *The Booke of the Ordre of Chyualry*, Trans. Alfred T.P. Byles and William Caxton (London: E.E.T.S., 1926).

knighthood, how can merchants, guildsmen, and the series of administrators who have found ways to become knights be worthy of the rank? This exemplar tears knighthood down, lamenting the lost honor of a brave and noble martial knighthood that historians like Andrew Ayton have proven never truly existed, but that strike an emotional appeal in audiences even today.²¹

At the close of the work, after Gawain has returned to Arthur's court and recounted his failure, instead of castigating Gawain and lowering his prestige, the Knights of the Round Table laud him for wearing the garter as a reminder of his sin, and they swear to each wear a similar token.

þe kyng comfortez þe knyzt, and alle þe court als,
Lazen loude þerat and luflyly acorden
þat lords and ledes þat longed to þe Table,
Vche burne of þe broþerhede, a bauderyk schulde haue,
A bende abelef hym aboute, of a bryzt grene,
And þat, for sake of þat segge, in swete to were. (ll 2513-18)

The king and all the court comforted that knight
Laughing loudly at that, and with love they agree---
The lords and the ladies who belong to the Round Table---
Each bold man of that Brotherhood should have a baldrick
A band of bright green worn slantwise around him
And that, for the sake of that man, to wear them in the same way (as he). (ll 2513-18)

The knights choose to wear a symbol to remind them of the same lessons that Gawain has sworn to remember from this adventure: to be humble, faithful to the church, and ever vigilant of the flaws of man undermining the glory of the chivalric ideal. The role of the

²¹ Andrew Ayton, *Knights and Warhorses: Military Service and the English Aristocracy under Edward III* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1994).

garter for Gawain becomes a point of focus on the vows of knighthood in a similar fashion that Gowther's sword is in *Sir Gowther* (discussed in more depth in chapter six).

This last is a blow that ties the lessons of Gawain back to the real world in which the knightly audience lived, an object lesson for all of English knighthood to remember. The most favored knights of the kingdom were admitted to the Order of the Garter, a ceremonial society founded in 1344 by Edward III and frequently given as an honorific during the reign of Richard II (r. 1377-1399). Symbolically connected to *Sir Gawain*, being admitted to this society during the height of the shift away from martial knighthood and toward administrative knighthood can be reinterpreted differently than it has been.

This symbolic order of knighthood had taken upon itself the trappings of the Arthurian court, with Edward even attempting to build a portion of Windsor Castle into an homage to it, complete with an emulation of the Round Table itself.²² The Order held in highest esteem its patron saint, St. George, a knight who (even as Gawain in romance) represented the highest ideals of English knighthood, even back to the time of Edward III's grandfather Edward I (r. 1272-1307), who displayed St. George's symbol on the surcoats of his troops.²³ While the rights and powers of the Order were far more ceremonial in nature than real, having such associations with the king and the real soldiers who made up the army at the time continued to feed the nostalgia for the martial knighthood of the past. They would have served as romance characters in their own right, holding a significant place in the minds

²² Howard Colvin, *The History of the King's Works II* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1976), 871; Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown*, 106.

²³ Frank L Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 557.

of the people. The symbol of office in this order of knighthood being the garter connects the admonishment of Gawain to the knights of that Order in a tangible way. This conjecture is supported by the penning of the motto of the order, *Hony Soyt Qui Mal Y Pence*, at the close of the manuscript as the conclusion to the romance. The Order of the Garter had a strong resurgence under Richard II, with attendance of more members at the yearly conclave, which was their single “required” meeting, being higher than at any time since the reign of Edward III and the founding of the order.²⁴ During a time of great social change for England, which raised what were once considered “lesser men” to the title of sir, the affiliation in the minds of the people with Arthurian glory would have been useful in accepting the new knights.

Whoever the Gawain poet was, it would appear through analysis of his opus that loyalty to the church and the lamenting of a martial knighthood that was dying out might have played a significant role in the design and execution of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The power of romance as a tool for commenting on the shift away from mighty warriors to bookkeepers and lawyers again surfaces, hiding within the pages of a romance a chronicle of the shifting social structure in England from 1100 to 1500.

The issues illuminated by *SGGK* bring us back to the idea expressed at the opening of this chapter, that oaths are binding contracts among members of the order of knighthood, ones that are so strong that breaking them can forever taint a man, no matter his prowess or stature. What makes the conclusion of this work so powerful is that it is not the other members of Gawain’s circle who condemn him, it is Gawain himself. The work seems to

²⁴ D’Arcy Jonathon Dacre Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown: The Monarchical Orders of Knighthood in Later Medieval Europe, 1325-1520* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000), 151.

indicate that if a knight is truly honorable that the breaking of oath contracts will lessen him in his own estimation, causing him to be haunted by the specter of his actions even when others deem him worthy. This self-flagellation, symbolized by Gawain's marking of himself by wearing the garter, is intended to be a fate worse than being outcast. Had Gawain been pushed out of court in shame there might be redemption in seeking a new master and a new court. As the tale stands, Gawain can never find redemption; forever marked as a traitor to his word he must live with his shame. Should knights have adopted this mode of thinking, even the most powerful would be circumspect in their behavior concerning oath contracts, as they would all be subject to a judge who could not be escaped, their own conscience.

CHAPTER 4

ATHELSTON

This chapter addresses a fundamental aspect of English knighthood: knights as jurists and the sociopolitical nature of the power that they held as a class as the administrative structure of knighthood shifted. This chapter focuses on *Athelston* to investigate the nature of judicial authority and how audiences in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century were to understand the power of the throne in balance with that of the legal system. This romance demonstrates that the power of English knighthood lay in the communal authority that could be wielded by the group within the bounds of established law. King Athelston must be circumscribed within bounds set by the due process required by the legal status given to the knightly ranks to curb an excess of royal prerogative. In order to set this romance in its historical context I begin with a consideration of the legal system as it evolved to curtail royal power and use this historical information as a means to think through the social and historical statements being made in the romance itself.

Bound by Laws

According to Julie Nelson Couch, “Middle English romances typically promote the proper fulfillment of roles within the boundaries of family, social class, kingdom, and church, and these institutions are represented as entities that intertwine to form ideal society.”¹ Thematically, *Athelston* the romance plays with each of these concepts, hitting

¹ Julie Nelson Couch, “The Vulnerable Hero: *Havelok* and the Revision of Romance,” *The Chaucer Review* 42, no. 3 (2008), 332.

upon courtly intrigue, as powerful nobles seek to displace one another; sibling rivalry, as a “sworn brother” becomes jealous of the power and favor that one of his fellows has garnered; and a clash of secular and ecclesiastic authority as the king struggles with the Archbishop of Canterbury over public power. While each of these plays a role in my analysis, where Couch’s statement is useful is the triangulation of social class, kingdom, and church. *Athelston* comments on the nature of kingship as being circumscribed by the knightly class through the emerging legal tradition of England and how that power can be utilized. The romance is a tightly woven tapestry of political agendas, propagandistic statements, and symbols that belie the straightforward nature of the piece and speak to a meaning directly undermining the “absolute power” of the crown in favor of a “due process” that is thoroughly administrative in nature.

Setting a frame within which to analyze what the tale says about the evolving state of knighthood requires a look at the emerging position of the knightly class in the legal system leading up to the penning of this work. What evolved from 1100 to 1300 was an ideal of law that strengthened the individual rights of the common man and decentralized power from the royal and ducal court directly into more local court structures which were at large in the shires, counties and duchies of Europe. Susan Reynolds, in her work *Fiefs and Vassals* states that “The first more or less professional lawyers had appeared in Northern Italy by the beginning of the twelfth century as products of the schools of Lombard and Roman law.”² In this statement we get a definitive position on the beginnings of a solid legal tradition in

² Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 66.

European society. Reynolds, however, is limiting the scope of law primarily to land law and the issues surrounding fiefdoms and vassalage. While these limits do not allow for the truest sense of the sweep of change in the legal tradition, Reynolds puts us on the trail of two hopelessly interwoven issues; (1) the growth of universities and intellectualism, and (2) the reality that the earliest innovations in legal tradition were based in the governing of land transactions and the accompanying issues of vassalage.

The initial issues that began reform of the legal tradition stemmed from the need to centralize authority around the king. The simple issue of royal authority was not a problem in much of Europe, as Reynolds argues that by 1100 kings had enjoyed the power of both ecclesiarch and secular ruler for at least 100 years in most of Europe. This authority was based in the canon law of the time. Canon law argued that the king was in fact a member of the church as the chosen leader whom God had selected for the people, *rex et sacerdos* (king and priest). Thus, using canon law as a basis, the rulers of Germany had long argued that they were priests who ruled in God's name as a way to bring the ducal courts to heel. This precedent was bolstered by the papal affirmation of the rule of Otto I by Pope John XII who crowned him Holy Roman Emperor in 962, "a tradition [which continued] until the sixteenth century."³ This intertwining of the church and the royal houses of Europe allowed kings to trade on the esoteric power of the church, arguing that their power was divine and that their actions were sanctioned by God. What forced the changes that came after 1100, eventually leading to the kinds of interactions at work in *Athelston*, was a realization by these monarchs

³ Stephen Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 140.

that the two prongs of royal government that had sustained the monarchies of Europe, the need for the approval of the pope and the support of the aristocracy, actually weakened their pure authority. Changes in the papacy's position on secular kings as authorities within the church began to shift, as highlighted by the European "Investiture Controversy." The German imperial house argued with the papacy concerning its power to appoint high ranking clergy, recognizing that one of the great strengths of the crown lay in manipulating the power of the church by placing hand-selected men into bishoprics and abbeys, despite their lack of any real religious qualification. The resultant church was run by secular princes in priest's robes. The political war caused by the controversy led to Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV's excommunication in the eleventh century and subsequent settlement between Pope Calixtus II and Emperor Henry V (r. 1106-1125) in 1122, after signing the Concordat of Worms.⁴ The church's strength in this moment became an object lesson to monarchs that they could no longer rely on ecclesiastical support for the throne without compromise. This was a serious blow to monarchs who had always relied, to a certain extent, on unfettered access to the lands, finances, and ecclesiastical voice of the church as a bulwark of their power. The shift in papal position signaled a change in status for European kings, and made the Pope more of a force to contend with in secular matters than ever before. The "princes of the church" saw themselves as beyond the princes of the land, and believed that their status as the spokesmen of Christ validated this. This is not to say that the kings did not still have great authority when it came to churchmen. Many of the bishops and abbots were still relatives of the crown, or were at least at one time appointees of the king. This more global issue reflected back on

⁴ Ibid, 143.

the kingdom of England by making for an unsteady sense of alliance between church and crown. Geoffrey Koziol writes that, “To the church leadership of England and France, the emperor was no pressing enemy, and the pope no immediate ally.”⁵ For these men, the more immediate danger was to their lands and income, not a theoretical argument over claims to power. It was thus in their interest to ally with the king, at least momentarily.

Almost simultaneous with this problem, Henry I of England (r. 1100-1135) realized that, while his barons were worthy allies, powerful nobles who also held powerful royal offices tended to favor the strengthening of their own class rather than the crown. This realization forced Henry to consider how to consolidate royal power and create an administrative system more to his advantage. To this end, Henry began to choose men of lower social status to hold the major positions of authority, beginning with his chief justiciar, Ralph Bassett. There had already been precedent for this to work as a way of consolidating power, as Conrad II (r. 1027-1039) had done much the same thing in Germany by placing crown lands and offices in the hands of non-free *ministeriales*. Marc Bloch writes that the use of such men was so fruitful that the practice could be traced back to Charlemagne himself.⁶ Henry used these men extensively, even filling his army with “landless nobles who looked for their keep while hoping to achieve something better.”⁷ He then expanded the king’s authority as judge in all major cases. It is this same direct judicial power that is at question in

⁵ Geoffrey Koziol, “England, France, and the Problem of Sacrality in Twelfth-Century Ritual,” in *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status, and Process in Twelfth Century Europe*, Ed. Thomas Bisson, (Philadelphia: William Penn University Press, 1995), 127.

⁶ Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*. Trans. L. A. Manyon (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961), 337-9.

⁷ David Whitton, “The Society of Northern Europe in the High Middle Ages 900-1200,” in *The Oxford History of Medieval Europe*. Ed. George Holmes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 115.

Athelston. Henry recognized that it would be impossible for him to individually judge all of the cases in the land, and thus he revolutionized the legal system with the advent of what is functionally a “circuit court” design. Deputizing men as his justices, Henry removed the civil authority of the individual baronial courts, taking power away from the vassals who held land and making his justices the carriers of the King’s Law, a stable set of statutes that enforced his will and his view of how justice should be meted out and fines should be levied. This idea of standardizing law actually reached a new height after Henry’s death in 1135, when church scholars of canon law began to seek standardization as well. A perfect example of this is the work of Gratian in 1140, who attempted “...to reconcile contradictory precedents by identifying the underlying principles and then extending them to analogous cases...[indicating] in the clearest possible way that precedent did not make law though it might help to justify it.”⁸ This new way of looking at canon law then fed back into the secular courts.

Henry I’s changes in jurisprudence would bear fruit twenty years after his death, during the reign of his namesake, Henry II (r. 1155-1189). After the turmoil of the reign of King Stephen (r. 1135-1155), whose rule was constantly challenged by Henry I’s daughter and named heir, Matilda, her son, Henry of Anjou, acceded to the throne with Stephen’s death. Henry II came to power in a land where the royal power had been eroded by constant strife in the royal house and baronial usurpations of power gained by pitting Matilda against her cousin Stephen. Looking to the example of his grandfather, he sought to strengthen the royal power again through the court system. Noticing that many crimes would go unheard

⁸ Ibid, 135.

under the current system for bringing a case before the king's justices, making it possible for many crimes to escape his notice and authority, in 1166 Henry II issued the "Assize of Clarendon," which ordered that twelve men out of every hundred should be chosen to speak to the crimes committed in their village (*vill*) and name those that they believed to be guilty so that they might be tried before the king's justice. This was functionally the advent of the "grand jury" concept.⁹ In a second move, Henry changed the laws that existed for land law and property disputes by the creation of possessory assizes, which would draft juries of twenty-four knights to investigate matters of ownership, theft, improper assumption of goods, and other issues such as legal inheritance. This took the legal process to a new level, granting "due process" in both civil and capital matters where before these decisions were made by force of arms. Thus, by the turn of the thirteenth century, the knightly warfare that was bound up in legal challenges decided by the sword had been removed from the public eye, replaced by knights who began to argue precedent, contract, and record keeping.

What makes the great difference in the change in governance and law that follows Henry I's use of "lesser" men is the change in the ability of such men, as bolstered by the rise of the university.¹⁰ Bennett and Hollister point out that throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries government documents and records began to proliferate. This change in the rate and thoroughness of documentation changed the standard of legal arguments away from personal

⁹ William Stubbs, ed. *Select Charters and Other Illustrations of English Constitutional History from the Earliest Times to the Reign of Edward the First*, Littleton: Fred B. Rothman and Company, 1985: 143.

¹⁰ Reynolds alludes to this point stating that the professionalism of the legal officers because of their schooling and the fact that this is their sole occupation creates a fundamental difference in the way in which law is practiced and lawyers are trained. Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*, 67-70.

loyalties to proof in the form of hard documentation. Further, they hold that with this change, physical force became less utilized in disputes as “parchment” began to hold to sway, stating finally that, “...law, which had long been based on local and long-remembered custom, came to rely on more coherent, written systems of secular and ecclesiastical jurisprudence.”¹¹

The question at hand is how this shift in the status of knighthood was handled. No longer was a challenge at arms an appropriate way in which to handle a legal dispute, and was it possible for juries of knights to find against the crown? These issues are front and center in *Athelston*, which parallels this change in the approach to royal legal authority.

At its core, *Athelston* serves to undermine the crown, describing a king who must be constrained and guided by the church and the baronage, and a mercantile class that is shrewd and discerning considering the inability of the nobles to function in their political games without their power. While on its face the work is a simple, short romance built with a sense of parable mixed with hagiography, it is in fact a deeply complex piece that speaks to the history of the English legal tradition and the place of the knightly class in that tradition.

The story describes how four messengers meet at a crossroads in England as they each pursue their current duties. The four men, Athelston, Wymound, Alryke, and Egelond, become fast friends, each swearing an oath of brotherhood to the rest. As fate would have it, soon after the men part company the king dies and one of the messengers, Athelston, who happens to be the king’s cousin, inherits the throne as the closest living male relative. As king Athelston summons his sworn brothers and gifts each of them with a title. Wymound,

¹¹ Judith M. Bennett and C. Warren Hollister, eds. *Medieval Europe: A Short History*, 10th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), 246.

the eldest of the four men, is given the title of Earl of Dover. Egelond, the second brother, is given the Earldom of Stone, and because Athelston loves him so strongly he follows the title with the added gift of marrying Egelond to his own sister, Edith. This detail gives the work historical grounding, because the audience would know that the historical Athelston had a sister Edith, whom, according to the *Chronica Majora* of Matthew Paris, he married to his ally, Otto I of the Holy Roman Empire.

Anno Domini DCCCCXXXVIII. Otho Romanum adeptus imperium imperavit annis triginta sex; qui continuo as imperium promotes, Elgivam, Ethelstani regis sororem, in conjugium suscepit.¹²

Year of our Lord 938. Otto of Rome, who has ruled for thrity-six years; continues to be preferred as the government advances and he receives, Edith, the sister of king Athelston, in marriage.

The fourth brother, Alryke, is considered the most studious of the group, and because of his great knowledge of “Goddys werk” (In 50) he is not given a secular title, but is instead appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, as the post is vacant. Athelston obtains the throne through a blood connection that would have been easily understood during the period, but was important to set the scene of the romance. The historical Athelston was also not in direct line to the throne, having been the son of King Edward the Elder and a concubine.¹³ Thus, the author creates his king as an analogue to a warrior who ruled East Anglia in 925, setting the temporal bounds of the story and creating a cultural template set before the changes to the legal system and the status of knights had occurred. The author has reconstructed a time of absolute royal authority supported by the church, a milieu designed to facilitate the conflict

¹² Matthew Paris, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores; or Chronicles of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages*. No. 1 (London: Great Britain Public Record Office, 1857), 451.

¹³ Campbell, John, and Wormald, “The Anglo-Saxons,” 164.

of the tale. As stated earlier, the Gonville and Caius MS is framed as both religious and politico-didactic. This setting plays into both the use of Athelston, who was considered a particularly pious king based on the gifts attributed to him through the church, and in the ultimate use of his knights, who are used only as a political group in the story and are therefore “faceless” and easy to associate with the trope of the knight. The knight of chivalric romance was a construct of absolutes: absolute loyalty to his king, absolute piety in his blessings by the church, and absolute strength of arms against any odds. The tradition categorized him as an unstoppable force when he was justified by the royal court in his actions, completing such tasks as defeating multiple armed men simultaneously whose skill as individuals was lauded as being equal to his own.¹⁴ With a figure designed to be an absolute in this way, we find the reversing of any of those absolutes jarring. The use of the knights in Athelston to break with the power of the throne then is designed as a literary moment of friction, reversing the expected actions of a stock figure completely.

In the story’s opening we find a man of noble lineage serving as a messenger. Such a role would be inherently dangerous, owing to the rigors of solitary travel and self-protection. Yet this was not an uncommon thing to occur in the medieval mind, since “the office of messenger was one of the few occupations that could properly be performed by aristocrat and common man alike.”¹⁵ But why, given the context of this particular story, would the author choose such a role for the character? The reason for this choice does not become readily

¹⁴ An example of this plays out in Thomas Malory, “Sir Gareth’s Tale of Orkeney That Was Callyd Bewmaynes By Sir Kay,” in *Complete Works*, 177-226.

¹⁵ A. Inskip Dickerson, “The Subplot of the Messenger in *Athelston*,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1976), 117.

discernable until we are well into the work, when we meet the second character bearing the name Athelston, a foundling who serves as the chief messenger of the king and queen once the main plot gets underway. Having the king share both a name and an occupation with this character lends particular significance to the messenger, who in many places becomes the main force of the tale's action. The original author of *Athelston* has created a kind of surrogate for the king, further pointing to the importance of the messenger by giving this second Athelston his own separate subplot and speaking roles in conversations with every major character in the work, making him the only character to have such an ever-present role. This idea that the messenger becomes the major focus of the work is still further enhanced by the fact that he occupies 216 of the 812 lines of the poem, more than one quarter of the work. What the author establishes is a subtle dichotomy between king and messenger, in which the main plot of the romance, when juxtaposed with the messenger's separate subplot, creates a comparison between King Athelston and his namesake wherein the king suffers when considered alongside the foundling. It is, however, my contention here that this dismantling of the king was intended.

Because of the great love that Athelston bears for his sister Edith and for Egelond, he invites them to be a part of his inner circle and to provide counsel. Wymound is soon driven to jealousy, feeling that he is being slighted because he is not considered in close proximity to the king. If we look at the practices of later kings as possibly having roots in the practices of their predecessors, we can see reason for this jealousy, as being close to the king had benefits even for the lowliest of persons. Gwilym Dodd points out that lower members of the king's household had access to act as intercessors for others during the reign of Henry IV,

with patent rolls showing esquires and knights acting as intercessors in gaining favors and benefices for others that would have resulted in income and favors in return.¹⁶ Bitter at his perceived slight, Wymound resolves to destroy the camaraderie between the two men, not with arms, but with words, saying:

“Here love thus endure may noughte;
Thorwgh wurd oure werk may sprynge.” (ll 86-87)

“Thus love may not endure here;
Through words our work may move forward,” (ll 86-87)

Here we see another divergence from the standard romance. Rather than simply challenge Egelond to a duel, as the chivalric code popular in romance would call for, Wymound sets out to use the law to exact his vengeance, a legal accusation of treason as his weapon of choice. Thus Wymound swears on the five wounds of Christ, that Egelond wishes to seize the throne and that he has convinced Edith to join him in a plot to poison the king. Athelston is brokenhearted at the seeming betrayal, and arrests Egelond and his entire family, intending to put them all to death immediately. He sends letters to Stone, declaring a banquet at which he will knight his two nephews. Ironically, the messenger chosen to bear this missive is also named Athelston. Edith, despite being very late in a pregnancy with their third child, obeys her brother's summons along with the rest of her family, going to London to witness this great honor for her sons despite the objections of her husband. Upon their arrival the entire family is immediately clapped in irons, without trial or evidence. Athelston has acted in a

¹⁶ Gwilym Dodd, “Patronage, Pettitions and Grace: The “Chamberlains’ Bills” of Henry IV’s Reign,” in *The Reign of Henry IV: Rebellion and Survival, 1403-1413*. Ed Gwilym Dodd and Douglas Biggs (York: York Medieval Press, 2008), 105-135.

manner fitting the legal structure of his time. He has personally judged the truth of Wymound's oath, and his summary judgment of execution is sound, based on the law as *rex et sacerdos*.

Helen Young sees the work as fundamentally dealing with this conflict. She writes:

Two systems of law operate in *Athelston*, one espoused by the king and the other by his opponents. The differences between these systems reside in historical differences between medieval English and French law, specifically the right to trial by jury and the separation of the monarch from the legal system. King Athelston acts as if he is above the law of England while his opponents, the queen, archbishop, and barony, fight to uphold it.¹⁷

Young's analysis fits with my own reading of the work, but where she sees conversation between the codes of law of England and France, if the analysis is re-approached in the frame of England as designed for this study, I see a conversation about the shift in the legal system of England as the issue becomes one not of strength of arms but of winning in the legal realm, as the example of Andrew Blunt highlighted in chapter one illustrates. Wymound attempts to gain power not through arms, but through legal wrangling. Where he fails miserably is in assuming that the legal realm begins and ends with the power of the king, an assumption that would have placed him in a superior position during an earlier era, but not one that held sway after the common law had gained power. Athelston's exercise of the crown's absolute legal authority is an anachronism by the 1400s and it has immediate repercussions.

¹⁷ Helen Young, "Athelston and English Law: Plantagenet Practice and Anglo-Saxon Precedent," *Parergon* 22, no 1 (January 2005), 96.

Athelston's queen pleads with him for mercy, begging that he relent as a gift to her and their unborn child. Athelston swears that he will see them dead by the following day, saying:

“For, by Huym that weres the corowne of thorn,
They schole be drawen and hangyd tomorn,
Yyff I be king of the lande!” (ll 270-272)

“For, [I swear] by Him who wears the crown of thorns,
They shall be drawn and hanged tomorrow,
If I be [still in authority as] king of the land!” (ll 270-272)

The queen continues her pleas, falling to her knees and begging for mercy. In a fit of rage Athelston lashes out, sharply kicking the queen as she kneels, causing her to go into labor and suffer a stillbirth. This death is attributed to the king's fury, now making him guilty of legal murder to go along with his transgression of due process:

A knave-chyld iborn thr wase,
As bright as blosme on bowgh.
He was bothe whyt and red;
Of that dynt was he ded---
His own fadyr hym slowgh! (ll 289-293)

A boy child was born there
As bright [and beautiful] as the blossom [growing] on a bough.
He was both white and red;
[Because] of that blow he was dead---
His own father had slain him! (ll 289-293)

The queen secretly calls Athelston the messenger to her sick bed, sending a letter to Alryke alerting him to Egelond and Edith's situation, and asking for Alryke's intervention. The messenger is reluctant to take on the task, until the queen offers him two things in recompense for his duty: an earldom which she holds in Spain and 100 gold coins.

He wole doo more for hym, I wene,
Thanne for me, though I be qwene---
I doo thee to yndyrstande.
An earldom in Spayne I have of land;
Al I sese into thyn hand,
Trewely, as I thee hyght,
And hundryd besauntys of gold red.
Thou may save hem from the ded,
Yyff that thyn hors be wyght. (ll 306-14)

He will do more for him, I believe,
Than for me, though I be queen---
I ask you to understand.
I have an earldom in the land of Spain;
All [of which] I give into your hand,
Truly I promise to you,
[Also] a hundred coins of red gold.
You may [yet] save them from death,
If your horse be vigorous. (ll 306-314)

The messenger undertakes the mission, accepting the gold but refusing the earldom, stating that he is not worthy to take such a gift, as it is the queen's "moregeve."¹⁸ Here I must pause to focus our analysis a bit closer. In the transaction of a 34-line conversation, three powerful moments would resonate with the society of the 1400s. First, the messenger's use of the term "moregeve" indicates that he is aware of the significance of such a gift. While there is no sexual congress between him and the queen, such a gift might indicate that there had been, as the use of the term is suggestive of the morning after a husband and wife first lay together.

¹⁸ The term is often offset by a *morgengabe*, a gift written into the will of a husband to give her a quarter of her estate back upon his death. That the queen is still in full possession of her earldom argues that she and the king have not followed law or custom in the disposition of their wealth. The use of this term is incorrect, but I hold that the author has done this purposefully. The queen is acting out of accord with the crown, establishing a power of her own. I hold that the use of a term meant for a king giving of his property to his wife highlights her representation of a force equal to the king in deciding to take action. Coupled with the juxtaposition of her husband being Athelston, and the offer she is making to the messenger Athelston, we see the author conflating the power of the throne and asserting an agency for the queen that gives her activity here more weight. Susan Mosher Stuard discusses charters as early as 940 showing this exchange in her monograph *Considering Medieval Women and Gender* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

Second, that the queen is sending this missive to the Archbishop of Canterbury in the name of justice is somewhat provocative considering her husband's position that his judgment is the absolute law. Within the context of the story there is no justice but the king's justice, which the queen's action immediately draws into question, creating another moment of friction for the reader of earlier romances. Finally, and most interestingly, the words selected by the queen have, in fact, reframed the tale by making Athelston the messenger, not Athelston the king, the eponymous hero of the tale. When she tells the messenger that he may, by his actions, save the lives of the earl and his family, all three pieces of this moment snap together. She has elevated the foundling to a noble status by a choice of wording that deems him worthy of being her lover and receiving a marital gift from her, she has shown that she is capable of questioning the legal power of the king making her no longer a royal archetype in the work, despite having only this role in the romance and never being named, and she completes the triad by granting the messenger the role of valiant hero, even using the term "wyght" or "valiant" in describing his steed should he be able to complete his task successfully. Thus we see, much as we did with the elevation of King Athelston at the beginning of the work, a messenger being made a powerful figure through the course of a few lines of the poem. That the messenger actually accepts the 100 gold pieces accentuates his understanding of the social structure, as discussed by Robert Bartlett. He recognizes that the most valuable thing that the queen has offered is money. In the refusal of the earldom he becomes a merchant who deals not in the commerce of feudal land, but in the simple monetary transaction of fee for service. Roger Ladd, in his *Antimerchantilism in Late Medieval English Literature* discusses how the merchant character transcends the common

roles of the three estates within medieval literature.¹⁹ Because of the social mobility inherent in the character of the merchant—if he is successful his wealth allows him a place among the nobility and if he is not his lack of wealth places him amongst the peasantry—we find a character who exemplifies the social mobility that becomes the norm with the rise of the merchant class. Athelston the messenger fits the mold of the merchant, as he gains gold, good favor, and even fine steeds throughout the work. He rises as the poem goes on, gaining importance to the action and continually finding himself the recipient of gifts and promises from those who rank above him. Again, that both the king and the messenger share the name Athelston is more important than previous scholars have discussed, as this is a signal concerning the trajectory of the two as characters to be used in comparison to one another. Even as the king is lowered by his actions, so is the messenger raised. The messenger is brave, trustworthy, and takes upon himself the responsibility for protecting the lives of those in distress. The king, by comparison, becomes the tyrant so often portrayed by Saracen kings in romance. He is brutal, unthinking, violent, and unreasonable. The author has shaped the romance in a fashion that is standard, while utilizing non-standard characters to fill the stock roles. This framing of the king, highlighted by his comparison to the messenger, engages the audience in questioning the royal character and his use of his authority in the legal setting which is highlighted by the inclusion of the Archbishop in the tale.

The messenger rides to Canterbury to deliver the queen's message. Alryke takes to his horse, crossing the space between Canterbury and Westminster in impressive time, made

¹⁹ Roger A. Ladd, *Antimerchantism in Late Medieval English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 2-7.

possible by switching horses every five miles, an act that highlights his vast wealth. Alryke promises the messenger that if they are successful he will personally reward him with gifts greater than if God himself had given him 100 years of life, again increasing the worth of the lowliest character in the work:

Thenne bespak the erchebysschop.
Oure gostly fadyr undyr God,
Unto the messangere:
“...The whylys that we ben here;
For yiff that I may my brother borwe
And bryngen hym out off mekyl sorwe,
Thou may make glad chere;
And thy warysoun I schal thee geve,
And God have grauntyd thee to leve
Unto an hundryd yere.” (ll 393-95; 398-404)

Then spoke the archbishop,
Our spiritual father under God,
To the messenger:
“...While we are here;
For if I may save my brother
And bring him out of great sorrow,
You may have great joy;
[Because] a greater reward I shall give you,
Than if God had granted you to live
A hundred years.” (ll 393-95; 398-404)

The Second Act

The second act of the work sees Alryke arrive at Westminster to barter with one sworn brother for the life of another. He approaches the church, seeking King Athelston just in time to hear a prayer from the king asking if Egelond and family are innocent that God free them from his prison:

“God, that syt in Trynyte
A bone that thou graunte me,
Lord, as Thou harewed helle
Gyltless men yiff thay be,

That are in my presoun free,
Forcursyd there to yelle,
Of the gylt and thay be clene,
Leve it moot on hem be sene,
That garte hem there to dwelle.” (ll 420-428)

“God, who exists in Trinity
A boon I ask that you grant me,
Lord, as you harrowed hell,
If they be guiltless men,
Free them, who are locked in my prison,
Condemned there to shriek,
If they are clean of this guilt
Grant that [their innocence] be seen plainly
By them who made them to dwell there.” (ll 420-428)

Alryke proceeds to ask for the family to be handed over to the church, while he sets the matter before a court for judgment. Immediately the conflict that has been in the background since the beginning of the tale, dealing with the question of the legal authority of the king, is brought to bear. Athelston is furious, accusing the archbishop of being a traitor for supporting Egelond, and calling for him to renounce his office, saying:

“...Lay down thy cross and thy staff,
Thy mytyr and thy ryng that I thee gaff;
Out of my land flee!
Hyghe thee faste out of my sight!” (ll 459-462)

“...Lay down your cross and your staff,
Your miter and the ring that I gave to you;
Flee! Out of my land!
Remove yourself quickly out of my sight!” (ll 459-462)

Alryke responds with a sharp rebuke, stating that he understands that the trappings of his office came from the king, but that the office is his nonetheless, as the king does not “rule” the church. This argument invokes the specter of the Investiture Controversy of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, specifically naming the crozier and ring, the key tools of

the lay investiture procedure.²⁰ Important here is that Athelston also demands that Alryke lay down the cross and the miter, symbols which belong not to the investiture process, but to the church itself. Exhibiting a desire to rule both the church and the land, King Aethelstan rekindles an argument settled by the Concordat of Worms, overthrowing church authority even as he has asserted his right to final legal authority in twice now pronouncing his summary death sentence. Alryke's desire for a trial pits the power of the law courts directly into conflict with the decision of the crown, firmly reminding the king that he has no legal power to remove a duly confirmed member of the clergy, which would require an ecclesiastical court just as he has no right to a summary death sentence without the judgment of a legal court. This lack of knowledge by the romance character Athelston is a break with the nature of the king who is captured in Matthew Paris's *Chronica*. In that history, Athelston is highly deferential to the church and its decision making, going so far as to found two monasteries in the name of Pope Stephen VIII (r. 939-942) to show his obeisance to that rule:

Anno Domini DCCCCXXXIX. Stephanus sedit in cathedra Roman annis tribus, mensibus quatuor, et diebus quindecim. Per idem tempus rex Anglorum Ehelstanus, pro anima fratris sui Eadwini, quem parvo usus consilio in mari fecerat submerge, duo coenobia, Middeltonense et Micheleneiense, constui praecepit, et ea praediis multis et possessionibus ampliavit.²¹

Year of our Lord 939. Stephen held his seat in the Cathedral of Rome for three years, four months and fifteen days. During this time, the king of the English, Athelston, for the soul of his brother Edwin, whom he had buried at sea, commanded that two monasteries be constructed, Middleton and Michelness, and that they be established for many and that the lands possessed by them be increased.

²⁰ Uta-Renate Blumenthal, *The Investiture Controversy: Church and Monarchy from the Ninth to the Twelfth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1988).

²¹ *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores; or Chronicles of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages*, No. 01 (London, 1857), 451-2.

In the romance, Alryke threatens that if Athelston deprives him of his bishopric he shall excommunicate all of England in recompense for the king's actions, which he is duly in possession of the ecclesiastic authority to do. With that he divests himself of his symbols and takes his leave. Upon entering Fleet Street, Alryke meets an assembly of knights who fall down upon their knees and seek his blessing. Alryke refuses to do so, at which time they notice the missing tokens of his office and question him concerning them. Alryke tells them of his quarrel with the king, and that he placed the kingdom under interdict. The knights beg him to reconsider his position, telling him that if they must choose between him and the king they will side with the church over the crown and as knights they will follow their oaths to the church.

A knight thane spak with mylde voys:
"Sere, wher is thy ring? Where is thy croys?
Is it from thee tan?"
Thanne he sayde, "Youre cursyd kyng
Hath me refft of al my thing,
And of al my worldly wan;" (ll 507-512)

The knight sayde, "Bysschop, turne agayn;
Of thy body we are ful fayn;
Thy brother yit schole we borwe.
And, but he graunte us oure bone,
Hys presoun schal be broken soone,
Hymselff to mekyl sorwe.
We schole drawe doun both hall and boures,
Bothe hys castelles and hys toures,
They schole lygge lowe and holewe.
Though he be kyng and were the corown,
We scholen hym sette in a deep dunjoun:
Oure Crystyndom we wole folewe. (ll 519-530)

A knight then spoke in mild tones:
"Sir, where is your ring? Where is your cross?
Has it been taken from you?"

Then he said, "Your accursed king
Has bereft me of all my things,
And of all my earthly goods;" (ll 507-512)

The knight said, "Bishop, turn back;
Of your presence we are greatly glad;
Your brother, we will save [him] yet.
And, if he [the king] does not grant us our boon,
We shall break into his prison soon.
To his greater sorrow
We shall tear down his halls and chambers,
Both his castles and his towers,
They shall be razed and made hollow.
Though he is king and wears the crown,
We shall set him in a deep dungeon:
Our Christian faith we will follow. (ll 519-530)

The author here highlights the crisis point wherein the massed power of knights could constrain the power of the kings. This is done with a reference to choosing their fealty to their earthly king, or obeisance to the church, to which they swore their vows when receiving their spurs.²² In this decision the knights make a political statement about the power of kings and the circumspection with which they must act to maintain the goodwill both of the church and their aristocratic supporters, the same weakness that we discussed at the opening of this chapter. The author of *Athelston* highlights here the great weakness acknowledged by the historical king Henry I, that there must be a legal process to determine the actions that a king is allowed to take. Thus, the full meaning of *Athelston*, that the power of feudal obligation is reciprocal is revealed. The knights act in their own best interest when the king fails to consider the wellbeing of the kingdom while maintaining his personal power. Athelston fails

²² For details regarding the oaths taken during the ceremony of knighthood see Richard W Barber, *The Knight and Chivalry* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1995).

to uphold his responsibility to keep his vassals safe and secure under his rule. If he can summarily choose to execute Egelond, who else is safe from his whims? The knights here utilize their aggregate authority under the law to constrain the king, much as the English barons attempted with Magna Carta in 1215, the provisions of Oxford in 1258, and the Ordinances of 1311.

King Athelston immediately sends messengers to Alryke, in the hope of making peace with the clergyman and the knights. Athelston submits himself to the archbishop, falling down before him and asking for forgiveness, turning over Egelond and his family, and saying to Alryke:

“Thou hast savyd here lyvys alle
Iblessyd moot thou bee.” (ll 559-560)

“You have saved all of their lives
[More] blessed might you be.” (ll 559-560)

The king understands that to continue on his path would have him removed from the throne, the fear of which initially drove his actions. He created an impasse that could be resolved only by submitting the issue to a jury of knights, in keeping with the assertion of power by the knights as a social class. The knights seized power in the text, but not as individual questing heroes. Their power is established here as a political group, whose utilization of a unified voice constrains the power of their king.

The Third Act

In the final 251 lines, we find that simply stopping the king does not make the point; he must be shown how his rule must be managed. Immediately after forcing the king to hand over his prisoners, Alryke takes the initiative to act upon the law. He states that there must be

judgment made of the guilt or innocence of Egelond and his family, and that the king can rest assured that:

Yiff thay be gylty off that dede,
Sorrere the doome they may drede,
Thanne schewe here schame to me. (ll 564-566)

If they are guilty of that deed
More grievous is the fate they should dread
Than showing there shame to me. (ll 564-566)

Calling for a great fire to be made before Westminster, with nine plow shares laid as a path within coals of the fire, Alryke calls for Egelond and his family to be brought forward to endure a trial by fire, with the assembled knights present to adjudicate the matter. Here the story takes on the broad dimensions of the romance genre in full. We are not treated to the arguments of a tightly packed courtroom, though evidence will be weighed and measured by the “jury” that is present. Because Edith, along with two squires who have not yet been knighted, is to be judged, combat would be unsuitable in this context. Under the old codes of judicial combat, Egelond would have acted as the champion of his accused family, and the outcome of a duel against a champion chosen to represent the king would have decided the fate of all four accused. Alryke selects instead a public test that requires no combat, judged by the decision of the knights present at the trial. That the trial is physical in nature distorts this reading only slightly, the metaphor being complete because neither the archbishop, nor the king, decide how to interpret the “evidence” at the conclusion of the “trial.” That rests with the “jury” of knights.

Egelond passes through the flames untouched, and is heralded by the knights present as innocent, before they escort him to St. Paul’s Cathedral to kneel at the high altar and thank

God for proving his innocence. Next Alryke demands that Egelond's sons proceed and then lady Edith. The scenario is twice repeated and the court has served its purpose.

The Mobility of the Merchants

Athelston ends with the legal conviction of Wymound for his act of treason. Alryke demands that judgment be passed on whomever had accused Egelond and questions the king closely regarding who brought the issue forward. Reluctant to give up Wymound, even after the trial, Athelston refuses to reveal his name because of the oath he swore never to reveal the source of his information. For the first time in the romance Athelston shows some semblance of honor. Recalling his oath, the king says:

“That schalt thou nevere wete for me,
In burgh neyther in sale;
For I have sworn be Seynt Anne
That I schal nevere bewreye that manne,
That me gan telle that tale” (ll 667-671)

“You shall never know from me,
In the town, nor in a hall;
For I have sworn by Saint Anne
That I shall never betray the man
Who told me the tale” (ll 667-671)

Alryke states that he has the power to absolve the king of any stain that breaking his oath might cause, since this is in the interest of the justice of the court. Understanding that he will now be bound by the law, even if his personal pride and promises are broken, Athelston reveals that Wymound gave him the story that set all of this into motion.

Alryke is disappointed in Wymound's actions, remarking that if he is found guilty of this treasonous act he will be drawn by five horses and hanged, as is the law. As the audience is already aware that Wymound is guilty, this disclosure should close out the piece. However,

it does not. This gives a final opportunity for the audience to meet the longsuffering messenger, Athelston.

The circumstances of Athelston's final trip are the reverse of his first outing in the romance. When he is first sent to fetch Egelond, he does not know that the message he carries is a lie, or what fate awaits that knight when he reaches London. On this last trip, however, he is empowered with the knowledge that Alryke has promised him riches in exchange for his service in exacting justice in this tale.²³ He knows this time what the message he carries is and that he is being paid to deceive Wymound. This knowledge gives him full agency and control of the denouement of the story. Athelston's role at the end of the piece is one of manipulation, using the greed and desire of a character to orchestrate the downfall of that character, elevating him in authority and privilege of knowledge even as he has been made a wealthy man through the promises that he has obtained for his services. The messenger has transcended his role as a tool and has become an equal of the men whose struggle creates the turmoil of the work.

The messenger rides to Wymound, delivering a letter that tells the earl that Egelond and his sons are dead and he has subsequently inherited the earldom of Stone. Wymound rejoices over the success of his scheme, and in his exuberance showers Athelston with more gold pieces in recompense for his services. Athelston, fully assuming the mercantile role, takes the gold, but then bemoans the loss of his excellent horse during the entire affair. He has been promised a replacement by Alryke for his role in saving Egelond and ferreting out

²³ See lines 400-404 of the work, in which Alryke promises Athelston great rewards if through his efforts they can save Egelond and his family and find justice.

the truth. Always with his eye on the main chance, however, the messenger takes matters into his own hand, asking:

Sere, of youre goode hors lende me on:
Now graunte me my bone;
For yystyrday deyde my nobly stede,
On youre arende as I yede,
Be the way as I come. (ll 730-734)

Sir, of your fine horses lend me one:
Grant me my boon now;
For my noble steed died yesterday,
As I went out on your errand
On the roads that I traveled. (ll 730-734)

Athelston has added his own twist to the lie, making Wymound believe that his steed died while working on his behalf. His words here can be taken as a double meaning, since the audience is aware that he lost his horse dealing with matters that concern Wymound's undoing, not his success. The vague nature of his words, though the audience can see the deception plainly, plays up the stereotype of the merchant as a trickster character who is dangerous to the elites even as he becomes a member of that group.

Wymound states that he believes his horses too spirited for a common man, but hesitantly he agrees to give Athelston a fine mount, again reinforcing the messenger's rise to the equal of the nobles in the work. Upon reaching Westminster Wymound is confronted by the king, who places the death of his heir at Wymound's feet, saying that:

“For thy falsnesse and they lesyng
I slowgh myn heyr, scholde have ben kyng,
When my lyf had been gon” (ll 762-764)

“Because of your falseness and lying
I slew my heir, who should have one day been king,
When I had passed on” (ll 762-764)

Despite the king's own temper and rashness being the true culprit of the crime, under the law the king's argument is that Wymound's acts set the issue in motion, placing him now under charges of both murder and treason. Wymound denies any wrongdoing, and Athelston places the matter before the court. Alryke again consecrates the fire and the plowshares, and Wymound, refusing to admit guilt, walks into the flames. He only makes it across the first three plowshares before the burns and pain cause him to fall down among the coals and suffer. Egelond's sons retrieve him from the flames, telling him that he must confess and tell why he committed such a crime. As he writhes in agony he admits his guilt, and his punishment is carried out. Wymound is tied to five stout horses and dragged through the streets of London so that the citizens might witness his suffering as the punishment for treason, and then he is hanged.

Athelston learns an important lesson in the romance concerning knights as jurists and the sociopolitical nature of the power that they held by recognizing that even though he is king he is required to bow to the will and judgment of his knights. Both the real world legal precedents outlined here and the intertextual framework of the story force the king to yield. Without the support of his knights to enforce his authority, Athelston has no power. Should he refuse to relent he will be violently dethroned. King Athelston must be circumscribed by the due process required by the legal status given to the knightly ranks to curb an excess of his royal prerogative, but the final treatment of Wymound shows that his if his will is in keeping with the will of his knights, then even the most brutal of punishments will be unflinchingly carried out upon those he deems it important to punish. Athelston is both all-

powerful and completely powerless, all depending upon whether his will is at odds with or accords with the will of his knights. The legal system balances the power of the king with the check of the body of knighthood, yet the laws that are signed by the king bestow and curtail the power of the knights who serve as his jurists. Delicate though it is, this balance is all important in the transition of knights into administrators.

CHAPTER 5

SIR CLEGES

This chapter addresses another fundamental aspect of English knighthood: the social code of knighthood as it dealt with issues of *largesse* and the distribution of wealth during the shift in the administrative structure of knighthood. This chapter focuses on *Sir Cleges* to interrogate the nature of wealth and generousness and how audiences in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century were to understand them. This romance demonstrates that largesse is a strategic tool that must be used with cunning and care, lest knights find themselves destitute, a balance that was precarious in English knighthood, leading to the need for marital and business alliances to remain solvent. *Sir Cleges* initially fails to understand the political utility of his wealth, giving so freely that he bankrupts his family. In order to set this romance in its historical context I begin with an observation of the shifting financial and social dynamics of England and use this historical information as a means to think through the social and historical statements being made in the work.

A Tale of Knightly Woe

Sir Cleges tells of a knight of great *largesse*, whose most prominent attribute is (after many of the most heralded heroes of myth and folklore before him,) also his utmost weakness. *Cleges* practices the virtue that is *largesse* in the most extravagant way possible, by opening his estate to any and all that would come, furnishing high and low alike with food, drink, and continual mirth and minstrelsy. Most notable is the audaciousness of his Christmas feast each year, which is financed by his beautiful estates and their produce. His

generosity at this particular feast is such that it is compared in the work to that of a king. It is this great charity to all that is his undoing. Cleges finds, after a dozen or so years of open-handed living, that his lands fail, resulting in an inability to pay for his most recent Christmas feast, and he is bankrupted. Bereft of all but the least of his manors and the small set of grounds that surrounds it, he finds that those who so gladly dined with him when he was at the height of his wealth and power have abandoned him, and none are willing to return his years of kindness by replenishing his funds. Thus, he is unable to practice his *largesse*, the one tenet of knighthood that has kept him in the good graces of his class. Having nothing else to recommend him in the eyes of his social stratum, Cleges falls into obscurity.

Thus does Cleges suffer a fall from grace. With nothing left but his wife, Dame Clarys, and two children, Cleges becomes a shut-in, forgotten at court and removed from power. When next we see the knight he is a broken man, swooning on the next Christmas Eve as he remembers his former stature, and the revelry that he would have held. He becomes depressed, having lost what was his greatest glory. His wife, seeking to give him solace, gently chides him for his despair and suggests that they venture forth from the estate to attend mass, remembering the reason for their former mirth and festivities. Cleges enters the church, and falling on his knees, begs Jesus Christ to save his family from destitution. For her part, Clarys prays that Christ save her husband from his pain.

When Cleges returns home from mass he finds himself feeling more relieved than ever before, and he sends his family inside without him. Going into the small garden that abuts the manor, he again kneels in prayer, thanking God for removing the sadness from his heart. As he prays a miracle occurs, and the cherry tree under which he is kneeling bursts

forth in full fruit, giving a harvest of fresh cherries in the middle of the winter. Cleges fears that such an unnatural occurrence is a sign of God's disfavor, a dark omen that means he is cursed. In his current state of destitution, he sees no beauty in this rebirth, but a mocking rebuke reminding him of the flower of his youth among the harsh remnants of his life. He rushes into the manor to show the cherries to Clarys, who immediately decides that it is not an omen of evil, but of God's love, and tells Cleges that he should take the entire harvest and set out to give it as a Christmas present to the king, who happens to be celebrating the holidays at his castle at Cardiff. This suggestion touches off the climax of the work in the third and final act of *Cleges*.

Taking his son to act as a valet and carry the load upon his back, Cleges approaches Cardiff and asks to be allowed to see the king. Not recognizing the once great knight because of his ragged and haggard appearance, the porter at the gate refuses to admit him. When Cleges shows him the gift that he has brought for the king, the porter grows greedy, sensing that such a miraculous gift at this time of year will net the beggar a large reward from the king. He agrees to let Cleges enter, but only if he swears to give a third of the reward to the porter. Cleges reluctantly agrees and is allowed egress. Cleges is slighted in the same way by both the guard at the inner door of the castle and king's steward, both men seeking to take advantage of the man they assume to be a beggar, demanding a third of the prize. Upon his promise to the steward, Cleges realizes that he has been forced to agree to give away his entire reward, and that there will be nothing left for his family. This pushes Cleges to the edge, and he immediately formulates a plan. Upon delivering the cherries to the king, Cleges is praised for his gift and asked what recompense he would have for such a wondrous

offering, the king promising him anything that he might desire. Instead of gold or land, to the shock of the assemblage, Cleges demands a dozen stern strokes with a staff, which he might distribute to his debtors about the hall. Keeping his word, the king grants the boon, and Cleges proceeds to rain down four mighty blows upon each extortionist, leaving them each broken and bloody.

After the assaults are completed, the king wonders at the wiliness and physical strength of the vagabond before him. In jest he turns to one of the minstrels that he has employed for the feast and asks if he has any idea who the beggar who brought the gift was. The minstrel, long one of the troupes that performed at Cleges' revelries, immediately names the man, and the king is dumbfounded. He swears that this cannot be the man that he once loved as a great example of knighthood, going so far as to say that he had been led to believe that Cleges was long since dead. Cleges affirms his identity, tells the king the story of his fall and explains why he asked for the twelve strokes to distribute. King Uther is so amazed by the tale and pleased with the cunning displayed by Cleges that he gifts him Cardiff Castle and all of its lands and names him royal steward, thus elevating the man to a place of even higher stature than he held before, and ensuring that he would be able to plan aristocratic galas for the rest of his life. Dame Clarys is elevated to the role of royal cup bearer and their son is made the king's squire and is given lands of his own worth a hundred pounds in rents.

“Land is the Only Thing That Lasts”

Sir Cleges is a study in contrasts. It is an indictment of one of the great tenets of knighthood, pulling down the idea of *largesse* as an attribute to be practiced by any besides the king. Simultaneously though, its resolution is driven by the martial violence that denoted

an era of knighthood that is passing away, almost as if clinging to a semblance of what knighthood meant before. This negative attitude concerning *largesse* shows an economic practicality that falls away from the lavish lifestyles highlighted in most of romance, and lends itself to a more parsimonious mindset. This occurs as knights begin to see their wealth diminished by the shift in how finance and status are changing around them. Cleges begins with the knight's downfall, caused by the loss of his land because of his poor management of his finances. Simon Payling speaks to this financial activity as one of the major factors that led to the change of the knightly class:

In a society where land was the predominant source of inherited wealth and the overriding determinant of status, the rate at which land passed between families was closely related to the nature of social change. Two simultaneous trends were at work. On the one hand, families that survived in the male line over several generations added to their estates by marriage into those families that did not, a process that promoted the concentration of estates into the hands of fewer families. On the other, the land market, the level of activity of which tended to vary with the rate of family failure in the male line, ensured that the landed class remained permeable by allowing for the conversion of non-landed wealth into land.¹

It is in this milieu that we consider our reading of the themes and overall lessons of *Sir Cleges*. Two major themes emerge when reading *Sir Cleges*, each corresponding to an issue of chivalric behavior that comments on the shift in knighthood that we have been chronicling. Considering its proximity in Ashmole 61 to the overtly didactic texts *How the Goode Wife Taught Hyr Doughter* and its complementary piece, *How the Goode Man Taught Hys Sone*, it is not far-fetched to suggest that the romance would have been read simultaneously as both entertainment and didactic text.

¹ Simon Payling, "Social Mobility, Demographic Change, and Landed Society in Late Medieval England," *The Economic History Review, New Series* 45, no. 1 (February, 1992), 51.

As the main argument of this dissertation is that these exemplars carry significant subtexts discussing the shifts being felt within the knighthood, indictments of the tropes of knighthood can be accepted within the frame of a story, as the characters were “fictitious” even though they might be designed to create specific connection to historical characters to increase the efficacy of the underlying message. Humorously, this might argue that medieval authors considered the concept of “plausible deniability” during their time, since scribes could comment on those in the social classes above them in indirect ways. In the case of *Cleghes*, the issues are (1) the loyalty toward one another that a knight and ruler ought to have, which is tied to the need for the king to give himself over completely to *largesse*, even during the decline of the treasury, in the hopes of maintaining his splintered barons and allies, something that was discussed in the analysis of *Athelston* and (2) the need for a knight to understand the evolving financial and administrative world around him to successfully create and maintain alliances and social standing. This second issue will be dealt with here.

Family in *Sir Cleghes*

The upkeep of family is of utmost importance within the framework of *Sir Cleghes*. The need for sons who will be able to marry well to bring financial stability back to the family is a key approach in fighting off the loss of landed status that Payling discusses. Initially, however Cleghes is shown to ignore this reality and long view of the success of his family line, preferring instead to focus on his own immediate enjoyment. While the explanation of how he comes to his hardship is the smallest portion of the poem, encompassing only the first 84 lines of the work, it is the problem of balancing the expectation of *largesse* for a knight with sound financial planning that sets the entire action

of the romance into motion. When we meet Cleges he is a hearty knight of some note, living a life of fame as a member of Uther's Table. Lines 4-12 of work state:

In tyme of Uter and Pendragoun,
Kyng Artour fader of grete renoune,
 A sembly man of sight.
He had a knyght, hyght Sir Clegys;
A doughtyere man was non at nedys
 Of Ronde Tabull right.
He was man of hy statoure
And therto feyre of all fetour,
 A man of mekyll might.

In the time of Uther Pendragon,
King Arthur's renowned father,
 Who was a handsome man to look upon.
He had a knight named Sir Cleges;
A stronger man could not be found in times of need
 Among the virtuous Knights of the Round Table.
He was a man of high stature
And also handsome,
 A man of great might.

What looks strikingly like a generic romance introduction is, in fact, very important in understanding the composition of the themes of the work. Richard Kaeuper hits upon an important issue that is brought to the fore by the anachronistic mention of Uther Pendragon and the Round Table as simultaneous.² The mythology surrounding both presents a direct chronology that places Uther's death well before the establishing of the Round Table, set into place by his son Arthur to celebrate the equality and brotherhood of his brother knights.

Kaeuper discusses looking at Lawman's *Brut* to analyze the origins of the Round Table:

Before its construction, Arthur's mid-winter feast had been disrupted by quarrels over precedence: blows were struck, loaves of bread and even goblets full of wine flew through the air as missiles; knight seized knight by the throat. Arthur retired to his

²Richard W. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

chamber to think of a solution and the knights got their hands on the carving knives; severed heads hit the floor amidst ‘an enormous blood-shed, consternation in the court’... Weeks later he introduced his solution: a Round Table which could seat 1,600 knights, so that none should have precedence over another... The Round Table came into being as both a sign of the unity between king and knights and as a means to stop disruptive knightly violence.³

This origin of the table would have been information readily available to the author of *Sir Cleges*, as Lawman’s *Brut* was written circa 1190 and could have been widely orally circulated by this time. That the choice is made to build on this anachronism creates a particular effect within the story. It both openly admonishes knightly violence directed at the court rather than at those enemies who lay outside, falling in line with the establishment of the common law and the removal of trial by combat, and shows the stature that Cleges himself had, even in a time of supposed “equality” among the knights. That none were “doughtyere” or of such “hy statoure” argues that Cleges was a knight’s knight, much as Lancelot and Gawain would be exalted above others in the series of tales concerning each. This is, admittedly, so frequent a topos as to be almost meaningless. Yet here, primarily because of the particular story arc of *Cleges*, it is a crucial piece of scenery used to set the stage for a very conspicuous lesson.

The opening salvo of the work leans further toward the uplifting of Cleges in standard romance style, naming him the most courteous, giving, and humble knight possible, giving of himself and his household to any man who would but ask for his hospitality. It is this lauded giving nature that is the downfall of Cleges and his house. While many studies look at the domestic life of Cleges as a model for the relationship between man and wife in the knightly

³ Ibid, 119-20.

class, I see things quite differently. Cleges is, in fact, not a particularly dynamic character, nor is his family truly at the heart of his personal motivation. His wife is his driving influence, but it is not purely “love” for his family that moves him. In fact, the work makes overt mention that although Cleges still has the love of his wife and two children after he falls into poverty, this is hardly enough to comfort him.

Hys men, that wer so mych of pride,
Weste away onne every syde;
 With hym ther left not one.
To duell with hym ther left no mo
Bot hys wife and his chylder two,
 Than made he mekyll mone. (ll 79-84)

His men, who were such a part of his pride,
Fell away from him;
 Leaving him there alone.
Dwelling with him there was left no one
But his wife and his two children,
 Then he made great lament. (ll 79-84)

Thus we see something here that is often overlooked in the drive to show the relationship between Cleges and his wife as warm and loving. It is not his family that gives Cleges comfort, but his social station, bolstered by the love and adoration of knights and hangers on who consume his fortune. It is their regard and “love”, such as it is, that gives Cleges his heartiness and comfort. In his look at the desire of knights to separate from and elevate themselves above the growing merchant class throughout Europe, Kaeuper indicates that knights made a point to separate themselves from the idea of farming, since in the early years of knighthood the delineations between knights and village laborers were not well defined. He says that, “...when a fighting man was termed *miles* (plural *milites*) — the word which will come to designate knight—the meaning often carried a distinct sense of

subservience and could be used of warriors of rather low social status... In fact, the term *miles* in this early period had no clear connotation of status and referred simply to function.”⁴ Into this social reality we see Sir Cleges and his desire for place in the social hierarchy emerge. As Kaeuper puts it blandly, “Significant social and economic change, as always, created problems with an existing hierarchy: noble or knightly rank did not always equate with wealth.”⁵ Citing a treatise from Honoré Bonet, written in 1387, Kaeuper points out that there were attempts by the 1400s to restrict knighthood in such a way that anyone carrying the title of knight still practicing the crafts of shepherding, sowing, or even law should actually give up the title of knight and all of the privileges that came with it. It is at this point that Kaeuper introduces the concept of knightly *largesse* into the conversation. As the merchant class rose to find itself on equal footing with the knight, knights sought to continue to differentiate themselves using the chivalric concept of *largesse*. This concept was tied to the belief that a knight was never to covet his property, but was to give of it freely and put his faith in God and his own prowess to continually replenish his fortune. It is ironic to note that by 1400 many merchants gained access to the knightly class because of the poverty of knights, who married into mercantile families to sustain their titles, since they could barely afford their lifestyle.

It is then quite arguable that, based on an interrogation of the first 84 lines, what is most galling to Cleges at this point of the work is not, in fact, the hardship of his family, the love of which he was assured according to the text, or the upkeep of his last major estate,

⁴ Ibid, 189.

⁵ Ibid, 193.

which while it was his last, seems to have been in no danger of being lost. What bothers him is the loss of the carousers, the minstrels, and the other locals whose presence in his hall enhanced his knightliness and allowed him to practice the *largesse* that would have differentiated him from any other landed individual who might not have had the honor of being called a knight. This difference in his financial activity, vastly dissimilar from the grasping and hoarding that was to have been associated with merchants, is not only to Kaeuper a social separator, but “in the hands of a great lord or king it becomes a buttress to dominance, a tool of governance.”⁶ Such gifts given and received would act as a commonplace marker of the feudal relationships among kings, lords, and vassals, elevating those who could give freely above other men. This concept would have been easy for any audience to understand by the early fifteenth century.

Where Cleges acts in a way that separates him from social concerns of his class during the opening fifth of the work is also relevant to the lessons of the piece. The unquestioning loyalty of the household to Cleges, uniting them in a common mission to maintain their collective status, is absolute within the work. Dame Clarys proves to be both a loyal ally and an instructive mentor for Cleges, providing the most potent impetus for his activity in the work. His son, a stout lad who goes unnamed in the work, serves him as a traveling companion, making him a mute witness to the works performed by his father during their journey and subsequent ascent back into the realms of power in the kingdom. This unity, when examined, bears with it a calculated and discerning meaning. If Cleges is successful, the entire family prospers. Doors are reopened to fostering for the sons, Dame

⁶ Ibid, 196.

Clarys is again in a position to be recognized for her beauty, intellect, and gentility, and overall the whole of the family unit is again made sound in the eyes of their community.

There is much to be gained from Cleges being reinstated to the social dominance that was the hallmark of his previous years, yet as such he cannot fall prey to the overuse of *largesse* a second time, as he is to blame for his current circumstances.

The Strength of a Man's Arm

Second among the lessons of *Sir Cleges* is the idea that a knight be intelligent in seeking his associations, surrounding himself with useful men who are loyal to him and see their own gain as tied to his. We see Cleges, upon his arrival at the court of Uther accosted by three treacherous servants of the king. The three servants, the porter, the inner door sentinel, and the steward, each attempt to extort from Cleges a third of the reward which he had hoped to obtain from Uther in recompense of his delivery of a gift of unseasonable cherries, which were made to ripen in the heart of winter as a miracle responding to the prayers that Cleges offered at Christmas Eve mass. Here is an interesting choice of the three individuals providing the impediment to the progress of Cleges. Considering that a fear of gentry knights lay in losing ground before lesser men, as discussed in the introduction of this dissertation, it is a fine use of metaphor by the author that the first two men preventing access to Uther would have been men of lower social status.

The first obstacle that Cleges faces is the porter. The role of the porter as an instigator of mischief is one that has been solidified by use of the character in Shakespearean works,⁷

⁷ Shakespeare's famous porter in *Macbeth* is a wily character whose speech was intended as comic relief, but he spoke to exactly the issues that we have analyzed here. He pretends that he is the porter of Hell, admitting businessmen who have died after failing to conduct their various trades well. While Shakespeare did not pen the porter until 1623, the character's lowering of the lords outside the gate to the station of tailors, farmers and

but here we must observe the authentic role of the porter, as a keeper of the outer portal, attempting to stop breaches of the gate. Cleges is a knight no longer in keeping with the mores of knighthood at the current time. He is an outcast, a nostalgic reference to a chivalry that is no longer the norm among men who hold the title of knight. In fact, it is his inability to recognize the need to change his approach to knighthood that has made him destitute. The porter here symbolizes Cleges' first needing to recognize that he stands on the outside; no longer are his mores the ones that govern the way in which knights are established. Similarly, the usher and the steward represent an almost gnostic approach to Cleges' gaining self-knowledge, with each interaction forcing him to question how things have changed so much that he does not understand the financial ambitions of each man and their self interest in juxtaposition to the *largesse* that he has been taught to practice as a native member of the knightly class.

The tale ends after the twelve strokes are doled out to the three miscreants and Cleges has been recognized by the king. The knight of great *largesse* has changed his approach entirely, and by refusing to give away all that he has he proves himself worthy of position in the new court and is installed as steward. While it seems almost nonsensical to place as steward a knight who had caused his own bankruptcy because of his freedom with his own stores, if we take Kaeuper's previously discussed tenets as a lens, the story makes a sound choice in Cleges for this role. It is not simply the trite "happy ending" that is expected of a lighthearted story, but is in fact a mercantile lesson in learning to temper the old tenets of

lawyers as he imagines them can be seen in the framework of this analysis as a reference to the "lowering" of the knightly class that occurred by the admission of these kinds of men to the order of knighthood.

knighthood, in this case *largesse*, with the new practicality of the administrative knights, whose business sense has brought them to prominence and the station of knighthood.

CHAPTER 6

SIR GOWTHER

This chapter addresses yet one more fundamental aspect of English knighthood: the importance of succession and familial inheritance that maintained the social cohesion of the class that was knighthood during the period in which the administrative structure of knighthood shifted. This chapter focuses on *Sir Gowther* to investigate the nature of succession and legal inheritance and how audiences in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century were to understand them. This romance demonstrates that there are multiple ways to legitimate oneself and one's ownership of goods and titles as a member of the knightly class. *Sir Gowther* finds that he is an illegitimate child and must forfeit his titles and lands, only to legitimize himself later in the work through a marriage that overrides his legal status as a bastard. In order to set this romance in its historical context I begin with a legal and social consideration of inheritance and social mobility and use this historical information as a means to think through the statements being made in the romance itself.

Succession as a Familial Priority

The concern that Simon Payling registered concerning the transfer of land out of the hands of knightly families being a prime mover in the social mobility that shifted the makeup and values of the class, creates the frame for analysis of the next exemplar, *Sir Gowther*.¹

While Payling's work focuses on marriage between members of the landed gentry and merchants or non-landed gentry of means, *Sir Gowther* deals initially not with marriage, but

¹ Simon Payling, "Social Mobility, Demographic Change, and Landed Society in Late Medieval England," *The Economic History Review, New Series* 45, no. 1 (February, 1992), 51.

with birthright. With the birth of a legitimate child, a family would secure a legal heir who would maintain control of the family holdings should they reach adulthood. This line of succession was one of the most important duties of any landed gentleman, and Wrigley, using a data model for a society built like that of medieval England, creates an estimate that 60 percent of married men would leave a legal heir when they died.² During 1247 Matthew Paris writes of the calamity caused by the death of Henry Raspe, Landgrave of Thuringia, who died without an heir and threw the succession of the German monarchy into disarray.³ These concerns highlight the importance of a viable heir to a family's rights and titles. In the case of many families, a female heir would marry and the holdings that she inherited would be joined to a new family, a situation that Payling argues led to a more fluid social mobility.⁴ While this might be a lamentable situation for a gentry family, *Sir Gowther* takes this fear of a loss of family goods and status to another level entirely, positing what would happen if a mother passed off the illegitimate child of her lover as a legal heir of her landed and titled husband?

Sir Gowther falls into the genre of tale that Rosemund Tuve, in 1929, dubbed the "wonder-child fable."⁵ The story opens with a broad outline that is common to stories of incubi and succubae that circulated regularly as a warning about sexuality and its power to

² E. A. Wrigley, "Fertility Strategy for the Individual and the Group," in *Historical Studies of Changing Fertility*. Ed. Charles Tilly (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 139.

³ Matthew Paris, *The Illustrated Chronicles of Matthew Paris: Observations of Thirteenth-Century Life*, Trans. Richard Vaughan (Cambridge: Corpus Christi College, 1993), 16.

⁴ Simon Payling. "Social Mobility," 51.

⁵ Rosemond Tuve, "The Red Crosse Knight and Mediaeval Demon Stories," *PMLA* 44, no. 3 (September 1929), 706.

corrupt.⁶ After ten years of marriage Gowther's parents, a duke and duchess, remain childless. The duke, in a move commonly associated with rulers who had no heir, decides that he must be rid of his wife and seek a woman who will bear him an heir. In her distress at the impending divorce, the duchess prays for a baby, any baby, conceived in any manner. She is immediately accosted by a demon, in the guise of her husband, who impregnates her beneath a tree in the castle garden before disappearing. Realizing what has occurred, the duchess tricks her husband into bed and passes off the pregnancy as legitimate. What follows is years of torment from a child begotten by a devil: Gowther kills several of his wet nurses by literally sucking the life from them, maims his mother by ripping off her nipple when she tries to feed him, and grows abnormally quickly to full size, exhibiting amazing physical strength as he does so. He is knighted at the age of fifteen in the hope that a life of chivalric duty and behavior will civilize him. This, of course, fails miserably, only serving to train Gowther in the use of arms, thus furthering his power. In shame for what she has brought on the world, Gowther's mother flees to an outlying castle to live out her life. Gowther inherits the duchy and becomes an even worse figure once he is possessed of his legal rights. He murders various priests, rapes an entire convent of nuns, burning down the abbey in the process, tortures and kills people for his own pleasure, and is at all times the worst man possible. This ends the first stage of the tale.

Eventually an old earl, a man who served his father, is brave enough to call the young man to task, arguing (ironically) that he must be the child of some demon. Gowther is

⁶ Dylan Elliot, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

offended by the remark and calls upon his mother to refute this public slight which, of course, she cannot do. In a fit of guilty admission the duchess tells Gowther of his true origins and he, in shame, leaves the duchy and goes to Rome to seek absolution for his very existence from the pope himself.

After the realization of his illegitimacy is validated, the pope instructs Gowther in an act of penance to earn the absolution of the church. He is to become mute, speaking to no man for any reason until released from his penance, and can only accept food that comes from the mouths of dogs. Going out into the world with nothing but his sword, the one badge of his identity that he will not relinquish, Gowther prays for sustenance from God and is met miraculously in the wilderness by a greyhound that brings him a loaf of bread each evening for three days. On the fourth day the hound does not come and Gowther wanders in search of food. He is taken into the court of a wealthy emperor as an invalid mute. As fate would have it, the emperor has a beautiful, mute daughter and is on the verge of a war he cannot hope to win against an evil Sultan who wants to claim his daughter. Gowther humbles himself before the court, sitting on the floor instead of in the seat offered to him, and eating only the spoiled food thrown to the dogs. Here ends the second stage of the story.

After a time, the Sultan attacks with his hordes and Gowther prays for arms and a horse so that he might defend the man who has taken him in, as he feels is his responsibility. Immediately a black charger appears, bearing black arms and a black saddle upon its back. No one sees this miracle occur except the mute princess, who watches the beggar from her tower. Gowther dresses in the arms, careful to lower his visor to hide his identity, and rushes to the field, where he cripples the forces of the Sultan single-handedly with the force and fury

of his martial prowess. He fights, as we would ironically state in the vernacular, “like a man possessed [of a demon].” The Sultan is forced to withdraw and Gowther returns secretly to his quarters. The Emperor is baffled as to the identity of the knight who has saved him, but proclaims his gratitude to the man publicly. Gowther disrobes, placing the armor back on the war horse. When he turns to put on the beggar’s garments the horse and armor miraculously disappear. At dinner that night the princess brings two greyhounds to the meal with her. She ceremonially cleans their mouths and places in them fresh food for Gowther. Thus does she honor the man that only she knows is responsible for the protection of her people and, in particular, herself. It is in this roundabout way that Gowther becomes her personal protector, a role that is often reserved for lovers who are promised to one another in the romance tradition.

The Sultan sends word that he will return the following day with greater numbers and stronger warriors and we see this cycle reoccur twice, each time with a different color horse and armor appearing for Gowther when he prays, red for the second battle and white for the third. During the third battle Gowther slays the Sultan himself, after the Sultan has captured the Emperor. Thus the mysterious knight has earned for himself the undying gratitude of the Empire, as well as the renown due the great knight. But in the process of this final victory Gowther is wounded by a spear and the princess, witnessing what she believes is his death in the field, swoons and falls to her death from the tower window where she has eagerly watched Gowther for so long. Thus ends the third portion of the story.

In the final act of the tale we see the sorrow of the court at the death of the princess. In a move that belies the strength of the Emperor within the Christian hierarchy he sends

earls and barons to Rome to fetch the pope to come and personally speak the mass before the burial of his daughter. When the pope arrives with a retinue of cardinals to absolve the princess and send her soul to heaven, a miraculous event occurs. God revives her, gives her a beautiful voice where before she stood mute, and has her deliver the message of absolution to Gowther, releasing him from his penance. Ironically, this effectively gives Gowther back his voice as well, placing himself and the princess in each other's presence in full view of the royal court and the ecclesiastical court, and giving a stamp of secular and sacred approval to the love between them. As the grandest gesture of the miracle, the pope interprets God's message as releasing Gowther from any fear of being sent to hell, even though his father is a demon and he shared that demonic nature in the beginning of the story:

Ho seyð, "My lord of Heyvon gretys the well,
And forgyffeus the thi syn yche a dell
 And grantys the tho blys;
And byddus the speyke on hardely,
Eyte and drynke and make mery;
 Thu schallt be won of his."
Scho seyð to hur fadur, "This is he
That faght for yow deys thre
 In strong batell, ywys."
Tho Pope had schryvon Syr Gother-
He loved God and Maré ther-
 And radly hym con kys,
And sayð, "Now art thu Goddus child;
The thar not dowt tho warlock wyld,
 Ther waryd mot he be."

(ll 661-675)

She said, "My Lord in Heaven greets you happily,
And forgives you all of your sins
 And grants you joy;
And bids you speak heartily,
Eat, drink and make merry;
 You shall be one of his own."

She said to her father, "This is the man
Who fought for you three days
In great battles indeed."
The pope had shriven Sir Gowther-
He now loved God and St. Mary-
And the pope quickly kissed him,
And said, "Now you are God's child;
You need not fear the devil,
He has been vanquished in you."

(ll 661-675)

This is the ultimate ending that one expects in romance, as all of the loose ends are neatly tied up in the last 80 lines of a work that spans some 756 lines. Gowther and the princess are married and he inherits the empire. Returning home, he gives his duchy (and his mother's hand in marriage) to the old earl who was brave enough to stand up to him and is thus his benefactor because the act set Gowther on the path to ultimate forgiveness. Gowther then founds an abbey (in the castle where his mother first spoke the truth to him? this is ambiguous) and places a group of Benedictine monks there. He also rebuilds the abbey he had burned, placing new nuns and a priest there because of his guilt about the rapes and murders he committed earlier. He reigns "mony a yere" (ln 721) a great emperor, beloved of all Christian people and feared by all Saracens. This is all done, according to the text, "Thoro the grace of God allmyght" (ln 744), and is now a story both good and fine to tell so that we might know that God dwells among us.

Gowther's Message

In contrast to what emerges later in the century, English literature of the first decades of the fifteenth century (and earlier) does not display the same degree or type of interest in treason. Following the security of Henry V's reign (1413-1422) and the hopeful efficiency of conciliar rule during Henry VI's minority (1422-1437), the effectiveness of central governance diminished; social stability and confidence in

authority progressively crumbled. This sociopolitical progression parallels a darkening in the tone of literary treatments of treason.⁷

Though Megan Leitch intends to focus in the above statement specifically on the use of treason as a plot point in specific works of romance, she touches on two important concepts that have spurred the argument of this chapter. First, the entire premise of her work expounds upon the very surmise that has driven this entire inquiry, the effects of the issues of the society on the very fabric and substance of the medieval romance. In particular she points to the weakness of the kingship of Henry VI (r. 1422-1461) and the consequential change in the tone of the romance genre. This understanding becomes further support for the previous elucidation and literary analysis of *Sir Cleges*, which focuses on the need for knights to strengthen their own family lines by stepping away from *largesse* and the more ancient ideas connected with their class to ensure individual stability in the face of kingship that fails to look after its knights. Secondly, her argument continues to highlight what Michael Hicks considers a clear lack of royal authority, which causes a “breakdown of public order” in the 1450s.⁸ This conjecture points to the idea that to solidify some public stability, “the gentry and aristocracy... had to rely upon horizontal networks and friendships as well as hierarchical loyalties in order to maintain social order.”⁹ These horizontal relationships were bounded by clear comradeship of local landholders, titled individuals and localized authorities.

⁷ Megan G. Leitch, *Romancing Treason: The Literature of the Wars of the Roses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8.

⁸ Michael Hicks, *The Wars of the Roses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 40.

⁹ Leitch, *Romancing Treason*, 9.

It is in this context that we see the work come into focus. As a counter to Leitch, whose argument is built upon the concept that mainstream works produced during the mid- to late-fifteenth century focused strongly on pragmatic secular decision-making and solutions, my argument here will consider how *Sir Gowther* focuses on a hopefulness of divine intervention and faith, alongside the staunchness of pragmatic legal rights, preserving the proper balance of power for local lords to maintain their influence when there is no powerful royal authority to turn to. In fact, the dénouement of *Sir Gowther* seeks the authority of the church in resolving the issues at hand, never once looking to the throne for clarity or input.

There is much here to explore, because there are two messages being delivered by the romance. The first is an obvious Christocentrism. Gowther's demonic heritage is seen as the driving force for a story of proper penance and the duty of a knight to the Christian church. However this is not all that the story says. Sublimated just beneath this interpretation is one that speaks even more strongly of purely secular issues. It discusses candidly the importance of patrilineal inheritance, the proper social and physical position and attitude of the knight, the strength of the Western Empire when pitted against the East, and, finally, how just rule should occur from a sovereign.

Observing the story with these ideas in mind, it is possible to connect the ideas of religious approbation as synonymous with secular legitimacy. First we return to Gowther's conception. The imagery of the garden as the place of conception ties readily to Christian myth. The story, at this early point, emulates a tradition that would have been familiar to many, Christian and non-Christian alike. Sexuality revealed in a garden recalls the story of Adam and Eve, in this case the trope highlighting the idea that Gowther is a child conceived

in response to a prayer, a perversion of the concept of immaculate conception. It is telling that the sex act takes place beneath a tree in the garden, and that the act involves Gowther's mother conceiving an evil with a devil and then tricking her husband into unknowingly sharing her sin by accepting the resultant child as his son and heir. Gowther's mother is first terrified of being shunned in a legal act of divorce. It is a common trope of our historical understanding that the creation of heirs was the most important duty of a ruling couple. Failing to conceive an heir endangered everyone in the region, since such a failure would not guarantee the succession and the relative safety of the duchy or its people. An example of this feeling would be the aforementioned death of Henry Raspe, who Matthew Paris decries as an "effeminate soul, lamented by no one" after not providing a viable heir to the throne.¹⁰ Thus, the prayer that Gowther's mother utters in the garden is not one that specifically asks for or accepts the idea of committing a sin, as the figure of Eve was castigated for by the ancient church, but is a prayer for the keeping of her legal and social position. The work says:

Scho preyd to God and Maré mylde
Schuld gyffe hur grace to have a child,
On what maner scho ne roghth
(ll 64-66)

She prayed to God and Mary mild
That they bless her with a child,
In what manner [this occurred] she did not care.
(ll 64-66)

¹⁰ Matthew Paris, *The Illustrated Chronicles of Matthew Paris*, 17.

What is the flaw in this prayer that would have God send a demon to bed her? It is the trope of the flawed wish, which we see in stories of djinn from the East.¹¹ In wishing for a child “by any means” the duchess intends to protect her social position and balance her legal obligations to the duchy. What she does, however, is open herself to damaging repercussions by failing to stipulate that the conception of the child happen within the bounds of her marriage, which is the true fulfillment of her legal obligation. Further, the sexual betrayal of the duchess is hidden to continue to protect her position in the court, securing the inheritance of the duchy for her child, who is, in point of fact, not even entitled to inherit lands or title since he is not truly of the patrilineal line of the duke.

The imagery of sexuality, conception, and deception in the garden, which brings to mind Christian themes that have been honored throughout literature, masks and overshadows what is articulated here, the proper exercise and responsibility of legal obligation, the exact wording required in a contract, and the social justification of hiding the true parentage of the child. These are themes which would have been of absolute importance to a knightly audience focused on administration of family lands and goods. Thus *Sir Gowther* builds upon the issues at work in *Athelston* and *Sir Cleges*, continuing to highlight the issues of legal rights, praxis, and shifting knightly values that outline the changes that knights had undergone. The gentry and nobility, amidst fears of their own lineage being impugned or of

¹¹ Tales like the *1001 Arabian Nights*, which collects tales from India and the Middle East, are prime examples of stories of powerful genies who offer to use their powers to grant whatever is asked. The twist in many of these stories lies in the result of the request being literally fit to the wording of the request and not the understood intent of the character making the wish. Geraldine McCaughrean, *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

losing their family's goods through false inheritance, would have easily seen this problem for characters of their own station.

The next practical concern embedded here is Gowther's childhood and growth into his position. The evils of Gowther are here attributed to his demonic siring, which makes it easy to explain the action of the tale. First we see Gowther murder nine wet-nurses in the first year of his life and rip off his mother's nipple when she tries to feed him. It would be logical to categorize the supernatural drawing the life from a woman by suckling her as a vampiric manifestation of demonic power within the babe. Yet, there is a social comment here as well. It is important that Gowther is given no ordinary nurses; he feeds only at the breasts of aristocratic women, a concept not common in either medieval tales or historical reality. It is much more common that children be nursed by a woman of the lower household, the body of the aristocratic female being more often reserved for the physicality of sexual love and adoration on the sensual plane, and on the practical plane because of the need for additional children to buttress the line of succession against the many common causes of childhood death during the time, as nursing was thought to delay further pregnancies.¹² The commentary underlying this romance is not focused on the demonic origin of the child, but on the fact that the heir to the seat of power is illegitimate. Gowther kills only the finest of the aristocracy as a metaphor for the destruction that his ill-gotten position will wreak upon the lineal line of the court. He destroys the mothers of the court, physically ending the proper

¹² Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001). Orme lays out the multiple diseases, defects and other causes of childhood illness and death in his treatise. He has a special section devoted to these issues and the subsequent problems brought upon families in dealing with these deaths on pages 106-128.

progress of the lines of inheritance in the duchy. This too is inherently a statement on the legal ramifications of an illegitimate child being moved into a position to inherit the power of a legally enthroned father. This observation is taken to its extreme conclusion in the blaming of an unfaithful wife for the demise of the proper patrilineal line when Gowther's own mother attempts to suckle him and has her nipple torn from her breast as a result. This moment of grotesque description (ll 126-32) encapsulates the culpability of the duchess' failure to be a properly righteous mother figure to the court. The source of nourishment for the child she is responsible for is disfigured, a symbolic replacement of the disfiguring of the social order caused by her falsehood in placing Gowther as heir. In essence, she fails in feeding her child because she has failed to provide the "nourishment" she should give the court by providing a rightful heir.

In the second episode of the work we find the old earl confronting the now adult Gowther. Having inherited his father's title as duke, Gowther has begun a reign of terror. For him killing priests, raping nuns, burning abbeys, and generally torturing members of the populace at will are pastimes. He refuses to attend mass, will not be shriven, and is in all ways a figure of the devil:

Now is he Duke of greyt renown
And men of holy kyrke dynggus down
Wher he myght hom mete.
Masse ne matens wold he non here
Nor no prechyng of no frere,
That dar I heyly hette;
Erly and late, lowed and styll,
He wold wyrke is fader wyll
Wher he stod or sete.
(ll 169-177)

Now he is a Duke of great renown
And he strikes down men of the holy church
Wherever he happens to meet them.
He will hear neither Mass nor matins
Nor the preaching of any friar,
That I solemnly swear;
All day long, whether it is peaceful or not
He would do the work of his true father
Wherever he would go.
(ll 169-177)

The reference to the will of his father here speaks of the devil who sired him, reminding the audience of the reality of Gowther's paternity. It is important that this is rehearsed for the audience, so that the hearer is not at all surprised when the old earl makes his accusation that Gowther is indeed the literal spawn of Satan (ll 205-12). When the accusation is made, Gowther, a titanic figure of evil, who might logically murder the man where he stands, is offended by the challenge to his paternity and goes to his mother to ask who his father is. Why do we not see the instantaneous fury of a man so vile that he would rape a nun in her cloister? He is described as being capable of killing men with such force that a single sword stroke can cut through two horses, and yet an old man can stay his hand with an accusation? It is obvious in this scene alone that paternity and rightful inheritance are given primacy in this tale. Gowther does not even hesitate to act out against the church and all of its representatives, but he is forced to move by an accusation of false lineage. At this point the focus of this work is squarely the issue of legal inheritance and social acceptance. We next follow Gowther to his mother, who has removed herself to a fortified castle to hide from her shame at her son's cruelty. After his mother admits to him that he was fathered by a demon, Gowther, who has been unmoved by any of the atrocities he has committed throughout the

story, is suddenly stricken. The realization that he is illegitimate, and thus illegally in possession of his inheritance, sends him forth in search of absolution. It is this point that moves the plot, as Gowther goes forth to face his penance, thus setting off the events of the second half of the romance.

Property Rights and False Piety

The second half of the work focuses on Gowther's journey from "sin" to "absolution." Having met with the pope and been given rules for his penance, Gowther finds himself forced to give up his armor, forsake his duchy, and refrain from speech and eating at table as befits the station that he has become accustomed to.¹³ In this we see that Gowther is labelled as illegitimate not just in the sense of legal inheritance. His existence among the knightly class has been a sham, a theft of rights and privileges he is not certain that he is due. He has no standing in the social order, no financial claims to press, and no business acumen with which to recommend himself. He has been a purely physical being, behaving as he has because of a belief that it was his legal right to do so. As master of his father's lands, he would have physically owned the commons whom he has so long mistreated. As his chattel they were his to treat as he would. Without this claim his behavior is cast into a completely different light, making his action akin to those of a common thief, abusing property that he has no claim to.

¹³ For a detailed discussion of the privileges and responsibilities a knight was trained to see chapter two of Ruth Mazzo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 20-66. For a discussion of the accoutrements of a knight see Alan Baker, *The Knight: A Portrait of Europe's Warrior Elite*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2003).

Spending three days in the wilderness, Gowther is filthy and wan when he is taken in at the court of the emperor. He has essentially gone from a falsely earned nobility, according to the laws of patriarchy, to a state of absolute poverty. He sits on the floor beneath the table at mealtimes, and continues to eat only what he can have from the mouths of the dogs. Margaret Robson states that Gowther rejects and is rejected by the courtly world, which “results in his living like a brute beast.”¹⁴ The only badge of office that Gowther retains is his falchion, hidden amongst his rags yet marking him a man of martial value, a knight. If his penance forces Gowther to forsake his position, why is he allowed to retain this piece of his identity? The answer lies in the next scene of religious focus: the miracle of the armor.

When Gowther prays to assist the emperor he brings to light two of the other major themes hidden within this story. Thus far we have dealt only with the issue of lineage, but there is more here. First there is the advent of the Sultan. The text sets him as an enemy to all of Christendom, and another character of evil reputation emerges as foil to Gowther. Robert Rouse discusses the use of romance in the creation of national identity, citing such characters as Guy of Warwick and Havelok as creating national pride by taking to the field to annihilate the heathen Other of the Saracens or other Eastern peoples.¹⁵ If these figures instill national pride, then what may we call it when a character cast as evil incarnate is still a hero when compared to a Saracen king? Even the most vile and lowly of Western knights, one who is a demon himself, shines in comparison to the eastern Other, in this case even one who is

¹⁴ Margaret Robson, “Animal Magic: Moral Regeneration in *Sir Gowther*,” *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 22, Medieval Narrative Special Number, (1992), 145.

¹⁵ Robert Allen Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005).

disgraced. Gowther has no claim to glory of knighthood at this stage of the work, he is an outcast. However he has taken the oaths of knighthood, though he has never lived by any of them. Where Nancy Bradbury questions the erosion of oath-based relationships in *Athelston*, citing Wymound's dishonesty toward Egelond, and the king's disregard for Egelond's honorable oath of brotherhood,¹⁶ here we see the author of *Sir Gowther* move in the opposite direction, showing that the oath of the knight is still binding, even when it is never exercised. This is both a religious and a political moment in the work, giving validity not only to Christianity over Islam,¹⁷ but also the West as a culture over the East.¹⁸ The seemingly religious focus of this moment is further elaborated, however, by the three sets of armor in which Gowther fights. The sequence of black, red, and white armor can easily be seen as a metaphorical device alluding to the steps of Gowther's salvation. The black armor embodies the foul, sinful state of his soul at the beginning of the work, the red the blood of Christ that absolves him of his sin, and the white speaks of his soul washed clean. Such a view makes sense in a solely Christian reading of the work, but there is also a more complex meaning played out here in the context of social acceptance and place.

¹⁶ Nancy Mason Bradbury, "The Erosion of Oath-Based Relationships: A Cultural Contest for *Athelston*," *Medium Aevum* 73, no. 2 (2004): 189-204.

¹⁷ The very words used to call for crusade created visions of unholy practices by Saracens and non-Christian peoples. An example can be found in *The Crusades: A Reader*, Readings in Medieval Civilizations and Cultures: VIII, Ed. S. J. Allen and Emilie Amt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 40-42; chronicling of Urban II's call for the first crusade by Robert the Monk, which attributes to Urban II horrific images of blood sacrifice and other such practices among the followers of Islam.

¹⁸ In her work *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*, Geraldine Heng discusses the use of romance to forward cultural beliefs by inscribing stereotypes onto characters as reinforcement of common beliefs. Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003): 63-114.

order. Without any skills other than his martial ferocity, Gowther cannot recast himself as in our other exemplars. He has been designed by the author in such a way that he can only exist as a weapon, only as a martial figure that aligns him with a nostalgic knighthood. That is the only road to redemption that will allow Gowther to regain his former status, service to church and crown that makes his violence acceptable. He is still an animal, but because his violence is directed outward at a non-Christian Other, the pope forgives his transgressions. Further, the aspect of the work that create his situation, his illegitimacy in the landed aristocracy, can only be righted by a marriage that legitimizes him. The knightly audience is aware of his demonic parentage, therefore he cannot be reinvested in the society in any way that is tied to a patrilineal heritage. The betrayal of her husband has tainted the matrilineal line of his mother, making it equally problematic for him to achieve respectability again in that way. What is left to Gowther is that he must be “civilized” through a line not his own, and that can only be accomplished through marriage. It is for this reason that Gowther was allowed to keep his falchion, for without his acceptance of his knightly position and the restrictions on his social acceptance that come with it, we would never see him forgiven.¹⁹ His sword must go with him as surely as Arthur must extract and carry Excalibur; it symbolizes the social position and responsibilities that he must accept to be truly fulfilled. For Gowther, that can only be accomplished by accepting that his elevation into the ranks of knighthood is based on

¹⁹ The meaning of Gowther’s weapon has been discussed by many scholars. The fact that he carries a falchion, a nonstandard sword for a western knight, one more synonymous with his eastern enemies in romance, has raised questions about how he is further set apart and differentiated as a knight. An example of these works would include E. M. Bradstock, “The Penitential Pattern in *Sir Gowther*,” *Parergon* 20 (1974): 3-10 which discusses how Gowther’s use of a Saracen sword would help underline his persecution of the church and its functionaries early in the work.

the rightful position of someone else, in this case the princess. Returning to the idea that begins this chapter, Payling's comment on the nature of social mobility through marriage proves to be accurately shown in *Sir Gowther*, and a lesson in upward mobility is sketched out for talented men seeking a way into the upper classes. A talent that is useful to crown or church creates the possibility of a good match, bringing even a demon an opportunity at a new social position.

In the final act of this romance we see the final miracle played out in the pronouncement of Gowther's absolution and his marriage to the resuscitated princess. It is in the denouement that we see the social commentary of *Sir Gowther* come full circle. With his marriage to the princess, Gowther becomes an official and, more importantly, legitimate part of a patrilineal line of nobility, and immediately the fierce demonic warrior is transformed into a man of great merit. Emphasizing that he has learned his lessons well, Gowther founds abbeys as payment for the clerics he killed in his past life (much like the historical Athelston gaining favor with the church by founding monasteries) and settles his father's duchy with the man who gave him the impetus to learn his proper role in the society, the old earl, by marrying the earl to his mother. Gowther has come to understand the rules of land ownership intimately, and in this proves his understanding of how marriage is used as a tool of social mobility in the knightly classes. It is ironic that the final lines of the romance speak to the power of inscribing these social structures onto the audience through the written word, harkening back to the statement of Leitch at the beginning of this analysis, discussing the power of the written word:

This is wretton in parchemeyn,

A story bothe gud and fyn
Owt off a law of Breyteyn.
Jhesu Cryst, Goddys son,
Gyff us myght with Hym to won,
That Lord that is most of meyn. Amen
(ll 751-56)

This is written on parchment,
A story good and fine
[Crafted] out of a lay of Britain.
Jesus Christ, God's son,
Give us the strength to dwell with him,
The Lord that is the omnipotent power. Amen
(ll 751-56)

The word “law” while it is translated here as “lay” also gives us a final hint that what is written here is not simply a story, but a commentary on the law and social structure of the time.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the etymology of the word law allows for these multiple meanings, coming from the Old English word *lagu* meaning both “layer” or “something fixed in place.” We see the specific workings of a particular layer of the English people, the landed gentry, as well as the fixed rules that now govern place within that group. The work, in and of itself, teaches us the proper application of the law as it stands when the work is written, and it makes that *hidden* meaning understood quite plainly as it speaks directly to the audience, almost like a moral attached to a children’s fable to elucidate the implication of the work without ambiguity. *Sir Gowther* speaks to us from a place that is secular, and though it has religious overtones that highlight the important moments of the work, each and every one of these moments can be read as a comment on the knightly social hierarchy, and the legal problem of proper lineage and inheritance, highlighting the

importance of this issue in a world constrained by the more formalized legal system into which knighthood had evolved.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The works that make up this corpus each provide an exemplar with which I have illuminated a particular facet of the issues that accompanied the shift of the knight from his martial role into his later administrative one. While I have segregated out each romance with an eye toward highlighting a particular facet in each, that is not to say that the romances do not collectively illuminate multiple constructs of the knightly community. In looking at the construct of oath taking and contracts, the importance of the bonds created by contracts and oaths and what can be done to enforce and/or manipulate situations based on them is central to all four of these tales and their design.

Sir Gowther ends with the eponymous knight learning what is required of him to legitimate his place in the knightly ranks. He does so utilizing the tool of marriage, an institution that is based on an inherently contractual arrangement. Coupled with learning to make and keep oaths, as he accepts the emperor as his lord and folds himself within the church, in line with the vows of knighthood that he at last learns to uphold, Gowther has become a complete member of the knightly class. He is said to rule wisely as emperor, which we can take to mean that he administered his empire skillfully. What Gowther learns concerning the nature of how to legitimize his existence via these contracts carries us to issues of evidence, contracts, and public oath-taking that set the stage for the legal and social shifts that motivated the reshaping of knighthood. Likewise, in *Athelston* a king learns to circumscribe his power within the bounds of the contracts that his position inherently demands. Despite being king, he is not all-powerful. He is subject to the laws of his land,

laws designed to place authority in the hands of a jury of knights to decide what actions he is allowed. Despite his position in the work as an antagonist, Athelston highlights the importance of maintaining oaths, as he is forced to recognize that oath making is a reciprocal exercise, creating responsibilities for both the maker and the receiver of the oath. The social contract of the monarch, that he is responsible for the wellbeing of his subjects and that they in turn allow him to remain in power, is foregrounded within that work, even as it outlines where the power within that relationship lies. The reciprocal nature of this particular relationship exchanges absolute power for the support of the knights in not opposing the decisions of the king or seeking to depose him as ruler. Athelston's realization of this necessary cooperation frames the final half of the work, as he reaches a crisis point where his knights admit, in lines 519-530 of the romance, that they will depose him rather than allow him to fail in placing their wellbeing ahead of his own authority.

Similarly, an understanding of how the responsibilities of oath taking can be manipulated is pertinent to the resolution of *Sir Cleges*. When Cleges recognizes that his oaths to the porter, the outer door guard and the steward have effectively robbed him of all potential material gain in his transaction with the king, he shrewdly recognizes that the wording of his oath is open ended enough to allow him to take advantage of the three men. As they sought to extract oaths from Cleges that would benefit each of them to his detriment, they failed to be exact in their wording, which allowed Cleges to keep his oath while actually delivering to each of his erstwhile business partners a return that is a negative for each of them. Instead of financial riches each man receives a series of violent blows as payment of their contracts. *Sir Cleges* creates a situation wherein characters who are inattentive to the

details of their oaths are punished with negative physical consequences by a partner in the oath taking process who is shrewder in interpreting the contract created. This work builds on what is highlighted in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: the importance placed on oath-taking and the conflicts that arise from entering into multiple contracts simultaneously. In the case of Gawain, the contracts into which he enters place him at a crossroads where the only ostensible way for him to physically survive is to break one or another of his oaths, rendering him ashamed and dishonored at the close of the work.

Sir Gowther plays on the contractual aspect of oaths of rulership, much as is the case in *Athelston*. At the beginning of the romance Gowther is a lord who refuses to acknowledge the reciprocal nature inherent in his rule. He chooses, much as Athelston does, to act according to a paradigm where he has complete authority and can act with impunity determining issues of life, death, safety, and the physical sanctity of those he is responsible for ruling over. The difference in the issues at stake for the two knights is that Gowther is found to be an illegitimate son, making him incapable of properly engaging in oath making as a lord, because he does not have legal standing as one. This crisis in the oath relationship between rulers and those ruled caused by illegitimacy destroying the legal position that underpins these oaths of rule becomes the focus of chapter five of this work.

The issue of succession, studied here utilizing *Sir Gowther*, is likewise reflected in other works. *Athelston* approaches this issue concretely as well, focusing on the problem as a crisis point during the establishment of an administrative superstructure within knighthood. The end of *Athelston* highlights how the movement toward a more constrained royal authority built on the support of the baronage is rewarded with a stable line of succession for

the throne, something vital to the survival of the kingdom. Because his rage earlier in the work results in the death of his own son, Athelston the king must honor his oath of rule, (again bringing to bear the “contract” to which he is held as a ruler,) by providing an heir to the throne, ostensibly assuring a peaceful legal succession that heads off the possibility of a hotly contested battle among the aristocracy. When Lady Edith progresses across the first three plowshares she is hit with terrible labor pains, causing her to stop and weather the onslaught. She is unscathed by the flames and the knights pronounce her innocence as well, reestablishing her legitimacy as a member of the royal family. Highlighting that the law has been rightly observed the author includes a miracle at this point in the story:

They comaundyd men here away to drawe,
As it was the landys lawe;
And ladyys than tyl here yode.
She knelyd down upon the ground
And there was born Seynt Edemound:
Iblessed be that foode! (ll 645-650)

They commanded the men to draw away,
As was the law of the land;
And the ladies went to her,
She kneeled down upon the ground
And Saint Edmond was born there;
Blessed was that child! (ll 645-650)

The child who is born to Lady Edith is St. Edmund, whom Athelston immediately gifts with half of his kingdom, naming him his heir and promising the remainder of the kingdom to be turned over to him when the king dies. The story squares the king’s responsibility to his knights in proclaiming Edmund as his heir, having that line of succession ratified by the acclaim of the knightly jury present. This again shows the judgment of the knights as the ultimate conduit to power in this administratively focused system. Their authority as a legal

panel is used to ratify the very succession of the throne. Secondly, however, the last act of the work also showed how the shrewdness of the merchant class could be used for great profit, that the merchant class, as represented by Athelston the messenger as he rises to the equal of the knights, archbishop, and dukes who represent the highest echelon of power in the story, was a vital tool in the control that knights were able to exert upon the kingdom. Dickerson argues that the messenger highlights the shifts in power in the story. His view is that the messenger's activity articulates the movement of the plot. Athelston the messenger serves, at each point he is referenced in the text, whomever is given primary power at that moment.¹

I hold that this shrewdness of the merchant class, to always have a keen eye to always find the paths to power, was feared by the gentry. Because knights had exercised power through physical prowess alone, they were unprepared for the changes that they themselves wrought in legal authority and what those alterations would do to the way in which power was gained and maintained in England. Even in *Sir Cleges* the return of the knight to a station of prominence is the result of finally understanding where the brutality of knightly warfare could be deployed within the space carved out by legal wrangling. Cleges overcomes the three men of lesser rank not through his use of words directly, but by the shrewdness to understand where interpretation of words would allow him to utilize what he knew best, raw physicality. It is an open question to be considered whether Uther actually raised Cleges back to respectability because he saw in him a man who succeeded in joining the savagery taught by knightly training in arms with the legal wrangling that was beginning to secure wealth and

¹ Dickerson, *The Messenger in Athelston*, 123.

power for the rising mercantile and administrative classes. The merchants, already well versed in the alliances required to climb the rungs of power, as discussed in chapter two, were worthy allies in instructing the knightly class in the new paradigms of power during this transition, but they were also to be kept in a lower position for as long as possible to secure a continued place for martially trained men who were losing ground as the main social force of the nation.

At the close of this work it is important to return to the concept with which it began, Herman Pleij's supposition that "the power of the pen... [is] the authority to inscribe a space of distinct moral and cultural practices."² It is certain that between the years of 1100 and 1500 a shift occurred in the hierarchy of medieval England tied to a codification of oaths and contracts, suddenly made more binding by a textually based administrative culture that provided records that could be used in settling disputes in court rather than on the field of battle. Knights, long a martial force whose status as warriors made them an important class, underwent a transition in their identity as a social group that found them as administrators in the legal realm as professional jurists, record keepers, and managers of royal assets rather than as soldiers. During this period, the knight served as the main character of the literary tradition known as romance. As the romance evolved in England the tales became strongly focused, depicting specifically English landscapes and themes. As the role of the knight changed in the physical world of England, so too did the character shift within the fantastic realms of the romance, both the grand *epic* and the shorter *lai*. In keeping with Pleij's position, the romance helped reinvent the knight by changing the milieu in which he was

² Herman Pleij, "Restyling 'Wisdom,'" 689.

presented to the audiences of England. No longer were these tales of battle that highlighted the martial skills of the knight that were to be lauded. Interpreted another way, Pleij's statement also makes a comment on what began to change the world of the knight. The move to an administrative society forced a change not simply in the rhetoric of the stories, but in the real world practice of knights. The keeping of records created a requirement for oaths to be codified and kept in a way that was much more strict than the idea of common memory or simple honor could enforce. The pen, in fact, became more powerful than the pennon. What is represented by the corpus of works examined here is an intersection between the chivalric and penitential romances of earlier eras, creating a knight who is not merely a weapon, but a thoughtful social being searching for his proper role within a society that challenges him intellectually, emotionally, and most importantly legally. These knights are designed not to be emulated in charging into the fray for the church or the monarch, but to be emulated in bending their personal will to the requirements of a system of order based in oath contracts, codes of law, and group social dynamics. What the knights extant in these romances of the later medieval period represent is a subservience not to the crown, but to the greater social and legal structures created by waves of baronial reform that occurred during the early Middle Ages, one that resulted in a very changed set of circumstances for the English knighthood.

Because of the nature of the Middle English romances analyzed here, with their unnamed authors and the paucity of extant copies and/or dating elements for the original authoring of the works, it is difficult to make definitive statements about what the original authors of the works might have been focused on when these tales were designed. What I

hold to be more certain, is that the compilers and/or patrons of the medieval manuscripts of these romances can be seen, by the hypotheses fleshed out here, to have had distinct moral and cultural intentions in the selecting and ordering of the works. Such intentions were to use the knight of romance as a tool to inform the audiences of these works that these changes in the knight and his position were (1) correct in the sight of God, (2) beneficial for the greater good of the kingdom, and (3) as laudable as previous examples of violence and valor were held to be. What has been attempted here, to utilize the manuscripts to place the works within a temporal frame capable of literary and historical analysis to yield new readings of these works, is a first step in distilling a method which can be employed to interrogate the works of medieval romance more fully. Utilizing the multiple overlaying frames of literary close reading, manuscript and historical analysis in refining a hypothesis creates a finer approach to these romances than before, with the intent that such might highlight the importance of the figure of the knight as a stock character. More directly, this work serves as an interrogation of the shift of knights in the real world from their martial role into an administrative one and how that change is reflected in the world of romance as a way of communicating this evolving set of morals and social mores to an audience through the manipulation of characters that already had a prominent place in the society.

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VITA

Larry Michael McCloud was born on July 19, 1975, in Saginaw, Michigan. He was educated in the local public school system and graduated from Saginaw High School as class salutatorian in 1993. He was a National Merit Scholarship Finalist, won the Michigan Competitive Scholarship and was named Mid-Michigan Science Scholar by Dow Chemical Corporation. He received a National African American Achievement Scholarship, and a George Washington Carver Memorial Scholarship to attend Iowa State University, from which he graduated in 1997, and was named State of Iowa Promising Teacher by the Iowa State Council of Teachers of English. His degree was in English, with an emphasis in education.

Arriving in Kansas City to teach and coach at North Kansas City High School, he immediately began his master's program at Baker University, completing a Master of Liberal Arts degree in three disciplines, English Literature, Philosophy, and Religious Studies in May, 1999.

In August of 1999, Mr. McCloud accepted a teaching position at Park Hill High School. In August of 2001, he was awarded a Kemper Minority Fellowship by the University of Missouri-Kansas City and began his doctoral training there. The following year he was awarded a School of Graduate Studies Preparing Future Faculty Fellowship by the institution.

In August of 2004, Mr. McCloud accepted a position as an instructor at Metropolitan Community College, joining the English Department as a junior faculty member. In 2010,

with his didactic training complete, he was awarded a Chancellor's Dissertation Fellowship to begin work on his doctoral dissertation. In August 2011, he was asked to serve as the Interim Associate Dean of Instructional Services at the Penn Valley campus of Metropolitan Community College. During that same year he was awarded the Ilus Davis Teaching Fellowship by the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He served in the interim Associate Dean role at Penn Valley for one year before being formally appointed to the position of Associate Dean in 2012. In 2014 he was appointed Dean of Instruction at the Blue River Campus of Metropolitan Community College. In July 2016, Mr. McCloud accepted the position of Chief Academic Officer of Johnson County Community College. Upon completion of his degree requirements, Mr. McCloud plans to continue his career in higher education and to pursue his research and writing interests.

Mr. McCloud is a member of the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship, The Missouri Community College Association, and The Ancient Order of Free and Accepted Masons.