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HUMOR IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH METRICAL ROMANCES

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Timothy Eugene Dykstra, B.A., M.A.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University

1975

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Someone embarking on a study of humor in the Middle English metrical romances must first assure his reader that there is in fact something to examine. Among scholars there has been a general assumption that the romances have very little if any humor. This assumption is so general that the issue is hardly even raised, and only in passing when it is. While it is true that humorous incidents do not dominate the genre, it is not true that these works are altogether humorless. As one reads the romances carefully he can identify literally hundreds of humorous incidents scattered throughout the narratives.

There are, however, a number of difficulties presented by the material, which significantly influence any examination of these humorous incidents and which must be outlined briefly before we actually begin that study. First, the amount of material one must handle is massive: there are about one hundred romances and the narratives themselves can run into thousands of lines each. Also, there is no precise corpus with which one can work. As popular literature, romances were compiled by a variety of writers, were translated from one language to another, were added to and altered frequently, all over a long period of time. There was no formal set of rules these romancers agreed to follow while writing. Consequently, the genre defies efforts to classify it neatly and permanently into one or more categories. Second, the broad topic of humor is so complex that it defies efforts to limit it through absolute definitions and classifications. There are no contemporary medieval theories for the use of humor in the romances that have come down to us and there is no modern system which lends itself readily to the analysis of this vast bulk of material.

These three difficulties impose two broad limitations upon any study of humor in the romances. First, absolute definitions are impractical for this investigation. Because the matters being examined are so complex, one would quickly get bogged down were he to endeavor to construct rigid and
comprehensive definitions for key terms. So, instead, if the study is to get under way, only working definitions can be offered, definitions which are sufficient for the reader to know generally what I have in mind and which will grow clearer as the particular discussions of humorous incidents proceed. The two words which require at least working definitions are "humor" and "romance."

By "humor" I mean that quality which amuses a character within a romance, the audience of the romance, or both. It is achieved by establishing a dichotomy between two parties in which one derives some enjoyment or pleasure from sensing superiority over the other. The sense of superiority results from one person not fulfilling the expectations another holds for him. The purposes of humor can vary. Humor may be intended to delight, to ridicule, or to do both.

When something within the romance strikes a character as humorous the romancer will usually have that character laugh, thus making it relatively easy to recognize an instance of internal humor. It is more difficult to identify instances of external humor, instances in which someone outside the romance is amused by something in it. There are, however, a couple of clues which can suggest when the audience might be amused. The romancer often uses the laughter of his character to hint that the audience should laugh also. The audience is invited to share the perspective of the laughing character, to join him in his amusement. At other times the romancer may use a more subtle means to encourage his audience to see something humorously. The romancers establish norms within their stories that are generally quite clear to the audience. If a character in the romance violates those norms, very often the audience feels free to laugh at him. It is not appropriate for the audience to laugh at normal behavior or at the norms themselves, however. I am thus excluding from my study incidents which may seem humorous to a modern reader merely because he is ignorant of medieval attitudes and beliefs. For example, in Havelok the Dane there are instances where a miraculous beam of light shines forth from the hero's mouth. A twentieth-century reader might suppose that a picture of a huge, strapping man lying in a bed, his mouth open and light pouring from it, was meant to be a bit ridiculous. But to do so would be to ignore the complete seriousness with which miracles such as this were received by the medieval audience. Laughter at Havelok here would simply be the result of cultural provincialism and would violate the romancer's intentions.
The second term requiring definition is "romance," a word almost as problematic as "humor." For my purposes, however, Helaine Newstead's definition can suffice:

The medieval romance is a narrative about knightly prowess and adventure, in verse or in prose, intended primarily for the entertainment of a listening audience. Didactic elements, to be sure, appear in some romances, but they are subordinate to the aim of entertainment. Although romancers draw upon an extremely broad range of subjects, the story is presented, even for bourgeois audiences, in terms of chivalric life, heightened and idealized according to the varying imaginative powers of the individual authors, whether pedestrian, crude, or genuinely sensitive to poetic values. The effort to idealize chivalry produces simplified characters, either heroes or villains, without psychological subtleties, and the happy ending is customary. Innocence is vindicated, virtue rewarded, and wickedness punished or cast out by repentance....Another marked characteristic is the conspicuous presence of the supernatural....

The English romances that have been preserved appear relatively late in the history of the genre, a few after the middle of the thirteenth century, the rest in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Most of them are based upon French originals composed after the continental romances had begun to deteriorate in artistic quality if not in number....

The English romances appear in a variety of forms. The four-stress couplet...is common; and many romances are composed in tail-rhyme stanzas, either short or long....An important group of romances, usually of West Midland, Northern or Scottish origin, are written in alliterative meter....Prose becomes a medium for romances after 1400.4

Although all scholars might not agree on exactly which works do or do not belong to the genre, a rough consensus has developed. This consensus is most conveniently reflected in the first fascicule of Severs' revision of A Manual of the Writings in Middle English and the Lists of Publications published by the Early English Text Society.5 My study largely accepts the works listed in these two sources as a canon with which to work.6

Just as the difficulties inherent in this study prohibit an absolute and completely satisfactory definition of crucial terms, so too they present the study's method from
being definitive. The sheer volume of the material being investigated requires some sort of classification of kinds of humor. Yet the complexity of that material makes almost any classification simplistic. The reader should be warned, therefore, that I present here not an exhaustive, absolute system of classifying humor in the romances but rather a tentative system, one designed to suggest tendencies of such humor. The method is also temporary. That is, I have divided humorous instances into different types in order to facilitate a more detailed examination of each. Such a sharp division of humorous incidents by type does not, of course, appear in the romances themselves. Rather, the types often overlap one another and can even exist concurrently.

The humorous incidents in the romances seem to fall into four broad categories. The first of these, character humor, is the most general. It concerns the romancer's fondness for using humor a figure in his narrative. It would be possible, of course, to argue that all humor in these works is of this type since all humorous incidents influence the audience's attitude toward some character. Nevertheless, I will limit my discussion to (a) incidents in which the writer includes humor primarily to influence characterization and to (b) characters whose humorous qualities are also their most dominant qualities. The other three categories mark three general topics around which humorous incidents tend to cluster. All three, like the first, seek to entertain the audience, but each does so in different ways. Some humor focuses on contemporary socio­logical matters, some is erotic humor, and some is of a dark or grotesque sort, appealing to sadistic impulses. My study takes up each of these types in turn and examines how they operate in the genre.

While these four categories, or combinations of them, can provide some point of reference for almost all instances of humor in the romances, there is one work, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, for which this classification of humorous incidents is insufficient. This poem has these conventional types of humor but it has another, unusual kind of humor as well. My final essay not only discusses this different kind of humor but also provides an overview for my entire study by contrasting the humor unique to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight with that of the four conventional types.

I have already noted that the four conventional kinds of humor are not necessarily mutually exclusive, that more than one type can appear simultaneously in a single romance or episode. In order to emphasize the importance of this point and to demonstrate how such a confluence may occur, I
wish here to select one romance, showing briefly some of the multiple types appearing in it. Although any one of several romances could be used, I shall discuss Sir Beves of Hampton, a tale that enjoyed widespread popularity throughout Europe and England.

Beves contains examples of not only all four types of humorous incidents but also single episodes in which more than one type operate simultaneously. Chapter II, "Character Humor," notes the romancers’ fondness for depicting heroes as naive youths just beginning their glorious careers. The young Sir Beves is such a youth. After his dubbing his very first combat is the result of having been humiliated by a group of Saracens. When asked by one of the Saracens which day it was—that is, which significant Christian holy day—Beves has to confess that he did not know since he had been sold into heathendom when he was but eight. The Saracen is delighted that he knows the day's significance better than Beves the Christian for it is one of the most sacred of Christian moments, the celebration of Christmas. The narrator explains:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{be Sarsin be-held and lou3:} \\
'\text{bis dai,' a seide, 'i knowe wel inou3:} \\
\text{bis is be dai of 30ul,} \\
\text{be god was boren wip outen doul.}
\end{align*}
\]

(11. 599-602)

Here it is only the Saracen himself who is delighted by Beves' ignorance. The others who might possibly sense humor here, the audience and Beves, do not. The audience has been prevented from joining the Saracen in laughing at Beves' ignorance by the rationalization for that ignorance which the romancer is careful to include and by which the audience is supposed to be impressed—Beves has had no reasonable opportunity to learn what day it is. Beves, of course, is not amused by this humiliation and he promptly responds by slaying singlehandedly all fifteen Saracens present.

A humorous incident with social humor occurs in lines 20-49-2146. Beves meets a palmer and exchanges costumes with him, thus setting up possibilities of mistaken identity, one of the stock humorous devices in the romances. In his religious garb with some other palmers he calls upon his true love Josian. Unaware of the palmer's real identity, she inquires whether he knows of Sir Beves of Hampton. Beves and the audience alike can share in their delight at the irony of his reply:
Elsewhere in the poem, Beves' extreme sensitivity to class distinctions often leads him into humorous situations. He is particularly afraid that someone might consider him to be less than noble and this is exactly what happens to him at many points in the narrative. For example, in lines 379-420 a porter refuses him admittance to court; in lines 1125-28 he takes literally a metaphoric accusation that he is a churl; and in lines 1593-1614 he is beaten by a churl with a sword, a weapon only nobles may use. In each of these situations Beves appears as something less than a glorious chivalric hero.

In the very first scene in the romance the writer uses a device often found in instances of sexual humor. He depicts Beves' parents as a January-May couple. He sketches a typical, titillating situation like those often exploited by the fabliaux, one which the medieval audience would have had no difficulty recognizing, even though the humorous potential is not worked out explicitly in the text itself. Beves' father, Guy, waits until his military career is over and he is old before he marries, and, when he finally does so, he weds a young woman. The couple manages eventually to have one child, Beves, but even in this single instance of sexual success, Guy's virility is undercut by the narrator. Like Old January in the fabliaux, Guy is all but impotent. The narrator gives the impression that it probably took Guy some time and effort before he was to impregnate his wife. Their lovemaking is more tedious labor for the old man than anything else.

Man, when he fallep in to elde,
Feble a wexep and unbelde
pour\(^3\) ri\(^7\)t resoun.
So longe \(\hat{p}\)ai \(\hat{p}\)ede to gedres to bedde,
A knaue child be-twene hem \(\hat{p}ai\) hedde,
Beues a het.
Faire child he was & bolde,
He nas boute seue winter olde,  
Whan his fader was ded.  

(11. 46-54)

Poor Guy is just the opposite of the "true man." Lines 49-50 make it sound as though Beves' mother got pregnant almost by default, and by juxtaposing the announcement of Guy's death so closely with the description of the love-making the narrator hints even more strongly how feeble Guy is. Beves' mother responds as May usually does. She is frustrated that her husband cannot satisfy her sexual appetite and she longs for a young knight who could satisfy her. (11. 55-56) It is this sexual frustration which the romancer uses to motivate the actions that propel Beves' life story into motion.

The final incident I would like to discuss combines sexual humor and dark humor. Beves has sent a messenger to his enemy, the Emperor of Almaine. Beves' message so infuriates the Emperor that he throws a knife at the messenger—but he inadvertently slays his own son instead. This affords the messenger an excellent opportunity to scorn the Emperor, an opportunity the messenger seizes upon immediately by saying to him:

'pow gropedest þe wif aniȝt to lowe,  
þow miȝt nouȝt sen ariȝt to þrove;  
þow hauest so swonke on hire to niȝt,  
þow hauest neȝ for-lore þe siȝt.  
Her þow hauest liber haunsel,  
A worse þe be-tide shal!'  

(11. 3105-10)

The messenger, by taking obvious delight in the misadventure of his enemy and by flaunting that delight with a direct insult to the Emperor's very face, is behaving in a typically dark humor manner. His scornful comment is very much a part of the boast and insult tradition so important to dark humor. Upon hearing the messenger's description of the incident, Beves' reaction is identical. He is thoroughly delighted by the Emperor's loss because it is a tragedy for the foe and because his envoy added to the injury with an insult. He is so pleased that he cannot help laughing.

Wel and faire he the messenger hap him diȝt  
& com aȝen to Beues in Wiȝt  
And tolde, a slouȝ is sone for grame;  
Beues louȝ and hadde gode game.  

(11. 3113-16)
It is possible, then, to find more than one of the four types of humor in a given romance or in a given episode, and it is also possible for these types to occur simultaneously. In order to gain a more thorough understanding of each of these types, however, it has seemed more profitable to study them individually. I therefore devote one chapter to each type, studying respectively, character humor, social humor, sexual humor, and dark humor. I believe that almost all humorous instances in the genre fall into one or more of these categories, but--to repeat--I do not claim that these types constitute a definitive catalogue. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for example, requires a separate chapter because it has, in addition to humor of the four types, another kind of humor, a kind unique to that romance. Rather than a final system, this study offers the reader an exploratory method which enables us to being the detailed examination of humor in the Middle English metrical romances.
Endnotes

1It is difficult, of course, to document silence. A few examples of what scholars have said about humor in romances show the widespread assumption that the romances are not humorous. George McKnight, ed., Three Middle English Humorous Tales in Verse (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1931), believes that Sir Cleges is "a unique specimen in English, a humorous metrical romance." (p. xviii) Louis Cazamain, The Development of English Humor (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1952), devotes an entire chapter to "Humor in Middle English Literature Before Chaucer," yet makes almost no mention of Middle English romances. He notes only "the insulting ironies and invectives of Layamon's Brut." (p. 51) In a footnote he mentions the "vigorous realism" in Havelok the Dane, which he says is an "element of some significance, though only related to humor and not exactly humorous." (p. 52) Finally, R. H. Bowers, "Gawain and the Green Knight as Entertainment," Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, eds. Donald R. Howard and Christian K. Zacher (Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 82, while making his point that the frequent laughter in SGGK is unusual for a Middle English romance, digresses to articulate concisely the position of those who find the genre largely humorless:

- The good-natured laughter in Gawain and the Green Knight contrasts sharply with the small amount of laughter in other Middle English romances, most of which are utterly devoid of humor. There is some laughter—but it is usually scornful laughter; the scorn of knights for cowards, of nobles for peasants, or rough Homeric laughter at the physical discomfort of others.

2This paucity of theory for humor actually extends beyond humor itself, for as students of medieval humor and of medieval rhetoric show us, there is not even a substantial body of theory about comedy, of which humor is a part. When it came to the perplexing issues of comedy, it seems, medieval theorists were content essentially with those portions of Cicero and Aristotle that had come down to them. C. S. Baldwin widens this observation still further to observe that medieval poetic theory "went but a little way. Mainly pedagogical formulation, it lagged far behind the most characteristic poetic advance, which was in verse narrative." (p. x) In presenting his own theories about the development of English humor, Louis Cazamain asserts not merely a lack in theory about humor but a lack of early
English humor altogether. (p. 8) Finally, in a dissertation which in part surveys theories of comedy from classical times to the present, Frances Shapiro asserts, "there is no mention of comic form between the fourth and twelfth centuries." (pp. 11-12) See: Charles Sears Baldwin, Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic (to 1400) Interpreted from Representative Works (Gloucester, Mass.: P. Smith, 1959; Louis Cazamain, Development; Marvin T. Herrick, "The Early History of Aristotle's Rhetoric in England," Philological Quarterly 5 (1926), pp. 242-57; Frances Ebstein Shapiro, "Theories of Comedy: An Attempt at Synthesis," Diss. Indiana, 1962.

Although the exact wording here is mine, this definition is derivative. It is not taken from any one source, however, but is influenced by a number of theorists. For example, the sense that humorous events require a dichotomy of some kind can be found in Aristotle's Poetics. For a list of titles which survey modern attempts to define and to understand the related topics of comedy, laughter and humor, see James R. Kincaid, Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 255-56.


This study limits itself, however, to metrical romances. It does not discuss the fifteenth-century and later prose romances or the prose redactions of earlier metrical romances. The one exception to this exclusion is the discussion of Malory's Works, an exception justified on the grounds that his characterization of Sir Kay is crucial to understanding the Sir Kay tradition. Sir Kay is an important figure in Malory's Works and in some ways he is unlike the Sir Kay that appears elsewhere in romance. I exclude prose narratives for two reasons. They would add an excessive amount of material to a mass of literature which is already so large it is difficult at times to manage properly. Also, the prose narratives can be said to be different from the metrical romances. Broadly speaking, they differ because when they were compiled they were intended for the printing press and a reading audience. The metrical romances, on the other hand, were usually delivered orally.
And even a discussion thus limited would extend far too long were every humorous incident discussed, so huge are many of these narratives. Consequently, only a few representative occurrences will be mentioned.


There are other instances where Beves' naivete does delight the audience. One such incident is discussed in the opening paragraphs of Chapter IV "Sexual humor."

Contrast Guy's impotence with the impressive virility seen in Beves' own marriage to Josian, a potency more befitting a true hero:

Now hab Beues al is stat;
Tweie children on hir he be3at
In the formeste 3ere.

(11. 3483-85)

Kolbing's note discusses the traditional nature of this sexual insult. "It is an old medieval belief that the man who has enjoyed his wife too often during the night turns giddy and loses his sight." (p. 321)
CHAPTER II

CHARACTER HUMOR

A character is humorous in the Middle English romances because he is a fool in one way or another. He may appear ridiculous to some other character in the narrative, to the romance audience, or to both, but the crucial point is that, before he can be humorous, someone other than the fool himself must be involved. This other party observes the fool's behavior, judges it in terms of expectations he holds for a given situation, and concludes that the fool fell short of those expectations. The recognition of this shortcoming, in turn, moves the observer of the fool to laughter. Recognizing this basic requirement—that to have a fool there must first be another to judge him thus—Barbara Swain offers the following definition of "fool":

...Whatever his special attributes, the creature behind the mask and the name when he is genuinely one species of the great genus fool has one inevitable characteristic: he appears from some point of view erring and irresponsible. He transgresses or ignores the code of reasoned self-restraint under which society attempts to exist, is unmeasured in his hilarity or in his melancholy, disregards the logic of cause and effect and conducts himself in ways which seem rash and shocking to normal mortals. But he is a fool because his extravagancies are supposed to be due not to intention but to some deficiency in his education, experience or innate capacity for understanding.1

This general definition encompasses many types of fools. In this chapter I discuss the prominent types to be found in the romances.

There are times in these narratives when a character, frequently the hero of the story, will consciously affect the mannerisms Swain describes. In so doing he accomplishes two things. He provides the romance audience with a character who is consistently a ready source for light entertainment since his antics in and of themselves are humorous.
Secondly, because the audience is fully aware that this foolish behavior is merely a facade, the serious reputation of the hero is enhanced, not damaged, by it. When an apparently foolish knight defeats a serious adversary the reader is doubly pleased. Also, many romancers are fond of ironic possibilities in the situation in which someone, a damsel perhaps, fails to recognize the true greatness beneath the hero's foolish mask.

Ipomadon (i.e., Ipomadon B, the couplet version)\(^2\) is an excellent example of a romance with such a fool. The tone of the poem is consistently one of light entertainment, and a good deal of that levity Ipomadon produces by feigning to be a court dandy, a foolish knight. He pretends that he refuses to fight in the three-day tournament, preferring instead the safety of the hunt. After each successive day he returns to court and describes his day of hunting. Those present ridicule him:

\[
\text{All the halle that there were in same,} \\
\text{At hym they loughe and hed game.} \\
\text{(ll. 895-96)}
\]

The audience, however, realizes that Ipomadon had actually just won that day's tournament, fighting incognito, wearing a different color each day. Each evening he makes an ironic reference to this by mentioning the color of the hound with which he had ostensibly hunted, and each day the ironic comment makes him appear less noble, until after the third day the courtiers "lawghyd at hym that myght, / that somme myght not sytte vpright." (ll. 1273-74) Note here the double nature of this humor. On the one hand Ipomadon is funny in the eyes of the other courtiers because he seems to be a dandy. On the other hand the courtiers themselves are objects of ridicule in the eyes of the audience. This latter, ironic humor is very common and is discussed more fully below.

Ipomadon again plays the fool in Fit III. He outfits himself to look ridiculous and then goes to court:

\[
\text{Righte vnsemely, on queynte manere,} \\
\text{He hym dight, as ye shall here.} \\
\text{A barbor he callyd, withouten more,} \\
\text{And shove hym bothe byhynd and before,} \\
\text{Queyntly endentyd, oute and in;} \\
\text{And also he shove halfe his chynne:} \\
\text{He semyd a fole, that queynte syre,} \\
\text{Bothe by hede and by atyre.} \\
\text{Armure he toke that was rusty,} \\
\text{And horsyd hym on an old rouncy;}
\]
An helme as blak as any panne,
A crokyd spere he toke hym than.
Whan that he was thus dight,
He semyd ylle a dogghty knyght.

(11. 1637-50)

The consequences of his wearing such a costume are predictable. Everyone, including the damsel he serves, calls him a "fole" and refuses to take him seriously. The poem's audience, even though not deceived by the disguise, nonetheless has an opportunity to watch a truly ridiculous-looking mock knight for a while. Everything ends happily, however, in keeping with the light-hearted nature of the humor a conscious fool such as Ipomadon produces. Ipomadon proves himself an able warrior to his lady and eventually replaces his foolish costume with an appropriate one:

Whan the foie was wele dight,
The mayde hym semyd a godely knight,
And trowyd wele foie was he none,
By the dedis that he had done.

(11. 1805-08)

The unconscious fool is just as common if not more so than the affected fool. Having a character unwittingly behave before the audience in a truly foolish manner is a favorite technique romancers use to distinguish heroes from villains, good people from bad people. The fool such a technique produces need not be so patently ridiculous as Ipomadon was, but he is ridiculous in some way. Often he is dull-witted and is "tricked" by someone into losing a contest in which the odds all seem to lie heavily in his favor. He is always making a mistake in judgment which neither the one doing the fooling nor the audience of the poem would make. They know better. This gap between the fool's knowledge and the audiences creates humor for the audience.

The courtiers who laugh at Ipomadon, the apparent dandy who refuses to joust, are good examples of unconscious fools. All the time they laugh at Ipomadon they themselves are foolish in the audience's eyes. They are foolish for their inability to perceive Ipomadon's true heroic nature, and for their failure to comprehend the irony in Ipomadon's evening speeches in which he provides a clue that he was actually the mysterious knight who won the day's joust. Each day the color of the mysterious knight coincides with the color of the hound Ipomadon claims to have used on the hung. The courtiers never pick up on the clue, so the audience can enjoy an ever-increasing joke on the courtiers just as they themselves enjoy ever-increasing ridicule of the dandy.
The Kyng Alisaunder the young Greek conqueror who is
the hero of the poem shares with Ipomadon the ability to
out-wit his opponent and to cause that foe to appear
ridiculous in the audience's eyes. Alexander's favorite
victim is Darius, the established ruler of the Persian
world, and he fools Darius in two different instances. In
the first encounter Alexander cleverly re-interprets the
meanings of three gifts Darius had sent him in order to
insult him. Darius sends a messenger with an explanation
of the gifts' significance so there can be no doubt of his
intent:

;pere-fore Ich Darius habbe þee ysent
A top and scourge to present,
And wiþ golde a litel punge,
For þou hast þeres jonge.
Wende þou home þercwip and pleye,
Jch þee rede, jonge boye!

(11. 1725-30)

Sensitive to the demoralizing potential such "gifts" could
have for his invading army, Alexander is quick to apply his
own assessment of the items' significance:

Forbi þis scourge shal signifye
þat J shal wynne þe maistrye
Of Darrye, and also chaste
Hyme and hise, þe moste and þe laste.
þe top that is rounde aboute
Signifieþ also, saunz doute,
þat þe werlde þat rounde is
Shal be myne also, j-wys.
And bitokneþ by þe punge
þat Ich shal of elde and þonge
Of þis midlerde tol afonge.

(11. 1751-61)

Alexander out wits Darius and makes him appear even
more foolish in an incident several thousand lines later.
Here Alexander disguises himself as a messenger and not only
penetrates into the innermost circles of Darius' camp, he
manages to steal a cup from Darius' own table. When Darius
complains of the theft the "messenger" not only escapes suc-
cessfully, he first responds so cleverly that Darius is the
one who is abashed, not the thief:

Darie, þow3 he were agramed,
Of his answere he was ashamed.

(11. 4219-20)

In other words, Alexander has humiliated the Persian leader
and made him a fool in his own court.
The romancer has his young hero playing similar pranks on other unfortunate victims from time to time throughout this eight-thousand line poem. The effect is consistently the same. The audience has fun at the expense of a character in the poem with whom it does not sympathize, and the hero comes out of the incident more glorious than ever.

The Tale of Beryn contains perhaps the most striking and sustained example of a clever hero humilitating someone and thereby making him a humorous fool. The tale, as Furnivall points out in his introduction, "is an awfully long-winded one, based on part of a French prose romance."

Although not original by any means, the story does present a clear picture of both the clever man who pretends foolishness and the man whose foolishness shows once he is outwitted. Briefly, the situation is this. Beryn, the central character in the tale, has been unfairly tricked out of his merchant vessels and wrongly accused of several crimes by citizens of a wicked town who will support any lie a townsman tells in order to get a stranger's wealth. At last he is befriended by Geffrey, a man who had earlier been victimized himself and who seeks vengeance through helping Beryn. Geffery explains that the usual, reasonable method of swearing to the truth to settle legal disputes will fail in this place. The only way to win the court cases against him is to out-wit the "Falsetowners" (as W. G. Stone, one of the editors, calls them) so thoroughly they cannot reply.

Wherfor wee must, with all our wit sensibill,
Such answers vs purvey, bat they been insolibil.

(11. 2621-22)

What follows is a most delightful trial scene in which Geffrey tricks the Falsetowners into believing he is a fool. Geffrey instructs Beryn to make him look foolish. The instructions are effectively carried out, for "ther was no man a-lyve, bet like to a folke / then Geffrey was." (11. 2920-21) After making some opening nonsense remarks he convinces the people "bat he was a folke / naturell of kynde."

(11. 2937-38) His act is so effective, in fact, that Beryn himself gets taken in and reacts angrily when Geffrey berates him along with everyone else. "Leve thy blab, lewd folke: me likith nat thy bord," Beryn cries." (1. 3022). Then, with Hanybald, the Falsetowners' spokesman, sufficiently lulled into a false sense of intellectual superiority, the actual hearing of charges begins with Geffrey acting as Beryn's counsel. The consequences of the trial in which a fool debates the judge have the expected ironic twist to them. Each charge Geffrey answers as though it were a riddle and in each instance he not only acquits Beryn, he
exacts some form of restitution from the plaintiff. The fool makes fools of the Falsetowners, as the narrator observes:

They held hym for a verry fole, but he held hem well more:
And so he made hem in breff tyme, al-bonp pey wer nat shore.

(11. 3425-26)

By carefully depicting Ceffrey as intelligent and shrewd at first, the romancer insures there will be no confusion in the audience's mind as to who is and who is not actually the fool at any point in the story. There is not even a problem when Beryn forgets the game. The juxtaposition of a non-fool who appears to be foolish with an apparently clever man who is actually a fool is a favorite ironic use of the fool generally as a source for humor in the romances.

The Falsetowners and Darius are fools, and thus sources for humor, because they were out-witted by a more clever character. Ipomadon and Geffrey are fools by their own choice. Although both types of fools, unconscious and affected, can generate laughter, they have markedly different effects on the romance audience. Foolishness is a dominant if not a sole characteristic of the unconscious fool. Consequently, the audience's negative judgment of him is complete and frequently quite harsh. He is often an evil character. He is in some way or ways essentially inferior to the assumed ideals held by the audience. The conscious fool, on the other hand, is essentially something other than a fool. He is one with admirable qualities who appears foolish only briefly and for some reason. The audience's judgment of him is tempered by what realization. The parameters of his foolishness are always clearly defined and maintained within the relatively harmless areas of his characterization. This prevents the audience from mistakenly assuming his foolishness is anything but temporary, or that his ennobling qualities might be subject to question.

With these general characteristics of the individual romance fool in mind, I would like to study two specific character types that appear in a large number of romances, and which usually have humorous connotations. Each type is humorous because the character has something of the fool in him. Through such study one can explore the various functions that a character and his accompanying humor, have for the work of which they are a part. One type, the fool named Sir Kay, is unique to Arthurian romances, while the other, the naive youth, appears widely throughout the romances, regardless of "matiere."
The stock figure of Sir Kay affords the Arthurian romances a convenient opportunity for including a humorous character in their plots. Kay is occasionally used merely as another name in a catalogue of names of knights with no pejorative sense intended. Such is the case in Sir Launfal:

Sere Perseuall and Sere Gawayn
Syr Gyheryes and Syr Agrafrayn
And Launcelot du Lake;
Syr Kay and Syr Ewaysn,
bat well couyte fyȝte yn playn,
Bateles for to take.¹

(11. 13-18)

Neutral or laudatory references to Sir Kay such as this, however, are rare, and he is more often ridiculed in one way or another. The jibe may be a one-line, stereotyped tag. Sir Lambewell, at the very beginning of the poem of the same name,² must leave Arthur's court because he has squandered his fortune. As he parts he bids farewell to his fellows by name, including Kay, to whom he says, "ffarwell Sir Kay, that crabbed Knight." (1. 37) The action of The Grøne Knight opens with Sir Bredbeddle challenging Arthur's court "to prous poynts in thy pallace / that longeth to manhood in euerye case / among thy Lords deere." (11. 118-20) Sir Kay is the first to accept the beheading challenge, but he is immediately told by the other knights to be quiet. They would not even consider the possibility that he could be a proper defender of the Round Table's honor.

the bade him all be still,
saith, "Kay, of thy dints make noe rouse,
thou wottest full litle what thou does;
now good, but Mickle ill."

(11. 169-62)

Immediately after this Gawain accepts the challenge and the plot gets under way in earnest.

In both of the above instances reference to Kay is brief, even incidental. He, along with others, is merely part of a catalogue of knights. Such minimal use of Sir Kay is not typical of the poems in which he appears. It is much more common for the romancer to involve him directly and extensively with the narrative's central figure. When Sir Kay is thus involved his involvement can serve two purposes. Limited, it may be a device enabling the romancer to begin the poem's central narrative; when more extensive Sir Kay is a foil to the hero of the romance.
In two poems, *The Turke and Gowin* and *The Weddynge of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell*, Sir Kay is more than just a stock name. He begins to assume somewhat fuller characterization through his activities. In both of these poems Kay does something that is decidedly improper for a knight to do, and in both Sir Gawain contradicts him.

*The Turke and Gowin* begins with a "burne," who was "broad and like a turke," challenging Arthur's court to a buffetting contest. Kay responds immediately, hurling insults at the challenger. Gawain reproves Kay for the discourteous nature of his reply; "cozen Kay, thou speakest not right, / lewd is thy answere." (11. 29-30) Gawain himself then takes up the "turke's" challenge and thereafter the plot concerns the adventures of Gawain. Sir Kay drops from the poem completely once he has eased Gawain into the action.

In *The Weddynge of Syr Gawen*, Kay also voices the improper reaction to a courtly situation only to have Gawain correct him and then assume dominance in the action from that point on. Upon meeting the ugly hag, Kay speaks for himself and all the other knights, except Gawain and Arthur, in his rejection of her as a potential spouse. He would rather die first. (11. 128-47) Gawain's interjection on the hag's behalf moves her to select him as her husband, and thus the story of Gawain's choice, the central plot of the poem, begins.

While neither of these brief passages is humorous, each shows the second, more basic function Sir Kay serves as a romance character. He is the improper knight; he insults without cause. His reply to the completely proper challenge by the "Turke" was unnecessarily and excessively rude. He violated a cardinal rule of chivalry by insulting a woman. The hero, by stepping in and righting these wrongs, not only initiates the poem's central plot line; he also defines good behavior.

In these situations Kay is consistently a foil to the hero, usually Gawain. As such, he not only has attributes directly opposite those of the hero, he becomes involved in activities which serve to underscore his distance from the hero. The poet uses interaction between Sir Kay and his foil to ridicule the undesirable and to praise the desirable in order to define an admirable knight, a common task for these works. This is both the most common and the most important role Sir Kay plays as a humorous character in the romances.

This latter function dominates Sir Kay's more prominent appearances, and in them he remains essentially the same
kind of character—an object of ridicule. This ridicule is consistently, but not always explicitly, justified on the grounds that he had violated knightly decorum in one way or another. At times this ridicule can dominate large sections of a poem, and at others it can be a central theme itself for the entire work. In such cases Sir Kay's character receives its fullest development and its most complete integration into the whole narrative.

Syre Gawene and the Carle of Carelyle opens with Arthur and several of his knights going out to hunt after hearing mass. During the hunt Gawain, Kay and Bishop Bodwin get separated from the group and soon find they are lost. Tiring, Gawain suggests they spend the night in the forest. Kay disagrees. He asserts he'll spend the night in someone's home and no one dares prevent him from doing so. The bishop counters by saying that the Carle of Carlisle, who lives nearby, will prevent him since he permits no one to lodge with him. The three repair to the Carle, Kay boasting in the meantime that if he is refused, "I shall beate [him,] as I thynke, / till he both sweate and stinke." (11. 117-112) As they ride the three consider how best they might gain lodging with the Carle. Gawain suggests they first try "ffaire speeche"; if that does not work they can try Kay's scolding approach. When they arrive at the gate Gawain requests lodging in a most courteous manner only to have Kay demand immediate admittance, threatening the porter as he does so. The porter retorts with a boast of his own and refuses to let them in until Gawain again makes the request with proper courtesy. The entire incident is an obvious object lesson in courtly behavior. Sir Kay, with his unwarranted hostility and boasting not only fails to gain entrance into the castle, he alienates the very man with the power to give him his desire—the porter. Gawain sees no need for a conflict with the porter. Respecting his position, he asks him and the porter grants his request. In his arrogance and ineffectiveness Kay is a ludicrous contrast to Gawain. The speeches of the two knights follow immediately upon each other and this heightens the differences between them. Lest his audience fail to catch the point of his object lesson, the poet immediately follows this scene with another, which uses farcical action to make its purpose unmistakable. There is no attempt on the part of the romancer to tie the episodes together in any way other than having in the former the same characters who were in the latter.

In this next scene each of the Carle's guests, Sir Gawain, Sir Kay, and the bishop, goes to the stables to check, on his own horse. Kay goes first, accompanied by his host. Finding one of the Carle's horses stabled with his
own and sharing its food, Kay runs the host's beast out of the stable, beating it as it leaves. The Carle responds by treating Kay as Kay treated his horse. He knocks down the ungrateful guest. When Kay then threatens his host, the Carle promises he'll knock him down again if need be. Kay returns to the castle and the bishop goes to check his horse. He behaves in the same rude manner Sir Kay did and gets the same treatment from the host. Finally Sir Gawain goes to check his horse. He not only permits the Carle's horse to remain and to eat the food intended for his steed, he covers the horse with a mantle and urges it to eat heartily, recognizing that it is the Carle, after all, who is paying for the grain. The Carle responds to Gawain's generosity with still more of his own; he passes him a gigantic bowl of wine from which the two drink to each other.

The poet here is repeating the point made in the earlier scene. Reader, he says, if you wish to observe the proper knight and to see how right behavior is rewarded, observe Gawain. If you wish to see the consequences of unknightly behavior for a knight, see Kay (and, in these passages, the bishop). Sir Kay is the vehicle for demonstrating here improper gratitude of a guest for the host's generosity. Kay is an improper knight and improper knights get treated in the most unknightly of manners. It is a simple quid pro quo situation. The slapstick humor in Kay's getting knocked down debases him to the level of a horse, and it reveals how readily he can be beaten. This scene is the last instance of slapstick to appear in the poem. After it, the romance's attention shifts to the Carle's test of Sir Gawain, "curteous and kind." Although he is mentioned twice later on, Sir Kay has no more immediate function in the poem, a poem which demonstrates proper knightly behavior through Gawain's adventures. Both the humor and Sir Kay leave the romance simultaneously.

Sir Kay is a more important character in The Avowing of Arthur than he is Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle. Nearly one-third of the entire romance is used to describe either his own actions or the actions of others who respond to him. The scenes are more elaborated and the responses to him detailed more fully, but Sir Kay is still essentially a humorous foil to a good knight. His behavior is a model of impropriety.

The poem begins with a relatively unusual focus upon Arthur himself as a doer of knightly deeds. In most romances Arthur is a less active figure, a person who presides over gatherings between guests but does not actually fight himself. The Avowing of Arthur devotes its first episode to a detailed description of Arthur organizing a
hunt for a wild boar and eventually killing the boar singlehandedly. The tone of this passage (11. 1-272) is consistently serious, culminating in a vivid battle scene in which Arthur succeeds only after demonstrating great martial prowess and strong Christian faith. At the crucial moment in his battle with the boar he shows himself at his best.

\[ \text{þenne þe king in his sadul sete} \\
\text{And wiȝtely wan on his fete;} \\
\text{He prays to Sayn Margarete} \\
\text{Fro wathes him ware:} \\
\text{Die as a duȝty knyȝte:} \\
\text{Brayd oute a brand bryȝte} \\
\text{And haue his schild opo[n hiȝte,} \\
\text{For Spold was his spere.} \\
\text{Sethun he buskette him ȝare,} \\
\text{Squithe, withoutun any mare,} \\
\text{Aȝaynus þe fynde for to fare} \\
\text{That heþoes was of hiere.} \]

(11. 209-220)

Finally, having endured the stench as well as the blows of the villainous swine, Arthur prevails, slashes the boar's throat and thus fulfills the vow he had made earlier not to rest until the beast was slain.

This entire passage, filled as it is with noble deeds of great heroism, apt use of Christian teaching, and an ultimately fulfilled vow, is highly serious and affirmative in its tone. Because it is so, the contrast between this scene and the one immediately following is all the more striking. Once again, there is only a minimal transition between the episodes:

\[ \text{The King hase fillut his avowe;} \\
\text{Of Kay carpe we nowe;} \\
\text{How þat he come for his prow[e} \\
\text{ȝe schall here more.} \]

(11. 273-76)

Sir Kay meets Sir Menalfe who is taking home a damsel he had won in a fight. Arthur's follower challenges Menealfe and the two exchange boasts. Up to this point, Kay's actions are not extraordinary. His boast and challenge may be a bit precipitous and overly enthusiastic, but there is nothing in this confrontation to distinguish Kay from anyone else. Nothing, that is, until the two begin to act. Then, suddenly, unquestionably, Menealfe defeats Kay on the first pass.
It's all over in eleven lines.

The audience of the poem, having just finished the stirring narration of Arthur's intense and prolonged struggle with the wild boar cannot but notice by the disparity between Arthur and Sir Kay. Beside Arthur Kay is ludicrous. He can challenge and boast but he cannot back up his boasts. Arthur, rather than boasting, offers solemn vow to defeat his foe, and then carries out that oath despite the risks. Kay, never at a loss for something to say, "saves" himself only by volunteering Sir Gawain as his defender. Menealfe accepts Kay's offer. He agrees to spare Kay's life in exchange for an opportunity to joust with Gawain. This turning to Gawain for help underscores again the great differences between Kay and men like Arthur and Gawain. In such comparisons Kay always comes out the loser, and often appears laughably inferior to the others, as is the case here.

It is important to observe, however, that even though Sir Kay is a supremely incompetent knight and an excessive graggart, he is not an evil person. He shares with the other Round Table knights the deep sense of integrity so necessary for proper knighthood. When appealing to Gawain for help, Kay readily confesses his own shortcomings: "He sayd, 'I, Kay, þat þou knawes, / þat owte of tyme bostus and blawus.'" (ll. 353-54) Kay must have this integrity if he is to be a comic figure. Were he to lack this he could easily develop into a villain. He would move from being an inept member of the Round Table to being an opponent of it. As such, he would disappear into the catalogue of other romance villains, the boars the Saracens and the non-Arthurian knights. Sir Kay's comic appeal depends largely upon the difference between himself and other honorable knights.
The short passage immediately following Sir Kay's plea to Gawain for help further underscores Sir Kay's incompetence vis-à-vis Gawain's skill. Gawain, upon meeting Menalfe, seeks a full explanation of the situation in order that he might act appropriately. Unlike Kay, he does not immediately challenge the strange knight. After hearing Kay's explanation Gawain seeks verification from Menalfe himself: "Gawan asshes, 'Is hit soe?' / To oper knygt grauntus, 'ȝoe.'" (ll. 377-78) Only after it is clear that a point of honor is indeed at stake (here it is the ransom of a fellow member of the Round Table) does Gawain agree to act.

During the combat itself Menalfe and Gawain are so superior to Kay that they do their best to ignore him altogether, despite Kay's incessant commentary upon their actions. Menalfe never speaks to Kay even though all of Kay's barbs are directed at him. Gawain only speaks to Kay twice, each time attempting to teach Kay the error of his thinking. Kay's boasts are a descant, but an imperceptive one, to the narration of the action. He can do little but repeatedly state the obvious, "Sir þou had a falle / And þi wench lost withalle..." (ll. 426-26) "Quod Kay, 'þi leue hase þou loste / For all þi boste,'" (ll. 429-30) Butte þou hast lost þi fayre may....." (ll. 444) Throughout the combat Gawain, and the reader of the romance, grow more and more impressed by Menalfe's skill, strength, and courtesy, while Kay acts more and more like a protected child whose bravery is hollow and whose boasts are not to be taken seriously. "...Take hit to none ille," Gawain tells Menalfe eventually, "if Kay speke würdes kene." (ll. 452-53) Shortly after this the episode draws to a close. Meanealfe becomes a member of the Round Table, and Kay again demonstrates his integrity by accurately telling Arthur all that took place, including his own quick defeats.

Kay figures prominently in one more brief section of The Avowing of Arthur. Here he volunteers to test the knightly ability to Sir Bowdewyn. He takes five others with him and sets off. The encounter between Bowdewyn and Kay has inevitable results; Kay is promptly defeated:

Kay stode nexte him [Baldwin] in his way:
He ioppes god auro on his play;
þat heuy horse on him lay;
He squinet in þestrete.

(ll. 661-64)

Despite the slapstick implicit in Sir Kay's defeat, this scene is not here primarily for its humor, nor is it particularly meant to expose Kay's incompetence again, although,
of course, it does do that. Rather, this scene is important because it introduces Baldwin to the poem. By depicting Baldwin as Sir Kay's foe and conqueror, the romancer quickly and efficiently tells the audience what kind of person Baldwin is.

It is interesting, and, I think significant, that the tone of the poem generally is consistently something other than humorous in all sections where Sir Kay is not a prominent figure. The opening passage shows Arthur himself engaged in valorous deeds. The last section of the poem studies Baldwin and demonstrates his "courtesy" to be strong, even when tested by his apparently conflicting loyalties to his king and to ladies. The poet is here working out through the plot line a straightforward definition of "a worthy man." The middle part of the poem has the same intent, but its point is made indirectly, in part through the humorous contrasts drawn between "the crabbed knyght" and others.

In *The Avowing of Arthur* the humor surrounding Sir Kay depends upon the juxtaposition of him with another. Consequently, the scenes in which he appears often tie closely with surrounding episodes. Such is also the case in the Scottish romance, *Colagros and Gawane*. The poem is generally serious. Most of is taken up with considerations of what qualities make for a good knight. There are two occasions, however, where Kay demonstrates knightly virtues in his usual negative fashion. Again, as the object of the audience's laughter Kay reinforces points made about knighthood in the serious passages.

On the first such occasion Kay defines rules for proper guest/host behavior by violating them, much the same as he did in *The Avowing of Arthur*. The situation is typical. One evening some Arthurian knights are afield and find themselves in need of food and lodging. Kay is sent to a nearby castle to request accommodations for the group, but, because of his rudeness and ingratitude, he is not only unsuccessful in his mission, he winds up in an altercation with the porter. Such a conflict with someone from a sub-knightly class is another clear violation on Kay's behalf of proper knightly decorum. Kay pays for his rudeness by being treated rudely himself, often getting knocked down. Later, while a guest at table, Kay boorishly storms after the food a dwarf is bringing to him. The Dwarf's master, Kay's host, is incensed. An argument ensues and Kay again falls at the first blow:

Their uith the grume, in his grief, leit gird to schir Kay,
Fellit the freke with his fist flat in the flure.11
After showing how not to be a guest, and the dangers inherent therein, the poem presents a model for proper behavior through Sir Gawane (ll. 118 ff.).

The second episode which uses Kay as a humorous foil to underscore the poem's description of a proper knight is more complex because the issues the episode raises are more complex. The last five hundred or so lines of the poem present a question of honor for knights. What should a knight do when two conflicting, but equally noble demands are made of him? How can a knight be merciful to a vanquished fellow knight and still protect his lord in battle? Gawain faces this dilemma in his fight with Golagros and through his actions demonstrates a proper response. Immediately preceding but mixed in with this episode, mixed in because the Gawain-Golagros fight had already been announced, Sir Kay has another humorous mis-adventure.

Sir Kay, bored with inaction, goes out and duels with another knight, a knight so incompetent he isn't even named in the poem. As fighters the two are evenly matched. Fortunately for Kay, the other knight is the first to yield to exhaustion and, consequently, to Sir Kay. The narrator is careful to explain the precise nature of the "conquest" by describing Kay at the moment of victory.

For to ressaue the brand the berne Kay wes full blith,
For he wes byrsit and beft, and braithly bledand;
Thoght he wes myghtles, his mercy can be thair myth,
And wald that he nane harm hynt with hart and with hand.
(ll. 869-72)

Kay is not the true victor here at all. In fact, the combatants are so exhausted they both victor and vanquished alike, had to be carried to King Arthur. In other words, Kay's "victory" is nothing for which he should be proud as though earned by himself; it is merely a fortunate accident. It is thus highly inappropriate for Kay to make an apparently gallant and merciful forgiveness speech when they arrive at court. He is entitled to say many things when he has returned, but not to make the glib proclamation he does:

..."lord, i.e., his vanquished foe will ye byth, 
Ye asl nane torfeir betyde, I tak upone hand.
Na mysliking haue in hart, nor haue ye na dout,
Oft in romanis I reid:
Airly sporne, late speid."
(ll. 875-79)

Kay's generosity is funny here because he is in no position to be generous. It is funny again when, a few hundred lines
later, the reader can contrast Kay's false generosity with the true generosity Gawain shows for Golagros on the battle field and in the most private of conversations. Sir Kay waits until he has the large audience of the court to make his offer; Gawain respects Golagros' request that the favor remain secret for a while, even though he knows Arthur and all the others will be greatly distressed at his apparent loss to Golagros.

In the first third of *Ywain and Gawain* Sir Kay's role as comic foil is integrated into the main narrative more thoroughly than in any other romance. The net effect of his presence, however, remains the same. He acts the part of the improper knight and he is consequently an object of ridicule. This opening section of *Ywain and Gawain* describes the adventures of Colgreuaunce and the first adventure of Ywain, which is tied closely to that of Colgreuaunce. These tales are preceded by an introductory scene, a passage which establishes the dramatic setting for the stories. It is in this scene that Kay plays an important role. Through their responses to Sir Kay's usual behavior Colgreuaunce and Ywain demonstrate their own characters, and in the comparison Ywain appears the better man. Furthermore, Ywain's superiority over Colgreuaunce and over Kay is documented by the two adventures themselves. In the scene which introduces the two adventures Sir Kay behaves like a complete boor. He is selfish, jealous, insensitive and dull-witte. Oblivious to those around him and to what they say, he can argue his position only by repeating himself over and over again until he gets his wishes.

It all begins innocently enough. Colgreuaunce has just begun telling a story to five other Arthurian knights seated just outside the door to the queen's chamber. Colgreuaunce alone notices her quiet arrival so he is the only knight who rises as court etiquette demands. Kay over-reacts to this trivial incident jealously and defensively. Rather than admit no harm had occurred, Kay escalates things by impugning Colgreuaunce's motives:

"Ow, Colgreuance!" said Sir Kay,
"Full light of þepes has þou bene ay,
þou wenes now þat þe sal fall
Forto be hendest of us all;
And þe Quene sal vnderstand,
þat here es none so vn kunand.
Al if þou rase and we sat styll,
We ne dyd it for none yll
Ne for no manere of fayntise
Ne vs denyd noght forto rise,
þat we ne had resen, had we hyr sene."

(11. 71-81)
In doing so Sir Kay completely misses the point of the incident and shows, ironically, that he actually is "vnkunand" despite his protests to the contrary. Immediately thereafter Kay takes his unneeded defense to the queen herself and finishes with a request that she get Colgrevance to continue his story, presumably so the embarrassing moment can be forgotten more readily; "Bot pray ye now pis gentil man / To tel pe tale þat he bygan." (11. 89-90) Once he gets this particular request in his head Kay can think of nothing else. Ignoring whatever the queen and Colgrevance say, he repeats his wish over and over until, at last, some forty lines later, the queen prevails upon Colgrevance to resume his narration. Kay's selfish obstinacy here underscores his crudeness and makes him appear ridiculous.

While Sir Kay is doggedly trying to get the storytelling resumed, Colgrevance insults him directly, a reaction to Kay's own previous response. Although he is more clever than Kay, his attack is basically ad hominem, just as Kay's had been:

"Bi grete God, þat ow þis day,
Na mare manes me þi flyt
þan it war a flies byt.
Ful oft wele better man þan i
Has þou desspised desspytusely.
It es ful someli, als me think,
A brok omang men forto stykn.
So it fars by þe, Syr Kay."
(11. 92-99)

While this ridicule does diminish Sir Kay in the audience's esteem, such an attack doesn't enhance Colgrevance's status in any positive manner. He shows himself wittier than the dull scold, but he doesn't show he has moral superiority over him. If he did, he would have been able to rise above Kay's plane of behavior.

Ywain, on the other hand, is superior to Sir Kay. After Colgrevance has told his story, Ywain in incensed by the wrong done Colgrevance and vows to avenge it. Kay ridicules this vow, yet Ywain refuses to address Kay's jibe. To do so would require him to stoop to Kay's level and to exchange insults with him as Colgrevance had done earlier. He chooses rather to rise above the insult by using occupatio:

...als, madame [i.e., the queen] men says sertayne
þat wo-so flites or turnes ogayne,
He bygins al þe melle,
So il i noght it far by me.
Recrimination, in other words, is not appropriate for knights. They have another means for righting wrongs done them—individual combat.

The respective adventures of Colgrevance and of Ywain in this section bear out this principle. Near the end of his marvelous adventure Colgrefance is unhorsed by a strange knight, though the sting of the defeat is somewhat alleviated by the fact that Colgrevance was the first ever to survive an encounter with him. Ywain, after a long adventure in which he fulfills his oath to Colgrevance, is eventually afforded an appropriate opportunity to reply to Kay's earlier insults. Although Kay did not realize his foe's identity, he and Ywain fight one another, and with the expected results:

Bot Kay wist noght wha it was,
He findes his fere now, or he pas!
Syr Ywayne thinkes now to be wroken
On he grete wordes þat Kay has spoken.
þai rade togeder with speres kene:
þare was no reverence þam bitwene.
Sir Ywayne gan Sir Kay bere
Out of his sadel lenkith of his spere;
His helm into þe erth smate;
A fote depe þarein yt bote.

Despite the fact that he never wins, that he is consistently ridiculous in his speech and actions, and that he himself isn't in the center of the reader's attention throughout much of this first portion of the romance, Sir Kay is an important character here. He stimulates others in the plot, and by their reactions to him they display their own qualities. The author uses Kay to establish the dramatic setting in which the opening stories are told. He uses Ywain's defeat of Kay to conclude Ywain's first adventure while simultaneously incorporating that adventure into the poem at large. As an object of others' laughter and as an epitome of the un-knightly knight, the Kay in Ywain and Gawain is like the Kay in the other metrical romances discussed above. In Sir Thomas Malory's large prose work, however, a somewhat different Sir Kay emerges.

As a knight, the Sir Kay in Malory's work is much like the Sir Kay in the metrical romances. He is the epitome of what a proper knight should not be. He is arrogant, rude,
imperceptive, hasty in making judgments, and inept on the field of battle. Furthermore, the other characters in Malory's work are generally aware of Kay's limitations, just as other characters in the metrical romances are. As in the metrical works in Malory, Kay is usually a foil to a good knight or knights.

Malory's Sir Kay, however, is not humorous. In the Tales Sir Kay's violations of courtesy take on a more serious, at times almost ominous, tone, whereas his errors in the metrical romances yield praise of a hero and laughter on the parts of others, but little more. Sir Kay's shortcomings in the metrical works were his own. He didn't influence others to develop those flaws or to persist in improper behavior. He was essentially a powerless and ridiculous exemplar of chivalric error. Not so in Malory. The Sir Kay that mocks and scolds here doesn't cause others to laugh at his incompetence. He incites good knights to anger and misleads the unwary. This sinister influence appears most visibly in "The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney" and in "The Tale of Syr La Cote Male Tale." Kay's role is similar in both stories. He ridicules unfairly a young man who had just arrived at court. By so doing, Sir Kay influences the attitude of the damsel in the story toward the youth. Thus, as he goes forth to prove himself, the young knight has an additional burden of convincing the lady that he is in fact competent to assist her. In both tales, of course, the knight proves himself overwhelmingly, and Sir Kay's scornful title for him at last ironically scorns Kay's lack of perception. In the end Sir Kay proves to be a foil to a hero, but he is a different kind of foil than he is in the metrical romances. In Malory, Kay is not a comic character whom a hero easily defeats on the field of battle. He is rather an evil character whose influence must be overcome through the hero's good actions.

In the poems where Sir Kay is a humorous character, he is funny because he is a fool. He fails to live up to a set of standards which he and others around him accept as desirable for a person in his position to observe, so people laugh at him. The disparity between the standard and the behavior is the source of the humor. As a character who appears often and who is a fool almost every time, Sir Kay is unusual in two ways. He is the most common romance fool, and he is a character unique to the Matter of Britain. No other group of romances has a single character who plays the fool so consistently and in so many different poems.

In the other romances, and, to a lesser degree in the Arthurian material as well, there are a number of individual characters whom one might also call fools. Beyond the fact that they can be distinguished generally as either
affected or unconscious fools, they are for the most part idiosyncratic. They appear briefly in their respective poems, providing the work with incidental humor but not necessarily contributing directly to the poem's overall purpose. Being idiosyncratic, these fools are shaped more by demands of the particular work in which they appear than anything else, making it difficult to view them as types. In addition to Sir Kay, there is one other notable exception to this claim. Many of these fools are examples of the type I call the naive youth.

A naive youth is uninitiated; he does not know some of the fundamental things about living most everyone else knows. In romances he is usually just beginning a knightly career, and, since he is a novice, his ignorance often makes him look ridiculous. Interestingly, most naive youths are also the heroes of the works in which they appear. Since many romances, regardless of "matier," are for the most part biographies, the writers frequently capitalize upon the opportunity to make the poem's central figure a humorous one as well, at least temporarily. Whenever an author does this, however, the humor is lighthearted. Never is the aspiring hero ridiculed so severely or cruelly that he cannot go on and build a successful career for himself. Rather, the poet simply enjoys the chance to entertain by presenting the hero's early difficulties. Scenes of this type often occur early in the romance, and, when they do, their levity draws one into the narrative. Furthermore, by presenting the hero's inauspicious beginnings first, the romancer can emphasize the heights of knightly achievement to which that hero will inevitably rise. These two latter functions can easily be overemphasized, however, for once the hero gains his lofty stature--and this can be a relatively quick acquisition--often no reference is made to his unseemly past. The most important purpose of these scenes, then, is the immediate, momentary entertainment of the audience. This is true for poems using the naive youth only occasionally as well as for poems in which the naive youth dominates. To show more specifically how this type of humorous character works, I shall describe those Middle English in which it is most pronounced.

In Chevelere Assigne the hero is a noble child who, along with his five brothers and sisters, is forced to live his early years in the care of a hermit. His wicked grandmother had ordered the children's execution, but a compassionate executioner killed some puppies in their stead. This early episode quickly reaches its climax as the wicked matriarch succeeds in turning all but one of the children into swans, the one being the Chevelere Assigne. She also persuades the king to kill his wife, the children's
mother. After hearing of all this, the hermit advises the youth, who is only twelve at the time, that he must take a horse and go fight for his mother. Having been raised in complete isolation, the Chevelere Assigne must have the hermit explain to him what a mother and a horse are. Although the queries tax the hermit's store of knowledge—he is forced to concede his only knowledge of horses comes through books—he answers the boy's questions and sends him off to court. Once there the lad identifies the king with some difficulty, approaches the ruler, and volunteers to defend his own mother's honor. In preparation for the battle the youth is christened "Enyas" by an abbot, dubbed knight by the king, and given instruction in basic military equipment by a fellow knight. In this last activity the young man again reveals a comical lack of even the most basic knowledge of knightly affairs:

A knyȝte kawȝte hym by þe honde & ladde hym of þe rowte: 'What beeste is þis,' quod þe chylde 'þat I shalle on houe?''Hit is called an hors,' quod þe knyȝte 'a good & an abulle.' 'Why etethe he yren?' quod þe chylde 'while he ete the elles?' And what is þat on his bakke of byrthe, or on bounden?" 'Nay, þat in his mowthe the men kallen a brydelle, And that a sadelle on his bakke þat þou shalt in sytte.' 'And what hauy kyrtelle is þis withe holes so thykke? And þis holowe on on my hede I may noȝt wele here.' 'An helme men kallen þat on & an hawberke þat other.' 'But what broode on is þis on my breste hit bereth adown my kekke.' 'A bryȝte sheldel & a sheene to shylde þe fro strokes.' 'And what longe on is þis that I shalle vp lyfte?' 'Take þat launce vp in þyn honde & loke þou hym hytte: And whenne þat shafte is schyuered take scharpelye another.' 'ȝe, what yf grace be we to grownde wended?' 'A-ryse vp lyȝtly on þe fete & rest þe no lengur; And þenne plukke out þy swerde & pele on hym faste, Alle-wey eggelynges down on alle þat þou fyndes; His ryche helm nor his swerde rebke þou of neypur; Lete þe sharpe of þy swerde schreden hym smalle.' 'But wolle not he smyte aȝeyne whenne he feleth smerte?' 'ys, I knowe hym fulle wele bothe kenely & faste: Euur folowe þou on þe flesh tylle þou haste hym fallethe; And sythen smyte of his heede I kan sey þe no furre.' 'Now þou haste tawȝte me,' quod þe chylde 'god I þe betche:

For now I kan of þe crafte more þenne I knowthe.

(11. 287-313)
None of this appalling ignorance hinders the youth's chances for success, however, nor is it intended to. The author is merely having a little fun with his character. The audience, already knowing the answers to these questions, can join in the fun. If the incident makes any comment about the Chevelere Assigne at all, it is complimentary. It serves to support the medieval feeling that true nobility—in this case nobility equals knightly skill—will manifest itself despite one's temporary circumstances. The hero goes directly into battle after receiving his instruction, and he does not cease his efforts until all the forces of evil, including the grandmother, are defeated and all their wrongs have been righted.

Such youthful naivety is also characteristic of Sir Perceval of Galles, but in this poem the naive youth theme is sustained throughout the work and it supplies much of the story's unity. In fact, this poem uses the theme of the naive youth more extensively than any other English metrical romance. Thus a somewhat detailed look at its gives us our best picture of this character type.

Like the Chevelere Assigne, Perceval is a child of noble birth who was removed from cultured society while still very young. This removal explains how the boy can be simultaneously very bright and ignorant. As the story unfolds Perceval gradually learns about court etiquette and proper knightly behavior, both matters already familiar to the poem's audience. And that, of course, provides all the fun. Perceval is not an object of ridicule because he knowingly violates propriety as Sir Kay does; he is funny because, temporarily, he knows so much less than his audience. The brevity is an essential quality of his ignorance. Were he permanently ignorant he would be nothing but a fool in the audience's eyes, and fools cannot be heroes in the romances, not bona fide fools at any rate.

Beneath all the humorous things Perceval says and does is a character who is consistently very intelligent and physically adept. His mistakes can all be explained by his lack of experience, for once he is told something he learns it quickly; he never needs to be told the same thing twice. When the narrator says of Perceval that "The childes witt was full thyn," (1. 275) we must recognize that the flaw is temporary, not chronic. Otherwise Perceval might really be a dolt, and if that were so he could never be a heroic, ideal knight. While learning he is usually the one who instigates a query. His mother needs only explain the strange object she found is a dart and he quickly becomes an expert marksman with it. (11. 189-224) When she suggests
that he learn to pray to God he presses her immediately for more information about him:

Till it byfelle, on a day,
be lady till hir son gun say,
"Swete childe, i rede pou praye
To Godde3 Sone dere,
Dat he wolde helpe the--
Lorde, for his poustee--
A gude man for to bee,
And longe to dulle here."

"Swete moder," sayde he,
"Whatkyns a godd may dat be
dat ʒe nowe bydd mee
dat i schall to pray?"
(11. 233-44)

He is quick to appreciate the ramifications of the explanation she gives him, and he is thoroughly impressed:

They by spakke be lady euen:
"It es be grete Godd of hueen:
This worlde made he within seuen,
Appon be sexte day."
"By grete Godd," sayde he þan,
"And I may mete with þat man,
With alle þe crafte þat i kan,
Reghte so schall i pray!"
There he leuede in a tayte
Both his modir and his gayte,
The grete Godd for to layte,
Fynde hym when he may.
(11. 245-56)

The romance is literally filled with similar incidents in which Perceval learns quickly and acts upon that new knowledge, often impulsively. It is this impulsiveness, not Perceval's stupidity, that produces the poem's humor. He rushes off in a newly discovered direction before learning all that is necessary to pursue the novel course. Thus, for example, when he dashes out, "the grete Godd for to layte," he is unprepared to meet the three knights, Gawain, Ywain, and Kay. He asks them,

"Wilke of ʒow alle three
May þe grete Godd bee
þat my moder tolde mee,
þat all þis werlde wroughte?"
(11. 281-84)
On the one hand this question shows Perceval's humorous assumption that this God is simply a man whom he might encounter on a road. On the other hand, of course, the innocent boy's aspiration to see God identifies with absolute precision that most noble ambition any Christian could possibly have. In other words, the poem very consistently ascribes to Perceval admirable qualities, even when he is the object of the audience's mirth.

Such a sympathetic attitude is crucial for this type of humorous character. In romances whose protagonists are naive youths it is consistently understood that there is nothing wrong with him that cannot and will not be corrected easily. The writer of Sir Perceval treats his hero sympathetically not only by ascribing admirable qualities to him but also by having him act properly.

Although he does make many ignorant mistakes, Perceval never does anything that would be considered morally wrong for a knight. He never, for example, ravishes a damsel or ignobly slays another man. To the contrary, his actions are consistently similar to or identical with those of a fully knowledgeable and good knight. That he can act without realizing right or wrong is often a source for some of the poem's levity, as in this little incident with the three knights. As the narrative continues, Perceval always behaves properly, despite his ignorance. Immediately after Gawain explains to Perceval that he is one of Arthur's knights, the lad aspires to join the Round Table, and he does not turn from this goal until he achieves it. The impulsiveness and arrogance which accompany his demand are tempered by the fact that he never questions the assumption, which he would have no way of knowing at this time, that one can only be dubbed knight by another knight. He never presumes to dub himself. Once knighted, and on his very first knightly adventure Perceval encounters a sleeping damsel. As ever, his behavior is exemplary:

Riche clothes fande he sprede,  
A lady slepande on a bedde;  
He said, "Forsothe, a tokyn to wedde  
Sail bou lefe with me."  
þer he kyste þat swete thynge;  
Of hir fynger he tuk a rynge;  
His awenn modir takynnynge  
He lefte with þat fre.  

(11. 469-76)

Arthur himself could not have pledged his troth more properly.
As Perceval's adventures continue, several other situations arise for which he had not yet been properly schooled, but in which he acts properly. After defeating the Red Knight, for example, he claims the horse and armor of his foe, albeit for reasons more prosaic than those in a knight's code of honor. Much later in the romance, after having defeated the Black Knight, he accedes to the lady's plea that the knight's life be spared despite the fact that none had ever made such a request of him before, and that he usually preferred wholesale slaughter of his enemies. Finally, he ends his career in the manner most fitting for any Christian knight:

Sythen he went into pe Holy Londe,
Wanne many cites full stronge,
And there was he slayne, i understonde;
Thusgatis endis he.

(11. 2281-84)

The romance writer is especially desirous that Perceval be viewed sympathetically. To accomplish this the writer keeps the humor optimistic, making clear Perceval's actions and statements can never reflect upon himself in any perjorative way. Because the romancer's intention is so explicit in this regard, many scenes which might at first seem problematic prove not to be so. For instance, at times when Perceval's own exuberant ignorance makes him violate laws of courtly etiquette, the violations appear humorous, not traitorous. Thus the narrator can have his hero charge into Arthur's court so rapidly that his horse runs right into the king himself:

At his firste in-comynge,
His mere, withowtten faylynge,
Kyste pe forheude of pe Kynge—
So nerehande he rade!

(11. 493-96)

The narrator can have the impetuous lad demand Arthur dub him knight or face death, and have him refuse to return Arthur's cup to the king, claiming to be just as good as Arthur. The romance consistently supplies, both implicitly and explicitly, enough mitigating information that Perceval's rudeness doesn't condemn him in the audience's eyes. The movement from ignorant youth to informed knight, the controlling theme of this romance, can thus be seen as one which always suggests praise for Perceval. This theme and the naive-youth character are ideally suited for one another in this instance. The humor documents those situations in which Perceval must still improve while at the same time always assuring a favorable attitude toward him.
Not all romances using this type of humorous character incorporate it so totally into their plots as does Sir Perceval of Galles. Occasionally the naive youth appears only in the early stages of the story and provides virtually the only humorous passages the romance contains. Such is the case in Sir Bevis of Hampton and in Malory's opening work, "The Tale of King Arthur." The first two books of Malory's tale especially, present Arthur as an ignorant, bungling youth who must learn a good deal from Merlin. They make the point that Arthur has much to learn as he begins his reign, a point which Malory explores throughout the rest of his Works. Each time Merlin tests Arthur in these opening books the young man fails, and the reader is struck by Arthur's ignorance and inability to perceive the consequences of what occurs around him. One of the broad tasks Malory undertakes in his Works is to describe the education and enlightenment of this youth who becomes the cornerstone of the entire chivalric world. As the tales of the various knights unfold, and especially in the "Morte Arthur," one can see this educational process at work. Arthur does not long remain the character he is initially, and he eventually grows to understand the full tragedy of the fall of the Round Table. Bevis of Hampton shares with Arthur an early, temporary characterization as a naive youth, a characterization which quickly gives way to more straightforward glorification as the work moves on. There, however, the similarity ends. Sir Bevis' naivete is not tied so intimately to an overriding theme as is Arthur's. His is more exclusively incidental. For example, the ridicule his naivete inspires motivates him for his first fight. Bevis' naivete and the incidents it produces show him to be a precocious child, but they do not have any direct bearing on the latter sections of the romance. Rather, the greatest portion of the romance concentrates on his adventures, especially his martial adventures after he has established himself as a hero. No allusion is made to his naive past, and the romancer does not invite the audience to reflect upon the total continuity of Sir Bevis' career as Malory urges his reader to consider Arthur's career.

I conclude my discussion of the naive youth character type by mentioning a poem with not one but two naive youths, William of Palerne. The romance presents the adventures of William and Melior, two courtly lovers who face fantastic obstacles and go to great lengths (including disguising themselves in white bear skins for a greater part of the poem) in their efforts to remain faithful to each other. The main instances of humor, and there are not many here, occur in the opening section of the poem in which William and Melior are being characterized as naive, courtly lovers. Both lover makes speeches which do in fact show them to be archetypal lovers. Melior's soliloquy is lengthy, and in it
she debates in medieval fashion whether her eyes or her heart is the true source of her love for William. (ll. 430-570) W. W. Skeat calls Melior's speech "amusing," but does not elaborate on his reasons for making such a judgment.23 A nineteenth- or a twentieth-century reader might find her remarks a bit ludicrous, but it is doubtful whether a medieval audience would have responded to her statements in that way. In this speech Melior is simply making the proper, conventional points a courtly lover would make.

Such is not the case with William's soliloquy, however. His is intended to be read humorously. One can see this in his behavior, ridiculously extreme even for a courtly lover. While still asleep, he responds farcically to a magical dream in which Melior announces her love for him and begs him to take her into his arms:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{bus wiliam } & \text{pou3t witterly. } & \text{as a gome ful glad. for } \text{pat grace fallen,} \\
\text{He wend to haue lau3t } & \text{pat ladi . loueli in armes;} \\
\text{& clipte to him a pulwere . } & \text{& propirly it gretes,} \\
\text{and welcomes hir worpli . for wisseli } & \text{pou3t pat it was } \text{pe menskful mayde . melior his laki!} \\
\text{bat puluere clept he corteisly . } & \text{& kust it ful ofte,} \\
\text{& made } & \text{per-wipe } \text{be most merpe . } \text{pat ani man schold;}
\end{align*}\]

\[\begin{align*}
\text{but } & \text{ban in his saddest solas . softili he awaked.} \\
(11. 669-77)
\end{align*}\]

The apparent pun on "softili" in the closing line of this passage, in addition to the action itself, marks clearly the narrator's intention to ridicule William here.

Both William and Melior begin the poem as naive lovers, and both are humorous at times because of their naivete.24 The two are typical in that they gradually lose their naivete. The ridicule of them here is gentle, as is usual with naive youths. It is not the romance's first order of business to poke fun at its two leading characters. The bulk of William of Palerne is concerned primarily with the adventures of the disguised lovers and of their benefactor, the werwolf. Not humor, but pathos and exotic disguises are the romance's main interests. The humorous incidents are limited to opening portions of the story, and once the character outgrows his naivete he ceases to be funny. In all these respects William and Melior share common ground with other naive youths.

The humorous character in the romances can be summarized in this way. First and foremost he is a fool in the eyes of the person who laughs at him, the observer. The audience of the romance is always an observer, and characters within the
narrative other than the fool are often included as well. To be a fool the character must violate behavioral norms the observer holds. This most often means a character fails somehow to be a good and proper knight, although being a faulty knight is not the sole criterion for being foolish. As the fool violates norms, the observer believes the fool is less competent than he himself would be in the same situation, and thus the observer feels superior to him. The romance enables the observer to feel this superiority by providing him much more essential information than the foolish character ever has. Romance writers make this distinction through a number of devices, the most common of which is mistaken identity. In an incident using this device, the fool does not recognize a disguised character and therefore does not respond to him as he would had he known his true identity. The observer, meanwhile, knows who the disguised person actually is and can take delight in the fool's error.

There are times when a character will affect foolish traits in order to achieve some personal end. Such an affected fool is not essentially foolish, and the romancers are careful to insure the observer understands the distinction between the character's true qualities and his feigned role, an important point because affected fools are often heroes in their respective narratives. More common is the unconscious fool, the fool who does not realize how others perceive him. The degree of ridicule to which an unconscious fool is subjected can vary considerably. It may be quite mild, so mild, in fact, that the observer can continue to think favorably of the fool even as he laughs at him. Naive youths are often treated in this manner. On the other hand, the ridicule can be very harsh. This harsh treatment is frequently a part of the romancer's effort to make a didactic statement to his audience. The Matter of Britain is particularly interesting and important in this regard because it, unlike any other group of romances, has a single character, Sir Kay, whose foolish behavior consistently bears the same message. Through his own inverse example and through contrast with heroes, Sir Kay helps the romancers define and describe the ideal knight.
Endnotes

1Barbara Swain, Fools and Folly during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (New York, 1932), p. 1.


3Such simplistic distinctions do not overstate most romance characterizations. The point has often been made that the actors in these poems are rarely subtle and rarely change significantly as the story progresses. Sir Gawain in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is, I think, the single most notable exception to this general trait of the metrical romances.


6Furnivall and Stone, p. viii. N.B. my comments here do not address the prologue to the tale, the section of the English work of greatest interest to the nineteenth-century editors because for a time it was thought to be one of the Canterbury Tales by Chaucer.


10French and Hale, pp. 605-646.


12This is the section published in French and Hale. It contains ll. 1-1488 of the Middle English version, which equal vv. 1-ca. 2414 of Chretien's work. Kay is mentioned
later on in the poem (E.g., Chretien, ca. 3563-4384), but he himself no longer participates directly in the action of the story.

Instead of Sir Kay, Malory uses Dynadan as his fool, particularly in books VII-IX of the Tristram section of his Works. In Dynadan one can see much the same technique, however. He is a humorous foil to others.


Although this incident occurs near the end of the alliterative English version from which it is taken, it actually appears rather early on in the plot of the French work of which it is a partial translation. See Gibbs, pp. i-iii.

French and Hale, M. E. Metrical Romances, pp. 529-603.

Two writers, each with a different task before them than mine, have already noted the importance Perceval's characterization as a comic figure has for the poem as a whole. See: Dean Baldwin, ed., "Sir Perceval of Galles," Diss., Ohio State, 1972; Edna Sue Hood, "Sir Perceval of Galles: Medieval Fiction," Diss., Wisconsin, 1966.

Ms. Hood, in her full length study of this poem, notes the tone is determined largely by the comedy of Perceval in a world where he cannot fail, and that Perceval's naivete and boyish exuberance are shown in his words and actions. Baldwin summarizes the romance's literary merit: "The author gives a well-structured, coherent, carefully plotted comedy of a young boy's rise from Dummling to knight." (p. 114) He finds the story "overall extremely funny and entertaining." (p. 103)

It might be argued that by this late stage in his career Sir Perceval is no longer naive in any way, and that this ending is merely a typical, convenient device many romancers use to finish off their poems. I agree, but the incident still contributes to Perceval's consistently sympathetic treatment.

Perceval makes this threat twice, once at 11. 381-84, and again at 11. 527-28. This can be easily rationalized by the assumption that it is desirable for one to aspire to be a Round Table knight. In line 814 Perceval claims to be Arthur's equal.


21 Kolbing, l. 599. "e Sarasin be-held and lou₃" at Bevis, the Christian youth, for not realizing that it was Christmas day. This ridicule fits also into that which is part of boast/insult ritual and will be discussed more fully in the chapter below on Violent Laughter and Humor.


23 Skeat, p. iii.

24 Although I disagree with Professor Skeat's response to Melior's long soliloquy, I do feel that other incidents occur in which Melior can be viewed as a humorous character. 11. 1726-44 is a convenient example. Here Melior jests about her newly-acquired white bear skin.
CHAPTER III

SOCIAL HUMOR

The preceding chapter discussed humor involved in the delineation of a particular romance character. Very often the point being made by the romance through that humorous character is essentially a sociological one. That is, a character is humorous when he fails somehow to adhere to behavioral norms society held for him as a member of a particular feudal class. This commentary frequently addresses the issue of proper knightly conduct, but it is not necessarily limited to addressing just this one point. In fact, the romances study a number of social ranks, using characters and plots to comment upon social behavior, explaining what is acceptable and what is not. The two topics that appear most frequently in this regard are proper conduct within a given social stratum, and the consequences of moving out of one's own proper class. When involved in this sort of normative commentary, the romancers frequently use humorous social satire to make their points.

A humorous social satire has three essential characteristics: a) it is especially interested in the day-to-day society it discusses; b) it is clearly and intentionally humorous; and c) its aim is to criticize or reprove. (It is not necessary for a work to be directly rehabilitating in order for it to be satirical.) Many Middle English romances have only one of these qualities, some have two, and a few possess all three simultaneously. Those romances which have only some of the necessary attributes deserve some notice for that reason, and are discussed first. The center of attention, however, will be those few works which have all three elements, and, consequently, prove to be the most fruitful and interesting.

First of all, such a romance must show an interest in the actual environment of the audience. This interest needs to be direct if the term "interest" is to have any real significance. Although one could say the courtly romances, those especially interested in defining the ideal knight, have an ultimate interest in the historical world around them because they focus on an ideal for man, a member of that world, this interest is so indirect that it cannot be
likened to the interest, say, that finds specific enjoyment in describing a particular sport which all members of the audience know and like themselves. There are a fair number of romances which could be said to have such an historical outlook. They are interesting here because, although they were composed at widely divergent times, times spanning the entire period during which Middle English romances were composed (e.g., King Horn ca. 1225 and Launcelot of the Laik late fifteenth century), they express their historical interest through a common subject—class consciousness. Each work in this group examines a particular class or classes and the behavior appropriate to it. At times this interest can be utterly humorless, as is the case with Book II of Launcelot of the Laik. The book is essentially a treatise on right-ruling for kings and is closer to a sermon in tone than it is to a secular romance. At other times, and these are more frequent, the interest is a simple, direct, perhaps even naive joy in the customs of the people and in describing them. The informed detail in the description of steps necessary for becoming a blacksmith (Sir Isunjbras 1. 392 ff.), and the delightful descriptions of both kitchen and shot putting contest (Havelok the Dane 11. 865ff. and 1007 ff. respectively) are among the most familiar examples. This interest is not limited to simple description, however. It also manifests itself in didactic statements. Like the piece mentioned above which detailed proper kingly behavior, proper behavior for the villain also receives attention in works of this type.

It is no shame forto swinken;
be man bat maY wel eten and drinken
bat nouth ne haue, but-on swink long;
To liggen at home it is full strong.
(Havelok 11. 799-802)

The first necessary element, then, for a romance to be a humorous social satire—alertness to contemporary life—can be found in a number of romances. Works with this alertness usually focus their attentions on the issue of social stratification within the society they examine. And their interest is not limited merely to studying how nobles live; very often, in fact, the ways of the common people are also deemed worthy of description. But this element, although essential, is only a beginning, and there are several romances with class consciousness in them which are neither humorous nor satirical. Others with this awareness may be humorous from time to time, but their humor is not connected to that consciousness. Sir Bevis of Hampton, Otuel a Knight, and Otuel and Roland, for example, each have a form of humor discussed more appropriately
elsewhere in this dissertation. Needless to say, the list of romances with just this first necessary element could almost include virtually all romances one would call popular, and even some that are courtly.

But the field narrows considerably when one adds the second requirement for humorous social satire—intentional humor. It is not at all difficult to discover which poems having alertness to contemporary life also contain humor, for there is nothing subtle about the humor in them. The authors of these works make humorous incidents in the stories self-evident by depicting ridiculous, farcical action and by giving the audience clues which say that they should join in the fun. These clues often are explicit announcements that a character within the plot 1o$_3$h. The reader will note a similarity between these two characteristics and some of the techniques used in romances whose humor derives from the characterization of individuals.

The most popular theme for romances which contain both an attention to feudal life and intentional humor can almost be anticipated without explanation. To be interested in daily living in feudal society means invariably to be attentive to a salient characteristic of feudal life—the rigid heirarchy of social classes. What better, and handier, source for humorous action could there be than a situation in which a member of a higher class, usually the king himself, meets but is not recognized by a vassal, and, consequently, does not receive the deference due him? This formula appears again and again in works of this kind, and it is a branch of a still more widespread motif in the romances—disguise. Our immediate attention is focused only upon episodes with humorous connotations, but not all such situations are treated thus in the genre. Whether done voluntarily, as in Kyng Alisaunnder, or involuntarily as in Octavian, an ironic situation occurs when a nobleman moves for a time to a lower station. A closer look at the romances themselves will demonstrate how the writers used this formula to combine humor with an acute awareness of the vast class differences existing within their own society.

Such socially-conscious humor at times dominates the tone of the entire piece in which it is found. Studying works of this type takes one right to and even beyond the limits of what one can with confidence claim to be romance, for the realms of romance and ballad overlap one another here. The characteristics that a humorous, socially-alert romance might reasonably be expected to have, as discussed above, are also characteristics found in one of the two most popular English ballad traditions. Because it is not the intention of this study to attempt a sharp definitional
distinction between romance and ballad—a futile task of questionable value for the study of this material—and since social humor is the object of discussion here, it is felt wiser to err in the direction of inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness at this particular point.

The poem *King Edward and the Shepherd* sits astride the fence labeled "romance" on one side and "ballad" on the other. More important for this discussion, however, is the fact that it is dominated throughout by social humor. It is a part of a widespread tradition of poems capitalizing on the unrecognized presence of a king before a commoner. The humor dominating this piece results from the relationship that develops between Edward and Adam, the good-natured shepherd. The poem falls into two sections or scenes. The first takes place in the country; the second at court. The two characters meet and strike up a conversation. After some initial chat about a variety of topics, including some complaint about king's men which Edward grants is valid, the expansive and loquacious Adam slips into his favorite pastime—boasting. First of all he is proud of his great skill in using a sling. He'll face any fore, if the odds are not too uneven, and he certainly can defeat that very common opponent, the archer:

```
I haue slyngus smert and gode
To mete with hem [his foes] jif pei were wode,
And revo hem her lyves swete.
be best archer of ilkon,
I durst mete hum with a stone,
And gif hym leve to schete.
per is no bow pat shall laste
To draw to my slynges caste,
Nought be fele fete.
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(11. 184-92)

Once he gets going, Adam needs little outside stimulation to keep himself talking. "With talis he made pe kyng to dwell / With mony moo pei i can tell, / Till hit was halfe gan prime." (11. 205-207) All during this time, of course, Adam does not recognize that his audience is the king. Rather he believes that Edward is who he says he is, Ioly Robyn, a "marchant." Warmed by the new friendship Adam invites the king home for dinner. On the way the king, playing on Adam's boasts of skill with a sling, tempts him to prove his prowess by shooting a rabbit, a serious crime against the crown. Adam, still uncertain whether or not he can trust Robyn, refuses. The refusal, however, for all its sound and fury, reveals a subtle weakness in Adam's character, for he objects not because he believes such an act would be ethically wrong but simply because he fears the
penalty he would suffer were he to be caught:

"Do way!" quod Adam, "let be bat! 
Be God, i wolde not for my hat 
Be takyn with fich a gyle. 

Hit is alle þe kynqus waren; 
There is nouþer knyþt ne sqwayne 
þat dar do sich a dede, 
Any conyng here to sla 
And with þe trespas awey to ge, 
But his sidis shulde blede. 

(ll. 226-34)

Nonetheless, Adam cannot help boasting that he is certainly capable of committing such a deed:

þer is no wilde foule þat will flyne 
But i am sicur hym to bittyne. 

(ll. 241-42)

Adam vacillates between his fear of being arrested as a poacher, "þe were bettir be still. / Wode has erys, fylde has siþt." (ll. 267-68), and his irresistible urge to impress his new friend through boasts. Once he is safely in his own cottage, however, his apprehension wanes, and, emboldened by his wine which his drinking game soon makes to flow freely, Adam eventually reveals, step-by-step, the huge cache of the king's goods which he had obtained by poaching. His fondness for bragging overwhelms his earlier inhibitions, and his confession is as complete as it is enthusiastic. He concludes stating frankly he has confessed all:

Ther is no man of þis contré 
So mycull knowes of my privaté 
As þou dose, Ioly Robyn. 

(ll. 515-17)

The crimes to which Adam confesses are very serious, yet the tone of the entire scene is consistently jovial. While on the one hand Adam is a criminal, on the other, he demonstrates himself to be a completely generous host and a man whose naivete reveals an essentially innocent good will. His portrayal, in other words, is completely sympathetic, and this sympathy dominates not only this scene but the poem generally. Because of the tolerant attitude taken toward a character deemed basically good, Adam's various errors can be viewed humorously and not as results of malice. Precisely what or how grievous Adam's crimes are is less important for determining the tone of the poem than this tolerance on the part of the author and the audience of the character. (In fact, it is indeed possible to
assume the poet wishes to imply that the crime is not as serious in the eyes of the audience as it is to those who wrote the laws.) Adam's crime can be a most serious one, like poaching, or it can be a violation of a simple rule of etiquette, like his consistent failure to lower his hood in the presence of the king in deference to the latter's superior status. In either case, a deviation from recognized proper behavior is treated humorously and not as a conflict, because of the attitude the audience has toward the one who is deviating. In this poem and in other poems like it the author is careful to provide a rationalization by which the audience can assume this tolerant attitude. Adam simply does not realize to whom he is talking and so he cannot be held accountable for his behavior. Were Adam shown to be a poacher because he sought to oppose the kind directly, rather than simply because he sought to provide food for his family, guests, and friends (another rationalization acceptable to the audience), were he shown refusing to lower his hood or to give up his staff when in court, as an act of overt defiance of the king's authority, the entire situation would be quite different. Because the story contains actions which would normally be construed to be critical of the crown and even traitorous, but which are in fact not as they first seem, the tale is humorous. "King Edward and the Shepherd" is not a protest poem against the king's prior right to forest game, nor is it a protest against lowering one's hood in the presence of superior.

This becomes apparent when comparing this passage with the one passage in this poem that is clearly critical. In their opening conversation with one another, Adam and the king touch upon several matters that are evils for the author, the audience, and the characters as well. Adam complains that he is being wrongfully impoverished by the custom of using wooden tally-sticks as receipts, a custom especially vulnerable to misuse. (See 11. 31-36, their note, and 11. 73-84.) Edward readily concedes the rightness of Adam's complaint and refuses to hold against him Adam's natural anger at the king for allowing this practice to persist.

For ðou and ober ðat lene your thyng,
Wel ofte sithes ye banne þe kynge,
    And þe are not to blame;
Hit er ober ðat do þat dede;
þei were worthy so God me spede,
    Therfor to haue gret shame.

(11. 133-38)

Later in the same conversation Adam moves on to describe in vivid detail the wrongs he has suffered at the hands of one of the many bands of outlaws which infest the roads and
forests of the kingdom:

Thai take geese, capons, and henne,
And alle þat euer þei may with renne
  And reves vs oure catell.
(11. 154-56)

They are so numerous that as soon as one band is captured and punished another is ready to replace it and to commit still further crimes:

þei toke my hennes and my geese
And my schepe with all þe fleese,
   And ladde þem forthe away;
Be my doȝtur þei lay alnyȝt.
(11. 163-66)

Adam's complaints here are overtly critical and there is nothing funny about them in the eyes of the author or the audience. Were the serious tone in which they are uttered allowed to dominate the entire work, the piece would be entirely different. It would look more like the political and religious complaints of the evils of the times, which were so common in the fourteenth century. Although the author of this work can lay no claim to literary greatness, he can be commended for having recognized the implications such seriousness would have for a piece he intended to be light-hearted, for having quietly dropped the direct complaint, and for starting the sketch of Adam as a boaster, all within the first two hundred lines of the story. He never allows that seriousness to dominate the poem again, thus confirming one's sense that he did not intend his piece to be dominated by social protest, even though it does center its attention on the issue of class within feudal society.

King Edward and the Shepherd has much in common with The Taill of Rauf Coileȝeȝ, a Scottish piece of the fifteenth century.15 Both are addressed to a popular audience; both treat the popular topic of an unrecognized king encountered by a humble subject; both contain two of the three necessary elements for a work to be a humorous social satire, i.e., intentional humor and direct awareness of contemporary life; and both have these elements as their dominant characteristics. In fact, they have so much in common it is somewhat surprising to find the former often excluded from the genre of romance while the latter is consistently included.16

Rauf Coileȝeȝ introduces the unrecognized-encounter theme by having Charlemagne seek shelter at Rauf's house
for the evening. The humor this situation produces is even more obvious to the audience than it is in King Edward and the Shepherd because it is almost exclusively slapstick humor. The irony added by the fact that the recipient of the blows is the king is less crucial to the success of the humor here than is the purely farcical action, although that irony does help to accentuate the comic tone. Most of the poem's humor results from Rauf's attempts to instruct the unrecognized king in the ways of proper courtesy as he sees them, which, of course, are just the opposite of the rules the king had previously known. A series of confrontations based upon this difference ensues, and studying two such confrontations gives a clear picture of the humor dominating this piece.

The first such episode occurs as the two approach the door to Rauf's cottage. Rauf wishes the king to lead and to enter the building first. Upon arrival at the door, the king attempts to step aside and let Rauf enter first in deference to Rauf's position as host. Rauf interprets the king's action to be a grave discourtesy:

He [Rauf] said: "Thow are vncourtes, that sall I warrand."
Hy tyt the king be the nek, twa part in tene;
"Gif thow at bidding suld be boun or obeysand,
And gif thow of Courtasie couth, thow hes for3ct it clene,
Now is anis," said the Coil3ear, "kynd aucht to creip,
Sen ellis thow art vnknawin,
To mak me Lord of my awin;
Sa mot I thriue, I am thrawin,
Begin we to threip."

(11. 122-30)17

The contemporary audience would have been most struck by the action described in line one hundred twenty three here; the rest of the passage is actually little more than rationalization included to make Rauf's behavior acceptable in the audience's eyes.

Not fifteen lines later the author has the king again defer to Rauf only to receive a second reprimand and buffet:

"Tak my wyfe be the hand, in feir, withoutin let,
And gang begin the buird," said the Coil3ear.
"That war unsemand, forsuith, and thy self vnset;"
The king proferrit him to gang, and maid one strange fair.
"Now leit gyrd to the king, withoutin ony mair,
And hit him vnder the eir with his richt hand,
Quhill he stakkerit thair with all
Half the breid of the hall;
He faind neuer of ane fall,
Quhill he the eird fand.

(11. 144-54)

This is typical slapstick humor. It repeats actions which were funny shortly before and the actions themselves are extreme. With the single blow the victim does not simply fall to the ground, he first must stagger into and through "half the breid of the hall," meaning he crashes into the table, sending filled bowls and cups smashing and splattering all over himself and the room as he collapses in the very center of the mess. Add to this the audience's awareness that the victim is none other than Charlemagne himself, and one has added class consciousness to an intentionally funny scene.

In the rest of the story Rauf's actions are much like those of the shepherd. He mentions to the king some of the common folk, and, eventually, he goes to the court to meet his new acquaintance. After encountering some difficulties of the "country-bumpkin-in-sophisticated-court" variety, he eventually meets the king, recognizes his error, and is rewarded by the king with knighthood despite the advice from others that he be hanged for his earlier impertinences. As "Schir Rauf," the former coalier goes off to have typical knightly adventures. By this time (ca. ll. 778-end) the poem has by and large lost its humorous character and is not particularly interesting except as a romance of wish fulfillment.

Particularly in the beginning of the poem Rauf's crimes are even more directly traitorous than were the shepherd's. Rauf actually strikes the king himself. Once again, however, it is important to remember that this piece does not use these humorous incidents as the basis for political criticism. When Rauf and the king discuss grievances of the poor, both do so in utmost seriousness, and the king lends a sympathetic ear to them (e.g., ll. 194-206), just as was the case in "King Edward and the Shepherd." The humor permeating both these works is dominated by the theme of class confrontation, but not by an explicit demand for social change. In his introduction to yet another piece of this type, "Kinge and Miller," John W. Hales offers a suggestion which helps explain the popularity of this particular theme, and which shows that such works did not need to be critical of the social order in order to fulfill a popular need.
The idea of majesty compelled, or condescending to fraternise with low life has in foreign countries, too, excited the vulgar imagination. Such meetings of extremes—the fellowships of a power so high with a thing so low—have proved extremely fascinating. And while the stories of them show how tremendous was the interval between the king and his poor subjects, they show also how friendly was the popular conception of royalty. The king was far, far off; but he was kindly and genial.18

These two poems, and most others discussed below, prove the validity of Hales' observation.

Not all episodes containing the first two elements of humorous social satire dominate a work so completely as they do in King Edward and the Shepherd and The Tail of Raul Coil3ear. Such episodes can also occur in otherwise serious romances. As such they can supply the teller and the listener with a welcome respite from the serious business of most romances, that is, the good knight vanquishing his foes in bloody combat. Most incidents of humor which possess the first two of the three elements of humorous social appear in this manner. The humor in these separate episodes again displays its social awareness as class awareness. This, in turn, usually takes the form of some nobleman either voluntarily or involuntarily residing temporarily in a class lower than is appropriate for him. Discussing one romance with an involuntary switch and one with a voluntary switch will show how this type of appearance is employed by romancers.

Octavian Imperator is a romance which provides a transition between romances completely dominated by the kind of humor under discussion and romances in which the occurrences appear only incidentally.19 The first half of the piece is dominated by a story of the "nobleman-temporarily-in-lower-class" variety; the second half is a straightforward narration of adventures of Christians against Saracens. The author himself provides an effective summary of what happens in the poem once the characters get established in their appropriate stations:

Yonge Octouian and Florentyn
There faughte as werrors good and fyn;
Ther mygte non hethernSarsyn
Withstonde hare dent.
Well many soules to helle pyn
That day was sent.

(11. 1752-58)
The open portions of this romance, then, are the sections of greatest immediate interest and comment will be limited to them.

The story is that of Octavian's wife and two sons. After a complex series of treacheries, chance happenings, and miraculous events, Octavian's wife, Florence, and one of her twin sons find themselves living in exile in the Holy Land. The other twin, Florentyn, winds up eventually being rescued by Clement Vyleyne, a miraculously tall butcher-palmer. As his last name suggests, Clement is first and foremost, for the purposes of this tale at least, a common man. Clement adopts Florentyn and undertakes to raise the child, neither of them is aware of Florentyn's true noble heritage.

This situation has in it much socially-oriented, humorous potential, and this potential is realized as Florentyn's rearing is narrated. When the youth turns fifteen, the age generally used in romances to mark the beginning of one's adult career, Clement, appropriately, begins training him to be a butcher so he will one day be able to follow in his adoptive father's footsteps. One of these skills, effective trading, seems completely beyond Florentyn's grasp. Twice he is sent out to buy and sell, and twice he makes errors in judgment which are so simple as to be ludicrous, to a tradesman that is. When sent off to sell two oxen Florentyn encounters: "A stout squyere, / And bar vpon hys ryght hond gay / A fayr spreuer." (11. 700-02) Instantly, Florentyn is seized with such a passionate longing for this popular nobles' gaming bird that he trades the oxen for the bird right on the spot. No medieval tradesman hearing of this transaction would fail to recognize and be amused at Florentyn's merchantile naivete and that is precisely why this incident is included in the poem. His second error is still more costly than the first. Sent off with a bag of gold florens to be changed, he encounters a horse thief who offers to sell the beast for "ten mark of sterlynges," (1. 806) an exorbitant price in its own. Right. Continuing his naive ways as a trader, Florentyn not only accedes to the inflated price but unwittingly offers much more than was demanded of him initially. He does not realize that gold is more valuable than silver:

Florent answered to the corsere:
"Me thyngeth thou louest hyt to there:
Sterlynges ne haue I non here,
As thou gynnyst craue:
Here beth ten pound of florens clere
Wylt thou ham haue

For that colt that ys so bold?" (11. 811-17)
The stanza concludes explaining this horse thief/trader is no fool even if Florentyn is. He takes the money and runs; after all, deals and fools like this do not come along every day.

The corser seyd, "Tak me that goold:
To no man schuld hyt be sold
Half swych a chepe."
He tok the floryns all vntold;
Awey he lepe.

(11. 818-22)

Social stratification is central to the humor of these episodes. Florentyn is not an absolute fool but is a fool only so long as he is a victim of social displacement, only so long as he is not a member of that class for which he is naturally intended. The consequences of his displacement are doubly difficult for him. Not only does he lack the "horse sense" needed to be a skillful trader, he is uncontrollably attracted to the trappings of his natural class of knighthood--falcons and horses. His problem, then, ultimately is that fate has removed him from his proper place in society and he cannot function properly outside that place. The author of the romance confirms this analysis by having Clement's wife correctly speculate on two separate occasions that this lies at the heart of the boy's difficulties. (See 11. 729-32 and 843-52.)

Once the boy's proper class is determined, he is afforded an opportunity to regain his rightful station. Florentyn agrees to don armor and fight Guymeraunt, the giant champion of Saracen forces. This situation affords the author one final opportunity to capitalize upon the humorous possibilities of Florentyn's awkward status before the lad returns to the nobility and commences his heroic career. He is offered armor by the emperor of Rome, but loyalty to his adoptive butcher-father leads him to reject it.

Men broght hum harnes good and sure*
He n'old noon but hys fader armure.

(11. 1015-16)

The result of this decision made in the face of conflicting loyalties--to proper knightly attire and to his father--is that Florentyn appears in a ridiculous outfit of "butcher's armor:"

The hauberck was all reed of rest,
Hys platys dykke and swyde just;
Thaugh the gypon were full of dust
Hyt was nat wykke,
Theryn to turneye or to juste,
The scheld was dykke.

The helm was of queyte kest,
A borys heed stood on the crest.
When Florent was all redy drest
In hys armure
Hys fomen myghte of hym be agast,
   We mowe be sure.
   
   The launce was swot red and croked;
   Of many a knyght he was beloked;
Tho Clement Florentyn bytok hyt
   Many men logh,
And Florentyn naght forsok hyt
   They hyt were wogh.

(11. 1027-38, 1045-50)

The foolishness of this costume is self evident, even
to the modern reader. This ridiculous compromise between
two manners of dress can occur because of the conflicts
Florentyn's improper status as commoner creates for him.
When, almost immediately after this description, Florentyn
has opportunities to act the part that is rightly his, he
is consistently depicted as a serious Christian hero.
Florentyn the apparent fool ceases to exist. The tone of
the poem changes irreversibly from farce in the scenes
described to adventurous heroism. Never again does
Florentyn make a mistake. His martial prowess, hinted at
in his participation in games testing strength (11. 895-
900), finally asserts itself fully and properly. Class
incongruity, in other words, is the primary source for humor
in "Octavian Imperator."

The reader will see in the description of his armor,
and in the humor concerning Florentyn generally, some marked
similarity with "naive youth" humor discussed in the pre­
ceding chapter. Sir Perceval of Galles' difficulties with
the Red Knight's armor and his youthful ignorance of the
world around him, it will be remembered, marked him as a
comic character. Much of Florentyn's comic effect is like
Sir Perceval's. The distinctions among the various kinds of
humor in the Middle English romance ought not to be con­
sidered mutually exclusive. These and other types of humor
discussed overlap one another, at times within a single
romance. In this particular situation the key difference
between Florentyn and Sir Perceval is that Florentyn's
foolishness is closely tied in with social humor, whereas
Perceval's is exclusively the result of his own character.
Both young men, however, are humorous in part because they
are naive youths.
Kyng Alisaunder, the last romance possessing two out of the three elements necessary for humorous social satire yet to be discussed, does not use the naive youth, although it does use humorous class incongruity to demonstrate its social awareness.20 Furthermore, it has additional characteristics, not found in any members of this second group so far mentioned, which combine intentional humor with social consciousness but which refrain from explicit satire.

Its first notable difference has to do with where instances of social humor appear in the narrative. In the works already mentioned, the social humor either dominates the entire piece, as in King Edward and the Shepherd, or confines itself to one section of the story, usually the beginning, as in "Emperor Octavian." In Kyng Alisaunder, however, instances of social humor are scattered throughout the eight thousand lines of the narrative. Such distribution dramatizes again the highly episodic nature of these works, with the tone of one passage often influencing that of its neighbors.

Secondly, in Kyng Alisaunder the romancer uses a different formula for creating a situation with class incongruity. In the other works the member of the nobility was temporarily in a non-aristocratic environment involuntarily, whereas in this romance all such descents, and their reascensions, are made voluntarily by the hero. Each method of shifting from class to class has its own comic potentials, and each influences the characterization of the hero in a different way. For the victim of the involuntary descent, the downward movement is an obstacle to be overcome while on the way to greatness, but the character who descends voluntarily underscores an already-established greatness by so doing. There are three episodes in Kyng Alisaunder in which the poem's namesake voluntarily assumes the position of someone lower than himself, and in each of these his action yields humorous effects in part connected to the incongruity between Alexander's real and feigned stations.

The first of these (11. 4101-4282) is discussed in the preceding chapter, for one of the effects of this humorous scene is the glorification of Alexander's cleverness at the expense of Darius his foe. As that earlier discussion pointed out, Alexander disguises himself, or at least presents himself, as one of his own messengers. He goes to Darius' camp, insults the Persian's hospitality, and successfully makes off with a gold drinking cup "bat he on Darries table fonde." (1. 4268) It is clear that the author of the poem wishes his audience to enjoy the specific irony of the situation in which Alexander pretends to be someone else. He underscores the situation by having Darius actually guess
correctly that the guest is Alexander himself, "Of tale þou art smart! / Alisaunder þi-self þou art." (ll. 4153-54)
This challenge the youthful Greek leader quickly disarms and turns to his own advantage:

And Alisaunder seide: 'It is nouȝth so!
He is whitter, wiȝbouten no,
And his lockes beeȝ nouȝth so cruelle,
Ac he is waxen more to þe fulle.
(ll. 4155-58)

The second such humorous scene is very similar. Alexander again impersonates one of his own subordinates. This time he pretends to be his chamberlain, come into the city to beg since supplies are so short in camp, in order to get access to his rival. Again Alexander has an opportunity to describe himself to his foe. This time, however, he fools Darius into thinking Alexander is "a letel man and an elde" (l. 5491) who chills easily, i.e., who is feeble in his old age. The not-so courageous enemy is delighted at the chamberlain’s description and announces his wish to fight Alexander in personal combat. After affording the rival king a few opportunities to make such unwittingly ironic remarks, the poet closes the episode in the same way he closed the first one: the tricked regent winds up paying Alexander in addition to being duped, and Alexander returns safely to his own lines, glorying in his successful jest:

To his folk he com ful swipe,
And of his comyng hij weren bliȝe.
He liȝtte and tolde his aventure-
Hij lowȝen and maden enuesure.
(ll. 5531-34)

The final episode in which Alexander assumes the role of an underling takes place near the very end of the poem. Alexander is at the pinnacle of his career. His foes are subdued and he busies himself administering his realm. However, being more a warrior than an administrator, he uses his last deception to get into a position where he can again fight. When he hears that Caddulake, the son of Candace, a queen who had made amorous overtures to Alexander earlier in the poem, is about to petition him for aid, Alexander dresses up Tholemew as himself and again assumes the name Antigon and the role of Alexander's chamberlain. This maneuvering makes it possible for Alexander to be ordered into battle on a mission which normally would not merit the direct intervention of the ruler of the entire known world. This deception is not carried out with any intent to humiliate or ridicule Canduleke and no jest is made of it. Canduleke, unlike those deceived earlier, makes no ironic statements to Antigon nor does he uncover the disguise.
There is humor in the second portion of this disguise episode, however. Alexander, still posing as Antigon, contrives to visit Candace, pretending to be initiating correspondence between her and the king. He meets Candace. She, as others had before her, asserts that Antigon is really Alexander himself. The hero tries once again his witty denial and praise of Alexander:

'Nay,' he seide 'by Goddes ore!
Alisaunder is wel more,
Redder man on visage,
And sumbel more of age,
And þou shalt certeyn ben,
Sunday when þou shalt hyn sen!'  
(11. 7644-49)

This time, however, the disguise fails. Candace ushers him into her chamber and shows him "an ymage" made in his likeness, confirming his true identity:

O, Alisaunder, of grete renoun!
þou art ytake in my prisium!
Al þi strengþe ne gayneþpe nauþth,
For a womman þee hap ycauþth.
A womman þee hap in her lass!  
(11. 7688-92)

The delightful king-underling ruse does not trick its final victim, and Alexander is forced to pay the price for that failure:

þoo Alisaunder gan ysee
þat it most so nedes be,
He dude al þe lefdyes wille
Vnder covertoure stille.  
(11. 7718-21)

The servant-master disguise becomes a convenient conspiracy now on the part of the two lovers to deceive the rest of the court, though one wonders how effective it could actually be.

Jn halle at table he sat hire by,
Jn chaumbre gest, in bed amy.
Antygon he hiþth in halle
And Alisaunder vnder palle.  
(11. 7723-27)

Through such maneuverings the author rationalizes his hero's sexual activities and maintains unity in Alexander's characterization by emphasizing his fondness for disguising himself as one of his own servants.
In this scene the dominant source of the humor changes. The scene opens with a king-messenger disguise, with its humor based upon class consciousness, and it concludes as an example of sexual humor, the class humor fading into the background. As such this scene is an excellent place to observe again how these humorous motives can overlap in the romances. (The Alexander-Candace scene receives additional comment below in the chapter discussing sexual humor.)

The non-critical nature of this humor based on class consciousness is perhaps more obvious in Kyng Alisaunder than in any of the other romances discussed. The author uses Alexander's disguises not to make any commentary about kingship or about proper behavior for messengers, but to aggrandize his hero, to show him defeating his adversaries in witty confrontation just as soundly as he defeats them with arms in the numerous battles which surround these isolated incidents and which determine the poem's dominant tone of heroic deeds performed by a decisive and forceful leader.

To sum up the three poems last discussed: the humor in Kyng Alisaunder does not need to attack contemporary vices to have a useful purpose any more than does the humor in "Octavian" or The Taill of Rauf Coil3ear. Even though there is class consciousness in these poems in varying degrees, none of them provides explicit commentary on that topic through humor. These romancers do not use social humor to preach to their audiences about contemporary life.

Such is not at all the case, however, in the final group of romances to be discussed in this chapter. This group is small, containing but three romances—Sir Launfal, Sir Cleges, and Gamelyn—21—but it is a particularly interesting one, for in these works one finds all three elements necessary for humorous social satire operating at once. The poems are humorous. They are deliberately written in such a way as to make their audiences laugh. They emphasize the social environment of their original audiences, usually by examining that society's class system. They are satiric. In these poems some particular object is being set up for ridicule with the intent of exposing perceived evils in it. Humor in these poems does not exist merely for the sake of entertainment. The humor here is part of a romancer's didactic commentary upon medieval life.

The major studies of medieval humor and satire do not offer much direct help in studying this small group of writings.22 Romances as a group have been largely ignored in such studies, and not entirely without reason. It must be remembered that the genre, viewed as a whole, the perspective from which these studies looked at them, is predominantly humorless. Nevertheless, in this instance, as
elsewhere throughout this dissertation, it is not correct to ignore humor in the romances altogether, even though humorous passages do not dominate the genre.

In the first of these three romances, Sir Launfal, the satire is the most narrowly focused. The poet's main interest is telling the riches to rags to riches story of Sir Launfal. It is a simple little tale which serves wish-fulfillment purposes for its popular audience. It contains humor which is not satiric, but merely farcical, e.g., ll. 214-16 where Launfal's horse slips and falls into the mud, taking its rider with it. The passages which could possibly be interpreted as being satiric appear in contexts which make such interpretations uncertain. For example, there are the references to knights whose motive for doing battle is that fighting will prevent their armor from rusting. (ll. 527, 1027-28) The romancer's explanation for the knights' motivation need not be interpreted as a satire against knights, but can be explained as manifestation of a simple, practical, common sense world view which an unsophisticated audience would appreciate and understand.

There are moments in the poem, however, when a character does come under attack by the romancer. There are two villains in the story. Queen Guinevere, the first of these, is hostile to Launfal because he recognizes the evil in her and is jealous of his rejection of her. Consistently evil and unsuccessful throughout the story, she is finally defeated by Launfal's fairy damsel. After rescuing Launfal from death, she effects upon Guinevere a simple yet brutal justice. Earlier Guinevere had jealously denied Launfal could produce a mistress more beautiful than she. To underscore her confidence she cries:

3yf he bryngeþ a fayrere þyngge,
Put out my eeyn gray!

(ll. 809-810)

Immediately after having been judged fairer than Guinevere, Launfal's Trayamour acts:

With þat, Dame Tryamour to þe Quene geþ,
And blew on here swych a breþ
þat neuer eft myȝt she se.

(ll. 1006-08)

Justice here is not ironic or subtle. It is clear, unmistakable, and direct. The poem generally deals with its villains in this forthright manner.
The second villain is the object of this poem's isolated instance of explicit satire. This also is not subtle. Early in the poem, improverished by his generosity at Arthur's court, Launfal leaves the court and seeks lodging with the mayor of Caerleon. Completely mercenary, the mayor befriends him only so long as he believes the knight to be wealthy. When Launfal hints that he is poor, the mayor makes excuses for being unable to lodge him. Launfal ridicules his avarice by saying sarcastically to his companions:

Now may ye se, swych ys servise
Unper a lord of lytyll pryse—
Unþ How he may þerof be fayn!

(11. 118-20)

Later, when Launfal is wealthy, he can avenge the mayor's insult with an insult of his own, much to his (and the audience's) delight. Immediately after learning that Launfal is rich the mayor fawns over him and asks Launfal to dine with him—the very thing Launfal had earlier solicited unsuccessfully:

þo seyd þe Meyr, "Syr, par charyté,
In halle to-day þat þou wylt ete with me;
yesterday y hadde ymont
At þe feste we wold han be yn same,
And þhadde solas and game,
And erst þou were ywent...."

(11. 403-408)

Launfal is quick to offer a rebuttal which exposes the mayor's hypocrisy and humiliates him at the same time:

Syr Meyr, God forþelde þe
Whyles y was yn my pouerté,
þou bede me neuer dyne;
Now y haue more gold and fe
þat myne frendes han sent me,
þan þou and alle dyne!

þe Meyr for schame away þede;

(11. 409-15)

Thus the author of this poem attacks the greed and falseness of the mayor through ridicule. Ridicule is crucial here for in it lies the beginning of satiric criticism. The criticism is most heavy-handed in this poem, so heavy, in fact, that for many this passage may not be particularly humorous at all. Such lack of subtlety is characteristic of this work. The satire here is crude in another sense as well; it fits into the story in which it is found, but it
is of only auxiliary importance. The satiric point and the theme of the story are not the same.

These two elements are more closely connected in Sir Cleges. G. H. McKnight correctly interprets this story as a presentation of two aspects of the theme of generosity. The generous man is rewarded in this life and the greedy man invariably gets punished for his vice. The poem divides roughly into two parts, the one is the tale of how Sir Cleges' generous gift of holly to the king results in his generosity, the other is the story of the king's servants being punished for their greed. The author uses satire to ridicule the servants in a scene which also combines the two parts of the romance.

The plot of this second part of the romance is simple. The poor Sir Cleges has found a miraculous branch bearing fruit in the midst of winter. He decides to present it as a gift to the king in the hope that he might be rewarded. Before he can meet with the king, Cleges is confronted in turn by a porter, an usher, and a steward, each of whom refuses to allow Cleges to pass unless he yields one third of the anticipated reward to him. Sir Cleges has no choice but to accede to these demands. When the king sees the holly is pleased and offers Sir Cleges anything he wishes. Much to the king's surprise Sir Cleges asks he be granted twelve blows with a staff, which he then doles out equally to the three servants. After learning the reason for the unusual request, the king is so delighted with Sir Cleges' wy3t that he rewards him again, this time with wealth.

Throughout the entire story class distinctions play an important part; they support the moral of the story and they offer indirect clues as to the audience for whom the romance was originally intended. Sir Cleges shows by his very name he is a nobleman. The unfortunate poverty in which he finds himself is not the result of any flaw in his character but comes solely from his generosity to others. Even when poor he remains a good man, as the touching scenes between him and his wife (11. 25-252) demonstrate. Both are humble, generous, faithful people even in poverty. The porter, usher, and steward, on the other hand, embody greed and pride. (Although ostensibly three different characters their real function in the poem is the same. They combine to behave as a type; as McKnight points out "there is little attempt to distinguish between [sic] the three. [p. lxxii]) Their greed is shown in their demands upon Sir Cleges. Their pride appears through their using their respective offices to beleaguer those less powerful than they, regardless of their victim's rightful status. The same Sir Cleges the audience sees behaving nobly even in
poverty they call "chorle." (11. 296, 314, 330) The king is aloof from most of the poem's action. When he does appear he displays a generosity, a kindness, and an ability to distinguish right from wrong very much like Sr. Cleges does. The audience views him favorably.

All these characters combine in the romance to present an ethic which says that those in high places should be morally superior and that a truly noble man will have this moral superiority. An evil man, on the other hand, harasses the powerless. When justice appears it punishes those who wrongfully misuse their positions in society, and it rewards those who live in a manner befitting their station. This message lies at the heart of this poem's satire. By receiving blows each servant gets his just deserts as well as, ironically, the reward he had improperly demanded of Sir Cleges. Unlike "Sir Launfal," then, this poem's sentence and its use of satire coincide. Men in the middle ranks of feudal hierarchy are punished for misuse of power and for greed.

Before leaving this poem one further point should be made. In the description of the actual beatings of the three servants there is an element of joyous brutality, a delight in seeing rough justice being meted out. One sees the author's relish in providing small details of the punishments. Each "present" is described in turn. First comes the steward.

He sowȝt after the prowȝd styward,  
For to yeve hym hys reward,  
    Because he grevyd hym sore.  
He yaffe the styward sech a stroke,  
That he fell down as a bloke  
    Before all þat therin were...  
(11. 448-53)

Next Sir Cleges rushes out to find the usher.

"Haue here sum strokys!" he seyde,  
    Whan he wyth hym mete,  
So þat after and many a daye  
He wold warn no man þe waye,  
    So grymly he hym grett,  
(11. 461-65)

Finally he repays the porter, first of the three extortioners.

Than he went to the portere,  
And iiii strokys he yaue hym there;  
    His part hade he tho,
So bat after and many a daye
He wold warn no man be waye,
Neythyr to ryde nere goo.
The fyrsste stroke he leyde hym on,
He brake in to hys schuldyr bon
And his on arme thereto.

This added element of brutality is not necessary for the satiric purposes of this scene, but it can contribute to its humor in a rough, farcical sort of way. Also, this episode hints at a fondness for brutality which is not infrequent in the romances and which often has laughter associated with it. In this poem, for example, the court is delighted after Sir Cleges explains what he did with the twelve blows:

The lorde, he, both old and yenge,
And all that wern with be kynge,
They made solas inowe.
The kynge lowe, so he my3t nott sitte;
He seyd, "Thys ys a noble wy3t,
To God i make a wove."

The association of violent behavior with humor is the subject of chapter five below, and is studied there in some detail.

The final romance to be discussed in this chapter, Gamelyn, effectively refutes G. H. McKnight's claim that Sir Cleges, because it is a humorous metrical romance, is a "unique specimen in English." Gamelyn offers a more complete and effective confluence of elements needed for humorous social satire than any other Middle English metrical romance. This delightful piece is very much interested in contemporary society. The author, through a variety of means ranging from manipulation of language to arrangement of the poem's structure, demonstrates that he often intends to be humorous. Finally, in a scene which it tied intimately into the poem's theme, he includes satire. In Gamelyn all these elements contribute to the essential nature of the poem. Since the three elements are so tightly interwoven in this poem, it is a superior example of social humor and it should be studied in some detail.

There can be little question that this poem was originally intended for a non-aristocratic audience. Although French's and Hale's claim that "the poem is important as a fore-runner of the Robin Hood ballads" is misleading, the poem's story does have unmistakable ties with folk traditions. Its popular appeal manifests itself in the
poem's great interest in its audience's world. The author shows his interest in reality in part by supplying his work with extensive detail taken directly from day-to-day life. Some of these details reflect human nature generally, like Adam's expression of dislike for the forest into which he and Gamelyn have just fled. (11. 620-22) Others, like the entertaining wrestling scene (11. 169-284), describe customs especially appropriate and familiar to the poem's original audience. Still other details show the romancer to be a keen observer of legal customs of the day. At several places in the poem he includes descriptions of violent activity in a manner much like that used by the author of "Sir Cleges."

These details when taken together present a world viewed from distinctly non-aristocratic eyes. The method of characterization in the poem is substantively influenced by this perspective. Villains are not from among the common folk, and heroes exhibit a morality consistent with that held by the commoner. The outstanding villain of the poem is John, Gamelyn's eldest brother who, despite a meticulously correct will by his father usurps Gamelyn's inheritance. His actions are all directed toward insuring that Gamelyn is foiled in his attempts to claim what is rightfully his. In so doing he must have looked remarkably like many dishonest landlords the audience might have known. He uses force to assert his will wrongfully, he bribes the courts and he even manipulates proper legal authorities for his own ends through his selective, legalistic argument. The most glaring instance of his falseness involves a principle of particular significance in feudal society— that of blood loyalty. After Gamelyn has finally succeeded in getting the upper hand over a brother who had knowingly violated his father's will, had stolen an inheritance, and had sought to kill one brother in lieu of another, John has the audacity to solicit mercy on the grounds that he and Gamelyn are bound by ties of brotherly love!

Lord, i crie pe mercy, broper art pou myn!
(1. 874)

In direct contrast to this hypocrisy and illegality are: Gamelyn and his other brother Ote, the Robin Hood-like band of outlaws in the forest, Gamelyn's faithful servant Adam, and, remotely, the king himself. The false legality seen in John's elaborate machinations with the sheriff and a kangaroo court (11. 545ff. and 11. 785ff.), clashes with the true justice of Gamelyn.

With the exception of characters drawn only vaguely, such as the king and Sir Ote, there is a strong tendency to
depict good people in the romance as commoners. Adam, the spenser who remains loyal to Gamelyn, is a servant and a clever, resourceful one at that. The porter at John's gate first obeys John out of fear, not out of love or respect; later free from that apprehension and able to act on his own, he unhesitatingly befriends Gamelyn. The outlaws, whose former status in general society is not revealed, conform to the hierarchy established in their new world and accept without difficulty an orderly change in their leadership. (ll. 687-94) Finally, Gamelyn himself, though a nobleman, spends the greatest part of the romance as an ideal de facto commoner. He eagerly joins in the wrestling match; he associates closely with Adam, soliciting and following his advice almost as though they were equals; he, as Havelok had done before him, fights with bare hands and staves, the weapons of the poor; he willingly defers and shows respect to those with rightful authority over him.

All this realistic detail and social criticism occurs in a poem whose tone is remarkably light. Evil does appear frequently in the poem through the acts of wicked men. But it never has an opportunity to accumulate sufficiently to control the atmosphere of the story. Rather, its effects are dissipated by the author's dispersing the descriptions of sinister events among descriptions of more frequent events which are pleasant, even joyous. After being told of John's first deceit, the audience moves quickly into the wrestling match with its carnival atmosphere. Immediately before Gamelyn is bound, the audience had been treated to a seven-day feast given by the hero to his many followers. At the very end of the poem the pattern is similar. The dire court proceeding threatening good Sir Ote's life is interrupted just in time by Gamelyn the rescuer who then proceeds to set all things to rights. Contributing to this optimistic tone are instances of humorous word play which appear from time to time, often unexpectedly. In a serious passage in which John and Gamelyn first confront one another, the author indulges in some word play by having John insult Gamelyn with a near pun on his name, one which is not lost on Gamelyn who respond indignantly:

Than byspak his broser. pat rape was of rees,  
"Stond still, gadelyng. and hold right by pees.  
Thouschaltbe fayn for to haue. by mete and by wede,  
What spekest pou, Gamelyn. of lond ober of leed?"  
Thanne seyde Gamelyn. pe child pat was ying,  
"Cristes curs mot he haue. pat clepep me gadelyng.  
I am no worse gadelyng. ne no worse wight,  
But born of a lady. and geten of a knight."

(ll. 101-108)
Near the end of the romance, when the tables are turned and John (now also sheriff) has fallen from power, the author again plays with words. The bribed justice, showing the cowardly lack of honor and loyalty typical of the villains in the poem, seeks to place all blame on John lest Gamelyn's vengeance reach him. "'By my faip,' seyde pe justice. 'pe scherreue is a schrewes!'" (1. 868) The net result of this plea is a reversal of the similar sound insult made earlier. Gamelyn suffered from the former; John is humiliated by the latter.

In another scene, this one not intending to criticize anyone, the author is again playful with words. Beginning with an apparently innocent, idomatic statement which was not intended to be taken as literally true by its speaker (11. 269-70), the author first puns and then elaborates on a metaphor sparked by the pun:

Two gentilmen þer were . þat yemede þe place
Comen to Gamelyn— . God geue him goode grace—
And sayde to him, "Do on . þyn hosen and by schoon;
For sope, at þis tyme . þis feire is idoon."
And þan sayde Gamelyn . "So mot i wel fare,
I haue nought ȝet haluende... sold vp my ware."
Theo sayde þe champioun . "So brouk i my sweere,
He is a fool þat þerof beyep . þou sellost it so deere."
Theo sayde þe frankelyen . þat was in moche care,
"Felaw," he sayde, . "why lakkest þou his ware?
By Seynt Jame in Galys . þat many man hapnsought,
ȝet it is to good cheep . þat þou has ibought."
(11. 268-78)

This playful banter which follows immediately after Gamelyn's wrestling victory over the "champioun" exists, not to pillory anyone, not even the former foe of Gamelyn, but to provide moments of levity between more ominous moments as well as to provide amusement.

Were Gamelyn limited to the characteristics so far described, there would be little to distinguish it from the humorous works discussed earlier in this chapter, but it is not. At the very heart of this poem is a scene which satirizes the mendicant and monastic orders of the church in a manner reminiscent of some of the most outspoken samples of complaint the fourteenth century produced.

This passage is central to the poem both structurally and thematically. The author has divided the entire poem into five sections or episodes of approximately the same length, introducing each section with some version of the stock minstrel's request that his audience attend him:
Lithep, and lestnep. and holdep ʒoure tounge,
And ʒe schul heere gamen. of Gamelyn be ʒonge.

(11. 341-42)

The satire appears in the third section squarely in the center of the poem. More significantly, this scene marks the low point in Gemalyn's career; in this episode the forces of evil are at their strongest and the forces of good apparently at their weakest. Furthermore, this scene presents the beginning of the reversal of this situation and shows Gamelyn beginning the climb which concludes at the very end of the poem with him in complete control, avenging the wrongs done earlier. This passage introduces this theme of balance through reversal, and the poet picks up on that theme throughout the remainder of the story. The humiliating mock judgment of Gamelyn by the religious men is balanced by the final trial scene in which Gamelyn assumes the justice's chair; and the flagrant discourtesy in John's court is contrasted to the highly courteous and proper conduct seen in the band of outlaws, to name only two examples. The romancer emphasizes the importance of this scene, and of the satire found in it, by placing the scene near the center of the plot and by using it to introduce the key theme of retributive justice counterbalancing evil. Sarcasm and insult appear elsewhere in this poem, but the sustained, satiric criticism of the religious orders stands out all the more for its singularity.

Shortly after explaining that the captive Gamelyn has been unbound by Adam, his loyal servant, the romancer introduces a feast to be given by John for the churchmen. Adam advises Gamelyn not to kill John outright, but to use the feast as a test of the churchmen, to see if they would come to his much-deserved aid. He will pretend he is still bound as John had ordered. In this manner, Adam says, two things, can be accomplished at once. If the clerics pity Gamelyn and effect his release, the fact that Adam had released him previously, and thus disobeyed John his master, need never be discovered. On the other hand, if they refuse to be charitable their wrongs will be plainly shown and he and Gamelyn can then punish them with staves. The ironic reversal of roles between the laymen, Adam and Gamelyn, and the churchmen is hinted at by the mere fact that such a test is conducted at all, and, soon thereafter, by Gamelyn's using religious terminology to describe how he will, if need be, punish the churchmen. He and Adam are still discussing their strategy as Gamelyn says:

If we schul algate. assoil hem of here synne,
Warn me broper Adam. whan i schla bygynne.

(11. 449-50)
Gamelyn and Adam are, in effect, an ironic order or "brotherhood" whose mission it is to pardon the sins of those around them. Theirs, of course, is the brotherhood which lives in accordance with truly Christian precepts, in direct opposition to the formal Christian orders. Adam's reply reinforces this reading. He swears by "Seynte Charite," an especially appropriate saint for the present situation, for Gamelyn's upcoming test will require that the monks and abbots be charitable to him before they can seek his release.

As the earlier lines had suggested, when the actual test occurs the churchmen act in as un-Christian a manner as possible, and the ironic contrast between them and John on the one hand and Gamelyn and Adam on the other grows ever starker.29 The mendicants violate not only rules of their order but even commit one of the seven deadly sins as they stuff themselves with course after course and fail to come to Gamelyn's aid:

To bek were servyd of messes two ober pre,
Than seyde Gamelyn. "How serue 3e me?"

(11. 467-68)

Each churchman in turn refuses to be merciful or generous to Gamelyn. Rather, each launches an insulting attack of his own, following the lead suggested by John their wealthy and powerful host. Abbots and priors call not for Gamelyn's being freed but for his death "bough pou were my broper." (1. 484) (The doubly cutting irony of the word "broper" in this context is yet another example of the author's fondness for word play.) Gamelyn's angry reply to these speeches must have articulated wishes felt by more than one fourteenth-century audience:

"Ow! seyde Gamelyn. "so brouk i my bon!
Now i haue aspyed.  pat freendes haue i non.

(11. 489-90)

Certainly there are no friends to be found in the church at any rate. He goes on:

Cursed mot he wrofe. bope fleisch and blood,
That euer do priour. or abbot ony good."

(11. 491-92)

With that furious cry he and Adam pick up staves and attack the evil churchmen. Throughout this attack the poet sustains the theme of religious orders ironically reversed, with Gamelyn and Adam constituting a true Christian order and the abbots, priors, friars and canons all belonging to
false orders. Religious services, terms and rituals are alluded to frequently in this battle scene (ll. 493-550) to insure that the ironic reversal is not missed by the audience. The narrator puns as he likens Gamelyn's fighting to the sprinkling of holy water:

Gamelyn sprengæp holywater wiþ an oken spine.

(ll. 503)

As was done in lines 449-50, Adam and Gamelyn are described as the friars' pardoners. (l. 516) Adam makes mocking reference to the victims' status by ostensibly sounding respectful of their position while at the same time urging Gamelyn on to further violence against them:

"Gamelyn," seyde Adam. "do hem but good; þey ben men of holy chirche drew of hem no blook. Seve wel þe croune. and do hem non harms, But brek boþe her legges sippþen her armes."

(ll. 521-24)

The narrator, after pausing briefly to assert explicitly the reversal in the churchmen's fortune (ll. 527-28), quickly resumes the ironic reversal motif. First he adds insult to injury by having a gray friar enunciate that mode of behavior which the churchmen ought to have followed, but even this apparent return to proper belief is undercut ironically because his motives are not the proper ones. He now would prefer to be "at home wiþ water and breed" (l. 532), but only because he wishes to escape Gamelyn's beatings and not because of any moral belief of his own. The insult is thus redoubled.

The final lines describing these evil churchmen makes the reversal explicit. Gamelyn is described, as Skeat and French and Hale have noticed, satirically ordaining the monks and friars, an act requiring "the laying on of hands."

While Gamelyn made ordres of monkes and frere, Euer stood his broþer and made foul chere.

(ll. 533-34, +n.)

This scene's closing reference to John the evil brother also reiterates the reversal which the now-completed battle has just accomplished. Gamelyn hits him in the neck, breaks his "riggebon," and binds him in the chair he himself had once been forced to occupy. "'Sitte þer, broþer," seyde Gamelyn, / pfor to colyn þy blood as i dide myn.'" (ll. 539-40)
The author chooses to satirize the religious orders at the crucial point in the story where Gamelyn begins to act in his own defense against his brother's wrongs. The orders' presence in the romance is not at all gratuitous, for they serve, by example and by association, as incontrovertible proof of the great depths to which Hohn's villainy had fallen. The churchmen and the evil nobleman effect their mutual condemnations and defeats at the hands of the commoner Adam and the rightly-noble hero Gamelyn. Identifying these two forces of social evil with each other must have proved immensely appropriate and satisfying to the original audience. Class evils and church misdeeds fall into the same category in the author's mind, and right-thinking commoners were wise to despise evil churchmen just as they despised unjust lords:

Ther was no lewede man but in pe halle stood
That wolde do Gamelyn eny ping but good,
But stood besyde and leet him bope werche;
For pey hadde no rewpe of men of holy cherche.

(11. 505-508)

For these reasons the satirizing of the churchmen, although itself not directly essential to Gamelyn's eventual restoration to his rightful place in society and to his inheritance, is crucial to the poem's thematic unity. Without this satiric scene the romance's lashing out at contemporary social injustices would be seriously weakened. With it the author expresses the deep hatred many must have felt for corruption in the church and in the nobility in the fourteenth century--hatred which erupted into the Peasants' Revolt some forty or fifty years after "Gamelyn" is thought to have been written.

I have said that these final three romances, "Sir Launfal," "Sir Cleges," and "Gamelyn," can be distinguished from other romances discussed in this chapter because there is a satiric element in each. Within each poem something is ridiculed because it is felt to be evil. It is now possible to reflect briefly upon those three works generally, to see what criticism they tend to make, and upon what norms they base their judgments. Everyone who is ridiculed in these poems, comes from what may broadly be said to be the middle ranks of feudal society. That is, neither the man at the top of the social hierarchy--the king--nor the man at the bottom--the serf--is satirized in these pieces. Rather, the poems attack men who have some authority over others, but whose authority is limited. These ranks include civil officials (the mayor in "Sir Launfal"), court officers (the porter, steward and usher in
"Sir Cleges," the bribed jury in "Gamelyn"), members of the lower nobility (Gamelyn's brother Joah), and men of the church (monks, priors, friars, canons, and abbots in "Gamelyn"). One must guard against construing these middle feudal ranks to be identical with the group envisioned by the term "middle class." There is no evidence in these poems to support a claim that satire is used as a weapon against the "middle class." The modern middle class, as it is called, had not yet defined itself in the time these romances were composed. The criticism these poems make is of a different kind. Which position one holds in society is less important to the authors of these works than how one behaves in his respective position. Each man is attacked not because he belongs to a specific class but because he has violated the accepted duties and responsibilities appropriate to his place.

The two most common wrongs attacked in these satiric passages are greed and the misuse of official power, and often these two are closely interrelated. Despite the fact that in "Sir Launfal" queen Guinevere has her eyes gouged out, despite the fact that every identified court official, save the king himself, is corrupt in "Sir Cleges," despite the fact that all monastic and mendicant orders are shamed in "Gamelyn," and despite the fact that the villain of that poem is a nobleman, these works do not attempt to encourage revolt against the feudal structure of society. They argue rather that each man should stay in his proper place in society and perform his rightful duties, nothing more. Whenever these writings depict a normative society, a world in which the evils being attacked are absent, there is a clear and just hierarchical order at work.

These norms are usually shown only briefly, most often at the very end of the story where the manditory "happy ending" dictates the resumption of rightful order. In "Gamelyn," however, as in the Robin Hood ballads so similar to it, the society of outlaws portrays this utopian view in some detail. Here there is a clear-cut leader to whom all defer. He, in turn, is a courteous, brave and generous master. When there is a change of leadership of the band it is from one good man to another and the society itself suffers to turmoil from the transition. All the popular romances present this view also by consistently portraying the king as one who is aloof but good and kind, and by endorsing the widespread belief that true nobility and moral goodness are inextricably entwined.30

The Middle English metrical romances, then, are often concerned in a very direct manner with the world around
them. Many times they express this interest through humor, and occasionally, this humor is further honed until it achieves the particularly effective cutting edge of humorous social satire.
Endnotes

1The most notable of these are: Amis and Amiloun, Havelok the Dane, Horn Child, King Horn, Otuel and Roland, Sir Bevis of Hampton, Sir Isumbras, Sir Launcelot of the Laik, and Sir Orfeo.


8A ready listing of all occurrences of this type in the romances can be found in: Gerald Bordman, "Motif-Index of the English Metrical Romances," FF Communications, vol. 79 (1963), #190 (Helsinki). N. B. especially the following numbers: *H195.2., *J1805.5., *J2369.1., K1812.15, *K1812.22, K1815, K1816, K1816.0.3.1, P15.1.1, P15.9.1, P15.93.


11"Next to adventures of Robin Hood and his men, the most favorite topic in English popular poetry is the chance-encounter of a king, unrecognized as such, with one of his humbler subjects." Francis James Child, ed., The English and Scottish Popular Ballads (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1965), III, p. 69.
"King Edward and the Shepherd," French and Hale, pp. 948+. This piece is not listed in the section dealing with romances in Wells' Manual or in Severs' revision. It is, however, included in the French and Hale anthology of romances.

See Child, V, pp. 67-75, for a full list of titles and summaries.

The confession scene in Adam's cottage makes up the first half of the poem, 526 out of 1090 lines. The second half of the poem is set in the king's court. Adam visits the court seeking Ioly Robyn, and, after committing a number of blunders in etiquette, yet still showing his essentially good, honest nature, he is informed of Robyn's true identity. I am not discussing this half of the poem in detail because nothing essentially new is added to the poem here insofar as the analysis of its humor is concerned, and because space in this chapter is better devoted to works which more clearly fall within the genre "romance."


"Rauf Coilear" is in Wells' section dealing with romance and in Severs'. "Rauf's" inclusion can be accounted for, I feel, on the basis of its subject matter. The king in the unrecognized encounter is Charlemagne himself, thus prompting the Early English Text Society (List of Publications, 1936) to include "Rauf Coilear" among the Charlemagne romances. This exposes the shortcomings of classifying the romances exclusively by character names or by "matiers." It is much more appropriate to include "Rauf Coilear" among works with the theme "an unrecognized encounter with a king" than within the matter of France.

In his notes, F. J. Amours provides a modern rendering of the confusing last five lines of this passage:

The speech of the Coilear is rather elliptical, as befits an angry man. What he means to say is this: 'Now that's one mistake you have made; however you must creep before you walk. Besides you are a stranger here, and you do not know how to make me lord of my own. Bless me! I am getting angry, and we are beginning to fall out.'"


Of these, the books by Owst and Peter proved the most helpful. Each develops in some detail the differences between "Satire" and "Complaint." Each of these studies, however, focuses almost exclusively on religious writings. I find that their formulae do not always work when examining secular works like the romances. For example, Peter forces complaint with its comprehensive and unspecific attacks to be exclusively a form used by religious writers ("To put all the examples of Complaint together...is only to reconstruct, in verified form, the thunderings of the preachers." p. 47), but much of the satire in the romances could be considered complaint, according to his definitions made earlier. In other words, when studying the romances specifically, the "perceptible overlap" (p. 10) which he sees between satire and complaint, grows so large as to render the distinction much less helpful than it is when considering religious works. Peter comes dangerously close to implying that complaint, with all its impersonality and its wide range of reproof, is religious while satire, with its personal relationship to the satirist, is a secular phenomenon. The romances show this implication to be simplistic.


24. Mc Knight points out that "the story of the man who is made to promise a share of an expected reward to one or more greedy servants and who, therefore, chooses blows for his reward, is one of the most widespread of tales." (p. lxvii) See his discussion of analogues, pp. lxvii-lxxii. One cannot, therefore, attribute to this poem's author much credit for originality in his work with satire as described in this discussion. See also Bordman, K2242 ff., pp. 58-9, for additional references to treacherous stewards and porters in romances. These motives are common.
Knight offers an interesting speculation as to why these particular court officers may have been chosen for this poem. The romance is to a large extent an instance of special pleading by the minstrel for himself and others of his trade. As such, it is part of an intra-court struggle between two relatively low ranks of serving men—minstrels vs. porters. "The animus against porters and their kind is appropriate to minstrels and appears not infrequently in minstrel tales." (p. ixii)

Knight, p. xviii.

French and Hale, p. 209. The statement is misleading because it implies a simple cause-effect relationship between "Gamelyn" and the ballads, a relationship which current scholarship does not assert or support. In fact, whenever the sources of this poem or its relationship with ballad traditions are discussed the issue is left unresolved. Severs is probably most accurate when he discusses similarity of only the broadest kind:

The composition seems to be of native English origin and presumably stems from the same tradition which gave rise to the Robin Hood ballads (already current in 1377), and perhaps even to the earlier legend of Fulk Fitzwarin (recorded only in Anglo-Norman; twelfth century). Manual, p. 32.

Child goes even further to contradict the French and Hale implication. Robin Hood, he says, is probably much older than our extant text would indicate. The ballad tradition giving rise to Robin Hood was established long before the estimated date for "Gamelyn," ca. 1340. He cites passages which "show the popularity of Robin Hood ballads for a century or more before the time when the Gest of Robyn Hode was pointed as early as late fifteenth century, a popularity which was fully established at the beginning of this period, and unquestionably extended back to a much earlier day."English and Scottish Popular Ballads, III, pp. 41-42. At the very least, then, it seems safer not to suggest in any way that "Gamelyn" served as a source for the Robin Hood ballads. In fact, there is a suggestion that the ballads might have been the fore-runner of "Gamelyn."


I cannot resist noting here what seems to be an indirect, but nonetheless real effort on the part of the author to suggest exact parallels between the main characters in the story, evil John and good Gamelyn, with Judas
and Christ respectively. Earlier in the poem (ll. 165-6*) John had given Gamelyn a treacherous kiss, a deceitful act motivated, the narrator tells us repeatedly, by "false treason." In the feast scene under current discussion, the passage in which Gamelyn is shown bound, "fastyng" and humiliated in the presence of his persecutors, saying nothing to rebut the false charges of his accuser-brother (ll. 459-73), sounds not unlike the Biblical recounting of Christ's scourging, mocking, and crucifixion above the gaming Roman soldiers. The association is confirmed by Gamelyn himself when he cries out to his "Lorde" for deliverance from his suffering just as Christ pled at Gethsemane and on the cross itself.

Such an interpretation of this passage is consistent with the bitterly satiric attack against the religious orders which is taking place at this time in the poem. In fact, seeing the monks as mockers only makes the satire reverberate more loudly.

For but two examples, compare Havelok the Dane, and Gamelyn's speculation concerning the "mayster outlawe," ll. 661-64.
CHAPTER IV

SEXUAL HUMOR

Very early in his long and illustrious knightly career, Sir Bevis of Hampton finds himself in a dilemma not at all uncommon for romance heroes. He is a young, exiled knight who has impressed not only his host in a foreign land, the king, but also the host's beautiful, eligible daughter and heiress, Josian. She easily contrives to get the young knight into her chamber. Once alone with him, she immediately declares her love for him and insists,

Sikerli can i no rede
Boute þou me loue, icham dede,
And boute þou wip me do þe wille.

(ll. 1095-97)

Being so young and, at this point, uncertain of himself, Bevis politely but firmly refuses her offer/demand, pleading that others far greater than himself would wish her hand. Josian is undaunted. Her overwhelming passion for the hero causes her to repeat her desires, this time with greater specificity:

'Merci,', he seide, 'ȝet wip þan
I chauedæ þe to me lemman,
þe bodi in þe scherte naked,
þan al þe gold, þat Crist hap made,
And þow wast wip me do þe wille!'

(ll. 1105-09)

But Bevis refuses her a second time. Bitterly disappointed at the double rejection, Josian lashes back at him with a vitriolic attack which includes a sexual jest most transparent in its metaphoric association. The imagery is so unsubtle that to describe it would insult the reader:

'he fel adoun and wip rìt sore:
þow seidest sop her be-fore:
In al þis world nes þer man,
Prinse ne king ne soudan,
þat me to wiue haue nold,
And he me hadde ones be-holde,
The naive young knight is so completely befuddled by this outburst that he misses completely the sexual implications in Josian's taunting suggestion that he would be better off sowing an olde diche, than having her for a leman, and he sees only that somehow she seems to be impugning his nobility. (His own social rank is a preoccupation for Bevis throughout the romance; see Chapter III above.) Consequently, the poor lad (and his behavior here is more that of a boy than of a man, at least by romance standards) can say nothing in reply other than to assert feebly that he is indeed a nobleman and to wonder how Josian's accusation could literally be true.

'Damesele,' a seide, 'bou seist vnri3t;
Me fader was bope erl & kni3t
How mi3te ich tanne ben a cherl,
Whan me fader was kni3t & erl?

(11. 1125-28)

His unfortunate simplicity here only redoubles the impact of the sexual joke and insult Josian had leveled at him. His ignorance of what is really going on in this interview is exposed to audience ridicule, and his humiliation is complete. The young man has a lot to learn.

This brief encounter between Bevis and Josian (covering only a hundred lines or so in a romance of about 4500 lines) is but one instance among many in which romance writers consciously incorporate sexual humor into their poems. Although no single romance intentionally uses sexual humor to control the effect of the entire work, such humor as that found in the example from Sir Bevis of Hampton does appear from time to time in the genre. A detailed analysis of several kinds of sexual humor in the romances can reveal both its forms and its functions.

However, the reader should note first of all that, while using several examples of sexual humor from several different romances, this study makes no attempt to cite all such humorous instances. The most significant occurrences do receive full discussion only insofar as they help one's
understanding of how sexual humor works. Secondly, the reader should bear in mind that the number of romances containing sexual humor is relatively small when measured against the total number of extant romances. It is easy at times to slip into a myopic view of the whole when in the midst of a detailed discussion of only romance humor. One must guard against thinking, for example, that Sir Bevis of Hampton is primarily humorous because one or two humorous episodes are given lengthy discussion here.

The final caveat is actually a reminder of a point made in the introduction. A modern reader should beware lest he read into a modern novel humorous connotations not originally intended. This third point is especially important to keep in mind when considering sexual humor because the romances often contain sex without humor.

Le Bone Florence of Rome is a good example of a story in which sex is absolutely essential, but in which humor is virtually non-existent. The tale narrates its heroine's incredible faithfulness despite repeated attempts by a variety of villains, as the euphemism goes, to compromise her honor. As such, the romance belongs to a rather common medieval story type, the pious allegory. Le Bone Florence of Rome is so heavily and consistently pious, in fact, that the distinction between it and a saint's life is not altogether clear. The reader must be particularly cautious, therefore, in attributing humorous connotations to incidents or utterances in this poem. He must beware lest such a reading contradict the tone of the poem or any of its characterizations.

In this romance two episodes, occurring within one hundred lines of each other (ll. 1437-49, 1497-1502), might well strike the modern reader as funny. In both scenes Florence is a solitary, powerless captive of her traitorous and covetous brother-in-law, Nyls. He tries to rape his brother's wife only to be thwarted each time by a most extraordinary but effective miracle:

They were nyghted in a wode thych,  
A logge made that traytir wyck,  
Underne the tree,
There he wolde have leyyn hur by,  
And sche made hur preyer specially,  
To god and Mary free,  
Let novyr thyss falsa fende  
My body nodur schame nor schende,  
Myghtfull in magnestey!  
Nys lyking vanysched all away  
On the moone, when nyt was day,
Ther horsys bothe dyght he....

(11. 1437-48)

Again, having paused briefly to incinerate a poor hermit who did not have enough bread to satisfy him, Mylys tries to rape Florence, but with no more success than on the first occasion:

And there he wolde by hur have layne,
   But sche preyed god to be hur schylde;
And ryght as he was at assaye
Hys lykyng vanysched all away
   Thorow the myght of Mary mylde.

(11. 1498-1502)

Mylys, finally, having recognized that Florence was responsible for his amorous difficulties, rids himself of his beautiful but frustrating victim by hanging her in a tree by her hair (11. 1509-20.

At first glance it seems delightfully appropriate for an evil, would-be rapist to fail because he cannot maintain an erection, and for Mylys to be a laughingstock. After all, he is a villain, and villains are often the objects of ridicule in the romances. But such a reaction to these incidents would be incorrect and would undermine what the poem is trying to do at this point. First of all, the poem despite Mylys as a real and present danger to the heroine both here and elsewhere throughout the narration. To demean his villainy by making him little more than a sexual buffoon would simultaneously detract from the plight of the heroine and from the glory of the Virgin Mary who rescues her, both explicitly contradictory to the poem's general intent. Levity in the midst of so supreme a crisis for Florence contradicts all the tonal effects the story-teller has been seeking here. The story-teller emphasizes his intention to make Mylys a bona fide villain by interpolating between these two rape scenes the episode in which Mylys mercilessly burns the guiltless hermit in his own poor hut. The narrator's desire is to make Mylys as hideous a foe as possible, and by implication, to glorify Florence and the Virgin for defeating that foe; he does not want his audience laughing here.

Like Le Bone Florence of Rome, The Procos of the Seuyn Sages is an utterly serious work. Also like Bone Florence, it is concerned primarily with studying woman's character, and consequently, considering medieval notions of womanhood, it deals extensively with the subject of sex. It is interesting to note that these two romances represent opposite extremes in medieval treatments of women. One is nearly a saint's life, showing woman defending her chastity through
the Virgin Mary's aid; the other poem is bitterly misogynistic, depicting woman as the devil's tool. In each exists little or no room for humor. Both are didactic poems, and to read portions of them as being funny, especially insofar as sexual matters are concerned, is to run the risk of misconstruing the purposes their respective authors had in mind when writing them.

The Seuyn Sages is a frame piece. As such it has several tales within a general narrative and the general narrative determines what the several smaller tales are about. In this instance the frame plot concerns the young son of the Roman emperor. The youth is sent away from the court so he can be tutored by seven of the wisest men in the empire. When the prince is brought back to the court, his wicked step-mother attempts unsuccessfully to seduce him and the succeeds in persuading the emperor to imprison him, claiming the boy had tried to rape her. The remainder of the romance depicts the debate before the emperor with the empress on one side and the seven sages on the other; the empress seeks the boy's execution while the sages each argue in turn for his release. In the debate each participant presents his case before the emperor by means of parable, alternating between the two different positions. These tales are essentially ad hominem attacks upon the opposition, the sages arguing that the emperor ought not listen to a woman, the empress arguing that he ought to ignore the old clerks. In studying these tales one can understand why humorous readings are inappropriate, even though many of them seem initially to resemble popular, humorous story types. Only a couple of examples need be cited to explain this.

The sixth tale, "The Husbande Shut Out" (11. 1411-1520), uses a plot line often found in fabliaux, and may be one itself. A jealous husband gets tricked by his wife and he ironically receives punishment which she deserves. In his attempt to discover whether or not his wife was sneaking out at night and being unfaithful to him (as in fact she was), the husband himself goes out. She takes that opportunity to dash in and to lock him out of their house, claiming aloud that he is a lecher who has violated the local curfew, and that he ought to be punished accordingly. He is. Thus, the evil wife gets away with her misdeeds while the hapless husband is wrongly punished. This tale is told by a sage to demonstrate woman's traitorous guile, thus implying that the empress is not to be trusted. His point is completely serious.

The empress is quick to respond with a double-edged rebuttal, reasserting the propriety of heterosexual love
(the reasoning being that the previous sage, implicitly at least criticized the lady for following her own natural impulses), and at the same time cautioning the emperor against trusting covetous servants. Tale VII, "The Kinge and His Stiward" (ll. 1559-1660), explains that a young ruler's homosexual activity causes him to fall ill.

Wimmen he louede swithe līte,
And usede sinne sodomighte.
So longe he pleiede with yong man,
A swele in his membres cam than
The skin might his nowt helde,
Ne he no mighte himselfe welde.

(ll. 1563-58)

As part of his cure the doctor recommends that the king spend a night with a woman, so the king orders his steward to procure him one for a fee of twenty marks. Coveting the money for himself, the steward forces his own wife to sleep with the king. When the king discovers the truth of the steward's treachery he banishes him and richly rewards the poor wife who, like himself, has been betrayed.

The near-fabliau plot of the former story and the king's ironically appropriate malady in the latter might seem humorous. To consider them humorous contradicts the immediate purpose of each tale, however. The object of ridicule in the sage's story would have to be the cuckolded husband, yet the teller clearly intends his audience to identify and sympathize with the husband and to abhor the wife's treachery. Were one to laugh during the telling of the empress's tale, he would laugh at the young king as he suffers the consequences of his homosexuality. This response, too, is inappropriate for the attack on homosexuality is serious here. The queen intends the emperor to associate himself with this king, and the king in the story is the hero in that he provides the story's proper conclusion--rewarding the good and punishing the evil characters. As the hero, he is not a proper object of ridicule in an exemplum such as this. Both these frame stores, in other words, exist within their larger context as parts of a heated debate, which, in turn, concerns the issue of whether or not an emperor will slay his own son for having attempted incest with the empress. The empress eventually loses the debate and confesses both to the truth of the seduction incident and to her selfish motives for wanting the young prince. Florentin, killed. The romance consistently forces the reader to sympathize with the sages' point of view. Thus, this debate serves the writer's greater purpose, which is, essentially, to attack womanhood as strongly as he can. A bitter aside by the narrator captures effectively the venomous, misogynistic tone prevailing throughout this work:
These two works, then, Le Bone Florence of Rome and The Proces of the Seuyn Sages, demonstrate that not all references to sex in medieval romances are necessarily intended to be humorous, even when sex is the central topic of importance. The somewhat lengthy excursus on that fact serves not only to underscore the importance of keeping this third general precaution in mind, but also to demonstrate briefly how one can use study of the overall tone of these works to aid in their interpretation. Having taken these three introductory precautions into consideration, one can go on to examine those instances in which intentional sexual humor does in fact occur. Such an examination can originate from a number of perspectives. I shall note first, briefly, the general forms sexual humor can take, and then, in greater detail, the various functions such humor can serve.

A good deal of the sexual humor to be found in the romances takes the form of quips, puns, or short phrases utilizing double entendre. These brief instances can appear almost anywhere in a story, but frequently they are found in the midst of a conversation between a man and a woman. Josian's taunting accusation that Sir Bevis would make a better plowman than knight, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is an excellent example of such a brief humorous instance. It would be futile to attempt to list every such instance of sexual humor, or even to attempt an exhaustive catalogue of all possible types of such word play, but noting a few examples will help demonstrate the rich variety one can find in these brief flashes of humor.

In In Ywain and Gawain, Ywain finds himself in a situation much like Bevis' and that of several other chivalric heroes. He is in a lady's chamber, and she, in articulating her wish to make him comfortable, makes an offer with obvious sexual connotations:

In at be dore sho him led,
And did him sit opon hir bed.
A quylt ful nobil lay þareon;
Richer saw he neuer none.
Sho said if he wald any thing,
He sold be serued at his liking.

Such delightful, euphemistic references to sexual intercourse (whether actually performed by the characters or not
are common. In Kyng Alisaunder, the hero "dude al pe lefdys wille" (1. 7720) once Candace succeeded in trapping him in her chamber. At other times the romancer, not content with simply a phrase, may choose to elaborate somewhat on his description with a not-so-subtle metaphor, as does the author of Sir Eglamour of Artois. Eglamour is ostensibly describing to Christabell, his damsel, his first two knightly adventures undertaken in her service, but the narrator's description leads to more than just a suspicion that all was not talk in that chamber:

So gracyously he come hur tylle,
Of poynetes of armys he schewyd
hur hys fylle,
That there they dwellyd all ny3t
(11. 653-56)

Some of the most humorous references to sexual intercourse are the result of puns, for through them the double entendre is often focused most sharply. In Kyng Alisaunder the author uses a particularly explicit pun at two, widely separated, but nonetheless similar points in the story's action. In the former instance, Olympyas is asking Neptenabus when she will be visited by the "god" Amon again, for he had proved an admirable bedmate shortly before.

She seide to hym 'of maistres flour,
How shal J take on wip myne amoure?
Shall J any more hym yseen,
Shal J anymore aqueynte hym ben?'
(11. 420-23)

Much later in the poem the pun on "aquente" is again used, but by different characters. Candulek is describing to king Alexander the eagerness with which Candace, his mother, awaits the opportunity to meet the great conqueror whom she has loved for some time:

Quoęp Candulek: "Leue sire,
Also mychel she 30u desirep--
Jch 30u sigge, by Goddes ore,
She desirep noping more
pan to ben to 30u aquiente.
(11. 7586-90)

A pun does not have to be so explicit in order for it to yield some degree of sexual humor, however. In Lai le Freine the narrator takes great delight in the fact that his heroines, who are twins, have as their own names the names for two different kinds of trees. Thus when a suitor comes and announces his preference for one damsel over the
other, he does so with a pun.

"Fairer maiden n'as neuer seen
Better than ash is hazle Y ween!"

(11. 339-40)

The sexual nature of the humor is subdued here. More immediately intriguing to the narrator than sex is the possibility for word play on the names. The brief tale (40211.) contains no fewer than four references to the fact that "Lay le Freine" is the French for "of an ashe." In 11. 23-28, the narrator offers just such a translation; 11. 167-73 find the maid placing the second daughter into a hollow ash tree outside an abbey; 11. 223-28 have the narrator again translating the French term, this time a bit more expansively; finally, 11. 339-42 have a character within the plot punning on "hazel" and "ash," the two girls' names and then have the narrator carefully and tediously explaining again the joke lest anyone miss it.13

Another type of casual sexual humor, coming from a word or phrase, in addition to the euphemistic description of sexual intercourse itself and the pun on someone's name, might be labeled the ironic joke. Through it a character makes an ironic statement, either wittingly or unwittingly, which has clear, sexual overtones for the audience. In Lovelich's Merlin,14 for example, such a joke appears in the speech of the incredulous hermit to whom Merlin's mother had just confessed that she had sexual intercourse with a devil. The Christian man, assuming she had merely slept with another mortal, reproaches her for concocting such a story, yet tells the unwitting truth as he replies to her narration:

"Ful of the devel thou art, ful pleyn,
and the devel js fer with-Jnne the."

(11. 699-701)

The audience, aware that a devil did indeed impregnate her, and that she is carrying Merlin, can see immediately the irony in the hermit's reprimand.15

In Sir Tristem16 occurs an example of a conscious ironic joke, this one aimed at King Mark and intended to ridicule him in the eyes of the audience. Tristem makes the joke because he is doubly angry with the king at this time. He is angry for Mark's allowing himself to be drawn into an untenable either/or dilemma by a wandering minstrel. (As reward for his playing, Mark promised the minstrel anything he wished, and the minstrel demanded Ysonde, thus forcing Mark to forfeit his honor or his wife.) Tristem, understandably waxes even angrier when Mark resolves the
problem by giving up Ysonde. After he returns from a hunt and learns what had transpired in his absence, Tristrem is almost beside himself with rage (and, one might suspect, suppressed apprehension over Ysonde's future). He hurls a bitter question at King Mark:

\[
\text{bo was Tristrem in ten } \\
\text{And chidde wip ðe king: } \\
\text{"3ifstow glewemen ði quen? } \\
\text{Hastow no noþer þing?"
\]

(11. 1849-52)

The obvious irony in this question, of which Tristrem must have been aware as he spoke, is that Tristrem too, is a gleman, that is, a man accomplished with harp and song, and he has been consorting with Mark's wife for some time. Mark's humiliation at this point in the narrative is thereby doubled. He loses his wife to not one gleman, but two, and the second succeeds in chiding him for giving Ysonde to the first.

Such then, are but a few examples of the most common form sexual humor takes when it appears in these works—the brief flash of double entendre produced in a short phrase, or pun, or comment by a narrator or character. But these brief quips are not the only form sexual humor can assume. The puns and quick phrases are complemented by another, broader form of sexual humor—the sexually humorous scene.

There are several times in the romances when the authors choose to alter radically the usually sober, martial atmosphere of their narratives by including a jocund episode. Such an episode occasionally involves sexual humor, with farcical action and ribald humor combining to create much of its levity. In these scenes the sexual humor is sustained in a way not possible with just a pun or a one-line joke. Indeed, such humorous passages can be quite long, covering hundreds of lines. Since they are larger narrative units, these episodes can also assume greater significance for the romance generally than can the brief jokes, often interacting with the main plot of the poem.

Sir Degrevant has an interesting mixture of interrelated sub-plots, most of which concern heroic demonstrations of knightly prowess by the poem's namesake, but one of which has subtle, but distinct, sexual humor. The story runs essentially like this: A neighboring earl raids Degrevant's lands and hunts in his forest while Degrevant is gone crusading. Degrevant returns to avenge the wrong done him, and promptly falls in love with Myldore, the
earl's daughter. Placing blood loyalty above her attraction to the hero, she resists his advances for a time, but eventually she capitulates. At the same time Myldore's maid is enamored of Degrevant's squire. A duke visiting the earl serves as his champion and is Degrevant's prime combatant. All eventually ends happily when the feud between Degrevant and the earl is ended by Degrevant and Myldore's marriage. As might be anticipated, the portions of the story containing sexual humor are those which present the women's love stories.

As the plot outline might suggest, Myldore is faced with the problem of equally valid, but self-contradictory, desires on her part. The handsome, rich, brave Sir Degrevant has sworn to her that he will marry none but her. At the same time he makes these pronouncements, however, he is the agent who is singularly responsible for destroying her father's forces. This dilemma might easily have yielded a most serious, even tragic, result, but his romancer does not choose to resolve the problem in that manner. Rather, throughout a good portion of the center section of the romance, he describes her gradual transformation from open hostility to her father's foe to the vehicle of the feud's resolution. He capitalizes on the comic rather than the tragic possibilities of the situation, preferring, in other words, the happy ending that is a romance staple. Because he chooses this course to resolve the conflict, the humorous touches in Myldore's story are appropriate. The humor is subtle. It manifests itself in a series of ever-weakening rationalizations by the heroine arguing why she should continue rejecting Degrevant even though her attraction to him grows continually.

She begins by being whole-heartedly, almost viciously, opposed to Degrevant. Her reply to his first overtures is spontaneous and unqualified:

_She said, "Tratur, thou shalt bye! Why were thou so hardye To do me this vylanye, By day or by ny3th? For oure folk that thou hast slayn, Though shalt be honged and drawn, Therof my fadyr wol be fayn To see that with sy3th!"

(11. 737-44)

Sir Degrevant, of course, retorts that he will take on any and all comers, even "Gyf ther come fourty for on," (1. 751), as he vigorously defends the justice of his cause in the debate. The fury of his reply is too much for Myldore, and she retreats to her chamber, thus concluding the stock
bitter-enemies-at-first-encounter opening to this love story. The severity of each character's emotional reaction to the other might, for some in the audience, already serve as a clue that both were shielding feelings from one another, even at this early stage.

Already at this point, i.e., immediately after this first lover's quarrel, the romancer begins hinting at a comic resolution to the problem in two different ways, each complementary to the other. First of all, while ostensibly doing nothing more than making a transition from one dramatic scene to another, the narrator inserts a clever, disguised, but nonetheless real, pun on "maidenhood." To appreciate fully the neatness with which this jest is tucked into the poem the complete stanza must be quoted. The stanza begins with Degrevant concluding his rebuttal to Myldore's angry response:

XLVII

"And her my trou3th I the ply3the,
Tho that lepeth now full ly3th
Shal be ffay, and we ffy3th,
 ffor all here michel pryde!"
The stout man was astered,
Hys squiere rau3th hym hys swerd;
Thanne the borlych berde
    No lenger durst byde.
Tyl hyr chaumbur sche went,
And swore the kny3th shulde be schent.
The mayde hur hood of how hent,
    And nelyd that tyde;
"Meydame, oppon 3owlus ny3the
My waryson 3e me hy3th;
Yne axe the bote 3onde kny3th
    To slep by my syde!"

(11. 753-68)

Now, it is clear that line seven hundred sixty-three, "The mayde hur hood of hoe hent," is literally a description of a second woman, Myldore's maid, entering Myldore's chamber and doffing her hood in deference to her lady. But this is not immediately clear when the audience confronts the line; the next line is needed to clarify the picture. (This is even more the case when it is recalled that the manuscript version of the poem does not contain the punctuation of the modern, printed text.) If only for a split second, the audience might well believe that "mayde" refers to Myldore and not to a servant, and that she is removing a cloak, perhaps, as she enters her own room. The ambiguity created by this unusually abrupt transition, buried in the midst of
a stanza, draws attention to the line, and this second glance by the reader (or quickened attention by the listener) provides him the opportunity to notice the sexual pun which is tucked so neatly into the line. Even more delightful is the fact that the pun can (and does, eventually,) apply equally to both women.

Referent ambiguity is also the key to the sub-plot this transition is introducing, and this sub-plot represents the second device used by the romancer for incorporating a humorous element into the Myldore-Degrevant story. From the perspective gained by reading the entire romance, and by contemplating how the various plot elements tie together, it is perfectly clear that 11. 736-68 begin describing the parallel love story between Degrevant's and Myldore's servants, the squire and the maid respectively. But at the exact moment the maid utters her request it is not at all certain with whom she wishes to sleep. As worded, her request could easily refer to Degrevant himself. In fact, this is actually the more logical of the two possible readings. It is more logical because, not nine lines earlier, the narrator had used the precise term "squire" to refer to this man, a term meant to distinguish him from Sir Degrevant a knight. It is understandable then, that Myldore, and in all probability the audience, might mistake the maid's complimentary metaphor for "man," for a literal reference to Degrevant himself, and this is precisely Myldore's response. In granting the maid permission to "go do thi best" (l. 773), the lady, obviously still exhausted and reeling from the highly emotional debate with Degrevant just concluded, shows that she assumes Degrevant to be the one the maid has in mind. His lofty social status and her own low estimation of him are direct opposites, Myldore says; and she, if given her druthers, would rather the maid chose just the opposite kind of man than Degrevant--a man high in Myldore's estimation, though perhaps low in social status. She concludes her reply with an injunction aimed clearly at Degrevant; she has no reason to be so furious with the squire. Myldore says to her maid:

"Damesel, go do thi best,  
I pray the let me haue my rest;  
Go and glad thi gest,  
    In all the devyl way!  
ffor as ever God me save, 
Haddest thou asked a knave, 
The symplust that I have,  
    Hadd be more to my pay:  
I swere the by Goddus grace, 
Come he never in this place,
He passed never such a pace,
By ny3the ne by day!"

(11. 773-84)

The humorous, ironic possibilities presented by this apparent confusion (yet another variation of the mistaken identity device) are not realized immediately in the story. It is possible that some might see the ironic appropriateness in Myldore's cautioning her maid never to permit Degrevant to appear while he is the maid's lover, suspecting that Myldore will eventually claim Degrevant for herself and might be jealous of the maid, but it is highly unlikely. Rather, the romancer suspends action in this plot for a while, leaving the ambiguity just as it is, and preparing to use that ambiguity later to help describe Myldore's eventual acceptance of Degrevant.

Some one hundred-fifty lines later Myldore and the maid speak with each other again, resolving the ambiguity in Myldore's mind concerning the identity of the maid's lover, but not before the author capitalizes on the lady's confusion by having her make a few more ambivalent statements.

The scene opens with the lady scorning the maid for having forfeited her virginity:

The lady low3h hyr to scorne,
Sche seys, "Thi maydynhed is lorne,
God gif the care!"

(11. 938-40)

but Myldore seems particularly interested in learning the exact details of what transpired between the kny3t and the maid. Ridicule loses ground to curiosity momentarily as Myldore asks,

"Damesele, for Godys my3t,
How pcyis the that kny3t,
As evere mote thou the?"

(11. 946-48)

One senses here that Myldore asks this question not so much to humiliate the maid as to verify in her own mind what she suspects has happened—that the man she loves has slept with another. The maid's reply to this query clears up Myldore's mistake as she describes how Degrevant rewarded the maid by knighting the squire and by providing the new couple with money and land. (Degrevant does this because the maid had provided him with valuable information concerning the duke
and his castle.) All this, she concludes, is true and she has a written document to prove it:

"here the chartur in thi hind,
Thiself may hyt see!"

(ll. 959-60)

The lady is delighted to hear that her maid has been so well "paid" by Degrevant. It is not clear, however, whether her delight stems from knowing that the maid has a legally-binding document and hence is secure in her reward, or whether it stems from knowing that Degrevant remains unattached. In her reply to the maid, she seems to be fishing for a supportive response from the maid which would confirm unequivocally that her suspicion is in fact unfounded:

Than that lady was glad
By sche that chartur had rad,
"Had thou syre Degrivaunant had,
Then had thou wel i-gon."

(ll. 961-64)

The maid loyally assures Myldore that Degrevant wants none but Myldore herself, and presents Myldore with a valuable ring betokening his affection for her. After seeing the ring, Myldore's ostensible rejection of the offer is actually a second request that the maid offer a face-saving rationalization which would enable her to accept the ring, and, consequently, Degrevant. She still pretends to hide from the hero behind a mask of hostility, but it takes much longer now for her to put it up to her face than it did when she first encountered him. For a few brief moments, i.e., ll. 977-83, her true feelings are visible. The author describes all this subtle action within the span of a single stanza.

XLII

The lady loked on thay ryng,
Hyt was a gyfte fore a kyng,
"Thys ys a merveylous thing!
Wenus thou I be wode
To do sych a ffoly,
To love my lordys enemy,
Thow he were to so dow3thy?
Nay, by the rode!
Y do the wele for to wyte,
Y nel non housbond have 3yte:
Seye the kny3the whan 3e mete,
I wol hym no gude!
This romancer, then, has used the subtle humor offered by the apparent ambiguity in Myldore's and others' statements to help develop his plot, and at the same time to delight the audience. This humor does not depend so much on single lines as it does upon a delicate manipulation of the poem's tone in given episodes, sometimes spanning hundreds of lines. But using this light, subtle touch of sexual humor is not the only way sexually humorous episodes can operate in romances. They can just as easily have a blatant, even farcical tone, perhaps even more easily. Sir Tristrem provides a vivid example of many such episodes which are more obviously sexually humorous.

A good deal of the Middle English version of the Tristan and Isolde story narrates in detail the cuckolding of King Mark. As they pursue their affair the two lovers have a series of adventures in which their escapes from detection get progressively narrower. Eventually King Mark does catch them and banishes Tristrem. Any one of these adventures, like the series collectively, is an excellent example of an episode with obvious sexual humor. One of the first encounters the lovers have with Mark is especially graphic.

King Mark, suspicious of Tristrem and Ysonde, attempts to trap the two lovers. He declares that he is leaving court for some time and chooses Tristrem to act as regent, having, however, confined Tristrem to the town and Ysonde to her bower. The undaunted lovers manage a secret rendezvous beneath a tree in an orchard only to be witnessed by a dwarf. The dwarf, in turn, reports all he sees to Mark who promptly resolves to sit in that tree himself in order to witness the lovers. When the lovers do meet beneath the tree, Tristem notices Mark's presence by seeing his shadow and warns Ysonde that they should speak as though they are enemies.

Sir Mark sat in þe tre;
þer mattan þai to.
þe schadowe Tristrem gan se
And loude spac he þo
þat Ysonde schuld Mark se
And calle Tristrem hir fo:

(11. 2102-07)

For the next fifty-nine lines the two lovers loudly feign hostility toward one another and assert their prior loyalties
to Mark. Meanwhile, the hapless, treed cuckold listens guillibly, feeling all the while progressively more and more guilty and ashamed for mistrusting the two. In such a setting virtually everything the characters say has obvious, ironic connotations. The connotations are obvious, in this instance, not only to the lovers but also to the audience, for the author had carefully prepared the way beforehand so they would know precisely and fully what was going on in this scene. Everyone understands, for example, the precise meaning behind the riddle/oath Ysonde utters in defense of her womanly honor:

\[Y\ loyed neuer man wip mode \\
Bot him, bat hadde me maidenhede!\]

(11. 2133-34)

Everyone understands, but Mark's understanding is erroneous, for he does not realize that Tristrem, not Mark, "hadde" her "maidenhede," and that all except Mark know of Mark's error. There is nothing subtle about the tone here, or about the effect the tone seeks to achieve for the audience. It provides all with a broad, sexual joke at Mark's expense.

Because it is so brazen and sustained, the sexual humor in the Sir Tristrem passage is very different from the more subdued sexual humor in Sir Degrevant. The forms, the brief joke and the episode, are by no means mutually exclusive, however. In fact, just the opposite is true. Both forms very often exist concurrently, as Ysonde's riddle shows. This simultaneity can be seen in the functions sexual humor serves as well.

In a number of romances one finds that sexual humor usually serves more than one purpose at the same time but that these purposes can be divided into two general groups for study. Some sexual humor, often confined to a brief moment in the narration, exists simply to entertain the romance audience. At other times the romancer can use sexual humor to manipulate the audience. This manipulation, in turn, can serve two different purposes. First, the romancer can use sexual humor to affect the presentation of the story to the audience. It arrests the audience's attention and directs it to the story in one way or another. Second, the romancer can use sexual humor to manipulate audience reaction to actions occurring within the narrative itself. For convenience, the two general functions of sexual humor can be labeled "incidental" and "manipulative" respectively. Manipulative humor can be further subdivided into "presentational" and "thematic" humor.

Of course, all occurrences of sexual humor seek to entertain the audience, but not all instances are limited
to just this function. Those that are simply incidental can often appear in the narrative quite unexpectedly and hold the audience's attention only briefly.

Such is the case in an early scene in *King Horn*, one of the oldest extant romances. Rymenhild, the heroine, is enamored of Horn and orders her steward to send him to her chamber. The steward, thinking such a request could come to no good, substitutes Afulf, the brother of the fifteen-year-old hero. This, in turn, sets up an incident with mistaken identity. For a moment or two the audience can enjoy watching Rymenhild make her advances to the man she loves so intently, yet whom she does not even know well enough to recognize. She does not realize a switch has occurred.

Abelbrus [the steward] gan Afulf lede,
And into bure wip him ȝede:
Anon vpon Afulf child
Rymenhild gan wexe wild.
He wende þat Horn it were
þat heo hauede þere:
Heo sette him on bedde;
Wip Afulf child he wedde,
On hire armes tweie
Afulf heo gan leie.
"Horn," quaf heo, "wel longe
Ihc habbe þe luued stronge
þu schalt þi trowþe plijte
On myn hond her hiȝte,
Me to spuse holde
And ihc þe lord to wolde."

(11. 293-308)

This delightful incident quickly passes into the background as the story continues, and (aside from possibly dramatizing indirectly the depth of Rymenhild's passion for Horn) is more or less forgotten. For a few lines, however, the audience has been treated to some fun at the heroine's expense.

These incidents occur throughout the genre. One could find examples of this purely entertaining sexual humor from some of the very latest medieval romances just as easily as from the early works. Tucked into the generally most serious, "Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake" by Sir Thomas Malory, is a splendid flash of sexual humor involving none other than Lancelot himself. As is often the case, Lancelot finds himself without proper lodging after a hard day of questing through the forest. As evening falls he discovers an unoccupied tent and beds down there for the night.
Than within an owre there come that knyght that ought the pavylon. He wente that his lemmam had layne in that bed, and so he leyde hym adowne by sir Launcelot and toke hym in his armys and began to kysse him. And whan sir Launcelot felte a rough berd kyssing hym he sterte oute of the bedde lyghtly, and the othir knyght after hym...

(p. 153, 11. 25-29)

As was the case with the King Horn incident, this brief event has little or no significant impact for the story in which it occurs. The incident serves merely to introduce Lancelot to lorde Bellus, something Malory could have accomplished easily without humor had he so desired, and this incident too, is quickly forgotten by narrator and characters alike.

In both incidents described the humor of the situation is external. It exists for the audience viewing the action but not for the characters involved in the action itself. Insofar as they are concerned, the events at issue are utterly devoid of humor. Such external humor is common in scenes only incidentally humorous.

There are times when a romancer wants to do more with sexual humor than make his audience laugh and at those times he employs another, more sophisticated function of sexual humor. Often the romancer uses humor to influence the audience's response to the romance. This manipulation operates in two different ways. In the first the romancer directs his efforts to the presentation of the romance rather than to elements within the romance itself. The romancer uses sexual humor to win the audience's attention and to draw that attention to his narrative. The opening scene in Sir Bevis of Hampton (discussed in Chapter I, above) in which Bevis' parents are depicted as a January/May couple is one such instance of presentational humor.

Kyng Alisaunder opens with a much more elaborate instance of this kind of audience manipulation, although the basic device is the same. The romancer begins his narrative with a titilating, humorous episode in order to get his audience to pay attention to what he is saying. The episode in question here runs from about line one hundred thirty-nine through line seven hundred fifty, a relatively short episode in a romance which runs nearly eight thousand lines. Preceded only by the poem's general introduction and a brief characterization of Neptenabus, the passage tells the delightful, promiscuous story of how Olympias and Neptenabus came to be Alexander's parents.
Early as this episode is, however, the narrator anticipates even this scene, and prepares his audience for the episode's bawdy subject matter in the very first twenty-eight lines of the poem. In keeping with the high seriousness with which romances are supposed to open, the narrator begins his work by ostensibly protesting against telling "a ribaudy" (1.21). But all is not as it appears on the surface, for the net effect of his protestation, especially in lines nineteen through thirty-one, is that ribaldry has been brought to the forefront, of the audience's attention rather than dismissed from it. This use of occupatio establishes an atmosphere of friendly banter between the narrator and the audience, an atmosphere which is reinforced by the jovial insult in lines 27-28. These quips establish an amiable rapport between the narrator and the audience and it would be a serious mistake for the audience to conclude that these lines ought to be taken only literally.

Napécles, wel fele and fulle
Beep yfounde in herte—and shulle—
bat hadden leuer a bibaudye
þan here of God oiper Seint Marie,
Ciper to drynk a copful ale
þan to heren any gode tale.
Swiche Ich wolde weren out bishett,
For certeynlich it were nett.
For hij ne habbeþ wille, Ich woot wel,
Bot in the gut and in þe barel,

(11. 19-28)

It is small wonder that the narrator must immediately call for things to quiet down before he can actually begin his story.

Now, pes! listneþ, and leteþ cheste—
Zee shullen heren noble geste,
Of Alisaundre, þe riche kyng....

(11. 39-31)

All this banter sets the tone quite admirably for the Olympias-Neptenabus story immediately following. The romancer can be said, in effect, to be using the same device, introducing a tale with humor to capture the audience's attention, on two different levels. The first thirty lines of the romance are a brief introduction to the Olympias-Neptenabus story, which, in turn, introduces the romance at large.

Space will not permit an exhaustive analysis of the Olympias-Neptenabus story, but even a brief look at it
shows the gay promiscuity so prevalent in it. A good deal of the story's effectiveness results from the interacting personalities of the two lovers. Neptenabus has just been depicted as a wizard, a man of great power who is hostile to Phillip, Olympias' husband and king of Macedonia. Olympias, in turn, is a proud, vain woman:

Mychel she desire to shewe hire body,  
Her faire here, her face rody,  
To haue loos and ek praisyng  
And al is folye, by heuen-kyng.  

(ll. 163-66)  

In their first encounter each is extremely wary of the other, yet fascinated nonetheless. Neptenabus says he has come to tell her the truth, and

She was adrad he shulde telle  
þing of shame, and nolde due lie.  
More she þouȝth þan she spaak.  

(ll. 229-31)

By so describing Olympias' response, the narrator hints broadly that she already has an unsavory past to hide. For his part, Neptenabus is overwhelmed by the lady's beauty. "Of her fairehede he was agast." (l. 250) As they converse, then, each parrys with the other, afraid to be explicit, yet successful in making advances nonetheless, for each is an expert player at "þis game deliciouse." (l. 241) Neptenabus' advances are witty and erudite; Olympias' are corporeal, visual; "selde she spaak." (l. 283) Note, for example, the tantalizing description of Olympias stretched voluptuously on her bed as she chats with Neptenabus:

þe lefdy liȝb on her bedde,  
Yhiled myd a silken webbe.  
Jn a chaysel smok she lay,  
And in a mantel of Doway.  

(ll. 277-80)

This, to say the least, is a most provocative manner in which to entertain a foreign guest, and it is not difficult for the audience here to imagine what Neptenabus' reaction to such a sight must be.

Once situated at her bedside, Neptenabus brings out some of his wizard's paraphernalia and prophesies the birth of her world-conquering boy-child, a birth which will be a miraculous feat involving a god:
Amon, þe god of Lybye,
Shal douune come from þe skye
To þine bed, la, God it were,
And in þine body hym the child biþete.
Greibe þee now, and faire þee kepe—
To-niðth þou seest hym in þi slepe.

(11. 317-22)

With this prophecy, or rationalization on each others' minds, they part for one night, Neptenabus to do some wizardly deeds with a doll-like likeness of Olympias, and Olympias to dream that Amon actually had made an appearance. Her dream so upsets her, she says, that Neptenabus must remain alongside her all night henceforth. Neptenabus for his part, aids this conspiracy by removing all servants from Olympias' chamber save himself, in order, he says, to afford Amon the privacy he will require when he visits the mortal. Lest anyone in the audience miss the by now already-obvious point that Amon and Neptenabus are one in the same, the narrator provides an editorial aside alluding directly to Neptenabus' marvelous versatility in assuming the roles of all Olympias' chamber servants, an aside which underscores both the lovers' privacy and the wizard's fondness for playing the parts of one other than himself:

(And hym-self was kniðth, and swayn,
And boure-mayde, and chaumberlayn!)

(11. 377-78)

Once safely isolated in her bedchamber, the thinly-veiled conspiracy between the two lovers yields to action which, so far as the audience is concerned, is explicitly sexual and nearly farcical. The miraculous visit by the god Amon is nothing more than Neptenabus donning a goat skin and jumping around her room for awhile before he jumps into her bed. The author's humorous intent is unmistakable in his description of the event.

Neptenabus his charme hape nome,
And takeþe hym hames of dregoun,
From his shulldre to hele adoun;
His heuede and his shuldres fram
He diðteþ in fourme of a ram.
Ouere hire bed tweyes he pedeþ,
þe þrid tyme and þe þe creþeþ.
Offe he cast his dragons hame
And wip þe lefdy playeþ his game.
She was þolemood and lay stille;
þe fals god dud of his wille.
Neptenabus does not even bother to keep on his costume once he gets into her bed, thereby stripping away even the slightest pretence that his fabulous prophecy is in fact occurring. Both the action itself and the double pun in line three hundred ninety-four ensure a comic reading of this scene. At dawn "Amon" returns to Neptenabus' bed.

The morning after the miraculous visit finds Olympias and Neptenabus discussing the previous night's events, both knowingly extending the charade. Their conversation operates on the very thinnest of possible rationalizations—that very thinness, of course, adding to the humor. Olympias tells Neptenabus that Amon's visit was most delightful and asks the wizard when she can expect the god's return. Neptenabus responds, adding some further "theology" about the god Amon as he does so. He just happens to be "Amonns messagere" (1. 436), he says, and he knows just what the god's demands are. Olympias must speak freely with Neptenabus during the days and Amon will visit her at night. However, Amon insists on his privacy; it would be best that no other lords of the court learn about his visits. That way neither he nor the others will get angry with one another. For her part, Olympias is so impressed by this new religious order and its priest that she brings Neptenabus permanently into her own ranks.

She maked hym her chaumberleyn
Ouere kni3th and ouere sweyn,
And hym bitook alle here kayes,
And her kepyng by ni3th and dayes.
Neptenabus al doop his wille
Wip Olympyas, ac euere stille,
Also it were pe god Amon.

There is little doubt that this episode ought to be read humorously. The pious asides by the narrator which seem to moralize upon the characters' activities, especially those of Olympias, are not intended to be taken seriously and do not determine the tone for this section of the romance. Rather, they are little more than formalized utterances found often in the romances, and their net effect on this episode's tone is to heighten the promiscuous gaiety of the main action rather than to destroy it, because of their stark contrast with the dominant atmosphere. One must also keep in mind the author's fundamentally sympathetic attitude toward his hero, Alexander, whose birth this scene presents.
To read the engendering episode between Olympias and Neptenabus as no more than outright adultery—which a pious interpretation would require—necessitates one's perceiving Alexander's birth as an undesirable, even evil event. This is inconsistent with the rest of the poem. The author has chosen to begin his romance with a humorous story filled with promiscuous fun, and through this story he wins the attention of his audience.

While the opening scenes in both *Sir Bevis of Hampton* and *Kyng Alisaunder* arrest the audience's attention, their usefulness to their writers is not limited to manipulation in order to affect the presentation of the work. These incidents also serve a second manipulative function, a thematic one. The sexual humor in these scenes contributes to the romance's internal development and the romancer uses this contribution to guarantee that his audience responds to a given theme within that narrative as he wishes. In *Bevis* the connection between the opening scene and the general plot is direct. The episode of sexual humor provides the motivation for Bevis, youth though he may be, to begin his adventurous life. His mother's illicit affair forces him into exile, and the romance following tells, essentially, the story of Bevis' struggle to return to his former home and to avenge the wrongs done him and his father. The opening scene in *Kyng Alisaunder* initiates the action for the greater part of the romance too, but does so only indirectly in that the net results of that scene are the facts that Alexander is born and that he is predicted to be a great conqueror. The author, in other words, uses the tale to begin Alexander's biography literally at its beginning.

This second manipulative function of sexually humorous episodes in romances—contributing to the story's internal development—is further elucidated by another scene in *Kyng Alisaunder*, this one occurring near the very end of the romance. In a very broad sense, the two scenes suggest an overall unity for the poem by having the son, at the conclusion of the narrative, involved in an episode similar in many respects to that of his father at the beginning.

This second scene operates in much the same fashion as the first; two lovers engage in a delightful charade to rationalize their sexual promiscuity, but they do so in a manner which enables the audience to understand fully what is really going on and which requires the audience to sympathize with the lovers. Without prolonging this study with a tedious summary of the entire episode, let it suffice to say that Alexander pretends to be one of his own
servants bearing a message to Candace, a rich and beautiful queen. She discovers his true identity and the two go to bed together. They continue the game for some time. During the day Alexander poses as a messenger from Alexander's court who is Candace's guest and at night he is her lover.

The two scenes not only operate in the same way, they also have a number of exact parallels between them. Both depend upon the male lover's pretense of being someone else. This impersonation offers both the men and the women rationalizations for their behavior. Both pretenses are so obvious that one is not taken in by them. It is clear to the audiences that they are just charades. Both men impersonate someone from a lower social rank than the women but in neither case does this fact deter the woman. Immediately after the first consummation of each affair, the lovers engage in some brief banter with one another filled with double entendre. This banter, entertaining in its own right, also impresses upon the audience the facts that each couple is playing a game and that events as they appear on the surface do not explain all that is going on. Finally, within each episode, the ladies have much in common. Both participate willingly and enthusiastically in the affairs, insuring their successes, but both prepare meticulously the appearance of propriety. The narrator, when describing the ladies, underscores their similarity by using virtually identical lines to explain their respective states of mind at the same respective moment in each affair—immediately before the first consummation. Compare

More she pou3th pan she spaak
(1. 231)

with

She pou3th more pan she seide.
(1. 7672)

With this line the narrator implies that the women have ulterior motives. Each woman, while her statements seem to be models of propriety, nonetheless desires to sleep with the man she is addressing at the moment this particular description is made of her.

Like the former episode, the latter serves a specific audience-manipulating function for the romancer. The first story had effectively opened the discussion of Alexander's career; the second story effectively closes it. This scene also works thematically by unifying elements of Alexander's characterization. It is the third and final instance of Alexander playing his favorite trick—impersonating an underling. Each time before he had tried to fool an
enemy, and each time he had succeeded. This time he tries to fool Candace, and this time his disguise fails. The consequences of this failure are even more desirable for Alexander and more delightful for the audience than were his two previous successes, however. Thus, it not only completes the comic career of the impersonator, it climaxes it.

With the exception of a few score lines before the first and after the second episodes, lines which essentially help the romance as a whole begin and conclude more gracefully, the audience's first and last impressions of the poem are dominated by these two scenes which use sexual humor. The romancer manipulates his audience in two ways with these episodes. As one faced with the problem of presenting a narrative to an audience, he gains their attention at crucial points near the very beginning and very end of the romance. Thematically, he uses the former episode to begin the narrative and the latter episode to conclude and unify the work through Alexander's characterization and through similarities between the two episodes.

Another romance, Floris and Blancheflour, also includes sexual humor for thematic reasons. It too employs it as a device for unifying the narration of the story and for enriching characterizations. But, since it puts sexual humor to additional uses, different from those seen in Kyng Alisaundra, it can serve to demonstrate the rich variety of thematic purposes romancers can have for sexually humorous episodes. In both Kyng Alisaundra and Floris and Blancheflour, the instances of sexual humor stand in marked contrast to the rest of the poem, and, consequently, attract a good deal of the audience's attention. Furthermore, both romancers position their episodes at important points in each narrative. But, unlike Kyng Alisaundra's opening and closing occurrences of sexual humor, Floris and Blancheflour has a single episode appearing in the midst of the romance.

This isolated humorous passage is crucial to the plot. The story, not unlike Le Bone Florence of Rome, is essentially that of two young lovers who are forcibly separated. While apart, the lady (Blancheflour) busies herself fending off those who would have her maidenhead, especially the heathen Amyral of Babylonyne, who purchased her and locked her up in his harem, intending "pat faire mayde haue to Queene; / Among his maydons in his hour." (ll. 198-99) Floris, in the mean time, searches for her, having many adventures on the way. Eventually the lovers reunite, defeat their enemies, and marry. The reunion scene is the only humorous scene in the romance, but it is undoubtedly meant to be sexually humorous, as a closer look at it shows.
The narrator sets the stage for this scene by describing the magnificent tower in which the ladies are kept and the various rules and regulations the Admiral has imposed. (ll. 555-642) In the midst of this description the romancer prepares for a lightening of the heretofore serious, heroic tone by including for the first time a sexual pun which appears often in the next hundred or so lines. Dares, Floris' counselor, is explaining to Floris that the Admiral permits only eunuchs to wait upon the ladies in the tower:

But no seruaunt may serue perynne
bat bereb in his breech bat gynne
To serue hem day and nyʒt,
But he be as a capoun dyʒt.

(11. 591-94)

Despite French and Hales' somewhat prudish glossing of "bereb in his breche bat gynne" to mean "has manhood," (p. 841, n.) it is clear here the author intends "gynne" to be a pun, the word "instrument" being a metaphor for "penis." Once so obviously established, the pun appears again less conspicuously, but in contexts where double entendre is clearly possible nonetheless. Dares advises Floris to get into the tower by disguising himself

As þou were a good gynoure;
Take en by hond squyer and scantlon
As þou were a fremason.

(11. 654-56)

Another example of this same sexual pun appears still later. When Floris explains to the porter his motive for seeking access to the tower, he says he wants to rescue Blanche-flour. He explains,

...he was of Spayn a kynges soon
For grote loue þer ycoom
To fonden, with some gynne,
þat feire mayde for to wynne.

(11. 715-18)

By repeating it so frequently the narrator makes his sexual joke conspicuous, and by introducing sexual humor to a sober narrative he diminishes sobriety. Having thus prepared the way for this change in the story's tone, the romancer moves into the humorous reunion episode itself, an episode made humorous through plays on words and comic action.
The humor in this scene all stems from the fact that, in order to gain access to the tower, Floris hides himself in a basket of flowers which is about to be delivered there. Resulting from this situation are a number of very obvious puns on the names "Floris" and "Blancheflour," and another occurrence of that favorite comedy device of romancers—mistaken identity. When the basket is delivered to Clarys' chamber instead of Blancheflour's, both Clarys and Floris are startled to see one another which results in some delightful, farcical action.

Clarys to be lepe come wolde, 
be flores to honde & to beholde; 
Florys wende it hadde by his swete wyȝt, 
Of the lepe he stert vpȝȝt, 
And be maybe, al for drede 
Bygan to shrelle and to grede. 
When he sawȝ it was not shee, 
Into be lepe aȝen stert he 
And held him betrayde clene 
Of his lyf toide he not a beene. 

(ll. 751-60)

This little "jack-in-the-box" scene had just been preceded by the equally funny scene of the maids' struggling to carry the unexpectedly heavy basket of flowers up into the tower (ll. 741-50), so it is clear here that the romancer is actively seeking to accentuate the humorous effect of each incident by having a series of them occur within rapid succession of each other.

Within all these puns and humorous events is a great deal of sexual humor, humor whose double entendre is abundantly clear. There is no subtlety, for example, in the narrator's describing twice within twenty lines that the maids are all anxious

be flores to honde & to beholde. 

(ll. 752, 770)

Once recovered from her startling discovery, Clarys dismisses the maidens who had rushed to her rescue, and seeks out Blancheflour. Clarys' very announcement of Floris' presence contains double entendre, one apparent to the audience, but not to Blancheflour herself. Clarys says,

Felow, come and see a feire ffloor! 
Suche a flour be shal wel lyke, 
Haue pou it sene a lyte. 

(ll. 780-82)
Unaware of Floris' presence, Blauncheflour misinterprets Clarys' invitation and responds with a seriousness markedly different from the tone of the rest of the scene. Finally Clarys prevails upon the maid to go to the basket. She does, and Floris jumps out again, making his grand (yet somewhat ludicrous) entrance a second time. At this crucial moment the romancer inserts yet another comment with double entendre as he describes the maiden's reaction to Floris' sudden appearance:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Of } \hat{b} \hat{a} \hat{t} \text{ lepe he stert ywys} \\
\text{Wel sone Blauncheflour chaunged hewe} \\
\text{Ayther of hem other knewe.}
\end{align*}
\]

(11. 802-04)

Line eight hundred three not only describes accurately the instant of meeting, it anticipates nicely the fact that the virginal lovers go straight to bed after this encounter. Following a night about which

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{per was no man } \hat{b} \hat{a} \hat{t} \text{ my}? \text{t radde} \\
\text{pe ioye } \hat{b} \hat{a} \hat{t} \text{ pey twoo madd,}
\end{align*}
\]

(11. 825-26)

Blauncheflour loses her virginal whiteness and so does indeed change hewe.

Once the lovers are reunited, the humorous episode is over and the serious tone which had dominated the romance earlier again dominates. The romancer returns to narrating the eventually successful trials and tribulations of these utterly devoted lovers. The reunion scene thus stands out from the rest of the romance and is a pivotal point in the action, for once united, although tested again, the lovers move rapidly to defeat the Admiral.39 As the climactic point in the narrative's action and as the culmination of the characters' efforts, this scene is a nucleus about which the romance can be built. The farcical action and the double entendre offer the audience notable relief from the serious events preceding and following the reunion. By making his hero and heroine the object of some of the gentle, sexual humor in this scene, through puns on their names and through having Floris behave somewhat foolishly, the romancer underscores in the audience's eyes his desired picture of the two as absolutely devoted but nonetheless young, idealistic, naive lovers. In a word, this sex-humor scene serves two key, thematic functions in the romance from which it comes.

This scene, too, because it is a concise example of sexual humor in the romances, impresses upon the reader the
overriding caveat which must be kept in mind when one is studying the forms such humor takes, the functions it serves, or both. The artificial categories established in this study to facilitate working with the material do not necessarily determine how sexual humor finally appears in the romances themselves. The various forms and functions exist concurrently much of the time. For example, in the Floris and Blancheflour scene, individual plays upon words prepare for and contribute to the prevailing atmosphere of the episode itself, thus presenting a fusion of the two forms this humor assumes. Furthermore, the functions ascribed to sexual humor appear here simultaneously. The scene is an example of incidental sexual humor in that it seeks to entertain the audience for the brief period it commands their immediate attention. But it also serves as a vehicle by which the author can get the audience to respond to elements within the romance. Recognizing the facility with which the various forms and functions of sexual humor have in fact been integrated with one another can enhance considerably the modern reader's appreciation for the Middle English romances, and in this scene just discussed, that integration is virtually complete.
Endnotes


3 These thinly-veiled allegories are often known by their heroines' names. The two most familiar examples are perhaps Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale," a "Constance Sage," or story describing a faithful, though slandered wife (cf., also the romance Emare); and Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale" which tells the story of "Patient Griselda."

4 I am grateful to Professor Stanley J. Kahrl for pointing these episodes out to me.


6 I have here discussed two out of fifteen tales. Each of the seven sages tells one; the empress tells seven; the last is told by the prince Florentin who had been the object of the debate.


10 These lines do not appear in all manuscript versions of the poem. The ms. from which Halliwell produced the version found in the Thornton Romances, lodging in Cambridge Public Library (Pf. ii. 38) according to Furnivall's introduction (II, p. 338), does contain these lines, while Bishop Percy's folio copy, edited first by Hales and Furnivall, does not. This is but one of the many differences Furnival notes between the Percy and the Thornton mss. (See Hales & Furnivall, II, p. 338, n.)
They are important lines to include, however, for with them the romancer describes most clearly Degrabell's moment of conception. Degrabell, son of Eglamour and Christabell, figures prominently in the latter portions of the romance. He and his mother almost enter into an incestuous marriage, a marriage prevented only by Eglamour's timely arrival upon the scene.

It is interesting to note here the inconsistent and perhaps prudish glossing of aqueynte in Smithers' edition. He denies, in effect, the possibility of double entendre for this word by ascribing but one of the meanings to each appearance, and by making the meanings mutually exclusive, at least insofar as these instances of this word's use are concerned. His entry reads thusly:

\[
\text{aqueynte} \quad \text{pp. a.: phr. ben (to) make the personal acquaintance of 7590, have carnal knowledge of 424.}
\]

To deny double entendre for both instances is a mistake, as both the words' contexts and definition 2A of aqceinten (v.) in the M.E.D. demonstrate. No arbitrary distinction between the two possible definitions is necessary or desirable.

These crude puns belong, of course, to a popular tradition within the romances—punning on a character's name (and especially the name of an important character). All such puns need not have sexual connotations. Cf. King Horn.

Note here that there is no real butt of this joke. The hermit may seem to be ridiculed for knowing less than the audience, but that ridicule is mitigated instantly by the fact that he is literally correct, although he himself may not realize it.


A romance narrator will more typically announce a change in scene with an extended, explicit statement to that effect. The author of Sir Degrevant, too, usually follows this custom. Cf. 11. 929-36. The transition now being discussed is a notable exception made for a particular effect.

The author intends this apparent ambiguity to be only apparent, thus permitting the audience to laugh, albeit softly and to itself, at Myldore's mistake. Earlier in the romance the serious relationships are explicitly stated. In 11. 513-28 the audience learns of Degrevant's desire to have Myldore and not, obviously, the maid. In 11. 677-84 Degrevant plights his troth to Myldore herself, thus enabling her to know exactly how he feels about her. Finally, in 11. 685-88, the narrator's description of Myldore's reaction to Degrevant (she fears him yet cannot ignore his attractiveness) shows already her potentially mixed feelings about him.

Notice how line 979, "'Thys ys a merveylous thing,'" is yet another example of this author's fondness for using apparent ambiguity to delight his audience while making his point. Myldore's exclamation could be interpreted as a statement of greed, an accusation that Degrevant was disloyal to the maid, or as a joyful expression of love for Degrevant.

By depicting Myldore's vacillation between her attraction to Degrevant and her opposition to her father's foe, the poet dramatizes a central dilemma in his story, and he prepares a rationalization with which the audience can accept her technically disloyal siding with Degrevant later in the poem. On unsure ground to start with, Myldore is, in effect, swept off her feet by Degrevant's brilliant performance at the tournament. The audience is thus supposed to react sympathetically when, ca. 11. 1329+, she accepts Degrevant as her lover, and when, 11. 1521+, she confesses she has loved him from the start. In other words, the author here uses humor to resolve an otherwise impossible situation in such a way that none of the characters with whom he wishes the audience to sympathize, and especially Myldore, looses face in the audience's estimation.


The dramatic situation here is essentially that of a stock fabliau jest with its cuckold stuck in a tree being bettered by others. Cf. Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale." See also F. N. Robinson's edition of Chaucer's Works, pp. 712-13 for further references.


26 One must be cautious when discussing how the romances were presented to their audiences in the Middle Ages. We simply do not have enough information to make definitive assertions on the matter. However, it seems highly probable that a work as long as Kyng Alisaunder was not presented entirely in a single session, whether that session involved listening to a minstrel or reading a manuscript. This fact does not necessarily obviate the arresting impact of the opening and closing scenes with presentational humor.

27 G. V. Smithers notes in his introduction that the specific mention of a ribald tale is "contributed by the English poet." (Smithers, O.S., vol. 237, p. 65.)

28 The last line in this quotation is cited intentionally. Such platitudes recur frequently in the work, but as my earlier comments have shown, it is not at all clear how seriously one ought to take them, especially when they appear in the midst of a titilating story describing the birth of the poem's hero!

29 There is a double pun on "fals god." The appellation is true not only in the orthodox sense that Amon is not the Christian deity, but also in the literal sense that Amon is not even Amon; he is Neptenabus.

30 Neptenabus' and Olympias' charade is unmistakable. The events as just described speak for themselves. The narrator's use of "also" in line four hundred fifty-one would be modernized to read "as if," another assertion of the pretense. Finally, Neptenabus and Olympias confess explicitly to Alexander their son. While dying, Neptenabus addresses Alexander thus:

\[\text{Ac Neptenabus hym seide ægen,} \]
\[\text{'My son Ich wist shulde me slen} \]
\[\text{'Artour my fader?' quof Alisaundre.} \]
\[\text{'3e,' quob he, 'sooþ is þe sclaunder;} \]
\[\text{Ich wil well þou it wyte,} \]

(11. 737-41)

and Olympias confirms the story's veracity:

\[\text{And Alexander hire telde al þe cas} \]
\[\text{She ne miþth it nowþh forsake.} \]

(11. 746-47)

The two lovers knew all along what was happening, and so did the audience.
Note, for example, 11. 19-21, 166, 455-56, 459-60, 750-52. Each of these occurrences is such that the statements' contexts render an exclusively pious interpretation suspicious.

See 11. 7577-7769. This does not mean, of course, that the rest of the poem is necessarily devoid of humor. The humor that does take place is of another kind. See Chapter II, "Character Humor," above.

Demands of the couplet rhyme pattern account for the slight differences between the two lines.

Although subsequent adventures are mentioned by the narrator, none are described in any detail. Rather, the narrator merely lists a variety of places Alexander is said to have visited. Even Alexander's fatal poisoning gets less development than the Candace scene.

See Chapter II, above, for discussion of the humorous consequences of such impersonations.


The passage in question runs from ca. 11. 735-834 in a poem which runs about 1100 lines. (French and Hale note, on page 855, n., that the Middle English manuscript version on which they base their text is not complete, but that little seems to be missing from the end of the tale.)

Cf., M.E.D.: "Gynne (N.) 3a--an ingenous device or contrivance,...a mechanical contrivance,... machine, an instrument." (Earliest occurrence ca. 1225.) "4a--Military: machine for assaulting fortifications." Earliest occurrence ca. 1300.)

See, for example, 11. 740, 744-45, 780, 798. Cf. discussion of fondness for name word play in Lai le Freine, pp. 14-15, above.

This sentence is a bit misleading. Actually, the romancer talks himself into a bit of narrator's corner. In his efforts to show the depths of Floris' and Blancheflour's mutual love he puts them into a situation where both are at the Admiral's mercy, and each offers to sacrifice himself to save the other. At this point, with his hero and heroine powerless and in the hands of the Admiral, but with the romance story effectively completed, the romancer resorts to a deus ex machina to rescue his lovers and himself. See 11. 978 ff.
CHAPTER V

DARK HUMOR

Combat is one of the staples of romance writing. So prevalent is warfare, in fact, that its dominance is often cited as evidence for the romancers' lack of a sense of humor. The romancers are supposedly so busy depicting one tedious battle after another that they do not have any time remaining to present humorous scenes. Such a view is incorrect. The romancers did not feel that violence and humor were necessarily mutually exclusive. Rather, they often use a type of humor which is particularly suited to their predilection for combat--dark humor.

This kind of humor is closely associated with violence, cruelty and humiliation. It capitalizes upon the dichotomy between the laughter and the object of that laughter inherent in all humorous situations. In dark humor the romancer strives to put a great distance between the two parties, to make the laughter feel as superior to the victim of the ridicule as possible. Furthermore in these humorous incidents the writers establish this distance through describing actions which would ordinarily be unacceptable being entertained by the story. Dark humor is willfully perverse and it is its very perversity which delights the audience. The more clearly and totally cultural norms are violated the more successful the dark humor is, even to the point, discussed more fully below, where cannibalism is not merely condoned but glorified. Through these incidents of dark humor the romancer and the audience can fantasize about improper behavior and they can rationalize it at the same time.

This kind of humor can either help or hinder the modern study of humor in the romances. On the one hand, because the modern reader may not share the particular belief presented by such incidents--for example, the enmity Christians had or Moslems or the automatic opposition to any knight not serving one's own feudal lord--he might be insensitive to or unimpressed by the ridicule to be found in a given scene. But on the other hand the extremism so characteristic of dark humor can be a boon to the modern
reader. By the very fact that it is so extreme, it often isolates and emphasizes vividly certain norms held by medieval English society. This emphasis, in turn, teaches later students about the older culture in a way explicit statement cannot. It is relatively easy to say, for example, that Christians opposed Saracens. But, after witnessing the variety and intensity of Saracen humiliations in these romances, one can appreciate the complexity of the Christians' attitude—sometimes using the Saracen as little more than a cardboard foe for a hero to eliminate, sometimes using him to voice clearly a passionate, almost at times desperate adherence to Christianity. Dark humor, in other words, because it is usually so extreme, can often outline medieval attitudes more sharply than other types of humor.

Dark humor differs in several ways from other types of humor already discussed. The degree and intensity of its ridicule are consistently greater than they are elsewhere. Invariably death is prevalent when this humor is used. Furthermore, it differs from other kinds of humor in its close association with violent behavior, actual or implied. Such violence is almost indispensable for dark humor. Despite these differences, however, dark humor shares with the other types of humor a fondness for announcing its presence explicitly to the audience. Very frequently, when a romancer includes an incident with dark humor one or more characters will respond to that humor with a laugh. When all characters in a given scene were the victims of ridicule and the humor is external, no such laughter will appear, but such occasions are in the distinct minority.1 In any event, episodes containing dark humor are relatively easy to find once one is alert for them.

The vast majority of instances of dark humor can be found in the matter of France, although no one of the traditional "matters" can claim a monopoly on dark humor. Violence, real or potential, plays an important role in all the romances and dark humor can appear wherever and whenever violence appears. Nevertheless, the matter of France commands particular attention here because dark humor is so prevalent to it. Examining in some detail just how Charlemagne (and to a lesser degree Arthurian) romances use dark humor offers the best explanation of the attitudes medieval authors and audiences had toward this kind of humor, an explanation which can then be applied to occurrences elsewhere in the genre as well.

It is not difficult to account for the dominance of Charlemagne romances over the other types insofar as the use of dark humor is concerned. The Charlemagne romances, more than any other group, depict a major, medieval religious debate, the holy war between the Christian and the
Saracen. Consequently, dark humor in the Charlemagne romances tends to be both more frequent and more intense than it is in Arthurian romance, or in any other type. Christian versus Saracen warfare pervades Charlemagne romances, bringing with it a ferocity which only a holy war can bring, ferocity so intense that it can rationalize cannibalism as not merely acceptable for a Christian leader but boisterously humorous. Arthurian works, on the other hand are necessarily more tempered in their use of dark humor. This is not surprising, for many of the episodes with dark humor involve conflicts between two, or more members of the Round Table. Furthermore, when one of Arthur's knights, or even Arthur himself, does fight someone not from the Round Table the enemy's religious convictions motivate the combat less frequently than they do conflict in the Charlemagne romances. An Arthurian villain, even though he might be called "heathene," is evil usually because of characteristics he holds as an individual, rather than as a member of a rival religious group. Consequently, when he is defeated, as he invariably is, his defeat is not viewed as part of a larger, religious war; it is an idiosyncratic episode, one of many in the hero's glorious career.

A second general context for dark humor to be kept in mind when studying particular examples, in addition to religious warfare, is the interrelationship between verbal and physical combat. A marked difference between "matters" does not appear in this regard, but the context is important nonetheless. The ridicule is, of course, most commonly verbal because it must be uttered for the romance audience to perceive it adequately. A character's statements may or may not be rebutted. If they are, one or more characters is engaging in a verbal combat, a boast and insult ritual discussed more completely below. What is important to keep in mind here is that this verbal combat does not appear in vacuo. It is closely associated in one way or another with physical combat, even when the participants are not necessarily confronting one another with drawn swords. The interplay between physical and verbal combat often helps to shape the dark humor that a romancer uses.

With these two general contexts in mind one can turn to a more particular examination of dark humor. Instances of dark humor appear often and are scattered widely throughout the romances. It is best, therefore, to break the examination into rough categories so that the material can be handled more easily. Because dark humor is always a social phenomenon—it only occurs when more than one character is before the romance audience—it is convenient to divide instances of dark humor on the basis of the number of people involved in a given passage. Scenes in which one individual confronts one other person tend to differ from scenes in which one person confronts many people.
At times the joke results from a single individual's ridiculing a large group, deriding it and persuading the romance audience to share in his derision. This individual may be either a character within the plot itself or the story's narrator, and different kinds of episodes can result from either case. If it is a character directly involved in the plot, the humor often serves as much to enhance his reputation and status in the eyes of the audience as it does to degrade the victims.

Such is the case in Richard Coer de Lion. The work is primarily a glorification of an English hero. Its pronounced nationalism is unusual for a romance, especially a romance purporting to be a translation from the French. Throughout the work Richard performs great feats, overwhelming anyone who is not his follower, be he French ally or Saracen foe. In fact, there are places where the distinction between French and Saracen in Richard's, the narrator's, and, consequently, the audience's minds grows tenuous indeed. Lines 3821-37, for example, find the narrator listing simultaneously flaws of the French and of the heathen, giving the distinct impression that he sees little difference between the two. Everything in the work, in other words, serves to enhance Richard's stature, and Richard's career is more important than any other topic the work discusses, including the holy war against the Saracens. In his career he does a wide variety of things—from seducing maidens to slaying wild beasts with his bare hands—and each act is calculated to make him more glorious to his audience than before.

Once Richard, ill after his arduous voyage to the Holy Land, craves pork which none in the camp can find to supply him. An old knight recommends that the head of "a Sarezyne yonge and fat" (1. 3066) be substituted. It is. Unaware of the switch, Richard enjoys his food so greatly his carver cannot keep up with him, much to the delight of those in on the joke:

Beforre Kyng Richard karff a knygght
He eete faster than he karve myght.
The kyng eet the flesh and gnew the bones,
And drank wel afftyr, for the nones:
And whenne he hadde eeten inowgh
Hys folk hem turnyd away and lowgh.

(11. 3087-92)

Thanks to the marvelous "pork," Richard recovers quickly and goes out, winning glorious victories over the Saracens. Returning for dinner, he orders another round of "pork." The unnerved cook reveals the trick by showing the Saracen's
head, "Hys black berd, and whyte teeth / Hou hys lyppys grenned wyd." (11. 3187-89) Much to the cook's relief, Richard is delighted by the notion of serving Saracens:

"What devyl is this?" the kyng cryde:  
And gan to laughe as he wer wood.  
(11. 3190-91)

A short while later the romancer amplifies and concludes the bloodthirsty joke. Richard invites some Saracen envoys to a meal at which he serves them the heads of their own richest and closest relatives whom he held captive. The heads grin from their platters, the names of the dead inscribed on their foreheads. (11. 3388-3414) The appalled Saracen messengers can eat nothing. After a while, content with the success of his practical joke, Richard relents and orders venison to be brought in for his guests.

These three incidents, and particularly the last, are in the poem primarily to show Richard's prowess, his fearlessness, and his wit. While reading through the romance at large, even though the episodes contain macabre humor extraordinary even by medieval standards, the reader is struck more by what they say about Richard than by any bitter Christian-Saracen hatred they depict. Even though the Saracen envoys are the object of the ridicule, Richard, in his planning and in his enjoyment of the incident, successfully commands the center of the audience's attention.

This collective ridicule is not limited to hero glorification. It also appears in romances having more explicitly didactic points to make, and in such cases the intent of the humor is the ridicule of individuals. Evil people are presented as laughingstocks, thus assuring the audience's distance from them. Foes are not merely defeated, their weaknesses are exposed also. Near the end of the alliterative Morte Arthure,7 for example, such a double defeat is reserved for Mordred's traitorous men as they confront Arthur's forces in a sea battle in the English channel. Having fought unsuccessfully for some time, the villains give up and flee the warfare by jumping into the channel to certain death, much to the delight of the victors:

When ledys of owt-londys leppyne in waters,  
Alle oure lordes one lowde laughene at ones!  
(11. 3697-98)8

Mor common, however, are instances of collective ridicule with Saracens as the victims. These scenes, too, exist largely to make unsubtle, didactic points to the romance audience. Unlike the scenes in Richard the Lion
Hearted wherein a Christian bettered his foe, many of these humorous scenes are peopled by Saracens only, giving the audience a glimpse of what goes on "over there." The romances consistently point out that in the privacy of their own courts or camps Saracens frequently lash out at their impotent and incompetent gods. While no one is killed or maimed, these scenes are brutal nonetheless. The brutality is ideological, not physical; the audience relishes the picture of the foe being so blatantly sacrilegious. In two romances where this religious self-ridicule is particularly evident, the heretical acts are reserved for the leaders of the Saracen forces, thus heightening the perversity. Garcy, in Otuel and Roland, curses "Mahoun and Appolyn, Termagaunt, and Iouyn," telling them, "y wene that ze ben domne & def." (1. 1544) His insulting prayer makes himself grow angrier, however, and he finally vents his frustration by smashing and burning his impotent gods:

he dud fette stonys grete
To-forn Hym in the halle.
All hys goddys he 3af a cloute,
he 3af hem strokys, styf & stoute.
"harawe!" they ganne to calle.
he brake bothe legges and swere
And kest hem bothe in-to the fere,
Mahoun, and hem all.

(11. 1551-58)9

Laban, Saracen leader in the Sowdon of Babylon, renounces his gods time and again in a fashion much like that of Garcy.10

Heresy and the weakness of false gods are not the only messages romancers send their audiences while portraying dissension within the Saracen camp. They also show weakness in Saracen blood loyalty. Floripas, in the Sowdon of Babylon, converts to Christianity and gets into several vicious arguments with her Saracen leader father, much to the delight of the romance audience. By ridiculing the Saracens' religious and blood loyalties, the romancers attack two of the most crucial forms of social order the medieval audience recognized. Such an assault on the beliefs of the enemy is anything but subtle, but it can be supportive of the Christians' beliefs and rationalized as acceptable, particularly when presented so as to stimulate audience laughter. Throughout these episodes the didacticism is so explicit that it cannot be avoided. The romancers are almost preaching here, unlike what they do in scenes like those in Richard Coerde Lion, where hero-glorification motivates the humor.
Both types of collective ridicule do have something in common, however. They are relatively general in their attacks. When the romancer is primarily interested in glorifying his hero he often cares little for any particular development of the victims. They are little more than a collection of bodies over which the successful hero rides. Even in the religious and social ridicule, where the perpetrators of the heretical acts are named and known, the individual is relatively unimportant. Aside from the fact that the high office the Saracen leaders hold intensifies the crime, these scenes have little interest in the personality of the individual smashing the gods. These scenes seek more to make an ideological point than to build or tear down any one's character. Episodes of collective ridicule using dark humor differ from dark humor scenes pitting one individual against another most significantly in this tendency to be less concerned with the individual traits held by those in the confrontations. This difference helps to explain why, especially in a romance intended primarily to glorify one person, scenes of collective ridicule supplement individual confrontation scenes. Each type of confrontation has its point to make.

Instances of dark humor which pit one person against another are more frequent than instances of collective ridicule. This is understandable first of all because the romances are frequently organized as a series of confrontations between individuals. These confrontations can govern not only particular episodes but also the larger works themselves. Secondly, the romancers like the one-to-one confrontation as a showcase in which they can display their characters. Such a confrontation allows the foes to speak to each other more readily. This speech, when incorporated with dark humor, takes the form of a boast and insult ritual in which physical and verbal combat play off one another and through which the romancers accomplish much of their characterization.

The romancer often includes verbal combat with physical combat because descriptions of physical struggle, important as they are in entertaining the audience, are quite limited in what they can say. By presenting a battle the romancer can show who is the better fighter, but, if he wants to show more than just that, simply describing a fight is insufficient. Any additional significance combat might have must be explained by the narrator or by a character. The romancers often include this additional significance by having the characters speak to one another. Usually one character tries to insult the other in order to enhance his own prestige and to humiliate the adversary in ways fighting alone cannot. Almost every combat including direct discourse
does this, but one specific example will help make the point more clear. In Richard Coer de Lion appears a scene in which Richard responds to having been insulted by two French justices. The description, in addition to displaying Richard's prowess, reveals the obvious relish with which the narrator provides gory detail:

King Richard held a tronchon true,
And to them two he him drew.
Marganyte, he gave a dynt than
Above the eye upon the pan;
The scull brake with that dent,
The right eye flew out quitement,
And he fel down ded in haste.
Hugh of Ipetye was aghast;
And pricked away without foyl;
And Richard was soon at his tail,
And gave him a stroke on the molde,
That dead he thought he be shoide.

(11. 1997-2008)

But the narrator cannot stop here. He is impelled to supply Richard a parting jibe at his unfortunate, surviving victim:

Ternes and quernes he gave him there,
And said, "Sir, thus thou shalt lere
To mis-say thy werhedlyngel
Go playne now to your French king!"

(11. 2009-12)

This parting reference to the impotence of the French king to do anything about what Richard had just done is most significant. The encounter follows closely a scene in which the French king had capitulated totally to Richard, thus resolving their conflict over which of the two was to lead their allied forces against the Saracens. The insult reveals the hollowness of the truce which had followed the capitulation and re-asserts clearly Richard's superiority. The jibe, then, juxtaposes the theme of fierce English nationalism, which dominates this section of the romance, alongside the vivid detail of the battle with the net effect that each enforces the other in the audience's mind.

The points I am making here are these. While not every instance of boast and insult ritual necessarily yields dark humor, and while not every occurrence of spoken ridicule coordinates so neatly with physical combat as in this scene, romancers do often include verbal combat with physical combat, and both forms of warfare can yield dark humor. Furthermore, verbal combat can often make thematic statements more efficiently than the physical can make alone.
By examining the interrelationships between these two forms, one can better understand the nature and functions of dark humor in one-to-one confrontations. Finally, because verbal combat is the more efficient of the two, emphasis in the discussion following is placed on it.

In Baugh's catalogue of elements in a battle scene, he lists but two out of forty-nine elements which would be likely to produce verbal combat. These two elements appear near the beginning and the conclusion of his hybrid confrontation, a theoretical battle containing all repeated elements commonly found in romances. Although he is careful to include a disclaimer stating that events need not appear in the order he describes, his arrangement does imply that verbal combat in these confrontations tends to occur either before physical combat has begun or after it is finished. Baugh's implication is somewhat misleading. Verbal warfare, while it often comes either before or after a fight occurs, can also interrupt the physical warfare itself.

When violent laughter precedes physical combat, it is part of a challenge to fight or it is part of a response to a challenge. In both cases a character's laughter is a sign of his strength, of his lack of fear for his adversary. By laughing he shows he is not intimidated. Also, in confrontations of this sort, the lack of such confident laughter during a challenge presents the subtle but powerful impression that a man is somehow weak.

This point can be demonstrated by taking two romances which tell essentially the same story, contrasting how they use violent laughter in their versions of the same scene, and observing the consequences of such usages for the respective works. The Charlemagne romances offer numerous opportunities for just such a comparison, a convenient one being the challenge scene opening many versions of the Otuel group. The action in Otuel and in Duke Rowland and Sir Otuel of Spain begins when Otuel, a great Saracen warrior, enters Charlemagne's camp to issue his king's ultimatum to the French ruler. It is a typical challenge situation. Otuel must deliver his message in a completely hostile environment where he has only his bravery for self-protection. Being alone in the very heart of the foe's camp, he has no chance for survival if he attempts to assert himself by force. Now, more than ever before, Otuel must be steel-nerved if he is to deliver his message and survive.

In Otuel, the romancer has Otuel respond to this challenge by showing him to be as bold and forceful as possible. Without reservation the messenger refuses to yield his sword
as custom dictates, but launches into his challenge, lacing it generously with insults to the effect that Charlemagne is too old and feeble to be an effective king. (11. 108 ff.) His ridicule exemplifies his complete confidence, and, when an impulsive unnamed French knight attacks him, he dispatches him at once. This slaying heightens the tension in the court, for the French are torn between their fear of Otuel and their desire to avenge the double insult of Otuel's slaying one of their members in their own court. Here Charlemagne intervenes, ordering none of the French to touch Otuel because Otuel is protected by his being a messenger. The French all breathe a sigh of relief at Charlemagne's order, for it offers them an honorable way to avoid almost certain death at Otuel's hands in their efforts to achieve vengeance. (11. 197-204) Throughout this confrontation the French are so completely and consistently on the defensive that even Charlemagne's command that none harm Otuel sounds more like a rationalization than anything else. Otuel chooses this moment to redouble his insults by chiding the French for their lack of action:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{bine freinsche kni} \text{t} \text{es kune 3elpe wel,} \\
& \text{wan} \text{tei be} \text{b to werre ibrou3t,} \\
& \text{banne be p} \text{i ri3t nou3t,}
\end{align*}
\]

(ll. 266-68)

Otuel's charges eventually force Roland's reply, and he says he will be glad to fight Otuel if they happen to meet in battle:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{"To werren on garsie 3ef we fare,} \\
& \text{In bataille, and i met 3e bare,} \\
& \text{& i may mete 3e ari3t,} \\
& \text{Bi ihu 3at is ful of mi3t,} \\
& \text{pou me sschalt neuere after 3at day,} \\
& \text{Despice freinchs man, 3ef ich may.}
\end{align*}
\]

(ll. 285-90, italics added)

The heavily conditional nature of Roland's oath moves Otuel to laughter: "Ou3," qua3 ouwell & lou3," (1. 291) and his reply mocks the deferral in the threat, urging instead that the two fight immediately. Roland, his knightly honor challenged in front of his king and his peers, must accept. (11. 292-99)

Throughout this scene Otuel is completely in charge of the situation, scorning, mocking, laughing at, even slaying the French at will. The French, on the other hand, although they try to appear brave, are intimidated and rationalize their inaction (one is tempted almost to say cowardice) as
best they can. Otuel's laughter here is his taunting assertion, his boast of superiority over the French. No French laugh in this passage.

Such is not the case in Duke Rowland and Sir Otuel of Spain. The outline of the scene is the same—the challenge and insult by Otuel in Charlemagne's court, the unsuccessful attempt by a French knight to slay Otuel, Charlemagne's refusal to yield to Garcy the Saracen king, and the eventual challenge and acceptance between Otuel and Roland—but the details are handled much differently. In Duke Rowland Otuel does not overpower his adversaries; the French, and especially Charlemagne and Roland, have more control over the situation. The Christian and Saracen parties seem equal with one another. The tone is shown in subtle but significant differences in the characters' actions. In Duke Rowland for example, Otuel agrees, albeit only after a threatening speech, to yield his sword to Roland so long as the Saracen messenger is in the Christian camp. In Otuel, it will be remembered, he refused to do so. Neither party, then, enjoys complete dominance over the other, and both are presented as having great warriors within their ranks.

Much of this balance is created by the romancer's use of laughter in this latter version. Here Frenchman and Saracen alike laugh in reply to an insult or a challenge. After Otuel repeats his ruler's challenge, Roland responds immediately with a laugh and a counter insult:

And Rowlande at those wordes loughe,
& said: "sir, þou arte doghety ynough
Sich dedes to vnder-too.
þou may Iangill & make it toughe,
For here schall no man do the woghe,
till aughte dayes ben a goo."

(11. 115-20)14

Later, after Charlemagne's refusal to yield to Garcy's demand, Otuel has his opportunity to laugh confidently:

The Sarazen laughs full smothirly:
"What! thrte 3e now sir Garcy
With 3our boste & 3our pryde?
There es none of 3ow so hardy,
And 3e hade sene his cheualry,
3our hedis þat ye nolde hyde."

(11. 259-64)

Charlemagne "loughe" too after hearing Otuel challenge Roland in order to avenge the death of his uncle Vernagu
whom Roland had slain earlier (1. 319) By portraying all three key figures in this scene as brave enough to laugh in reply to a challenge, the romancer emphasizes the relative equality of these great men in the confrontation.

Although different characters laugh in two versions of the same story, in both versions the use of violent laughter is consistent with the more general theme the romancer wishes his scene to present, and in both versions violent laughter is used as a clue to a character's bravery and knightly prowess. The differences between these two versions is explained by the differing purposes of the writers. In Otuel the confrontation exists primarily to enhance Otuel's status as a great warrior in the eyes of the audience. The messenger is the focus of attention. It is not difficult to explain why the romancer goes to such an extreme while glorifying Otuel—he almost makes Charlemagne and Roland out to be cowards. The romancer had to make certain that his audience was indeed impressed by Otuel's greatness. This called for extraordinary actions on Otuel's part if he was to surmount the a priori prejudice an English audience would have against all foreign heathens as being a singularly cowardly, incompetent lot, a very real and powerful prejudice as this and most other romances will attest. Furthermore, while praising Otuel at the Christians' expense the author knew he need not worry too much about harming their reputations permanently because he knew Otuel would soon convert to Christianity and join Charlemagne's forces. The writer of Duke Roland, on the other hand, uses this scene more as a lesson in how one behaves properly under the chivalric code than as an opportunity to aggrandize one character's reputation. The point is made implicitly through the proper behavior of all three main characters. As such, the scene is an interesting example of the belief that the demands of good chivalric behavior apply to all knights, Christian and Saracen alike. It is significant in this respect that near the end of the confrontation scene Otuel chooses to insult one of the Frenchmen on precisely these grounds. Duke Naymes, Otuel asserts, is a coward "for cheualrye es fro hym gone, / A nolde nappere als he were." (11. 287-88)

Dark humor is by no means limited to insults and laughter hurled from one warrior to another immediately before they actually fight one another. Often one or both combatants will pause briefly in the battle to ridicule his foe. These insults, in addition to entertaining the audience by provid­ing vivid, first-hand commentary on the action, are exten­sions of the pre-combat statements in that they glorify the one who is most successful at a given stage in the fighting and at the same time they humiliate the loser. Predictably, when these instances occur the loser is almost always one
for whom romancer and audience have no sympathy, one who will eventually lose the battle. Again, Christian versus Saracen warfare offers the most numerous examples of verbal warfare amid physical combat.

In another romance from the Otuel group of Charlemagne romances, Otuel and Roland, a Christian knight derides his victim after having landed a particularly successful blow. Otuel, the same Otuel discussed above but also now a convert to Christianity, fatally wounds the Saracen Clarel. The blow is so fierce it slashes away Clarel's shield, beard and jaw, exposing the victim's teeth. Otuel voices his great delight by ridiculing Clarel:

Tho lowe Otuel and sayd:
"Y sawe neuer, so god me rede,
sythe that y was bore,
neuer man in kny3tys wede
Also fer as y haue rede
a berd so clene y-schore.
So god me saue and sent sauour,
Now ys cursins a good rasour,
hyt ys scharp, and that ys sene,
hyt hath y-sshaue thy berd ful clene,
That ther nyl last no more!

"Now be þou syker in alle thyng:
Nyl neuer Garcy, the kyng,
By-leue on þe after thys;
Ney-ber enfame, þat fayre thyng,
Sche nyl na more of thy playyng,
ne ffor no loue the kysse.
Now thy be-boueþ to grenne
And to make þe to mowe on menne,
FFor thy mouth syttyth alle on mys.
Now ne helpþ the nouuþt thy god mahound,
Iubiter, ne þat lyberen platoun,
Tat þou art syker of thyself!"

Otuel's cruel mockery is complete. His speech forces Clarel to confront his own imminent death, ridicules his appearance through its grotesque detail, reminds Clarel painfully of all he is about to lose and concludes with an assault on the Saracen's faith. The speech's very length is itself partial evidence that the romancer relished the viciousness here.

It will be noticed that, although this insult occurs before the combat is in fact completed, there is a strong
sense of finality about it, that it looks back to an already-completed portion of the fight for its subject matter. This characteristic is held in common by a good deal of the dark humor that occurs during a battle, and for this reason there is usually much similarity between ridicule amid physical combat and ridicule following physical combat.

Earlier in this essay I mentioned a passage from the alliterative Morte Arthure while discussing dark humor resulting from collective ridicule. The narrator had issued a few crisp lines of insult as Mordred's vanquished men jumped from their ships in order to flee from Arthur's forces. This incident is also an example of verbal humor following physical combat. In insults following physical combat the speaker, who is perforce either the narrator or the victor since these battles are almost always fought to the death, engages in some hearty gloating over his former foe, telling the corpse, himself, and anyone else listening (i.e., the romance audience), that he has proven his earlier boasts and that the victim will never again be able to do such and such or see beloved persons. He often includes some statement to the effect of the modern colloquialism, "that'll teach ya," and frequently makes some ironic comment at this time. Finally, the victor will often "tell" the corpse the lesson their earlier conflict ought to have taught him.

These common instances of dark humor, in addition to serving the obvious functions of permitting character and audience alike to relish the victory, of florifying the hero, and of enabling the romancer to make a few ideological points of his own, serve an important structural function for the works in which they appear. They mark the conclusion of a given episode, at times an extended one, and prepare for the next by tying up the loose ends, so to speak, through the commentary in the insult. This organizational function can be particularly important if the battle is a climactic one for a very long section of a poem, as, for example, it is for the two lines from Morte Arthure cited earlier which conclude a hundred-line battle description. Insults of this type are numerous, too numerous to be catalogued here. A few additional examples will display the variety of ways these incidents can appear in the romances. Again, the examples come from Charlemagne romances, but they could come from other romances as well.

Three particularly interesting samples, interesting because they differ so much from one another, come from the Otuel group. In Otuel and Roland is an unusual instance of one Saracen's gloating over the corpse of a fellow Saracen whom he has just slain. Clarel has killed an "ameral" who
had tried to prevent Clarel from protecting Ogier, his Christian captive; he goes on to say:

"lo," he sayde, "syre ameral,
Thus men the teche schall
To sygge wycked sawe!
Now may Oger Denys
Euer more haue pes
In ernest and eke in plawe!"

(11. 983-88)\textsuperscript{17}

In an earlier version of Otuel's story, Otuel, Roland has an opportunity to gloat over an enemy and he capitalizes upon it with a witty remark of his own. A Turkish foe had cut away one of Roland's stirrups. Roland replies by knocking him from his horse and slaying him. His closing insult picks up on the stirrup theme:

Quap rowlond, "pat ich pe biheet,
þou nult na more stenden on þi feet;
Min o stirop þou madest me tine,
Nou hauestou lose bope þine.

(11. 1395-98)\textsuperscript{18}

A bit later in the same romance the narrator, too, indulges in a post-combat insult while describing Otuel's exploits. This gibe is one through a crisp, efficient, one-line simile:

Otuwel no lengere nabood
To poichas a noon he rood,
& smot poidras of barbarin
þat þere he lay as a stiked swin.

(11. 1499-1502)

The other group of Charlemagne romances, the Ferumbras group, has some instances of a woman, Floripas, ridiculing someone, a rare phenomenon in the romances. In the Sowdon of Babylon such an incident opens an extraordinary series of events depicting Floripas as a major militant force in the romance. (It is unusual for a woman to play so dominant a role in romances dealing primarily with Christian-Saracen warfare.) Walking in her garden one day, the Saracen damsel Floripas hears some Christian captives, takes pity on them, and asks her governess to help her feed them. The governess hesitates, recalling the Sultan's explicit edict against feeding the prisoners. The compassionate Floripas responds by tricking the governess into standing by a window and then she pushes her out to her death, scolding her as she falls:
Floripe by-thought hir on a gyle
And cleped Maragounde anoun right,
To the wyndowe to come a while
And se ther a wonder syght:
"Loke oute" she said "and see a ferr
The Porpais play as thay were wode."
Maragounde loked oute, Floripe cone ner,
And shofed hire oute in to the flode.
"Go there" she saide "the devel the spece!
My counsail shaltowe never biwry.
Who so wole not helpe a man at nede,
On evel deth mote he dye!"

(11. 1571-82)

Another version, the Ashmole Sir Ferumbras, continues
Floripas' story, including in it another such quip. Her
goal is still the French prisoners, only this time the
jailer stands in her way. Floripas secures a staff with
which she attempts unsuccessfully to pry open the prison
door. Later she uses the staff to dash out the jailer's
brains, immediately after which she says:

"Rest," quob she, "bou sory wy₃t, god ₃yue yuele chaunce!
now schal y speke my fille ri₃t with ₃es kny₃tes of
fraunce."

(11. 1252-53)

The whole incident is presented as though the jailer is but
a trivial irritant, a petty obstacle preventing a spoiled
little girl from getting her way. This levity, this refusal
to take the jailer seriously contributes to the humorous
effect of the insult.

In studying the interrelationship between verbal and
physical combat in dark humor scenes, then, one sees that
the verbal humor may come before, during or after physical
activity, although the first type is the most common of the
three. I turn from comparing the relationships between
physical and verbal combat to studying the forms of and
functions assumed by verbal dark humor, the more common of
the two types.

Statements of ridicule can vary in length a great deal.
They can be extremely brief, no more than a one-word pun,
or they can be elaborately drawn out, as is the extended
"practical joke" in Richard Coer de Lion using cannabalism.
Most instances tend to be relatively brief, however,
shorter than the descriptions of the physical combat with
which they are usually associated. The examples above, it
will be noted, are usually no more than five lines long, and
rarely longer than fifteen to twenty lines. This tendency
to be brief helps account for the general impression that the romances are humorless, for these snippets of humor often seem to be overwhelmed by the battle descriptions surrounding them. The verbal is often a preparation for or a commentary upon physical combat and hence seems subsidiary to it. When, therefore, a relatively long and sustained instance appears, it tends to command special attention. Such is the case in Richard Coer de Lion, and such is also the case in the Ashmole Manuscript version of Sir Ferumbras.

Sir Ferumbras tells, among other things, the story of how the Saracen damsel Floripas befriends several captive French knights. At one point in this story an incident occurs which the romancer chooses to emphasize by making elaborate. The incident can be summarized in this way: The French are in Floripas' chamber being entertained by her. Lucifer, a Saracen knight who is curious to learn what Floripas and the French are doing because he is jealous on Floripas' account, enters the chamber and converses with them, asking the Frenchmen how they entertain themselves in their free time in their native land. Naymes explains they hear mass, hawk, hunt, attend jousts and tournaments, play chess or draughts, and fence. Lucifer replies that these games cannot compare with one of his games, "to blowen atte glede," (l. 2230) and promptly demonstrates by dragging Naymes across the hall by the beard, taking a hot coal from the fire and burning Naymes' mouth by blowing the fire into it. Naymes responds by seizing the coal and burning half of Lucifer's beard. A brief fight ensues in which Naymes kills Lucifer with a single blow of his fist and casts him into the fire:

\[
& with his hand [Naymes] 3yf him a stroke ounride; \\
\text{wib-inne pe neckes space;} \\
\text{Such on a gurt him with is furste; } \text{pat sondrede al } \\
\text{plip,} \\
\text{\& ys neeke } \text{par-wip a-two to-durste; } \text{\& ys e}_3 \text{ene f}_3 \text{e} \\
\text{out } \text{par-wyp} \\
\text{\& pat bodi ful doun amidde pe fyre; withoute any} \\
\text{more delay:} \\
\text{"now rest," quap Naymes, } \text{"bou proute syre; bou} \\
\text{playest a sory play."} \\
\text{(11. 2247-51)}
\]

Following this are a number of scornful remarks by the others in the room, remarks which play upon notions introduced by previous events—gaming, eye gouging, Lucifer's fondness for fire and the irony that he end up in a fire. (11. 2252-61)

This extended scene uses the first of three common devices found in dark humor to create humorous effect—an extended play upon a word and/or metaphor. The romancers
are fond of seeing how long they can get their characters to extend a particular humorous motif. Thus, for example, Otuel responds to his assailant with an extended financial metaphor after having taken a blow to the head:

Quoþ otuwel, "so mote þ ye,
Ich ne þoute nauþt boruwe þat strik of þe;
Bi min heued under myn hat,
I nele nouþt longe owrue þe þat."
Otuwel, wip a fauchoun,
Cleef hum al þe heued a-doun,
& he fil vnder his horse feet.
Quaþ otuwel, "þat Ich þe bi-heet."
(Otuel, 11. 1115-22)

Romance writers also enjoy playing with specific words. In Richard Coer de Lion the narrator describes Richard's smashing of a table thusly:

The table with his foot he smot
That it went on the earth fote-hote....
(11. 1797-98)

Later in the same work, the narrator uses a violent incident to inspire the interjection of his first editorial aside and, simultaneously, to make his first joke. The emperor's steward has had his nose cut off for advising the emperor to follow a course of action favorable to his foes, the English. As the steward leaves the castle the narrator explains:

The steward his nose hente
(I wys his visage was y-shente,)
 Quickly out of the castle ran;
Leve he toke of no man.
(11. 2151-54)

Besides such plays with word and metaphor, romancers are fond of using both overstatement and understatement. Overstatement seeks to amuse by depicting someone or something in such an extreme fashion that it looks ridiculous. Such is the case in the cannibalism scenes and in the passages which show the humiliation of the French in Richard Coer de Lion. The horror of the Saracen messengers in seeing their relatives' heads being served to them and their consequential inability to join in the banquet are intended to be viewed as weaknesses on their part, just as the humiliation of the French by Richard is ridiculed. Humor produced by overstatement often contains a grotesque, even macabre, realism modern readers may have difficulty considering funny. Take, for instance, yet another example, this time a description of the almost farcical death of an
an obese Saracen warrior in the Sowdon of Babylon:

Tho the grete gloton Estagote
With his myghty mace sware
On the Gatis of Rome he smote
And brake hem all on thre thare.
In he entrid at the Gate
The Porte-Colis on him thai lete falle.
He wende, he hade come to late,
It smote him through herte, lyuer and galle
He lai cryande at the grounde...

(11. 427-35)

This may not seem humorous to a twentieth-century reader, this stark description of a man impaled by a portcullis because he was too fat to run out of its way, but the Christians in the romance were delighted (11. 439-40), and, one suspects, the medieval audiences were too.

Modern audiences might have less difficulty seeing the humor created by the third common device, understatement. Understatement can be humorous because of the ironic juxtaposition between event and comment it can produce. This irony was much used by the romancers generally, not just the writers of the Charlemagne romances. The Romance of Partenay, a non-cycle romance, describes the facetious response by the evil giant, Grymold, to the hero Geffrey's challenge to a duel. Grymold sarcastically begs for mercy:

Grymold this hiring, take hym to laugh too.
There hym faid Grymold, "you befeche and pary,
Fair fir, faue my life, let me on-lif go,
Taking this peple to ranfom alfo!"
Geffray underfode, "cherll!" faid haftily,
"Scorneft thou with me? certes thou fhalt dy!"

(11. 4202-07)

In Arthurian romances one can find even more explicit examples of understatement, by characters and narrators alike. The narrator of the Awntyrs of Arthur avails himself of the opportunity to use understatement while describing a fight between Galeron and Gawain. Galeron had just been wounded by Gawain so severely that he was left "groveling on the ground," his entire side slashed open. (11. 601-07) Nevertheless, he rises again and charges at Gawain, only to be cut down again, this time by both Gawain and by the narrator's ironic description of the charge itself:

Ffull 3erne he wayttis Sir Wawayne þe wighte,
But hym lympede þe wese, and þat me wele lykis.

(11. 614-15)
Similarly Arthur, in the alliterative Morte Arthure, uses understatement to heap ironic insult upon his foe. The victim this time is the giant, Golpas, whom he cuts down to size both figuratively and literally:

He clekys owtte Collbrande full clenlyche burneschte, 
Graythes hyme to Golpas, that greuyde moste; 
Kuttes hyme euene by the knees clenly in sondyre. 
"Come doun," quod the kinge, "and karpe to thy ferys! 
Thowe arte to hye by the halfe I hethe in trouthe! 
Thowalle be handsomere in hye, with the helpe of my Lorde!"

With that stelene brande he strake ofe his dede. 
(ll. 2123-29)

Two final examples of understatement come from Richard Coer de Lion. In both cases the narrator cannot resist making a joke as he describes Richard's various successful encounters with his enemies. The first instance is self-contained; it needs no introduction or comment:

He [Richard] smot an amyrale in the schelde. 
The dynt smot through the hethene herte, 
I undyrstande it gan hym smerte. 
(ll. 5042-44)

The second instance is an equally blatant piece of dark humor using understatement. The narrator explains the consequences of a Saracen's (Sere Archolyns) attempt to battle King Richard:

He ne schal kerve never mare 
And he gaff Richard a sory flatt, 
That foundryd bacynet and hat. 
Kynge Rychard was agreydyd sore, 
For the stroke that he hadde thore, 
Kynge Rychard took his ax ful strong, 
And on the Sar3yn fast he dong, 
On the helm above the croun, 
He cleff hym to the sadyl arsoun. 
Hys lyff forsothe not longe lest 
For Kyng Richard was hys preest. 
(ll. 5265-74)

No single romance or group of romances has a monopoly on any of these three forms of verbal dark humor, that produced by word play and extended metaphor, that resulting from overstatement, or that coming through understatement and its irony. Numerous examples of all three types can be found in virtually all romances containing dark humor. Some writers may prefer one form over another, but the three make up a common stock from which a romancer feels
free to draw whenever he wishes. Many of the jokes, however formed, appear with only slight modification in romances telling different versions of the same story or nearly the same story. This is particularly true of the very brief humorous incidents, and applies to a lesser extent as humorous passages get longer and more elaborate.

This phenomenon tells a good deal about how romancers used their source materials. While writing his particular version of an established story, the romancer may retain an especially appropriate or striking image, delete it, or alter it. In any event, his use of that source is seldom slavish. For example, the description of Clarel after he receives a blow from Otuel is remarkably similar in all three versions of the Otuel group which present the incident. All three poke fun at the teeth exposed when the jaw gets slashed away; all three ridicule his "grin." The exact consequences of this ridicule are not identical, however; they are influenced by the immediate context of each occurrence. (See Otuel, ll. 1315-20; Otuel and Roland, ll. 1464-87; Duke Rowland and Sir Otuel of Spain, ll. 1321-26.)

When looking for dark humor, then, the reader should be alert for all three forms, not merely the one he expects. This error is perhaps most common in a modern reader's tendency to seek only understatement, the form assumed to be the most widespread in romances.

Having shown the interrelationships between verbal and physical combat when used to present dark humor, and having examined forms verbal insults usually take, I conclude this study by discussing the functions dark humor serves. What observations about the purposes for dark humor do the texts support?

At the very outset of this chapter the point was made that dark humor depends to a large extent upon conflict and that that conflict can be extreme. Vicious hatred is often given free rein in these passages. Since the polarities between warring parties in these works are so great, can one use verbal combat as a gauge to measure the outcome of the physical struggle with which it is often associated? Can one predict, for example, that the one doing the ridiculing is invariably a "good" character, a member of the side which will ultimately win the war, and that victims of dark humor are consistently on the losing side? The answer to both these questions is, "no." Despite the fact that it would seem reasonable to expect these works, which are consistently explicit in their distinctions between desirable and undesirable forces, to permit "good" characters to always ridicule "bad" characters and never the reverse, such is not the case. One cannot anticipate, on the basis
of dark humor alone, which combatant will win a given physical conflict. "Evil" forces, be they Saracens, giants, or what have you, insult "good" forces in the romances with just as much vigor and enthusiasm as the heroes use against them. Each side laughs at the other's misfortune. There are times when Christian and Saracen knights hurl the same insult back and forth at one another in a single debate.25 There are even times when a Saracen clearly gets the advantage over his Christian victim, at least verbally.26

Simply belonging to the right army, then, will not assure a character freedom from ridicule, and the person doing the ridiculing will not necessarily win the physical fight associated with a given verbal confrontation.

There are some functions dark humor does serve reliably, however. This verbal ridicule can serve as a substitute it makes it possible to attack someone who may not be attacked in physical warfare. This is especially true when women are involved. The Ferumbras group contains the story of Floripas, a pagan damsel who converts and aids the Christian forces. Frequently she uses insults to humiliate proud Saracens, including her father, Laban, leader of the Saracen army. Similarly, in the Otuel group, a woman insults her lover. In Otuel and Roland Clarel sends Ogier, a Christian captive, to his "temman," Enfamy. She sarcastically deflates Clarel's boast of success after she learns that his "success" was a massive Saracen attack against but three Christians, an attack in which the Saracens suffered great losses and which capture just one of the three Christians. Clarel opens by bragging about how formidable a warrior his captive had been:

"Today he [Ogier] hath wonne in fyʒt
Many goode knyʒtes in dede.
Twe other and thys knyʒt
Thys day haueth slaw in fyʒt
A thousand of our maynne."
Thenne lowe that mayde so bryʒt,
and sayd to hym a-none-ryʒt,
"why ne hadde je brouʒt al thre?"
Tho sayde to here a knyʒt douʒty,
"Good damysel Enfamy,
Ours ne lyketh syker no gle,
Ffyrst mote somer come,
Ere thay tweye wyl by y-nome,
And more batalye schal be.

(11. 999-1012)

Also, by virtue of the fact that verbal insults often work in close association with physical insults and warfare by introducing, interrupting, or concluding such combat,
dark humor serves a structural function in that it helps to define episodes and to distinguish one episode in the romance from another. This can help the audience to understand exactly what is going on at a given point in the narration. Often, for example, a narrator will pause in his description of a major battle or will conclude such a description by having the victorious party gloat over his fallen victim.

The final, most general, and most important function of dark humor, however, whether physical, verbal, or both, is that it fits the scene in which it appears into the larger context of the romance as a whole. It contributes to the ultimate goals the romancer had for telling his story in the first place. First and foremost, these bits of humor help the romancer entertain his audience. Through their vivid realism and often brutal violence, these scenes delight an audience which wants to see an adversary humiliated and defeated as completely as possible, without reservation or moderation. This may not be the most attractive aspect of medieval literary taste, but it certainly is a very real one. Secondly, dark humor helps a romancer make and elaborate a particular point or thematic statement through his poem. Although there may be temporary setbacks, such as an incident wherein a Christian is bettered by a Saracen, the ultimate effect of this humor supports the writer's intent. The three most common, and by no means mutually exclusive, messages these romancers wish their audiences to receive concern hero glorification, ideological warfare, and the explanation of the chivalric code. The first and last of these are common throughout romance. The romancers found dark humor to be especially suited to the second topic, the holy war against the infidel. The consistency and the ferocity with which dark humor in these romances assaults Saracens and foreigners go beyond what mere stereotyped villains need receive; they provide a glimpse suggesting that the adversaries were perhaps not merely cardboard after all. A fourth message, the advocacy of English nationalism, is not widespread in the genre, being limited insofar as dark humor is concerned to Richard Coer de Lion, but it is expressed forcefully nonetheless.

Dark humor in the romances, then, while it seeks to entertain, is not merely incidental. It participates in and contributes to the romance in which it is found. It helps the romancer structure his work by defining episodes in it, and it helps him make a statement with his narrative. Through a kind of humor based on perversity he articulates normative positions about the chivalric code, about heroism, or about the true religion.
Endnotes

1This happens most often when two or more parties in the enemy camp are shown squabbling. Most notable are the scenes depicting Saracens railing against their impotent idols. N.b. Otuel and Roland, ed., Mary Isabelle O'Sullivan, in Fillingham Firumbras and Otuel and Roland, EETS, O.S., vol. 198 (Oxford Univ. Press: London, 1935), 11. 1524-58. See also The Sowdon of Babylon, ed., E. Hausknecht, EETS, Ex. Ser., vol. 38 (N. Trübner & Co.: London, 1881), 11. 2104-14, 2424-38, 2497-7526, 2755-90. This is not the only situation, however. Sowdon has some extended father-daughter feuds between Garcy and Floripas which must have delighted the audience for a number of reasons, one of them being the inability of heatheans to stay together even within family circles. In Otuel and Roland a Saracen wife mocks her husband's martial shortcomings. (11. 999-1012).

2This extraordinary phenomenon is a prominent part of Richard Coer de Lion, ed., Henry Weber, Metrical Romances of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Centuries (Edinburgh, 1810), II, pp. 1-278. See especially 11. 3020-3202, 3380-3414. It is an unusually extreme case of dark humor, even for the medieval romancers who were anything but intimidated by the notion of incorporating violence and humor. To prevent confusion, it must be stated here that Richard, even though it contains Christian-Saracen warfare, is not considered to be part of the Matter of France; rather, it is part of the Matter of England. It should be noted too, that not every romance presenting religious warfare necessarily contains dark humor. Some works addressing the infidel question are pious works, and this piety supercedes humor of any kind, including dark humor, e.g., The King of Tars, ed., Joseph Ritson, Ancient English Metrical Romances (London: W. Bulmer & Co., 1802) II, pp. 156-203.

3There is precious little romance activity of any kind, humorous or otherwise, that is solitary. Soliloquies, for example, are extremely rare. Whenever a character does fill the scene entirely by himself, he is usually being described en route from one place to another.

4At one point the narrator, in describing one of Richard's exploits, explains:
The Frensche says he [Richard] slough an hundryd
(Whereoff is made this Ynglysche sawe,)
(ll. 5060-61)

See also the opening lines of the poem.

It is not impossible that the author may have intended the pun in this line.

This is not the first time Richard had demonstrated his unusual culinary habits, for earlier (ll. 1100-12) he had slain a lion sent to kill him, had torn out its heart, and eaten it. Hence his name.


It is interesting to note the particular appropriateness of "ownt-londys" here. Not only are these men, fighting at sea as they are, literally away from land, but also they had been described earlier to be a collection of outlaws, Saracens, and Danes. The latter definition is, of course, the narrator's prime intent, but it seems not unlikely he was alert to the pun as well.

Line 1555 presents an interesting conflict between the author's wish to anthropomorphize the pagan gods and conventional Christian doctrine. Technically, since the Bible teaches that false gods are mere stone, etc., it ought not be possible for false idols to cry out when stricken, and their cry belies Christian teaching. As medieval writers so often do, however, this author chooses to sacrifice dogmatic consistency in order to gain realism and immediacy in his narrative.


The term "ritual" is a bit of a misnomer here. Although there are certain characteristics this humor tends to have, as the discussion below will explain, the exact shape of a given occurrence is not rigidly prescribed, just as the exact shape of the confrontation within which the humor is found is not rigid. These confrontations are best perceived as part of the fight description theme, the most common extended theme in romance, as explained by Albert C. Baugh in "Improvisation in the Middle English Romance," Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, CIII (1959), pp. 418-54. See especially pp. 425-27, 440-54. Baugh's excellent article enumerates the recurring elements which might constitute a knightly encounter. Because of its different point of view, i.e., dark humor within these confrontations, my argument focuses on only parts of
Baugh’s catalogue, but studies those parts in greater detail than he can in his survey. By "boast/insult ritual" I mean roughly issues implied by elements 5 ("He shouts an angry defiance or orders his opponents to yield") and 32 ("He taunts the vanquished foe") in his list of forty-nine. The discussion below will demonstrate, however, that once a more particular examination of a given incident or incidents actually begins, Baugh’s list of elements is correct, but it is so general it omits important material. Specifically, the importance of humor in these scenes has not only been underplayed but almost completely ignored.

12Ibid., pp. 425-27.


14The interesting contrast with Otuel these lines present is not limited to the fact that Roland laughs at Otuel. Notice that Duke Rowland employs the notion that a messenger is protected in a foreign court as Otuel does, but Duke Roland makes substantially different use of it. In these lines the convention really does protect Otuel from an unintimidated adversary. In Otuel the custom strikes the reader more as a rationalization offered by Charlemagne which his knights readily accept. Note too, that Roland accuses Otuel of being little more than a cowardly boaster, another reversal of how materials are applied in Otuel.

15This may not be true one hundred percent of the time. When it is not, the romance is careful to supply an explanation that the situation is extraordinary will be corrected eventually. Such might be the case, for example, in the story of a young hero suffering a defeat early in his career. This defeat will be more than compensated for by later successes, however.
16Lest the constant and extensive citation of dark humor examples from Charlemagne romances lead one to think that only these works contain dark humor, I cite here two other instances of dark humor occurring amid physical combat. These examples appear in Libeaus Desconus, John W. Hales and Frederick J. Furnivall, eds., Bishop Percy's Volio Manuscript (London, 1868), II, p. 405, a work tied indirectly into the matter of Britain by the fact that its namesake is Gawain's son. The scene of the first incident is a tournament relatively early in the young knight's career. Libeaus is struggling to gain public recognition as a great knight, but has been having little success. In this tournament, the crowd had just shown its favor for Gefferon, Libeaus' rival, by picking his lady over Libeaus'. The crowd turns against Gefferon, however, after Libeaus is able to knock away his shield in battle:

then laughed all that was there
and said without more,
Duke, Erle, or Barron,
that the saw neuer a knight,
ne noe man abide might
a course of Sir Geffron.

(11. 1109-1114)

In a later tournament in the same romance, the narrator joins with the crowd's ridicule by employing an insulting simile to describe the loser. After suffering from one of Libeaus' fierce lance charges,

...Sir Lmaberd vpright
sate rocking in his sadle
as a chyld in a cradle
Without main & might
every man took other by the lappe,
& laughed and gan their hands clappe,
barron Burgesse, and knight.

(11. 1728-34)

17This incident is interesting on a number of counts, and I can only touch briefly upon one of them here. The pagan Clarel is motivated to slay his fellow pagan because the edicts of chivalric order here supersede religious or national loyalties. Shortly before these lines, Clarel, in reply to Otier's having spared his own life earlier, had just promised Ogier sanctuary. The admiral, thinking only of the Christian versus Saracen warfare in which all were engaged, sought to forbid Clarel from giving sanctuary. Thus, to preserve his word and honor, Clarel dispatched the admiral. The "wycked sawe," then, is the admiral's counsel that the wounded, unhorsed, captive Ogier be slain forthwith, despite Clarel's oath to protect him. This episode shows just how compartmentalized the romancer and his audience could be in their attitudes toward events in one
episode vis a vis another. It is not long after this that Clarel, instead of being viewed favorably by the audience, is rather a Saracen villain himself, one who must be destroyed as quickly as possible.

The point was made earlier in this discussion that members of the French court are not as impressive as warriors in this version of the Otuel story as they are in some others, the status going instead to Otuel himself. In that regard it is significant to note that this is the first chance Roland gets to insult someone in Otuel, and that this insult comes but four hundred lines from the end of the poem.

See 11. 2215-2261.

Since, as Baugh's article on improvisation points out, the phrase "on the earth fote-hote" is a romance commonplace, it is unclear whether the pun here is intentional or not.

"Shent" can mean both "disgraced" and "disfigured." This pun we know is intentional for, eighty-six lines later, the steward picks up on the narrator's joke in his plea to Richard for help in avenging his insult:

The steward said, "I am shent bor thee; Gentle lord, awreke thou me."

(11. 2237-38)


That the similarities in this particular instance can be explained in part by the fact that the versions stem from a common source is not disputed. What is of primary interest here is how various romancers used their materials.


This can be seen most graphically in the opening scenes of the Otuel group romances. The Saracen messenger overwhelms the French in some versions. See especially Otuel.
CHAPTER VI

PARADOXICAL HUMOR IN SIR GAWAIN
AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

There is no longer any need to worry, as John Spiers did in 1949, that Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is not receiving enough critical attention.1 Much has been written about the poem since then, covering a large variety of subjects, including the poet's use of humor and laughter.2 Because of that, some general justification for still more discussion of humor in Sir Gawain must be offered. Particular justification is also needed for devoting an entire chapter to one romance in a dissertation otherwise ordered thematically. Looking at the humor in Sir Gawain and comparing it to the humor in other romances helps one both to resolve a scholarly debate that has been going on for some time about what the poet sought to do with its humor and to appreciate more completely the differences between Sir Gawain and other romances, the fact that it is indeed sui generis.

There has been no difficulty in recognizing that humor does, in fact, exist in this poem. From the opening scene in Arthur's court, through the episodes at Bertilak's castle and at the Green Chapel, to the closing scene again in Arthur's court, the poet has included a good deal of internal and external humor. The problem for critics has been in deciding how one ought to respond to this humor.

Students of the poem's humor tend to belong to one of two general groups. One feels that after all is said and done, the poem is optimistic, that the audience leaves the work reassured, and that the humor in the poem contributes to that resolution. Despite the fact that the poem contains much that is sobering, in the end the poet brings the reader back to a comforting norm, to a secure status quo. Others feel differently. These critics believe the poem is essentially pessimistic despite the frequent laughter in it. The romance presents the poet's audience with an ominous commentary, one that overwhelms the work's superficial levity.
To find such opposed views of the same poem is surprising and possibly disconcerting. That so many serious, thoughtful students of the romance have responded to its humor in such different manners argues not so much that they are unsympathetic to the poet's intent but that a one-sided response to the work is simplistic. For this reason many critics have seen in Sir Gawain an inseparable interdependence between the poem's pessimistic and optimistic elements. The critic's task is to strike what he perceives to be the best critical balance between the two, allowing full latitude to the many ironies arising from such a compromise.

Robert G. Cook's "The Play-Element in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" is an example of just such a critical compromise. After suggesting the humor in Sir Gawain "stands in a certain definite relationship to the poem's essential meaning," Cook says that he "will work from the assumption that it is unnecessary and even wrong to separate the poem's lighter elements from its more serious content." He follows this declaration with a reading of the poem which is, essentially, a systematic application of principles established by Johan Huizinga in Homo Ludens. He explains how play, particularly among Gawain, Arthur, and the Green Knight, creates much of the levity in the poem. These three, Cook feels, have some sense of what they are about: "Gawain and Arthur are...the only two who have really played with the Green Knight, and their laughter reflects their awareness of whatever it is they are involved in, it is something of a game." These characters, and others too, respond differently to the consequences of this game, however. Gawain alone among the members of the Round Table recognizes its serious consequences: "When the game is over, all but one of the members fail to grasp its meaning; and for that one--Gawain--the meaning is such a disturbing self-awareness that the fun is gone." The seriousness of the poem's conclusion, in other words, virtually overwhelms the levity which had dominated earlier, particularly for Gawain and for the poem's audience as well.

Cook's essay is significant not only for its attempt to be rigorously balanced in its consideration of both elements in Sir Gawain but also for its ultimate failure to maintain this balance, especially while interpreting the significance of the poem's conclusion, the scenes from the Green Chapel through to the end of the poem. For, finally, when he tries to synthesize the effect of Sir Gawain on its audience, Cook, like virtually every other student of the poem, finds himself forced into an either-or situation, no matter how he struggles to balance and qualify his analysis. When all is said and done, to some the poem remains
essentially optimistic and reassuring—to others serious, even foreboding. Yet neither group can prevail upon the other. This perplexing refusal to be codified simply and without qualification remains one of Sir Gawain's strongest claims to literary greatness. The poem defies being "known" in any simple way; each reading somehow slights or overlooks a vital portion of the romance.

This then is the problem which needs to be resolved. In Sir Gawain the reader is forced to confront and accept paradoxes in a manner rarely, if ever, found elsewhere in romance. Both the optimistic and the pessimistic must be recognized. How can the poem's readers avoid this polarizing which oversimplifies the interpretation? To a degree it is unavoidable, since any reading of Sir Gawain which attempts to "take a stand" on the poem's ultimate optimism or pessimism will inevitably slight important parts of the poem. It is not necessary, however, for a balanced reading to slip into such an either-or position despite its own best intentions.

The poet's use of humor is a major source for Sir Gawain's paradoxical nature; to a large extent the poem is paradoxical because the humor in it is often paradoxical. If we can recognize the sources for paradox we can understand the paradox itself more fully and this better understanding can enable us to maintain the delicate balance paradox requires. And we can learn just how some humor in Sir Gawain is paradoxical if we compare it with the conventional humor found elsewhere in romance.

As the earlier chapters in this dissertation have shown, conventional humor is relatively direct and easy to understand. The conventionally humorous situation found in the romances has two essential participants, the laugher, or person doing the ridiculing, and the victim, or object of the ridicule. Humor arises from the discrepancy between these two parties. The laugher is knowledgeable. He understands the norms by which one is to be judged in a particular situation, and he sees a failing on the part of the victim. This yields an automatic sense of superiority which expresses itself through laughter. As a character in a romance, the laugher is consistently in a position of strength vis a vis the audience, at least temporarily. (This qualification is important, for often an undesirable character will temporarily win the upper hand in these romances, and, in that position, will laugh at the hero's expense.) The conventional victim, for his part, is someone in an undesirable position, someone usually ignorant of certain vital information. Because of his shortcoming, he is degraded in the audience's eyes for the duration of the comic incident. Such a humiliation can
happen to heroes and villains alike, although it happens more often and more intensely to villains. If it does happen to a hero, the very fact that he is a hero insures that he will eventually recover from the temporary setback and rise to even greater glory.

It is important as well to note the audience's position in these conventionally humorous situations. The audience is always on the side of the laugher; romancers are very careful to make their audiences knowledgeable even when the hero of the work is not. Even, in fact, when no characters in the story know fully what is happening. Romancers' fondness for using mistaken identity to create humorous encounters is a good example of this. In no conventional episode of mistaken identity is the audience tricked. When a knight arrives disguised at a tournament, none but the knight and the audience may know his true identity, but the audience will always know this crucial information. Knowing more, the audience can always see the incongruity between the anticipated and the actual behavior of the victim, and this incongruity sparks laughter.

The romancers use their humor to achieve one effect or another closely related to three or four different general motifs. It may contribute to characterization or to making some commentary about contemporary social and political conditions. It may serve to titillate the audience or to appeal to man's more sadistic impulses. Even when more than one of these motifs occur simultaneously, as is most often the case, the different purposes can be isolated and understood with relative ease.

In Sir Gawain the laugher and the victim often fit the same qualifications as they do in conventionally humorous situations, and, indeed, much of the humor in the poem is in fact conventional. But this is not always the case as it is always the case in other romances. Sometimes the Gawain poet does not use the neat formula for conventional humor but rather violates one of its cardinal tenets. There are instances in Sir Gawain when the audience senses that the laugher himself is in error, when the laugher, by his very actions, shows he does not fully comprehend something of the situation in which the victim finds himself. This ironic, unrecognized self-confession of shortcoming unnerves and disquiets the audience more than it amuses or delights. While he usually does have all the readily apparent inferiority of the conventional victim, the victim in Sir Gawain can also be different. There are cases where subsequent information shows he does not have the insufficiency the laugher presumed him to have, but rather that he was operating on a different plane than the laugher. Both the
laughers and the victim in a sense are victims; neither is fully knowledgeable.

The audience's position in these cases is also complicated; it is not always at one with the laughers. At times the reader is a distanced third party to the poem's action, who, because of his conflicting loyalties, is a troubled observer, unsure whether he should laugh or not. This uncertainty is further aggravated by the fact that the audience is not always fully knowledgeable. The poet witholds information from the reader just as he does from characters within the poem itself. Because he is no longer omniscient as he is in conventionally humorous situations his position is limited. The audience is often limited to just Gawain's point of view, for example. While thus limited the audience is denied the comfortable superiority other romance audiences enjoy.

All this complication prohibits neat, simple responses by the audience; it cannot accept blindly the superficial appearance of a given humorous incident. Such humor no longer serves just a comfortable, entertaining role and an audience cannot rest assured that it is safe from the poet's manipulation, that all victims are confined to the world within the romance. The net effect of all this is a paradoxical humor, a humor through which the romancer may intend a sober or a comic effect or both. I would like now to examine a few scenes from Sir Gawain in order to demonstrate more clearly this complicated, unconventional humor and its paradoxical effects.

There are four major passages where this humor is most striking; the poem's opening scene where the members of the Round Table laugh and jest (ll. 36-490), the scenes in Bertilak's castle where all seems to be gaiety and mirth (ll. 763-1997), the scene depicting Gawain's confession before Bertilak at the Green Chapel and Bertilak's responses to it (ll. 2331-2478), and the poem's closing scene where the Round Table knights receive the returned Gawain (ll. 2489-2521).

The less-than-exalting effect of the Round Table's laughter at the beginning of the poem is widely recognized. The laughter documents their spirited enjoyment of the holiday feast, true, but it reveals silly immaturity as well. The narrator capsulizes this view in his description of Arthur:

Bot Arthure wolde not ete til al were serued,
He watz so joly of his joyfnes, and sumquat childgered:
His lif liked hym lyzt, he louied pe lasse
Auber to longe lye or to longe sitte,
So bisied him his zonge blod and his brayn wylde.
(11. 85-89)

All this collective and individual bravado dissipates instantly and completely at the appearance of the court's first challenge.

Ther watz lokyng on lenpe pe lude to beholde
For vch mon had meruayle quat hit mene myzt,
(11. 232-33)

the magnitude of the silence skillfully underscored by the lengthy description of the intruder (ll. 134-231). Yet even this silence is nothing compared to the silence following the Green Knight's actual proposal, a silence so profound and extended the Green Knight cannot resist predicating his typical pre-combat insult upon it (ll. 301-15). Quite appropriately, and one might add, conventionally, the Green Knight concludes his insult with unrestrained laughter, laughter none can ignore or misinterpret, especially not Arthur:

Wyth pis he the Green Knight lazes so loude þat
þe lorde greued;
þe blod schot for scham into his schyre face
and lere;
(11. 316-18)

Eventually the court manages to respond to the Green Knight's challenge, although only Gawain and Arthur can bring themselves to confront it. The first blow is given, the rules are repeated, and the visitor leaves in a hail of sparks. Despite Arthur's attempt to restore the court's original levity with his not-fully-convincing rationalizations (ll. 467-80), and despite the narrator's telling us that they returned to the meal, it is clear that everyone is shaken by the Green Knight's intrusion. So overwhelming is the sense of the Green Knight's superiority over the court, in fact, that it is difficult to keep in mind that the Round Table did not technically suffer a humiliating defeat here at all, and that, through Gawain, it actually had risen to and met successfully the challenge put before it.

There is little or no question the poet wanted this foreboding atmosphere to be left hanging in Arthur's hall after the Green Knight left. The admonition to Gawain with which the narrator closes the first fit is permeated by it:
Now þenk wel, Sir Gawan,
For woe, þat þou ne wonde
þis auenture for to frayn
þat þou hatz tane on honde.

(11. 487-90)

By closing with these lines the poet dramatizes the vast shift in the court's frame of mind from its opening gaiety. That gaiety was superficial, untested. The laughter of the courtiers revealed their limitations as brave knights, whereas the Green Knight's laughter in the same confrontation displayed his clear supremacy in an almost archetypal fashion. By laughing, in other words, a character here shows himself either to be particularly strong in a given situation or particularly weak.

This discrepancy complicates things for the audience. One has no choice but to identify with the Round Table in this scene. The Green Knight is too foreign a creature, and the sharp details inexorably draw one into the action, prohibiting a distanced, disinterested perspective. Yet the court is without doubt the loser, psychologically, at least, in this encounter. Not sharing the Green Knight's perspective, the audience cannot laugh with him at the Round Table; but the audience is also reluctant to laugh with the courtiers since it is so painfully aware of their limitations. Thus, despite almost continuous laughter within the scene, the audience feels uneasy, disquieted, troubled. And this, of course, is precisely the tone the poet wishes to establish, for by so doing he impresses upon the audience the seriousness of the issue being raised by events.

The second passage containing paradoxical humor describes the events in and around Bertilak's castle. It is important to note that in this scene the complications in the humor are not readily apparent and that they are recognized only after one reflects on the actions of the characters. As the audience first encounters these lines it does not suspect that the laughter in them is anything but the expression of simple gaiety, a gaiety very much like that enjoyed by the Round Table before the Green Knight appeared. In this respect the audience's position is identical to Gawain's in this passage and one result of this is the tightening of the audience's bond with Gawain.

In this scene Bertilak, Gawain's host, is delighted, even excited, to learn of his arrival and his joy frequently spills over into laughter. After attending to his guest's immediate needs, Bertilak asks his name and learns he is, indeed, Gawain from Arthur's court; Bertilak is thrilled, "loude lazed he þerat, so lef hit hym þoʒt." (l. 909) The
host's joy never diminishes; he can hardly contain himself in his exuberation:

½e lorde luflych alofte lepez ful ofte,
Mynned merthe to be made vpon mony sypez,
Hent hezly of his hode, and on a spere henged,
And wayned horn to wynne þe worchip þerof,
þat most myrþe myzt meue þat Crystenmas whyle—
'And I schal fonde, bi my fayth, to fylyre wyth þe best
Er me wont þe wede, with help of my frendez.'
þus wyth lazande lotez þe lorde hit tayt makez.
(ll. 981-88)

Now, it is possible to consider such behavior to be merely the enthusiasm of a delighted host, especially since, by contrasting so sharply with the terrible journey Gawain had just complete, the warmth and gaiety dominates the scene. Like Gawain, many readers, perhaps most, see nothing portentous in Bertilak's antics because the immediate purpose of Gawain's trip is, for the moment, forgotten. However, with the advantage of hindsight, one can see that Bertilak was delighted in a very particular way to see Gawain, and that, for example, he is jesting with Gawain at Gawain's expense when he plays with his hood, because he knows he is the Green Knight but Gawain does not.

Gawain is completely oblivious to all this. He believes he has, at long last and after much suffering, come to a haven where he can escape from the rigors of his difficult quest. His is the simple, direct delight at being once again in a courtly environment, one he knows and enjoys. The poet uses his brilliant powers of description to emphasize this contrast as he explains the courteous manner of Gawain's reception by the watchman, the luxury of his new outfitting, and the sophistication of the social intercourse between the guest and those residing at the castle. To Gawain, and to the audience sharing his perspective, this is all reassuring and Gawain believes that now he can relax.

It is no mere coincidence, then, that the very first instance of Gawain's laughing in the poem (l. 1079) comes at precisely that moment when he feels most able to relax. Not only is he again in comfortable surroundings, he has just been informed he has all but completed his journey to the hard-to-find Green Chapel. When he hears this welcome news, he is particularly pleased and relieved:

½enne watz Gawan ful glad, and gomenly he lazed:
'Now I þonk you þryuandely þurz alle ober þynge,
Now acheued is my chaunce, I shcal at your wylle Dowelle, and ellez do quat ze demen.'
(ll. 1079-82)
By saying, "Now acheued is my chaunce," Gawain shows that he believes his quest to be virtually a fait accompli.

At this moment neither the audience nor Gawain can see the terrible irony in this relaxation and in the laughter it yields. Hindsight shows that Gawain ought to have been at his most vigilant here, and that, far from being acheued, his chaunce was actually just about to begin in earnest, for it is precisely at this point that the host introduces the exchange-of-winnings game. (11. 1088-1125) Gawain's laughter, in other words, is an ironic identification of his precarious situation; it comes just when he thinks he is most secure.

Gawain's erroneous perception of his true situation is underscored in each of the five subsequent incidents wherein he laughs. In each instance Gawain laughs because he thinks he is involved in gay, delightful events, but in each he is actually engaged in crucial, serious matters, life and death matters. He laughs after the host completes his explanation of the rules of the exchange game; once each on three separate days he laughs as he banterst with the host's wife in his bedchamber; he laughs after the first day's exchange of winnings. Each time his laughter dramatizes his blindness, his obliviousness to what is happening, and the audience, sharing Gawain's limited perspective, shares in Gawain's error.

Gawain's and the audience's errors become evident in the scene depicting events at the Green Chapel when Bertilak explains the significance of the exchange-of-winnings game. Not insignificantly, this scene, with Gawain's confession and Bertilak's response to it, is the third scene in which the poet uses unconventional, paradoxical humor. The irony here is similar to that which Gawain himself experienced in the previous scene: by his very laughter, a character, far from showing himself to be in a position of relative strength, instead exposes shortcomings, and the effect of that laughter upon the audience is complicated. The troubling laughter in the former scene is largely Gawain's; in this confession it is Bertilak's.

Superficially, Bertilak's reaction to Gawain's self-deprecation appears to be the assertion of a norm by which Gawain can be reassured. Bertilak feels that Gawain's confession is more than adequate, and that Gawain should consider himself absolved by it:

`Then thon lede'bat o perl leude and luflyly sayde'
'I halde hit hardily hole, be harme þat I hade.
þou art confessed to clene, beknownen of þy mysses,'
Insofar as Bertilak is concerned, the laughter in line 2389 is that of a kindly judge who believes that error and punishment have been aptly matched and that the matter is now over.

But it is difficult, if not impossible, to accept this laughter purely at face value. That very laughter simultaneously reveals two unsettling qualities about Bertilak, qualities which make it difficult to view him as such a reassuring, priestly figure. There is some question whether or not it is appropriate for Bertilak to be such a judge of lewte in the first place. Bertilak is quite hypocritical when he condemns Gawain for not being fully honest with him while at the same time he sees no problem in having elaborate, extensive deception at Gawain's expense. The entire series of bedchamber confrontations and exchanges of winnings was, in effect, a lie, a test which not only did not inform Gawain a test was underway but which actually purported to be something entirely different. The audience, seeing the grounds upon which Bertilak judges Gawain, can sense an ironic unfairness in the whole test and in the tester.

Bertilak's laughter also documents his failure to recognize or to comprehend Gawain's reaction to the test. In this confession scene, the poet reveals dramatically the fact that the two men are perceiving the test differently and he describes the different perspectives they each hold. Gawain's tirade against himself after contemplating the test's significance (ll. 2369-88) demonstrates that, for him, the test probed deeply into his most fundamental qualities of identity and integrity and found them wanting. He is absolutely crushed by the realization. He takes up the girdle as a symbol of that devastating fault he is forced to recognize, as a tangible, permanent reminder of his utter humiliation. This symbol replaces his former emblem—the pentangle of knightly perfection, so total is the reversal of his self-assessment. His response is absolutely serious.

Bertilak simply does not understand any of this. To him the delight and the gaiety so dominant the previous several days at his castle can carry over without interruption to the Green Chapel. His behavior is consistent, from his cavorting about with Gawain's hood upon first greeting his holiday guest, through the delightful, witty conversations when the winnings were exchanged, through his taunting of Gawain at the chapel by grinding his ax, leaping over the stream, and balking with the strole, right up to and
including his final, easy forgiveness of Gawain's fault and
his inviting Gawain back again to "make myry in his hous." (l. 2468) To Bertilak the whole affair, dating back actu-
ally to his initial challenge in Arthur's court, is a
pleasant escapade, a neat little adventure that transpired
pretty much as he had planned. It is not a particularly
ominous undertaking, even if it does undercut the pride of
the Round Table, and it surely is not something significant
enough to interfere with the annual holiday festivities.
Nor is it difficult to understand why Bertilak can feel
this way. He, after all, is never in any real personal
danger, thanks to Morgan la Fay's magical powers.12 Furth-
more, as event unfold, he is the only one who realizes his
double identity and its significance. Consequently, even
though he clearly wishes to test Gawain, the challenge does
not take on much more significance for Bertilak than an
elaborate practical joke. Small wonder then that we can
find it in himself to forgive Gawain so easily when he
judges him. All of Bertilak's antics, including his
laughter, explain his perspective in the challenge affair.

When, however, Gawain reveals his radically different
view of the same events, Bertilak seems confused by Gawain's
seriousness and shaken by it too. By explaining his own
original motives he endeavors to assure Gawain that he had
not really intended the incident to be so terrible as
Gawain perceives it. The explanation is far from satis-
factory, however, because it is actually three explanations,
not one,13 and, coming right after one another as they do,
they sound more like rationalizations, nervous attempts at
shooting Gawain's aroused feelings, than anything else.
Bertilak says he initiated his challenge because Morgan la
Fay wished to "make ful tame"..."be grete renoun of pe
Rounde Table," to reue the knights of their wyttez, and
to kill Guinevere with dismay at the sight of the headless
giant holding his own head before her. (ll. 2456-62)
Morgan, he explains, was the real moving force behind the
affair. When, therefore, five lines later Bertilak joyfully
invites the one who had been victimized by the scheme to
meet the scheme's key perpetrator, and simultaneously
urges the victim to make myry, one gets the distinct impres-
sion that this merriment is either the obliviousness of a
complete dullard or it is the nervous attempt to escape a
most discomfiting situation. In either case, Bertilak's
very attempt at jollity here is a statement of his failure
to appreciate Gawain's perspective. Of all the suggestions
Bertilak could make to Gawain at this time, the offer to
return to the scene of his painful downfall and to be gay is
the least appropriate insofar as Gawain is concerned. And,
of course, Gawain declines the invitation.
He returns instead to Arthur's court, and, by so doing, he begins the fourth and final scene in the poem containing paradoxical humor. There is little doubt that Gawain's frame of mind remains just as serious in Arthur's court as it was when he departed from the Green Chapel. There is also little doubt that Gawain's interpretation of the girdle's significance remains the same as it was when he first explained to the Green Knight his motive for retaining it. This latter point is underscored by the poet's having the narrator (11. 2485-88) and Gawain himself (11. 2505-12) repeat its symbolism. The former point is unmistakeable in the description of Gawain's state of mind as he narrates his adventures to the court:

Of his fare pat hum frayned; and ferlyly he telles, 
Biknowez alle pe costes of care pat he hade, 
pe chaunce of pe chapel, pe chere of pe knyzt, 
pe luf of pe ladi, pe lace at pe last. 
pe nirt in pe nek he naked hem schewed 
pat he lazt for his vnleute at pe leudes hondes 
for blame. 
He tened quen he schulde telle, 
He groned for gref and grame; 
be blod in his face cone melle, 
When he his schulde schewe, for schame. 
(11. 2494-2504)

He alludes indirectly to the fact that his former emblem, the pentangle, has been replaced by his new emblem, the girdle. The girdle, like the pentangle before it, has no end:

bis is pe token of vntrawpe bat I am tan inne 
And I mote nedez hit were wyle I may last; 
For mon may hyden his harme, bot vnhap ne may hit, 
For ðer hit onez is tachched twynne will hit neuer. 
(11. 2509-12)

His fallen condition, in other words, is permanent.

The court's reaction to all this is extraordinary. At first, when he has just arrived and before he has had an opportunity to make his state of mind known to them, their actions are understandable. They are delighted and relieved at the safe return of their comrade:

þer wakned wele in þat wone when wyste þe grete 
þat gode Gawayn watz commen; gayn hit hum þozt. 
þe kynge kysssez þe knyzt, and þe whene alce 
And syben mony syker knyzt þat sozt hym to haylce. 
(11. 2490-93)
But we are never told that they understand anything at all of what Gawain has just told them concerning his adventure or the girdle's significance. They say nothing of these matters which weigh so heavily upon Gawain's shoulders. Instead, in complete violation of Gawain's seriousness they laugh loudly and arbitrarily redefined the girdle's significance their own way. The girdle is not emblematic of a man's failing; it betokens comaradery and renown. Such a redefinition is a complete perversion of the significance Gawain has so painstakingly and painfully explained to them:

\[\text{be hunt confortez be knyzt, and alle be court als Lazen loude perat, and luflyly acorden pat lordes and ladis pat longed to be Table, Vche burne of be broperhede, a bauderyk schulde haue, A bende abelef hym a oute of a bryzt grene, And pat, for sake of pat segge, in swete to were.} \]

(11. 2513-18)

Their response, in other words, is to ignore completely what he had just said and to see Gawain's return solely as they themselves wished to see it. This ignoring is emphasized by their laughter. It might be argued that the phrases, "be kyng confortez be knyzt" (1. 2513) and "for sake of pat segge" (1. 2518), demonstrate the court's instantaneous perception of Gawain's depression and its sources, as well as an equally instantaneous effort to rid him of it by refuting the premises of which it is based. But we are never told that Gawain is actually comforted by the court's efforts. Instead all one actually hears is the court's boisterous laughter surrounding Gawain's silence. This laughter actually serves to isolate the hero from the very court which is striving to embrace him, and Gawain's silence here may well be a mute echo of his declining of Bertilak's offer of companionship. Although each is mistaken for a different reason—Bertilak because he failed to understand Gawain's perception of the test, the court because it either ignored Gawain or sought to assure him with arbitrary assertions of loyalty that sound somehow feeble—neither the Round Table nor Bertilak understands Gawain. Faced with a sober Gawain, both groups laugh, and by laughing both dramatize the fact that Gawain is alone.

In four major portions of the romance, then, one finds humor operating in a complex, paradoxical fashion. Each instance contains genuine levity, but they all leave the audience less than joyous. Rather it is disturbed, troubled because it must face contradictory issues and because the poet does not offer neat answers to the problems raised. In Sir Gawain the person doing the laughing cannot always be assumed to be superior person, one with whom the audience
can identify comfortably and be amused. Not even when the audience laughs itself can it be assured that it understands a given situation fully. The audience is not always taken into the poet's confidence and thus finds itself manipulated by the poet just as though it were another character in the romance. There are some times in the poem when the audience can rely upon the laugher to be truly superior over his victim. For example, when the Green Knight laughs at Arthur and his Round Table in the challenge scene one can see laughter of the traditional boast and insult ritual. But such is not always the case and the audience must constantly be on the alert that it not regard as simple something that is actually very complex.

If one is alert to the paradoxical nature of much of the humor in Sir Gawain he also understands one important source for the greater paradoxes posed by the poem generally. Being aware that the romance is not what it seems and yet is all that it seems helps to answer such questions as: "Is Sir Gawain an optimistic or a pessimistic work?" The most appropriate answer to such a question is "yes" and it is just such an answer that the paradoxical humor in the poem supports.

In talking about maintaining a precarious balance between contradictory readings of the poem, about paradoxical humor, and about humorous situations in which the audience cannot relax with the comforting assurance that all is as it appears superficially, in discussing all these issues we have come a long way from the simple, conventional humor found elsewhere. This very distance is one mark of the greater sophistication of Sir Gawain over the other Middle English metrical romances. By redefining the role of the laugher in humorous situations from one of mere stereotypic superiority over the victim to one of ambivalent superiority, the writer of Sir Gawain introduces complexity not to be found elsewhere in the genre. But we would not understand the humor in Sir Gawain nearly so well had we not first understood the humor of the other narratives. Only after recognizing the simplicity of the conventional humor in romances can we fully appreciate the paradoxical humor in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. And too, studying the humor in the other romances is valuable in its own right, for it shows us that these narratives are not simply monotonous descriptions of one tedious battle after another, but that they do have levity and that that humor has its own variety.
Endnotes


4Book, p. 6.


6Cook, p. 16.

7Cook, p. 30.


9See: 11. 1113, 1217, 1397, 1554, 1777. All instances of Gawain's laughter, his explicit laughter that is, occur only in this section of the poem.

10Significantly, Gawain and the audience are the only people involved in these scenes who do not know what is really going on at the time.
Some, but not all, students seem to have recognized this fact. Martin Stevens, p. 78, does make such a recognition in his essay's final paragraph.

Gawain is keenly aware of this profound difference in his and Bertilak's positions. When Bertilak chides Gawain for flinching and says he did not flinch when Gawain struck him, Gawain says,

...'I schunt onez,
And so wyl I no more;
Bot þaz my hede falle on þe stonez,
I con not hit restore.

(11. 2280-83)

I am indebted to professor Walter Scheps for this observation.

In light of the Gawain poet's meticulous care in explaining various characters' perspectives on events (e.g., Arthur's moods in the challenge scene, Bertilak's perception of Gawain's fault, Gawain's very different perception of that same fault, etc.), one should be cautious in ascribing to characters motives not actually stated in the romance. Here, for example, it is evident that Arthur's courtiers wish to embrace Gawain through their redefinition of the girdle's significance. But we are never told they do so only after having first understood Gawain's position. It is possible they are ignorant here, and, if their performance in the opening challenge scene can offer any clues, it is probable.
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