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MIDDLE ENGLISH POPULAR ROMANCES

DISSERTATION

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the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
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By

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM WITH "POPULAR ROMANCE"

The Middle English romances, especially those of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, have not lacked scholarly attention. But, as many have noted, it is difficult to compose a general description of the works because of the number and diversity of the texts. About the only term that is frequently applied to many of them in common is "popular." The romances have been so called since they first attracted scholarly attention in the eighteenth century as "popular antiquities." But "popular" has taken on new, more precise meanings since then and what was once merely a polite interest in antiquities has become the systematic study of a variety of phenomena which collectively is called popular culture. Now that this study has come of age, it is time to re-examine the "popularity" of the medieval English romances.

Often the term "popular romance" has been applied very generally to narratives which are said to have appealed to "unsophisticated" or middle class audiences and to texts which are judged to be artistically inferior. Helaine
Newstead, in her introduction to the volume on romances in Severs' Manual, notes that the Middle English romances are generally "less sophisticated and less polished than the French, possibly in response to the audiences that they were designed to reach in fourteenth and fifteenth century England, and possibly because the authors were writers of modest literary ability."

However, scholars do not agree as to the nature of this audience. Katheryn Hume, writing about the composition of the romances, says that those written in English before 1350 were intended to entertain minimally educated native speakers. But Laura Hibbard Loomis in her study of the Auchinleck manuscript (a large volume of miscellaneous material, including sixteen romances, among them such familiar titles as Beves of Hampton, Guy of Warwick, and Sir Orfeo) suggests that this book, which dates from 1330, was designed for an audience of London civil servants who had a better than average education. Thus, here we discover two eminent writers on romance disagreeing about a fundamental point: the level of education of the audience of these texts.

The audiences of the English romances are frequently said to have been made up of members of the middle or lower classes, with the result that "popular" is used as a kind of catch-all term to describe those narratives which are unconcerned with or show little awareness of the life style
of the courtly aristocracy. For example, *Gamelyn*, with its outlaw theme, manifests the less-refined world and sentiments of the Robin Hood ballads, whose atmosphere is far from courtly. Other romances, like *King Horn* and *Havelok the Dane* (which John Halverson says "is essentially middle class ... a peasant fantasy of class ambition and resentment"), seem almost a-courtly in that they do not dwell on the manners and accoutrements of aristocratic life. Conversely, romances like *Sir Launfal* and *Sir Degrevant*, whose emphasis on such details is thought to reflect an outsider's vicarious fantasy about how the upper classes lived, are also called "popular." Derek Pearsall says that all Middle English romances were popular literature (excepting those in alliterative verse and the works of Chaucer), since they were composed for "lower or lower-middle-class audiences who wanted to read what they thought their social betters read."5

To return to Newstead's assessment of the romances, we should note that she attributes their lack of sophistication to their authors as well as to their audiences. To many scholars, Newstead included, "popular" connotes artistic inferiority. Loomis articulates this view in her evaluation of the Auchinleck romances, which are especially relevant to the study of medieval "popular" literature since this manuscript is one of the few examples of commercial book production from the period:
With the exception of this ... [Sir Orfeo] ... and a few others, most people would agree that these English romances are thoroughly conventionalized and pedestrian in style. They must be put down to the authorship of men of generally humble literary attainments, of no literary ambition, and nearly all of whom were possessed of the same "patter" of well-worn cliches, the same stereotyped formulas of expression, the same stock phrases, the same stock rhymes, which Chaucer was to parody in such masterly fashion in Sir Thopas.6

But before we judge a work to be "artistically inferior," we ought to have access to the standards by which it was written. As John Cawelti asks in his work on contemporary forms of popular culture and art, "Is there a distinctive aesthetics of popular culture, or are the popular arts simply degenerated or naive forms of the fine arts?"7 His own answer, which has gained wide acceptance, is that there is a distinctive "popular" aesthetic, or rather a plurality of popular aesthetics, and that by better understanding them we can better understand the appeal and value of popular art.

The romances certainly had great appeal, to judge from the number which have survived and the many references to them in contemporaneous works. The word "popular" is frequently applied to them to refer to this third feature, their wide dissemination and obvious appeal. Such stories as those of Beves of Hampton and Guy of Warwick, for example, survive in numerous manuscripts and continued to circulate as late as the nineteenth century. Even the tales of now
obscure heroes like Robert of Sicily, Sir Isumbras, Sir Degare and Partenope of Blois have survived in equal, or greater numbers of texts.

Part of the problem with the term "popular romance," then, lies not with the nature and diversity of the works themselves and their audiences, but with the word "popular" itself. Although the term "popular literature" has been around for a long time, the study of it is relatively new and has become a true discipline largely because popular culture's impact on life and art has been dramatically increased by the development of mass media and marketing of this century. Most studies of popular art forms deal with modern materials—novels, movies, comic strips. Thus, as sociologist Zev Barbu has said, there has been a "tendency to confine the phenomenon of popular culture to its most recent version, namely popular culture in advanced industrial society, and to apply to it models and analytical tools relevant for this and for no other type of study."8 Thus "popular culture" has come to suggest mass production and consumption and a largely middle class audience; "popular literature" has come to imply widespread literacy. Yet, in medieval England members of the middle classes made up only a small portion of the population. In truth, as D.S. Brewer explains, the nineteenth-century idea of upper, middle and lower classes did not exist in England
at the time the romances were composed and cannot be
applied to the society of that day." Though literacy
gradually became more common, written literature was
cultivated mainly by those of higher station. Additionally,
despite the efforts of bookshops with their standardized
operations, mass production of reading matter was not
possible until the introduction of the printing press.

To untangle this terminological mess and thereby give
us a better understanding of the medieval English romances,
I will attempt to deal with the cultural, social and
aesthetic aspects of the narratives separately. Before we
can say what kind of culture the romances belong to, we
need to know what kinds of culture existed in the Middle
Ages. Before we characterize the narratives as artistically
deficient we need to know what aesthetic standards
they were intended to meet. And, before we ascribe their
shortcomings to the social class of their audience, we need
to know what the nature of that audience was. The rest of
this chapter will be a general discussion of these three
aspects of the romances' cultural dynamic, that is, the
cultural patterns made manifest by the genre: the kinds of
medieval culture, the development of certain social classes
in medieval England and the basic aesthetic principles of
elitist and popular art.
"Culture" is one of those slippery words which refers to two different things at once. In one sense, a culture is a people's world view, "the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order." In another sense, culture is the people's ethos, "the tone, character and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood." These are the words of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz whose distinction between these two aspects of culture is crucial to an understanding of cultural dynamics. Cultures are both a model for life and a model of life. Thus, "cultural patterns have an intrinsic double aspect: they give meaning, i.e. objective conceptual form, to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves." Through these patterns, the group's ethos is shown to represent a way of life well suited to "the way things in sheer actuality are" while its world view is shown to present an image of reality which corresponds to that way of life. Cultural patterns thus synthesize world view and ethos, for they present them in such a way that they simultaneously confront and confirm each other.

I would like to consider the terms "popular culture" and "elite culture" as indicating different modes of cultural synthesis. These modes may be understood as different aesthetics, that is, as different ways of engaging the
individual in this synthesis, different ways of relating him to the ultimate order of the universe and to the conditions of life around him. Popular literature embodies an aesthetic of receptivity and familiarity, affirming accepted values and encouraging the individual to identify with a picture of the world as he would have it be—a moral fantasy. Elitist literature embodies an aesthetic of difficulty and novelty, challenging the individual to work out his own synthesis between world view and ethos. These aesthetics are designed to elicit different kinds of responses from an audience. They also require different kinds of creative acts from artists. The Folklorist Barre Toelken has described fine art as that "based on the study of objects that are related to an ever-developing intellectual sense of proportion, design and individual creativity held by and judged by people of educated and sophisticated taste." Thus elitist literature is academic, exclusive and formal.

To paraphrase Joseph Arpad's discussion of popular aesthetics, "high" literature is characterized by indirect expression, reliance on the permanence of the written record, individual creativity, innovative outlook, self-conscious design, selection of materials and the privileges of exclusiveness. On the other hand, "popular" literature may be said to be characterized by direct expression,
pragmatic outlook, conventional design, the use of received materials and non-exclusiveness. Popular literature is pragmatic, for the writer's first consideration is the basic needs of the audience. Its design is conventional because such works are derived from a relatively limited repertoire of elements which are combined in stereotyped ways. Popular literature is essentially a conventional literature which reaffirms, in an intense form, values and attitudes already known; it reassures and portrays the world as we would have it. While a popular audience expects simplicity and familiarity, an elite audience expects complexity and invention. According to David Madden, the elite audience judges the achievements of an artist by how well he is able to transform his inherited material through his imaginative conception. The popular artist, on the other hand, is judged by his skill in manipulating the conventions and formulas of his genre for a calculated effect. This last distinction is less clear in medieval literature than in modern. In the earlier period, many elite authors were manipulators of traditional material. Almost all medieval narratives are formulaic and conventional, and no one hesitated to revise stories already in existence. But elite authors transformed older stories through their imaginative conception to give them unique significance. In the work of popular artists we see the
manipulation of stereotyped elements according to accepted cultural and literary patterns. The creative act, the artistic faculty from which such works proceeds, is best described, as Northrop Frye says, by Coleridge's term "fancy." That is, "a mode of memory playing with fixities and definites."15

As early as 1581, George Puttenham, one of the first writers on English literature, distinguished in his Art of English Poesie between "artificial poesie," which was created by education, and "vulgar poesie," which was created by instinct and nature. This is as intelligent an explanation of the two aesthetics as any provided by more modern students of culture. Puttenham would probably have associated "artificial poesie" with members of the higher social classes who sought formal education and "vulgar poesie" with those of the lower classes who did not. However, there is no necessary correlation between social rank and the mode a group of people uses to effect a synthesis between its ethos and its world view, as later chapters will show.

For a better understanding of the relationship between culture and society, we need to focus our attention on the nature of ethoi and world views. Any group of people—that is, any society—inherits a world view and a social system corresponding to it. As long as these go unchallenged by
other world views or the conditions of everyday life, cultures tend to remain stable—that is, patterns through which synthesis is achieved remain the same. Thus the narrative form of the *chanson de geste* flourished as long as the basically tripartate society of the early Middle Ages (clergy, warriors and workers) remained intact and the individual warrior's identity was submerged in that of his social group—whether Franks, Spaniards, or Christians. But by the twelfth century in parts of France this kind of society no longer existed and the world view which had justified it came into question. A new narrative pattern and literary form, the romance, was brought into being to offer a new synthesis of ethos and world view. Here, the focus was on the individual and on love and the stories are structured around the love and marriage, separation and reunion of a couple, not around family quarrel, insult, treachery and punishment.16 Though organized in a simple hierarchy, the society of feudal France was largely culturally undifferentiated. That is, rulers and ruled slept in the same places, ate the same food, wore the same style of clothes and enjoyed the same entertainments. From his two biographers we know that Charlemagne lived in this way, though he also cultivated the intellectual tradition of Latin writers and Church Fathers. By the twelfth century, however, French society had become a hierarchy and different
groups within it began to cultivate their own distinctive ethoi. Not only had the organization of society become more complex, but cultural expressions, particularly in written form, became more diversified also. Thus, any individual might participate in several kinds of culture.

By the later Middle Ages this large scale social stratification had several small results that affected the romances. Medieval Englishmen began to precisely mark social distinctions by style and color of dress, order of seating at table and other such displays which became increasingly elaborate; however, social ties were vertical, to those above one in the hierarchical relationships of feudal tenure and patronage, not horizontal to other members of one's own rank. This meant that an untitled knight sat below the salt, perhaps, but he was present with his lord after dinner when the minstrel, or whoever happened to be the resident story teller, might read or recite romances to the household in the great hall. However, in the late fourteenth century there was a tendency to build chambers adjoining the great hall. These rooms provided a private place for the lord and lady to retreat to sleep, eat, and amuse themselves. Naturally, one of the leisure activities which went on in the chamber was romance reading. In manuscript illuminations and stories also (for example, Troilus and Criseyde) we find scenes of small groups gathered
in a chamber listening to one of their members read from a romance. This withdrawal of the greatest folk from the communal dinners and entertainments of the hall was one of the many signs of degeneration lamented by Langland in *Piers Plowman*. The lords were no longer fulfilling their ancient and approved function. The change is significant for it was part of the social stratification of culture and life accompanying the decline of medieval civilization and the emergence of what might be called early modern Europe.⁰¹⁸

One of the many smaller changes which occurred was the social stratification of reading matter. As vernacular literacy increased during the Middle Ages, social distinctions came to be made, as Franz Bauml says in a study of medieval reading habits, not on the fact that one was literate and had access to the written word, for that was no longer distinctive in itself, but on what one read and wrote.⁰¹⁹ A late example of this attitude can be seen in Caxton's prologue to *Enydos*, which he translated for Arthur Prince of Wales. This book is not, Caxton says, appropriate for rude uplandish men, but "only for a clerk and a noble gentylman that feleth and vnderstonde in faytes of armes in loue and in noble chyvalrye."²⁰

The romances, of course, began as courtly culture, an expression of the ethos of a certain social class. Eric Auerbach has said that the purpose of twelfth-century French
romances was the "self-portrayal of the ideals and mores of the feudal knightly class." This statement neatly encompasses both aspects of their purpose— they present models for life in ideals, but also models of life in self-portraiture. The idealistic concept of chivalry which this class developed at that time remained an important cultural pattern throughout the later or "high" Middle Ages in Western Europe. It was part of the world view inherited by fourteenth-century Englishmen. Those of the knightly social classes still formed the main audience of romances, for chivalry was their raison d'être. However, over time and space, the ethos of this social group changed and the class structure of the society varied.

In the years between 1250 and 1550, when most of the Middle English romances were produced, the nobility of England became stratified. As the late Oxford historian K.B. McFarlane says, during this period

a nobility of a type peculiar to England, having little in common with the French noblesse, first came into existence. ... The essential changes had already occurred by 1485; they had hardly begun in 1300. In the reign of Edward I a dozen earls, the dwindling survivors of a seemingly obsolescent baronage, shared their nobility with an undifferentiated mass of some three thousand landowners, each of whose holdings were said to be worth £20 a year or over. ... By the second half of the fifteenth century the lords were sharply distinguished from those without the fold. Nobility had parted company with gentility, the quality with which those rejected were still permitted to be
endowed. The gentry, that is to say, did not so much rise (though some did) during the later middle ages as fall from the nobility which their antecessors had enjoyed in common with all landowners from a great earl to the lord of an estate worth £20 a year.22

According to the historian Sylvia Thrupp, the gentry included those belonging to the four military ranks of knight, banneret, esquire and man-at-arms, those who held senior posts in the estate and household service of the great barons (though the rank was associated with the post, not the person who held it), and those who performed high services in municipalities or in the administration of the crown.23 Another historian, R.H. Hilton, further describes the country gentry as those who had incomes of £50 a year and held half a dozen manors. These people witnessed local charters, stood on grand assize juries and performed tasks imposed by sheriffs or the central government.24 To fill out our picture of the gentry, we might note with M.J. Clanchy that the great merchant dynasties took on the coloring of landed gentry rather than forming a distinct bourgeoisie.25 Thrupp enumerates the distinguishing marks of the gentry as birth, money and a distaste for manual labor.26 Usually three or more generations passed before members of a family of lower origins, for example merchants or lawyers, could be considered truly gentle.

Other new social groups besides the gentry emerged in late medieval England—a bourgeoisie and a yeomanry developed,
each with its own ethos. By the Renaissance, these three
groups were large and unified enough to have developed a
culture of their own. The middle class culture of
Elizabethan England described by Louis B. Wright was
considerably different from the upper class culture of
twelfth-century France, yet Elizabethans were reading
fourteenth-century English translations of twelfth-century
French romances and composing new works in the genre.27
The cultural patterns the form embodied must still have
effectively synthesized world view and ethos, but as they
had changed, so, subtly, had the patterns.

It remains for the rest of this dissertation to explore
in more detail the various aspects of the cultural dynamics
of Middle English romance touched upon here: the cultural
patterns they embody, the world views and ethoi of their
audiences, the way these are synthesized and the manner in
which this synthesis is presented to the individual. We
may characterize the difference between twelfth-century
French romances and their fourteenth-century Middle English
counterparts as that of elite and popular literatures.
However, before embarking on a detailed analysis, we should
note that there are a number of other paired terms besides
popular and elite which might be used to chart the
similarities and differences of a Chretien de Troyes and a
Thomas Chestre. Despite the problems they raise, these two
labels are the best for the purposes of a cultural study. They alone capture both the literary and the cultural aspects of the romances and allow us to better understand their relationship. However, since other paired terms are familiar and do have some bearing on the aspects of the romances we wish to investigate, it is appropriate to mention them here.

*Courtly* might be substituted for *elite* in the pair, but it is somewhat over-specific for our purposes. The word refers to the literature of a particular social group centered in a royal family. Strictly speaking, courtly romances are those written by court poets. However the term is also used to distinguish those romances primarily concerned with love from those focusing on adventure. To try to use it in third sense, as our study would require, might create more confusion than clarity. Such adjectives as "naive" and "sophisticated" might provide satisfactory labels, except that they denote opposite qualities while *popular* and *elite* and the characteristics they refer to do not. *Naive* may be taken to mean "natural" and "direct" while "sophisticated" describes a quality of self-consciousness, complication and "advancement" over naivete. While these terms do describe the art of some romances, they do not accurately characterize the narratives' cultural contexts and so are not really satisfactory for our purposes.
"Aesthetic" and "didactic" is another pair of adjectives with a long history in critical theory, going back, as they do, to the ancient opposition "utile et dulce" developed by the classical poets and the Christian Fathers. The former term, or some version of it as in "art ballad," "art epic" or "art lyric," does describe important distinguishing features mentioned in the explanation of popular and elite which appeared earlier in the chapter. In these instances art is used to designate those works of known authorship which are sophisticated, idealized and self-consciously strive for perfection of form. But aesthetic, like its companion didactic, really applies only to the aims of the artist and the audience's response to (interpretation of) a literary work. It says nothing about cultural context. Didactic is perhaps even less appropriate since most medieval literature is in some sense didactic, but given this, the romances are among the least didactic. In some ways similar distinctions between "serious literature" and "literature of entertainment," between "high" and "low" cultures are too relative and subjective to be precise or useful in a comprehensive study such as ours.

The terms written and oral have an advantage in that they may be applied both to works of literature and to cultures. In spite of this they are of limited value in distinguishing between kinds of Middle English romances
since all the narratives we know of were written. Many are translations from texts already written in French and others were probably composed in writing. The romances were read aloud, but they are not oral literature in the usual sense of the term. On the other hand we might cite their formulaic composition and existence in versions and variants as evidence of their closeness to oral tradition. In fact, most Middle English romances exhibit an amalgam of features associated with both written vocal literatures and cultures. These aspects of the narratives, as they may be understood from minstrel performances and from manuscripts, will come in for much discussion in the present study. However, the terms oral and written do not accurately distinguish between what we can only call elite and popular romances.

The rest of this dissertation will explore the nature of elite and popular romances in order to suggest a more accurate appraisal of these narratives and to demonstrate the precise and useful application of these terms. To this end we will examine a number of romances to examine their aesthetics and note their contexts. Proceeding in a roughly chronological sequence we will consider first the early, elite French romances Yvain, Lai le Fresne and Lai de Lanval in conjunction with their sometimes popular Middle English adaptations in order to chart their distinguishing
characteristics. Following this we will begin a more detailed analysis of the artistry and cultural contexts of Middle English romances. This will be based upon a careful consideration of their two modes of circulation, minstrel performance and manuscript copy. In discussing these we will characterize and explain the significance of their "oral" style, relating it to the concerns of the narrative's gentry audience. We will also be able to identify those which were best liked and further understand their cultural context by referring to the other writings with which they appear. But most significantly, our study of the manuscripts will reveal the overwhelming popularity of a particular group of romances whose structure and themes were picked up and perpetuated through all subsequent incarnations of the popular romance.

In keeping with our generally historical scheme we will end our study by examining two of the latest Middle English romances, Paris and Vienne and The Squire of Low Degree. These narratives, published in printed books, are representative of early sixteenth-century elite and popular romance. In addition, they are thematically and otherwise related to earlier romances appearing in manuscripts. Of particular importance in our discussion of these two stories will be the information about their cultural contexts provided by a consideration of the oeuvre of their
publishers, William Caxton and Wynken de Worde, and the audiences for whom they printed their works. Finally, if in this survey of over 400 years of literature and life, our focus shifts somewhat from specific to general, from descriptive detail to broad analysis, I can only say that this is the consequence of our attempt to treat the romances both diachronically and synchronically. Any thorough study of cultural expressions must take these two approaches and in ours the terms popular and elite will be shown to be useful in both of them.
NOTES TO CHAPTER I


3 Laura H. Loomis, "The Auchinleck MS and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-1340," PMLA 57 (1942), 601.


6 Loomis, pp. 607-8.


11 Ibid, p. 81.


16 These structural patterns are identified and analyzed by Susan Wittig in *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in Middle English Romance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978) passim and by Eugene Dorfman, *The Narreme in the Medieval Romance Epic* University of Toronto Romance Series, No. 13 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969).


25Clanchy, p. 188.

26Thrupp, p. 238.


CHAPTER II
EARLY FRENCH ROMANCES AND THEIR ENGLISH ADAPTATIONS

An examination of the cultural dynamics of Middle English romances should begin with the earlier French versions of the stories. There can be little doubt that narratives of the genre romance were first written in the twelfth century at the courts of the ruling aristocrats in twelfth-century France. The romances of two writers in particular, Chretien de Troyes and Marie de France, are cited as paradigms of the genre. Chretien, it is well known, was in the service of Marie, Countess of Champagne, and later Philip d'Alcase, Count of Flanders. The Countess and her mother, Elinor of Aquitaine, came from a family of patrons and poets beginning with William of Aquitaine, who wrote the earliest surviving love poetry in any modern European language. The circumstances of Marie's life are less well known to us than Chretien's, but it is thought that the dedication for her lais was addressed to Henry II.

Several of their narratives were translated into Middle English in the early fourteenth century. The story of Yvain was retold in the romance Yvain and Gawain.
Lai le Fresne and Lai de Lanval have their English counterparts in Lay le Freine, Sir Landevale and Sir Launfal. Though in their own way they remain faithful to their French originals, the English romances have a style of their own. The different styles of these works represent two different types of cultural dynamic— that is, the world views and ethoi they present are different. Also, a different relationship obtains between their audiences and their inherited cultures. Thus the syntheses of world view and ethos achieved by these narratives are not the same. Though they tell the same stories, they do not mean the same things and they achieve their meaning in ways of their own. The aesthetic of a work determines the mode of interaction between audience and artifact. This mode may be characterized by the artifact's effect on the audience, the techniques by which this effect is achieved, and the audience's response to the artifact. Chretien and Marie worked according to an elitist aesthetic like that described in the preceding chapter. Their romances are self-conscious, part of an academic literary tradition, highly individualistic and innovative. They are also difficult, challenging members of the audience to apprehend their fuller meaning by confronting themselves. The romances of the French poets create the system of values they express.
The works of the English adaptors reflect, in heightened form, this same value system which was in their time well-established.

Different aesthetics require different roles for the artist and responses from the audience. By contrasting the aesthetics of the French and Middle English romances, particularly their composers' roles and the audiences' responses as well as the authors' methods of narration and their treatments of the formulaic aspects of their plots and the ethos and social makeup of their audiences, we can determine some of the cultural forces at play in the life of the literary form romance.

The first place to go in determining Chretien's and Marie's role as artists is to their own statements about what they are doing. In the Prologue to her Lais, Marie tells us that in her search for worthwhile stories to compose she first thought of translating some tales from Latin to Romance. Realizing that this had already been done,

De lais pensai, k'oi aveie,  
Ne dutai pas, bien le saveie,  
Ke pur remembrance les firent  
Des aventures k'il orient  
Cil ki primes les commencèrent  
E ki avant les enveierent,  
Plusurs en ai oi conter,  
Nes viol laisser ne oblier.  
Rimez en ai e fait ditié,  
Soventes fiez en ai veillé.1 (11. 33-42)
Then I thought of the lais I'd heard.  
I did not doubt, indeed I knew well,  
that those who first began them  
and sent them forth  
composed them in order to preserve  
adventures they had heard.  
I have heard many told;  
and I don't want to neglect or forget them.  
To put them into word and rhyme  
I've often stayed awake.

A few lines later she tells us

M'entremis de lais assembler  
Par rime fere, e recontier...  

I undertook to assemble these lais  
to compose and recount them in rhyme.

Marie took stories that she had heard or read, and, lest  
those tales, already old, should be forgotten, put them  
into the vernacular of the court. She says she set herself  
to assembling the lays, as though she collected them (from  
recitation, by memory or notes?) then composed them into  
rhymed verses and retold them. But as she hints earlier in  
her Prologue, she has done more than simply versify the  
Breton's narratives. She is inspired to composition in  
part by the example of Priscian and those who spoke  
obscurely in the books they wrote.

Pur ceus qui a venir esteient  
E ki apprendre le devient,  
K'i peussent gloser la lettre  
E de lur sen le surplus mettre  
Li philesophe le saveient  
E par eus memes entendieient,  
Cum plus trespasserunt le tens  
Plus serreient sutil de sens...  

(11. 47-48)
so that those who were to come after
and study them
might gloss the letter
and supply its significance from their own wisdom.
Philosophers knew this,
they understood among themselves
that the more time they spent,
the more subtle their minds would become...

But by referring to the Roman rhetorician and the aesthetic
of difficulty to which the ancients supposedly aspired, she
reveals the learning of her audience and her own artistic
intentions. Her stories, too, will repay careful reading
and thought—the meaning is not on the surface to be gathered
simply by understanding the words, but is more subtle and
more subtly realized. It is the job of the wise writer to
provide for such meaning and the reader, by bringing his
own wisdom to bear on the text, may apprehend it. Marie
apparently conceived her function as that of a mediator
between an already existing story and an audience, but her
Prologue, like her narration of the lays themselves, is
deceptively simple and unassuming—and deliberately so.

She has not just assembled the lays, but selected and
to some extent arranged them on the basis of the kind of
love affairs they treat. The nature and significance of
love is the subject of her lays, and read together they
form an exploration of and commentary on this most important
and bewildering emotion. Only one of the five manuscripts
in which her lays have come down to us contains the whole
collection, but from the Prologue and the fact that several
of the narratives begin "I will tell you another lay," we know what a reading of them makes obvious—they were conceived of and executed as a whole.

Chretien, who is anything but unassuming, goes much further than Marie in claiming for himself a role as creator and inventor, one who selects, modifies, develops and combines traditional thematic elements to suit the purpose he has in mind. However, Chretien's garrulousness is as much a pose as her reticence. What he tells us of his role as artist corresponds quite well to Marie's practices, though she does not remark upon them.

Three words particularly require our attention here: sens, conjointure, and antancion. They appear in the opening lines of Eric and Enide where Chretien tells us that he will derive from a "conte d'aventure/un moult bel conjointure," and in the often cited prologue to The Knight of the Cart where he explains that his patron, the Countess of Champaigne, has given him both the sens and matiere of the romance, leaving him simply to carry out her antancion (which may not have been to his liking). These terms have been the subject of voluminous scholarly commentary, and it is not my purpose to add to that here, but only to summarize the more accurate and suggestive explanations of their meaning in order to indicate how two medieval authors approached the task of composition. Like its modern English cognate, "sense," sens can refer to both intelligence and
meaning. W.W. Comfort translates it as "interpretation" and "manner of treatment" in his edition of Launcelot. Marie-Louise Ollier says that the word refers to the meaning of the story, the interpretation of the matiere (source material). Eugene Vinaver understands conjointure to refer to the interpretive elaboration imposed by the author through which an artistic whole is formed. Paul Strohm understands it as fine interrelationship of parts. Ollier says it means the principle of arrangement of elements in a narrative, the textual organization in its entirety which invests the text with meaning at every level of structure. "Matiere engenders a sens thanks to an antancion (creative plan of the poet) that is realized, at the level of the text, by a conjointure, the conjointure thus becoming the textual organization productive of sens."7

Both our authors, then, are taking "simple" narratives--stories of avantures (which in twelfth century French means "events" or "happenings" as much as "adventures") and imbuing these tales with a particular meaning or significance of their own creation. Like Marie, Chretien calls upon his audience to be receptive to his deeper meaning. Through the voice of Calogrenant he says

Cuer et oroilles me randez!
Car parole oie est perdue,
S'ele n'est de cuer antandue.
De tes i a, que ce, qu'il oent,
N'antandent pas et si le loent;
Et cil n'an ont mes que l'oie,
Des que le cuers n'i antant mie.
As oroilles vient la parole
Aussi come li vanz, qui vole;
Mes n'i areste ne demore,
Ainz s'an part an mout petit d'ore,
se li cuers n'est si esveilliez,
Qu'au prandre soit apareilliez;
Que cil la puet an son venir
Pandre et anclorre et retenir.
Les oroilles sont voie et doiz,
Par ou s'an vient au cuer la voiz;
Et li cuers prant dedanz le vantre
La voiz, qui par l'oroille i antre.
Et qui or me voldra antandre,
Cuer et oroilles me doit randre!
Car ne vuel pas parler de songe,
Ne de fable ne de mançonge,
Don maint autre vos ont servi
Ainz vos dirai ce, qui je vi. (H. 150-176)

Let your hearts and ears be mine. For words, though heard, are lost unless understood within the heart. Some men there are who give consent to what they hear but do not understand: these men have the hearing alone. For the moment the heart fails to understand, the word falls upon the ears simply as the wind that blows, without stopping to tarry there; rather it quickly passes on if the heart is not so awake as to be ready to receive it. For the heart alone can receive it when it comes along, and shut it up within. The ears are the path and channel by which the voice can reach the heart, while the heart receives within the bosom the voice which enters through the ear. Now, whoever will heed my words, must surrender to me his heart and ears, for I am not going to speak of a dream, an idle tale, or lie, with which many another has regaled you, but rather shall I speak of what I saw.

Chretien makes explicit Marie's implied distinction between those who apprehend only the words and those who grasp their meaning, or sens, as well. The distinction is not new in the twelfth century—it had a long Christian and Classical tradition behind it and Chretien's analysis of the functions of ear and heart is Ovidian. However, it had
only recently come to be applied in the context of vernacular, secular literature. The French poets are making large claims for themselves—they are not telling idle tales. Their prologues tell us three main things about their attitude toward their compositions. They expected their audience to work to understand their narratives. They felt that this was necessary because they had imbued the stories with a deeper meaning. This was not just anybody's sense, it was their own, achieved through the realization of their antancion by means of the narrative's conjointure. All of these are traits compatible with the aesthetic criteria of elitist art: difficulty and the individuality of the author.

The authors' attitudes towards their creations should be considered in the literary context of their time and place. Written vernacular literature was just coming into prominence in twelfth-century France and the fixed text of a written narrative offers possibilities to the composer not to be had in oral composition and transmission. It makes possible the immortality of the author as well as the story. It preserves his expression verbatim and so his conception of the story remains intact. The medium of transmission permits the survival of a personal style and an individual's interpretation of a traditional narrative. The composer of the Chanson de Roland did not expect his
words to remain unchanged through repetitions of his story. Chretien may have. Chaucer, two hundred years later, certainly did. His "Complaint to Scoggan" records his impatience with a careless (or "improving") scribe. Chretien, too, cared very much that his conception of the story remain intact. He concludes Yvain by remarking "I never heard any more told of it, nor will you ever hear any further particulars, unless some one wished to add some lies." Godefroi de Leigni, who wrote the conclusion to Launcelot, assures us that he did so with the author's consent. At the beginning of Eric and Enide he announces that he is going to tell "a story which those who earn a living by telling stories are accustomed to mutilate and spoil in the presence of kings and counts." Presumably he, Chretien, is going to tell it as it should be told. Such statements reveal the composer assuming a new prominence in his composition--he has become an author. 

There is also something significant in the court poet's sneer at his less fortunate brethren. Chretien, a cleric, would have held an office in a noble household and so did not have to live by his stories. He was a literary amateur, not a professional entertainer and he looked down on those who were. This attitude is common among court poets who had to define and defend their value as story tellers by excelling and attacking the professionals (minstrels, jongleurs, histriones, mimes) who competed with
them for the recognition and munificence of the wealthy. Petrarch, writing to Boccaccio, complains of "that vulgar and widespread class who get their living by words--and not their own, either--who have become so disgustingly prevalent." He characterizes them as men of little ability but great memory who make a living performing before the nobles materials "picked up here and there, sometimes from the writers themselves, either by begging or for a price." The poet is especially irritated by those who pester great writers, himself included, for a song and then perform it before some wealthy person, winning for themselves a great reward. Petrarch, Boccaccio and Chaucer are all later than Chretien and Marie; in earlier times the traditions of the fixed text and the individuality of the author were not so well-established.

An author of narratives who feels so strongly that the works he has composed belong to him has obviously invested them with a good bit of his ego. When he has at his disposal a medium of transmission which insures the survival of this individual imprint, his antancion, he will not be indifferent to the voice through which he speaks, but will use it, so far as he is able, to achieve his antancion. Thus the manner of narration itself, the narrator's voice, is an important aspect of conjointure, for it overtly organizes the text. It is also a natural vehicle for the author's expression of his intention.
The written, fixed text made possible a relationship between the composer of a story and its narrator and a number of stances were open to him. Dorothy Everett notes that this is the principal difference between the chanson de gestes and the romances. In the former the "characters speak for themselves, whereas in the romances we are always conscious of the story teller and his manipulation of episode and character."10 This manipulation is possible because there is a distance between the narrator and the story itself. In turn the audiences' awareness of this manipulation distances them from the story as well. The distance allows one to question the tale and approach it from different points of view. Franz Bauml has said that when fixed texts become the norm, ironic or unreliable narrators appear, as do disposing narrators, participating narrators and narrators within narrators.11 Paul Dembowski, in an article on Chretien's romances, notes his "multivocity," the varying degrees to which the author's presence is felt in the narration.12 It is most intensely felt in the author's monologues which comment and generalize on the significance of a given situation to the story. The author is least present in the characters' dialogues. In their monologues (which are often dialogues with themselves) and in passages of straightforward narration and description, the author is present in intermediate degrees.
Chretien uses this complex narration, especially the author's monologue, to get his sens across and to subordinate the avanture to this meaning. In what can only be called the prologue to Yvain, though it does not have the form of one, he describes King Arthur's Pentecostal feast and then intrusively digresses from the narrative.

Aprésp mangier parmi cez sales
Li chevalier s'atropelerent
La ou dames les apelerent
Ou dameiseles ou puceles.
Li un recontoient noveles,
Li autre parloient d'amours,
Des angoisses et des dolors
Et des granz biens, qu'an ont sovant
Li deciple de son covant,
Qui lors estoit riches et buens.
Mes ore i a mout po des suens;
Que a bien pres l'ont tuit leissiee,
S'an est amors mout abeissie;
Carcil, qui soloient amer,
Se feisoient cortois clamer
Et preu et large et enorable.
Or est amors torenee a fable
Por ce que cil, qui rien n'an santent,
Dient qu'il aiment, mes il mantent,
Et cil fable et mançonge an font,
Qui s'an vantent et droit n'i ont.
Mes por parler de caus, qui furent,
Leissons caus, qui an vie durent!
Qu'ancor vaut miauz, ce m'est avis
Uns cortois morz qu'uns vilains vis. (11. 7-32)

When the meal was finished, the knights betook themselves whither they were summoned by the ladies, damsels, and maidens. Some told stories; others spoke of love, of the trials and sorrows, as well as of the great blessings which often fall to members of its order, which was rich and flourishing in those days of old. But now its followers are few, having deserted it almost to a man, so that love is much abused. For lovers used to deserve to be considered courteous, brave, generous, and honorable. But now love is a laughing-stock, for those who have no
intelligence of it assert that they love, and in that they lie. Thus they utter a mockery and lie by boasting where they have no right. But let us leave those who are still alive, to speak of those of former time. For, I take it, a courteous man, though dead, is worth more than a living knave.

Throughout the romance, the narrator interjects himself into the flow of events to point out to the audience the disparity between what some take to be love and what love really is:

De ceste plaie vos deisse,
Tant que hui mes fin ne preisse,
Se li escouters vos pleust;
Mes tost deist tel i eust,
Que je vos parlasse d'oiseuse;
Car la janz n'est mes amoreuse,
Ne n'aimment mes, si come il sueuent;
Que nes oir parler n'an sueulent. (11. 5389-5396)

I could tell you so much about this wound,... love...if you were pleased to listen to it, that I would not get through my tale today. But there would be some one who would promptly say that I was telling you but an idle tale; for people don't fall in love nowadays, nor do they love as they used to, for they do not care to hear of it.

In a passage following the description of Laudine's formal reception of King Arthur, her ladies entertain his knights with hospitable flirtation. At this the narrator comments

Et caus puet l'an nices clamer,
Qui'cuident, que les vuelle amer,
Quant une dame est si cortoise,
Qu'a un maleureus adoise,
Si li fet joie et si l'acole.
Fos est liez de bele parole,
Si l'a an mout tost amusé. (11. 2458-2465)
but such persons may be properly rated as fools
for thinking that a lady is in love with them
just because she is courteous and speaks to some
unfortunate fellow, and makes him happy and
careses him. A fool is made happy by fair
words, and is very easily taken in.

The warning of the last four lines may be directed at readers
and listeners as well as lovers. Chretien's narrator
characteristically challenges his audience to understand
him.

Marie is not nearly so intrusive and multi-vocal an
author/narrator as Chretien. She often speaks directly in
the short introductions to her lais, but she rarely allows
herself a monologue. At the beginning of Equitan, she
introduces the hero and says of him

\begin{quote}
Cil metent lur vie en nuncure
Que d'amur n'unt sen e mesure;
Tels est la mesure d'amur
Que nul n'i deit reisun garder
\end{quote}

(11. 17-20)

Whoever indulges in love without sense or moderation
recklessly endangers his life;
such is the nature of love
that no one involved with it can keep his head.

But she is seldom so direct in stating the point of her
story. Frequently she introduces or concludes the tales by
referring to their titles. She is very precise about naming
her lais, often suggesting alternatives. The double title
of Chativel (or The Four Sorrows) indicates two perspectives
on the action of that lay, the knight's and the lady's.
The nightingale (or laustic, or rossignol—Marie gives the
word in three languages) is the central symbol of the story
to which it gives its name. The symbols and different perspectives all make a comment on love, but it is more like Marie to imply rather than state what that comment might be.

Her narration of *Lanval* is typically understated. She addresses her audience once to secure its sympathy for and understanding of the hero's plight:

> Seignurs, ne vus esmerveillez:
>   Hume estrange, descunseillez,
>   Mut est dolent en autre tere,
>   Quant il ne seit u sucurs quere. (ll. 35-38)

My lords, don't be surprised:
a strange man, without friends
is very sad in another land,
when he doesn't know where to look for help

When the fairy lady has granted Lanval her "love and her body," the narrator exclaims "Now Lanval was on the right road!" At the conclusion of the lay we are told that the knight has gone with his lady to Avalon

> Ceo nus recuntent li Bretun,
>   En une isle que mut est beaus.
>   La fu ravi li dameiseau:
>   Nul humme n'en oi plus parler
>   Ne jeo n'en sai avant cunter. (ll. 642-646)

So the Bretons tell us,
to a very beautiful island;
there the youth was carried off.
No man heard of him again
and I have no more to tell

*Lanval* has usually been understood as the story of one who so loses himself in the world of ideal love (symbolized by the supernatural world of the beautiful fairy) that he
can no longer live in the real one. Thus at the end of the romance he simply disappears into fairy land. Marie's narration of the conclusion reinforces the sens of her tale. She raises subtle doubts as to the reality of this happy ending. The Bretons say that Lanval went to Avalon, she does not, and she refuses to speculate further about the matter.

Of course authors had other means at their disposal to realize their antancion besides manipulation of the narrator's voice. It was certainly an important aspect of conjointure, but in general that term is understood to refer to the author's structuring of the narrative and treatment of elements in it. Manipulation of plot is another important means by which authors can realize their antancion.

The basic plots of Lanval and Yvain are quite similar. Both are versions of a traditional plot, Tale Type 400: Man on a Search for his Lost Wife. The story tells of the union, separation and reunion of a couple. Marie and Chretien were indebted to Celtic versions of this plot which often combine it with the story of the man who went to fairy land. The narrative almost always tells of the attempt of a supernatural woman to take a mortal as her lover, sometimes by transporting him with her to the other world. The separation usually occurs when the man
inadvertantly breaks a taboo imposed by the woman as a condition of their relationship. Only after a period of suffering is the penitent lover reunited with her. The main difference between the two romances is that Yvain is an active, Lanval a passive hero. This four part structure, the love, marriage, separation and reunion of lovers underlies most of Cretien's and Marie's romances and many later French and English romances as well. It is the pattern of Fresne, though here the central character is a woman. This, like the presence of an active or passive hero, affects the way formulaic elements are combined and manipulated. There are variations on this pattern throughout the later Middle Ages, but that it should have inspired thought and expression in so many people in such different circumstances suggests that this structure struck a profound note or resonated at a frequency to which medieval audiences were fundamentally attuned.

In romances, a knight falls in love with a lady and she, in turn, with him, but then, through some breach of the courtly code—whether neglect, as in Yvain, or unequal social status, as in Lai le Fresne, or the treachery of those around them, as in Lanval—the lovers are separated. Tested by adversity, they remain true to each other. Their reunion, usually in marriage, affirms not only their own social and personal worthiness of each other and the
rightness of their union, but also the validity of marriage as a social institution and cultural model of love. Such an affirmative ending to this formulaic plot is appropriate to a popular aesthetic.

Of all Marie's lays, Fresne comes closest to popular narrative in that it directly affirms values the audience already held. The heroine, abandoned as an infant, is brought up in a nunnery. Wooed by a young noble of the neighborhood, she falls in love with him and becomes his mistress. However, his barons eventually urge him to take another woman as his wife, since Fresne, whose background is unknown, would not be a suitable match for someone of his status. He reluctantly assents and eventually arranges to marry a nobleman's daughter who is, unbeknownst to anyone, Fresne's twin sister. At the nuptials the orphan's identity is discovered and she is reunited with her family. She is thus revealed as a suitable spouse for Gurun after all, and so they are married.

The structure of this plot is fundamentally the same as Lanval's, but the plot itself is different, as is the sense of the story. The love of Gurun and Fresne is of this world and not some impossible dream. Marie is careful to show the development of the lover's relationship through several stages so that love and not fortuitous circumstance or the conventional morality of virtue rewarded is seen to bring about the happy ending. Fresne is recognized through
the nobility of spirit which is her birthright and identity. This is symbolized by the coverlet in which she was abandoned; it testifies to her high lineage, is the means by which she expresses her nobility, and brings about her recognition and identification. It is her love of Gurun, her desire to enhance his honor, that leads her to place the rich coverlet on the marriage bed. Her mother, on seeing it, discovers in Fresne her long lost daughter. Fresne's noble conduct first draws her mother's attention. Throughout the story her virtue is emphasized. She is "noble and cultivated/ in appearance and speech./ Everyone who saw her loved her." Elsewhere she is called "beautiful, cultivated/ wise, refined, well educated." Nobility of birth and nobility of spirit go hand in hand with love. Patrimony and social status are necessary to marriage. In the act of putting the coverlet on the bed, Fresne brings all these things together and acquires the wealth, the status and the marriage which are hers by right.

*Lanval* is not nearly so affirmative, though a quick glance at the plot would make it seem so. The outcast knight, who is noble and courteous, encounters a beautiful, wealthy and equally courteous lady who grants him her love. He grants her his in return and they live happily in the splendor befitting such a couple, though their love must
remain a secret. The queen, now attracted to the once
disregarded knight, makes advances and when repulsed,
falsely accuses Lanval of trying to seduce her. In self
defense he praises the beauty of his lady, at once breaking
the taboo of secrecy and insulting the queen. Bereft of
the lady, he suffers agonies with no expectation of remedy.
But at his trial, where he must demonstrate the truth of
his boast, the fairy suddenly appears, exonerates Lanval
and takes him with her to Avalon, as we have seen. This
turn of events would seem to affirm the value of their love
and the rightness of their union. The hero gets the most
beautiful woman of all so, in the usual formulaic logic of
the fairy tale, he deserves this fine reward.

Marie's treatment of the plot does not permit such a
comfortable assumption. The lady's other-worldly beauty is
made much of, her courtly virtues, while not lacking, are
subordinated to her physical appearance and the luxury of
her surroundings which are described evocatively and at
length. (We might note that Fresne, who we know to be
lovely, is nowhere described.) The end of the story too
stresses the beauty of the lady more than the happy reunion
of the lovers. The proceedings of Lanval's trial take up
most of the second half of the lay, building to the
climactic moment of the lady's appearance. More than 25
lines are devoted to the portrayal of her splendor and
after the hubbub caused by her arrival has subsided, she speaks to set the matter straight. She does not speak to Lanval, who is transported by the sight of her, but addresses the king and his council telling them that she had loved Lanval and that the queen had falsely accused him. This done, she turns to leave and will not be detained even by royal entreaty. Lanval makes his escape with her only by waiting as she passes through the gate and springing up behind her on her palfrey. This is not the joyous reunion of separated lovers celebrated by family and friends with which Fresne concludes—it is a last minute escape into fantasy.

Yvain is more than ten times as long as Marie's lais, so Chretien's handling of the basic plot is much more elaborate. However, he tends to manipulate his formulaic materials towards the same general ends as Marie. In spite of the fact that at the conclusion the hero is able to win back the wife he has so desperately sought, it is not a particularly satisfactory reunion. For one thing, it is based on a trick. Yvain, who since the derangement occasioned by his loss of Laudine, has been known only as the Knight of the Lion, finally makes his way back to Laudine's spring. He is able to defend it against the tyrannical knight who would claim it and Laudine for himself. He then sends Lunette, Laudine's maid in waiting,
who is sympathetic to his cause and knows his identity, to plead his case with her. After some persuasion Laudine agrees to marry this Knight of the Lion, so renowned as a champion of women. She is furious to discover the deception that has been perpetrated on her.

"...Se Damedé me saut,
Bien m'avez au hoquerel prise!
Celui, qui ne m'aimme ne prise,
Me ferás amer maugré mien.
Ore as tu esploitie mout bien.
Or mas tu mout a gre servie!
Miauz vossisse tote ma vie
Vanz et orages andurer!
Et se ne fust de parjurer
Trop leide chose et trop vilainne,
Ja mes a moi por nule painne
Pes ne acorde ne trovast.
Toz jorz mes el cors me covast,
Si con li feus cove an la candre,
Ce, don je ne vuel or reprandre,
Ne ne me chaut del recorder,
Puis qu'a lui m'estuet acorder." (ll. 6760-6776)

"God save me! You have caught me neatly in a trap! You will make me love, in spite of myself, a man who neither loves nor esteems me. This is a fine piece of work, and a charming way of serving me! I would rather endure the winds and the tempests all my life: And if it were not a mean and ugly thing to break one's word, he would never make his peace with me. This purpose would have always lurked within me, as a fire smoulders in the ashes; but I do not wish to renew it now, nor do I care to refer to it, since I must be reconciled with him.

Laudine agrees to accept Yvain because she would not be ignoble and break her word; also to do so would be to commit the sin of perjury. So peace is made between them and they live out their lives in bliss. The Ovidian figure of love as a trap--effectively employed in the passage
above, is an apt image of Chretien's handling of courtly love. Laudine had originally been tricked into marrying Yvain in much the same way. When she agreed, out of sympathy for his distress and love of her, to accept his love, she did not know he was the man who had slain her husband.

There is, then, a conventional happy ending to Yvain; its plot is ultimately formulaic. However, the psychological realism with which the hero and heroine are portrayed to some extent contradicts the reassurances of the formulas. These two tendencies—toward realism and formularism—create a tension in Chretien's romances because they are aesthetically incongruent. In fact, in their extreme development they establish the opposite ends of a sort of literary spectrum. John Cawelti points this out in his discussion of formulaic fiction. At one end there is mimetic literature, which seeks to present in art the world as it is. At the other is formulaic literature which takes as its model not the "real" world, but the world as we would have it, as it should be. Almost all medieval literary (as opposed to historical) narratives are formulaic. Their plots are similar and highly conventional. The early French romances, medievalist Per Nykrog notes, are unique in their cultural and psychological realism. These two qualities, especially the latter, are notably missing from
most Middle English romances, except for those of Chaucer, Malory and the Gawain Poet, which Pearsall says correspond to the paradigm of the form developed by Chretien and his contemporaries.15

Chretien, we have seen, composed his narratives according to an elitist, individualistic aesthetic. In Nykrog's words, his romances are the product of a creative inventor, "a person who selected, modified, developed and combined...traditional...thematic elements so that they would serve the purpose he had in mind." However, the more usual role of a medieval narrative artist is that of a mediator between a traditional narrative and an audience—"one who selected (modified, developed) a certain number of thematic elements found in literary tradition and/or in his own experience as a historical person, and combined them into a story."16 A person who works in this mode is going to produce highly conventional, formulaic narratives. All cultural expressions contain a mixture of conventions and inventions, as Cawelti has said. Inventions are things uniquely imagined by the creator, conventions are those literary elements familiar to the creator and audience such as favorite plots, stereotyped characters, accepted ideas, common metaphors and other linguistic devices.17
The more conventional the work, the more it tends toward the pole of formulaic literature. While an author's inventions are not always mimetic, in Chretien's and Marie's cases they are. Chretien's exploration of his character's psychology is often couched in Ovidian terms and is therefore conventional, but his purpose is mimetic which is something new. Lanval's trial is conducted according to accepted legal procedure and the author's attention to realistic detail in this episode helps to emphasize the difference between the real world of Arthur's court and the supernatural world of the lady. Mary Ann Ferguson notes that Marie constantly alters the folk-tale structures of her lays to make the narratives more realistic.\textsuperscript{18}

As long as cultures are relatively stable over long periods of time and homogeneous in their structure, the relationship between convention and invention in literature poses few problems. However, when cultures change and become more heterogeneous, intellectual elites place more emphasis on invention, to quote Cawelti, "out of a sense that rapid cultural changes require continually new perceptions of the world."\textsuperscript{19} The twelfth century was a time of rapid cultural and social change—for rather it was a time in which the numerous small changes which had occurred over a period of many years together generated a critical
force that made visible and dramatic the disparities between life as it was lived and the inherited models for the living of it. Unlike literature composed according to a popular aesthetic, which seeks primarily to restate familiar values and attitudes in order to reassure its audience, Chretien's and Marie's romances seek to heighten their audiences' self-awareness through the exploration of an individual's responses to problems arising from conflicting values and attitudes. The authors have adapted the man on a search for his lost wife plot, usually preserving the reunion in action by undercutting it in treatment.

Why, we may ask, this concern with conflicting values and attitudes especially regarding marriage and love between men and women? To answer the question we must refer to the cultural and social history of the period in which the authors lived and wrote and examine in detail the world view and social ethos of the group by and for whom the first romances were composed.

The vernacular literature of the Anglo-French courts arose in a newly established milieu and in response to the tastes of people belonging to newly evolved groups within medieval society. The culture which shaped the society, and thus the lives of individuals, was feudal and Christian. It offered an ideal of society based upon three orders: churchmen, warriors and laborers, whose respective functions
were the salvation of souls, protection of lives and property, and production of the material necessities of life. Knighthood had achieved prestige during the Crusades which gave it a sacred mission. However, by the twelfth century, more and more, knights were fighting not the infidel but each other. They were not protecting anything but their lords' (and their own) interests. However, at about this same time, the French nobility began to regard knighthood as a sign of prestige and status. A knight was no longer a chevalier, a warrior on horseback, but a member of an exclusive social order. Increasingly, the nobles regarded themselves as superior to non-nobles, not just in degree, but in kind. This superiority was believed to manifest itself in chivalric behavior. Only the nobility were thought to be capable of it. As Auerbach says, the aristocracy of twelfth-century France developed the idea that nobility, greatness and intrinsic value had nothing in common with anything ordinary. Chivalry was cultivated, not as the means to any social end, like defense, but as a testimony of personal superiority. It became an end in itself.

The change in the society's conception of its cultural ethos is related to changes taking place within the society itself. These changes affected only a small segment of the population, but they were a literate and artistically
inclined group and they held the reins of social power, so they produced many cultural artifacts which express their ethos. They were able to act it out on a large scale and ensure that less powerful groups within the society also participated in their drama. In his collection of essays, *The Chivalrous Society*, the historian Claude Duby describes how the noble families, particularly in northern France, began to change the behaviors through which they defined and perpetuated themselves. More and more they practiced primogeniture and strictly controlled marriages to keep their wealth and social position intact. This was most important since nobility was to be considered an innate characteristic, a matter of kind, not degree. Thus marriage outside one's social class was unnatural—a sin against kind and God's appointed order in the universe. One could only be as noble as one's family and the family's nobility depended upon the status of the individuals which constituted it. In theory, primogeniture ensured that at least one individual in the family would be able to make a good marriage and preserve the nobility of future generations. Doubtless the younger siblings who could not expect to inherit, or to marry, took some comfort from the privileges the status of their family offered them, and it was to the benefit of the primary branch of the family to see that its cadet branches did not die out or sink too low, but theory and practice were often at odds.
The nobility of France thus became an intrenched aristocracy which increasingly cut itself off from members of other classes, but within this class there was a growing number of people who had no clearly established position. Duby calls them juvenes, or youths, young men of noble birth who had either not yet come into their patrimony or, being younger sons, had little inheritance to come in to.22 Sent away to be educated and establish a position for themselves in the households of other noblemen (frequently a maternal uncle), the juvenes were trained in the arts of polite behavior and armed combat as befitted a person of their status. L'Histoire de Guillaume le Marechal records that in 1175 Henry the young king (son of Henry II) and his companions spent a year devoted to pleading cases, hunting, and fighting in tournaments under the tutelage of the renowned Marshall. Such are the lives of knights in romances, and it leads one to wonder to what extent art imitated life or vice versa.

The same courts which were centers of artistic patronage were filled with bachelors bred to pride and combat. Those who did not marry and inherit became members of the magnate's household or band of knights. Usually they sought to improve their position by obtaining the grant of a feif, office or other source of income in return for satisfactory service. Other ways of acquiring an establishment of one's
own were capture and marriage. We have only to turn to the opening scene of *Yvain* for a portrait of the youths. There we find Calogrenant and his companions, all bachelors of noble family, apparently without the responsibility of their own households. They have been drawn to Arthur's court by the advantages of service at the premier court. Waiting outside the king's chamber door, they while away the hours in attendance upon their sleeping lord, quarreling, chafing at their inactivity and swapping stories of combats and adventures. Duby makes the connection between the ethos of the youths and the appeal of the romances explicit by pointing out that the wanderlust, turbulence and aggression of this social group is "described and exalted in the literature of pleasure written largely by and for the youths themselves." 

These people's position disposed them to create and be responsive to literature which explored conflicting values and attitudes, especially those regarding combat and love. Says literary historian Colin Morris, the new social and cultural circumstances forced upon the individual "choices in important areas of consciousness where previously they had hardly existed." 

The practice of primogeniture and the concept of innate nobility which developed with it, coupled with the militaristic ethos of the knights, produced a peculiar situation. In the lives of many people of the upper classes,
there was no pragmatic function or culturally sanctioned outlet for their sexuality and aggression. All those bachelors could hardly be expected to remain celibate, but marriage was a liability or impossibility.

There were probably always fewer women than men at the courts of the great aristocrats. The architectural and social historian Mark Girouard remarks upon the striking absence of women from the medieval account books of noble households and descriptions of feasts and ceremonies.²⁵ Women at court were likely to be at the top of the social scale present there, for they were all part of the lady's circle. There was no female group equivalent in numbers to that armed retinue attached to any noble and his household. So most courts were filled with many marriageable men and only a few women. It is no wonder that women appear in the romances mainly as objects of desire. This desire is usually presented in a displaced form—the romances' preoccupation with feminine beauty. Lanval's lady is a pure incarnation of this idealized love (she is also, perhaps, a figment of the imagination). When sex has no social or practical function, it comes to have mainly personal significance, which in the world of chivalry is ultimate significance.

Women are important as conduits of nobility—this is the only function allowed them under primogeniture and it is their main function in the romances as well. They inspire knights to chivalrous conduct, that is, to the
heightened expression of their innate nobility. Though the ladies are usually denied much direct participation in the chivalric world, their presence is necessary to its existence. But if love is one of the distinguishing emotions of the noble character and it is inherently personal and private, then it has little to do with marriage, which is full of social significance being commonly arranged by families with regard only for their social status, not for the emotions of the couple involved. And besides, establishing a family and attending to the business of a large estate took one away from the masculine company of the courts where the virtues of chivalry were most practiced and valor most to be had. Yvain and Eric both leave marriage in favor of tourney and knightly adventure—though by the end of their stories they are able to reconcile these conflicting but necessary states as they come to apprehend more deeply their complementary nature through the persons of their wives, love of whom inspires their greatest knightly deeds.

In the twelfth century, the uncertainty created by a more complex world where older categories no longer applied led people to look inward for ways to handle situations which had not arisen earlier. Morris points out the emergence in literature of a new interest in the individual and the discovery of self.26 The individualism of Chretien
and Marie as authors is therefore partly to be explained in terms of the intellectual climate of their social milieu. Their cultivation of an aesthetic of difficulty corresponds to their sense of what life itself required. Their fondness for problematic situations in which an individual is faced with conflicting emotions or social and personal obligations corresponds to their experience of life. They frequently undercut the reconciliations their characters achieve in order to force their audiences to further explore the issues raised by these conflicts.

Romance, as developed by our poets is an elite literary form not only because it employs an elitist aesthetic but also because it is the expression of a social elite and proposes an ideal of life which can only be experienced by a member of this hereditary class— that is, chivalry. Chivalry is a social expression of innate nobility; romantic love was its personal expression. This focus on the individual and on love distinguishes romance from the narrative form it superceded— the *chanson de geste*. As I noted in the first chapter, Auerbach has said that the purpose of twelfth-century French romances was the self-portrayal of the ideals and mores of the feudal knightly class. Their appeal was, then, in some ways class-specific. As the social structure of which that class was a part continued to become more and more complex and new social
classes came into existence, in societies like England's where primogeniture and the exercise of power were not so intrenched in a hereditary aristocracy, and in later times when the issues and situations which confronted the individual of the twelfth century were no longer new and disturbing, we should not be surprised to find the nature of romance changed. In the following brief examination of the Middle English analogues of the French stories, I will point out what some of these changes were. The following chapters will explain how and why these changes came about and examine in detail the nature of Middle English romance.

Between 1300 and 1350, Yvain, Fresne and Lanval were composed into English. They are the only works of their authors which have come down to us in that language. The usual assumption is that the move from French to English indicates an audience lower down the social scale. We can be sure that Fresne was not translated, as it had been composed, for some member of the royal family or their circle. L.H. Loomis says that the first Breton lays to be translated into English were a popular phenomena since, at the time, the upper classes would still have had French versions. Among the earliest of the six manuscripts of Marie's work to survive are two late thirteenth century manuscripts of English provenance (they contain her fables as well). From these we know that her romances were being
read in England by people able to afford and appreciate well-made books, though neither of them is a deluxe volume. It is hard to speak authoritatively about who in England was speaking, reading and hearing what in what language in the year 1300. Albert Baugh, in *A Literary History of England*, says that the writing of romances in French died out with the spread of English to the upper classes in the thirteenth century. The prologue to *Arthur and Merlin* (written in Kent 1250-1300) seems to support this, for the composer says that many gentlemen do not understand French but all Englishmen know English. So while *Freine*, which like *Arthur and Merlin* makes its first appearance in the fourteenth-century Auchinleck manuscript, may not have been literature of the royal court, there is good reason to think its audience was composed of members of the upper classes including nobles, knights, and other wealthy individuals of relatively sophisticated literary taste.

*Lay le Freine* is quite faithful to Marie's narrative. Working somewhere in southeast England, the individual who translated the story shortened it from 518 to 408 lines of octosyllabic couplets. There is less detailed treatment of the developing love of Gurun and Freine and the denouement is condensed, altering the pacing and diminishing the depth and subtlety of the French poem. The translator's only addition is the prologue, which also appears at the beginning
of Sir Orfeo and is really a more appropriate description of that lay—unlike Freine, it treats of fairy.

We findeth oft and findeth y-write-
And this clerkes wele it wite—
Layes that ben in harping
Ben y-found of ferli thing.
Sum bethe of war and sum of wo,
And sum of joie and mirthe also,
And sum of trecherie and of gile,
Of old aventours that fel while;
And sum of bourdes and ribaudry,
And mani ther beth of fairy.
Of al thinges that men seth,
Mest o love for sothe thai beth.
In Breteyne bi hold time
This layes were wrought, so seith this rime.
When kinges might our y-here
Of ani mervailes that ther were,
Thai token an harp in gle and game,
And maked a lay and gaf it name.
Now of this aventours that weren y-falle
I can tel sum, ac nought alle.
Ac herkneth, lordinges, soth to sain,
Ichil you telle Lay le Frayne30 (11. 1-22)

Marie had deliberately refrained from any direct references to the fairy nature Lanval's Lady's. Her audience, familiar with stories of the Celtic fee, would have recognized her as such—or at least would have had to do so in order to grasp the sens of the lay. The audience of Freine and Orfeo obviously expected lays to be kinds of fairy tale. That is certainly what the translator of Lanval gave his audience. When Landeval encounters the lady in her tent, we are told that it is the work of fairy and that she is "The kyngys daughter of Amylion;/ That ys an ile of the fayre/ In occian, ful faire to se." The subtlety and sophistication of Marie's lay are lacking in
the English version—everything has been made explicit. The narrative has also been shortened by about one hundred lines, but a long passage has been added at the end describing the reunion of the knight and lady. When he goes to leave with her after the trial she refuses him, explaining that he has broken her taboo of silence. However, after he begs her forgiveness she accepts him into her good graces again and they proceed to Avalon. The narrator remarks approvingly "Loo, howe love is lefe to wyn/ Of wemen that arn of gentyll kyn!" and the formula tale is brought to its conventional affirmative ending. In the English poem, the supernatural world is a fantasy of wealth and social status, not a symbol of escapism and over-refined emotion.

The translator consistently makes alterations which affirm accepted moral values and shift the narrative's aesthetic from one of difficulty to one of familiarity and ease. Arthur's and his court's original mistreatment of the hero has disappeared. In the English narrative, the hero is poor for no other reason than that he spends largely. Guenevere becomes a villain pure and simple, since she is the only one who harms the hero. Her charge that Landevale propositioned her is thrown out by those conducting his trial, not, as in Lanval, because two witnesses were required for the defendant to be brought to
trial, but because the barons know the queen is adulterous. Marie, more sophisticated in the ways of courtly love, does not address this issue. The subject of Landevale is not the escapism of courtly love and its limitations as a model for real life, but the marvelous rewards which come to those who are in need or unjustly accused. This is a moral fantasy of social advancement, pure and simple. It is the world as we would have it, not as it is. Landevale is clearly a formulaic narrative composed according to a popular aesthetic.

It is appropriate that the translators of the Middle English romances we have been considering so far should be anonymous, for their debt to their original is heavy. It is also appropriate that the name of Sir Launfal's composer is known. While there are some passages in Thomas Chestre's poem which are taken verbatim from Landevale, his narrative is really a skillful conflation of several versions of the story with many new episodes added. All of the changes and additions enhance the formulaic aspects of the story, making it even more a fantasy of wealth and social success.

Of Chestre's three main additions to the narrative, the first two focus almost entirely on Guenevere (again the villain) and Launfal's poverty. The action begins with a new scene, Arthur's marriage, which sets a tone of prosperity and lavish celebration—a strong contrast to the
knight's later misery. Guenevere is presented at once and the two important aspects of her character are immediately evident. She is rumored to be promiscuous and she-withholds Launfal's gifts. Thus she is ultimately responsible for all his tribulations and it is fitting that Tryamour (the name Chestre gave Launfal's lady) should punish her explicitly at the end of the story. It is even more fitting that the punishment, blinding, is brought about by the queen's own false and hasty oath.

The whole first part of the story, up to the meeting with the fairy has been expanded to make the hero's humiliation and suffering thorough. He is forced by poverty and the gravity of the queen's insult to leave the court. Scorned by former friends, he and his squires live in penury until Launfal can no longer provide for them and they are forced to return in rags to court. The real nadir comes when his horse slips and falls in the mire. The onlooking townspeople scorn the knight as he makes his escape to a meadow. None of this appears in Lanval or Landevale. Launfal's stay with the mayor and his meeting with his daughter are based on material in Graelent (a French lay, independent of Marie's, which recounts another version of Lanval's story). Chestre has so altered these episodes in incorporating them into his narrative that the characters' only function in the English romance is to abuse the poor hero.
If Chestre's knight sinks lower in poverty than his analogues, he rises higher in wealth, for the beauty and lavishness of the lady are detailed with the same thoroughness as his sufferings. Where Marie playfully treated the lady's beauty and wealth as outer manifestations of an inner quality, ideal love, Chestre is concerned with value and quantity. His description of the fairy's tent is briefer than the corresponding one in Lanval, but more details are included. We are told that the knight and his lady drink "pyment," "clare" and "Reynysh wyn" at dinner. This is typical of the itemization of clothing, gems and accoutrements throughout the poem and it suggests that the audience expected such exaggerated descriptions of how the folk of romances and the higher aristocratic classes were supposed to live. Lanval and Landevale receive wonderful gifts from their lovers, but they are nothing compared to Launfal's. Tryamour gives him a magic standard, a horse and an elaborate purse. When he returns from his meeting with the fairy, the same citizens who formerly scorned him stare in admiration and wonder at the train of ten horses and riders led by Gyfre the dwarf which arrives flamboyantly laden with choice fabrics, armor, gold and silver.

Chestre's third major addition, the tournaments and the battles with the giant Sir Valentine, follows Launfal's meeting with the fairy. These combats and the campaign to conquer Lombardy which is mentioned in passing are all
absolutely conventional. Their chief function is to provide scenes of action in which the hero is able to demonstrate his prowess and use his magical gifts, which are made much of. There were no scenes of combat in Chestre's sources, and the shift from a passive to an active hero makes the narrative more conventional. For Marie, Lanval's passivity was an important part of her sens; to Chestre such inactivity probably just seemed inappropriate to a knight and hero.

Chestre's treatment of the final reunion is explicit and affirmative, though different from that in Landevale. As Tryamour leaves the court, Gyfre comes leading Launfal's steed (they had both disappeared along with the lady and all his other gifts when he broke the taboo of silence) and the knight rides away with his lady to Avalon where, we are told, he waits to joust with all comers.

By expanding the first part of the story leading up to the meeting with the fairy, Chestre more fully develops the male Cinderella pattern latent in the earlier analogues. Reduced to poverty through no fault of his own by those who should value and protect him, Launfal is rescued and raised to wealth and high status by marriage to a princess. Susan Wittig has pointed out the pervasiveness of this motif in the Middle English romances, which suggests that even a person of the lower classes can win a princess, if he is
worthy. This, she says, is one of the main messages of the romances, for it offered a solution to a problem which much concerned their audience—the restrictiveness of their class system. The composer of Landevale exclaims over the joys of marriage to women of gentle kin, and Launfal is definitely more concerned about wealth and social class than is Lanval.

When we think of the gentry audiences for which Launfal was probably written, Wittig’s analysis of the deep structure of such romances becomes even more convincing. They could still claim gentility, that quality they still shared with members of the upper classes to which their families had once belonged. However, they were largely cut off from re-entry to those classes because it was difficult to marry into the aristocracy and marriage, family and inheritance were the only recognized means of achieving higher status. Thus, in the romances the social inequality of the lovers which frequently thwarts their marriage in the love-marriage section of the basic plot is overcome during their period of separation. Usually this is accomplished by a demonstration of innate worthiness. Since the couple are now seen to be equals, their happy reunion can take place. We should note that for this meaning to be manifest, the romance must end in affirmation.
Chestre has added episodes to the plot and treated the narrative in such a way that its meaning and the way in which it means are different from those of its sources. He is not an inventor but a mediator, combining formulaic elements in conventional ways. His narration too is different from Marie's. Though he intrudes into the narrative at various points, he does not speak as an individual interpreting or challenging the audience to interpret the events of the story. Instead he speaks in the anonymous voice of the professional story teller, occasionally calling on his audience to listen or attest to the truth of his statements. He does not speak in as fully developed a "minstrel" voice as do the narrators of some other romances, but he is definitely in that tradition and not in Marie's. For one thing, our poet has recast the couplet romance into tail-rhyme stanzas—a verse form which encourages the use of tag lines. S.T. Knight thinks that Chestre might have been a minstrel and says "perhaps we should not think of the poem as a rather moderate piece of literary work, but as a particularly interesting example of the work of a minstrel."32 Of course, Launfal is a literary work; it is just not composed according to an elitist aesthetic, and although I will have more to say about minstrels in the next chapter, let me say here that the
differences between Middle English romances and their French sources are frequently attributed to the fact that the English poems were composed by minstrels who approached their task in their own way.

Albert B. Friedman and Norman T. Harrington, who edited *Yvain and Gawain* for the Early English Text Society, suggest that its translator omitted the psychologizing passages of his original because he was trained in a different tradition of storytelling and was unable to cope with the dramatic dialogue and interior monologue he found there. Chretien's multi-vocal narration was, apparently, too much for him. In the words of the editors, the romance "is clearly the work of a minstrel catering to the sober, realistic audience of a provincial baron's hall." I think it highly unlikely that *Yvain and Gawain* was the work of a minstrel or formed a part of a minstrel's repertoire, but it probably was translated for some provincial baron and the differences between it and Chretien's romance are probably due to the fact that the composers worked in different literary traditions as well as to the interests and outlook of fourteenth-century Englishmen.

*Yvain and Gawain* is a skillful translation and condensation of the French poem. The composer was surely working from a text before him, for a comparison of the two texts suggests that he read a dozen lines or so and then
put them into English in the same octosyllabic couplet form as his original. He made drastic cuts, omitting long passages and reducing the narrative from 7000 lines to 4032. In general the changes include the omission of the more esoteric refinements of courtly love and chivalry and details of combat and ceremony as well. Topical allusions, literary references and rhetorical figures have been pruned or omitted. The effect of these changes is to quicken the pace of the narrative, make it more regular and make the narrator's distance more consistent throughout the story. By condensing passages of description, introspection, debate and the analysis of emotions, the composer produced characters which are less finely drawn and circumstances which are less complicated than in the French source. His handling of the ending is a good example of his approach. He does not elaborate on the reunion in an attempt to affirm it, but by omitting the image of love as a trap and some of Laudine's explication of her conflicting feelings for Yvain, he modifies the situation and it is not so charged with contradictions.

Many English poets show a preference for action stories and consecutive, straightforward narrative, as we have seen in Chestre's treatment of Lanval. Arthur and Merlin, King Alexander and the stanzaic Morte d'Arthur, all early fourteenth-century translations of late twelfth-century
French romances, take much the same approach as Yvain and Gawain. Like that poem they achieve directness by omitting digressions, unraveling interlaced plots and contracting passages of description, dialogue and emotional analysis. There is more emphasis on action, less on the character's emotional reactions. In Yvain and Gawain such cuts alter Chretien's sens, bringing the story closer to a conte d'avanture. Actually, what the composer of the English poem has done is remove the eccentricities of the French author—the individualistic eccentricities of the narrator, the historical eccentricities of courtly love, the over-wrought quality of the Frenchman's rhetoric. The English poet does not adapt the narrative to the popular aesthetic of the shorter romances in his tongue, though he does make his story's appeal more general. In fact, he is so far from the popular aesthetic of "minstrel" style romance seen in Launfal that it is hard to believe that both could have been in the repertoire of minstrels—they are vastly different in length, style, and theme.

Thus, we can conclude that the English writers treated their inherited material in a number of ways. The writer of Freine is really a translator, especially by medieval standards of transmission, which were less precise than ours today. The composer of Landevale modifies his story to suit the tastes of his own time's audience, though at
times he can be a close translator. Thomas Chestre combined elements from at least two lays and from the storehouse of formulaic romance episodes to recreate his story through a popular aesthetic. He is the only one of our writers who was not translating (his sources were probably in English) and the only one not faithfully following a source. A true composer in the formulaic tradition, Chestre is not an author, for no individual presence makes itself felt in his romance. The poet of Yvain and Gawain is more of an adaptor, systematically making certain alterations which cast his narrative in a less elitist mode than his original.

However, despite the variety of roles the English poets played in transmitting their material and the degree to which they creatively transformed it, we may note certain common tendencies among their romances. They all tend to simplify the French stories, making their own less self-conscious and subtle. Their poems are less individualistic. Though they do indeed show artistic purpose, they do not show antacion, the individual creative plan of an author. They also do not treat their characters with psychological realism, which gave Chretien's and Marie's characters a veneer of individuality. The cultural realism of the earlier stories, that is, the details which correspond
to the life of the times, has disappeared in the later ones—no doubt because such details were no longer current, but also because their composers wanted to present a world of fantasy, not a comment on reality. The English romances tend to affirm the formulaic aspects of their plots, rather than undercutting or manipulating them to challenge their audiences' assumptions. They are narrated in a different manner—rather than the voice of the individual author which is often modulated in the French romances, there is an anonymous voice, sometimes that of a professional story-teller, which remains fairly constant throughout the narrative. And finally we may note that the shorter narratives tend to become stories of wealth and social success rather than stories of courtly love when they appear in English. In short, though the plots of the stories are the same, the English writers imbue their narratives with a more popular aesthetic, the French with a more elitist. As we have seen, these aesthetics permit of extensive variation, but they are quite distinct. The particular form the elitist romances of twelfth-century France took owes much to the peculiar cultural and social milieu of their audience. To what does that particular form of Middle English popular romance, the "minstrel" romance, owe its peculiarities? It is to this question we now must turn.
NOTES TO CHAPTER II


7Ollier, pp. 29, 32.


16 Nykrog, p. 160.


19 Cawelti, p. 385.


22 Ibid., p. 87.

23 Ibid.


26 Morris, p. 70.

27 Auerbach, p. 131.
Sir Frances Madden notes on the flyleaf of Harley 978 that the manuscript was written at the Abbey of Reading, since the obituaries listed in a record of Bishops are similar to those in the calendar cartulary of Reading in Ms. Cotton Vespatian E V.


Ibid., p. xvii.
CHAPTER III
THE MINSTRELS

Since it is often said that Middle English romances are "minstrel" versions of French narratives, we should examine this assertion in some detail. Its implications are far-reaching. For one thing, it raises the issue of oral transmission and formulaic improvisation. Oral narratives, unlike written narratives, have no fixed text, and, as we have seen in the cases of Chretien and Marie, a fixed text allowed both authorial individuality and gave new prominence and capabilities to the narrator's voice. The composers and narrators of the Middle English poems do behave differently from their French counterparts, and we must ascertain to what extent their differences are attributable to an "oral" tradition which they do not share with the French artists.

Secondly, minstrels, especially itinerant ones, reached a wider and more diverse audience than the French poets. Among their listeners would have been people farther down the social scale and farther from the great courts which were the centers of patronage and chivalric culture. Professional performers, seeking to cultivate this varied
audience, would have told stories of wide appeal, based on an aesthetic of familiarity and general cultural affirmation. And, finally, minstrels were mediators between a pre-existing story and an audience. Few of them were creative authors, though some may have been adaptors and modifiers. For the most part, they were circulators of tales. They made their living telling stories composed by others or traditional stories in general circulation. Usually considered "popularizers," minstrels were among the primary conduits of popular literature in the Middle Ages.

There is, however, little hard evidence to support the assertion that many of the Middle English romances, which have, of course, come down to us in manuscripts, owe much at all to minstrel performance. Since it is so widely assumed that they do, we should first evaluate this evidence before offering other explanations for the "minstrel" characteristics of the stories. The main support for the oral circulation of these narratives comes from three sources: references to minstrel performances, the narrational style of some romances, and the fact that most exist in different versions and textual variants.

There are various kinds of references to minstrel performances of romances. The most reliable are those appearing in records and non-literary writings. Walter Map, at the court of Henry II, complained that in his day
the stories of Charlemagne were told by vulgar mimes.¹ The author of the *Penitentiale*, writing in the thirteenth century, mentions dignified performers who sang of great men and saints and excepts them from his general approbrium of minstrels.² In 1338, it is recorded, the minstrel Hereward told the stories of Guy of Warwick's fight with the giant Colbrand and Emma and the Plowshares to the monks of Saint Swithan's monastery in Winchester.³

In addition to these references to minstrel performance, much of the evidence of minstrels telling romances comes from the romances themselves. A number of them claim to be by minstrels or are narrated in a way that suggests professional performance. *Emare*, for example, begins with a stanza invoking Christ and His mother, after which the narrator pauses to observe that

> Menstrelles that walken fer and wyde
> Her and ther in every a syde
> In mony a dyverse londe,
> Sholde at her bygynnyng
> Speke of that ryghtwies kyng
> That made both see and sonde.
> Whoso wyll a stonde dwelle,
> Of mykyll myrght Y may you telle
> (And mornyng theramonge):
> Of a lady fayr and fre,
> Her name was called Emare
> As I here synge in song.⁴ (11. 13-24)

Similarly, though the narrator of *Havelok the Dane* does not call himself a minstrel, he speaks as one in his direct address to a "hearing" audience:
"Herkneth to me, gode men,
Wives' maidnes, and alle men,
Of a tale that ich you wile telle,
Who-so it wile here and ther-to dwelle,
The tale is of Havelok y-maked
While he was litel, he yede full naked.
Havelok was a full good gome:
He was full good in every trome;
He was the wighteste man at nede
That thurte riden on any stede.
That ye mowen nou-y-here,
And the tale you mowen y-lere,
At the beginning of ure tale
Fill me a cuppe of full good ale;
And while I drinken, her I spelle,
That Christ us shilde all fro helle!
Christ late us evere so for to do
That we moten comen him to;
And, with-that it mote ben so,
Benedicamus Domino!
Here I schall beginnen a rim;
Christ us yeve well god fin!" (ll. 1-22)

These two romances and many others are narrated in this way, sharing certain features which suggest that they were composed for oral delivery. Ruth Crosby and others have enumerated the characteristics of such works: the use of direct address (the narrator addresses the audience and makes use of transitions, asseverations of truth, oaths and other devices to emphasize his relationship to the audience), the religious beginnings and endings which invoke the blessings of the Holy Family on those present and request a prayer for the maker of the story, and the repetition of characteristic descriptive phrases, expletives and formulas. Albert Baugh suggests that the romances were often composed by clerks and clerics who knew that their written compositions would be circulated orally and indeed depended on
minstrels for the dissemination of their works. The narrative's style, with its repetition and conventionality, was developed to facilitate oral delivery and aural apprehension.

And then there are those who find in the formulas of Middle English romances evidence of an oral tradition similar to that described by Lord and Parry in their work on the oral composition of epic narratives. Ronald Waldron, who has given the alliterative romances much study, says that these narratives were composed in writing by poets working with conventions not far removed from those of oral tradition. The texts show "the remains of an oral technique embedded in written literature." He further suggests that the narratives "flourished for the most part as oral poetry and only incidentally found...[their]...way into writing." William Holland argues for the oral transmission of Arthur and Merlin, saying that the variations between the Auchinleck manuscript and later texts of that romance (Lincoln's Inn Hale 150 and Douce 236) show the copyist's reliance on oral formulas.

Holland's study brings us to that other aspect of the romances which offers evidence of their oral circulation—the many variations between different texts of the same romance. These variations may be due to the inexact transcriptions of scribes, but some of the differences go
beyond mistakes and oversights and it is assumed by some scholars that these are due to oral transmission. Richardson proposes that the texts of Sir Eglamour of Artois in the Cotton and Cambridge manuscripts descended by oral transmission from the same source (since they are very similar but not so similar as texts of The Owl and the Nightengale which probably were copied from each other). Baugh says that the versions of Bevis in the Chetham and Auchinleck manuscripts represent the story "as told by different minstrels, from memory, who resorted to improvisations and independent composition when their memory failed." S.T. Knight argues that Thomas Chestre knew the story of Landevale in oral form and as evidence cites the frequent similarity of rhymes in Launfal and Landevale when the wording of the lines is not the same. This shows he memorized the story and then wrote it down. G.V. Smithers holds that the text of King Alisaunder which appears in the Lincoln's Inn manuscript is descended by oral transmission from a version similar to the Auchinleck text of that romance. He lists a number of lines whose modifications are the results of auditory, not paleographical, errors. Derek Pearsall says that the text of Sir Orfeo in Harley Ms. 3810 illustrates the fifteenth-century tendency of some romances to "regress into oral tradition."
It seems to me unlikely that many Middle English romances were told by minstrels in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. There is not enough evidence to support this conclusion and there is much evidence which contradicts it. The references to minstrels reciting romances that I noted at the beginning of this chapter are all from early in the period. Most references to minstrels in documents of the later Middle Ages are to musicians. Of course the term was used to refer to a variety of performers, from serious musicians and professional story tellers to acrobats and jugglers. The court minstrels whose activities are recorded in the account books of Edward III were musicians, as is made clear by Claire Olson's study. The minstrels who figure in the account book of the Baliffs of Shrewsbury in the latter half of the fifteenth century were also musicians, frequently in the retinues of royalty and great aristocrats. We have a late example of a minstrel's repertoire in manuscript Ashmole 48 (mid-sixteenth century), which belonged to and was in part written by one Richard Sheale. In a colophon he refers to himself as a minstrel and the volume is largely a collection of topical and traditional songs and ballads. It contains no romances.

Something had happened in the years between Hereward's recitations at Winchester and Richard Sheale—the function and repertoire of the minstrel had changed. As the emphasis
on knighthood and the popularity of tournaments increased under monarchs like Edward I and Edward III, who encouraged the proliferation and refinement of chivalric ceremony, minstrels began to take on specialized functions. Some were heralds, experts in the practice of chivalry who conducted tournaments and recorded their results as well as other knightly activities. Eventually they came to oversee the granting of coats of arms. Other minstrels were musicians much in demand at the feasts and ceremonials accompanying the tourneys. Still others were messengers, liveried emissaries of their patrons. The specialization of court minstrels corresponds to another concomitant trend. As Richard Firth Greene points out, increasingly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the term "minstrel" began to take on the sense of a "mere popular entertainer," generally a musician.¹⁸

Much earlier, William the Conquerer may have ennobled his minstrel Taillefer on the battlefield at Hastings and that man may have led the charge chanting the Song of Roland. Wace and other chroniclers of his time who recorded it may have found such a story creditable, but it would not have happened three hundred years later. Though they remained a part of the world of chivalry, minstrels had less and less to do with romances. In earlier times their repertoire seems to have been made up of chansons de geste. Surely
one important difference between the romances and the chansons is that the chansons developed in an oral tradition and were only later recorded, whereas romance was, from the first, a written genre. Chretien and Marie composed their works to be read, though aloud to a listening audience. There is even a scene in Yvain which portrays a noble family gathered in their garden to listen to the daughter read from a romance. Though some earlier Middle English narratives were circulated orally by minstrels, most of the texts we have were composed to be read aloud in a domestic setting or perhaps at more public entertainments. Minstrel performances of stories of romance were on the wane in the fourteenth century, when most of the English poems were composed. Toward the latter part of that century and throughout the next, there was a dramatic increase in the production of manuscripts containing romances. This further suggests that the stories were for private reading, not for public recitation.

Probably the stories from romances told by minstrels were short episodes from the life of a hero, like the fight between Guy and Colbrand narrated by Hereward. Performance conditions placed a limit on the length of the story to be told. Diether Wehl's observation, that the episodes in many romances are announced in a way and are of a length (around 1000 lines) appropriate to reading in one sitting,
is quite astute. The stories told by minstrels must have been of a similar length. The narrator of the Laud Troy Book, in his introduction, makes a distinction between minstrels' *gestes* and romances which were read. This is probably not simply a distinction between oral and written forms, but between a short episode and the lengthy, complete narrative as recorded in romance.

Many spokyn of men that romaunces rede
That were symtyme doughti in dede,
The while that god him lyff lent,
That now ben dede and hennes wente:
Beuis, Gy and of Gauwain,
Off kynge Richard and of Gwayn,
Off Tristram, and of Percyvale,
Of Roland Ris, and Aglavale,
Off Archeroun, and of Octauian,
Off Charles, and of Cassibaldan,
Off Havelok, Horne & of Wade,
In Romances that of hem ben made
That gestours often dos of him gestes
At mangeres and at grete ffestes.
Her dedis ben in remembraunce
In many fair Romaunce. (11. 11-26)

Havelok earlier made references to both the *gestes* which were sung at the hero's coronation feast and the "romanz-reding on the book" that was also part of the entertainment provided.

So the stories circulated, side by side, in oral versions (perhaps musical) and in written ones. The Laud Troy Book dates from the early fifteenth century, more than 150 years after Havelok was composed. Minstrel performances of such stories had probably ceased by then, so we can not take the narrator's statement as literal truth. Still, it
seems likely that the heroes he lists would have, earlier, been celebrated by minstrels. Indigenous tales of legendary heroes like Havelok, Guy, Horn, Bevis, Wade and Richard Lionheart, which had circulated in England for hundreds of years, would surely have formed a part of a minstrel's repertoire. We know that Roland and Charlemagne were celebrated in *chansons de geste* by mimes. On the other hand, A.C. Baugh tells us that the lengthy Middle English romances of a historical nature (like the *Troy Book*) would not have been recited by minstrels.\(^{20}\) Also, I think narratives like *Freine* or *Floris and Blancheflur*, early translations of French works which focus on love rather than combat, or *Yvain and Gawain*, which treats its characters' emotions in some detail, did not provide material appropriate to *gestes*.

As the function of the minstrels changed over time so that they no longer chanted the epics of feudal heroes, historical or legendary, new narrative forms developed. It appears that the sung narrative of adventure took the form of the ballad, which remained the property of the minstrel, as we know from the manuscript belonging to just such a performer, Richard Sheale. There are even a few ballad versions of the stories in romances, though few are medieval. An episode from *Sir Eglamour of Artois* was until recently alive and well in the Anglo-Saxon ballad tradition of the
Appalachian Mountains under the name "Old Bangum and the Boar"—earlier versions are Sir Lionel and Sir Cawline. The ballad of Hind Horn is recorded in the Percy Folio manuscript. With the development of a new, written form of feudal narrative, the romance, and a growing reading audience in later medieval England, the older stories of combat and adventure were adapted to and replaced by this form.

Of course it is always possible that after the aristocracy had abandoned minstrel romances in favor of written ones, such narratives were still recited by minstrels in areas away from the forefront of sophisticated literary taste. It is often assumed that the Middle English romances circulated in such a manner to a rustic audience in taverns and market squares. But I do not think that many of the surviving texts were derived from such performances. The gentry for whom most of the manuscripts containing romances were made would have looked to their equals or betters for literary entertainment.

The surviving romance which seems the most likely candidate for minstrel performance or public reading is Havelok the Dane. It is quite early (composed 1280-1300), so it existed at a time when minstrels still recited gestes. Karl Brunner says that the only complete text, which survives in Ms. Laud 108 (1300-25), was probably recited by a minstrel on market days. Havelok is divided into episodes the
right length for oral performance and it has a minstrel style and many "bourgeois" elements. It was composed in Lincolnshire and relates a story of a local hero which was probably well established in the oral tradition of the area before it was recorded briefly by Gaimar in his Anglo-Norman History of the English or developed in its French romance version, also of the twelfth century. But because of the care with which the English composer has shaped the narrative to dwell on the themes of good government and rightful rulership and because of his frequent and skillful use of rhetorical devices, I think he may have had a larger and more exalted audience in mind than would be found at a local market. David Staines suggests, on the basis of its governmental theme and exemplary nature, that Havelok was composed for the ceremonies attendant on Edward I's Parliament of 1284, held at Lincoln. Such an occasion would have been most appropriate for the presentation of an important episode in local history to the visiting barons and knights who made up the assembly. The "bourgeois" elements of the tale would not have made it inappropriate for such an audience, since it would have been composed of persons of various social stations. Because of the institution of Parliament, the English aristocracy was never so separate from the classes below it as was that of France. Only in the later Renaissance did members of the
aristocracy withdraw from public ceremonies of the kind that would have accompanied the Parliament at Lincoln, and we should not forget that the amusements of medieval courts were often far from sophisticated by our standards. The wrestling, fencing, bull and bear baiting that went on along with the geste singing and romance reading at Havelok's coronation were popular at courts throughout the Middle Ages.

Other evidence, often cited as proof of the oral transmission of romances (besides references to minstrels and internal clues provided by the narrators themselves) includes the variations among different texts of the same story, variations which are sometimes attributed to oral circulation. However, when we carefully compare some of the different texts said by scholars to depend on oral versions, we see that this is open to question. The variations between texts are revealing, but they do not always indicate oral performance. Passages from the romances cited earlier, *King Alexander*, *Eglamour of Artois*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Arthur and Merlin*, show several kinds and degrees of variation.

G.V. Smithers says that the Lincoln's Inn text of *King Alexander* "teems with gross blunders." These corruptions "are such as would arise in oral transmission of a text, and specifically a copy based on (and perhaps designed as)
the version of a minstrel." This text is shorter than
the other full text, Laud misc. 622, by 1200 lines. A
whole section describing the exotic lands of Alexander's
conquest has been neatly excised. A rough count of the
corrupt lines cited by Smithers in his introduction to his
edition shows that there are fewer than one hundred. This
means that of the 6750 lines of the poem, less than seven
percent vary significantly from the corresponding line in
the Laud text. Some of the variations are extreme and
puzzling, but only a few of the twenty-eight examples he
gives of auditory (not paleographical) errors are convincing.
The substitution of furourrinde for soccour hende in line
1905 is a typical peculiarity which may have resulted from
the scribe's attempt to transcribe a carelessly written
text. In late fourteenth-century scripts a long s could be
mistaken for an f, a c for an r. Besides, the Lincoln's
Inn scribe was himself not an especially careful writer.
If he had not understood the line on hearing it, he would
not have substituted a syllable which had no meaning, but a
word. Such variations as Serses/certis (l. 3055), bede/yn
bedde (l. 7566) and Albeynne/ al by empne (l. 7944) could
all be copyists' errors. Some of them might be the result
of inaccurate recording from dictation, but on the whole,
King Alexander shows few signs of oral transmission.
Most damaging to Smither's claims for oral transmission by minstrels is the similarity of the two texts. The following short passage, as recorded in the Lincoln's Inn and Laud manuscripts, is typical of the whole romance in the degree and type of variation it shows. What is remarkable is that there is so little variation.

Laud 1915
Lincoln's Inn 1909

Who so wil now Given lyst,
Here bigynne pe romauence best.
Darrie pe soudan, maister of all yng,
Js stronglich anoyed of selcoup tiping.
He is yshet in a verger,
And wi hym many bolde cayser,
Alle of Jnde into Mount Taryn,
And of Affrike to pe cite Daryn.
Pere was many a Sarsyn
And longe-berded Barbaryn:
Bitwene Tygre & Eufraten
Seten all pise helpen men.
Pere was Jonas of Sklaveyne,
And Joachym of Tabarye
And Antiphilys of Barberge
(Of) Capadoce and Saturyn,
And of Saba pe duk Mauryn
(He was of Kaymes kynrede--
His men ne couphem speke ne grede,
Bot als houndes grenne and berken,
so
So vs siggen pise clerken).
telli
(- indicates omissions)
blank lines indicate agreement

The omissions, modifications of rhyme words, and inversions can easily be accounted for by scribal oversight or copyists' mistakes. Not that the Lincoln's Inn scribe copied from the Laud manscript. The volumes are roughly contemporary (late fourteenth century) and are antedated by the Auchinleck text, the remaining fragments of which most resemble the Laud version. The later texts are independently derived, but in writing, and by copyists, not by a minstrel from his memory.

Though the passage quoted above does not suggest oral transmission, there are a number of pertinent things to note about it. It begins with a "minstrel" style address to the audience, and the narrator calls his story a romance. In the last line, which like the first two is conventional, he attributes a detail of his story to clerks. Passages of this type, a catalogue of warriors, are also conventional in epic and romance.

The Cotton and Cambridge manuscript texts of Sir Eglamour of Artois show more variation than is common in King Alexander, but they also are too close for oral transmission to seem likely.24 The variations between the
text of Sir Orfeo in Harley manuscript 3810 and the two others which survive—in the Auchinleck and Ashmole 61 manuscripts—are certainly greater than and different from those in King Alexander. A.J. Bliss, who edited Orfeo, notes that the Harley and Ashmole texts are both "corrupt," but thinks that the former was probably "written down by a minstrel from memory," while the latter was "the work of an idiosyncratic scribe." The strongest evidence that the Harley Orfeo is based on memory is the many omissions. The Auchinleck and Ashmole versions are both about 600 lines long. The Harley is only 500. Fifty of the missing lines belonged to the last 100 lines of the poem. The frequency of the omissions—a couplet here and there—increases over the length of the narrative. At the end the cutting is wholesale. As many as eight lines at a time have disappeared. For the most part these omissions do not seem to have been made for aesthetic purposes. However, they are not inadvertent and I do not think they were caused by lapses of memory; it seems more plausible that they were made by someone running out of space or time or facing an uninterested audience. The climax and resolution of Orfeo's adventures may come more quickly in the Harley version, but they are presented in a dramatic and coherent way. Some descriptive details and displays of emotion from the "original" version are missing here, but the remaining lines correspond closely and the rhymes are intact.
The Harley text of Orfeo may not be the fullest version of the poem and it may lack some of the details and refinements appearing in the others, especially toward the end, but it does not represent a "regression into oral tradition," to use Pearsall's phrase. The first part of the Harley poem corresponds closely to the others, so presumably the end has regressed more than the rest of the romance. There is no way to prove that the Harley romance was not presented orally, either before or after it was copied down, but even if its omissions are due to a forgetful or hurried minstrel, its textual correspondences are very strong. It was surely read aloud and may have been recited, but such a presentation would have been based on a written text.

It is true that its handling of the "original" is different from the Ashmole's whose scribe was probably working from a written text which he did not hesitate to revise. If these variations may be attributed to a revising scribe, surely the variations in the texts of King Alexander and Sir Eglamour could be also. The Harley variations seem more purposeful than those in the Ashmole romance, but we cannot be sure why the composer wanted to make his poem shorter. At any rate, the omissions are not due to oral tradition but to an individual and the circumstances for which he produced the romance.
The differences between the Lincoln's Inn and Auchinleck texts of *Arthur and Merlin* also suggest, at first glance, oral transmission or revision according to modes akin to those of oral composition. The earlier text is a 10,000 line poem, a translation and adaptation of the French prose *Lestoire de Merlin* and other sources. It is believed to have been composed by the same individual who produced *King Alexander* and *Richard Coeur de Lion*, also in the Auchinleck. Apparently Englishmen found the whole story too long, for a version soon appeared which recounted the first part only. The Lincoln's Inn text and that in Ms. Douce 236 are copies of this. The composer of Lincoln's Inn has produced a poem of some 2000 lines (a length much more suitable for a listening audience) which he says will be about Merlin. The beginning and ending passages of the Auchinleck and Lincoln poems are different because the latter version is carefully shaped to focus on Merlin. A digression on the state of learning and language in England, which begins the earlier romance, does not appear in its analogue.

A comparison of the texts shows different degrees and kinds of variation. A few passages are quite close, suggesting that the composer of the short version copied a text similar to the Auchinleck. Other passages show more variation, mainly formula substitution. Still others relate
the same events in almost totally different language. It would seem, in these cases, that the Lincoln's Inn version is not a copy of a text like the Auchinleck at all. However, the narratives are for all practical purposes the same and it seems unlikely that stories would correspond so closely if they did not have a common written tradition.

One characteristic of a written text is fixity. The fact that some aspects of the Lincoln's Inn and Auchinleck texts of Arthour and Merlin seem fixed indicates their allegiance to a written tradition. However, other aspects of the texts show much free variation, a characteristic of literature in oral tradition. MacRae-Gibson, EETS editor of the poem, says that the variations are the product of a scribe working from a text similar to the Auchinleck version, who felt so familiar with the material that he did not make constant references to his exemplar but relied on an imperfect memory. But if he had an exemplar to refer to, why would he tax his memory and go to the trouble to invent his own verses, especially if he had no specific plans for improving the narrative?

The different kinds and degrees of variation in the texts of Arthour and Merlin are unique among all the examples we have examined. In the Lincoln's Inn version, the narrative has been recreated, as it were, in a way that makes sense only if the creator did not have access to a
written exemplar at the time he composed his narrative. Perhaps, as Holland suggests, that poem was written out from aural memory, or taken down from dictation. His theory, that a stage of oral transmission lies between the Auchinleck and Lincoln's Inn texts is, however, questionable. We have seen, in the passages that are reproduced in the appendices, that many of the differences are variations on or substitutions of conventional (formulaic) phrases.

The reviser relied on compositional techniques similar to those used by guslars in telling oral epics, yet then most composers of romances seem to have used similar ones and they were composed in writing. A number of Middle English romances have been shown to be constructed in good part of formulaic phrases. Their presence does not indicate oral composition or transmission, yet it does demonstrate that the romances were composed in much the same way as oral epics, by manipulation of formulas, and that they too were regarded as material for recreation. It is clear that the creator of the Lincoln's Inn version is composing, not relying on an imperfect memory. He was obviously a practiced composer, someone familiar with the idiom of romance, for he tells his story well. Of course, we will never know the circumstances of its composition, but it seems to me plausible that its creator heard a reading of Arthour and Merlin and took notes, in the fashion of Odericus Vitalis who tells us that he took notes on a legend
of William Courtnez in a book owned by a visiting monk from which he later composed his own written version. Perhaps the romance's composer had the opportunity to memorize or take notes from a text, but not to copy it out fully. In either case he would have used his record of the text to recreate the full narrative. This would also account for the degrees of variance from the Auchinleck text. Some passages the poet recorded more exactly than others, some he may not have recorded at all, indicating only the gist of the action to reconstruct it later.

So even in some of the texts most commonly accepted as products of oral transmission, there is little hard evidence to show that they were. We know that well into the fourteenth century, some episodes of romances whose texts have come down to us were recited (read?) by professional performers. But none of the texts we have has been definitely identified as the possession of a minstrel or a transcript of a performance. Thus it is very hard to say what a minstrel's romance would have been like, because we do not have any certified examples. We also do not know how his version might typically have varied from the written text he had memorized or referred to and how these variations might be different from the variations produced by scribes copying the texts. We can only surmise.
A general assumption has been that versions dependent on oral transmission are inferior because the texts are thereby corrupted. H.S. Bennett remarks that oral transmission is "inseparable" from "gradual degeneration," and I have several times referred to Pearsall's phrase "regression into oral tradition." Textual variation, however, is only corruption if the text was intended and regarded as fixed, as romances obviously were not, or if it destroys the "original" sense without expounding one of its own. Oral transmission or minstrel performance would not necessarily produce any more corrupt texts than scribal copying. There were bad minstrels and careless scribes working from illegible exemplars, to be sure, but there were obviously skilled and conscientious members of both professions.

In looking over the compared passages above, we see a number of degrees and kinds of textual variations. No doubt some of them are due to various forms of oral transmission, like note taking and copying from dictation, or to memorization, but a distinction must be made between narratives in an oral tradition and written narratives read aloud. The fact that lines are added or lacking or transposed in a particular version of a romance certainly does not indicate that it is part of an oral tradition.
We can be sure, though, that romances circulated orally—they were read aloud and it has often been said that their style, particularly their style of narration, was developed to enhance the audience's listening pleasure and comprehension. This is no doubt true, but most medieval vernacular literature was circulated orally and it does not all have the same style. Of course it may be argued that Chaucer's audience was more sophisticated than that of the romances' and did not need to be urged to listen or have things repeated. But even the religious legends—which were recited by minstrels and appear beside the romances in manuscripts—do not rely on the "minstrel" style so extensively. They reached the same audience as the romances, by the same means, and may even have been composed by the same people. Many of the verse legends are composed in formulas and narrated in first person. But the control of the formulas is different and the narrator makes no pretense to be a minstrel. We can call such narratives as Amis and Amiloun and Le Bone Florence of Rome romances only on the basis of their style, but because of their style, we cannot classify them with the saints' lives and exemplary tales.

There is more to the oral style of the Middle English romances than oral circulation. Particularly we may wonder about the significance of references to minstrels and the imitation of minstrel recitation in narratives designed for
private reading. The Harley and Ashmole texts of Sir Orfeo, which were written down after minstrels had probably dropped romances from their repertoires, both add a different "minstrel" conclusion to the story. The Auchinleck King Alexander, which descends from a literary, even learned tradition, is a stylish, sophisticated narrative. It first appears in a fine manuscript, deals at length with historical material, and was obviously intended for a reading audience; yet it contains a number of "minstrel" tags.

To consider first the many references to minstrels in romances, we should note that they are all very similar and that they generally correspond to what the documents of the period tell us about minstrels. At the conclusion of Sir Eglamour of Artois, when the hero is married,

```plaintext
mynstrelles come fro fere lond:
Thay hadde ryche gyftes, I vnurstond:
    In hert ey were lygt
Sythen to ey castell gon ey wend
To holde wyd brydale to wyd ende:
    Hyt lasted a fowrtenygt.
When wyd brydale was all don
Ilke a lorde toke his lefe ful son,
    edur wyd ey schuld lend all nygt.

Mynstralles ey were ey in ey stownd
Ey gyftus were an hondred pownd,
    The boldere mygt ey spende.
In Rome ey is gest cronyclyd ys:
Ihesu bryng vs hys blys
    That nevyr schall haue ende! (11. 1363-77)
```
Interestingly, this passage does not tell us what the minstrels did to entertain those at the wedding, only that they were lighthearted and received rich gifts which they boldly spent. Frequently when minstrels appear in romances, it is as recipients of gifts. Launfal, in his knightly acts of generosity, clothes minstrels. A common and appropriate gift to a minstrel was the lord's old cloak. Likewise, Isumbras, praised as a paragon of courtesy, is characterized by his generosity to minstrels:

His gentylnesse nor his curtesye
There knowthe no man hit discreye:
   A ffull good man was he.
Menstralles he hadde in his halle,
And yafe hem robes of ryche palle,
   Sylver, golde and fee.
Of curtesye he was kynge;
His gentylnesse hadde non endying
   In worlde was no so fre. (11. 22-30)

We know, from the various surviving records, that minstrels were commonly given gifts of money and clothing, often livery. The bailiffs of Shrewsbury regularly made gifts or payments of wine to minstrels on their performance, so the narrator of Havelok is speaking in character when he calls for "a cuppe of ful good ale." We know that minstrels were in attendance at feasts, jousts and other celebrations and that on such occasions additional (itinerant) performers were hired to supplement those who normally performed for the lord and his household. There were 175 minstrels at the King's Pentecostal Feast in 1306, and at the knighting of Edward I's son at Westminster.
Under Edward III the practice was continued. Many minstrels were present at the Feast of the Round Table in 1345, at the Garter Ceremony of 1358, and at the tournament held at Smithfield. Most of these performers would have been musicians and heralds. So the activities of the minstrels we glimpse in romances do correspond to those of "real life." In fact, in the instances mentioned above, it is really a case of life imitating earlier Arthurian romances.

The passages in which minstrels are mentioned are very conventional and their language is quite formulaic. We can see at a glance a number of phrases we have met elsewhere. "Robes of ryche palle" corresponds to "on hym were purper palle" in Orfeo, where the rhyme, as in Isumbras, is with halle. In Eglamour and Emare, there are three manifestations of the same formula:

"minstrels that/ were in at stound (Eg. 1. 1372)
walken fer and wyde (Em. 1. 13)
com fro fere lond (Eg. 1. 1363)

References to minstrels almost always occur in passages like the ones above that demonstrate the hero's generosity or the magnificence of some celebration. In either case, the presence of minstrels attests to a character's nobility. Geoffrey de Vinsauf in his Poetria Nova recommends that references to minstrels be included in descriptions of courtly celebrations. Although probably few composers of
Middle English romances worked with the aid of Geoffrey's Latin treatise, his mention of the practice shows how widely accepted this convention was. Minstrels were an important part of the world of chivalry in life and in art, and I think that this is why the composers of the romances chose to narrate their stories in the voice of a minstrel.

The fully developed minstrel narrator is, it seems to me, unique to the Middle English romances. This kind of narration contributes to the meaning of the stories and may account for the continuing appeal of this literary form in England while romance was taking on other forms on the Continent. Most Middle English romances have some characteristics of the oral style described by Olson and Baugh—a "listneth" formula here, as "I yow telle" there (formulas such as these can be found in saint's lives too) but some romances go out of their way to cultivate this style, namely Havelok, Gamelyn, Bevis, Otuel, Otuel and Roland, Seege of Troy, Isumbras, Eglamour and, most notably, Emare. The tradition is continued in a number of late romances: Torrent of Portengale, Generides, The Squire of Low Degree, Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle, and Gawain and Dame Ragnell.

In these and other similar romances, the narration is a deliberate imitation of an oral performance. Although composers of romance knew their works would be read aloud,
I do not think they wrote for minstrels, and in any case, a real minstrel would not have needed to have his tags written into his prompt book, if he had one. By casting their narratives in minstrel style, composers and scribes insured that the traditions of minstrel performance endured even when the minstrels themselves had become musicians and balladeers. Thus minstrel style is one aspect of the generally nostalgic, idealized world of romance. From its inception, romance has been a nostalgic mode; the flowering of chivalry was always in the past and the characters of the Middle English narratives are part of this noble past. So though fewer and fewer minstrels recited romances, the reading audience knew that they had done so in the past, in the golden age of chivalry when the events described in the romances took place, and in this way the minstrel narrator "validated" the story. Minstrels belonged to the chivalric world of the fictional past as well as to the courtly present. Edward I's and his grandson's fascination with minstrels was a part of their deliberate attempt to revive chivalry on the order of the Round Table. The role minstrels played in tournaments and celebrations was to associate their patron with the past glories of chivalry and announce to the world his own exemplary nobility. The fact that in general literary practice one way to indicate the grandeur and courtliness of a celebration was to refer to the
minstrels present shows how important they were to the conception of chivalry.

Minstrels were the traditional preservers of the chivalric ethos. The narrator of the *Laud Troy Book* remarks that deeds of the great English heroes—Bevis, Guy, Havelok, Richard, and a number of others—live still in the *gestes* of minstrels and in written romances, while the story of Troy, where chivalry was at its greatest, has not been told and so may pass into oblivion. Such statements are conventional, not necessarily factual, but they show that minstrels were regarded as preservers of chivalry. Though the chivalric ethos was a class ethos of the aristocracy, the minstrels themselves bridged classes. Whether early reciters of feudal epics or later singers and musicians, they were men of common birth who by virtue of their profession and talents were brought within the realm of the court. Of course not all were fortunate enough to have an aristocratic patron, but that was the ideal. The legend of Taillefer shows the same kind of social mobility that the romances fantasize—a gentleman of humble family is raised to the high social position his innate nobility deserves. The minstrels of Richard III and later kings and other great aristocrats performed for the Baliffs of Shrewsbury and their men, in their performance bridging the gap between nobleman and bourgeois. Medieval feasts and festivities
were attended by the general populace of the area and the households and retinues of the nobles present, so the stories and songs of the minstrels there would have reached a socially diverse audience.

Since the linguistic and narrative structures of the romances, their formulaic style, may be understood as an artistic expression of their deep structure, we can see that the minstrel or oral narrator, which makes the style possible and appropriate in performance, is as integral to the deep structure as the linguistic and narrative structures. Susan Wittig following Levi-Strauss, has noted that the popularity of the romances "is due in part to the fact that they lessen the gap between the classes." They do this because they are structured on a certain narrative pattern, the male Cinderella, which offered a means through which the audience could resolve conflicts it felt about the restrictiveness of its class system. This structure bridges two classes within the culture, offering the possibility of upward mobility to worthy men of low station through marriage to a noble woman while "at the same time, it endorses the upper-class belief that worth and birth are synonymous, that only a noble man can be a nobleman." We will examine some romances which particularly manifest this structure in a later chapter. However, it is clear that the pattern is not demonstrated in the career of the hero
alone, but through the voice of the minstrel narrator as well.

Thus, that the style seem oral and that the narrator call attention to himself, his narrative and his relationship to the audience were significant for the deepest meaning of the story, not just to its mode of composition or circulation as Baugh and others suggest. "Listneth and leiteth" formulas may have been addressed to the audience literally on occasion, and the teller of a romance may have paused to drink a cup after calling for such in his narrative, but I think the main function of such conventions was to remind the audience that this was a story told by minstrels--this was a romance and it was to be understood in a certain way. Whether or not a romance actually did circulate in minstrel performance, it was important that on some level the audience believe that it did. Quite a few scholars have found it necessary to believe this too--though usually because they understand the romances as distorted versions of earlier aristocratic narratives and not as a unique form with an aesthetic of its own.
Appendix A

The following passage is typical, of *Sir Eglamour* and I have analyzed all four versions of it since some of the differences between the Cotton and Cambridge texts are really correspondences to the other texts. There are significant differences between the texts of the romance in the Lincoln Thornton and Egerton manuscripts and those in Mss. Cotton Caligula A II and Cambridge 2.38 which make it clear that the latter two are related to each other more than to the former. These differences will be discussed in detail in the next chapter; here it is sufficient to note that they do not suggest modification through oral transmission.

Egerton
Lincoln Thornton
Cotton 61-84
Cambridge

Pan my
"Pa" he sayd, "mystir free
Pe sqwyer "so mote I the

shewed in
e hafe me told youre private
told me

jeve pe
I sall bow giff answare

an

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All invert but

Thornton

-- greve

Takis it not to ill; I vndirstande

-- euyll

hyt

\(\text{ge are a knyghte of lytill lande}\)

\(\text{And mekill wolde hafe mare}\)

For

say to \(\text{fe lady}\)

If I wende and say hyr sa

to \(\text{at lady and told}\)

to that lady \(\text{fyys telle for \(\text{fy sake}\)}\)

Al to greve

In a skorne scho will it ta

Perautner on take hit wold scho

henley sche wolde hyt take

fare

And lightly let me passe

fare

to

Maystir, \(\text{fe man \(\text{fat hewes ourir hey}\)}\)

Syr

Dere frendey prey \(\text{fat \(\text{fou me behete}\)}\)

spones

The chyppis fallis in his eye

Lightly

That thou wylt \(\text{fat lady in \(\text{fyys maner grete}\)}\)

euer aywhere

Thus fallis it now and ay was

happis oft aywhere

Whatsome euyer happe to be hur answere

Maister -- vppon

Sir, umbythynk \(\text{pow of all thynge}\)

-- \(\text{fyys}\)

Vmbe \(\text{pan} \) on

\(\text{fat hir wowes emperour and kynge}\)

There wowes hir
ben
And dukes at are bolde

--------[omits]--------

and
Erils, barons, hir dose also
and kny^tis
done

Kepe she never ooon
And jitt ne will scho none of all tho
not have --
she will
Bot in guûnes hir holde
euer
th so

Wist hir fadir, by hevens kynge
I swer be God

* at hir were profirde swulke a thyng
Wyst her fadyr of

* shuld
Ful dere it mond be solde
schole
bought

And -- a
Now ne wold scho neur kyng forsake
sche wold a
The whych y trowe ys for *y loue and no mo

---------- for to
And til a sympill knyght hir take
* soche
to

our lyuf
Bur if aire lufe were olde
our lyfe
loue in her herte wrout.
Except for transpositions of lines, the texts are quite similar. Only the Cambridge shows major differences. It substitutes three completely new lines in place of the proverbial saying in 11. 10-12, perhaps because the saying was unfamiliar or, more likely, seemed old fashioned in the early sixteenth century when the manuscript was compiled. These new lines are weak metrically and add little to the story. They do not form as effective a conclusion to the squire's speech as the originals. In the following line, a scribal error has made a new character, Sir Vmbe, from what was, by then, an archaic verb form. Though this might be an auditory error, it could just as easily be the result of faulty copying or an illegible exemplar. A totally new line of explanation is added after line 22 of our passage, which interrupts the rhyme scheme. Whoever made these changes was not a skillful writer in the romance idiom. Since none of them involve the manipulation of formulas or conventional phraseology, which is the basis of the composition or recreation of orally transmitted narratives, but only the substitution of words, it seems to me that the relationship between the Cotton and Cambridge versions of Sir Eglamour is written, not oral.
Appendix B

A close comparison of the different manuscripts' versions of a single passage from Orfeo may tell us more about their relationship to each other and the romance's modes of circulation.

Auchinleck, 1. 237 Purth wode & ouer hep
Ashmole, 1. 239 He went ----
Harley, 1. 232 Bo prow

2 In-to e wildernes he get
And -- inverted

3 Nothing he fint at him is ays,
So fer he went, j sey, jwys,
Now he is nou at ese

4 Bot euer he liuer in gret malais
That he wyst not wher he was
now is at malese

5 He pat hadde y-werd pe fowe & griis,
sate in boure & halle,

6 And on bed pe purper biis
hym were palle

7 Now on hard hepe he lift,
in " wode

8 Wip leues and gresse he him wrif his body hydynth erbis
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9 He pat hadde castels & tours,
   Also --

10 River, forest, frum fifrons fruits and
       Forest, frup, bope fele and

11 Now, it comenci to snee & frese
    thoff be store as -----  

12 His king now make his bed in mese
    He may ese

13 He pat had y-had knijtes of priis

14 Bifore him kneeland, & leuedis
   [And ed -]

15 Now set he no-ping pat him like
    He not pat hys herte

16 Bot wilde wormes bi him strike-
    bestys that bi

17 He pat had y-had plente
    grete

18 Of mete & drink, of ich deynste
    -- withouten le
    " -- and grete dignyte

19 Now may he al day digge & wrote
    Long
    --- most bofe

20 Er he finde his fille of rote
    haue
In somer he liveth bi wild frut, hawys
& berien bot gode lite; pat were full suete; pat on hauorne growth, by schawys
In winter mey he no-ting finde
And by rote & rynde,
Bot rote, grases, & pe rinde. leuys & of For ower ting may he non fynde.
Al his bodi was oway duine is dryve
For missays, and al to-chine.
And grete cold With hayle & reyne ryve
Lord! Who may telle pe sore
He can of grete care
No man coude his sore
is king sufferd ten jere & more?
That he winter jere
His here of his berd, blac & rowe was both hede is
To his girdel-stede was growe
Be-nepe it is y-

While some of the lines are nearly identical, there are so many omissions, inversions of couplets and transpositions of lines that it is confusing to try to follow them. The Ashmole manuscript transposes lines 9-12 with
lines 13-16, an easy mistake to make since 9 and 13 both begin with the same words and the passages which follow have parallel structures. The transposition of the last two couplets is an improvement since it puts the lines which sum up Orfeo's suffering last in the description. Both the Harley and Ashmole have weak lines in the second couplet. The former's clumsy rendering makes the two lines almost identical; they seem to be a faulty recording of lines similar to those in the Auchinleck text. The Ashmole couplet, which is totally different, is very formulaic and conventional. So are the changes in phrasing and diction of the one following it: "bower and hall" and "purple pall" belong to the common vocabulary of Middle English romance, as does "withouten le," substituted for "each dainty" in line 18. The Harley substitution of dignity for dainty in the same phrase is probably a visual error.

In general, the variations between the Auchinleck and Ashmole versions are frequent small omissions, additions and transpositions of couplets. Harley adds nothing and tends to transpose longer passages, as in the example above. But this transposition is one of only three in the whole romance. Except for the omissions, the Harley text takes fewer liberties with the "original" than does the Ashmole. However, the effects of the changes are more drastic. The Auchinleck version of the passage is more overtly organized...
and comparative than the Harley. The then/now contrast describing the fall of a great man is related to the medieval conceptions of Fortune and tragedy. We may recognize this passage as a conventional expression of this idea—a motif, as it were. In the Auchinleck version, this motif is not only stated but also expressed in the structure of the language through parallelism and repetition. The Harley version does not preserve the "he that had...now..." pattern in successive couplets. Lines 9-16 (minus two couplets) are moved to the end of the passage, between lines 28 and 29. This may be a scribal oversight similar to the one in the Ashmole manuscript, for line 17, which follows line 8 in the Harley text, begins in the same way as line 9. (All the transpositions in this version occur in this manner.) Most of the absent lines relate details of courtly life so the contrast between the comfort and security of civilization (and sanity) and the harshness and unpredictability of wild nature is less developed.
Appendix C

The following passage is an example of the variations between the two texts of Arthour and Merlin:

Linc. Inn. 1. 33 On that tyme we
Auchinleck, 1. 63 Sone after as ich finde on boke

---

A gret sikenes þe king him toke

[Incorporated variations and corrections]

And dude
After his barouns he gan sende

---

And when ai were y comen ichon

þe king seyd to hem anon

"Lordinges" he seyd, "lesse and mare schal
Out of þis warld y must fare
And for þe love þe owen to perfore þy pray for love o me [inverts]
For Godes love and for charite [inverts]
lokyn
When ich am dede and roten in clay

Help þe mi childer þat þe may moyne
And take þ costaut mi neldest sone

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makip kyng and gever him
And gif him bope reng & crone

And holdep him for yoor lord for euer mo.
ed
Al pay graunt it schuld be so."

Of course, it is a highly conventional episode (council of
a dying king) coming near the beginning of the poem, so
familiarity and the fact that it was a fresh task might
account for the accuracy which is elsewhere missing.
The following passages are more typical in their variations.

Lincoln's Inn 1815 and e may here!
Auchinleck 1708 Listnep now gret and smale!

A
Miri time it is in May

Wan spryngyp pe somores
an wexe along eday

-------------[omits]--------------
Floures schewen hir borioun

-------------[omits]--------------
Miri it is in feld and toun

On grene fowlles
Foules miri in wode gredep

And
Damisels carols ledep.

Two
A baroun com to Fortiger

So in pat tyme as je may here
per he sat at his dinner

en
And seyd "Allas mi lord pe king
We have now brought
Y sigge pe an hard tiding

Orpedlich pou pe bistere

And pou fond to were

Pat is py fo
Vter Pendragoun and mani anoper

of Vter also
And Aurilis Brosias his broper

Pey arn come into pis lond
(Pople bop gret and smale

mony a knyght doust of hond
Wip hem is comen wipouten tale)

Lincoln only

Pey no wolen stynte noust
Til pat pow beo to grounde brought,

Pey arn
At Winchester pai ben almost

Perfore send abowte in
Sir pine help now on hast.

Many of these variations are formula substitutions of a kind that anyone familiar with the idioms of the Middle English romances could make. The question is, why would anyone make them? Before attempting to answer this, we should examine other passages showing a different, but also typical, kind of variation. (Underlined words appear in both texts.)
Lincoln's Inn

1. 1928

Bote o baroun was so strong  
rat askaped out of pat prong  
He priked his stede wip gret raundoun  
Til he com to Pendnagoun  
He seide 'pow art kynde eyr of londe  
To my tale pow vndurstonde  
For te loue of py bropir and pe  
Hider y come to helpe pe,  
Perfore arn we now yschent inversion  
For we wip wille to pe went  
Kyng Fortiger and kyng Aungys  
Wip mony a sarsyn of gret pris  
Schal ows hewe doun to grounde  
Bote je helpe ows in pis stounde  
And for pat we arn schent for pe  
God help ows now par charite!'  

Auchinleck  

1. 1827

Per was a baroun a noble man  
rat brac hem al fram  
He dede his stede swipe gon  
Til he com to Vter Pendragoun  
And seyd "Welcome air of pis lond."  
No duelle her nougt for Cristes hond,  
For love of pi, fader fre
And for drede eke of *pe*
*Pe* barouns ben to *pe* *went*
And for *pi* love almest *y schent*
For *Portiger* and eke *Angys*
Hem han al biloken *wis*
And *penke* hem sle to *grounde*
*gif* pou duellest ani *stounde*
"Owe" qua*†* Vter Pendragoun "bi God above*
Now y schal se who me wil loue."

These passages relate the same events in almost totally different language (though some of the rhymes are the same). In addition, both the Lincoln's Inn and Auchinleck texts contain groups of lines for which the other has no equivalent, the result of addition and omission. Obviously, Lincoln's Inn is not a corrupt copy of a text like Arthur and Merlin. It is not a copy of it at all. The variations are not scribal error or oversight; they are not auditory errors either.
NOTES TO CHAPTER III


2Claire Olson "Minstrels at Court of Edward III," PMLA, 54 (1941), 609.

3Wilson, p. 58. A story much like Emma's is incorporated in Athelston.


8Ronald Waldron, "Oral Formulaic Technique and Middle English Alliterative Poetry," Speculum, 32 (1957), 794.

9Ibid., 793.


The authors include a number of entries showing payments to minstrels in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Many of these were members of the household retinues of aristocrats, picking up some extra money for performances before the burgesses. In 1520 we find recorded "Reward to two minstrels of the Countess of Derby, for the honour of etc. 40d. And in wine spent by the bailiffs and their compeers hearing their melody, 40d." Some of the money rewards were customary, required by the magnates who held sway in Shrewsbury, some were humanitarian: "Paid for a certain reward given to a minstrel of our Lord the King in way of alms because of his poverty and age, 8d." (1479). Not all the minstrels paid belonged to the retinues of the great. In 1520 2s were paid to "the minstrels of John Talbot, knight, for their melody performed in the presence of the bailiffs." In 1483 we find an entry "for the livery of the common histriiones called the Waits of the town, 15s." These may have been the same minstrels who were given payment for their livery in 1479. They were men supported by the corporation who no doubt played at public ceremonies and for the burgesses. The Bailiff would have had the responsibility for entertaining visiting dignitaries, so it is not surprising to find that he regularly made payments to minstrels. Whether or not there was a society or guild of minstrels at Shrewsbury, as Barnicle suggests in her edition of the Seege of Troy, there was a lot of minstrel activity there. All the minstrels referred to in the account book are musicians or signers, not reciters of romances.


23 Smithers, pp. 11-12.

24 See Appendix A.


26 See Appendix B.

27 See Appendix C.


29 Holland, p. 94.


Wittig lists the percentage of formulaic lines in 25 romances. Of the romances we have discussed so far, Freine has least (10%) and Landevale and Launfal have 11% and 16%, respectively. More than a quarter of the lines in Yvain and Gawain are formulaic. We might note that Octavian and Libeaus Desconus, said to be by Thomas Chestre, are 25% and 30% formulaic, which leads one to wonder if they really were composed by the author of Launfal. Horn and Floris and Blancheflur, which are the earliest surviving Middle English romances, appearing together in the earliest surviving manuscript containing such works, are 18% and 41% formulaic lines, yet it is usually assumed that Horn lies closer to oral tradition than Floris.
Wilson, p. 109. Odericus tells us that the monk made his visit during the winter months when it was too cold to write, so he had to wait until spring to reword and complete his text of the story. We should not forget the effects the conditions of daily life in the Middle Ages might have had on the production of literature at that time. We might also note that Oderic knew the story from minstrels as well, but considered it less authentic.


Olson, pp. 605, 610. La Barge, p. 180.

Mehl, p. 9.

Susan Wittig, Stylistic and Narrative Structures in Middle English Romances (Austen: University of Texas Press, 1978), p. 188.

Ibid., p. 189.
A study of the oral aspects of the Middle English romances has shown that the narratives which have come down to us do not really belong to an oral tradition, as that term is usually understood. They do have a number of distinctive characteristics associated with narratives composed and circulated orally, and they were read aloud. However, they were read. It is to the romances' written tradition that we must now turn for evidence of their cultural context. The manuscripts in which the narratives appear are rich sources of information about medieval readers. They tell us of their interests, tastes in literature, ways of life, habits of mind, and sometimes even their identities. The volumes also provide a kind of documentary evidence about the romances -- which ones appear most frequently, which ones were read by what kinds of people.

A comprehensive study of the manuscripts of the romances has yet to be completed. Although it would be a lengthy project, the published results would be a valuable tool to students of these narratives. Derek Pearsall has
called for the study of manuscripts on cultural grounds, and P.R. Robinson has outlined a fairly comprehensive and useful scheme for descriptions of such volumes. However, until such time as a full study can be made, a partial analysis will have to suffice. I have examined some of the more important and accessible manuscripts in some detail, addressing myself principally to three tasks: a physical description of the volume (its size, material, page format, presentation of text and decoration), a description of its contents (the number and kinds of items it contains and their arrangement), and notations of evidence of ownership and the particular circumstances of its production.

From these detailed observations it has been possible to identify and characterize the primary audience of the Middle English romances. This is particularly important to the study of what are called "popular" romances since that adjective implies the existence of certain characteristics in their audiences. Further, any study of the cultural dynamics of a literary form must locate, as precisely as possible, its cultural milieu. And finally, by examining those manuscripts containing the most romances and noting those narratives which survived in the largest number of volumes, it will be possible to identify a group of textually related and thematically similar narratives which are central to the development of Middle English popular romance.
These romances and the owners of the volumes in which they appear will be the primary concerns of this chapter. If the discussions of particular narratives and manuscripts are to be meaningful, however, we must first acquaint ourselves with them as a group. By a rough count there are nearly 90 manuscripts which contain Middle English romances.\textsuperscript{2} This would seem to indicate a substantial but not outstanding demand for these stories. To compare the number of these manuscripts with those of more "enduring" literary works, one might remember that items from \textit{The Canterbury Tales} appear in 82 manuscripts and that there are upward of 45 surviving texts of \textit{Piers Plowman}. It is sometimes suggested that an unusually high percentage of romance manuscripts has disappeared since many cheap copies of these popular narratives would have been thumbed into oblivion.\textsuperscript{3} We may assume that many have been lost, since we know that some 63 romances were composed in writing during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but only 12 manuscripts containing romances have come down to us from that period. To help explain the incongruity of these numbers, D.S. Brewer figures that only one in five of the manuscripts which once existed has survived.\textsuperscript{4} R.M. Wilson notes the many references in medieval writings to romances of which no written text now exists.\textsuperscript{5} Of the extant volumes, 66 contain only one romance, six contain two, six more have three. Only ten
manuscripts contain more than three romances; the famous Auchinleck contains the most—16. All but two of the manuscripts include other kinds of works as well as romances, and in most collections the latter are far outnumbered.

While it is true that earlier manuscripts have had more time to succumb to wear and tear, there are other reasons why so few copies of Middle English romances survive from the late thirteenth and even the fourteenth century. The reading audience for romances in English was smaller then than in later years, so there was less demand for their production. Fifty-one, or more than half the total number of volumes, were compiled in the fifteenth century. Karl Brunner points out in his discussion of the audiences of the metrical romances that increased interest in and opportunities for education produced a larger literate populace at this time. Not only was there a larger audience for romances, but the availability of a steady supply of inexpensive paper from France and the Low Countries made it easier for people to satisfy their desire for books. This desire was encouraged by the fashion, cultivated by the wealthy, of assembling libraries. For example, the Pastons, like their benefactor Sir John Fastolff, commissioned and collected many books. Thus, while most romances were composed in the fourteenth century
or earlier, most of the manuscripts containing them were produced in the fifteenth century or later. This indicates a fairly dramatic increase in the number of people owning books. It also attests to the continued appeal of the romances for later audiences. The development of printing eventually made manuscripts obsolete, so it is not surprising that only seven volumes compiled after 1500 have come down to us. However, numerous Middle English romances were printed during the early Renaissance, so this figure does not indicate a decline in their popularity.

A number of distinctly different kinds of manuscripts were produced over the years. From the middle of the fifteenth century to the early years of the sixteenth, many compendium manuscripts were made. These are large collections, executed as a unit usually by professional scribes. These typically include works of religious instruction and stories on sacred, moral and chivalric subjects. Relatively plain books, they seem to have been compiled for domestic reading. These manuscripts' similarity in contents and format suggests that they were recognized types of volumes compiled according to a set of accepted principles of selection and presentation. Usually they contain a number of romances, frequently the most popular ones. In addition there are several other smaller manuscripts which are composed almost exclusively of
romances. Most of these collections contain groups of narratives associated with each other in the compendiums, so they too are among those volumes most important to a study of popular romances.  

Leaving this brief chronological and descriptive review, we may now turn to a consideration of the romances' audience. Just who were the owners of the manuscripts? From the evidence of the volumes themselves we may judge that most of the large collections were owned by gentry families. Occasionally they recorded their names, formally or informally, in the pages of their books. In addition, often we can judge something of their owners' social status and cultural milieu from the design and physical appearance of the books.

Robert Thornton, who compiled two compendiums in the middle of the fifteenth century, was lord of a manor in Yorkshire. His family, both before and after him, were people of local importance. He himself may have been a knight, since he signs himself "Robert Thornton armiger" in one of his signatures. By station the Thorntons were land holders and administrators of estates. They would have also participated in the administration of law and government policy. They were educated people--there is evidence in the manuscripts that Thornton knew some Latin and French--but their names do not appear on university rolls.
While he seems not to have had their high social and literary connections, we might imagine that Thornton belonged to more or less the same social stratum as the well-known Pastons who were roughly his contemporaries.

In the next century, we know, the Lincoln's Inn manuscript belonged to people of similar status. This collection of five romances was owned by a prominent West Midland family, the Fosters. Some of them were knights and members of Parliament. M.E. Barnicle has identified the Anthony Foster de Trafford who left his name on the flyleaf at the end of the volume with an individual to whom Henry VIII granted the Shropshire manor of Little Wenlock when he dissolved the great priory of Much Wenlock to which it belonged. It is sometimes suggested that the manuscript had earlier belonged to the priory, but there is no real evidence for this.

Two exceptional volumes, which probably did belong to some religious house, are the Vernon and Simeon manuscripts. These large, lavish, and exquisite volumes of the late fourteenth century must have been made for people of great wealth. They may have been compiled for a Thomas Henley of Litchfield around 1390. Kari Sajavaara traces the manuscripts to the scriptorium of Bordesley Abbey or another Cistercian house of Worcesthershire. In the sixteenth century one of the books was owned by the Vernon
family, knights of neighboring Staffordshire, who gave it their name. Perhaps it passed into their hands after the dissolution of the monasteries. The size, ornateness and religious contents of the volume all suggest that it was designed as a display piece in a religious establishment.

There is further, though more tenuous evidence of gentry ownership in the Fillingham manuscript (BM 24792). In the fifteenth century a Steven Barzey of Barzey Hall, Buckinghamshire, left his name in its pages. Though this person and place have not been identified, the fact that he called his residence a hall may indicate an association with the gentry.

Evidence of medieval owners is abundant in the Auchinleck manuscript. Many names are listed in the margins—a whole family of Brownes appears as do John and Anthony Elcock, William and Richard Drowne and others. However, none of these individuals has been identified. On the basis of its probable cost, contents and format, and the fact that it was made in London, Pearsall, in his introduction to the fascimile edition, says the volume was most likely designed for "an aspiring middle class citizen or merchant," and this assertion seems reasonable. Whether the people mentioned above belonged to this class has not been established. While it is no longer thought that the book belonged to Chaucer, a person of his social station may well have owned such a one.
It would seem that the aspiring merchant of the early fourteenth century had more means and a greater interest in literature than his sixteenth-century counterpart. Harley manuscript 2252, compiled around 1517, belonged to and was in part written by the prominent London mercer Thomas Colyn; Sylvia Thrupp's survey of the books bequeathed in the wills of fourteenth and fifteenth century London merchants shows that they owned few romances, preferring instead practical and religious works. Colyn's volume is predominantly utilitarian, but it contains the only known copies of The Lyfe of Ipomydon and the Stanzaic Morte d'Arthur. These romances, plus a few verses on contemporary people and events, including a ballad on Flodden Field, are the only literary items in a collection otherwise composed of recipes, lists of knights and parishes, weights and measures, ordinances (especially those relating to trade) as well as chronicles and letters. This is a fairly casual production written in several hands. Even more casual is Harley manuscript 2386. It consists of two parts, the first containing 36 items in Latin relating to the history of Norwich. These sheets may have been owned by Robert Pekard, rector of Hedenham in Norfolk. Around 1500 he seems to have given them to his butler, William Cresset, who recorded household expenses on the blank pages and also copied out a part of Mandeville's Travels and the romance Ami and Amiloun.
From the meager and incompletely assessed information provided by the manuscripts themselves it seems that most were owned by gentry families. These people would have been literate or cultivated literacy in their households as the administrative and managerial tasks entailed by land ownership would have required record keeping, legal expertise and letters and written documents. They would also have had the leisure to read or listen and the money to commission books or purchase them. Among such people we can see an increased interest in education and a desire to have older French works available in English. As early as the beginning of the fourteenth century we find clearly stated evidence of this desire. The composer of *Arthur* and *Merlin* explains why he chose to translate that narrative from the French.

Childer *pat* ben to boke ysett  
In age hem is mich *ve* bett ...  
Avantages *pai* hauen *pare*  
Frenysch and Latin eueraywhare.  
Of Frenysh no Latin nil y tel more  
Ac on Inglisch ichil tel *ferfore:*
  
Rigt is *pat* Inglische vnderstond  
*Pat* was born in Inglond.  
Freynsche vse *pis* gentil man  
Ac euerich Inglische Inglische can,  
Mani noble ich have yseige  
*Pat* no Freynsche coule seye,₁₅ (11. 9-10, 16-26)

While he recognizes that French is used by gentle people, he notes that there are many exceptions. All Englishmen (whatever their social status) understand English and since
the writer professes a moral and educational purpose he chose to write in a language used by a large number of people.

It may seem that the earliest English manuscripts are most likely to have been owned by people of lower status and less literary sophistication since French was still the first language of the court. However, this is not borne out by the evidence. Cambridge University manuscript Gg 4.27.2 (ca 1275), is the earliest surviving collection of romances in English, containing texts of King Horn, Floris and Blanchefleur and The Assumption of Our Lady. Karl Brunner, who has discussed the manuscript in his study of the romances' audiences, says that it "was compiled by a clerk connected with a gentleman's house, perhaps for its ladies, who wanted the two love stories, which they had heard somewhere, to be preserved, but in English because they did not know enough French." The Assumption provides an interesting example in the shifts in literacy taking place in the early part of our period. Originally composed in Latin by Wace for Elinor of Aquitaine, it was soon translated into French and within one hundred years found a large audience of English readers. While those at court continued to demand literature in French until the fifteenth century, we may not assume that readers of literature in English were necessarily less educated or belonged to the lower social classes.
It is sometimes noted that the manuscripts containing Middle English romances are by and large a plain lot and this is taken as an indication that their audience did not include wealthy folk who made up the social and cultural elite. While this may be generally true, especially later, some popular romances do appear in fine illuminated manuscripts. These books are among the most formal and fully developed in their format and presentation of text. Thus they provide a standard against which the plainness of the others may be judged. The Vernon and Simeon volumes (ca. 1390) are the most impressive. Of the hundreds of works found in these manuscripts, only two are romances, Robert the Devil and The King of Tars. Both books originally contained around 400 fine quality vellum leaves measuring approximately 22 x 16 inches. The Vernon is the largest manuscript in the Bodleian Library, weighing in at 48 pounds. Such books must have been stationary since they could only have been read from a stand. The format and decoration of the leaves are appropriate to their size. Each page is ruled in two or three columns leaving generous space in the margins and between the columns. The lettering is a large, careful modified court hand. The scribe often distinguished the beginnings and endings of items (which follow immediately on each other) by lettering the lines in red ink. Three sizes of colored capitals, most in a lombard
style, are used throughout to mark divisions in the text. Almost every page has some colored initials in red, blue, green or purple. Some are quite ornate with extensions down the margins and across the tops and bottoms of pages. Many of the letters and designs are gilded. Some of the saint's legends in the Vernon manuscript are accompanied by illuminated miniatures illustrating the text. These are based on a famous series of Flemish illuminations. This volume also has an elaborate table of contents, unusual in a medieval book. The Vernon and Simeon manuscripts are very beautiful and very carefully compiled. They could only have been commissioned by a wealthy person. Although the works they contain are not especially courtly or learned, a few of them are in Anglo-Norman.

A smaller and differently but no less beautifully decorated manuscript is the Arundel XXII in the College of Arms (late fourteenth century). The fine vellum leaves are regular folios and the first one has a delicately and profusely ornamented margin. There are many illuminated initials on the double-columned pages, richly colored and gilded. The book contains only two items, The Seege or Batayle of Troy, which serves as an introduction to an English prose translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regnum Britanniae. M.E. Barnicle, EETS editor of
The Seege, suggests that the volume was made for the Earls of Shrewsbury. While there is only incidental evidence for this, it is certainly possible since the scribe's dialect is that of the West Midlands and only such a wealthy patron would have been able to afford the book.

The Auchinleck manuscript too is illuminated, which makes it unique among surviving compendiums. Though not an exquisite or lavish production like the volumes just discussed, it is certainly a deluxe book in comparison to most manuscripts containing romances. Its 334 full folio leaves are good quality vellum adorned with decorated and historiated initials of various sizes in red and blue. Many extend into the margins with delicate trailers and curliques and there is one on almost every page. The first letter of each line is picked out in red and some titles and headings are written in red ink also. In addition to the fancy lettering, there were once as many as 36 small illustrations throughout the book. Most of the items began with a picture. To judge from the four that remain, they were appealing and carefully executed (and we may suppose this is why they were removed in the first place). They contain a variety of colors (red, blue, green, grey, brown), usually on a gold background. Romances more than other items are preceded by an illustration. In the Thornton manuscripts too, which are otherwise sparsely decorated,
the romances are presented with large colored and decorated capitals. Some, particularly in Alexander and the Morte, are quite ornate. Such treatment may indicate that Thornton held these poems in high esteem.

Conventions of page format and presentation of text are carefully and fully observed. Most of the pages are ruled in double columns with generous margins, though the number of lines per page varies from scribe to scribe. All but one of the six hands in the book are accomplished, clear bookhands. Beginnings and ends of works are marked by titles and explicits. Stanza divisions are indicated by red and blue marks in the margins. The pages are numbered throughout by red Roman numerals centered in their top margins. The Auchinleck manuscript was indeed a fine production, intended for private reading.

In contrast to these decorated volumes, all of which date from the fourteenth century, most manuscripts which contain a large number of romances date from the second half of the fifteenth century and are plain, undistinguished texts. The larger collections are so similar in format and contents that they merit consideration as a group. The Cotton Caligula, Cambridge 2.38 and Thornton manuscripts in particular and the other compendiums in general are substantial volumes composed of about 200 paper quarto leaves. Most contain around 40 items written in double
columns with some headings and colophons. Generally they are informally prepared, observing few of the conventions of presentation like titles, stanza divisions or textual divisions. Usually compendiums are written in one hand which is practiced but plain. They have little decoration other than occasional large colored capital letters.

Though these volumes were not exactly mass-produced—and there is no reason to suppose that they were made in bookshops—their uniformity, plainness and proliferation all anticipate the printed book. They also indicate the existence of a large audience demanding a variety of reading materials in a convenient, attractive but not-too-expensive format. The Cotton manuscript Caligula A II is a very typical volume of this kind and so will serve as an example for more detailed discussion. This is a quarto book in two parts. The first, of 142 folios, is an English compendium. The second is a record of statutes and ordinances in Latin pertaining to the Carthusian order. Though they both date from the end of the fifteenth century and contain some sheets bearing the same watermark, they are separate volumes of independent origin bound up together for the library of Robert Cotton. The watermarks on the pages of the first section indicate that the paper was manufactured in northern France. They appear frequently in other English manuscripts and the designs were so commonly used that the
exact origin of the Cotton manuscript's paper cannot be traced even with the aid of Briquet.23 So we may say that the materials of this book are typical. The paper, of average quality and (we may assume) price, was a kind continuously imported in the late fifteenth century to meet the increased demand for writing materials and reading matter.

The Cotton manuscript was copied out by one scribe who wrote a professional though not especially fine hand. The texts are in a typical cursive script, while the titles, running headings and colophons are in book hand. The writing is regular but not particularly uniform in size and spacing, so the number of lines per column varies widely, even on the same page. Frances Richardson, EETS editor of Sir Eglamour, says that the scribe was careless in his copying.24 Some errors have been corrected and some lines marked out, but the scribe did not consider himself bound to verbatim transcription since he changed lines in Eglamour under the influence of Emaré.

The Cotton manuscript is absolutely plain but the pages are spaciously and uniformly laid out. Most contain two columns of text; only the margins are ruled. There are no large colored capitals or decorated letters though items usually begin with a slightly enlarged capital in the same black ink as the rest of text. They and the first letters
of lines have been tinted red or yellow. The items do not follow immediately on each other but begin on their own page or in a new column. Their textual presentation is rather formal and complete. They are preceded by titles and followed by colophons. Usually stanza and textual divisions are indicated by a mark in the margin. The passus of The Sege of Jerusalem are indicated by that word and the appropriate number in the margin. In some of the poems rhyming lines have been bracketed, a practice common in both couplet and tail rhyme pieces.

Since most of the manuscripts just described observe similar conventions of textual presentation and format, it is not surprising that they were often compiled in the same way, from booklets, that is, groups of gatherings with some integrity of contents. P.R. Robinson has shown that a number of manuscripts were made up of booklets—this practice is not unique to the compendiums. But because these physical units were also designed as "thematic" units, in the compendiums they reveal common principles of selection and organization which reflect the audiences' literary interests.

Pearsall points out that the Auchinleck manuscript was probably compiled of twelve booklets or fascicles. All begin with a new item, and within them items run on from gathering to gathering. The first and second booklets
contain religious and miscellaneous pieces. The only romances appearing in this earlier part of the volume are *The King of Tars* and *Amis and Amiloun*, which are frequently said by scholars to be hagiographic narratives rather than true romances because of their overwhelming religious emphasis. *Floris and Blaunchefleur* and *Degare* form a substantial part of the third booklet, but beginning with the fourth, which is devoted to *Guy of Warwick* and *Reinbrun*, all the booklets are taken up primarily with romances. Following the section on Guy and his son, said by Pearsall to be the set piece of the volume intended by its compilers as its main attraction, comes the ever popular *Bevis of Hampton*.

The next section contains *Lay le Freine* and *Roland and Vernagu* and is followed by the related poem, *Otuel*. It and the next romance, *King Alexander*, remain only in fragments, but they were probably in separate booklets. After a booklet containing a chronicle and *Horn Childe*, comes *King Richard* at the end, in fragments, and part of a poem on the evil times of Edward III. The bookshop in which this volume was made would have produced a variety of booklets such as these to be selected and bound together as the patron saw fit.

Even manuscripts made by a single individual which were not produced in bookshops were made up in much the same way. The Cambridge manuscript is composed of two
booklets. The first one, of eight quires, contains the first 39 items, including romances. The second, of five quires, contains only romances: Guy, Le Bone Florence of Rome and Degare. The watermarks of the paper in the two sections are different and they may well have been produced separately, the second to provide more romances for the collection. Like the Auchinleck, the Cambridge volume distinguishes romances from religious legends and instructional works. The first fifteen items are a group of materials for religious instruction and meditation derived from the Catechism of Archbishop Thorlesby (1357). The same items appear together in the same sequence in four other manuscripts. Pepys 1584 contains the whole group, parts of it appear in Manuscripts Harley 1706 and 2339 and in Manuscript Douce 322, which are identical. Thus it appears that some texts were copied from similar or standard exemplars. Several romances in the earlier part of the Cambridge volume also seem to have been copied from a standard exemplar. The Earl of Toulous, Eglamour and Octavian appear as items 34, 35, and 37. In the Lincoln Thornton manuscript, Octavian, Isumbras and The Earl of Toulous appear consecutively. These four romances are associated with each other in several manuscripts. Their proximity to each other in the Cambridge, says Robinson, is due to the fact that they were copied from similar sources.
Though we do not know that the Thornton manuscripts were bound by Robert Thornton, they are both organized in ways that suggest they were conceived as units and composed of booklets. Brewer points out that the 17 quires of the volume in the Lincoln Cathedral Library form six booklets according to the number of quires beginning with a new item. The first three quires are almost wholly taken up with Alexander. The next eight are also devoted to romances. The following five quires form three booklets devoted to religious pieces and the final two quires contain a medical treatise. Brewer also notes that the first folios of these groups of quires are smudged. Folio 53, which begins the Morte, has a "grimy sheen" indicating that it was for a while unbound. Booklets offered a way to have a large collection of writings with organization. One could copy related items in sequence and then arrange these sequences as saw fit.

The compendium manuscripts were compiled in much the same way and their materials organized in a similar manner. They also contain the same sorts of items; their compilers seem to have shared certain principles for the selection of materials to be included. In looking back over the preceding descriptions of the booklets, we can see that the compendiums provide large and sometimes thoughtfully arranged cross-sections of the literature their owners
read. Like a library list, which is often all that remains of medieval book collections, manuscripts reveal an individual's taste in reading matter and the literary context within which the romances are to be understood.

The Auchinleck is almost exclusively a literary collection. Among its many items are 11 saints' lives and religious legends, an English Paternoster, a poem on the seven deadly sins, "The Disputation of the Body and Soul," a chronicle of England, a list of Norman barons, some miscellaneous pieces and 16 romances. The Cambridge manuscript includes more works of religious instruction, including penitential and meditative works and poems on the articles of faith, the Ten Commandments, the seven deadly sins and the works of corporal and spiritual mercy in addition to saints' legends, exemplary tales and romances.

The only works of religious instruction in the Cotton manuscript are the ever-popular poem paraphrasing the Ten Commandments and the prose form of confession. These apparently were felt to be basic materials for they appear in many manuscripts. There are a number of short poems on religious subjects (five wounds of Christ, five joys of Mary, fifteen signs of doomsday) and other spiritual matters ("Oh Death," "Thank God of All," "Make Amends," "Urbanitas," "Amen Par Charite," and the longer "Letter of Jesus Christ"), religious legends (concerning Susan, Childe Ypotis, William
Tundale, Eustace and St. Jerome), a short chronicle of England and "The Stations of Rome," a description of noteworthy places along the pilgrim routes to that city. Written in a different hand are recipes for cures for colic and gravel. These suggest that the manuscript saw domestic use, as we might assume from the nature of its other contents. Most of the romances are grouped together. Two poems by Lydgate, "Stans Puer ad Mensam," a manual of courtesy, and the fable "The Churl and the Bird," appear together. These are two of the most frequently copied of Lydgate's many popular poems, the former appearing also in other compendium manuscripts Ashmole 61, Advocates 19.3 and Rawlinson C86.

The Lincoln Thornton manuscript contains many works by Richard Rolle and his followers, as befits a northern collection. But there are few of the religious legends which figure so largely in the other compendiums. The British Library manuscript contains a large collection of miscellaneous short poems, including many songs and carols. It concludes with "Parliament of the Three Ages" and "Winner and Waster."

The compendium manuscripts, then, were compilations of certain types of materials, literary and non-literary, including secular and religious works. A combination of works on important elements of the Christian faith,
instruction in Christian living and edifying examples of the same, along with stories of exemplary chivalry and treatises on manners and morals is typical. The manuscripts' owners seem to have particularly enjoyed narratives, whether cautionary, chivalric, hagiographic or legendary, but they were also familiar with allegories, debates and dream visions, histories and travel books. Most of the compendiums are multi-purpose books. Their more literary contents would have been read aloud for entertainment. Other items, like prayers, may have been read daily. Still others may have been used for the instruction of children, or for private reading and meditation. Cures and medical recipes would be consulted as the need arose. Many of the religious and moral pieces, particularly, presented material known in one form or another to anyone instructed in the Christian faith. Archbishop Thorlesby's Catechism was designed for the instruction of laymen and intended to reach a large audience—in short, it was a popular work. A number of the saints legends included were derived from the South English Legendary, a collection central to the study of medieval popular literature in Britain.33

The manuscripts of the romances include few works by court poets and almost no learned items. A few poems by Lydgate appear repeatedly, but they are not his courtly
compositions produced for aristocratic patrons. Some pieces by Chaucer—the complaint of Dido from the Legend of Good Women, and the tale of Griselda—appear in the compendium manuscript Rawlinson C-86 along with a moral poem by Gower, and many pieces by Lydgate, but this is the exception, not the rule. The owners of the manuscript apparently prized the works by these authors, since they frequently wrote in the poets' names and sometimes attributed to them works they did not write. If court poets were not often included in the same books with romances, court life is not included either. There are few items in the manuscripts I have described which relate to such courtly pass times as hunting or heraldry or particular refinements of manners, like carving. There are only a small number of prose pieces among the contents of these volumes, though by the second part of the fifteenth century prose was the fashionable form for narrative and exposition. The readers and auditors of the manuscripts may have owned other volumes containing more courtly and learned works, or may have been familiar with them, but usually they did not include them in their compendiums. Instead, they chose reading matter that was conventional and general in its appeal. Most of the writings they collected in their manuscripts had been circulating in English for many years.
In many manuscripts the selection and arrangement of items shows an awareness of genre. Certain romances appear with religious tales, exemplary and historical, and were understood as such. They are treated this way in the Cambridge and Auchinleck volumes. The only romances to appear in the religious B.M. Thornton manuscript are largely concerned with the rescue of the Holy Land and the protection of Christianity from the Infidel. The Seige of Jerusalem, Sege of Melayne and another Charlemagne romance, Otuel and Roland, appear together. Thornton may have felt that there was a connection between the first narrative and The Passion of Christ which immediately precedes it, since the events of the romance are predicated in the Passion.

All forms of romance are represented: couplet, tail rhyme, alliterative and even prose. There are long novels in verse (Guy and Bevis) and short tales. The lay (Orfeo, Freine, Launfal), the epic (Sege of Troy and Jerusalem), the religious romance (Amis and Amiloun), and the story of adventure are also represented. All the important heroes of the past are included: Arthur and his knights, Charlemagne, Roland, Richard Lionheart and others. The works vary greatly in style and quality, from the Alliterative Morte with its noble poetry and Alexander with its rhetorical sophistication to the short, lively and utterly formulaic Emaré and Eglamour. As we might expect,
there are many romances based on French sources, but in the Cotton, Cambridge and Thornton volumes there are a number of native English compositions.

While most forms of Middle English romance are represented in the compendium manuscripts, a number of similar narratives reappear with such consistency that we must recognize them as a group and attempt to account for their appeal to the owners of the volumes. Their popularity is striking. Of a total of 34 different narratives in the five largest compendiums and three largest collections, 17 are duplicated in these manuscripts. Octavian appears in three, the Lincoln Thornton, Cotton Caligula and Cambridge volumes. The Earl of Toulouse appears in these and Manuscript Ashmole 61 as well. Sir Isumbras is also in the Ashmole, Thornton and Cotton volumes as well as several collections: Naples Royal Library 13.B.29, Caius Cambridge 175, and Douce 261. A text of Sir Eglamour of Artois exists in the latter and in three other books: Ms. Egerton 2682, and the familiar Cambridge and Cotton volumes. This last also contains Libeaus Desconus, which makes other appearances in the Ashmole, Naples and Lincoln's Inn manuscripts. Bevis of Hampton and Guy of Warwick, two enduring favorites, appear in the Auchinleck and Cambridge volumes. Both romances were frequently recopied, Bevis into the Egerton and Caius Cambridge collections, Guy into the Naples.
Several of these manuscripts have so many romances in common that it seems they must have been related. Five of the seven romances in the Egerton volume appeared earlier in the Auchinleck. The Lincoln's Inn volume contains versions of another two, Arthur and Merlin and Alexander. The Egerton texts are generally closer to their counterparts in the Auchinleck than the Lincoln's Inn texts are to theirs, but we can only guess at the particulars of the connection between the later manuscripts and their precursors or the bookshop which produced them. The Cotton, Cambridge, Thornton and Ashmole manuscripts also seem to be related. Octavian and Eglamour appear in the first three. Isumbras appears in all except the Cambridge, The Earl of Toulous in all but the Cotton. These romances may have been copied from a standard exemplar which also contained Libeaus Desconus. These are certainly among the most popular romances. They employ a popular aesthetic, were appreciated by a wide audience and frequently recopied.

Of course, none of these texts are identical. The Cotton and Cambridge Eglamours are more alike to each other than to the Thornton and Egerton texts. The Cambridge text of Octavian is the later northern version which differs from the southern Cotton version in dialect and details (it lacks its bourgeois humor). The Lincoln's Inn Arthur and Merlin is a complete retelling of the first half of the
Auchinleck story and the later manuscript's Alexander is abridged. This sort of dynamic variation is a fundamental characteristic of the romances—there is no such thing as a fixed text.

In looking over these romances and their manuscripts, we are made aware of the popularity of the Constance-Eustace-Florence-Griselda and the composite romances distinguished in Sever's Manual. These are all familiar developments of the four part love-marriage, separation-reunion plot we noticed earlier. Interestingly, there are relatively few examples of this in the Auchinleck manuscript (though Guy and Bevis do have this general outline and some of the formulas associated with this plot), but they appear in profusion in later ones. Octavian, Eglamour, Chevalere Assigne, Emare, Isumbras, Sir Triamour, The Earl of Toulous, Le Bone Florence of Rome, Robert of Sicily, The Squire of Low Degree, Torrent of Portengale, and to some extent Degare and Libeaus Désconus are all romances of this type and they appear and reappear well into the sixteenth century. All of these romances, except Chevalere Assigne, are written in tail rhyme. The later ones were composed in the northern Midlands in the late fourteenth century. Many are original English compositions having no French source. The narratives' stylistic and structural similarities and their association with each other in manuscripts makes them a natural grouping within the corpus of romances.
These are all composite romances freely sharing their formulaic material. They are all based on the four part narrative structure love-marriage, separation-reunion which we saw in Chretien's and Marie's romances and in their English adaptations. These patterns were developed through the calumniated queen and male Cinderella themes we noted in earlier chapters. The romances share a number of lines and details. Most Middle English romances are redundant, that is, formulaic in language and structure, but these narratives are practically analogous. Octavian is thought to have been the conduit by which many popular themes and motifs were introduced to the authors and audiences of romances in Middle English. There are a number of other instances we can point to where a new romance has been composed on the basis of an older one or details of some formulaic episode have been altered in keeping with those of a similar narrative. Readers demanded romances on the order of Octavian and Eglamour and composers were intrigued by the possibilities and popularity of their standard plot. Even as old romances were being recopied and revised, new ones of the same type were being written. Eglamour (composed ca 1350) may have suggested Emare (ca 1400); we know it was the basis for Torrent, composed at about the same time. One hundred years later, when Eglamour was being copied into the Cambridge compendium, The Squire was being written
by someone familiar with it as well as with Emare and Isumbras. All these romances recount the story of the dispersal and reunion of a family. Usually the wife and children (almost always a son whose legitimacy is suspect) are treacherously accused and exiled in the husband's absence. The accuser is often an unnatural father or jealous mother-in-law. The patient suffering of the innocent outcasts is but one instance of the widely occurring calumniated wife motif.

To some extent the particular formulas employed in a particular narrative depend on whether the central character is male or female and on whether he or she is a husband or son, wife or daughter. The romances ring the changes on these combinations. In Degare the central character is a son orphaned because he is illegitimate (his mother was raped by a supernatural being). In Eglamour the central character is a husband who loses his family through an exiling father-in-law. In Emare the focus is on the calumniated woman. With these various permutations on the love-marriage-separation-reunion plot, a writer could give his material different treatments. One could be more or less religious, or focus more on aspects of the love-marriage or separation-reunion episodes. One could bring about the reconciliation through tests and combats, or simply through patient suffering. The formula story of the
patient spouse or lover is an adaptation of chivalric characters to the narrative formulas of saints' lives. Though love, marriage and social obligations are more significant in such stories than in tales of courtly love, all are secondary to Christian duty. Often a Cinderella motif is introduced to develop the theme of wealth and social advancement which we have seen in *Landevale* and *Launfal* and will see again in *The Squire of Low Degree*. These two formulas, Cinderella and the patient spouse, express the two dominant medieval fantasies of love.

In looking back over the formulas of *Eglamour* and similar romances, we can see that a key episode, the separation of the hero and heroine, is almost always precipitated by a parent who disapproves of its child's choice of a spouse. It is not just the lovers who are separated by this conflict, but the entire family of parents, children and grandchildren. The importance of family in the romances we are considering here is a distinguishing characteristic which is lacking in *Yvain* and *Gawain* and *Launfal*. Family members are important in *Freine*, but they do not block the marriage of the heroine. It seems to me that in the English composite romances we see the beginnings of a shift in the focus of such stories. This theme--parent-child conflict over marriage partners--became ever more prominent in romances of the later Middle
Ages and Renaissance. It did not replace other themes, but was more frequently and centrally employed.

If parents precipitate the separation of the family, children are usually responsible for its reunion. Eglamour even exists in a second version where the family reunion scene has been slightly modified to strengthen this point and heighten the climax of the story. The Cotton scribe seems to have altered his text of Eglamour by introducing events and lines from Emare†, which makes its only appearance in that manuscript. In the modified version, Eglamour recognizes his son, who has been sent by his knowing mother, Christabelle, to serve him at table. Impressed by the boy's demeanor, the father inquires after him and so comes to be reunited with his family. In the original version, Christabelle simply tells everyone that Eglamour is the boy's father when she discovers his identity from his shield. This version of the episode is told better and makes more sense than the revision. However, the Cotton version is, perhaps, more poignant and dramatic. As in the corresponding episode of Freine, it is the father's notice of the boy's gentility which sparks the recognition and at the same time confirms both's innate nobility. After this the marriage of the parents, once delayed by their parents on grounds of social inequality, takes place quickly. Eglamour then restores Christabelle to her patrimony and himself ascends to the high social status befitting his proven nobility.
The concepts of innate nobility and hereditary social status are central problems in many Middle English romances. As we have seen, these concepts would have greatly concerned medieval readers who had conflicting feelings about the restrictiveness of the class system the romances validated. The love-marriage, separation-reunion structure served as a device for the expression and resolution of these feelings. By means of it, the composers of the romances were able to describe an ideal social order which, in Susan Wittig's words, was based on the "myth of power gained through the marriage alliance, and the reconciliation of the contradictory notions of love for power's sake and love for love's sake." Love for power's sake is love that submits to the conventions of social class, while love for love's sake is almost always presented as occurring between people of different classes.

As was discussed in chapter two, romance developed in coincidence with the institution of primogeniture among the nobility. This practice encouraged marriages arranged to strengthen a family's social status. Such unions were a fact of life for the nobles of the Middle Ages. The fantasy of love for love's sake and the code of courtly love developed in romances offered an escape from, or antidote to, the problems of marriage for power's sake. However, in fourteenth-century England this fantasy was no
longer viable. In fact, as Gervaise Mathew points out, it had never flourished there as it did in its native France. Rather than being ambivalent about marriage, as were the juvenes for whom the first romances were written, the gentry audience of the Middle English poems seems to have been agreed that marriage was the answer to problems of love and social status. In addition, noble classes were never so restricted and did not practice primogeniture so exclusively as did the French. Members of the gentry class, which had emerged from the nobility over the course of the fourteenth century, sought to marry into families of higher social rank.

Besides addressing conflicting feelings that medieval audiences might have had about the restrictiveness of their class system, the group of romances we have been examining also express and resolve conflicting feelings about the restrictions imposed by family relationships. This is especially true in those narratives where Oedipal motifs and other threats of parent-child incest appear. In them the opposing situations, marriage for power's sake and love for love's sake, become the basis for conflict between generations--parents favoring the former, children the latter. This family context is as much an expression of the concerns of the romances' audience as the Cinderella theme they employ. The gentry owners of the compendium
manuscripts lived in family units, not as separate figures in the communal life of court and castle as the juvenes had. Children were not usually sent away for their upbringing and education but remained at home. A number of items in the manuscripts we have reviewed were probably intended for the instruction of children. There is further evidence of the owners' concern for family in their books, for several contain lists of names of parents and siblings. Relationships with family members would probably have loomed larger on the mental horizons of the gentry than on those of aristocrats who lived in a less domestic setting. It is not surprising, then, that they found romances whose action was centered in family conflict particularly interesting.

The manuscripts of the Middle English romances show us that while there were variations in the kinds of romances produced at different times and in different places during the late Middle Ages, and though we can point to developments in the form, many new narratives were based on older ones and they tended not to replace them but to circulate alongside them. Among the most common and frequently recopied romances are formulaic compositions on the theme of the separated family. This theme appealed directly (though we should note, not exclusively) to a gentry audience and the owners of the manuscripts were mostly members of this class. The overwhelming popularity and
adaptability of this pattern will be further demonstrated in the following chapter. The steady spread of literacy and the development of printing eventually created a new reading public among the non-chivalric classes. Eager to imitate the domestic habits of the upper classes, these people demanded copies of romances. It was not long before publishers and writers were producing works which catered to their tastes.
NOTES TO CHAPTER IV


2This count is based on information compiled in Sever's Manual, the introductions to editions of individual romances, and Laura Hibbard's Middle English Romances. Also see H.S. Bennett, "The Production and Dissemination of Vernacular Manuscripts in the Fifteenth Century," The Library, V, 1 (1946-47), p. 172.

3Richard Firth Greene, Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 133.


7The following is a list of the more important compendiums and collections containing Middle English romances:

The Auchinleck Manuscript. This volume was compiled in a London bookshop around 1330. Of its 44 items, 16 are romances -- they take up over half of the 334 folios. The King of Tars, Amis and Amiloun, Degaré, Guy of Warwick and Reinbrun seem to have been composed as well as copied in the bookshop. The book also contains Alexander, Arthur and Merlin, and Richard Coeur de Lion (perhaps composed by
one author) as well as Otuel, Roland and Vernagu, Lay le
Freine and Sir Orfeo, Bevis of Hampton, Floris and
Blanchefleur and Tristram.

Ms Cotton Caligula A II was compiled in the years
1451-60 in the southeast Midlands. It contains 38 items
including the alliterative romances Chevaliere Assigne
and The Siege of Jerusalem, as well as Octavian, Sir
Launfal, Libeaus Desconus, Isumbras, Eglamour of Artois
and Emaré.

The volume known as Cambridge University Library
Manuscript Ff 2.38 dates from the late fifteenth or early
sixteenth century. Of its 43 items, nine are romances:
The Earl of Toulous, Sir Eglamour of Artois, Sir Tryamour,
Octavian, Bevis of Hampton, Guy of Warwick, Le Bone
Florence of Rome, Robert of Sicily and Sir Degare.

The Thornton manuscripts (B.M. Additional 31042 and
Lincoln Cathedral 91) were made Yorkshire in the middle
years of the fifteenth century. Among the 90 items in the
two volumes are thirteen romances: The Life of Alexander,
Morte Arthure, Octavian, Isumbras, The Earl of Toulous,
Sir Degrevant, Sir Eglamour of Artois, The Awentys of
Arthure at the Terne Wathing, and Percivval of Galles
appear in the earlier Lincoln volume. The Seige of
Jerusalem, The Seige of Melayne, Otuel and Roland and
Richard the Conquerer appear in the later British Library
manuscript.

Manuscript Ashmole 61, a product of the late fifteenth
century, contains 40 items and five romances: Isumbras,
The Earl of Toulous, Libeaus Desconus, Sir Cleges and
Sir Orfeo.

These, then, are the principal manuscripts of the
Middle English romances. There are other compendiums
(Rawlinson C86, Landeveal, Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell;
Advocates 19.3.1, Amadace of Gaul, Sir Gowther, Isumbras;
Chetham 8009, Ipomadon, Torrent of Portengale, Bevis of
Hampton). Two late fourteenth-century collections are
Manuscripts Egerton 2682 and Lincoln's Inn Hale 150. The
former includes Knyng Richard, Bevis of Hampton, Sir Degare,
Floris and Blanchefleur, The Seege or Batayle of Troy, Amis
and Amiloun, and Sir Eglamour of Artois. The latter is
incomplete at beginning and end, but it presently contains
five items: Libeaus Desconus, Arthur and Merlin, The Lyfe
of Alexander, The Seege or Batayle of Troy and a part of
Piers Plowman. A very late collection is the picture-book
manuscript Douce 261, dated 1564. It contains texts of four poems: *Sir Isumbras*, *Sir Degare*, *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain* and *Sir Eglamour of Artois*. It may at one time have included *Robert the Devil*, now B.M. Egerton 3132, since the Douce Manuscript is incomplete and they are both in the same hand. Finally, we should mention two other collections of these familiar narratives: Caius Cambridge 175 (*Richard Lionheart*, *Athelston*, *Bevis of Hampton*, *Isumbras*), and Naples Royal Library XIII (*Bevis of Hampton*, *Libeus Désconus*, *Isumbras*, *The Clerk's Tale*).


16Brunner, p. 221.


18 Pacht and Alexander, p. 61.


20 Barnicle, p. xxvii.


23 Tête du Boeuf—most resembles Briquet's numbers 15,054, 15,064; Raisin: Briquet's number 12,999.


25 Robinson, passim.

26 Pearsall and Cunningham, p. ix.

27 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., p. xvi.


32 Ibid., p. ix.


35 Hornstein, p. 121.


The expansion of the reading public which was both a cause and result of the increased production of manuscripts in the last half of the fifteenth century accelerated dramatically in the sixteenth with the introduction of printing. Many Middle English verse romances were published in inexpensive editions made readily available in London and in towns throughout the land. The first romances to be printed were not Middle English ones, however. William Caxton chose to issue only translations of French prose romances, frequently works composed for the Burgundian court. It remained for his assistant and heir, Wynken de Worde, to mine the manuscripts and transmit to Renaissance readers the tradition of the older narratives.

Taken together, the careers and literary productions of Caxton and de Worde reveal the trends of late medieval and early Renaissance literature that contributed to the survival of the form romance and its flowering as popular literature. Caxton's romances, even those which later became popular, were, when he printed them, fashionable,
courtly and new and they reached an audience composed of aristocrats, gentry and important bourgeois. Some of de Worde's romances were similar and were read by the same sorts of people, but many of them were old-fashioned and had never been courtly. They found their readership among the petite bourgeois and yeomen who made up the greater part of the newly emergent English middle class. In business practices too, the men differed significantly. De Worde's policies of publishing what would sell were the wave of the future. Caxton, in his reliance on patronage and cultivation of exclusivity was more "medieval;" his presentation copies were in manuscript, not printed. These two men and the romances they printed belong to the end of the medieval phase of the cultural dynamics of popular romance. They represent the final developments of the patterns of twelfth-century chivalric narrative and the ethos and world-view of the Middle Ages, as well as of the narrative form which was the progenitor of the modern novel—popular romance.

William Caxton was England's first printer; he was also, as F.N. Blake says, her first publisher. A glance at the list of titles brought out by his press reveals not a random collection of the many kinds of books which would have found an audience in late medieval England, but a selection of works, all in the vernacular, designed to
appeal to those with a taste for courtly, fashionable or standard reading matter. Yet within this conservative category the works Caxton printed take a variety of forms and subjects. R.H. Wilson, in Sever's Manual of Writings in Middle English, assigns Caxton's literary productions to four major categories: works of established English court poets (Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate), history and geography, saints' lives and other didactic works both philosophical and religious, and prose romances.² The latter make up a small portion of the total number of Caxton's publications—of the roughly seventy works he brought to press, only nine are romances: The Recuyll of Troys (the first book printed in England), Jason, Geoffrey of Boulogne, Le Morte D'Arthur (Caxton's title is King Arthur), Charles the Great, Paris and Vienne, Four Sons of Aymon, Blanchardine and Eglantine and Enydos. All these works are consistent with his policy of printing, in English, literature which was fashionable, courtly and standard. The romances were fashionable in that several of them were translations of narratives found in the libraries of the Burgundian court, a dominant influence on the tastes and political strategies of the English nobility of the time. They could also be considered fashionable in that they were prose, which had only in the fifteenth century begun to replace verse as the preferred mode for written narrative in England. Caxton's
romances are all his own translations from French texts. Apparently he chose not to print romances already extant in English, either out of a desire for novelty or to enhance the body of literature in his native tongue, as he says in his prologue to the Recuyll:

> And for so moche as this booke was newe and late maad and drawen in to frenshe/ And neuer had seen hit in our englissh tonge/I thought in my self hit shold be a good besynes to translate hyt in to our englissh/ to thende that hyt myght be had as well in the royame of Englond as in other landes/"

or perhaps because those romances did not suit his taste or that of his patrons. Since most of his patrons were members of the royal family, Caxton's romances must be considered courtly. The Recuyll is dedicated to Margaret of Burgundy, Duchess of York; Jason to Edward, Prince of Wales; Geoffrey and Arthur to his father, Edward IV. Blanchardine and Eglantine was translated for the Duchess of Somerset, Four Sons of Aymon for the Earl of Oxford, Enydos was presented to Arthur, Prince of Wales. Charles the Great was translated for William Daubeney, a prominent Londoner and friend to Caxton, one of three commoners to whom he dedicated books. Paris and Vienne is unique in that it had no patron.

Though Caxton's romances had the appeal of the new and fashionable, they were also conservative and orthodox. Six of them, all except Four Sons of Aymon, Blanchardine and
Eglantine and Paris and Vienne, belong to the cycle of the Nine Worthies. The stories of these exemplars of chivalry appear frequently in medieval literature and in the later Middle Ages were brought together in the formal schema of three pagan, three Jewish and three Christian warriors representing the three historical and cultural traditions recognized in medieval Europe. Caxton particularly wanted to translate the histories of the Classical and Christian Worthies so that Englishmen might know their noble heritage and be inspired by it to comparable feats of chivalry. His concern for chivalry and his reliance on noble patronage have led historian Sylvia Thrupp to call Caxton an "arch-aristocrat." 4

At Caxton's death de Worde inherited the business—the shop in Westminster with its stock, fonts, presses, and clientele. Caxton had taken on de Worde as an apprentice just before leaving Flanders to set up his press in England, so their relationship was a long one, spanning seventeen years. Since Caxton no doubt devoted much of his time to translation and the conduct of business, it seems likely that de Worde was occupied primarily in producing the books. 5 Thus it is not too surprising that the heir was more of a printer than a publisher like his master, more of a businessman than a man of letters. A survey of his publications reveals several obvious departures from Caxton's
practices. De Worde did not cultivate Caxton's social connections or his literary accomplishments. Relatively few of the works first printed by de Worde had patrons, though he was at one time printer to the King's Mother under Henry VIII. While he printed translations made for him on a regular basis, de Worde made no translations himself. He also wrote no prologues or epilogues and his translators wrote only the briefest. It is partly for these reasons that we know so much less of him than we do of Caxton.

While there is general agreement among scholars that Caxton's publications tended to be courtly, fashionable and conservative, apparently there is no such consensus about de Worde's. E.G. Duff, in Westminster and London Printers, discusses de Worde's career in a chapter on popular printers, those "who neglecting legal, political and learned books, such as were issued by the King's Printers, confined their attention to books of a lighter and more ephemeral kind." Blake calls de Worde an academic publisher because he printed grammar books and treatises by clerics, a contrast to Caxton's non-scholarly output. The fact is that de Worde printed what he thought would sell. He could sell grammars to students in this time of spreading literacy and demand for formal education. He could sell ballads of Robin Hood or a geste of the Mayor of Abinton to
those with a taste for unpretentious literature and works of Lydgate or Hawes to those preferring something more sophisticated. Many of his literary publications fit into those categories mentioned by Wilson in his discussion of Caxton: court poets (Chaucer, Lydgate, Hawes), history and geography (Mandeville's *Travels*, Higden's description of England), saints lives and didactic works (many more of these than Caxton published and, notably, the works of Richard Rolle and Margery Kemp), and romances in prose and verse. He published many more non-literary works than Caxton. In short, Caxton printed a fairly select number of works, most of them literary, for a rather homogeneous audience. De Worde, however, was much more inclusive in his publications and printed a wider variety of reading materials which would have been bought by people in diverse walks of life.

Velma Richmond, in her discussion of popular romance in Middle English, has said of Caxton that he was the first to exploit the public's taste in fiction, but with romances the credit for this achievement should really go to de Worde. In evaluating his contributions to English literature, H.S. Bennett says that the printer had a "real understanding of what was required for romance." He printed twenty five romances; twelve of these are new in the English language, three are unique to de Worde. He
published four of Caxton's romances: *The Recuyell* (1502, 1503), *King Arthur* (1498, 1528), *Paris and Vienne* (1510) and *The Four Sons of Aymon* (1504). Eight of de Worde's romances are translations of late French prose works. *Valentine and Orson* (1502), *King Ponthus* (1501, 1511) and *A History of Oliver of Castile* were translated for him by Henry Watson. *Appolonius of Tyre* (1510) and *Helyas, Knight of the Swan* (1512) were translated by Robert Copland, the latter at the command of Edward, Duke of Buckingham. *Huon of Bordeaux*, brought into English by John Bourchier, Lord Berners, was printed in 1534. *Melusine* appeared in 1510 and *Robert the Devil* twice, in 1502 and 1517.

The romances already in English which de Worde printed fall into roughly two groups according to their age. *Bevis of Hampton* (1500, 1503, 1528), *Guy of Warwick* (1500), *Sir Degare* (1515), the short *Arthur and Merlin* and *Richard Coeur de Lion* (1509, 1528) are the oldest, making their first appearance in English in the Auchinleck manuscript. Most of the other, later romances belong to that group of textually related and thematically similar romances we recognized in preceding chapters. *Sir Eglamour of Artois* (1500), *Generides* (1504-5), *The Lyfe of Ipomydon* (1500, 1530), *Torrent of Portengale* (1509), *Octavian* (1504-6), *Sir Isumbras* (1530), *Sir Triamour* (nd) and *The Squire of Low Degree* (1520). Most of these are native English products
composed in the late fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, often in the West Midlands. Unlike the translations, these romances are all metrical. The only exceptions are one edition of Ipomedon (two others are in couplets) and William of Palerne, which are in prose. The English romances printed by de Worde were among the best liked of the Middle Ages. They survive in many manuscripts, including several of the important compendium volumes we have already discussed. Of the romances appearing in these collections, six are found in Ms. Cambridge University Library 2.38 which was compiled around 1500. Perhaps de Worde used an exemplar similar to this volume. His editions of some romances resemble their Cambridge counterparts more than those in other manuscripts.

A number of de Worde's romances continued to be printed well into the Renaissance. Of Caxton's, only two besides the Morte were widely read or well-known in later years. These, Paris and Vienne and Four Sons of Aymon, are based on the formula plot structure of the love, marriage, separation and reunion of a couple. They have this in common with de Worde's most popular productions, among them Valentine and Orson, The Squire of Low Degree, Sir Tryamour, Eglamour of Artois and Isumbras. All develop elements common to the Eustace-Constance-Florence-Griselda legends. In Paris and Vienne and in The Squire, the central conflict
occurs between parents and children over the choice of a marriage partner. In both cases, the suitor's social status is the point of contention. The eventual happy marriage of the beleaguered lovers offered a sixteenth-century audience an escapist but ultimately moral fantasy of love and social success in a nostalgic setting. It was this combination that insured the survival of romance and its pre-eminence in fiction.

*Paris and Vienne* is the most popular of Caxton's romances. The story of the two lovers was widely known and long-lived; it can be traced to Provence as far back as the end of the fourteenth century, but the first version to become well-known was that composed in 1432 by Pierre la Cypede of Marseilles, a gentleman in the Dukes' of Burgundy's establishment in that city. Six French texts of the romance survive in manuscripts of the fifteenth century. Within fifty years of its composition, Cypede's story was condensed. In this second version the narrative is reduced to roughly half its former length through the omission of detail in action, dialogue and description of emotion, as well as the excision of five allegorical dreams. The reviser, and Caxton who followed him, may be considered something of a "popularizer" since they do shed some of the more courtly elements of the narrative's literary style.
The second version was printed in many languages: Italian, French, Spanish, Flamish, Swedish, German and even Latin. Caxton's English version was reprinted three times. A deluxe edition with woodcuts was produced in Antwerp in 1492; de Worde re-issued it in 1502 and Thomas Pynson in 1510. The story continued to flourish in the later sixteenth century. The Stationer's Register lists an English edition to be published by Thomas Purfoot in 1598. A play based on it was presented at court in 1571 and the lovers are cited in poems by Skelton and Douglas along with other heroes of romance as examples of true love and noble deeds.10 Paris and Vienne underwent further modification in the seventeenth century at the hands of Matthew Mainwaring. He expanded the narrative considerably, adding episodes, details and rhetorical flourishes which MacEdward Leach, editor of Caxton's romance, says transform it into a "highly fantastic, verbose, sentimental and impossible story..."11 In contrast to this, one of the chief charms of Caxton's version is its realism.

The author's prologue (which appears with only one text of the second version) clearly states his realistic intent. Cypede explains that he chose to translate the lovers' story rather than that of Lancelot or Tristram because he found parts of those hard to believe (impossibles a croyer) which the matter (matiere) of Paris et Vienne was
more appealing because it "me semble estre bien raisonnable et assez créable, et aussi que l'histoire est assez plaisant, quar belle chose est oy er raconter les beaulx faits que les anciens firent jadis." The features of the Tristram and Lancelot stories which Cypede found hard to believe were perhaps their use of the supernatural and their focus on adulterous love. These feature largely in these two heroes' careers but they do not figure at all in *Paris and Vienne*.

Though Cypede places the lovers among les anciens, the events of their story unfold in the real world, not in some timeless, marvelous golden age, of chivalry, but "In the tyme of kynge Charles of Fraunce the yere of our lord Ihesu Cryst mcclxxi/" in the land of Vienne. The realism of *Paris and Vienne* is achieved through the inclusion of many concretizing, localizing details. The action is carefully set in Provence, where the story originated. Vienne and Aigues Mortes are real places and the author seems to have been quite familiar with them since his references to distances and even to the arrangements of buildings are accurate. The castle of the Duke of Vienne was adjacent to the church of Notre Dame in life and in romance; there were, in fact, five post stops on the road between Vienne and Aigues Mortes which the lovers take in their escape. The characters all have names and they are real ones, not
symbolic like Freine or quasi-allegorical like Laudine or Lunette. Their titles are actual ones; we find no damsels who hail from Noir d'Espigne or the like. The names of the rulers we meet in the story are the names of historical personages; King Charles rules France while a King Edward sits on the English throne and a Pope Innocent preaches a crusade. Though no Innocent was Pope while a Charles ruled France and no Innocent preached a crusade, and even if the audience was not familiar with the cities and countryside of Provence, such circumstantial, concretizing details would have made the narrative seem more realistic and placed its action in the world the audience lived in, not some other world of romance.

Besides being grounded in a specific time and place, the story of Paris and Vienne unfolds in a generally plausible way. There are no marvels, no supernatural occurrences and little of the reliance on fortuitous circumstances to move the plot which are so common in other romances. For example, take the series of events by which Paris is able to save the Duke of Vienne's life and win the hand of his daughter. The exiled hero has undertaken a journey to the Holy Land (a motif derived from Mandeville's Travels) where his skill as a huntsman wins him a place in the Sultan's inner circle of companions. Here he learns the language and ways of the infidel so well that his
Christian background goes undetected. The Duke, on crusade, is sent ashore on a reconnaissance mission which fails. Cut off from rescue, he falls into the hands of the enemy. When Paris first hears of him, he seeks out further knowledge and arranges a logical pretext on which to meet the Duke without giving away his own identity. There are many more such examples of attention to detail and realistic presentation and motivation. When Paris and Vienne attempt to elope, they do not just go off into the night—elaborate preparations are made. Paris travels to Aigues Mortes to secure a ship and provisions, arrangements are made for hiding places in Vienne, the money to pay for all this comes from messire Gerald's bank.

Version two of Paris and Vienne is even more realistic since it omits passages of conventional courtly description appearing in the original as well as several lengthy allegorical dreams which reveal the future. Descriptions of tournaments and armour—the full panoply of chivalry—have been shortened. This excision of elaborate details of courtly life, besides streamlining the narrative, helps to remove events from the idealized, unreal context of some romances.

The lovers' story is made very plausible. However, it is also extremely conventional, though I would not go so far as to say with Leach that the "incidents of a more
specific and more realistic nature...are rather incidental, it is the stock motifs that carry the story." The story is the same one told in Eglamour, Torrent and The Squire of the father who refuses to let his daughter marry her chosen suitor because of his inferior social station. The lovers are separated but after a series of agonies and adventures are reunited to the satisfaction of all. More specific conventional elements are: the unknown suitor, suitor in disguise, attempt to surprise the lovers, tournament for the hand of a lady, use of confidantes as go betweens, threatened forced marriage, fighting incognito in tournament, priest as intermediary, ring as love token, recognition through token, escape from prison by getting jailer drunk, trick to avoid unwanted marriage, social inequality as a bar to marriage, pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and blind oath of reward.

The plot structure and episodes of Paris and Vienne are formulaic, but the treatment of character and place is mimetic. To use the words of Per Nykrog, Cypede and the composer of Caxton's version chose "to make use only of events which could have happened in the world around him," that is, "submitted himself to the claims of what Auerbach called mimetic realism." The formula plot calls for the Duke to encounter Paris in exile in the Holy Land, beginning the movement toward return and reunion. Unlike
the Middle English romances we have studied, Caxton's narrative does not just deposit the father there through the exigency of some storm at sea or other timely catastrophe. The events through which he and Paris are brought together are reasonable, explained in detail and well motivated. We saw a similar use of psychological and cultural realism in the romances of Chretien and Marie, but in their works mimesis exists in tension with idealism and supernatural elements. This is not so in _Paris and Vienne_, in part because of the later narrative's treatment of love.

Chretien and Marie express their age's uneasiness about the contradictions arising from the practice of primogeniture and a changing attitude toward the individual. In _Paris and Vienne_ we may note a further modification of the love-marriage, separation—reunion formula found in earlier romances. The virginity of the heroine is greatly stressed as the essential feminine expression of nobility. As a consequence of the importance of virginity, the family context of the main action is modified. The story focuses on two generations, not three, so the dispersal of the family which figures so significantly in _Eglamour, Torrent_ and _Octavian_ is less prominent here. In the more than three hundred years between Chretien and Marie and Caxton, the terms of romance seem almost to have reversed themselves. Rather than questioning the institution of marriage and
remaining largely unconcerned with virginity and lovers of unequal social rank or such issues as the family's role in arranging marriages and focusing instead on the lover's feelings for each other, *Paris and Vienne* offers marriage as the rightful reward of those who temper the expression of their feelings out of regard for chastity and the proper respect for parental authority. This reversal was the product of changes in the social structure and the nature of the processes and institutions through which the structure was perpetuated.

Though there is no consensus about what courtly love was, I think there would be general agreement that it did not concern itself primarily with marriage and was presented not in terms of family and social obligations but in terms of the personal obligations of the lovers to each other. For whatever reason, its immorality in the eyes of the Church, the English pragmatic temperament, or the impossibility and absurdity of courtly love for someone who did not share the particular circumstances of the *juvenes* in which it had a function, the literature of courtly love in its more exotic forms did not catch on in England, though the general idea that love was ennobling did.

Love in *Paris and Vienne* is at first courtly love--secret, from a distance, an inspiration to ministrality and valor in tournament. Once the lovers have revealed their
feelings to each other they pledge constancy but there is no talk of marriage until Vienne's father begins to look for a husband for his daughter. Then, true to her promise, she assures Paris:

I haue not consented to ony maryage/ And ye knowe wel that maryage is nothyng worth/ wythout the consentyng of bothe partyes/ wherfore I praye you to be contente/ for I promyse to you that I shal neuer haue man in mariag but you/ and I wold that it shold be shortly accompliyshed yf it pleased god/ honestly & Iustly and not in synne ne in ordure/ Theryfore I wyl that ye assaye one thynge...that Incontynent ye say to your fader/ that he goo to my lord my fader/ and requyre hym that he gyue me in maryage to you/ and that herein ther be no deffaute/

When the Dauphin refuses to consider the match on grounds of social inequality, Vienne agrees to elope on condition that Paris not touch her body until they are lawfully married. So though she will disobey her parents in choosing a spouse, she will not violate the sanctity of marriage and in fact insits upon it by refusing to take a husband she does not love. When the elopement fails and she is brought before her father, she calls upon the chaplin to testify to her virginity and kneeling says:

Redoubted fader I see wel and knowe in my self that I haue mesprysed and faylled toward you/ wherof I haue grete desplaysyr/ Neuertheles folysshe loue hath enforced me to loue hym/ whyche is wel worthy to be byloued of the moost grettest lady of the Royame of fraunce allewaye seen the noblenes that is in hym/ For I wene that in alle the world is none to hym lyke ne pareylle/

And also I thynke that I am not the first that haue trespassed by semblable reasons/
Over and over again the point is made that marriage must be based on common consent and mutual love.

There was nothing new in the idea that a marriage, to be valid, must have the consent of both parties, though it had not been so specifically emphasized as it is in *Paris and Vienne*. David Benton, in his survey of medieval marriage customs, notes that the Church had always considered this necessary, though it was honored more in theory than in practice.\(^\text{15}\) Practice, among the upper classes at least, was on the side of the Dauphin and the way in which he goes about arranging an appropriate match for his daughter—the consultation with his liege lord and peers to determine a likely candidate, the visit of the young man to his prospective spouse and family and the negotiation of the marriage settlement—accords well with historical accounts of such arrangements. However, we have only to compare the totally different situations of Vienne and Laudine in regards to marriage to apprehend the tremendous change which had taken place over the course of the Middle Ages. For Laudine, marriage is a trap. She may take a lover as she chooses, but she must have a husband to defend the spring. For Vienne, marriage is the culmination of love and its appropriate social and personal expression. But in the last years of the fifteenth century, love was no longer particularly regarded as a reflection of social
status—the expression of noblesse on which the social order was based. Rather, virtuous love was a reflection of individual superiority. It was as though the social significance attached to courtly love in the twelfth century had been less and less emphasized over time, so that by the Renaissance only the personal virtue which it had always signified remained meaningful.

Over the course of the later Middle Ages, marriage came to be generally regarded more as an arrangement between individuals based on mutual consent than as an alliance constructed by families. Earlier in the period (and still among the great aristocrats) marriages were arranged when the principals were quite young, before they were really capable of giving or withholding their consent. Later, people tended to marry when a little older, in young adulthood rather than early adolescence. Also, since there was less reliance on primogeniture, which valued males above females, women came to be more valued as more than just a passive conduit of nobility. The status of women generally improved, in the eyes of the Church and society in general. Thus they had not just social value but individual value, which more and more came to be symbolized by virginity. Not that virginity had not been important before, but it was now less significant as a husband's (and his family's) assertion of uncontested ownership of a
woman. Virginity became a sign of a woman's own integrity, not her future spouse's. Also, as people married later in life, virginity came to mean more. It had little significance if one was betrothed as a child and marred at the onset of puberty. But if one married later, the fact that one was a virgin indicated personal virtue and vouchsafed the truth and rightness of their love.

A fifteenth-century audience would have been particularly interested in discussions of marriage and the realistic treatment of passion like those found in Caxton's romance. In this they set the style of the future. Velma B. Richmond points out that in its treatment of love Paris and Vienne presages the work of Shakespeare and Spenser "whose interest in the romances and enthusiasm for the sanctity of love in marriage are notable. And generations of readers of popular fiction continue to find such love affairs reassuring and uplifting, for...the ideals of chastity and constancy inspire for centuries." Elsewhere she attributes the popularity of Caxton's romance to "the crucial combination of love and adventure with moral tone which offers the excitement and uplifting that readers of popular fiction characteristically seek." While this is correct, I believe we can be more specific and attribute the story's appeal to the fact that it was based on a particular formulaic plot. We have only to think of the
countless novels, plays and movies whose story revolves around the plight of two young lovers whose marriage is thwarted by unsympathetic parents and unyielding social convention to realize the enduring appeal of Paris and Viennne.

The artistic appeal of Caxton's romance is due in great part to its skillful combination of formulaic and mimetic elements. John Cawelti has said that formulaic literature allows for originality (in this case the introduction of realistic elements) only insofar as it "intensified the expected experience...of the formula...without altering it."18 Because the plot of Paris and Viennne is so formulaic, the realistic sensibility of the narrative intensifies the expected by making the story more accessible to the audience since it happens in a world they recognize as their own. It also creates a pleasant excitement by teasing the audience with the prospect that things might not go as expected—in the real world they never do. Vitality is given to stereotyped characters by the presence of significant touches of human complexity and frailty. For example, Viennne comforts Paris in the failure of their elopement but chides him lightly, saying that it is he who should be comforting her. She is spunky and down to earth, reminding him "O my knyght thys is noo newe thynge that the persones that lyuen in thys world haue
trybulacyons/of what someuer lygnage they be/" Paris is a valiant knight, but he does have a tendency to act rashly and his courage occasionally flags. However, like all formula literature, Paris and Vienne appeals not primarily to our experience of life, like mimetic literature, but to our previous experience of the formula itself.

Cypede's realism is largely a literary reaction against the excesses of earlier French romances like those of Lancelot and Tristram with their convoluted, impossible stories of undying illicit passion so often dependent on supernatural elements. Others, like those of Alexander or the Roman de Troie, also spring to mind. Leach points out that this tendency toward realism was characteristic of later romances "and a reflection of new cultural patterns that were...replacing those of the Middle Ages."19 It was also an elite, self-conscious reaction against the elite literature of earlier times. In the cultural dynamics of popular Middle English romance this trend was greatly overshadowed by a "revival" of earlier romance styles. These nostalgic compositions used chivalric settings for an escapist fantasy of love and social advancement. Not only do they make much use of the supernatural and the fantastic but they have, as Finlayson says of The Squire of Low Degree, "things of the sort one expects of romance, but very rarely finds; a romance where
attention is focused at least as much on the splendour of
the created world and the rhetorical elegance of the
sentiments as on the knightly adventures and the love
story." Valentine and Orson, Huon of Bordeaux, Arthur of
Little Britain and Mainwaring's version of Paris and Vienne,
that "fantastic, verbose, sentimental and impossible story"
are examples of this later kind of romance.

The Squire of Low Degree creates a nostalgic fantasy
of chivalry through rhetoric. In contrast to Caxton's
romance which has a relatively plain style (though it is
full of the redundancy which at the time passed for elegant
variation), The Squire self-consciously relies upon
conventional rhetorical devices. John Finlayson, in his
essay defining romance, cites this poem as proof that
English writers were aware of the conventions of courtly
romance (romance of love as distinguished from romance of
adventure) and were able to create their own works in this
mode. But as Sands points out, The Squire's courtliness
is nostalgic—somebody's idea of what a romance was
supposed to be like. The constant use of rhetorical
figures and topoi, especially descriptive formulas and
catalogues, focuses attention on the details of courtly
life in a way we have not seen since discussing Launfal.
This is just another way of making Finlayson's point that
the narrative is full of things of the sort one expects to
find in romance but seldom does. The Squire belongs to that last wave of medieval popular romances, which like Mainwaring's *Paris and Vienne* may be described as "fantastic, verbose, sentimental and impossible."

Conventions of romance description and lovers' speeches developed as an expression of the world of chivalry. The author of de Worde's romance makes use of these conventions to enhance the fantasy of courtly life which is the poem's main appeal. He relies primarily on three devices: catalogue, description and oratory. After a brief introduction, the story opens with a catalogue inspired by the topoi of the *locus amoenus*. Our lovesick knight has taken himself to a garden beneath his lady's window where he finds a delightful arbor.

```
the The sother-wood and sykamoure,
The reed rose and the lyly-floure...
The Filbirdes hanging to the ground,
The figge-tree and the maple round,
And other trees there was mane one,
The piany, the popler, and the plane,
With brode braunches all aboute,
Within the arbar and eke withoute.
On every braunche sate birdes three
Singinge with great melody,
the lavarocke and the nightengale,
The ruddocke, the woodwale, ...
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(11. 33-46)

All in all sixteen varieties of plants and nineteen species of birds are listed for no purpose other than to provide the conventional setting.
This passage is followed immediately by the Squire's soliloquy which is ornamented with repetition and parallel structure. These rhetorical flourishes do not contribute much to the portrayal of emotion as they do in Yvain's soliloquies, though they do characterize it as courtly and refined.

"...Alas, that I was borne!
That I were rich of golde and fee!
That I might wedde that lady free!
Of golde good or some treasure
That I might wedde that lady floure!
Oe elles come of so gentill kinne,
The ladies love that I might winne.
Wolde God that I were a kinges sonne,
That ladyes love that I might wonne!
Or els so bolde in eche fight
As was Sir Libius, that gentell knight,
Or els so bolde in chivalry
As Sir Gawaine or Sir Guy;
Or els so doughty of my hande
As was the giaunte Sir Colbrande.
And it were put in jeoperde
What man shoulde winne that lady free,
Than should no man have her but I,
the Kings daughter of Hungry."
But ever he saide, "Waile a waye!
For poverte passeth all my paye!"
And as he made this rufull chere,
He swoned downe in that arbere. (ll. 69-90)

Aside from the repetition of phrase, couplet structure and idea upon which the speech is built, there are other features we should notice which are characteristic of this romance. The formula "gold and fee" which appears in the second line reoccurs throughout the poem. The Squire and his lady are both very concerned about this and it does establish a less than truly chivalric tone. His desire to
be like the heroes of romance shows the literary self-consciousness of the poem. There is a similar passage in one of the lady's many lengthy speeches to her lover:

Though you be come of simple kinne,  
Thus my love, sir, may ye winne.  
If ye have grace of victory,  
As ever had Sir Libius or Sir Guy,  
When the dwarfe and maide Ely  
Came to Arthoure, king so free.  

(ll. 611-17)

She continues to summarize the events of the romance as an example to the Squire. The above passages also show our author's reliance on conventional phrases and formulas of metrical romance. The Squire is not distinguished poetry. Finally, we should note that upon finishing his lament, the knight faints. There is a lot of swooning in this romance and it contributes to its sentimental, melodramatic atmosphere.

Of course, the lover's lament does not go unheard. The lady opens her window to speak to him, but not before it is described to us.

In her oriall there whe was  
Closed well with royall glass;  
Fulfilled it was with imagery.  
Every windowe by and by;  
On eche side had there a ginne,  
Sperde with many a divers pinne  
Anone that lady, faire and free,  
Undide a pinne of ivere  
And wid the windowes she open set.  
The sunne shone in at her closet.  

(ll. 93-102)

Oriel windows and closets were architectural features which had only become popular in the late fifteenth century and
were signs of wealth and prestige. The descriptive detail of this passage and the mention of rich ornaments like the ivory pin and the imagery in the window contribute to the portrayal of courtly life. Later in the poem, the lady's father, the king of Hungary, makes a long speech in which he tries to cheer her up and bring her out of seclusion by offering her all the delightful things he can think of. He suggests an elaborate outing including hunting and hawking, and a fancy picnic with seventeen kinds of wine, all listed. She is to be carried in a gilded litter curtained with red velvet, or ride a Spanish mule accompanied by musicians. Upon her return to the castle there will be revels, dances and song, then she will withdraw to her private chapel complete with gold censers and an organ and choir to sing in descant and counterpoint. Then to supper served in tents set with sapphires and diamonds where one hundred knights will serve and entertain her. A post prandial stroll by the river will reveal to her a small navy, including mariners to sing sea chanties for her amusement. After a collation of sweetmeats on board, she is to return to her chambers where the silk bed clothes are embroidered with lilies and set with jewels. Incense is to be burned that she may breathe sweet smells as she sleeps. Should she be unable to rest after this busy and filling day, minstrels will come to soothe her.
I know of no other passage quite like this in all Middle English romance—so full of specific details. It is a fantasy of courtly amusement in a splendid setting. None of it ever happens, for the daughter, a true lover, refuses to leave off mourning and so it remains a pretty picture painted by the King to take his daughter's mind off her problems. It is also typical of the way the author uses dialogue—not to reveal character or the relationships of characters but as a vehicle for fantasy presentation of details of courtly life we usually associate with romance: descriptions of tents, clothes, trappings, feasts, etc. Sir Launfal comes close to this in the speech of the fairy lady promising her lover gifts, but these gifts do figure in the action later. Chestre's descriptions of the lady and her maidens are not nearly so precise as those in The Squire. They do not show the same self-consciousness evident in this later recreation of medieval romance. It makes little attempt to be realistic or believable. Its author has chosen to follow the dictates not of mimetic realism but of his conception of romance as a literary genre.

Most of the characters' speeches are fairly rhetorical, based on formulas and repetition. Seeking to take leave of his lady and escape capture, the Squire comes forth with an address based on the formula "Undo your door, my lady sweet
The lady's reply, much of it based on repeated exhortations to "go forth," strains credulity in its length and redundancy for she carries on for a hundred lines or so before she ever opens her door, and by then it is too late. The Squire has been abducted and the steward's unrecognizably disfigured corpse left in his place. Her last long speech in which she announces her intention to enter a nunnery contains a list of farewells to the life she has known. Her father, who is about to reunite her with her lover responds,

"Doughter," he saide, "you must not do so, For all those vowes thou must forgo." "Alas, father, and wele aways! Now have ye harde what I dide saye." "Doughter, let be all thy mourninge; Thou shalt be wedede to a kinge." "Iwis, father, that shall not be For all the golde in Christente;... "My doughter," he saide, "dere derlinge, I knowe the cause of your mourning;... "Alas! father, why did ye so?"... (11. 971-87)

Here the repetition in dialogue is reminiscent of ballads and moves with some of the tension and economy of those narratives, but this soon dissipates when the speech becomes just a summary of the incident in which the Squire was taken.

His fondness for description and rhetorical device led the composer of The Squire to use the plot of his narrative as little more than a frame from which to hang topoi and figures. He is clearly more concerned with physical details
of setting and manner of action than in the action itself. As the lady proposes the tests by which he may win her love, she describes how they are to be conducted with great particularity. He is to sleep on the ground in his armour, even in wet weather, and seek adventures and battles by perilous seas, fight in Lombardy and then Rhodes and finally undertake a journey to the Holy Sepulcher. All of this is pure romance convention as is the description of his armour and shield with its device "Both O and R shall be therein;/ With A and M it shall beginne." (215-16) which is included in the lady's exhortation to her knight. We are never given an actual description of the Squire in combat, though his deeds are summarized several times, and as we have seen, the round of courtly amusements so carefully described never takes place.

The plot of *The Squire* is baldly formulaic and relies heavily on conventional episodes. De Worde's title for the romance is *Undo Your Door*, taken from the central episode—the exposure of the young lovers in the lady's chambers by a jealous steward which also appears in *Amis and Amiloun* and other romances. Elements of this formulaic episode appear in *Paris and Vienne* but they are not focused in one incident. The Dauphin does send out his steward to accost and identify the young man who is serenading his daughter every night, but Paris eludes him. The lovers are not
exposed through treachery, though they fear it and so conduct their meetings with extreme secrecy and propriety. The "undo your door" scene combines the elements of treachery, exposure and separation all in one melodramatic episode. In Paris and Vienne the separation is made final only when the elopement fails. So though Caxton's romance is conventional and does have a formulaic plot, the elements of the formula are not all introduced at once in conventional scenes. To return to Leach's statement that the conventional elements carry Paris and Vienne, we can see that the romance relies much less on conventions than some romances and in its realism handles elements of formulas in unconventional ways, though not so unconventional as to interfere with the expected outcome of the story.

The composer of The Squire is not always successful in his handling of formulas. They dominate the plot, but the actions of the characters do not always accord with them. According to the formula, the lovers are separated because of unequal social rank, the girl cloistered by her father, the boy exiled. But the King of Hungary has no real objection to the Squire. Why then does he imprison him? Why, since he knows the cause of his daughter's sorrows and makes other attempts to cheer her up, does he not tell her that her lover is alive and performing the tests of chivalry
she had demanded of him? Since the King is not moved to cloister his daughter, thus allowing her an opportunity for the virtuous suffering requisite for the lovers' reunion in this moral fantasy, another way is found to introduce the necessary tribulations. The daughter mistakes the steward's mutilated body (which his men, for no reason we are told, have dressed in the Squire's clothes) for that of her lover, embalms and enshrines it in her bedchamber and withdraws from the world to mourn. This motif of the embalmed lover appears in folktale and literary versions (Boccaccio's Decameron) so it is conventional, but in The Squire it is not well integrated into the whole plot.

In keeping with their formula plot, The Squire has in common with Paris and Vienne the theme of the poor suitor. In both romances the man's inferior social status is an obstacle to the lovers' marriage. In Caxton's romance it truly is an obstacle because the parents on both sides consider such an unequal match an outrage against convention and social order (this in spite of their friendship and Paris' triumphs in tournaments). The King of Hungary is much more egalitarian. Indeed, no aristocrat of the sixteenth century would have spoken as he does, though his observations on social climbing are accurate.

For I have sene that many a page
Have become men by mariage;
Than it is semely that squier
To have my daughter by this manere,
And eche man in his degree
Become a lorde of ryaltye,
By fortune and by other grace,
By heritage and by purchase: (11. 373-80)

This only real problem caused by the Squire's social inferiority is that he lacks gold and fee to conduct himself and live in a manner fitting his natural nobility. However, a promise of reward takes care of that. This treatment of the theme of the poor suitor marks *The Squire* as a popular romance because its egalitarian attitude and overt concern for money are non-aristocratic. Lack of money does not figure very largely in *Paris and Vienne*.

*The Squire*, composed around 1500 in the East Midlands, was a new romance in the sixteenth century. It has no known sources and no manuscript version has come down to us. It seems to be closely related to *Eglamour* and *Emare*, for it has many formulas in common with them. First printed by de Worde, it was re-issued by William Copland in 1555-56 and a shortened version was copied into the Percy Folio manuscript, that late compendium of medieval popular literature. It also appears among the literary holdings of one Captain Cox, a Coventry mason of the sixteenth century. Donald Sands, in his introduction to *The Squire*, says that "the poem seems to have enjoyed a peculiar popularity a century after its creation—perhaps not of an altogether noteworthy kind—a popularity attested to by numerous
references to it by printers, pamphleteers, playwrights and collectors of the time." But the very fact that this popularity is of a kind Sands considers not worthy of note shows that the romance was indeed popular literature.

De Worde's romances reached an audience rather different from Caxton's and so though both The Squire and Paris and Vienne were popular literature, we may distinguish several socio-cultural groups among their readers. To complete our analysis of the cultural dynamic of the Middle English popular romances, we must now turn from a consideration of the romances and their formulaic syntheses of ethos and world view to consider the nature of their audiences.

Caxton's taste was courtly, but his audience was by no means exclusively aristocratic. In the Prologue to King Arthur he addresses that romance to "noble lords and ladies and all other estates of what estate or degree they been of." Richard Green and others point out that in order to make a reasonable profit, Caxton needed to reach an audience larger than the aristocracy and realized that lesser folk would be attracted to his courtly productions by the "promise of initiation into aristocratic mysteries." The social makeup of Caxton's audience was not new. It had long been the case that people of substance and education, whether noble or not, shared pretty much the
same literary tastes and interests. Especially in London, the center of government and of the wool and wine trade which early on gave rise to a wealthy and powerful merchant class, there was a demand for literature. The Auchinleck manuscript was one of the earliest books made to meet this demand. Multiple copies of Lydgate's and Chaucer's poems had been produced for sale by John Shirley (d. 1465) and bought by essentially the same sorts of people who bought editions of these poems from Caxton. None of Chaucer's works survive in manuscripts made for aristocrats; all were owned by prosperous merchant and gentry families.

In the second half of the fifteenth century there was a general interest in books and book collecting among such people as well as the aristocracy. John Tiptoft, Earl of Worcester, one of the leading bibliophiles and patrons of the day, and others like him prepared the way for the humanism of the Tudor renaissance. Tiptoft's friend, Sir John Fastolf, the wealthiest and most powerful commoner of his time, was another avid collector of books in French and English. He was also responsible for the rise of the famous Paston family to whom he left a manor and a number of his books. All of these people were part of an active circle of literary patronage in East Anglia.26 Peter Aderne, a London lawyer of the same period, owned a large number of manuscripts, all in English, including The Seige of Troy,
Lives of the Saints, Boniface's Life of Christ, The Consol­
solation of Philosophy, a life of St. Thomas of Canterbury
and books on hunting and grammar. Thomas Stotevyle, also
a Londoner, had forty manuscripts including Piers Plowman
and romances of Alexander, Bevis of Hampton, Jerusalem and
Troy, though these may have been in French. Even
provincial gentlemen like Robert Thornton were collecting
literature.

We are fortunate in having detailed information about
the literary tastes and activities of Caxton's audience
from the papers of the Paston family. Among the Paston
papers is a list of English books probably belonging to
John Paston the younger, drawn up between 1475 and 1483.
Its contents are as follows:

1. A book had of my hostess at the George...of the Death
of Arthur beginning at Cassableaun, Guy, Earl of Warwick,
King Richard Cour de Lion, a Chronicle...to Edward III.

2. Item, a Book of Troilus which William Bra...has had
nearly ten years, and lent it to Dame...Wingfield...

3. Item, a black Book with the Legend of Ladies, la Belle
Dame sans Merci, the Parliament of Fowles, the Temple of
Glass, Palatyse and Sciticus, the Meditations of...the
Grene Knight

4. Item, a book in print of the Play of Chess

5. Item, a book lent Middleton, and there in is La Belle
Dame sans merci, the Parliament of Fowles, Baladd...of
Guy and Colbrand, of the Goose the [Horse and the Sheep],
the Disputation between Hope and Dispair....Marehaunts,
the Life of Saint Christopher.
6. A red book that Percival Robsart gave me...of the meeds of the mass, the Lamentation...of Childe Ypotis, a Prayer to the Vernicle...called the Abbey of the Holy Ghost.

7. Item, in quires, Tully de Senectute in...whereof there is no more clear written...

8. Item, in quires, Tully or Cicero, de Amititia, left with William Worcester

9. Item, in quires, a book of the Policy of In...

10. Item, in quires, a book de Sapiencia...wherein the ii parson is likened to sapience....

11. Item, a book of Othea, text and glose,...in quires

Memorandum, my old book of Blazonings of arms
Item, the new book portrayed and blasoned
Item, a copy of blasonings of arms and th...names to be fownde by letter.
Item, a book of arms portrayed in paper...

Memorandum, my book of Knighthood and the manner of making of knights, of jousts or tournaments fighting in lists, paces held by soldiers...and challenges, slautes of war and of the Rule of Princes.
Item, a book of new statutes from Edward IV2

A number of these books were made for the Pastons by William Ebesham, a scribe who had connections with Caxton at Westminster.30 He copied Othea (Epistle of Othea to Hector by Christine de Pisan, composed for the Duke of Burgundy) as well as Cicero's On Old Age and On Friendship which were translations from French made for the Fastolf-Tiptoft circle. Tiptoft himself translated Of Friendship and all these works were later published by Caxton. One of the Paston's books, The Game and Play of Chess, was the product of his press. The Pastons were,
then, part of an elite literary circle. Much of their library was made up of courtly literature, including works by Chaucer and Lydgate.

Only a few of the titles in their collection are familiar to us from our study of the compendium manuscripts. Lydgate's "The Horse, the Goose and the Sheep," and the religious contents of the red book are exceptions, as are the romances, but for the most part this is a collection of learned and courtly works. None of the Pastons' romances were published by Caxton, though he had printed only two, *The Recuyll of Troys* and *Jason*, when the inventory was compiled. Most of the chivalric narratives the Pastons possessed, those of the death of Arthur, Guy of Warwick and Richard Lionheart, are to be found in a borrowed, not a commissioned book. The volume had belonged to the hostess of a London inn where the Pastons frequently stayed during their trips to the capital, so the contents of this collection are possibly more representative of middle class than aristocratic taste. In another volume they had a romance of the Green Knight (apparently part of the description of this item is illegible, so we cannot be sure which Middle English romance is being referred to) and a ballad of Guy and Colbrand, a favorite since the early days of the minstrel Hereward's recitation at Winchester. The Pastons, then, had a small collection of romances, most of
them legendary-historical narratives of adventure concerning English heroes. They are among the most frequently appearing titles of the earlier romances and may well have been composed in the characteristic minstrel style. Versions of two of them, Guy and Richard, were later printed by de Worde.

The relatively large number of books in the collection relating to heraldry and the conduct of knighthood were made for William Paston, Knight, and his father, Justice Paston. The Justice rose to great prominence, partly through his association with Sir John Fastolf, and was offered a knighthood, which he refused. However, he went to the great trouble and expense of having his son knighted. A person so recently admitted to the ranks of the elite might well require such books for their "initiation into the mysteries of the aristocracy."

De Worde actively sought a different audience from Caxton's. As H.S. Bennett says, de Worde's success lay with the citizens and petite bourgeoisie. Caxton had cultivated the nobility and gentry. In 1500, eleven years after inheriting Caxton's business, de Worde moved it from Westminster to London. Westminster, Blake suggests, was frequented mostly by members of the clergy, gentry and nobility; few others would have had occasion to come there. By the turn of the century it was clear that
London would be the center of the English book trade and cultural life and no doubt it was for this reason that de Worde set up shop there at the sign of the sun in Fleet Street. In London, of course, his books would have found an audience of citizens and petite bourgeoisie, and we may note some changes in his publications after the move which may reflect the interests of this new buying public. Half of the works de Worde printed before the relocation (roughly fifteen of twenty nine titles) were reprints of books brought out by Caxton, most of the rest were religious. But of the seventeen titles published by de Worde in 1500 (an unusually large number for one year) twelve were non-Caxtonian. It is especially significant that four very popular romances were printed for the first time that year, Bevis of Hampton, Eglamour of Artois, Guy of Warwick, and Ipomadon, as well as a ballad of Robin Hood. The only romance he had published previously was Caxton's King Arthur.

That de Worde's romances did, indeed, reach an audience of citizens and petite bourgeois (the yeomanry) and that they were popular literature is confirmed by an inventory of the books in the possession of one Captain Cox, a Coventry mason. It appears in a letter written in 1575, forty years after de Worde's death, and so does not belong to his immediate context. Wright (Middle Class Culture in Elizabethan England) reprints the inventory section of the
letter in full, saying that it "doubtless represented the
taste of readers of his...[the Captain's]...social class."33
It includes many titles of books printed by de Worde
(though we have no way of knowing whether or not these
particular volumes were): Sheperds Kalender, The Ship of
Fools, Robin Hood, The Churl and the Bird, the Seven Wise
Masters, as well as a good number of romances, eight of
which were issued by the press in Fleet Street: King
Arthur's Book, Huon of Bordeaux, Four Sons of Aymon, Bevis
of Hampton, The Squire of Low Degree, the Knight of Courtsey
and the Lady Faguell, Frederik of Gene, Sir Eglamour of
Artois, Sir Tryamour, Sir Lamwell, Sir Isumbras, Sir Gawain,
and Oliver of Castile.

Wright's comments on the inventory stress its popular
nature.

Here are found types which continued in favor
with the commonality for years to come. Indeed,
some of the Coventry mason's books were
continually being reprinted throughout the
seventeenth century. If his taste runs somewhat
to romance, especially those stories dealing
with legendary British history, Captain Cox need
make no apology, for though ridicule of this
type of fiction had already set in, it was still
enjoying considerable favor, even with
aristocratic readers, and was to continue in
favor with the multitude for a century to come.34

One of the outstanding characteristics of popular
taste and literature is that they do not strive for novelty
or innovation. Richmond frequently points out examples of
"the continuity of popular fiction over the centuries."35
Wright notes its basic stability in spite of change.\textsuperscript{36} The fact that aristocrats of the sixteenth century still liked romances is typical of the state of popular culture in early modern Europe, for as Peter Burke says, the aristocracy had not yet withdrawn from participation in it, though it was their secondary cultural tradition.\textsuperscript{37} That romances like Captain Cox's were objects of ridicule also suggests that they were popular literature. Northrop Frye notes that from the standpoint of elitist, that is serious, literature romance has always been at the bottom of the hierarchy of literary genres.\textsuperscript{38}

Caxton and de Worde published different kinds of romances and sought to satisfy the needs and desires of audiences drawn from different socio-cultural groups. Like his mentor, de Worde printed translations of French prose romances and had some contact with the nobility, but his printing policies were inclusive. He printed what would sell. Caxton's were exclusive—he printed what reflected his own taste and that of a particular group within the reading public.

Though both men contributed to the development of popular literature, de Worde clearly played a more important role in popularizing Middle English romances. Though others sometimes printed such works, de Worde was largely
responsible for their continued circulation in the Renaissance. In choosing to print such stories, he recognized the existence of a reading public which Caxton had chosen not to cater to. He also recognized the enduring appeal of romances. Though composed hundreds of years earlier, they were still in demand. As the reading public continued to grow and education (not mere literacy) and the desire to own books of literature became more common, the demand for romances increased. Old ones were reprinted, new ones were composed. The new ones took their basic plot structure—of lovers separated and reunited, finally in marriage—and their favorite themes—social inequality of lovers as a bar to marriage, marriage threatened by over-bearing parent, lovers' fidelity tested by long separation, etc.—from the older works. However, they tended to be more ornate, more sentimental, in short, more romantic, than the earlier ones. As the militaristic, elitist ethos of the medieval aristocrats was replaced by the more bourgeois and socially inclusive ethos of Renaissance Englishmen, that medieval model for life, chivalry, became largely a nostalgic fantasy of love and social advancement and popular romance as the twentieth century knows it came into its own.
NOTES TO CHAPTER VI


5Blake, p. 187.


7Blake, p. 187.


10Paris and Vienne are mentioned by Skelton in Phyllyp Sparowe and by Douglas in The Palais of Honour.


12Ibid.

13Ibid., p. xxi.


17. Ibid., p. 143.


21. Ibid.


23. Ibid., p. 252.

24. Ibid., p. 249.


28. Ibid., p. 147.


31 Bennett, p. 176.

32 Blake.


34 Ibid., p. 85.

35 Richmond, p. 106.

36 Wright, p. 87.


CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

Having traversed two countries and four hundred years in pursuit of Middle English popular romance, what can we say about it in summary? We began this study by pointing out a number of problems presented by the word "popular" as it is applied to Middle English romances. It is fitting then to conclude by delineating those Middle English narratives which were popular romances and offering a more precise and therefore more meaningful definition of "popular" than has existed before.

Over the course of this study we have distinguished popular romances in a number of ways: by recognizing their formal and aesthetic characteristics, by identifying those which enjoyed the largest and longest circulation and analyzing their cultural milieu, and by distinguishing them from works belonging to and composed for members of the royal courts. A primary consideration in describing the formal and aesthetic characteristics of the romances is the role the authors play in the creation of their works. This is related to the ways in which they shape their narratives and their aesthetic purpose. The authors of popular romances
are relatively anonymous. Though we may, in fact, know
their names, their productions are not shaped by an
individual artistic conception but by the logic of their
formulaic material. Elite romances, on the other hand, do
bear the imprint of their individual authors. Chretien
de Troyes called this imprint *antancion*, that is, the
author's particular plan for his work. These different
approaches to composition and the different aesthetics the
composers aspire to are clearly reflected in the kinds of
narrators they employ. In the romances of Chretien and
Marie, the voice of an individual, the author, intrudes in
ways that challenge the reader to a more complex under­
standing of the events it has related and maintain a tension
between life as lived and the ideal world of chivalry. The
popular romances are typically narrated by a minstrel or at
least are set forth in oral style. The narrator's main
function is to explicate and validate the story for members
of the audience, not to challenge them to do it for
themselves. In further contrast to elite romances, tensions
are safely dissipated in a fantasy of chivalric life.

In addition to their minstrel narration, we have
noticed other oral qualities in the popular romances,
including highly formulaic language, which contribute to
their distinctive style. This is no less a style than the
poetic language of elite romances in whose conventional
imagery and ornamentation we may trace the influence of Ovid or treatises on rhetoric and poetics. Thus the frequent redundancies and borrowings in the popular romances cannot be generally attributed to the poetic incompetence of "hack writers." Some aspects of these narratives, especially their formulaic composition, do seem to have roots in the practices of oral poets. Also like oral poets, the romances' compilers and copyists had little respect for the fixed text or the integrity of an "original" version. To a large extent this attitude did not develop until the introduction of printing and multiple identical texts. This fact greatly weakens the assertion that the existence of many "corrupt" or "degenerate" versions shows the romances reached an undiscriminating audience.

In spite of their oral characteristics, the Middle English romances have come down to us in manuscripts and owe little to minstrel performance. We may not assume that the romances we know reached an unlettered audience in inn yards or market squares from the lips of itinerant story tellers. By the fourteenth century, when most Middle English romances were composed, minstrels were musicians. But in the nostalgic world presented by the romances minstrels traditionally celebrated the deeds of chivalric heroes. Since the glorification of chivalry is the primary aim of
most romances, minstrels were deemed to be appropriate speakers, lending authority and authenticity to the narratives. Many of the "oral" aspects of the popular romances are not derived from an oral tradition at all but are deliberate simulations of oral performance, or what their composers thought minstrel delivery was like.

In addition to direct and unequivocal presentation of their stories and their oral style, we may further characterize the Middle English popular romances by their plot structure and predilection for certain themes and motifs. Courtship and marriage, separation and reunion are the main events of the narrative and may be repeated a number of times before the action finally concludes. Usually the action is precipitated by a conflict between parent and child over the choice of a suitable spouse, which results in the dispersal of the entire family. At the heart of the conflict is the issue of social status—whether one marries for love's sake or for power's sake. This conflict is usually resolved when one of the characters rises in social status through recognition of innate nobility and/or through revelation of true (aristocratic) identity. Two motifs frequently used to develop these themes of family conflict and social mobility are the male Cinderella and the calumniated wife. This general type of story is, of course, very common and the mere fact that it is presented in the
trappings of chivalry does not mean that a work is necessarily a popular romance. However, when we identify those Middle English romances in which this plot is present with those other characteristics of popular romance we have already mentioned, we can distinguish a well defined group of narratives. These are also, it happens, the most popular romances in the sense of being widely known and well liked, for they were the most frequently recopied.

The minstrel narration of these romances and their focus on family conflicts and upward social mobility bespeak the adaptation of chivalric material originally developed for aristocrats to the concerns of another audience. The world of chivalry was exclusive, restricted on the basis of lineage and innate nobility. The romances make this world available to people outside the pale of wealth and inherited position by affirming their innate nobility and the myth of power gained through the marriage alliance.

We may further delineate the popular romances by considering the social status and cultural milieu of their primary audience. The social status of their audience is particularly relevant to an understanding of the romances since they are a most class-conscious form of literature. They began in twelfth century France as the self-portrayal of the ideals and mores of the aristocracy and characters in romances almost always belong to this social station.
But the ideals and mores of the aristocracy differed over time and space; and especially when romances were read by people of a different class, it is not surprising that the synthesis of chivalric worldview and ethos achieved in the narratives changed too.

So the meanings of the romances are clarified by reference to their audiences' social status. The word "popular" refers to an audience's social status as well as to a work's aesthetic. At the least it implies that the work in question was not read exclusively by members of the upper classes but was accessible to the general populace. Only in late medieval England did such a wide reading public develop. At the end of the thirteenth century, people outside the great courts and religious establishments began to seek literature for instruction and entertainment. At first the audience for romances in English was rather small, but by the end of the fourteenth century English was the language of grammar school instruction, schools were more numerous and formal education was more common. The size of the audience for the romances increased markedly and rather suddenly. It also became more socially diverse.

As far as we can tell from the owners of the manuscripts containing Middle English romances, their audiences did not belong to the lower or lower middle classes, as Derek Pearsall suggests.¹ The owners of the Auchinleck manuscript and the
Thorntons do not fit this description. Most of the manuscripts belonged to country gentry or to wealthy bourgeois who shared their way of life. Only in the early sixteenth century do we find romances in manuscripts owned by members of the middle classes (as that term is usually understood). Nor were the readers of romances people of minimal education. The Pastons sent their sons to Oxford and commissioned copies of works by Christine de Pisan and Cicero that had been translated into English by the early humanist, John Tiptoft, Earl of Worcester. They also owned romances recounting the adventures of several popular heroes. Chaucer's listeners could not have appreciated Sir Thopas had they not known the likes of Sir Launfal.

The spread of literacy in late medieval England and the importation of large quantities of relatively inexpensive paper from France and the Low Countries led to conditions in which a genuinely popular literature could develop. The compendium manuscripts containing so many romances were not mass-produced. However, they were less expensive standardized volumes made in large numbers. The audience which bought de Worde's romances had existed a generation earlier, but at that time the technology of book making did not permit the inexpensive production of numerous copies.

Once printing was established as the accepted method of book making, the cultural dynamics of literature became much more complicated. The bourgeoisie and yeomanry, which
by the end of the Middle Ages were well defined social
groups, began to compose and demand their own kinds of
literature because they were educated and could afford
books. This was quite a change, since most literature had
been produced by and for churchmen or laymen of the upper
classes. We should remember that there were many more
copies of the Canterbury Tales in circulation than there
were of all the romances combined. Lydgate's siege poems
survive in more manuscripts than the most popular romance.
In the Middle Ages, most readers and manuscript owners
turned to the court for literature. Only in the
Renaissance did the number of works produced by and for
people other than the elite equal and outdistance those
produced for the elite.

The nature of literature as well as that of the audience
changed in the Renaissance. The fact that books were
produced for sale meant that authors were less dependant on
patronage, so more kinds of works were produced now that
book production was out of the hands of select groups.
Also, now all copies of a work could be identical. No
longer could any number of scribes and improvers silently
exercise their editorial faculties on a narrative. All of
this contributed to the importance accorded to fixed texts.
By the sixteenth century works of literature were composed
and circulated in ways that are recognizably those of our
own world. They are modern, not medieval.
Though there is continuity between the Middle English popular romances and their more modern counterparts, the circumstances in which they existed were very different. Conceptions of popular and elite literature which are based on productions of later times must be applied only with caution to medieval works. Still, it has been helpful in identifying the Middle English popular romances to survey those narratives that continued to find an audience in the Renaissance. De Worde, as we have seen, printed versions of many older narratives: Isumbras, Ipomedon, Eglamour, Octavian, Guy, Bevis, Degare and Richard Lionheart. Torrent and the Squire of Low Degree were composed later but in the same style. Besides being among the longest lived, these were the most frequently copied romances, appearing in numerous manuscripts. The only very popular Middle English romance de Worde did not publish some version of was Titus and Vespasian/Sege of Jerusalem.

The medieval romances that were printed in the Renaissance are similar in fundamental ways to later popular romances also surviving in editions from de Worde's press. The Four Sons of Aymon, Valentine and Orson, Paris and Vienne, Huon of Bordeaux and less enduring works like Appolonius of Tyre and Helyas, Knight of the Swan recount tales of courtship and marriage, separation and reunion. Furthermore, they develop themes of family conflict over
marriage and social advancement by employing male Cinderella and calumniated queen motifs. Though they lack the Middle English narratives' formulaic style and structure—since they are prose, not verse, and are reasonably close translations of fifteenth-century French works—the later romances do share the same concerns and some stereotypical characters and episodes.

Chivalric narratives of this sort continued to find an audience even in the seventeenth century. To judge from the comments of one Francis Kirkman, a London merchant, their appeal had not changed much since the fourteenth century when, according to Sylvia Thrupp, it was a commonplace of satirists that even soap-maker's sons wanted to be knights. Berating his younger self for reading so many romances, Kirkman says,

But when I came to Knight Errantry, and reading Montelion Knight of the Oracle, and Ornatus and Artesia, and the Famous Parismus; I was contented beyond measure and (believing all I read to be true) wished myself Squire to one of these Knights: I proceeded on to Palmerin of England, and Amadis de Gaul --- and reading how that Amadis and other Knights not knowing their Parents, did in time prove to be Sons of Kings and great Personages; I had such a fond and idle Opinion, that I might in time prove to be some great Person, or at leastwise be Squire to some Knight.3

from The Unlucky Citizen

The Middle English romances printed by de Worde are, then, clearly in the mainstream of the development of popular
romance in England. No only had they been the most frequently recopied in medieval manuscripts, but they had the greatest continuity with later popular romances.

We have identified and characterized the Middle English popular romances according to their aesthetic and their audience and their cultural milieu. To complete our picture of them we need only to bring out the contrast with those romances owned by and composed for members of the royal court and those that did not survive into the sixteenth century. Most of the romances owned by medieval English aristocrats were in French. At his death in 1305, bibliophile Guy Beauchamp, Earl of Worcester left to Bordesley Abbey a large portion of his library, which included a few romances: Lancelot, Titus and Vespasian, a Romance of Troy, Brut and Constantine, three Alexander romances and Arthur and Modred. Queen Isabella, in the middle of the century, owned a Siege of Troy, Percival and Gawain, Arthur and Tristram and Isolde. Richard II inherited several of these books and owned a number of others: Ameri de Narbonne, Enseignements Trebor, Garin de Lorrain, Roman de Daurel, Fuerres de Gadres, Queste del Sant Graal and Generides, as well as a book of lais. Romances like these, most of which belonged to the three great Matters of Greece and Rome, France, and Britain, or to the cycles of the Nine Worthies, always commanded the
greatest literary respect. They claimed to be history (i.e. true) and they had a lengthy formal literary tradition (prestige). Several narratives of this type were translated from French during the early fourteenth century and appear in Middle English versions. These adaptations almost always streamline the narrative and avoid the more esoteric features which would have limited its audience to a select group. Such romances as Arthur and Merlin, The Lyfe of Alisaunder, Sir Tristrem or the Stanzaic Morte are not in the mainstream of Middle English popular romance, though they appear in manuscripts containing popular works.

The romances in English written by the court poets Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate do not appear in these manuscripts at all. Some romances in the Canterbury Tales do draw upon popular narratives. However, "The Knight's Tale" and Troilus as well as Lydgate's long siege poems of Troy and Thebes and Caxton's cycle of the Nine Worthies are deliberately elitist in style, subject matter and treatment. At the end of the fifteenth century the aristocratic preference for cyclical, historical romances was even more pronounced than in earlier times. In fact, Lydgate and Caxton referred to their chivalric narratives not as romances at all, but as histories.

Significantly, no Middle English cyclic verse romances were printed in the Renaissance. Of Caxton's, only two, The Recuyll of Troy and Malory's Morte (both of particular
historical interest to Englishmen), were printed later. The more historical forms of chivalric narrative declined in the sixteenth century. (Though marginal notes in the Auchinleck and Lincoln's Inn Manuscripts indicate that Arthur and Merlin and King Alisaunder were being studied as history at this time.) The new romances that became popular and the older ones that remained so all tell similar stories of love and adventure. The histories and cyclic romances, on the other hand, are primarily concerned with less purely personal matters. They have a different sort of structure from popular romances (and because of this difference, Susan Wittig excludes these works from her study of stylistic and narrative structures).

Though some Middle English epic romances such as The Sege or Batayle of Troye or Titus and Vespatian must be recognized as popular works, on the whole they are not. Katheryn Hume explains their proliferation at the end of the fifteenth century as "crossing the language barrier." Until that time most romances of the Matters or cycles had been read in French. The fact that they were translated indicates that even among those who shared the literary tastes of the social elite, English was now the language of choice. Most of these later histories are lengthy works, many are prose. None survive in manuscripts with popular romances. This kind of layering—whereby different kinds
of romances were produced in English at different times in response to shifts in the language of certain social groups—reveals the complexity of the romances' cultural dynamic. It also helps us to distinguish the truly popular Middle English romances.

The term "popular" can be usefully applied to the romances if we do not mean by that narratives recorded from oral tradition which found minimally educated audience among members of some ill-defined lower-middle class. Such an audience would have had little desire for books of literature or exposure to them or their contents. Instead, the popular romances reached a diverse audience ranging, over time, from noble to merchant. Their primary audience, though, was the gentry.

The term "popular" cannot be applied to the Middle English romances generally, but only to particular ones and sometimes only to particular versions in particular manuscripts. Neither can it be used to distinguish productions deemed to be less skillful compositions or those which are adaptations of more "courtly" French romances. The Middle English popular romances have formal and aesthetic integrity. They have a formulaic style and poetic language of their own which may be handled more or less skillfully; popular romance is not bad romance.

"Popular" is, finally, a term useful in describing some of the Middle English romances. By recognizing the
complexity of the interaction of cultural, social and artistic influences, rather than trying to simplify or generalize about it, we have been able to develop a clear but flexible definition that will, on the one hand, exclude from consideration works like Lydgate's *Guy of Warwick*, though Guy was perhaps the most popular hero of romance, while including courtly works translated by aristocrats which were widely read. Lydgate did everything he could to make his production elite since it was commissioned for the Countess of Shrewsbury as an ancestral romance. He turned to a Latin source (the fact that the deeds of Guy were recounted in a Latin prose history shows how materials span cultural strata), calling his own narrative a history. A number of late romances commissioned by aristocrats—*Huon of Bordeaux, Valentine and Orson, The Four Sons of Aymon*—were printed by Caxton and de Worde. These were, for a long time, popular with a socially diverse audience and can be considered as popular romances.

The most genuinely popular Middle English romances are those like *Eglamour, Octavian* or *Isumbras*. Appearing in many manuscripts and enjoying long circulation, these narratives are variations on the most common plot in their conventional genre. The fact that they seem to have influenced each other and inspired a number of similar narratives is a further indication of their central
importance to the tradition of Middle English popular romance. Scholars have long been aware of the stylistic, thematic, textual and formal similarities of these poems. Now we can better understand how and why this came to be.
NOTES TO CHAPTER VI


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