

*Mi Suede Leuedi, Her Mi Béne:*  
The Power and Patronage of the Heroine  
in Middle English Romance

by

Karen Clout

Department of English

McGill University, Montreal

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the heroines in Middle English romances and argues that, like the noblewomen who lived in England during the Plantagenet period, they are not helpless princesses simply waiting to be rescued by the brave, strong hero. In fact, these heroines show an enormous amount of intelligence, ingenuity, perseverance, and strength of character. Many play a pivotal role in the hero's success in his quest by giving him a token, providing knowledge, or teaching him a lesson. Also, it is the heroines who provide the heroes with rewards after the quests are completed. The present thesis offers a contribution to the study of Medieval English Romances in providing a revision of standard feminist analyses. In many of these studies there seems to be a lack of appreciation for the role of female characters and their relation to the outcome of the hero's quest. Even studies written from a feminist perspective tend to overlook the strength of the heroine's character, the attainment of her goals, and the fact that she is often a powerful figure who is of much higher status than her suitor. In these romances the female characters wield a substantial amount of both private and public power, an aspect of the genre which has often been ignored.

# ABSTRACT

Dans cette thèse nous étudions les héroïnes dans les intrigues amoureuses du moyen anglais et nous avançons l'argument que ces dernières, tout comme les Anglaises aristocrates la période de Plantagenet, elles ne sont pas des princesses impuissantes qui attendent qu'un héros fort et courageux vienne à leur secours. En réalité, ces héroïnes font preuve d'intelligence, d'ingéniosité, de persévérance et de force de caractère extraordinaire. Bon nombre d'entre elles jouent un rôle essentiel dans le succès de la quête du héros en lui offrant un cadeau, des renseignements ou en lui donnant une leçon. Aussi, ce sont les héroïnes qui offrent des récompenses aux héros une fois les quêtes achevées. Cette thèse contribue à l'étude des intrigues amoureuses de l'Angleterre médiévale en offrant une nouvelle perspective sur l'analyse féministe répandue. Dans un grand nombre de ces études, il semble y avoir un manque d'appréciation envers le rôle des personnages féminins et de leur contribution à la réussite de la quête du héros. Même les études écrites du point de vue féministe ont tendance à négliger la force de caractère de la héroïne, la réalisation de ses objectifs et le fait que bien souvent, elle est un personnage puissant qui possède un statut plus prestigieux que celui de son prétendant. Dans ces intrigues amoureuses, les personnages féminins exercent un pouvoir considérable sur le plan public et privé, un aspect souvent négligé dans ce genre.

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# INTRODUCTION

Many of the works produced in the Middle Ages have suffered exhaustive study, such as the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Thomas Malory, and of course; Geoffrey Chaucer, to whom the study of English literature is nonetheless indebted, as their works constitute an integral chapter in the development of this field. It is the intention of this thesis to concentrate on lesser known works in the genre of romance, written in English, for the most part, by anonymous writers. These works were popular during the Plantagenet period, and they offer a unique view of the hopes and desires of the English nobility at that time.

The Middle English Romances are somewhat difficult to isolate and study as a group. In order to examine these works accurately, one must take into consideration other literature produced at the same time, as well as that which preceded it. The latter includes Celtic and Classical mythology, Breton Lays, English Lyrics, Arthurian Legend, Chansons de Gestes, early French Romances, and courtly literature. One must also understand the continued tensions between France and England, and the predominantly feudalistic French culture that existed in England in the period when these romances were read. Primarily though, we must understand something of the different views of women put forth by many different men, and, in some instances, by women themselves.

The very nature of a romance dictates that there be both a hero and heroine who are in love, or fall in love during the story. However, many previous studies focus only on the

hero, and consider the heroine to be no more than a mere object of the hero's desire. In labeling the female characters as such, critics miss as much as half the story, character development, and even the purpose of the quest. The heroines of Middle English Romances are not cardboard figures thrown in by the authors to provide a love interest for the hero. Rather, they show characteristics such as strength, wealth, independence, intelligence; and the ability to rule a kingdom, rescue the hero, withstand physical hardship, all the time remaining faithful, courteous, and somewhat obedient to their lords, and God. Essentially, these heroines hold power, despite and contrary to the patriarchal society in which they are depicted.

In medieval England the position of women, especially those of the nobility, was quite different in theory than in practice. There seems always to be exceptions to the rule. The Middle English Romances portray women as taking on roles that are not normally accepted for their gender in a feudal society. However, history itself supports the notion that women did take on these roles, and performed them well, as the examples cited in this thesis will demonstrate.

The power exerted by medieval women and the heroines of the Middle English Romances is essentially of two types: feminine power, and masculine power. Feminine power is much more intricate than physical strength, administrative capabilities, and war-like tendencies, which were used by men in just about every conceivable situation. Feminine power is adaptive, in that each situation calls for a different approach to reach the desired result, as long as the methods used are well within the limits of what feudal



society dictated that the role of women should be. Sometimes however, women launched themselves into masculine roles to exercise power normally held by men in medieval feudal society. Whether it was for praise or detriment, they were often acknowledged by authors or contemporaries, as possessing and applying male characteristics when necessary.

## CHAPTER I

### WOMEN'S PATRONAGE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Before we consider the portrayal of women as patrons and power-brokers within the romances, it will be instructive to consider in greater detail an idea discussed in the Introduction, that this portrayal is rooted in a certain historical reality, since royal and noble women did in fact exercise patronage. I am thinking here specifically of the Plantagenet period (1154-1399, Henry II-Richard II), since this is the period with which the Middle English Romances are associated. Historical writing unfortunately concentrates on the males in royal dynasties. This is particularly so in the case of the Plantagenets, since they were prolific producers of daughters. Three of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine's eight children were daughters, and all of them married and had issue. Matilda and Henry "The Lion" of Saxony had 10 children, Eleanor and Alfonso of Castile had 12 children. Joan and Raymond of Toulouse had four children. John and Isabella of Angoulême had three daughters out of five children, all of whom married and had children. The same can be said for Henry III, Edward I (14 daughters), Edward II (two daughters), Edward III (five daughters), and Richard II. When one counts down to the second or third generation of descent from all these people, one finds considerable numbers of granddaughters along with the grandsons. This means that as the generations passed, there was a growing number of women, closely connected with the Royal House, who were part of a complex family network in whose hands the governance of England lay. Indeed, this network extended well beyond England, as the evidence of royal daughters marrying abroad shows. At home, a number of the clans of magnates

particularly associated with the royal power owned close descent from royalty by the maternal line, as for example, the de Bohuns, the de Burghs, the de Clares, the de Monthermers and the FitzAlans, to name the most important barons who supported Edward III in the Hundred Years' War. Indeed, some of these very families of magnates owed the rise of their fortunes to their marriage with a royal daughter or granddaughter.

This means that the patronage we will be looking at takes two general forms: the first kind involves the giving of gifts and grants, and the second involves bestowing one's estate upon a husband in marriage. The importance of both kinds of patronage for the establishment and building up of the Norman state should not be underestimated. For generations after the Norman Conquest, England was in social turmoil. The primary method of ensuring loyalty of both Anglo-Saxons and Normans, was through patronage. Patronage can take many forms, including bestowing land on a faithful servant, giving gifts of jewels and embroidery, endowing monasteries, convents, or colleges, or having works written or copied. Patronage of the arts was a common pastime for medieval noblewomen in England who were trying to establish themselves as rulers in this newly conquered society. In general, patronage was seen as a means of cultivating political power for both men and women. Frances Underhill notes:

The royal themes designed to undergird the king's statecraft and military adventures had a decidedly masculine cast. A woman, especially one of independent means and important connections, might emulate the richness of costume, jewelry, and costly furnishings. However, since females were precluded from service to the state and its military endeavors, they could be rather creative in their cultural expressions even while adhering to the aesthetic norms of their society (266).

Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare for example, spent an enormous amount of time and money on patronage. She apparently loved the minor arts, such as embroidery and metal work. In fact she kept several goldsmiths on staff at Clare Castle, and made many purchases of gold and silver from other artisans. She was also greatly involved in patronizing religious and learning establishments as she "founded and built two friaries, a chantry, several chapels" (Underhill 267), and later, probably her most famous act of patronage, she founded Clare College at Cambridge University. She also paid living expenses for relatives of her staff to attend college. Underhill asserts that:

The lady's patronage focused broadly across the spectrum of literary, academic, and artistic endeavors. Although she cannot be identified with promoting many specific artists, authors or architects, her love of beauty and her ability to purchase the finest works stimulated artistic production. Her greatest role as patron was in education, where her foundation endured and benefited scholars well past her own life span (280).

Matilda of Scotland, Wife of King Henry I, like Elizabeth de Burgh, was very much involved in patronage. Like Elizabeth, Matilda patronized religious institutions, but she was also responsible for building a hospital for lepers, and several bridges leading to and from London (Huneycutt 158).

Matilda of Scotland also used patronage as a way of legitimizing her queenship. Before she married Henry I, there was some contention as to whether or not the Anglo-Saxon princess had taken the veil. The matter was argued at great length and in the end she was allowed to marry Henry. Anselm, the exiled archbishop of Canterbury, and the bishop Ivo of Chartres both supported the legitimacy of Matilda's marriage, and both were

rewarded with tokens of her appreciation (Huneycutt 159-161). Another reason for Matilda's patronage, especially on the continent, is put forth by William of Malmesbury who alleges that Matilda was only concerned with "proclaiming her dignity abroad" (Huneycutt 160).

Both Matilda of Scotland, and Elizabeth de Burgh patronized literature, however most of these were religious works. They were written or copied at request, bought already made, or written for these women in the hopes that the authors would find favour with these noble ladies. Underhill notes that Elizabeth de Burgh, apparently a voracious reader, purchased books in London and "she sent seven horses to transport her book purchases home in 1350-51" (273). Matilda too patronized religious works, but she also encouraged writings that proclaimed the glory of pre-conquest England and her own royal bloodline. She commissioned an Anglo-Norman version of *The Voyage of St. Brendan*, and it is now believed that she was the patron of the earliest manuscript of *The Song of Roland* (Huneycutt 165). She also commissioned William of Malmesbury to write *The Deeds of the Kings of England*. Huneycutt notes that many medieval noblewomen had the deeds of their ancestors commemorated, and that:

Matilda's literary commissions demonstrate that she certainly saw herself as a member of an ancient lineage whose deeds were worth recording. These commissions, along with the benefactions recorded in her charters, confirm that the queen valued her natal family and relished the status that came with being the daughter of a crowned king. The continental recognition of the royal marriage of Henry I and the Anglo-Saxon / Scottish princess could not help but elevate the status of the Anglo-Norman monarchy within the European nobility (163).

Like the English noblewomen, their counterparts on the continent used patronage to

diffuse: "the boundaries between the public and private, they developed patronage projects with the specific goals of building and reinforcing their own power and that of their family or lineage" (Shadis 202). Shadis also notes that women "...used their patronage to affirm the power of their lineage and to place themselves squarely within that lineage" (202). Noblewomen were often sent to another country as brides. Thus to have a history of their family and customs proved essential to teach their children, especially daughters, about their matrilineal ancestors. For example, when they married, King Henry II's daughters brought Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* to Sicily, Castile, and Germany to honour the deeds of the English kings and introduce British history and legend to these kingdoms (Parsons 186).

Weiss asserts that the writing of *Bevis of Hampton*, may have been due to the patronage of the Albini family, the earls of Arundel (18). The women of this family she notes, were powerful and heavily involved in patronage. In 1139 Adeliza, widow of King Henry I, married William II d'Albini and she was "obviously a considerable landowner and benefactor in her own right, a woman of rank and power, and also a lady of literary interests" (Weiss 18). Adeliza was known to have patronized writers such as Philippe de Thaon and Benedeit, the author of *The Voyage of St Brendan* (Weiss 18). Similarly Elizabeth Beauchamp, Countess of Shrewsbury and joint heiress of the Earl of Warwick commissioned the English tale *Guy of Warwick*. Yet another notable female literary patron was Constance, the wife of Ralf Fitzgilbert. She commissioned Gaimar to write the *Estoire des Engleis* that contained the story of Havelock the Dane.

The patronage of literary works, like the written family histories, seems to be a predilection passed down from mother to daughter. In Karen Jambeck's study of *Patterns of Women's Literary Patronage: England, 1200-ca. 1475*, she focuses on four families, tracing the literary patronage of the matriarchs, daughters, and granddaughters<sup>1</sup>. Jambeck notes that: "In England from the thirteenth to the late fifteenth century, for instance, the literary patronage of at least thirty women, excluding queens, has been recognized" (228).

The history of women's patronage of romance literature is more difficult to trace as most of the surviving English manuscripts are anonymous with no dedications. However, the rise of the popularity of romances among English noblewomen can be glimpsed through various records kept by these ladies. Matilda of Scotland, was active in promoting literary works; although these were mostly on the subject of her ancestors and on religious matters. Later, with the marriage of Henry II to Eleanor of Aquitaine, the English royal court was exposed to an unprecedented interest in romance and poetry, and the rise of the courtly romance in England.

Eleanor of Provence, wife of Henry III, was known to have owned a French romance of William the Conqueror, and to have bought several romances. It is not clear however, if Eleanor commissioned these romances or if they were copied for her (Parsons 176).

Eleanor of Castile, wife of Edward I, maintained a personal scriptorium and Parsons

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<sup>1</sup> These are the families of Elizabeth Berkeley, Countess of Warwick; Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster; Joan FitzAlan, Countess of Hereford; and Joan Beaufort, Countess of Westmoreland.

suggests that these workers produced "saints' lives and 'romances'", among other religious works (178-179). Parsons also notes of the court of Edward I and Eleanor of Castile that:

...the accomplishments of Edward's reign restored the idea of an heroic age, allowing his deeds to be seen in the same light as romances of chivalry...As Edward broadened the historical focus of his kingship, so literary production at his court turned away from the devotional verse works produced for the circle of Henry III and Eleanor of Provence, instead favoring romance and instructive prose, marked by strong overtones of secular history - and virtually all that is known of this production points to Eleanor's promotion (185).

Parsons goes on to explain that Eleanor of Castile was successful in her role as cultural and matrimonial ambassador because of her literary activity (185).

Aside from medieval queens, there were many other noblewomen (as Shadis notes) who took part in literary patronage; some of these works being romances. One notable literary patron for whom Chrétien de Troyes wrote *Perceval*, was Marie of Champagne, daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine and King Louis VII of France. As mentioned earlier it is difficult to determine to what extent these women played a part in the physical production of romances, but it is known that many romances were owned by medieval noblewomen. For example, Margaret Courtenay, Countess of Devon bequeathed three romances in her 1391 will. While in 1392, Isabel, Duchess of York left her son Edward a book called *Launcelot* (Scattergood 35). The 1399 will of Eleanor de Bohun, Duchess of Gloucester, shows she left her son Humphry a French book in rhyme entitled *Histoire de Chivaler a Cigne*<sup>2</sup>, presumably a family romance as the swan was the de Bohun badge (Ward 51). Ward also mentions that in a 1432 will, Joan Hilton bequeathed two romances to female



relatives (158).

For all of Elizabeth de Burgh's patronage, her will contains a number of books, but, none of these are romances, except as Underhill asserts, there was a book of legends that was bequeathed to Clare College. This may have been a collection of romances (274).

However, she was known to have read romances. In February of 1327 she borrowed several books from the royal collection including four romances (Underhill 273).

In the early part of the Middle Ages, literary works produced by request were usually in French or Latin, as these were the languages used by the nobility. English was thought to be a lower-class language used only by the common people. Over the centuries, as the Normans and Anglo-Saxons integrated, we see more and more works written in the vernacular. Romances were not exclusively a 'female' form of entertainment, as Henry III was known to also have enjoyed these works and owned a "great book of romance". However, it is believed that noblewomen were primarily responsible for having works created or copied in English. Parsons notes that: "Surveys of medieval book owners and dedicatees have repeatedly confirmed noblewomen's role as disseminators of vernacular literary culture, most especially the international brides whose migrations were critical to the transmission of many works" (175).

Very few of the surviving manuscripts can be traced to a particular person's patronage.

All that is known is that noblewomen, among their many acts of patronage, caused

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<sup>2</sup> The History of the Knight of the Swan

romances to be copied, commissioned, and borrowed. If they were in fact the primary patrons of this type of literary work, then it makes sense that they would prefer to see strong, intelligent, resourceful, and faithful female characters represented in these romances. It is possible that they were interested in characters whom they could emulate, or to whom they might be compared, for this would help them gain recognition both at home and abroad. They might also have been interested in characters who were not completely intangible, but who bore similarities to real medieval women. This now leads us to consider something of the medieval ideal of womanhood. Later we shall return to the romances, to consider the relationship between patrons and their heroines.

## CHAPTER II

### MARIOLOGY AND THE COURTLY LOVE

#### TRADITION

Before exploring the female characters of Middle English Romances it is important to note the medieval concept of the ideal woman. In one sense this is an almost impossible task, since not only is the primary evidence complex, modern scholarship is also filled with controversy and has its own agendas. There is a strain of scholarship which portrays medieval women as the victims of a strict patriarchy, and to be sure, evidence can be found to support this point of view. For example, Angela Lucas points out that "St. Jerome was one of the most influential heirs to the age-old literary tradition of anti-feminism, and he produced many bitterly satirical attacks on the absurdities of women's licentiousness, gluttony, ostentation in dress and make-up" (117). To leave this evidence hanging, though, risks overgeneralizing a society that properly defies any such simplification. For leaving aside the context within which Jerome himself was writing, even the use during the Middle Ages of bits of Jerome to support misogynist arguments has to be seen within a dynamic setting. The plain fact is that during the fourteenth century, some of the oldest values that had held society together were thought to be coming apart at the seams. If the polemical heat is raised, it is simply evidence of the extraordinary evolution that society was undergoing at the time.

According to the sternest misogynistic line all women were considered to be the daughters of Eve and thus responsible for the expulsion from the Garden of Eden and, consequently, men's downfall. In *Medieval Women* Eileen Power aptly describes the development of the notion of women as evil:

The view of woman as instrument of the Devil, a thing at once inferior and evil, took shape in the earliest period of Church history and was indeed originated by the Church. Its roots lay not in the words of Christ but in those of St Paul, and it found its expression in the lives and writings of the early Christian fathers and its embodiment in the ethics and philosophy of monasticism. As ascetic ideals rose and flourished, and monasticism became the refuge of many of the finest men, in the turmoil of the Dark Ages, there came inevitable into being the concept of woman as supreme temptress, *janua diaboli*, the greatest of all obstacles in the way of salvation (15-16).

That this argument was not swallowed whole even in the High Middle Ages is suggested by the "Eva into Ave" tradition. According to this idea, the sin of Eve is cancelled out by the obedience of the Virgin Mary. This idea is reflected in popular spirituality, for example, in the MS. Harley 2253 lyric *I Repent of Blaming Women*. The poem begins with reference to Eve:

al wrong y wrohte for a wyf  
 þat made vs wo in world ful wyde;  
 heo rafte vs alle richesse ryf,  
 þat durre vs nout in reynes ryde.  
 (Brown, No. 79, lines 13-16, p. 141.)

However, as the world has been lost through the action of the one woman, it has been regained through the action of another:

Nou wo in world ys went a-way,  
 & weole is come ase we wolde

þourh a mihti methful mai  
 þat ous haþ cast from cares colde.  
 euer wymmenn ich herie ay,  
 & euer in hyrd wiþ hem ich holde,  
 ant euer at neode y nycke nay  
 þat y ner nemnede þat heo nolde.  
 (Brown, No. 79, lines 49-56, p. 142)

The action of Mary allows the singer in fact to give himself whole-heartedly to the service of ladies, which is an ironic secularizing of a theological idea. And the Virgin Mary was presented as an ideal of what women were and should strive to be, not only in homiletic terms, but also within the context of courtly love. This motif seems to flourish alongside the "gate of hell" view of women (Powers 11), which suggests that there was great tension and inconsistency in the imagery.

In the romances, the authors compare their virtuous heroines with the Virgin Mary to show that they are almost divinely beautiful, compassionate, faithful and indeed worthy of the hero's love.

Although beauty is a relative concept, there were certain standard notions of women's beauty noted in the writings of this period. An abundance of examples of the Virgin Mary's beauty can be found in the lyrics of the Middle Ages. In *A Song to the Queen of Heaven* in Carlton Brown's collection of 13<sup>th</sup> century lyrics, Mary is described as: "...sþo fair, so schene, so rudi, sþo briht..." (116, line 14). Similarly in *A Prayer to the Mother of Mildness*: "Blessed beo þu, lauedi, ful of houene Blisse, / sþete flur of parais, moder of mildernisse..." (111, line 1-2), "Iblessed beo þu, lauedi, so fair and so briht..." (112, line

17). Marian literature of the Middle Ages is strewn with comparisons between the Virgin Mary and flowers, light, and snow; and she is almost always described as fair, bright, and mild.

These characteristic descriptions in Marian writings are carried over to the heroines in Middle English Romances. In *Havelock the Dane*, *Emaré*, *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, *Sir Launfal*, and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*; the heroines are all described as the fairest women alive. In *The Earl of Toulouse* the author goes so far as to say that Beulybon is "The fayrest oon that euyr bare lyfe, / Saue Mary mekyll of myght..." (French & Hale ll. 38-39). In *Sir Eglamour of Artois* the author says of Cristabelle: "A fayrer þyng sawe I neuer non, / Nothere of flesch, blode ne bon, / But hyt were Mary fre." (Richardson [Cotton] ll. 913-915).

In the eleventh century Marian literature began to equate the Virgin with the sun and light. Parsons notes that:

In the thirteenth century both Bonaventure and Aquinas maintained that sunlight is the most fitting Marian metaphor and described the light of dawn as the perfect expression of the effects of her mercy, echoing Bernard for whom Mary's mercy falls like the sunlight on everyone, good and bad alike (1995, 155).

There are allusions to Marian sun imagery in the Middle English Romances as can be seen in *Emaré*. The heroine, who is described as "bryzt as someres day" (French & Hale l. 192), was given a dress of gold cloth by her father. When *Emaré* is set adrift at sea

with her son, she lands in Rome where she is discovered on the shore by a merchant who notes that:

The cloth on her shon so brythe  
 He was aferde of þat syght,  
 For glysteryng of þat wede;  
 And yn hys herte he þowzth ryght  
 That she was none erdyly wyght;  
 (French & Hale ll. 697-701).

In Sir Launfal, the beauty of the fairy princess Dame Tryamouré is paralleled with that of Mary; including the comparisons with flowers, whiteness, brightness, and the sun. When the hero first meets Dame Tryamouré the author notes:

Sche was as whyt as lylve yn May  
 Or snow þat sneweþ yn wynterys day:  
 He seygh neuere non so pert.  
 Þe rede rose, whan sche ys newe,  
 Azens here rode nes nauzt of hewe,  
 I dar well say yn sert;  
 Here here schon as gold wyre...  
 (French & Hale ll. 292-298).

Later, when she rides to Arthur's court it is noted that "Her lyzt schoone", and "þe here schon vpon here hed" (French & Hale ll. 936 & 938). What is interesting to note in the heroine's first encounter with Launfal is that the imagery commonly used to describe the Virgin Queen of Heaven is, in this case, used to describe a fairy princess who is reclining on a bed, naked to the waist, trying to seduce the hero.

In the courtly love tradition that was increasing in popularity in France, the lady became a

creature to be loved, cherished, and indulged<sup>3</sup>. One of the greatest gifts a knight could earn was a lady's love. Associating the romance heroines with the Virgin Mary moves them from the realm of 'supreme temptress, Eve's descendants responsible for the downfall of man', to almost divine goodness, purity, and beauty, and thus worthy of the hero's love.

Behind the guise of courtly love, men did what society and the laws of medieval Europe basically forbade them to do. By holding women in such high esteem men handed women great power. However, as Ferrante notes: "the man's willingness is the source of the woman's power; for all her magic, the man must come to her, must let himself be caught, before she can control him" (121). Although the power of women to be revered can be seen as 'women's power', one could draw a rather close parallel with an earl's or duke's love for, and obedience to his king. This is part of the difficulty we have in reading the imagery of courtly love: for some modern writers have argued that the tradition merely reduces women to the role of objects of desire, while others argue that it was part of a whole revolution in manners, and that equating courtly with feudal devotion eventually led the way to a real improvement in the legal position of women.

As noted above, the romance heroines are often compared with the Virgin Mary.

However, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in the courtly love tradition Gawain puts a mortal woman in a position higher than the Virgin Mary, and subsequently pays for his mistake. When Gawain sets out on his journey to find the Green Knight, the author

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<sup>3</sup> Of course this applied primarily to the ruling class.



extols Gawain's virtues and describes his attire and arms. When the shield is described the author notes that he has an image of the Virgin Mary painted on the inside:

At þis cause þe knyzt comlyche hade  
 In þe [inner]-more half of his schelde hir ymage depaynted,  
 Þat quen he blusched þerto, his belde neuer payred  
 (Gollancz ll. 648-650).

This icon of the Virgin Mary is more than a good luck charm. Gawain essentially has faith in this image to give him courage and keep him safe during battle.

Later, when Gawain is lodging with Bertilak and Madame Hautedesert, the lady of the castle, gives Gawain a love token: a garter that will keep him safe during battle. In accepting the garter Gawain ultimately replaces his trust in the holy Virgin Mary with a magic token given and accepted out of courtesy, and retained through deceit. Although the garter saves him from having his head severed by the Green Knight, it does not save him from shame.

The inner beauty of the Virgin is equally important to the medieval man and thus, the romance heroines are portrayed as possessing the characteristics that make them most attractive to men. The Virgin Mary is renowned for her loyalty, faithfulness, and particularly her mercy, and so too are the romance heroines.

A rather extreme example of faithfulness and loyalty can be seen in *The Squire of Low Degree*. After she believes her lover is killed, the princess of Hungary carefully tends his body and:

She put him in a marble stone  
 With quaynt gynnes manu one,  
 And set hym at hir beddes head;  
 And euery day she kyst that dead.  
 Soone at morne, whan she vprose,  
 Unto that dead body she gose;  
 Therefore wold she knele downe on her kne  
 And make her prayer to the Trynite  
 And kysse that body twyse or thryse.  
 And fall in a swowne or she myght ryse.  
 (French & Hale ll. 691-700).

Although keeping a dead body in one's bedroom for seven years may seem a little excessive, it certainly proves to the audience beyond a doubt that the princess was faithful to her lover.

A less extreme example of faithfulness can be seen in *Sir Tryamour*, when Queen Margaret's husband, Ardur the King of Aragon leaves for the crusades. His treacherous steward Marrok tries desperately to seduce the queen telling her that the king will never return and she has no choice but to become his lover. However: "Then was the quene wondur wrothe / And swere mony a grete othe, / As sche was woman trewe!" (Hudson [Tryamour] ll. 100-102). Although Margaret is driven out of the kingdom pregnant, penniless, and unjustly accused of adultery, she remains true to her husband until their reunion many years later at their son's wedding.

Other essential qualities shared by the Virgin Mary and the medieval romance heroines are compassion and mercy. In many of the prayers and lyrics of the Middle Ages addressed to the Virgin Mary, the authors prevail upon her compassion in helping them acquire a place in heaven as in *A Prayer to the Mother of Mildness*, and *A Prayer for*

*Deliverance* (Brown No.111 & 155). These supplications for the Holy Virgin's aid also appear in the romances. In *Sir Eglamour of Artois* for example, as the hero is taking leave of Cristabelle he says "I sall wende and come full sone / Thorow þe helpe of Mary mylde" (Richardson [Lincoln] ll. 713-714).

In the romances the acts of compassion and mercy performed by the heroines are also in accordance with Christian practices. In *Eger and Grime*, Lady Loospine takes Eger into her castle and carefully tends his wounds. In both *Sir Isumbras* and *Amis and Amiloun* the heroines take in the poor and feed, clothe and care for them.

Another interesting aspect of paralleling the romance heroines with the image of the Virgin Mary is that most of the heroines give birth to a single child, a son. Also, like Mary, they leave their kingdom with this son. In the Gospel According to Matthew God tells Joseph to: "Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt..." (2:13). Several of the romance heroines are forced to flee with their sons as in *Emaré*, *Sir Tryamour*, *Sir Isumbras*, and *Sir Eglamour of Artois* where Cristabelle also ends up in Egypt.

Now that a relationship between the Virgin Mary and medieval romance heroines has been established, it is time to look at the purpose of this association. As was already mentioned, one of the aims of drawing parallels between biblical and literary heroines is to augment the position of the heroine in the eyes of the audience. If she is associated

with the Blessed Virgin Mary she must be a virtuous woman and thus worthy of the hero's love and a happy ending. Later I will discuss other aspects of Marian imagery.

## CHAPTER III

### CONDUCT LITERATURE

Like the heroines in these romances, the audience that read or heard them read, was primarily composed of women, many who were noblewomen. It was not only women who enjoyed reading romances however, but they were probably in the majority because "among the upper-class laity more women than men could read" (Potkay & Evitt 67). In this respect the purpose of drawing parallels between the Virgin Mary and the romance heroines is to show these noble ladies in the audience how to conduct themselves in a manner befitting a queen. Potkay and Evitt note that: "romance teaches its audience not only the social roles they must play but also the psychological attitudes these roles require" (69). Romance literature then, can be seen in part as conduct literature aimed at English noblewomen, where the heroine provides a role model for the audience.

The issue of just what this role model is, and what it is supposed to do is a matter for debate. Stephen Knight has noted that romance plots describing the creating or perpetuation of a noble family may in fact "indoctrinate their readers in feudal ideology" (Potkay & Evitt 67). Potkay and Evitt go on to note that "romances, as feudal propaganda, teach aristocratic women to accept their lot as wives, mothers, and means of acquiring wealth" (67). Thus if the romances present these roles for women as enjoyable, and the heroines as happy and in love, then more noblewomen will be encouraged to support the system of feudalism. Thereby they could earn the love and adoration of their husbands, families, kings and the common people. This is certainly an interesting theory,

but one is left wondering if the ideology behind it is perhaps somewhat anachronistic.

There is no evidence from the fourteenth century of a central office for the propagation of loyal feudalists, and any suggestion that a genre of literature designed particularly to entertain is nothing more than a body of pamphlets for a certain set social project may be somewhat simplistic.

Nevertheless, fourteenth-century writers were as aware as anyone of the principles of rhetoric that had been established at least since the time of Cicero, that the aim of oratory (and by extension, of literature) was not only to delight, but also to teach and to persuade. Thus, despite my reluctance to accept the notion that the romance genre represents a crude layering of feudalist ideals upon its readers, I think it is important to consider what indeed is being taught, and in which direction persuasion is tending. It may well be that my conclusions lead away from the direction to which Knight, Potkay, and Evitt are pointing. For if women are indeed important patrons of this genre, as well as forming its main readership, and if the role of the heroines in these works is more than just passive, then it may well be that persuasion is leading towards something more than simple peaceful acceptance of the feudal code. Medieval social history is extraordinarily complex. Rules may be stated in what seem to a twentieth-century reader to be terms that admit of no variation: but we know that under the surface, in the dimension of real life, there were as many exceptions as there were rules. The important thing here is not merely to see how the romances reinforce the norm, but where they may in fact be subverting it. To begin this part of the inquiry, it will be interesting to consider two important medieval role models for women, the Virgin Mary, and Queen Esther, for both will show some of

the interesting tensions that exists between a view of woman as accepting and obedient, and one in which woman comes to exercise genuine power.

I will begin by considering the Virgin Mary, since (as we saw in the preceding chapter) she was an important icon in High Medieval spirituality. In one sense, Mary offers the perfect model of ascent through humility, for she is at once the *ancilla Domini*, representing the ideal of obedient submission to God, and she becomes Mother of God, Mediatrix, and is even described in some prayers and hymns as “Empress of Heaven”. Ferrante notes that: “The ideal thirteenth century woman is the Virgin Mary, who is both chaste child-bearer and intercessor, the mediator through whom God reaches man and man reaches God” (100). In fact, Bonaventure held that a man could not reach God at all except through a woman (Ferrante 100). Of course, the image of the sorrowful Virgin standing by the Cross is familiar from such hymns as the *Stabat Mater*, rendered into Middle English as “Stond wel, moder, ounder rode” in the MS. Digby 86 version (Brown, 87f.). However, the queenly image is present too in contemporary writing, as the “englissce lai” entitled “*On God Ureisun of Ure Lefdi*” shows (Brown lines 3-8). Here the Virgin is described as seated on a throne high above the cherubim (line 25), dispensing favours as a monarch:

Vor al is godes riche an-under þine honden,  
 Alle þine ureondes þu makes riche kinges,  
 þu ham ziuest kinescrud, beies & gold ringes;  
 þu ziuest eche reste ful of swete bliss  
 þer ðe neure deað ne come, ne herm ne sorinesse.  
 (Brown lines 31-35)

The suppliant prays for the grace and favour that Mary's followers enjoy, and he swears perpetual fealty to her in turn (e.g. lines 96 ff).

The theology behind this concept is interesting. In the original scheme of things, it is Christ who is seen as having paid the penalty for human sin, and thus to have averted the wrath of God. However, in certain strands of medieval theology, the Christ who suffered upon the Cross is seen as returning at the Day of Judgement to repay the injuries he received. He thus is cast in the role of justice, and Mary is seen as the dispenser of mercy to avert the stern power of the Judge (Ferrante 100-104).

Just as the imagery of courts and justice-giving infuse the theological images of the time, so the spiritual images influence the way in which human roles are seen. A striking example of a woman acting as intermediary between God and the hero can be seen in the romance *Sir Gowther*.

Gowther, who is fathered by a devil, spends the bulk of this story seeking God's forgiveness. He goes to Rome to consult the Pope about what to do. After being reprimanded for destroying a church the hero is told by the Pope that:

Wherser thou travellys, be northe or soth,  
 Thou eyt no meyt bot that thou revus of howndus mothe  
 Cum thy body within;  
 Ne no worde speke for evyll ne gud,  
 Or thou reyde tokyn have fro God,  
 That forgyfyn is thi syn.  
 (Laskaya & Salisbury ll. 295-300).



Gowther finds service with a kind king who is being besieged by a sultan who wants to marry the king's beautiful, but mute daughter. Gowther prays for armor, and is successful in vanquishing the sultan in a series of battles. The princess however is injured from falling out of a tower and her father fears that she will die. Instead:

Syche grace God hur sentt  
 That scho raxeld hur and rase,  
 And spake wordus that wyse was  
 To Syr Gowther, varentment.  
 Ho seyde, "My lord of heyvon gretys the well,  
 And forgyffeus the thi syn yche a dell,  
 And grantys the tho blys;  
 And byddus the speyke on hardely,  
 Eyte and drynke and make mery;  
 Thu schallt be won of his."  
 (Laskaya & Salisbury ll. 657-666)

Thus it is the mute princess, who, through the grace of God, is able to speak and bring God's message of forgiveness to Gowther. This romance certainly supports Bonaventure's view that man can only reach God and vice versa, through a woman.

Although comparison with the Virgin Mary as a role model was common in medieval literature, so too was a likening to the biblical Queen Esther as an image of the ideal earthly queen. Queen Esther, was a beautiful Hebrew woman who married Ahasuerus, King of the Persians. When the king's treacherous counselor Haman planned to murder all of the Hebrews, Queen Esther interceded on behalf of her family, friends, and entire race. She risked her life to reveal the counselor's plot to the king, thus keeping the harmony between the people and their ruler. She maintained the balance of relationship between herself and the monarch to whom she is married, and ostensibly remained passive; though she was willing to test her role to the limit by appearing before the king

without being summoned, itself a capital offense (Esther 4.11). However, she took the risk upon her confidence of the king's favour towards her, a justified confidence; and the result of her action was the reversal of a royal order, the preservation of her people, the death of her enemy, and the promotion of her father, surely no mean accomplishment!

Queen Esther was often used as a role model for medieval queens. Huneycutt notes that: "the *ordines* for the coronation of a medieval queen often invoked Esther as a role model, sometimes just in a list with other Old Testament females worthy of imitation, but in other cases with a reference to a specific episode from Esther's story" (129). She also notes that "a thirteenth-century manual for preachers lists Esther's prayer as an appropriate text for sermons addressed to noblewomen" (130). In one sense, Esther offered the perfect example of wifely obedience that the male-dominated medieval English society wished to promote. However, on another level, the story tells of the correction of royal injustice, even at the risk of the queen's life, and so the example takes on a deeper significance. So the fourteenth-century reader of the tale could well take away the idea that the consort was obliged to be far more than an ornament beside her husband, but should have her own sense of justice, her own sources of information, her own ability to devise and execute a plan, and be willing to take her own initiative.

As Huneycutt argues, "Esther was often used as an example of one who could mollify the king or bring about a peaceful solution to the kingdom's problems", (130). Philippa of Hainault, wife of Edward III was also known for her intercession with her husband. Huneycutt notes that her fame derived from "Froissart's dramatic story about her

successful efforts after the surrender of Calais to move her angry husband to mercy for the town's dignitaries brought out in chains to their conquerors" (63). Earlier, Eleanor of Provence's successful intercession with her husband on behalf of William de Haustedede caused two generations of William's family to provide service for the queen (Parsons 151).

After the Norman Conquest the English queen's authority decreased and with Eleanor of Aquitaine's support of her sons against her husband, this authority declined even further. Essentially cut off from public authority, the intercession of queens became an accepted, although at times suspicious, practice. Parsons notes:

Queenly intercession indeed emphasized just that emotional, intuitive aspect of a woman's power, associated with her abject posture and with the disempowered, that posed the greatest risk to male order, giving a tinge of urgency to the process by which an image as powerful as that of the Virgin was summoned to legitimize the queen's role as government expanded, and as society more sharply defined gender roles and limits between knightly authority and queenly influence (159-160).

Huneycutt also notes that this intercessory imagery was supported by queens and noblewomen as a new means for exerting their authority (131).

Matilda of Scotland, hailed as the 'second Esther' was known for her intercessory role in England, and "a poem by an unknown author praises Matilda as one who persuaded her husband to bring about a change in the legislative policy and praised Henry as the Caesar who listened to his wife..." (Huneycutt 162). The chronicler Eadmer writes that in 1105 Matilda was surrounded by a group of poor parish priests, apparently aware of her

intercessory power, who asserted that bishop Anselm's decree that they no longer keep wives, combined with her husband's fines for offenders, was causing financial ruin (Huneycutt 137). Her intercessory role with her husband was often stressed in letters and literary works by those seeking her aid or who were aware of her success in this capacity. Matilda was also referred to as "'a second Esther for us in our times', who ended the bitterness between the conquering Normans and the conquered English" (Huneycutt 130).

It has been asserted that many noblewomen, and Queen Matilda in particular may have embraced this role of intercessor, modeling themselves after Esther; thus gaining power by showing themselves as successful intercessors. Parsons mentions that as these women aged, they exploited their intercessory role in order to "manifest strength of their marriages after they ceased to give the most obvious proof of intimacy with their husbands" (151), and of course, as a means to retain at least some power in widowhood. There were certainly advantages for the woman who acted as intercessor, because this role:

... allowed her to manipulate successfully behind the scenes, legitimized her crossing of boundaries between influence and authority, and perhaps permitted her to convey some criticism to her husband; she thereby projected the image of an influential wife and could forge networks of great practical benefit to her (Parsons 161).

This image of the queen acting as intercessor is quite prevalent in the Middle English Romances. An example of a queen acting in this capacity to keep peace in the kingdom

can be seen in *The Earl of Toulouse*. In this romance Dyoclysyen, the Emperor of Germany pilfered land from Bernard, the Earl of Toulouse. Naturally Bernard was angry about losing some of his property and its revenues, so he and his army entered Dyoclysyen's land and promptly proceeded to plunder "...And þere he began to brenne and sloo." (French & Hale l. 36). At this point in the story the Emperor's wife Buelybon is introduced with her first words being an act of intercession: "My dere lorde, y you pray, / Delyuer the Erle hys ryght." (French & Hale ll. 47-48). She recognizes the fact that the emperor wronged the earl by stealing his land and that matters would only get worse if the emperor did not return control of the land immediately. Dyoclysyen's response to his wife is simply that that day will never come and he proceeds to make ready for war.

Dyoclysyen loses the battle and sixty thousand of his men lose their lives. The emperor is sorrowful and he cannot eat or drink until he has had vengeance. Buelybon again goes to her husband in an attempt to prompt him to end the war:

Syr, y rede, be Seynt John,  
Of warre that ye hoo;  
Ye haue the wronge and he þe ryzt,  
And that ye may see in syzt,  
Be thys and othyr moo.  
(French & Hale ll. 152-156).

Buelybon puts forth a valiant, yet unsuccessful attempt, to keep peace in the kingdom as a good queen should. Although Buelybon was not directly responsible, in the end the emperor and the earl become friends.

In *Florys and Blancheflour* the queen steps in to save Blancheflour's life. In an effort to cure Florys of his infatuation with Blancheflour, the royal couple send their son to stay with relatives for awhile. When the king receives word that Florys is still pining for Blancheflour he becomes enraged and vows to murder Blancheflour. At this point the queen intercedes and says:

For Goddes love, sir, mercy!  
 At þe next hauen þat here is,  
 þen ben chapmen ryche, ywys,  
 Marchaundes of Babylon ful ryche,  
 þat wol hur bye blethelyche.  
 Than may ze for þat louely foode  
 Haue muche catell and goode;  
 And soo she may fro vs be brouzt  
 Soo þat we slee hur nouzt.  
 (French & Hale l.144-152).

Not only does the queen ask the king for mercy for Blancheflour, but she also provides an alternative method of getting rid of Blancheflour; a method that would increase the king's wealth in the process. The king eagerly agrees and Blancheflour is sold for "XX mark of reed golde, / And a coupe good and ryche" (French & Hale ll.161-162). Thus this queen's intercession for mercy is successful.

In *Emaré*, the heroine does not seek mercy by her intercessory action, but rather forgiveness and a reunion of the family. She tactfully reunites three generations and restores the status quo ensuring a better future for both herself and her son . In the beginning of this romance Emaré is cast out to sea by her father for refusing to marry him. Later she is cast out to sea by her evil mother-in-law who tricks her son into thinking that Emaré and her newborn son are beasts. Emaré lands in Rome where she

and her son Segramoure are taken in by a merchant. After seven years Emaré hears that her husband is coming to Rome. Not knowing whether or not he had given the order to set her and her son adrift, she arranges for her son to broach the delicate matter. Emaré sends Segramoure to serve the king in the hall with some advice "Byfore þys nobull Kyng; / Loke, sone. so curtays þou be / That no mon fynde chalange to þe. / In no manere þynge!" (French & Hale ll. 849-852). Then she instructs him to come back to her chamber and tell her everything that the king says. King Kadore immediately loves Segramoure and asks the merchant if he can take the boy home with him.

As instructed, Segramoure returns to his mother and tells her everything that happened. Emaré again gives the boy carefully planned instructions aimed at reuniting the family:

Soone when he shall to chambur wende,  
Take hys hond at þe grece ende,  
For he ys þy fadur, ywysse;  
And byd hym come speke wyth Emaré,  
That changed here name to Egeré  
In the londe of Galys!  
(French & Hale ll. 904-909).

Segramoure does as he is told and Emaré and her husband King Kadore are happily reunited.

Later, Emaré's father the emperor visits Rome. Again she is not sure if they can be reunited or if he is still angry about her refusal to marry him. So, again she sends Segramoure to inquire about the emperor's views on this matter and bring him to her if he chooses to see his daughter. Once again there is a joyful reunion and the author notes that Segramoure later becomes emperor. Thus Emaré's intercession both for herself and

her son is successful, and she reunites her family establishing herself as a queen and mother of a future emperor.

With such close ties between Church and state in the medieval period the clergy saw 'the queen' as an invaluable means of persuading the king. When writing to a queen to request a favour clergymen often compared the royal lady to her heavenly counterpart the Blessed Virgin Mary, or her earthly role model Queen Esther. The reason for this was twofold. First, a comparison with either Esther or Mary was a compliment to the queen. Secondly, the comparison reinforced the image of the perfect queen and encouraged the queen to emulate the role model to which she is compared. Huneycutt notes:

Churchmen had long recognized the power of a wife to influence her husband's course of action... These good wives of the medieval period were to use their "persuasive voices" to further the goals of the church, whether it be in patronizing a certain monastic house or, in Matilda's period, pursuing the goals of the reform papacy (130-131).

There were risks however, for the women who chose to act as intercessors, as each encounter with her husband brought the possibility that he may take out his wrath on his wife. An example of the failed attempt of a queen to act as intercessor can be seen in *Athelston*. The king imprisons the Earl of Stone, his children, and his wife, who is also Athelston's sister, because of accusations made by a traitor. The king vows that he will have them drawn and quartered the next day. As the earl and his family are also friends of the queen, she approaches her husband and pleads for mercy on their behalf. The queen, like Esther, humbles herself before her husband saying:



Sere Kyng, I am before þe come  
 Wiþ a chylde, douztyr or a sone:  
 Graunte me my bone,  
 My broþir and sustyr þat i may borwe  
 Tyl þe nexte day at morwe  
 Out off here paynys stronge,  
 Þat we mowe wete be comoun sent  
 In þe playne parlement...  
 (French & Hale ll. 259-266).

Athelston refuses to grant her wish ordering her to leave the room immediately. She falls down on her knees before the king weeping for the fate of her friends. This only heightens the king's anger so that he "Wiþ hys ffoot he wolde nouzt wonde; / He slowz þe chylde ryzt in here wombe" (French & Hale ll. 282-283). A short while later the queen delivers a stillborn son.

For the authors of medieval romances it was important to show noblewomen the importance of acting properly. However, it was equally important to provide a model of how not to conduct oneself. In the medieval romances the heroines who adhere to the proper conduct of a queen by following the examples of the Virgin Mary and Queen Esther are properly rewarded for their virtues. In an attempt to show the audience of English noblewomen what may happen if proper conduct is not followed, in some cases the authors add female characters who are severely punished for improper behaviour.

In *Emaré* the exemplary behaviour of the heroine has already been established.

However, the corruption of King Kadore's mother should be explored as an example of how a queen should not behave. The king's mother is against the union from the beginning saying that *Emaré* "ys a fende" (French & Hale l. 446). Nevertheless, Kadore

marries her and then goes off to war while Emaré manages the castle and gives birth to a son. She sends a messenger to the king to let him know the good news, but the messenger stops at the queen mother's house where he is made to drink ale and wine until he falls asleep and then:

The Qwene, that was of wykked þowzt.  
 Tho chambur gan she wende;  
 Hys letter she toke hym fro:  
 In a fyre she brente hyt do;  
 Of werkes she was vnhende!  
 Anoper lettur she made wyth euyll,  
 And sayde þe Qwene had born a deuyll;  
 Durste no mon come her hende.  
 Thre heddes hadde he there,  
 A lyon, a dragon, and a beere -  
 A fowll, feltred fende.  
 (French & Hale ll. 530-540).

Although King Kadore receives this fake letter from his mother saying that his wife has given birth to a monster, he writes back saying that Emaré and the child should be cared for as well as they had always been. The messenger of course stops at the evil queen's castle on his return. The king's mother reads the letter and realizes she has not achieved the desired result so she again replaces the letter with one that says to:

...putte her ynto þe see,  
 In þat robe of ryche ble,  
 The lytyll chylde here wyth;  
 And lette here haue no spendyng  
 For no mete ny for drynke...  
 (French & Hale ll. 589-593).

The queen mother is thus responsible for sending the newborn baby and his mother out to sea, and separating Emaré from her husband for seven years. When the deed is revealed, King Kadore accuses his mother of treason and wants to have her burnt. His lords

suggest however, that she be exiled from the kingdom "And byrafte here hyr lyflope clene, / Castell, towre, and towne." (French & Hale ll. 803-804). The latter punishment is chosen.

Similarly in *Amis and Amiloun*, when Amiloun becomes a leper for helping his friend Amis, his wife shows no compassion or mercy whatsoever. In fact she sends him to live in the gatehouse, and slowly drives him from the kingdom by refusing to supply him with food. Belisaunt and Amis gladly take in their friend who has lost everything, and do whatever they have to, including killing their children to make Amiloun well again.

When Amiloun recovers he returns to his kingdom to find that his wife is about to remarry. Her punishment for the evil she caused is to be imprisoned in a hut with nothing to eat but bread and water for the rest of her life. Punishments such as these, were not uncommon in Plantagenet England as King Henry II's confinement of Eleanor of Aquitaine for her support and encouragement in her sons attempted overthrow of their father illustrates.

Thus the biblical Queen Esther and the Virgin Mary were two of the few women considered worthy of emulation by medieval writers, and thus worthy of imitation by the noblewomen for whom these romances were intended. If medieval noblewomen were successful in following the examples set by these role models, their good behaviour was generally acknowledged in literary works and letters, which promoted their reputation

both at home and abroad. We shall now look further at some of these writings, in order to see how some of the models and ideals were exemplified in the romance heroines.

# CHAPTER IV

## THE FUNCTION OF WOMEN

### IN MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCES

Generally, strictly on a surface level, the heroines of Middle English Romances are seen as beautiful, delicate, faithful ladies who are waiting for a knight in shining armor to rescue them from the evils fate has dealt them. Thus they are seen only in terms of how the heroes see them, i.e., they are thought of as no more than the object of the hero's desire. Because of this desire to possess the lady, the hero prevails over extreme dangers simply to win her love, thus making him a great knight. In *Sir Eglamour of Artois* for example, Sir Eglamour is sick with love for Cristabelle, the earl's daughter. This desire for Cristabelle causes the knight to accept the three tasks set by her guardian in order to marry her. He executes a giant, the boar of Seydon, and then a dragon, all because of his desire for the earl's daughter. Similarly in the *Squire of Low Degree* the hero accepts the challenge imposed by the object of his desire, to withdraw from Hungary for seven years and prove himself a brave and virtuous knight. Granted, without the desire on the part of the heroes for these ladies there would be no story. Thus it can be concluded that these women serve as a means by which the story of the hero's adventures may begin. Most of the women in Middle English Romances share this function of being the driving force behind the hero's need to accomplish great deeds for the honour of his lady, a concept inspired by the courtly love tradition. However, if one looks more closely at the actual role these women play throughout the romances one can see that their presence is often

an integral part of the plot, not just a means by which the hero can prove himself.

The idea of an integral role is important to the entire argument of this thesis, and I wish to explore some of it in detail. For I think there has been a misconception about the role of women in the Middle English Romances. The woman is not simply 'thrown in' as a love interest for the hero, or a means by which he can prove his knightly worthiness, but rather she is an indispensable part of the plot. There is no denying however, that she does fulfill the role of the hero's love interest, but her actions go far beyond the stereotype of the princess on a pedestal. In fact, without the female character, the hero cannot complete his quest, and certainly cannot receive a generous reward. Not only are these women regularly the reason behind the hero's quest, but quite often they hold the key to his successful completion of the quest. They may give the hero critical information to defeat his foe, a token to keep him safe, teach him a lesson, or simply push the hero to obtain his goal. The hero's reward is the privilege of marrying the princess. Because he is usually of equal or lower status, he also gains land and title through this union, thus augmenting his own status.

### **Link to the Supernatural**

The first function of women in medieval romances that should be considered is that they act as a link to the mythic supernatural, whereas the men are more often associated with the Christian God. Some of these romances combine Christian ideology with vestiges of

pagan beliefs to create stories that extol the benefits of Christianity while still asserting that women, for the most part, are the last link to the mythology of this region. Thus the character of the heroine who is associated with magic or fairies becomes a bridge between mythology and Christianity. Women were thought of as carnal creatures, mostly due to Eve being responsible for the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. A prime example of the stereotypical supernatural temptress can be found in *Sir Launfal*:

He fond yn þe pauyloun  
 þe Kynges douzter of Olyroun,  
 Dame Tryamoure þat hyzte;  
 Here fadyr was kyng of fayrye  
 Of Occient, fere and nyze,  
 A man of mochell myzte.

In þe pauyloun he fond a bed of prys  
 ltheled with purpur bys,  
 þat semyle was of syzte.  
 Þerinne lay þat lady gent  
 þat aftere Sir Launfal hedde ysent,  
 þat lefsome lemede bryzt.

For hete her clopes down she dede  
 Almost to here gerdylstede;  
 Þan lay sche vncouert;  
 Sche was as whyt as lylve yn May  
 Or snow þat sneweþ yn wynterys day:  
 He seygh neuere non so pert.  
 (French & Hale ll. 277-294).

Unlike mortal women, Dame Tryamoure has an enormous amount of freedom in that she can take a lover and give him as much of her wealth as she pleases without the risk of ruining her reputation or that of her family. All the hero has to do is promise never to mention her to anyone, so, in essence Sir Launfal gives Dame Tryamoure total

sovereignty as does Gawain in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*, when he gives Ragnell the choice of being beautiful by day or by night.

Although Launfal is seduced by a fairy princess, in these romances it is usually the princess who is seduced by the supernatural knight; as in *Sir Degaré*, *Sir Gowther*, and the queen who is kidnapped by the King of Fairie in *Sir Orfeo*. In both *Sir Degaré* and *Sir Gowther* both princesses conceive a male child creating sons that are half human and half supernatural. Yet, it is the princesses rather than their sons who are most associated with the supernatural through their unions with the fairy knights, and the magical tokens they possess.

The author of *Sir Gowther* makes it quite clear that Gowther has supernatural blood in his veins, and it is up to him to reject this part of himself and seek God. In fact, the bulk of this romance deals with Gowther's crimes and his quest to be forgiven by God, and the princess with whom he falls in love seems to be added as an afterthought. Gowther's quest, in essence, takes him from being a child of the devil, to becoming the champion of God with whose help he is armed and able to win in battle. However, Gowther leans back to his supernatural nature when he falls in love with the princess. She seems to possess some supernatural ability, in that she knows who the mystery knight is; and she falls out of a tower because she feels Gowther's pain when he is wounded on the battlefield.

In the medieval period women were generally responsible for providing medical care for



their own families as well as for poorer neighbours. This image of woman as healer is often enhanced in the romances where the female characters are sometimes portrayed as *venefica*, a 'potion maker', which imbues them with unquestionable power<sup>4</sup>. In *Eger and Grime*, for example, the Lady Loospine has an incredible healing power akin to that of Morgan le Fay. As Mabel Van Duzee notes:

Morgain's reputation for healing was established in early tradition, and her power was no ordinary one. Since the traditions of Morgain have strongly influenced the *matière de Bretagne*, it is not surprising that that influence shows itself often in the healing power of ladies in the romances. In fact, whenever these ladies have power to heal that has something of magic in it, we may suspect Morgain's influence (64).

Van Duzee also shows that Morgan le Fay possessed a magic drinking horn that "had the power to heal the sick" (66), similar to the one Lady Loospine uses to give Eger a drink:

And then shee gaue me drinke in a horne;  
 Neuer since the time that I was borne  
 Such a draught I neuer gatt;  
 With her hand shee held me after thatt.  
 The drinke shee gaue mee was grasse greene;  
 Soone in my wounds itt was seene;  
 The blood was away, the drinke was there,  
 And all was soft that erst was sore.  
 And methought I was able to run and stand,  
 And to haue taken a new battell in hand.  
 (French & Hale ll. 287-296).

Van Duzee contends that Lady Loospine can be paralleled with the character of the 'Lady of the Thorn', so common to folklore of the British Isles. She argues:

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<sup>4</sup> Another example of the woman as healer can be found in the character of Yseut.

It is well known that the Church, according to its custom of absorbing pagan beliefs, placed sacred pagan wells under the protection of saints. And the same practice was extended to thorn trees. "From the custody of the fairies the thorn trees are sometimes transferred to the saints," says Wood-Martin, and he mentions Patrick's Bush, an ancient thorn beside a spring in Wicklow (54).

The parallel between the Lady of the Thorn and Lady Loospine can be drawn, she says, for many reasons: one of which is the fact that when Lady Loospine first meets Eger, she "came forth of a fresh arbor. / Shee came forth of that garden green..." (French & Hale ll. 212-213). Van Duzee believes, with good reason, that the 'fresh arbor' noted above, evolved out of what was once a thorn tree. There are of course other examples in the romance of what may be construed as 'fairy magic' relating to thorns. In *Sir Tryamour* for example, when the pregnant Queen Margaret is banished by her husband and attacked in the forest by Marrok the steward, she runs into the woods and hides under a thorn tree. No matter how hard the steward and his men look, they cannot see her:

The quene passyd away and fledd  
 On fote and lefte hur stede.  
 Sche ranne to a thorne grene;  
 Tyl sche come thedur sche wolde not blyn  
 And daryth there for drede.  
 (Hudson [Tryamour] ll. 293-296)

They rode forthe wyth grete envy  
 To seke aftur the quene;  
 But they wyste not what they myght sey -  
 Hur stede they fonde, sche was away -  
 Then had that traytur tene.  
 Ther jurney then they thocht evyll sett,  
 But they wyth the lady not mett,  
 They wyste not what to mene.  
 Ovyr all the wode they hur soght  
 But, as God wolde, they fonde hur noght;

Then had they grete tene.  
(Hudson [Tryamour] ll. 318-327).

In fairy myths the Lady of the Thorne is able to hide in, or seems to emerge from a thorn tree. In Queen Margaret's case the magic of the thorn tree is able to hide her from the eyes of her pursuers.

The magic of the thorn tree also comes into play in *The Squire of Low Degree*. There is evidence in folklore that sitting under a thorn tree can inspire magical dreams<sup>5</sup> and in one of the versions of *Sir Degaré*, the group of women lost in the woods fell asleep under a hawthorn tree while the princess wanders off and is seduced by the fairy knight. In *The Squire of Low Degree*, the squire, while sitting with his back against the thorn tree, wishes that he could be worthy of marrying the princess.

Into that arber wolde he go,  
And vnder a bente he layde hym lowe,  
Ryght euen vnder her chambre wyndowe;  
And lened hys backe to a thorne,  
And sayd, "Alas, that i was borne!  
That i were ryche of golde and fe,  
That i myght wedde that lady fre!  
(French & Hale ll. 64-70).

Not only is he leaning against a thorn tree pining for the princess, but also the tree is located right under her bedroom window, associating the magic of the tree with the princess herself. Indeed, she eventually fulfils his wish by providing him with a means of making himself worthy, by telling him exactly where to go, what to do, and how to do it, and giving him money to get started.

Of all the romances, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a prime example of the function of women being the link to the supernatural, as the connection is evident in Morgan le Fay. Even though the male character Bertilak is transformed into the Green Knight and has his head severed by Gawain at King Arthur's Christmas feast, it is Morgan le Fay who orchestrates the action. She is responsible for putting the 'green' spell on Bertilak and thus initiating Gawain's quest. Morgan, in the form of an old hag, is the constant companion of Lady Hautedesert, the latter being pulled into the realm of the supernatural by association, which is supported by the magic garter that she possesses. There are several other examples of magical tokens given to the hero by the heroine, which will be discussed later in this paper.

It is probable that many of the female characters in the romances have their roots in folklore. By the Middle Ages Christianity was well established in England and there was no more room for the old pagan beliefs. Thus the heroines were 'updated' to fit the beliefs of the society in which these stories were written. However, as we have seen, there are still vestiges of the folkloric beliefs of fairies and magic evident in the romances.

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<sup>5</sup> Van Duzee p.55

## Provider of the Hero's Quest

Many female characters are critical to the development of the romances because they may be the reason behind the hero's pursuit of a quest. This is quite evident in *The Squire of Low Degree*, *Havelock the Dane*, *Amis and Amiloun*, and *King Horn*; all of which have heroines who are extremely strong willed. Initially in both *King Horn* and *The Squire of Low Degree*, neither hero has a quest per se. However, Horn wants revenge on the man who killed his father, but he seems quite comfortable at King Aylmair's court where he spends several years. It is Rymenhild who pushes Horn into action by professing her love for him and encouraging him to prove himself worthy of her love. He responds by saying that he is not worthy of her love, but if she could convince the king to make him a knight, then he would love her. Also, she persuades her father, the king, to make Horn a knight.

The Squire of Low Degree, like Horn, is not particularly aggressive in advancing his station in life. He spends his time feeling sorry for himself and sitting in the garden pining for the King of Hungary's daughter:

"...Alas, that i was borne!  
That i were ryche of golde and fe,  
That i myght wedde that lady fre!  
Of golde good, or some treasure,  
That i myght wedde that lady floure!  
Or elles come of so gentyll kynne,  
The ladyes loue that I myght wyne..."  
(French & Hale ll. 68-74).

Luckily for the hero, the princess hears the squire's laments (his favourite spot was beneath her bedroom window), and pushes him into confessing his love for her. The

squire does nothing but profess his love and threaten that if it is not returned he will have to leave Hungary and become a hermit begging for food. He certainly is not portrayed as a typical hero; a protector and strong and worthy mate for the princess.

The princess however decides that the squire would be a suitable mate and takes charge of the situation telling him exactly how to become worthy of her love:

... For and ye my loue should wynne,  
 With chyualry ye must begynne,  
 And other dedes of armes to done,  
 Through wiche ye may wynne your shone;  
 And ryde through many a peryllous place  
 As a venterous man, to seke your grace,  
 Ouer hylles and dales and hye mountaines...  
 Till seuen yere be comen and gone;  
 And passe by many a peryllous see,  
 Squyer, for the loue of me...  
 (French & Hale ll. 171-188).

She continues, telling the squire what countries to visit, how long to stay in certain areas, and how his shield, weapons and garments are to be decorated. The squire is grateful and readily agrees to her terms - she has provided him with a quest and offered herself as the reward.

Amis, in *Amis and Amiloun*, falls into the same situation as the Squire of Low Degree where he tells the princess that he is not worthy of her love. In this case however, Belisaunt accepts Amis as he is; her father's vassal. When they become lovers and the dishonour is uncovered by the steward, Amis is terrified to fight his accuser because he knows he is in the wrong and will therefore lose. Belisaunt calmly asks her lover if he knows of anyone who could help them and he replies that Amiloun would gladly help.

Here Belisaunt plans the strategy by which Amis and Amiloun will switch places and Amiloun will fight in Amis' stead:

Take leue to morwe at day  
 & wende in þi iurne.  
 Y schal say þou schalt in þi way  
 Hom in to þine owen cuntray,  
 Þi fader. þi moder to se:  
 & when þou comes to þi broþer rizt,  
 Pray him, as he is hendi knizt  
 & of gret bounte,  
 Þat he þe batail for ous fong  
 Ozain þe steward þat wiþ wrong  
 Wil stroie ous alle þre.  
 (French & Hale ll. 961-972).

Without Belisaunt's prodding and planning it is fair to say that Amis would probably have been killed by the steward, and that would have been the end of the story. However, in the interest of creating a romance with a happy ending, this is not the case. Due to Belisaunt's plan Amis lives to marry the princess and become the lord of the land.

*Havelock the Dane* contains a notable example of the heroine being the driving force behind the hero's success. Goldborow not only wants her husband to regain his rightful title to Denmark, but through him she knows she can recover England. Havelock, although he is the strongest man in England, seems to have little ambition, and even his intelligence is questionable. When he is forced to marry Goldborow he returns to Grime's house simply because he has no money to support a wife and no idea what else to do with her.

In a dream an angel shows Havelock that he will rule both Denmark and England, but he

is unable to interpret the dream's meaning. He turns to Goldborow and says: "Deus! Lemman, hwat may þis be?" (French & Hale l. 1312). She immediately interprets the dream for him:

Ne non strong, king ne caysere,  
 So þou shalt be, fo[r] þou shalt bere  
 In Engelond corune yet.  
 Denemark shal knele to þi fet:  
 Alle þe castles þat aren þer-inne  
 Shaltow, lemman, ful wel winne,  
 (French & Hale ll. 1317-1322).

At this point Goldborow takes charge of the situation and tells Havelock what they will do to regain their land:

þeroffe withinne þe firste yer  
 Shalt þou ben king, withouten were.  
 Nimen we to Denema[r]k baþe,  
 And do þou nouth on frest þis fare;  
 Lith and selthe felawes are.  
 For shal ich neuere bliþe be  
 Til i with eyen Denemark se;  
 For ich woth þat al þe lond  
 Shalt þou hauen in þin hon[d].  
 Prey Grimes sones, alle þre,  
 þat he wenden forþ with þe...  
 (French & Hale ll. 1333-1344).

Havelock does not hesitate; he follows Goldborow's instructions and they go to Denmark to reclaim his land, then return to England and claim the throne through Goldborow as rightful heir. Thus it is Goldborow who pushes Havelock into seeking revenge on Godard who killed his family and stole his title of King of Denmark. And through his strength and lineage, she regains her inheritance, and Havelock's own position in the world is thus enhanced.



All four of these men seem to have little ambition, whereas the women have rather high aspirations both for themselves and for their men. They not only recognize the opportunity to further their men's careers and in turn their own, but they also form the plans for the knights to attain their goals providing both the quest and the solution.

### **Heroine as Financial Patron**

The heroines of Middle English Romances sometimes act as financial patrons towards the heroes who would not otherwise be able to afford the expenses of a quest. Instead of giving tokens, they give the hero money that he can use on his journeys while proving his worth. In *The Squire of Low Degree*, the hero is painfully aware that his social and financial status is much lower than the princess with whom he has fallen in love. When the princess agrees to love him if he proves himself worthy of her, she spends eighty lines of the story telling him where to go, what to do, and what to wear. Being aware of his financial status she ends this speech by saying that she will provide for his seven year journey:

I shall you geue to your rydinge  
A thousande ponde to your spendinge;  
I shall you geue hors and armure,  
A thousande ponde of my treasure,  
Where-through that ye may honoure wynn  
And be the greatest of your kynne  
(French & Hale ll. 251-256).

Without the financial support of the princess, the squire would not be able to afford to go

on this journey. Thus he would not have become a knight and would not have been able to marry the princess and become king after her father's death.

The fairy princess, Dame Tryamoure, in *Sir Launfal* also acts as a financial patron, although she is not providing for a journey, but rather just keeping her lover happy with a lavish lifestyle. A year after leaving King Arthur's court Launfal becomes destitute. The author of this romance describes just how poor Launfal has become when he declines an invitation from the mayor's daughter to join her for a meal. Launfal says to her:

To-day to cherche y wolde haue gon,  
 But me fawtede hosyn and schon,  
 Clenly brech and scherte;  
 And fore defawte of clodynge,  
 Ne myzte y yn with þe peple þrynge;  
 No wonþur douz me smerte!  
 (French & Hale ll. 199-204).

He asks instead if he can borrow a saddle and bridle so that he can ride in the woods to find comfort. While Launfal is resting, he meets a maiden who asks him to follow her to meet Dame Tryamoure, who offers to be his lover saying that if he forsakes all other women, she will make him rich:

I wyll þe zeue an alner  
 Imad of sylk and of gold cler,  
 With fayre ymages þre;  
 As oft þou putttest þe hond þerinne,  
 A mark of gold þou schalt wyne,  
 In wat place þat þou be.  
 (French & Hale ll. 319-324).

She also provides a horse, a banner, and a squire. Launfal readily accepts her terms saying that he has never seen a better deal. This is not the end of Dame Tryamoure's financial support of the hero. When Launfal returns home, ten well armed men with pack

horses approach his hovel: "Some with syluer, some with golde; / All to Syr Launfal hyt scholde; / To presente hym wythe pryde / With ryche clopes and armure bryzt" (French & Hale ll. 379-382). Launfal uses this money to hold rich feasts, help prisoners and religious orders, and to support himself when he attends tournaments. In fact it is because of Dame Tryamoure's love and financial patronage that Launfal is able to become a valiant knight, winning every battle he fights.

Launfal does not exactly have a quest to pursue like the typical romance hero. It is only later in the story that he has a goal: to be cleared of the charges against him due to his remarks to Guenevere. However, he is not active in seeking a method to clear himself. It is Dame Tryamoure in the end who is responsible for clearing Launfal's name. Although the money she provides does not specifically help him on a quest, except to escape poverty, it certainly helps make a more interesting story. Launfal is not only the heroine's lover, but he is also totally dependant on her for financial support, essentially putting Dame Tryamoure in the masculine role of provider.

### **Key to the Hero's Quest**

Some of the heroines who are instrumental in helping the heroes attain their goals provide them with information that either directly saves their lives, or helps them defeat their foes. In both *Eger and Grime* and the *Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* the

heroine gives the hero information that is critical to his completion of the quest. When Sir Grime meets Lady Loosepine and tells her that he will fight Gray-steele she says:

There is noe woman aliue that knoweth so weele  
 As I doe of the condic[i]ouns of Sir Gray-steele;  
 For euerye houre from midnight till noone  
 Eche hower he increaseth the strenght of a man,  
 And euery houer from noone till midnight  
 Euery hower he bateth the strenght of a knight.  
 Looke thou make thy first counter like a knight,  
 And enter into his armour bright;  
 Looke boldlye vpon him thou breake thy spere  
 As a manfull knight in warr;  
 Then light downe rudlye for thy best boote;  
 The tyrant is better on horsbacke then on foote.  
 Presse stiflye vpon him in that stoure  
 As a knight will thinke on his paramoure;...  
 (French & Hale ll. 889-902).

By using this valuable information provided by Lady Loosepine, Grime is able to defeat Gray-steele in battle and complete the quest that he set for himself. If the Lady had not told Grime about Gray-steele's weaknesses he would most likely have failed like the hundred knights who attempted the battle before him. Thus Lady Loosepine holds the key to Grime's successful completion of his quest.

Another example of the heroine holding information that is crucial to the outcome of the hero's quest can be found in *The Marriage of Sir Gawain and The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*. In an attempt to find the answer to Sir Gromer Somer Jour's question: what do women desire most, both King Arthur and Sir Gawain search for a year. They: "...euer enquired of man, woman, and other," (Hahn [Wedding] l. 197), and their search yields many different answers. Later, King Arthur meets Dame Ragnell in the woods and she tells Arthur the answer to the question. When Arthur returns to give

Sir Gromer Somer Jour his answer, he first recites all of the answers that he and Gawain had collected:

The Kyng pullyd oute bokes twayne:  
 "Syr, ther is myne answer, I dare sayn;  
 For somme wolle help att nede."  
 Syr Gromer lokyd on theym everychon:  
 "Nay, nay, Sir Kyng, thou artt butt a dead man;  
 Therfor nowe shalt thou blede."  
 (Hahn [Wedding] ll. 449-454 ).

As a last resort Arthur says: "Abyde, Sir Gromer," ... "I have one answere shalle make alle sure." (Hahn [Wedding] ll. 455-456), and gives Dame Ragnell's answer: "Wemen desyre sovereynté, for that is theyr lykyng. And that is ther moste desyre, To have the rewllle of the manlyest men, And then ar they welle...." (Hahn [Wedding]ll. 468-471). Thus, Sir Gromer Somer Jour reluctantly allows King Arthur to live.

The women who bestow tokens to help the hero complete his quest may not be directly responsible for saving his life as is the case with the heroines who bear information. However, they do play an important role in the story in that they supply the hero with a gift that he uses to attain his goal. In *Sir Degaré*, for example, the hero's main objective is to determine the identity of his parents. When she sends her baby to live with a hermit, Degaré's mother gives him two tokens; a pair of magic gloves that fit only her, and a sword with a broken tip by which his father will recognize him. Both of these tokens serve their purpose and are essential in helping Degaré find his parents. Without the gloves, Degaré would have committed the sin of incest after winning his mother's hand in marriage at a tournament. Similarly, without the sword, Degaré and his father would have battled to the death if Degaré's sword had not been recognized. Essentially, then,

Degaré was on a quest to find his parents with two tokens given to him at birth by his mother. One helps him identify his mother, while the other reunites father and son.

A favourite token in the romances is the ring, which serves as a reminder of the hero's paramour as in the cases of the *Earl of Toulouse*, *Sir Launfal*, and *King Horn*, or as a means to safeguard the hero in battle as seen in *Florys and Blancheflour* and again in *King Horn*. In *King Horn* Rymenhild wants to make sure that Horn is committed to her and that he will return to her alive. She gives him the ring saying:

Tak nu her þis gold ring:...  
 For my luue þu hit were,...  
 þat þu ne schalt in none place  
 Of none dundes beon ofdrad,  
 Ne on bataille beon amad,  
 And þenke vpon þi lemman.  
 (French & Hale ll. 563-576).

As with most of the romance heroes, Horn later finds himself in battle:

He lokede on þe ringe,  
 And þozte on Rimenilde;  
 He sloz þer on haste  
 On hundred bi þi laste,  
 Ne mizte no man telle  
 þat folc þat he gan quelle.  
 (French & Hale ll. 613-618).

The ring, in essence, binds Horn to Rymenhild and allows him to draw strength in battle from the strength of their love.

In *Florys and Blancheflour* the ring is given to the hero by his mother in order to keep him from harm on his journey in search of Blancheflour. The queen takes the ring off her finger and gives it to Florys saying: "While it is þyne, douzt no þyng / Of fire brennyng

ne water in þe see; / Ne yren ne steele shal dere thee" (French & Hale ll. 376-378). When the hero and heroine are caught together in bed, the admiral wants to have them both burned. At this point Florys gives the magic ring to Blancheflour telling her that it will keep her safe. She immediately gives it back saying that she would rather die so that Florys can live. Neither accepts the ring and it drops to the floor where it is found by a king who takes it to the admiral and tells him what had occurred between the lovers, asking that their lives be spared. Ultimately the ring saves the lives of both the hero and heroine as it, and its story, move the admiral to compassion and then forgiveness. Thus the hero may have completed his quest of finding Blancheflour without the help of the ring, but it is the ring that enables the couple to save their lives and return home to live happily ever after.

In *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, Cristabelle gives the hero a sword before he leaves on the quest her guardian has set for him. As most tokens given by princesses to heroes, this is no ordinary sword. Cristabelle tells Eglamour:

Also a good swerde I schall zeue þe:  
 Sent Pole fond it in þe Grekes see:  
 Of egge syche knowe I none.  
 Þer was neuer helme made of stele -  
 And þou haue happe to hit hym wele -  
 But hyt woll thorowz gone!  
 (Richardson [Cotton] ll. 265-270).

The sword certainly proves its worth when Eglamour uses it to slay the giant. Later, when he is hunting the boar, he tries to attack the animal with a spear but, "His nobill spere on hym he braste - / It wold nott in hym bytt (Richardson [Cotton] ll. 389-390). He resorts to using the sword Cristabelle gave him and only then is he successful in killing

the boar. The sword also helps the hero in the third part of his quest when he uses it to kill a dragon.

The magic tokens that the heroines give to the heroes can be viewed as both patronage and the application of power. The heroines possess power simply by owning such valuable and powerful items, and they exercise their power by choosing where, when, and to whom these tokens will be given. So, once they have chosen a suitable mate, they make every effort possible to see that he is successful in proving his worthiness and returning to her alive.

Some heroines who are instrumental in the completion of the hero's quest take the matter a little further and teach the hero a lesson. Dame Ragnell for example, not only provides the answer that saves Arthur's life, but she also teaches a lesson to Gawain, Arthur and the entire court. The narrator describes her extensively as the foulest woman to ever live, but she says to Arthur: "And yett a Lady I am" (Hahn [Wedding] l. 317), and thus, she should be treated accordingly. Yet, Arthur feels ashamed of her as he brings her to his court, and all the ladies sympathize with Gawain for having to marry such a foul creature. Even Guenevere tries to convince Dame Ragnell to get married early in the morning as privately as possible to avoid the sorrowful gaze of the court. Dame Ragnell blatantly refuses Guenevere's suggestion and demands a public wedding befitting of her station and as promised by Arthur. On the wedding night the loathly hag turns into a beautiful young lady. The next day when her beauty is seen by everyone the lesson is learned - you cannot judge the value of people by their looks.



In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the lesson taught by Morgan le Fay is far more calculated than that of Dame Ragnell. Morgan orchestrates an elaborate plan to test the courtly honour of King Arthur's knights. Gawain accepts the garter from Lady Hautedesert knowing that it will magically protect him from being killed by the Green Knight. In accepting the garter to save his life, Gawain loses his honour. He returns to Arthur's court ashamed of his actions. The entire court, both men and women agree to wear a green garter to remind them of their honour and how easily it may be lost.

A similar situation occurs in *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, where, after Eglamour succeeds in fulfilling two of the tasks set by Cristabelle's father, he rests at King Edmund's castle. However, a giant besieges the castle and demands that the king send out his daughter Organate, so that he may marry her. Eglamour kills the giant and King Edmund says: "Here shalt þou be kyng! / To-morn schall I crowne the, / And þou schalt wedde my dowztyr fre (Richardson [Cotton] ll. 603-605). As Eglamour is an honourable knight who is in love with Cristabelle, he kindly refuses this offer so the king gives him a horse instead. Organate however, has other ideas saying to Eglamour:

Sir, I sall gyffe þe a gud golde ryng  
 Wyth a full ryche stane.  
 Whare so þou walkes on watir or land,  
 Whills it es appon thyn hande  
 þou sall neur be slayne...  
 Sir, I sall habude the þis feftene zere,  
 So þat þou wold me wedd  
 (Richardson [Lincoln] ll. 617-624).

Eglamour accepts the ring and says that by the end of fifteen years he will let the princess know if he will marry her.

Thus, as Gawain took the girdle from Lady Hautedesert replacing the Virgin Mary with the mortal lady, Eglamour symbolically replaces his love Cristabelle with the new princess Organate. For both knights their faithlessness is followed by injury. When Gawain meets the Green Knight, he has his neck cut by his adversary. Eglamour goes to battle the dragon and receives a head wound that takes a year to heal. When Gawain returns to Arthur's court, it is evident that he lost his honour, and on Eglamour's return to Artois he learns that Cristabelle and her son were put out to sea, thus he lost his love. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ends with this revelation that Gawain's honour is lost and all the members of the court agree to wear a green band to remind them of the incident. Eglamour on the other hand, goes to the Holy Land where he lives for fifteen years seeking penance and fighting in tournaments until he is eventually reunited with Cristabelle and his son. Although the ring from Organate does not help the hero complete his quest, it furthers the plot by teaching Eglamour a lesson about faithfulness. Even though his indiscretion is never really treated as such, he has still learned a lesson and sought penance.

### **The Hero's Reward for Completing the Quest**

Another equally important function of women in Middle English Romances is that they provide the hero's reward for completing the quest. There are several methods by which

this reward is given. First and foremost, of course, is that the heroine gives her love to the hero. However, with this love comes a number of benefits. Practically all of the heroines are heirs and are thus capable of rewarding the hero with their wealth and lands, augmenting his status through marriage. Finally, these women, if they go on to bear children, tend to give the hero a male heir.

The importance of land ownership in the medieval world cannot be stressed enough. The possession of land meant not only an income, but also title and prestige to the owner. A grant of land could raise an entire family from relative obscurity to prominence in the kingdom. Land was considered an extremely valuable commodity and was thus the cause of disputes and wars over its control. A land owner was a noble or at least a knight or gentleman, and with these titles came certain rights to the land and control over the people who lived on it. Yet there were also responsibilities to the king, such as supplying soldiers, that had to be met by the landowner, whether one was a man or a woman. Thus the acquisition of land not only meant an augmentation of status for the owner, but it also improved the status and reputation of the entire family. Because of this focus on land as the basis of both title and wealth, transfers of land were handled with extreme care.

According to the law in medieval England, women could not acquire land through service as their male relatives could. However, there are always exceptions, such as Margaret de Brotherton, who, in her own right was granted a title (Ward 125). Women primarily acquired land through their family in the form of *maritagium*, jointure, dower, and inheritance. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries the practice of primogeniture

developed in an effort to keep land undivided and inherited through male offspring.

However, quite often there was no male heir and the land was handed down to a daughter. In this case Ward notes that: "Until the 1130's it was usual for a single heiress to succeed even when there was more than one daughter, but from the 1130's it became usual for the lands to be divided among the daughters, and this remained the rule for the rest of the Middle Ages" (87-88).

Occasionally there were disputes as to the right of daughters to inherit. These incidents were often handled by lords, or in some cases by the king. An example of a king's intercession on behalf of female heirs can be seen in an extract from the London Public Records Office, translated by Ward:

Richard by the grace of God king of England, duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, and count of Anjou...have granted and confirmed by our present charter...between Beatrice de Say and Matilda her sister, daughters of William de Say, concerning the partition of their whole inheritance, as the chirograph made between them testifies. Namely that 'Bruninton' with its appurtenances should remain for ever in the hands of Matilda the younger and her heirs, together with the service of William de Reigny and the service of Ralph son of Bernard. ... land to remain to her and her heirs by hereditary right. (100).

When considering the Middle English Romances, the lands are generally passed down through a single heiress. Regarding the English baronage Ward also notes that:

Great changes took place within the group in the 250 years after the Norman Conquest as a result of forfeiture of estates because of rebellion, and the failure of heirs within families; moreover, many new families arose as a result of service and reward, especially from the Crown, and through the marriage to heiresses. Only about thirty-

six out of 210 English baronies between 1066 and 1327 descended in a single male line... (1-2).

A great number of examples can be cited from medieval English history regarding the acquisition of land through marriage to an heiress. Probably the most famous example is that of Eleanor of Aquitaine's marriages first to Louis VII, the King of France, and later to Henry II, King of England. Here it should be noted that the bestowing of land and title was a form of patronage which kings and the higher nobility often employed to reward faithful servants and ensure that lands stayed in the hands of their allies. Lucas notes that "widows and heiresses were freely sold to the highest bidder or to the friends of the king or overlord, even if those friends were of low degree, to the ladies' 'disparagement'", (86). In fact Ann of Bohemia was given to Richard II in marriage because he managed to outbid his competitors (Lucas 90). However, if a woman had a choice in who she married, as in the romances, then it is she, and not her lord, who is involved in bestowing patronage on a man of lesser fortune.

In the medieval romances the value of marriage to an heiress is well recognized, as most of the heroines are heiresses who marry the hero by the end of the story, giving him land and title. In *Sir Amadace* the hero seems well aware of the fact that he can acquire land and wealth through a marriage to an heiress. When Amadace sets out on his journey, his lands are mortgaged and he has only 30 pounds to his name. When the White Knight meets him in the forest and tells him: "For here beside duellus a rialle king, / And hase a doghtur fayre and yinge;" (Mills ll. 460-461), Amadace gratefully accepts the White

Knight's terms and proceeds to win the princess in a tournament. Although he has never met the princess, Sir Amadace wants to marry her to gain control of her lands and inheritance so he can use the income to regain his own lands and pay his debts. Thus Amadace obtains a 'second chance' to prove that he can rule his lands profitably and, in essence, he learns a lesson about squandering his assets.

Another benefit of marrying an heiress, aside from acquiring land, of course, is the acquisition of title. For a man of lower status than his wife, this was a great opportunity for his entire family to augment their social status. The majority of these marriages were arranged by the parents or guardians specifically to create an alliance that would benefit both families. Sometimes however, an heiress was married to a man of lower status by order of her king or lord as a reward for service. Although the minimum age for a woman to marry was twelve, she was often betrothed as young as five or six. For example in 1196 when the Earl of Salisbury died, his only heir was his six-year-old daughter Ela. After the earl's death, King Richard I arranged for Ela to marry his illegitimate brother, William Longespee thus raising him to the status of Earl of Salisbury by right of his wife (Ward 103).

A reflection of the marriage arrangements of Plantagenet England can often be seen in Middle English Romances in the powers and status given in marriage by the heroines. In *Amis and Amiloun* and *The Squire of Low Degree* it is the noble's daughters, through their love for the heroes, that help them climb the social ladder from squire to duke, and squire to king respectively. Similarly Eger and Grime and Sir Eglamour marry heiresses,

thus gaining titles and land through their unions.

For example, both the heroes and heroines of *Havelock the Dane* and *Sir Tryamour* are of equal status - all are heirs to an entire kingdom. Their unions basically double their wealth and territory, both for the heroes and the heroines. Both Tryamour and Havelock acquire their wives through a demonstration of strength in tournaments where it is decided that the strongest man will marry the princess. In accordance with historical marriage practices of the English nobility, both Helyn and Goldborow should have been betrothed to princes long before the tournaments took place. However, the author explains this by the sudden death of Helyn's father when she is only seven years old, and the fact that Goldborow was locked in a tower by her malicious guardian.

Helyn inherits Hungary at the age of seven and calls a tournament to find a husband that is strong enough to protect her lands. Tryamour wins the tournament but is badly injured and subsequently leaves Helyn to fend for herself for a year while he recovers and then goes off to seek adventure, leaving his wife-to-be without the male protection that she originally sought. Needless to say, Helyn's castle is besieged by the evil knight Burlonde who wants to marry Helyn and acquire her land. In the end, Tryamour kills Burlonde and marries Helyn, becoming the King of Hungary, as well as inheriting Aragon from his father.

According to Harriet Hudson, *Sir Tryamour* was written near the end of the fourteenth century (introduction i ). The segment in this romance dealing with Helyn's castle being

besieged by a knight who wants to marry her is reminiscent of an incident that occurred in England in 1316. The widow Elizabeth de Burgh became one of the heiresses to her brother's lands, Gilbert de Clare, Earl of Gloucester, after his death at the battle of Bannockburn. She was in residence at Bristol castle when she was besieged by Theobald de Verdun. In this case however, Theobald was successful in his abduction, and he married Elizabeth (Ward 41), thus gaining control of her lands.

Another incident of a successful abduction that can be seen in the romances is presented in *Sir Isumbras*. After Isumbras loses his wealth, lands, and title, and has only one son and his wife left; "The sawdon beheeld that lady thare, / Hym thoughte an aungyl that sche ware / Come adoun from hevene" (Hudson [Isumbras] ll. 268-270). The sultan offers Isumbras gold and lands if he will sell his wife to him. Isumbras, the good Christian king, of course refuses this offer so the sultan resorts to stealing his wife instead. The sultan "...took hys wyff hym froo. / And sithen on the land they hym casten / And beten hym tyl hys sydys brasten / And maden hys flesch al bloo" (Hudson [Isumbras] ll. 288-291). The sultan then crowns Isumbras' wife queen of his own land.

Unlike Sir Isumbras' wife, who brings nothing but her beauty to this marriage, the pattern of abduction for the purpose of marriage in the Middle Ages was generally to acquire wealth, title, and lands. Also, it was rarely if ever, that a married woman was abducted for this purpose because, if her husband was still alive, medieval law held that the first marriage was legal and any subsequent marriages would be deemed invalid.



Under medieval English law, a married woman was required to let her husband control her property. In practice however, women, especially widows who remarried, or women of higher status than their mate, tended to keep control of their lands. Archer cites a 1467 example "Henry, Lord Stafford was largely dependant upon the income of his wife Lady Margaret Beaufort and she was with Stafford when they toured her estates in the West Country..." (159). Similarly the widow Ann Neville, Duchess of Buckingham was in charge of her lands during her marriage to Lord Mountjoy (Ward 122). Because women usually married young, especially heiresses, they were also often widowed young.

Labarge asserts that:

Real power for a woman came with widowhood when she took full control of her dower lands and frequently, if the heir was a minor, the management and supervision of all the lands and revenues until he came of age (72).

Countess Adela of Blois, the daughter of William the Conqueror is one of the early medieval women who fits this profile perfectly. After fifteen years of marriage she encouraged her husband Stephen to join the First Crusade in 1096. Two years later he abandoned the army and returned home. Adela persisted, and in 1101 he returned to the Holy Land but was soon killed in battle (Labarge 78). "Stephen's death made little difference at home where Adela had been ruling the country ever since his departure and where she continued to be in charge as long as her sons were minors" (Labarge 78). She did not remarry, but she ran a court that was famous for its cultural and literary riches. After her sons came of age, Countess Adela retired to a convent where she spent her last seventeen years.

However, it is worth asking whether during her marriage Adela wished to be a widow. She certainly did everything she could to encourage her husband to risk his life in the Crusades. For a widow enjoyed status almost equal to that of a man. As a *femme sole* she could "hold land, even by military tenure, and do homage for it; she could make a will or a contract, could sue or be sued" (Power 2). Not to mention that she would no longer have to deal with the risks of childbirth. As is common to human nature, women during this period had to look out for their best interests. If they were capable and comfortable running their lands there would be no need for another husband unless for love, or as in some cases, by order of the king.

In the Middle English Romances, there are several cases where a widow marries the hero thereby rewarding his love with incredible wealth. In *Sir Isumbras* the hero's wife is stolen by the sultan who falls in love with her and makes her his queen. However, only a few years after the marriage, the sultan dies leaving Isumbras' wife as queen of the land, in possession of both land and wealth. Although she is still married to Isumbras, she is left in a quasi-widowed state when the sultan dies. When Isumbras the blacksmith-turned-pilgrim finally journeys to Jerusalem, he is taken in by the compassionate queen; fed, clothed and nursed back to health. When they recognize each other they are remarried and the queen gives Isumbras title, power, and the sultan's land: "Then was he kyng, Ser Ysumbras, / Off more welthe thenne evere he was" (Hudson [Isumbras] ll. 688-689). Thus, the wealth that his wife gives him is far greater than what he inherited by birth.

The Earl of Toulouse however, falls in love with an emperor's wife. After several heated battles concerning the possession of land, the earl and the emperor become friends, with the earl serving as steward at the emperor's court. After the emperor's death three years later, the widow Buelybon marries the earl/steward thus bringing to him the title of emperor along with the lands she possesses through her marriage to the emperor<sup>6</sup>.

The widow's marriage to one of her, or her late husband's, servants seems to have been fairly common, although not a recommended practice in medieval England. Perhaps one of the most famous cases is that of the marriage of Joan of Acre, daughter of King Edward I and Eleanor of Castile, and widow of Gilbert de Clare, Earl of Gloucester; to Ralph de Monthermer, her husband's groom (Ward 43). This marriage was performed in secret while Joan's father was negotiating a marriage for her to the Count of Savoy, Amadeus V. Although this clandestine union caused quite a stir, due to the fact that many other nobles wished to marry her, the marriage was recognized out of respect because Joan was the predominant countess in the land. When she was called to the king's court to explain her actions she boldly said:

'It is not ignominious or shameful for a great and powerful earl to marry a poor and weak woman; in the opposite case it is neither reprehensible nor difficult for a countess to promote a vigorous young man'. Her reply pleased the lord king, and thus his anger and that of the magnates was appeased (Ward 43).

This marriage promoted the entire Monthermer family to a higher status because of their new found proximity to royalty. Similarly both Katherine Neville, Duchess of Norfolk,

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<sup>6</sup> In Chrétien de Troyes *Yvain*, the hero marries the widow Laudine. She does not even like him, but

and Alice St. Aubyn, Countess of Oxford married their servants after their husbands deaths (Archer 180).

Both in the romances and in Plantagenet England marriages between noble ladies and servants were plentiful. Historically these marriages were more often second marriages for noblewomen. Archer notes that:

These unions may suggest a propensity among aristocratic women for conducting affairs, perhaps in the long absence of their lords, but they may be the quite natural end to a long and close relationship between a mistress and a faithful servant in their administration of the estates, one which had grown into a genuine affection over the years. It is also possible that such liaisons represent some kind of move on the part of widows to guarantee the integrity of the inheritance, could certainly be a valuable asset at a time of uncertainty. The former relationship between the two, of servant and mistress, might possibly have assured the widow of a greater degree of control over her estates than marriage to a new outside lord might allow (170).

In the romances however, the heroines for the most part had never been previously married, yet many of them still marry their father's servants. Perhaps this is for the same reason as the widows mentioned above. In *The Squire of Low Degree*, *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, *Amis and Amiloun*, *King Horn*, and *Eger and Grime*, all of the heroes are of lower status than the princesses, and they work for the princess' fathers. All of these heroes, having proved their worth, inevitably win the love of the princess and marry her with the consent of her father, becoming the new ruler of the kingdom.

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marries him because she believes that he will be able to protect her lands against King Arthur.

Because marriages between widows and their servants in Plantagenet England were a fairly common occurrence, one must question whether or not these close relationships existed prior to the husband's death. Considering that husbands were away from their wives often for years at a time on crusades, fighting battles, or serving the king, there seems to have been plenty of opportunity for a relationship to develop. Given that this practice was not out of the ordinary, it is no wonder that several of the servants in the romances attempt to win the queen's love while her husband is away. For example in *Sir Tryamour* the steward tries desperately to win Queen Margaret:

Now ys the kyng passyd the see,  
 To hys enemyes gon ys he,  
 And warryth there a whyle;  
 But than Syr Marrok, hys steward,  
 Was faste abowtewarde  
 To do hys lady gyle.  
 He wowyd the quene bothe day and nyght,  
 To lye hur by, he had hyt hyght,  
 He dredyd no peryle.  
 Feyre he spake to hur aplyght;  
 Yf he hur thocht turne myght  
 Wyth wordys, hyt was hys wylle.  
 (Hudson [Tryamour] ll. 63-74).

If Marrok had been successful in winning Margaret's love in her husband's absence, then when the king died, Marrok would have had a good chance of marrying the widow and becoming the new king.

However, Margaret refuses the steward's love and remains loyal to her husband the king. Marrok, being angry for this unrequited love, accuses Margaret of having an affair with a young knight. He even arranges for the knight and Margaret to be caught together in her chamber.

Then exylyd the kyng the quene.  
 Sche had wondur what hyt myght meene,  
 What made hym so to begynne:  
 No lenger he wolde gyf hur respyte  
 Nor no worde he wolde speke hur wyth,  
 And that was grete synne.  
 (Hudson [Tryamour] ll. 236-241).

These accusations of affairs were also rooted in the court society of the Middle Ages. There were certainly many noblewomen accused of affairs, such as Blanche of Artois, wife of King Philip IV's youngest son Charles. She was charged with having an affair with a knight at the royal court who was subsequently executed for this alleged crime. Blanche was imprisoned and her marriage was annulled, although she continued to plead her innocence.

Now that we have established that a woman can bestow patronage and reward the hero through marriage, what of the woman who is forced to marry? We must take into account the position of women in pre-conquest England as opposed to their post-conquest counterparts. In Anglo-Saxon society women possessed many more rights and freedoms than their descendants. In accordance with the practice of feudalism, these rights and freedoms were gradually eroded. Judith Weiss notes of post-conquest women in England that:

No married woman could now make a valid will without her husband's consent. She could inherit land, if there was no male heir in the family, but if she married, her husband had to control it; even if he died and she remarried, her new husband would do the same. It was rare for her to make charters and rare to witness those by other women. The nobler she was, the more her choice of husband was controlled

by others, concerned with questions of land, money and rank - and this despite the attempted insistence by canon lawyers that she should give her full and free consent to a match. (8).

Marriage in the Middle Ages had very little to do with love; in fact if the couple eventually grew to love each other that was simply a bonus. Marriage was primarily about land and producing an heir to rule it. Thus if a woman was forced to marry, it was usually for the good of the family.

As noted above, arranged marriages were the norm for the upper class in medieval England and this too is reflected in the romances of the same period. In *Havelock the Dane*, Goldborow's guardian arranges for her marriage to the strongest man in the land. This man happens to be Havelock, however he is working in the castle kitchen at the time. Goldborow says:

Bi Crist and bi seint Iohan,  
 þat hire sholde noman wedde  
 Ne noman bringen hire to bedde,  
 But he were king or kinges eyr,  
 Were he neuere man so fayr.  
 (French & Hale ll. 1112-1116).

She goes on to say she would rather die than marry such a base born man. In the end of course, Havelock wins back Denmark, and Goldborow ends up as queen of both Denmark and England. Perhaps the authors intentionally included a message in these romances to noble ladies who were thinking of refusing a marriage their family had arranged for them.

One problem with feudalism that both historical women and romance heroines had to contend with in relation to marriage was the degree to which the couple was related by blood or spirit. In the early Middle Ages the Church prohibited marriage within seven degrees of consanguinity, and in 1215 after the Fourth Lateran Council this was amended to four degrees (Ward 18), as it was difficult to find a mate of equal status that was not related within seven degrees. Considering that the nobility was rather small, it was not uncommon for a betrothed couple to share a great-great-grandparent. In the case of a couple wishing to marry who were related within four degrees however, a papal dispensation had to be acquired for the marriage to proceed and the offspring of the marriage to be recognized as legitimate.

One example of the need for a dispensation can be seen in the marriage of John de Hastings, Earl of Pembroke and Ann, the daughter of Margaret de Brotherton and Lord Mauny. John de Hastings' deceased wife Margaret was related in the third and fourth degrees to Ann Mauny (Ward 34). Although John and Ann were not related by blood, the families had previously been united through marriage, thus the need for the dispensation. Similarly Eleanor of Aquitaine and her husband King Louis VII of France required a dispensation to proceed with their marriage. Later however, the couple separated on the grounds that they were too closely related to marry in the first place, even though their relationship was known at the time of marriage. The marriage was dissolved on the grounds of consanguinity and Eleanor promptly married Henry of Anjou, later King Henry II of England.



Papal dispensations for the marriage of related parties within the prohibited degrees of consanguinity were relatively common. A social comment on the relatively easy acquisition of dispensations can be seen in the late fourteenth century romance *Emaré*. After Erayne, the Emperor Artyus' wife dies, Artyus falls in love with his only daughter and wishes to marry her:

...The fayrest wommon on lyfe,  
 That all hys hert and all hys þowzth  
 Her to loue was ybrowght;  
 He byhelde her ofte syþe.  
 So he was anamored hys þowztur tyll,  
 Wyth her he þowzth to worche hys wyll,  
 And wedde her to hys wyfe.  
 (French & Hale ll. 222-228).

Needless to say *Emaré*, the emperor's daughter was revolted at the prospect of marrying her father saying: "zyf hyt so betydde þat ze me wedde / And we shulde play togedur in bedde, / Bothe we were forlorne!" (French & Hale ll. 253-255).

The emperor knows that his daughter is too closely related to him for marriage, so he sends to Rome for a dispensation and gets it!

Messengeres forth þey wente-  
 They durste not breke hys commandement-  
 And erles wyth hem yn fere.  
 They wente to þe courte of Rome,  
 And browzte þe Popus bullus sone,  
 To wedde hys dowzter dere.  
 (French & Hale ll. 235-240).

*Emaré* continues to refuse the marriage even though it is absurdly sanctioned by the Pope.

In the early Middle Ages marriage was not primarily considered a religious matter. In fact it was not necessary to be married at a church for the union to be judged valid, although the practice of secret marriage was heavily discouraged by the Church. All that a marriage required to be legal was the consent of both individuals, and words spoken in the present tense confirming the marriage (Ward 18). The 1469 secret marriage between Margery Paston and Richard Calle, a Paston family servant, caused an enormous shock to the Paston family and their friends. Ward cites a letter regarding an examination by the bishop of Norwich of Margery and Richard, to determine whether or not their marriage was valid:

He said that he wanted to know the words that she had spoken to Calle, as to whether they constituted marriage or not. And she went over what she had said, and said boldly that if those words did not ensure marriage she would make it surer before she left, because, she said, she thought that she was bound in conscience whatsoever the words were (38-39).

During the course of the Middle Ages secret marriages became illegal. In 1175 the Archbishop Richard of Canterbury decreed that all marriage celebrations should be held in public. In 1215, Innocent III made the publication of banns mandatory before a marriage could take place. Later, the marriage had to be officially blessed, and a priest who took part in a secret marriage was to be suspended, and the newly weds punished (Lucas 96-97). However, Lucas notes:

...the commonest matrimonial cause in the Church courts in the Middle Ages was the suit brought to enforce a marriage contract. Individuals seeking divorce were far less numerous than those seeking to assert the existence of a secret marriage contract and asking the court to enforce the contract by a declaration of validity (97).

It was not until the Council of Trent (1545-63) when it was decided that for a marriage to be considered valid it had to take place in front of two witnesses and a priest (Lucas 100).

As secret marriages generally occurred because of a genuine affection, or even love between the two parties; the clandestine marriage naturally finds a place in the romances of the time. In both *King Horn* and *Amis and Amiloun*, examples of secret marriages can be seen. In the latter, Belisaunt, after some serious persuading finally convinces Amis to love her, and "He graunted hir hir wil þo, / & plizt hem trewþes boþe to, / & seþþen kist þo tvai" (Leach ll. 667-669). Later, a public marriage is held for the couple, after Amis has proved himself worthy, and a bridal feast is held. The author describes the noble guests; but, there is no mention of a priest performing, or even attending, the second, public marriage. In *Sir Eglamour of Artois* the hero and heroine marry in secret after Eglamour completes two of the three tasks set by Cristabelle's father in order to marry her. When they are reunited fifteen years later, they also have a public wedding, however this one is performed by a bishop, (Richardson [Cotton] l. 1354). In *King Horn*, Rymenhild also convinces the hero to marry her secretly. Horn agrees to the marriage only if she helps him to become a knight. Rymenhild readily agrees, and gives Horn a ring as a token of their love and commitment. Like *Amis and Amiloun*, in this romance there is no mention of a priest, only that Horn made Rymenhild his queen. In fact, in the Middle English Romances few authors include a religious figure at the marriage ceremony, thus strengthening the idea that marriages in the Middle Ages were not as concerned with the provisions made by the Church as we are today.

Another essential reward for completing the quest is the production of a male heir. Even though the heroines in medieval romances are generally the only heirs to their fathers' lands when they marry the heroes, they tend to have male children instead of female. In the society in which these romances were read, this production of a male heir can be seen as a means of restoring order in the story. With a female heir the future of the inheritance is uncertain in a feudal society, which is the basis for the perceived need to find a worthy mate for the princess. When the male heir is born to the hero and heroine, the future of both the family and the land becomes more secure. For example, Sir Tryamour inherits Aragon from his father, and his wife Helyn inherits Hungary from her father. When they marry they have two male children, one to rule Hungary and the other to inherit Aragon. Similarly Sir Isumbras and his wife have three sons virtually insuring the future of the family and assets. When the three boys are stolen by various wild animals, the status quo is completely disrupted.

In *Havelock the Dane*, Athelwold, the King of England is dying and has no heir except a very young daughter; Goldborow. He sends for all of his lords to come to Winchester before his death so that he can deal with the matter of succession. In front of his lords he names Goldborow as his heir:

Nou ich wille you alle preye  
 Of mi douthur þat shal be  
 Yure leuedi after me,  
 Wo may yemen hire so longe,  
 Bopen hire and Engelonde,  
 Til þat she wman [be] of helde'  
 And þa[t] she mowe [hit] yemen and welde?  
 (French & Hale ll.169-175).

Contrary to what one might expect, this announcement causes little commotion on the part of the lords, and all seem to readily accept the king's decision swearing oaths of allegiance to the king's daughter. This story of Goldborow being named her father's successor to the crown of England is reminiscent of an event that occurred with Henry I and his daughter Matilda at Windsor in 1127.

King Henry I of England had no male heir and thus was justifiably worried about the succession of the English crown. His only surviving legitimate child was a daughter, Matilda, who had been married to the emperor of Germany. When the emperor died, Henry I brought Matilda home to England and named her his heir. Chibnall notes that:

At the beginning of January 1127, before his Christmas court had dispersed, the king obtained oaths of allegiance to his daughter from all the bishops and magnates present. They swore, according to John of Worcester, to defend her loyally against all others if she outlived her father and he left no legitimate son. ...Certainly the substance of the oaths was that all who took them agreed to accept Matilda as their lady if Henry died without a male heir (52).

Although Goldborow, with Havelock's help, succeeds to the throne, Matilda had a much more difficult time securing her inheritance as her cousin Steven usurped the crown on Henry's death. Matilda's son Henry II of Anjou later claimed the English throne through his mother as rightful heir and thus the Plantagenet reign began.

If a daughter were the only heir to a kingdom, then the choice of a husband for her

became critical<sup>7</sup>, as he had to be able to produce a strong, intelligent and legitimate heir to claim the title. When a kingdom was being ruled by a woman its future was seen as being uncertain. Was her husband of equal or higher status? Was she going to have a son? Would he survive? Was he legitimate? These questions are the reason for an insistence on romance heroes proving themselves to win the princess. It is all about the production of an heir to rule the land, and the future of the kingdom.

So, it can be stated that women, both in medieval England and their counterparts in the Middle English Romances use their power to bestow patronage on the heroes in order to reward them for completing the quest. The favour the heroes find with the romance heroines is expressed through love and consequently the marriage of the couple. With this union the princess brings the hero her inheritance, i.e. her father's wealth, land, and title. To insure the succession of the land that he rules by right of his wife, she also gives him a son, thus solidifying the family's control of the property into the next generation.

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<sup>7</sup> Thus all the arranged marriages.

# CHAPTER V

## THE CHARACTER OF THE WOMAN IN MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCE

So far, I have been looking at elements of plot, to show that the women in the Middle English Romances are integral to the development of the narrative. I want now to look at the characters themselves, and I shall be arguing the same general line, that they are not mere objects, but strong and intelligent women with, in many cases, an enormous amount of power, and their own agenda in winning the hero's love. I will also argue that there was no lack of powerful models for these heroines in medieval England.

Weiss notes that the female characters in romance:

...appear to reflect the realities of life for well-born women in the early medieval period. Their actions are restricted, their choices limited or ignored, they are often victim rather than perpetrator. Yet there is another, equally important, side to the picture. The women in these romances, especially those who rise above mere cardboard figures, seldom come over as weak, passive, helpless: on the contrary, they impress us by their initiative and resourcefulness. They compensate for their subordinate position by exercising power through other channels, though occasionally, they also have the opportunity to play a male role. The forcefulness of some of these women, especially in juxtaposition to less strong-willed or able heroes, is at first unexpected in a romance context, though it is a not uncommon feature of both continental and insular *chansons de geste*. (13).

My argument will take quite a different course from the opinion just given. As I have already begun to show with direct references from the primary material, the heroines are certainly not weak, passive and helpless. In fact, some of these women show almost

excessive stamina and determination. In *Sir Eglamour of Artois* for example, shortly after Cristabelle gives birth, her father sets her and her son adrift at sea. The wind blows them to a rock where her son is stolen by a griffin;

All nyzt on þe roche sche lay;  
 A wynd rose agayn þe day,  
 And fro þe lond here dryues.  
 Sche had nothere mast ne rothere  
 But ylke storme, strengere þen odur,  
 Strongly with her stryues.  
 (Richardson [Cotton] ll. 880-885).

Cristabelle floats through high winds and storms for six days without food or water mourning the theft of her son, until she finally lands in Egypt. Although the author notes that "For feyntenes sche spake no worde" (Richardson [Cotton] l. 898), the fact that she survives such an ordeal raises her above the conventionalized idea of the weak, frail woman.

Like Cristabelle, Emaré is set adrift by her father for refusing to marry him. The author's description of Emaré's hardship is almost identical to that of Cristabelle, in that Emaré has neither food nor water, and has to drift through heavy winds and storms until finally coming to rest on the shore after seven days at sea. Although she is able to speak, the author notes that she is on the brink of death when she is found by Kadore. Due to the deceit of Kadore's mother, after Emaré gives birth, she and her son are set adrift once again without food or water for another seven days. Although Emaré is "For hungur and thurste allmost madde" (French & Hale l. 683), the author describes a touching scene of tenderness for her son:



And when þe chylde gan to wepe,  
 Wyth sory hert she songe hyt aslepe,  
 And putte þe pappe yn hys mowth,  
 And sayde, "myzth y onus gete lond  
 Of þe watur þat ys so stronge,  
 By northe or by sowthe,  
 Wele owth y to warye þe see;  
 I haue myche shame yn the!"  
 And euur she lay and growht.  
 (French & Hale ll. 661-669).

Emaré and her son both survive this journey and land in Rome where they are taken in by a merchant. These two heroines were set adrift with the expectation that they would not survive to land on a foreign shore, but rather die of thirst, hunger, or exposure. The fact that they survive portrays them as strong and determined heroines who are physically capable of withstanding extreme conditions.

Female characters in the Middle English Romances often exert their power by taking on a male role such as that of rescuer, ruler, or sexual aggressor, thus being recognized in medieval patriarchal society as 'powerful' in the male sense. Remarkably however, these heroines manage to retain her femininity while doing so.

As previously shown, medieval women were expected to possess characteristics such as beauty, loyalty, and compassion; anything that made them act like the role models. One means of being recognized as powerful that these women employed was to essentially deny their sexuality. Chibnall notes:

The advice given by St. Bernard to Queen Melisende of Jerusalem after the death of her husband Fulk at about this time was to 'show the man in the woman; order all things... so that those who see you will judge your works to be those of a king rather than a queen' (97).

Instilling a woman with masculine virtues occurred when she was able to prove her power through wise administration and the defense of lands. Chroniclers have noted that Eleanor of Castile was "by sex a woman, but manlike in courage and virtue" (Parsons 158), while they recorded that Eleanor of Provence supported King Henry III "as manfully as the most puissant virago" (Parsons 158). There was often a problem however, when women took on male characteristics in order to use their power. Chibnall notes of the Empress Matilda that she:

...certainly tried to show the man in the woman; unfortunately the comments of hostile chroniclers make plain that what might in a man have passed for dignity, resolution and firm control were condemned in her as arrogance, obstinacy and anger (97).

This certainly was not the case all of the time as illustrated in the Middle English Romances where many of the heroines successfully combine their femininity with these male characteristics, resulting in a character who is strong, intelligent, yet very much a woman.

Because women's physical strength for the most part, prevented them from proving themselves by feats of arms like their men, they reached their goals through knowledge and the power they held in society, relationships and love; and the ability to best use this influence in a non-violent means. These women were by no means passive, waiting for the knight in shining armor to rescue them, in fact, it is sometimes the heroine who rescues the hero.

## The Rescuer

In *Sir Launfal* the fairy princess, Dame Tryamour, is active in rescuing Launfal not once, but twice; first from poverty and then from King Arthur's wrath when he insults Guenevere. However, she does not employ an army to overthrow the knights of Arthur's court in a show of brut strength, as Sir Tryamour does to rescue Helyn from the knight besieging her castle. Instead, Dame Tryamour uses peaceful means to solve the problem, yet she is no less effective in her endeavor. She uses her social status as a means of power, displaying all her beauty and wealth, and thus power, for the entire court to see.

In the beginning of this romance Launfal and Guenevere do not have an amicable relationship. As the story progresses the situation does not improve so Launfal takes two young knights and leaves Arthur's court. However, less than a year after his departure:

So sauagelych hys good he besette  
 þat he ward yn greet dette  
 Ryzt yn þe ferst yere...  
 þat Syr Huwe and Syr Ion  
 Tok here leue for to gon  
 At Syr Launfal þe knyzt;  
 þey seyde, "Sir, our robes beþ torent,  
 And your tresoure ys all yspent,  
 And we goþ ewyll ydyzt."  
 þanne seyde Sir Launfal to þe knyzt[es] fr[e],  
 Tellyd no man of my pouerté,  
 Ffor þe loue of God Almyzt.  
 (French & Hale ll. 130-144).

Launfal is on the verge of disgrace when he meets Dame Tryamour in the woods where she makes him an offer he simply cannot refuse considering his financial condition: "Yf

pou wylt truly to me take, / And alle wemen for me forsake, / Ryche i wyll make þe."

(French & Hale ll. 316-318). One of the conditions of this offer however, is that Launfal must never mention her to anyone or she will never visit him again. For seven years Launfal lives as an extremely rich man with Dame Tryamouré visiting him every night. His luck turns however when he attends a feast held by King Arthur, where Guenevere professes her love to the hero. Launfal rejects the queen's advances saying rather harshly:

I haue loued a fayryr woman  
 Þan þou euir leydest þyn ey vpon,  
 Þys seuen yere and more!  
 Hyre lþlokste mayde, withoute wene,  
 Myzte bet be a quene  
 Þan þou, yn all þy lyue!  
 (French & Hale ll. 694-699).

Naturally Guenevere is angry at being so boldly rejected so she tells Arthur what Launfal said to her. Arthur wants to have Launfal drawn and quartered, but it is agreed that if Launfal will bring his lover to Arthur's court in a year, and she and her maids are indeed more beautiful than the queen, then Launfal will be acquitted. Launfal appears at the court at the appointed time, but he cannot produce his lover and thus the king condemns him. In fact, there is no mention in the romance of Launfal even making a slim attempt to locate Dame Tryamouré. He seems instead to wallow in self-pity at the fact that he cannot defend himself.

While the lords are discussing Launfal's fate, ten of Dame Tryamouré's maidens approach the castle, and the lords agree that they are more beautiful than Guenevere. They are followed by another ten maidens and then by the princess herself who, all agreed that: "þey saw neuere non so gay / Vpon þe grounde gone" (French & Hale ll. 929-930). Thus

Dame Tryamoure is successful in clearing Launfal's name and rescuing him from certain death by order of Arthur and the queen. She even takes him riding off into the sunset, so to speak, as she leads him to the land of Olyroun where the hero spends the rest of his life.

In order to rescue Launfal, Dame Tryamoure unveils herself so the court may see her more easily and conclude that she is in fact much more beautiful than the queen. This action however, is not for the benefit of the men to judge her. Williams notes that: "it was a woman who forced Launfal into his rash boast, and it is the women who must make public acknowledgement that he was right" (166). Indeed the author notes that Guenevere and her ladies stood up "Her for to beholde all aboute, / How euene sche stod vpryzt" (French & Hale ll. 986-987), even though it is Arthur who voices the acknowledgement that what Launfal had said to Guenevere was the truth.

There is no doubt here that Dame Tryamoure rescues Launfal from the cruel death Guenevere and Arthur want to impose on the him. The heroine does not use force of arms to rescue her lover, but rather her presence at the court is enough to prove Launfal innocent. Another incident of the heroine rescuing the hero from death occurs in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*, where Ragnell, like Dame Tryamoure in *Sir Launfal*, does not need to use physical strength, her knowledge is enough to save Arthur. When Dame Ragnell meets Arthur in the woods she makes it quite clear that she is the only one who can save his life:

For alle the answerys that thou canst yelpe,  
 None of theym alle shalle the helpe.  
 That shalt thou knowe, by the Rood.  
 Thou wenyst I knowe nott thy councele,  
 Butt I warn the, I knowe itt every dealle.  
 Yf I help the nott, thou art butt dead.  
 Graunt me, Sir Kyng, butt one thyng,  
 And for thy lyfe I make warrauntyng,  
 Or elles thou shalt lose thy hed.  
 (Hahn [Wedding] ll. 261-269).

Although these two heroines do not physically fight to save the heroes, they are no less effective in completing a rescue.

There are other rescues accomplished by the heroines in these romances, although they are often not clearly delineated as rescues per se. As Sir Launfal is rescued from poverty by Dame Tryamour, so too are Sir Amadace and Sir Isumbras by their wives. Although Sir Amadace is active in finding a way to relieve his poverty, is through his wife, an heiress, that this is accomplished. Similarly the poverty stricken Isumbras is taken in by his wife, fed, clothed and nursed back to health. Later, when they remarry, the queen gives Isumbras title to all of her land making him a very rich man. As has been shown, in medieval England there were many men saved from poverty by marriage to a widow or heiress.

Also, it should be mentioned that the squire in *The Squire of Low Degree* and Sir Eglamour are in need of rescuing from themselves. They are both so sick with love for the princesses that they are virtually incapable of functioning. The squire can do nothing but pine for the princess of Hungary in the garden, until she hears his laments and quickly

fixes the situation, telling him exactly what to do to win her love. Sir Eglamour's state is much worse. One morning he does not appear for breakfast and the princess Belisaunt asks Eglamour's squire where his master is:

Madame, he lyes seke and dede full nere,  
 Bysekis zowe of a syght;  
 For he lyes castyn in swylk a care,  
 Bot if ze mende hym of his fare  
 He leuys nought bis seuenyght.  
 (Richardson ll. 116-120).

Cristabelle returns the knight's love and thus presumably saves his life, and the story continues with Eglamour proving his worthiness of the princess.

Although these heroines do not engage in battle to win their lovers freedom, they still manage to save the heroes lives. Whatever the means of salvation, be it bravery or beauty, saving a life is still saving a life.

## **Decision Maker**

A forum in which romance heroines habitually exercise their power is in relationships with their lovers. As already shown, in the romances the heroines are generally of higher social status than the heroes. This automatically gives them an edge in the relationship in that by birth, they command more respect than the heroes. Also, the courtly love tradition should be taken into consideration when discussing the view of women in relationships in romances.

The basis of the courtly love tradition dictates that the women should be unquestionably revered by her faithful knight. Shahar points out that courtly literature: "...presents the romantic image of the noblewoman who introduces young knights to the mysteries of love, imposes missions on her lover, plays chess, and engages in falconry and embroidery" (152). Whitaker notes that: "Within the code of courtly love, no allegiance must be allowed to override the knight's loyalty to his lady - not even loyalty to King and God" (xii).

Middle English Romances, although heavily influenced by the courtly love tradition, present women in a somewhat different light. They still retain many of the characteristics and abilities of the courtly heroines, such as extreme beauty, chess playing and falconry, but they move beyond the shallow portrayal of 'just a love object', to a well developed character with ambitions, goals, and feelings. Alexander notes that:

The main focus of love is the pursuit of the object of desire. These romances show that the existence of the love relationship generates situations which require the woman to be active, rather than being confined to the role of passive object of her lover's affections (33).

Also, the heroines of romances are often the dominant ones in the relationship, and the decision makers for the couple. Basically, there are more to the romances than just adoration of a lady, and the hero's performance to do her honour.

In *Havelock the Dane*, it is Goldborow and not Havelock who makes the decisions, whereas Havelock merely does what he is told by Grime, then Godard, and later by



Goldborow. Havelock in essence is a large, strong man, but he seems to lack intelligence, or at least a will of his own. When the couple are married and Goldborow is seething in anger at being given to someone so far beneath her rank, an angel comes to her and reveals that Havelock is heir to Denmark. It is certainly notable that the angel tells Goldborow and not Havelock, that Havelock will be the King of Denmark. Also, even though Havelock has the divine dream he does not understand it, and Goldborow has to interpret it for him. Then, it is Goldborow who decides that they should enlist the aid of Grime's sons and go to Denmark to regain the crown. Havelock does not question Goldborow, but goes straight to a church to pray for help in overthrowing his enemy. Of the French *Lai d'Haveloc* Weiss notes that "It is Argentille [Goldborow] who takes decisions, instigates action, possesses resource and initiative: she is the true protagonist of the *Lai d'Haveloc*" (15). This assertiveness on the part of the heroine is retained in the Middle English version as well.

Similarly, Belisaunt in *Amis and Amiloun* makes the critical decisions for the couple. When the steward reveals their affair to the king, Amis becomes extremely upset at the prospect of having to falsely swear that he did not have an affair with Belisaunt, and that he will lose the battle because he is clearly in the wrong. Belisaunt saves their honour by coming up with a plan to clear Amis of wrongdoing. She says to Amis:

Take leue to morwe at day  
 & wende in þi iurne.  
 Y schal say þou schalt in þi way  
 Hom in to þine owen cuntray,  
 þi fader, þi moder to se;  
 & when þou comes to þi broþer rizt,  
 Pray him, as he is hendi knizt

& of gret bounte,  
 þat he þe batail for ous fong  
 Ozain þe steward þat wiþ wrong  
 Wil stroie ous allw þre.  
 (Leach ll. 961-972).

The next morning, as Belisaunt instructed, Amis sets off in search of Amiloun to ask him to fight the battle for him. Naturally this plan is successful with Amiloun defeating the steward and Amis marrying Belisaunt.

Also, the dominant decision makers in *The Squire of Low Degree*, *King Horn*, and *Sir Launfal* are the heroines. These are certainly not passive women, in fact they assert their power through the decisions they make for their lovers. Interestingly, all of the heroes follow the heroines instructions without question, willingly giving them the upper hand in the relationship<sup>8</sup>. A partial answer to why these heroes hand over their power so easily may be found in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*: "A woman will have her will, / And this is all her cheef desire" (Hahn ll. 104-105). Also, the fact that female characters are making important decisions in these medieval romances supports the theory that they were written primarily for the enjoyment of noblewomen<sup>9</sup>, who wished to see their equals portrayed as both intelligent and powerful.

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<sup>8</sup> Or in some cases not so willingly as in Morgan le Fay's control of the action in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

## Sexual Aggressor

Traditionally the role of sexual aggressor has belonged to men, as the expectation of women was to be virgins until marriage, if not completely chaste for life; thus they should not even know how to be sexually aggressive. Also, if a woman ventured into this role she risked not only her reputation, but that of her family as well. However in these romances there are a remarkable number of women who take on the role of sexual aggressor, with the majority being successful in their seductions. Surprisingly few are reprimanded for this behaviour by fathers, husbands, or lovers. In fact, if they are punished as is Cristabelle in *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, they are later forgiven and their offspring are even accepted as legitimate.

Unlike their male counterparts they do not show off their strength to win their lover, instead they use a variety of non-violent means to acquire the love of the hero, from begging to threatening. For example, *Sir Launfal's* Dame Tryamoure and Madame Hautedesert in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* both use seduction and offer gifts as a means to win their lover. Although Dame Tryamoure is immediately successful with Launfal, Gawain rejects Madame Hautedesert's advances, on the grounds that she is the wife of his host.

The romance of *Sir Launfal* is a special case however, as it is based on Marie de France's twelfth century Breton Lai of *Lanval*. Having been originally written by a woman, it

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<sup>9</sup> This is not to exclude men from the audience at all - I am simply looking at why these romances were enjoyed from a female point of view.

presents a much bolder and more powerful picture of the heroine than what might be expected from a male author<sup>10</sup>. Thomas Chestre, in his version of *Sir Launfal* retains Marie de France's dominant characteristics of Dame Tryamour, but he makes it clear that she is a fairy princess, thus providing an acceptable rationalization for her sexual freedom.

In *King Horn* the character of Rymenhild is fully developed and there can be no doubt that she is not just an object of the hero's affection. Alexander asserts that: "the most obvious connection between the woman's love and the plot is created when the heroine is assertive in her sexual conduct" (31). She also notes that: "the woman's exercising of her wishes in the choosing of a sexual partner is an important element of the action of *King Horn*" (31). The author records Rymenhild's thoughts and feelings about her love for Horn, even acknowledging the pain she feels at not being with him:

Heo louede so Horn child  
 þat nez heo gan wexe wild:  
 For heo ne mizte at borde  
 Wiþ him speke no worde,  
 Ne nozt in þe halle  
 Among þe kniztes alle,  
 Ne nowhar in non opere stede:  
 Of folk heo hadde drede:  
 Bi daie ne bi nizte  
 Wiþ him speke ne mizte;  
 Hire soreze ne hire pine  
 Ne mizte neure fine.  
 (French & Hale ll. 251-262).

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<sup>10</sup> Although Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* is a formidable woman, there is definitely an air of censure in her portrayal whereas this does not come across in the portrayal of Dame Tryamour.

Rymenhild's "...assertiveness is combined with the competence to pursue her desire effectively, and she does so apparently without having to obtain authorization from her father" (Alexander 31). It isn't long before she comes up with a plan to win Horn's love.

She conspires with the steward to bring Horn to her chamber where she sits him on the bed and tries to seduce him by speaking passionately. The steward however brings Horn's brother Apulf to the chamber instead. Rymenhild realizes she is professing her love to an imposter and quickly orders him to leave. Unfazed, Rymenhild tries again. She tells the steward to bring Horn to her chamber dressed as a squire so that: "He schal wip me bileue / Til hit beo nir eue, / To hauen of him mi wille (French & Hale II. 363-365). When she has Horn alone she immediately offers herself to be his wife and asks him to pledge his love to her. Horn objects on the grounds that he is of much lower status than she, and that it would not be an equal marriage.

It is interesting to note that while Rymenhild is functioning in the role of sexual aggressor she is referred to as a king not a queen when Horn describes the unequal marriage they would have "Bitwexe a þral and a king" (French & Hale I. 424). This suggests that the aggressiveness she shows can be construed as a male characteristic and thus should be acknowledged as such. However, to counterbalance this 'maleness' she has exhibited, she quickly goes back to her delicate female role and proceeds to faint (French & Hale I. 428). The fainting however, helps her attain her goal. Rymenhild breaks down into tears which makes Horn comfort her and offer his love on the condition that she helps him become a knight.

In *Amis and Amiloun*, the first line of the heroine's description calls her "bold" (Leach l. 422); a depiction she certainly lives up to. Belisaunt, like Rymenhild, falls sick with love for the hero and after agonizing over the situation, she confronts Amis and professes her love asking for a pledge of love from him. Amis also initially rejects Belisaunt's advances saying that being her father's butler, it would dishonour the king if he were her lover. Belisaunt taunts Amis, calling him a priest, monk, and canon<sup>11</sup> (Leach ll. 616-617), however this has no effect on the hero and he still will not give in to her advances. She becomes even more aggressive, resorting to threats and saying that she will cry rape if he does not return her love. This method works, and he immediately pledges his love to her.

Later, Amis still tries to undo the pledge he made to Belisaunt when she goes to his room one night. He argues that he is a poor man and not worthy of her love. She nonchalantly answers: "Riches anouz y may þe finde / Boþe bi nize & day" (Leach ll. 761-762). Apparently Amis finds no fault with this answer: "& in his armes he hir nam / & kist þat miri may; / & so þai plaid in word & dede, / Þat he wan hir maidenhede" (Leach ll. 764-767).

In *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*, Gawain, like finds himself in a difficult situation. After meeting the loathly lady, Arthur returns to his court and presents the problem to Gawain:

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<sup>11</sup> Guenevere also uses this tactic of name calling in *Sir Launfal*. She accuses the knight of being a coward and also suggests that he may be a homosexual (French & Hale l. 689).

Gawen, I mett today with the fowlst Lady  
 That evere I sawe, sertenly.  
 She sayd to me my lyfe she wold save -  
 Butt fyrst she wold the to husbond have.  
 Wherfor I am wo begon -  
 Thus in my hartt I make my mone.  
 (Hahn [Wedding] ll. 336-341).

Gawain, of course is a valiant knight, and a true friend to Arthur who he cannot let die, so he responds with the only possible answer:

Ys this alle? then sayd Gawen;  
 I shalle wed her and wed her agayn,  
 Thowghe she were a fend;  
 Thowghe she were as foulle as Belsabub,  
 Her shalle I wed, by the Rood,  
 Or elles were nott I your frende.  
 For ye ar my Kyng with honour  
 And have worshypt me in many a stowre;  
 Therfor shalle I nott lett.  
 To save your lyfe, Lorde, itt were my parte,  
 Or were I false and a greatt coward;  
 And my worshypp is the bett.  
 (Hahn [Wedding] ll. 342-353).

Thus Sir Gawain falls prey to Dame Ragnell's sexual aggression without even meeting her. When they do eventually meet, they pledge to each other their intention to marry. On the wedding night, Gawain is again subject to the sexual aggression of Dame Ragnell. She says to her husband: "A, Sir Gawen, syn I have you wed, / Shewe me your cortesy in bed; / With ryghte itt may nott be denyed" (Hahn [Wedding] ll. 629-631). Although it takes some coaxing on the part of the lady: "Yett for Arthours sake kysse me att the leste; / I pray you do this att my request. / Lett se howe ye can spede." (Hahn [Wedding] ll. 635-637), she is eventually successful in consummating the marriage.

Although the private lives of the medieval nobility were seldom documented, it can still be seen that medieval women were sometimes the aggressors in their relationships. In a form somewhat reminiscent of the manner by which Dame Ragnell arranges to marry Gawain, Henry of Anjou is pursued by Eleanor of Aquitaine. Labarge aptly describes the situation:

There seems little doubt that Eleanor had carefully planned the scenario of the divorce [from Louis VII] and also knew what she proposed to do next. As soon as the marriage was dissolved in March 1152 Eleanor traveled at once to Poitiers, leaving her daughters with her divorced husband, and notified Henry Plantagenet, son of the Empress Matilda and her second husband the count of Anjou, that she wanted to marry him. By this time Eleanor was thirty and Henry a young man of nineteen, but she was the richest heiress in Europe with power and resources to aid his ambitions (51).

Considering that most medieval marriages of the nobility were arranged, there was little room for seduction and sexual aggressiveness on the part of women. However, the freedom to choose a mate and be the aggressor in the relationship may have been a common desire of the audience for whom these romances were written.

## **The Ruler**

The power the heroines of romances show is not restricted to their relationships. They take on many other male roles which add valuable details to their representation. One role they often assume, which is mirrored by the lives of women in Plantagenet England,



is that of ruler. There are numerous examples in medieval England of women who ruled in the absence of their husbands, or after their deaths. Not only did these women run the households, but they also took over all of the duties generally considered to be the husbands' responsibilities. Ward notes that: "These activities with regard to land and lordship were regarded as very much in the male domain; the woman was virtually taking on a male identity" (9). She goes on to say that: "The noblewoman was therefore expected to be obedient, submissive and virtuous, but to be able to carry out men's duties as needed within the family and on the estates" (9).

A notable example is Adela Countess of Blois, who ruled her husband's lands for several years while he was on crusade. After his death, and while her children were still minors, she continued to rule. Labarge notes of Adela that : "She was praised for her prudent government by Hildebert of Lavardin, the scholarly bishop of Le Mans, flattered by Baudri de Bourgueil in a lengthy and highly ornamented Latin poem" (78). Another illustration of a woman ruler was Countess Marguerite of Flanders. After her two marriages, she inherited Flanders where she ruled skillfully for over thirty years.

Ermengarde of Narbonne is an example of a woman ruler whose story necessitates a mention in this study. This noblewoman inherited her title from her father, which was in danger however, because the Count of Toulouse was attempting to seize control of the vicounty. Not only did she succeed in keeping control of her lands, which she ruled for fifty years, but she also physically led her troops into battle against the count. Labarge notes of the vicountess:

Although she married twice, neither husband seems to have been allowed any share in the government of Narbonne where the vicountess resolutely pursued a policy of closer relations with the French king as a counterbalance to the local power of the count of Toulouse (79).

Ermengarde was extremely politically active; signing trade agreements, keeping peace with her neighbours, and patronizing the Cistercian abbey of Fontfroid. Also, her court at Languedoc was famous with, "the historians of Languedoc who chronicle her achievements claim that she 'distinguished herself not less by masculine virtues than by those proper to her sex, and by the wisdom of her government'" (Labarge 79).

The examples just given suggest that historically, although ruling was normally regarded as a masculine occupation, nevertheless under certain circumstances it could be filled -- and very ably -- by women. We will consider now how this motif works in the Middle English Romances. The first factor of note in the romances is that the majority of heroines are heiresses to their father's lands, wealth, and title. Thus they have a vested interest in protecting their family's rule of the kingdom. However, given the very nature of the medieval romance genre, women who rule do not rule for long, because they marry the hero. Most of these stories end after the marriage and thus little is said of who, and how the lands are subsequently ruled. It is usually only noted that a male heir is born to the couple, solidifying the family's rule, but not that of the individual heroines. Nevertheless, there are one or two romance heroines who spend some time as the ruler without a husband or father.

When the hero goes in search of his father in *Sir Degaré*, he encounters a castle where he

wishes to lodge for the night. He enters the castle but cannot find anyone until the household gathers to eat dinner in silence. The next morning the lady of the castle tells Degaré that her father was the baron of the land, and all of her men have been killed protecting her from a knight that "was aboute wiz maistri / For to rause me awai" (French & Hale ll. 886-887). She refers to her father in the past tense and indicates that she is his only heir. She does not mention a husband or even a betrothed. She calls the land hers and seems to be free to make the decision of who should rule the baronage. Thus it can be assumed that she is ruling the land as her father's heir.

Helyn, in *Sir Tryamour* is presented in a similar situation. Her father dies and leaves her the country of Hungary to rule. However, she is only seven years old and thus holds a tournament to find a worthy husband to defend her lands. After Tryamour wins the competition, and consequently the hand of the princess in marriage, he goes off in search of adventure saying he will return in two years. This leaves Helyn ruling an entire country while still a child.

Like the princess in *Sir Degaré*, Helyn is besieged by a knight who wishes to marry her. Both heroes battle the evil knights, eventually killing them and freeing the princesses from attack. Although these two characters rule for only a short time before their marriages to the heroes, they are successful in keeping their attackers at bay long enough for their fiancés to return. Women being called on to defend their castles was not an uncommon situation in medieval England, especially during times of rebellion. One dynamic medieval woman who defended her castle was Alice Knyvet. In 1461,

while her husband John was absent, the king sent commissioners to take legal possession of the castle. However, Alice defended Bokenham Castle "with slings, parveises, fagots, timber and other armaments of war" (Power 45). She had over fifty armed men with her and said to the Justice of the Peace:

Maister Twyer ye be a Justice of the Peace. I require you to keep the peace, for I will not leave possession of this castle to die therefor and if ye being to break the peace or make any war to get the place of me, I shall defend me, for liever I had in such wise to die than to be slain when my husband cometh home, for he charged me to keep it (Power 45-46).

There were many other noble ladies who were required to defend their property during the Middle Ages. For example, Berwick Castle was safeguarded against Edward I by the Countess of Buchan, and Dunbar Castle was protected by Black Agnes, Countess of Dunbar, against Edward III (Power 45). In the early thirteenth century Nicolaa de la Haye was renowned for her defense of Lincoln Castle against Prince Louis<sup>12</sup> of France. Labarge notes that: "Her spirited resistance impressed her fellow citizens, for, sixty years later, their representatives reported to the royal officials how Nicolaa, after her husband's death, had 'held the castle in time of war and in time of peace'" (80).

Some medieval women however, felt it necessary to take on the male role of warrior and thus they dressed in armour, fought with their army, or at least led troops into battle. Joan of Arc is probably the most famous example of the medieval warrior woman, but she is definitely not the only one. As mentioned above, Ermengarde personally led her

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<sup>12</sup> Later Louis VIII.

troops into battle, as did Isabel of Conches who "donning a hauberk and riding as a knight among the knights" (Chibnall 97), led her army. While the Empress Matilda, who never actually wore armour, led a thousand knights to Le Sap to help her husband Geoffrey Plantagenet, Count of Anjou (Chibnall 71). Other women who led armies include Richilde, the eleventh century Countess of Flanders, and the thirteenth century Blanche of Castile and Blanche of Champagne (Ferrante 9). Eileen Power asserts that the chronicles of the Hundred Years War are filled with deeds of warlike women, including courageous Joan of Flanders, "of whom Froissart says she had 'the courage of a man and the heart of a lion' " (45).

Apparently the occurrence of women fighting with, or like men was common enough to be exemplified in the Middle English Romances. In *Sir Isumbras*, after the hero and heroine are reunited, Isumbras prepares to go to war against the heathens in his new kingdom. He takes leave of his wife, but she says: "Helpe me, Sere that I were dyght / In armes as it were a knyght, / I wole with yow fare." (Hudson [Isumbras] ll. 718-721). Then the author notes that: "Soone was the lady dyght / In armes as it were a knyght, / He gaff here spere and scheelde." (Hudson [Isumbras] ll. 724-726). Unfortunately the author does not describe the heroine actually fighting, only that they won the battle with the help of their sons.

So in both medieval Europe and in the romances, when it was necessary women took on the role of ruler with all of its functions including administrator, defender of the land, and on occasion leader of the army. Albeit there were some women who chose to fight for

their beliefs even when it was not necessary, such as Joan of Arc and the queen in *Sir Isumbras*.

## The Hunter

The woman as hunter, whether from necessity or for pleasure, is another masculine role that women of the Middle Ages and their counterparts in the romances undertook. In *Sir Degaré* the hero seeks lodging at a castle in the forest. When he is warming himself by the fire:

... he biheld and vndernam  
 Hou in at þe dore cam  
 Four dammaiseles, gent and fre;  
 Ech was nakked to þe kne.  
 Þe two bowen an arewen bere,  
 Þe oþer two icharged were  
 Wiz venesoun, riche and god.  
 (French & Hale ll. 767-774).

The author says nothing else about these women, implying that this occurrence is an accepted role if there are no men present to do the hunting. Certainly in the circumstances which the author slowly uncovers, these women had to hunt if they were to eat, because all of the men had been killed in defense of the princess, and so there was no one else available to fill the role of hunter / provider. It seems however, that these women comfortably filled this masculine role as easily as women in the Middle Ages who took over the administration of estates in the absence of their husbands.

When the heroine believes that the squire has been killed in *The Squire of Low Degree*, her father tries to comfort her by suggesting that: "To-morowe ye shall on hunting fare" (French & Hale l. 739). He does not expect her to take part in the hunting of large animals, but rather to watch as the game is driven past her by her men and the greyhounds. The king implies however, that she may enjoy actively hunting with birds<sup>13</sup>:

Homward thus shall ye ryde,  
On haukyng by the ryuers syde,  
With goshauke and with gentyll fawcon,  
With egle-horne and merlyon  
(French & Hale ll. 773-776).

Although the king describes a beautiful day filled with excitement, decadent food, and singing, the princess is too consumed with grief to enjoy such an adventure and declines her father's suggestion.

In medieval Europe, and especially France and England, falconry was considered a skill with which noblewomen should be familiar, and many women kept predatory birds to hunt small game. Elizabeth de Burgh for example, kept falcons, as can be seen from the records she detailed of their costs and keepers (Ward 185). Also Ward cites an interesting grant by Henry V to Joan de Bohun, Countess of Hereford, his maternal grandmother:

The king greets all those to whom these letters come. You should know that, on account of the sincere love and deep affection which we have towards our very dear grandmother Joan countess of Hereford, we have granted her for life all the game within our forest of Hatfield, to have as our gift. The countess or her servants may hunt in the forest in summer and winter as often as she pleases, and carry away the beasts

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<sup>13</sup> In *Sir Launfal*, Dame Tryamour approaches Arthur's court with "A gerfawcon sche bar on here hond" (French & Hale l. 961).

of the chase taken there, and dispose of them as she wishes, without any interference or hindrance from us or any of our foresters or officials whatsoever (185-186).

In this grant the king acknowledges that the countess herself may wish to hunt, and thus gives her permission to do so if she desires. Although there is no direct evidence to support whether or not Joan de Bohun actually hunted, the fact that Henry V wrote that 'the countess or her servants' were permitted to hunt in Hatfield shows that it was not considered improper for a woman to hunt.



## CHAPTER VI

### The Heroine's Quest

Like the heroes, the heroines of Middle English Romances also have a purpose, or goal in the story and, like their male counterparts, many of them must embark on a quest to obtain their goal. Women in the Middle Ages were generally associated with the domestic sphere with the bulk of their responsibilities being based in the home, nevertheless they had adventures, fulfilled quests and proved themselves worthy of the hero's love and the right to be the mother of the heir.

Although the romance authors tend to focus on the hero's quests to prove their worthiness, the heroines in these stories frequently have goals and quests of their own for which they often, but not always, need the hero's strength to succeed. These are definitely not characters appearing in the story simply to be the object of the hero's desire. So, another crucial masculine role that women often assume in the Middle English Romances is that of a person on a quest. Yet, they take on this role in a very feminine way, in that the women themselves do not get involved with feats of arms. However, like the hero's quests, there is often an evil knight to overcome. For the heroine the quest involves finding the right knight to vanquish this adversary, and convincing him to do battle for her.

In *Eger and Grime*, *Sir Tryamour*, and *Sir Degaré*, there are female characters who are almost at the mercy of evil knights. Although this may fit the stereotype of the princess waiting for the knight in shining armour to rescue her, there is much more to these stories, and these women's characters. Before meeting the heroes, both Lady Loosepine, and the princess in *Sir Degaré*, lost all of their men while actively trying to dispose of their attackers. They need champions who are physically strong, and able to defeat their adversaries. By finding such men, enticing them to battle their attackers, and rewarding them with marriage; the heroines succeed in their quest of finding husbands who will be able to protect them and their families, and defend their lands.

In *Sir Degaré*, the princess plays on the hero's emotions and his honour as a knight to encourage him to eliminate the problem for her. At dinner she uses her beauty and silence to invoke mystery and, the author notes, Degaré's heart and all his thoughts were on the lady. After dinner she leads Degaré into her bedroom where one of her maidens plays the harp and sings the hero to sleep. In the morning the princess asserts that she is an honourable lady by expressing her anger at Degaré for falling asleep in her chamber where he stayed all night without any of her maidens present. Before she reveals her story to Degaré, she begins to cry eliciting his sympathy. Then she establishes that she is a rich heiress saying:

Mi fader was a riche baroun,  
 And hadde mani a tour and toun.  
 He ne hadde no child but me;  
 Ich was his air of þis cuntré.  
 (French & Hale ll. 870-873).

After describing how all of her men had perished at the hands of the evil knight, she offers Degaré a prize if he is successful in defeating the knight. She says:

...Pan al mi lond  
 Ich wil þe ziue into þin hond,  
 And at þi wille bodi mine,  
 zif þou mizt wreke me of hine.  
 (French & Hale ll. 910-913).

The princess is successful in her goal as Degaré "beheld þe leuedi wiz gret pité" (French & Hale l. 906), and agrees to accept the challenge. He was "... wel gladere þat he mizte / Haue þe leuedi so brizt / zif he slough þat oþer knizte" (French & Hale ll. 915-917).

In *Eger and Grime*, when Lady Loospine takes in Eger after he loses his finger in a battle with Gray-steele, she does not mention her status, her inheritance, or her situation of being tormented by the evil knight. In fact, the wounded Eger does not seem like a candidate who will be able to help her, as he has already been defeated by her adversary. Thus there is little point in her revealing her situation to Eger because he has already failed the challenge.

When she meets Grime however, she also chooses her words and actions carefully to elicit his love and pity. At their first meeting she is angry with Grime for pretending to be Eger. However, Grime explains that "he was my brother, / And hee thought me more abler than any other / For to take that matter in hand" (French & Hale ll. 829-831).

Loospine suddenly has a change of heart and takes Grime into the castle for dinner, and then to a bedroom. Her altered demeanor is likely due to the possibility that Grime may

be able to rid her of her enemy Gray-steele. Thus she recounts her story to the hero explaining how she became her father's heir, then she reveals the secret to Gray-steele's strength. Loospine plays on Grime's pride and honour telling him that Gray-steele has killed over a hundred worthy knights:

And shamefully driuen them to dead  
 Withouten succor or any remed;  
 And if thou be comen to fight with that knight,  
 Iesu defend thee in thy right!  
 (French & Hale ll. 885-888).

Loospine is successful in convincing Grime to accept this challenge and he in turn is successful in killing Gray-steele. Thus the princess achieves her goal of riding herself of the enemy knight, and finding a worthy husband with whom to rule her lands.

The recently orphaned seven year old Helyn, in *Sir Tryamour*, is in rather dire circumstances and needs to be more active than her counterparts in finding a husband to defend her lands because:

When hur fadur was dede  
 Moche warre began to sprede  
 Yn hur lande all abowte.  
 Therefore sche ys gevyn to rede  
 To take a lorde to rewle and to lede  
 Hur londe, wyth hys rowte.  
 A nobull knyght that cowde or myght  
 Rewle hur londe wyth gode ryght  
 That men myght drede and dowte.  
 (Hudson [*Tryamour*] ll. 652-660).

So, with the counsel of her barons she decides to hold a tournament offering herself as the prize to the winner. In so doing she acquires a husband who is physically the strongest man in the land, or at least the most successful in combat.

There is no question that Dame Ragnell, *In The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* is also on a quest to find a husband, however, she has a very specific man in mind. She does not need a strong man to fend off an enemy, but rather an honourable man to break a spell. After she is successful in marrying Gawain, and he has given her the choice of whether to be beautiful by day or night, she explains how she was put under a spell: "For I was shapen by nygramancy, / With my stepdame, God have on her mercy, / And by enchaunement;" (Hahn [Wedding] ll. 691-693). She tells him that the spell could only be broken by the following conditions:

Evyn tulle the best of Englonde  
 Had wedyd me verament,  
 And also he shold geve me the sovereynté  
 Of alle his body and goodes, sycurly.  
 Thus was I disformyd;  
 (Hahn [Wedding] ll. 695-699).

Although the primary goal of many of the romance heroines is marriage to the hero, it is definitely not the only goal. In *Havelock the Dane* for example, Goldborow is insistent in her refusal to marry Havelock who has proven himself the strongest man in the kingdom. She knows that if she has any hope of regaining the throne of England she will need a husband who also comes from royal blood. Once she realizes that Havelock is the heir to the crown of Denmark, she pushes him to get things started, so they can win back the rule of Denmark and then England.

Similarly the heroine's goals in *Emaré* and *Sir Launfal* are not to find a husband. First of all Emaré's quest is to survive the ordeals of being set adrift at sea. Once she has found a

home with the merchant in Rome, she seizes the opportunity to reunite her family and provide a stable, noble future for her son, and subsequently herself. In *Sir Launfal*, Dame Tryamoure's goal is certainly not marriage. She has too much power and freedom to want to be tied down in marriage, although her goal is to win the love of the hero.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have attempted to describe the image of the heroine in medieval English romances, against a background both of contemporary social history and of modern scholarship. I should hasten to say, though, that I am not a social historian, and I have introduced aspects of the subject only to support my argument that the romances were in fact embedded in a real context. Essentially I believe there has been a misinterpretation of the heroine's role in medieval romances, in that some readers have argued that she is there solely to be the hero's love interest. Instead, I see a much more positive and instigating role. These heroines are mostly powerful, intelligent and resourceful women who have their own goals and desires and are active in attaining them. Although these romances have been generally considered to be stories about valiant knights completing perilous quests, they are quite often in fact stories about the heroine, her family, their wealth and success, and their continued power in their kingdom.

It is perhaps too easy to fall into the trap of generalizing, even with this genre, and to assume that the women in the romances may simply be put into certain categories, such as "wife", "mother", "hag", and what is perhaps most often described, the "damsel in distress". However, if one looks closely at these romances one sees that the heroines are neither simply waiting to be rescued nor only acting as a vehicle by which the hero can prove himself. Many of the heroines are active in attaining their own goals by employing elaborate plans, which often involve finding the right people to perform critical actions. Some heroines need to find the right man to protect their interests, and this process often

involves the hero having to prove his strength and intelligence to the heroine before she agrees to marriage. Thus the heroine provides the hero with his quest. Others have already found the right man and proceed to win, or in some cases demand, his love; and in almost all cases, the heroine is successful in marrying the man that she chooses. In fact, it is the heroine, once she has chosen a suitable knight, who gives him a gift that is essential to the completion of his quest, which in turn earns him a reward. In the end, the heroine provides this reward by marrying him and augmenting his social status by sharing with him her land, wealth, and title; and often she gives him a male heir, thereby solidifying the rule of the family. However, in many cases the hero joins the heroine's family and consequently rules her ancestral lands if he has none of his own. Thus the hero helps the heroine and her family ensure control of their land by being a worthy father to the next generation.

It is virtually impossible to separate medieval English romances from other written and oral texts of the Middle Ages, as they often have a bearing on one another. When one is reading these romances, it is important to keep in mind the society in which they were popular, with cultural clashes between English and French, the introduction of feudalism by the Normans, the decreased legal rights of women after the Anglo-Saxon period (with possibly a lingering memory of former rights), increasing control of the Church as political and ideological struggles occurred, and various wars and uprisings. In this changing society, women played a pivotal role, not only in the structure and rule of the family, but also in legitimizing land claims by the conquerors through marriage and giving birth to children. Many noblewomen controlled enormous amounts of wealth and



land during their lives, and their power could often be more than that held by medieval men.

The medieval world was a complex society, and thus it is difficult if not impossible to impose generalizations on the characteristics of the women who lived in England at this time. Although certain voices within this society attempted to relegate women to the status of maiden, wife, or mother under the guardianship of male relatives, situations often arose where women were required to step out of these roles for the good of the family, or to attain their own goals. In such instances they proved themselves more than capable of performing functions normally handled by men. I hope that my study has shown in the medieval English romances another and perhaps less familiar voice even in the culture of the High Middle Ages in England, where women are seen as leaders and partners, and where they have great spiritual, intellectual, and material benefits to contribute to the welfare of the kingdom.

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