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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

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Troubling Truth in the Auchinleck Manuscript

by

Amy Reynolds

A dissertation presented to
The Graduate School
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2017
St. Louis, Missouri

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Amy Reynolds

Washington University in St. Louis

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Troubling Truth in the Auchinleck Manuscript

by

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Washington University in St. Louis, 2017

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“Troubling Truth in the Auchinleck Manuscript” argues that many of the romances contained in this famous volume (c. 1330-40) respond in complex ways to the intensely unstable reign of Edward II (1307-27), and to that reign’s cataclysmic end and aftermath. These romances engage with these crises’ varied and negative impact on the foundational medieval value of “truth”—i.e. loyalty, trustworthiness, honor. Richard Firth Green’s *A Crisis of Truth* examines many the late fourteenth century results of this destabilization of truth, and my work expands and adjusts his not only by examining the early fourteenth-century roots of such changes, but also by placing contemporary literature at the core of my investigation. I contend that romance provided the ideal ground for exploring the damage done by the recent disruptions of human truth, largely because romance itself freely mixed the untruths of fantasy with the troubling actualities of contemporary medieval life. My historicism is informed by—and looks to contribute to—the manuscript studies work that surrounds Auchinleck itself, the largest early witness to over a dozen new or unique Middle English romances. By blending an interdisciplinary approach with keen attention to the details of the romance texts themselves, my dissertation seeks to expose how this ostensibly “popular” literature creatively engages with its own historical circumstances, giving voice to a variety and depth of distress with those circumstances in a way that reveals otherwise obscure layers of this crisis of truth

Introduction

There has been a great deal of productive historicist attention paid to the literature of the fourteenth century, but most of this scholarship has focused, understandably, on the latter half of that century. Scholars such as Lee Patterson, Paul Strohm, David Aers, Ardis Butterfield, Richard Firth Green, and many others have worked to bring to light different facets of this era's intricate textual environment and the significance of that intricacy. Geoffrey Chaucer's position in this "web of discourses"¹ is naturally an essential one, and his chronological location at the end of the fourteenth century, combined with the political, social, religious, and cultural upheavals of the late 1300s, has pulled a great deal of medieval literary criticism towards his era. This scholarship has produced a deep, nuanced, and still-expanding appreciation for the complex ways in which the literature created by Chaucer and his contemporaries responded to the pressing issues of their own time and engaged with the fraught discourses of class structure; urban, rural, and national self-definition; the evolving position of the English language; monarchical sovereignty and its limits; to name but a few. Such investigations have been characterized by a mixture of respect and thoughtful skepticism in the effort to tease out valuable implications from particular details, whether moving from text to context or from context to text, as well as a willingness to undertake truly interdisciplinary studies, taking into account the intersections between religious, political, historical, literary, and legal texts. In more recent years, focus has shifted towards exploring fissures and subtler undercurrents in the relationship between text and context, challenging or nuancing some of the traditional axioms that have long informed medieval literary studies and exposing hitherto unappreciated links and tensions at work in the late-fourteenth-century world.

¹ Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity*, 4.

The purpose of this present investigation is not to take this work forward, but instead to take it backwards: to examine the literature and the textual environment arising from the reign of Edward II with the same kind of respect and shrewdness that has for so long been applied so profitably to the age of his great-grandson and dynastic echo, Richard II. To be sure, excellent historicist work has been performed and continues to be performed on texts from this period. Writing during the opening surge of historicist interest in the late fourteenth century, Thorlac Turville-Petre, in *England the Nation*, argued that the pre-Chaucerian literature of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries was involved in crafting a sense of national English identity.² This interest in English “nation-building” is also addressed—and rewardingly complicated—by Geraldine Heng’s *Empire of Magic*, Laura Ashe’s *Fiction and History*, and David Matthews’ *Writing to the King*, among others.³ Heng melds the notion of the “national” to that of the “imperial,” and ties both of these to the operations of medieval romance, which eagerly “cannibalizes” the cultural discourses with which it comes into contact, redeploying them in an effort to produce a stable set of discourses for English culture itself. In a similar vein, Ashe delves into the contrast between the strong model of pre-Conquest Anglo-Saxon national identity and the efforts of the first generations of Norman aristocracy to create their own sense of identity out of a growing body of intertwined literary and historical writing. As one of the rare scholars specifically examining the interplay between politics and literature in the early fourteenth century, Matthews keeps his focus primarily on those texts that are directly and explicitly created for the political realm. He also employs an appreciation for the melding of

² He also devoted an entire chapter to the Auchinleck manuscript, famously coining the term “handbook of the nation” to describe it (112). Turville-Petre’s reliance upon the increasingly widespread use of the Middle English vernacular for his nationalistic arguments has been contested in, among others, Butterfield’s *The Familiar Enemy*.

³ I do not mean this to be by any means a complete list. Other significant contributions to this field include, for example, Christopher Cannon’s *Grounds of English Literature* and Andrea Ruddick’s *English Identity and Political Culture in the Fourteenth Century*.

different discourses that informs Heng's and Ashe's work, highlighting how the idea of England as a nation can be deployed negatively during times of crisis, as something that *did* exist but is now lost, as in, for instance, *The Simonie*, one of the political laments in the huge 1330s miscellany called the Auchinleck manuscript.

Matthews is far from the only pre-Chaucerian literary scholar to devote a chapter to this manuscript, which I take as the central textual location of my dissertation.⁴ Ralph Hanna, for example, devotes an entire chapter to Auchinleck in his 2005 *London Literature*, examining this unique manuscript's place within the growing book trade of early fourteenth century London, and the 2016 volume of essays edited by Susanna Fein, *The Auchinleck Manuscript: New Perspectives*, includes several excellent examinations of the nuances of Auchinleck's codicological details and the historical resonances of several of Auchinleck's constituent texts.

What has been comparatively lacking, however, and what I intend to at least begin to accomplish in the following chapters, is the kind of extended, focused, interdisciplinary, and textually rooted investigation which has long allowed Chaucerians to effectively extrapolate from the details of a diverse but coherent literary collection in order to increase our understanding of that literature's external circumstances, while simultaneously grounding our approach to literary criticism within a broader appreciation of a text's historical, political, and social contexts. Auchinleck provides the ideal vehicle for such an examination, and there has been, to date, very little in the way of book-length examinations of Auchinleck's contents within their contemporary context.⁵ While, of course, I do not mean to suggest that the anonymous

⁴ For studies of Auchinleck texts in their historical contexts, see Holford, "History and Politics in *Horn Child and Maiden Rinnild*," 149-168; Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages*, 132-147; Butler, "A Failure to Communicate," 52-66; Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, 112-115; et al.

⁵ The one example which I know of is Siobhain Bly Caulkin's *Saracens and the Making of English Identity*. She reads Auchinleck texts against one another in much the same way I intend to and ties them to the different attitudes current in fourteenth century England concerning Saracens and religious/ethnic otherness. Her work is convincing in both its close readings and its historicizations, and has served as a valuable exemplar for my own endeavors, but she

creators of this early Middle English manuscript were Chaucer's equals in genius or in impact, many of the qualities that make Chaucerian literature particularly suitable for this kind of historicist analysis are shared by Auchinleck: recent and devastating political crises, generic diversity melded with a consistent faith in Middle English as a literary language, an appreciation for "popular" literary forms, an impulse to translate and adapt earlier works to suit new circumstances, a collection at once miscellaneous and cohesive, and, not least, a deep-rooted investment in creatively confronting one of the most profound cultural shifts of the Middle Ages, what Richard Firth Green calls the fourteenth-century crisis of truth. Characterized by an increasing awareness of the unreliability of human memory—the foundation for oaths and sworn truth of all kinds, themselves the foundation of stable social intercourse—in the face of documentation's more accurate evidentiary nature, the crisis of truth had wide-ranging consequences for every sphere of medieval life, from the personal to the political, the mercantile to the religious, the commoners to the barony to the Crown.

Standing as bookends of this crisis were the reigns of Edward II (1307-1327) and Richard II (1377-1399). Both saw unprecedented levels of baronial opposition, lethal shifts in the discourse of treason, contention over the ideologies of kingship, and, of course, the devastating deposition of a sitting king by violent insurrection and invasion. But while medieval historians have long recognized and interrogated the similarities between these two eras, there has been little in the way of sustained scholarly attention to the relationship between the literature of these two eras. To be clear, performing a grand comparative analysis of the historical resonances of all significant literature from these two eras is well outside my current purview. Instead, I propose

casts her contextual net very wide where I intend to cast mine much more narrowly, focusing for the most part within the bounds of England's coast (and sometimes within the London city limits) and the reign of Edward II itself (or at least that reign's textual afterlives) for what I consider to be Auchinleck's most relevant intertexts.

to approach the early fourteenth-century links between history and literature through an examination of this single—though massive and miscellaneous—manuscript. Auchinleck as a whole is particularly invested in questions of truth, and those questions are particularly pertinent in the manuscript's celebrated romances, thanks to the unique position medieval romance as a genre enjoyed at the nexus of fictionality and contemporary rootedness. As such, I will endeavor to bring to light the unique purchase that several Auchinleck romances have upon this developing crisis of truth, illuminating their creative and nuanced responses to recent, troubling developments as well as using their engagement with their own historical contexts as a lens through which we might better understand the early development of this crisis.

In my first chapter, I establish my methodology, articulating the answers to the four most crucial questions that lie beneath the larger project: What made the reign of Edward II such a formative period in English history? How do the upheavals of that reign intersect with the nascent fourteenth-century crisis of truth? Why use the Auchinleck manuscript as the central textual location for exploring these intersections? In what ways is Middle English romance a particularly appropriate genre for such exploration? I begin the chapter by sketching the relevant history in broad strokes, supplying extensive quotes from medieval chronicles in the footnotes in order to give a sense of the kind of language that was used when discussing these events. Much of this chronicle language is concerned with the perceived instability of human truth as a force for social cohesion, and the palpable anxiety surrounding this topic serves as an early indication of the crisis of truth's impact on medieval high politics. The Auchinleck manuscript, an expensive but thoroughly vernacular miscellany produced in London in the 1330s, likely for a wealthy merchant rather than a nobleman's household, emerges from and responds directly to this maelstrom. Three non-romance texts in particular, *The Simonie*, *The Sayings of the Four*

Philosophers, and *The Short Metrical Chronicle*, engage overtly with the issues of Edward II's reign and downfall, and each of these texts radiates anxiety concerning truth's deterioration.

Auchinleck's romances—of which the manuscript contains an astonishing number of the earliest or unique versions—react more subtly and more diversely to their own contexts, and the genre of Middle English romance itself constitutes a blend of fictiveness and sharp historical relevance, the ideal testing ground for examining the very nature of truth and falseness.

My second chapter argues that the unprecedented executions of ostensibly treasonous English earls—which came into bloody vogue during Edward II's reign—served as a turning point in the medieval history of treason. One of Auchinleck's longest romances, *Sir Bevis of Hampton*, bears witness to the intense unease occasioned by this trend. The discourse of treason plays an intimate and troubling part in each of the three England-based episodes of the romance. The betrayal of Bevis's father by his mother catalyzes the plot, and this episode is saturated in both narratorial condemnations of treason and accusations of treason flung between enemies. This overt engagement in the discourse of treason ends badly for both Bevis and his father: the former sold as a slave into heathen lands and the latter murdered by his wife's lover. By contrast, Bevis's eventual return to reclaim his patrimony is carefully stripped of not only the language of treason, but of details from the original Anglo-Norman version of the romance that might cast the hero's own behavior as potentially treasonous in a fourteenth-century context. This suppression is subtly tied to Bevis's success in defeating his father's murderer. In later interactions with the English king Edgar, these adaptations from the received tradition cast the hero in a much nobler and more forbearing light than his Anglo-Norman counterpart enjoys. Despite this, the pressure of suppressing the discourse of treason eventually explodes in a climax original to the Auchinleck *Bevis*, which sees accusations of treason ignite a massive riot in the

city of London, forcing the hero to slaughter thousands of citizens in self-defense until “al Temse was blod red.” This unique ending especially resonates with the decisive part that London had played in Edward II’s defeat and deposition, implicitly condemning the city for its participation in the discourse of treason.

The third chapter of my dissertation focuses on the sworn brotherhood at the core of the romance *Amis and Amiloun*. While it had a long and largely positive history in medieval Europe, the institution of sworn brotherhood would have been seen as particularly fraught by the time Auchinleck was compiled, thanks to Edward II’s extreme prioritization of his sworn brotherhood with Piers Gaveston near the beginning of his reign. A comparable prioritizing of sworn brotherhood by the romance heroes Amis and Amiloun results in severe consequences. Though not related to one another, Amis and Amiloun are physically identical, and their oath to champion one another “in wrong and right” requires Amiloun to deploy that indistinguishability in order to subvert a trial by combat, beguile their lord and patron, and defy divine intervention in order to save his brother from shame and death. In order to reverse the leprosy which afflicts Amiloun as punishment for this behavior, Amis is required in turn to slaughter his two male children and bathe his sworn brother in their lifeblood. This romance consistently suggests that *kept* truth can be quite as devastating as *broken* truth. Ultimately, sworn brotherhood is shown to be incapable of providing a final solution for the heroes, and the blatantly unearned divine grace that does eventually intercede to resurrect the sacrificed heirs serves only to highlight the inadequacies of human truth even when it is faultlessly upheld.

My final chapter addresses Auchinleck’s singular Middle English version of the Tristan story, which rejects the subtle anxiety that permeates many other Auchinleck romances. Instead, in a mingling of parody and satire, *Sir Tristrem* mocks the received Tristran tradition while also

undercutting any tendency that its characters (or audience) might have to rely upon “sooth” — the kind of strict accuracy that was beginning to overrun truth’s semantic territory—over compromised human “truth.” Time and again, visual evidence is shown to be just as unreliable as traditional truth-as-integrity, and this romance’s indulgence in humor and absurdity serves to augment this hitherto unnoticed undercurrent. There is, for example, no hint of a courtly or elevated relationship between Tristrem and Ysonde: instead, once the love potion is drunk, the two hardly speak to one another at all, spending all their time and energy on sexual “play.” While the text repeatedly calls Tristrem himself a “trewe frere,” many of these epithets come at such inappropriate and ironic moments that the accolade is quickly evacuated of all meaning. King Mark himself, far from being the jealous or vengeful cuckold of Thomas’s or Beroul’s versions, seems perfectly happy to live with the lovers’ betrayal as long as he is not confronted with undeniable visible evidence of it; he himself never seeks out such evidence and, even when prompted to seek it out, often manages to miss or misinterpret it. While *Sir Tristrem*’s approach is certainly different from that found in other Auchinleck romance’s, it still engages critically—even sophisticatedly—with the troubling ramifications of the nascent crisis of truth.

Finally, in a brief coda which I intend to expand into a full fifth chapter upon the refining of this dissertation into a book manuscript, I work to bridge the early fourteenth-century troubling of truth to Chaucer’s grappling with the full-blown crisis of truth that came to a head at the end of that century. I will focus on the two Chaucerian texts with the most obvious links to the Auchinleck material I examine: “The Knight’s Tale,” with its treatment of sworn brotherhood as an institution bereft of all dignity and power, and *Troilus and Criseyde*’s exploration of treason writ small.

Chapter One
The History, the Theme, the Book, and the Genre: A Four-Strand Methodology

[A]ny reading that hopes to have relevance to a particular text must include an attempt to relocate it in the web of discourses and social practices within which it was made and which determined its horizons. At the same time, every text discloses aspects of this web, potentially revealing something about contemporary projects, ideologies, and anxieties.⁶

Although the period under scrutiny in David Aers' *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360-1430*—from which this quote is drawn—does not, strictly speaking, include the early fourteenth century and the events and literature that this dissertation will address, his “web of discourses” provides a compelling and useful image which has guided my efforts in conceptualizing and expressing the arguments I make here. The layers of meaning inherent in the texts I examine are, I believe, best understood—perhaps even only fully understandable—against the layers of context that influenced, contained, defined, and were influenced by them.⁷ This dissertation offers not a mere relocation of Aers' conceptualization to an earlier period, but instead builds upon and re-purposes this kind of historicist methodology, insofar as I work to not only illuminate, but to extrapolate from the intersections between four different pertinent contexts. To that end, this chapter will offer an explanation of my four strands of investigation and the matrices they create, within which I will situate my later, more in-depth examinations of individual texts. The strands are as follows: (1) the historical crises of the early fourteenth century, (2) the developing medieval “crisis of truth,” (3) the Auchinleck manuscript and its codicological particulars, and (4) the capacious, protean genre of romance.

I will begin this chapter with a brief narrative of the major relevant events in the reign of Edward II and the period immediately following his deposition (1307-1330)—an era in which

⁶ Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity*, 4.

⁷ See also Speigel, *Romancing the Past*, 10 and Giancarlo, “Speculative Genealogies,” 364.

“something of a deeply unpleasant nature was developing within English political society”⁸—in order to provide an outline of the historical context that I intend to develop in further, specific detail chapter by chapter as necessary. Having established this historical groundwork, I will describe the thematic lens that shapes my literary approach and gives this project its name: the foundational medieval value of “truth” and its worrying shifts and disruptions during this period. Richard Firth Green’s *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* provides the central model upon which I will draw in this section, even as I adjust his concepts in response to the unique circumstances of the early fourteenth century. This section will, aside from laying the thematic foundation for my discrete literary analyses, hopefully illuminate how essential it is to bring to bear on the Edwardian period the same degree of intertextual, interdisciplinary scrutiny that has long characterized the scholarship of the Ricardian era, which is Green’s own focus.

In the third part of the chapter, I will narrow my scope to the Auchinleck manuscript. I intend to demonstrate not only how Auchinleck’s coherence and uniqueness affect how we read its romances, but also how the manuscript directly interacts with its early fourteenth-century circumstances in ways which encourage a historicist and truth-centric reading of its constituent texts. In particular, the manuscript’s site of composition, London, played a considerable role in the upheavals of Edward II’s reign and in the troubling of truth resulting from those upheavals. Finally, I will discuss how romance as a genre not only has a particular interest in the problems of human truth, but also has unique claims on the nexus of literature and history, often melding evocative escapism with political awareness. The Auchinleck romances in particular constitute a significant development in this genre, representing the earliest collection of Middle English romance of such size and range.

⁸ Philips, “Violence and Politics,” 86. See also Westerhof, *Death and the Noble Body in Medieval England* 115, 120; and Gillingham, “Killing and Mutilating,” 133.

By establishing each strand—that is, each avenue of investigation, each relevant context—as well as the intersections between strands, this chapter will act as a clear delineation of the “web of discourses” within which each following chapter is situated. In doing so, I will not only provide the foundation for my individual readings of individual romances, but will also lay my methodological cards on the table so that the reasoning behind each reading can be understood, and perhaps even emulated. Medievalists must always be interdisciplinarians; hopefully this four-stranded interdisciplinarianism can be of use to scholars working to clarify and define their own “webs of discourses.”

1. *The Early 14th Century*

While the upheavals of the early 1300s have in hindsight become overshadowed by the more dramatic and disruptive crises of Richard II’s reign in the late 1300s, the people living through Edward II’s domination by favorites, various parliamentary attempts at reform, recurring baronial opposition, multiple judicial murders, civil war, invasion, the first deposition of a sitting king since the Norman Conquest, several attempted coups, and the general uncertainty of the years 1307-1330 would have likely regarded their experiences as more than dramatic and disruptive enough to warrant alarm and analysis. The (abbreviated) narrative I will provide is one that the patron, scribes, and audience of the Auchinleck manuscript would have lived through and—given the manuscript’s London context and London’s centrality to many of the crises—been particularly affected by. Anxiety, shock, outrage, despair, and, finally, desperate hope permeate the chronicle accounts of the period, selections of which are provided in several footnotes to give a taste of the range of reactions and attitudes to the upheavals, as well as the

language used to describe, discuss, and decry them.⁹ Some of the chroniclers are quick to pick a side and find scapegoats on which the blame the whole frightening mess, but all acknowledge the extreme nature of situation they address.¹⁰

In 1307 King Edward I died, ending a reign of thirty-five years and leaving his twenty-three-year old son, Edward of Caernarfon, to ascend the throne. Edward II soon proved unequal to his father's legacy as a powerful and generally effective king. Before he even became king, his excessive devotion to a Gascon squire named Piers Gaveston was well established; their relationship had infuriated Edward I enough to have Gaveston exiled in 1307, and it was one of Edward II's first official actions as king to recall his favorite and to gift him with the earldom of Cornwall.¹¹ Shortly after his ascension, Edward II completed the marriage contract his father had negotiated for him with Isabella, daughter of King Philip IV—but he left Gaveston in charge of England while he was away at his wedding in France. The nobility of England proved no more tolerant of Edward II's obsession with Gaveston than the old king had,¹² and under their intense pressure the young king allowed Gaveston to be exiled again in 1308. This did not last long before Gaveston was once again back on English soil, and many of the most powerful members

⁹ The *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, widely regarded as the most reliable account of these events, was written while the crises unfolded, but stops before the climax of Isabella and Mortimer's invasion; the other chronicles used here were written within a decade or two of the events they describe and are largely composed by people who had experienced parts of the narrative first-hand as well as having reliable first-hand witnesses to draw on. This is not to say that I take their accounts at face value, only to indicate that they provide reliable examples of contemporary attitudes, beliefs, and "common knowledge," even as they each pursue their own agendas.

¹⁰ Geoffrey le Baker sanctifies Edward II while vilifying Isabella and her cohorts—Adam Orleton, Bishop of Hereford, comes in for particular abuse—while Jean le Bel's sympathy for Isabella—whom he had met when she came to Hainault to ask aid of his patron—skews his own account in the opposite direction. Thomas Gray's *Scalacronica* is somewhat more even-handed, but he also writes at a greater chronological remove and relies upon earlier accounts and his father's experiences for the build-up to the crises.

¹¹ Chaplais, *Piers Gaveston*, 24, 27; Phillips, *Edward II*, 123.

¹² "[T]he great men of the land hated him, because he alone found favour in the king's eyes and lorded it over them like a second king, to whom all were subject and none equal...the earls and barons of England looked down on Piers because he was a foreigner and formerly a mere squire raised to such splendour and eminence, nor was he mindful of his former rank. Thus he was an object of mockery to almost everyone in the kingdom" (Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 5, 9).

of Edward II's barony united to impose upon their wayward king the Ordinances of 1311, which again demanded Gaveston's exile in addition to a number of other reforms.¹³ Among the strongest supporters of the Ordinances was Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, the king's cousin and the most powerful and wealthy magnate in England.¹⁴ Edward reluctantly yielded to the Ordainers' demands, but in late 1311 Gaveston had once again rejoined his king. Before long, Gaveston's enemies, led by Thomas of Lancaster, managed to capture the Gascon while he was separated from Edward, and on June 19 1312 the king's favorite was executed.¹⁵

Overcome with grief, Edward II nevertheless eventually allowed himself to be talked into coming to an accord with Gaveston's murderers in October 1313.¹⁶ The next year, Edward II led an abortive invasion of Scotland, losing badly at the battle of Bannockburn on June 24 1314. This defeat substantially weakened his position and allowed Lancaster to achieve ascendancy for a time, supporting and enforcing the Ordinances at every turn. But Lancaster's power in England was countered by the rising power that a new favorite, Hugh Despenser the Younger, was beginning to wield over the king. The younger Despenser's father, Hugh the Elder, had served both Edward I and Edward II for years, but as Hugh the Younger wormed his way deeper into the young king's affections, the influence that this father-son pair exerted over England became increasingly marked and increasingly resented.¹⁷ They were accused not only of a Gaveston-like

¹³ See Prestwich, "The Ordinances of 1311."

¹⁴ Lancaster held a total of five earldoms, and his annual income was almost twice that of the next wealthiest nobleman (Phillips, *Edward II*, 174-175).

¹⁵ "[I]n killing Piers the earls of England had undertaken a difficult task, unlike anything that has ever happened in our time. For they put to death a great earl, whom the king had adopted as a brother, whom the king cherished as son, whom the king regarded as a companion and friend. Therefore it was necessary for the one who should prosecute such a deed [i.e. Lancaster] to be great" (Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 51). Gaveston's status as Edward II's "adopted brother" will be discussed in much greater detail in Chapter 3.

¹⁶ "Through the mediation of the magnates of the realm, the king was reconciled with Thomas Earl of Lancaster concerning the quarrel over the death of Piers Gaveston; this goodwill between them lasted for awhile, but afterwards, [their quarrel] was quickly resumed" (King, *Scalacronica*, 85-87)

¹⁷ "The son was extremely handsome in physique, excessively haughty in attitude and deeply depraved in deed. It was his spirit of ambition and greed that precipitated him from the disinheriting of widows and orphans to the

monopolizing of Edward's attention and affection, but also of stripping the country bare of wealth in their insatiable greed.¹⁸

Eventually Thomas of Lancaster risked open defiance, forcing the Despensers into exile in July 1321, but before two months had passed the favorites had returned, and civil war rose in England. On March 16 1322, at the Battle of Boroughbridge, the rebel forces were defeated and Lancaster himself was captured. Six days later, in an unprecedented move that shocked contemporaries and resounded throughout all levels of society, Edward II condemned Thomas, Earl of Lancaster to death for treason.¹⁹ For a time, the Despensers continued their uncrowned reign largely unchallenged, despite growing discontent.²⁰ Eventually, however, their interference with Queen Isabella's finances and affairs drove her to seek shelter with her brother the French king in 1325, and she soon manipulated her husband to send their son, the future Edward III, to her as well. In France, Isabella took up with another English exile, Roger Mortimer, and the two of them approached William, the Count of Hainault for support, promising a marriage between Isabella's son and his daughter, Phillipa. With Hainault backing, Mortimer and Isabella invaded England on September 24, 1326, and met with almost immediate success. Practically no

murder of the highest nobles of the king and the destruction of himself and his father" (Preest, *Chronicle of Geoffrey le Baker*, 6).

¹⁸ Childs, "Finance and Trade," 20.

¹⁹ "[O]ut of reverence for his royal blood the penalty of drawing was remitted, the hanging was suspended, and one punishment was decreed for all three [beheading]... Perhaps a hidden cause, not immediate but in the past, brought punishment upon the earl. The earl of Lancaster once cut off Piers Gaveston's head, and now by the king's command the earl of Lancaster has lost his head. Thus, perhaps not unjustly, the earl received like for like" (Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 213-215). Lancaster's posthumous reputation was, however, staggeringly positive, and a cult grew up around him almost immediately, calling for his canonization—see Tuck, *Crown and Nobility*, 64-66.

²⁰ "The old hatred of the nobles of the kingdom against the two Hughs (the earls of Winchester and Gloucester) had somewhat died down after the king's victory at Boroughbridge, or, more accurately, had been hidden in the nobles' fear of the king's power. But now for clearer reasons than of old it resumed its strength, though still not proudly erect but creeping along the ground... Everybody thought that the enduring of three kings in England at the same time was a burden too big to be borne. Many loved the king greatly, but many more hated the two Hughs out of fear" (Preest, *Chronicle of Geoffrey le Baker*, 16).

resistance met them on their way to London, and London itself embraced them heartily.²¹ At Bristol, Hugh Despenser the Elder was captured and brutally executed,²² and before long Edward II and Hugh Despenser the Younger were also apprehended, the son meeting a fate even more gruesome than his father's.²³ The actual deposition of Edward himself was handled with extreme care in January of 1327, painstakingly stage-managed so as to have the maximum possible gloss of legality.²⁴ The usurpers eventually arranged for the death of Edward II, who had been made disposable by the coronation of his son, King Edward III, crowned while his father still lived.²⁵ In September 1327, it was announced that the former king had died at Berkeley Castle, and there can be little doubt that Mortimer was responsible.

For a time, Mortimer took up the role of uncrowned king, but he was no favorite with the young Edward III.²⁶ When Edward III's uncle—Edmund, Earl of Kent, Edward II's half-brother—was tricked into believing that the old king still lived and thus began plotting to free

²¹ "In this situation the crowd at London, in their desire to please the queen and Roger Mortimer, on 15 October in the middle of the city ran riot and seized and beheaded Walter [Stapleton], the bishop of Exeter of happy memory. They also savagely put to death various other men loyal to the king, for no other reason than that they were faithful followers in the king's service. Indeed they brought the head of the bishop to the queen who was watching over her army at Gloucester, thinking it a sacrifice well pleasing to Diana. They also entered the Tower of London and released all the prisoners... In fact so widespread was the apparent goodness and mercy of the queen's party that the people were fired with eagerness for the coronation of a new king who would be less harsh than the old one" (Preest, *Chronicle of Geoffrey le Baker*, 23).

²² Unlike Thomas of Lancaster, the Elder Despenser's sentence was not commuted to a cleaner death—he was drawn, beheaded, and his body hung on a gibbet "right outside Bristol Castle, in full view of the king and Hugh the Younger and all the others inside, who were maddened by the sight, you can be sure" (Bryant, *Jean le Bel*, 29-30).

²³ His execution reportedly included being dragged through the city of Hereford, "tied to a tall ladder so that everyone could see him," having his penis and testicles cut off and burned "because he was alleged to be a pervert and a sodomite—above all with the king himself," having his belly sliced open and his heart torn out "because it was a false and treacherous heart," and finally having his head cut off and sent to London, while the fragments of his quartered body were "sent to the next four principal cities of England" (Bryant, *Jean le Bel*, 31).

²⁴ For a comprehensive investigation of the careful political moves made upon this occasion, see Valente's "The Deposition and Abdication of Edward II."

²⁵ Almost as much as the deposition itself, this coronation too represented "an unprecedented event in post-Conquest England: one which upset the accepted order of things, threatened the sacrosanctity of kingship, and lacked clear legality or established process" (Valente, "Deposition and Abdication," 852).

²⁶ "Roger Mortimer the earl of March, glittered in all his transient glory as the principal adviser of queen Isabella, at whose nod everything was arranged. Nobody dared call him by any other name than earl of March. A bigger, noisier crowd waited on him than waited on the king's person. He awarded honours to those he loved. He allowed the king to stand up out of respect for him. When he went out with the king, he would arrogantly walk side by side with him, never letting the king go in front though sometimes doing that himself" (Preest, *Chronicle of Geoffrey le Baker*, 41)

him, Mortimer had the royal earl executed for treason in March 1330, steamrolling Edward III's own wishes in the matter.²⁷ Later that year, Edward III accomplished a counter-coup, capturing his mother and Mortimer at Nottingham Castle, and having Mortimer, fittingly enough, executed for treason on charges including the murder of Edward II.²⁸ At 18, Edward III finally stood as king in his own right, but some uncertainty as to the sort of king he would make could perhaps be forgiven.²⁹ It wouldn't be until later in the 1330s that he would begin what we now call the Hundred Year's War, and it would be even longer until he and his son, Edward the Black Prince, became the shining figures of martial prowess and chivalry that would leave such indelible marks on the English concept of what a king or a warrior should be. But for most of that first decade of Edward III's autonomous rule—the same decade in which the Auchinleck manuscript was being compiled—the scars of the recent past likely lingered in the social consciousness of a country that had endured an entire reign of near-constant calamity.

²⁷ Geoffrey le Baker describes Kent's death as "was not particularly displeasing to the people of England, seeing that the wicked men of his household had roamed the land, picking up things belonging to the people at the 'royal' price, that is paying little or nothing for their purchases" (Preest, *Chronicle of Geoffrey le Baker*, 40), while Jean le Bel claims that "[e]veryone in the land, noble and non-noble alike, was greatly troubled and distressed by this, and turned very much against Lord Mortimer, feeling sure that it was at his prompting and instigation that the noble earl, considered by all to be a good and loyal man, had suffered this fate" (Bryant, *Jean le Bel*, 58-59).

²⁸ Mortimer reportedly gave his "consent to the suffocation of the father of the king" and "he had deliberately been a bad councilor to the king" (Preest, *Chronicle of Geoffrey le Baker*, 42-43). His punishment was to "die in the same way as the Lord Hugh Despenser [the Younger]" (Bryant, *Jean le Bel*, 59).

²⁹ The early years of his reign were marked first by an abortive invasion of Scotland—itsself marred by a massive riot between English and Hainault troops in the city of York, to which Jean le Bel was an eyewitness (Bryant, *Jean le Bel*, 37), and then by an apparent willingness to "led a jolly young life, awaiting a greater season for greater affairs" (King, *Scalacronica*, 107). Jean le Bel reports that Edward III "formed a new council of the wisest and most respected men in all his land and governed with great distinction, maintaining peace in the realm with their sound guidance," and spent his time in "frequent jousts and tournaments and assemblies of ladies, and won great respect throughout his kingdom and great renown in every land" (Bryant, *Jean le Bel*, 59).

2. *Crisis of Truth*

Though he was writing before the disasters had even reached their climax in Isabella's invasion and Edward II's deposition, the chronicler of the *Vita Edwardi Secundi* explains what he sees as one of the crucial factors in the ongoing English turmoil:

It would go well with great men if they could distinguish truth from falsehood, if they could separate pretence [*simulaciones*] from sound judgement [*uero iudicio*]. But I do not know by what perversion of nature the tender ears of the rich more readily receive the flatteries of a lying tongue [*mendacis lingue blandicias*] than the candid testimony of truth [*aperte testimonium ueritatis*].³⁰

From this perspective, the falseness of advice as well as the false intentions of so many powerful men at such high levels of government undermined the proper functioning of medieval England's society to the point of near-collapse. And this perspective was certainly not limited to a single chronicler. For most of the middle ages, truth was understood as an internal, human attribute, what we would call honor, faithfulness, loyalty, trustworthiness, or even righteousness. As part of the slow turn from primarily oral systems of memory to primarily documentary systems of record-keeping, however, this human truth was becoming increasingly destabilized, as stricter standards of accuracy began to confront the fallibility of both human memory and human truth.³¹ Green examines the ultimate fallout of this shift in the upheavals of Richard II's reign, wherein it had become nearly impossible "to maintain an illusion of communal coherence founded on ethical truth in the face of the unwavering insistence of written evidence on a depersonalized intellectual truth. The final realization that these two kinds of truth could no longer be equated helped produce the crisis of confidence so vividly reflected in the work of the Ricardian poets."³² No matter how fervently a man swore, how deeply he believed in his oath, or

³⁰ Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 55; Latin from 54.

³¹ Green, pp. xiv, 26, 39.

³² Green, *Crisis of Truth*, 39.

how honorable his neighbors knew him to be, the gap between the “truth” of his oath and the “sooth” provided by written evidence eventually became impossible to ignore.³³ Paradoxically enough, this problem was exacerbated by the fact that, while the traditional meanings of these two terms were brought into ever-increasing conflict, the usage of the two terms was becoming ever more interchangeable, as, by “a natural synecdoche, the acknowledged reliability of a speaker will come to be applied to that speaker’s statements.”³⁴ This linguistic uncertainty helped to fuel the destabilization of the epistemological underpinnings of medieval England, as the value of human truth became not only questionable, but difficult to define. Where it had once been straightforward to call another person “true,” and to rely upon their truth in your dealings with them, now the meaning of the word and the meaning of the value that lay beneath it were being continually called into question by cultural shifts, legal developments, historical discourses, political disasters, and, not least, the ostensibly “fictive” literature of the period.

In particular, Green examines how the literature of the late fourteenth century engaged in, reacted to, and helped to shape the crisis of truth as it developed across political, social, religious, and legal dimensions. Similarly, Marion Turner, focusing specifically on Chaucer and his relationship with his historical and political context, argues that his work “reflect[s] the turbulence and antagonism amongst which he lived, and present[s] an image of society and communication as inevitably fractured.”³⁵ This aligns with Green’s understanding of the period—when the stability of human truth is called into serious question, the fracturing of

³³ While the definitions given for “sothe” in the Middle English Dictionary overlap considerably with those given for “truth,” the connotations of the former consistently skewed more towards the sense of “accuracy,” especially when used in the same text as “truth.” See Green, *Crisis of Truth*, 28, 30 and <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED41701>.

³⁴ Green, *Crisis of Truth*, 24.

³⁵ *Chaucerian Conflict: Languages of Antagonism in Late Fourteenth-Century London*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), p. 25.

society and communication, both depended upon that very stability, becomes all but inevitable, and that fractured state naturally finds expression in contemporary literature.

In the Ricardian period, then, the ethical and rhetorical underpinnings of both literary endeavor and political stability were in severe flux, and while the historical contexts of medieval literature have always been of interest to scholars, understanding that relationship becomes all the more crucial when the very foundations of that relationship are so troubled, as they were at the end of the fourteenth century.

That said, much of the turbulence, antagonism, and undermining of truth which Green and others have examined in the Ricardian period have their seeds, and even their precedents, in the reign of Edward II and its immediate aftermath. While this earlier era does not see quite the full-blown “crisis” of truth that Green explores at the end of the century, truth, communication, and politics were all nevertheless in extreme and unprecedented flux at this time. For example, in describing the London riots that preceded Isabella and Mortimer’s arrival, Geoffrey le Baker’s chronicle paints a picture of society turned on its head, all standards and certainties reversed or abandoned: “So in the confusion right and wrong collided...Under the cover of this disorder criminals found it profitable to add treason to their misdeeds. In this fashion many grew richer or had their liberty given back to them.”³⁶ The normal order of things had so far broken down that treason, the most serious of offenses and the antonym of truth, suddenly became a laudable crime—and this even after Edward II’s reign had seen a dramatic increase in the number of executions for treason, as well as an unprecedented expansion of treason’s definition.³⁷

It should perhaps come as no surprise that this chaotic climax of the Edwardian crises subverts traditional understandings of human truth, since the build-up to this climax had been

³⁶ Preest, *Chronicle of Geoffrey le Baker*, 23.

³⁷ See Chapter 2.

based, in many respects, on repeated probing of the strength, value, and nature of truth. The *Vita Edwardi Secundi* repeatedly expounds upon the “native and traditional trickery [*paterna et patria fretus cautela*]” and the tendency to perjury that characterize the English race.³⁸ This same chronicler, who lamented the inability of great men to distinguish truth from falsehood, puts a damning indictment of Edward II’s own un-truth in the mouth of Robert the Bruce of Scotland. Edward had reportedly promised to recognize Bruce’s kingship over Scotland in return for Bruce harboring Gaveston and keeping him safe from the angry English barons, but Bruce questioned how he could trust the word of a king who “does not keep the sworn promises [*legiis*] made to his liege men, whose homage and fealty [*fidelitatem et homagia*] he has received, and with whom he is bound in return to keep faith [*quibus eciam mutuo fidem seruare tenetur*]”? No trust can be put in such a fickle man.”³⁹ Being a ruler himself gives Bruce’s condemnation a particularly potency, pointing to the fundamentality of mutual truth-keeping to the power and position of a king. The contractual nature of kingship was, in fact, a major concern of the *Vita*, and at multiple points in this chronicle, the barons declare that they will not keep faith with a king who will not keep faith them, threatening to renounce their homage and fealty.⁴⁰ This is especially significant since the *Vita* itself does not extend through to Edward II’s actual deposition, and yet it seems as if the actual deposition itself operated under very similar reasoning, with the barons officially withdrawing their homage before offering Edward a choice between resigning in favor of his son or being forcibly deposed in favor of whomever the barons chose.⁴¹ The fact that Edward chose the former option helped his opponents to avoid the appearance of outright deposition (and thus treason), but this careful pantomime was itself

³⁸ Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 15 (Latin from 14); 109; 111. See also Childs, “Resistance and Treason,” 177.

³⁹ Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 41; Latin 40.

⁴⁰ Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 19-21, 63, 187, 193.

⁴¹ Valente, “Deposition and Abdication,” 860.

somewhat undermined by Edward II's suspiciously convenient death not long after his son's coronation.

Although many of the mechanics of the process are different, Edward II's deposition inarguably set the precedent for not only the deposition of Richard II, but much of the baronial resistance that plagued his reign.⁴² The contractual nature of kingship and the discourse of treason were two particularly fraught political battle-grounds during Richard's reign, both issues impacted enormously by Green's crisis of truth, and both issues which also contributed enormously to the destabilization of Edward II's reign. Historians have long acknowledged the importance and impact of these Edwardian developments, including their influence over later events such as Richard II's own deposition, but when it comes to examining the English literary world that emerged from and responded to the earlier Edwardian crises, the relative lack of literature in English during this period would seem to limit our ability to accomplish the kind of work carried out by Green and others. To be sure, not all literature written in medieval England was composed in Middle English, nor—as has been thoroughly established by this point—should we see insular literature in Anglo-Norman or Latin as being inherently less “English.”⁴³ That said, a remarkable repository of Middle English literature did emerge in the aftermath of the Edwardian crises of the early fourteenth century, and many of its constituent texts offer invaluable opportunities to explore, in this earlier period, the intersections of language, politics, literature, and law that have contributed so much to our understanding of the discursive realities of the Ricardian crises.

⁴² See Valente, *Theory and Practice*, 171, 175, 196; Green, p. 229; Tuck, *Crown and Nobility*, 161-173, 291, et al.

⁴³ See Ashe, *Fiction and History in England*, 9, 208-209 and Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy*, 101, 265, 239, 353.

3. *The Auchinleck Manuscript*

National Library of Scotland, Advocates MS 19.2.1, more commonly called the Auchinleck manuscript after its first known owner,⁴⁴ was compiled in the decade following Edward III's execution of Mortimer. This manuscript serves as the central textual location of my dissertation, containing as it does the romances that I intend to examine. Auchinleck is, in fact, perhaps most famous for its numerous Middle English romances, providing, in general, either their earliest extant copies or significantly unique versions.⁴⁵ Our information about the specifics of Auchinleck's production, however, is limited. We do know that it was compiled in the 1330s, in London, by five or six scribes; that its intended reception was probably secular, probably "for the household", and very likely "a commercial work...produced by a contractor on a bespoke basis."⁴⁶ What we do not know are any names—not of the scribes, not of the patron or patrons. Fortunately, this ignorance does relatively little to hinder our appreciation of this remarkable miscellany's contributions to Middle English literature.

Understanding how these romances—not only individually but collectively and even, perhaps, collaboratively—go about the business of "troubling truth" requires an appreciation of the material circumstances that enable this collective/collaborative potential. Moreover, because the readings I offer are deeply historicist ones, I intend to provide a solid link between the literary texts and the tumultuous history to which, I argue, they are responding. That link is—can only be—manuscript-based. The material of Auchinleck, its physical existence, bridges the time

⁴⁴ Alexander Boswell, Lord Auchinleck, presented the manuscript to the Advocates' Library, Edinburgh in 1744. For more information on this manuscript's history and known (unfortunately mostly post-medieval) owners, see <http://auchinleck.nls.uk/editorial/history.html>.

⁴⁵ *The King of Tars* (earliest version), *Amis and Amiloun* (earliest), *Sir Degaré* (earliest), *Floris and Blancheflour*, *Guy of Warwick* (earliest), *Reinbroun* (unique copy), *Sir Bevis of Hampton* (earliest), *Of Arthur & of Merlin* (earliest), *Lay le Freine* (unique), *Roland and Vernagu* (unique), *Otuel a Knight* (unique), *Kyng Alisaunder*, *Sir Tristrem* (unique), *Sir Orfeo* (earliest), *Horn Childe & Maiden Rimmild* (unique), and *King Richard*.

⁴⁶ Wiggins, "Imagining the Compiler," 63; Shonk, "A Study of the Auchinleck Manuscript," 72; Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, 134; Turville-Petre, 136; Shonk, 89.

of its creation to our own time.⁴⁷ What's more, it is only via the material survival of other manuscripts that we have any knowledge of that history that preceded and surrounded Auchinleck's own compilation. Our access to both literature and history is thus mediated by the manuscripts that carry them. By examining the manuscripts that contain such works, we can of course discover (or at least infer) practical information such as the date, location, scribes, and possible audience or expense of a manuscript—but we can also uncover readings that place “particular romances in constellations of distinct though not separate literary works... Thus, romances individually familiar to us mutually realign and redefine themselves in their groupings.”⁴⁸ “Constellation” is a particularly appropriate term for a miscellaneous manuscript like Auchinleck, since it contains individual works that exist in close proximity but whose relations to one another—the imaginary lines drawn between the fixed textual stars—are flexible (though not infinite) and can change from one reader or audience member to another. Indeed, as a “constellation,” the manuscript can act to define a text's horizon of expectations as much as its genre does. Just as appreciating the reciprocal relationship between historical context and literary work can bear interpretive fruit, “aligning codicological with literary evidence often reveals more extensive traces of intentionality than we would otherwise have.”⁴⁹ Such traces of intentionality are, I argue, particularly apparent in Auchinleck, which has been the subject of a good deal of scholarly appreciation and study, having been long regarded as remarkable; Thorlac Turville-Petre famously called it the “handbook of the nation.”⁵⁰ Moreover, Auchinleck is

⁴⁷ My access to the manuscript is provided by the fully digitized version of this manuscript available online, for free, at <http://auchinleck.nls.uk/>, edited by David Burnley and Alison Wiggins. All quotes from the manuscript, unless otherwise indicated, are drawn from this site, and this dissertation would not be possible without this extraordinary resource.

⁴⁸ Evans, *Rereading*, 114.

⁴⁹ Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages*, 3.

⁵⁰ *England the Nation*, 112. See also the opinions of Matthew Fisher: “Impressive access to a large number of historiographical and romance exemplars is also demonstrated in the sophisticated use of those texts by the composer(s) of the texts preserved in the Auchinleck manuscript” (*Scribal Authorship*, 149), and Arthur Bahr:

remarkable in ways that intersect with the remarkability of its romances, offering an infrastructure solid enough to support the different ways in which those romances engage with the functions of truth in medieval society. A greater understanding of the qualities of this unique manuscript thus enriches our understanding of its constituent texts, and I hope that my analysis of the Auchinleck romances will in turn enrich our understanding of the manuscript itself.

In the following section of this chapter, I propose to examine three significant qualities of Auchinleck that illuminate the frame that the manuscript provides for its romances. The manuscript is, first of all, coherent to a degree unusual in manuscripts of its size and date. The editorial efforts of its Scribe 1 provide a pan-manuscript unity that affords a solid foundation for examining its disparate romances as belonging to a deliberate collection. Auchinleck is also unrivaled in terms of its size, language, decoration, and content, hinting at the ambitions and attitudes of its anonymous patron. Finally, in addition to the subtler ways in which I shall argue the Auchinleck romances engage with contemporary crises, there are texts within Auchinleck that overtly connect the manuscript explicitly to the historical contexts of its compilation. It is as a coherent, creative, and contemporaneous whole, then, that Auchinleck is best understood, both on its own terms and as the context for its texts.

i. Coherent

The question of agency in literary production remains a contentious issue. Even in modern literature, the author's degree of conscious control over their own art is up for debate, and how much more vexed does this question become when the means of textual reproduction are not mechanical, but human? Despite the impossibility of total certainty on this score,

"Tantalizing in its massive uniqueness, it begs to be analyzed as more than the sum of its many parts" (*Fragments and Assemblages*, 105).

however, recent medievalist scholarship has begun to take rather a marked interest in the question of authorship, and to examine some of the uniquely medieval ways in which certain functions of authorship could be exercised by those same human reproducers of texts—scribes.

One of the most thorough recent examinations of this topic can be found in Matthew Fisher's *Scribal Authorship and the Writing of History in Medieval England*. For Fisher, there is no question that medieval scribes exercise agency over the texts they copy, and while he admits that "copying, like all forms of writing, confronts the problematic array of intentionality," he also points out that the scribe unavoidably "bears a degree of intellectual responsibility for the texts passing through his hands."⁵¹ Whatever the motivation behind a scribe's choices, Fisher argues, medieval manuscripts are "the end-result of a series of political, spiritual, poetical, and decidedly individual decisions about a text."⁵² Decisions can be careless, misguided, or limited; they can be mistakes; they can involve simply choosing the path of least resistance. But the existence of evidence for poor decisions made by scribes must not blind us to the fact that scribes can not only make intelligent and constructive decisions, but that they are *always* involved in making decisions about the text they're copying. Something as simple as selecting the placement of a punctus or the spelling of a word is probably not going to rank as a strong expression of authorship, but without myriad small decisions made by scribes who were bored or rushed or inspired or passionate, there would be no texts, no manuscript evidence for the work of any sort of medieval author—and, as previously mentioned, it is in examining the intersection between "the whole book" and the particular text that much of this intentionality can be uncovered.

⁵¹ Fisher, *Scribal Authorship*, 15, 22.

⁵² Fisher, *Scribal Authorship*, 189.

One of the most overt fashions in which a scribe could exert control over his manuscript was to act as compiler as well as copyist.⁵³ Even when the compiler himself had written the texts in question, compilation could be a powerful avenue of medieval authorship. Chaucer himself, in the “Explicit” and *Redaction* of his *Canterbury Tales*, “may well have asserted his own authorship most actively through precisely those extratextual elements of his book that were traditionally the province of scribes”, such as compilation.⁵⁴ Various modes of authorship can therefore be seen at work simultaneously: one need not be either an author *or* a scribe, a copyist *or* a compiler. Each of these roles contributes differently, but harmoniously, to the final book. Each role certainly can be played by separate people, but one person can also embody a wide collection of such roles, utilizing them as appropriate.

A striking example of one person taking on such a variety of roles in the production of a single manuscript—scribe, compiler, editor, and more—can be found in Auchinleck’s primary scribe, the anonymous person generally known as Scribe 1. Timothy Shonk’s 1985 article “A Study of the Auchinleck Manuscript: Bookmen and Bookmaking in the Early Fourteenth Century” is still fundamental to the study of this manuscript, and one of Shonk’s central and most minutely supported claims is that Scribe 1 “assumed many of the ‘editorial’ duties for the book.”⁵⁵ Scribe 1’s importance to our understanding of this manuscript has been widely recognized,⁵⁶ but while subsequent scholars have built off the foundation that Shonk lays, the

⁵³ Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages*, 8.

⁵⁴ Partridge, “The Makere of this Boke,” 138. “In the French culture which had done so much to form Chaucer’s literary identity, the verb ‘compiler’ could be used to refer not only to the act of assembling material from existing writings, but also to a writer’s ordering his own works and directing their disposition on the page” (133). See also Sønnesyn, “Obedient Creativity,” 118.

⁵⁵ Shonk, “Auchinleck Manuscript,” 87.

⁵⁶ Arthur Bahr describes Scribe 1 as “the effective editor in chief of the whole production” (*Fragments and Assemblages*, 107), Matthew Fisher and Ralph Hanna both call Auchinleck “Scribe 1’s book” (Fisher, *Scribal Authorship*, 157; Hanna, “Reconsidering,” 93), and Susanna Fein, in her introduction to a recent compendium of Auchinleck essays, agrees that the “hand of Scribe 1 dominates the project” (Fein, *Auchinleck Manuscript*, 5).

level of detail that Shonk brings to his analysis remains unparalleled, and thus his article will provide the basis for my own investigation of Auchinleck's unity.

Scribe 1's most obvious impact upon Auchinleck is the sheer amount of his handwriting in it—he copied 237 of the 331 folios and 14 stubs that comprise the extant manuscript.⁵⁷ Scribe 1's investment in the book, however, is not limited to his scribal production of seventy percent of its contents. With only three exceptions, Scribe 1 provided every extant title, each of which was inserted after copying was complete.⁵⁸ Similarly, Scribe 1 provided the catchwords, which served as a critical step in putting the different gatherings of the nascent manuscript into order.⁵⁹ His assumption of these duties, on top of his own massive amount of copying, indicates at the very least his awareness of the larger design at work in the manuscript that he was so thoroughly overseeing. Shonk furthermore argues (admitting the impossibility of total certainty) that Scribe 1 provided the numbering for Auchinleck's folios,⁶⁰ but even if he didn't, he was still undoubtedly “the last person we know of to have worked on the book before it was bound.”⁶¹ Based on this substantial evidence, Shonk speculates that Scribe 1 could have very well been the person who accepted the commission for Auchinleck in the first place, and who would have thus consulted with the patron on the project throughout its compilation.⁶² It is possible, therefore, that Scribe 1 might have acted as a stationer, one of an emerging class of “middle men” in the

⁵⁷ Shonk, “Auchinleck Manuscript,” 73.

⁵⁸ Shonk, “Auchinleck Manuscript,” 87. The exceptions are two titles written by Scribe 3, and the title of the *Short Metric Chronicle* (a text copied by Scribe 1 but given its title by another hand, perhaps the rubricator's).

⁵⁹ Shonk, “Auchinleck Manuscript,” 82. A catchword is the first word of the following page, which is placed at the bottom of the preceding page.

⁶⁰ “[T]he items were numbered with roman numerals, nearly always centered at the top of each recto; the same number occurs on every recto of every leaf of the item. Thus if an item numbered v, for example, is ten folios long, the numeral v appears at the top of all ten rectos” (Shonk, “Auchinleck Manuscript,” 84). Given the limited number of graphs involved in this numbering, “it is impossible to determine with absolute certainty that Scribe I did number the items. But the evidence points to him” (ibid), and, if he did number the items, then it would mean that he “handled every folio of the codex” (85).

⁶¹ Shonk, “Auchinleck Manuscript,” 87.

⁶² Shonk, “Auchinleck Manuscript,” 90-91.

early London book trade.⁶³ Scribe 1 certainly looks like a stationer, given his involvement with Auchinleck at multiple levels of production, and the fact that stationers were to become more and more ubiquitous in London throughout the fourteenth century puts this manuscript on the leading edge of the developing book trade.⁶⁴ Ultimately, it is clear that Scribe 1 fulfilled nearly all of the most crucial roles required for a manuscript's production—main scribe, editor, compiler, perhaps even stationer.

What's more, Scribe 1's pan-manuscript influence convincingly demonstrates the degree of care and planning that went into Auchinleck's production. It is this pervasive—though not, to be fair, completely uniform—striving towards coherence that not only marks the manuscript out as worth studying comprehensively, but that allows and even invites the kind of intertextual consideration of its contents that will be the overarching project of this dissertation. And the evidence for this sort of manuscript-wide congruity is not confined to Scribe 1's visible marks upon its pages.⁶⁵ Other scholars, following in Shonk's lead, have discovered further indications of Auchinleck's codex-wide integrity by attending to the manuscript's contents as well as to the well-crafted and consistent appearance of its pages.⁶⁶ Fisher, for example, agrees that the manuscript's contents were "curated", but he bases his argument on the grounds of the "broadly thematic clusters" into which the manuscript is organized.⁶⁷ The extant manuscript falls, roughly,

⁶³ Michael, "Urban Production," 171.

⁶⁴ "During the course of the 14th century the rising demand for books quickly assumed commercial importance, and it was met by the growth of a more organized book trade...some, while still working as independent craftsmen, assumed financial responsibility for co-ordinating the different stages of production and for accepting commissions from patrons for completed books. These men came to be known as 'stationers.' The first recorded instance of a stationer in London occurs in 1311" (Parkes, *Scribes, Scripts and Readers*, 286).

⁶⁵ "The ruling and decoration of the codex also demonstrate uniformity sufficient to suggest that a plan must have been set out early in the making of the manuscript" (Shonk, "Auchinleck Manuscript," 78).

⁶⁶ For instance, A.S.G. Edwards, attentive to the "different lines of transmission" that carried different texts into this collection, argues that Auchinleck arose as "a whole that sought to achieve, through its treatment of these larger questions of organization and construction in the manuscript, a close and unprecedented comprehensiveness in its representation of the range of Middle English verse" ("Codicology and Translation," 34).

⁶⁷ As Fisher goes on to note: "This is not surprising: books as large and expensive as Auchinleck do not come into being accidentally or carelessly" (*Scribal Authorship*, 155). Auchinleck would have been a very expensive

into two such “clusters”: of the first sixteen items, all but one are overtly religious in focus, although ranging in genre from hagiography to catechism; of the remaining texts, romances dominate, with smaller chunks of political or religious texts interspersed among them.⁶⁸ The clusters are, in turn, made up of booklets—“units intermediate in extent between the quire and the full codex” that generally consist of “a group of leaves forming at least one quire, but more likely several, and presenting a self-contained group of texts.”⁶⁹ Auchinleck contains twelve booklets, and individual booklets in the second “cluster” tend to begin with romances and end with “fairly blatant filler.”⁷⁰ Even these instances of “blatant filler,” however, might represent selections made by the compiler of the manuscript, providing yet another possible role for Scribe 1, another opportunity for him to mold the massive manuscript into a more unified, streamlined shape, and perhaps a chance for him to insert some of his own tastes and preferences into his project.⁷¹

Even across a wide-ranging booklet, this deliberate tailoring is apparent: Murray J. Evans examines what he calls the *Sir Degaré* booklet (folios 70-107), and sees not only a “generic coherence” within a very diverse collection of texts, but also perceives how this booklet serves a transitional function within the manuscript at large, bridging the two aforementioned clusters of religious material and romances.⁷² Except for the last two items, the entire booklet is copied by a single scribe, Scribe 3, and begins with three overtly religious texts. The first two are the

manuscript indeed, costing around ten pounds, or roughly a quarter of a knight's yearly income (Clifton, “Children’s Literature,” 188-189).

⁶⁸ The exception being the romance *Amis and Amiloun*, which carries its own strongly religious messages and will be discussed in Chapter 3.

⁶⁹ Hanna, *Pursuing History*, 104, 21.

⁷⁰ Hanna, “Reconsidering,” 94. Hanna does insist, however, that “this effort at finishing the book, making it look like a unit, does not succeed in producing a thoroughly continuous manuscript” (ibid)—and indeed, “thoroughly continuous” does not suit as an accurate descriptor for Auchinleck, but this does not much undermine the fact that “it look[s] like a unit” *does* suit.

⁷¹ Fein, “Fillers of the Auchinleck,” 64.

⁷² Evans, *Rereading*, 95-96.

straightforwardly didactic “On the Seven Deadly Sins” and “The Paternoster,” while the third, “The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin,” introduces an investment in narrative that is continued and emphasized in the fourth item, the Breton lai *Sir Degare*, followed by *The Seven Sages of Rome*, a long text combining a romance-style frame narrative with multiple smaller fable-like stories. Then comes one of the earliest romances of the manuscript, *Floris and Blancheflour*, and the booklet finally ends with Scribe 2’s contribution in the political lament “Sayings of the Four Philosophers” and the Battle Abbey Roll.⁷³ The booklet as a whole acts as a kind of *mise en abyme* for the manuscript at large, its contents diverse but clearly, carefully arranged into smaller generic “clusters” that mirror the larger arrangement of the whole book, with religious material gently giving way to romance, capped with “filler” that reflects more directly upon the manuscript’s historical circumstances. Auchinleck’s coherence thus manages to hold true on both the macro and micro levels, unified as a whole and within its constituent parts.⁷⁴

Part of the reason why Auchinleck’s coherence is regarded as so remarkable and has been investigated so thoroughly is not only the rareness of that quality at this period in English book production, but the fact that this coherence exists alongside Auchinleck’s massiveness, its fragmentariness, its undeniable miscellaneity.⁷⁵ Scholars agree that the manuscript is significant,

⁷³ This item is particularly odd—it is the only text in the manuscript copied by Scribe 4, and represents the oldest copy of a list of 551 names of those Norman barons who supposedly fought at the Battle of Hastings with William the Conqueror in 1066.

⁷⁴ More recently, Emile Runde has argued that this same booklet “represents the largest eruption of difference—linguistic, visual, scribal, and so on—within the manuscript,” and she investigates what this booklet can tell us about the “multiple scribal intelligences” that shaped Auchinleck (“Scribe 3’s Literary Project,” 68, 71). That said, Runde and Evans’ readings are not so incompatible as they may seem at first, since both see this booklet as operating within the larger Auchinleck context in a way that reinforces rather than undermines the overall goals and ethos of the manuscript.

⁷⁵ The distinction between what can be considered a “miscellany” and what an “anthology” is still a point of contention between some medievalist scholars, although in general the recent trend has been towards recognizing that “[w]hat seems to us a miscellany might, then, have been received more as an anthology by contemporary readers” (Fein, “Fillers of the Auchinleck,” 63). See also Hanna, *Pursuing History*, 8-9; Nichols and Wenzel, *Whole Book*, 3; and Shailor, “A Cataloger’s View,” 153. For the opposite perspective, see Derek Pearsall’s “The Whole Book: Late Medieval English Manuscript Miscellanies and their Modern Interpretations” in Stephen Kelly and John J. Thomson’s 2005 *Imagining the Book*.

and worthy of study, but in addition to being relatively coherent, it is also an indisputably “messy” document and “a large complex book which resists easy classification.”⁷⁶ Of course, far from being a deterrent to investigation, this is part of Auchinleck’s appeal. As Arthur Bahr points out, the manuscript’s size prohibits any single academic publication from performing a truly comprehensive investigation, while at the same time the manuscript’s fragmentariness rescues whatever research is performed from the danger of being “conclusively disproved... it *could* always be the case that Auchinleck’s lost texts, or miniatures, or circumstances of production, or scribal identities, or owners (you get the idea) would fit just right.”⁷⁷ This combination of solid, encouraging evidence and the lure of the unknowable combine to make Auchinleck enticing—the former providing a foundation for the imaginative analyses that seek to address the latter.

Indeed, the deliberateness that went into Auchinleck’s compilation—and especially the care with which its major texts, principally the romances, were handled and included⁷⁸—provides just such a foundation for my own dissertation. Specifically, my decision to draw these romances exclusively from within this manuscript and to compare them inter-textually is not a choice of simple convenience. It is a critical move grounded in the material evidence of the manuscript itself, evidence that is strong enough to bear the interpretive weight I mean to put upon it. Whether the extant manuscript is “messy” or not, this is no random gathering of arbitrary texts thrown together for expediency’s sake. It is a consciously crafted collection—a miscellaneous collection, but a collection all the same⁷⁹—and examining its constituent parts as belonging to the greater whole of the manuscript is therefore not only permissible, it is essential.

⁷⁶ Hanna, “Reconsidering,” 93; Wiggins, “Imagining the Compiler,” 63.

⁷⁷ Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages*, 106, emphasis original.

⁷⁸ Shonk, “Auchinleck Manuscript,” 75-76.

⁷⁹ “[W]ithin Middle English literary production generally, miscellaneity forms a model procedure for creative work—as well as for its presentation in books. ‘The matere,’ the thematic subject, governs collections to an extent many students, still bound by modern categories, have not thoroughly appreciated” (Hanna, “Miscellaneity and Vernacularity,” 50).

Doing so will allow me to explore the romances in juxtaposition, to examine the different ways that the romances individually or cooperatively highlight different aspects of troubled truth. Because we know how curated the manuscript was, how much effort went into the layout and unity of the book, we must acknowledge that the selection of Auchinleck's contents would have been, for the most part, no less carefully handled. We can thus safely regard these romances as belonging together, as individual points in the same complex constellation. By examining the texts in relation to each other as well as to the manuscript as a whole, we can better understand the distinct interrogations of truth that each particular romance performs, interrogations that may resonate with or contrast sharply against the ways that other romances within the same manuscript carry out similar undertakings.

ii. Creative

If Scribe 1, for all the visible marks he left upon Auchinleck, still hangs like “a ghostly not-quite-author” over the manuscript, then how much more spectral must Auchinleck's patron and intended audience be?⁸⁰ The manuscript was likely a bespoke order for a wealthy, perhaps bourgeois client, and despite our unavoidable ignorance of this person's identity, he too has managed to leave an indelible impact upon the book he commissioned.⁸¹ If it was Scribe 1 who framed and streamlined the finished product, then it was surely the patron's tastes and desires that account for the strongly creative impetus behind Auchinleck's design. There is an impression that “this was an order that, in some sense, got out of hand, that scribe 1 was provided with a succession of requested items (‘Give me a *Beves*’, ‘This week I was thinking about *Richard Coeur de Leon*’) from someone perhaps imperious but certainly wealthy and

⁸⁰ Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages*, 111.

⁸¹ Shonk, “Auchinleck Manuscript,” 89, 90.

enthusiastic.”⁸² The enthusiasm, at least, is hard to deny—the aforementioned miscellaneity of Auchinleck speaks to an omnivorous taste, or perhaps even a variety of tastes being kept in mind as the manuscript was constructed. In fact, this manuscript was very likely meant to act as a library of vernacular reading material for not only the patron, but his family and likely his entire household as well (probably, given his evident wealth, an extensive household).⁸³ While such inferences are unprovable, they are not inappropriate in the case of such a manuscript as Auchinleck, which is indisputably “unique, without precedent or emulator. If it is to be seen as a harbinger of the rising status of literary manuscripts, then it was one significantly ahead of any followers.”⁸⁴ If, as seems likely, the patron was indeed the source for Auchinleck’s innovative quality, and if he deliberately set out to create a manuscript that, while serviceable, would stand out among contemporary compilations, then he certainly succeeded.

One of the most striking ways in which Auchinleck is exceptional is its all-but-exclusive use of English in a time when most literary compilations, even when they did include English, still contained significant proportions of Latin or Anglo-Norman or both, as can be seen in Auchinleck’s contemporary Harley 2253.⁸⁵ Apart from a few Latin phrases and a handful of Anglo-Norman verse in otherwise English texts, all forty four items of the extant manuscript are

⁸² Hanna, “Reconsidering,” 94. Fein points out that “the Auchinleck versions of certain items evince a strong awareness of the planned-for user” (Fein, Intro to *Auchinleck Manuscript*, 8), and Derek Pearsall provides a compelling hypothetical narrative for the process of Auchinleck’s creation, positing a patron who deliberately commissioned “a ‘Great Book of English Romance” (Pearsall, “Forty Years On,” 13-14).

⁸³ Shonk, “Auchinleck Manuscript,” 90; Hilmo, *Images, Icons, and Illustrated*, 113; Pearsall, “Forty Years On,” 13, 22; and Taylor, “Manual to Miscellany,” 15. As Arthur Bahr puts it, Auchinleck was “an object that a medieval mercantile audience would have *wanted* to sit down with frequently, not least because it offered tangible proof of the economic might behind its commission” (*Fragments and Assemblages*, 114-115, emphasis original).

⁸⁴ Boffey and Edwards, “Middle English Literary Writings,” 388.

⁸⁵ This scribe was probably working on a manuscript for his own use “in his spare time rather than as a full-time occupation...his work is not extensively decorated” (O’Rourke, “Imagining Book Production,” 57). He also, in the context of another manuscript, provided a “prose redaction of the romance *Fouke le Fitz Waryn*, copied into Royal 12.C.xii in two stints, c. 1325-7 and 1333-5,” which “shows him laboring as a transmitter of Anglo-Norman ancestral romance over the space of a decade, exactly when Auchinleck was in production and its redactors were converting Anglo-Norman romances to English” (Fein, “Fillers of the Auchinleck,” 74).

composed in English. This represents, at a date long before Chaucer, “a major step in the restoration of the English vernacular as a literary language of consequence” and marks “the first significant emergence of a new class of readers.”⁸⁶ Auchinleck’s patron was clearly making a deliberate, even bold move in his commissioning of such a manuscript. While it is debatable whether he intended his book to stand as such a marked signal on the road of his native language’s literary progress, he was certainly willing to pour a great deal of money into a material vote of confidence in English’s suitability for such a project.

This investment in Middle English implies an innovative impulse at work behind the whole project. Given such a specific linguistic program, to be carried out over so vast a manuscript, it is likely that many of the texts in Auchinleck were extensively modified from their exemplars, orally transmitted, or translated by the scribes themselves.⁸⁷ See for example the booklet-ending fillers mentioned above, which might have allowed the makers of the manuscript to exercise their own creativity, however limited. Moreover, Scribe 1 seems to have had access to an unusual volume and variety of source-texts, although the manuscript’s production in London does make this “exemplar wealth” more likely than it might have been elsewhere in England at this time.⁸⁸ That said, the admittedly unprovable but nevertheless intriguing possibility of alternative (i.e. oral) transmission persists as a reminder of the limits of even the best materially-grounded, manuscript-studies-savvy investigation, and of the potential, again, for scribal authorship. It is not my intention to argue definitively for such speculations, but, as Arthur Bahr and Alexandra Gillespie have recently pointed out,

⁸⁶ Hilmo, *Images, Icons, and Illustrated*, 112; Pearsall, “Literary and Historical Significance of the Manuscript,” *The Auchinleck Manuscript* [facsimile] vii-viii; quoted in Hilmo, *Images, Icons, and Illustrated*, 99.

⁸⁷ See, inter alia, Fein, *Auchinleck Manuscript*, 6; Fisher, *Scribal Authorship*, 58, 157, 167; Taylor, “Manual to Miscellany,” 3; Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, 112; and Machen, “Editing, Orality,” 236.

⁸⁸ Fisher, *Scribal Authorship*, 150-151; Boffey and Edwards, “Middle English Literary Writings,” 388.

To speculate is not to guess, but rather to look both carefully and imaginatively: carefully to see the surviving picture as fully as possible, and imaginatively in due recognition of what that picture has lost or cannot include...without embracing the creative potential of the not-fully-knowable, there is no space for interpretation, only demonstration.⁸⁹

The Auchinleck manuscript itself is also a particularly suitable site for speculation. This manuscript not only invites but practically challenges us to fill in its gaps, to puzzle out its quirks, to interpret its ambiguities, while at the same time frustrating “even wily efforts to impose closure.”⁹⁰ In this case, the known facts of Auchinleck’s near-exclusive use Middle English and the unusualness of that quality at this date suggest that, in addition to a high degree of deliberate coherence, this manuscript was also created with a willingness to rate user-friendliness at a level higher than the impression of aristocracy that Anglo-Norman might have provided.⁹¹ It seems that Auchinleck’s patron wanted a book that could, in other words, “earn its keep,” one that would function not only as a mark of wealth and status—although, as I shall discuss momentarily, he clearly wanted that too—but could also be accessible and enjoyable to the largest number of people possible.⁹²

Auchinleck’s use of English throughout also helps to make significant its level of decoration: there are five surviving miniatures, thirteen now-patched holes of the right size and placement to have been miniatures, and eighteen missing leaves containing the opening of new texts (where a miniature probably once stood).⁹³ This is to say that as many as thirty six of the extant forty four texts might have once included such illustrations, a staggering level of ornamentation. This was the first time that a substantially secular English manuscript offered

⁸⁹ Bahr and Gillespie, “Medieval English Manuscripts,” 358-359.

⁹⁰ Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages*, 151.

⁹¹ See Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages*, 33.

⁹² Perhaps an audience even larger than a single household may have been intended; Bahr hypothesizes “some sort of collective confraternal or civic ownership of the manuscript” (Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages*, 32).

⁹³ Hanna, “Reconsidering,” 93.

such an extensive decorative program, and that program does not end with the miniatures.⁹⁴ Colorful paraps⁹⁵ and initial capitols⁹⁶ also add visual interest to the pages of Auchinleck, working harmoniously with the miniatures and the “ribbony double columns of text, with extremely ample margins” to testify to a kind of “aristocratic opulence” that one might not expect in so thoroughly English a manuscript.⁹⁷ But this deliberate display of wealth was certainly not inimical to the accessibility that I have argued that the patron desired in his book; quite the contrary, since the miniatures in particular would have helped to make Auchinleck’s texts even more accessible to an even wider audience than its use of Middle English had already done. In the extant miniatures, “a single illustration tends to preface the work illustrated, encapsulating, compressing, typifying, or anticipating the main idea or narrative action.”⁹⁸ For instance, the two-paneled miniature for *The King of Tars* shows, in its left half, the pagan Sultan praying to a beast-shaped idol and, in its right half, the newly converted Sultan and his Christian bride praying to a crucifix. The use of the beast-shaped idol is particularly suggestive since Auchinleck text’s list of the Sultan’s pagan gods ends with a reference to “alder best” (657).⁹⁹ This image also resonates with a dream wherein the Christian bride sees hounds “as symbolic of heathens to be converted;” that conversion has been accomplished in the second panel.¹⁰⁰ This agreement of image with text might suggest that the artist painting the miniatures was familiar with Auchinleck’s stories or had even read them, or that his employer—or, more likely, Scribe 1

⁹⁴ Boffey and Edwards, “Middle English Literary Writings,” 388.

⁹⁵ There is throughout the manuscript “generous use of rubrication and marginal flourishes in green, blue, and red ink” (Taylor, “Manual to Miscellany,” 2).

⁹⁶ “For the most part, these capitols are blue-filled lombards with red designs within and red flourishes without. The lettering is clearly by the same hand” (Shonk, “Auchinleck Manuscript,” 80).

⁹⁷ Hanna, *London Literature*, 153.

⁹⁸ Hilmo, *Images, Icons, and Illustrated*, 101.

⁹⁹ A detail which “is not in the Vernon equivalent which has *On Astrot* instead” (Hilmo, *Images, Icons, and Illustrated*, 116).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

in his role as stationer and editor—gave him directions for miniatures that would match Auchinleck’s specific texts. Either way, Timothy Shonk’s proposed order of production for Auchinleck does make it possible for Auchinleck’s artist to have read its texts, since the decorations were only completed after the scribes had finished their work.¹⁰¹ This again demonstrates the forethought and organization that went into the manuscript’s production, and the illustrations themselves are remarkably consistent in style.¹⁰² Although Auchinleck’s decorations are not extravagant, their very inclusion—not to mention their regularity and their synergy with the texts they beautify—acts as yet another example of the manuscript’s uniqueness.

Just as Auchinleck’s coherence supports an inter-textual reading of its contents, so too does the pervasive creativity evident during production support a reading of its contents as themselves creative. Indeed, Auchinleck itself resembles “the medieval romances for which it is so famous: dauntingly long yet incomplete, episodic and paratactic yet deceptively subtle in its organization, and with the ever-deferred prospect of closure.”¹⁰³ Even though romance is not the only genre in the manuscript—nor is it an overwhelming majority—the evident impulse to creativity throughout Auchinleck should encourage us to rank innovation, even boundary-pushing, as one of the goals of the manuscript and its makers.¹⁰⁴ This goal is pursued through

¹⁰¹ Each scribe “designated the position in his text for the inclusion of the rubricator’s paraphs, allotted space for large capitals designating major sections of his pieces, and...left space for miniatures” (Shonk, “Auchinleck Manuscript,” 78). As usual, of course, there are exceptions—in this case “the troublesome Scribe II and the early folios of Scribe III.” See also Shonk, 79-80, 82.

¹⁰² Shonk, “Auchinleck Manuscript,” 78-79, 80.

¹⁰³ Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages*, 106.

¹⁰⁴ Again, the agency which I here assign, for simplicity’s sake, to the inanimate Auchinleck would have likely been dispersed across those involved in the manuscript’s production—the scribes and patron(s) most obviously. Such shorthand is never intended to suggest a simple, single, “author-function” animating every decision which I analyze; it is only intended to indicate that there is a deliberate decision here that is worth analyzing as such.

artistic and linguistic choices, the deployment and manipulation of generic expectations, and, not least, a lively engagement with the consequences of contemporary politics.

iii. Contemporary

Auchinleck's awareness of, and investment in, the historical circumstances surrounding its creation can best be seen in three of its texts that fit neatly into neither the category of romance nor that of religion. *The Sayings of the Four Philosophers*, *The Simonie*, and the *Short Metrical Chronicle* each make reference, whether explicitly, subtly, or both, to the period of turmoil that had, from the manuscript's perspective, only recently begun to abate, and each of them points to the troubled state of truth as a major cause of that turmoil.

The two shorter works, *The Sayings of the Four Philosophers* and *The Simonie*, are political poems that bewail the perilous state in which England finds itself. Of the two, *The Simonie* is by far the more-studied Auchinleck text. Thorlac Turville-Petre describes it as “a comprehensive and passionate indictment of all the social estates. English prestige is at rock-bottom, its people humiliated by recent reversals and facing an uncertain future.”¹⁰⁵ This suffocating tone of despair permeates *The Simonie* from beginning to end. The opening promises explanations for a variety of dreadful conditions: “Whij werre and wrake in londe and manslauht is icome, / Whij hungger and derþe on eorþe þe pore haþ vndernome, / Whij bestes ben þus storue, whij corn haþ ben so dere, / 3e þat wolen abide, listneþ, and 3e muwen here / Þe skile” (1-5). The repetitive demand for the reasons behind such sweeping wretchedness suggests a fundamental bewilderment and a sense of being overwhelmed, which the rest of the poem will grapple with in full. While the main answer to the insistent “Whij”—as indicated by the title—is

¹⁰⁵ *England the Nation*, 132.

that “coueytise and symonie han þe world to wille” (30), as *The Simonie* progresses, a slightly different culprit emerges: the brokenness or absence of the “treuþe” that should hold the fabric of society together.

At first, only small, individual examples of this lament for lost truth pepper the text’s ongoing enumerations of England’s many woes. The failure of legal truth can be seen in the ease with which a man can divorce his wife—he need only bring her to “þe constorie, þer treuþe sholde be souht” and the divorce is made (200). While seemingly minor, this failure of truth to reside in a place where it *should* be sought indicates a crack in one of the most socially constitutive sacraments, an institution particularly dependent upon the sworn truth of its participants: marriage. Those in positions of power and influence are also censured for their lack of truth: lying doctors are “false fisiciens þat helpen men to die,” while “Attourneis in cuntre, þeih geten siluer for noht,” and therefore “Ne triste no man to hem, so false þeih bep in þe bile” (212, 349, 354). Similarly, there “sumtime were chapmen [merchants] þat troweliche bouhten and solde; / And nu is þilke assise broke, and nas noht 3ore holde. / Chaffare [commerce] was woned to be meintened wid treuþe. / And nu is al turned to treccherie; and þat is muchel reuþe” (355-358). The trust that is essential to such relationships—doctors and patients, lawyers and clients, merchants and customers—is clearly regarded as a thing lost within recent memory, with descriptors like “sumtime”, “And nu”, “woned to be”, and “nu is al turned” emphasizing the break between the more stable past—built upon trust in one another’s “treuþe”—and the disastrous present, wherein “treccherie” has sway.

The contrast between “treuþe” and the “treccherie” that has replaced it is even more overtly highlighted when *The Simonie*’s speaker prays “God sende treuþe into þis lond, for tricherie dureþ to longe. / And baillifs and bedeles vnder þe shirreue, / Euerich fondeþ hu he may

pore men most greue” (336-338). The local officials and agents of the government are no more to be trusted in their wielding of power than are the merchants, doctors, and lawyers. It is the “pore men”, those without power, who are most vulnerable to the consequences of failed truth in those above them. The abuses add up, and before long *The Simonie* pinpoints falseness, the destructive antithesis of trust and of treuþe, as the root cause of England’s miseries: “For falsnesse is so fer forþ ouer al þe lond isprunge, / Þat wel neih nis no treuþe in hond, ne in tunge, / Ne in herte. / And þerfore nis no wonder þouh al þe world it smerte” (363-366). The insistent “Why?” from the beginning is answered by a cynical “What did you expect?” It should not surprise us that, when there is no treuþe to be found in the actions (“hond”), words (“tunge”), or intentions (“herte”) of those in power, the whole world smarts from the pain and sorrow of the falseness that has taken treuþe’s place.¹⁰⁶

Even with such a bleak outlook, *The Simonie* makes a few gestures towards a hypothetical solution, illustrating, as it does so, that at least some of the responsibility for this breakdown of truth rests on the king’s shoulders. The poem insists that “þe pore is þus ipiled and þe riche forborn. / *Ac if* þe king hit wiste, I trouwe he wolde be wroþ,” that “*were* þe king wel auised and wolde worche bi skile, / Litel nede sholde he haue swiche pore to pile” (312-312, 319-320, my emphasis). As the ultimate source of temporal power in England, it is within the king’s power to protect those whom others in power have so failed in their falseness. But the emphasis on the contingency of “if” and “were” only serves to subtly accuse the king as well: he is *not* aware of the extent of the problem, he is *not* well advised, and he is *not* working “bi skile.” Although this poem has traditionally been known as the “Poem on the Evil Times of Edward II,” its longing for an informed, well-advised, skilled king could also potentially speak to the time of

¹⁰⁶ “smerte (n.): 1(a) Physical pain; also, harm (b) grief, sorrow, annoyance...also, contrition, remorse; (c) suffering, hardship; also, punishment” (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED41074>)

Edward III's early reign (1327-1330), when the young king was firmly under the thumb of his mother, Queen Isabella, and her consort Roger Mortimer. Similarly, one of the most striking and specific laments that *The Simonie* offers could apply just as well to the results of Mortimer's actions as to those of Edward II's:

...þe lordinges of þe lond þat swich wo han iwrouht
þat nolde spare for kin þat o kosin þat oþer;
So þe fend hem prikede vch man to mourdren oþer
...þe beste blod of (of) þe lond shamliche was brouht to grounde.
If hit betre mihte a ben! Allas! þe harde stounde / Bitid,
þat of so gentille blod iborn, swich wreche was ikid.
Allas, þat euere sholde hit bifalle þat in so litel a þrowe,
Swiche men sholde swich deþ þole and ben ileid so lowe.
Of eorles and of barouns, baldest hij were;
And nu hit is of hem bicom riht as þeih neuere ne were / Iborn.
...þise grete lordinges þus han ihurled to hepe. (428-430, 435-443, 445)

While Edward II had executed his royal cousin Lancaster for treason in 1322, Mortimer had done the same to Edward II's half-brother Edmund in 1330, shortly before the young Edward III accomplished the counter-coup that won him control of his own throne. Alternatively, Edward III's own subsequent execution of Mortimer—first Earl of March and effective ruler of England since the old king's deposition—for *his* treason might also fit this description of “þe beste blod” being “shamliche” brought to ground. This is not to mention the earlier deaths of the king's favorites, Piers Gaveston and the two Despensers. Even more troublingly, the murder of Edward II shortly after his forced abdication in favor of his son in 1327 offers perhaps the best example of one who was “of so gentille blod iborn” being “ileid so lowe.” This extended jeremiad thus does not have to offer specific names in order to be excruciatingly relevant to its contemporary audience. The sheer volume of possible referents is indeed perhaps best summarized as a “hepe” of “grete lordinges.” The speed as well as the volume of such losses—“in so litel a þrowe”—and the comprehensive destruction wrought upon the most powerful figures in the land—“hem

bicome riht as þeih neuere ne were / Iborn”—adds to the sense of being overwhelmed. The corruption of the church, of those in secular power, even the ill-advisedness of the king register as almost commonplace complaints compared to this slaughter among England’s highest ranks. This poem thus raises the stakes of those relatively standard laments by linking them to this unprecedented culling of the wellborn, tapping into the sense of shock and disgust that “even jaded contemporaries” couldn’t shake.¹⁰⁷ In the face of such unparalleled and destabilizing violence at the very highest political levels, in addition to the pervasive failures of truth permeating the rest of society and landing most heavily upon those at the bottom, “þe pore,” it comes as no wonder that *The Simonie* declares, as part of its closing diatribe, that “Engelond is shent þurw falsnesse” (456).

The shorter political lament, *The Sayings of the Four Philosophers*, has received comparatively little in-depth attention, at least in its Auchinleck incarnation.¹⁰⁸ Like *The Simonie*, it deals with the wide-ranging problems afflicting England and bewails the current state of things, but its approach is considerably different. This poem was copied by Scribe 2, and is, structurally, a combination and adaptation of two earlier works. One, the “traditional sayings” of the four philosophers, is found in perhaps its most famous version in the *Gesta Romanorum*—a late 13th/early 14th c. collection of Latin tales and fables. The other is a macaronic Middle English and Anglo-Norman lyric known as “De Provisione Oxonie” in Cambridge, St John’s College MS 112 (*NIMEV* 2831.44), a manuscript roughly contemporary with the *Gesta Romanorum*. In the Auchinleck manuscript, the poem—at a mere 98 lines, one of the shortest in

¹⁰⁷ Hanna, *London Literature*, 22.

¹⁰⁸ This poem has two earlier—though significantly different—versions; one is to be found in the *Gesta Romanorum*—a late 13th/early 14th collection of Latin tales and fables—titled, in its modern translation, as “Tale CXLIV: Of the Actual State of the World” (Swan, 251-252); the other, a Middle English version, is in the roughly contemporary Cambridge, St John’s College MS 112 (*NIMEV* 2831.44).

the entire book—takes up only a single recto and gives no hint as to its composite nature; it is presented as a unified text. As such, and for the sake of convenience, I will refer to the whole of it as *The Sayings of the Four Philosophers*.

The macaronic verse at the beginning of *Four Philosophers*, wherein two lines of Anglo-Norman alternate and rhyme with two lines of Middle English for the first twenty lines of the poem are, despite the blend of languages, the most straight-forward in meaning. The poem opens by addressing, in the same vein as *The Simonie*, why “Engelond is shent” (4), and finds a similar answer in the fact that the English king

At Westminster after þe feire
Maden a gret parlement.
La chartre fet de cyre –
ieo l’enteink & bien le crey—
It was holde to neih þe fire
And is molten al away (ll. 7-12)

[At Westminster after the fair he made a great parliament. The charter made of wax—so I heard and well believe it—was held too near the fire and is melted all away.]

In this case, it is the written, material lynchpin of *treuþe*, the “chartre,” which has been destroyed, literally “molten al away”, and this naturally results in pervasive affliction at every level of society: “Hundred, chapitle, court & shire, / Al hit goþ a deucl wey” (15-16). Like *The Simonie*, *Four Philosophers* seems unsurprised—although dismayed—to discover that a failure of *treuþe* at the highest level wreaks havoc on the kingdom as a whole, and takes it for granted that such widespread calamity is traceable back an issue of documentary (im)permanence. The physical state of written agreements—in this case the sealing wax standing in metonymically for the “chartre” as a whole—has here a tangible impact on the social realities of English life. In the process, this political lament obliquely raises the stakes of its own existence as a truth-bearing

document that is *not* “molten al away” and is indeed here to address the issue of those things—charters, royal promises, political stability—that have lately been prone to melting.

But what is the “chartre” in question? This reference has usually been understood as a reference to the 1311 Ordinances, and if we assume that the Ordinances are the “chartre,” then by naming Westminster, accurately, as the location of the Ordainers’ parliament, this poem not only demonstrates an awareness of the details of contemporary events, but also subtly places London at the center of these events.¹⁰⁹ John Scattergood has identified the “feire” mentioned as “that of St Bartholomew at Smithfield which was held on 24 August”—which did coincide with the Ordainers’ parliament.¹¹⁰ The specificity of such references could be seen as a demonstration of how relevant the Ordinances of 1311 were still felt to be, even nearly a decade after their repeal in the Statute of York in 1322. This repeal, Edward II’s rejection of the Ordinances made in conjunction with his execution of Lancaster, their main champion, would obviously be the referent for the image of the “chartre” melting away—if the “chartre” in question were the Ordinances.

Although Scattergood has made a very good case for understanding both parliament and charter as references to the creation of the Ordinances, there are hints within *The Sayings* that suggest an alternative understanding. This is not to discard Scattergood’s convincing argument, only to point to another metaphorically melted “chartre” that Londoners in particular would have had cause to lament: the charter of the city of London itself, which guaranteed the capital’s rights and freedoms. As mentioned, Auchinleck was compiled in London, and at certain fraught moments in the manuscript, the London perspective of its makers colors its portrayal of the crises

¹⁰⁹ Matthews, *Writing to the King*, p. 118.

¹¹⁰ Scattergood, *Manuscripts and Ghosts*, 102.

with which it is engaging. This London lens offers a particularly fruitful and unique way to read *Sayings*, opening up hitherto unrecognized interpretations.

In 1307, Edward II gave the Londoners “generous terms” when he restored their charter upon his accession, and in 1319 “London’s popular radical movement (then at one of the climaxes of its fortunes), was able to extract from the king (then at a low point) a charter that greatly enlarged the power of the citizen commonality.”¹¹¹ Any satisfaction that the city might have felt at this triumph, however, was turned to animosity just two years later, when, in 1321, Edward suspended the city’s traditional liberties, imposing mayors and officials of his own upon a populace he no longer trusted.¹¹² This made it all but inevitable that London would side with Isabella and Mortimer—and indeed, it was the London elite who drafted and lobbied for the infamous Guildhall Oath, writing to the great men of the land and urging them “to swear to maintain Isabella and her son, and ‘to crown the latter; and to depose his father for frequent offences against his oath and his Crown.’”¹¹³ For this, Edward III—under the instructions of his mother and Mortimer—confirmed all of the city’s ancient liberties.

Even if London’s charter is not meant to be the “chartre” mentioned in the poem, Edward II’s willingness to flagrantly renege on his promises to London could easily have resonated with his willingness, only a year afterwards, to renege on the oath he swore to uphold the Ordinances. As with *The Simonie*’s bemoaning of the best of England’s blood brought shamefully to ground, the multiple possible referents to a “chartre” that has been melted away, a royal promise that has been broken, would have possessed a clear and painful resonance for Londoners in the 1330s, and it is only by examining Auchinleck in light of its contemporary political contexts that we can

¹¹¹ Burford, *The Synfulle Citie*, 80; Sheppard, *London: A History*, 93.

¹¹² Sheppard, *London, A History*, p. 93.

¹¹³ Phillips, *Edward II*, p. 526; quoting *CPMR*, pp. 11-12. See also Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages*, 26-27 and Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community*, 157.

appreciate the full range of potential implications that hinge upon even such seemingly minor phrases or images. Thus, as Arthur Bahr has pointed out, *The Sayings of the Four Philosophers* “imagines the abuse of texts as tantamount to the failure of government...[it] suggests that, by dissolving the textual basis of social organization, Edward [II]’s failures have undone society itself.”¹¹⁴ Reliance upon textual truth ultimately proves to be just as misguided as the reliance upon personal, human truth that *The Simonie* shows to be unreliable.

All this, however, covers only the first twenty lines of the poem; the remainder of *The Sayings* is composed in Middle English alone. The use of Anglo-Norman here is particularly noteworthy given that Auchinleck as a whole is otherwise (barring a handful of scattered Latin) an exclusively English manuscript, making it is well worth asking why Anglo-Norman was included at this textual moment. There are a number of possibilities. Perhaps the discussion of legal documents (the charter) and political events (the parliament) seemed to naturally invite the use of the language most often used in those circumstances. Perhaps at this moment of high textual stakes, either the patron or the scribe (or both) saw an opportunity to show off his degree of learning and sophistication, so as to add weight to the poem’s perspective on the situation.¹¹⁵ That an unavoidably political linguistic choice is being made to describe very tense political developments cannot, in any case, be mere coincidence. While the earlier version of this section, “De Provisione Oxonie,” does include macaronic verse (though it does not include the “sayings” of the philosophers themselves), the lines have been heavily modified, and the decision to include Anglo-Norman at all must still be regarded as a deliberate one in the context of an

¹¹⁴ Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages*, 25.

¹¹⁵ As David Matthews points out, “linguistic competence is always at issue in macaronic poetry and this is a code-shifting poem which implies that the reader or hearer has at least enough Anglo-Norman to muddle through” (*Writing to the King*, 8).

otherwise solidly English manuscript.¹¹⁶ Although the changes to “De Provisione Oxonie” might have come from a now-lost, intermediate exemplar that *The Sayings*’ Scribe 2 was working from, it is just as possible that Auchinleck’s highly-curated nature encouraged Scribe 2 to exercise a degree of scribal authorship at this moment.¹¹⁷ Instead of translating the Anglo-Norman verse to suit the overarching linguistic program of the manuscript, he displayed both his own literary skill and his confidence in his patron’s linguistic abilities by modifying the macaronic verse to address—in the two vernaculars of England—the perceived unreliability of textual truth.

A unique pair of macaronic couplets links the section derived from “De Provisione Oxonie” to the section derived from the *Gesta Romanorum*’s traditional sayings: the four wise men offer “vn sarmoun” in response to the question of “Whi Engelond is brought adoun” (ll. 18, 20). Their answers are given in English in the form of riddles, first framing the riddle with a few lines, then glossing the lines of the riddles one by one. The opening example is typical:

Be ferste seide “I vnderstonde
Ne may no king wel ben in londe,
Vnder God almihte,
But he kunne himself rede
Hou he shal in londe lede
Eueri man wid rihte.
For miht is riht,
Liht is niht
And fiht is fliht
For miht is riht, þe lond is laweles;
For niht is liht, þe lond is lore-les;
For fiht is fliht, þe lond is nameles.” (21-32)

The remaining philosophers adhere to this same format, and each of them addresses a particular category of England’s woes. The first philosopher, describing the land as “laweles”, “lore-les”,

¹¹⁶ See Scattergood, *Manuscripts and Ghosts*, 98-102. His conclusion is that the Auchinleck poem “is not a scribal variant of *J* [the St. John’s manuscript version], but that the author of *A* used *J* as his source, omitting and changing what was no longer relevant” (102).

¹¹⁷ Matthews, *Writing to the King*, 119. The *Gesta Romanorum* version is markedly shorter, more general, and the sayings themselves, while following a similar format, are significantly different than those found here.

and “nameless”, seems to have a legal focus, and, like *The Simonie* and in keeping with the opening of this poem, indicts the king for his lack of good “rede”—advice, counsel, or judgement. The second philosopher’s framing of his riddle is a bit more cryptic; he warns that “Whoso roweþ aȝein þe flod, / Off sorwe he shal drinke,” and his three descriptors for “þe lond” are “streinþeles,” “reupeles,” and “loueles” (34-35, 42, 43, 44). Perhaps there is a social focus here: the “flod” representing the immense pressure against Edward II’s unpopular decisions, and the result of the king’s disregard for this is the loss not only of compassion and love—socially cohesive virtues—but also of the strength England could be capable of under a better king. The image of the “flod” arises again in the fourth and final philosopher’s contribution, and here the meaning seems to be associated with reward and with profit: “he is wod [insane] / Þat dwelleþ to muchel in þe flod, / For gold or for auhte. / For gold or siluer or any wele, / Hunger or þurst, hete or chele, / Al shal gon to nohte” (57-61).¹¹⁸ The emphasis on the fleetingness of temporal gain or comfort is borne out in the glosses on the third philosopher’s riddle: the land’s status as “wrechful,” “wrongful,” and “sinful” points to a moral, spiritual poverty at work in England (55-58).

More explicit reference to contemporary events can be found in the third philosopher’s framing: “...it is no wonder / Off þise eyres þat goþ vnder / Whan þeih comen to londe, / Proude & stoute, & ginneþ ȝelpe, / Ac of þing þat sholde helpe / Haue þeih noht in honde” (45-50). While the word “eyres” has traditionally been glossed as “heirs,” naturally leading to some confusion as to these lines’ meaning,¹¹⁹ there is another, hitherto unrecognized possibility: the

¹¹⁸ One intriguing reading sees these references to “þe flod” as jabs at “Edward [II]’s well-known predilection for water sports” (Matthews, *Writing to the King*, 119—he credits Laura Kendrick with this insight but does not cite her). Once again, the possibilities are not mutually exclusive, but instead reinforce the poem’s overall sense of contemporary investment.

¹¹⁹ Scattergood has read the line this way, although he acknowledges that the word is a difficult one—he also sees the people who “comen to londe” as foreigners and thus the reference to what he reads as their heirs “seems to be

eyre was one of the tools that the Crown could use to interfere in a city's self-government, and to raise funds. The king would appoint "a group of royal justices 'in Eyre' to visit the city and investigate the way in which the city's rulers had governed it and administered justice on the king's behalf...[and] fines could be exacted for any breach of charter or custom."¹²⁰ As a part of Edward II's rejection of the generous charter he had granted London, he appointed in 1321 "a crippling (and long-running, almost six months) general eyre, designed to root out its ruling class," an eyre that was "bent on prising every privilege and penny out of the city."¹²¹ The eyre was instigated at the behest of Edward II's then-ascendant favorite, Hugh Despenser the Younger, who had backed London's civic interests when it suited him only to reveal his true hand when he felt himself secure enough.¹²² The eyre also worked to set different London factions against one another, as each individual ward "was ordered to make its complaints to the justices."¹²³ Thus the city was fractured from within even as it was financially attacked from without, its own inherent divisions and conflicted interests revealed at the moment wherein it was most vulnerable. This reference to the eyre also gives further weight to the possibility that the "chartre" mentioned in the first part of the poem could have been read, not only as the Ordinances, but also as the London charter awarded and then rejected by Edward II. The end of the third philosopher's contribution, the three words he uses to explicate his riddle, carry the financial concerns that one would expect to attend an eyre: "þe lond" is, in this estimation, "þeweles,"¹²⁴ "penyles," and "almusles" (54-56). Thus we have, according to these philosophers,

used here pejoratively, and if it implies considerations of lineage, birth and comparative youth, it may well be that here again the author has Gaveston in mind" (*Manuscripts and Ghosts*, p. 105).

¹²⁰ Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages*, 32.

¹²¹ Hanna, *London Literature*, 61; Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages*, 33, quoting Williams, *Medieval London*, 287; *The Eyre of London 14 Edward II A.D. 1321*.

¹²² Nightingale, *Medieval Mercantile Community*, 142-146.

¹²³ Nightingale, *Medieval Mercantile Community*, 149.

¹²⁴ This word has a stronger moral than financial connotation—"theules" in the Middle English Dictionary is glossed as "Lacking in moral character, immoral" (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED45246>);

a land that is seriously compromised legally, socially, financially, and morally. That compromised state is traceable back to the melting of a charter: the destruction of a document and the breaking of a royal promise.

Despite the questions that linger concerning some of its referents, the engagement of *The Sayings of the Four Philosophers* with its own contemporary, London context is undeniable. The overall project of the poem is clearly aligned with that of *The Simonie*—an enumeration of England’s many grim problems and a pinpointing of their causes—even while it brings to bear different techniques to achieve a similar sense of conscientious discontent with the current state of affairs, a similar desire to somehow work through recent unpleasantness. Both texts demonstrate how damaging the breakdown of truth, especially at the highest levels of government and society, had been to England; both paint that breakdown in vivid imagery, whether a heap of dead lordlings or a melted charter. Both texts react with a mixture of distress and world-weariness, and both illuminate different aspects of and contributors to that broken truth: pride, false council, greed, and interference with city government to name a few. It is likely significant, therefore, that these two poems share a scribe: Scribe 2, who provided only one other text for Auchinleck, the “Speculum Gy de Warwick,” an instructional religious text.¹²⁵ None of Scribe 2’s poems appear near each other in the manuscript—indeed, *Sayings of the Four Philosophers* appears early in the cluster of romances in the second part of Auchinleck, while *The Simonie* is the extant manuscript’s final text. It might be going too far to claim that these overtly political, pessimistic poems are in some sense framing the bulk of the romances,

thus the complaint points to the wider implications of the shameful behavior of those who have made the land penniless and almsless. The word also connects this description to the more overtly moral one that follows it, especially since the fourth philosopher’s riddle also contains a combined interest in finance and morality.

¹²⁵ Which, like Scribe 2’s other two contributions, vividly demonstrates Auchinleck’s intertextuality—the frame for the religious instruction provided in the “Speculum” is that it has been created for the use of Guy of Warwick, whose exploits (including a dramatic religious conversion) dominate the center of the romance section of Auchinleck.

especially since both poems appear near the ends of their booklets—in the place usually left to “filler” texts. But neither text can comfortably be dismissed as simple “filler,” not when they resonate so strongly with each other, as well as with recent political events.

In contrast to the subtler hints of a London-centric perspective at work in the *Sayings of the Four Philosophers*, the investment of Auchinleck’s *Short Metrical Chronicle* in the capital is marked and consistent. Unlike the contemporary—though much shorter and substantially different—version of the *Chronicle* found in British Library MS Royal 12 C.xii,¹²⁶ Auchinleck’s text “has been deliberately tailored for London use...more precisely for London use in this manuscript context.”¹²⁷ The interest in London begins, naturally enough, with the city’s founding by Brut, who “made London first wiþ game / & 3af it his houne name, / Newe Troye, for he cam / First fram Troye & it bigan” (453-456). While calling London “New Troy” is by no means an unusual move—particularly for a chronicle—Marion Turner has pointed out that the idea of London as a “New Troy” can be “a very mixed metaphor...New Troy is supposed to be a perfected version of its point of origin, but it also represents the contemporary, flawed capital.”¹²⁸ While Turner’s focus is on the later fourteenth century—particularly Chaucer’s deployment of this concept—the disturbing resonances of Troy’s double legacy far predate Chaucer, and, as has been seen, London had revealed itself to be every bit as flawed in the 1320s as it was in the 1380s. This brief mention of the city’s first name might not register as noteworthy if the *Short Metrical Chronicle* is read alone or out of its context, but when seen against London’s recent history and the disturbing resonances in other Auchinleck portrayals of

¹²⁶ A.k.a. “the ‘other book’ of the Ludlow scribe of Harley 2253” (Hanna, “Reconsidering,” 100).

¹²⁷ There are, for instance, “extended Guy of Warwick and Richard Coer de Lion episodes” (Hanna, *London Literature*, 105). This “tailoring” provides yet another occasion for the scribe—Scribe 1 in this instance—to exercise scribal authorship. Indeed, the “*Short Chronicle* invited scribal authorship, and both the Harley Scribe and Auchinleck Scribe 1 responded to that invitation to compose unique texts in dialogue with the other texts of the manuscripts, and with the historical circumstances of the books’ production” (Fisher, *Scribal Authorship*, 187).

¹²⁸ Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict*, p. 60.

the city, this reference to “Newe Troye” takes on an uneasy significance, one that will surface again later in the text.

Initially, though, Brut not only names the city after his illustrious home, but also makes London’s future grandeur and importance a requirement of those who will follow him: “ʒif ich king þat after me come / Make þis cite wide & rome / As ichaue bi mi day, / ʒete herafter men sigge may / Þat Troye nas neuer so fair cite / So þis cite schal be” (459-464). And later kings did indeed take up Brut’s injunction—a king called Eboras “made ʒorke wide & rome / O lengþe & brede he it mete / More þan Londen bi seue[n] street” (498-500), and his son, Lud, “At Londen he made a gat / & ʒaf it his owen name, / Ludgate, in his game” (528-530).¹²⁹ The echoing of specific phrases, such as “wide & rome” and “ʒaf it his owen name” illustrates the consistency of London’s importance; from the beginning the capital has been central to English history, a solid touchstone in a narrative where kings rise and fade in a mortal cycle, leaving behind, at best, tangible traces of themselves in the fabric of the city, or in the pages of the chronicles.

London’s prominence is particularly highlighted during the career of Hengst, wherein we see the first reference to a parliament being called, specifically in London (675-688). Hengst also seems to have a particularly good relationship with the capital, and it with him: “Into Londen sone he come; / Þe buriays alle curteys & fre / Welcomed him fair into þat cite” (728-730). It is not—as might be expected—the high nobility, but instead the “buraiys”, the London citizens, who not only welcome the king, but are commended for being courteous and free. Significantly, Auchinleck’s patron was almost certainly a London “buriay” himself.¹³⁰ On this occasion,

¹²⁹ This reference to Ludgate and a shorter version of Brut’s founding of the city are the only details about London which British Library, MS Royal 12.C.xii shares with Auchinleck (97-100, 164-167)—although Royal does not include Auchinleck’s detail that Lud was buried at Ludgate (533).

¹³⁰ burgeis (n.): “1(a) A freeman of a town, a citizen with full rights and privileges; also, an inhabitant of a town; -- usually used of city merchants and master craftsmen in the guilds; 2(a) A magistrate or other official of a town; a member of the council or assembly governing a town; (b) the representative of a town in the House of Commons.” (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED6321>).

Hengst takes it upon himself to give a brief history of London's names, including one the text has not given thus far, and adding one of his own: "Wele be 3ou, gode men ichon, / Þo Brut first þis cite ches / Newe Troye ycleped it wes, / & seþþe þo þat went her þurth / For king Lud, Luddesburth. / & nov, lordinges, ich warn 3ou alle / Hingisthom 3e schullen it calle" (732-738). This lends an additional weight to the importance of London during Lud's reign—initially, the chronicle only indicated that this king made a gate that bears his name, but here we are told that the whole city was renamed for him, just as that name changes once again. Although these multiple different names indicate the impact a single king can have upon London, they also illustrate how re-naming the capital could be an avenue to lasting fame. Even the names that London no longer bears—New Troy, Luddesburth, Hengisthom—are remembered, as are the givers of those names. Hengst's own partiality for London does not end at giving it his own name—in between descriptions of wars and battles and conquests, we are told that "Þo went þe king to Hengisthom / & al þe lond folk þider come; / Þer he comand heye & lowe / Her wast londes tile & sowe" (853-856). London is where this king feels it appropriate to go in order to direct his kingdom, to command and to see to the peaceful, normal work of managing his lands, and it is also a place of gathering for folk from all over the land.

It is Caesar himself who gives the capital the name it still holds, having won the city "Þurth falsnisse, tresoun & pride / Gret folk was sleyn bi ich a side. / Þurth gret strengþe þe cite he nom / Þat was ycleped Hingis[t]hom. / For it was wiþ strengþe ygete, / Londen þe cite he dede clepe, / & so it schal be cleped ay / Til þat it be domesday" (953-962). London's permanence and significance are both on display here, but at the same time the famous city's final name is only acquired after—and explicitly *because of*—a great battle in which many died through falseness, treason, and pride. After such consistently positive attention has been paid to the relationship

between king and capitol throughout the manuscript, this moment comes as a jarring reminder of London's thorough implication in the cycle of political violence that attends the rise and fall of kings, and speaks in explicit terms to the anxiety that the earlier name, "Newe Troye," had only obliquely evoked. Even though Isabella and Mortimer did not invade London and subject it to the kind of violent conquest here imagined for Caesar, the 1327 riot still saw a great many people "sleyn bi ich a side," and the city still played a critical role in a historic moment of regime change. Indeed, when the challenger Cassibalan finally comes to oust Ceasar, we see the wheel turn again: "Cassibalan was in Londone. / He drof Julius Cesar out of lond" (972-973). This implies a correlation between holding London and holding the "lond" as a whole, and being not only the capital but, in many ways, the polestar of English history comes with its costs. The city is an ancient and famous one, but here the *Short Chronicle* confronts the fact that such a long and important history necessarily contains chapters of darkness. That fact is not ignored, but neither is it confronted with the kind of direct lamentation that the *Sayings of the Four Philosophers* and *De Simonie* employed. Instead, violence, falseness, pride, and treason seem to be viewed as more-or-less expected aspects of the turning of the political wheel. The broken, unreliable state of truth does not come as a surprise in the *Chronicle*, but it still causes measurable damage.

But the London details do not solely concern conquest. The city's religious history is also of some significant interest—we are told that King Seberd "Westminster first he bigan," and this illustrious church is also the occasion for a long story concerning a "pouer fischer bi Temes side" who ferries St. Peter (in disguise) across to Westminster so that Peter can bless the church: "Si(n)gnes he made on þe wal / & on þe grounde ouer al / þat al men miȝt wele se. / Of Gru he made an a. b. c. / & þo þe chirche halwed was" (1142, 1151, 1177-1181). On the way back over the river Peter, having been a fisherman himself, naturally assists the poor Themes fisherman,

who miraculously catches 450 salmon; the fisherman later visits both the bishop and the king and informs them of the marvelous events, and the king makes him very rich.¹³¹ Not only does this tale paint London as a blessed place, a place where the lowest orders of society can meet and converse with the highest orders (saints, bishops, kings), but the story ends with the injunction “& 3if 3e wil nou3t leue me / Go to Westeminster & 3e may se” (1261-1262). In other words, go to the place that, as Londoners, you my audience will know quite well, and observe the material proof of your nation’s history embedded in the very fabric of your city.

Here as well can be detected echoes of recent, lived experiences of London life: whether they occurred in London or not, many significant political events existed as part of the city’s fabric in the form of prominently-posted or widely-distributed texts. One particularly telling example of this is the plaque commemorating the Ordinances of 1311, which Thomas of Lancaster made to be posted at St. Paul’s. After his execution in 1322 the plaque was removed, in large part because it had become a central site for the cult that quickly grew up around a man widely regarded as a martyr to tyranny.¹³² Similarly, in 1326, Isabella sent a flood of letters into the city announcing her justifications and goals, letters that were reportedly plastered in public view, which paved the way for the city’s swift decision to side with her.¹³³ At occasions of tense political change, the documents recording or even embodying such changes might be available to the vast majority of Londoners, literate or not, as material emblems of important events. There were moments when London itself became a thing to be read, the physical city bearing the words of earls and queens, a text with an audience that literally inhabited it.

¹³¹ The whole story can be found in lines 1142-1252.

¹³² Hanna, *London Literature*, p. 33. See also Fisher, *Scribal Authorship*, p. 114.

¹³³ “Queen Isabella’s second letter soliciting the City’s aid in 1326—the first having been ignored by timorous officialdome—[was] said by chroniclers to have been posted everywhere almost immediately (*Annales Paulini* 315, *Croniques* 51, *Great Chronicle* 29-30)” (Hanna, *London Literature*, 33). See also Matthews, *Writing to the King*, 13.

While the end of the *Short Metrical Chronicle* does not directly address London's participation in the tumultuous transition, it does briefly describe and lament Edward II's reign, describing him as a "a stalworþ man" who lost his land "Þurth his wicked conseyle," and the chronicle ends with a prayer for "þe 3ong king Edward," who would have only just seized control from Mortimer as Auchinleck was beginning to be compiled (2338, 2341, 2349). Even though this text is not a straight-forward lament like *The Sayings of the Four Philosophers* or *De Simonie*, its final impression is that of still coming to grips with catastrophe, while at the same time longing for an improvement that must have seemed unlikely, especially in a world so seemingly devoid of reliable truth. The cyclical rise and fall of king after king seems here not so much to end as to catch up with the present, and the future looms ahead, simultaneously uncertain in its specifics and foreshadowed by the often violent, London-centric politics preceding it. Edward III, son of an incapable king and his ruthless queen, must have seemed an uncertain hope for that future.

Auchinleck's investment in its own historical context, though often oblique or subtle, is nevertheless as significant as its coherence and creativity. These intersections between the historical and manuscript contexts provide a crucial, grounded foundation for my analysis of the intersections between these contexts and the manuscript's non-specifically-historical contents: its romances.

4. *Middle English Romance*

The romance genre inhabits a number of nexuses: it is in the place where escapism meets political awareness, where fantasy meets utility, where a whole host of medieval genres—hagiography, instruction, folk tale, epic, lyric, chronicle, fabliaux, chanson de geste—intersect,

and, perhaps most crucially, romance's very nature is itself tightly bound up with both truth and fictionality. Largely because of such elastic, protean qualities, this genre is notoriously difficult to define.¹³⁴ Even so, understanding the generic expectations that informed the romances I intend to examine constitutes a crucial strand of my methodology.

First of all, while I will address the specific contemporary resonances of particular romances in the chapters to come, I cannot overstate just how open to historicist readings the genre tends to be. Although practically all medieval romance has some interest in depicting, lauding, questioning, or denouncing aspects of the culture and society that surround its creation, the insular romances—works created in England, in either Anglo-Norman or English—were particularly invested in incorporating history (specifically English or Breton history) and/or contemporary politics into its fabric. Susan Crane, in her seminal *Insular Romance*, points to this investment as a core feature of the genre as it evolved in England: “the insular works share poetic concerns and techniques that respond forcefully to issues of their time and place.”¹³⁵ In Crane's estimation, it is the English barony whose “issues” were most consistently addressed, since they were the class that tended to patronize romance most heavily, but she also points out that the process of translating French and Anglo-Norman romances into Middle English, a process that picked up steam throughout the fourteenth century, worked to broaden the range of social ranks to whom romance audiences could belong.¹³⁶ This puts the Auchinleck patron's position into perspective: he was partaking in a genre with a long and distinctly insular history,

¹³⁴ For an illuminating range of attempts to define romance, see Saunders, *Cultural Encounters*, 1; Liu, “Prototype Genre,” 347; Crane, *Gender and Romance*, 4; Field, “Romance in England,” 161; Finlayson, “Definitions,” 55; Cooper, “Romance as Prophecy,” 177-178; and Saunders, “Desire, Will and Intention,” 31.

¹³⁵ Crane, *Insular Romance*, 1.

¹³⁶ Crane, *Insular Romance*, 23. Moreover, “the English barony itself was revising its already modest sense of separateness in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries,” becoming less exclusive and distinct a class as time wore on.

one that left plenty of room, especially in Middle English, for an audience of non-noble rank to both consume and produce texts.

This broader Middle English appeal also broadened the range of contemporary issues that romance could address. John Simons, in his discussion of the fourteenth-century northern romance *Octavian*, which has a patently non-noble merchantman as one of its main characters and tackles issues of class very directly, recommends that “[i]f we look at the fourteenth century with the general political crisis in mind... numerous romances can be opened up to political readings and... can very satisfactorily be understood through comprehension of the political consciousness and ideological wariness of its audience.”¹³⁷ Keeping fourteenth century crises in mind and examining the Auchinleck romances for traces of the “ideological wariness” that these crises produced is, of course, exactly what I propose to do in my dissertation—and it is a project very much in the current vein of Middle English literary studies. While, in decades past, the romance genre—and particularly Middle English romance—struggled against a reputation as merely “popular”, as “lacking in the kind of artistic unity and coherence that modern criticism tends to look for in evaluating poetry”,¹³⁸ it is now a truth (nearly) universally acknowledged that Middle English romance is a genre replete with self-consciousness, structural sophistication, rhetorical artistry, and contemporary resonance.¹³⁹

Given the burgeoning crisis of truth that I have described as informing both this era’s politics and this particular manuscript, the matter of these romances’ intersections with reality becomes even more fraught than usual. To be sure, any argument over whether romance can be

¹³⁷ Simons, “Northern *Octavian*,” 111. *Octavian* is, unfortunately, not in the Auchinleck manuscript, and so evades my own close analysis at this time.

¹³⁸ Mehl, *The Middle English Romances*, 23. See also Pearsall, “The Development of Middle English Romance” and Finlayson, “Definitions of Middle English Romance.”

¹³⁹ See, inter alia, Saunders, *Cultural Encounters*, 1-2; Field, “Romance as History,” 163; Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England*, 52-53; Ashe, “The Hero and his Realm,” 135; Hardman, “Popular Romances and Young Readers,” 150-151; and Rikhardsdottir, *Medieval Translations*, 5, 77.

definitively classified as mimetic or non-mimetic is doomed, if not to failure, then at least to irrelevance, since romances themselves subsume that binary, representing “real and complex problems of contemporary feudal society, which they invite their public to identify and tackle with the same inventive experimentation with which romance itself represents and transforms them through its fictional license.”¹⁴⁰ Whether romance is rooted in historical realities and reaches into fantasy for a safe space to explore those realities, or instead is rooted in fantasy and reaches into its historical context to bring relevance to that escapism, or some combination thereof that changes subtly with every text, the mingling of reality and fantasy—or, to put it another way, of “truth” and “fiction”—animates romance at a fundamental level.

As such, it comes as no surprise that romance not only deals with topics of historical, social, cultural, and political interest, but also serves as a testing ground for issues of human truth in a number of different ways. Romance often acts as “a site of discrepancies between a truth and a hidden subtext,” staging direct confrontations between strict accuracy and underlying, hidden truth.¹⁴¹ Perhaps two of the most famous such confrontations are seen in the stories of Guenevere and Isolde, who both avoid punishment for adultery by relying on technicalities in swearing to their innocence of a crime they have actually committed. Such ambiguous oaths—Isolde’s will be discussed in Chapter 4; another ambiguous oath, made by a hero in the romance *Amis and Amiloun*, will be discussed in Chapter 3—deliberately exploit the gap between honesty and accuracy inherent in the medieval definition of truth, and the characters swearing them are deliberately undermining royal justice in an attempt to hide, essentially, their own treason. These adulterers are, however, our protagonists, and the not-quite-lies that they tell are essential to keeping the story moving forward. But the ambiguous position into which these subversions of

¹⁴⁰ Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, 210-211.

¹⁴¹ Furrow, *Expectations of Romance*, 203.

truth place the romance characters forces the audience to confront the uncomfortable cracks in one of the most socially cohesive virtues of their society. At each end of the fourteenth century, writers of romance—whether acting as translators, adaptors, or authors in some sense of the word—used this genre’s unique relationship with truth to explore their own contexts’ fraught relationship with truth.

Romance not only regularly and complexly took truth as its subject: the genre itself was the site of competing positions surrounding its own claim to truth. A part of this came in the scrutiny that some romance invited by claiming to depict “true” historical figures and their times, such as Richard the Lionheart, King Arthur, and Charlemagne. But even those romances that did not venture into such territory still received criticism for doing “As þe lyer doþ” by making “speche queyntlyche þat hit may ben delysious to mannes heryng for þat hit scholde be þe better listened.”¹⁴² Romance’s very literariness, its embracing of “queynt” and entertaining language, opened it up to accusations of deception, but there were also those who, while they acknowledged romance’s fictiveness, nevertheless defended the genre’s status as “true”—specifically as morally useful.¹⁴³ Because the medieval definition of truth was, at least originally, based on *morality* more than on *accuracy*, the moral value of romance was inexorably tied to its truth value, and this value was very much up for debate.¹⁴⁴ This debate would, of course, become all the more complex as the definition of truth itself began to shift from the moral to the accurate.

¹⁴² *The Middle English “Mirror”*: An Edition Based on Bodleian Library, MS Holkham Misc. 40, ed. Kathleen Marie Blumreich (Tempe, AZ, 2002), pp. 1-2; quoted in Furrow, *Expectations of Romance*, 29.

¹⁴³ “There is a deep split on ethical lines, between those like William of Nassington and Denis Piramus, on the one hand, who warn against the genre’s ability to distract the reader with lies and frivolity from the pursuit of the true and the purely good, and those like Caxton on the other, who argue that a romance should have an ethical impact on its readers and allow them to choose to pursue the good and avoid the evil. But both sides of this rift would be in agreement that the genre’s moral effect on its readership was the criterion by which it should be evaluated. There are fewer voices struggling to articulate other values for romance” (Furrow, *Expectations of Romance*, 41).

¹⁴⁴ For a useful overview of negative medieval reactions to romance, see Furrow, *Expectations of Romance*, 25-31; for positive medieval reactions, see 22-25.

For modern scholars, however, the ambiguities of truth with which romance plays are a source of fascination and inquiry rather than moral discomfort. Two works in particular, Mellissa Furrow's *Expectations of Romance: The Reception of a Genre in Medieval England* and Matilda Bruckner's *Shaping Romance: Interpretation, Truth, and Closure in Twelfth Century French Fictions*, undertake similar investigations to the one I attempt here, and have been invaluable resources. While Bruckner's focus is largely on earlier continental romance, her perspective on the ways in which romance can grapple with issues of truth translates well across the Channel and the centuries. For instance, she characterizes Chretien de Troye's *Chevalier de la Charrette* as not "a statement containing truth, but as a movement toward truth(s), as an exploration of the problems that movement entails," and infers from this an awareness on Chretien's part that "we cannot express a given truth without the detours of fiction that are part of the way we perceive it."¹⁴⁵ The moves that the Auchinleck romances make "towards truth(s)" are perhaps more dominated by the problems encountered within that movement. The stakes for using "the detours of fiction" to get around those problems and rediscover, or re-envision, or even just properly lament damaged truth were naturally different than those of the courtly, French, twelfth-century named poet with named patrons. Auchinleck's stakes were perhaps more immediate, given the London context for both crises and manuscript; perhaps more middle-class, given the likely non-aristocracy of the patron; certainly more invested in the ramifications that that damaged truth had upon England, given the language used. Bruckner's methodology is nevertheless a flexible and useful one for my own project, rooted as it is in a solid understanding of the basic intersections between two of my strands of inquiry, truth and genre: "In romance we inhabit a place of multiple truths seen through multiple points of view...truth and lies, appearance and reality,

¹⁴⁵ Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, 108.

inside and outside, may be opposed at times, but more significantly, they are often intertwined in ways that resist polarization.¹⁴⁶ It is this intertwining, this status of romance as the crossroads of apparent oppositions, which gives the genre its unique suitability for the project of probing troubled truth. Put simply, “[r]omance lies in order to tell and even discover truths that human history creates.”¹⁴⁷

Furrow does similar work, and her area of investigation is closer to my own in both language, time, and locale. She is, as far as I can tell, the first scholar to directly apply Green’s analysis of medieval truth to fourteenth-century insular romance, and as such she offers both an invaluable resource and a potential model. “Making Free with the Truth,” the fifth chapter of her book *Expectations of Romance*, surveys multiple different ways that romance can play with the concept of truth, and she is deeply interested in how contemporary audiences would have responded to such play. She neatly parses a crucial distinction: that more medieval readers “would have agreed to the broad proposition that there was truth to be found in romances than would have agreed to the narrow proposition that romances represented factual reality”, while at the same time acknowledging that “[m]edieval users of the concept *truth* are not of course parceling it out mentally into discrete senses and sub-senses of the term as they use it. For them it is an integral whole, of which parts can be fore-grounded as wanted.”¹⁴⁸ As such, a medieval audience, especially one living through a developing crisis of truth, would likely be highly attuned to the ways in which their literature was engaging with that crisis, even if they were not always consciously or deliberately aware of that engagement.

¹⁴⁶ Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, 107.

¹⁴⁷ Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, 224.

¹⁴⁸ Furrow, *Expectations of Romance*, 178-179; 229, italics original. She explicitly points her readers towards Richard Firth Green’s *Crisis of Truth*, when she explains that “fact was a late-arriving and initially somewhat peripheral aspect of truth” in the Middle Ages (178).

While the chapters of my own dissertation divide troubled truth into different categories—treason, sworn brotherhood, adultery and deception—I intend to keep the “integral whole” which Furrow discusses in view throughout my investigation. At the same time, by narrowing my own focus to Auchinleck’s romances, and by keeping the manuscript context in view along with the generic and historical webs, I hope to perform a more grounded intertextual reading that allows for both a more sustained and specific perspective on the capacity of these romances to interrogate human truth than has been performed to date. Ultimately, of course, it is impossible to keep every layer of meaning, every strand of inquiry in equal view all at once. That being said, my intention in the following chapters is not to lose the trees for the forest, nor vice-versa. The romances themselves are compelling enough to sustain a depth of analysis of which, until recent years, they have received rather little. It is the aim of this dissertation not merely to add to the growing volume of scholarship that takes these texts seriously and on their own terms, but also to illuminate the range of insights available from a vantage point that keeps the connections between text, manuscript, and political and ideological context as much in view as possible. The multiple discourses at work within each romance I examine are always already tangled up in one another, the four strands that I have attempted to define separately in this first chapter are, in fact, not only impossible to separate, but impossible to accurately or usefully discuss without a keen awareness of the ways in which they intersect and affect one another. While I come to several discrete and specific conclusions in the following chapters, my overarching goal is to appreciate the multiple nexuses that inform each romance, and that facilitate their multifaceted engagement with the circumstances of their own creation.

Chapter Two
“Thow schelt ben hanged and to-drawe”:
The Discourse of Treason in *Bevis of Hampton*

Near the middle of the Auchinleck manuscript, we find the earliest extant Middle English version of *Bevis of Hampton*, a long, episodic romance adapted from the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman *Boeve de Hamtoun*.¹⁴⁹ The plot of *Bevis* ranges in time across the entire lifespan of its titular hero, in geography across England, Europe, and the Middle East, and in action across battles and wooings, separations and reunions, exiles and returns, and every other conceivable type of adventure. There are three episodes, however, that stand at the beginning, center, and end of *Bevis*, each taking place in England (the only episodes that do) and each anchoring the far-ranging plot in familiar soil. Each of these episodes centers on the act, avoidance, or accusation of treason. The entire plot of *Bevis* is catalyzed by the cunning treason of Bevis’s mother, which results in the hero’s exile. By contrast, an almost paranoid *avoidance* of any mention of treason permeates the second England-based episode, wherein Bevis returns to Southampton to reclaim his patrimony. And finally, the climactic battle of the romance—which first appears in this version—is incited by the English king’s evil Steward, who provokes a riot in London by publicly accusing Bevis of treason.

The discourse of treason¹⁵⁰ that permeates the England-based episodes of *Bevis of Hampton* is inextricably bound up with the changes to that very discourse that had permeated the decades leading up to Auchinleck’s creation. The years between Edward II’s accession in 1307 and his son’s successful seizure of power in 1330 saw the spectacular careers and unprecedented deaths of multiple powerful noblemen—even many earls, the highest aristocratic rank at the

¹⁴⁹ Weiss, *Boeve*, 3.

¹⁵⁰ I have chosen this phrase for its combination of succinctness and openness. While I will explain it more fully below, in general I intend to use it to indicate not just the *act* of treason, but accusations and invocations of it, attitudes (moral, legal, political, etc.) towards it, and its results, multivalent though they may be.

time—on charges of treason, not to mention the ground-breaking deposition of the king himself. This period was marked “by judicial execution, and by forfeiture of lands¹⁵¹ on a scale unknown, perhaps, since the Conquest.”¹⁵² Behavior that had previously been regarded as legitimate resistance or as a lower, more generalized form of treachery began to be treated as treason proper, and to be punished by death. In addition, the question of who could be both called a traitor and punished as such—not to mention the question of who had the authority and power to enforce such punishments—combined with these fluctuating definitions to form a highly charged discourse of treason that saturated this period and, to a significant extent, shaped these conflicts. The England-based episodes of *Bevis* respond to, evade, and fail (or possibly refuse) to definitely resolve this discourse of treason. Ultimately, the cost of this discourse undercuts the seemingly simple, happy ending of the romance, leaving England’s future as uncertain in *Bevis* as it must have seemed in reality, and thus resisting closure for the hero’s home country even as it gives that closure to Bevis himself.

1. *Lese-Majesté, Proditio, and Rebellion*

In many ways, the evolving discourse of treason dominated English high politics during Edward II’s reign. While this discourse was influenced by the legal and moral definitions of treason that had developed over the preceding centuries,¹⁵³ the language of treason in this era

¹⁵¹ Forfeiture of lands was the traditional punishment for treason—see footnotes 17, 69, and 83.

¹⁵² Tuck, *Crown and Nobility*, 67.

¹⁵³ One of the early codes of English law, *Britton*, written in French in the thirteenth century, “had said that ‘treason consists of any mischief which a person knowingly does, or procures to be done, to anyone to whom he pretends to be a friend,’ (bk. 1, ch. 9.2; 1:40).” (Green, *Crisis of Truth* 214). *Fleta*, a contemporary of *Britton*, is more specific: “Treason, according to *Fleta*, is any act against the king: such as plotting his death or his abdication, or to betray him and his army” (Westerhof, *Death and the Noble Body*, 106). Stephen D. White, one of the leading scholars of medieval treason, describes a definition of treason more moral than legal: “treason was understood to be a dishonorable, underhanded, and devious way of causing or simply plotting harm of various kinds...It was bitter, cruel, dirty, shameful, ugly, and vile.” (White, “Alternative Constructions,” para 34).

was less concerned with exact theoretical definitions and more concerned with where the line fell between generalized “treachery” and official, actionable “treason.”¹⁵⁴ J.G. Bellamy, in the still-foundational study of medieval treason, *The Law of Treason in England in the Later Middle Ages*, describes these two types of treason by drawing upon the distinction that existed, in Latin, between the two commonly used terms for this kind of behavior: *seditio* or *proditio* on the one hand and *laesa maiestatis* or *lese-majesté* on the other.¹⁵⁵ Both sets of terms described treacherous behavior, but the stronger of the two, traditionally, was *lese-majesté*, which represented an unmistakable offence “against the office and powers of the king” and was treated with a good deal more harshness.¹⁵⁶ *Proditio*, on the other hand, could cover a wider range of lesser offenses, and carried relatively gentler penalties.¹⁵⁷ Traditionally, the punishment for even the more severe form of treason was generally limited to forfeiture of goods rather than forfeiture of one’s life—particularly in the case of high noblemen. By the time Auchinleck came to be compiled, however, even learned writers and thinkers, such as the anonymous chronicler of the *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, were struggling to come to terms with the fact that behavior previously understood as *proditio* was being treated and prosecuted as *lese-majesté*.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ In Middle English this line, at least linguistically, was not as marked as it was in Latin. The given definitions for each word in the Middle English Dictionary tend to contain each other.

¹⁵⁵ “The Germanic element was founded on the idea of betrayal or breach of trust [*treubruch*] by a man against his lord, while the Roman stemmed from the notion of *maiestas*, insult to those with public authority. *Seditio* is the word often associated in medieval writings with the Germanic concept, *laesa maiestatis* with the Roman” (Bellamy, *The Law of Treason*, 1).

¹⁵⁶ Specifically, the “greater emphasis on the crime of *lèse majesté* may explain the emergence in the 1230s and 1240s of symbolic multiple punishments beyond drawing and hanging for those convicted of treason, a reflection of the growing distinction between high and petty treason” (Strickland, “The Baron’s War,” 168), and “[l]ater legal treatises, such as *Glanvill* and *Bracton* (c. 1180-1220)” agreed that the punishment for this crime “should be death or mutilation” (Westerhof, *Death and the Noble Body*, 105). See also page 7, esp. footnote 28.

¹⁵⁷ Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, iv. For this particular fourteenth century chronicler, “*Seditio* was used rarely, and for our author fell short of treason” (Childs, “Resistance and Treason,” 186).

¹⁵⁸ This chronicle has been described as “probably the most satisfactory contemporary account of Edward II’s reign” (Tuck, 35) and, moreover, is particularly interested in questions of “resistance and treason. The great increase in political violence and executions for treason caused comment then and now” (Childs, “Resistance and Treason,” 179-180).

Not only was *proditio* blurring into *lese-majesté*, but so was any sort of resistance to or rebellion against the king. During most of the early middle ages, it was understood that

the subject owed his ruler fealty rather than obedience. Fealty was reciprocal and was owed only as long as the other party kept faith... Before the thirteenth century many a ruler recognized a subject had the right to disobey him: tacitly this understanding was included in every act of homage.¹⁵⁹

This tolerance on the part of kings for resistance, however grudging or inconsistent it may have been, began to change dramatically in the reign of Edward II's father, King Edward I (1272-1307). This period saw several unprecedented executions of high-born opponents as traitors, such as Prince David of Wales in 1283¹⁶⁰ and William Wallace in 1305.¹⁶¹ In many ways, Edward I began the process whereby rebellion or resistance of any sort began to be called and treated like treason.¹⁶² Later, during the reign of Edward I's son, this expanded discourse of treason was able to "'jump the species barrier' from Welsh or Scottish enemies to leading members of the English nobility."¹⁶³ The lines between *proditio*, rebellion, and *lese majesté* became increasingly uncertain during this period, and actions that could be described by any of these terms could potentially be punished by death. This penalty had long been attached to *lese majesté* by English legal writers such as Bracton, but it had not been carried out against an earl in England since shortly after the Norman Conquest.¹⁶⁴ Even the already-harsh *lese majesté*, then, was evolving and expanding, not only in its absorption of the two lesser crimes, but also in the

¹⁵⁹ Bellamy, *The Law of Treason*, 10. For example, in *History of William Marshal*, "making war against the king was not necessarily considered to be intrinsically shameful or wrongful and, as a result, there was no overwhelming presumption that a noble who engaged in it was, by definition, a traitor" (White, "Alternative Constructions," para 38).

¹⁶⁰ Gillingham, "Enforcing Old Law," 191. It was the manner of David's death that stood out, the drawing, hanging, and evisceration that would come to characterize treason's penalty (Bellamy, *The Law of Treason*, 26).

¹⁶¹ Westerhof, 101. See also Strickland, "Law of Treason?," 63 and Bellamy, *The Law of Treason*, 37-38.

¹⁶² It is an ongoing topic of debate among medieval historians whether the reign of Edward I was in fact the definitive turning point in the discourse of treason, or whether we should look to earlier developments. See Valente, *Theory and Practice*, 33; Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 231-232; and White, "The Ambiguity of Treason," 90-91.

¹⁶³ Philips, "Violence and Politics," 88.

¹⁶⁴ Bellamy, *The Law of Treason*, 20.

actualization of its theoretical punishment, even against the previously-immune highest ranking men of the land.¹⁶⁵

2. *Favorite Traitors*

The destabilization of the discourse of treason in the fourteenth century began in earnest with the death of Piers Gaveston, the “sworn brother” of Edward II, in 1312.¹⁶⁶ The aftermath of this event would bring into dangerous conflict several different perspectives concerning what kind of actions counted as treason and who could be prosecuted for those actions—as well as the different sources of power, whether royal or baronial, used to enforce those perspectives. As established, Gaveston was hated by the majority of the English baronage, because, according to the *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, “he alone found favour in the king's eyes and lorded it over them like a second king.”¹⁶⁷ Edward’s exclusive partiality towards Gaveston eventually resulted in his favorite’s capture and murder at the hands of a group of barons led by Thomas of Lancaster, the king’s first cousin and the most powerful nobleman in England. The *Vita* portrays these barons as deciding that Gaveston “should not be hanged as a thief nor drawn as a traitor¹⁶⁸ [*nee ut fur suspenderetur nee ut proditor protraheretur*], but should suffer capital punishment as a nobleman [*nobilis*].”¹⁶⁹ This decision is particularly significant, given the heated disagreement that arose when the barons eventually reconciled with their king and came to receive Edward II’s pardon. The issue of contention was whether Gaveston was officially to be recognized as *proditor* or not. Despite their unwillingness to give him a traitor’s death, the barons were

¹⁶⁵ Westerhof, *Death and the Noble Body*, 115.

¹⁶⁶ For further discussion concerning the nature of this relationship, see Chapter 3.

¹⁶⁷ Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 5.

¹⁶⁸ Being “drawn” to the place of execution was traditionally the prelude to the ignoble death of hanging—together, these punishments were “the hall-mark of treason” (Bellamy, *The Law of Treason*, 26).

¹⁶⁹ Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 47; Latin 46. He was subsequently beheaded.

insistent that he should be given a traitor's name. By contrast, the king declared that "I pardon the earls for the death of Piers, but I will never call him traitor [*set proditorem nequaquam appello*]." ¹⁷⁰ The barons refused to accept this perspective, pointing out that "if the king proposes to reacquire the earldom of Cornwall under any pretext, then it is necessary that Piers should be said to have died as a traitor [*ut Petrus tanquam proditor obiisse dicatur*]" and further insisting that "unless Piers is held to be a traitor [*nisi proditor Petrus habeatur*], the Ordinances are much diminished." ¹⁷¹ The Ordinances had sent Gaveston into exile a few short months earlier, from which he had returned only to meet his death, and Lancaster was the most constant and vocal champion of this set of reforms which was already proving to be a central site of conflict between Edward and his barons. ¹⁷² The king, however, remained intractable, reminding his opponents:

We pardoned [*remissum*] Piers of every crime, therefore I cannot regard him as a traitor [*ergo proditorem eum reputare non possum*]. . . let the barons seek whatever they think may justly be sought; I will comply with their judgement in all things, but I will in no wise charge Piers with treason [*set Petro prodicionem nullatenus imputabo*]. ¹⁷³

The fact that such an issue—which one might expect to have been made moot by the death of the person concerned—could matter so much to the most powerful men in the land illustrates the stakes inherent in the discourse of treason and in its proper application and understanding, not just in terms of punishment, but in terms of perception. Piers must be *said* to have died a traitor's death (even though his executioners themselves declined to give him one), he must be *held* to be the traitor that the Ordinances made him out to be (or the authority of that document is made

¹⁷⁰ Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 65; Latin 64.

¹⁷¹ Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 65; Latin 64, my emphasis.

¹⁷² The Ordinances were set of reforms drawn up by Edward II's baronial opposition, championed most strongly by Thomas of Lancaster, and intended to ensure that the king observed his duties properly and listened to appropriate advice. See my previous chapter for more information.

¹⁷³ Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 65; Latin 64.

suspect), and yet the king refuses to either *regard* his deceased beloved in these terms or to officially *charge* him with them. The chronicler's decision to portray this tense and decisive historical moment as being dominated by an argument over the very *language* of treason speaks to the power and danger that the discourse of treason had come to possess in English politics.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, the sticking point here is not over the Ordainers' actions—Edward expresses himself willing to forgive those—but over their choice of terminology. Although this conflict is eventually resolved (in the king's favor), the chronicler is at pains to make it clear how seriously the discourse of treason must be taken, even when divorced from overtly treasonous actions.

The chronicler of the *Via* even enters into the discourse himself when he exhibits the growing interchangeability of its terms by applying “*lese-majesté*” to Piers while expounding upon the lesson to be learned from his downfall: “Let English courtiers henceforth beware lest, trusting in the royal favour, they look down upon the barons... Therefore those who belittle the barons without doubt despise the king and show themselves guilty of treason [*lese magestatis*].”¹⁷⁵ For a writer who only uses this term on four occasions,¹⁷⁶ it is incredibly significant that one of those occasions should show that even the more restrictive “*lese-majesté*” could be applied to actions undertaken against people besides the king. In this case, respect for the barony and respect for the king seem to have been elided, the former somehow partaking of the dignity of the latter, suggesting that it would be impossible to insult one of them without insulting both. Piers' own example, of course, gives the lie to this: while he did clearly “belittle” and “despise” the barons, he never behaved this way towards the king, his sworn brother. The chronicler seems here to be trying to come up with a reason why Piers' behavior should have

¹⁷⁴ Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, lii.

¹⁷⁵ Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 49; Latin 48.

¹⁷⁶ Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, lv.

been treated as *lese magestatis*, and his admonition that English courtiers should “henceforth” beware of incurring Piers’ fate indicates that he sees this as a new development with potentially dangerous consequences for the future. The discourse of treason, expressed in a language that was rapidly becoming unstable, was expanding its scope, and would go on to leave fewer and fewer men immune to the penalties it could bring.

In a particularly dangerous turn, the discourse of treason soon proved to be a reciprocating trap for those who entered into it, as nobles who successfully accused or persecuted others for treason tended to face their own demise for treason in the end. In using the accusation of treason as justification for taking Gaveston’s life, Thomas of Lancaster unwittingly set the precedent that would go on to claim his own life in an even more spectacular downfall. It would take Edward ten years to get revenge against Lancaster for Gaveston’s death, by which time he had a new favorite in the person of Hugh Despenser the Younger, Earl of Gloucester, whose father, Hugh Despenser the Elder, was also a powerful figure at court.¹⁷⁷ Lancaster’s crime was levying war against the king; he was the first earl to be officially put to death for the treason of rebellion, and his execution on 22 March 1322 was even more shocking and unprecedented than Gaveston’s had been.¹⁷⁸ Where Gaveston had been seen by many as an upstart with only the king’s love to support him, Lancaster was an immense power in his own right, and even related to the royal family.¹⁷⁹ His death proved to be the most dramatic turning point in the history of treason yet, and would have devastating long-term consequences.

One of the earls responsible for judging and condemning Lancaster was Edward II’s half-brother, Edmund of Woodstock, the Earl of Kent.¹⁸⁰ Later, after joining Isabella and Mortimer

¹⁷⁷ See Nigel Saul’s “The Despensers and the Downfall of Edward II.”

¹⁷⁸ Tuck, *Crown and Nobility*, 67; Bellamy, *The Law of Treason*, 51.

¹⁷⁹ See Tuck, *Crown and Nobility*, 67 and Valente, *Theory and Practice*, 39.

¹⁸⁰ Haines, *King Edward II*, 141.

and participating in their victory over his brother, Kent played a leading role in the judgment of the Despensers for treason. Despite having managed to land on the winning side twice, however, Kent eventually found himself on the opposite end of the weaponized discourse of treason he had wielded to such effect against others.¹⁸¹ A few months after the announcement of Edward II's death, Kent made the grave mistake of claiming that his brother still lived, and he even attempted to restore him to the throne.¹⁸² Mortimer, by then having elevated himself to the first Earl of March, called this treason and treated it as such. Kent's execution, in March 1330, was yet another unprecedented stage in the ever-more-vicious discourse of treason: somehow, England had become a place where the son of a king could be tried and executed for treason on the authority of the son of a baron.¹⁸³ This proved the last straw for Edward III.¹⁸⁴ The young king seized control of his throne in October 1330 and proceeded to do to Mortimer what Mortimer had done to the Despensers, to Kent, and, in all probability, to his father as well.¹⁸⁵ The Earl of March was publicly executed in London as a traitor and a regicide. Few Londoners likely mourned the death of the man they had hailed as a hero and liberator a few short years earlier when he rode into the welcoming city at the head of Isabella's army.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸¹ Weir, *Isabella, She-Wolf of France*, 235.

¹⁸² Warner, "The Adherents of Edmund of Woodstock," 779. His actions were treasonous in that Edmund clearly stated his intention of restoring his brother to the throne, thus overthrowing his reigning nephew, Edward III (Haines, "Sumptuous Apparel," 889; Doherty, *Isabella and the Strange Death of Edward II*, 228). Edmund's case has long puzzled historians (see for instance Warner, 780), but there has recently been a spate of arguments for Edward II's survival beyond his announced death date (see for instance Ian Mortimer's *The Greatest Traitor*), which it is not within my purview to explore here.

¹⁸³ Warner, "The Adherents of Edmund of Woodstock," 804-805. Edward III, in whose name the execution was officially carried out, "was all for pardoning his uncle, but...in the end, it was Mortimer who bullied Edward into submission" (Weir, *Isabella, She-Wolf of France*, 334).

¹⁸⁴ Both Philips, *Edward II*, 571 and Doherty, *Isabella and the Strange Death of Edward II*, 229 use this exact phrase, "the last straw."

¹⁸⁵ When Mortimer faced his own treason trial, "he was held directly responsible for the murder of Edward II, the death of Edmund of Kent and of creating discord between Edward II and Queen Isabella" (Doherty, *Isabella and the Strange Death of Edward II*, 162). Isabella "was sentenced to lose all her lands, but was given an allowance of £3,000 a year" (Tuck, *Crown and Nobility*, 85).

¹⁸⁶ A man who, moreover, several prominent Londoners had helped to escape from the Tower of London in 1323, enabling his later achievements. Nightingale, *Medieval Mercantile Community*, p. 153.

In 1352—some time after Auchinleck would have been finished—Edward III attempted to codify and contain the discourse of treason, which had grown out of all control during his father’s reign, and for a time, this worked.¹⁸⁷ But the crises of the early fourteenth century had managed to loose the “genie of political violence” from its bottle, and the 1352 Statute of Treason would not be able to contain it for long, as it returned “to haunt the king and the magnates once again in the reign of Richard II and with increasing frequency in the future.”¹⁸⁸

3. “*She Answerde with Tresoun*”

Compiled well before Edward III’s attempt to re-bottle this particular genie, Auchinleck and its constituent texts were created in a world still reeling from both the overt political breakdown and the subtler discursive changes that helped to bring about that breakdown. In *Bevis of Hampton* in particular, the scars of this breakdown are fresh and unmistakable. While the bulk of the romance is taken up with seemingly straightforward adventures, adapted with relatively little change from the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman *Boeve de Hamptoun*, the discourse of treason surfaces at key points to unsettle the “ebullient narrative inventiveness and profusion” that characterizes the text as a whole.¹⁸⁹

Indeed, the entire plot of the romance, ebullience and all, is catalyzed by the treason of the unnamed Countess of Southhampton, Bevis’s mother. Before being married to Bevis’s father, Count Guy of Southhampton, she was the lover of the German Emperor Devon, and after several years of marriage, she conspires with the Emperor to remove her aged, unwanted husband. The

¹⁸⁷ See, inter alia, Hanrashan, “Seduction and Betrayal,” 230; Westerhof, *Death and the Noble Body*, 104; Muckerheide, “The English Law of Treason,” 49-50; and Bellamy, *The Law of Treason*, 100-101.

¹⁸⁸ Philips, “Violence and Politics,” 88. See also Valente, *Theory and Practice*, 36-37 and Gillingham, “Killing and Mutilating,” 130-131.

¹⁸⁹ Hanna, *London Literature*, 133.

Countess is determined to destroy Guy by means of “sum braide,” that is, trickery and deception, and she sets him up for an ambush by telling him that she is ill, and only the flesh of “a wilde bor” could cure her (69, 184). The narrator explicitly condemns her for this deception: when Guy asks his wife “Whar mai ich finde þat wilde swin?” we are told that she “answerde wiþ tresoun mest,” and she is censured again—“she answerde wiþ tresoun þan”—when she falsely thanks her husband for undertaking this task (188, 190, 196). In foreshadowing Guy’s impending death, the narrator hammers the point home once more: “Wiþ tresoun worþ he þar islawe” (208). However, this is not the kind of treason that would, traditionally, have been described as *lese-majesté*—certainly no king is involved here, and the fate of the kingdom is not explicitly at stake. That said, Guy is a high-ranking nobleman, and his betrayer is joined to him by oaths of loyalty, in this case marriage vows.¹⁹⁰ Moreover, a woman who plotted her lord and husband’s murder could even be burned to death, specifically for treason, and adultery was generally regarded as treacherous in all cases and treasonous in some.¹⁹¹ By calling the actions of Bevis’s mother “tresoun,” the text not only engages overtly with the discourse of treason, but entangles the hero’s origins and the story’s catalyst with that discourse.

The significance of this entangling becomes all the more apparent when this episode is read against its counterpart in the twelfth-century *Boeve de Haumtone*. In this earlier version of the story, for example, the hero’s mother is nowhere explicitly condemned for treason, nor is she intent on doing away with her husband specifically through trickery.¹⁹² While the audience is

¹⁹⁰ He is in fact, as we discover later, King Edgar’s marshal (3507), which implies a political dimension to this murder. However, Guy’s position as marshal is not raised here, and when it is raised later in the text, it is not connected to these actions. The poet, on this occasion, seems to be focusing more on the personal betrayal of a wife to her husband, and the treacherous nature of the conspirators’ behavior, than on the potential political ramifications.

¹⁹¹ A woman had even been executed by fire for treason against her husband within Edward II’s reign (Bellamy, 226). Queen Isabella, as related in Geoffrey le Baker’s chronicle, also expresses “a real fear that her husband, if he was one day restored to his former position, might condemn herself as a traitor to the fire or to perpetual bondage” (Preest, *The Chronicle of Geoffrey le Baker*, 30).

¹⁹² Weiss, *Boeve*, 26; 37-44.

clearly not meant to sympathize with this character in either romance, the narratorial judgement that her deception is accomplished with/as treason makes her guilt more concrete and specific in *Bevis* than it is in *Boeve*. Moreover, a wife plotting with her lover to have her husband killed might have, in some sense, required a denunciation of treason in the early fourteenth-century, thanks to Queen Isabella's disturbingly comparable behavior.¹⁹³ Looked at from this angle, we can detect some anxiety in the insistent repetition of the narrator's use of "tresoun" to denounce the Countess's actions—this word appears three times in the space of twenty lines, as if the writer feels the need to make his own condemnation of such behavior excessively clear.

While the Countess's own behavior is consistent between versions, then, the language used to describe that behavior in *Bevis* carries significant undertones that are absent from *Boeve*, undertones that subtly point towards the particular unease surrounding the discourse of treason in the early fourteenth century. I am certainly not arguing for a direct line of transmission between *Boeve* and *Bevis*, but the two different versions nevertheless offer two considerably different treatments of the discourse of treason, as will become even more apparent below.¹⁹⁴ While we cannot be sure which important changes are the work of the Auchinleck makers—whether *Bevis*'s own Scribe 5, the editorial Scribe 1, or even the patron—and which are being copied from an intermediate exemplar, by holding specific moments in *Bevis* up against their counterparts in *Boeve*, we can observe how the discourse of treason had changed and evolved in the decades between versions, and we can also speculate productively about the ways in which those changes might have been influenced by specific contemporary events.

¹⁹³ The influence of Isabella's political actions and adultery will be more thoroughly discussed in Chapter 4.

¹⁹⁴ The relationship between these two versions of the romance is complicated. Ivana Djordjević explains that none of "the various manuscripts of *Bevis*," including Auchinleck's, are "directly based on the Anglo-Norman text, yet most of them are close enough to be legitimately considered its translations, if only in the broader, medieval sense of term" (Djordjević, "Mapping Medieval Translation," 19). I take all translated Anglo-Norman material from Judith Weiss's *Boeve de Haumtone and Gui de Warewic: Two Anglo-Norman Romances*. Material in the original Anglo-Norman is from the 1899 German-published *Der Anglonormannische Boeve de Haumtone*, Albert Stimming, ed.

In *Bevis*, the engagement with the discourse of treason intensifies when Guy, undertaking the boar-hunt for his wife, finds instead the ambush that she has set for him and the German Emperor has sprung. The Emperor accosts his lover's husband with "A3ilt þe, treitour. Þow olde dote / Þow schelt ben hanged be þe þrote, / Þin heued þow schelt lese; / Þe sone schel anhanged be / And þe wif, þat is so fre, / To me lemman I chese" (217-222). Not only does the Emperor bluntly—and apparently ridiculously—declare his enemy a "treitour", but he threatens both him and his son with the ignoble death of hanging, part of the traditional punishment for treason. This is almost a parodic demonstration of the breadth of "crimes" that could be described with that single word—Guy has not even committed *proditio* or rebellion against the Emperor, since both are impossible given their lack of an oath-based relationship, but there is still no more lethal an accusation that the Emperor could deploy. Whereas the narrator's use of "tresoun" to describe the actions of the Countess was supported by her deceit, betrayal, and conspiracy, the Emperor's use of it here, as an accusation against a man who has done him no treason even under the fourteenth-century's extraordinarily broad definition of the term, exposes through its very absurdity how ambiguous and unstable the accusation of treason had become. And unfortunately, the narrative bears out how lethal that discourse can be even when deployed frivolously.

Instead of ignoring the accusation, Guy engages in the discourse of treason himself, throwing his enemy's words back at him: "Tretour... þow ert to bolde! / Wenestow, þez ich bo olde, / To ben afered? / Þat þow hauest no ri3t to me wif, / I schel þe kiþebe me lif" (235-239). This exchange of accusations, much like the conflict over whether to call Piers Gaveston *proditor*, offers two different perspectives on treason—that of Guy (and implicitly the narrator and audience as well) and that of the Emperor (and, presumably, the Countess). Similar language is used in each and reference is made in each to the central object of contention, Guy's wife. This

episode goes on to illustrate how the power to enforce one's perspective on treason, rather than the soundness or righteousness of that perspective, had become the crucial factor in the violent politics of this time. This contest of perspective is absent from *Boeve*, wherein Guy is the only one to call his enemy a traitor—which is naturally a much more supportable accusation than the Emperor's.¹⁹⁵ In its inclusion of the Emperor's inciting, absurd accusation, *Bevis* centers the conflict on the discourse of treason and implicitly connects the outcome of the battle to the successful defense of one's perspective on that discourse.

Moreover, by calling the Emperor “tretour”, verbalizing the indisputable fact that he has no “right” to Guy's wife, and promising that he shall “kithe” (show) the emperor this, Guy also attempts to cast this confrontation somewhat into the mold of a judicial ordeal by combat, which was a traditional (though not widely used) method of determining guilt in matters of treason.¹⁹⁶ Trial by combat was also the ideal chivalric way to deal with such accusations, and by implicitly conjuring the idea of such a trial, Guy seems to be attempting to impose a chivalric framework on the battle.¹⁹⁷ Unfortunately, the Emperor is not content to face his lover's husband in this fashion. Had he done so, Guy would have won, for we are told that “Pemperur wiþ he hadde slawe” if only “Nadde be sokour,” that is, if there had been no help at hand in the form of the Emperor's lackeys (242-243). Even when Guy is defeated through the interference of his opponent's followers, he still seems to cling to the idea that his opponent will react in a chivalric way and begs the Emperor for mercy, agreeing to the same sort of disinheritance that high-born traitors would traditionally receive: “Al þat ichaue I graunte þe, / Boute me wife!” (263-264). Throughout this entire episode, then, Guy seems to be clinging to an older perspective on the

¹⁹⁵ Weiss, *Boeve*, 28; 148-54.

¹⁹⁶ Vale, “Aristocratic Violence,” 165.

¹⁹⁷ Muckerheide, “The English Law of Treason,” 61.

discourse of treason, a perspective under which noble perpetrators of even *lese-majesté* tended to have their lives spared in exchange for forfeitures of land and revenues. The Emperor, unfortunately, is operating with a contemporary attitude of how to deal with high-born opponents who are perceived to be traitors by their enemies, and thus claims Guy's life. Perhaps it should not surprise us that the real traitor is the one who is willing to cheat to win, but the fact that it is the Emperor—the unchivalric, treacherous adulterer and invader—who succeeds in imposing his own perspective of treason sets an unsettling precedent for the rest of the romance and echoes the unsettling precedents that were being set in English politics during this time.

The Emperor's and Countess's perspective on treason is also successfully imposed on Bevis, who, even as a child, already has a very firm idea of who the real traitors are. He identifies his mother as such, deeming her worthy of at least part a traitor's death for her actions: "Vile houre, þe worst todrawe / And al totwigt" (302-303). Later, he attempts to bash his unwanted new father-in-law to death with a club and threatens him with the full penalty: "Pow schelt ben hanged & todrawe" (434). Unsuccessful, as his father was, in enforcing his righteous perspective on treason, Bevis's life is spared but his freedom and patrimony are forfeit—he is sold as a slave into "hethenesse" (500). This first episode of the romance thus embeds the discourse of treason into the origins of its hero and demonstrates the destructiveness of engaging in that discourse, even (perhaps especially) if one is in the right. Despite the care taken to identify the actions of Bevis's mother as "treason," the villains not only triumph because of their own treasonous behavior, but also because of their successful manipulation of the discourse of treason.

4. “A Queinte Gile”

In many ways, the second England-based episode seems to be trying to correct for the first England-based episode’s entanglement in the discourse of treason. Rather than adding clarifying statements about the treasonousness of its villains or centering crucial conflicts on the issue of whose definition of treason can be successfully imposed, this episode is oddly bereft of any hint of the discourse of treason. Indeed, differences from the comparable episode in *Boeve* seem designed to avoid the subject completely. Most tellingly, the hero’s own behavior has been carefully modified from that found in the Anglo-Norman romance, stripping away any hint of potential treasonousness in the man we are meant to be supporting. This, in turn, reveals new layers to the text’s anxiety concerning the discourse of treason, as the suppressions implemented here ultimately fail to keep that discourse at bay.

After several adventures and a good deal of maturation, Bevis prepares to return to Southhampton, revenge his father, and reclaim his patrimony. He reveals to his lady, the Saracen princess Josian, that he intends to use his mother’s own weapon of cunning against her: “Lemman...ich wile go / And avenge me of me fo, / 3if ich mi3te wiþ eni ginne/ Me kende eritage to winne” (2761-2764). The term “ginne”¹⁹⁸ signals that Bevis will be relying on intelligence, more than on brute force of arms, to achieve his goals. The operations of subtlety and cunning here will be particularly important, since there is, in this episode, a conspicuous erasure of much of the blunt and (in the context of the mid-fourteenth century) dangerously treasonous material that permeates the earlier version of the story. The Anglo-Norman *Boeve* exhibits none of *Bevis*’s anxiety about treason, operating under an earlier, very different

¹⁹⁸ Which occurs several times in this romance, along with a close synonym, “gile,” and a variation, “engine”—such terms were “frequently used in courtly literature to stand for intellectual rather than heroic abilities, such as wit, shrewdness, manipulation and deceit” (Taylor, *Chivalry and the Ideals of Knighthood*, 234-235).

discourse of treason, wherein resistance to the king (or to one's overlord), up to and including armed rebellion, was not automatically treated as treasonous. The Anglo-Norman *Boeve* not only openly accuses his enemies of treason, but he even goes so far as to brusquely rebuke his king. By contrast, the English *Bevis* works with subtlety throughout this second England-based episode, exhibiting a greater reliance on "ginne" and a greater attention to the words he uses (and does not use).

The set-up for the "ginne" whereby *Bevis* will regain his homeland has no antecedent in the Anglo-Norman version, and carefully sets the stage upon which the whole affair will be acted. *Bevis* begins by creating a kind of script for one of his men to take to the German Emperor, which includes his false name of "Gerard," his origin, force of men, and intentions. A messenger agrees to undertake this assignment, and "Gerard" and company are welcomed by the Emperor. In *Boeve*, the hero merely turns up, unannounced, and launches immediately into the deception of the German Emperor.¹⁹⁹ *Bevis*, on the other hand, having provided himself with such a solid foundation, carefully executes the linchpin of his "ginne"—an ambiguous but subtly suggestive oath, promising that if the Emperor provides "Gerard" with everything he needs, including armor, horses, supplies, and a hundred men, then "y schel swere þe an oþe / þat I schel 3eue swiche asaut/ On þat ilche Sabaaut,²⁰⁰ / þat wipinne a lite while / þow schelt here of a queinte gile" (2842-2846). By carefully using strictly literal wording that nevertheless leaves him free to act as he chooses, *Bevis* is here joining the ranks of romance heroes and heroines who have, in a tight spot, employed equivocal oaths to cast their ambiguous—sometimes dangerously treasonous—activities in a technically innocent light.²⁰¹ The phrase "queinte gile" is particularly

¹⁹⁹ Weiss, *Boeve*, 63; 2004-14.

²⁰⁰ An alternate spelling of "Saber," who is *Bevis*'s uncle and has been causing the Emperor a good deal of trouble. It is his elimination that the Emperor believes he is purchasing.

²⁰¹ See Hexter, *Equivocal Oaths and Ordeals in Medieval Literature*, as well as my next two chapters.

notable for its ambiguity, as both words carry overtones of cunning, craftiness, and deception.²⁰² The Emperor's failure to pick up on the danger inherent in such a phrase further detracts from any sympathy the audience might feel at his being tricked, and increases our willingness to accept Bevis's deceptive behavior. Although he is exploiting a gap between the Emperor's perception of reality and the "truth," Bevis intends to deliver on exactly what he promises, proving his own truth while at the same time keeping faith with his murdered father and with his inherited obligations to his patrimony.

By contrast, in the Anglo-Norman version, Boeve does not so much swear an oath as implicitly offer his word to the Emperor: "If you wish to pay me, I will go and seize and bind Sabaoth for you, and bring him safely to this castle."²⁰³ The Anglo-Norman casually breaks this almost-promise once he has reunited with Sabaoth, his uncle, and there is no obvious anxiety engendered by this behavior. In the Middle English romance, we can thus observe a level of anxiety when it comes to making promises, whether implicit or explicit, which was either not present or not pressing for the creators and audience of the Anglo-Norman romance. The use of the equivocal oath in *Bevis* is clearly meant to alleviate any blame that could attach to the hero for breaking his word, even to such a villain—there must be no hint of behavior that is reminiscent of any variety of treachery. As such, Bevis employs "ginne" in his use of the ambiguous oath, where his predecessor had, ironically enough, been free to deceive more straightforwardly.

Once Bevis has gotten what he wants from the Emperor, he meets up with Saber, and shortly thereafter he makes a grand (but sensibly distant) gesture of casting off his disguise as

²⁰² See <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED35506> for "queinte" and <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED18554> for "gile."

²⁰³ Weiss, *Boeve*, 63; 2015-41.

Gerard via messenger, which throws the Emperor into such a fit of rage that he accidentally kills his own son with the knife he had thrown at the messenger.²⁰⁴ Without explicitly intending to, Bevis has managed to bring about the destruction of the Emperor's heir, thus rendering any dynastic issues that this heir's existence might have raised forever moot. After losing to Bevis's forces in battle, the Emperor dies a gruesome death, but one that contains none of the traditional punishments for treason.²⁰⁵ Bevis's mother conveniently—and ostensibly accidentally—destroys herself from grief, again keeping the hero's hands clean.²⁰⁶

What's more, Bevis never accuses the Emperor of treason at any point in this episode—something that his father did, that he could have done with accuracy, and that, moreover, the Anglo-Norman Boeve is all-too-quick to do, by means of the messenger he sends to cast off his disguise: “Traitor...you'll be crushed! [*Traitur...tu seis confundu!*]...Through me Boeve sends word that you'll be hanged. Traitor, wicked thief, where is your valor now? [*traitor, fel laron, ou est ore ta vertu?*].”²⁰⁷ Given the double-edged, indiscriminate nature that the discourse of treason had gained by the time Auchinleck was compiled, it makes sense that the discourse is, in this occasion at least, held at a distance from the entire proceeding, and not just from the protagonist's actions. After all, as we have seen, once the accusation of treason comes into play, it becomes a weapon that anyone can pick up and use, and a weapon that, moreover, had the demonstrated tendency to lop off the head of its wielder every bit as effectively as it loped off the head of its target. Lancaster used the accusation of treason as a weapon against the despised

²⁰⁴ Presumably this person was Bevis's half-brother, although this disturbing possibility is glossed over.

²⁰⁵ “And þat his stifader wer ded, / Ase tit [at once] he let felle a led / Ful of pich and of bremston, / And hot led let fall þeron; / Whan hit alþer swiþer seþ, / Demperur þarin a dep, / Par a lay atenende” (3275-3281).

²⁰⁶ “His moder over þe castel lai, / Hire lord seþen in þe pich 3he sai; / So swiþe wo hire was for sore, / 3he fel and brak hire nekke þefore. / Ale glad he was of hire, / Of his damme, as of is stipsire” (3283-3286). Glad Bevis may be, but he also feels the need to ask her posthumous forgiveness while clarifying his own innocence in the next breath: “for3eue me þis gilt, / I ne 3af þe noþer dent ne pilt” (3465-3466).

²⁰⁷ Weiss, *Boeve*, 66; 2193-2223. Stimming, 80; 2211, 2218.

Gaveston, and to justify Gaveston's murder, only to see that weapon wielded by Edward II in turn to claim Lancaster's own life. Kent sat in judgment over Lancaster and the Despensers in their trials for treason, only to face such a trial himself. And Mortimer, prime instigator of the Despensers' deaths for treason as well as Kent's execution, was himself the greatest traitor in an age of great traitors, and died for it. In the first England-based episode of *Bevis*, Guy's own engagement in the discourse of treason—his reciprocal accusation of the Emperor—lead to a similarly tragic outcome. In this episode, however, the hero avoids lodging his own accusation of treason against the Emperor, which in turn helps him to avoid the kind of rebound action that tended to plague those who historically lodged such accusations, however justified.²⁰⁸ The anxiety surrounding the discourse of treason in this episode is thus discernable only in contrast with the previous version of the romance, but it is not less palpable for that. In avoiding careless engagement with the discourse of treason, seen not only in his father but in his literary precursor as well, the Middle English *Bevis* achieves a clean, safely laudable victory over his enemy.

5. "*Beves Scholde Ben Anhonge*"

This careful exorcism of potentially treasonous material stretches beyond *Bevis*'s reclamation of his homeland, saturating his entire second visit to England. Several sequences of events in *Boeve* include behavior that had come, by the end of Edward II's reign, to be seen and punished as treason—and those sequences are nowhere to be found in the Middle English version. The most striking example of this sort of elimination can be seen in *Bevis*'s dealings with the English king, including the hero's second exile from England.

²⁰⁸ It is even possible to see the Emperor's downfall as the result of this same kind of rebound action, finally catching up with him after he unjustly accused Guy of treason and subsequently killed him.

After Bevis has won the day against the German Emperor, been recognized by all the local lords, and married Josian, he goes to the English king, Edgar, as the final step in his reclamation of Southhampton. In the Middle English, Bevis proves himself a consummate courtier, according Edgar the respect a king deserves—“Beves a knes doun him set, / Þe king hendeliche a gret”—and graciously making his request—“Ich bidde²⁰⁹ before ʒour barnage, / Þat ʒe me graunte min eritage” (3315-3316, 3325-3326). Edgar agrees with equal courtesy, and even with un-sought favor: “Gii, is fader, was me marchal, / Also Bevis, is sone, schal” (3332-3333). There is no hint of discord between the king and this powerful baron who had just executed a major coup within his country.

By contrast, the Anglo-Norman Boeve behaves rudely, even aggressively, towards his king. When he attempts to have his rights to Southhampton recognized, the king raises the issue of a levy that needs to be paid. Sabaoth, Boeve’s uncle, urges his nephew to acquiesce, but Boeve tells him, in the king’s presence: “My lord, it was extraordinarily shameful [*Sire, ceo fu merveilluse pité*]: when Doun [the German Emperor] killed my father with his sword, the king then gave him my mother with my inheritance and allowed me to be exiled. This wrong he has done me must be redressed [*Ceo tort, ke me ad fet, deyt ester redressé*].”²¹⁰ Boeve explicitly lays some of the blame for his disinheritance at the king’s feet, revealing him as an active player in the perfidious transfer of power that led to his exile. The possibility of Edgar’s involvement in this matter gets no mention in *Bevis*, but in *Boeve*, this accusation speaks to the idea that, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries at least, the king operated in concert with his barons, exercising power over them only with their consent and cooperation. They had every right to resist—even

²⁰⁹ In contrast to modern usage, the Middle English “bidden (v.)” is best understood, according to the MED, as “To ask, beg, or plead for” (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED4381>).

²¹⁰ Weiss, *Boeve*, 70; 2402-2590. Stimming, 87; 2431, 2337.

up to the point of armed rebellion—if circumstances warranted it, and even though the forfeitures could be harsh if they lost such a contest, it was understood that their persons were safe from corporeal punishment or imprisonment.²¹¹ The reciprocal nature of this fealty, the idea that the king “owed” it to his subject to keep faith, is clearly implicit in Boeve’s assertion here that the king’s failure to keep faith with him will result in justified defiance.

This concept was by no means extinct by the fourteenth century, either—indeed, the English nobles attempted to use it against Edward II early in the conflict over Gaveston, when the “united barons” declared that

unless the king granted their requests they would not have him for king [*iam non ipsum pro rege haberent*], nor keep the fealty [*fidelitatem*] that they had sworn to him, especially since he himself was [not] keeping the oath which he had taken at his coronation; since in law and common sense there is this reservation, that with the breaker of faith faith may be broken [*cum in lege et naturali ratione caueatur, quod 'frangenti fidem fides frangatur eidem'*].²¹²

Edward’s refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy—or even the conventionality—of their position helped to push the discourse of treason further in a dangerous direction. If there was no longer room for non-treasonous rebellion in the legal course of politics, then all that was left was absolute subjugation to a tyrant, or indisputable treason. Thus, whereas once a magnate might have assumed an inherent right to advise, chastise, or even oppose his king in arms, Edward II had refused both advice and chastisement, and had regarded those who opposed him in arms as traitors, useful only as bloody examples of his power and authority, and Mortimer had behaved very similarly. Even though both men were dead by the time Auchinleck was created, Edward III

²¹¹ “Mulct, disseisin, banishment and imprisonment were the most common and politically expedient means by which Anglo-Norman rulers brought recalcitrant nobles to heel...the great merit of such mechanisms was their flexibility” (Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 240). Naturally, execution had no such flexibility. See also Valente, *Theory and Practice*, 12, 48; Bellamy, *The Law of Treason*, 9; Childs, “Resistance and Treason,” 183; and Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 230.

²¹² Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 19 and 21; Latin from 18 and 20; the quoted proverb is from Walther, *Proverbia*, ii. 182, no. 9915.

was then still a young and largely unknown quantity, who had, upon seizing power, proved his ruthlessness and his own attitude towards traitors in his destruction of Mortimer. For the makers and audience of Auchinleck, therefore, it would have probably been uncomfortable to observe their romance hero engaging in such behavior.

For the poet of *Boeve*, however, there would have likely been nothing particularly dangerous about portraying such a confrontation between a high-ranking baron and the king. In fact, the Anglo-Norman text implicitly endorses Boeve's perspective on this issue by having the king capitulate rather pathetically, as well as make an admission of guilt: "I don't want a penny from you. Keep your revenues, your fiefs, and your cities...I greatly loved Gui, who brought me up with kindness; I have poorly rewarded [*mal guerdon*] his son."²¹³ Boeve accepts the oblique apology: "My lord...since you repent [*repentez*], I forgive you here and before God [*jeo le vus pardoune iei e devant deus*]", to which the king responds, "Now that is well spoken."²¹⁴ No trace of this part of the conversation survives in the Auchinleck version.

If it was a relatively simple matter for the Middle English redactor to transform Boeve's confrontational attitude into Bevis's perfect courtesy and deference, however, the catalyst for the hero's second exile from England—and for the remainder of the romance—presented him with a much knottier problem. In both versions of the story, Arundel, Bevis's marvelous horse, wins a high-stakes race for his master, and attracts the eye of the king's son, who attempts to steal the horse and gets killed by Arundel for his pains. In both versions, the king is furious and initially seeks the hero's own head: "I will have him hanged [*Pendre le frai*], for he has greatly angered me [*car mult me ad irez*],"²¹⁵ threatens the Anglo-Norman Edgar; but the Middle English

²¹³ Weiss, *Boeve*, 70; 2404-2590. Stimming, 87; 2448.

²¹⁴ Weiss, *Boeve*, 70; 2404-2590. Stimming, 87; 2449, 2450, 2451.

²¹⁵ Weiss, *Boeve*, 73; 2404-2590. Stimming, 90, 2565.

Edgar's threat contains the full penalty for treason: "þe king swor for þat wronge / þat Beves scholde ben anhonge / & todrawe wiþ wilde fole" (3391-3393). This invocation of treason's traditional punishment not only demonstrates, once again, the ready availability of the accusation of treason as a weapon, but also signals to a contemporary audience how much danger Bevis is suddenly facing.²¹⁶ Even more worryingly, Bevis really is, from a certain point of view, responsible for the death of the king's son: an act easily construable as treason. Fortunately, Edgar is more receptive to his barons' advice than Edward II was: "þe barnage it nolde nouzt þole / & seide hii miȝte do him no wors / Boute lete hongen is hors" (3394-3396). Since Bevis would rather abjure the realm than allow Arundel to be hanged, he once again leaves England. What really saves Bevis, then, is Edgar's amenability to other perspectives on what could be punished as treason—and *who* could be punished. It was this sort of tempering of royal power with a respect for the power of the barons that had allowed the older, pre-Edwardian discourse of treason to operate with much lower stakes and much less inherent danger to noble bodies. Therefore, despite King Edgar's threat here and even his relative inactivity later in the romance, at this point his behavior can be read as an evocation of an earlier, more stable discourse than that which had plagued England in recent years.

The same events transpire in *Boeve*, with the king being willing to hang Arundel in place of Boeve, and Boeve's decision to abjure the realm rather than allow this to happen. In the earlier version, however, the tone of that abjuration is hostile, even threatening, as Boeve makes a rather blatant threat to the king before he leaves, promising that if Edgar moves to disinherit Boeve's

²¹⁶ It is even possible that an image of a king who has lost the person he loves most in the world at the hands of one of his most powerful barons might have called to the contemporary mind a memory of Edward II's grief and fury over the death of Piers Gaveston, wrought by his cousin Thomas of Lancaster. The *Vita Edwardi Secundi* even describes Gaveston as one "whom the king cherished as son" (Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 51). To be sure, the parallels are inexact, but suggestive.

chosen heir, his uncle Sabaoth,²¹⁷ “I will come to help and aid him. I will never defy you except on the day you have deserved it [*Mes ja pur moi ne serrez defiez, / de ci ke a cele jur ke deserve l’avez*].”²¹⁸ In *Boeve*’s world, a king can still “deserve” defiance; in *Bevis*’s, such defiance has too often been construed as treason for it to be a safe occupation for any righteous hero, and this material, so evocative of the threats of Edward II’s own barons that they will not keep faith with a faithless king, is tellingly absent from the Middle English version.

As I said before, I am not arguing that Auchinleck’s Scribe 5 was himself translating and adapting this exact Anglo-Norman exemplar as he went about the business of adding *Bevis of Hampton* to the manuscript, and so the comparisons I draw between these two texts must necessarily be general ones, made with the understanding that these troubling details may well have disappeared in the intervening years between versions, rather than having been excised specifically for Auchinleck. That said, the pattern evident in these repressions and excisions does, at the very least, point to the drastic shift that had taken place in the discourse of treason between the late twelfth and early fourteenth centuries, and the reign of Edward II was itself one of the most dramatic chapters in that ongoing shift. Given that the upheavals of that reign and its aftermath had, as I demonstrated in my last chapter, a profound impact on other Auchinleck texts, it is no great stretch to detect their influence here as well.

6. “*Al Temse Was Blod Red*”

This influence is not only detectable in excisions, but is in fact most apparent in a remarkable addition to the Auchinleck version of this story—an episode with no counterpart in the Anglo-Norman at all. The hero’s final return to England and the climax of the romance as a

²¹⁷ In both versions, the hero leaves his uncle in charge of his heritage.

²¹⁸ Weiss, *Boeve*, 73-74; 2596-2621. Stimming, 92, 2620-2621.

whole is profoundly different between versions, and that difference centers on the discourse of treason.

Near the end of the romance, Bevis—by this point himself the king of the far-off country of Mombraunt—receives word that the English King Edgar has seized Southhampton from the relative he left in charge there. The hero declares hot-headedly “Parof ich wile awreke be,” but, when he arrives at Westminster and confronts the king, he takes a courtly, even conciliatory approach: “...on is knes he him set, / Be king wel hendeliche a gret / & bad before his baranage, / Pat he him graunte is eritage” (ll. 4110, 4121-4124). It is worth noting that the vocabulary here is nearly identical to Bevis’s initial meeting with Edgar: he greets his king “hendeliche”, makes his request “before his baranage”, and asks to be granted “is eritage” (4301-4302). Bevis’s willingness to again humble himself before Edgar subtly signals an unwillingness to critique or antagonize the king that aligns very deftly with the anxiety evident in the absence of just such moments of critique and antagonization in the Anglo-Norman text.

Indeed, this very moment of courteous obeisance stands in sharp contrast to Boeve’s behavior. When the Anglo-Norman hero receives the news that his patrimony has been seized, he “got ready and summoned his men; he left ten thousand foot-soldiers to protect his land, and with him took forty thousand brave knights. Then the noble Boeve went to England.”²¹⁹ Upon arriving, Boeve assures his cousin Robant, Saobath’s son, that he will “conquer [*veinterum*]” Southhampton for him.²²⁰ When the king hears of Boeve’s arrival, “his forehead broke out in sweat [*si li sua le front*]; he summoned his lords from throughout England.”²²¹ To these

²¹⁹ Weiss, *Boeve*, 93; 3691-3727.

²²⁰ Weiss, *Boeve*, 93; 3728-39. Stimming, 125; 3734.

²²¹ Weiss, *Boeve*, 93; 3728-39. Stimming, 125; 3737, 3738.

summoned lords, Edgar admits “I think he has come to make war on me, and I fear the approach of death [*Jeo qui ke il vint pur moi guerer / e jeo moi doute de la mort aprocher*].”²²²

This entire incident reads like a shopping-list of actions that had, by the middle of the fourteenth century, been consistently treated like treason and had contributed to the deaths of several extremely powerful noblemen. Not only had Roger Mortimer quite recently led an invasion of England, as Boeve does here, but the act of “levying war against the king” was exactly the act for which Lancaster and his followers had earlier been executed.²²³ What’s more, Edgar’s confession that he fears for his life invokes the crime of “compassing the king’s death.”²²⁴ By *Bevis*’s time, more importantly, “compassing the king’s death” was not merely a theoretical crime—it was something that had actually been accomplished. Before Edward II’s death in 1327, there had been “no precedent in post-Conquest England for the removal of a crowned and anointed king”, much less his murder.²²⁵ Again, *Boeve* clearly operates under an earlier paradigm wherein armed resistance against the king did not necessarily constitute treason, but this paradigm had changed dramatically shortly before *Bevis* was put to parchment. While it might have been a simple matter for the writer to eradicate Boeve’s dangerously treasonous actions on this occasion, replacing them with the perfect courtesy and respect of a good baron, the stain of the hero’s responsibility for the prince’s death ultimately proves less escapable.

In the Anglo-Norman romance, the king gives way before Boeve’s superior position, and offers his daughter to Boeve’s son, Miles, who is even crowned while Edgar still lives, and then again directly after the old king (quickly and conveniently) dies.²²⁶ This outcome would have

²²² Weiss, *Boeve*, 93; 3740-3804. Stimming, 125; 3745-3746.

²²³ Gillingham, “Enforcing Old Law,” 188. In fact, it was “Edward I who first defined the crime of levying war against the king and who first classified it as high treason” (Bellamy, *The Law of Treason*, 56-57; see also 51).

²²⁴ Bellamy, *The Law of Treason*, 1-2.

²²⁵ Tuck, *Crown and Nobility*, 76.

²²⁶ Weiss, *Boeve*, 93-94; Stimming, 125-126, ll. 3728-3786.

resonated very uncomfortably for a 1330's audience with Edward III's own coronation in 1327. It too took place while the old king, his deposed father, Edward II, was still alive, but shortly before his death. The Auchinleck *Bevis* lacks these disturbing details, simply having Miles marry the princess and become the English king's heir. But before this happy resolution, the Middle English hero faces a brutal, newly invented challenge.

In *Bevis*, the conflict is not between hero and king: instead, the character of the king's Steward—absent from the Anglo-Norman text—acts as a foil to Bevis. Immediately after King Edgar agrees to return Bevis's patrimony, the Steward insists on reminding the king that not only has Bevis been “forbanniiste” from England, but that he “haþ þin owene sone slawe. / He haþ ydon aþenes þe lawe, / And 3if a mot forþer gon / A wile us slen everichon” (4133, 4135-4136). Worryingly enough, the fact that Bevis has indeed returned to England while banished invokes not only the general legal position on outlaws,²²⁷ but also mirrors the fates of both Piers Gaveston and the younger Hugh Despenser, whose executions were predicated at least partly on the fact that they had returned to England while under sentence of exile.²²⁸ The Steward may well be the “worste frend of alle,” but he is not, technically, incorrect (4306). In light of this, the Steward's accusation that Bevis has broken the law by returning while banished becomes a legitimately dangerous threat.

The Steward goes on to conjure even more perilous accusations. Heading out to the city, “into Chepe” specifically, he harangues the crowd, and, claiming to be delivering “þe kinges comaundement” and acting “for þe kinges sake,” he denounces Bevis as a traitor for killing the

²²⁷ Officially, “if apprehended in the future, ‘the outlaw could be hanged merely upon proof’ of his outlaw status. The law even protected those who killed an outlaw” (Muckerheide, “English Law of Treason,” 64; quote from Theodore F.T. Plucknett, *A Concise History of the Common Law* [1956]).

²²⁸ For Gaveston, see Tuck, *Crown and Nobility*, 47, 49-50. For Despenser, see Tuck, 74 and Westerhof, *Death and the Noble Body*, 111-113.

king's son. (4153, 4156, 4161). This again resonates with Gaveston's death—Lancaster justified his execution of the king's favorite not only on the grounds that he had returned while under sentence of exile, but also by denouncing Gaveston as a traitor to the crown. Lancaster cast his own actions as being in the best interest of king and kingdom, even though they were against the king's personal wishes, as the Steward's actions here go against his king's desire to be reconciled with Bevis.²²⁹ By pretending to act in the king's name, however, the Steward makes the fatal mistake of committing a form of treason himself. Not only does this theft of authority make him culpable of accroaching the royal power—something of which Roger Mortimer in particular was patently guilty—but his activities here also constitute a kind of *lese-majesté*, in that he is making a mockery of the king's authority by advocating unlawful behavior in his name.²³⁰

When Bevis appears on the scene, the Steward repeats the accusation of treason to his face. Bevis carefully refutes the allegation, and, just like his father did, offers to “keþe,” to show his accuser the truth of his innocence: “Be Sein Jon, / Treitour was I never non. / Pat I schel keþe hastily” (4201-4203). As before, when the German Emperor and Guy accused one another of treachery, the issue here turns on the weaponized accusation of treason, supported by the power of each party. On the one hand, Bevis could be considered guilty of treason for his part, however distant, in the death of the prince, but on the other hand, from Bevis's own perspective (and, in all likelihood, the audience's as well) the mitigating factors of the prince's misbehavior and Arundel's loyalty to his master outweigh any such responsibility. Here is the ultimate demonstration of the discourse of treason in action: two powerful figures vying to justify their

²²⁹ See Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 60-63.

²³⁰ Both Gaveston and Despenser were also accused of “acroaching” (Tuck, *Crown and Nobility*, 40, 75). In these cases “acroaching” meant wielding and thereby weakening royal power—just as the Steward is doing here. Mortimer's “acroaching” was similar but on a much larger and more blatant scale. See Childs, “Resistance and Treason,” 186 and Westerhof, *Death and the Noble Body*, 105.

own perspectives on treason, not so much to each other as to the watching world, and to enforce those perspectives using two different sources of power: control over a violent urban mob vs. equally violent heroic prowess.

Initially, Bevis seems to have an easy job ahead of him: he kills the Steward immediately after declaring his innocence, and only then does he turn the accusation of treason back on its source: “Treitour, now is þe lif itint. / Þus men schel teche file glotouns, / Þat wile misaie gode barouns” (4210-4212). In this post-mortem accusation, the text not only explicitly paints the Steward’s rabble-rousing as treason, but also adds another dimension to the Steward’s treason. Just like Piers Gaveston, whom the *Vita Edwardi Secundi* used as an example of what happens to “those who belittle the barons,”²³¹ the Steward is condemned for “misaie[ing] gode barouns.” On this occasion, the broadness and flexibility of the discourse of treason works to Bevis’s advantage, since there was by this time a famous precedent for dealing with a “misaier” of good barons as a traitor.²³² On the surface, then, it must seem that Bevis’s perspective is clearly, cleanly victorious, but the discourse of treason—in which he has now become entangled—proves as messy as ever. The mob that the Steward had riled up attacks Bevis and his knights, quickly killing Bevis’s retinue, and what follows is an enormous, bloody street battle waged throughout and *against* all of London.

The fact that it is the city at large, a collective, almost personified London that Bevis fights is repeatedly emphasized. After his six knights have been ignominiously dispatched with “grete clobbes & wiþ smale,” Bevis finds himself repeatedly trapped in the claustrophobic urban

²³¹ They “without doubt despise the king and show themselves guilty of treason [*lese magestatis*] (Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 49; Latin 48).

²³² This is not to say that the Steward is necessarily meant to be an analogue of Piers Gaveston, nor that any part of this episode should be taken for straightforward political allegory. These are merely pertinent contemporary resonances that would have likely occurred to the makers and audiences of Auchinleck, and are thus worth examining for what they can tell us about those makers and audiences.

environment (4226). The physical fabric of the city helps to defeat him by means of lanes that are “so narw ywrouzt, / Þat he miȝte defende him nouȝt” and “chaines grete” strung across “Eueri lane and eueri street” (4235-4236, 4172, 4171). On top of the material trap that the city presents to a knight on horseback, the Londoners themselves operated as a faceless, collective entity with seemingly bottomless reserves—no matter that near the beginning of the battle, Bevis and his knights bring five hundred Londoners “te gronde”—it isn’t long before “Aboute him com peple grete, / Al newe & fresch, wiþ him to fiȝt” (4218, 4264-4265). The city, at one point, even speaks with a single voice: “Þe folk him folwede al to hepe; / And al þai setten vp a cry / ‘Aȝilt þe, Beues, hastely; / Aȝilt þe, Beues, sone anon / And elles þow schelt þe lif forgon” (4248-4252). Bevis refuses to yield, treating the “hepe” of folk like a singular opponent and swearing “To non oþer man I nel me ȝelde, / While þat ich mai me wepne welde!” (4253-4254). This semi-formal, semi-chivalric challenge and refusal seems to signal the start of the next phase of the fight: “Now beginneþ þe grete bataile / Of sire Beues, wiþouten faile, / Þat he dede aȝenes þat cite” (4257-4259). What had been implicit before is now made overt: the final, climactic battle of the romance is waged not against a giant or an enemy army, as in many romances, but against the capital city of the hero’s homeland. The only single combatant mentioned is “a Lombard in þe toun,” whom one of Bevis’s sons, rather than Bevis himself, manages to defeat (4321). That a foreigner, and particularly a Lombard, should be the only individualized foe in the battle against the English capitol can be seen as an attempt to pass at least some of the city’s blameworthiness onto a more acceptable target. Thanks to a series of economic upheavals that had coincided with the political ones, the cosmopolitan nature of London and its openness to foreign (and especially Italian) traders would have been touchy subjects during Auchinleck’s compilation, easy to mine

for a scapegoat.²³³ Even so, the single, unnamed Lombard is vastly outnumbered by the endless supply of apparently native Londoners who willfully attack the romance hero, all but erasing the mitigating impact of the foreign combatant.

By the time London realizes that it can't kill the hero and his sons, "So meche folk was slawe & ded / Pat al Temse was blod red; / Pe nombre was veraiment / To and pretti posent" (4353-4358). As mentioned, the English King Edgar marries his daughter to Bevis's son in order to achieve peace, and Bevis's final abjuration of England not only spares him the trouble of cleaning up and rebuilding, but strongly implies that England—and London specifically—is unfit to house such a hero.

Naturally enough, most scholars who discuss *Bevis of Hampton* work to come to terms with this unusual and disturbing climax. Ralph Hanna concludes that, "[f]or the author of *Bevis of Hampton*, London is no place for a nobleman, and its citizens are only upstart irritants," and Robert Rouse has approached this episode through the lens of regional versus urban "Englishness," the former represented by Bevis, the latter by the Londoners.²³⁴ While these analyses are certainly accurate and valuable, the London street battle, if read against the violence that had actually erupted in the streets of London just a few years before Auchinleck's compilation, becomes a much more specific response to and indictment of contemporary events.

Indeed, London participated directly in many of the events of Edward II's reign and downfall. In the fall of 1326, the approaching invasion of Edward II's estranged queen Isabella and her consort, Roger Mortimer, was met by the welcoming city of London with an enthusiastic "orgy of plunder and mayhem," which included taking over the Tower of London and murdering

²³³ See Nightingale, *Medieval Mercantile Community*, 140-162 and Rouse, "For King and Country," 123.

²³⁴ Ralph Hanna, "Images of London," 27. See also Rouse, "For King and Country?," p. 123 and Fellows, "The Middle English and Renaissance *Bevis*," 84.

government officials.²³⁵ Several of the more riotous Londoners took it upon themselves to exterminate anyone who was considered a friend of the king; most notably the bishop of Exeter and Edward II's treasurer, Walter Stapeldon.²³⁶ Certain elements of the city even, reportedly, took advantage of the recent shifts in the discourse of treason to their own advantage—*The Chronicle of Geoffrey le Baker* reports that “[u]nder the cover of this disorder criminals found it profitable to add treason to their misdeeds. In this fashion many grew richer or had their liberty given back to them.”²³⁷ The discourse of treason had become so tangled, and the perspectives on it so varied, that the accusation of treason could be used not only as a weapon but, in certain circumstances, as a shield

Some of these riotous Londoners were no doubt present a few months later, on January 12, 1327, to support the infamous Guildhall Oath, writing to the great men of the land and urging them “to swear to maintain Isabella and her son, and ‘to crown the latter; and to depose his father for frequent offences against his oath and his Crown.”²³⁸ The city was handsomely rewarded by the new king—then under the thumb of his mother and her consort—with “a comprehensive charter confirming all [their] ancient liberties.”²³⁹ London proved an unreliable ally, however, and certain factions within it even went so far as to support an abortive rebellion against Mortimer's rule in 1328-29.²⁴⁰ When Mortimer was publicly executed in London as a traitor and a regicide in 1330, few Londoners likely mourned the death of the man they had hailed as a hero

²³⁵ Phillips, *Edward II*, 506-507.

²³⁶ Philips, “Violence and Politics,” 86.

²³⁷ Preest, *Chronicle of Geoffrey le Baker*, 23.

²³⁸ Phillips, *Edward II*, p. 526; quoting *CPMR*, pp. 11-12. See also Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages*, 26-27 and Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community*, 157.

²³⁹ Philips, *Edward II*, p. 540.

²⁴⁰ Haines, *King Edward II*, 202-203. This is not to suggest that London had been a wholly united entity up until this point, far from it. The city was always a collection of individuals and groups working together or at cross-purposes, and it is simply for the sake of convenience that I refer to any reasonable degree of apparent consensus on the part of Londoners as being an act of the city at large.

and liberator a few short years earlier—a man whom several prominent Londoners had, in fact, helped to escape from the Tower of London in 1323, enabling his later achievements.²⁴¹

Mortimer's death signaled the dawn of Edward III's autonomous rule, a young man whose political role, up until that point, had mostly consisted in being the pawn of his ambitious mother. London's involvement in one of the most significant civil conflicts for centuries, although in some respects profitable for its citizens, directly helped to bring about the downfall of an anointed king and, moreover, the city proved fickle in loyalty.

Perhaps it would be going too far to say that *Bevis of Hampton* is attempting to symbolically punish the city for its deep entanglement in the destructive discourse of treason, but the fact remains that nothing about this episode paints London in a good light. And despite Bevis's triumph in literally defeating an entire city, the marriage of his son Miles to the crown princess, and the personal happy ending he achieves at the end of the romance, this is where we leave London: defeated, bloodstained, condemned for its gullibility and riotousness. Bevis's triumph over the entire city is a clear demonstration of both his prowess and innocence, but I don't think it would be stretching a point to say that the cost of that triumph is deliberately exorbitant. The discourse of treason *can* be mastered, the accusation *can* be disproved, the righteous *can* triumph—but at what price? And even if that price is paid by those who could be said to have deserved it on some level, the implication of London—of England as a whole—in that discourse is not erased by such enormous bloodshed; instead it is highlighted. If Bevis is the one who emerges vindicated, then he manages to do so only at London's expense, and his truly final abjuration of England not only spares him the trouble of cleaning up and rebuilding, but strongly implies that England is unfit to house such a hero. In the end, the anxiety about treason

²⁴¹ Nightingale, *Medieval Mercantile Community*, 153.

that has, either overtly or in the quiet act of editing, plagued each of the hero's sojourns in England is only suppressed, not eliminated. Ultimately, England remains a locus of treason best left to the younger generations to rule—whether Bevis's son Miles or the historical Edward III—hopefully with more success than their predecessors could manage. Bevis and his wife ultimately return to and live out their lives in Mombrant, the land he won in straightforward chivalric battle from a much more straightforward enemy. While Bevis's own story goes on to end in power, wealth, and poetic closure, the story of England is left tantalizingly open, looking forward hopefully to the rule of its young new king while unable to completely rid itself, yet, of the memories of treason's damage. The discourse of treason in this romance ultimately resists closure, both out of fears raised by the recent past and out of a weary but desperate optimism for the immediate future.

And it was not only in *Bevis of Hampton* that this discourse resisted closure, for the ambiguity of England's future that the end of this romance implies would indeed—despite stabilizing efforts such as the 1352 Statute, and Edward III's relative competence as a ruler—prove destructive in the long term. Not only the precedents set by the deposition and murder of a reigning king and the execution of earls for treason, but the unsettledness, the inability to fully excise the consequences of the changing discourse of treason, would go on to haunt Richard II's reign. Richard Firth Green acknowledges not only that there was a crisis of truth during the late fourteenth century, but also that—since treason is truth's antonym—there was an undeniable “crisis of treason” as well.²⁴² The Ricardian crisis, though engaging in a different way with a discourse of treason that had continued to change in the intervening decades, had many of its roots in the crisis of treason that plagued the period I have been discussing. Moreover, not only

²⁴² Green, *Crisis of Truth*, 230; see also 207 and 247.

did the historical events of the mid-fourteenth century drastically shape the discourse of treason, and not only did that discourse shape this romance, but this romance itself gave a shape to that discourse that would prove regrettably accurate. For, in a way, Richard II's reign would prove the Middle English *Bevis* right: no matter how hard you work to contain, soften, or erase the discourse of treason, the most you can ever achieve is a partial victory. The attempts of Edward III's government to stabilize and limit this discourse helped for a time, but in the face of a king like Richard II, who was determined to once again weaponize the accusation of treason, the 1352 Statute proved unable to achieve any more permanent a victory over this discourse than *Bevis* itself managed.

As has been admitted, to call the *Bevis*'s Scribe 5 an "author" in the modern sense would likely be going too far, but his is the first hand we know of to include the episode of London street battle, and there is abundant reason to believe that, whatever his motives, he did so in response to the upheavals of the end of Edward II's reign. Though it is unlikely that this final England-based episode was meant to be a warning or prophecy, it nevertheless graphically illustrates not only the deadly nature, but the inescapability of the discourse of treason.

Chapter Three
No Good Brother Goes Unpunished:
Keeping Truth in *Amis and Amiloun*

The oath-based relationship between the two title characters in this Middle English romance acts as the center of the story, and every decision the heroes make is driven—or at least informed—by their devotion to that bond and to each other. Swearing brotherhood to one another as young retainers in a duke’s court, Amis and Amiloun hold unswervingly to their sworn truth while they work to navigate an uncompromising moral landscape. As such, it is understandable that this romance has often been mistaken for “a hymn to exemplary brotherhood,” even as some of the scholars who label it as such simultaneously acknowledge that “the ethic of that brotherhood is troubling”—particularly in light of the subversion of justice, contraction of leprosy, and infanticide that all result from this “exemplary brotherhood.”²⁴³ But these troubling implications are generally only mentioned in passing, and are treated—intentionally or not—as an almost accidental outcome of what was clearly *meant* to be a much more positive portrayal of sworn brotherhood.²⁴⁴ Indeed, the romance is generally approached as “an example of ‘test literature’ and as an elaborate testing of *treuþe*,” wherein “Amis and Amiloun embody a genuine (if flawed) *treuþe*-fidelity in motive and spirit.”²⁴⁵ In fairness, the romance *does* perform extensive testing of truth—but it is not the heroes who are found to be

²⁴³ Stretter, “Engendering Obligation,” 513. Despite such misgivings, Stretter eventually declares that “There is no better example of the fantasy world of unassailable brotherhood than the legend of Amis and Amiloun” (507).

²⁴⁴ This is certainly the conclusion that Edward Foster comes to—despite his otherwise nuanced and appreciative analysis of the romance, he disdains attempts “to find excellences contrary to our human instincts...to mistake ineptitude for sophistication” and, in the end, he dismisses the romance as “merely an entertaining moral confusion” wherein “sleaze abounds and is respectfully rewarded” (Foster, “Simplicity, Complexity, and Morality,” 417-418). While I find many of his close readings to be insightful and useful, I cannot by any means endorse a verdict on the romance as a whole which is not in fact supported by anything in his own analyses. For more moderate and balanced examples of the view that *Amis and Amiloun*’s sworn brotherhood is a positive force, see Mann, “Messianic Chivalry,” 154; Saunders, “Greater love,” 134; and Reuters, *Friendship and Love*, 160.

²⁴⁵ Baldwin, “The Testing of *Treuþe*,” 354, 361. See also Green, *Crisis of Truth*, 334 and Calin, *The French Tradition*, 486.

flawed by that testing, but truth itself. The problem is not that Amis and Amiloun fail to keep faith with each other, it is that keeping that faith requires them to sacrifice practically every other faith they owe on the altar of sworn brotherhood, sometimes literally. This exorbitant cost is never glossed over, and although the consequences of their keeping truth with one another are eventually commuted by God's mercy, that commutation itself acts to emphasize the severity of those consequences. While the overt logic of the romance—apparently reinforced by its overwhelmingly happy ending—would seem to support a reading that praises Amis and Amiloun for their faithfulness through trials and tribulations, I contend that the disturbing implications that plague that very faithfulness are too consistent and explicit to be either accidental or incidental. As Corinne Saunders has acknowledged, “friendship here is both ennobling and corrosive.”²⁴⁶ Such apparent contradictions make it difficult to decide, in the end, what the romance is trying to communicate about sworn brotherhood and truth, whether it is a “hymn to exemplary brotherhood” or whether the primacy of brotherhood is here being tied to “the apotheosis of amorality,” as Tison Pugh declares.²⁴⁷

It is not my intention to attempt to resolve these issues into a simple or straightforward answer—instead, I am interested in the questions that *Amis and Amiloun* raises about truth, the historical resonances of those questions, and the consequences of the romance's refusal to finally, satisfactorily answer any of them. And the romance *is* asking them, almost constantly, and the tension and anxiety generated by the absence of answers permeates the entire tone of the text. What Paul Strohm calls the “textual unconscious” is in fact not buried very deep here, and the heroes' own awareness of the problems inherent in much of their keeping of truth often

²⁴⁶ Saunders, “Greater love,” 131.

²⁴⁷ Pugh, *Queer Discontents*, 115.

reveals the questions lurking beneath their dilemmas.²⁴⁸ Such moments of moral ambiguity are all the more apparent when the Auchinleck romance is read against the three previous versions of this story. Instances where the heroes had before been excused or made sympathetic here become opportunities to emphasize the negative impact of their decisions, to bring the textual unconscious even nearer the surface. In the end, although *Amis and Amiloun* does not overtly condemn sworn brotherhood, it does expose not only the consequences of tangled loyalties, but their near-inevitability in a world where different truths can pull a man one way and another, and choices must be made between irreconcilable options.

The catalyst behind this profound change in focus from earlier versions of the story can be found by examining the early years of Edward II's reign. Beginning before his coronation and extending several years into his rule, Edward had himself demonstrated how destructive an exclusive, prioritized friendship could be through his sworn brotherhood with Piers Gaveston. Not at all coincidentally, the relationship between the title characters in the Auchinleck romance is, for the first time in this story's tradition, overtly and fundamentally a relationship of sworn brotherhood. I argue that the unease and ambiguity inherent in *Amis and Amiloun's* portrayal of sworn brotherhood is best understood as a result of and response to the unease and ambiguity that plagued Edward and Gaveston's relationship. In this way, the *keeping* of truth—rather than the treasonous *breaking* of truth which we saw in the last chapter—becomes the core problem of the romance and a source of intense destabilization. As Leah Haught has recently argued, “the conflict in *Amis* arises from the central characters' insistence upon upholding their oath, making *trewth* itself the potential source of social dissonance.”²⁴⁹ Hers is, as far as I know, the first thorough examination of the romance's pervasive ambiguity as a deliberate consequence of its

²⁴⁸ See Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text*, xvi and 165.

²⁴⁹ “Ambiguity and Meaning,” 245.

overarching concern with truth. While nuanced and persuasive, however, her argument does not engage in the kind of historical contextualization that I regard as crucial. In particular, Haught rejects the widely-held view that this relationship between Amis and Amiloun constitutes sworn brotherhood at all, on the basis that the two characters are not “technically knighted” when they make their oath to one another.²⁵⁰ While most men who swore brotherhood to one another were indeed adult knights, there is no evidence that being knighted was a prerequisite for this relationship, and indeed there is reason to believe that Edward II and Gaveston themselves swore brotherhood to one another before being knighted.²⁵¹ As such, this odd assertion limits Haught’s analysis to terms of mere friendship, ignoring the insistent and unwavering use of “brother” by both the main characters themselves and those who describe them. Moreover, while she argues for the heroes’ “success” as being dependent upon “the reduction of *trewth* to a specific form of homosocial obligation,” I take the opposite view.²⁵² When this specific form of truth is put into the larger context of the larger “troubling of truth,” which my dissertation argues was at work in this time period, it becomes clear that instead of reducing truth to a single definition, the romance is using this single definition of truth as an avenue to approach larger questions concerning the overall troubling of truth. While I agree wholeheartedly with Haught’s conclusion that the romance deliberately raises more questions than it answers, the project of this chapter is to ascertain *why* and *to what effect* this is done, and the answers to those questions are best sought in the historical context afforded by Edward II and Gaveston’s unique relationship.²⁵³ As seen in the last chapter, this relationship acted as the impetus for a great deal of the upheaval that plagued Edward’s reign, and established a recurring pattern of elevated favorites wielding royal

²⁵⁰ “Ambiguity and Meaning,” 246.

²⁵¹ Phillips, *Edward II*, 112.

²⁵² “Ambiguity and Meaning,” 259-260.

²⁵³ “Ambiguity and Meaning,” 258.

power to devastating effect and violent overthrow. Even so, I am not suggesting that we should see *Amis and Amiloun* as providing direct parallels to the historical narrative that played out between 1306 and 1312. But understanding the sworn brotherhood at the core of this romance does require an understanding of how the perception of that kind of bond would have been affected by such a dramatic and largely negative real-life example.²⁵⁴ Both Amis and Amiloun's and Edward and Gaveston's relationships engaged with and distorted the norms of sworn brotherhood, and just as an appreciation of this historical context helps to make sense of the romance, the romance in turn offers a contemporary attempt to make sense of one of the most infamous relationships in fourteenth-century politics.

In the last chapter, my analysis of *Bevis of Hampton* was deliberately focused on the three episodes concerning the hero's time in England; in contrast, I will here be examining the overarching plot of *Amis and Amiloun*, and because this narrative is not as widely familiar as that of *Sir Tristrem*, which I will examine in the next chapter, I would like to provide an overview of events to situate the reader before delving into particulars. Born on the same day—though to different sets of parents—Amis and Amiloun are as identical as twins. As young men brought up together in the court of an unnamed duke, they swear an oath of brotherhood, but soon Amiloun's parents die, requiring him to return home to administer his patrimony. After he leaves, Amis is ambushed in quick succession: first by a jealous Steward wanting to usurp Amiloun's position as Amis's sworn brother—whom Amis spurns—and then by the duke's daughter Belisaunt—who threatens Amis until he agrees to sleep with her. The spurned Steward

²⁵⁴ To be sure, I am not the first to point out *Amis and Amiloun*'s historical resonances; Sheila Delany has persuasively argued that “in this story an English writer found material suitable for indirect representation of issues of his day, and that he shaped this material to make its suitability even more apparent,” and she provides an itemized list of thirteen “points of contact” between details in the romance and details in the historical record (“A, A and B,” 73). My goal is not simply to add more items to her insightful and comprehensive list. Instead, my analysis will demonstrate the dedication of this Auchinleck romance to asking difficult, contemporaneously relevant questions to which it does not have answers. For her list, see 73-75.

reports them to the duke, who arranges for a trial by combat between the Steward and Amis to determine the truth of the matter. The sworn brothers take advantage of their identical appearance to switch places, allowing Amiloun to truly swear to an innocence that Amis cannot claim. Before the combat begins, however, an angel warns Amiloun that, if he goes through with the trick, he will be struck with leprosy. Amiloun decides to continue even at such a cost; he wins the combat, but becomes leprous after returning home. Amis, in the meantime, marries Belisaunt and becomes duke when her father dies. Amiloun, evicted by his shrewish wife, eventually reunites with Amis. Another angelic messenger arrives, this time telling Amis that, if he will murder his two children and bathe Amiloun in their blood, the leprosy will be healed. Despite wrestling with the decision, Amis eventually chooses to work the extreme cure. Amiloun is restored to full health, and when Amis and Belisaunt enter the boys' nursery, they are startled to find the children alive and whole. In a brief dénouement, Amis and Amiloun exact a non-lethal vengeance on Amiloun's wife, ride off to have adventures together, die on the same day, and are buried in the same tomb.²⁵⁵

1. "*An Unbreakable Bond of Love before All Men*"

The institution of sworn brotherhood had a long and largely positive history, beginning roughly around the eleventh century and becoming thereafter a relatively common practice.²⁵⁶ The duties attendant upon sworn brotherhood were extensive, and worked to bind the two

²⁵⁵ The Auchinleck version of the romance both begins and ends imperfectly, with these sections being provided by the c. 1400 manuscript BM Egerton 2862, as presented in Foster, Edward E., ed. *Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle, and Sir Amadace*. 2ed Ed. TEAMS Middle English Texts Series. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications. 2007. While the plot points in these missing sections are likely reliable, I do not rely upon the specific language of the Egerton manuscript as I rely upon the language of the extant Auchinleck text, and I will signal in a footnote if I am relying on the TEAMS edition rather than on the online facsimile.

²⁵⁶ Stretter, "Engendering Obligation," 503. See also Keen, *Nobles, Knights and Men-at-Arms*, 46 and Bray, *The Friend*, 32-33.

partners together in tangible ways—they included “fighting alongside the brother, sharing possessions, fighting duels on behalf of the brother... [and,] if necessary, avenging his death. Sworn brothers would often wear each other’s arms, or even combine their individual coats of arms into a new heraldic icon.”²⁵⁷ Sworn brotherhood thus constituted a form of “voluntary kinship;” the two members would have been regarded as a united legal unit, and the bond itself was—at least ideally—meant to be founded upon and to foster equality between the two partners. This created “a legal bond to which enforceable law gave reality,” and some sworn brothers would even formalize their relationships by attending Mass together and sharing the Eucharist.²⁵⁸ We know, for example, that when Edward and Gaveston swore to keep faith with one another upon the occasion of Gaveston’s first exile in 1307, they took this oath “upon the cross of Neit, upon the king’s relics, and ‘sur le cors dieu’ [upon God’s body].”²⁵⁹

However, this was likely not Edward and Gaveston’s initial oath of sworn brotherhood, but rather a restatement of their loyalty to one another upon the occasion of their parting. While we do not have the words of that original oath of sworn brotherhood, an account of their first meeting reflects (however over-dramatically) the significance and exclusivity of the bond that resulted: “When the king’s son [Edward] gazed upon him [Gaveston], he straight away felt so much love that he entered into a covenant of brotherhood with him and chose and firmly resolved to bind himself to him, in an unbreakable bond of love before all men.”²⁶⁰ The young Edward’s father, King Edward I, banished Gaveston from England in 1307, predicting the damage his influence over the young prince would do—it was upon this occasion that they swore

²⁵⁷ Stretter, “Engendering Obligation,” 505; see also Chaplais, *Piers Gaveston*, 19-20; See Keen, *Nobles, Knights and Men-at-Arms*, 46; Bray, *The Friend*, 32-33.

²⁵⁸ Keen, *Nobles, Knights and Men-at-Arms*, 45, 46. See also Bray, *The Friend*, 25, 110.

²⁵⁹ Bray, *The Friend*, 27-28.

²⁶⁰ “[F]ilius regis intuens, in eum tantum protinus amorem inicit quod cum eo fraternitatis fedus iniit, et pre ceteris mortalibus indissolubile dileccionis vinculum secum elegit et firm[i]ter disposuit innodare” (Bray, *The Friend*, 27). See also Phillips, *Edward II*, 97 and Chaplais, *Piers Gaveston*, 12-13.

the oath mentioned above.²⁶¹ But upon the old king's death later that same year, Edward II rushed to recall Gaveston, and immediately elevated him to Earl of Cornwall, snatching the lofty title and prosperous domain from his two real half-brothers—one of whom Edward I had intended should receive it—in order to bring his sworn brother more near himself in status, power, and wealth.²⁶² The immediacy, permanence, and exclusivity of the bond between Edward and Gaveston, while not identical to that which springs up between Amis and Amiloun, nevertheless resonates suggestively with it. Indeed, the nature of the bond between the Middle English romance heroes is one of the most suggestive differences between the Auchinleck text and this story's earlier versions, which themselves differ significantly from one another.

There are four known antecedents to the Auchinleck *Amis and Amiloun*, diverse in chronology, language, and even genre. The two earliest are both in Latin, and both emerged in the eleventh century: a very brief epistolary version by Rodulfus Tortarius, and a prose hagiography called the *Vita amici et amelii*.²⁶³ In the late twelfth century the story appears in both an Anglo-Norman verse romance—*Amys e Amillyoun*—and a French *chanson de geste*—*Ami et Amile*. The Auchinleck *Amis and Amiloun* is significantly closer to the Anglo-Norman version than to the Continental one, but I am not assuming a direct line of transmission.²⁶⁴

Whether or not Scribe 1—who acted as both Auchinleck's central organizing figure, and as the

²⁶¹ One chronicle suggests that the king, in a moment of not-too-demanding prescience, had “imagined that, after his death, the excessive love of his son for Gaveston might create numerous problems for the kingdom” (Chaplais, *Piers Gaveston*, 22; citing *Ann. Paul.* 255).

²⁶² Chaplais, *Piers Gaveston*, 30-31.

²⁶³ I am deeply indebted to John Geck, who provided me with early access to his edition of this version, *The Elaborated Vita Amici ed Amelii: Critical Edition and Introduction*, the first edited edition this text has received since the nineteenth century. My access to the Totarius is provided in translation by Leach, MacEdward, ed. *Amis and Amiloun*. “Appendix A: The Amis and Amiloun Story of Radulfus Totarius.” Early English Text Society. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937. 101-105 and in its original Latin by Geck.

²⁶⁴ It is entirely possible, perhaps even likely, that the Auchinleck romance is based on an earlier Middle English redaction, now lost. This is the assumption of MacEdward Leach, who posits a late thirteenth century origin for such a version (*Amis and Amiloun*, xxvi-xxvii).

scribe for *Amis and Amiloun*—ever got his hands on a textual copy of *Amys e Amillyoun* or any of the other earlier versions, it is still plausible that he could have had access to or perhaps even a memory of such a popular and re-told tale. Indeed, as I established in my first chapter, Auchinleck’s creation included access to an unusual wealth of exemplars. While it would be inappropriate to speak of the Auchinleck version as the result of direct and conscious changes to the earlier tradition(s), the degree of customization and adaptation evident throughout the manuscript does suggest that *Amis and Amiloun* would have been, at the least, similarly modified upon its inclusion.²⁶⁵

One of the most significant differences between Auchinleck and the earlier versions comes fairly early in the story, at the moment when the two protagonists chose to pledge themselves to one another. In Radulfus Totarius, we are told that the young men, here named Amelius and Amicus, “entered straight into a bond of indissoluble friendship [*indissolvendae prosorus amiciae*], a bond which no one could break [*solvere*] in their lifetime.”²⁶⁶ In the Old French *chanson de geste*, the heroes simply “made a pledge of lasting friendship [*s’entr’afient compaignie nouvelle*].”²⁶⁷ In neither of these texts is the relationship ever described as any kind of brotherhood, even though that institution would have been a familiar one by this time.²⁶⁸ The Anglo-Norman romance, however, transforms “friendship” into something more, informing its audience that the heroes “loved each other so dearly that they swore to be brothers [*Tant*

²⁶⁵ Thorlac Turville-Petre reminds us that “Though it is usually impossible to be sure that a particular text was revised specifically for this anthology, the cumulative evidence points strongly to the active intervention of an editor conscious of the overall design of the volume” (*England the Nation*, 114). See also Fisher, *Scribal Authorship*, 155-156 and Taylor, “Manual to Miscellany,” 3.

²⁶⁶ Leach, *Amis and Amiloun*, 101. Original Latin provided by Geck, vii. Interestingly enough, this language lines up very closely with the language provided for Edward II and Gaveston’s bond—except that, in the historical case as in the Auchinleck romance—it is indissoluble brotherhood [*fraternitatis*], rather than friendship [*amiciae*] which is sworn.

²⁶⁷ Rosenberg and Danon, *Ami and Amile*, 37. Original Old French is provided by Dembowski, Peter F. *Ami et Amile Chanson de Geste*. Paris: Éditions Champion, 1969, 7, l’assie 13, line 200.

²⁶⁸ Stretter, “Engendering Obligation,” 503.

s'entreamerent durement, / Ke freres se firent par serment]. They showed no friendship to anyone else at all [*As autres ne feseint semblant / De compaignie tant ne kaunt*].”²⁶⁹ Even though the bond here is explicitly one of sworn brotherhood, and the two main characters do consistently refer to one another as “brother,” the specifics of the oath that *creates* that relationship are not provided.

Auchinleck’s *Amis and Amiloun*, by contrast, is at some pains to lay out the terms of this relationship in detail. We are told that the “childer” one day decided to plight their “[t]rewepes togider,” swearing that “bope bi day & bi niȝt, / In wele & wo, in wrong & riȝt” they would “hold togider at eueri need” and would never “[f]ailen oþer for wele ne wo” (93, 94, 96-97, 99). The oath is explicit about the completeness of Amis and Amiloun’s duty to each other: no matter the time (“bi day & bi niȝt”), the prosperity (“wele & wo”) or, most crucially, the morality (“in wrong & riȝt”) of the situation, this troth-plight firmly bind them to champion one another regardless of circumstances. In a significant departure from the story’s tradition, the Auchinleck romance holds this oath of brotherhood as the core of its story, the catalyst for its entire plot, and the undeniable source of its heroes’ troubles. Though this oath will remain unbroken, the troubling ambiguity inherent in its wording is one of the factors that twists sworn brotherhood into a force that bends or breaks all other obligations in service to it.

An early hint of this arises when, after the boys have grown up and been knighted, Amiloun’s parents die and he must return home to take up the governance of his patrimony. Tellingly, Amiloun’s sorrow is not for his parents’ deaths, but for his separation from his sworn brother: “Þan was sir Amiloun ferli wo / For to wende sir Amis fro, / On him was al his þouȝt” (189-191). Despite this singular focus on his sworn brother, Amiloun is, when it comes to the

²⁶⁹ Weiss, *Birth of Romance*, 171. Original Anglo-Norman provided by Kölbing, Eugen. *Amis and Amiloun*. Heilbronn: Henninger, 1884, pg. 113, lines 17-20.

point, willing to be parted from Amis for the sake of taking up his responsibilities, even if all his thoughts remain with his sworn brother while they are physically separated. Edward's own disinclination to let Gaveston out of his sight, by contrast, led to repeated trouble. The king recalled his sworn brother from multiple exiles inflicted by his disaffected barons, who were outraged at this relatively low-born man's exclusive influence over their king. This attachment was also seen as splitting the king's focus, sometimes disastrously, as it did during an abortive war against the Scots, wherein Edward "acted feebly" against Robert Bruce, partly because of the lack of baronial support, but also, reportedly, because he was obsessed with "keeping Piers Gaveston with him [*erat circu retencionem Petri de Gauestone*], for whose expulsion and exile almost all the barons of England were working together. In these two matters the king, worried and very distressed, could not attain one on account of the other."²⁷⁰ Unlike the many times when Pier's arrogance is given sole credit for his downfall, this moment demonstrates the king himself being held accountable for the attention and care he lavished on his sworn brother to the detriment of his other responsibilities.

As far as it goes, then, Amiloun's willingness to be parted from Amis speaks to a more balanced set of priorities than Edward regularly displayed, perhaps offering a potential literary corrective to the disastrous historical practice. But, like Edward, Amiloun clearly feels the need to re-state his bond with his sworn brother upon the occasion of their parting. While the literary sworn brothers do not avail themselves of relics or overtly religious forms, Amiloun frames this moment as a reiteration of their earlier oath—"as we er trewþe-pliȝt"—and he emphasizes the reciprocity and equality upon which that plighted trewthe is based: "Broþer, be now trewe to me / & y schal ben as trewe to þe" (241, 246-247). In addition, Amiloun's parting gift to Amis—a

²⁷⁰ Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 27; Latin from 26.

pair of identical golden cups that “boþe þai weren as liche, ywis, / As was Sir Amiloun & sir Amis” (198-199)—makes perfectly clear the permanence of their bond despite their separation, as well as evoking the remarkable physical similarity that predated their oath-based bonds. These tokens thus transform the sworn truth of the main characters into a tangible form, making their oath “thinglike” and tying their invisible truth directly to material, valuable objects.²⁷¹ The golden cups are not original to the Auchinleck version: the Anglo-Norman romance included them, but in that earlier version their existence was only mentioned near the end of the story, when their function as recognition tokens became necessary.²⁷² Since the cups do appear in the earlier Anglo-Norman version, it is unlikely that this moment should be read as a deliberate reference to the occasion, early in Edward and Gaveston’s relationship, when Edward refused to accept a gift of a cup “worth £50 until one of comparable value (£40) was offered to Gaveston.”²⁷³ Even so, this incident demonstrates Edward’s dedication to the practical, physical realities of sworn brotherhood, and it also introduces into the historical narrative a symbolic language of equality that is nearly identical to that at work in *Amis and Amiloun*. It is, of course, possible that Scribe 1 had heard of the historical incident, which prompted him to emphasize the importance of the trope he had inherited from earlier versions of the romance, but it is also possible that Edward himself may have been familiar with the earlier, Anglo-Norman story of two dedicated sworn brothers, featuring identical golden cups.²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ Richard Firth Green discusses how “concrete symbols” would be used with the aim of “clothing the abstract trothplight with a thinglike physicality” (*Crisis of Truth*, 50).

²⁷² The cups also appear in the Latin *vita*, but there they are a gift from the boys’ godfather, the Pope, upon the occasion of their baptism, and are made of wood instead of gold (Geck, xi). As stated, I am not arguing that the Anglo-Norman romance was a direct source for the version we have in Auchinleck, but it is the closest to *Amis and Amiloun* of any of the earlier extant versions, likely putting it in or near the line of transmission which eventually resulted in this Middle English romance.

²⁷³ Phillips, *Edward II*, 97.

²⁷⁴ Edward was a known reader of romance; indeed, “one of our last recorded transactions between the king and Hugh Despenser [a later royal favorite] was a royal order to hand over to the favourite the king’s copy of the romance of Tristan and Iseult” (Fryde, *The Tyranny and Fall of Edward II*, 15)

The intersections between romance and politics thus seem to run in both directions, and this lends to the historical relationship some of the flavor and pathos of a romance, as well as giving the literary relationship some of the weight and consequence of contemporary politics. Edward seems to have been deeply invested in crafting the *perfect* sworn brotherhood, whereas the only realm in which such perfection is possible—the literary realm—instead produces an image of sworn brotherhood that is deeply implicated in the *im*-perfections of medieval political reality. In an oddly diachronic way, then, the two relationships seem almost to be entangled in one another, and untangling either one requires untangling them both together. The meaning of the golden cups in *Amis and Amiloun*—whether or not they constitute an intentional reference to a historical event—necessarily shifts when read against the meanings attached to the material emblems at play in Edward and Gaveston’s relationship.

2. *Questions of Sodomy and Sexual Truth*

Edward II undeniably went to great lengths to enshrine his relationship with Gaveston in a visible, readable form. At the banquet following his coronation, Edward reportedly preferred his sworn brother’s couch to his new wife and queen’s, “while above them hung specially made tapestries bearing not the arms of England and France but those of Edward II and Gaveston. [Queen] Isabella’s relatives were enraged by her treatment, and one of the English earls allegedly wished to kill Gaveston on the spot.”²⁷⁵ While the symbol of the sworn brothers’ arms combined was a relatively common aspect of such a relationship, Edward’s deployment of that symbol in this context—his reckless announcement of his extreme preference for Gaveston over any other member of the court, even his own queen—worked as a synecdoche for everything that was

²⁷⁵ Preest, *Chronicle of Geoffrey le Baker*, 4; Phillips, *Edward II*, 145-156.

wrong with his priorities.²⁷⁶ Sworn brotherhood, in this moment, became a problematic relationship not because it was being itself distorted or transformed, but because it was being elevated above all other priorities, and the banner operated as a material emblem of that problematic elevation.

Moreover, this excess of devotion might have suggested, to a medieval audience, indulgence in excesses of other kinds: Edward II was accused in fourteenth-century accounts of having “particularly delighted in the vice of sodomy [*in vitio sodomitico nimium delectabat*].”²⁷⁷ There is still a great deal of debate among historians as to whether we should in fact understand Edward’s relationships with his favorites—both Gaveston and Hugh Despenser the Younger, who rose to prominence after Gaveston’s death—as being sexual in nature.²⁷⁸ It is possible, for example, that the accusation of sodomy could have been based a perception “that Edward II was vulnerable to this precise issue...its very selection as a means of attacking the king is consistent with the degeneracy of the king, as a man as well as a ruler.”²⁷⁹ Sodomy had a range of medieval meanings, encompassing not only homosexual intercourse and non-procreative sex in general, but also signaling a “general tendency to immoderate indulgence in the sins of the flesh.”²⁸⁰ And of course, we cannot divorce these accusations from the political motivations of the men who made them, making it difficult to decipher whether Edward and Gaveston (and/or Edward and Hugh) were indeed lovers or whether accusing them of having been lovers was simply a

²⁷⁶ “Sworn brothers would often wear each other’s arms, or even combine their individual coats of arms into a new heraldic icon” (Stretter, “Engendering Obligation,” 505). See also Chaplais, *Piers Gaveston*, 19-20

²⁷⁷ Bray, *The Friend*, 38, quoting “fourteenth-century chronicle of the Cistercian abbey of Meaux in Yorkshire—a work of outstanding scholarship.”

²⁷⁸ Edward’s most recent biographer, Seymour Phillips, admits that it is “impossible to be certain of the true nature of the relationship between Edward II and Gaveston,” but he tends towards the view that “Edward really did regard Gaveston as if he were his brother by blood...As brothers, this would allow for a strong emotional tie but would also rule out a physical sexual relationship” (Phillips, *Edward II*, 102-103). I do not regard the two relationships—sworn brotherhood and sexual partner—as being automatically mutually exclusive in this way.

²⁷⁹ Mortimer, “Sermons of Sodomy,” 57.

²⁸⁰ Ormrod, “Sexualities of Edward II,” 33.

particularly convenient weapon for the king's enemies.²⁸¹ Regardless, the fact that this particular weapon was so convenient and so effective points to how completely unacceptable Edward's prioritization of Gaveston was to the English barony. Whether or not the pair were lovers, their vows of sworn brotherhood had cemented them into a bond of voluntary kinship, not unlike marriage, and the more Edward and Gaveston elevated that bond, the more vulnerable Edward in particular was to accusations that he was taking his sworn brotherhood "too far" in private as well as in public.

The institution of sworn brotherhood itself has come under similar debate among historians. Some scholars—notably John Boswell—have proposed that sworn brotherhood constituted a form of recognized and acceptable homosexual marriage.²⁸² Others, such as Stephen Jaeger, argue against such an understanding, since these bonds were almost universally seen as positive—"ennobling," in his terminology—and would not have been regarded as such if they included homosexual behavior as an integral element.²⁸³ Obviously, this is a question even more difficult to definitively answer than the question of Edward and Gaveston's precise relationship. There is no way to be certain what most relationships of sworn brotherhood did or did not include in terms of sexuality, and thus it is unwise to completely exclude either possibility. As Tison Pugh has pointed out, "[b]rotherhood oaths potentially incarnate both normativity and queerness, as these ideologically sanctioned homosocial pacts allow two men to join in a courtly relationship in which their primary allegiance is to each other."²⁸⁴ The potential

²⁸¹ "[T]he earliest specific accusation that Edward was a sodomite appears in a sermon preached by Adam of Orleton, Bishop of Hereford, at Oxford in October 1326. To be precise, in 1334 Orleton was accused by John Prickehare, a Winchester cleric, of a number of crimes connected with the fall of Edward II, including that at Oxford he had preached that Edward was a 'tyrant and a sodomite' (*tyrannus et sodomita*), his motive being 'to subvert the status of Edward II'" (Mortimer, "Sermons of Sodomy," 50; quoting *The Register of Bishop Grandison*, III, 1542).

²⁸² *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*. New York: Villard Books, 1994.

²⁸³ *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

²⁸⁴ Pugh, "Satirizing Queer Brotherhood," 285-286.

for “queerness”—like sodomy, a word encompassing a good deal more than just homosexual intercourse—inherent in sworn brotherhood certainly seems to have inflected contemporary responses to Edward and Gaveston’s relationship.

At certain points, Amis and Amiloun find themselves similarly vulnerable to such queer readings, particularly when it comes to Amis’s interactions with the character of the king’s steward. Upon leaving, Amiloun gives Amis specific and valuable advice in addition to his golden cup: “Be nouȝt oȝain þi lord forsworn / & ȝif þou dost þou art forlorn / Euer more wiþouten ende. / Bot ever do trewþe & no tresoun” (252-255). Amiloun here makes it clear that Amis’s relationship with his lord—the unnamed duke who has, by this point, knighted them both—is just as predicated upon truth as their sworn brotherhood is. Betraying that vassal-lord relationship would be “tresoun” and would make Amis “forsworn.” As a preventative to this unhappy possibility, Amiloun further advises his brother to “þenk on me, sir Amiloun,” in much the same way that Amiloun’s own thoughts, even at the news of his parents’ deaths, were all for Amis (256). This also seems to suggest that the mere thought of the one to whom Amis owes his deepest truth can anchor him against every possible species of untruth. As a final piece of particularly clairvoyant counsel, Amiloun sternly commands “broþer, ȝete y þe forbade / Þe fals steward felawerede; / Certes, he wil þe schende” (258-260). The alliteration across “forbade,” “fals,” and “felawerede” knit together the strands of Amis’s loyalty to Amiloun, the steward’s untruthful nature, and the seriousness with which fellowship between men should be taken. Amiloun’s advice to his brother is entirely concerned with keeping truth and avoiding untruth in all its forms, signaling even more strongly how central these issues will be to the romance as a whole. Amiloun speaks with authority on these matters: having come into his inheritance, he takes the lead throughout this encounter, instructing his sworn brother for his own good and

trying to preemptively address any problems that Amis might face without the apparently more mature Amiloun's ever-present guidance.

And of course, the Steward does make his move, attempting to initiate exactly the kind of “felawerede” that Amiloun had forbidden his brother to accept. The Steward urges Amis to forget Amiloun, proposing instead that they “swere ous boþe broþerhed / & plizt we our trewþes to; / Be trewe to me in word & dede, / & y schal to the, so God me spede, / Be trewe to þe also” (310-314). There are echoes of specific phrases that Amiloun himself had very recently used—“so God me spede”, the reciprocal “be trewe to me” and “y schal ben as trewe to þe”—which make it clear that the Steward is trying to directly usurp Amiloun's exclusive position of privilege in Amis's heart. Amis naturally refuses in high dudgeon, declaring that “bi þe treuþe þat God me sende / Ichave him [Amiloun] founde so gode & kende... / Y schal be to him trewe; / & 3if y were now forsworn / & breke mi treuþe y were forlorn, / Wel sore it schuld me rewe” (321-322, 326-329). Not only does this gesture towards God as the “sender” of the truth that Amis so prizes, but it also provides Amis with a belated opportunity to reciprocate his sworn brother's renewal of their oath, as the text had not provided any response from him at the moment of parting. It also allows Amis to demonstrate how well he has internalized Amiloun's advice; he is aware that being “forsworn” would lead directly to being “forlon,” and that he would rue the day he broke faith. Amiloun had given that warning to keep Amis from breaking truth with their mutual lord, but here Amis calls on it as a defense against breaking his truth with Amiloun instead. That said, this repetition of Amiloun's counsel also acts as a reminder—and a harbinger—of the kind of forsworn-ness that Amiloun was truly worried about, Amis's being forsworn against his lord.

Amis finishes his rebuke of the steward by citing a clear distinction between mere friendship and the kind of private bond that he only intends to share with Amiloun: “Gete me frendes ware y may, / Y no schal never bi nizt no day / Chaunge him [Amiloun] for no newe” (330-332). Sheila Delany reads this response as indicative of a homoerotic subtext, suggesting that “the ‘night or day’ phrase may be more than convenient rhyme: it may mark out one difference between friendship, a daytime relationship, and a homoerotic bond which includes bedding down together.”²⁸⁵ As with Edward II and Gaveston’s relationship, there is some debate over whether or not Amis and Amiloun should be considered lovers as well as sworn brothers.²⁸⁶ And as with the historical relationship, there is no direct evidence supporting such a conclusion, but the suggestive echoes once again gesture towards the problematic context within which Auchinleck’s audience would have seen such an exclusive and prioritized homosocial relationship. These resonances are faint enough when viewing the romance on its own terms, but become more significant when set against the questions surrounding the nature of the king’s relationship with his favorite. The excess of devotion that marks both Amis and Amiloun’s and Edward and Gaveston’s relationship leave both pairs “vulnerable” to this reading, in a way that points to the implicit unacceptability of that very excess of devotion. While sexuality is certainly not an explicit part of Amis and Amiloun’s relationship—nor an explicit part of the relationship the Steward proposes between himself and Amis—the implicit possibility of its inclusion adds another unsettling note to the growing chorus of anxiety.

By contrast, the next temptation Amis faces is flagrantly sexual in nature. Belisaunt, the duke’s daughter, falls in love with Amis from a distance, and eventually happens upon him alone in the garden. She urges him, with echoes of both Amiloun’s renewed oath and Amis’s refusal of

²⁸⁵ “A, A and B,” 68.

²⁸⁶ See Pugh, *Queer Discontents*, 107 and Stretter, “Engendering Obligation,” 512.

the Steward ringing in her words, to “Pliȝt me þi trewþe þou schalt be trewe / & chaunge me for no newe / Þat in þis world is born, / & y pliȝt þe mi treuþe also, / Til God & deþ dele ous ato / Y schal never be forsworn” (531-536). The layers of possible meaning that have by now informed the bonds of truth which link these characters to each other—the sworn brotherhood of the two heroes, the references to God’s function as authorizer of such a truth, the jealous desire to replace one troth-plighted male partner in another’s affections, the implicit truth owed to the duke by his retainers, and now the amorous troth-plight desired by the daughter of the very duke to whom that implicit truth is owed—vividly illustrate what an unnavigable tangle truth can become. What’s more, the same phrases—“chaunge me for no newe”, “pliȝt me þi trewþe,” and so on—recur again and again, but with each reoccurrence the changing context throws the stability of their meaning into doubt. Amiloun makes it clear that Amis owes his loyalty to the duke, but at the same time the truth between Amis and Amiloun is clearly an exclusive one, which will not permit any challenges. Belisaunt, though she does not explicitly want to supplant Amiloun, nevertheless embodies the very threat of treachery that Amiloun had so carefully warned Amis against. To agree to her proposed sexual liaison—and it is explicitly sexual, as Belisaunt goes on to make clear—would make Amis a traitor against her father, and yet she proposes this betrayal in the language of truth, the same language that binds Amis and Amiloun and that the Steward had employed in his attempt to usurp that bond. Indeed, the language is stable across all four potential relationships—Amis + Amiloun, Amis + Steward, Amis + Belisaunt, and Amis + Duke (as described by Amiloun)—and so it is not the discourse surrounding truth that is in flux, but the nature of the sworn truth itself. This series of events makes it clear that swearing truth to one person—the Steward or Belisaunt—would make Amis a traitor to another person—Amiloun or the Duke—thus complicating even the most foundational aspect of traditional truth, the oath.

Perhaps Amis is aware of this tangle for, in contrast to his immediate rebuff of the Steward's proposal, he does not immediately respond to Belisaunt's. Instead, after carefully considering his options, he argues that such a dalliance would be a "sinne" that would both anger God and constitute a "deshonour" against his lord, making Amis "an ivel traitour" (553, 555, 556). Here again, he has clearly taken Amiloun's advice to heart, framing Belisaunt's proposed actions in terms of his obligations to God—against whom this would be sin—and to the duke—against whom this would be dishonorable treason. He looks for no loophole that would allow him to accept, but argues vehemently against such a course of action, his objections rooted in the value he places upon the truths he owes. Belisaunt erupts with anger at being refused; she threatens that, if Amis does not acquiesce, then she will tear her "kerchief & mi clopes anon... / & say wiþ michel wrong, / Wiþ strengþe þou hast me todrawe; / Ytake þou schalt be þurth londes lawe / & dempt heize to hong" (579, 581-584). Significantly, her promise that she will say "wiþ michel wrong" that he has raped her carries a subtle double meaning, indicating either that his (invented) rape will have been wrongly accomplished, or that her own lie will have been wrongly accomplished. She also picks up the threads of the discourse of treason that Amis had included in his objection. Both of them are aware that an affair with her will make Amis a traitor, but Belisaunt makes it clear that, unless he becomes her lover in truth, she will have him hung as her rapist on false charges, referring to the very "londes lawe" that Amis refuses her in order to adhere to. While the discourse of treason does not play as large a role in this romance as it does in *Bevis of Hampton*, its inclusion at this fraught moment increases the sense of danger that Amis is in. Finally, in contrast to all Belisaunt's talk of wanting Amis to "be trewe" to her, and her own resolve to never be "forsworn" to him, her immediate response to his refusal is to threaten

him with the most damaging deception she can imagine—to essentially lie her way into a troth-plight.

Painfully ironic as her strategy may be, Amis capitulates, pleading for a week’s reprieve, which he gets only by swearing that he will “graunt þe þi wille” when the time is up, and the encounter ends when they “pliȝt hem trewþes boþe to” (608, 616). In addition to being disturbingly paradoxical, Belisaunt’s success at achieving a romantic troth-plight via a threatened, lethal lie manages to undermine the integrity of the very nature of plighting troth itself. The Steward desired a straightforward substitution of himself for Amiloun, and even though he had responded to rejection with threats of vengeance, Belisaunt’s response to rejection—a willingness to twist truth itself—is manifestly more successful.

The Auchinleck version of the romance varies significantly from its precursors by grounding this particular dilemma so deeply in the concept and language of truth. The Latin *vita* expands upon Radulfus’s brief account by describing its hero, Amelius, as deliberately “overpowering” (*oppressit*) his lord’s daughter, and this before rather than after he is tempted by—and in this version, agrees to take oaths of friendship with—the steward character.²⁸⁷ In the Latin *vita*, therefore, neither the Steward nor the lord’s daughter represent challenges to Amelius’s friendship with Amicus. These details change substantially across the later vernacular renditions. As in most respects, the Anglo-Norman version most resembles Auchinleck’s handling of the episode, although it casts the meeting in the garden as a deliberate trap on the girl’s part.²⁸⁸ The girl—Florie in the Anglo-Norman—makes no mention of a troth-plight, but instead pleads with this Amis that “she would die for love of him unless he took pity on her and loved her,” and when Amis, thinking her “out of her mind” does not immediately reply, she

²⁸⁷ Geck, xii-xiii.

²⁸⁸ Weiss, *Birth of Romance*, 175; ll. 187-25.

threatens to “tell my father you have wronged both me and him, and you will be torn to pieces by horses.”²⁸⁹ Although Florie’s strategy is similar to Belisaunt’s, the absence of any suggestion that she and Amis should formalize their relationship with sworn oaths, as well as the obliqueness of her threatened lie (when compared with Belisaunt’s explicit plan for a detailed deception), keeps the dilemma from impinging in any direct way on questions concerning the integrity of truth. The Old French *chanson de geste* differs greatly from both these versions, and is more overtly concerned with saving its hero, Amile, from any possible hint of blame for betraying his lord by sleeping with that lord’s daughter. Indeed the girl—here named Belissant, Charlemagne’s daughter—responds to Amile’s evasions of her multiple propositions by deceiving him. She simply sneaks into his bed at night, holds her tongue when he asks who she is, and both she and Amile enjoy themselves without Amile ever needing to consent to the betrayal of his lord.²⁹⁰ The dilemma in Auchinleck is thus, in many respects, the harshest of the three. It is made abundantly clear that Amis’s capitulation is sin, as well as being treason, but at the same time, Amis’s options are shown to be extremely limited. This does not save him from having to face the consequences of his actions, however, and those consequences come swift and hard.

The Steward reports Amis and Belisaunt’s tryst to the duke, who is immediately and violently furious. Amis does not directly deny the Steward’s accusation—in fact, he admits that he should be “hong on tre” if the accusation were proved against him, echoing both his own earlier recognition of his actions as treason as well as Belisaunt’s threat that, should he refuse her, she would have him “dempt heize to hong” (811). Amis manages to dance around any direct assertion of his innocence, but he does stretch the truth enough to twice call his accuser a liar. The duke declares that the truth of the matter will be proved “in batail,” and Belisaunt and her

²⁸⁹ Weiss, *Birth of Romance*, 175; ll. 251-312.

²⁹⁰ Rosenberg and Danon, *Ami and Amile*, 51; 40.

mother promise to stand borrow for Amis so that he will not be thrown in jail in the interim (863).

3. *The Misuse of Equality*

Knowing he must face the Steward in a trial by battle to settle the question of whether he has slept with Belisaunt, Amis makes his own awareness of his guilt explicitly, repeatedly clear, bewailing the fact that the Steward, however jealous and conniving, “hadde þe riȝt & he þe wrong” (856). He considers that he would “leuer to ben anhong / Ðan to be forsworn,” declaring himself “aferd to fiȝt” because “ȝif y swere icham forsworn, / Ðan liif & soule icham forlorn,” and repeatedly emphasizing that “forsworn man schal never spede” (868-867, 899, 894-895, 1050). Not only is there no attempt to soften or excuse Amis’s seemingly inevitable wrongdoing, but considerable effort is put into making sure that the audience knows that the hero is explicitly and emphatically guilty. The repetition and rephrasing of the central dilemma highlights the inexorable link between being “forsworn” and being “forlorn” in a way that reflects medieval historical reality, a world in which, as Richard Firth Green explains, “the oath was the cornerstone of civilization...society itself was kept from anarchy by certain unwritten understandings that civilized men observed. In a society which was so dependent on the formal oath, the basic crime was perjury.”²⁹¹ Amis’s repeatedly voiced anxiety surrounding the judicial oath he knows he must face and the perjury that such an oath will necessitate vividly illustrates not only the stakes of his own dilemma, but also the brutal realities that can attend the keeping of truth. When the choices are between being (justly) hanged for a traitor, or being

²⁹¹ Mickel, “The Question of Guilt,” 24.

forsworn—and thus likely killed in the trial by battle, since God will not champion a forsworn knight—keeping truth and breaking truth seem to have very little to choose between them.

Belisaunt, however, manages to come up with a third option, asking if there may be some “oper gile” they can use (898). In opposition to the binary under which Amis had been operating—wrong and right—she attempts to find the loophole that it had never occurred to him to seek. While this offers a circumnavigation of the difficult questions raised by Amis’s dilemma, it does not, in the end, provide answers to them. In the short term, however, Amis is jolted out of his melancholy by this suggestion; he remembers his sworn brother and sets forth to seek out Amiloun’s help. Amiloun himself, forewarned in a dream of his brother’s peril, rides out alone and meets Amis partway between the duke’s lands and Amiloun’s own. The two of them exchange clothes, horses, and identities so that Amiloun can honestly swear to an innocence Amis cannot claim, while Amis rides to Amiloun’s home, where he will face the necessity of deceiving his brother’s wife.

Amiloun is, upon his arrival, indeed mistaken for Amis, but on his way to the battlefield, it becomes clear that he has not fooled the arbiter who will be ostensibly judging this judicial ordeal. A voice issues “fram heuen adoun, / þat noman herd but he” and informs him that, should he undertake this battle, within three years he will be struck with disfiguring leprosy, as a result of which “þo þat be þine best frende / Schal be þi most fon, / & þi wiif & alle þi kinne / Schul fle þe stede þatow art inne / & forsake þe ichon” (1198-1199, 1216-1220). Almost more disturbing than the threat of leprosy itself are these social consequences; Amiloun will be forsaken by those closest to him, excluded from family and community and society at large.²⁹² Not only will his

²⁹² While this might seem to hint that even Amis will turn on him, the pair never call each other “friend,” only “brother,” and the text consistently refers to them as such. Indeed, Amis’s earlier rebuff of the Steward had drawn the line between a mere friend and the exclusive relationship represented by sworn brotherhood, which argues against a reading of the “best frende” who becomes the “most foe” as Amis.

physical identicalness to Amis—the very thing that allows him to accomplish this trick—be destroyed, but so will his social parity with his brother. These two equalities undergird their sworn brotherhood to such a foundational degree that the subversion of these equalities, coming as a consequence of Amiloun’s actions taken in support of that very brotherhood, cannot help but suggest divine censure of the relationship—or at the very least, the uses to which the relationship is being put.

Edward I can be seen as guilty of a comparable misapplication of the equality inherent in sworn brotherhood. By insisting that his sworn brother’s position should be as similar to his own as possible—which is exactly what sworn brotherhood is designed to accomplish—Edward worked to undermine the very basis of his own exclusive royal power. While Gaveston was never himself subject to sodomitical accusations, the complaints that were leveled against him would have been, from his enemies’ point of view, hardly less dangerous. The most consistent criticism centered on his overweening arrogance: “For Piers reckoned no one his fellow, no one his equal, [*Nullum suum comitem, nullum suum parem*] except the king alone...His arrogance [*fastus*] was, then, intolerable to the barons and the main cause of both the hatred and the rancour.”²⁹³ What the barons saw as intolerable arrogance can just as easily be seen as the result of the fact that the king really *was* Gaveston’s only equal at court: Edward saw it as not only being his right to shower Gaveston with favors, attention, and largesse, but as his duty. As for Gaveston, the accusations that he acted as a “second king, to whom all were subject and none were equal [*cui subessent omnes et par nullus*]” indicate that he took his sworn brotherhood—and the equality it demanded—just as seriously as the king did.²⁹⁴ Edward and Gaveston had to put considerable effort into transforming themselves into a pair of equal sworn brothers. Amis

²⁹³ Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 27-29; Latin from 26-28.

²⁹⁴ Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 5, Latin from 4. See also Chaplais, *Piers Gaveston*, 3, 20.

and Amiloun are gifted from birth with a physical equality—their identical appearance—which acts as an outward sign of their inward commitment to one another. But just as the equality for which Edward and Gaveston worked so hard backfired on them, so too does Amis and Amiloun’s deployment of their own identicalness result in serious consequences.

The angelic warning does bring Amiloun up short, but he decides to see the deception through: “To hold mi treuþe schal y nouȝt spare, / Lete God don alle his wille” (1230-1231). He casts his decision in terms of upholding the truth he has sworn with Amis, in defiance of a divine warning. The truth owed to a sworn brother has been brought into direct opposition with the truth owed to one’s lord, to legal observance, and even to God—and Amiloun elevates sworn brotherhood above all of them. The fact that Amiloun was given the chance to avoid his fate makes his sacrifice all the more noble, and his culpability all the more undeniable.

That said, the truly unexpected thing about this entire sequence is not that the heroes attempt to subvert divine justice, or even that they succeed.²⁹⁵ It is the fact Amiloun is punished for doing so. The ambiguous oath and the tricked ordeal are familiar tropes in medieval romance, but they rarely involve any kind of punishment for their perpetrators. For example, Tristrem and Ysonde—as I will discuss in my next chapter—enact a very similar ruse to clear Ysonde of an (accurate) charge of adultery. The trick works, Ysonde is exonerated, and the romance continues in the same vein it had taken before. Similarly, the ambiguous oath which Bevis takes while disguised, in order to trick the German Emperor and reclaim his patrimony, operates to shield Bevis from blame rather than to cause it, and this trick too ends up working in the hero’s favor. This is how tricked ordeals *usually* play out: the heroes get away with their deception while the audience follows along with happy complicity. The Auchinleck *Amis and Amiloun* disrupts this

²⁹⁵ Amiloun does of course defeat the Steward in combat. If he had been fated to die for his part in this deceptive substitution, there would presumably have been no need to warn him of the consequences of winning.

norm with its inclusion of the angelic warning that precedes the tricked ordeal, and any sense of triumph we might be tempted to read into Amiloun's victory is dampened by the looming threat of leprosy.

Not only does this romance handle its tricked ordeal very differently than the trope is usually handled, but this episode also marks a significant divergence from the earlier versions of the story. The two Latin versions provide no angelic warning at all.²⁹⁶ The Old French and Anglo-Norman versions, by contrast, each attach their predictions of leprosy to the moment when their Amiloun-characters must swear to marry their lord's daughter—a bigamous oath (since he is already married) that is completely absent from the Auchinleck version. The divine censure is thus set at a significant remove from the central purpose of the deceptive substitution—the trial by combat with the Steward—and instead concerns, in these earlier versions, a matter of sexual ethics.

In the Old French version is even at some pains to make sure its heroes are not blamed for the Steward's death: here, the battle drags on for two days, and, after being armed for battle on the second day, the Steward “muttered to himself words that would doom him that day: ‘Yesterday I did battle in the name of the Creator. Today I will fight in the name of the lord who has never had any love for God. Ah, Devil, how triumphant you will be today!’”²⁹⁷ It almost seems that the poet is worried his audience might have some sympathy for this character and feels the need to inflate his villainy to cartoonish proportions. This characterization also divides

²⁹⁶ Radulfus Totarius does not even connect the tricked ordeal with the leprosy. The text simply reports that, “[a]fter several happy years, Amicus, you became ill with the well-known spots of leprosy” (Leach, *Amis and Amiloun*, 104). The Latin *vita* simply includes a brief internal prayer that Amicus makes before the battle, in which he silently acknowledges that he is falsely seeking the death of a blameless man, and that God will hold him accountable for it. “Amicus cepit cogitare intra se dicens, ‘heu michi, qui mortem huius comitis tam fraudulenter cupio! Scio namque, quod si illum interfecero, reus ero ante supernum iudicem, si vero meam vitam tulerit de me semper obprobrium narrabitur perpetuum” (ll. 289-293). Geck, xiii. The leprosy, though it is not prefaced here, is later referred to as a chastisement from God.

²⁹⁷ Rosenberg and Danon, *Ami and Amile*, 78; 84.

the outcome of the ordeal from the oaths sworn at the beginning of the ordeal. Ami is not so much vindicated for having sworn accurately as the Steward is punished for his bizarre Satanism.²⁹⁸ As such, the outcome of this episode is completely separate from the realm of troubled truth, its outcome dictated not by a strict adherence to the words of an equivocal oath but by an event utterly unconnected with the heroes and their actions. While the ordeal here ends in triumph for the Ami, without a hint of divine censure, that censure does manifest at a later juncture, as the hero finds himself swept up in his lord's desire to immediately betroth the vindicated champion to his daughter. Ami silently prays "Let me pledge my troth in the name of my friend; I will do penance for it to the very end, and my wife will never know."²⁹⁹ God apparently accepts the bargain, since an invisible angel informs him that "you will be a loathsome leper... from neither kith nor kin will you have any help, save from pope Ysoret [his godfather] and kind Amile [the Amis-character]."³⁰⁰ Just as the catalyst for the divine punishment is different, so too is the severity. Whereas the Middle-English Amiloun was told that even his "best frende" would abandon him, in the Old French *chanson*, Ami is provided with two people who will stand by him, which "reaffirms God's will that Ami and Amile be friends and, also that the sinner find refuge in the Church."³⁰¹ There is no hint of this kind of divine approval of the relationship at work in the Auchinleck version—indeed, Amiloun is explicit about contrasting the "treuthe" he owes to his sworn brother to the manifest "wille" of God. Not only is the main characters' relationship *not* sworn brotherhood in the Old French *chanson*, but

²⁹⁸ See Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre*, 73.

²⁹⁹ Rosenberg and Danon, *Ami and Amile*, 81. "Or jurrerai en non mon compaignon, / La penitence en ferai jusqu'an som, / Ja nel svra ma fame" (Dembowski, pg. 57, lassie 88, lines 1772-1774)

³⁰⁰ Rosenberg and Danon, *Ami and Amile*, 82. "Tus eras ladres et mexiaus ausiment / ... Ja n'I avra aide d'ami ne de parent / Fors d'Yzore ed d'Amile le gent" (Dembowski, pg. 58, lassie 90, lines 1817, 1819-1820)

³⁰¹ Hyatte, *Arts of Friendship*, 125.

that relationship is not remotely implicated in the episode's consequences. Quite the reverse, since it is in that relationship that Ami will find solace from those very consequences.

The Anglo-Norman romance also links the leprosy to bigamy rather than to the tricked ordeal. This version does bring up the relationship of sworn brotherhood at this moment, but the implications are significantly different. When asked to provide his name before the wedding ceremony, the hero—here called Amilun—“was plunged into thought, and lo and behold, a voice, which nobody heard but he, said to him: ‘My lord Amilun, don’t do it! I tell you for certain, if you take the maiden, before three years have passed, you’ll be a leper for all to see.’”³⁰² The warning here does not reference the leprosy’s attendant pariah-hood, which features so heavily in both the Old French and Auchinleck versions. More puzzlingly, where the Old French and Auchinleck versions are at some pains to establish that the warning has a divine origin, the warning here simply comes from “a voice” only audible to Amilun. While its heavenly provenance can likely be inferred given the context, the fact that it is not explicitly a divine warning could be seen as working to mitigate Amilun’s liability in his rejection of it—and reject it he does: “Amilun heard it well enough, but nevertheless would not stop...He did not want it observed how his brother had deceived them [*Ne voleit ke fust aparceu, / Coment son frere eust deceu*].”³⁰³ In the absence of anything resembling either the Auchinleck Amiloun’s “Lete God don alle His wille” or the Old French Ami’s “whatever you inflict I shall accept,” Amilun’s rejection comes across as defiant, almost rash, particularly in light of the text’s explicit mention that he “heard it well enough.” The wording also explicitly blames Amis—and him alone—for the deception. Although there is a sense that he is trying to protect his sworn brother,

³⁰² Weiss, *Birth of Romance*, 181; ll. 697-770.

³⁰³ Weiss, *Birth of Romance*, 181; Kolbing, *Amis and Amiloun*, pg. 153, lines 721-722.

Amilun's priority here is cast in terms of concealing another person's wrongdoing, rather than as an elevation of sworn brotherhood itself above other obligations.

Many of the differences evident in the Auchinleck version of the romance thus make sworn brotherhood central to the episode in a significant departure from the earlier versions. This is most clearly seen in the fact that the divine warning is occasioned—for the first time in any extant version—not by any threat of bigamy, but by the looming prospect of the tricked ordeal. In prefacing this usually acceptable trope with the divine warning, the Auchinleck version shakes its audience out of their complacency with such a trick, while simultaneously shifting the emphasis onto the moment of Amiloun's decision whether to undertake the deception. This not only transforms that decision into a conscious sacrifice made on behalf of the sworn brother, but also transforms the resulting leprosy into a particularly apropos punishment, in that it destroys the physical similarity that both enables the tricked ordeal and undergirds the sworn brotherhood that occasioned the tricked ordeal.

4. “*His Brother Out of Sorwe Bring*”

As far as we know, Edward was never confronted by an angel offering him a choice between supporting Gaveston and adhering to his legal obligations. But a group of noblemen called the Ordainers managed to create a similar dilemma for the king. The 1311 Ordinances included forty-one articles, which addressed themselves to various problems that the Ordainers saw as being in need of reform. But, as the contemporary account in *Vita Edwardi Secundi* puts it, “the ordinance which expelled Piers Gaveston from England seemed more welcome [*magis uidebatur accepta*] to many than the rest, for when people examined the Ordinances they at once

turned to it.”³⁰⁴ This was Clause 20, which not only exiled Gaveston (again), but also provided a comprehensive justification of that exile, couched in language that points obliquely to the perquisites of sworn brotherhood as the root of the problem. Gaveston is accused of having “badly advised our lord the king and has incited him to do wrong...in drawing to himself royal power and royal dignity; in lording it over the estate of the king and of the crown, to the ruin of the king and of the people; and especially in estranging the heart of the king from his lieges.”³⁰⁵

Sworn brotherhood itself is nowhere mentioned in the Ordinances, but the document nevertheless offers an alternative, disturbing perspective on a relationship that had for centuries been an ostensibly positive institution. The mutual sharing of influence and resources becomes the accroaching or royal power, the equality of status becomes “lording it over” those more deserving, and the exclusivity and kin-like nature of the bond becomes a matter of “estranging” one party’s heart from all other men. Alan Bray points out, correctly, that despite the negative consequences of Edward and Gaveston’s relationship, “the relation of sworn brotherhood itself is treated with cautious respect” by contemporary commentators.³⁰⁶ Indeed, as far as strictly historical and political evidence can attest, the institution of sworn brotherhood never came under attack as a result of this abnormal example of it in action. But when we expand our view of what might provide pertinent contemporary evidence, the romance *Amis and Amiloun* certainly

³⁰⁴ Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 35; Latin from 34.

³⁰⁵ Phillips, *Edward II*, 178-179; quoting *English Historical Documents*, 532, Clause 20 of the Ordinances. See also Chaplais, *Piers Gaveston*, 71, who cites Rol. Parl. i. 283, Statues, i. 162, and BIHR 57, 201-2. The *Vita Edwardi Secundi* provides this ordinance “word for word as it was read out publicly [*contra dictorum ordinatorum prouisiones et decretal*],” making it clear that access to the Ordinances was not restricted to those who could get their hands on and read the text itself (Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 35; Latin from 34). The *Vita*’s version of the quoted part of the Ordinance reads as follows: “Petrus de Gauestone dominum regem male duxit, domino regi male consuluit, et ipsum ad male faciendum deceptoire et multiformiter induxit...de die in diem dominando supra statum regis et corone in destruccione regis et regni; specialiter elongando cor domini regis a suis legiis hominibus (Childs, 34).

³⁰⁶ Bray, *The Friend*, 29. Intriguingly, Bray discusses this pair as being, in general, a prime example of medieval sworn brotherhood (27-29, 38), pointing again to the fact that it was not a distortion of this well-established institution that got Edward and Gaveston into trouble, but rather their very devotion to its norms.

seems to be handling sworn brotherhood with a kind of distress and even disapproval not observed in official documents and chronicles, perhaps pointing to a wider, negative shift in contemporary attitudes towards the institution than can otherwise be observed. Although, of course, the parallels between romance and historical narrative are not exact—and I am certainly not arguing that we should read *Amis and Amiloun* as a historical analogy—the similarities and resonances between these two examples of sworn brotherhood make it imperative that we read these relationships alongside one another.

And indeed, much like Amiloun's decision, Edward's recall of Gaveston from the banishment inflicted by the Ordinances represents a clear example of his willingness to choose sworn brotherhood over the oath he swore to uphold the Ordinances. In other words, Edward subverted legal mores in order to save his sworn brother from an unpleasant fate at the hands of jealous noblemen, not unlike we see Amiloun do in his undertaking of the judicial ordeal on Amis's behalf. For the literary brothers, this subversion works in the short term but carries devastating consequences—and the same holds true for the historical brothers.

Gaveston was captured not long after his return from the Ordinance-mandated exile, and delivered into the hands of the Ordinances' main champion and the king's most powerful enemy, Thomas, Earl of Lancaster. On June 19, 1312, Gaveston was beheaded at Lancaster's order. Although Lancaster and his fellow barons would eventually be reconciled to the king (at least nominally), Edward stubbornly refused to acknowledge that they had done the kingdom a service in disposing of the "traitor" Gaveston.³⁰⁷ He also continued to behave as a sworn brother to Gaveston, assuming after his death "his most sacred duties, the prosecution of his just quarrels and the protection of his kin": maintaining his burial place, providing for his widow and

³⁰⁷ The debate over whether the king will call Piers a "traitor" (*proditor*), is lengthy, involved, and acerbic in the *Vita Edwardi Secundi*'s account. See Childs, *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, 64-65.

children, and finally, in 1322, gaining vengeance upon Lancaster.³⁰⁸ Edward would go on to have other favorites—some of whom would catalyze his downfall—but he would never again enter into a covenant of sworn brotherhood. Like Amis when confronted with the Steward’s attempted usurpation of Amiloun’s place, Edward seems to have held fast to the opinion that, “Gete me frendes ware y may, / Y no schal never bi night no day / Chaunge him [the beloved sworn brother] for no newe.”

The consequences that Amis and Amiloun face for their own excessive devotion to their sworn brotherhood and their misuse of their equality are not, perhaps, as terminal as were the consequences Gaveston faced, but they are severe. When Amiloun and Amis meet to resume their own identities, Amis makes a point of voicing the overt re-confirmation of their bond that he had not given when they first parted: “Be it in periil neuer so strong, / Y schal þe help in riȝt & wrong, / Mi liif to lese to mede” (1398-1400). As with Amiloun’s earlier reaffirmation of the brotherhood oath, Amis’s words here also act to foreshadow coming trouble—in this case, the leprosy that Amiloun and the audience know to expect, even if Amis is not yet aware of it. In addition, the phrase “in riȝt & wrong” appears here for the first time since its inclusion in their initial oath, and it gestures not only back in time—towards the ambiguity built into their oath and towards the immorality of their recent deception—but also forward in time to Amis’s provision of the kind of help he here promises, help that will indeed require “wrong” of him.

The promised leprosy does strike Amiloun, and his shrewish wife is disgusted not only by his diseased appearance but also by its cause, having been informed of the double-deception. In retaliation, she subjects him to progressive stages of exile, first from the hall, then from his hut at the gate of the hall, then from the town entirely. The only member of the household who stays

³⁰⁸ Keen, *Nobles, Knights and Men-at-Arms*, 57; Phillips, *Edward II*, 242, 296.

loyal to Amiloun is his nephew, named Owaines but called Amoraunt because he is “trewe & of his kende” (1575). While Amoraunt’s relationship with Amiloun is predicated more on familial than sworn bonds, he does take an oath that “His lord nold he neuer forsake / Whiles he ware oliue” (1603-1604). In contrast to the all-encompassing oath binding the two sworn brothers together, this promise is simple and relatively limited, which perhaps accounts for Amoraunt’s success in keeping it, even as he and his uncle are banished further and further from their home. In preparing to leave the town entirely, Amiloun takes with him only the gold cup that signifies his bond with Amis. Despite clearly remembering and cherishing the fact that he does have someone he can turn to in this most dire trouble, Amiloun seems determined to avoid seeking out Amis for help. Even when he and Amoraunt eventually end up in Amis’s city, he instructs his nephew to ask at the duke’s house for food, since the duke is “a man of milde mode,” but at the same time sternly warns him to “be aknowe to no man / Whider y schal, no shenes y cam, / No what mi name it be” (1818, 1824-1826). To be sure, this raises the pathos of the situation a great deal, and makes Amiloun appear only one step away from true martyrdom, but after it had been made so clear that Amis heartily desires to help his sworn brother “in any woe,” and that Amiloun had taken this offer to heart, and has carried the token of that relationship with him, this determination to remain incognito seems strangely unmotivated in a romance where the motivations have been generally clear and understandable.

I believe that Amiloun’s reluctance to be recognized or helped by his sworn brother can best be understood in the light of the text’s consistent painting of the tricked ordeal—the source of Amiloun’s leprosy—as immoral. Amiloun’s acceptance of his punishment for engaging in that deception, even to the degree of not seeking out Amis’s help, may well be the ultimate demonstration of the tricked ordeal’s reprehensibility. Even though that action was taken for the

sake of brotherhood, Amiloun refuses to call upon that truth in order to ease the sufferings caused by that truth. In addition, Amiloun's resolve to remain incognito *from* his brother also suggestively echoes his resolve to remain incognito *for* his brother. Whereas the disguise at the heart of the tricked ordeal had been made possible by the brothers' identicalness, Amiloun's disguise at this juncture is made possible by the destruction of that identicalness. As before, he is determined not to be recognized as Amiloun, even though to be so recognized would save him from suffering. In a text that is full of loaded repetition, a text that so often generates meaning out of variations in context rather than variations in content, this stands as a particularly subtle and sophisticated restaging. As with so many other things in this romance, the surface reading—that the romancer simply wanted to increase pathos and to set up a moment of high emotional drama in the recognition scene—is, while perfectly legitimate, only one layer of a moment that almost overflows with potential resonances.

Regardless of Amiloun's desire to remain unknown, the sight of his young and handsome nephew dancing attendance upon such a wretched leper catches the attention of a member of Amis's court, who tries—unsuccessfully—to woo Amoraunt away to his service. When rejected, the man relates the strange occurrence to his duke, Amis, who responds shrewdly, “Oþer þe child is of his blod yborn, / þer he haþ him oþes sworn... / For þat he is so trewe & kende, / Y schal quite him his mede” (1944-1945, 1950-1951). Indeed, Amoraunt is—as the audience knows—bound to Amiloun by both blood and oath, and Amis's astute understanding that these are the only things that can forge so strong a bond not only demonstrates his wisdom as a ruler, but also displays the continued value he places on truth and loyalty. In order to reward this loyalty, he sends out his golden cup, the truth-token Amiloun had given him at their parting, full of wine to be given to the leper and his attendant. When this largesse arrives,

Amiloun pours the wine from his brother's cup into his own, until they both have the same amount. This makes no sense in terms of alms-giving—surely he would have taken it all (as he does in the Anglo-Norman poem)—but it does make sense from the point of view of the narrative imagery...Up to this point there has been an ever-widening divergence between the two brothers...[but t]he pouring of the wine from one cup to the other begins the process by which this split is healed.³⁰⁹

Amis's deployment of his own truth-token is met by Amiloun's reciprocation of the gesture.

Amis had perhaps meant his choice of that particular cup to act as a marker of the kind of behavior he was rewarding—a symbol of truth to requite truthful behavior. When Amiloun takes out his own cup, the contrast between the unchanged, unchangeable truth-tokens and his very changed body serves also to contrast their enduring bond with the gulf that now looms wide between the brothers who were once as equal as the cups. And indeed, the equal sharing of wine between these cups makes their contents, like the inner nobility and loyalty of the brothers whom they symbolize, as identical as their appearances. If Amiloun is still hesitant to be recognized, by this gesture he nevertheless begins the process of bridging the gulf between himself and Amis—as well as taking the first step towards his own recovery from leprosy.

The healing of the brothers' split is not immediate, however, for the sight of so foul a leper with so rich an object causes predictable astonishment. When Amis is informed that a cup identical to his own has ended up in such hands, he jumps to entirely the wrong conclusion, rushing out and attacking the man he had so recently honored with his charity, accusing him of stealing the cup and demanding to know how he came by it. Fortunately Amoraunt intervenes and reveals his uncle's identity and indignantly pointing out that “Wel sore may him rewe þat stounde / Þat euer for þe toke he wounde” (2058-2059). The “wounde” that Amoraunt mentions refers not only to the leprosy, but specifically to the wound through the shoulder that Amiloun had suffered at the Steward's hands during the tricked ordeal. Amis checks for the scar and, upon

³⁰⁹ Mann, “Messianic Chivalry,” 151,

finding it, swoons. It thus takes two tokens of identity for the recognition to properly take place: first the cups, those symbols of their now-broken physical similarity, and secondly the scar, a pre-leprosy mark that differentiates the otherwise identical bodies of the sworn brothers, and moreover acts as a permanent reminder of the debt that Amis owes to Amiloun, the “mede” that he has so evilly acquitted.

Once Amiloun’s identity is understood, Amis insists on taking his brother in. For a full year he and Belisaunt take excellent care of Amiloun. While this may be seen as a chance for Amis to properly “quite” Amiloun for his earlier truth, a more direct and costly opportunity eventually appears. One night Amis receives his own divine visitor in the form of an angel who gives him instructions for how to cure Amiloun’s leprosy: he must, on Christmas morning, “slen his children tuay, / & alien [anoint] his broþer wiþ þe blode, / Þurth Godes grace þat is so gode / His wo schuld wende oway” (2141-2144). The divine message once again sets up a clear dichotomy between two different truths that the visited hero owes. For Amiloun, the dilemma saw his sworn brotherhood being set in opposition to the truth he owed to both his lord and to the legal system, but for Amis, sworn brotherhood is opposed to the truth he owes to his own family, not to mention his obligation, as a duke, to maintain his dynastic line. Whereas Amiloun had responded to his own heavenly messenger almost immediately, Amis reacts with an overwhelming mix of emotions and impulses as two of his most sacred obligations come crashing into irreconcilable conflict: “Ful bliþe was sir Amis þo, / Ac for his childer him was ful wo, / For fairer ner non born. / Wel loþ him was his childer to slo / & wele loþer his broþer forgo” (2151-2155). The two obligations are explicitly shown to be incapable of co-existing: either the “childer” or the “broþer” must be harmed. Amis wrestles with his decision over the course of three days, receiving the same message each night. The audience is continually privy to

his inner turmoil, just as when Amis struggled with his imminent duel with the Steward: “Þan þouʒt þe douk, wiþouten lesing, / For to slen his childer so ʒing, / It were a dedli sinne; / & þan þouʒt he, bi heuen-king, / His broþer out of sorwe bring” (2181-2185). Amis is clear in his own mind that the action he is contemplating would be unequivocally wrong, would be “dedli sinne,” just as he was clear that his potential forsworn-ness in the trial by combat would have been equally unacceptable. Amis firmly believes that his enormous debt to Amiloun for the latter’s sacrifices on his behalf can only be rectified by a sacrifice of equal or greater value. After all, Amis would not have his children, would not have been able to marry Belisaunt and assume the mantle of duke, without Amiloun’s participation in the tricked ordeal. Not only do Amiloun’s sufferings distance the brothers, but the gap is made all the wider by how high Amis has risen. Both sworn brothers have had their fortunes change immeasurably since they first bound themselves to one another, and those fortunes were only able to change in those ways *because of* that sworn brotherhood. In order to re-establish any measure of the equality essential to sworn brotherhood, not to mention the identical appearance which embodies that equality, Amis must not only raise his brother up out of suffering, but must also bring himself low.

Even so, he hesitates on the very edge of his sleeping children’s crib, and again his inner turmoil is laid bare. Speaking half to himself and half to his innocent heirs, he confesses “It were gret reweþe ʒou to slon / Þat God haþ bouʒt so dere” (2224-2225). The reminder that his baptized children are also, in a very real way, God’s children once again raises the specter of the “dedli sinne” of which Amis is so afraid. But Amis eventually “turned oʒain his mode” and thinks on how his brother “Wiþ grimly wounde he schad his blod/ For mi loue opon a day,” stating the debt he owes to Amiloun in terms of shedding blood for one another’s love (2230, 2230-2231). And, from a certain point of view, it is *his* blood he would be shedding—his paternal blood

running in the veins of his two heirs, themselves a reflection of his own body in much the same way that Amiloun once had been. In order to restore the physical similarity between himself and his sworn brother, he must re-claim the blood that gave rise to these two smaller replicas of himself. He had sworn to give his own life to help his brother if the need arose, and his children are themselves receptacles of that very life he had sworn away.³¹⁰

Finally having found his resolve, Amis slits the children's throats and carefully collects their blood in a basin. When he brings the blood to Amiloun—who is distraught at the sacrifice—Amis insists that the loss was worth it and re-iterates the words of his earlier vow: “Thesu, when it is his wille, / May send me childer mo. / For me of blis þou art al bare; / Ywis, mi liif wil y nouȝt spare / To help þe now þerfro” (2272-2276). Here Amis makes perfectly clear the degree of his prioritization of sworn brotherhood. As he had sworn, he has not spared his life—even if it was his life carried in vessels outside his own body—and he indicates the relative replaceability of children when compared to the irreplaceability of a sworn brother. Amis also implicitly declares the debt between the two of them settled, countering Amiloun's previous state of being bare of bliss for Amis's sake with the help Amis now offers in order to restore that bliss and bring them back to full equality.

The efficacy of the cure is complete: “Al his fowlehed was agoo / Thruȝ grace of Goddes sonde; / Than was he as feire a man / As ever he was yet or than” (2407-2411).³¹¹

³¹⁰ Corinne Saunders attributes particular significance to the Christmas timeframe of this action, and she argues that the “sacrifice and innocent blood of the children, like Christ's, restores the sufferer, even while the act of murder, articulated by Amis, and the passive innocence of the children render the scene profoundly disturbing. The children are Amis's bone and blood: by killing them he sacrifices himself, his Christ-like action illuminated by the miracle of healing on, appropriately, Christmas Eve” (“Greater love,” 133). While I agree that there is definitely an element of sacrificing likeness for friendship's sake, and that this sacrifice may echo Christ's, I believe that the persistent negative light thrown upon this “dedli sinne” effectively forecloses the possibility that we are meant to read Amis's actions here as primarily positive or Christ-like.

³¹¹³¹¹ This section of the primary text—and those following—are provided by the c. 1400 manuscript BM Egerton 2862, as presented in Foster, Edward E., ed. *Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle, and Sir Amadace*. 2ed Ed. TEAMS Middle English Texts Series. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications. 2007.

Moreover, this healing is explicitly tied, not to Amis's actions, but to God's grace. And that grace is not done with the sworn brothers, for the children are discovered to be "Withouten wemme and wound / Hool and sound" (2419-2420). Either miraculously resurrected or miraculously preserved, the two boys stand again as biological brothers that mirror the restored equality and identicalness between the sworn brothers. This overwhelmingly happy, unquestionably undeserved conclusion to the most fraught episode of the romance starkly highlights the unbridgeable gap between the results of the heroes' best efforts to keep truth with one another, and the real efficacy of divine grace.

5. *Happily Ever After?*

Though the children's resurrection is not original to this version of the story, certain differences from the earlier tradition lend the Auchinleck version a heightened discordance that once again speaks to this romance's increased unease with the central relationship and the lengths to which it is pursued. In Radolfus, the cure is provided not by an angel but by human doctors.³¹² By contrast, the Latin *vita* justifies the sacrifice in explicitly biblical terms. In this version, the Amis-character does not wrestle with his own guilt, but rather prays as he sacrifices his children, referencing the importance of keeping faith [*fidem*] with the one who has kept faith with him. Indeed, seems almost to be claiming credit for his willingness to go to such extremes, asking that God "deign to cleanse my friend [*socium*], for whose love [*amore*] I did not fear to shed the blood of my sons!"³¹³ While this tonal handling may jar against modern readers' sensibilities just as much as the Auchinleck version's had, the text itself seems to endorse such a perspective. There is very little in the way of introspection here, and no hint that acknowledges,

³¹² Leach, *Amis and Amiloun*, 104-105.

³¹³ Geck, xiv.

even obliquely, the sinfulness of the deed. Human emotionality is almost completely quashed, allowing the Biblical resonances to fully emerge and justify the exercise as a straightforward act of keeping faith with a friend and displaying trust in God, rather than as a tortured choice between two horrible options. By contrast, the Auchinleck version gives its readers an intimate view of Amis's torment and his internal struggle over the decision, refusing to shy away from the unsavory aspects of the sacrifice, and in fact emphasizing the hero's awareness of those aspects.

In the Old French *chanson de geste* the emotions and pathos of the moment are even more amplified. In this version, the elder of the two boys wakes up, and, upon seeing his father's naked sword, asks what he is going to do with it. After the Amis-character explains his intended infanticide and the reason for it, the boy agrees to be sacrificed, and helpfully stretches out his neck to the blade.³¹⁴ After recovering from a swoon, the father complies.³¹⁵ The drama is pitched as high as it will go, but the responsibility of the characters caught in it is commensurately diminished. Not only is sacrificing the children never described as anything resembling a "dedli sinne," but the older child's consent works to soften much of the moral distastefulness of the act by endorsing the hero's prioritization of his sworn brother over his children.

By contrast, the Anglo-Norman romance eschews moral ambiguity by veering in exactly the opposite direction: it contains not a trace of the hesitation or high emotion we might expect. As with the warning that cautioned against the bigamous oath, in this version the message informing the Amis-character of the potential cure is not specified as either an angel or divinely sent. Moreover, when he comes to do the deed, "[t]he children's father had no pity, but cut the heads off them both, steeped the sheets in the blood, and wrapped Amilun in them."³¹⁶ This

³¹⁴ Rosenberg and Danon, *Ami and Amile*, 116-117; 154

³¹⁵ Rosenberg and Danon, *Ami and Amile*, 118-119; 158-160.

³¹⁶ Weiss, *Birth of Romance*, 186; ll. 1070-1144.

version gives no chance for either the characters or the audience to pause and question the action, but skips straight to the sacrifice's accomplishment. And while, upon the discovery of the children whole and sound, both Amis and his wife "thanked God heartily," there is no more a direct crediting of God's grace for their resurrection than there was a direct divine source for the cure that required their sacrifice.³¹⁷

Ultimately, the Old French seems more interested in creating a scene of intense emotional resonance with a minimum of pesky moral concerns, whereas the Anglo-Norman almost valorizes the Amis-character's lack of scruples and dedication to decisive action. Neither version shows their hero visited with the same message three nights running, as the Auchinleck version does, and neither takes the time to detail their hero's careful, furtive preparations for the sacrifice, or his agonizing over the decision. The Middle English romance has consistently emphasized the negative consequences of elevating sworn brotherhood above all other concerns in a way that departs significantly from the tradition it is derived from, and this final, climactic episode is no exception.

As such, it might be tempting to let the happy ending override the insistent moral ambiguity of the romance at large—tempting indeed, to take at face value the emphatic statement of closure which the boys' resurrection represents. But allowing these apparently contradictory elements to coexist without attempting to explain one or the other of them away—especially when these elements are viewed within their poignant contemporary context—makes it possible to appreciate the full complexity and sophistication of *Amis and Amiloun*. The apparent forcing of closure in fact works to refuse closure, resisting at the last any endorsement of sworn brotherhood by bypassing sworn brotherhood entirely in order to achieve a happy ending for

³¹⁷ Weiss, *Birth of Romance*, 187; ll. 1070-1144.

which neither Amis nor Amiloun can claim any real credit. Sworn brotherhood—or rather, the extreme elevation of sworn brotherhood—is clearly shown to *cause* the majority of the main characters’ problems, and so it makes sense that it would be unable to *solve* any of them.

This consistently problematic portrayal of sworn brotherhood throughout the romance, different in so many ways from earlier versions of the relationship, is only explicable if we keep in mind the historical example that, as I have argued, would have profoundly affected contemporary attitudes towards sworn brotherhood. *Amis and Amiloun* is no mere allegory of recent historical events, and the outline of the story is obviously inherited from a centuries-old tradition; but the differences from that tradition that highlight the ambiguity and unease surrounding sworn brotherhood can be seen to resonate suggestively with concerns unique to Auchinleck’s context, and in doing so, to reveal this romance as responding with unease, distaste, criticism, and—eventually—some little hope to the affair of the king’s sworn brotherhood. No miracle was on hand to save England from the consequences of this affair; instead, human intervention was necessary. To the jealous barons of England, the problems caused by their king’s obsessive elevation of his sworn brotherhood would have also required a solution that completely bypassed sworn brotherhood itself. Lancaster’s execution of Gaveston might have been seen as almost as much of a *deus ex machina* as God’s intervention to save the children, even if a less pleasant one. Only by going far outside of the established pattern of objection, resistance, exile, and return could the historical problems caused by sworn brotherhood be resolved, just as it is only by going outside the pattern of mutual wrongdoing in order to aid the sworn brother that the literary problems caused by sworn brotherhood are resolved. In the romance, at least, the blood sacrifice is reversed, and the pattern is broken, but Edward II stubbornly refused to abandon the same tendency to obsessive and exclusive

attachment that lead to Gaveston's death, even if he was careful never again to call any man his sworn brother. But one of the more hopeful notes of the romance—Amis's resurrected heirs—may have also called to mind a hopeful historical reality: the young king Edward III, only just come into his own as the Auchinleck manuscript was being compiled. With the sworn brothers themselves out of the way—Edward II and Gaveston dead separately while Amis and Amiloun are, in the end, buried in the same grave—the carrier of one sworn brother's likeness and lifeblood lives on, a figure of hope for the future.

All “Play” and No Work:
Satirizing Sooth in *Sir Tristrem*

Relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to Auchinleck’s *Sir Tristrem*, the earliest extant Middle English version of the Tristan legend, and much of the attention it has received has centered on its relationship with Thomas of Britain’s twelfth-century Anglo-Norman version of the story, which was likely the source for either the Auchinleck text or for an intermediate exemplar, now lost.³¹⁸ This kind of attention has usually been less than flattering, as critics work to come to terms with the absence, in *Sir Tristrem*, of Thomas’s “psychological intricacies,” the loss of “[m]eaning and motivation,” and “the compression of the action and the uncourtly nature of the references to the love-play.”³¹⁹ These idiosyncrasies have led some to theorize a poet who did not really understand the tradition he had inherited, writing for an audience that was “relatively uncultured,” inevitably resulting in a “dismaying” and incoherent poem.³²⁰ To be sure, the Auchinleck version of this romance is indeed lacking in any sustained interest in its characters’ psychologies, the motivations behind those characters’ actions are often presented as meaningless, the action is much compressed, and the love-play is uncourtly in the extreme. But these qualities are not, I argue, the results of incompetent translation or adaptation, and they should not be seen as reflecting poorly on the audience that was intended to enjoy this romance. In fact, if read carefully both on its own terms and in relation to its manuscript and

³¹⁸ Susan Crane summarizes two of the widely-held transmission suppositions and adds her own: “Eugen Kölbing proposed that *Sir Tristrem* was written from memory of Thomas’s work, thus explaining many of the English poet’s confusions, but Bédier argued that it could equally well have been written with direct reference to a copy of Thomas’s poem. Probably there was between the Anglo-Norman *Tristan* and the Auchinleck *Sir Tristrem* a thirteenth-century intermediary, a Northern Tristan poem by an English Thomas” (*Insular Romance*, 188-189; citing Kölbing, ed., *Tristansage*, I, cxlvii; Bédier, ed., *Tristan*, II, 87-88). Regardless of which of these theories is the more correct, Auchinleck’s ultimate reliance upon Thomas’s version can be safely assumed.

³¹⁹ Rumble, “Toward a Reappraisal,” 223; Crane, *Insular Romance*, 190; Lupack, “Reception and Perception,” 53.

³²⁰ Rumble, “Toward a Reappraisal,” 223; Crane, *Insular Romance*, 188-189.

historical contexts, *Sir Tristrem* reveals itself to be a uniquely self-conscious and self-reflexive parody of the Tristran tradition.

I am not the first to propose such a reading: Alan Lupack has been perhaps the most overt voice calling for an understanding of *Sir Tristrem* as a parody on the basis of these same seemingly inferior features, although he does not explore the motivations behind and ramifications of this argument.³²¹ Other recent critics, while rarely going so far as to label this romance a parody, have been by and large more tolerant of *Sir Tristrem*'s idiosyncrasies, seeing them as deliberate and significant rather than accidental.³²² Writing even before Lupack, Michael Swanton argues that the "author"³²³ of *Sir Tristrem* seems to be "deeply conscious of the potential humor of the situation and the ironies present in individual events," and that he plays these up for the benefit of an audience already familiar with the Tristran tradition.³²⁴ Indeed, it would be difficult to create a parody of something that was not widely known and immediately recognizable, and even those scholars who do not advocate for reading *Sir Tristrem* as a parody nevertheless agree that the romance assumes an audience to whom the Tristran story would have been well known.³²⁵ This apparently widespread familiarity with the tradition not only enables this romance to act as a send-up of that tradition, but also provides the avenue by which *Sir*

³²¹ Lupack, *Sir Tristrem*, 147; "Reception and Perception," 53. His main goal seems to be defending the romance from the kind of derision it has traditionally received, and his analysis of the text is focused on demonstrating that it *is* a parody, rather than on exploring its parodic agenda.

³²² See Mainer, "The Singularity of *Sir Tristrem*," 98, 99; Symons, "Does Tristan Think," 5; and Hardman, "The True Romance," 93.

³²³ Auchinleck's Scribe 1 served as this romance's copyist, and even if, as seems likely, there was an intermediate exemplar between the Thomas and this Middle English version, the adaptive impulses at work behind the manuscript as a whole and evident in Scribe 1's work in particular should go without saying by this point. While I decline to use "author" in the same kind of convenient shorthand which probably informs Swanton's use of the word here, therefore, I do regard *Sir Tristrem*—like *Bevis of Hampton* and *Amis and Amiloun* (another of Scribe 1's works)—as having been deliberately crafted for inclusion in the Auchinleck manuscript.

³²⁴ Swanton, *English Literature before Chaucer*, 204.

³²⁵ Hardman, "The True Romance," 93; Symons, "Does Tristan Think," 18. A recent article points out that, even though the Auchinleck text is the only surviving copy of *Sir Tristrem*, the romance "was evidently well-known at the time, for there are allusions to it in a number of ME works" (Putter, Jefferson, Minkova, "Dialect, Rhyme, and Emendation," 73). See also Lupack, *Sir Tristrem*, 152.

Tristrem, in its own unique way, grapples with the nascent fourteenth century crisis of truth that so troubles other Auchinleck romances.

In many ways, *Sir Tristrem* offers a significant contrast to the anxiety evident in *Amis and Amiloun* and *Bevis of Hampton* surrounding the instability of truth. Centering on an adulterous relationship made possible by incessant deception, we might expect truth to be an inescapable concern in *Sir Tristrem*, but the manner in which this concern is handled seems flippant and irreverent in contrast to the tension that manifests elsewhere in the manuscript. This is because the world of *Sir Tristrem* is one wherein truth rarely operates according to its traditional meaning—honor, integrity, faithfulness—and instead exists largely as “sooth,” as “accuracy,” the definition into which it was evolving over the course of the fourteenth century. While the parodic impulse of *Sir Tristrem* is thus directed towards the Tristran tradition, this romance also incorporates a great deal of satire at the expense of sooth.³²⁶ Richard Firth Green discusses the intersection of “truth” and “sooth,” and the slow process whereby “*truth* made further inroads into the semantic territory formerly occupied by *sooth*” as one of the central transitions of the Ricardian crisis of truth:

the belief that the trouthe of an oathworthy litigant should always prevail over the sooth of circumstantial details allowed many fourteenth century judges and lawyers to use legal fictions [when necessary]...but as the relentless progress of literate habits of mind drove trouthe and sooth ever closer together such a belief must have become more and more difficult to maintain.³²⁷

Sir Tristrem does not even try to maintain a workable distinction between the two. The romance treats truth-as-integrity with consistent ambivalence and irony, but it is every bit as skeptical that “the sooth of circumstantial details” is any easier to discern or to believe. In *Sir Tristrem*, sooth

³²⁶ While the argument that *Sir Tristrem* is a parody has been made before, as far as I am aware I am the first to claim that the romance also engages in politically and socially motivated satire.

³²⁷ Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, 378, 147. See also 25, and 28.

is tied to the evidence of one's own eyes, the direct experience of an event, rather than the kind of written evidence Green discusses here, but at the same time, the readerly gaze of the audience is solicited in such a way and at such fraught moments as to subtly elide the difference between the "firsthand" sight of the characters *within* the romance and the document-based "sight" of the audience absorbing the romance.³²⁸ At every turn, the absurdity of relying on strict visual evidence make it clear that sooth, far from being a more accurate (and thus potentially more reliable) counterpart to human truth, it is in fact every bit as prone to being misused and misunderstood. Bérout's and Thomas's Tristran tales take traditional human truth very seriously, even as they focus on and celebrate adulterous heroes, but *Sir Tristrem* refuses to treat either truth or unfaithfulness with solemnity, presenting instead a story of absurd naiveté meeting mindless physicality in a dynamic only maintainable by the reliance on visual sooth shared by all three members of the love triangle. In this way, the process of parodying a romance tradition so dependent upon deception and false appearances offers a perfect vehicle for mocking the very idea of "true" appearances. Even when the human qualities of truth seem to be invoked—as in Tristrem's own regular epithet "the trewe"—the irony of many of these moments evacuates truth's traditional meaning of most of its power. The deception and adultery that animate Tristrem and Ysonde's entire relationship engender no noticeable textual anxiety; instead, they are the source of most of the amusement to be had in this romance. At first glance, this approach might seem dissonant with the other Auchinleck romances discussed above, but the combination of parody and satire ultimately works to come to terms with and respond to recent destabilizing

³²⁸ This is not to ignore the likelihood that much of the audience of *Sir Tristrem* would have experienced it audibly, perhaps as it was read aloud to the household of the Auchinleck patron, but even so, the language of vision as it operates within the romance invites an understanding of this poem as a kind of spectacle, its pleasures "visual" in nature even if oral in reception.

events just as these other romances do. The use of humor and irony should not lead us to assume an absence of intelligent generation of meaning—quite the opposite.

1. *Contexts and Intertexts*

Sir Tristrem partakes of a robust medieval tradition of parody and satire while also standing as an early example of these modes being employed in Middle English literature, let alone Middle English romance. Though, in modern terms, parody and satire are held to be distinct if interrelated forms, in the Middle Ages it is doubtful that that such a distinction would have operated with quite as much force.³²⁹ Moreover, in the case of my own investigation, the parody and satire that inform *Sir Tristrem*'s handling of troubled truth intertwine and reinforce one another to the point where attempting to sharply differentiate between the moments that are primarily satire and those that are primarily parody would be an unsuccessful and certainly unhelpful enterprise. In the same way, I intend to largely avoid engaging in the debate at the core of many studies of satire: whether satire works ultimately to reinforce or to undercut its target ideologies. There are convincing voices to be heard on both sides when it comes to medieval satire,³³⁰ but when it comes to medieval parody, there seems to be a good deal more willingness to accept complexities and apparent paradoxes in the relationship between imitator and imitated. Earle Birney puts it succinctly when he describes the importance of appreciating parody in terms of its dual meanings: "*Para*, meaning 'counter' or 'against,' may be understood as accentuating

³²⁹ While Earle Birney, one of the foundational scholars of medieval irony, argues for understanding parody and satire as "constitutionally different" genres, since the former primarily targets literature while the later takes aim at the world in general (*Essays on Chaucerian Irony*, 81), M.E.J. Hughes has argued that, in many medieval discourses, "it is very difficult to see where literary expectations end and these other expectations begin," and I tend to agree more with Hughes on this matter ("Medieval Parody as Literary Benefactor," 71, 68). See also Parsons, "A Riotous Spray of Words," 116.

³³⁰ Alfie, "Love and Poetry," 348; Hughes, "Medieval Parody as Literary Benefactor," 67, 68; Parsons, "A Riotous Spray of Words," 110, 112, 115.

the critical distance (diachronic and otherwise) between the counter-pointed discourses. But *para*, meaning ‘beside,’ may be seen as underscoring the complementary and synchronic parity between two equal texts.”³³¹ I find this paradigm to be particularly useful for understanding *Sir Tristrem*. On the one hand, I believe that the primary goal of this romance’s satire/parody is to expose and mock sooth’s insufficiencies, to act as a comic warning against relying upon visual evidence as a substitute for damaged human truth. That said, the characters in the romance who rely upon visual evidence seem to be perfectly happy and content to do so—even the perennially duped Mark has very few moments of obvious distress as a result of his perfect trust in what his eyes tell him.

Given this particular interest in sight and vision, I find Sarah Kay’s exploration of the ways in which parody can engineer “positions from which it itself is to be viewed” to be extremely apropos when it comes to analyzing *Sir Tristrem*.³³² Much of the humor in this Middle English romance skirts the edge of fabliau sensibility, and Kay examines the parodic potential in those fabliaux characters who “are apparently willing to believe they see what they are told they see (even if they patently don’t). Their gaze, positioned within the story, parallels the gaze that the story directs upon itself, and warns the reader not to fall into the same trap.”³³³ This aligns with my understanding of *Sir Tristrem* as being invested in exposing the fallibility of visual sooth: in inviting us to laugh not only at Mark, but at the lovers as well for their consistent reliance upon and exclusive interest in physical, visible “realities,” the romance works to undercut the very notion that truth-as-evidence is any more ascertainable or reliable than truth-as-integrity. Therefore, while Susan Crane has argued that “*Sir Tristrem* unselfconsciously

³³¹ Birney, *Essays on Chaucerian Irony*, 80-81.

³³² Kay, “Genre, Parody, and Spectacle,” 167.

³³³ Kay, “Genre, Parody, and Spectacle,” 173.

resists Thomas's ideal through its misapprehensions and faltering reformations," I instead propose that the Auchinleck romance's resistance to such ideals—whether those found in Thomas, in Bérout, or in the early fourteenth century discourses of truth—is in fact uniquely self-conscious and self-reflexive.³³⁴

Although, as mentioned, the Auchinleck *Sir Tristrem* follows Thomas's version most closely, it also seems to have been influenced by Bérout's work at several points. In fact, it seems to me very likely that the Middle English romance was crafted with as much awareness of Bérout's *Tristan* as of Thomas's, and though it is beyond the purview of my current analysis to argue conclusively for reading *Sir Tristrem* as a melding of and response to both of these earlier versions, it will suffice to say that Bérout's romance should be considered a valuable intertext for understanding the Auchinleck romance.³³⁵ Both of the earlier Tristan tales are deeply invested in questions of traditional truth that seem not to trouble the Auchinleck version—or rather, these questions are addressed in a profoundly different way in the Middle English romance. In Thomas's version, the attention to psychological detail is nuanced and extensive; very little actually *happens* in the surviving fragments, but a great deal is felt and thought and pondered. Indeed, his overarching agenda seems to be to craft, not a romance, but “a greatly extended poem in the *débat* tradition.”³³⁶ As a result, the characters in Thomas are almost always hyperaware of their own interiorities and the ways in which their decisions affect the other main players. In

³³⁴ Crane, *Insular Romance*, 181.

³³⁵ The episode of the lovers' exile in the forest—and specifically the details surrounding Tristrem's dogs—offers emblematic evidence of this kind of dual-awareness. In Bérout, the only dog mentioned is called Husdent (Hodain in Auchinleck), whom Tristan is at great pains to teach not to bark so that he does not give away their position to Mark's lackeys, who are searching for the fleeing lovers. In Thomas, the only dog mentioned is the marvelous multi-colored dog (called Petticrew in Auchinleck), whom Tristrem wins from the Duke of Poland (Wales, in Auchinleck) as a reward for defeating the giant Urgan, and whom he brings with him to the woods once exiled. Only in Auchinleck are *both* dogs included in the story in the first place, and *both* dogs are mentioned as having been brought along on the forest exile (ll. 2467-2468).

³³⁶ Rumble, “Toward a Reappraisal,” 222. See also Symons, “Does Tristan Think,” 10.

Béroul, the interest in human truth is even more pronounced, as the world of the romance in this version constitutes “a universe in which truth cannot be discerned; a world based on linguistic deceit, on the necessary dissociation of act from intent and the willful bifurcation of word and deed.”³³⁷ The text often highlights these dissociations, drawing attention to the manipulation of truth by the lovers and the layers of ambiguity inherent in their incessant and creative deceptions. Both of these earlier works take seriously the betrayal of Mark which the adultery represents, even as they continually side with those adulterers. In this way, Thomas and Béroul use heroes working to navigate unfaithfulness to their lord/uncle/husband and eminent faithfulness to one another to explore the nature of love and loyalty.³³⁸

That *Sir Tristrem* presents itself as supremely uninterested in such explorations is understandably dismaying to scholars such as those discussed above, who seem to assume that an interest in the psychological intricacies of adulterous love is an integral part of the Tristan tradition. By contrast, Middle English romance in general has a well-established dislike for and disinterest in adulterous relationships,³³⁹ and part of *Sir Tristrem*'s parodic impulse might be locatable within the act of translation not just between languages, but between cultures of literary adultery. This difference between Middle English and Francophone romance has led Phillipa Hardman to attempt to reconcile the apparent contradiction of a Middle English romance focusing on adulterous characters by asserting that “the poet has striven to associate the lovers’

³³⁷ Burns, “How Lovers Lie Together,” 21. See also Sullivan, *Truth and the Heretic*, pp. 161, 162, 165, 177 and Maddox, *Fictions of Identity*, pp. 141, 142.

³³⁸ For Thomas, see Swanton, *English Literature before Chaucer*, 203-204 and Crane, *Insular Romance*, 149. For Béroul, see Burns, “How Lovers Lie Together,” 26.

³³⁹ See, inter alia, Crane, *Insular Romance*, 179; Krueger, *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, 5; Gaunt, “Romance and Other Genres,” 47; Charbonneau and Cromwell, “Gender and Identity in Popular Romance,” 97; and especially Riddy, “Family, Marriage, Intimacy,” 235-255. The reasons for this difference in perspective on literary adultery are difficult to pin down, but Amanda Hopkins offers a possibility: “The nature of the differences between the Old French and Middle English lays suggests that Church teaching in medieval England was particularly effective in influencing such texts” (Hopkins, “Female Vulnerability,” 54).

irrevocable and faithful union symbolically with the bond of marriage.”³⁴⁰ While I agree that the romance works to take into account this shift in perspectives on adulterous love between the original story and the genre into which it is being adapted, I actually take the opposite view from Hardman in terms of how this is accomplished. Instead of elevating the heroes’ relationship out of the anxious arena of apotheosized adulterous love into the more acceptable realm of married love, *Sir Tristrem* devolves it to an almost animalistic physicality that can be more easily laughed at. In this way, the romance is in accord with the anti-adulterous-love trend in Middle English romance, despite the fact that its main characters are two of the most famous adulterers of medieval literature. It would be difficult to say definitively whether or not conforming to this trend is part of the motivation behind parodying the Tristan tradition, but the two agendas certainly align very neatly.

In addition to potentially parodying the broader tradition of adultery in French romance, *Sir Tristrem* may also be responding to the historical adultery of a French queen that had, from the perspective of the Auchinleck makers, caused very significant damage very recently. Isabella of France, wife of Edward II and mother of Edward III, is perhaps the most famous adulterous queen in English history, given that her adultery contributed substantially to the deposition and death of her husband the king. Having been sent to France in 1325 to negotiate the issue of Edward II’s homage to the French king, her brother Charles IV, for territories in Gascony, she successfully convinced her husband to send their son to France to perform the homage in his place. Once she had possession of young Edward, however, Isabella made it clear that she had no intention of returning to England unless her husband rid himself of the Despencers, who had done her a great deal of harm and dishonor.³⁴¹ In addition to flatly refusing Edward II’s

³⁴⁰ Hardman, “The True Romance”, 98.

³⁴¹ See Weir, *She-Wolf of France*, 148, 160; Phillips, *Edward II*, 482-484.

commands to return home, Isabella also began an affair, both sexual and political, with Roger Mortimer, who had fled from the Tower of London and escaped to France two years ahead of her own journey there. As has been seen in previous chapters, Isabella and Mortimer succeeded in dethroning her erstwhile husband, and Edward III became little more than their puppet king until he seized control of his throne in 1330, putting to death in the person of Mortimer both his mother's lover and his father's murderer. Isabella, for her part, was placed briefly under house arrest in November of that year, but she celebrated Christmas with her son and was soon, to all appearances, fully back in favor.³⁴² Edward III treated his mother's past misbehavior with circumspection, even going so far as to name his first daughter after her in 1332. Before long, then, it must have seemed that Isabella had been rehabilitated after her destructive descent into treason and adultery, but her infamy left a permanent mark on the historical accounts of fourteenth century England.

These accounts, in all their contradictory biases, nevertheless demonstrate the concept that "there are only two stories to tell about the royal female body: a tale of maternity or a story of adultery."³⁴³ In other words, a "good" queen is the one who fulfills her primary function in ensuring the continuation of the king's line, and for that continuation to be effective, the queen's chastity must be beyond doubt. Alternatively, if a "bad" queen is adulterous, then she must not have children who might muddy the waters of succession—this is why the famous adulterous queens of literature, Guinevere and Ysonde herself, are always childless. But Isabella presented a disturbing combination of the "two stories" about the royal female body, both mother and adulteress. While Edward III's own legitimacy was effectively beyond question, given that Isabella was only twelve years old when she wed Edward II and seventeen when she gave birth

³⁴² Bryant, *Jean le Bel*, 59, footnote 2.

³⁴³ McCracken, *Romance of Adultery*, 47.

to the future king, the chronicle descriptions of her participation in her husband's overthrow seem unsure how to handle a queen mother who also engaged in notorious adultery, generally choosing to emphasize one of those aspects over the other.³⁴⁴

Geoffrey le Baker focuses on Isabella's adultery, partially by asserting (or inventing) Edward II's affection for her. Indeed, le Baker goes so far as to portray Isabella's decision to end her husband's life as a reaction against the intolerable suggestion that she might be forced once more into a sexual relationship with him, even while he is in prison.³⁴⁵ Regicide, in le Baker's account, is the result not of political calculations but of the personal, sexual desires of a single woman. This narrows the direct impact of Isabella's adultery, but also targets that impact on what Baker sees as the single most inexcusable act of the entire usurpation. By contrast, Jean le Bel prefers to portray Isabella as noble heroine and royal mother.³⁴⁶ Indeed, in his account, Mortimer does not emerge as a significant figure in Isabella's circle until after the successful deposition and destruction of Edward II, when le Bel suddenly mentions, with as much equivocation as he can manage, how "a dreadful rumour started—whether it was true I don't know—that the Queen Mother was pregnant, and Lord Mortimer more than anyone was suspected of being the father."³⁴⁷ By insisting on calling this information "rumour," le Bel seems to be doing his best to either distance Isabella from any definitive blame or to distance himself from any accusation of slandering the queen, or both. Moreover, the fact that Isabella, in le Bel's account, is never accused of consorting with Mortimer until *after* her husband's death—that is, until after such consorting would have been officially considered adultery—manages to partially distance Isabella's alleged transgressions from the realm of the political and the treasonous. This

³⁴⁴ Phillips, *Edward II*, 102.

³⁴⁵ Preest, *Chronicle of Geoffrey le Baker*, 28.

³⁴⁶ Bryant, *Jean le Bel*, 26, 36.

³⁴⁷ Bryant, *Jean le Bel*, 59.

also provides a near-perfect opposite to Baker's account of Isabella's adultery *inciting* her husband's death. These two accounts demonstrate an intriguing range of responses to this unusually destructive example of a queen's adultery. While one paints her as a virago and one as a victim, both chronicles curiously enough agree in their attempts to remove Isabella from the political sphere as much as possible. In Geoffrey, Isabella's motivations in having her husband killed are exclusively sexual rather than political, and in le Bel those exploits are not only reported as mere rumor, but are framed to minimize their political effects. While the fallout from Isabella's adultery certainly has profound political consequences, it is almost as if these (male) chroniclers cannot imagine that she *meant* it to have political consequences; instead she acts out of personal desires and the men around her have to deal with the ramifications of those desires.

Regardless of how it was portrayed by the chroniclers, the reality of Isabella's adultery would have been particularly distressing in London, that city with which she had enjoyed a particularly cordial relationship for many years. London had "erupted in celebration"³⁴⁸ when she herself announced the birth of her firstborn son; Londoners had rioted in her support before she even arrived with her invasion and had sent her Walter Stapleton's head "thinking it a sacrifice well pleasing to Diana,"³⁴⁹ and powerful Londoners had pressured the lords of the realm into swearing "to maintain Isabella and her son, and 'to crown the latter; and to depose his father."³⁵⁰ As we saw in the first chapter, London had been well rewarded for this consistent support during Isabella's ascendancy, and her fall from power and from grace must have been a

³⁴⁸ Weir, *She-Wolf of France*, 71.

³⁴⁹ Preest, *Chronicle of Geoffrey le Baker*, 23.

³⁵⁰ Phillips, *Edward II*, p. 526; quoting *CPMR*, pp. 11-12. See also Caroline M. Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages: Government and People 1200-1500*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 26-27 and Pamela Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community: The Grocer's Company & the Politics & Trade of London, 1000-1485*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 157.

subject of some consternation to those who had become accustomed to regarding the Queen Mother as an ally.

As such, it becomes imperative to ask: Why would these historical events inspire a humorous approach to adultery in *Sir Tristrem*, especially since, as we have seen, so many other devastating historical events were treated with anxious respect in other Auchinleck romances? To be sure, in contrast to the massive damage wrought by Isabella's adultery, the largely laughable exploits of Tristrem and Ysonde must have seemed refreshingly ridiculous, a welcome escape even. The process of parodying the Tristran tradition effectively removed not only the political threat posed by their affair, but also any claim that affair might have to the elevated, the courtly, or the serious. Even if excising potentially anxious material from a tale of a queen's adultery was not the primary motivation behind this parody, Isabella's adultery serves as yet another intriguing context, one which suggests that humor might have been felt to be an effective method of dealing with this kind of social trauma. Moreover, these recent historical events offered a real-life example, unavailable to either Béroul or Thomas, of how tremendously destructive a queen's adultery could be. Looking back at the Tristran tradition through the lens of that destruction, perhaps the writer of *Sir Tristrem* found their attempts to take truth seriously while centering on a profoundly treasonous kind of adultery absurd enough to be worth mocking.

2. *Illegitimate Origins and Unstable Naming*

Sir Tristrem opens by explicitly locating itself in relation to the Tristran tradition: "I was a[at Erceldoune,] / Wiþ Tomas spak y þare; / Þer herd y rede in roune / Who Tristrem gat & bar... / Bi zere, / Tomas telles in toun / Þis auentours as þai ware" (1-4, 9-11).³⁵¹ Tellingly, there is no

³⁵¹ "[T]he English poem treats this cited 'Thomas' (2, 397, 412, 2787) as a contemporary and as the immediate source of *Sir Tristrem*. Another contemporary writer, Robert Manning of Brunne, substantiates this association

mention in this framing of the love between Tristrem and Ysonde, only of Tristrem's origins and adventures. This works to establish early on that the adulterous love at the core of the tradition is not of immediate importance to *this* rendition of the story. By claiming to be based not on a textual exemplar but on an oral performance, *Sir Tristrem* reduces "the supposed 'master text' to the level of just another 'imitation,'" thus boosting its own "claim to be an accredited rendition, even as it thoroughly undoes the effects of the literary version."³⁵² Just as the romance in general takes an ironic view of the stability of both human truth and accurate sooth, its self-presentation as a literary endeavor calls into question the very possibility of an authoritative "original" to which it is obligated to be faithful. This playful relationship with authority is not, of course, limited to the introduction; it infuses the entire romance, fueling the parody.

Indeed, the details surrounding "who Tristrem gat & bar" constitute a small but significant change from other versions, and offer an early hint at how ironically the language of truth will be used in this romance. The first time we see the Tristrem's common epithet, "þe trewe," applied to him, the context makes the tag instantly absurd. Tristrem's parents, Rouland of Ermonie and Blancheflour, the sister of King Mark, come together as a result of Rouland being wounded by his rebellious baron Duke Morgan. Blancheflour, already in love with the valiant Rouland, goes to cure and comfort him, only to need comforting herself: "Sche swooned / & hir was wo. / So comfort he þat may, / A knaue child gat þai tvo, / So dere; / & seþpen men cleped him so: / Tristrem þe trewe fere" (105-110). Rouland and Blancheflour are not married at this point, nor—in a slight but notable deviation from Thomas³⁵³—do they ever get married after conceiving

between the Tristan story and Erceldoune, in addition to lamenting the story's degenerate form" (Crane, *Insular Romance*, 189); see *The Chronicle of Robert Manning of Brunne*, ed. Furnivall, lines 93-100.

³⁵² Symons, "Does Tristan Think," 9. See also Mainer, "The Singularity of *Sir Tristrem*," 95.

³⁵³ Indeed, the Norse Saga's rendition is emphatic on this point: between Tristrem's conception and his birth, the text assures us that Kanelangres (Tristrem's father), "married her [Tristrem's mother] in a legal, Church-sanctioned ceremony that was followed by a great and glorious reception" (Jorgensen, "*Tristrem's saga ok Isöndar*," 47)

Tristrem, thus rendering our hero permanently a bastard, and rendering his description of “trewe” in the context of his illicit conception unavoidably ironic. Adding to the humor of this moment is the description his conception itself: Rouland “comforts” Blanche flour so successfully that he gets her pregnant! Given the later, similarly unsubtle euphemism of “play” used to describe illicit sexual activity, this early moment sets us up to be on the lookout for thinly veiled innuendo, and indeed places Tristrem’s own origins in the same vein of impulsive, amusing sex that he would continue to pursue with Ysonde.

Tristrem’s bastardy becomes significant again, later in the story, when he fights Morgan to reclaim his patrimony. In the Norse preservation of Thomas, Morgan claims “‘You are the son of a whore and have no idea who sired you, and you are lying about your father!’ Tristrem then became very angry and said: ‘Now you are lying, Duke. I was born in a lawful marriage and I will prove it at your expense if you dare to repeat it.’”³⁵⁴ Here, Tristrem is absolutely correct, and his enemy’s accusation reads more like a generic slur than a specific allegation. Moreover, Tristrem does in fact prove that slur a lie by killing Morgan, although he has to fight a protracted war against his enemy’s remaining army before he can fully claim his father’s lands. In this version, then, “truth” operates as an inherent human quality that can be proven by outward deeds, such as the trial-by-combat-like confrontation between Tristrem and Morgan. But the world of the Auchinleck version contains very little of such truth. Here, Morgan tells Tristrem “‘Þi fader þi moder gan hide, / In horedom he hir band. / Hou comestow wiþ pride?’” and Tristrem simply replies “‘Þou lext, ich vnderstand’” and defeats Morgan and his entire army immediately (861-864, 866). Here, Morgan is technically correct about Rouland and Blanche flour’s relationship; he never claims that Tristrem doesn’t know who his father was, and simply points out (accurately)

³⁵⁴ Jorgensen, “*Tristrem’s saga ok Isöndar*,” 71.

that his parents engage in “horedom,” in illicit sexuality. Given this, Morgan has every right to be annoyed by a bastard coming “wip pride” to take his lands. Moreover, Tristrem’s laconic response that he understands Morgan to be lying is itself a lie, since by this point in the narrative he has been told the story of his conception and birth. This transforms his triumph over Morgan from the vindication of truth that it was in the earlier version into something a good deal less straightforward. We the audience know that Tristrem is Rouland’s son and we know that Morgan only holds Rouland’s lands because he broke faith, but we also know that Tristrem *is* the bastard that Morgan says he is. As such, Tristrem may be victorious in this confrontation, but he is certainly not as solidly on the side of truth and right as his literary predecessor was. The handling of Tristrem’s bastardy also resonates with the text’s own initial self-presentation. Both hero and romance seem to be aware of their own noble lineage and their less-than-entirely-pristine relationship with that lineage. Tristrem’s terse and inexact assertion of his own legitimacy aligns with *Sir Tristrem*’s self-reported descent from the “Tomas” from whom the narrator allegedly heard this story in town. In a romance that does not seem to take adultery very seriously, perhaps it is to be expected that bastardy is no cause for concern, either.

Before Tristrem’s confrontation with Morgan, and in addition to his illegitimate conception, the hero’s identity is further destabilized and disassociated from any kind of “true” origin. His parents having died during Morgan’s usurpation, Rouland’s steward Rohand claims the infant and devises the pseudonym Tramtrist for him. This suggests that Tristrem grows up disconnected from his own origins and his own identity. He clearly believes that Rohand is his father, and while Rohand shelters Tristrem/Tramtris, he never reveals the young man’s true identity until Tristrem has already established himself King Mark’s court.

This flexible relationship with truth—whether traditional truth or accurate sooth—is particularly noticeable during Tristrem’s first, unwilling sojourn in Ireland. After taking a wound in his battle with the Irish giant Moraunt, Tristrem is set adrift in a boat, largely, it seems, in order to spare Mark and his court the extreme stench of the wound, which refuses to heal.³⁵⁵ The winds take him to Ireland where, realizing that to be known as the killer of Moraunt would be unwise, Tristrem reverts to his earlier pseudonym. Even before landing and having to explain himself to anyone, we are told that “Tristrem he gan doun lain / & seyð Tramtris he hiȝt” (1187-1188). This laying down of one name and taking up of another seems to come very naturally to him—after all, he lived his entire early life believing that he was truly Tramtris, and has only been called (hiȝt) Tristrem for a relatively short time. Thanks to the machinations of others, his own identity has proven a slippery thing in Tristrem’s career, manipulated in order to defend him from enemies who would do him harm, and here he seems to take that lesson to heart in choosing not to be someone the Irish would have every reason to want to kill.

Although the hero adopts the same pseudonym in Thomas’s version, the valence of the Tramtris name is significantly different between the versions. It is only in Auchinleck that the hero’s foster father calls him “Tramtris” from birth; in Thomas’s poem, the hero’s arrival in Ireland marks the first instance of the Trantris name, used as a mask crafted by the hero himself for this particular purpose, a mask with no particular claim on his identity.³⁵⁶ We also never see Thomas’s Tristran introduce himself *as* Trantris, since in this version he never bothers to explain himself or his origins until he chooses to leave Ireland. Even then, he concocts a rather vague lie that is very much in keeping with the courtly manners he had displayed from the beginning,

³⁵⁵ See 1117-1118. While the stench is not unique to Auchinleck, the Middle English version puts a great deal of emphasis on it, implicitly blaming the stink of Tristrem’s wound for his being set adrift.

³⁵⁶ Jorgensen, “*Tristrem’s saga ok Isöndar*,” 87.

telling the royal family that “I had intended to land in Spain, where I wanted to study astronomy and learn about things unknown to me. But now I wish to visit my friends and relieve their sorrow.”³⁵⁷ This seems to content the Irish royals, who never so much as asked how their charming guest came by his poisoned wound, and they send him off with handsome gifts. Before he even boards the ship to head back to England, the text—which had been referring to him as Trantris—reverts to calling him Tristran, the transition between names going unremarked.

By contrast, the Middle-English *Tristrem* produces a much more specific—but much less courtly—explanation for his situation upon his first meeting with the Irish queen, which only takes place after she has sent a poultice to destroy the stench of his wound, having been unwilling to come near him while it lingered. *Tristrem* tells her “Marchaund [merchant] ich haue ben ay, / Mi nam is Tramtris. / Robbers for soþe to say / Slouȝ mine felawes, ywis, / In þe se; / Þai raft me fowe & griis / & þus wounded þai me” (1215-1221). There are several small verbal markers in this speech that work to emphasize its veracity, such as using “þus” to point to the visible fact of his wound in order to strengthen his story’s integrity, and insisting that he has “ay” (always) been a merchant. More importantly, *Tristrem*’s use of the phrase “for soþe to say,” while itself perfectly innocuous, marks the beginning of a pattern evident throughout the romance. With increasing frequency after this point, the term “soþe” is invoked at moments wherein traditional truth—human, inherent truth such as honor and faithfulness—is under pressure, and/or when simple honesty—that place where “truth” and “sooth” meet most closely—is being subverted. This is where the satire beneath the parody comes in, the mocking not only of the Tristran tradition but of the very notion of a stable and reliable truth. *Tristrem* is not a merchant, and robbers did not kill his fellows, and his insistence that these things are

³⁵⁷ Jorgensen, “*Tristrem’s saga ok Isöndar*,” 89.

“soþe,” while not in itself a serious lie, nor out of keeping with the character’s traditional brand of trickery, nevertheless builds on the notion that the language of truth is not to be trusted.

The hero’s naming of himself as Tramtris further manages to straddle a blurry line between truth and lie, a line made all the more blurry by the fact that he is consistently called Tramtris by the narrator as well as the other characters during his first sojourn in Ireland.³⁵⁸ This becomes particularly ironic when his semi-false name is combined, apparently unselfconsciously, with his usual tag, and he is described by the narrator as “Tramtris þe trewe” (1275). We have already seen Tristrem’s self-conscious decision to revert to his former Tramtris identity, but if both names are “trewe” enough to be attached to this tag, then how stable can either identity be in its own right? Or, to look at it from the other direction, how trivial a descriptor must “trewe” be to so easily attach to a deliberate pseudonym? The question becomes even more complicated when, upon eventually leaving the Irish court, the text conscientiously provides a second bookend to enclose the period during which the hero went by the name Tramtris: “Now hat he Tristrem trewe,” which is to say, “Now was he called Tristrem the true” or “Now was he truly called Tristrem” (1303).³⁵⁹ This tag has already been shown to carry ironic undertones, but its use during the first Irish sojourn in particular makes it clear how formulaic and empty it has become, stripped of any moral weight or value judgement.³⁶⁰ The text is at no pains to resolve—or even to examine—the questions raised by the inconsistent, often laughable

³⁵⁸ Only twice after the re-naming discussed above does the text call him “Tristrem” (1243, 1250), and before long that name has fallen away altogether for the duration of his stay.

³⁵⁹ For the definition of the verb used here, “hoten” or “hatten,” see <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED21307>. It is worth noting that this is a form of the same verb, “hiȝt,” which was used to describe his assumption of the Tramtris pseudonym.

³⁶⁰ It is worth noting that this tag, like the early adoption of the Tramtris pseudonym, is unique to Auchinleck. See Crane, *Insular Romance*, 193.

applications of the phrase “the trewe;” at most, this phrase carries no more significance than a nudge and a wink in the direction of the audience, alerting them to that very incongruity.³⁶¹

3. *Seeing the Sooth in Sight*

While in Ireland, Tristrem unwittingly lays the foundations of the most important relationship of the romance. After his (false) story and (ambiguous) identity have been accepted, and his poisoned wound has been healed (by the unsuspecting family of the man who gave it to him), he takes up a position in the Irish court serving as a musician, in addition to acting as tutor to the Irish king’s daughter Ysonde. Her introduction reveals many of the qualities that will shape her course throughout the romance: “Þe king had a douhter dere / Þat maiden Ysonde hiȝt, / Þat gle was lef to here / & romaunce to rede arizt. / Sir Tramtris hir gan lere / Þo wiþ al his miȝt / What alle pointes were, / To se þe soþe in siȝt” (1255-1262). Two points in particular deserve consideration here. First, Tristrem/Tramtris’ lessons center on teaching Ysonde how to “se þe soþe in siȝt,” to determine the facts of a situation, specifically by means of examining visual evidence. This skill will serve her in good stead when, upon Tristrem’s second visit, she and her mother twice investigate the material traces of his actions and come to the accurate conclusions. But this phrase also hearkens back to Tristrem’s insistence on his lie as “soþe” (a lie that Ysonde will eventually penetrate by means of this very skill). Given this dissonance in Tristrem’s handling of soþe, Ysonde’s education, and thus the basis of their relationship, are implicated in all the blurriness attendant upon his mendacious handling of the language of truth. Moreover,

³⁶¹ Swanton once again proves to be one of the rare scholars to have noticed this, although he does not pursue its ramifications: “This collocation [“the trewe”] recurs repeatedly thereafter whenever the name Tristrem is mentioned—often in the most ironic circumstances, for while Tristrem may prove a true lover perhaps, he will prove consistently false in every other respect. There exists throughout the poem a constant counterpoint of truth and falsehood, appearance and reality (treuþe and tresoun)” (*English Literature before Chaucer*, 2006).

Ysonde is introduced as being an avid reader of romance even before she meets Tristrem, putting her into subtle alignment with the audience of the very romance in which she features. This kind of meta-textual awareness, this genre-savviness, seems to fuel her ability to discern the scope of events in much the same way that Auchinleck's audience is able to see past the many cunning deceptions of the characters from our position *as* audience, given a privileged perspective outside the world of the text. Ysonde's ability to read romance "arizt" puts her in a comparable position, and plays into Sarah Kay's description of parody as positioning "readers in such a way as to provide them with particular ways of looking back at these works."³⁶² The heroine's cunning and well-trained gaze encourages the audience to apply a similar gaze to the story in which Ysonde is acting, implicitly helping them to read her as she reads the (literary) world around her.

When Tristrem returns to Ireland a second time, it is with the intent to acquire Ysonde as a wife for his uncle, in return for being named Mark's heir. Fortuitously, a dragon arises to menace the country, offering a perfect opportunity to win Ysonde's hand by the slaying of it. Tristrem manages to accomplish this feat, although not without some slapstick humor that deflates any glory that might have accrued to him. Whereas, in Thomas's version, the hero slays the dragon with his very first blow,³⁶³ Tristrem's first blow in Auchinleck "no vailed o botoun, / Oway it gan to glide" (1448-1449). While he does eventually manage to triumph—after hiding behind a tree, offering a brief and desperate prayer for help, and seeing his horse killed and his fine armor shamefully disfigured by the dragon's fire—this battle fails to show Tristrem to any advantage. Instead, the audience's expectations of what should happen in a dragon fight are undercut to comic effect, offering an excellent example of *Sir Tristrem's* parodic relationship with its Anglo-Norman antecedent. The aftermath of the battle does little to improve the

³⁶² Kay, "Genre, Parody, and Spectacle," 179.

³⁶³ Jorgensen, "*Tristrem's saga ok Isöndar*," 99.

audience's judgment of the hero's abilities, for Tristrem decides to cut out the dragon's tongue and store down his hose, where the envenomed tongue proceeds to paralyze him and rob him of the ability to speak. While languishing thus, a wicked steward comes along, chops off the dragon's head, and presents it in court in order to claim Ysonde's hand.

In Thomas's romance, the heroine refuses to believe that the steward, "infamous for his cowardice and totally unproven in battle," could have achieved this feat, and her disdain for him drives her to seek a different answer.³⁶⁴ In Auchinleck there is no hint of this personal contempt, and Ysonde's actions appear to be driven more by curiosity. She and her mother examine the scene of the dragon fight, discovering the charred remains of Tristrem's horse and traces of the burned clothing and armor. Ysonde concludes that none of these things belonged to the steward: "Þis ich brende stede / No au3t [owned] he neuer a day, / No þis riche wede / Nas neuer his, soþe to say" (1510-1513). The use of "soþe" is particularly appropriate here, given the visual nature of the evidence and the factual reasoning being practiced. The word also connects this moment to Tristrem's earlier lessons teaching her to "se þe soþe in si3t"—lessons that end up saving his life when the women discover his prone form. Even before he is revived, Ysonde declares that "Þis man þe dragoun slou3," and upon regaining consciousness Tristrem produces visible proof to support his claim: "Þai loke, / Þe quen þat michel can / Out of his hose it toke. / Þai sei3en he hadde þe ri3t, / Þe steward hadde þe wou3" (1518, 1527-1531).³⁶⁵ The emphasis here on looking and seeing as being connected to discovering "þe ri3t" bolsters the continuing emphasis on "soþe" being something inherent in and dependent upon vision, rather than speech. Indeed, Ysonde had puzzled out "þe ri3t" before Tristrem was even able to verbally explain himself,

³⁶⁴ Jorgensen, "*Tristrem's saga ok Isöndar*," 101.

³⁶⁵ This sequence of events takes much longer to play out in the Norse/Thomas version; only after he has been removed to the palace and restored to health does he reveal himself as the dragon-slayer and produce the dragon's tongue as proof.

much more quickly than Thomas's Yseut was able to reach the same conclusion. While this skill on Ysonde's part serves Tristrem well in the short term—he is brought home with them and put into a bath—it proves dangerous to him before very long.

Further proving her competence at matching visual evidence with accurate conclusions, Ysonde has already guessed at the dragon slayer's identity—"Ysonde briȝt of hewe / Þouȝt it Tramtris ware"—but, in examining his effects, she discovers that he is more than simply her old tutor: "His sword, sche gan it schewe, / & broken hye fond it þare; / Out of a cofer newe / Þe pece sche drouȝ ful ȝare / & sett it to þat trewe. / It nas lasse no mare, / Bot riȝt" (1563-1564, 1565-1571). Here again, words such as "riȝt" and even "trewe" adhere to a process of strictly visual detective work, a process of once again discovering the sooth by sight. Ysonde's reaction to discovering the "truth" about the dragon slayer is to accost him while he is stuck in the bath, brandishing his own sword and accusing him of having killed her uncle Moraunt. When her mother comes to investigate the racket, Ysonde emphasizes the visual nature of the evidence upon which she is basing her actions: "Þe pece þou miȝt her se / Þat fro mi nem was drain. / Loke þat it so be, / Sett it euen ogain" (1587-1590). Caught by the irrefutable proof of his deeds, discovered and interpreted by the woman he taught to do just that, Tristrem seems more amused than worried: he laughs and comments that "Þou miȝt haue slain me ynouȝ / Þo þat y Tramtris hiȝt," reminding her that "Þo y Tramtris hiȝt, / Y lerld þe play & song" (1598-1599, 1607-1608). In addition to making this claim to his former persona, Tristrem points out that he killed Moraunt in a fair fight, exposing a gap in the sooth that Ysonde had been so certain she had finally, fully discovered. He goes on to swear repeatedly that Mark wants to marry her, promising "Þat Ysonde schuld be quen" (1616). To put it another way, he counters Ysonde's reliance upon visual signs with his own verbal ones, insisting on the history she has with the man named

“Tramtris” and swearing effusively that he will make “Amendes of al wrong” in making her Mark’s queen (1615). These efforts cannot help but smack of hypocrisy, given how untrustworthy his own use of language has been, and given how it was Tristrem himself who taught her to rely on visual signs in the first place. Nevertheless, Ysonde agrees to become Mark’s queen.³⁶⁶ Despite all her vaunted abilities when it comes to see the sooth in sight, she is willing to put aside her accurate conclusions when tempted by a greater prize, even though she knows the untrustworthy nature of the tempter. Both sooth—the correct discernment of Tristrem’s identity—and truth—the loyalty she owes to her blood relative, the uncle that Tristrem had cut down—would seem to encourage the same vengeful conclusion, but both falter when confronted by a more accomplished manipulator of language.

Ysonde’s mother, accepting her daughter’s decision, crafts a love potion designed to bring happiness to the arranged marriage, but on the journey from Ireland to England, that potion accidentally binds Ysonde to a man much more her equal in cunning.

4. *Adulterous and Animalistic Play*

When unfavorable winds delay their landfall in England, Ysonde’s maid Brengwain accidentally serves the queen’s love potion to her mistress and Tristrem. The narratorial language initially casts this bond in an elevated, courtly light: “Her loue miȝt no man tvin / Til her ending-day,” but almost immediately the physical nature of this “loue” surfaces, subsuming such lofty sentiments: “Tristrem in schip lay / Wiþ Ysonde ich niȝt, / Play miri he may / Wiþ þat worþli

³⁶⁶ In Thomas’s version, her stated motives have nothing to do with a desire to be queen and everything to do with her loathing for the steward. Far from laughing when confronted in his bath, Thomas’s Tristran (as portrayed in the Norse Saga) takes Ysonde’s threats seriously, and he succeeds in pleading for his life not by means of expansive oaths to make her a queen, but by speaking so “meekly and eloquently, asking so often for mercy, that after a while neither of them desired his death” (Jorgensen, “*Tristrem’s saga ok Isöndar*,” 117). It is Ysonde herself who decides that she hates the steward more than she hates Tristrem, and so forgives him purely out of a desire to take the lesser of two nuptial evils.

wiȝt / In boure niȝt & day. / Al bliȝe was þe kniȝt, / He miȝt wiȝ hir play; / Þat wiȝt Brengwain þe briȝt / As þo; / Þai loued wiȝ al her miȝt” (1671-1672, 1684-1693). The emphasis on the sexual nature of the activity here is rather excessive, with repeated emphasis on the regularity and duration of their sex—not only “ich niȝt” but also “niȝt & day”—as well as the on the effort they put into it—loving “wiȝ al her miȝt.” These details make sure that the audience will associate the verb “play,” used twice here, with unambiguous and unrefined sexual activity. The uncourtliness of this playing is made all the more apparent by the detail—unique to this version—that Tristrem’s dog Hodain laps up the dregs of the love potion, and as a result, “dede also” love with all his might (1694). Allowing an animal to have access to the kind of love to which Ysonde and Tristrem bend all their might profoundly undercuts any attempt to read the lovers’ passions as anything more elevated or refined than carnal coupling, and offers an early hint as to the animalistic nature of their relationship.³⁶⁷ This covert dehumanization of the lovers is also evident in their lack of verbal communication. Aside from a single conversation staged for Mark’s benefit, the text never supplies direct dialogue between Tristrem and Ysonde after their drinking of the love potion.³⁶⁸ Not only is the language of courtly love stripped away only moments after it is introduced, but so is any private language between the two of them: what they do in private does not seem to require a great deal of discussion.

³⁶⁷ See Lupack, *Sir Tristrem*, 148; Swanton, *English Literature before Chaucer*, 208; and Crane, *Insular Romance*, 193. Phillipa Hardman diverges from general scholarly opinion of this moment by finding it “touching” and arguing that Hodain’s sharing of the love-bond “symbolizes the fidelity of their love relationship exactly as do the dogs carved beneath the feet of married couples on medieval tombs” (“The True Romance,” 90). Given what I see as the overall program of the romance to evacuate fidelity and similar aspects of traditional truth of their weight and power, I disagree with her conclusions on this occasion.

³⁶⁸ As far as I am aware, only one other scholar, Sergi Mainer, has noticed this oddity; he points out that the “absence of conversations between the two lovers, not only here [in the forest exile] but in the whole romance, redefines the nature of the love theme,” but he does not specify exactly what that new definition is (“The Singularity of Sir Tristrem,” 97).

Nearly all of the time that the lovers spend together is reported in similar terms:

“Tristrem, wiþouten lesing, / Played wiþ þe quen”; “Tristrem to Ysonde wan / Anigt wiþ hir to play”; “Þre ȝere he playd stille / Wiþ Ysonde briȝt so beȝe”; “Now Tristrem willes is / Wiþ Ysonde for to play”; “Tristrem & þe quen / Stalked to her play”; “Tristrem in bour is bliþe, / Wiþ Ysonde playd he þare” (1807-1808, 1930-1931, 2170-2176, 2201-2202, 2577-2578, 3224-3225).

As can be gleaned even from this limited sample, the “play” of the lovers continues in much the same fashion for the entire romance. It is interrupted only when they are physically separated by forces beyond their control, and the nature of their “play” never changes or evolves during the course of their relationship. That said, while the content in these descriptions is consistent to the point of redundancy, the differences in word order and line structure make it clear that the writer felt it worth his time to invent slightly different wording for every encounter. This has the result of preventing the trysts themselves from becoming familiar enough to easily ignore or gloss over. Each time that Tristrem and Ysonde play together, we are meant to notice, and the sexual nature of their relationship is never allowed to become truly mundane.

The only times when Tristrem and Ysonde do not “play” together are, as mentioned, the times when they are forcibly separated. Indeed, after drinking the love potion, the only feats of arms Tristrem performs are undertaken in separation from her and specifically in order to distract him from that separation. While in exile in Wales, for example, we are told that “For he ne may Ysonde kisse, / Fiȝt he souȝt aywhare” (2298-2299). The fight he finds in the giant Urgan, brother of Moraunt, ironically partakes of the same language apparent in Tristrem’s assignations with Ysonde: “Tvelue fete was þe wand / Þat Vrgan wald wiþ play, / His strok may no man stand - / Ferly ȝif Tristrem may” (2333-2336).³⁶⁹ The double entendre inherent in Urgan’s magnificent

³⁶⁹ See also Tristrem’s fight with Beliagog, yet another giant brother, on yet another exile: “No most þer no man play / Þat he no dede him abide / & fiȝt” (2713-2715).

wand is unavoidable by this point in the romance; the audience has been too well-trained to chuckle knowingly when encountering the word “play.” While Tristrem wins this battle and those that follow, he clearly has no interest in either advancing his own honor and reputation or in winning renown for his lady’s sake.³⁷⁰ These giant fights—usually such staples of the romance knight’s chivalric exploits—instead contribute to the parody of *Sir Tristrem*, as the hero seeks to distract himself from his lady’s absence by “playing” with hyper-masculine giants wielding enormous wands.

Unfortunately, as Tristrem finds during a later exile, Ysonde’s charms are not easily replaced, even by someone bearing her own name. He allows himself to be talked into a marriage with a woman called Ysonde of the White Hands, but is then thrown into confusion concerning what to do on his wedding night. In Thomas’s Anglo-Norman version of the Tristan romance, the hero’s internal debate concerning whether or not to consummate his marriage to Yseut of the White Fingers comprises a detailed, extended portion of the extant text. Thomas delves deeply into Tristan’s dilemma on this occasion, showing his motivations, desires, fears, and thought processes in comprehensive detail. This moment also demonstrates Thomas’s interest in the problems of keeping or betraying one’s truth, as Tristran agonizes over the fact that he “cannot but betray [*traïr*], / deceive [*decevrëi*], and cheat [*enginnier*] one of them, / or play false [*trichier*] to both, it seems” (514-517). Here again, we see traditional truth operating at full force in the Tristran tradition: questions of faithfulness and falseness are taken seriously and comprehensively considered. Eventually, Tristran chooses to deceive his new wife in order to keep faith with his lover, telling Yseut of the White Fingers that he has a pain in his side that will not allow him to enjoy her charms.

³⁷⁰ See Hardman, “The True Romance”, 89.

The Middle English romance forgoes this focus on interiority and instead uses Tristrem's relationship with Ysonde of the White Hands to demonstrate a hitherto unseen level of his relationship with Queen Ysonde. On the verge of climbing into bed with his new wife, the ring that Queen Ysonde had given to him slips from Tristrem's finger. Observing this, "Þo was his hert ful wo / 'Oȝain me swiche a þing / Dede neuer Ysonde so; / Mark, her lord þe king, / Wiþ tresoun may hir to. / Mine hert may no man bring / For no þing hir fro, / Þat fre. / Ich haue tvinned ous to, / Þe wrong is al in me'" (2680-2695). It is the assertion that Mark could only ever enjoy Ysonde's sexual favors by means of "treason"—ridiculous as the statement may be—that comes as close as this romance gets to treating Tristrem and Ysonde's relationship as being based on something more than physical desire. Their own coupling is nowhere described as constituting "treason" to Mark, but Mark's coupling with Ysonde would constitute "treason" to Tristrem, indicating that it is Tristrem who has the "true" claim to Ysonde, or at least to her body. It is worth noting, by the way, that *Sir Tristrem* never shows Mark and Ysonde being physically intimate, as do both Thomas and Béroul's versions.³⁷¹ The Middle English Ysonde and her husband do share multiple conversations—always mendacious conversations, to be sure, but still containing more direct dialogue than she shares with her lover—but we never see them "play" together, and even Tristrem's wording on this account is ambiguous enough to allow for doubt. This is not to say that we should read *Sir Tristrem*'s Mark and Ysonde as participating in a chaste marriage, but the absolute lack of direct evidence for their sexual intimacy, when contrasted with the excessive evidence for the sexual intimacy between the lovers, gives the inescapable impression that sexual intercourse in this romance is strictly limited to Ysonde and

³⁷¹ For Thomas, see Turin (Fragment 1), ll. 1099-1102; for Béroul, see ll. 461, 3272.

Tristrem. This is borne out in Tristrem's decision not to sleep with his wife, reserving all his play for his lover (always excepting the occasional giant).

The fact that sexual play seems to exist exclusively *outside* the bounds of marriage—not to mention the bounds of social acceptability in general—further emphasizes the almost animalistic nature of the lovers' relationship. An aspect of this has been seen already in the casual inclusion of the dog Hodain in the love that sprung from the potion, but it becomes particularly clear when the lovers find themselves exiled to the forest. This sojourn gives license to Tristrem and Ysonde to enjoy their relationship in its least constrained state, and the text is it at some pains to emphasize how incredibly happy the lovers are now that they have been banished: “Ysonde of ioie haþ her fille / & Tristrem, wiþouten wene, / As þare; / So bliþe al bidene / Nar þai neuer are”; “Þai hadden al þat þai wold / Wiþ wille. / For loue ich oþer bihalt, / Her non miȝt of oþer fille”; “Swiche ioie hadde þai neuer ȝete” (2460-2464, 2494-2497, 2507). On this occasion, the terminology of “ioie,” “loue,” and “bliþe”-ness seems to take over the function that “play” had fulfilled while they were at court. Their pleasure in one another now goes beyond brief trysts stolen beneath Mark's nose: it is complete and effusive in a way it could never be at court. That they continue to have sex while in the woods cannot be in doubt: their “loue” and “ioie” clearly represents a change in intensity rather than as a change in kind.

The details of this episode make it clear that being completely separated from society and from civilization of any kind is exactly the thing to suit these two lovers.³⁷² The text admits to their lack of courtly luxuries—“No hadde þai no wines wat, / No ale þat was old, / No no gode mete þai at”—but insists nevertheless that “Þai hadden al þat þai wold” (2491-2494).³⁷³ Just as

³⁷² See Swanton, *English Literature before Chaucer*, 212.

³⁷³ This mention of their lost luxuries is not in the Norse Saga's rendition of Thomas's forest exile, but is of serious interest to Bérout, hinting again at an awareness on the Auchinleck writer's part of both traditions.

Tristrem and Ysonde seem able to thrive romantically (if that is the right word) without any exchange of courteous or amorous speech, so they are able to thrive physically without any of the hallmarks of civilized living. In place of wine, ale, and good meat, they seem perfectly content to dine upon “wilde flesche” and “gras,” and this primeval diet further distances them not only from the court, but from the world of humanity in general (2505-2506).³⁷⁴ Just because this animalistic aspect of their relationship has been fully realized in the forest, however, it does not mean that it was not inherent in their “play” from the beginning. The instinctive, insistent, wordless coupling that consumes them from that first night on the boat always held the seeds of this blithe abandon, this natural consummation.

Michael Swanton has pointed out that, in this romance, “[w]ithout apologia or even reflective circumstances which might make it emotionally and philosophically tenable, the bare facts of courtly love become mere adultery.”³⁷⁵ It is on this reduction to “bare facts” that *Sir Tristrem*’s parody of its received tradition is based: by stripping away the “reflective circumstances” and emotional and psychological details that so occupy Bérout’s and Thomas’s attention, *Sir Tristrem* provides a clear view of the naked core of Tristrem and Ysonde’s relationship and finds there nothing courtly or refined or even very substantial. This Auchinleck romance thus engineers a position from which the audience is able to observe not only its own absurdities, but the absurdities inherent in the tradition it is parodying.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁴ The detail that they eat “gras” is not to be found in either earlier version.

³⁷⁵ Swanton, *English Literature before Chaucer*, 212.

³⁷⁶ See Alfie, “Love and Poetry,” 348.

5. *What King Mark Sees*

Although it solicits the audience's critical gaze in this way, *Sir Tristrem* also goes to some lengths to demonstrate the follies inherent in relying upon one's gaze for an accurate (or truthful) reading of the situation at hand. This is most clearly observable in the character of King Mark, whose reliance upon the evidence of his own eyes keeps him eternally duped, but also perfectly happy in his state of being duped. In inviting us to laugh at his metaphorical blindness, the romance also implicates us for the pleasure we take in observing his folly: while we might like to think ourselves capable of seeing the sooth in sight like Ysonde, we are just as likely to be misled by our sight as Mark is, even (perhaps especially) while we are enjoying what our literary gaze reveals about his own blithe cuckoldry.

Almost from the instant he is introduced, King Mark is shown to care very little about finding out those things that he does not already know. When Tristrem is first brought to his court, Mark naturally asks the young man where he is from, but when Tristrem answers that he is the son of one Sir Rohand, Mark clearly couldn't care less: "Þe lasse 3af Mark forþi, / For Rohand he no knewe nou3t" (538-539). He only begins to take an interest in Tristrem's origins when Rohand himself eventually arrives and presents physical evidence of Tristrem's familial connections to Mark, in the form of a ring that Blancheflour, Mark's sister and Tristrem's mother, entrusted to Rohand's keeping: "To Marke þe ring he 3old, / He knewe it also sket, / Gan loke. [He knew it as soon as he looked at it] / He kist Tristrem ful skete / & for his nevou toke" (733-737). It is only when he has something to "loke" at that Mark is willing to take action, to acknowledge the invisible bonds that tie Tristrem to himself. In contrast to Ysonde's demonstrated interest in seeking out and interpreting visual evidence, Mark is portrayed as a passive receiver of visual evidence, which he tends to take at face value. He is never taught, as

Ysonde is, to see the “soþe in siȝt,” and yet Tristrem, Ysonde’s teacher in this matter, seems to have learned his own reliance on sight while at Mark’s court.

In between his confident (but mistaken) declaration that Rohand is his father, and Rohand’s presentation of the ring to Mark, Tristrem himself apparently absorbs Mark’s habit of looking only at the surface of things. When Rohand first arrives looking poor and travel-worn, Tristrem utterly fails to recognize him: “Tristrem knewe him no þing, / . . . He no trowed it neuer in lede / þat Rohand robes were torn, / þat he wered swiche a wede” (647, 651-653). Tristrem, in this moment, reenacts Mark’s earlier reaction: “Rohand he no knewe nouȝt.” The visual paradigm to which Mark adheres has managed to infect his nephew, but upon Rohand’s rebuke, Tristrem manages to move beyond reliance upon sight alone. Even when he himself has done so, however, he demonstrates an awareness that Mark is incapable of seeing past surfaces; he asks the king “Wil ȝe mi fader se / Wiþ siȝt? / Graiþed [dressed/prepared] y wil he be, / & seþþen schewe him as kniȝt,” and indeed, Rohand is carefully bathed and properly dressed before he’s taken in to see Mark, or rather, to be seen *by* Mark (668-671).³⁷⁷ If Tristrem himself had difficulty recognizing the man who raised him when that man was not presented “as kniȝt,” how much more trouble would Mark—who has a proven disinterest in the subject of Rohand—have in taking the visitor seriously? Even after these careful preparations, it is only Rohand’s producing of Blancheflour’s ring that accomplishes Mark’s recognition of Tristrem as his nephew. The pattern is thus set, even from this early episode, for Tristrem’s careful management of his uncle’s reliance upon visual proof, and for Tristrem’s own adoption of this visual paradigm. He takes this mentality with him into Ireland and there indoctrinates Ysonde, to mixed

³⁷⁷ In the Norse Saga, there is no failure of recognition on Tristrem’s part, and no preparation that Róaldr, his foster father, has to go through before being presented to Mark—in fact, it is Mark himself who orders the newcomer’s pampering: “serve him well. Give him a fine outfit and make sure that it is suitable,” and this is even before he knows that Tristrem is his nephew (Jorgensen, “*Tristrams saga ok Isöndar*,” 65).

results as seen above, and as such she has fully absorbed the sight=truth paradigm even before she meets Mark. The only notable difference between Ysonde and Tristrem's approach to this paradigm and Mark's is that the lovers prove capable, at least on occasion, of moving past surface appearances and of manipulating those surface appearances, confident in Mark's inability to see beyond them. As a result, the plot unfolds as a series of attempts to see and to subvert seeing.

This shared perspective is borne out in two of the more famous subversions of truth in the Tristran story, the tryst under the tree and Ysonde's ambiguous oath, as well as in the beginning and ending of their exile in the forest. These three episodes serve as crucial instantiations of this visual paradigm, and each one reveals additional facets of these characters' reliance upon or manipulation of visual evidence.

i. Meriadok's Meddling and the Tryst beneath the Tree

In the Auchinleck version of the story, the lovers' opponents are always individual men working to show Mark "the truth," rather than the united baronial opposition the lovers face in other versions, and it is these interlopers rather than Mark himself who actively oppose Tristrem and Ysonde.³⁷⁸ The primary meddler is Meriadok, who takes some time to learn how crucial visual evidence is to Mark's sense of truth. In his first attempt to expose the lovers, he makes the mistake of advising Mark to set a verbal rather than a visual trap. Mark acquiesces without question or comment, asking Ysonde whom she would like to have charge of her while Mark goes crusading. Ysonde names Tristrem, but her wily maid Brengwain is bright enough to see through the trap and she advises her lady to change her tune, since "ȝour dedes han ben sain /

³⁷⁸ For Thomas, see ll. 10-13 from the extant fragments and Jorgensen, "*Tristrans saga ok Isöndar*," 91-93 for the Norse Saga. For Béroul, this theme is even more central, as can be especially seen in ll. 621-622 and 590-594.

Wip siȝt” (1988-1991). This phrase, “seen with sight,” is yet another consistent ingredient of the romance—even though in this instance it is Meriadok, and not Mark, who has seen evidence of their deeds. Along with Tristrem’s ironic tag of “the trewe” and the descriptions of the lovers’ “play,” this phrase’s repetition undercuts any reliance on immaterial values such as integrity, honor, or courtly love, bringing the romance constantly back down to earth and grounding each move and counter-move in the observable. Ysonde pretends to hate Tristrem, and this works initially, leaving Mark “bliȝe & glad / For al þat trowed [believed] he,” but this blitheness and belief lasts less than ten lines, undercut almost immediately by Meriadok, who has by now begun to appreciate the necessity of showing rather than telling when it comes to Mark: “In toun þou do him be. / Her loue-laike þou bihald / For þe loue of me. / Nouȝt wene, / Bi resoun þou schalt se / þat loue is hem bitvene” (2014-2015, 2019-2024). Again, Mark concedes without comment, demonstrating how flimsy his verbally created beliefs can be when confronted by the possibility of visual proof. Even so, Meriadok again manages to once more bungle his management of Mark, in trying to get his king to see a *lack* of love (i.e. love-longing) in Tristrem and Ysonde rather than showing him undeniable, positive visual evidence.

It takes Meriadok until his third try to finally hit upon the proper approach, setting Mark up to actually observe one of their trysts himself: “Þou schalt hem take þat tide. / In þe tre / Here þou schalt abide, / Her semblaunt þou schalt se” (2054-2057).³⁷⁹ Meriadok, having finally adopted the mindset under which the other three had been operating all this time, arranges for Mark to see the “semblaunt” of the lovers for himself, but unfortunately for him, his word choice

³⁷⁹ I am here glossing over the involvement of a dwarf who seems to be acting as Meriadok’s assistant in setting up Mark to observe the tryst beneath the tree. While the dwarf has a much larger role in Bérout’s version of the romance, and a much clearer one in Thomas’s, here he acts as little more than a convenient stand-in for Meriadok, pursuing the same goal of making Mark see the truth of the lovers’ activities.

ends up being prophetic, as the lovers indeed present only a semblance, an “outward show or display,” revealing to Mark part but not all of the truth of what is between them.³⁸⁰

When Tristrem and Ysonde meet in the garden, the skill that he had taught her in Ireland, to see the sooth with sight, proves not to have deserted either of them: “Þe schadowe [of Mark] Tristrem gan se / & loude spac he þo, / Þat Ysonde schuld Mark se / & calle Tristrem hir fo” (2104-2107). This interweaving of speech with sight—Tristrem’s sight resulting in his loud speech engineered to direct Ysonde’s sight and thus her own speech—provides the pattern of the deception that the lovers enact for their ignorant audience. While it is their words that are actively misleading, it is the absence of that which Mark had come to see, the “playing” that the audience has come to expect of the couple, that gives silent authority to their verbal equivocations. Once again, Meriadok’s own word choice proves unintentionally prophetic: what Mark sees from his perch in the tree is indeed a “loue-laïke,” an absence of any signs of love.

Tristrem proves the most cautious and reticent with his deceptions, but he is also the one who puts the most pressure on Mark’s reliance upon the visual, pointing out to Ysonde that “Þou gabbest on me so, / Mi nem nil me nouȝt se, / He þreteneþ me to slo” (2115-2117). Her words have removed him from his uncle’s sight—hinting at a removal from the realm of things that Mark considers true—and thus Mark threatens to remove him from the realm of observable things entirely by slaying him. Moreover, Tristrem’s awareness that he is currently within Mark’s sight manages to give even this seemingly straightforward statement a gloss of irony, since Mark has actually gone to a great deal of trouble to see Tristrem in this context.

Ysonde, in reply, employs a rough draft of the ambiguous oath she will later use to exonerate herself in a much more public setting: “Tristrem, for soþe to say, / Y wold þe litel

³⁸⁰ <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED39334>.

gode, / Ac y þe wraied [betrayed] neuer day, / Y swere bi Godes rode. / Men said þou bi me lay, /
 Þine em so vnderstode... / Y loued neuer man wiþ mode / Bot him þat hadde mi maidenhead”
 (2124-2129, 2133-2134). Her wording here is careful and deliberate, invoking “soþe” at the
 beginning, but it is “soþe to say,” not “soþe in siȝt,” to which she appeals, further destabilizing
 the meaning of a word that already carries connotations of truth under pressure. Her insistence
 that she has never “wraide” (betrayed) Tristrem is accurate on several levels. Her blackening of
 his name to Mark was undertaken in order to protect and defend both of them. Moreover, *Sir*
Tristrem is, as mentioned, unique in that it provides no clear indication that Mark has ever
 enjoyed Ysonde’s sexual favors, hinting at the possibility that Ysonde has an exclusive sexual
 relationship with Tristrem, which she has not betrayed. Ysonde also carefully handles the issue
 of the accusations against them, putting it into language as vague as she can manage, and
 pushing it into the realm of unreliable speech meeting unreliable perception: “Men said” and
 therefore “Þine em so vnderstode.” The final two lines are made accurate, sooth-ful, not only by
 her loss of virginity to Tristrem, by also the bed trick she performed with Brengwain’s
 cooperation, substituting her maid in the marriage bed on the wedding night, so that Mark would
 deflower a maiden, believing her his wife.

It is not, however, Ysonde’s cunning word tricks that finally spark the beginnings of a
 change of mind in Mark, but Tristrem’s repeated appeal to their shared visual paradigm, asking
 Ysonde to intercede for him with Mark and saying that, unless she does, “Of lond ichil elles fare,
 / Schal he me neuer se” (2139-2140). It is only at this point that the audience is informed of any
 reaction from Mark in his tree; he thinks “Vngiltles er ȝe / In swiche a sclaunder brouȝt” (2144-
 2145). Even though he had apparently refused to see Tristrem before, his sight of him now and

the threat that he may never see him again marks the turning point wherein he begins to believe both his eyes and his ears.

Ysonde's own response to Tristrem's proposed departure presents such a tangled web of verbal deception in a mere two lines that it almost ends up being true: "No reche y what y liže, / So þat þou be oway" (2152-2153). Essentially, she is lying about how much she doesn't care about how much she has to lie in order to achieve a goal she doesn't actually want to achieve. This complex piece of reverse psychology serves to further enforce the threat of Tristrem's self-removal from his uncle's sight, as Mark in his tree immediately thinks "ȝete he schal duelle stille" (2156). It is at this point that the lovers exit their impromptu stage, and Mark, in contrast to his "bliþe & glad" reaction to Ysonde's initial, simple lie that she did not want to be left in Tristrem's keeping, is instead downcast: "Nas neuer Mark so wo, / Him self he herd al þis" (2159-2160). His "wo" is explicitly linked to his having "herd" all that passed between Tristrem and Ysonde: this rare occasion wherein his auditory experience of the world is even mentioned clearly causes him distress, and he is quick to remedy that distress by reinstating Tristrem to the realm of things he is willing to look at.³⁸¹

Throughout this episode, the audience's perspective is aligned most closely, not with Tristrem and Ysonde, but with Mark. The only hint we have of the lovers' point of view comes at the moment, early on, when we are told that they notice Mark's shadow and become aware of his presence. For the rest of the episode, the only glimpses of interiority to which we are privy

³⁸¹ The episode of the tryst beneath the tree marks another example of *Sir Tristrem* apparently partaking of both Béroul's and Thomas's versions. As the Norse Saga reports, Thomas's version contains none of the verbal equivocation which characterizes this episode in Auchinleck—instead, the lovers flee the garden the instant they spot Mark's shadow on the ground (Jorgensen, "*Tristrams saga ok Isöndar*," 143). It is instead Béroul's version that contains a staged argument between the lovers enacted for Mark's benefit; indeed, Béroul's Yseut, like Auchinleck's Ysonde, even takes the opportunity to practice her skill at ambiguous oaths when she declares "I swear to God that I have been faithful: / Let Him place a scourge upon me / If anyone, except him who took me as a virgin, / Ever enjoyed my love a single day!" (22-25) ["*Mais Dex pelvis ma loiauté: / Quo sor mon cors mete flaele / S'onques fors cil qui m'ot pucele / Out m'amistié encore nul jor!*"]

are Mark's: his initial thought that they must be "vngiltles," his resolve that Tristrem shall stay, and his woe at what he has heard. These instances, small as they may seem, keep the audience up in the tree with Mark, looking down on the performance the lovers are staging for his/our benefit. By aligning the audience's gaze with Mark's in this moment of his deception, *Sir Tristrem* allows us to enjoy his naiveté while also implicating us for our own reception of Tristrem and Ysonde's trick. We are as glad that Mark has been tricked as Mark ultimately is to be tricked, unified in our desire to return to the status quo where the lovers are reintegrated into his good graces and thus free to continue their play. The "theme of looking" that saturates this romance "solicits an imaginary gaze from the audience," but in setting up that gaze as parallel to the gaze of the story's perennial dupe, *Sir Tristrem* subtly cautions its audience not to rely overmuch on such a gaze, on such visual "sooth," lest we prove as blithely deceived as Mark.³⁸²

ii. *The Ambiguous Oath*

With equilibrium returned after the tryst beneath the tree, Mark gladly "welcom Tristrem trewe" back into his good graces—easily one of the most ironic uses of that tag in the entire romance (2167). Tristrem and Ysonde, of course, continue to "play," but they do at least go about their pursuits more discretely. Unfortunately, Meriadok too has learned his lesson, and on his next attempt to expose the lovers, he works to set a purely visual trap. Meriadok arranges to have all three members of the love triangle subjected to blood-letting, and Tristrem leaves bloody marks on Ysonde's sheets when he comes to play with her that night. Mark observes the blood the next morning, and this purely visual sign, presented with no chance for language to obscure its patent meaning, at last accomplishes what Meriadok has so long been seeking.

³⁸² Kay, "Genre, Parody, and Spectacle," 168. Kay is discussing *Aucassin et Nicolette*, another fabliaux-esque tale which is greatly concerned with vision and spectacle.

Tristrem puts into action the pseudo-promise he had made to Ysonde under the tree and flees “Out of Markes eij3 sene” (2222). Ysonde at first seems forced to face the consequences of her and Tristrem’s actions alone, but with her disguised lover’s help, she finds a way to combine excessive visual evidence with the same kind of carefully ambiguous oath-language she had used beneath the tree to exculpate herself.

In Bérout’s version of the story, the episode of the blood on the sheets leads directly to the lovers’ flight to the forest, and it is the lovers’ return from the forest and their desire to be reintegrated into the court that necessitates Yseut’s trial by ordeal. In both Thomas’s version and Auchinleck’s, it is the blood on the sheets that prompts the trial by ordeal, but in Thomas the two episodes are separated by a scene not present in Auchinleck, wherein Mark takes counsel on how he should proceed. One bishop maintains that since the king “has never actually seen nor learned of anything negative except this slander that people circulate, but without their presenting proper proof,” that proof should be obtained by means of a trial by ordeal.³⁸³ In this version, therefore, the blood on the sheets is held to be insufficient proof of wrongdoing, and the trial is designed to obtain a certainty that had hitherto been lacking. In Auchinleck, by contrast, the impetus for the trial comes entirely from Mark himself, in a rare proactive move for the Middle English king. In addition, the purpose of the trial is not, as it was in Thomas, to obtain concrete evidence; instead, we are told that “Mark wald spourge þe quen” because “Men seyð sche brak þe lay” (2226, 2227). Like in Thomas, there is the element of public slander as a prompting force, but Mark’s intention is not to confirm or disprove that slander, but to “spourge” Ysonde—to “purify” and “cleanse” her.³⁸⁴ Indeed, Ysonde herself “þou3t to make hir clene / Of sake [guilt]” by means of the ordeal (2230-2231). This terminology subtly implies that there is in fact something there to

³⁸³ Jorgensen, “*Tristrams saga ok Isöndar*,” 147.

³⁸⁴ <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED42464>.

“spourge,” but both guilt and cleansing are rendered as purely public affairs: we are given no indication that Ysonde *feels* guilty about her behavior, only that she desires her own visible guilt to be removed in a visible way. The trial by ordeal is thus transformed from a truth-discovering exercise to an appearances-altering exercise from the very beginning. Mark, apparently aware on some level that his wife is not as clean as he could wish, is not in search of justice, vengeance, or even certainty about her behavior—his only concern is to have her officially “spoured,” and in this he and Ysonde seem to be in perfect alignment.

In both Bérout and Thomas, the audience observes the lovers carefully laying their plans ahead of the trial itself, but in Auchinleck, stripped as it is of any interest in the Tristrem and Ysonde’s conversations with one another, the trial begins immediately. When Tristrem does appear, disguised in beggar’s clothing, we are told that this was as they had agreed ahead of time, but we are not privy to that discussion, and we are not told exactly what their plan is (2244). This not only aligns with the aforementioned lack of any significant non-sexual intercourse between the lovers, but also puts the audience more firmly in the position of the spectators at Ysonde’s trial. The only thing we know that they do not is the identity of the beggar man, whom the knights on the scene “No knewe him non bi siȝt” (2241). If our sight is clearer than theirs, it is still restricted to the present tense and does not, lacking the benefit of semi-omnipotent narration as afforded in Bérout’s text, anticipate the drama to be played out. Indeed, even should the audience be familiar with the outlines of the Tristran story, and thus be expecting a trick of some kind at this point, the mechanics of the trick as they occur in the Auchinleck *Sir Tristrem* are unique, and carefully couple Ysonde’s verbal equivocation with a reliance upon visual evidence that she provides in a most revealing fashion.

Having to cross the Thames to the place of her trial, Ysonde declares to the waiting knights that the beggar will bear her to the ship. In this way the lovers manage to engineer a convenient accident: “Tristrem hir bar þat tide / & on þe quen fel he / Next her naked side, / Pat mani man miȝt yse / Gan schewe. / Hir queynt abouen hir kne / Naked þe kniȝtes knewe” (2249-2255). The twinned acts of seeing and of showing, which have been repeatedly emphasized throughout the romance, here culminate to provide an ultimate form of visual proof. Ysonde grants knowledge of that which, before now, only Tristrem definitively “knewe” to an unspecified number of knights, in order that she will be able to remove any suspicion that Tristrem himself has known that part of her which she here bares to them. Once again, the audience’s perspective is aligned with that of the knights—while we had been privy to the lovers’ play, this is the first time that we have been “shown” quite so much of Ysonde.

The nature of the visual evidence Ysonde provides in this trick is much more extreme than in either of the earlier versions. In Béroul, she rides her disguised lover across a plank bridge, insulting Tristran all the while, much to the amusement of the onlookers.³⁸⁵ In Thomas, as reported by the Norse saga, Ysonde lifts her dress (we are not told how high) and Tristrem “accidentally” falls on her; she stops the assembled knights from hurting him by making a joke at his expense.³⁸⁶ Oddly enough, it is only in *Sir Tristrem*, by far the most consistently humorous and ridiculous of the three versions, that this moment occasions no laughter from anyone. Instead, Ysonde defends the clumsy beggar by insisting that it was “For pouerte me þenk / He fel, for soþe to say,” and she even succeeds in urging the nearby knights to give him gold and send him on his way (2262-2263). This lack of ribaldry where we might expect it lends an unwonted solemnity to this presentation of the queen’s most private physical secret. While her

³⁸⁵ See ll. 3882-3955.

³⁸⁶ Jorgensen, “*Tristrams saga ok Isöndar*,” 149.

exposed “queynt” is obviously a crucial ingredient in the lovers’ “play,” she is not using it to play now, but is instead deploying the very organ of her play to absolve herself from the accusations of that play. While the subversion of the ordeal itself is accomplished via her ambiguous oath, the power of that oath—like the power of Ysonde and Tristrem’s staged argument beneath Mark in the tree—is rooted in the visual evidence supplied in bodily behavior.

This link between Ysonde’s visual disclosure and her verbal deception is made clear in the careful phrasing of her oath: “Swete Ysonde sware / Sche was giltles woman / ‘Bot on to schip me bare, / Þe kniȝtes seiȝe wele þan; / What so his wille ware, / Ferli neiȝe he wan, / Soþe þing; / So neiȝe com neuer man / Bot mi lord þe king” (2269-2277). Here the knights who did not know Tristrem “bi siȝt” but who nevertheless did “seiȝe wele” Ysonde’s “queynt” are transformed into the arbiters of both visual and verbal truth. The disguised Tristrem on the one hand and the naked Ysonde on the other have revealed to them everything they need to know in order to judge correctly, but their perspective is too similar to their king’s in that they look only at the surface, passively absorbing what is offered to their gaze.³⁸⁷ Even though the audience knows better than they do, our own perspective on this episode has been consistently aligned with that of the knights, and if we are not fooled by Ysonde’s trick, we are every bit as complicit in her continued adultery as the knights are. Our enjoyment in observing the lovers’ play, supplemented by moments such as the titillating glimpse of Ysonde’s “queynt,” implicitly puts the audience on the side of the lovers, and our decision to keep reading or listening enables the story to unfold and the adulterous play to continue. But at the same time the audience is repeatedly positioned on the outside of Tristrem and Ysonde’s relationship looking in—we rarely every have access to their thoughts and never to their direct dialogue, and at crucial moments our

³⁸⁷ For further discussion of the management of expectations in this episode, see Gilbert, “Gender, Oaths and Ambiguity”, especially page 245.

perspective is linked, not with theirs, but with those whom they seek to deceive. This, I believe, is where the satire of the romance is at its strongest, this consistent portrayal not only of visual sooth's insufficiencies, but the way in which the audience is implicated for our own reliance upon visual sooth, upon our privileged gaze *as* the audience of a literary text, at the very moments wherein visual sooth is being subverted.

iii. *Found in the Forest*

The processes whereby the lovers are first exiled to and then recalled from the forest offers one of the clearest examples of how Mark in particular encounters and understands the visual evidence upon which he so heavily relies. Without any interloper prompting him to take action against the lovers and without the lovers themselves actively working to influence his actions, we are allowed to observe Mark's own natural instincts at work just as the forest exile itself allows us to observe the natural instincts of Tristrem and Ysonde. After Ysonde has been cleared via her ambiguous oath, and Tristrem has returned from his own sojourn in Wales, the two automatically fall back into their adulterous liaison, apparently with enough lack of discretion that Mark can perceive it without help: "So long of loue þai mene / þat Mark seiȝe it was so. / Mark seiȝe hou it is, / What loue was hem bitvene; / Certes þis þouȝt was his, / Ful wele awreken to ben; / He cleped Tristrem wiþ þis / & bitoke him þe quene, / & flemed [banished] hem boþe, ywis, / Out of his eiȝe sene / Away" (2441-2451). The emphasis on Mark's gaze—he both "seiȝe it was so" and "seiȝe hou it is"—combined with the note that Tristrem and Ysonde indulged themselves "so long," gives the impression that it took a good deal of time before Mark was able to actually perceive what was going on under his nose. We are not told exactly what he saw, and so we are left with the vague impression of a long period of slowly accumulating

evidence that finally becomes too blatant to ignore. The text once again gives us access to Mark's "pouzt" in reaction to this betrayal—he determines to be "ful wele awreken."

But the revenge he takes must seem, at first glance, to be absurd. Exiling the lovers to the forest together is just about the nicest thing he could do for the wife and nephew who betrayed him, especially since he essentially gives Ysonde into Tristrem's care—Mark "bitoke him þe queen"—in a gesture oddly suggestive of awarding them his blessing. This seemingly foolish behavior makes sense, however, when understood in the context of the visual paradigm that governs Mark's experience of the world and his reactions to it. His form of being "awreken" of the lovers simply consists in getting them out of his sight. All he cares about is whether or not he has to look at the "loue was hem bitvene," and this exile essentially solves the problem of their betrayal in a world where out of sight truly is out of mind. As we saw in his desire to "spourge" Ysonde, the only problems that Mark cares to address are problems of appearance. As such, as long as he does not have to *look* at the facts of the relationship between his wife and his nephew, he can consider himself well "awreken."

This reading also helps explain Mark's reaction to finding Tristrem and Ysonde in the woods and his decision to recall them. In Bérout, this moment of discovery carries a sense of imminent threat, as the lovers have fled from Mark's punishment rather than being exiled *as* punishment, and the king follows an informant to their whereabouts intent on exacting the revenge that had been denied to him. Upon seeing them asleep, clothed, and with a naked sword between them, he hesitates, becomes convinced of their innocence, and effects a silent exchange of tokens with the sleepers. Upon waking, Tristan and Yseut realize that the king has come and gone, and they panic, misreading his tokens and becoming convinced that he intends to return in force to complete the punishment that they had already fled. In order to preempt this, they flee

even deeper into the forest and out of Mark's reach. They only return to court, of their own volition, when the love potion has worn off and they desire reintegration to society and their rightful places within it. In Thomas's version, as recorded in the Norse saga, the lovers are exiled to, rather than flee to, the forest, just as they are in Auchinleck, and their time there is similarly carefree.³⁸⁸ That said, the discovery and pardoning of Tristrem and Ysonde in Auchinleck partakes of the unique visual paradigm established within this romance, and represents the depths to which all three characters have internalized this paradigm. For the first and only time, the lovers manage to trick Mark unintentionally, without resorting to verbal manipulation.

Tristrem returns from hunting in the woods to find Ysonde asleep, and he lays down next to her, carelessly dropping his sword between them. This happens on the exact same day that Mark and his knights are out hunting deer. The hunters spot the sleeping lovers first: "Tristrem seiȝen hȝe þan / & Ysonde, soþe to say. / Seiȝe þai neuer swiche man / No non so fair a may / Wiþ siȝt" (2524-2528). Once more, the audience's gaze is aligned with that of the knights, and the familiar terminology again associates sight with "soþe." When Mark arrives on the scene, similar language is used: "Þe leuedi & þe kniȝt, / Boþe Mark haþ sene; / He knewe hem wele bi siȝt" (2533-2535). This represents a culminating example of the audience being placed outside the lovers' relationship looking in. In earlier instances, Tristrem and Ysonde were aware that they were being viewed and presented themselves accordingly; here, the audience along with Mark and his knights have visual access to them without their knowledge. This works to indict a reliance upon visual sooth much more than any of the lovers' deliberate deceptions. On those

³⁸⁸ As usual, however, where the content is similar the tone is markedly different between Thomas's version and Auchinleck's. For instance, part of the lovers' contentment in the former text is grounded in their belief that "God would grant them nourishment enough, wherever they were," a sentiment that never appears at any point in the Middle English affair; similarly, the lovers in Thomas's version are pleased at their ability to be together "without guilt," implying that guilt would have been a regular part of their being together outside the woods in a way it never is for the lovers in *Sir Tristrem* (Jorgensen, "*Tristrams saga ok Isöndar*," 161).

occasions, the sight of the witnesses—including the audience—was being actively manipulated by the recipients of that sight, but on this occasion, no manipulation is necessary to render visual sooth completely inadequate and misleading.

Just as Mark required no interloper to prompt his perception of their earlier transgression, leading to their exile, so too does he reach his own conclusions based on the sight he has stumbled across: “3if þai weren in sinne, / Nou3t so þai no lay. / Lo hou þai liue atvinne. / Þai no hede nou3t of swiche play, / Ywis” (2546-2550). While he does not mention the striking image of the sword separating their sleeping bodies, Mark’s focus is nevertheless on how Tristrem and Ysonde “liue atvinne.” His opening assumption, based on his own observation of their “play,” is that, if his nephew and wife were indeed “in sinne,” they would not lay “atvinne,” as he can clearly see they do. Mark reads this accident as irrefutable proof, and concludes that Tristrem and Ysonde “no hede nou3t of swiche play,” despite the fact that he had himself previously observed their “play,” prompting their exile in the first place. Then again, that sentence had been for the explicit purpose of putting such play “out of his eize sene,” which was all he thought needful in order to be “awreken” of his ostensible betrayers. Now that he has reason to believe that he can have Tristrem and Ysonde back at court without having their play offending his eyes, Mark seems to regard it as a win-win situation: his vengeance, such as it was, still stands in the absence of any visible play on their part.

For Mark, these deductions suffice well enough, but his knights add their own interpretation to the “atvinne” position of Tristrem and Ysonde’s bodies and that position’s implicit lack of “play”: they declare that these signs indicate that “trewe loue it is” (2552).³⁸⁹ Here, “trewe loue” is directly linked to a patent lack of “play”—indicating that true love must be

³⁸⁹ This declaration has no corollary in Thomas’s version as found in the Norse Saga.

non-sexual love. In general, however, the vocabulary of “loue” is almost invariably linked with the vocabulary of “play” in this romance, and Tristrem and Ysonde, under the influence of the love potion, clearly embody a definition of love that is synonymous with physical, sexual play. On this occasion, then, Mark’s disinclination to dig beneath the surface layer of the visual evidence he encounters in fact manages to save him from the deeper error into which his knights fall. He only concludes a lack of play from the “atvinne” bodies, which, at least in the exact moment of his observation, is nothing but the purest sooth, whereas his knights, in extrapolating from their king’s conclusion, end up dragging the already adulterated value of truth in this romance onto even shakier semantic ground by ascribing “trewe” love to a relationship wherein truth is of little to no value. This serves as a further illustration of how a reliance upon visual evidence—even/especially when combined with a desire to extrapolate from that evidence—can lead the viewer into folly and error.

The lovers themselves awake only after Mark and his company have left. In contrast to their counterparts in both Bérout’s and Thomas’s versions, they manage to “read” the glove that Mark has left behind correctly: “For Markes þai it knewe, / Þai wist he had þer bene. / Þo was her ioie al newe, / Þat he hem hadde ysene / Wiþ siȝt” (2553-2561). Being familiar with the way Mark’s mind operates as well as, themselves, fully invested in the visual paradigm on which he relies, Tristrem and Ysonde know instantly that what he has seen “wiþ siȝt” exonerates them fully, and this is the cause of their all-new joy. In Bérout, the lovers know that they are guilty and so act partly in their guilty conscience, assuming that Mark has seen their guilt and thus fleeing his justified anger. In Thomas, they are first puzzled as to “how the king’s glove had gotten there” and then “relieved and comforted that he had found them the way they were at that

time.”³⁹⁰ But in *Sir Tristrem*, the lovers know that what Mark has seen *makes* them innocent in the same way that Ysonde’s ambiguous oath *made* her “clene.” The sooth that Mark has seen is the same sooth that they have repeatedly presented to him intentionally, and this unintentional presentation seems to cause no internal dissonance for them. Upon their return to court, the episode of the forest exile is drawn to a close when “Mark kist Ysonde þo / & Tristrem trewe fere” (2566-2567). The sooth having been recognized, this instantiation of the cyclical pattern ends on a by-now familiar irony.

Conclusion

The romance does not end here, although the cyclical pattern breaks down not long after Tristrem and Ysonde return from the forest. After managing to kill the meddlesome Meriadok, as well as Canados, a would-be suitor of Ysonde, with the help of his new friend Ganhardin (his wife’s brother), Tristrem agrees to go to the assistance of another knight, one “þong Tristrem” who needs the “trewe” Tristrem’s help in recovering his sweetheart from a knight who has carried her off (3329, 3336).. Unfortunately, Young Tristrem perishes on this endeavor, and our Tristrem is injured “In his eld wounde” (3344). This is the last line of the extant text.

We are missing the final leaf of this romance, so we cannot know whether, as in *Bevis*, *Sir Tristrem* originally included a unique and jarring ending, or whether, as seems more likely, Sir Walter Scott’s reconstructed ending, based on that found in one of Thomas’s extant fragments, presents a reasonable substitute.³⁹¹ To be sure, the emotionally fraught, highly tragic ending of Thomas’s romance (and of Scott’s reconstruction) fits rather poorly with the overall parody of *Sir Tristrem*. For my own part, I imagine an ending possessing the same basic

³⁹⁰ Jorgensen, “*Tristrams saga ok Isöndar*,” 165.

³⁹¹ Lupack’s TEAMS edition provides this ending on pages 251-256, lines 3345-3509 in his text.

ingredients—Tristrem sending for Ysonde to come and heal him, the signals of the white or black sails, Ysonde of the White Hands' revenge in misreporting that signal, and the doubled death of the lovers—but suffused with the same kind of absurdity that characterizes the rest of the romance. Certainly the black and white sails, with their wordless, visual message, twisted by Ysonde of the White Hands' malicious words, would lend themselves well to the paradigm of reliance on visual over verbal evidence. Even without the ending, however, the handling of truth and sooth throughout this romance forms a clear and consistent pattern which compliments, even as it contrasts with, the handling of truth in the other two romances I have examined.

For one thing, *Sir Tristrem* holds itself at more of a remove from its historical context than either of those had. *Bevis* engaged with the active and deadly discourse of treason in various ways but always relatively openly, and *Amis and Amiloun* even more openly grappled with the similarly live issue of sworn brotherhood as ultimate priority. Tristrem's central issue of adultery, thanks to Isabella and Mortimer, would have been just as crucial and the parallels just as easy to draw, and yet the text consistently declines not only to engage in direct exploration of its historical context, but in any serious consideration of the troubling of truth at all, instead preferring to craft a satirical indictment of sooth. As such, I argue that we should see *Sir Tristrem* as providing a third distinct approach to dealing with the contemporary crisis of truth, one which becomes all the more apparent when set against those approaches evident in *Bevis of Hampton* and *Amis and Amiloun*. Understanding Auchinleck, and especially its romances, is contingent upon understanding its constituent texts' approaches to troubled truth, and how those approaches intersect, diverge, reinforce, or even contradict one another. Unlike with *Bevis* and *Amis and Amiloun*, human truth is never at issue in *Sir Tristrem*, having been largely sublimated by truth's

emergent definition as “accuracy” or “that which is seen”—which proves, in the end, to be no more stable than the quality it was beginning to replace.

In each exemplar or story tradition to be included in Auchinleck, there was an opportunity for adaptation and modification, and there was clearly something in each text that the Auchinleck scribes saw as resonating with the distressing circumstances of their own time, and which they chose to emphasize, minimize, explore, or mock. It is worth remembering that *Amis and Amiloun*, which unflinchingly confronts the problematic resonances of its portrayal of sworn brotherhood, was copied by Scribe 1, who also provided *Sir Tristrem* in all its fleshy, visually reliant absurdity, while *Sir Bevis of Hampton*, employing a slightly different strategy in each of its three England-based episodes, was copied by Scribe 5. It would be interesting but ultimately fruitless to dream up motivations for each scribe’s approach to each text, and moreover, as I have said in my first chapter, it is possible that many of the moments that I hold as significant were to be found in Auchinleck’s now-lost exemplars. That said, while the strategies of each text are unique, the overarching concern with troubled truth is undeniable. Treason, sworn brotherhood, and an increasing reliance on sooth were all facets of the unfolding crisis of truth that had produced recent and disastrous consequences for fourteenth century England, and their handling within this manuscript speaks to an awareness of and an interest in such weighty questions making itself known in some of the earliest English literature. These three Auchinleck romances, when read together, demonstrate not only how crucial the problem of troubled truth was felt to be (in order to require so many avenues of approach) but also how conscientiously and creatively the Auchinleck makers were engaging with that problem, using the literary opportunities at hand to confront crucial questions raised by contemporary upheavals.

Coda

During the early fourteenth century, despite all the pressure that truth was under, a person's sworn truth was still regarded as having a reciprocal relationship with reality, such that an instability in human truth could negatively rebound onto the social fabric of which that truth was a part. That is to say, a breakdown in sworn oaths, loyalty, and honor was felt to naturally lead to a breakdown in social order: the consequences for troubled truth on a personal scale could and did manifest on the communal scale. Thus the personally motivated treason of Bevis's mother against her husband profoundly affects her son and all of Southampton; the misprioritization of sworn brotherhood has serious consequences for everyone in and every aspect of Amis and Amiloun's lives; and the central paradigm of reliance upon visual sooth dominates the actions of every major character in *Sir Tristrem*. Thus too the shockwaves sent through English society by the execution of a single royal earl for treason, the exclusive oath-based relationship between the king and a single man, and the adultery of a single powerful woman. Although all of these historical individuals operated at the highest levels of society, and their actions and fates would have a profound effect on that society regardless of how they behaved, the pattern of individualized troubled truth becoming collectively troubled truth was clearly incorporated into and explored by the romances of the Auchinleck manuscript.

By Chaucer's time, however—or at least, in Chaucer's writing—there seems to have been a profound de-coupling of human truth from the “real world.” Broken or unreliable truth is still destructive, but the scale of that destruction and the seriousness with which troubled truth is taken is noticeably reduced from what we see in the early fourteenth century and in Auchinleck in particular. In many ways, Chaucer lived during the climax of the crisis that first began in earnest during the reign of Edward II, and his perspective on that climax offers an instructive

contrast to Auchinleck's perspective on its roots. Indeed, the analysis of the literary responses to these roots which has been performed in this dissertation allows for an enhanced understanding of Chaucer's own approach to these same themes of troubled truth. Chaucer's main interest in truth lies in exploring the fissures between appearance and reality, between a person's sworn oath and their actual behavior. This decoupling leads to a containment of troubled truth's consequences, since, for the most part, only those people directly implicated in an oath-based relationship—rather than society at large—are subjected to the fallout from broken truth, and sometimes that fallout barely even registers. My examination here will be, of necessity, both brief and preliminary, given not just the size of Chaucer's opus, but also his extensive interest in multiple facets of the changing nature of truth. I intend to focus on the two texts with the clearest parallels to the Auchinleck material I have discussed: *Troilus and Criseyde* and "The Knight's Tale."

In *Troilus and Criseyde*, much like in *Bevis of Hampton*, the discourse of treason permeates much of the plot but only manifests fully at a few key moments. Unlike the Auchinleck romance, however, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, treason is largely confined to the personal realm, its effects felt on the micro rather than the macro level. The narrative opens with the treason of Calkas, Criseyde's father, and while the treason of a parent acting as the inciting incident in the life of their child resonates suggestively with the actions of Bevis's mother at the beginning of his story, there are significant differences in the circumstances and manner of treason between these two examples. Indeed, Calkas is initially introduced as "a lord of gret auctorite," who is "in science so expert" that he can accurately predict the fall of Troy well before it happens (I. 65, 67). Burdened with this foreknowledge, he makes the sensible choice and flees to the side he knows will be victorious. Significantly, this is only described as treason

second-hand, in the “rumour” that begins after he had already fled, reporting “That Calkas traitour fled was an allied / With hem of Greece,” and blame falls on Criseyde despite her lack of knowledge about “this false and wikked dede” (87-88, 93). We do not see Calkas plot his treason, we do not know his emotional reaction to his circumstances—all of which we do observe first-hand in the case of Bevis’s mother, whose treason is emotionally motivated in her desire to be rid of an unwanted husband and reunited with a lover.³⁹² For Calkas, treason is a logical rather than emotional decision, a choice made in the face of inevitability, and as such becomes less of an overtly villainous deed. It has consequences for Criseyde, of course, but—unlike the later, only ever hinted-at treason of Antenor—it does not have a noticeable effect on the course of the war itself. Indeed, the only person affected by his treason seems to be his daughter, making even this betrayal primarily resonant on a personal rather than political level.

Similarly, Criseyde’s betrayal of Troilus, while devastating to him, has a negligible effect on the politics of Troy or the war itself, especially given the fact that her father was correct about the inevitability of the Trojan’s defeat. Against the ever-present but never-primary backdrop of grand political treason in an urban setting, Chaucer chooses to focus on treason at its smallest scale, the betrayal of one person’s oath to another, the falseness of one lover as contrasted to the maintained truth of the other. While it has been convincingly argued that the household could be the site of personal betrayals that partook of the politically charged fourteenth century discourse of treason, I do not believe that we are meant to understand Criseyde’s treason as representing the same kind of threat to patriarchal and hierarchical order which, for example, Paul Strohm discusses in “Treason in the Houshold.”³⁹³ Although these lovers are bound in a recognizable,

³⁹² We also see the Countess of Southampton unambiguously indicted for treason by the narrator, something which Chaucer’s narrator declines to do.

³⁹³ Much of the significance which Strohm attributes to the 1386 Wauton case, described in *Hochon’s Arrow*, 121-123 and 128-134, is based on his reading of the 1352 Statute of Treason as newly introducing the legal principle that

oath-based relationship, not only are Criseyde and Troilus unmarried, but there is no overt patriarchal or hierarchical order to their relationship. The power dynamic between them may be tricky to parse, but they in no way constitute a part of one another's domestic units, and they do not participate *as* a couple within the context of their broader community—indeed, they barely participate in their broader community at all. Even Troilus's military escapades are largely described second-hand, with a focus on how they affect him personally and his relationship with Criseyde. Instead of resonating on a broad social scale, then, this treason manifests as a deeply private event, just as the affair itself was painstakingly kept secret. Even Diomedes, the instrument (or occasion) of Criseyde's betrayal, is himself unaware of their relationship's treacherous valences.

Significantly, the moment wherein Criseyde betrays Troilus is difficult to pin down. We are not privy to her decision to “false” him, instead we find her sorrowing after the fact: “whan that she falsed Troilus. / She seyde, ‘Allas, for now is clene ago / My name of trouthe in love, for evermo! / ...Allas, of me, unto the worldes ende, / Shal neyther ben ywriten nor ysonge / No good word, for these bokes wol me shende. / O, rolled shal I ben on many a tonge!’” (1053-1055, 1058-1061).³⁹⁴ Just as with her father's treason, here the language of betrayal only emerges after the betrayal has occurred. We see neither Calkas nor Criseyde *decide* to betray, we only ever see that they have betrayed. For Calkas, the consequences of this betrayal were primarily expressed in the rumors that sprang up about him after he had left, which directly affected only his

a woman who murdered or conspired to murder her husband was guilty of treason and should be burned for it. In fact, not only was this legal principle well-established long before 1352, but there had even been an incident in Edward II's reign where “a woman was tried for attempting unsuccessfully to kill her husband and was sentenced to be burned. Although there was no reference to petty treason in as many words the penalty exacted showed that the offence was not treated as an ordinary felony. ‘If a woman be attained of any treason’, said *Britton*, ‘let her be burnt’” (Bellamy, 226; quote from *Britton* I, 40-1). *Britton* is a late-thirteenth-century legal compendium.

³⁹⁴ Jill Mann has pointed out that, “[j]ust as she never formally decides to yield to Troilus, but comes to realize that she has yielded...so her betrayal too is a matter of retrospective acknowledgement” (*Feminizing Chaucer*, 23).

daughter. Similarly, at the moment of her own betrayal, Criseyde's reputation her primary concern: her "name of trouthe" rather than her truth itself. Another of Chaucer's heroines, Dorigen from "The Franklin's Tale," is portrayed as incapable of distinguishing between her truth and her identity: her kept truth is essential for her survival, both in the literal physical sense and in terms of her own sense of herself. By contrast, Criseyde seems to have a clear sense of herself as existing separately from her truth. Even if she is destined to be rolled on many a tongue and is ashamed of that fact, her looking forward to the future makes it clear that she expects both a long life and a long literary after-life, however unpleasant. Indeed, her treason, like Calkas's, ensures her continued survival. For both father and daughter, treason is a primarily practical decision, and even Criseyde's woe at having "falsed" Troilus does not, apparently, exist until after that false-ing is accomplished. Unlike Bevis's mother, she does not deliberately decide to exchange one lover for another, the narrator does not explicitly condemn her for that betrayal, and we never see her face the long-term consequences of that betrayal.

This focus on personal treason is thus particularly noticeable when *Troilus and Criseyde* is contrasted to *Bevis*, where treason always has dramatic negative effects on the community at large, whether the inciting treason of the hero's mother or the exorbitant death toll from the London street battle. While we know that Troy falls (as London does not) and thousands of Trojans similarly spill their blood as a consequence of treason, the audience is never allowed, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, to see the consequences of the final treason that ends the Trojan War. Instead, we are whisked away from the human realm along with Troilus, disdaining such earthly things as unfaithfulness, and told to put our trust in Christ, he who "nyl falsen no wight" (1845). While this highly spiritualized, Christianized ending can seem dissonant with the majority of the

poem, it actually complements the way that treason has been handled throughout, pointing to a specific, individual relationship with the one person who is incapable of betrayal.

In Chaucer's hands, the impact of private, personal treason, the emotional cost of one man's broken heart and shattered life, becomes a tragedy to rival the Thames running red with blood. The number of people affected by treason has narrowed, the (visible) communal impact is softened, but this is still treason and it is still devastating. At the same time, the devastation in *Troilus and Criseyde* lies not in the fact that Criseyde's truth has some real purchase on the fabric of Trojan social reality such that that reality must tear along with her truth, but simply because her truth has real purchase on the fabric of Troilus's heart and sense of self, and that is what tears. This is treason writ small.

Chaucer is similarly interested in the personal valences of betrayal in his examination of sworn brotherhood in "The Knight's Tale." Although on this occasion the consequences of broken truth do eventually ripple out to affect more people than the two men bound by oath, the transition from personal to collective conflict is imposed by an external force, Duke Theseus. While various outside players—including the gods and the warriors each sworn brother brings to the tournament—are thus brought into the hitherto private dispute engendered by broken truth, this wider impact does not emerge from *within* broken truth, as it were, but is almost artificially tacked on to a personal matter from the outside. And even so, the most serious impact of broken truth falls to the sworn brothers themselves to bear. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, it is the betrayed member of the couple who eventually dies as a result of personal faithlessness; in "The Knight's Tale," this ultimate cost is paid by the betrayer. In the end, it is Arcite alone who bears the brunt of his own faithlessness, and even though Palamon certainly suffers his own share of turmoil, troubled truth once again proves unable to seriously damage the broader social fabric.

Similarly to *Troilus and Criseyde*, the moment wherein truth is betrayed in “The Knight’s Tale” is difficult to locate, since we only learn of the main characters’ sworn brotherhood *after* it has already been broken.³⁹⁵ When we first encounter Palamon and Arcite, wounded on the battlefield, they are wearing the same arms—a typical aspect of sworn brotherhood, but also of blood relationships. The two men are indeed cousins and, moreover, consistently call one another “cosyn” rather than “brother” throughout the text (1012, 10081, 1093, et al). Locked together in a tower dungeon, they each spot the beautiful Emilie strolling in the garden below—Palamon is the first to see and love her, Arcite the second, and this sparks an intense falling out when Arcite will not retract his claim in favor of his cousin’s earlier stake. Palamon’s rebuke relies heavily on the language of sworn truth, hammering home the oath-bond between them even more than the blood-bond, telling Arcite that it would be “to thee no greet honour / For to be fals ne for to be traitour / To me that am thy cosyn and thy brother / Ysworn ful depe and ech of us til oother / ...that thou sholdest trewely forthen me / In every cas as I shal forthren thee / This was thyn ooth and myn also, certeyn” (1129-1132, 1137-1139). Significantly, this speech is framed not just as a censure of Arcite’s falseness, but also as an attempt to save Arcite from the shame and infamy of “falsing” one to whom he owes loyalty—exactly the fate Criseyde herself fears. Palamon furthermore reminds Arcite that he is “ybounden as a knyght,” another hint at Palamon’s concern for Arcite’s honor and standing, since Arcite’s own chivalric identity is inextricably bound up in his sworn word (1149).

Arcite’s rebuttal begins with a petty parroting of Palamon’s own accusation—“Thow shalt...be rather fals than I. / And thou art fals, I telle thee outrely”—and his support for this position is legalistic in the extreme, since he argues that that Palamon initially thought (or at least

³⁹⁵ See Stretter, “Engendering Obligation”, 517.

said) that Emilie must be a goddess, supposedly invalidating his earlier claim (1153-1154). Arcite tries one last time to base his argument on Palamon's own reasoning, again echoing him when he says "I tolde thee myna venture / As to my cosyng and my brother sworn," but he almost immediately gives up on such truth-based tactics, instead throwing out their sworn oath entirely, claiming that "Love is a gretter law" and "therefore positif lawe and swich decree / Is broken alday, for love in ech degree" (1160-1161, 1165, 1167-1168). Where Palamon's argument was consistent to the point of repetitiveness, Arcite seems determined to try out every avenue that might get him what he wants, at last hitting upon a strategy that works for him. There is no hint, in Arcite's words, of anything resembling Palamon's apparent concern for his brother's honor and identity. Instead, Arcite ends his speech with a clear dismissal of their bond and a rare, sarcastic address of "brother": "at the kynges court, my brother, / Ich man for himself. Ther is noon oother. / Love if thee list, for I love and ay shall! / And smoothly, levee brother, this is al" (1181-1184). This attitude of competition rather than community, of every man for himself, is in direct contrast to the core ideals of sworn brotherhood, which was designed to be a relationship that ensured a man would always be able to count upon his sworn partner, even if he could count upon no one else. Throughout this conversation—the first direct dialogue we get from these characters—Palamon holds staunchly to the side of human truth, whereas Arcite seems to land on the side of sooth, citing technicalities, strict legalities, and circumstances in an effort to reduce their sworn oath to mere "lawe" and "decree" rather than a matter of faithfulness and loyalty.

Catherine Rock has argued that Arcite's transgressions against traditional truth account for the fact that he dies shortly after winning Emilie's hand in the tournament.³⁹⁶ This would

³⁹⁶ See Rock, "Forsworn and Fordone," 416, 420. It is worth noting, in fairness, that Arcite *does* keep the oath he swears to Palamon upon encountering him after his escape, promising to supply Palamon with food and gear so that their inevitable battle over Emilie will be a fair fight: "Have heer my trouthe, tomorwe I wol nat faille / Withoute wityng of any oother wight, / That here I wol be founden as a knyght" (1610-1612). Indeed, this seems to be one of

seem to suggest a lingering respect in the late fourteenth century for the bonds of truth in general and sworn brotherhood in particular, but, as Tison Pugh has pointed out, “[i]n Chaucer’s canon, when a man swears an oath of brotherhood to another man, the vow is soon repudiated, rejected, or otherwise rendered problematic,” and he argues that, by the late fourteenth century, relationships of sworn brotherhood “were often viewed suspiciously in courtly and aristocratic contexts.”³⁹⁷ I believe that these two scholarly perspectives are not as contradictory as they might first appear: Arcite does indeed seem to be punished for his failure to hold to his sworn word while Palamon is rewarded for his own dedication to the ideals of truth, but at the same time the kind of suspicion Pugh mentions is also borne out by the utter failure of sworn brotherhood to resolve the conflict at hand. This is particularly noticeable when “The Knight’s Tale” is compared to *Amis and Amiloun*. While *Amis and Amiloun* has often been held up as a contrast to “The Knight’s Tale” in its so-called “celebration” of sworn brotherhood,³⁹⁸ the political commentary embedded in Chaucer’s portrayal of Palamon and Arcite’s relationship seems to me to rather represent a conclusion or a climax to the early fourteenth-century disillusionment with sworn brotherhood evident in the Auchinleck romance.³⁹⁹ Even though sworn brotherhood offers no clearer a way out in *Amis and Amiloun* than it does in “The Knight’s Tale,” in the Auchinleck romance the relationship itself does survive the intense pressures brought to bear upon it, and the happy ending of *Amis and Amiloun*—however inordinately unearned—does allow for its

the rare occasions when Arcite’s concern for his status “as a knyght” compels him to any sort of action, and he fulfills his “trouthe” even though the battle is interrupted by Theseus’s arrival. Why he should keep this oath when he breaks so many others I cannot confidently say, but it seems as if Arcite’s main concern lies in his own self-interest, and in this case that self-interest was adequately served by the keeping of the oath. Ironically, when they do meet the following day, the text tells us that they each help to arm one another “As freenly as he were his owene brother” (1652).

³⁹⁷ Pugh, “Satirizing Queer Brotherhood”, 282.

³⁹⁸ See, inter alia, Stretter, “Engendering Obligation”, 502; Hyatte, *Arts of Friendship*, 91.

³⁹⁹ Robert Stretter, informed by Green’s *Crisis of Truth* in his examination of this poem, concludes that “the destruction of Palamon and Arcite’s bond with each other can be read as a sign of the end of the age of brotherhood, as a Chaucerian comment on the social realities of fourteenth-century England” (“Engendering Obligation, 520)

continuance and even its potential reincarnation in the form of Amis's two young sons. No such potential remains by the end of "The Knight's Tale;" indeed, there is no such potential in sworn brotherhood at the *beginning* of Chaucer's poem, since the institution is only introduced after it has been undermined, which is in keeping with Chaucer's generally negative treatment of sworn brotherhood throughout his opus.⁴⁰⁰ In the early fourteenth century, the danger of sworn brotherhood lay in its hyperprioritization, which could rebound to the detriment of medieval society, especially if entered into by highborn men. By the end of the century, it seems that sworn brotherhood is always/already compromised, but the effects of this deterioration have also narrowed considerably, at least within Chaucerian literature.

This consistent focus on the personal valences of truth and betrayal gestures towards an interest in individual interiority that will not surprise Chaucerians, but the contrast between this emphasis on human psychology and the interest in communal consequences that animates much of Auchinleck's troubling of truth also suggest a profound shift in both the crisis of truth and in the Middle English literary approach to individual experience. To be sure, Auchinleck contains moments of profound interest in interiority—witness for example Amis's extended and repeated throes of despair when caught between two insupportable options. But even in *Amis and Amiloun* the final consequence, reversed by divine grace, is borne not by either brother but by Amis's sons, by two innocents who are not only outside the discourse of sworn brotherhood that binds their father but who represent, insofar as they are Amis's family and heirs, the entire external community that relies upon the proper application of truth by this one man. For Chaucer, truth seems to be automatically decoupled from any kind of reciprocal relationship with social order,

⁴⁰⁰ "The sworn relationships of *The Shipman's Tale*, *The Friar's Tale*, and *The Summoner's Tale* all involve deception and betrayal, and in the case of *The Pardoner's Tale*, the betrayal extends to murder" (Stretter, "Engendering Obligation", 519).

and it is this that allows—or even compels—his explorations of faithlessness to center on the travails of individual characters caught up in troubled truth. Moreover, the very fact that it is truth’s consistent *instability* that interests Chaucer, its proclivity for containing fissures and flaws, demonstrates the pervasiveness and urgency of the crisis of truth by the end of the fourteenth century. The upheavals of Edward II’s reign put some of the earliest dents into the perceived stability of traditional truth, and by Chaucer’s time, those dents had widened into chasms that couldn’t be ignored, but could be examined. Chaucer thus took the opportunity to explore one of the most pertinent moral, legal, and existential questions of his day through the medium of Middle English literature, and although his historical circumstances and literary approaches are significantly different from those pertaining to Auchinleck, in both oeuvres the falseness of fiction becomes a powerful tool for confronting the troubled state of human truth.

Appendix
The Auchinleck Manuscript

Booklet	Title	Folios	Quires	Genre	Scribe
1	The Legend of Pope Gregory	1r-6v	1-2	religious narrative	1
	6Ar/6Av (thin stub)				
	The King of Tars	7ra-13vb	2-3	religious narrative	1
	The Life of Adam and Eve	1ra-2vb; ff.14ra-16rb	3-4	religious narrative	1
	Seynt Mergrete	16rb-21ra	4	saint's life	1
	Seynt Katerine	21ra-24vb	4-5	saint's life	1
	St Patrick's Purgatory	25ra-31vb	5-6	religious narrative	1
	þe Desputisoun Bitven þe Bodi and þe Soule	31vb-35ra stub	6	didactic religious text	1
	The Harrowing of Hell	35rb-37rb or 37va stub	6	religious narrative	1
The Clerk Who Would See the Virgin	37rb or 37va stub-38vb	6	religious narrative	1	
2	Speculum Gy de Warewyke	39ra-48rb stub	7-8	didactic religious text	2
	Amis and Amiloun	48rb stub-61va stub	8-9	romance	1
	The Life of St Mary Magdalene	61Ava stub-65vb	9-10	saint's life	1
	The Nativity and Early Life of Mary	65vb-69va	10	religious narrative	1
3	On the Seven Deadly Sins	70ra-72ra	11	didactic religious text	3
	The Paternoster	72ra-72rb or 72va stub	11	didactic religious text	3
	The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin	72rb or 72va stub-78ra	11-12	religious narrative	3
	Sir Degare	78rb-84rb stub	12-13	romance/Breton lai	3
	The Seven Sages of Rome	84rb stub-99vb	13-(15)	miscellaneous	3
	Gathering missing (c1400 lines of text).				
	Floris and Blancheflour	100ra-104vb	(15)-16	romance	3
	The Sayings of the Four Philosophers	105ra-105rb	16	political text	2
The Battle Abbey Roll	105v-107r	16	list of names	4	
f.107Ar / f.107Av (thin stub)					
4	Guy of Warwick (couplets)	108ra-146vb	17-22	romance	1
	Guy of Warwick (stanzas)	145vb-167rb	22-24	romance	1
	Reinbroun	167rb-175vb	24-25	romance	5
Leaf missing					
5	Sir Beues of Hamtoun	176ra-201ra	26-29	romance	5
	Of Arthour & of Merlin	201rb-256vb	29-36	romance	1
	þe Wenche þat Loved þe King	ff.256vb-256A thin stub	36	miscellaneous	1
	A Peniworp of Witt	256A stub-259rb	36	miscellaneous	1
	How Our Lady's Sauter was First Found	259rb-260vb	36	religious narrative	1

6	Lay le Freine	261ra-262A thin stub	37	romance/Breton lai	1
	Roland and Vernagu	262va stub-267vb	37	romance	1
7	Otuel a Knight	268ra-277vb	38-?	romance	6
Many leaves lost, but some recovered as fragments.					
8	Kyng Alisaunder	2783-277v	?-41	romance	1
	The Thrush and the Nightingale	279va-vb	41	debate	1
	The Sayings of St Bernard	280ra	41	didactic religious text	1
	Dauid þe King	280rb-280vb	41	prayer	1
9	Sir Tristrem	281ra-299A thin stub	42-44	romance	1
	Sir Orfeo	299A stub-303ra	44	romance/Breton lai	1
	The Four Foes of Mankind	303rb-303vb	44	miscellaneous	1
10	The Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle	304ra-317rb	45-46	chronicle	1
	Horn Childe & Maiden Rinnild	317va-323vb	46-47	romance	1
	Leaf missing.				
	Alphabetical Praise of Women	324ra-325vb	47	miscellaneous	1
11	King Richard	326r-327v	48-?	romance	1
Many leaves lost.					
12	þe Simonie (ff.328r-334v)		52	political text	2

This table was assembled from information available at <https://auchinleck.nls.uk/contents.html> and <http://faculty.washington.edu/miceal/auchinleck/table.html>. The entries under “Genre” represent my own classifications and are meant to be broadly suggestive rather than perfectly exact. Those items that are **bolded** are discussed at length in the dissertation.

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