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Writing reform in fourteenth-century English romance, from  
the Agrarian Crisis to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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Abstract—'Writing reform in fourteenth-century English romance, from the Agrarian Crisis to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'— Kaylara Reed

This thesis investigates five fourteenth-century Middle English romances—*Sir Isumbras*, *The King of Tars*, *The Earl of Toulouse*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—for their resonances with fourteenth-century reformist ideology. The fourteenth century witnessed the emergence of Middle English complaint writing and also culminated in two reformist movements in the 1380s: the Peasants' Revolt and Lollardy. Each romance considered in the thesis share resonances with reformist ideology and complaint poems—like William Langland's *Piers Plowman*—as well as texts relating to the Peasants' Revolt and Lollardy. Such evidence suggests that romance and complaint shared ideologies and both types of texts may have contributed to reformist activities—writing, acting, or both—throughout the century.

*Sir Isumbras* is explored in relation to the Agrarian Crisis, related complaint texts such as *The Simonie* and *The Song of the Husbandman*, and the penitential philosophy it shares with *Piers Plowman*. *Isumbras* shows landowners causing peasant suffering, and problematises orthodox penitential prescriptions. *The King of Tars* is read in relationship to complaint texts like *The Sayings of the Four Philosophers* and with later Lollard writing. *Tars* reforms nations by highlighting the consequences of immoral kingship—both Christian and Saracen—and replacing it with an ethically superior woman. *The Earl of Toulouse*, examined alongside texts relevant to the Peasants' Revolt, represents armed revolt as a means of stopping obstinate tyranny and envisions that heroic men—even to the point of breaking the law—will insist upon truth and justice. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* shares resonances with an array of Middle English Lollard writings, from its stance on execution, nobility, poverty, the power of sermons, and female autonomy and power. Finally, I analyse *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* alongside Ricardian complaint texts, illuminating tyrannical character traits in Arthur and his negative influence on Gawain.

## Abbreviations

EETS—Early English Text Society

O.S.—EETS, Original Series

S.S.—EETS, Supplementary Series

E.S.—EETS, Extra Series

TEAMS—The Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages

M.E.D.—*Middle English Dictionary*, 10 vols. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952-2001).

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## Introduction

### Middle English romance as an act of reform

This thesis explores a range of Middle English romance texts from across the fourteenth century and argues for the participation of romance in the wider currents of reform visible in literature as well as rebellious action in the later fourteenth century. I argue that as fiction, romance exhibits the ability to challenge social expectations and posit new modes of social or political interaction that could benefit society at large through the actions of its characters and the consequences of those actions. My interpretation of these moments is informed by the socio-political and historical context of the fourteenth century. I read romance texts not only through the lens of historical acts of rebellion and reform—the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 and rise of Lollardy—but also alongside Middle English complaint poems and other forms of literature that represent religious or political corruption, and I see evidence of disquiet with the status quo in these romance texts as an appeal to social reform.

My practice of reading romance alongside fourteenth-century English complaint and political poems is informed by Robert Miola’s recognition of the multiple ways and degrees that ideological interactions can occur within and across texts and events.<sup>1</sup> Like Paul Strohm, I also seek those moments of ideological cross-over between the literary and non-literary, recognising with Strohm the political and historical investments of literary texts, as well as the cultural information that non-literary texts can contain.<sup>2</sup> I am extending the net Strohm

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<sup>1</sup> R. S. Miola, ‘Seven types of intertextuality’, in M. Marrapodi (ed.), *Shakespeare, Italy, and intertextuality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) 13-25.

<sup>2</sup> P. Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (London: Harvard University Press, 1989) ix-xiii; P. Strohm, *Hochon’s arrow: the social imagination of fourteenth-century texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) esp. 3-9; P. Strohm, *England’s empty throne: usurpation and the language of legitimation, 1399-1422* (London: Yale University Press, 1998) esp. xi-xiv; P. Strohm, *Theory and the premodern text*, *Medieval Cultures* 26 (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) esp. xi-xvi; P. Strohm, *Politique: languages of statecraft between Chaucer and Shakespeare* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005) 1-20.

has cast to include romance, thereby developing Strohm's theoretical perspective by applying it to a neglected genre. I acknowledge with Strohm that, as literary historians, we rely 'on the written record for what we can know of the past', and that, as such, fourteenth-century romance represents a repository of historical evidence, 'as argumentative and interpretive documents in their own right, as historical contestants and as objects of contestation'.<sup>3</sup> In the past, romance has not been acknowledged for the potential that I argue it possesses—to be a written record of fourteenth-century reform.

I accept that literature is by nature political, especially when addressing, describing, or centralising power structures as romance does.<sup>4</sup> Whether these texts support or encourage the status quo, or, as I suggest throughout this thesis, put pressure upon those systems by positing alternative strategies, these texts engage with political ideas. Critically, romance texts are often seen to be sources of entertainment alone, or more recently of propaganda, designed to support the politically and socially powerful.<sup>5</sup> By these definitions romance would represent, in the words of Michel de Certeau, the 'producers' (dominant members) rather than the 'consumers' (subordinate members) of culture.<sup>6</sup> I contend, instead, that in fourteenth-century culture Middle English texts, including romance, are not simply 'producers' (like Latin/Catholic or French/monarchical cultural influences), but also function as 'consumers', those that interpret and reshape culture from a subordinate position.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, I argue that Middle English romance authors and readers use the dominant social

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<sup>3</sup> Strohm, *Hochon's arrow*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> F. Jameson, *The political unconscious: narrative as a symbolic act* (London: Methuen, 1981); M. de Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*, translated from French by S. Rendall (London: University of California Press, 1988) xv.

<sup>5</sup> N. McDonald, 'A polemical introduction', in N. McDonald (ed.), *Pulp fictions of medieval England: essays in popular romance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) 1-21:1-2; H. Cooper, 'When romance comes true', in N. Cartlidge (ed.), *Boundaries in medieval romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008) 13-27:13; M. Johnston, *Romance and the gentry in late medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 1-20.

<sup>6</sup> Certeau, *Practice*, xi-xxiv.

<sup>7</sup> Certeau, *Practice*, xi-xvii.

discourse to enact ideological change (no matter how slow such drives and changes appear within the scope of history).<sup>8</sup> For, in the words of Anthony Giddens, ‘those in subordinate positions in social systems are frequently adept at converting whatever resources they have into some degree of control over the conditions of reproduction of those [dominant] social systems’.<sup>9</sup> While Middle English complaint poems are seen as potentially ‘radical’, representing the values of the subordinate classes, romance is not generally thought of in these terms. It is my contention that Middle English romance should be explored for radical cultural ideas, and can be a vehicle for cultural and ideological change of this kind.

The desire for change is visible in fourteenth-century English culture before it culminated in drastic revolutionary activity (the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt and Lollardy). I would argue that the beliefs central to these acts did not arise in the 1380s, but as Certeau, Pierre Bourdieu, and Giddens insist, that social change occurs over time, and not instantaneously or spontaneously, through the slow workings of discourse.<sup>10</sup> In Certeau’s words, people bring about these changes through ‘innumerable and infinitesimal transformations within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules’.<sup>11</sup> I seek evidence within fourteenth-century romance that supports ideas and beliefs that become central to resistance to the social order in the 1380s, exploring Middle English romance texts across the century that anticipate the later fourteenth-century language of complaint, rebellion, and reform.

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<sup>8</sup> Certeau, *Practice*, xi-xvii; for a similar theory of social resistance, see A. Giddens, *Central problems in social theory: action, structure, and contradiction in social analysis* (London: MacMillan Press, 1979) 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> Giddens, *Central problems*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Certeau, *Practice*, xi-xxiv; P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice*, translated from French by R. Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 1-5:4-5; Giddens, *Central problems*, 1-7.

<sup>11</sup> Certeau, *Practice*, xiv.



In the chapters that follow, therefore, I explore fourteenth-century romance for its generic potential to be an ‘act of reform’, by which I mean an action that seeks to address social changes that may benefit society as a whole. I situate romance alongside other examples of fourteenth-century writing (and rioting) that I class as ‘acts of reform’, such as complaint and political writing, the writing and actions of participants of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, and the writing of Lollards. Romance texts may not overtly call upon their readers to see them as a site of contest, or a site in which contested ideas are explored, but as Strohm suggests, ‘fabulists and romancers conceive episodes within imaginary structures or value systems their audiences embrace as true’.<sup>12</sup> By exploring how romance authors and scribes imagine the lives, deeds, and beliefs of both heroic and villainous characters, as well as the consequences of those beliefs and actions, and how they show God acting upon the lives of these men and women, a series of values can be inferred from the positive and negative results of different behaviours witnessed within these texts. For Strohm, it is these ‘properties (including its fantasies, its omissions, the social “work” it accomplishes)’ that allows a work of fiction to provide us with evidence that is ‘fully historical’.<sup>13</sup>

There are caveats to the critical appreciation of any text’s ability to function as historical evidence, however, as well as to the appreciation of the unique value of a literary text as such evidence. In the words of Strohm, ‘[c]omposed within history, fictions offer irreplaceable historical evidence in their own right’, so long as critics keep in mind what ‘*kinds* of evidence they are and are not suited to divulge’.<sup>14</sup> In the case of romance, these texts do not lend themselves to topical allusions as direct commentaries upon specific events or people. That said, their metaphors, uses of good and evil, cause-effect events, narrative voice, and character voices and actions, can all elucidate the poetic or social morality of a

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<sup>12</sup> Strohm, *Hochon’s arrow*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Strohm, *England’s empty throne*, xii.

<sup>14</sup> Strohm, *Hochon’s arrow*, 4.

particular romance as this may have been understood by its original audience in the fourteenth century. In so doing a romance can provide historical evidence for the kinds of ideas, philosophies, and social behaviours that romance authors and scribes attribute to their characters, and which their readership could accept as heroic or villainous.

In exploring the inter-textual relationship between romance, complaint, and other ‘non-literary’ texts such as sermons and polemics, I do not seek to imply authorial intent or argue that the romance authors and/or scribes read complaint and other texts and used them directly in their work, although sometimes the potential for this is there.<sup>15</sup> Rather, I use evidence of reformist ideologies associated with the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt and Middle English Lollard and complaint texts as evidence of contemporary cultural beliefs that were written, spoken, or performed with the professed intention of correcting or addressing societal ills, and of changing or reforming those aspects of society they found problematic. Although romance is rarely seen in this light, it is the intention of this thesis to demonstrate how romance texts also engage with these same ideas and ideologies. In order to do so, I have not looked for direct borrowings from specific texts, but rather have argued that romance is like a soundboard or echo chamber in which cultural ‘noise’ rebounds and resonates.

This study focuses on the broad fourteenth century in order to take a panoramic view, and measure the slow development, of certain ideas that would flourish later in the century, within the radical context of the 1380s. I explore five romances, *Sir Isumbras* (c. 1315-30), *The King of Tars* (c. 1330-40), *The Earl of Toulouse* (c. 1350), Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* (c. 1380-95), and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (c. 1380-1400). These romances all show a moment that can be read as social reform in action, in which the original political or ethical framework, the status quo, is seen to be replaced, or ‘reformed’, by the

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<sup>15</sup> M. Johnston & M. van Dussen, ‘Introduction: manuscripts and cultural history’, in M. Johnston & M. van Dussen (eds.), *The medieval manuscript book: cultural approaches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 1-16:9.

actions of heroic characters. These internal reforms within the narrative can be seen to overturn the political or spiritual convention of fourteenth-century English society. I turn now to look at the fourteenth-century rebellions and complaint texts that inform this thesis, their interconnected ideologies, and their engagement with these ideas across the century.

#### Fourteenth-century reform and complaint

Two reformist movements, the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and Lollardy, revealed the extremity of tensions in England between the wealthy nobility and clergy and the peasantry.<sup>16</sup> Although participants in both movements came from all three medieval estates, these reformers rhetorically spoke for the poor and oppressed while ideologically focusing on the well-being of England as a whole and the impact the immoral wealthy were having on the increasingly disempowered majority.<sup>17</sup> The dominant causes of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 were enforced serfdom and associated legal corruption,<sup>18</sup> heavy taxation and dishonest taxmen,<sup>19</sup> and laws preventing hunting, fishing, and gleaning from the woods.<sup>20</sup> Each of these had dangerous implications for the economic survival of the poorest members of society, but they also financially strained those used to more comfortable lifestyles but who exercised limited political power. From 1374,<sup>21</sup> John Wyclif (d. 1384) attempted to restructure the moral law of

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<sup>16</sup> Wyclif disseminated his ideas starting in the 1370s, and these were condemned as heretical in 1382, see S. E. Lahey, *John Wyclif* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 7-31.

<sup>17</sup> R. B. Dobson (ed.), *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London: Macmillan, St. Martin's Press, 1970) 13-8; M. Aston & C. Richmond (eds.), *Lollardy and the gentry in the later Middle Ages* (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1997); A. Hudson, 'Foreword', in *Lollards and their books* (London: The Hambleton Press, 1985) ix-xi:ix-x; M. Aston, 'Lollardy and literacy', in *Lollards and reformers: images and literacy in late medieval religion* (London: The Hambleton Press, 1984) 193-217:199-200.

<sup>18</sup> E. B. Fryde, *Peasants and landlords in later medieval England, c. 1380-c. 1525* (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1996); Dobson, *Revolt*, 19, 132, & 165.

<sup>19</sup> Dobson, *Revolt*, 21-3, 103-125, & 358-62.

<sup>20</sup> Fryde, *Peasants and landlords*, 50; Dobson, *Revolt*, 186.

<sup>21</sup> Wyclif became interested in *dominium* in 1374, and published highly controversial *De Civili Dominio* in 1376-7, see Lahey, *Wyclif*, 18.

the Church, arguing that the sacraments were limited in spiritual efficacy (denying transubstantiation) but even more controversially denying dominion (holding power, land, authority) to anyone living in sin, demanding apostolic poverty for all churchmen, and calling on lay leaders to restructure the Church hierarchy.<sup>22</sup> His proposals were aimed at reducing or eliminating corruption in the clergy in order to reduce or eliminate lay poverty.<sup>23</sup> Lollards expanded these ideas, often by arguing that grace, visible in ethical behaviour, gave any man or woman from any estate (lay or clerical, wealthy or poor) spiritual authority, and recommended passive resistance (refusing alms, work, etc.) to correct sinners in positions of social power.<sup>24</sup> Both movements sought to increase the rights and freedoms of the disempowered classes, limit the corruption of legal systems, and reduce poverty through the redistribution of wealth and power.

Complaint poems spanning the fourteenth century share some of the ideological goals of these reformist movements, focusing on social and legal corruption and its impact on the disempowered, while also attempting to speak for the poorest members of society: ploughmen, widows, starving beggars, labourers struggling to feed their families, and/or those repressed by authority or the law. Critics have shown diverse fourteenth-century complaint texts to be ideologically connected across multiple discursive fields—by the

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<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of Wyclif's writing and theories, see Lahey, *Wyclif*, 102-221; for the Lollard interpretation of Wyclif's ideas, see F. Somerset, *Feeling like saints: Lollard writings after Wyclif* (London: Cornell University Press, 2014) 36-45 & 253-4.

<sup>23</sup> Lahey, *Wyclif*, 199-221, esp. 218; Somerset, *Saints*, 36; D. Aers, 'John Wyclif: poverty and the poor', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 17 (2003) 55-72.

<sup>24</sup> M. Aston, 'Lollard women priests?', in *Lollards and reformers: images and literacy in late medieval religion* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1984) 50-70:52-9; Somerset, *Saints*, 25-62; A. Hudson (ed.), 'Sixteen points on which the Bishops accuse Lollards', in *Selections from English Wycliffite writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 19-24:19; A. Hudson (ed.), 'Twelve conclusions of the Lollards', in *Selections from English Wycliffite writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 24-29:25; A. Hudson (ed.), 'Confession of Hawisia Moone of Loddon, 1430', in *Selections from English Wycliffite writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 34-37:35.

philosophy of fraternal correction,<sup>25</sup> the use of legal terms and procedure,<sup>26</sup> poverty and the need for charity,<sup>27</sup> and addressing or questioning kingship policies.<sup>28</sup> In the process, they demonstrate wide-ranging information sharing among reform-minded individuals.<sup>29</sup> In the first two quarters of the fourteenth century, poems like the *Song of the Husbandman* (c. 1294-c. 1347),<sup>30</sup> *The Simonie* (c. 1322-c. 1340),<sup>31</sup> and the Auchinleck-*Sayings of the Four Philosophers* (c. 1311-c. 1340)<sup>32</sup> express dissatisfaction with English society, showing the cost of sinfulness among the nobility and clergy upon the well-being of the peasantry. William Langland's *Piers Plowman* is the central text of complaint poetry and the greater web of fourteenth-century reformist action. *Piers* was influenced by early complaint texts that came before it and is likely to have inspired poetry and reformist movements that came after it.<sup>33</sup> *The Simonie* and the *Song of the Husbandman* are, like Langland, part of the Alliterative

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<sup>25</sup> E. D. Craun, *Ethics and power in medieval English reformist writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> W. Scase, *Literature and complaint in England, 1272-1553* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> D. Hazell, *Poverty in late Middle English literature: the 'meene' and the 'riche'* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> D. Matthews, 'The destruction of England: crisis and complaint, c. 1300-41', in *Writing to the king: nation, kingship, and literature in England, 1250-1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 108-34.

<sup>29</sup> M. S. Nagy, *The alliterative tradition in early Middle English poetry: political complaint and social analysis in 'The Song of the Husbandman' and beyond*, foreword by T. A. Shippey (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Composed most likely between 1294 (first event of concurrent heavy taxation and famine) and c. 1347, the date of London, British Library, MS Harley 2253, see Nagy, *Alliterative tradition*, 59-62.

<sup>31</sup> *The Simonie* refers to cattle murrains and famine of 1315-16 and civil war of 1321-22, and the earliest manuscript witness dated to c.1330-40, see Nagy, *Alliterative tradition*, 104-5.

<sup>32</sup> The Auchinleck version of the *Sayings* refers to Edward II breaking the Ordinances of 1311, and the earliest manuscript witness is dated c. 1330-40, see J. Scattergood, 'Political context, date, and composition of *The Sayings of the Four Philosophers*', in *Manuscripts and ghosts: essays on the transmission of medieval and early Renaissance literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006) 95-106:96-7.

<sup>33</sup> S. Justice, 'Literary history and *Piers Plowman*', in A. Cole & A. Galloway (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 50-64.

Revival,<sup>34</sup> and the *Simonie*, especially, has been shown to have influenced Langland's text.<sup>35</sup>

The early *Sayings of the Four Philosophers*, like Langland's *Piers*, influenced the rhetorical and allegorical framework of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 visible in John Ball's *Letters*.<sup>36</sup>

The Plowman tradition—so called for being influenced by *Piers Plowman*—is a subgroup within the Alliterative Revival that 'radically questioned the church' or civil authority.<sup>37</sup>

Langland's work, accelerated by the spread of Lollard ideology, fed into these later

fourteenth-century complaint texts such as *Pierce the Ploughman's Creed* (1393-1400),<sup>38</sup>

*Mum and the Sothsegger* (c. 1409),<sup>39</sup> *Richard the Redeless* (after 1399),<sup>40</sup> and *The Crowned*

*King* (after 1413)<sup>41</sup> and influenced later reformist action.<sup>42</sup> This intercommunication of

reformist ideology with the literature of complaint speaks to a deep-seated frustration at the

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<sup>34</sup> Nagy, *Alliterative tradition*, vii-ix.

<sup>35</sup> Nagy, *Alliterative tradition*, 106-11; E. Salter, 'Piers Plowman and The Simonie', *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 203 (1966) 241-54; Hazell, *Poverty*, 70-1 & 86; S. Hussey, 'Langland's reading of alliterative poetry', *Modern Language Review*, 60 (1965) 163-70; J. Finlayson, 'The Simonie: two Authors?', *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 226 (1989) 39-51.

<sup>36</sup> A. W. Astell, "'Full of enigmas": John Ball's letters and Piers Plowman', in *Political allegory in late medieval England* (London: Cornell University Press, 1999) 44-72; S. Justice, *Writing and rebellion: England in 1381* (London: University of California Press, 1994) 102-39; M. R. Jones, 'Preface', in *Radical pastoral, 1381-1594: appropriation and the writing of religious controversy* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011) 1-10:1-2; Warner argues that the dates do not allow for cross-pollination, although the ideological evidence is more secure than the dating evidence he relies on, see L. Warner, 'Plowman traditions in late medieval and early modern writing', in A. Cole & A. Galloway (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 198-213:199-200.

<sup>37</sup> H. Barr (ed.), *The Piers Plowman tradition: a critical edition of 'Pierce the Ploughman's Crede', 'Richard the Redeless', 'Mum and the Sothsegger', and 'The Crowned King'* (London: J. M. Dent, 1993) 5.

<sup>38</sup> Barr (ed.), *Plowman tradition*, 9-10.

<sup>39</sup> Barr (ed.), *Plowman tradition*, 23.

<sup>40</sup> Barr (ed.), *Plowman tradition*, 16.

<sup>41</sup> Barr (ed.), *Plowman tradition*, 30.

<sup>42</sup> H. Barr, 'The place of the poor in "the Piers Plowman tradition"', in T. Matsushita, A. V. C. Schmidt, & D. Wallace (eds.), *From Beowulf to Caxton: studies in medieval languages and literature, texts, and manuscripts* (Frankfurt: Lang, 2011) 79-98:87-96; Justice, 'Literary history', 56-64; Warner, 'Plowman traditions', 200-3; S. Yeager, 'Lollardy in *Mum and the Sothsegger*: a reconsideration', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 25 (2011) 161-88; A. Blamires, '*Mum and the Sothsegger* and Langlandian idiom', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 76, 4 (1975) 583-604.

corruption within the medieval Church as well as legal and political structures, and shows that a desire to achieve reform had permeated the imaginations of poets, philosophers, and theologians from multiple counties across England, and had, by 1381, inspired diverse individuals to stand up to that corruption at great risk to themselves. Langland's text is central to many different types of complaints, binds together many disparate reformist strategies, is influenced by early fourteenth-century complaints, and influenced in turn the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, Lollards, and complaint writers from the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Yet, while critics have recognised the centrality of *Piers Plowman* few have considered the centrality of romance, either in regards to complaint texts or fourteenth-century reformist movements. This thesis explores the ideological overlap between a broad range of Middle English romances on the one hand, and the complaint poems and reformist movements to which they gave voice on the other. The romances discussed here generally contrast heroic characters in a state of grace (ethically exemplary and divinely aided) with villainous characters whose selfish, immoral, and sinful actions cause both moral decline and death within their kingdom or nation. Many of these romances also represent compromised central characters who either through successful or unsuccessful individual reform highlight social ills that prevent grace, or ethical ideals, from being achieved by individuals within a kingdom and/or by the social, political, and legal structures of a kingdom as a whole. The radicalism of romance has been overlooked, especially by critics searching for political allegories of topical events such as those found in complaint poems. Romances do not lend themselves to topical allusions, but they do provide opportunities for character growth that make them amenable to that great discourse of fourteenth-century reform: the search for 'truth'. This thesis will compare romance and complaint poems, but it will also use complaint, romance, and other writing to highlight the importance of 'truth' to fourteenth-

century reformist ideology across discursive fields, and to understand more clearly the role romance plays in the dissemination of reformist ideas throughout the century.

Langland's *Piers Plowman* is central to fourteenth-century reformist culture and as such is central to this thesis' exploration of reformist romance. *Piers Plowman*'s textual history and labyrinthine poetics complicates critical analysis and interpretation of the poem, both in attempts to winnow Langland's intentions for, and potential reader responses to, the poem. Even more so than Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Langland's *Piers* became immediately popular even as the author sought to rewrite, expand, and clarify his own thoughts and words on highly complex issues arising from his day.<sup>43</sup> Three versions of *Piers* exist that are generally accepted to be Langland's own work, the A (1360s), B (1370s), and C (1380s) texts, while the 'Z tradition' comprises a collection of non-authorial interpolations in Langland's voice.<sup>44</sup> Langland's popularity in the fourteenth century can be measured by the dozens of *Piers Plowman* manuscripts that survive before 1400.<sup>45</sup> This study uses the B-text because of its date, having been completed before the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and condemnation of Lollardy. Some critics view the C-text as the mature expression of Langland's vision,<sup>46</sup> but there is evidence to suggest that Langland redacted his own work to dissociate his text from the Peasants' Revolt and Wyclif(fites), and that the C-text reflects the

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<sup>43</sup> A. Cole & A. Galloway, 'Introduction', in A. Cole & A. Galloway (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2014) 1-11; C. D. Benson, 'What then does Langland mean? Authorial and textual voices in *Piers Plowman*', *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 15 (2001) 3-13.

<sup>44</sup> R. Hanna, 'The versions and revisions of *Piers Plowman*', in A. Cole & A. Galloway (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 33-49.

<sup>45</sup> Hanna, 'Versions and revisions', 33.

<sup>46</sup> Hanna, 'Versions and revisions', 47-9; M. Kim, 'Hunger, need, and the politics of poverty in *Piers Plowman*', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 16 (2002) 131-68:133; S. Wood, *Conscience and the composition of 'Piers Plowman'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 134-59; D. Pearsall, 'Langland and Lollardy: from B to C', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 17 (2003) 7-23:22.



result of this redaction.<sup>47</sup> The B-text, therefore, more plausibly represents Langland's unedited and uncompromised vision of reform. Critics of *Piers* nevertheless emphasise the difficulty in pinning down the text and its meaning and that even with an 'authoritative' edition we are still left with the winding roads of Langland's imagination in which conflicting opinions compete for our attention.<sup>48</sup>

*Piers* explores legal and social corruption, especially in the clergy, through its protagonist, Will, who quests for moral goodness and authority (defining Truth against Falseness, seeking Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest) through a series of encounters with allegorical representatives of vices and virtues, social roles, and theological and philosophical concepts. Langland identifies Meed and her cohorts (Envy, Falseness, etc.) as the centre-point of social corruption, arguing that money had degraded Christian morality. He recognises how ingrained a greed for money is, and that any attempt to reform England, or English people, legally or ethically, will be hampered by the prolific covetousness corrupting medieval society. He toys with the idea that labouring, led by the moral Piers Plowman, can reform a greedy society. Yet, Piers is forced to send Hunger after lazy vagrants who refuse to work but who still expect to be fed, and the idyllic dream of reform through honest labour falls by the wayside.<sup>49</sup> It is the true poor, not the apostolic poverty of priests, but those who labour honestly and barely survive, whom Langland ultimately embraces as those truly worthy of charity as well as heaven.<sup>50</sup> For the wealthy, it is the choices they make that ultimately

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<sup>47</sup> Craun, *Ethics and power*, 85-100; H. Barr, 'Major episodes and moments in *Piers Plowman*', in A. Cole & A. Galloway (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 15-32:24-5; A. Cole, 'William Langland's Lollardy', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 17 (2003) 25-54; A. Cole, *Literature and heresy in the age of Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 23-71.

<sup>48</sup> Cole & Galloway, 'Introduction', 1; Hanna, 'Versions and revisions', 33-5; M. Giancarlo, 'Political forms and institutions in *Piers Plowman*', in A. Cole & A. Galloway (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 115-35:134.

<sup>49</sup> Kim, 'Hunger', 131-68.

<sup>50</sup> Barr, 'Place of the poor', 79-87.

determine whether they are worthy of salvation. Patient poverty, genuine poverty experienced patiently as penance, is demonstrated helping Haukyn the Actif-Man and seems the most likely candidate for salvific satisfaction, so long as true contrition is felt during the sinner's penitential labour.<sup>51</sup> Piers Plowman re-emerges in passus XVIII, this time as Christ jousting the devil for the redemption of mankind.<sup>52</sup> As alluded to in earlier passus, however, Christ's words are too perfect for fallen man and Langland finishes, not on Christ's triumphal victory some 1400 years before Langland's time, but with the utter ruination of Langland's England, with the nobility and friars corrupting Conscience for greed, Contrition lost, and the hope of an ethical Christian society within the Barn of Unity wholly destroyed by the sinful nature of mankind.<sup>53</sup>

Concurrently with Langland's composition of *Piers Plowman*, John Wyclif instigated the Lollard movement through a series of treatises that sought to reinterpret biblical teachings on matters of faith and society. Langland and Wyclif are unlikely to have interacted directly, and the debate is still ongoing regarding the extent of cross-pollination between Langland's poetics and Lollard philosophy.<sup>54</sup> Unlike Langland, Wyclif challenged doctrinal orthodoxy by denying transubstantiation, arguing for disendowment, and claiming that *dominium* could not be held by sinners.<sup>55</sup> Building on Archbishop Richard Fitzralph's theories, Wyclif developed his ideas at Oxford and influenced many thinkers and writers who come after him.<sup>56</sup> The

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<sup>51</sup> Barr, 'Place of the poor', 79-87; Barr, 'Major episodes', 25; Wood, *Conscience*, 65; Hanna, 'Versions and revisions', 47.

<sup>52</sup> Barr, 'Major episodes', 26-9.

<sup>53</sup> Barr, 'Major episodes', 29-32; Giancarlo, 'Political forms', 31-135; Wood, *Conscience*, 87-106.

<sup>54</sup> A. Cole, 'Introduction: Langland and Lollardy: the form of the matter', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 17 (2003) 3-6; D. Pearsall 'Langland and Lollardy', 7-23; Cole, 'Langland's Lollardy', 25-54; Aers, 'Wyclif: poverty', 55-72; F. Somerset, 'Expanding the Langlandian canon: radical Latin and the stylistics of reform', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 17 (2003) 73-92; A. Hudson, 'Langland and Lollardy?', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 17 (2003) 93-105.

<sup>55</sup> Lahey, *Wyclif*, 102-221.

<sup>56</sup> Lahey, *Wyclif*, 3-31.

followers of Wyclif, deemed variously Wycliffite or Lollard, show more ideological affinity with Langland and, like Langland, write texts for the laity in the vernacular, allowing lay people to interpret their own faith without the assistance of the clergy. These texts were written for the ‘trewe religious’, and promoted learning, community outreach, charity (loving all men and working towards social improvement), acting with virtuous behaviour, and prescribing bottom-up schema for social reform.<sup>57</sup> Although some critics differentiate between Wycliffites (direct disciples of Wyclif) and Lollards (followers outside of Oxford), I agree with Margaret Aston’s and Anne Hudson’s concerns with these distinctions. Firstly, the terms ‘Wycliffite’ and ‘Lollard’ were used interchangeably by medieval writers, and secondly, most surviving texts have no clear authorship and are difficult to date accurately making such distinctions impracticable.<sup>58</sup> Likewise other critics have suggested that ‘Wycliffite’ should be used to define those texts or people following specific doctrines condemned as heretical.<sup>59</sup> Following Fiona Somerset, I would argue that understanding Lollardy is best achieved by ascertaining how Lollards or Wycliffites viewed themselves rather than by how their oppressors saw them.<sup>60</sup>

Lollards share certain beliefs with Wyclif, but do not necessarily align with him on all issues. Wyclif, for example, applied his theories of dominion only to the clergy,<sup>61</sup> while some Lollards expanded this to include resistance to secular authority as well.<sup>62</sup> Wyclif did not advocate for female agency over teaching or the sacraments, however multiple Lollard

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<sup>57</sup> Somerset, *Saints*, summarised 273-83.

<sup>58</sup> M. Aston, ‘Lollardy and sedition, 1381-1431’, in *Lollards and reformers: images and literacy in late medieval religion* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1984) 1-47; A. Hudson, ‘Foreword’, ix-x; for a discussion of the debate, see Somerset, *Saints*, 15-20; Hudson, ‘Langland and Lollardy?’, 93-105.

<sup>59</sup> Cole, ‘Langland’s Lollardy’, 27; Craun, *Ethics and power*, 101.

<sup>60</sup> Somerset, *Saints*, 1-8; I use Lollard throughout this dissertation for simplicity.

<sup>61</sup> Lahey, *Wyclif*, 199-221.

<sup>62</sup> Somerset, *Saints*, 54-9.

leaders, like William White and Walter Brut, did have proto-feminist agendas.<sup>63</sup> Lollard groups share with Wyclif an interest in sins by consent, a sin in which a witness to it is equally guilty if they did nothing to stop the sin from occurring.<sup>64</sup> The Lollards, Edwin Craun argues, based their beliefs about sins of consent on the orthodox prescription for ‘fraternal correction’, the moral obligation to correct the sins of others be they equals, inferiors, or superiors. He also argues convincingly that fraternal correction is the basis of Langland’s use of writing as an act of reform and that, although it was intended for one-on-one correction, it inspired or legally justified fourteenth-century complaint texts aimed at institutional or corporate sins.<sup>65</sup> The Lollard obsession with truth parallels the cultural prominence of truth debates as well as Wyclif’s own interest in the term.<sup>66</sup> Lollard thinkers associated grace (true men and women) with good works, ethical action, charitable behaviour spanning social strata, resistance to illegal or immoral commands, and the idea that *dominium* can be held only by virtuous men and women.<sup>67</sup> The reformist activity in the fourteenth century is a complex web of interconnected ideas reflected and refracted by diverse writers and actors. This dissertation reassesses the contribution of romance to this web.

### The reform of truth

Each act of reform, whether writing complaint, defying orthodoxy, or rebelling, participated in an ideological debate central to fourteenth-century culture and law: the definition of

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<sup>63</sup> R. Krug, *Reading families: women’s literate practice in late medieval England* (London: Cornell University Press, 2002) 118-29; Aston, ‘Lollard women priests?’, 52-60; A. Minnis, ‘John Wyclif—all women’s friend?’, in B. Wheeler (ed.), *Mindful spirit in late medieval literature: essays in honor of Elizabeth D. Kirk* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 121-33.

<sup>64</sup> Somerset, *Saints*, 36-98 & 279; Craun, *Ethics and power*, 85-119.

<sup>65</sup> Craun, *Ethics and power*, 83.

<sup>66</sup> A. Hudson, ‘A Lollard sect vocabulary?’, in *Lollards and their books* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1985) 165-180:166-8.

<sup>67</sup> Lahey, *Wyclif*, 199-221; Somerset, *Saints*, 273-83.

‘truth’.<sup>68</sup> Both the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 and Lollardy centralised the term ‘truth’—the letters from the Peasants’ Revolt condemn the immoral wealthy who had set truth ‘under a lokke’ and call on good men to ‘stand manlike together in truth’,<sup>69</sup> while Lollard writers differentiated ‘trew cristen men’ from ‘false’, outlining rules of ethics for a reformed church and a virtuous society.<sup>70</sup> Complaint poems, too, often centralise truth—the *Simonie*, for example, opens by describing papal corruption, lamenting ‘if Treuthe comes amonges hem, that he shal be ded’.<sup>71</sup> *Piers* identifies ‘truth’ as God, while Will seeks behavioural truth, by learning how to avoid falseness, on his journey.<sup>72</sup> In the early fifteenth century, *Mum and the Sothsegger* prescribes truth-telling as a means to reform English politics—a way of weighing good and evil, virtues and vices, right and wrong.<sup>73</sup> In all contexts, poets, philosophers, and rebels associated truth with God, good men, and virtuous behaviour, whilst outlining the false, or sinful behaviours that they attributed to the degradation of society.

Truth ties qualities like goodness, virtue, honour, and justice together, within a concept of ethical virtue that cuts across legal, political, and religious philosophies and institutions. As Hazell says, ‘Judging by the near-obsession with which writers treat the theme of *trouthe*, it is clear that the concept and its realization in society were under

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<sup>68</sup> R. F. Green, *A crisis of truth: literature and law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); H. Barr, ‘Signes’ and ‘sothe’: language in the ‘*Piers Plowman*’ tradition (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994) esp. 51-94; J. Simpson, ‘*Piers Plowman*’: an introduction to the B-text (London: Longman, 1990) 18-20, 26-37, & 49-60.

<sup>69</sup> J. M. Dean (ed.), ‘Jakke Trewman’, in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 138; J. M. Dean (ed.), ‘*Prima epistola Johannis Balle*’, in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 139.

<sup>70</sup> Hudson, ‘Sect vocabulary’, 166-7.

<sup>71</sup> J. M. Dean (ed.), ‘*The Simonie*’, in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) I. 14.

<sup>72</sup> W. Langland, ‘*The Vision of Piers Plowman*’: a critical edition of the B-Text based on Trinity College Cambridge, MS B.15.17, A. V. C. Schmidt (ed.), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Everyman, 1995) I, ll. 12-209 & II, ll. 1-4.

<sup>73</sup> J. M. Dean (ed.), ‘*Mum and the Sothsegger*’, in ‘*Richard the Redeless*’ and ‘*Mum and the Sothsegger*’, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000).

scrutiny'.<sup>74</sup> Critics, wrestling with the meaning of truth in late medieval usage, have recognised the multivalency of a concept that can mean troth-plights, the legal value of the spoken accord, or speaking truthfully; it can embody a range of religious and ethical concepts, often being a metaphor for God and virtuous living; and in this latter context can be used as a yardstick with which to expose the sins of others (avoiding consent), and to recognise one's own.<sup>75</sup> Medieval thinkers themselves wrestled with the seeming contradictions of a term intrinsic to law and justice on the one hand, and Christian ethics, a complex of morals and mores that were not always strongly supported—indeed, were often undermined—by the law, on the other. As such, medieval people defined truth broadly in an attempt to reconcile its complex and potentially contradictory facets: truth as God (biblical law, faith), truth as a yardstick for the exemplary morality of 'true' men, and the concept of troth-plighting as a means to keep one's word, and a measure of honour. It is the complications of such a broad definition that give medieval romance and complaint writers pause, asking questions like, 'What if keeping your word interferes with being virtuous?', 'What if sinful people manipulate the law to their own advantage?', 'What if papal or regal institutions undermine virtue?', and 'Can the sinful elite be defied?'. Medieval reformist strategies—whether articulated on paper, in the pulpit, or through protest—all engage with debates regarding truth and its social application, recognising that the failure of political leaders to exercise virtue impacts negatively on the English populace at large.

Truth debates are also a central feature of the romances explored here, each offering behavioural models of 'true' men and women—in a state of grace, capable of true leadership,

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<sup>74</sup> Hazell, *Poverty*, 27.

<sup>75</sup> Green, *Crisis of truth*, 8-31; Hazell, *Poverty*, 26-9; Somerset, *Saints*, 36-81 & 273-83; Lahey, *Wyclif*, 3-31 & 135-68; A. Hudson, 'Sect vocabulary?', 166-68; G. Morgan 'The significance of the pentangle symbolism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *The shaping of English poetry: essays on 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', Langland, Chaucer, and Spenser* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010) 1-38, esp. 5; A. Putter, *An introduction to the 'Gawain'-poet* (London: Longman, 1996) 44-5.

judging right from wrong, and producing or enforcing social, legal, or religious structures that protect truth and true people. These ‘true’ men and women are contrasted to false characters who disregard, or openly undermine, truth in its various contexts. These sinful characters generally have social power, as kings or nobles, and are those whom the *General Prologue* to the Wycliffite Bible deem to be ‘cristen lordis in name, and heþene in condicions’; they fail to wield power ethically and cause widespread suffering as a result.<sup>76</sup>

*Isumbras* and *The King of Tars* ask what happens when the lies a king tells himself result in death and destruction within his kingdom. Isumbras is punished for his naïve view of his role as landlord, and only gains God’s forgiveness when he admits the truth of his sin to himself. In *Tars*, the false king is replaced by his ‘true’ daughter, in a state of grace, who imposes divine will upon her father’s and husband’s kingdoms. *The Earl of Toulouse* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* both ask, ‘What if keeping your word prevents you from being virtuous?’. In the process, they explore complex legal situations in which troth-plights are made that undermine religious truth and condemn true men and women. Both texts confront these dilemmas in narratives that explore the extent to which troth-plights might be broken or bent in order to maintain ethical truth above and beyond the parameters of the law. Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* imagines women overturning the flawed orthodoxy of the late medieval patriarchal church and society by educating a false man about the conflicts between social and ethical truth.

### Romance and its role in reform

Each romance explored in this thesis presents moments where the established ideology, or the ‘law of the land’, cannot accommodate the problems that surface within the narrative.

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<sup>76</sup> Somerset, *Saints*, 178.

Therefore, true men and women must deny social precedent to protect a virtuous, Christian sense of morality. It is in those moments—when only open rebellion can correct the sins of a kingdom, when the law itself is untrue, when only a woman can save a kingdom, when only a Saracen can correct the wrongs of a Christian, or when the practices prescribed by the Church ultimately fail—that reformist and even rebellious ideology shines through. Romances do not simply parallel the texts of complaint, but represent individual voices that reflect and refract complex social ideas and rework them, offering their own guides towards salvation. This often occurs in conflict with the hierarchical and orthodox legal structures that critics generally believe romance was written to support.<sup>77</sup>

Middle English romance appears in the manuscript record in or shortly before the beginning of the fourteenth century.<sup>78</sup> Romance also shares a manuscript context with complaint poems throughout the century, suggesting that readers sought both types of content in miscellanies.<sup>79</sup> The largest and earliest surviving Middle English miscellany, the Auchinleck manuscript, contains both types of poetry, showing a strong English cultural interest in complaint as well as romance. The assumed audience and authorship demographic of romance and complaint overlap—even though, barring notable exceptions, their authors

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<sup>77</sup> L. Ashe, 'The hero and his realm in medieval English romance', in N. Cartlidge (ed.), *Boundaries in medieval romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008) 129-47:142-6; McDonald 'Polemical introduction', 1-2; N. Saul, *For honour and fame: chivalry in England, 1066-1500* (London: The Bodley Head, 2011) 309.

<sup>78</sup> The three earliest recorded Middle English romances can be found in manuscripts dated c. 1300: *King Horn* in Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg.4.3.III (c. 1260-1300), *Floris and Blancheflur* in London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius P.3 (before 1300), and *Havelock the Dane* in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 1486 (c. 1300).

<sup>79</sup> London, British Library, MS Harley 2253 (before 1348) containing multiple complaint texts and *King Horn*; Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.2.1 (the Auchinleck Manuscript, 1330-40) containing multiple complaint texts and fifteen romances; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS English Poetry A.1 (the Vernon Manuscript, 1390) containing *The King of Tars*, *Robert of Sicily*, and *Joseph of Arimathea* alongside *Piers Plowman*; London, British Library, MS Additional 22283 (the Simeon Manuscript, 1390-1400) containing *Ypotis*, *King of Tars*, and *Robert of Sicily* alongside a treatise by John Clanvowe (a known Lollard Knight).



are anonymous. Although some critics argue that both genres enjoyed an exclusively noble audience in the fourteenth century,<sup>80</sup> most agree that romance and complaint were likely written and read by members of all estates, namely the lesser nobility, the lesser clergy, wealthier merchants, and free peasants.<sup>81</sup> Some critics expand the audience to include the poorer peasantry for both complaint and romance, highlighting social circumstances in which these texts could reach a wider audience.<sup>82</sup>

Although most characters are in elite positions, the moral lessons offered by romance could easily be applied to noble and religious as well as peasant readers. Medieval people understood social hierarchy allegorically, accepting that while the king is the father of his kingdom, so too the father is the king of his household. Although romances rarely depict clerics, many members of the clergy behaved socially like secular lords, owning property, ruling over the peasantry, setting the laws of their manors, holding secular office, and behaving and dressing like knights. Therefore, people across the secular and religious social strata could relate to various romance characters and therefore read ethical and behavioural

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<sup>80</sup> For romance, see S. Knight, 'The social function of the Middle English romances', in David Aers (ed.), *Medieval literature: criticism, ideology and history* (Brighton: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986) 99-122:101-2; Cooper, 'Romance comes true', 13. For complaint, see P. Coss, 'Introduction', in *Thomas Wright's political songs of England from the reign of John to that of Edward II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) xi-lxviii:lxv; J. R. Hulbert, 'A hypothesis concerning the Alliterative Revival', *Modern Philology*, 28 (1930-31) 405-22.

<sup>81</sup> For romance, see D. Pearsall 'The Development of Middle English Romance', in D. Pearsall (ed.), *Studies in medieval English romances: some new approaches* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988) 11-35:12; A. Putter, 'Introduction', *The spirit of medieval English popular romance* (Harlow: Longman, 2000) 1-15:3; J. Gilbert, 'Introduction', *The spirit of medieval English popular romance* (Harlow: Longman, 2000) 15-31:21; For complaint and romance, see Hazell, *Poverty*, 22-3. For complaint, see J. Coleman, *Medieval readers and writers, 1350-1400* (London: Hutchinson, 1981) 63; Coss, 'Introduction', lxv; Nagy, *Alliterative tradition*, 18-20.

<sup>82</sup> For romance, see A. J. Bliss, *Sir Launfal* (London: Nelson, 1960); T. Turville-Petre, 'Politics and poetry in the early fourteenth century: the case of Robert Manning's *Chronicle*', *Review of English Studies*, 39 (1988) 1-28:6. For complaint, see J. R. Madicott, 'Poems of social protest in early fourteenth-century England', in W. M. Ormrod (ed.), *England in the fourteenth century: proceedings of the 1985 Harlaxton Symposium* (Woodbridge: Boydell 1986) 130-43:140.

lessons from the characterisation of heroes and villains. The ideological affinities, concurrent emergence, and shared manuscript context of romance and complaint are the starting point of my exploration focused on romance as an act of reform.

Several critics have shown romance and complaint poetry to be ideologically connected. Geraldine Barnes argues that counsel, and the effects of both good and bad counsel, is central to both complaint and romance, exploring complaint in the context of royal-baronial conflict and following that up with assessments of individual romances.<sup>83</sup> Likewise, Dinah Hazell suggests that social commentary is a central theme to both complaint and romance texts, arguing that ‘many, perhaps most, Middle English romances contain some degree of didacticism, as well as implicit or explicit social commentary’, and that romance authors were among the ‘ecclesiastics and literate lay individuals at all levels’, who ‘felt increasingly responsible for voicing criticism against the rampant corruption they observed’.<sup>84</sup> Although Raluca Radulescu does not use complaint texts for comparison, she does show how fifteenth-century penitential romance engages in political debates, thereby inviting a complaint or reformist reading of romance.<sup>85</sup> Recent articles have argued for a Lollard inflection in romance,<sup>86</sup> or point to intertextualities shared between romance and *Piers Plowman*.<sup>87</sup> These studies reveal the ideological closeness of romance and complaint

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<sup>83</sup> G. Barnes, *Counsel and strategy in Middle English romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993).

<sup>84</sup> Hazell, *Poverty*, 22-3.

<sup>85</sup> R. Radulescu, *Romance and its contexts in fifteenth-century England: politics, piety, and penitence* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013); for the preceding article length study, see R. Radulescu, ‘Pious Middle English romances turned political: reading *Sir Isumbras*, *Sir Gowther*, and *Robert of Sicily* in fifteenth-century England’, *Viator*, 41, 2 (2010) 333-59.

<sup>86</sup> D. Vincent, ‘Reading a Christian-Saracen debate in fifteenth-century Middle English Charlemagne romance: the case of *Turpine’s Story*’, in L. Ashe, I. Djordjević, & J. E. Weiss (eds.), *Exploitations of medieval romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010) 90-107.

<sup>87</sup> M. Turner, ‘*Guy of Warwick* and the active life of historical romance in *Piers Plowman*’, *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 28 (2014) 3–27; N. Zeeman, ‘Tales of Piers and Perceval: *Piers Plowman* and the Grail romances’, *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 22 (2008) 199-236.

and show that these two poetic genera represent two interconnected parts of Middle English speaking and reading culture that were interested in social reform. Their popularity, and the reformist ideology they together helped to disseminate across the fourteenth century, may be factors in the spread of discontent that culminated in rebellious action towards the end of that century.

This thesis contends that romance offers a superior vehicle for expressing reformist ideology in more meaningful ways than complaint poetry. Complaint writers express their concerns allegorically through immutable characters, like Meed or Falseness, or through the sins that specific estates were predisposed to, such as fat or greedy friars, whose moral qualities or failings were seemingly unalterable. By contrast, romance characters can represent or typify many people across all medieval estates and they are not named for their professional or moral qualities. In *Sir Isumbras*, for example, the protagonist is not named ‘Sir Sinner’, even though he is one at the beginning of the story. Instead, Sir Isumbras is a three-dimensional individual character, able to reform himself and choose to change for the better over the course of his story in a way that Langland’s Lady Meed never can. Indeed, even characters in a state of grace, like Dame Beulybon in *Toulouse*, learn from and offer lessons to the reader regarding the conflict between ethical ideals and social reality. A character’s heroism emerges in these romances when individual reform encourages him or her to change institutional (political, religious, or legal) precedent for the betterment of his or her kingdom, or of Christendom as a whole.

Although others have recognised comparisons between complaint and romance, this thesis uniquely recognises just how well suited romance is to the reformist ideas that it helped spread. I use Raluca Radulescu’s and Geraldine Barnes’ method of exploring the political inflection of romance as a stepping off point. However, rather than focusing solely on political concerns of the elite, as Barnes has, I seek to explore the broader interactions of

noble, religious, and peasant estates, as Radulescu's study of fifteenth-century penitential romance promotes. The study here offers new insights into the radical nature of romance by expanding the search parameters beyond penitential romances to mine a broad seam of romance for evidence of reformist ideology. This study also looks at the broad fourteenth century, rather than the fifteenth, for romance and complaint texts that prefigure the central ideology of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, Langland, and Lollardy. Additionally, I expand upon critical studies of reformist romance by looking at 'truth' as it was applied to contemporary social issues affecting all estates. Truth debates were not limited to the political sphere but were used to highlight moral issues in broader social, religious, and legal contexts. Both complaint and romance texts address social inequality and show elite members of the nobility and clergy causing suffering for the disempowered and impoverished members of all estates. I explore intertextualities with complaint texts and reformist movements that sought to redistribute wealth from the sinful elite and acted to protect the disempowered poor, teasing out evidence for the origins and nature of those ideas and romance's role in propagating them.

In order to assess the textual evidence of reform that romance reveals, I have been reliant upon critical editions and facsimile prints of manuscripts. I acknowledge that critical editions are often highly mediated by the editor, thereby making it difficult to see beyond the editorial practice to the manuscript beneath. Therefore, I have chosen ones that have their basis in a single surviving romance manuscript, as such texts tend to be less mediated by editorial practice and can be more accurately placed within a specific cultural milieu. I also engage with criticism of editorial practice in order to assess these editions and make changes supported by textual, contextual, and/or syntactical information. This is not a manuscript study, but I do respond to and incorporate such studies into the analyses that follow, and use

their conclusions as ballast for, and to place factual limits upon, my study of ideas.<sup>88</sup> By understanding how manuscripts are developed and used in the fourteenth century, scholars can begin to understand complex questions that the texts alone do not answer. For example,

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<sup>88</sup> In each chapter introduction, I reference critical analysis of the significant manuscripts associated with each romance. For example, in chapter two, ‘The reforming Princess in *The King of Tars*’, I discuss the Auchinleck, Vernon, and Simeon manuscripts in which the romance is found, focusing on the Auchinleck manuscript as it is the source of the version of the romance analysed in that chapter. I use multiple critics of the Auchinleck manuscript that discuss how, when, and where the manuscript was made, the relationships of various scribes, and theories about the composition of complaint texts and romances specifically for use in the Auchinleck manuscript, showing how different critical discoveries and theories support my reading of *Tars* as a reformist romance, see L. H. Loomis, ‘The Auchinleck manuscript and a possible London bookshop of 1330-1340’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 57, 3 (1942) 595-627; D. Pearsall & I. C. Cunningham (intro.), *The Auchinleck manuscript: National Library of Scotland, Advocates’ MS 19.2.1* (London: The Scholar Press, 1977) ix-x; T. Shonk, ‘A study of the Auchinleck manuscript: bookmen and bookmaking in the early fourteenth century’, *Speculum*, 60, 1 (1985) 71-91; A. Minnis, *Latin and vernacular: studies in late medieval texts and manuscripts* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1989); J. Griffiths & D. Pearsall (eds.), *Book production and publishing in Britain, c. 1375-1475* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); R. Hanna, ‘Miscellany and vernacularity: conditions of literary production in late medieval England’, in S. G. Nichols & S. Wenzel (eds.), *The whole book: cultural perspectives in medieval miscellany* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996) 37-51; T. Turville-Petre, *England the nation: language, literature, and national identity, 1290-1340* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); F. Porcheddu, ‘Edited text and medieval artefact: the Auchinleck bookshop and “Charlemagne and Roland” theories, fifty years later’, *Philological Quarterly*, 80, 4 (2001) 465-500; S. Kelly & J. J. Thompson (eds.), *Imagining the book*, *Medieval Texts and Cultures* 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005); J. Scattergood, ‘Political context, date, and composition of *The Sayings of the Four Philosophers*’, in *Manuscripts and ghosts: essays on the transmission of medieval and early Renaissance literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006) 95-106; M. Fisher, *Scribal authorship and the writing of history in medieval England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012); J. Boffey, *Manuscript and print in London, c. 1475-1530* (London: The British Library, 2012); C. M. Meale & D. Pearsall (eds.), *Makers and users of medieval books: essays in honour of A. S. G. Edwards* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2014); R. Radulescu & M. Connolly (eds.), *Insular books: vernacular manuscript miscellanies in late medieval Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); A. Bahr, ‘Miscellaneity and variance in the medieval book’, in M. Johnston & M. van Dussen (eds.), *The medieval manuscript book: cultural approaches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 181-98; S. Fein (ed.), *The Auchinleck manuscript: new perspectives* (York: York Medieval Press, 2016); R. Hanna, ‘Auchinleck “Scribe 6” and some corollary issues’, in S. Fein (ed.), *The Auchinleck manuscript: new perspectives* (York: York Medieval Press, 2016) 209-21; T. Shonk, ‘Paraphs, piecework, and presentation: the production methods of Auchinleck revisited’, in S. Fein (ed.), *The Auchinleck manuscript: new perspectives* (York: York Medieval Press, 2016) 176-94; D. Pearsall, ‘The Auchinleck forty years on’, in S. Fein (ed.), *The Auchinleck manuscript: new perspectives* (York: York Medieval Press, 2016) 11-25.

my research has been influenced by medieval miscellany studies that seek to understand the seemingly disparate collections in which romances can often be found.<sup>89</sup> In so doing, information regarding the composition of and the proximity of various romance and complaint texts within these multi-text manuscripts reveal an overlapping cultural interest in both types of literature, and therefore provide contextual justification for reading romance in light of complaint narratives.<sup>90</sup>

I analyse a single manuscript version of each romance, representing a text that was actually read by a fourteenth-century medieval audience. As a manuscript witness can generally be dated within a quarter of a century, each therefore provides an accurate reflection of, and commentary upon, contemporary ideologies and events. In the cases of *Sir Isumbras* and *The Earl of Toulouse*, no complete fourteenth-century manuscript versions survive, although there is evidence to suggest that both stories were circulating in Middle English in the fourteenth century. In these cases, I have chosen the earliest complete witness, and, in the case of *Isumbras*, the version that has the most in common with the fourteenth-century manuscript fragment that does survive. I am applying close literary analyses to these individual manuscript exemplars in order to tease out strands that align with complaint texts or acts of rebellion in the fourteenth century, and which demonstrate where romances promote ideologies that fed into fourteenth-century reformist action (writing or rebelling). I am using a range of relevant complaint texts to draw out those resonances and to show how individual romances communicate ideas of reform, encompassing complaint and even rebellion. It is the contention of this thesis that romance is an ideal medium for giving

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<sup>89</sup> Hanna, 'Miscellany and vernacularity', 37-51; D. Pearsall, 'The whole book: late medieval English manuscript miscellanies and their modern interpreters', in S. Kelly & J. J. Thompson (eds.), *Imagining the book*, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe, 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005) 17-30; Radulescu & Connolly (eds.), *Insular books*, 1-29; Bahr, 'Miscellaneity', 181-98.

<sup>90</sup> Turville-Petre, *England the nation*, 131; Scattergood, 'Political context', 95-106; Fisher, *Scribal authorship*, 146-87; Bahr, 'Miscellaneity', 181-91.

expression to social reform, offering complex individual characters who can reform themselves, their neighbours, and their society, promoting virtuous ethics in political, religious, and/or legal ways. Due to their versatility, reformist sentiment is visible in romance throughout the fourteenth century. The romances explored here seek to empower women, correct the justice system, redistribute wealth, teach morality to sinners, limit the power of kings and nobles, provide dominion only to the virtuous, and remove power from those whose sins cause damage to society.

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I begin with *Sir Isumbras*, a tail-rhyme romance known to have circulated during the first quarter of the fourteenth century. Although evidence suggests *Isumbras* was in circulation in English in the first quarter of the fourteenth century, the romance survives in six manuscripts and three fragments from the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries.<sup>91</sup> Using the Agrarian Crisis as historical background, I explore *Isumbras* alongside the *Simonie* and the *Song of the Husbandman*, two roughly contemporary complaint poems which concern starvation and the use and abuse of power by lords. The romance reveals Isumbras, a noble and landlord, to be the sole and direct cause of his subjects' suffering. Isumbras is punished for this behaviour and, unusually, his suffering increases after following orthodox prescriptions for penance. Crusade and pilgrimage are shown to be ineffectual, and it is Isumbras' internal journey to contrition—recognising that his, his family's, and his subjects'

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<sup>91</sup> London, Gray's Inn, MS 20 (1350), 104 line fragment; Oxford, University College, MS 142 (end 14<sup>th</sup> century), 17 line fragment; Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College, MS 175 (1425-1450); Lincoln, Lincoln Cathedral, MS 91 (the Thornton Manuscript, c.1440); Naples, Bibliotheca Nazionale, MS 13.B.9 (1457), 122 line fragment; London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii (1450-1500); Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 6922 (Ashmole 61, 1475-1500); Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.3.1 (the Heege Manuscript, 1475-1500); Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 261 (1564), see H. Hudson (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', in *Four Middle English Romances: 'Sir Isumbras', 'Octavian', 'Sir Eglamour of Artois', and 'Sir Tryamour'*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006) 8-9.

suffering stems only from *his* deeds—that eventually brings about his redemption. Two experiences, labour and poverty, are also elevated as activities that allow Isumbras to achieve contrition through action and experience. These experiences correlate with arguments in Langland's *Piers Plowman* and speak to ideological similarities between these two texts regarding the theology of sin and redemption, the causes of social ills, and prescriptions for possible reform. I contend that *Isumbras* is a radical romance because it openly argues a cause-effect relationship between the sins of the nobility and the suffering of the peasantry. I show that *Isumbras*' prescription for social change illuminates peasant unrest in response to noble neglect, and promotes a political leader who is reformed by prolonged experience of labouring and begging.

Second, I discuss the *King of Tars*, a romance first appearing in the Auchinleck manuscript. *Tars* survives in three fourteenth-century manuscripts: Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.2.1 (the Auchinleck manuscript, c. 1330-40); Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS English Poetry A. 1 (the Vernon manuscript, c. 1380-c. 1400); and London, British Library, MS Additional 22283 (the Simeon manuscript, c. 1380-c. 1400). The King of Tars is a leader whose selfish choices lead to the deaths of thousands of his men. He professes courage when in reality his reason cannot temper his emotions, revealing a mental weakness that damages his kingdom. I use the Auchinleck complaint texts, the *Simonie* and the *Sayings of the Four Philosophers*, alongside medieval philosophies regarding courage in warfare to espouse the sinfulness of the King of Tars and the damage that his ignorance inflicts upon his kingdom. This damage is assuaged by the insistence of the princess, who reforms the consequences of her father's actions through heroic self-sacrifice. Where the King of Tars weighs his own life as more valuable than that of his people, his daughter, the Princess of Tars, sacrifices herself in order to save her subjects and is rewarded. The Princess defies fourteenth-century cultural expectation, and her spiritual and temporal



agency demonstrates beliefs about female ability that became central to many Lollards. *Tars* expressly argues that a woman in grace can, and should, overtake dominion held by sinful men. The Princess declares full control over the life of her child and enjoys freedom within her marriage vows. She calls a crusade, prescribes penance to sinners, teaches the Creed to a Saracen convert, and no masculine character questions her right to lead them in either spiritual or temporal matters. I argue that *Tars* is a radical romance on two axes, firstly by presenting the gross impact that sinful kings have upon the lives of their subjects, and secondly, by showing the positive impact that ethical women can have upon their kingdom if given full rein to lead. *Tars* argues that ethics are more important than gender in determining who can, and should, hold *dominium*.

Third, I examine the *Earl of Toulouse*, a romance that encourages military rebellion to curb a leader's sinfulness. *Toulouse* is a Middle English romance believed to be composed in the middle of the fourteenth century, but this dating is speculative as there are no fourteenth-century manuscript witnesses.<sup>92</sup> *Toulouse* does survive in three fifteenth-century manuscripts—Lincoln, Cathedral Library, MS 91 (Thornton, c. 1425-50),<sup>93</sup> Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.2.38 (c. 1445-c. 1500),<sup>94</sup> and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 6922

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<sup>92</sup> W. Hoyt & C. B. Hale (eds.), *Middle English metrical romances* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1930) 383-419:383; A. Laskaya & E. Salisbury (eds.), 'The Earl of Toulouse', in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001) 309-65:309.

<sup>93</sup> R. Hanna, 'The growth of Robert Thornton's books', *Studies in Bibliography*, 40 (1987) 51-61:51; R. M. Thompson, *Catalogue of the manuscripts of Lincoln Cathedral library* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1989) 69.

<sup>94</sup> M. Johnston, 'Two Leicestershire romance codices: Cambridge, University Library, MS F.2.38 and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61', *Journal of the Early Book Society* (2012) 85-100:86; F. Hülsmann, 'The watermarks of four late medieval manuscripts containing *The Erle of Tolous*', *Notes and Queries*, 32, 1 (1985) 11-2; F. McSparran & P. R. Robinson (intro.), *Cambridge University Library MS. Ff.2.38* (London: Scholar Press, 1979) xii.

(Ashmole 61, c. 1470-c. 1500)<sup>95</sup>—and one sixteenth-century manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 6926 (Ashmole 45, c. 1530-40).<sup>96</sup> Due to *Toulouse*'s arguments about rebellion, it correlates with ideologies relating to the 1381 Peasants' Revolt. I show its ideological overlap with Ball's *Letters* and *Piers Plowman*, and with *Truthe, Reste and Pes*, whose advice is aimed at preventing rebellion by offering a definition of truth that resonates with *Toulouse*. *Toulouse* elevates truth as an ethical necessity and shows various rebellions as a means of establishing balance in a corrupted empire. It especially tests legal truth—troth-plighting—and the concept of justice. *Toulouse* shows troth-plights to be generally used by people attempting to engage in or cover up sin, whilst good people simply do right without needing one. The investigation is expanded to explore injustice stemming from an absolute monarch. The emperor is a sinner who encourages his vassals to sin by his example, ignores good counsel, and causes death and strife. His closest advisors imitate him, using law for unjust purposes so effectively that the injustice is impervious to legal correction. Only the rebel Earl of Toulouse chooses to break the law for the preservation of justice. Like Lollards, *Toulouse* refuses *dominium* to sinful men, using God ultimately to remove power from the sinful and elevate instead a man in a state of grace. *Toulouse* reveals its radical potential by showing rebellion, military and legal, as necessary in order to return truth to a corrupt kingdom. By using Him as an actor, the romance poet implies that God supports ethical rebels seeking to maintain truth and aligns with Lollard ideas about *dominium*. I argue that *Toulouse* promotes reform in rebellious ways by arguing that military action can stem illegal and unjust leadership and that if legal practice is corrupt then only by defying the law can justice be found.

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<sup>95</sup> Hülsmann, 'Watermarks', 12; G. Shuttleton (ed.), *Codex Ashmole 61: a compilation of popular English verse*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008) 2-3; Johnston, 'Leicestershire romance', 87.

<sup>96</sup> Hülsmann, 'Watermarks', 12.

In the penultimate chapter, I approach Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale* as a site of Lollard ideology and explore the various ways the *Tale* can be viewed through a Lollard lens, from giving women authority in justice and education, to showing that ethics are necessary for *dominium*, that patient poverty is a means for moral education, and that sermons can convert men from sin. The *Wife's Tale* is surprisingly consistent across early Chaucer manuscripts despite the *Prologue's* various readings amongst the surviving copies. I use an Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 392 D (Hengwrt manuscript) edition as the base text because of its early date and its consistency with the San Marino, Huntington Library, MS EL 26 C 9 (Ellesmere manuscript).<sup>97</sup> The romance shows a knight condemned to die for raping a woman who receives a stay of execution when the queen intercedes on his behalf, giving him time to reform himself. Rather than prescribing self-correction as does *Isumbras*, in Chaucer's *Tale* a fairy woman uses Lollard philosophy to teach the knight morality. From this, he achieves a state of grace, thereby basing his noble status on ethical ideals rather than falsehood. While the *Wife's Prologue* has been critically associated with Lollardy for some time, exploring the *Tale* for similar associations is in its infancy. Through a broad survey of Middle English Lollard texts, I show the *Tale's* significant resonances with Lollard ideology. I contend that the fairy, especially in her practice of fraternal correction of a superior, her theories of dominion and poverty, and her successful conversion through preaching, represents a range of beliefs central to Lollard philosophy, and that this makes the *Wife's Tale* a site of reform.

Finally, I explore anti-Ricardian sentiment in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, focusing on the youthful tyranny of Arthur, the problems associated with absolute monarchy, and the resulting demise of ethical truth at Camelot. *SGGK*, survives only in London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero A.x alongside three didactic poems most likely composed by the

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<sup>97</sup> The relationships of the early Chaucer manuscripts will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

same poet during or shortly after the reign of Richard II.<sup>98</sup> As a member of the Alliterative Revival, I show *SGGK* engaging with ideas from *Piers Plowman*, *Richard the Redeless*, and *Mum and the Sothsegger*. The *Gawain*-poet compares the sinfulness of two leaders, Arthur and Morgan le Fay, and contrasts the different strategies of resistance to their sinful commands demonstrated by Gawain and the Green Knight respectively. Where Morgan's sins are tempered, Arthur is allowed to become a tyrant with absolute rule. The Green Knight is also used to contrast troth-plights with the ethical exercise of justice. Gawain sacrifices his moral identity because he breaks a troth-plight, whereas the Green Knight, by contrast, is willing to break his word in order to preserve justice and maintain his ethical identity. Gawain ultimately rejects the Green Knight's reform, sacrificing his own beliefs about ethical truth for the more simplistic (but less just) letter of the law. The romance offers alternatives to narrow definitions of truth, placing God's ethical truth above that of human law, and prescribing limitations upon power. *SGGK* reveals its radical potential by showing a tyrannical Arthur and the impact that tyranny has on the spiritual health of his kingdom, contrasting the damage caused to Camelot by Arthur's tyranny with that of Hautdesert's more exemplary culture. Although Hautdesert is also led by a tyrant—Morgan le Fay—there are

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<sup>98</sup> For the Ricardian dating, see J. Mann, 'Courtly aesthetics and courtly ethics in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 31 (2009) 231-65; A. Putter, *An introduction to the 'Gawain'-poet* (London: Longman, 1996) 1-37; D. Aers, "'In Arthurus Day": community, virtue, and individual identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *Community, gender, and individual identity: English writing, 1360-1430* (London: Routledge, 1988) 153-78; E. Miller, 'The date and occasion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles*, 28, 2 (2015) 59-62; S. J. Rayner, *Images of kingship in Chaucer and his Ricardian contemporaries* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008); for Edward III's reign, see F. Ingledew, *'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' and the Order of the Garter* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); for Henry VI's reign, see C. K. Stephens, 'The "Pentangle Hypothesis" a dating history and resetting of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Fifteenth Century Studies*, 31 (2006) 174-202; for authorship debates, see M. Andrew, 'Theories of authorship', in D. Brewer & J. Gibson (eds.), *A companion to the 'Gawain'-poet* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997) 23-33; A. S. G. Edwards, 'The manuscript: British Library, MS Cotton Nero A. x', in D. Brewer & J. Gibson (eds.), *A companion to the 'Gawain'-poet* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997) 197-219:199-200.

cultural structures that limit her power. At a time when English kings in the fourteenth century were increasingly limiting Magna Carta in preference for absolute rule, *SGGK* highlights the serious social problems that stem from absolute monarchy, suggesting that morality can only be maintained in kingdoms in which limitations are placed upon the king, and in which ethical truth is held above the letter of the law.

## Chapter One

### The Caius *Sir Isumbras*: landowner sin and the reformers' plough

The Caius *Sir Isumbras* (*Isumbras*) is a unique version of the romance found in Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College, MS 175 (c. 1425-50).<sup>1</sup> *Isumbras* follows a sinful knight over a fifteen-year penitential journey from punishment to redemption, explicitly connects landowner sins to peasant suffering, and shares ideas with fourteenth-century complaint poetry and reform. *Isumbras* survives in six manuscripts and three fragments from the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> The romance is also extant in one complete and five fragmentary printed editions from the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Each surviving manuscript copy of the romance has diverse readings that influence the interpretation and ideological messages visible within the text.

The unique readings in the Caius manuscript emphasise the centrality of an individual's journey from denial to contrition as the centre-point of God's forgiveness, problematise orthodox penitential prescriptions like pilgrimage and crusade, and prescribe labour and poverty as a means for nobles to attain contrition and redemption. I define contrition throughout as the individual's recognition of his or her own culpability in sin and

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<sup>1</sup> For manuscript dates, see H. Hudson (ed.), '*Sir Isumbras*', in *Four Middle English romances*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006) 8.

<sup>2</sup> London, Gray's Inn, MS 20 (1350), 104 line fragment; Oxford, University College, MS 142 (end 14<sup>th</sup> century), 17 line fragment; Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College, MS 175 (1425-1450); Lincoln, Lincoln Cathedral, MS 91 (the Thornton Manuscript, c.1440); Naples, Bibliotheca Nazionale, MS 13.B.9 (1457), 122 line fragment; London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii (1450-1500); Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 6922 (Ashmole 61, 1475-1500); Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.3.1 (the Heege Manuscript, 1475-1500); Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 261 (1564), see Hudson (ed.), '*Sir Isumbras*', 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> London, British Library, MS C21C61, Garrick Collection, William Copeland (c. 1530), fifteen leaves; Boston, Harvard University Library, John Skot (c. 1525), eight leaves; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce Fragment f. 37, one leaf; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 1119, one leaf; Boston, Harvard University Library, I. Treveris (c. 1530), one leaf, see Hudson (ed.), '*Sir Isumbras*', 9.

of the importance of taking full responsibility for its consequences, together representing two necessary components of the choice to reform oneself (the purpose of contrition). By arguing that peasant suffering stems from landowner sinfulness, the Caius *Isumbras* reflects complaint rhetoric, such as that found in *The Simonie* and *The Song of the Husbandman*, two complaint poems from the first quarter of the fourteenth century, the period in which *Isumbras* was also known to be circulating. Both complaint poems are believed to be written in relation to the Agrarian Crisis (1315-22), which, Patricia Cullum tells us, was a series of ‘natural disasters that affected most of Western Europe’.<sup>4</sup> The *Simonie* and the *Song*, like *Isumbras*, address issues of poverty and famine and offer theories regarding the cause of peasant suffering. By arguing that contrition, especially that achieved through labour and poverty, is the source of redemption from sin, *Isumbras* also anticipates the reformist rhetoric of William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*.

Criticism to date generally does not see a desire for social reform in *Isumbras*, with several critics arguing the opposite, that the romance supports social, religious, and political orthodoxy.<sup>5</sup> As Stephen Powell writes:

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<sup>4</sup> P. H. Cullum, ‘Poverty and charity in early fourteenth-century England’, in N. Rogers (ed.), *England in the fourteenth century: proceedings of the 1991 Harlaxton Symposium*, Harlaxton Medieval Studies III (Stanford: Paul Watkins, 1993) 140-51:143; M. S. Nagy, *The alliterative tradition in early Middle English poetry: political complaint and social analysis in ‘The Song of the Husbandman’ and beyond*, foreword by T. A. Shippey (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2011) 59-62 & 104-5.

<sup>5</sup> Uniquely, R. Radulescu argues that *Isumbras* can function as political commentary in, ‘*Sir Isumbras*: women, male suffering, and lineage’, in *Romance and its contexts in fifteenth-century England: politics, piety, and penitence* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013) 66-86, which expands upon her article, ‘Pious Middle English romances turned political: reading *Sir Isumbras*, *Sir Gowther*, and *Robert of Sicily* in fifteenth-century England’, *Viator*, 41, 2 (2010) 333-59; L. Manion suggests that *Isumbras* desires crusade reform in ‘The loss of the Holy Land and *Sir Isumbras*: literary contribution to fourteenth-century crusade discourse’, *Speculum*, 85 (2010) 65-90. Most other studies argue that *Isumbras* supports ‘orthodoxy’, such as L. K. Norako, ‘*Sir Isumbras* and the fantasy of crusade’, *The Chaucer Review*, 48, 2 (2013) 166-89:188; S. D. Powell, ‘Models of religious peace in the Middle English romance *Sir Isumbras*’, *Neophilologus*, 85 (2001) 121-36; S. P. Landers, “‘And loved he was with all’”: identity in *Sir Isumbras*’, *Orbis Litterarum*, 64, 5 (2009) 351-72.

It is important at the outset to state that *Sir Isumbras* is, in every way, a poem that adheres closely to both Christian doctrine and the romance genre's conventions. It is not a revolutionary poem, nor one that is overtly sympathetic to dissident causes.<sup>6</sup>

Only recently has Raluca Radulescu recognised a political inflection to the poem, arguing that:

In the mid to late fifteenth century *Isumbras* could be read not only for its penitential content, but also for its emphasis on the responsibilities of rulers towards their subjects (here followers or retainers) [and that *Isumbras*] remained a story that appealed to audiences suffering through a period of uncertain loyalties and powerful debates over rulers' disposition to pursue personal interests (including spiritual) while neglecting their duty of good governance of the land and its people.<sup>7</sup>

In what follows, I want to build on Radulescu's findings, but I turn instead to fourteenth-century contexts and complaint intertexts that further reveal the radical potential of *Isumbras* at an earlier stage in its manuscript life. I expand upon the evidence she discusses, highlighting the unique features of the Caius *Isumbras* for its protagonist's internal journey from denial to contrition, and exploring more closely the cause-effect relationships between *Isumbras*' behaviour and punishment.

A number of critics have explored *Isumbras* for its generic classification as hagiographical romance, often by highlighting contrasts and comparisons with its sources and analogues.<sup>8</sup> Critics like Andrea Hopkins, for example, consider *Isumbras* to be analogous

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<sup>6</sup> Powell, 'Religious peace', 122.

<sup>7</sup> Radulescu, '*Sir Isumbras*', 70-1.

<sup>8</sup> R. Purdie, 'Generic identity and the origins of *Sir Isumbras*', in P. Hardman (ed.), *The matter of identity in medieval romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002) 113-24; L. Braswell, '*Sir Isumbras* and the legend of Saint Eustace', *Mediaeval Studies*, 67 (1965) 128-51; A. B. Thompson, 'Jaussian expectation and the production of medieval narrative: the case of *Saint Eustace* and *Sir Isumbras*', *Exemplaria*, 5, 2 (1993) 387-408; D. Mehl, *The Middle English romances of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries* (London: Routledge, 1969); S. Crane, *Insular romance: politics, faith, and culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English*



with two groups of texts, those of the legend of St. Eustace and a group of Middle English romances known as the ‘Eustace-Constance-Florence-Griselda’ legends.<sup>9</sup> At times, however, comparisons between *Isumbras* and its analogues have led to prejudiced conclusions regarding the relative merits of the romance narrative. Anne Thompson, for example, praises the hagiographical *St. Eustace* while at the same time berating the *Isumbras*-poet’s failure ‘to provide motivation or logical transitions’, and his ‘repeated failures to explain his hero’s action from either an external or internal perspective’.<sup>10</sup> Thompson declares that the romance is ‘frustrating’ and ‘random in the extreme’.<sup>11</sup> Yet, she does not look for justifications or explanations outside of hagiography for what appear to her to be *Isumbras*’ inherent flaws. By contrast, Hopkins, who looks at the unique features of the romance, concludes that its penitential theme, ‘is consistently worked out through the action of the poem, and creates a moral impetus which is radically different from that of its analogues’.<sup>12</sup> Hopkins shows that *Isumbras* departs from these analogues in key ways, including *Isumbras*’ Christian identity, being punished for sin, and his need to perform penitential action.<sup>13</sup> The unique features of the Middle English romance, especially as they appear in the Caius manuscript, reveal *Isumbras*’ reformist potential.

More recently, exploration of the romance has followed the popular critical trend of interpreting Christian-Saracen conflicts in terms of crusade *apologia*, supporting violence across military, legal, and religious contexts.<sup>14</sup> This criticism generally argues that *Isumbras*

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*literature* (London: University of California Press, 1986); L. Hibbard (Loomis), *Mediaeval romance in England: a study of the sources and analogues of the non-cyclic metrical romances* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1960); A. Hopkins, ‘*Sir Ysumbras*’, in *The sinful knights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 119-43.

<sup>9</sup> Hopkins, ‘*Sir Ysumbras*’, 120.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson, ‘Jaussian expectation’, 393.

<sup>11</sup> Thompson, ‘Jaussian expectation’, 393.

<sup>12</sup> Hopkins, ‘*Sir Ysumbras*’, 123.

<sup>13</sup> Hopkins, ‘*Sir Ysumbras*’, 121.

<sup>14</sup> E. Fowler, ‘The romance hypothetical: lordship and the Saracens of *Sir Isumbras*’, in J. Gilbert & A. Putter (eds.), *The spirit of medieval English popular romance* (Harlow:

promotes crusade by presenting the Saracen characters in a negative light, yet such work struggles to reconcile its reading of Saracens in *Isumbras* with the textual evidence from the poem's various manuscript witnesses, several of which offer a much more nuanced representation of Saracens than critics have hitherto assumed.<sup>15</sup> For example, Powell frames 'How to deal with the Saracen problem?' as the central question of *Isumbras*, and argues that the romance prescribes whole-sale genocide, and promotes the impossibility of peaceful coexistence. Yet, despite the fact that this extreme argument is apparently visible to Powell, he still admits that, 'the questioning is neither sustained nor philosophically consistent'.<sup>16</sup> Many of these studies rely on the Cotton *Isumbras* (1450-1500), which contains readings that differ in characterisation and plot compared to that of the Caius version. The Caius *Isumbras* offers a very different perspective on the Saracen, complicating their negative representation in criticism and problematising the orthodox understanding of penitential crusade. Throughout this study, when describing an important textual moment in the interpretation I offer, I compare the reading in Caius to that of all other surviving witnesses. I use critical studies of the Cotton *Isumbras* throughout to highlight how Caius radicalises the romance in contrast to the more conservative versions surviving from later in the fifteenth century.

The range of textual differences among *Isumbras* manuscripts exacerbate the problems critics face when analysing the poem. Maldwyn Mills discusses the diversity among surviving copies and argues that recension methods can never hope to recover a single 'true' text of *Isumbras*.<sup>17</sup> In response, Mills groups the manuscripts into two different families—the z- and y-traditions—and this provides an alternative means of understanding

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Longman, 2000) 97-121; Powell, 'Religious peace', 121-36; Manion, 'Holy Land', 65-90; Norako, 'Fantasy of crusade', 166-89.

<sup>15</sup> Fowler, 'Romance hypothetical', 119; Powell, 'Religious peace', 121-36.

<sup>16</sup> Powell, 'Religious peace', 122.

<sup>17</sup> M. Mills, 'Sir *Isumbras* and the styles of the tail-rhyme romance', in C. M. Meale (ed.), *Readings in medieval English romance* (Cambridge: D. S Brewer, 1994) 1-24.

the poetic intention behind, and medieval reception of, the romance.<sup>18</sup> The z-tradition consists of the Caius, Caligula, and Copeland manuscripts, and the y-tradition, the Ashmole, Thornton, and Advocates (Heege) manuscripts. Mills compares these to the recension edition by Julius Zupitza and Gustav Schleich, highlighting the difficulties facing editors of *Isumbras*. Mills' survey is incomplete, however, as he excludes the Naples and the Gray's Inn fragments.<sup>19</sup> Harriet Hudson, including the fragments, argues for three traditions: the early version found in the Caius and Gray's Inn manuscripts; the 'heroic' version in Thornton, Ashmole, and Heege manuscripts; and the third including the Cotton and Naples manuscripts.<sup>20</sup> Yet, resemblance studies also problematise the analysis of this romance because they undersell the textual variation within any one tradition. *Isumbras* responds well neither to recension nor resemblance methods, as each individual within the *Isumbras* manuscript family is capable of evoking a unique perspective. I look at the Caius *Isumbras* in isolation because its reformist message is one that no other surviving manuscript witness reflects.

I chose the Caius *Isumbras* as the basis of this study for several factors: because it is the earliest complete manuscript, sharing features with the earlier Gray's Inn fragment; because it problematises orthodox religious prescriptions while uniquely valuing the individual's internal and emotional journey toward contrition; and because of the philosophical intertextualities it shares with fourteenth-century complaint poems. The later fifteenth-century versions of *Isumbras* tend to promote orthodox principles: removing the internal journey; elevating works of mercy as the dominant factors contributing to its protagonist's redemption;<sup>21</sup> and promoting crusade by amplifying negative Saracen

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<sup>18</sup> Mills, 'Styles of tail-rhyme', 3-4; Hudson (ed.), 'Sir *Isumbras*', 8.

<sup>19</sup> Mills, 'Styles of tail-rhyme', 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> Hudson (ed.), 'Sir *Isumbras*', 8.

<sup>21</sup> Thornton: D. S. Brewer & A. E. B. Owen (intro.), *The Thornton Manuscript (Lincoln Cathedral MS. 91)* (London: The Scholar Press, 1975) f. 112v; Heege: P. Hardman (intro.),

characteristics.<sup>22</sup> Of recent critical surveys of *Isumbras*, only Leila Norako's study is based upon the Caius *Isumbras* with others all choosing the Cotton *Isumbras* as the basis of their studies.<sup>23</sup> Only within the last decade, thanks to Hudson, has the Caius *Isumbras* been available in a printed edition. Before this, only Zupitza's and Schleich's recension, and Mills' Cotton-based editions, were available in print. Powell, Thompson, Hopkins, Rhiannon Purdie, and Elizabeth Fowler all published their studies before the Caius *Isumbras* was available in a critical edition, while Radulescu, Lee Manion, and Samara Landers chose to base their more recent studies on the later Cotton manuscript for fifteenth-century perspectives. Like Norako, I choose the earlier Caius version as the basis for this study, but I deviate from hers and all other previous studies by reading *Isumbras* in a reformist light, alongside fourteenth-century complaint poems and other reformist texts.

I first look at *Isumbras* in the context of the second quarter of the fourteenth century, especially how it evokes the Agrarian Crisis and the complaint poems that gave expression to this crisis, because there is evidence that the romance was circulating in written Middle English, and because the action of the poem reflects historical events from that time. Two writers indicate that *Isumbras* was being disseminated in English in the first quarter of the

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*The Heege Manuscript: a facsimile of National Library of Scotland MS. Advocates 19.3.1*, Leeds Texts and Monographs, New Series 16 (Leeds: Leeds Studies in English, 2000) 53v; Cotton: M. Mills (ed.), 'Sir *Isumbras*', in *Six Middle English romances* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1973) 125-47, ll. 514-6; for a newer edition, see D. C. White, 'Sir *Isumbras*', in 'BL Cotton Caligula Aii, manuscript context, the theme of obedience, and a diplomatic transcription edition' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Georgia State University, 2012) [http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english\\_diss](http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_diss), 440-8:445; Ashmole: G. Shuffleton (ed.), 'Sir *Isumbras*', in *Codex Ashmole 61: a compilation of popular Middle English verse*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008) 39-59, ll. 538-40.

<sup>22</sup> Thornton: Brewer & Owen (intro.), *Thornton manuscript*, f. 113v; Heege: Hardman (intro.), *Heege manuscript*, ff. 54r-54v; Cotton: Mills (ed.), 'Sir *Isumbras*', ll. 559 & 640-2; White (ed.), 'Sir *Isumbras*', 446-7; Ashmole: Shuffleton (ed.), 'Sir *Isumbras*', ll. 620-2 & 628.

<sup>23</sup> Manion, 'Holy Land', 71, n. 16; Norako, 'Fantasy of crusade', 166, n. 1; Powell, 'Religious peace', 134, n. 3; Fowler, 'Romance hypothetical', 119, n. 1; Thompson, 'Jaussian expectation', 392, n. 8; Radulescu, 'Sir *Isumbras*', 67, n. 80; Landers, 'Loved he was', 370, n. 6.

fourteenth century:<sup>24</sup> William of Nassington, in his *Speculum Vitae* (before 1320),<sup>25</sup> and the anonymous author of the *Cursor Mundi* (c. 1300-25).<sup>26</sup> Although both writers describe *Isumbras* in terms of being heard and not read, both authors use writing-speaking and reading-hearing words synonymously. The *Speculum Vitae* describes minstrels in terms of oral recitation, ‘Als dose mynstralles and iestours / Pat mas carpynge in mony place,’<sup>27</sup> but uses the same terms in reference to his own written work, saying ‘Bot þis sal be my carpynge / To carp of mast nedefull thyng.’<sup>28</sup> The author of the *Cursor Mundi* argues that ‘Man yhernes rimes to here’<sup>29</sup> when describing romance, but uses similar terms of speaking and hearing when discussing his own writing project, stating ‘Pat I speke o þis ilke tre, / Bytakens, man, bothe me and þe’.<sup>30</sup> Both writers wrote Middle English poems intended to replace secular entertainment in the vernacular, suggesting that the romances they sought to displace were circulating in written form and in Middle English at the time of their compositions. This coincides with the Agrarian Crisis (1315-22), a period of famine in England that killed ten per cent of the population and significantly increased vagrancy and begging.<sup>31</sup> Chronicles describing the crisis offer political instability, ill-advised military

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<sup>24</sup> R. Morris (ed.), ‘*Cursor Mundi (The Cursur o the World)*’: a Northumbrian poem of the XIVth century, I, EETS O. S. 57 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1874) l. 19; R. Hanna (ed.), ‘*Speculum Vitae*’: a reading edition, I, EETS O. S. 331 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) l. 40.

<sup>25</sup> Hudson, ‘Sir Isumbras’, 5; Hanna argues for a later date (c. 1348) and gives comprehensive descriptions of the forty-five extant manuscripts, Hanna (ed.), *Speculum Vitae*, xiv-lxiii.

<sup>26</sup> J. J. Thompson, ‘The *Cursor Mundi*, the “Inglis tong”, and “Romance”’, in C. M. Meale (ed.), *Readings in medieval English romance* (Cambridge: D. S Brewer, 1994) 99-120:99. The oldest three manuscripts date from the first quarter of the fourteenth-century, although textual evidence suggests an earlier copy existed at one time, see J. J. Thompson, *The Cursor Mundi: poem, texts, and contexts* (Oxford: The Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 1998) 1.

<sup>27</sup> Hanna (ed.), *Speculum Vitae*, ll. 38-9.

<sup>28</sup> Hanna (ed.), *Speculum Vitae*, ll. 49-50.

<sup>29</sup> Morris (ed.), *Cursor Mundi*, l. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Morris (ed.), *Cursor Mundi*, ll. 39-40.

<sup>31</sup> M. Bailey, ‘Peasant welfare in England, 1290-1348’, *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 51, 2 (1998) 223-52:238-40; I. Kershaw, ‘The Great Famine and Agrarian Crisis in

activity, and the sinful choices of the elite as the causes of this devastation.<sup>32</sup> The Caius *Isumbras* explicitly identifies its landowning protagonist's sin as the cause of death and starvation among his peasantry, and Isumbras, I suggest, is forced to implement penitential strategies in order to earn forgiveness for the neglect of his poorer subjects. The *Simonie* (c. 1330-40) and the *Song of the Husbandman* (1340), two complaint poems from the same quarter century, link famines, failed harvests, and the starvation and death of peasants to sinfulness within the nobility and clergy.<sup>33</sup> *Isumbras*, like the chronicles of the Agrarian Crisis and these complaint poems, acts as social commentary describing how landowners neglect their responsibility to their peasant subjects and cause those subjects to suffer to the point of starvation and death.

The second strand of this chapter traces Isumbras' path from his sins and how he earns redemption. William Langland's B-text of *Piers Plowman* (1376-7) shares redemptive principles with *Isumbras*, as both poems condemn institutional penitential regimens in lieu of labour, poverty, and charity in *imitatio Christi*.<sup>34</sup> Whereas orthodox prescriptions, like pilgrimage and crusade, increase Isumbras' punishments, labour and poverty, I will argue, are shown to alleviate them. The Gray's Inn fragment (c. 1350-1400) of *Isumbras* shows that the romance continued to be read in the mid to late fourteenth century, concurrent with the composition of *Piers Plowman*.<sup>35</sup> Langland's work influenced later reform movements, like

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England, 1315-1322', *Past & Present*, 59 (1973) 3-50:11 & 49; Cullum, 'Poverty and charity', 146-8.

<sup>32</sup> H. E. Hallam, 'The climate of Eastern England, 1250-1350', *The Agricultural History Review*, 32, 2 (1984) 124-32:124.

<sup>33</sup> J. Dean (ed.), 'The *Simonie*', in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 184; J. Dean (ed.), 'The *Song of the Husbandman*', in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 247.

<sup>34</sup> Dating from S. Justice, *Writing and rebellion: England in 1381* (London: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>35</sup> Although dated generally to c. 1350, critics have recently dated the fragment to the final quarter of the fourteenth century, see R. Purdie, 'Sir *Isumbras* in London, Gray's Inn, MS 20: a revision', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 55 (2011) 249-83:253-4.

the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and Lollardy, indicating that his ideas give voice to widespread social concerns. The Caius *Isumbras* embraces these same ethical ideals, encouraging individuals to reform themselves through spiritual awareness and honest work. In so doing, it exemplifies romance's interest in reformist principles throughout the fourteenth century. *Isumbras*, like Langland, elevates ploughmen as spiritual teachers, while upholding labour and poverty as ethical and redemptive ideals. Lynn Staley argues this purpose for *Piers Plowman*, stating that, on the half acre, 'Piers here preaches labor as a remedial for the common good'.<sup>36</sup> *Isumbras* offers blacksmiths, in place of Piers the Plowman, as its spiritual educators—their purpose to teach *Isumbras* true charity through labour. Significantly, the blacksmiths refer to themselves as ploughmen, the ideal workers elevated by Langland, when they invite *Isumbras* to work like them. From poverty, *Isumbras* accepts responsibility for his own sins and their consequences, revealing contrition to be the true cause of redemption. The Caius *Isumbras* reflects the ethical ideology and social commentary of complaint poems spanning the fourteenth century, uses the space of romance to comment on contemporary debates around the time of the Agrarian Crisis over the use and abuse of wealth and power, and imagines a wealthy sinner re-educated and redeemed through labour and poverty.

#### *Isumbras'* sin and his fall

*Isumbras* opens with what appears to be a conventional introduction to its eponymous protagonist, describing him in terms of his generosity, heroic proportions, loyal retainers, and beautiful family (1-30). The poem undermines this positive identification, however, when *Isumbras* is punished for excessive sin, resulting in the loss of all of the positive features of heroism and lordship with which the poem begins. The poem offers an array of sinful

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<sup>36</sup> L. Staley, *The island garden: England's language of nation from Gildas to Marvell* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012) 81.

behaviours—pride, neglect of faith, and forgotten identity—as the causes of Isumbras’ downfall. It also highlights how Isumbras continues to sin even after God’s messenger arrives, showing choice upon choice that exacerbate his punishments. I begin by exploring current critical debates surrounding Isumbras’ sin, and then expand upon these critical perspectives by offering an alternative interpretation based upon the evidence supplied by the Caius manuscript. I support this interpretation through comparisons between the poem and contemporary complaint texts written in reaction to the Agrarian Crisis of the early fourteenth century, in so doing revealing the reformist potential of the romance.

Critics have debated the type of sin that causes Isumbras’ downfall, drawing on the language of the romance’s introduction for evidence. Manion and Fowler discuss the two features of Isumbras’ sin, pride and forgotten identity, that are explicitly outlined in the poem as the cause of the protagonist’s punishment. Yet, it is not only in the overt evidence, but also in the subtler evidence such as that described by Hopkins, that the broad terms of Isumbras’ sins are revealed. Hopkins even sees evidence of Isumbras’ error within the ostensibly heroic description provided in the romance introduction.

He was mekil man and long  
With armes grete and body strong  
And fair was to se.  
[...]  
Menstralles he lovyd wel in halle  
And gaf hem ryche robes withalle,  
Bothe golde and fe.  
[...]  
A fayr lady hadde hee  
[...]



Bytwen hem they hadde chyldren thre,

The fayreste that myghte on lyve be. (13-29)<sup>37</sup>

These lines describe Isumbras as having a well-formed body and being generous to minstrels, and from this Hopkins argues that Isumbras misapplies charity because he gives robes to minstrels rather than alms to the poor.<sup>38</sup> In the lines Hopkins focuses on, Isumbras is given two major features—large body and generosity—that generally function as heroic characteristics in romances. Hopkins, however, is convincing in her argument that, although generous, Isumbras misdirects his funds towards people who do not actually need charity. The Caius *Isumbras* further problematise these features, highlighting, as we will see, that Isumbras does not possess heroic strength despite having a well-made body. He appears heroic physically but he turns out to be unable to use strength in the defence of self, family, or kingdom. If the two features of Isumbras' heroism—generosity and his well-made body—are each ironic indications of his failure, then the introduction serves, not to highlight Isumbras' traditional heroic features, but to emphasise how far Isumbras' appearance of goodness in fact belies his sinful acts, giving further credence to Hopkins' argument. However, there is critical disagreement over the interpretation of these lines, with Landers arguing that these same descriptors denote Isumbras' goodness and moral worth.<sup>39</sup> Of the four manuscripts and one fragment to include these lines, the Cotton and Ashmole manuscripts agree with Caius, and the Thornton manuscript and Naples fragment replace minstrels with the synonymous 'gleemen', but the Heege manuscript uniquely disagrees with the other manuscripts by replacing minstrels with men.<sup>40</sup> Fourteenth-century cultural contexts

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<sup>37</sup> All quotes from Hudson (ed.), '*Sir Isumbras*'.

<sup>38</sup> Hopkins, '*Sir Ysumbras*', 132.

<sup>39</sup> Landers, 'Loved he was', 355-9.

<sup>40</sup> Cotton: Mills (ed.), '*Sir Isumbras*', l. 25; White (ed.), '*Sir Isumbras*', 440; Ashmole: Shuffleton (ed.), '*Sir Isumbras*', l. 19; Thornton: Brewer & Owen (intro.), *Thornton manuscript*, f. 109v; Heege: Hardman (intro.), *Heege manuscript*, f. 48r; Naples: E. Kölbing (ed.), 'Das Neapler Fragment von *Sir Isumbras*', *Englische Studien*, 3 (1880) 200-2, l. 24.

and complaint intertexts favour Hopkins' conclusion over that of Landers for all except the Heege manuscript. On the one hand, medieval prescriptions for Christian religious practice argue, as Brown tells us, that 'Provision for the poor was inseparable from pious expression; it was, as canonists had emphasised since the twelfth century, one of the seven works of mercy in the penitential process of making satisfaction for sin'.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, *Piers Plowman* expressly warns readers that giving to minstrels causes men to neglect the poor, and therefore their Christian duty.

Clerkes and knyghtes welcometh kynges minstrales,  
And for love of hir lord litheth hem at festes;  
Muche moore me thynketh, riche men sholde  
Have beggeres bifore hem, the whiche ben Goddes minstrales.<sup>42</sup>

Yet while it is likely to be a factor, Isumbras' failure to provide charity for the actual needy is not the only reason the poet supplies to account for his punishment.

The poem informs us that excessive pride has led Isumbras to forget God and to neglect worship.

Swyche pryde in hys herte was brought;  
Of Jhesu Cryst thoghte he nought.  
Ne on His names sevene.  
So longe he levede in that pryde  
That Jhesu wolde no longer abyde;  
To hym he sente a stevenne. (31-6)

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<sup>41</sup> A. D. Brown, *Popular piety in late medieval England: the Diocese of Salisbury, 1250-1550* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) 181.

<sup>42</sup> W. Langland, *'The vision of Piers Plowman': a critical edition of the B-Text based on Trinity College Cambridge, MS B.15.17*, A.V.C Schmidt (ed.), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Everyman, 1995) XIII, ll. 437-40.

Fowler and Manion argue that it is Isumbras' neglect of worship that is the main cause of Isumbras' punishment.<sup>43</sup> However, as we will see, Isumbras returns to worship long before God sends his forgiveness, problematising this interpretation. For Powell, pride is the only recognizable cause of Isumbras' punishment, but he states that this outcome 'is complicated by Isumbras's immediate repentance, which seems devoid of pride'.<sup>44</sup> This critical confusion draws attention to the complexity of the poem's definition of pride, which does not relate solely to Isumbras' lack of prayer or faith but entails a wide range of behavioural problems.

The final clue to Isumbras' chief sin is supplied by God's messenger, who suggests that he has failed in some way to uphold his social identity and responsibility as a result of his pride:

Welcome Syr Isumbras,  
Thow haste forgete what thou was  
For pryde of golde and fee. (43-5)

The poet argues that Isumbras has forgotten something important within his own identity by sinning, and many interpretations of these lines have also been offered. Manion argues that it is exclusively Isumbras' crusading identity that is compromised.<sup>45</sup> Yet, while this may be true in the Cotton *Isumbras*, the Caius manuscript shows that a crusade, performed without contrition, is spiritually ineffectual, as we will see. Fowler, by contrast, argues that Isumbras compromised his leadership identity within a Christian hierarchy because he does not acknowledge God as his feudal superior, from whom he receives his earthly power.<sup>46</sup> But again it is worth noting that Isumbras returns to faith, acknowledging God as the source of his power on earth, long before God sends him forgiveness. Instead, internal evidence and

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<sup>43</sup> Fowler, 'Romance hypothetical', 113; Manion, 'Holy Land', 70.

<sup>44</sup> Powell, 'Religious peace', 127.

<sup>45</sup> Manion, 'Religious peace', 84.

<sup>46</sup> Fowler, 'Romance hypothetical', 113.

complaint intertexts suggest that pride, misapplied charity, neglect of faith, and a compromised identity are all factors of Isumbras' sin. It is how those sins coalesce into an ignorant disregard for the common good that fully accounts for Isumbras' punishments as they unfold. Isumbras enjoys a wealthy lifestyle without the responsibility that such a post holds. He neglects charity (neglecting the Christ-like poor who suffer in poverty as Christ did), neglects faith (neglecting worship in religious practice, i.e. attending church, following the ten commandments, the works of mercy, etc.), and his identity as a noble and landowner is ultimately compromised because he does not fathom the selfless responsibility that wealth and power require.

The *Simonie* offers a complaint perspective on pride, echoing *Isumbras* in its definition of that sin, and the multifaceted consequences that the sin of pride can cause.

Pride hath in his paunter kaught the heie and the lowe,

So that unnethe can eny man God Almihti knowe.

Pride priketh about, wid nithe and wid onde;

Pes and love and charité hien hem out of londe

So faste

That God wole for-don the world we muwe be sore agaste.<sup>47</sup>

The *Simonie* claims that pride catches out the high (the wealthy) and the low (the poor); it causes men to forget God (as Isumbras has), and it causes peace, love, and charity (the central tenets of Christ's message) to disappear from the land and its people entirely. *Isumbras* also identifies pride as the centre-point of its protagonist's sin, likewise causing him to forget God's name, neglect worship of God, and to lose sight of charity. Isumbras' pride causes him to lose faith in God and therefore to forget the system of Christian ethics that should govern his position as landowner; he does not feel love for his subjects (neglecting their needs), he

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<sup>47</sup> Dean (ed.), '*The Simonie*', ll. 457-62.

gives charity only for his own entertainment (minstrels and not the poor), and makes sinful choices that undermine the peace of his land (causing dearth and death).

Isumbras' responses to God's messenger demonstrate his ignorance in regards his position of power. The first two questions surround the messenger's words:

The kyng of hevenn the gretheth so:

In yowthe or elde thou schall be wo,

Chese whedur hyt shall be. (46-8)

These words leave ambiguous the type of suffering Isumbras will actually endure, and give Isumbras the choice of when such suffering will occur. In the Thornton, Heege, and Naples manuscripts, the messenger specifies that Isumbras will lose worldly wealth as a consequence of sin.<sup>48</sup> In the Caius manuscript, along with Cotton and Ashmole, the messenger does not indicate what type of suffering Isumbras will experience other than 'wo', and it is thus revealing of Isumbras' character that he assumes that a loss of wealth will be an integral part of his punishment (52-4).<sup>49</sup> Isumbras offers to give up worldly wealth, choosing to do so in youth because he believes his strong young body will successfully mitigate his punishment (52-60). There are two problems with Isumbras' assumptions. Firstly, his body is not strong enough to prevent or augment any of the punishments God metes out. As I alluded to earlier, Isumbras may be given a heroic description emphasising how well made his body is, but the poem reveals the actual physical weakness that his body belies. Like his misapplied generosity, Isumbras' physical weakness is another feature of his failure to uphold his feudal duty, to militarily protect his subjects from harm. Secondly, it becomes apparent that Isumbras expects this punishment to affect him in isolation and he is surprised to find that his

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<sup>48</sup> Thornton: Brewer & Owen (intro.), *Thornton manuscript*, f. 109v; Heege: Hardman (intro.), *Heege manuscript*, f. 48r; Naples: Kölbing (ed.), 'Das Neapler', l. 52.

<sup>49</sup> Cotton: Mills (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', ll. 53-4; Ashmole: Shuffleton (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', ll. 47-8.

punishment extends to all people living on his lands. Isumbras demonstrates a naïve belief that his youth would allow him to comfortably endure all of his punishments. This naivety is quickly quashed, and as his subjects' suffering is shown to him, Isumbras reveals his emotional inability to cope with the knowledge that he is the cause of the suffering of so many. At the same time, however, he is completely unable to face his culpability for this suffering.

The first punishments do affect Isumbras in isolation. All of the trappings of lordship and knighthood are removed, his horse dies underneath him, and his hunting hounds and hawks disappear into the woods (65-9). Isumbras reveals his disregard for his poorer subjects through his response to losing the accoutrements of knighthood:

What wonder was thowgh hym were wo?

On fote byhoveth hym to go,

To peyne turned his pleye. (70-2)

He must return home on foot, a seemingly great tragedy to him that immediately turns 'pleye' to 'peyne'. He experiences walking on foot, one of the day-to-day struggles of the poor, with sorrow, implying that he cannot imagine the life of a peasant, even under normal circumstances, in positive ways. He also shows no signs of anticipation that such suffering will be visited on anyone else.

The significant consequences of his sins are revealed when a young knave reports the deaths of Isumbras' servants.

Syr, brent be thy byggynges bolde,

Thy menne be manye sleyne.

Ther is noght left on lyve

But thy children and thy wyfe

Withouten any delayne. (77-88)

This consequence is absent entirely from the Thornton, Heege, Ashmole, and Naples manuscripts, where the men are replaced by beasts, removing the most obvious life cost from Isumbras' sin.<sup>50</sup> In the Caius and Cotton manuscripts, by contrast, God expressly identifies Isumbras as the sole cause of these punishments, including the deaths of all people living in his home.<sup>51</sup> The poet reveals problems with Isumbras' leadership by showing how he is not affected emotionally by news of his servants' deaths; instead, Isumbras shows only relief because his wife and children are still alive:

If they on lyve be,  
My wyfe and my children three,  
Yet were I never so fayne. (82-4)

This is praiseworthy for a father but not for a lord whose feudal responsibility extends well beyond his immediate family. Isumbras experienced great sorrow when his horse died and he was forced to walk for the first time, so it is a surprising textual moment when Isumbras fails to respond to the deaths of his men. This emotional void indicates that Isumbras does not feel for his humbler subjects, not even if they die as a consequence of his actions. If he cannot feel for their deaths, then he cannot have valued their lives before God's messenger arrived either, demonstrating his failure to lead his subjects towards anything even resembling the 'common good'.

The men of his household are not the only ones to suffer, the peasants living on his lands are affected as well. Isumbras' ploughmen come to him complaining that their livelihood, and therefore their ability to feed themselves and their families, is gone.

'Owre fees ben fro us revedde,

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<sup>50</sup> Thornton: Brewer & Owen (intro.), *Thornton manuscript*, f. 109v; Heege: Hardman (intro.), *Heege manuscript*, 48v; Ashmole: Shuffleton (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', l. 78; Naples: Kölbing (ed.), 'Das Neapler', l. 83.

<sup>51</sup> Mills (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', l. 84.

There is nothyng ylevedde,

Nowghte on stede to thy plowe'

They wepte and gaf hem yll. (88-91)

'Isumbras's decision,' Radulescu writes, 'has immediate personal and political consequences that he had not fully considered; in this he can be read as a ruler who should think carefully about his dependants (family and retainers) as well as his personal salvation'.<sup>52</sup> Radulescu's point, made from the Cotton *Isumbras* and in reference to the late fifteenth-century political climate, had even greater resonances during the Agrarian Crisis (1315-22) of the early fourteenth century.

The Agrarian Crisis, a famine that killed more than ten percent of the population, was at its peak during the period of time that *Isumbras* is known to have been circulating in the early fourteenth century. These disasters included harvests ruined by rains (1314-6), and murrains killing as much as fifty per cent of cattle (1319-21), and forty per cent of sheep (1316).<sup>53</sup> Even years later, land could not be tilled as so many plough beasts had died.<sup>54</sup> According to Cullum, 'One chronicler writes that "those who were accustomed to supporting themselves and their dependants in a suitable manner travelled along streets and through places as beggars"'.<sup>55</sup> The chroniclers impress upon their readers the devastation witnessed during these hard times. Ian Kershaw tells us that the 'Rumors of cannibalism—of people stealing children to eat them—may have been exaggerated but they testify to the stark horror which this period of extreme famine impressed upon the memories of contemporaries'.<sup>56</sup> The wretched sights of starvation and death were visible throughout England, and Cullum

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<sup>52</sup> Radulescu, '*Sir Isumbras*', 69.

<sup>53</sup> The most comprehensive study of the Agrarian Crisis is still that of Kershaw, 'Great Famine', 3-50; see also Cullum, 'Poverty and charity', 143-4.

<sup>54</sup> Kershaw, 'Great Famine', 33-4.

<sup>55</sup> Cullum, 'Poverty and charity', 146.

<sup>56</sup> Kershaw, 'Great Famine', 9-10.



describes a chronicler, Trokelowe, who ‘writes of the emaciated forms of those coming into the city, and of the dead bodies of the poor and needy lying conspicuously in the streets and ways’.<sup>57</sup> Chroniclers attempted to make sense of the devastation and some blamed leaders for their sinful choices.<sup>58</sup> These horrifying events were happening at a time when the *Cursor Mundi* and *Speculum Vitae* tell us *Isumbras* was circulating. *Isumbras*’ peasants similarly lament that there is not one beast left for their ploughs. *Isumbras* offers a potential explanation for the causes of famine and death to its readers.

In *Isumbras* the famine and the deaths of men and livestock come explicitly from the sins of the ruling elite. Where chronicles of the Agrarian Crisis could only speculate about the cause of the crisis, *Isumbras* leaves no room for doubt. The *Isumbras*-poet uses God as a means to place that blame solely onto *Isumbras*’ shoulders. Many of *Isumbras*’ men have already died at the manor and their bodies, although not visible, represent the immediate and terrible cost that noble sins can have. Likewise, the consequences of sinful leadership can be read into the prospect of starvation facing *Isumbras*’ peasant farmers and their families. People reading or hearing *Isumbras* in the early fourteenth century would be immediately reminded of the horrors they were, or had just, experienced, and in *Isumbras* they found a reason for their suffering. It was because the wealthy and powerful neglected charity and angered God through pride that so many had suffered and died.

Both the *Simonie* and the *Song of the Husbandman* describe starvation and death, especially as suffered by the poorest members of society, and attribute this to the malicious will of the rich. The *Simonie* states:

Fore al is long on lordis that suffre thus hit go.

They scholde mayntene the porayle, and they do noght thereto,

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<sup>57</sup> Cullum, ‘Poverty and charity’, 148.

<sup>58</sup> Hallam, ‘Climate of Eastern England’, 124.

But take methe and sle the fole in as moche as they may.

The pore han her purgatorie; the riche kepe her day

In helle.

That so scorneth God and Hise, can I non other telle.<sup>59</sup>

The *Simonie* differentiates between the poor, who suffer only purgatory, and the wealthy, who deserve to suffer in hell. The *Song of the Husbandman* also states:

Thus me pileth the pore and pyketh ful clene,

The ryche me raymeth withouten eny ryght;

Ar londes and ar leodes liggeth fol lene,

Thorh bidding of baylyfs such harm hem hath higt.

Meni of religioun me halt hem ful hene,

Baroun and bonde, the clerc and the knyght.

Thus wil walketh in lond, and wondred ys wene,

Falsshipe fatteth and marreth wyth myght.<sup>60</sup>

The *Song of the Husbandman* speaks of the rich wilfully picking clean the poor and fattening themselves upon that suffering. Isumbras, by contrast, does not appear to be compromised through malicious will at all, instead displaying an apparent ignorance regarding his role. Isumbras does not desire bloodshed and displays no villainous cruelty, so despite his inability to accept culpability for his sins, it does appear that he unwittingly damaged the health of kingdom and subjects through his sins. Regardless, Isumbras' punishments are not moderated because he was ignorant; instead, Isumbras' ignorance is shown to increase his suffering because he continues to sin even after his punishment begins; he does not know yet how to

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<sup>59</sup> Dean (ed.), '*The Simonie*', ll. 505-10.

<sup>60</sup> Dean (ed.), '*The Song of the Husbandman*', ll. 25-32.

act virtuously. Isumbras continues to make selfish choices that devalues his peasant subjects, disrupts Christian charity, and increases the punishments God metes upon him.

Isumbras shows the limitations of his feelings for his peasants, together with his assumption that his punishments would not extend to them, by how he responds to their questions. The peasants ask Isumbras what the cause of their sorrow is. As the audience, we know that the deaths in the manor and this loss of livelihood come directly from Isumbras' sin: the messenger from God explicitly identified Isumbras' sins alone as the cause of this suffering. Yet Isumbras does not admit this to his peasants, but lies instead.

I wyte nowght yow this wo,

For God bothe geveth and taketh

And at His wyll ryches maketh

And pore men also. (93-6)

This feigned ignorance, speaking to a lack of contrition for sin in Isumbras, is not present in either the Heege or Ashmole manuscripts.<sup>61</sup> 'His Job-inspired wisdom ('God bothe yeveth and taketh') is a poor consolation for the devastating losses suffered by his tenants,' Radulescu writes, 'and his desertion of the lands does not assist with improving their situation either'.<sup>62</sup> This is true, but more than this, the passage proves that Isumbras cannot or will not admit responsibility for his own sins. Isumbras clearly did not comprehend the impact that his sins would have on his people any more than he expected them to be punished alongside him; he cannot openly accept God's explanation for the cause of their suffering. However, Isumbras should know that he is the cause of their sorrow; God's messenger leaves no room for such doubts. Isumbras cannot admit fault even to his family, instead spreading blame to all of his family members (112-4). The Heege manuscript does not possess this

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<sup>61</sup> Heege: Hardman (intro.), *Heege manuscript*, f. 48v; Ashmole: Shuffleton (ed.), '*Sir Isumbras*', ll. 88-90.

<sup>62</sup> Radulescu, '*Sir Isumbras*', 69.

feature either, limiting even further the contrition element of Isumbras' penance seen in Caius.<sup>63</sup> This denial, and its duration, indicates an extreme inability to feel contrition, or accept responsibility, for the consequences of his abuses of power, or sin. The narrative also tells us that Isumbras does not respond emotionally to his subjects' suffering, even after all these lives are lost:

Yette chaunged no thyng his ble  
Tyll he sawe his wyfe and children thre  
That erste were comely cladde. (103-5)

Although Isumbras' emotional attachment to his family is understandable, they are not affected by Isumbras' sin to the same degree that his peasant subjects are: their bodies remain healthy, only their wealthy attire is lost. Isumbras reveals that the wealthy clothes of his wife and children mean more to him than the lives of his poor subjects.

The denial, deflection, and dishonesty expressed by Isumbras here show his discomfort at knowing that he is the cause of such suffering, and his psychological inability to accept it. Following his feigned ignorance, Isumbras lies a second time.

*Of myselfe have I no thowghte*  
Bot that I may geve my menn noghte,  
For hem is all my kare. (118-20; Italics mine)

The narrator has shown Isumbras' responses to his men and their losses. No care is actually shown, and the poet expressly tells us he only responds with feeling to his wife and children. *Piers Plowman* describes the dangers of not feeling compassion and acting towards the alleviation of the suffering of the poor: 'And for thei suffren and see so manye nedy folkes / And love hem noght as Oure Lorde bit, lesen hir soules'.<sup>64</sup> Isumbras is not ready to admit

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<sup>63</sup> Hardman (intro.), *Heege manuscript*, f. 49r.

<sup>64</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, XII, ll. 53-4.

fault and he does not take any actions to help his poor men, regardless of the extent of suffering that they report. Instead, Isumbras declares a penitential pathway intended to save his own soul but which leaves his peasants, starving because of his sins, to die.

Isumbras' selfishness continues as he declares a pilgrimage, carving a cross onto his bare shoulder (127-35). Like most romance heroes, Isumbras does not consult or rely on a priest for his penance.<sup>65</sup> Instead, by 'Taking the cross', he simply chooses an orthodox penitential pathway, one which, as Tyerman says, was 'depicted as part of a cycle of confession, penance, forgiveness and redemption'.<sup>66</sup> Although Isumbras follows orthodox prescriptions for his penitential behaviour, forgiveness does not come for this act of penance and instead God increases Isumbras' suffering significantly. The pilgrimage does not bring forgiveness because, through it, Isumbras leaves his starving peasants to die, selfishly choosing a penitential pathway that saves only himself and his family. The *Simonie*, likewise, describes a period of dearth where nobles similarly rushed to save themselves at the expense of their subjects.

And wid that laste derthe com ther another shame,  
That oughte be god skile maken us alle tame.  
The fend kidde his maistri, and arerede a straf,  
That averi lording was bisi to sauve his owen lyf,  
And his good,  
God do both theron, for His blessedde blod!<sup>67</sup>

Isumbras determines to save his own life and the lives of his family while neglecting entirely his greater social responsibility. Although Isumbras could attempt to secure his own future,

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<sup>65</sup> R. Radulescu, 'How Christian is chivalry?', in R. Field, P. Hardman, & M. Sweeny (eds.), *Christianity and romance in medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010) 69-83:78.

<sup>66</sup> C. Tyerman, *The invention of the crusades* (Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1998) 82.

<sup>67</sup> Dean (ed.), 'The Simonie', ll. 421-6.

and that of his men, by seeking charity from his Christian neighbours, he does not do so, believing: ‘owre frendes of us wyll yrke’ (116). Yet, the narrator shows the sorrow that their friends feel on their behalf: ‘Toke here leve at her frende [...] For hem wepte both olde and yynge’ (140-2). Their neighbours feel pity upon them, yet Isumbras is not comfortable asking those he knows for help, either for himself or his subjects. Although a Christian, Isumbras does not trust Christians to be charitable and his pride prevents him from seeking help, so he leaves his retainers wholly unprotected.

### The consequences of neglect

The poet confirms that Isumbras’ pilgrimage and abandonment of his peasants is problematic by increasing his punishments significantly after the pilgrimage begins. In other romances, a declaration of penitential behaviour generally results in immediate reward. For example, in *Octavian* (c. 1350), which, like *Isumbras*, is a member of the ‘Constance-Eustace’ romance family and is bound with *Isumbras* in the Thornton and Cotton manuscripts, a Christian couple are barren and choose to build an abbey as penance for their sins.<sup>68</sup> Immediately they are rewarded with children: ‘An abbaye than he gerte wyrke so / And sone he gatt knave childire two’.<sup>69</sup> Villainous action, and not God’s will, cause the tribulations in that romance. In *Isumbras*, however, the act of pilgrimage significantly increases the hero’s suffering.

Isumbras can find neither food nor charity on his pilgrimage:

Sex deyes were come and gone,  
Mete ne drynke hadde they none.  
For honger they wepte sore. (157-60)

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<sup>68</sup> H. Hudson (ed.), ‘*Octavian*’, in *Four Middle English romances*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006) 39-95, ll. 1-80.

<sup>69</sup> Hudson (ed.), ‘*Octavian*’, ll. 82-3.

Isumbras and his family cross two kingdoms wholly without finding sustenance.

Isumbras' state of sin alone may prevent him from seeking or getting charity; because he left his men to starve so too must he. *Piers Plowman* anchors 'Truth', Staley tells us, 'to a rural landscape [...] and, more important, to the truth of hunger that threatens those who do not work for the common good'.<sup>70</sup> Isumbras' starvation here may also imply his negligence of the common good, the welfare of his lands, and therefore his people. The *Song of the Husbandman* laments extreme dearth, and desires that those causing the suffering be stopped.

Stont stille y the stude, and halt him ful sturne,  
That maketh beggares go with bordon and bagges.  
Thus we beth honted from hale to hurne;  
That er werede robes, nou wereth ragges.<sup>71</sup>

Isumbras is shown as the cause of such suffering, and the Caius *Isumbras* seems to answer the *Song of the Husbandman* as Isumbras now must walk as a beggar himself, starving alongside his family, and experiencing the suffering his sins inflicted on his peasants.

The romance seems to point to the foolishness of Isumbras' justification for suffering in his youth, as his physical body is in fact too weak to find food. Readers first meet Isumbras riding in the woods with hunting hawk and hound, yet while he possesses hunting skills according to this description, on his pilgrimage he does not hunt at all. Isumbras only learns how to make a fire once he works for the blacksmiths, so preparing food, even if he could hunt, is likely outside his purview. However, Beves, an early fourteenth-century romance hero, uses his natural prowess to hunt under similar circumstances. Beves and Josian are lost and starving in a cave, and Josian suggests that Beves hunt:

I haue herde of sauagenes,

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<sup>70</sup> Staley, 'Island garden', 79.

<sup>71</sup> Dean (ed.), 'The Song of the Husbandman', ll. 33-6.

Whenne þonge men were in wyldernes,  
 Pat þey toke hert and hinde  
 And other bestes, þat þey myȝt fynde;  
 Pey slown hem and soden hem in her hide;  
*þus doon men, þat in wood abyde.*<sup>72</sup>

Isumbras' lack of hunting knowledge here is surprising and may well connect with fourteenth-century political debates surrounding hunting and begging. Delia Hooke states that 'Hunting in the forest was reserved for the king or those of his nobles to whom such rights had been granted. It was assuredly an aristocratic privilege'.<sup>73</sup> Although of noble status, as a beggar Isumbras cannot hunt legally. Stephen Justice tells us that, 'For the lord, prohibition on poaching was maintenance of his prerogatives; for the peasants, it was a restriction of their livelihood'.<sup>74</sup> The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 included in its complaints a desire for woods and waterways to be open for public fishing and hunting.<sup>75</sup> Henry Knighton notes how Wat Tyler had demanded that, 'all warrens as well as in fisheries as in parks and woods should be common to all; so that throughout the realm...poor as well as rich might take venison and hunt the hare in the fields'.<sup>76</sup> Fishing and hunting rights were coveted but extremely difficult to attain, and most peasants did not have them. Beggars like Isumbras and his family would have had no right to hunt or fish from the woods under any circumstances, significantly reducing their chances of survival. In his noble life, Isumbras would have defended his legal

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<sup>72</sup> E. Kölbing (ed.), *The romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, EETS E. S. 46, 48, & 65 (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1885) ll. 2363-8; Italics mine.

<sup>73</sup> D. Hooke, 'Royal forests: hunting and other forest use in medieval England', in E. Ritter & D. Dauksta (eds.), *New Perspectives on People and Forests*, World Forests 9 (London: Springer Science and Business Media, 2011) 41-59:45.

<sup>74</sup> Justice, *Writing and rebellion*, 152-3.

<sup>75</sup> Justice, *Writing and rebellion*, 151-2.

<sup>76</sup> E. B. Fryde, *Peasants and landlords in later medieval England, c. 1380-c. 1525* (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1996) 6, full quote 50; for a larger excerpt of this entry, see R. B. Dobson (ed.), *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London: Macmillan, St. Martin's Press, 1970) 181-7, esp. 186.



right to hunt, even though this put tangible strains on his retainers' ability to feed themselves and their families. These scenes suggest that Isumbras, and fourteenth-century English society more generally, did not protect the poor and left landless beggars especially vulnerable.

The experience of starvation is only the first part of Isumbras' punishment; after Isumbras and his family starve for seven days, God takes each of Isumbras' family members one by one. First, God causes the apparent deaths of Isumbras' two eldest sons. 'They come by a water kene, / Ther over they wolde fayn have bene' (161-2). Isumbras can only cross one son at a time leaving each son in turn vulnerable and alone on the other side of the river. The first son is taken by a lion, the second by a leopard. Both are, from Isumbras' perspective, killed and eaten. This scene may well reflect the horror of the Agrarian Crisis where, as we have seen, there were reports of 'people stealing children to eat them'.<sup>77</sup> Isumbras is the cause of starvation and loss, and here he is seemingly subjected to the worst horrors of that crisis, as punishment for his culpability in his subjects' suffering. Isumbras is unable to intervene to mitigate the effects of God's punishment, standing as further evidence that Isumbras' strength, like his generosity, is inadequate.

As a consequence of the loss of their children, Lord and Lady Isumbras experience an extremity of sorrow. Lady Isumbras nearly commits suicide and Isumbras must stay her hand (181-6). While Isumbras does appear unaffected by his sons' deaths, stating 'Be styлле / And thanke we God of his wille', his actions and emotional responses belie his apparently stoic response. Isumbras is seen using deliberate care crossing the river his wife and remaining child, protecting them from the fate his eldest sons were subjected to (190-2). From here on, sorrow colours Isumbras' and his wife's actions:

No wondyr though here hertes wer sore;

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<sup>77</sup> Kershaw, 'Great Famine', 9-10.

Bothe her chyldren loste they thore,

Here eldere chyldren twoo. (187-9)

This sorrow continues ‘thorwgh forest they wente dayes three [...] they grette and were ful wo’ (193-5). Isumbras has demonstrated sorrow only in regards his and his family’s loss of wealth, being unmoved by the deaths of his people. Now Isumbras proves that he feels love toward his children, and finally experiences the emotional devastation associated with such losses. Isumbras’ paternal interest in his children, sketched time and again by the poet, is a unique demonstration of feeling in conflict with his absence of response towards his servants’ deaths. Isumbras is shown feeling the virtue of love (one virtue the *Simonie* tells us that pride destroys) only after his family suffers. Although Isumbras does not care for his subjects as children, when his own children appear to die he feels the cost of his own sins. These losses emphasise the subject-as-child philosophy, and suggest God punishes Isumbras because he was not sympathetic to the suffering of his subjects. God continues to punish Isumbras with the loss of his family because it can teach him a valuable spiritual lesson in a way that other losses have not. Isumbras could not fathom his impact upon his peasants, causing them and their wives and children to starve, and he could not feel for the men who died in his house. But, Isumbras does express sorrow for his sons after he believes they are dead.

Isumbras’ wife is the next member of his family to be taken, and this episode is used to highlight more than Isumbras’ neglect of his servants and peasants. Isumbras’ party arrives on the Greek Sea where they see Saracens and beg for food (214-9). Until now, Isumbras has not been shown seeking charity from anyone, and he expressly chooses not to seek charity from his Christian neighbours—those spiritually obligated, and therefore most likely, to give charity. It is strange, considering he has travelled through two additional Christian kingdoms, that while he has not asked any Christians for charity, he does seek sustenance from an invading Saracen army. The error of this decision is made clear when the Saracens kidnap

Lady Isumbras. Although Isumbras refuses to give up his wife, his supposed strength of youth, and 'heroic' body cannot prevent it; he is overpowered and beaten without showing any resistance.

The gold upon hys mantal they told  
And to himselff they gan it folde  
And took hys wyff hym froo.  
And sithen on the land they hym casten  
And beten hym tyl hys sydys brasten  
And maden hys flesch al bloo. (286-91)

Most heroes confronted by Saracens defeat them, even unarmed heroes confronted by multiple assailants.<sup>78</sup> Later in this romance, Isumbras and his wife alone defeat 10,000 Saracens (724-31), and their three sons 20,000 Saracens (736-41). Isumbras argued that suffering in youth would be easier because of the strength in his young body, and the irony of that argument is revealed when that body cannot stop his wife's kidnapping. The poem introduces Isumbras by his generosity and his well-made body. Yet this generosity does not extend to his subjects, and although Isumbras may be blessed with a body capable of strength, it has never achieved it. It is only Lady Isumbras' own strength of mind that prevents her ravishment and damage during her captivity.

This sequence of events shows Lady Isumbras' power in contrast to her husband's weakness, and it also shows that her punishment is limited in comparison to his, indicating

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<sup>78</sup> King Horn defeats one hundred Saracens single-handedly, see R. B. Herzman, G. Drake, & E. Salisbury (eds.), 'King Horn', in *Four romances of England: 'King Horn', 'Havelok the Dane', 'Bevis of Hampton', 'Athelston'*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999) 11-70, ll. 619-24; In *Of Arthour and of Merlin* small bands of soldiers defeat thousands of Saracens, see O. D. Macrae-Gibson (ed.), *Of Arthour and Of Merlin*, I, EETS O. S. 268 (London: Oxford University Press, 1973) ll. 6140-2 & 7071.

that her sins are not the ones being punished. Firstly, the Saracen Sultan chooses her, not simply for her beauty, but for the strength of her command:

Sche schall be qwene of my lond,  
Alle men bowe under her hond  
And non wythstonde her stevene. (277-9)

In the Caius manuscript, her sexual purity is also undamaged, despite her *raptus*, because there is a charter drafted that prevents adultery and preserves her sexuality.

The sowdon sith hys owne hand  
Corownyd here qwene of his land  
To sende her over the see.  
A chartre in the maner he bonde  
Yiff sone ever come to londe  
His qwene thenne scholde sche bee. (292-7)

Powell has suggested that Lady Isumbras' chastity is compromised when she is made queen,<sup>79</sup> and this may be true in other versions of the narrative, as the charter protecting Lady Isumbras' chastity is absent from the Heege and Cotton, and limited in the Thornton and Ashmole, manuscripts.<sup>80</sup> The charter in the Gray's Inn fragment agrees more with Caius than with the other witnesses:

Pe sowdan þer wiþ his honde  
Crounede hur quene ... al..s [*sic*] lond  
& sente hure ouer þe see  
Wyþ a chartre he hure bond

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<sup>79</sup> Powell, 'Religious peace', 128-30.

<sup>80</sup> Thornton: Brewer & Owen (intro.), *Thornton manuscript*, f. 111v; Heege: Hardman (intro.), *Heege manuscript*, f. 51r; Cotton: Mills (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', ll. 301-6; White (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', 443; Ashmole: Shuffleton (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', ll. 334-6.

Pat whanne hue were come to lond

Quene hue shold be.<sup>81</sup>

In the Caius manuscript, the charter explicitly protects Lady Isumbras, for although she is crowned 'qwene of his lond', she is not 'his qwene' until the Sultan returns home. As the Sultan is killed before returning to Hethenesse, we can believe that Lady Isumbras' chastity is preserved.

Isumbras is made even more sorrowful now that his wife is taken from him. As his wife sails away, Isumbras is seen crying (337-9). His paternal instincts deepen and he is shown keeping his only surviving son close to him.

He took his sone be the hand

And wente up upon the land

By holtes that were hore

They sette hem doun undyr a tree,

Neyther off hem myghte other see

So hadde they wept so sore. (340-5)

Isumbras realises the value of their lives too late, and these emotionally tender scenes are not enough to stay the will of God. Isumbras abandoned his spiritual children, and so his blood relatives are taken one by one. On the following day, God's messenger eagle takes all his gold and food, leaving Isumbras no means of rescuing his wife. This strongly suggests that the Saracens' capture of Lady Isumbras reflects God's plan for Isumbras' punishment.

Isumbras chases after the eagle attempting to rescue the gold and food, and, while he is gone, a unicorn takes his final son. Ironically, Isumbras leaves his youngest son alone because he is again seen to be chasing after gold rather than protecting his children; his punishment began in the first place because he loved gold and fee more than he loved his people. As the *Song of*

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<sup>81</sup> Purdie (ed.), 'Gray's Inn', ll. 73-8.

*the Husbandman* states: ‘Whose hath eny god, hopeth he nouht to holde, / Bote ever the levest we leoseth alast’.<sup>82</sup> Isumbras proves that his wife and children are the only subjects that he loves, and ultimately by losing that family he begins to feel the truth of his sin.

Isumbras, for loving money more than God and his fellow man, is punished finally with solitude. Thompson suggests that ‘we might expect the meaning of the story to reside primarily in Isumbras’s separation from and subsequent reunion with his family’.<sup>83</sup> She concludes, however, that too much time in the narrative passes and the audience will forget Isumbras’ family even exists.<sup>84</sup> I would argue that Thompson’s original arguments on the subject are far more persuasive than she allows for. The familial separation shows how Isumbras’ punishments continue beyond his penitential choice to go on a pilgrimage. Although Isumbras is punished for his accrued sins at the beginning of the romance, his sinful and negligent behaviour continues long after that punishment begins. God punishes Isumbras for his sins by showing him, at the cost of his own body and family, what those sins have in turn cost his subjects. Isumbras, in a state of denial, cannot recognise or admit that his sins are the sole cause of this suffering. In order to teach Isumbras the responsibility associated with a leadership position, God causes the apparent deaths of Isumbras’ family in order for him to understand emotionally the consequences of his ignorance and sin. His pilgrimage is shown to be a selfish and empty gesture because he leaves his spiritual family (his servants and peasants) to die.

Isumbras begins his pilgrimage with every intention of earning God’s forgiveness. The protagonist chooses an orthodox penitential practice in order to atone for the sins he knows he has committed. Yet, Isumbras’ pilgrimage causes further suffering for himself because he abandoned his remaining subjects to die alongside the servants at the manor. The

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<sup>82</sup> Dean (ed.), ‘*The Song of the Husbandman*’, ll. 11-2.

<sup>83</sup> Thompson, ‘Jaussian expectation’, 394.

<sup>84</sup> Thompson, ‘Jaussian expectation’, 394.

pilgrimage, intended to be a penitential act, causes greater suffering to Isumbras because the pilgrimage itself is a problem. *Isumbras* places tension on the value of pilgrimage in similar terms as *Piers Plowman*. In Passus V of Langland's B-text, the men seeking Truth, a metaphor for God, ask an experienced pilgrim if he has ever met 'Truth' along the way. The pilgrim replies:

Nay, so me God helpe! [...]

I seigh nevere palmere with pyk ne with scrippe

Asken after hym er now in this place.<sup>85</sup>

For Langland, men neither discover God nor forgiveness through pilgrimages and for *Isumbras* this is also true. After God's messenger arrives, Isumbras continues to make mistakes; the suffering of his poor and the deaths of his servants do not move him, he will not accept responsibility for his own sins, and he leaves his ploughmen to starve in the field. Isumbras' pilgrimage is not the act of a good man, and God uses his supposedly penitential action as a means of punishing Isumbras further: on his pilgrimage Isumbras loses his two eldest sons; he only seeks charity from invading Saracen forces and loses his wife as a consequence, and God confirms this punishment by taking Isumbras' means of rescuing her himself. Isumbras abandons his youngest son when he chases after God's messenger in an attempt to recover gold, again pursuing wealth in lieu of protecting his people, and so his youngest child is taken as well. Despite the penitential intention of his pilgrimage, Isumbras has not learned from it how to correct his behaviour and so his suffering continues.

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<sup>85</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, V, ll. 534-6.

## Redemption through labour and poverty

It is solitude that finally motivates Isumbras to renew his relationship with God and submit to his divine superior in the feudal system, recognising that he cannot solve the problem of his sin without God. Once his entire family has been taken, Isumbras reaches the end of his emotional tether; the four most important people to him are gone or apparently dead: 'Offte was hym wele and woo, / But never so sory as he was thoo' (364-5). Isumbras has done everything wrong; every choice he has made has cost him members of his family, and he has been wholly unable to prevent any of it. Now, he stops his pilgrimage, but he does not choose a new penitential pathway himself. Instead, he asks God what to do in the form of prayer.

He sayde: 'Lord, ful woo is me,  
I have lost wyff and my children three.  
Now am I left alone.  
Jesu that weredest in hevene coroun  
Wysse me the way to sum toun,  
Al amis am I gone.  
Lady of hevene, bryght and schene,  
Flour of wymmen, of hevene qwene,  
To the I make my mone.' (367-75)

Isumbras recognises, finally, that his situation is beyond his power to fix and asks for divine help, fully relinquishing his pride in regards God and returning to worship. However, God does not forgive Isumbras' sin here, demonstrating that Isumbras' sin of pride encompasses more than his relationship with God alone. Yet, although Isumbras is not forgiven, God does reward his prayer by revealing blacksmiths working nearby.

Critical appraisal of the labour Isumbras performs generally concludes that working for blacksmiths is a continuation of the punishments meted out by God. Thompson believes



that the series of events centring on the blacksmiths make little to no thematic sense to the romance,<sup>86</sup> arguing that the scenes either function to degrade Isumbras by forcing him to work, or else that by building armour Isumbras is finally listening to his wife by taking revenge.<sup>87</sup> Powell agrees with Thompson's first assessment—that Isumbras must 'suffer the twin *indignities* of manual labor [...] and poverty'.<sup>88</sup> However, the blacksmiths are revealed after Isumbras prays for the first time and are therefore more likely to be representative of a reward. Radulescu agrees, stating 'Isumbras learns the value of manual work as well as the importance of each profession / class in society—an indispensable lesson for any good ruler'.<sup>89</sup> The fourteenth-century spiritual valuation of work supports the probability that Isumbras' return to worship is rewarded with a difficult, but spiritually valuable, means of redemption. The positive valuation of labour was becoming increasingly common in the fourteenth century, as Christopher Dyer explains: 'Intellectuals revised their assessment of work, which was increasingly regarded as a worthwhile activity, rather than a punishment for the sins of mankind'.<sup>90</sup> I do not believe that the poet saw work as degrading either; the blacksmiths are not revealed to Isumbras as punishment for error but immediately follow on from renewing his relationship with God. Unlike all of Isumbras' earlier actions, he consults God directly on where to go and what to do next, and God provides the means for Isumbras to use and strengthen his noble body so that he can fulfil his role as a knight.

Isumbras initially begs the blacksmiths for a free meal, but they practise charity differently from nobles. They do not give food for free but they offer Isumbras work so he can earn food for himself: 'They bad hym swynke for "so doo wee, / We have non othir

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<sup>86</sup> Thompson, 'Jaussian expectation', 393.

<sup>87</sup> Thompson, 'Jaussian expectation', 393.

<sup>88</sup> Powell, 'Religious peace', 122; Italics mine.

<sup>89</sup> Radulescu, 'Pious Middle English', 341.

<sup>90</sup> C. Dyer, 'Work ethics in the fourteenth century', in J. Bothwell, P. J. P. Goldberg, & W. M. Ormrod (eds.), *The problem of labour in fourteenth-century England* (York: York Medieval Press, 2000) 21-41:24.

plowe” (380-1). Isumbras abandoned his own ploughmen, and here a different type of labourer offers to teach Isumbras how to become a ploughman of a sort. It is notable that the poet uses ‘plough’ here as a reference to work in general, and specifically links it with sustenance. In this, *Isumbras* anticipates the B-text of *Piers Plowman* and its ideas about labour found in Passus 6.

Kynde Wit wolde that ech a wight wroghte,  
Or in dichynge or in delvyng or travaillng in preieres—  
Contemplatif lif or actif lif, Crist wolde men wroghte.  
The Sauter seith in the psalme of *Beati omnes*,  
The freke that fedeth hymself with his feithful labour,  
He is blessed by the book in body and in soule.<sup>91</sup>

Langland’s use of the word ‘wrought’, we will see, echoes the recurrent use of the term within *Isumbras*, where Isumbras is ‘wrought’ by his labour, and through that work recreates his knighthood anew. Langland states that Kind Wit and Christ prefer that each man work, that labour sustains both body and soul, and that those who feed themselves through labour are blessed. James Simpson describes *Piers Plowman* in a way that reflects both Langland’s poem and *Isumbras*: ‘The ploughing, of course, itself constitutes the act of penance, and as such replaces pilgrimage; but Langland capitalizes on this moment of transformation to re-imagine society being constructed as a penitential act’.<sup>92</sup> Staley likewise states ‘In [the A version of *Piers Plowman*] rather than the pike of the staff of the pilgrim, he will wield the plow’.<sup>93</sup> Isumbras has performed an ineffectual pilgrimage, which not only has no effect upon

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<sup>91</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, VI, ll. 246-51.

<sup>92</sup> J. Simpson, “‘After Craftes Conseil clotheth yow and fede’”: Langland and London city politics’, in N. Rogers (ed.), *England in the fourteenth century: proceedings of the 1991 Harlaxton Symposium*, Harlaxton Medieval Studies III (Stanford: Paul Watkins, 1993) 109-27:112.

<sup>93</sup> Staley, ‘Island garden’, 78.

his state of sin but causes the kidnapping and deaths of his wife and children. Here, 'ploughing' becomes Isumbras' means of working towards salvation, a space where he can learn the hardness of labour, and make his body strong for the first time in his life. In so doing, *Isumbras* prescribes peasant labour as a type of penance available to noble and knightly sinners.

The blacksmiths teach Isumbras what true charity is from a much lower social position than that from which Isumbras, as a noble, began. Where Isumbras abandoned his ploughmen in hard times, even in a time of war, the blacksmiths provide long-term charity, ensuring Isumbras does not suffer. Isumbras, now as a poor beggar without skills, is more impoverished than the blacksmiths, as they have a trade and the ability to earn money through the skills associated with their trade. They do not give food for free, but they still give charity openly by teaching Isumbras skills and offering him work to earn his bread: 'Faste he bar and drowgh. / They goven hym mete and drynk anon' (384-5). Isumbras begins simply and earns a simple meal by working a day's labour. It is possible that men like blacksmiths cannot give charity in any other way, as Dyer explains: 'Beggars who were capable of work were compelled to accept employment, and it was forbidden to give alms to such idle potential workers'.<sup>94</sup> Regardless, the charity given by blacksmiths to Isumbras has longer-term benefits than simple alms-giving, as once skilled, Isumbras does not need to beg.

Later in the romance, Isumbras shows that he has indeed learned the style of charity demonstrated by the blacksmiths by giving physical rather than financial assistance to others. In his wife's kingdom in Hethenesse, Isumbras is willing to help anyone from any station should they ask him:

He was a far man and hygh,

Alle lovede hym that hym sygh,

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<sup>94</sup> Dyer, 'Work ethics', 27.

*Ful redy he was on to calle.* (595-7; Italics mine)

This visible charity and the respect it garners Isumbras in his wife's Saracen subjects is not present in any subsequent manuscript versions of the narrative.<sup>95</sup> Yet, in the Caius version, Isumbras demonstrates that his charity applies to anyone, regardless of faith or station, and he is not above working alongside others to provide it. Although it takes years to be visible, the charity Isumbras learns from the blacksmiths increases his virtues later in the narrative.

The blacksmiths allow Isumbras to work beside them, and as a result of this labour Isumbras is physically changed. The term 'wrought', meaning made or forged, is used with reference to Isumbras' own self-fashioning.<sup>96</sup> The first skill that Isumbras is taught involves carrying stones from the quarry: 'And taughten hym to bere ston; / Thenne hadde he schame inough' (386-7). Powell and Thompson have suggested that it is work alone that brings shame, yet carrying water does not have this effect (383-4).<sup>97</sup> It is through the phrase in which 'wrought' is used that the physical value of labour is realised:

Thus they taughte hym to bere ston  
Tyl the twelve monethis becomen and gon;  
They wroughten hym ful wowgh. (388-90)

'Wrought' is used here to describe Isumbras himself being forged, or made, through carrying stone. The woe and shame Isumbras experiences most likely demonstrates Isumbras' physical weakness and that his initial assessment of his own youthful strength was incorrect. Isumbras, after all, has lost his family to wild animals and has been defeated by Saracens without

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<sup>95</sup> Thornton: Brewer & Owen (intro.), *Thornton manuscript*, 113v; Heege: Hardman (intro.), *Heege manuscript*, 54v; Cotton: Mills (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', l. 559; White (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', 446; Ashmole: Shuffleton (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', l. 559.

<sup>96</sup> M.E.D., Werken (wrought): 14(b), to perform physical operations on (metal) so as to change its composition, appearance, or useful properties, smelt, refine, or forge; also, hammer or beat. 15. To transform (one substance into another), turn; produce (one thing from another).

<sup>97</sup> Powell, 'Religious peace', 122; Thompson, 'Jaussian expectation', 393.

putting up any physical resistance. Blacksmithing is an extremely demanding job and Isumbras is not invited to perform that role at first. Instead, he must, through his shame and woe, be forged into a strong body so that he can work at a forge and eventually defeat an invading Saracen army where before he could not. Isumbras is 'wrought' through his work, and this creation/forging metaphor continues into his next task, his elevation to working the forges: 'Thenne took he mannys hyre / and wroughte more than twoo' (391-3). 'Wrought' is used again, this time to describe Isumbras rebuilding armour, and, therefore, his knighthood by hand. His body is made in the quarry and his knighthood at the forge.

*Isumbras'* promotion of work ethics within its noble protagonist anticipates the qualities of Langland's imagined perfect leader. *Piers Plowman* warns that Mede has corrupted current leaders and that the world will finally be unified under Christianity once the law itself is a labourer.

Mede of mysdoers maketh manye lordes,  
And over lordes lawes lordeth the reaumes.  
Ac kynde love shal come yit and Conscience togideres  
And make of lawe a laborer; swich love shal arise  
And swich pees among the peple and a parfit truthe.<sup>98</sup>

*Isumbras* also imagines a leader who is changed for the better by experiencing labour. In so doing, the romance puts labour at the heart of ethical leadership and it also imagines that unethical leaders can be reformed through honest labour.

Despite his experience as a labourer, however, Isumbras still has not experienced contrition for his own actions, and it is this internal failure that negates both his labour and crusade action as effective penance. After seven years at the forge, the battle between the Christian kings and the invading Saracen Sultan comes to a head. Isumbras joins the battle

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<sup>98</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, III, ll. 297-301.

with his newly strengthened body, and wearing his newly crafted armour. He has been made strong so that he can assist in the protection of Christendom, but this act does not bring forgiveness to him either. Like his pilgrimage, in the Caius manuscript, the crusade seems spiritually ineffectual because Isumbras is still not aware of his responsibility for his own sins. Isumbras has not yet realised, or acknowledged, that God took his wife and children from him in payment for those sins. As Isumbras is preparing to fight the Saracen army he prays to God and blames the Saracens for his sorrow:

And sette hym doun upon his knee.

To Jhesu he besoughte

To sende hym grace in the feelde,

The hethen houndes that he myghte yeld

*The woo they hadde hym wroughte.* (418-23; Italics mine)

Although this prayer is nearly identical across all manuscripts, the prayer can most clearly be identified as a spiritual fault in the Caius manuscript, where three key moments of denial and deflection (to his peasants, to his wife, and here in prayer) precede the moment of true contrition, unifying Isumbras' spiritual journey as it is described here.<sup>99</sup> Neither the Heege nor Ashmole manuscripts possess Isumbras' feigned ignorance in response to his peasants or the contrition element of God's forgiveness at the end of the narrative, and the Heege manuscript does not show Isumbras dissembling to his wife.<sup>100</sup> While the Thornton and Cotton manuscripts share with Caius the three moments where Isumbras deflects his guilt, the manuscripts do not show contrition ending Isumbras' denial or bringing God's forgiveness,

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<sup>99</sup> Thornton: Brewer & Owen (intro.), *Thornton manuscript*, f. 114r; Heege: Hardman (intro.), *Heege manuscript*, f. 52r; Cotton: Mills (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', ll. 430-2; White (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', 444; Ashmole: Shuffleton (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', ll. 442-4.

<sup>100</sup> Heege: Hardman (intro.), *Heege manuscript*, ff.48v-49r; Ashmole: Shuffleton (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', ll.88-90.

as will be discussed further below.<sup>101</sup> In this battle, Isumbras is still refusing to acknowledge his own responsibility for his sin and his lack of contrition continues. Thompson attributes the language of the prayer to the incoherence of the poem, stating, ‘When, after seven years, the Sultan conveniently turns up, Isumbras does indeed kill him, although the vagueness of the poet’s reference to Isumbras’s previous misfortune still makes it difficult to see the killing as an act of vengeance’.<sup>102</sup> That Isumbras frames this battle as an act of vengeance is not, I think, correct, but neither is it correct to suggest that the killing of the Sultan lacks narrative coherence. Instead it is a sign of Isumbras’ continued inability to accept responsibility for his own sin and its consequences. The Saracens may have taken Lady Isumbras, but it is God that undermines Isumbras’ ability to rescue her and effects the loss of Isumbras’ children. It is actually Isumbras’ sins that forge his suffering and the Saracens, like the lion, leopard, and unicorn, are only the instrument of that punishment. Isumbras’ vengeance is problematic, but it does not undermine the narrative coherence of the *Caius Isumbras*. Although Christendom is saved by Isumbras’ actions, his own soul is not. Isumbras appears to be aware of this when he refuses to be rewarded for this crusade, seeking further penitential action to be reformed in God’s eyes, even if society has already forgiven him.

The Christian king, having witnessed Isumbras’ victory, desires to knight Isumbras and return wealth and noble status to him.

The kyng a gret oth he sware

As sone as he hool ware

That he wolde dubbe hym knyght. (466-8)

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<sup>101</sup> The Naples fragment shows the first two moments of deflection, however the fragment does not allow for a full analysis of the story arc as described here, see Kölbing (ed.), ‘Das Neapler’, ll. 98-118.

<sup>102</sup> Thompson, ‘Jaussian expectation’, 393.

Yet, when worldly wealth and reputation are offered to him, Isumbras chooses to abandon even his elevated labourer status in lieu of becoming a poor beggar again.

He bethoughte hym fol yore  
That he wolde dwelle ther no more  
Thenne that he were sounde.  
He took hys leve withouten les  
And thankyd fayre the pryores  
And the nunnes hende.  
He purveyyd hym bothe scryp and pyke  
And made hym a palmer lyke  
Redy for to wende. (481-9)

Isumbras chooses to divest himself entirely of worldly wealth and continue on his pilgrimage. Thompson finds tension in this scene but again accounts for it as a failure of the poet to produce good work.<sup>103</sup> Powell also expresses some confusion that Isumbras ‘is made’ by God to wander poor and alone even after his initial defeat of the Saracens.<sup>104</sup> Fowler, too, contradicts herself, first arguing that Isumbras reconstitutes his identity as a knight by building it himself, and yet, for all his work and military success, ‘that reacession to knighthood is not sufficiently merited’.<sup>105</sup> In forsaking his newfound social status, Isumbras departs from the behaviour of his romance counterparts: Beves, when separated from his wife, chooses elevated status and gets engaged to a new woman (while his wife and best friend suffer) and lives like a king;<sup>106</sup> Horn, likewise, accepts elevated status and betrothal to the Irish princess in the event that he should not hear from Rymenild in seven years.<sup>107</sup> In

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<sup>103</sup> Thompson, ‘Jaussian expectation’, 393.

<sup>104</sup> Powell, ‘Religious peace’, 133.

<sup>105</sup> Fowler, ‘Romance hypothetical’, 103.

<sup>106</sup> Kölbing (ed.), *Beves*, ll. 3836-7.

<sup>107</sup> Drake, Herzman, & Salisbury (eds.), ‘*King Horn*’, ll. 903-34.



both cases, the betrothals are rewards for protecting these Christian kingdoms against Saracen invasion. *Isumbras* rejects this tradition and its protagonist instead refuses worldly reward for his crusading. Isumbras rejects all worldly splendour, including the relative comfort of blacksmithing, to go on an unarmed pilgrimage as a poor palmer instead. Although militarily successful, the battle with the Saracens garners no forgiveness and has no impact on the moderation of Isumbras' sin, problematising the medieval perception of crusade as a penitential act.

For most critics of *Isumbras*, the crusade action is redemptive and serves to remove Isumbras' sin.<sup>108</sup> 'Isumbras's journey as a whole is remarkably consistent,' Manion writes, 'when read as the narrative of a crusader rather than that of a troubled knight who is sometimes a penitent pilgrim and sometimes a warrior'.<sup>109</sup> Fowler agrees, stating: 'The close association between penance and crusade allows us to see the sufferings, pilgrimage, and military acts of *Isumbras* as one continuous penitential action'.<sup>110</sup> Fowler and Manion are both discussing the Cotton *Isumbras*, where, although Isumbras still rejects worldly wealth, the Saracen characters are far more vilified, giving a greater indication of crusade's positive valuation. By contrast, the action of the poem in the Caius manuscript is much more ambivalent about the merits of crusade. The Caius manuscript amplifies the ethical behaviours of the Saracens and questions the spiritual efficacy of this and the later crusade scene. God does not forgive Isumbras, and he does not forgive himself, through this crusade. Like his pilgrimage, Isumbras' crusade is an empty gesture unaccompanied by contrition or redemption. Instead, it increases Isumbras' suffering again. If crusade was redemptive, as popular understanding in the early fourteenth century assumed, then Isumbras' crusade should remove his blot of sin entirely, returning him to a state of spiritual innocence. James

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<sup>108</sup> Norako, 'Fantasy of crusade', 177-8; Manion, 'Holy Land', 79-90.

<sup>109</sup> Manion, 'Holy Land', 85.

<sup>110</sup> Fowler, 'Romance hypothetical', 115.

Brundage states that ‘Without any quibbling over *pena et culpa* the common understanding was that the crusade indulgence wiped away the blot of sin altogether and that the crusader was automatically restored to a state of spiritual innocence’.<sup>111</sup> Yet in *Isumbras* crusade does not remove sin on its own. *Isumbras* does not receive an angelic visitor bringing forgiveness from God because he is a crusader. Although crusading does not appear to add to *Isumbras*’ sin, neither does it have the spiritual power to alleviate its consequences.

The final crusade of the romance is also of limited efficacy and the poem highlights possible problems with the crusading in spiritual and political contexts. Norako argues that: ‘Throughout the whole of the romance, the Saracens and Christians are presented as diametrical opposites incapable of intercultural dialogue or coexistence’, and that, by the vilification of the Saracen, crusade is promoted.<sup>112</sup> However, in all versions of the narrative, Lady *Isumbras* proves that peaceful interaction is possible. Over the fifteen years of *Isumbras*’ exile, she changes a Saracen nation into an idyllic system of Christian charitable living. Lady *Isumbras* gives money to all poor men who come to her door (535-40) and of those, the fifty most needy are brought into her castle for a meal (550-2). The poorest get a seat of honour, and Lady *Isumbras* personally engages with those who express great sorrow, like *Isumbras* (560-80). As Radulescu states, ‘Here the queen seems to represent the embodiment of chivalric prowess as well as Christian virtue (manifest in her charity) that her husband failed to display at the beginning of the romance’.<sup>113</sup> It is from this system of exemplary charity that *Isumbras* finally accepts knighthood and lordship and not from his crusade or pilgrimage.

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<sup>111</sup> J. A. Brundage, *Medieval canon law and the crusader* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969) 151.

<sup>112</sup> Norako, ‘Fantasy of crusade’, 185.

<sup>113</sup> Radulescu, ‘Pious Middle English’, 79.

In the Caius manuscript, Lady Isumbras' Saracen subjects are given several positive characteristics. They can recognise worthiness in Isumbras without their queen's direct insistence, shown when her steward recognises that Isumbras' suffering is the greatest (560-1). The Saracens display a natural pity for Isumbras' sorrow, for after Isumbras discovers his gold and falls into depression, they bring this to Lady Isumbras' attention so she can help him (637-9). In all other manuscript witnesses this pity is replaced by a deep envy of Isumbras and the Saracen report is based upon their negative feelings, and in the Cotton manuscript the Saracens openly accuse Isumbras of treason.<sup>114</sup> Norako's argument for the crusading fervour of this romance rests upon the idea that the Saracens are wholly vilified, stating 'Isumbras's entire journey and his triumphal reunion with his family actualize a domestication of massacre reliant upon the destroyed other being unequivocally evil rather than complex, and incapable of achieving salvation'.<sup>115</sup> The other witnesses, especially the Cotton manuscript, can better justify this argument than the Caius manuscript, on which Norako's study is in fact based. In the Caius manuscript, the Saracens are presented with positive characteristics, capable of charity and kindness, and are not shown to be 'unequivocally evil'. *Isumbras* promotes the argument that Saracens, under ethical female leadership, can themselves adopt certain ethical Christian traits.

Once Isumbras is crowned, however, his leadership style serves to undermine the peace that his wife created. Where the Saracens follow Lady Isumbras' commands, they refuse to heed any of Isumbras' own. The romance leaves open the question of why Lady Isumbras is more successful in this than her husband. I would argue that it is Isumbras' misuse of the legal space of parliament that reveals a moral quandary which may account for

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<sup>114</sup> Thornton: Brewer & Owen (intro.), *Thornton manuscript*, f. 113v; Heege: Hardman (intro.), *Heege manuscript*, 54v-54r; Cotton: Mills (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', ll. 559 & 640-2; White (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', 446-7; Ashmole: Shuffleton (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', ll. 620-2 & 628.

<sup>115</sup> Norako, 'Fantasy of crusade', 188-9.

his failure. Isumbras calls a parliament, a space in which kings and their counsellors could theoretically debate changes to law and policy, but which Isumbras uses to command his people to convert to Christianity, without acknowledging the opinions of his counsellors within that legal space. The Saracens refuse to convert and immediately desire to return Isumbras to the state of poverty in which they met him (694-6). Where once they believed in, and supported, Isumbras' marriage to their queen, Isumbras' tyrannical ultimatum, making his word into law, reveals a political rather than a religious motivation for the rebellion. Although he uses the space of parliament, he does not acknowledge the power of his retainers within this legal space.

In English law, the king was expected to seek counsel from parliament for important decisions, although not all late medieval kings did so.<sup>116</sup> This legal principle stems from Magna Carta, which, as Judith Ferster says, 'articulates not only the idea of limitations on the monarchy but also the idea that the people as a whole serve as the source of those limitations'.<sup>117</sup> Parliament represented the community of the kingdom, and 'the approval of the kingdom was to be vested in [this] small group of advisors'.<sup>118</sup> The belief that the king served the law rather than being the source of law was expressed by the Middle English 'Elegy on the Death of Edward I' which sought to tell Edward II how to rule. David Matthews says of it, that 'The English poem in particular is strongly concerned with the law, and a *rex* who is beneath the *lex*'.<sup>119</sup> Both Edward II and Richard II were deposed, among other reasons, for disregarding parliamentary counsel and breaking Magna Carta,<sup>120</sup> and

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<sup>116</sup> J. Ferster, *Fictions of advice: the literature and politics of counsel in late medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996) 67-88.

<sup>117</sup> Ferster, *Fictions of advice*, 16.

<sup>118</sup> Ferster, *Fictions of advice*, 17.

<sup>119</sup> D. Matthews, *Writing to the king: nation, kingship, and literature in England, 1250-1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 94.

<sup>120</sup> J. Nuttall, *The creation of Lancastrian kingship: literature, language, and politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 2-3; N. Saul, 'The kingship of Richard II',

Edward III was reminded of his predecessor's mistakes and learned to seek parliamentary counsel on all major decisions.<sup>121</sup> The entire parliamentary episode in *Isumbras*, and with it the scene of Isumbras' political mistake, is not present in any other manuscript version of the romance.<sup>122</sup> This tension surrounding the contrasts between Sir and Lady Isumbras' leadership styles is never resolved, Isumbras and his wife nearly die, and only at the point of their potential martyrdom are their three sons returned: 'Ryght as they scholden have slayn be / Ther come rydyng knyghtes three' (730-1). In all other manuscript versions, their imminent death is not present, the word, 'slayn' reads as 'taken' in the Thornton, Heege, and Ashmole manuscripts, and in the Cotton manuscript their sons arrive before the battle even commences.<sup>123</sup> The Caius manuscript, unlike later fifteenth-century versions, forces this delay. The reader watches as Isumbras and his wife, armed as knights, are nearly overcome and killed. Just on the brink of that death, their sons return riding wild beasts and defeat the Saracens. It is their potential martyrdom that triggers the return of Isumbras' family rather than the action of crusade.

The Saracens and Christians in the Caius manuscript are not presented as diametric opposites; instead, the manuscript amplifies the complexity of those relationship possibilities. Lady Isumbras' peaceful kingdom shows that coexistence and intercultural dialogue were possible. Although Isumbras is ultimately rewarded for his military action, the tensions placed upon crusade and pilgrimage, and the contrast between Lord and Lady Isumbras' governing styles, illuminate potential problems with Isumbras' actions. The Saracens can

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in A. Goodman & J. Gillespie (eds.), *The art of kingship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) 37-57; Ferster, *Fictions of advice*, 70-2 & 79-85.

<sup>121</sup> Matthews, *Writing to the king*, 109-10; Ferster, *Fictions of advice*, 72-6.

<sup>122</sup> Thornton: Brewer & Owen (intro.), *Thornton manuscript*, f. 114r; Heege: Hardman (intro.), *Heege manuscript*, f. 55v; Cotton: Mills (ed.), '*Sir Isumbras*', ll. 721-3; White (ed.), '*Sir Isumbras*', 448; Ashmole: Shuffleton (ed.), '*Sir Isumbras*', ll. 769-71.

<sup>123</sup> Thornton: Brewer & Owen (intro.), *Thornton manuscript*, f. 114r; Heege: Hardman (intro.), *Heege manuscript*, f. 56r; Cotton: Mills (ed.), '*Sir Isumbras*', l. 751; White (ed.), '*Sir Isumbras*', 448; Ashmole: Shuffleton (ed.), '*Sir Isumbras*', ll. 769-71.

display natural empathy for Christian ethics in other contexts, and it is only when conversion is forced within parliament that rebellion and bloodshed occur. The actual value of crusade, and the violence associated with it, are left in doubt as they are not given clearly positive outcomes in either episode. In the second crusade episode, tyrannical behaviour destroys the peace, love, and charity with which Lady Isumbras imbued her kingdom. Only Lord and Lady Isumbras' willing deaths as martyrs bring God's intervention and the return of their sons.

The first crusade episode, following Isumbras' labour as a blacksmith, creates an even greater sense of ambiguity. Isumbras receives no forgiveness or reward from God for this action, so by rejecting wealth and honour and choosing to further his own suffering through *imitatio Christi*, Isumbras denies entirely the social value of crusading as penance, while at the same time embracing a spirituality admired by the *Simonie* and the later *Piers Plowman* tradition. Stephen Knight writes of the *Simonie* that: 'The evil clergy have also corrupted the knighthood into obeying the Church and going on Crusade, and as a result there is a general disorder throughout the land'.<sup>124</sup> Isumbras abandons the crusade as if it would cause him more strife, instead choosing to behave in *imitatio Christi* by begging in poverty in the Holy Land. This contrasts with the popular understanding of crusading—designed, as Nigel Saul states, to elevate 'the knightly estate, making it comparable in some way in Christian service with the priesthood'.<sup>125</sup> As a knight, Isumbras did not need to do penance like a poor churchman, which makes it more significant for our understanding of the Caius manuscript's attitude towards crusade that he still chooses to do so. Although crusade occurs, it does not hold the penitential weight in *Isumbras* that society often applied to it. Crusade becomes

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<sup>124</sup> S. Knight, 'The voice of labour in fourteenth-century English literature', in J. Bothwell, P. J. P. Goldberg, & W. M. Ormrod (eds.), *The problem of labour in the fourteenth century* (Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 2000) 101-22:108.

<sup>125</sup> N. Saul, *For honour and fame: chivalry in England, 1066-1500* (London: The Bodley Head, 2011) 220.

ambiguous, and orthodox beliefs about its spiritual value are undermined in lieu of extreme poverty.

*Isumbras* continues to draw attention to the inefficacy of orthodox crusade and pilgrimages, highlighting by contrast the significance of Isumbras' spiritual journey towards contrition. Although Isumbras appears to take up his pilgrim's mantle again, he avoids completing his journey to Jerusalem, lingering in Acre for years:

Seven yer was he palmer thore  
In hungyr and in thurst ful sore,  
In book as men rede. (499-501)

Fowler argues that Isumbras' crusader vow is 'the least removable' part of his social identity,<sup>126</sup> yet here, Isumbras stubbornly refuses to complete that vow. Isumbras moves towards Jerusalem, but does not enter the city; he stops just outside of Jerusalem, without visiting any of the sacred sites that orthodox penitential prescriptions required.<sup>127</sup> As Brundage states, 'The visit to the Holy Sepulchre was the crucial nexus of the crusade obligation, as contemporary accounts of crusade expeditions imply'.<sup>128</sup> These expectations rested on the rules governing unarmed pilgrims, who were expected to visit holy sites in order to fulfil their obligations. For those who did not fulfil their vows, Brundage tells us, there 'entailed legal penalties which although essentially religious were nonetheless real and effective'.<sup>129</sup> Isumbras, contrary to orthodox expectation, does not complete this process but this incomplete pilgrim's vow does not in any way hinder Isumbras' redemption.

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<sup>126</sup> Fowler, 'Romance hypothetical', 101.

<sup>127</sup> Brundage, *Medieval canon law*, 115-38, esp. 115-24.

<sup>128</sup> Brundage, *Medieval canon law*, 122.

<sup>129</sup> Brundage, *Medieval canon law*, 122.

In the Holy Land, Isumbras experiences long-term starvation and poverty, in imitation of Christ and of the peasants he left to starve in his fields. In Acre, Isumbras embodies poverty:

As he yede upon the day,  
Ryght so upon the nyght he lay  
In hys pore wede. (502-4)

Where the sight of his wife and children naked from poverty triggered Isumbras' initial sorrow, here, it is the norm of day-to-day life for Isumbras to be thus clad. Isumbras now physically resembles the peasants of his field and also resembles the starving beggars from the Agrarian Crisis. Fowler sees clothing as a central element of Isumbras' investiture,<sup>130</sup> and the poverty and lowly clothing here, she suggests, is the 'penalty that is required by the medieval sacrament of penance'.<sup>131</sup> More than being a penalty, however, the beggar's clothing redeems Isumbras, not because he suffers, but because he experiences first-hand the effects his actions had upon his subjects, learning to have spiritual self-awareness and recognising his own culpability for his sins and subsequent punishments. This education through poverty brings actual heroism to Isumbras. In this way, *Isumbras* aligns morally with *Piers Plowman's* beliefs about poor living found in Passus XI of the B-text.

Preisen poverte for best lif, if pacience it folwe,  
And bothe bettre and blesseder by many fold than richesse.  
Although it be sour to suffre, ther cometh swete after;  
As on a walnote—withoute is a bitter barke,  
And after that bitter bark, be the shelle aweye,  
Is a kernel of confort kynde to restore.

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<sup>130</sup> Fowler, 'Romance hypothetical', 100-6.

<sup>131</sup> Fowler, 'Romance hypothetical', 104.



So is after poverte or penaunce paciently ytake,  
Maketh a man to have mynde in God and a gret wille  
To wepe and to wel bidde, wherof wexeth mercy,  
Of which Crist is a kernell to conforte the soule.<sup>132</sup>

By living poorly, Isumbras attracts the mercy of God and brings himself closer to comprehending the cause of his own suffering.

Isumbras achieves an internal lesson through his poverty—his sorrow finally leads to contrition. It is the first moment in the narrative where Isumbras owns his own sin. Where Isumbras previously deflected blame for the tragedies resulting from his sin, here Isumbras acknowledges his individual culpability for that sin:

Of hys paynes thoughte hym nought ille,  
Goddes hestes to fulfyllle  
For *hys* ovyrdon dede. (505-7, Italics mine)

For a man to change his behavior, he must recognise what parts of his behavior are sinful. Until now, Isumbras has not been able to comprehend or accept that he has been the sole cause of his own, and countless other people's, suffering, but after more than fifteen years of labour and poverty, Isumbras is finally able to admit his fault. The contrition element in the Caius manuscript is not visible in any of the later witnesses, all emphasise instead that Isumbras performs God's works, or works of mercy, continually, and that through those works he earns forgiveness.<sup>133</sup> The Caius version repeats Isumbras' recognition of his sins as his own:

Besyde the burgh of Jerusalem

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<sup>132</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, XI, ll. 255-63.

<sup>133</sup> Thornton: Brewer & Owen (intro.), *Thornton manuscript*, f. 112v; Heege: Hardman (intro.), *Heege manuscript*, 53v; Cotton: Mills (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', ll. 514-6; White (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', 445; Ashmole: Shuffeton (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', ll. 538-40.

He sette hym by a welle-strem,

Sore wepand for *hys synne*. (511-3, Italics mine)

The repetitive mention of contrite feelings in the Caius manuscript is not present in any of the later witnesses, where Isumbras weeps from pain and not for his sins.<sup>134</sup> In the Caius manuscript, Isumbras experiences his sin as his own for the first time. Hopkins concludes that Isumbras never achieves an awareness of his own sin, stating that there ‘is no sense of the sinfulness of the heart [...] the tribulations inflicted on him do not appear to make him conscious of, and sorry for, his sin’, and all versions of Isumbras except for the Caius version agree with this conclusion.<sup>135</sup> However, in the Caius manuscript, it is only *because* Isumbras shows an awareness of his sin that he is forgiven, providing a unique piece of evidence that, for some medieval thinkers, the individual’s internal journey was more spiritually beneficial than outward signs of faith. Isumbras grows from a man who refuses to recognise his own fault into a man capable of accepting that he alone is to blame for what he, his family, and his subjects had suffered. In response to this, God sends an angelic messenger with food and forgiveness:

And as he sat, about mydynyght,

Ther come an aungyl fayr and bright

And broughte hym bred and wyn. (514-6)

God takes pity on Isumbras and, although he has not technically completed his pilgrimage, forgives him for his contrition (517-25). *Piers Plowman* in Passus XI, speaks of sinners and their experience in purgatory: ‘But if contricion wol come and crye by his lyve / Mercy for

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<sup>134</sup> Thornton: Brewer & Owen (intro.), *Thornton manuscript*, f. 112v; Heege: Hardman (intro.), *Heege manuscript*, 53v; Cotton: Mills (ed.), ‘*Sir Isumbras*’, l. 522; White (ed.), ‘*Sir Isumbras*’, 445; Ashmole: Shuffelton (ed.), ‘*Sir Isumbras*’, l. 546.

<sup>135</sup> Hopkins, ‘*Sir Ysumbras*’, 125.

his mysdedes with mouthe *or with herte*' they can find heaven.<sup>136</sup> In Passus XII, Ymaginatif states that contrition is valuable above all other penitential actions:

For if the clerk be konnyng, he knoweth what is synne,  
And how contricion withoute confession conforteth the soule,  
As thow seest in the Sauter in salmes oon or tweyne,  
How contricion is comended for it cacheth away synne.<sup>137</sup>

The Caius *Isumbras* elevates the internal emotional journey above empty orthodox gestures. Neither crusade nor pilgrimage can bring forgiveness; rather, both actions seem to increase Isumbras' punishments. Instead, labour is shown to increase Isumbras' charitable behavior, while poverty increases his awareness of his own responsibility in regards his sins. It is this contrition—a recognition that his suffering was caused by his own misdeeds—that brings his forgiveness. It is the internal journey from denial and deflection to true recognition that reveals itself to be a coherent thematic message behind the Caius *Isumbras*.

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The Caius *Isumbras* opens itself up to a unique reading that all other manuscript witnesses to the narrative depart from in one way or another. Isumbras' internal journey in the Caius manuscript indicates that the suffering he experiences is related to his neglect of his servants and retainers. Isumbras, when faced with the consequences of his sin, cannot accept responsibility for his selfish greed. These defensive behaviors prevent Isumbras' two penitential acts of pilgrimage and crusade from being effective, indicating that unless a man is spiritually aware of his own sins, he will not be forgiven, regardless of any seemingly penitential action. However, Isumbras does learn vital skills from his unrepentant state that eventually allow him to become a better leader: he gains the physical strength to protect

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<sup>136</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, XI, ll. 135-6; Italics mine.

<sup>137</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, XII, ll. 174-7.

Christendom from invasion and save his own people, even if not himself; he learns from the blacksmiths the value of labour and the value of active charity, sharing his skills with others when they are in need; finally, Isumbras experiences the suffering that he caused his own people—starvation and poverty—and in this state of suffering he recognises his sins as his own. It is this realization of contrition that brings Isumbras forgiveness, this indicates how vital Isumbras' internal character change—from deflection to contrition—is to his spiritual journey. His acts of socially acceptable penance—crusade and pilgrimage—do not, on their own, bring redemption and become empty gestures when not accompanied by spiritual self-awareness. By highlighting issues with orthodox spirituality, and highlighting the importance of Isumbras' internal journey above orthodox penitential prescriptions, the Caius manuscript reveals *Isumbras* to be a site of reformist spirituality.

The Caius *Isumbras* also produces a unique perspective on Saracens that is absent from all other witnesses. It presents Saracen characters with natural empathy who learn to love Isumbras (and his wife) because of their charitable behaviors. When Isumbras suffers for sorrow, it is their pity for him that reunites him with his wife. Although the Saracen Sultan is predisposed to violence, his men recognise Isumbras and his wife's intrinsic value beyond the faith-based judgements that the Sultan makes. Although Isumbras is successful in his military encounters with the Saracens, there are unresolved tensions in the political, spiritual, or social situations in which those wars occur. The efficacy of the first crusade is limited because it comes without contrition, showing it is ineffectual as penance even though it is militarily successful. The second scenes occur after Isumbras gives an ultimatum, without respecting, in parliament, the political power of his counsellors. The Saracen rebellion takes place in the context of a legal situation that places tension on Isumbras' leadership style, especially as it clashes significantly with the peaceful kingdom Lady Isumbras had previously created. This tension is never fully resolved and it is not the crusade, but their near martyrdom, that brings

the reunion of Isumbras' family and the resolution of the romance. The Caius *Isumbras* creates moments of political and spiritual tension that may have raised debate over the efficacy of armed and unarmed pilgrimages, elevating the internal spiritual journey above the physical, action-based heroism common to the romance canon. By having Isumbras err in relation to parliamentary process, the romance engages with complaint and contemporary political issues promoting limitation of the monarch and the nobility and seeks to reform the political sphere.

The romance, finally, creates a sense of social awareness of the responsibility that comes with leadership, and the social problems that stem from unwise, uncaring, and un-Christian behaviors. The Caius *Sir Isumbras* is a story that shows the consequences of neglectful leaders. Isumbras, as a lord, can affect the spiritual and physical health of his subjects through his sins. Isumbras' sins cause starvation and death in his subjects, especially his servants at home and the peasants in the field. Isumbras is punished with the loss of his family because he did not understand the responsibility he had for his people, and he did not experience sorrow with regard to their suffering. It is only through the loss of his family that Isumbras feels sorrow enough to recognise his human limitations and God's superiority. Isumbras is finally educated by labour and poverty to learn his culpability in such suffering. In this way, *Isumbras* is a prescription for social change. The romance seeks to show landowners, like Isumbras, that their sins can affect more people because they are in a position of power. This reflects contemporary concerns surrounding the Agrarian Crisis and beliefs about the sins of the nobility and clergy as the cause of peasant suffering. These same issues continue to raise popular concern, and boil over in the last quarter of the fourteenth century. In *Piers Plowman*, Langland teaches kings, nobles, and churchmen to recognise now far their sinful behaviour was ruining England, morally and politically, and he offers ideas about social reform to alleviate the suffering of the poor. Circulating some fifty years before

*Piers Plowman*, the Caius *Sir Isumbras* proposes similar prescriptions for social awareness and change.

## Chapter Two

### The reforming Princess in the *King of Tars*

The *King of Tars* (*Tars*), a fourteenth-century Middle English romance contained in Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.2.1 (c. 1330-c. 1340, the Auchinleck manuscript), removes dominion from sinful men and gives temporal and spiritual authority to its female protagonist, prefiguring late fourteenth-century Lollard doctrine. The *King of Tars* demonstrates cowardice in battle and a total disregard for the lives of his subjects, evoking complaint poetry from the Auchinleck manuscript, such as *The Sayings of the Four Philosophers* (c. 1311-c. 1340, *Sayings*)<sup>1</sup> and *The Simonie* (c. 1322-c. 1340, *Simonie*).<sup>2</sup> The problems created by the King's misrule are corrected, or reformed, by the Princess. The Princess of Tars sacrifices her life in order to correct the sins of her father and save the lives of her subjects. Through Christ's direct influence, the Princess is granted authority over her husband, father, and the priest Cleophas, and by taking *dominium*, she improves the spiritual and physical health of her father, her husband, and her subjects in Tars and Damas. This chapter argues that *Tars* anticipates John Wyclif's theory of *dominium* and Lollard beliefs about female spiritual equality by limiting the authority of sinful men and by giving the Princess dominion in spiritual and temporal matters in reward for her exemplary virtue.<sup>3</sup> The Auchinleck manuscript was completed at least forty years before Wyclif's ideas

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<sup>1</sup> The Auchinleck version of the *Sayings* refers to Edward II breaking the Ordinances of 1311, and the earliest manuscript witness is dated c. 1330-40, see J. Scattergood, 'Political context, date, and composition of *The Sayings of the Four Philosophers*', in *Manuscripts and ghosts: essays on the transmission of medieval and early Renaissance literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006) 95-106:96-7.

<sup>2</sup> *The Simonie* refers to cattle murrains and famine of 1315-16 and civil war of 1321-22 and the earliest manuscript witness dated to c.1330-40, see M. S. Nagy, *The alliterative tradition in early Middle English poetry: political complaint and social analysis in 'The Song of the Husbandman' and beyond*, foreword by T. A. Shippey (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2011) 104-5.

<sup>3</sup> M. Aston, 'Lollardy and sedition, 1381-1431', in *Lollards and reformers: images and literacy in late medieval religion* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1984) 1-47:3-17; M.

were condemned (1382)<sup>4</sup> and, I argue that its version of *Tars* therefore stands as evidence that the social and political ideology behind Lollardy, especially its proto-feminist agenda, already had currency within writing produced by the previous generations.

*Tars* survives in three fourteenth-century manuscripts: the Auchinleck manuscript; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS English Poetry A. 1 (the Vernon manuscript, c. 1380-c. 1400); and London, British Library, MS Additional 22283 (the Simeon manuscript, c. 1380-c. 1400). All three manuscripts contain romance as well as complaint content, and in what follows I want to explore these miscellanies, or multi-text manuscripts, while recognising that the composition of a miscellany may be programmatic, potentially revealing a reformist intention or inflection within these collections of texts. This follows from what Margaret Connolly describes as the ‘text-in-context’ methodology, which seeks ‘narrative unity’ within ‘apparently haphazard or miscellaneous collections’.<sup>5</sup> Connolly argues that this is best achieved through a series of focused case studies that allow the ‘details of the overall picture to be shaded incrementally’.<sup>6</sup> I explore several interrelated studies of the manuscript miscellanies in which *Tars* is found in order to unpick potential thematic resonances that may have been recognised by a medieval audience. The inclusion of *Tars* in the Vernon and Simeon manuscripts may in this light be seen to underscore the reformist reception of the romance and its re-emergent popularity in the tumultuous period following the 1380s, while

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Aston, ‘Lollard women priests?’, in *Lollards and reformers: images and literacy in late medieval religion* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1984) 50-70; S. E. Lahey, *John Wyclif* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 199-221; A. Hudson, ‘Lollardy: the English heresy?’, in *Lollards and their books* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1985) 141-64:156-7; R. Krug, *Reading families: women’s literate practice in late medieval England* (London: Cornell University Press, 2002) 114-52.

<sup>4</sup> Lahey, *Wyclif*, 26-7.

<sup>5</sup> M. Connolly, ‘Introduction: understanding the medieval miscellany’, in R. Radulescu & M. Connolly (eds.), *Insular books: vernacular manuscript miscellanies in late medieval Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 3-15:9-10.

<sup>6</sup> Connolly, ‘Introduction’, 10.



its inclusion in the Auchinleck manuscript stands as evidence that similar reformist ideologies had currency much earlier in the same century.

The Vernon and Simeon manuscripts are miscellanies that are believed to have been produced under similar circumstances, sharing both scribal contributors and much of their content. The title of the Vernon manuscript—‘Here begynnen þe tytles off þe book þat is cald in latyn tonge salus anime, and in englysh tonge sowlehele’—may reveal a conscious purpose behind its seemingly disconnected make-up, and this may in turn suggest a similar intent for the Simeon manuscript.<sup>7</sup> The Vernon manuscript uniquely contains the A-text of *Piers Plowman*, while the Simeon manuscript preserves a treatise by Sir John Clanvowe, a known Lollard Knight.<sup>8</sup> Although the volumes are generally considered orthodox,<sup>9</sup> the texts they contain are mostly vernacular religious texts intended to educate and encourage an individual lay person to meditate on and interpret their own faith, and this accords with Wyclif’s

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted by P. R. Robinson, ‘The Vernon manuscript as a “Coucher Book”’, in D. Pearsall (ed.), *Studies in the Vernon manuscript* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990) 15-28:26; also, see R. Hanna, ‘Miscellany and vernacularity: conditions of literary production in late medieval England’, in S. G. Nichols & S. Wenzel (eds.), *The whole book: cultural perspectives in medieval miscellany* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996) 37-51:46; W. Scase (ed.), *A facsimile edition of the Vernon Manuscript: MS. Eng. Poet. A.1.*, Software by N. Kennedy, Bodleian Digital Texts 3 [on DVD-ROM] (Oxford: Bodleian Library Publishing, 2012); W. Scase, ‘Patronage, symbolism, and ‘sowlehele’’, in W. Scase (ed.), *The making of the Vernon manuscript: the production and contexts of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Poet. A. 1.* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013) 231-45.

<sup>8</sup> S. S. Hussey, ‘Implications of choice and arrangement of texts in part 4’, in D. Pearsall (ed.), *Studies in the Vernon manuscript* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990) 61-74:74; A. I. Doyle, ‘The shaping of the Vernon and Simeon manuscripts’, in D. Pearsall (ed.), *Studies in the Vernon manuscript*, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990) 1-13:11-2; Scase (ed.), *facsimile edition*.

<sup>9</sup> N. F. Blake, ‘Vernon manuscript: contents and organisation’, in D. Pearsall (ed.), *Studies in the Vernon manuscript* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990) 45-59:57; T. J. Heffernan, ‘Orthodoxies redux: the *Northern Homily Cycle* in the Vernon manuscript and its textual affiliations’, in D. Pearsall (ed.), *Studies in the Vernon manuscript* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990) 75-87; R. Perry urges caution in assigning an orthodox inflection until the contents are studied more closely, in ‘Editorial politics in the Vernon manuscript’, in W. Scase (ed.), *The making of the Vernon manuscript: the production and contents of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Poet. A. 1.* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013) 71-95.

emphasis on the soteriological importance of self-directed reading and learning.<sup>10</sup> As William Kamowski states of Lollardy, ‘the emphasis on the efficacy of the individuals’ moral bearing and autonomy is likewise consistent with Wyclif’s insistence on individuals’ participation in their own salvation’.<sup>11</sup> The Vernon *Scale of Perfection* edifies the ‘trew religiose’, a phrase Anne Hudson has associated with Lollard writers.<sup>12</sup> The Vernon and Simeon romances can themselves be read in light of, and as contributions to, the reformist potential of these miscellanies. Thomas Heffernan, advocating for the orthodoxy of the Vernon manuscript, argues that ‘since [...] much of the class factionalism of the time coalesced around questions both secular and theological which concerned authority, it is notable that the bulk of the texts in the Vernon avoided these contentious issues’.<sup>13</sup> However, the subject matter of both *Tars* and *Robert of Sicily* reflect significant issues with authority. Both highlight the damage caused by sinful leaders who are then denied *dominium* and are replaced with leaders who are in a state of grace (a virtuous princess, an angel) in order to reform a kingdom, or Christendom more generally. These factors suggest a reformist, if not heterodox, inflection to both miscellanies, and support *Tars* as a reformist romance.

The Auchinleck manuscript, the first surviving miscellany written predominantly in Middle English, has a strong reformist pedigree. Susanna Fein recently demonstrated that the Auchinleck and its near contemporary, London, British Library, MS Harley 2253 (1347),<sup>14</sup> share textual exemplars suggesting collaboration or communication between the two projects.<sup>15</sup> Harley 2253 contains a wealth of complaint texts, ten in Middle English, and four

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<sup>10</sup> Hussey, ‘Implications of choice’, 66-74.

<sup>11</sup> W. Kamowski, ‘Chaucer and Wyclif: God’s miracles against the clergy’s magic’, *The Chaucer Review*, 37, 1 (2002) 5-25:11.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Hussey, ‘Implications of choice’, 68; A. Hudson, ‘A Lollard sect vocabulary?’, in *Lollards and their books* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1985) 165-180:165-7.

<sup>13</sup> Heffernan, ‘Orthodoxies *redux*’, 79.

<sup>14</sup> Nagy, *Alliterative tradition*, 59-62.

<sup>15</sup> S. Fein, ‘Introduction’, in S. Fein (ed.), *The Auchinleck manuscript: new perspectives* (York: York Medieval Press, 2016) 1-10:2, summarising her arguments from, ‘Fillers of the

in Anglo-Norman,<sup>16</sup> written by the Ludlow Scribe (1314-1349),<sup>17</sup> whose literary manuscripts demonstrate reformist sentiment and a ‘distinct interest in both political and local concerns’.<sup>18</sup> The Auchinleck manuscript shares this interest in complaint texts, preserving three that were likely composed or adapted specifically for the manuscript—the *Simonie*, *The Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle* (*Short Metrical Chronicle*), and the *Sayings*. Matthew Fisher has theorised that Scribe I wrote the *Short Metrical Chronicle* specifically for the Auchinleck manuscript.<sup>19</sup> Thorlac Turville-Petre surmises that the unique Auchinleck *Simonie*, also known as *On the Times of Edward II*, was added by the Auchinleck ‘interpolator’, as it is unique to the manuscript.<sup>20</sup> John Scattergood argues that the unique Edwardian material in the Auchinleck-*Sayings* shows ‘deliberate authorial alterations’.<sup>21</sup> Arthur Bahr has recently suggested that the poem *David the Kyng*, previously believed to be miscellaneous filler, actually increases the manuscripts’ ‘larger exploration of the practice and ethics of royal power’, theorising that the translation of the psalm emphasises the problematic kingship elements in the surrounding romances *King Alisaunder*, *Sir Tristrem*, and *Sir Orfeo*.<sup>22</sup> Together, these iterations and additions imply an outriding interest in reform by those collaborating on the Auchinleck manuscript.

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Auchinleck manuscript and the literary culture of the West Midlands’, in C. M. Meale & D. Pearsall (eds.), *Makers and users of medieval books: essays in honour of A. S. G. Edwards* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2014) 60-77.

<sup>16</sup> D. Matthews, *Writing to the king: nation, kingship, and literature in England, 1250-1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 35, 91, & 129-32; Nagy, *Alliterative tradition*, 22-3.

<sup>17</sup> Nagy, *Alliterative tradition*, 2-3.

<sup>18</sup> Nagy, *Alliterative tradition*, 4-40, quoted 40.

<sup>19</sup> M. Fisher, *Scribal authorship and the writing of history in medieval England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012) 146-87.

<sup>20</sup> T. Turville-Petre, *England the nation: language, literature, and national identity, 1290-1340* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 131.

<sup>21</sup> Scattergood, ‘Political context’, 95-106.

<sup>22</sup> A. Bahr, ‘Miscellaneity and variance in the medieval book’, in M. Johnston & M. van Dussen (eds.), *The medieval manuscript book: cultural approaches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 181-98:186.

Until recently, critics believed that the Auchinleck scribes worked in a lay bookshop, although these ideas have more recently been challenged by critics citing a lack of evidence—historical or textual—to suggest such a degree of organisation in early fourteenth-century book production.<sup>23</sup> What we do know is that five or six scribes worked in relatively close collaboration and,<sup>24</sup> Shonk argues, that the manuscript ‘was conceived as a whole at some early point in its production by the organizer, Scribe 1’.<sup>25</sup> The unique complaint poems were transcribed by Scribe 1, and each of these complaint texts critique the state of England under the successive reigns of Edward I, Edward II, and Edward III. The Auchinleck and Harley miscellanies therefore witness an English-speaking cultural interest in political reform in the 1330s and 1340s, alongside an interest in religious instruction and romance. *Tars*, a poem spanning the fourteenth century in both early and late miscellanies, combines romance storytelling, hagiographical style, and an interest in political, religious, and social reform. In this sense, it represents the communication of reformist ideology across genres that would itself appear to be the aim of the manuscript miscellanies in which the romance survives today.

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<sup>23</sup> The bookshop theory was first argued in L. H. Loomis, ‘The Auchinleck manuscript and a possible London bookshop of 1330-1340’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 57, 3 (1942) 595-627; D. Pearsall & I. C. Cunningham (intro.), *The Auchinleck manuscript: National Library of Scotland, Advocates’ MS 19.2.1* (London: The Scholar Press, 1977) ix-x. This has since been challenged, see T. Shonk, ‘A study of the Auchinleck manuscript: bookmen and bookmaking in the early fourteenth century’, *Speculum*, 60, 1 (1985) 71-91; F. Porcheddu, ‘Edited text and medieval artefact: the Auchinleck bookshop and “Charlemagne and Roland” theories, fifty years later’, *Philological Quarterly*, 80, 4 (2001) 465-500; T. Shonk, ‘Paraphs, piecework, and presentation: the production methods of Auchinleck revisited’, in S. Fein (ed.), *The Auchinleck manuscript: new perspectives* (York: York Medieval Press, 2016) 176-94:177; D. Pearsall, ‘The Auchinleck forty years on’, in S. Fein (ed.), *The Auchinleck manuscript: new perspectives* (York: York Medieval Press, 2016) 11-25:12-3.

<sup>24</sup> Scribe 1 and 6 may be the same scribe, see R. Hanna, ‘Auchinleck “Scribe 6” and some corollary issues’, in S. Fein (ed.), *The Auchinleck manuscript: new perspectives* (York: York Medieval Press, 2016) 209-21.

<sup>25</sup> Shonk, ‘Paraphs, piecework’, 189.

Criticism of *Tars* has been slow, however, to recognise the reformist potential of the romance. Instead, scholars have searched for its sources and analogues,<sup>26</sup> its manuscript contexts,<sup>27</sup> critiqued editorial practice,<sup>28</sup> and male-female power relationships.<sup>29</sup> Early work by Lillian Hornstein, Laura Hibbard Loomis, and Robert Geist reveal analogues between *Tars* and chronicles and poetry in multiple languages spanning the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.<sup>30</sup> Yet, this search for influences and analogues can at the same time act to downplay the originality of the Middle English version of the romance, which contains unique variants, including the Saracen invasion, the flight of the King of Tars, the shape of the malformed baby, and the final conversion crusade.<sup>31</sup> Although the sources and analogues are valuable for measuring the popularity and possible origins of the story, it is the unique features of the Middle English romance that are of particular significance to the reformist message of the romance that I want to highlight here.

More recent scholarship focuses on the baptism and military scenes as evidence for Christian beliefs about Saracens, with Siobhain Calkin and others arguing that the romance

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<sup>26</sup> R. J. Geist, 'On the genesis of *The King of Tars*', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 42 (1943) 260-8; L. H. Hornstein, 'Trivet's constance and *The King of Tars*', *Modern Language Notes*, 55, 5 (1940) 354-7; L. H. Hornstein, 'The historical background of *The King of Tars*', *Speculum*, 16, 4 (1941) 404-14; L. H. Hornstein, 'New analogues to the *King of Tars*', *The Modern Language Review*, 36, 4 (1941) 433-42; L. Hibbard (Loomis), *Mediaeval romance in England: a study of the sources and analogues of the non-cyclic metrical romances* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1960) 45-8.

<sup>27</sup> A. S. G. Edwards, 'The contexts of the Vernon romances', in D. Pearsall (ed.), *Studies in the Vernon manuscript* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990) 159-70; K. Reichl, 'The *King of Tars*: language and textual transmission', in D. Pearsall (ed.), *Studies in the Vernon manuscript* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990) 171-86; R. J. Geist, 'Notes on the *King of Tars*', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 47, 2 (1948) 173-8.

<sup>28</sup> A. J. Bliss, 'Notes on the *King of Tars*', *Notes & Queries* (1955) 461-2.

<sup>29</sup> K. A. Winstead, 'Saints, wives, and other "hooly thynges": pious laywomen in Middle English romance', *Chaucer Yearbook: A Journal of Late Medieval Studies*, 2 (1995) 137-54; M. H. Ellzey, 'The advice of wives in three Middle English romances: *The King of Tars*, *Sir Cleges*, and *Athelston*', *Medieval Perspectives*, 7 (1992) 44-52.

<sup>30</sup> Geist, 'Genesis' 260-8; Hornstein, 'Trivet's constance', 354-7; Hornstein, 'Historical background', 404-14; Hornstein, 'New analogues', 433-42; Hibbard (Loomis), *Mediaeval romance*, 45-8.

<sup>31</sup> Hornstein, 'New analogues', 434; Hibbard (Loomis), *Mediaeval romance*, 45-8.

represents evidence of racism and fear of the other.<sup>32</sup> Many of these studies focus on the baptism scenes, especially the ‘lump-child’ transformation and the Sultan’s skin colour change.<sup>33</sup> Elias uniquely measures emotions and their social conventions in order to understand how the poet viewed Christian and Saracen characters.<sup>34</sup> These studies predominantly argue that the poem imagines Christianity as flawlessly idealised and whiteness as racially superior, while Saracen blackness is fundamentally inferior, supporting the critical argument that the Sultan learns cultural morality from the King of Tars and his

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<sup>32</sup> M. Elias, ‘The case of anger in the *Seige of Milan* and *The King of Tars*’, *Comitatus*, 43 (2012) 41-56; S. B. Calkin, ‘Monstrous intermingling and miraculous conversion: negotiating cultural borders in *Pe King of Tars*’, in *Saracens and the making of English identity: the Auchinleck Manuscript* (London: Routledge, 2005) 97-132; S. B. Calkin, ‘Saracens’, in N. Cartlidge (ed.), *Heroes and anti-heroes in medieval romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012) 185-200; S. B. Calkin, ‘Romance baptisms and theological contexts in *The King of Tars* and *Sir Ferumbras*’, in R. Purdie & M. Cichon (eds.), *Medieval romance, medieval contexts* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011) 105-19; S. B. Calkin, ‘Marking religion on the body: Saracens, categorization, and *The King of Tars*’, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 104, 2 (2005) 219-38; J. Friedman, ‘Making whiteness matter: *The King of Tars*’, *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, 6 (2015) 52-63; J. Gilbert, ‘Unnatural mothers and monstrous children in *The King of Tars* and *Sir Gowther*’, in J. Wogan-Browne et al. (eds.), *Medieval women: texts and contexts* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000) 329-44; J. Gilbert, ‘Putting the pulp into fiction: the lump-child and its parents in *The King of Tars*’, in N. McDonald (ed.), *Pulp fictions of medieval England: essays in popular romance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) 102-23; L. Lampert, ‘Race, periodicity, and the (neo-)Middle Ages’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 65, 3 (2004) 391-421; K. L. Walter, ‘The form and the formless: medieval taxonomies of skin, flesh, and the human’, in *Reading skin in medieval literature and culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013) 119-39; C. J. Whitaker, ‘Black metaphors in *The King of Tars*’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 112, 2 (2013) 169-93; A. Czarnowus, ‘“Still as ston”: oriental deformity in *The King of Tars*’, *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia*, 44 (2008) 463-74; K. Castleberry, ‘Devils in the bridal chamber: violent unions in *The King of Tars*’, in R. Florio & A. Andrews (eds.), *Love, friendship, marriage* (Weston: The Public Heritage Institute at Regis College, 2012) 7-12; T. Hahn, ‘The difference the Middle Ages makes: color and race before the modern world’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 31 (2001) 1-37.

<sup>33</sup> Calkin, ‘Monstrous intermingling’, 97-132; Calkin, ‘Romance baptisms’, 105-19; Calkin, ‘Marking religion’, 219-38; Gilbert, ‘Unnatural mothers’, 329-44; Gilbert, ‘Putting the pulp’, 102-23; Whitaker, ‘Black metaphors’, 169-93; Walter, ‘Form and the formless’, 119-39; Lampert, ‘Race, periodicity’, 391-421; Friedman, ‘Making whiteness’, 52-63; Czarnowus, ‘Still as ston’, 463-74; Hahn, ‘The difference’, 1-37.

<sup>34</sup> Elias, ‘Case of anger’, 41-56.

daughter.<sup>35</sup> The chapter hopes to illuminate issues with these conclusions, for although the Sultan is flawed and the Princess of Tars idealised, the King of Tars himself is ethically compromised. This chapter highlights how the King of Tars is a coward in battle, causing 30,000 deaths, selfishly disregarding the lives of his subjects, and only learning courage and strength from his daughter and the Sultan. By overlooking the King's problematic behaviours, I suggest, critical opinion skews the story, emphasising the racist elements of the poem to the detriment of its reformist message. By illuminating the King's flaws, the Sultan's role is both clarified and complicated; but, more importantly for this study, the Princess' characterisation is also revealed to be politically and religiously reformist.

The Princess' actions prefigure Wyclif's theories of *dominium* and Lollard beliefs about female authority. *Tars* combines both, removing social power from sinful males whilst placing all spiritual and political authority into the Princess (later the Sultanness of Damas), the only character in a state of grace with uncompromised ethical behaviour. The Princess fulfils roles usually reserved for men of the highest social orders—nobles, kings, or prelates: she judges a priest's worthiness to perform his function, teaches the Creed to a Saracen convert, prescribes penance for her father, and calls and organises the military functions of a crusade. *Tars* argues thereby that the Lollard concept of grace as an ethical qualifier is more important than gender in determining who can and should hold *dominium*. It is because of her spiritual, ethical, and intellectual superiority that the Princess—a laywoman—is chosen by Christ to replace masculine authority, and why she retains it, even after the sins of the male characters are corrected. *Tars* engages with reform through its proto-Lollard Princess and the cowardly King, showing early fourteenth-century interest in reforming leadership, military practice, and opening up new social roles to women.

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<sup>35</sup> Walter, 'Form and the formless', 134; Lampert, 'Race, periodicity', 406; Friedman, 'Making whiteness', 52-63; Calkin, 'Marking religion', 219-38; Calkin, 'Romance baptisms', 105-19; Gilbert, 'Unnatural mothers', 329-44; Gilbert, 'Putting the pulp', 102-23.

## The King of Tars' failures

The King of Tars is a sinful leader because of his selfishness, his disregard for the lives (and deaths) of his subjects, and his cowardice in battle, culminating in 30,000 deaths and the *raptus* of his daughter. These sins of the King are themselves explored in the Auchinleck complaint poems, the *Simonie*, and the *Sayings*, and in what follows I want to discuss textual similarities between *Tars*, the *Simonie*, and the *Sayings*, also drawing on Thomas Aquinas' ideas on communal ethics and courage, and the military principles of courage and 'comynthe' such as those outlined in Giles of Rome's *De regimine principum*.<sup>36</sup> It is because of the King's failure to rule effectively that the Princess of Tars is forced to sacrifice herself, I suggest, contrasting the selfless love a good woman has for her subjects with the King's ignorant disregard for them.

The romance begins with the Sultan of Damas demanding the Princess of Tars in marriage and threatening to destroy Tars should the King refuse. The Sultan's behaviour here is deplorable; his uncontrolled lust leads him to invade another kingdom, and he directs his anger at his own men as well as at his enemy. Marcel Elias, differentiating 'righteous anger'—an ethical act in response to moral outrage—from the sinful uses of anger, suggests that the Sultan uses the latter: 'A clear emphasis is given to the sultan's frenzy, hence marking his anger as detrimental'.<sup>37</sup> The Sultan undeniably possesses ethical failings that set in motion the events of the poem. That being said, the Saracen Sultan is only successful in his villainy because the King of Tars fails to lead his people either ethically or effectively.

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<sup>36</sup> P. M. Clark, *Perfection in death* (Washington D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2015); K. L. Walker, 'Peril, flight, and the sad man: medieval theories of the body in battle', in L. Ashe & I. Patterson (eds.), *War and literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014) 21-40.

<sup>37</sup> Elias, 'Case of anger', 54.



When the Sultan's message arrives, the King of Tars, in a seemingly correct use of righteous anger, refuses the Sultan's proposal and vows to die rather than lose his daughter to a Saracen.<sup>38</sup>

Bi Him that dyed on the rode,  
Ich wald arst spille min hert blode  
In bateyl to ben yslawe.  
Y nold hir giue a Sarazin,  
For alle the lond that is mine  
The deuel him arst to drawe. (40-5)<sup>39</sup>

This speech imitates righteous anger by representing the King's intention to be heroically courageous in battle: to willingly sacrifice his life for the greater good in imitation of Christ. Katie Walter, studying the reception of military treatises in England, uses various Middle English translations of Latin source texts to better understand medieval perceptions of courage.<sup>40</sup> Trevisa's late fourteenth-century Middle English translation of Giles of Rome's *De regimine principum* states that, 'it longeþ to hym þat is fortis and a good werryour to drede not to die wel in bataille'.<sup>41</sup> Were the King of Tars to live up to his promises, his anger might indeed be called 'righteous'.

The King also demonstrates the intention to temper his own actions by asking his daughter's counsel before proceeding (46-72). Although the heiress is not seen, in medieval culture, as a source of true counsel (parliamentary), she still represents an ethical character

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<sup>38</sup> Elias, 'Case of anger', 52.

<sup>39</sup> All quotations from J. H. Chandler (ed.), *The King of Tars*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2015) Robbins Library Digital Projects, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/chandler-the-king-of-tars>, edited from the Auchinleck Manuscript.

<sup>40</sup> Walter, 'Peril, flight', 21-40.

<sup>41</sup> J. Trevisa, *The governance of kings and princes: John Trevisa's Middle English translation of the 'De Regimine Principum' of Aegidius Romanus*, D. C. Fowler, C. F. Briggs, & P. G. Remley (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1997) 401; quoted by Walter, 'Peril, flight', 22.

from whom advice can be sought and whose perspective is shown throughout to be moral and supported by God's grace. Geraldine Barnes has demonstrated that reformist ideology, found in complaints, romances, and baronial power struggles against the king in parliament, had often rested upon the belief that good leaders should seek counsel from their advisors on all important matters.<sup>42</sup> The *Simonie* argues that the nation's problems would be corrected 'if the king hit wiste' and 'were the king wel avised', indicating that ideals of counsel as described by Barnes were esteemed by the authors of some Auchinleck texts.<sup>43</sup> From these perspectives, the King could be said to demonstrate morally upright behaviour. However, *Tars*, like the *Sayings* as we will see, problematises the reformist solution of good counsel by writing a passage in which counsel cannot be sought and that reveals the King's promise of heroic courage to be false.

The first real sign that something is wrong occurs early in the battle scene when the Saracen faith, and not the Christian, appears to be supreme and divinely aided. The poet laments the success of the Saracen gods:

Allas, to wele sped Mahoun!

The Cristen men yede al adoun

Was nought that hem withstode. (178-80)

Again, it is Saracen prayer and not Christian that appears to be successful on the field, for, when the Sultan prays 'Help, Mahoun!' (198), it leads to a successful assault and many Christian deaths (199-204). Where most heroes in romance, under a threat greater than their own power, pray to God and are miraculously saved, the King of Tars never does, demonstrating an apparent distrust in the power of the Christian God. This lack of faith

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<sup>42</sup> G. Barnes, *Counsel and strategy in Middle English romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993).

<sup>43</sup> J. Dean (ed.), 'The *Simonie*', in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) ll. 313 & 319.

results in a problem the *Sayings* associates with England's downfall under Edward II: 'For miht is riht, þe lond is laweles'.<sup>44</sup> This phrase 'might is right', embraced by participants in the 1381 Peasants' Revolt as well as complaint poems like *Truthe, Reste and Pes*, refers, implicitly, to the debates about 'truth' that were central to fourteenth-century reform.<sup>45</sup> 'Might' refers to strength, either political or physical, and the phrase 'might is right' argues that the socially powerful use might as the sole justification for their actions, refusing to allow ethics or 'rightness' to moderate their behaviour. The 'might' of the Saracen is shown to succeed in *Tars* without the religious 'right' of Christianity, and in so doing the spiritual law of Tars is compromised because its King does not wield 'might' at all, let alone in a moral way, allowing the false strength of the Saracen faith and army to be rewarded.

In the face of the Saracen advance and the deaths of many men, the King of Tars succumbs to fear and flees toward his castle gate:

The king of Tars seye him so ride

*He fleye and durst nought abide*

Homward to his cite. (205-7; Italics mine)

The King of Tars had promised to spill his own heart's blood before letting his daughter fall into the hands of a Saracen, yet when that anger is tested it becomes cowardice and fear. Elias argues that, 'the function of a good king or leader came to more openly include fierce actions *driven by* righteous anger in order to impart justice on wrongdoers, people who defied the doctrines of the church'.<sup>46</sup> Yet retreating to the safety of his castle, the King's anger can

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<sup>44</sup> D. Burnley & A. Wiggins (eds.), *The Sayings of the Four Philosophers*, in *The Auchinleck Manuscript* (Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 2003) <http://auchinleck.nls.uk/>, l. 30.

<sup>45</sup> A. W. Astell, "Full of enigmas": John Ball's letters and *Piers Plowman*, in *Political allegory in late medieval England* (London: Cornell University Press, 1999) 44-72; J. Dean (ed.), *Truthe, Reste, and Pes*, in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 153-8.

<sup>46</sup> Elias, 'Case of anger', 46; italics mine.

hardly generate courageous action in the heat of battle. The King's promise to fight with righteous anger dissolves, highlighting a sinful disconnect between his intentions and actions under pressure. Walter states that, 'All men [...] *want* to be good warriors, and imagine themselves as such: but to those who are accustomed to silken cloth, the hardness of iron, the weight of armour, and the travail and pain of battle will likely prove too much'.<sup>47</sup> For the King of Tars, too, inexperience of the sights and sounds of warfare also leads to cowardice and flight. *Knyghthode and Bataile* (c. 1408), a Middle English paraphrase of Vegetius's *De re militari*, argues:

For whos is vnexpert  
Of werre, and woundis seeth, and summe slayn,  
He weneth euery stroke go to his hert,  
And wiste he how he worlde fle ful fayn.<sup>48</sup>

Although the King's intentions are good, he is dishonest with himself, ignorant of his own mind, and unable to temper his baser instincts with wit or reason. While behind his castle walls he is willing to sacrifice his life for his daughter and kingdom, in a real-life situation the falseness of his promise is revealed. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologiae* (c. 1265-74), associates this type of fear with sin:

Quando ergo appetitus fugit ea quæ ratio dictat esse sustinenda ne desistat ab aliis  
quæ magis prosequi debet, timor inordinatus est, et habet rationem peccati [So when  
appetite avoids particular things which reason commands us to endure, so that we may

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<sup>47</sup> Walter, 'Peril, flight', 28-9.

<sup>48</sup> R. Dyboski & Z. M. Arend (eds.), *Knyghthode and bataile: a XVth century verse paraphrase of Flavius Vegetius Renatus' treatise 'De re militari'*, EETS, O. S. 201 (London: Oxford University Press, 1935) ll.1664-7; quoted by Walter, 'Peril, flight', 31. The English translation of Vegetius is late, however the Latin source text circulated in England in the fourteenth century.

not abandon other objectives which we should pursue, such fear is disordered and becomes sinful].<sup>49</sup>

In a state of relative safety, reason demanded that the King of Tars defend his daughter at all cost, however fear on the battlefield overcomes this reason and he abandons his moral objectives because of baser instincts. His 'truth' is tested and the King fails, breaking his word, when he chooses to save his own life at the expense of his soldiers, whom he abandons on the field of battle.

The King of Tars' cowardice has significant consequences because he is the king and military leader of the battle. The poet explicitly highlights the King's fear as the cause of the deaths of thousands of his soldiers. As the King runs for fear:

*The sarrazins folwed in that tide,*  
And slough adoun bi ich aside  
That Cristen folk so fre.  
Thritti thousand ther were yslawe  
Of knightes of Cristen lawe  
And that was of gret pité. (208-13, Italics mine)

The Saracens follow in the tide of the King's flight, and in the wake of that fear tens of thousands of Christian men die. The *Sayings* also identifies flight as a cause of England's downfall, arguing 'For fiht is fliht, þe lond is nameles'.<sup>50</sup> Although the exact meaning of the *Sayings* is unknown, *Tars* provides a scenario in which the 'name' of a land is lost because of flight in battle: due to the King's cowardice, 30,000 men of Tars die. On top of this, the Princess sacrifices herself to the Saracen Sultan, leaving Tars without an heir and potentially open to civil war, endangering both land and lineage. It is also possible that if Tars had no

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<sup>49</sup> St. T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Gilby et al. (eds.), 61 vols. (London: Blackfriars, 1963-1976) (xlii) 62, translated 63.

<sup>50</sup> Burnley & Wiggins, (eds.), '*Sayings*', ll. 27-32.

Princess to save it, its conquest would cause a conversion to the Saracen faith, thereby losing Tars' spiritual 'name' or identity as a Christian realm. The King's choices leave his kingdom very vulnerable, and it is only through the Princess' sacrifice and Christ's miraculous intervention that the 'name' of Tars is preserved.

As I alluded to earlier, the king's flight precludes seeking counsel. The King has no opportunity in the heat of battle to listen to, let alone heed, any advice. Barnes identifies the vital importance of a king taking heed of counsel before action as the thread tying English political unrest, complaint poems, and romance together. *Tars* highlights that counsel is not all encompassing and cannot heal a nation on its own because there are moments where a King can only be his own counsel, and therefore must be able to maintain temperance and wit on his own in circumstances where immediate action is necessary. The *Auchinleck Sayings* shares *Tars*' unique perspective on the need for a King to act at times as his own true counsel:

De 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.'<sup>51</sup>

By revealing to its reader a moment where counsel cannot be sought, *Tars* again offers a concrete situational example justifying the argument of the *Sayings*. By showing a King making a decision in the heat of battle where counsel cannot be sought—a decision that significantly undermines the welfare of his soldiers, subjects, and family—*Tars* shows a concrete reason why a king *must* be rationally competent enough to be his own counsel, to 'lede eueri man wid rihte'.

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<sup>51</sup> Burnley & Wiggins, 'Sayings', ll. 21-6.

The King proves that his mind is disordered and prone to sin because fear causes him to compromise his ethical beliefs. In her discussion of the Thomist philosophy of courage, Patricia Clark shows how true courage, for Aquinas, stems from a desire for the common good.<sup>52</sup> Aquinas, Clark argues, defines courage as naming ‘the disposition that preserves reason’s sovereignty when the soul encounters what is fearful’.<sup>53</sup> So, for the King to be virtuous he must maintain what he believed to be true even if he is afraid. The King swore to die before losing his daughter to the Saracens, showing what his calm mind identified as ‘true’ or ‘right’ action. However, under pressure his reason fails him, and his seemingly virtuous courage dissolves into sinful cowardice. In a Middle English translation of Wyclif’s Latin treatise *Of Confession*, a Lollard writes that, ‘Two virtues ben in mannes soule by whiche a man shuld be rewled; hoolyness in mannes wille, and good kunnyng in his wit’.<sup>54</sup> The King of Tars can in no way rule himself; even if his will is holy his wit is not strong enough to be virtuous, creating a strong divide between his intentions and actions. The *Sayings* again offers a cryptic warning of apparent relevance to *Tars*, ‘Nu on is two, þat lond is streinþeles’.<sup>55</sup> The King is divided against himself; his rational will desires to be virtuous but is in conflict with his inability to temper his own emotions, and this division leads to his weakness in battle. The King of Tars’ internal division leads to his own cowardice, which in turn causes 30,000 soldiers to die, removing strength from the land.

The King’s flight and its consequences, for his country, are unique to the romance canon. Heroes of romance never lose against Saracens, but occasionally sinful Christians do. For example, in the fifteenth-century *Sowdone of Babylone*, Rome falls because of its sins.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Clark, *Perfection*.

<sup>53</sup> Clark, *Perfection*, 166.

<sup>54</sup> H. E. Winn (ed.), *Wyclif: select English writings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929) 94.

<sup>55</sup> Burnley & Wiggins, ‘*Sayings*’, l. 42.

<sup>56</sup> E. Husknecht (ed.), *The romance of the Sowdone of Babylone and of Ferumbras his sone who conquerede Rome*, EETS E. S. 38 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Trübner, 1881) ll.

Likewise, Christians fleeing from Saracens in battle are also rare; only in the Otuel romances do Christian heroes run from battle.<sup>57</sup> In the Auchinleck *Otuel a Knight*, Otuel, a newly converted Saracen, chides the Christian Roland for his sinful flight, citing cowardice and a lack of faith in God's power.<sup>58</sup> Defeat in battle, then, represents the consequences of sinful actions by Christian characters who fail in some way with regards to heroism and Christian faith. The King of Tars' cowardice shows the limits of his belief in God's power. Clark shows that courage, especially in the face of death, is 'endurance' that forces a man to 'depend more completely upon God's provision and allows him to give more powerful witness to the power of the gospel of Christ'.<sup>59</sup> But in *Tars*, the King does not allow Christ's power to supplant his own through faith or prayer. Rather, he chooses sin, as Clark describes, when he 'turns away from the common good in order to pursue some other, lower good as the final end of [his] acts'.<sup>60</sup> In general, romances provide Christians with miraculous military successes to Christians over Saracens, further illuminating how unusual the King of Tars' cowardice is within the culture of fourteenth-century Middle English romance: Horn, from *King Horn*, kills one hundred invading Saracens single-handedly;<sup>61</sup> Guy, in *Guy of Warwick*, uses a small army to defeat 10,000 Saracens;<sup>62</sup> Arthur, in *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, with 150 knights defeats 8000 Saracens,<sup>63</sup> and with 1200 Christians defeats 40,000 Saracens,<sup>64</sup>

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17-23 (attributed to sins), ll. 555-574 (the Pope participates sinfully in battle), & ll. 573 (15,000 Roman soldiers die).

<sup>57</sup> S. J. Herrtage (ed.), 'The Romance of Otuel', in 'The tail of Rauf Coilyer', 'Roland and Vernagu', and 'Otinell', EETS E. S. 39 (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1882) 63-116, l. 1130.

<sup>58</sup> Herrtage (ed.), 'Otuel', ll. 1053-6.

<sup>59</sup> Clark, *Perfection*, 173.

<sup>60</sup> Clark, *Perfection*, 199.

<sup>61</sup> R. B. Herzman, G. Drake, & E. Salisbury (eds.), 'King Horn', in *Four romances of England: 'King Horn', 'Havelok the Dane', 'Bevis of Hampton', 'Athelston'*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999) ll. 619-24.

<sup>62</sup> J. Zupitza (ed.), *The romance of Guy of Warwick: the 2<sup>nd</sup> of 15<sup>th</sup> century versions, edited from MS. Ff.2.38*, EETS E. S. 25 (London: Trübner, 1875) (i) ll. 3295-324.

<sup>63</sup> O. D. Macrae-Gibson (ed.), *Of Arthur and of Merlin*, EETS O. S. 268 (London: Oxford University Press, 1973) (i) ll. 6140-2.

<sup>64</sup> Macrae-Gibson (ed.), *Of Arthur*, l. 7071.



Isumbras and his wife, from *Sir Isumbras*, alone kill 10,000 Saracens,<sup>65</sup> and their three sons 20,000 Saracens.<sup>66</sup>

Historically, Maccabean biblical texts were used to justify and glorify crusade and military violence. The military and spiritual argument of Maccabees 3:18 established biblical precedent for the type of military successes desired in crusades and some romances: ‘It is an easy matter for many to be shut up in the hands of the few: and there is no difference in the sight of the God of heaven to deliver with a great multitude or with a small company’.<sup>67</sup> Nigel Saul tells us that Maccabean imagery and ideology were painted in Edward I’s time, decorating his palace.<sup>68</sup> Allusions to Maccabees can be found in crusade ideology and chronicles as well. Christopher Tyerman says that: ‘Each account is shot through with precise biblical allusions aimed at establishing specific interpretive parallels between the crusades and the Israelites of Exodus or the Maccabees’.<sup>69</sup> The King of Tars’ actions therefore defy both generic and cultural expectations with regards to crusade.

By failing to protect his people, the King of Tars demonstrates that his love for himself greatly outweighs his charity, and love for his subjects. Trevisa’s translation of Giles’ *De regimine principum* argues that courage in battle stems from the fact that the love a man feels for his community outweighs the love he has for himself, for ‘þif a man loueþ boliliche lyf more þan þei scholde, he wol liȝtliche chese a foul fliȝt’.<sup>70</sup> In a leader, this excessive love of life and fear of death can cause the deaths of significantly more men. The King of Tars is

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<sup>65</sup> H. Hudson (ed.), ‘*Sir Isumbras*’, in *Four Middle English romances*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006) 5-38, ll. 724-31.

<sup>66</sup> Hudson (ed.), ‘*Sir Isumbras*’, ll. 736-41; see above Chapter One—The Caius *Sir Isumbras*, 54.

<sup>67</sup> The Holy Bible: Douay Version (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1956).

<sup>68</sup> N. Saul, *For honour and fame: chivalry in England, 1066-1500* (London: The Bodley Head, 2011) 84.

<sup>69</sup> C. Tyerman, *The debate on the crusades* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011) 8.

<sup>70</sup> Trevisa, *Governance*, 401; quoted by Walter, ‘Peril, flight’, 22.

at the head of his army, and when he flees the battle, it greatly increases the risk to all soldiers under him. In this respect, the King of Tars demonstrates that he does not have the love of community that Giles connected to courage: ‘the man who displays courage in the face of death does so because he loves the “comynthe”—the community, his country, his sovereign—more than his own “bodiliche lyf”’.<sup>71</sup> For a sovereign, love of ‘comynthe’ would imply loving his country and his subjects more than his own life. Thomas Aquinas’s explication of courage and its purpose in pursuit of the ‘common good’ highlights that sacrificial action and risk are valuable when, as Clark puts it, ‘the good of the universe and the good of a particular species’ outweigh the individual’s life.<sup>72</sup> For the King of Tars, his cowardice placed the entire ‘comynthe’ of his kingdom at risk of death, either physically through war or spiritually through forced conversion.

The King can only think of his own selfish desires in the face of adversity and, even after so many men have died, he expresses no love for his ‘comynthe’, and no sorrow for the deaths his cowardice caused. This is suggested when the King of Tars thanks his daughter for sacrificing her life, not because it saves his kingdom, Christendom, or his subjects, but only because it saves his own life.

Now douhter, blisced mot thou be

Of Jhesu Crist in Trinite

The time that thou were bore.

*For thou wilt saue thi moder and me*

Al thi preier graunt Y thee

Astow hast seyde bifore. (241-6; Italics mine)

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<sup>71</sup> Walter, ‘Peril, flight’, 23.

<sup>72</sup> Clark, *Perfection*, 190.

The Princess willingly sacrifices herself in order to save the lives of her community *in totem*, sacrificing not only her freedom but, as we will see, her spiritual health and access to heaven in order to protect the ‘common good’ and ‘comynthe’. Rachel Moss, in her study of fatherhood, points out that leaders, from fathers to kings, should maintain lines of inheritance, teach their children, and rule selflessly: ‘these were the duties of fatherhood, and a man who neglected them was in danger of becoming a tyrant’.<sup>73</sup> Although not an aggressive tyrant, the selfish cowardice the King of Tars embodies does cause significant damage to the health of his subjects, and proves that his leadership interests do not extend to the well being of his subjects. Fourteenth-century reformers reminded lords (secular and ecclesiastical) that their main duty was to protect the lives of their humbler subjects. The *Simonie* repeatedly reminds its readers of this and the bulk of the poem is spent chiding churchmen, knights, and nobles for their neglect of the poor.<sup>74</sup> As the Lollard writer of *Pe Ten Comaundementis* argues, the right to wield power should be connected to rightful living, and ‘Whoevere failliþ by defaute of grace, he failiþ riȝt title of þing þat he occupieþ’.<sup>75</sup> The King is not in grace and his sins cause significant problems within Tars. It is because of these ethical failings that his daughter takes authority from him. In so doing, she changes her father for the better so that he may earn the title of king that he has inherited.

The final scenes of the romance, where the King of Tars assists in the conversion of the Sultanate of Damas, stand as further evidence that the King of Tars’ cowardice at the beginning of the story is sinful. The King of Tars, as we have seen, is an ineffectual military leader, so his participation in the crusade cannot stem from his military superiority, as some critics claim.<sup>76</sup> Rather, crusade by the fourteenth century has been established as the most

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<sup>73</sup> R. E. Moss, *Fatherhood and its representations in Middle English texts* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013) 187.

<sup>74</sup> Dean (ed.), ‘*The Simonie*’, 193-212.

<sup>75</sup> Winn (ed.), *Wyclif*, 4.

<sup>76</sup> Elias, ‘Case of anger’, 52-5; Gilbert, ‘Unnatural mothers’, 336.

effective means for a secular Christian male to atone for his sins.<sup>77</sup> The indulgences of crusade were not all encompassing but, as chronicle and literary sources suggest, people generally believed that crusade created a state of *tabula rasa*.<sup>78</sup> The Sultan no longer needs a crusade for penance; his purity has been achieved through baptism. As Clark states, baptism ‘washes away both personal and original sin’, and ‘also bestows upon the person the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love’.<sup>79</sup> It is not the Sultan, therefore, but the Christian King of Tars whose sins the crusade can help wipe clean. When fear becomes a mortal sin, it guarantees the King an eternity in hell should he not repent, as Aquinas writes:

Si enim quis propter timorem quo refugit periculum mortis, vel quodcumque aliud temporale malum, sic dispositus est ut faciat aliquid prohibitum, vel prætermittat aliquid quod est præceptum in lege divina, talis timor est peccatum morale [For if a man, fleeing from fear or danger of death or any other evil of the world, is ready to commit some forbidden act or to leave undone something which the divine law prescribes, such a fear is a mortal sin].<sup>80</sup>

The *Simonie* argues that knights were ‘Mad for Holi Church to fihte, / *Sanz faille*’, describing the divinely sanctioned purpose of knighthood.<sup>81</sup> The King of Tars’ cowardice breaks this purpose; he cannot fight without fail, and by fleeing to the safety of his castle, he causes 30,000 deaths as he closes the gates on his men. The crusade at the end of the romance gives the King an opportunity to redeem himself and earn forgiveness for these sins. In the final battle, the King of Tars learns how to defend Christendom from the newly baptised

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<sup>77</sup> J. A. Brundage, *Medieval canon law and the crusader* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969) 151.

<sup>78</sup> Brundage, *Medieval canon law*, 154.

<sup>79</sup> Clark, *Perfection*, 230.

<sup>80</sup> Gilby et al. (eds.), *Summa*, (xlii) 68, translated 69.

<sup>81</sup> Dean (ed.), ‘*The Simonie*’, ll. 244-5.

Sultan, learns the selflessness demonstrated by his daughter, and redeems himself from his cowardice.

The final battle scene in the romance highlights and confirms how far the King of Tars learns skills in battle from the Sultan. The Sultan opens the battle by performing successful jousts against the enemy (1099-1110). The King of Tars, on the other hand, cannot kill at the first blow and many Christians, including princes and dukes, die as a result (1117-28). The King of Tars is first unhorsed and the Sultan demonstrates moral selflessness by rescuing him (1141-52). However, the King of Tars has at least shown improvement in skill and experience, as the sights and sounds of battle here do not cause his flight. Instead, he uses reason to temper his fear, performing a selfless sacrifice that benefits his fellow knights and community. When the Sultan himself is nearly unhorsed at the end of the battle, the King of Tars imitates the Sultan by risking his own life to protect him (1165-82). Here, the King expresses verbal anger—‘The dogge schal adoun to grounde / That fightes thus in feld’ (1175-6)—and, immediately following that anger, he shows ‘fierce action’ leading to military success.

He rode to him anon right  
And smot to him a strok of might—  
Atuo he clef his scheld  
And thurth his hert the swerd gan glide;  
The blod ran out bi ich a side  
And so he him aqueld. (1177-82)

This is the King of Tars’ first clean kill of the battle, and the first time in the romance that he performs a selfless action, risking his own life for the common good, as well as being the first instance that righteous anger precedes courageous action, and in which virtue and reason are combined. Clark demonstrates that, for Aquinas, such a change in character represents a

virtuous act, for if ‘their inclinations do not in fact dispose them to act this way (and may even strongly dispose them to the *opposite* sort of action), [it] thus [necessitates] a very strong command of reason, and [results] in maximal merit’.<sup>82</sup> The King requires this ‘maximal merit’ to earn redemption for his sins earlier in the narrative, especially as they appear to be mortal ones. The King of Tars, once inexperienced and disposed to cowardice, now demonstrates the cool reason that skilled and virtuous warriors (true knights) were expected to possess. He does this through crusade, and also through force of reason in which he reverses his disposition towards vice into that of virtue.

This action is rewarded, and is shown to cancel out the sins he committed at the beginning of the romance, for in a reversal of that battle the King of Tars’ new fierceness leads to the flight of the rebellious Saracens. The fifth king, Memaroc:

Priked his stede opon the pleyn

And fleye oway with might and mayn

For dred to hide his heved. (1186-8)

Many Saracens are captured in the battle and 30,000 of their number either convert or die (1200-29). The same quantity of lives that were lost through the King’s cowardice are saved or killed here through redemptive crusade action. The King of Tars does not teach, but does learn, finally, how to defend his people selflessly with anger and courage together.

The Princess changes the King of Tars through her actions, and through these changes, Tars is protected. At the beginning of the romance, Tars is vulnerable to military assault. After the King learns how to fight from the Sultan, at the Princess’ command, he proves himself to be a skilled warrior able to win battles and wars. The King is no longer a man who disregards the lives of his subjects and who has no control over his emotions and baser instincts; now he is a man of selfless strength able to protect others at great risk to

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<sup>82</sup> Clark, *Perfection*, 179.

himself. The King of Tars learns from the exemplary actions of his daughter, and follows the commands she gives that allow him to improve his leadership ability. The King accepts the authority of his daughter, allowing her word to supersede his in all cases, and as such recognises her superiority, but it is only when he learns finally how to follow her example that the romance can end. This improvement of the Christian King of Tars comes from the Sultaness' direct command as well as from her example, and it is to her character and its implications that we now turn.

### The reforming Princess

The Princess of Tars, following her father's failure, embodies many of the aims of fourteenth-century reformist writing across the political and religious spheres. She chooses self-sacrifice herself for the benefit of her subjects, and as a result is rewarded with secular and spiritual *dominium*. I want to begin by contesting Karen Winstead's assessment of the Princess in *Tars*. Winstead argues that the romance upholds 'husbands, fathers, judges and rulers' as 'figures of authority',<sup>83</sup> and she goes on to state that the Princess 'subordinates herself completely to the desires and interests of others, most notably her father and husband'.<sup>84</sup> Winstead's conclusions are informed by her wide survey of Middle English romances, and her reading of *Tars* reflects the misogyny that she finds evidence of in Middle English romance more generally. But a close reading of *Tars* in fact reveals the mental, physical, and spiritual strength of women, while underscoring weakness in men. The Princess does not submit to masculine authority; instead, she employs wit, reason, and will to direct the actions of the male characters who actually subordinate themselves to her word.

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<sup>83</sup> Winstead, 'Saints, wives', 139.

<sup>84</sup> Winstead, 'Saints, wives', 144.

When the romance begins, the Princess defers to her father's authority, supporting military action in defence of her kingdom and self. Even so, her father is willing, even before his military defeat, to defer to the Princess' wishes with regards the Sultan's proposal, and his deference to his daughter problematises Winstead's assessment of patriarchal authority in *Tars*. Once the King's cowardice causes 30,000 deaths, the Princess becomes the Sultanness of Damas, and changes her kingdom by taking authority, governance of military affairs as well as her own life and body, from her father. Mary Ellzey argues that, in romances like *Tars*, women only take power from men when those men are compromised in some way.<sup>85</sup> Yet, while Ellzey acknowledges the Sultan's flaws, stating that the Princess 'is superior because of her religion',<sup>86</sup> she overlooks instances where the Princess also takes power from her father, and she does not, therefore, acknowledge that the King of Tars may also be morally compromised. Yet, her assessment of male-female power relationships certainly can equally apply to the relationship between the Princess and the King of Tars. While the Sultan is compromised because of his false faith, the King is compromised through cowardice, military failure, and his disregard of the lives of his subjects. The Princess, by contrast, makes her choices, exhibiting a strength of courage and enduring trials with strength and patience, and prioritising the lives of her humbler subjects above her own.

By highlighting compromised male authority and elevating a woman imbued with grace and natural ethical leadership abilities to replace it, *Tars* prefigures Lollard beliefs about female agency and power. Many orthodox writers, in the late fourteenth century, associate female spiritual authority, preaching and teaching, with the evils of Lollardy.<sup>87</sup> Various Lollards did argue in the late fourteenth century that any person in grace (ethically virtuous), be they a laywoman or layman, had the right to take over roles reserved for the

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<sup>85</sup> Ellzey, 'Advice of wives', 44-52.

<sup>86</sup> Ellzey, 'Advice of wives', 46.

<sup>87</sup> Krug, *Reading families*, 114-5; Aston, 'Lollard women priests?', 49-51.



clergy.<sup>88</sup> In the 1390s, Walter Brut, a Lollard, preached the idea that ethically good women had the right and the power to preach and perform the sacraments.<sup>89</sup> In the fifteenth century, before he and members of his community were examined and condemned in a series of heresy trials (1428-31), William White, a preacher in Norwich, ran a Lollard spiritual community that educated laymen and women, and supported the spiritual authority of women.<sup>90</sup> Of its members, Mrs. Foxe ran a Lollard school and, for a while after William White died, his wife Joan White took full control of his duties as a priest.<sup>91</sup> The Lollard text, *Dis is the Ave Maria*, shares the conventional belief that no man can surpass a woman in wickedness, however: ‘Whanne wymmen ben turnyd fully to goodnesse, ful hard it is þat any man passe hem in goodnesse’.<sup>92</sup> The Princess is such a woman; her ethics are fully steadfast and to such a level of goodness that, even after her husband’s and father’s apparent sins are corrected, she retains authority over them. Like these Lollard women, the Princess of Tars fills roles reserved for the clergy in late medieval society, by determining and confirming a priest’s rights to perform his duties, teaching the creed to the Sultan, prescribing penitential actions affecting the soul health of her father, husband, and the kingdoms of Tars and Damas, and calling a crusade. *Tars* prefigures the Lollardy of Walter Brut and William White by professing a desire to see women lead in secular as well as spiritual matters, and the romance embraces the position of complaint writers who desired selfless leaders to look after all of their subjects, even their humble ones.

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<sup>88</sup> A. Hudson, ‘English heresy’, 156-7; A. Hudson (ed.), ‘Confession of Hawisia Moone of Loddon, 1430’, in *Selections from English Wycliffite writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 34-7, esp. 35; M. Aston, ‘William White’s Lollard followers’, in *Lollards and reformers* (London: The Hambleton Press, 1984) 71-100; Aston, ‘Lollardy and sedition’, 15-7; Aston, ‘Women priests’, 49-70; Krug, *Reading families*, 118-31.

<sup>89</sup> Aston, ‘Lollard Women Priests?’, 52.

<sup>90</sup> Krug, *Reading families*, 118-31; Aston, ‘William White’, 71-100.

<sup>91</sup> Krug, *Reading families*, 118-9; Aston, ‘William White’, 87-8.

<sup>92</sup> Winn (ed.), *Wyclif*, 5.

The Princess begins to replace her father after he loses in battle to the Sultan. The Princess highlights that her father's military weakness and the resulting deaths of Christian men motivate her sacrifice.

Sir, lete me be the soudan's wiif

And rere na more cunttek no striif

As hath ben here bifore.

*For me hath mani men ben schent,*

*Cités nomen and tounes brent;*

Allas that ich was bore!

Fader, Y wil serve at wille

The soudan bothe loude and stille,

And leve on God almight.

*Bot it so be, he schal thee spille*

*And alle thi lond take him tille*

With batayle and with fight.

Certes Y nil no lenger dreye

*That Cristen folk for me dye—*

It were a diolful sight! (223-37, Italics mine)

She also acknowledges that she will convert to the Saracen religion, sacrificing her faith, spiritual health, and eternal life in addition to her bodily freedoms. The motivation behind the Princess' sacrifice comes from, 'grief for the suffering and loss of life, personal and otherwise, which [war] entails'—a grief, Walter argues, that medieval thinkers believed to be the source of true courage.<sup>93</sup> Whereas, prior to the battle, the Princess does desire warfare with the Saracens, post-battle she believes that if war continues, all of her lands will be

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<sup>93</sup> Walter, 'Peril, flight', 24.

conquered and all of her people will die. She shows an awareness of her father's failure, and chooses to take the dominant role to correct the consequences of that failure. In the highlighted statements in the quoted passage above, the Princess focuses on the value of her father's land and the Christian people who have already died. This contrasts significantly with her father's selfish impression that the Princess' sacrifice will affect only his life and that of her mother. As Walter states: 'The first philosophical question the romance asks then, is [...] are 30,000 lives worth sacrificing for one?'.<sup>94</sup> Ultimately, the Princess denies that her life is worth more than the lives of the 30,000 soldiers who have already died. In fact, she goes beyond the value of her life alone, weighing those 30,000 of her subjects' earthly lives as more valuable than her own eternal life. Unlike her father, the Princess demonstrates that she loves her 'comynthe' above herself, valuing her subjects *in totem* and displaying a selfless, and therefore virtuous, courage.

Despite her father's selfishness, her selfless sacrifice acts to protect all of Christendom only at her expense:

The maiden preyd hem bothe tho  
That thai schuld bi her conseyl do  
To saven Cristen kende. (298-330)

Ultimately, of course, the romance does not call on the Princess to realise her avowed willingness to sacrifice body and soul. However, at this point in the narrative her character does not know this. Her sacrifice does not in any way guarantee success; without her, Tars is still vulnerable, the King of Tars still militarily weak, and she has no actual power or recourse to force her new husband to turn from sin. 'There can be no possible assurance that death will ensure victory in battle or the safety of one's homeland or loved ones,' Clark states; 'there can be no possible assurance that one's own death will further the ideological or political

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<sup>94</sup> Walter, 'Form and the formless', 132.

changes one believes are desperately needed for the common good'.<sup>95</sup> Yet by taking the risk, the Princess shows 'the greatest possible strength with which one can adhere to the highest goods of reason'.<sup>96</sup> From the Princess' perspective, she is willing to accept a spiritual death that surpasses the bodily sacrifice of the martyr in hagiography, whose suffering is after death exchanged for a heavenly reward. The Princess, here, chooses to sacrifice her access to eternal life by submitting to a Saracen husband, 'And leve on God almight', in order to save her subjects. In such a character, we see the poet of *Tars* exemplify a leader in a state of grace, one who would be prepared to hold the lives of their subjects not only above their own life, but their immortal soul as well.

The Princess' sacrifice proves her idyllic virtue and courage as described by Aquinas, and also connects her to Lollard beliefs about spiritual leadership. Aquinas, Clark writes, argues that 'a person's love for a thing is proved in proportion to the value of what he despises for its sake, and likewise in proportion to the disvalue of what he chooses to suffer for its sake'.<sup>97</sup> The love the Princess feels for her people is therefore immense by Aquinas' argument, as she willingly risks eternity in hell to save them. Lollards sometimes praised these same features, for example the writer of the 'Sermon of John 10:11-18' promotes the selflessness that the Princess demonstrates.

*A good heerde, as Crist seiþ, puttþ his liif for hise scheep, for more charite mai noon haue þan to putt his liif for his freendis, and, if he worchip wiisli, for to brynge þese scheepe to heuene, for þus þe heerde haþ moost peyne and þe scheep moost profit.*<sup>98</sup>

Although a secular shepherd, the Princess does ensure that she suffers pain so that her subjects can profit. The Princess argues, with a martyr's sacrificial logic, that her role as a

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<sup>95</sup> Clark, *Perfection*, 213.

<sup>96</sup> Clark, *Perfection*, 214.

<sup>97</sup> Clark, *Perfection*, 209.

<sup>98</sup> Hudson (ed.), *Selections*, 64-5.

leader requires that she protect her humbler subjects at any cost. As Clark states, ‘the martyr stands firm in the truth that she professes, and in doing so she preserves justice with regard to her relation to God *and* to the human community’.<sup>99</sup> Clark continues:

Aquinas cannot simply discount the martyr’s own loss of life as insignificant to her act of virtue. Indeed, it is her adherence to the good of virtue in the face of this loss that makes it the greatest proof of charity [which is the] natural expression of her love of the common good over self.<sup>100</sup>

Through her virtuous sacrifice, the Princess not only proves that she is a ‘good woman’ but also a better leader than her father, in so far as she demonstrates full awareness of the responsibility that a position of such significant power requires.

Through her sacrifice, the Princess of Tars becomes the Sultanness of Damas and appears to lose her Christian identity. After her marriage, the Sultanness publicly practises the Saracen faith, recites their prayers, and dresses like a Saracen. Calkin argues that ‘at this point, the tale’s illumination of the problems of discerning individuals’ religious identities from their physical behaviours and appearance becomes most apparent’.<sup>101</sup> The Sultanness retains Christianity in her heart, but in her behaviour and dress she appears to have fully sacrificed her Christian identity. Yet, her willingness to participate in Saracen ritual highlights the risk to her soul that she takes in order to save the lives of her subjects.

The poet rewards the Princess’ selfless sacrifice by having Christ visit her on the eve of her conversion, offering her spiritual comfort and a promise to reward her sacrifice with miracles in the future. Even though the Sultanness is willing to sacrifice the public aspects of her faith in Him by converting to another religion, the meritorious grace behind her sacrifice—saving her ‘comynthe’ bodily and spiritually—is worthy of reward. To reward the

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<sup>99</sup> Clark, *Perfection*, 219.

<sup>100</sup> Clark, *Perfection*, 219.

<sup>101</sup> Calkin, ‘Marking religion’, 223.

Princess, Christ uses her *raptus* and conversion for the advantage of the ‘common good’, using the Sultanness’ strength of character and command to bring life, convert her husband, save 10,000 Christian knights and a priest, provide penitential crusade for her father, convert a Sultanate to Christianity, and protect Tars from future invasion.

Christ comes to the Sultanness in a dream vision. In her dream, she is attacked by black demon hounds who pursue her unto death. Christ overtakes the body of one of these hounds, dresses it as a white knight, and speaks to her through it, promising to protect her from all harm. Most editors of the poem punctuate the lines of this scene in such a way as to suggest that Christ himself comes to her, fully separate from the Saracen hounds. Yet, Cord Whitaker has highlighted the syntactical incongruity with this editorial practice, showing convincingly that the sense of the lines support the summary above.<sup>102</sup> The full passage in Chandler’s edition places a full stop at the end of line 445, separating the clauses describing the hounds and Christ’s use of might:

Yete hir thought withouten lesing  
Als sche lay in hir swevening  
(That selcouthe was to rede)  
That blac hounde hir was folweing.  
Thurth might of Jhesu, Heven king,  
Spac to hir in manhede  
In white clothes als a knight,  
And seyde to hir, ‘Mi swete wight,  
No tharf thee nothing drede  
Of Ternagaunt no of Mahoun.

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<sup>102</sup> Whitaker, ‘Black metaphors’, 183-7.

Thi Lord that suffred passioun  
Schal help thee at thi nede.’ (442-53)

Whitaker suggests that this full stop should be amended, changing the phrasing instead to read:

That blac hounde hir was folweing,  
Thurth might of Jhesu, Heven king,  
Spac to hir in manhede.<sup>103</sup>

This creates more syntactical congruency, helping to identify what it is that speaks to her ‘through the might of Jesus, heaven king’. Most other heroes of romance who receive messages from God are instructed through a proxy, usually an angel or an animal, and such romance conventions also support Whitaker’s argument.<sup>104</sup> With the lines amended, the Sultan’s eventual conversion and miraculous colour change are prefigured in the Sultanness’ dream vision, when ‘a black hound that menacingly pursues the princess in a dream suddenly becomes a comforting mouthpiece for Christ’.<sup>105</sup> At that moment, the Sultanness is pursued by the Sultan, and only much later is he ‘dressed up’ as a white knight and able to protect her from Saracens. Furthermore, reading the dream vision as a prophecy also serves to clarify events later on in the romance. As we will see below, the Sultanness believes wholeheartedly that her suffering will culminate in the conversion of her husband and his Sultanate, and her monstrous child is but a catalyst for this change, implying that a message of this sort was delivered to her through Christ’s visit. The dream vision also performs an emotional function for the Sultanness. In the morning, after she wakes from her dream, her great sorrow is relieved ‘Of that swevening in slepe sche thought, / Schuld turn to gode ending’ (461-462).

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<sup>103</sup> Whitaker, ‘Black metaphors’, 184.

<sup>104</sup> Hudson (ed.), ‘*Isumbras*’, ll. 41-2 (fowl); S. J. Herrtage (ed.), ‘*Roland and Vernagu*’, in ‘*The tail of Rauf Coilyer*’, ‘*Roland and Vernagu*’, and ‘*Otinel*’, EETS E. S. 39 (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1882) 35-61, l. 806 (angel); Herrtage (ed.), ‘*Otuel*’, 63-116, l. 577 (dove).

<sup>105</sup> Whitaker, ‘Black metaphors’, 183.

She knows for the first time since her sacrifice that she will be protected and that her sacrifice may create political and spiritual change. Again, this justifies the dream vision as a type of prophecy rather than a simple promise. She also shows her spiritual strength by interpreting such a dream correctly.

The Sultan has yet to be converted at this point in the narrative; however, the dream vision's message is still to be realised. Christ has no knight to be his proxy to protect the Sultaness while the Sultan remains unconverted, so he performs the duty himself. During the period of time when her father has failed and when her husband cannot serve her faith, Christ performs the duties of Christian knighthood that her husband and father cannot. She is converted to the Saracen faith publicly, but her inner Christian faith is protected. Christ chooses her to work for him on earth, turning the human cogs so that his miracles can occur. She becomes his soldier, his priest, and his labourer, and this authority comes from her ethics and not by virtue of her social rank. As a Middle English translation of Wyclif's *De Papa* argues, 'Croune and cloþ maken no prest, ne the Emperowrs bischop wiþ his wordis, but power þat Crist ȝiveþ'.<sup>106</sup> So too *Tars* argues.

Christ's and the Sultaness' miraculous plan begins with her pregnancy. The Sultaness gives birth to a lifeless lump of flesh (574-9), instigating a contest between Christ and the Saracen gods that enables Christianity to prove its superiority. This helps negate the negative impact of her father's failure through which the Saracen faith emerged as apparently superior, and reveals the strength of authority wielded by the Sultaness. The Sultaness uses this monstrous birth as a means of taking *dominium*—control of a kingdom and its subjects—from her Saracen husband. She does this by verbally controlling the Sultan's actions, and through him, the Sultanate as a whole.

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<sup>106</sup> Winn (ed.), *Wyclif*, 3.



The Sultan, upon seeing the child, berates and threatens the Sultanness, blaming its deformity on her lack of faith in the Saracen gods (586-97). The Sultanness is in real danger from her husband's anger, being in a vulnerable position both physically and politically. Yet, with rhetorical strength, she takes the upper hand by challenging the Sultan to prove his claims. She suggests that he take the child before his gods and see if they can bring the child back to life (598-618). The Sultan calmly consents to this, despite the rage he had felt towards his wife and her subordinate position in the social hierarchy (618-20).<sup>107</sup>

The Sultan takes the child before his gods and prays all day, but the child is not animated (621-42). The Sultan, in his last emotional frenzy, destroys his idols, effectively denying the viability of his own faith, and reforming his own ethical framework (643-60). Prior to his baptism, the Sultanness effectively corrects the Sultan's vices by showing him that his idols are false gods and by redirecting his uncontrolled anger in positive ways. When the Sultan returns to his wife, lamenting his gods' failure, the Sultanness again takes control of the situation, suggesting to her husband that they now test Christianity (670-81). The Sultan again submits to her and promises to convert if the child is healed (682-93). This test of her God requires that he find a priest in his dungeons (706-14), and again, the Sultan follows her command (715-7). The Sultanness successfully tempers the Sultan's anger with reason, and usurps authority from him by using logic and physical proof to correct her husband's rational errors.

The Sultan locates the priest Cleophas in his dungeons, and yet his clerical identity alone is not sufficient for the Sultanness, who interviews Cleophas to determine if he is indeed worthy enough to perform the duties of a priest. She does so by asking two questions: 'Artow a prest?' (724) and 'Canstow of Cristen lore?' (726). Cleophas demonstrates some level of

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<sup>107</sup> Chandler has a line number 'skip', although these should be lines 619-620, they are labelled incorrectly.

Latin and confirms his professional identity: ‘In verbo Dei ich was on, / Tuenti winter gon and more’ (728-9). He goes on to describe his career as a priest and laments his incarceration: ‘Ten winter song Y masse non / And that me liketh ille’ (731-2), he says, for so much time has passed in prison ‘with wrong and gret unskille’ (735). The priest has at least confirmed his experience singing mass, indicating his ability to consecrate a host and therefore perform sacraments, and he also indicates his patient suffering in imitation of Christ.

To the culture of late fourteenth-century England, this apparently simple exchange would have seemed highly contentious. Orthodox belief, as described by the Lollard *Designavit Dominus Iesus*, held that ‘no prest schulde preche to þe peple but if he hadde leue of þe bischop or leue of þe pope’.<sup>108</sup> Wyclif and his followers, by contrast, argued that this insistence that scripture be thickly veiled allowed the clergy to deceive their parishioners, arguing that virtue rather than hierarchical power should determine one’s worthiness.<sup>109</sup> The image of a deceitful, unworthy priest is satirised within the Lollard poem, *Allas, What Schul We Freris Do?*, in which a friar laments how laymen contest his authority as a priest, ‘Alle abowte whire I go / Thei aposen me of it’, and through their education in scripture ‘oure disseytis bene aspiede’.<sup>110</sup> The Sultanness claims authority over the priests within the sultanate. The image of a laywoman judging a priest’s worthiness to perform his role would become associated later in the century with heterodox belief, and emerged as the focus of many vitriolic rants by orthodox thinkers. The *Tars*-poet, in this scene, anticipates the later claims of Lollards that virtue, especially the degree possessed by the Sultanness, renders the virtuous worthy of *dominium*, regardless of their social status or gender.

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<sup>108</sup> Hudson (ed.), *Selections*, 120.

<sup>109</sup> J. Dean (ed.), ‘*Allas, What Schul We Freris Do?*’, in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 60-74, ll. 112-9.

<sup>110</sup> Dean (ed.), ‘*Allas?*’, 56-7, ll. 3-4 & 29.

The Sultanness' conversation with Cleophas reveals that she has planned well beyond simply healing her child, and that in line with her dream vision, her aim is ultimately to convert the Sultan and his subjects to Christianity. Rather than explain to the priest that her child should be converted and animated, as she had to her husband, she shows a desire to turn many 'houndes' into 'Cristen men':

Lat be thi fare.

Thou schalt be brought out of thi care,

And tow wilt held thee stille.

For thurth thine help in this stounde,

We schul make Cristen men of houndes—

God graunt it yif it be His wille. (736-41)

She uses the plurals here, suggesting that many hounds are to be made Christian and in no way references the child. This also demonstrates, as I alluded to earlier, that she values the spiritual health of all of her subjects, including her Saracen ones. For while she uses derogatory language to describe them, arguably, in seeking their conversion, she is trying to save them spiritually and physically by making them Christian. It is only after discussing her Saracen subjects *in totem* that she reveals the specific plan of baptising, and therefore healing, her child (743-56). This is further evidence that the Sultanness rules selflessly and her ultimate goal is the spiritual healing of Damas, requiring that the Saracens under her care convert to Christianity so that they can have access to heaven. It is the baptismal healing of her child that is the catalyst behind the conversion of Damas, but the goals of her leadership extend well beyond her immediate family. The priest does as she requests and baptises the child and it is animated (760-74). In these moments, the Sultanness becomes a commander in Christ's army, organising the human factors behind Christ's miracles herself.

The Sultanness reveals that she still feels strongly about her husband and child, even if she prioritises the conversion of the Sultanate as a whole. Upon seeing her child animated, she prays to God, revealing that she feels love for her husband and genuinely desires that he be converted also.

Lord, ich pray Thee  
Almighti God in Trinité,  
So give me might and space  
That Y may that day yse  
Mi lord wald ycristned be,  
The soudan of Damas. (787-93)

This is her only direct prayer in the romance, and represents her genuine hope in her husband's conversion and shows the love she feels for her family, even if her subjects are her priority. Even with this love, she stands firm in her conviction, acting towards the conversion of her husband with rhetorical strength and skill. Despite the love she feels, her conversation with her husband following this prayer belies her emotional attachment to him. The Sultanness presents their now animate child to her husband with satisfaction, declaring that her God is greater than his:

Mahoun no Apolin  
Is nought worth the brostle of a swin  
Ogain mi Lordes grace! (796-8)

The Sultan is overjoyed when he sees the child:

Leman min,  
Ywis ich am glad afin  
Of this child that Y se. (799-801)

The Sultanness subsequently takes command of her husband, requiring that he submit to her will within the bond of marriage, and thus taking on for herself the traditional station of the husband, as the head of his wife. The Sultanness denies the Sultan paternity of the child:

Ya, sir, bi Seyn Martin

Yif the halvendel wer thin

Wel glad might thou be. (802-4)

The Sultan is confused and seeks clarity: ‘O dame [...] hou is that? / Is it nought min that Y bigat?’ (805-6). She creates the sense that the child has been switched, and a completely different child sits before the Sultan. This move is purely rhetorical, however, the trump card in her bid for *dominium* in marriage, and she proceeds to outline what he must do before he can claim her or their child as family.

‘No sir,’ than seyde sche,

‘Bot thou were cristned so it is—

Thou no hast no part theron ywis,

Noither of the child ne of me.

[...]

And yif thou were a Cristen man

Bothe were thine,’ sche seyde than,

‘Thi childe and eke thi wive.’ (807-19)

This argument places the Sultanness in the position of authority within the structure of her family unit, denying the Sultan’s right to his own child unless he concedes to her desires. The Sultan subsequently subordinates himself to her, choosing to convert in order to maintain his family unit (823-34). Cleophas, the priest, also agrees to baptise the Sultan (885-8). Although Cleophas is present, the Sultanness teaches the vital creed (the central tenets of Christianity) to the Sultan (835-70). As in *Piers the Plowman’s Crede*, a Lollard poem, a layperson is the

source of religious education.<sup>111</sup> Such scenes would have seemed positively contentious to late fourteenth-century readers schooled in the religious controversy of Lollardy.

The Sultan is converted and through baptism his skin changes from black to white. This scene has consistently been interpreted as evidence of the poet's racism, with critics arguing that it represents his or her desire to make all Saracens white before they can be incorporated into the Christian community.<sup>112</sup> Yet no other Saracen baptisms in this romance come with this colour change, suggesting that becoming Christian does not necessitate becoming white (1045-7 & 1222-4). The Sultan's change of colour does not inspire the conversion of his kingdom, as the colour change, and his subjects' response to it, goes unmentioned in the parliament that follows. The change functions as a miracle only for the Sultan and Sultanness, providing evidence of God's power and generating faith in the Sultan and renewing it in the Sultanness. It is only after the Sultan witnesses his own colour change that true faith in Christ is achieved: 'And when the soudan seye that sight / Than leved he wele on God almight' (925-6). It also serves as evidence, to the Sultanness, that the conversion was true. She displays emotional catharsis at the sight of his transformation.

The levedi thonked God that day;

For joie sche wepe with eyghen gray,

Unnethe hir lord sche knewe.

*Than wist sche wele in her thought*

*That on Mahoun leved he nought*

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<sup>111</sup> J. Dean (ed.), '*Piers the Plowman's Creed*', in *Six ecclesiastical satires*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991) Robbins Library Digital Projects, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/dean-six-ecclesiastical-satires-plowmans-tale-introduction>, 1-49, ll. 793-840.

<sup>112</sup> Calkin, 'Monstrous intermingling', 97-132; Calkin, 'Romance baptisms', 105-19; Calkin, 'Marking religion', 219-38; Gilbert, 'Unnatural mothers', 329-44; Gilbert, 'Putting the pulp', 102-23; Lampert, 'Race, periodicity', 391-421; Friedman, 'Making whiteness', 52-63; Hahn, 'The difference', 1-37.

*For chaunged was his hewe.*

For that hir lord was crised so,

*Oway was went al hir wo—*

Hir joie gan wax al newe. (934-42; Italics mine)

The transformation is as much for her as it is for the audience. Cathartic emotional scenes are often seen in romances where lovers have been reunited after years apart.<sup>113</sup> In a way, the Sultan and Sultanness have indeed been separated, although religious rather than geographical or political borders had divided them. His conversion effectively removes the barriers to their relationship, but also realises the dream Christ sent to the Sultanness. In her dream vision, a black heathen hound is changed into a white knight and speaks for Christ, protecting the Sultanness from the remaining black hounds. The Sultan, now converted and changed, fulfils that prophecy and can also protect his wife from the unconverted Saracens who remain. Once the Sultan is converted he makes it clear to his wife that both of their lives are in danger because of that conversion. Should either of them be discovered before their official announcement, they will be executed (878-82). The Sultan and Sultanness are now an effective partnership and their conversion is made public in such a way as to gain the maximal benefit for the Sultan, Sultanness, and the subjects of both Tars and Damas.

Although the Sultan is now a Christian, he does not take over *dominium*. Instead, the Sultanness retains authority over the Sultan, who follows her commands explicitly. She commands that he first send for her father, and then orchestrates a conversion crusade through which the people of Damas can be brought into the fold of Christianity:

‘Mi lord,’ sche seyde with hert fre,

‘Sende now this prest in priveté

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<sup>113</sup> Herzman, Drake, & Salisbury (eds.), ‘*King Horn*’, ll. 1207-22; Hudson (ed.), ‘*Isumbras*’, ll. 645-78.

To mi fader the king,  
And pray him for the love of me  
That he com swithe hider to thee  
With alle that he may bring.  
And when mi fader is to thee come,  
Do cristen thi lond alle and some,  
Bothe eld and ying.  
And he that wil be cristned nought,  
Loke to the deth that he be brought,  
Withouten ani duelleing.’ (943-54)

Whitaker argues that the Sultan initiates the final conflict, and that this suggests that the Saracen violence is problematic because it stems from him.<sup>114</sup> ‘All other characters, even the warrior king of Tars himself’, he states, ‘only respond to the Sultan’s call for violence’.<sup>115</sup> However, the call to violence comes not from the Sultan, but from the Sultanness. *Tars* does not question the need for crusade, as *Isumbras* does. Instead, the crusade is valued and given a multi-faceted purpose: by sending for her father, the Princess offers him a penitential prescription to atone for his sins; by converting Damas, she saves the souls of her subjects. The crusade proves an opportunity for the Sultan to teach the King of Tars military skills, and ensures the safety of Tars by teaching the King to fight. Immediately upon the King of Tars’ arrival in Damas, the Sultan’s household is converted without military action. Some choose death, but most convert (1039-50). The Sultan also frees from prison and secures the loyalty of 10,000 Christian knights (1051-62). As the conversion begins, and the new alliance of Tars and Damas is confirmed, the Sultanness becomes further removed from the central action.

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<sup>114</sup> Whitaker, ‘Black metaphors’, 188-92.

<sup>115</sup> Whitaker, ‘Black metaphors’, 190.



However, her commands in regards that war, who participates in it, and the consequences of non-compliance, are all determined by her authority.

These commands, given over twelve lines, reflect the proto-feminist arguments of some late fourteenth-century Lollards. The Sultanness ‘usurps’ roles reserved in late medieval society for prelates and priests. She designs a penitential strategy for her father, calls a crusade, and outlines the spiritual goals and military actions of that crusade. The romance shows the Sultanness in a state of grace and offers this as the reason for her *dominium*, provided by Christ. Hawisia Moon, a member of William White’s Lollard sect, between 1428 and 1431 confessed to the heterodox belief ‘þat euery man and euery woman beyng in good lyf oute of synne is as good prest and hath as muche poar of God in al thyng as ony prest ordred, be he pope or bisshop’.<sup>116</sup> *Tars* agrees, using Christ’s direct action to place the power of a pope or bishop into the hands of his chosen heroine. Hawisia continues, ‘þat he oonly þat is moost holy and moost parfit in lyvyng in erthe is verry pope’.<sup>117</sup> By possessing ethical virtues—a selfless desire to protect her people, and heal every member of her family—the Sultanness anticipates the reformist dreams of complaint writers and Lollards interested in selfless leadership as well as female empowerment. Her commands allow her father and her husband’s subjects to be saved by conversion. She need not sacrifice herself to achieve this, but promotes the most effective pathway to ensure the greatest number of lives and souls are saved. One Lollard text, which Hudson entitles ‘On the nature of the Church’, defines ‘true preaching’, arguing that ‘þise prechours prechen trewli to edifie þe peple in vertu’.<sup>118</sup> The Sultanness ensures the greatest spiritual benefit for the most people, including her family, by blood and law, and her subjects in both *Tars* and *Damas*.

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<sup>116</sup> Hudson (ed.), *Selections*, 35.

<sup>117</sup> Hudson (ed.), *Selections*, 35.

<sup>118</sup> Hudson (ed.), *Selections*, 118.

The Sultanness' secular and religious authority aligns her with late fourteenth-century Lollard thinking. From her first sacrificial action, and especially from the birth of her child, the Sultanness embodies secular and religious authority by the Lollard definition— teaching the Creed and determining the worthiness of a priest; making a penitential prescription for her father and orchestrating the crusade as a means of removing his sin; correcting her husband's false faith and unifying her family; and calling a conversion crusade and organising its military action—because she is in a state of grace (ethically virtuous), given power directly from God without intermediary, and, even as a laywoman, given *dominium* by him. *Tars* highlights the value of the Princess' uncompromising selflessness as leader and never returns authority to the male characters even after their sins have been corrected. In this respect, the Sultanness represents the early fourteenth-century desire for female authority and autonomy that were being developed and embraced by some late fourteenth-century Lollards. It is these features that account for the place of *Tars* alongside other potentially radical writing within the Auchinleck manuscript, and account also for its re-emergence in the Simeon and Vernon manuscripts in the 1390s.

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*Tars* reveals its reformist potential in the characterisation and actions of the King and Princess of Tars. By representing the Christian King of Tars as cowardly and weak, *Tars* both highlights the problems with Christian military leadership and radicalises the relationship between Christian and Saracen by having a Saracen teach the King of Tars how to protect Christendom militarily. These issues reflect the concerns of Auchinleck complaint poems, such as the *Simonie* and *Sayings*, and the issues they attribute to England's downfall. The romance offers the virtuous Princess as a means of correcting the failures of patriarchal Christian leadership, both spiritual and secular. The poem prefigures Lollard philosophies promoted by Walter Brut and William White that so concerned fourteenth- and fifteenth-

century orthodox writers. It also agrees with Wyclif's beliefs about grace and *dominium*, expanded by Lollards, using the character of Christ to promote them. It exemplarises the Princess' selfless leadership style, in which she shows a willingness to sacrifice her eternal soul in order to assure that Tars is peaceful and to protect the lives of her subjects and family. The King of Tars' cowardice and selfish disregard for the lives of his subjects is the foil against which to read the Princess' selfless heroism. Where the King of Tars can only think of blood family, not understanding the responsibilities of kingship, the Princess becomes a highly idealised leader who loves her subjects above her own family and self, demonstrating the poet's vision of exemplary virtue leading to *dominium*.

All the male characters in *Tars* significantly submit willingly to the Princess' authority, raising no issues with her right to command: the King of Tars accepts her counsel and recognises her moral and intellectual superiority; the Sultan of Damas willingly submits to her even before his conversion; the priest Cleophas does not question the woman's ability to judge his own worthiness, nor does he interfere when she educates a Saracen convert in the creed; and the divine male, Christ, is revealed as the source of the Princess' authority, further legitimising it. The belief that ethical females could replace corrupt male religious and secular officials is embraced by this romance and demonstrates that these ideas were not unique to late fourteenth-century Lollardy, but had currency in England from at least the 1330s—the date of Auchinleck's production. The desire for female agency and lower class agency within early fourteenth-century literature reveals earlier origins for the issues that gained social traction later in the century, to the point of open defiance of secular and religious law. *Tars* shows that the social issues central to Lollardy were already visible in the literary record prior to Wyclif's defiance. Its re-emergence in the Simeon and Vernon manuscripts speaks to the continued popularity of the romance, after Wyclif's ideas had emerged.

## Chapter Three

### Rebellion and reform: *The Earl of Toulouse* and the 1381 Peasants' Revolt

*The Earl of Toulouse* (*Toulouse*) is a romance that raises several issues central to reformist movements, especially the literature and precipitating factors behind the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. *Toulouse* explores tyrannical leadership and corrupt legal procedure, problematises the moral and legal value of troth-plights and social misogyny, removes *dominium* from sinners, and argues that armed rebellion can sometimes be necessary in order to curtail tyranny. *Toulouse* also uses terms that had allegorical currency for fourteenth-century rebels and reformers; 'trawthe' and 'untrawthe', right and wrong. In this chapter, I draw out these resonances by exploring *Toulouse* alongside literature from the Peasants' Revolt, William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and *Truthe, Reste, and Pes*, all of which engage with truth debates, define ethical behaviour, and prescribe social reform.

*Toulouse* is a Middle English romance believed to be composed in the middle of the fourteenth century, but this dating is speculative as there are no fourteenth-century manuscript witnesses.<sup>1</sup> *Toulouse* does survive in three fifteenth-century manuscripts—Lincoln, Cathedral Library, MS 91 (Thornton, c. 1425-50),<sup>2</sup> Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.2.38 (c. 1445-c. 1500),<sup>3</sup> and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 6922 (Ashmole 61, c.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Hoyt & C. B. Hale (eds.), *Middle English metrical romances* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1930) 383-419:383; A. Laskaya & E. Salisbury (eds.), 'The Earl of Toulouse', in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001) 309-65:309.

<sup>2</sup> R. Hanna III, 'The growth of Robert Thornton's books', *Studies in Bibliography*, 40 (1987) 51-61:51; R. M. Thompson, *Catalogue of the manuscripts of Lincoln Cathedral library* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1989) 69.

<sup>3</sup> The date range is from M. Johnston, 'Two Leicestershire romance codices: Cambridge, University Library, MS F.2.38 and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61', *Journal of the Early Book Society* (2012) 85-100:86; also, see F. Hülsmann, 'The watermarks of four late medieval manuscripts containing *The Erle of Tolous*', *Notes and Queries*, 32, 1 (1985) 11-2; F. McSparran & P. R. Robinson (intro.), *Cambridge University Library MS. Ff.2.38* (London: Scholar Press, 1979) xii.

1470-c. 1500)<sup>4</sup>—and one sixteenth-century manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 6926 (Ashmole 45, c. 1530-40).<sup>5</sup> It is possible, considering *Toulouse*'s consistent resonances with the political events and reformist ideology of the 1380s, that the romance was composed or translated into English during the 1380s in response to these events. The story itself is known to have existed in several analogues from several genres (plays, chronicles, etc.) ranging from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries,<sup>6</sup> leading critics to speculate that *Toulouse* is a translation of a French original or derived from one of its earlier Spanish analogues.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of its origins, the Middle English romance differs in significant detail from its analogues: Dyoclysyen's war and Barnard's rebellion, the court case and the misogyny associated with it, Barnard acting as confessor, Dyoclysyen's death, and the subsequent marriage of Barnard to Beulybon are all additions unique to *Toulouse*.<sup>8</sup> The reformist message described below emerges from out of the variants that make the Middle English *Toulouse* unique.

Critics have not yet explored *Toulouse* for reformist resonances. Indeed, Arlyn Diamond states that the romance 'does not lead the reader to consider what alternative strategies [Beulybon] might have employed, as happens in Chaucer's *Melibee*, in the writings of Christine de Pizan, in *Piers Plowman*, and in other works with an interest in social

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<sup>4</sup> Hülsmann, 'Watermarks', 12; G. Shuttleton (ed.), 'Erle of Tolouse', in *Codex Ashmole 61: a compilation of popular English verse*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008) 2-3; Johnston, 'Leicestershire romance', 87.

<sup>5</sup> Hülsmann, 'Watermarks', 12.

<sup>6</sup> L. Hibbard (Loomis), *Mediaeval romance in England: a study of the sources and analogues of the non-cyclic metrical romances* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1960) 35-44; adding to S. Paris, 'Le roman du Conte Toulouse', *Annales du Midi*, 12 (1900) 1-31; and G. Lüdtke, 'The Erle of Tolous and the Empress of Almayne', *Sammlung englischer Denkmaler*, 3 (1881); for a summary of Hibbard, see Laskaya & Salisbury (eds.), *Breton Lays*, 306, note 1.

<sup>7</sup> W. Calin, *The French tradition and the literature of medieval England* (London: University of Toronto Press, 1994) 431.

<sup>8</sup> Hibbard (Loomis), *Mediaeval romance*, 39-43.

reform'.<sup>9</sup> While other critics argue that *Toulouse*, and the Breton Lay genre, express a desire to limit violence in society, this interest in reform is not political or religious, although it does critique inappropriate uses of force.<sup>10</sup> This chapter will expand these discussions, arguing for *Toulouse*'s interest in political, legal, and social reforms above and beyond inappropriate uses of violence, and exploring reform of tyrannical leadership, social misogyny, and legal procedure through counsel, rebellion, and reform. Previous studies of *Toulouse* have generally focused on the broader implications of genre and manuscript context,<sup>11</sup> exploring the poem's connections to Sir Robert Thornton, his manuscript collections, and the literary interests of the gentry,<sup>12</sup> or as evidence for the French origins of Middle English romance.<sup>13</sup> Critics studying *Toulouse* in isolation have described the game and play aspects of the romance,<sup>14</sup> while other studies emphasise the concepts of truth and honour and their centrality to the narrative.<sup>15</sup> Robert Reilly first critiqued the moral structure of honour and

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<sup>9</sup> A. Diamond, 'The Erle of Tolous: the price of virtue', in J. Weiss, J. Fellows, & M. Dickson (eds.), *Middle English insular romance: translation and innovation* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000) 83-92:84.

<sup>10</sup> S. Furnish, 'Thematic structure and symbolic motif in the Middle English Breton Lays', *Traditio*, 62 (2007) 83-118:117; D. Crawford, "'Gronyng wyth grysly wounde": injury in five Middle English Breton Lays', in C. M. Meale (ed.), *Readings in medieval English romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994) 35-52:36-7.

<sup>11</sup> Laskaya & Salisbury (eds.), *Breton Lays*, 309-65; Furnish, 'Thematic structure', 83-118; S. Furnish, 'The modernity of *The Erle of Tolous* and the decay of the Breton Lai', *Medieval Perspectives*, 8 (1993) 69-77; A. Hopkins, 'Female vulnerability as catalyst in the Middle English Breton Lays', in P. Hardman (ed.), *The matter of identity in medieval romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002) 43-58; E. Archibald, 'The Breton Lay in Middle English: genre, transmission, and the *Franklin's Tale*', in J. Weiss, J. Fellows, & M. Dickson (eds.), *Middle English insular romance: translation and innovation* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000) 55-70.

<sup>12</sup> S. Fein & M. Johnston (eds.), *Robert Thornton and his books: essays on the Lincoln and London Thornton manuscripts* (York: York Medieval Press, 2014); M. Johnston, *Romance and the gentry in late medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) esp. 159-205.

<sup>13</sup> Calin, *French tradition*, 427-74.

<sup>14</sup> G. Barnes, 'Deception and game in *The Earl of Toulouse*', *Poetica*, 17 (1984) 31-42; V. L. Weiss, 'Blurring the lines between the play world and the real world', *The Chaucer Review*, 31, 1 (1996) 87-98.

<sup>15</sup> R. Reilly, 'The Earl of Toulouse: a structure of honour', *Mediæval Studies*, 37 (1975) 515-23; Furnish, 'Thematic structure', 112; Crawford, 'Gronyng', 49-51; J. Stavsky, "'Gode in all

determined that good in the romance was defined through key terms like ‘truth’, ‘justice’, ‘fidelity’, and ‘trust’, while bad or evil was defined by ‘falsehood’, ‘injustice’, ‘infidelity’, and ‘lack of trust’.<sup>16</sup> Critics continue to use these terms to investigate the poet’s social attitudes: Donna Crawford, for example, explores how the poet uses these terms to delimit good and evil types of bloodshed.<sup>17</sup> Both Alcuin Blamires and Diamond see these terms illuminating problems with Beulybon’s apparent perfection; Jonathan Stavsky, on the other hand, argues that the poet prescribes ‘pragmatic ethics’, where virtues are applied pragmatically based upon circumstances.<sup>18</sup>

Each of these studies highlights the importance of truth to *Toulouse* as a means of discussing aspects of social culture, speaking about warfare and death, faults in ethics that imply misogyny, or simply a lesson that idyllic morality is dangerous. However, these studies do not address the centrality of ‘truth’ debates to reformist literature, and therefore do not acknowledge the reformist contours of *Toulouse*. Even Richard Green, whose study elucidates medieval definitions of truth and the prevalence and complexity of the term in fourteenth-century England, uses *Toulouse* mainly to define legal-truth, represented in the romance as ‘troth-plights’, arguing that the romance highlights the necessity for good men to keep their word.<sup>19</sup> Contrary to this, in what follows, I argue that *Toulouse* draws attention to troth-plights as a problematic legal mechanism that good men do not need to use and that sinners abuse. Rather than look at how ‘truth’ is used by the poet to delimit aspects of cultural

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thynges”: *The Erle of Tolous*, Susanna and the Elders, and other narratives of righteous women on trial’, *Anglia*, 131, 4 (2013) 538-61:559; A. Blamires, *The case for women in medieval culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 162-8:164; Diamond, ‘Price of virtue’, 91; R. F. Green, *A crisis of truth: literature and law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); T. M. Stone, ““What woman holdyst thou me?”: honour, love, and domesticity in the *Erle of Tolous*”, *Medieval Perspectives*, 17, 1 (2002) 203-22.

<sup>16</sup> Reilly, ‘Structure of honour’, 515-23.

<sup>17</sup> Crawford, ‘Gronyng’, 515-23.

<sup>18</sup> Stavsky, ‘Gode’, 538-61.

<sup>19</sup> Green, *Crisis of truth*.

behaviour, I will explore the broader reaches of ‘truth’, together with the implications of such behavioural signposting within the culture of fourteenth-century reformist movements. The ‘truth’ exhibited by Barnard and Beulybon is, I argue, exemplary, and their actions are supported by God within the narrative, showing how diverse reformist actions can profit a kingdom, and how rebellion is to be encouraged when counsel cannot change tyranny for the better.

#### Barnard’s true rebellion

*Toulouse* engages with several aspects of reformist culture—defining ‘truth’ against ‘falsehood’, highlighting and correcting misogyny in the law, removing *dominium* from sinners, and exploring rebellion as a means of correcting tyranny—through the contrasted ‘trawthe’, on the one hand, of the Empress Beulybon and Barnard, Earl of Toulouse, and, on the other, the ‘untrawthe’ or falseness of Emperor Dyoclysyen and his closest advisors. Dyoclysyen embodies pride, greed, envy, wrath, and sloth, does not possess virtues, and does not perform spiritual or temporal acts of mercy. Instead, the poet defines Dyoclysyen by his vices and sins—he is shown stealing lands from vassals, breaking oaths and legal truth, and being intemperate, violent, wilful, and ethically corrupt—and reveals those sins to be causally related to the immorality that flourishes in his lands. I agree with Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, who argue that Dyoclysyen’s sinful behaviour ‘throws into question his ability to provide his knights with an example for appropriate chivalric behaviour, and seems to activate a trickle-down effect as his knights later demonstrate their interpretations of the code’.<sup>20</sup> Dyoclysyen surrounds himself with sinful knights and all of his most trusted advisors are shown abusing their positions of power.

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<sup>20</sup> Laskaya & Salisbury (eds.), *Breton Lays*, 312-3.



By contrast, the poet constructs Empress Beulybon as the pinnacle of Christian ethics, embodying and defending virtues and truth against the falseness of her husband and his counsellors. The poet describes her as ‘therto gode in all thyng, / Of almesdede and gode berynge’ (40-1); and shows her engaging with all the seven works of spiritual mercy (she instructs the ignorant, counsels the doubtful, admonishes sinners, bears wrongs patiently, forgives offences willingly, comforts the afflicted, and prays for the living and the dead); and maintaining all seven virtues in opposition to the deadly sins (chastity, temperance, charity, diligence, patience, kindness, and humility), as well as the spiritual virtues (including justice, fortitude, faith, and hope).<sup>21</sup> Laskaya and Salisbury say of her that, ‘Short of being the Virgin Mary herself, Beulybon embodies the attributes associated with the Mother of God, sterling qualities both of body and soul’.<sup>22</sup> Stavsky, however, has denied Beulybon’s idealised ethics, arguing that:

If at first the Empress seems to embody the voice of virtue in taking Barnard’s side against her covetous husband, later in the romance her moral authority suffers blow after blow as she both indulges the Earl’s passion (within certain limits) and fails to induce persuasion by giving counsel.<sup>23</sup>

I disagree with this assessment, firstly because Beulybon meets Barnard in order to preserve the honor of her vassal, Trylabas, and not to indulge Barnard’s love, and she maintains her celibacy for the duration of her marriage. Secondly, it is not Beulybon’s moral weakness, but her culture’s misogyny that prevents her counsel from impacting on patriarchal society. The Empress Beulybon is the only advocate for the other ethical character, Barnard of Toulouse, a victim of Dyoclysyas’s tyranny. The poet offers Beulybon and Barnard as representatives of

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<sup>21</sup> All references are from Laskaya & Salisbury (eds.), *Breton Lays*, 309-65, who base their edition on the Cambridge MS Ff.2.38.

<sup>22</sup> Laskaya & Salisbury (eds.), *Breton Lays*, 312.

<sup>23</sup> Stavsky, ‘Gode’, 555.

‘trawthe’ within a tyrant’s empire, and shows their responses to that tyranny as his or her own prescription for reform.

Where Barnard’s and Beulybon’s truth aligns with the prescriptions for ethical living found in complaint poetry, Dyoclysyen and his men embody corruption in society, as this is defined by complaint poetry and rebellious movements. For example, William Langland defines truth in *Piers Plowman* in a similar way to *Toulouse*, as a religious and ethical set of qualities. In the first Passus, Holy Church explains the meaning of the ‘tour’ (heaven), the ‘deep dale’ (hell), and the earth-bound ‘feeld ful of folk’,<sup>24</sup> and indicates that truth is God, ‘The tour up toft [...] Truthe is therinne / And wolde that ye wroughte as his word techeth’.<sup>25</sup> She then explains the crux of God’s teachings, defining the behavioural characteristics that true men must embody:

Whan alle tresors arn tried [...] treuthe is the beste.

I do it on *Deus caritas* to deme the sothe;

It is as dereworthe a drury as deere God hymselven.

For whoso is trewe of his tonge and telleth noon oother,

And doth the werkes therwith and wilneth no man ille,

He is a god by the Gospel, agrounde and olofte,

And ylike to Oure Lord, by Seint Lukes wordes.<sup>26</sup>

To be God like, and therefore ‘true’, charity, truth in speech, and doing God’s works (works of mercy, etc.) are necessary behavioural characteristics, and all these Barnard, and especially Beulybon, possess. Truth in word is an especial interest of the poet, who shows sinners using ‘troth-plights’ (legal truth) at the expense of the virtuous Barnard and Beulybon while the

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<sup>24</sup> W. Langland, *The vision of ‘Piers Plowman’: a critical edition of the B-Text based on Trinity College Cambridge, MS B.15.17*, A.V.C Schmidt (ed.), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Everyman, 1995) Prologue, ll. 13-9.

<sup>25</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, I, ll. 12-3.

<sup>26</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, I, ll. 85-91.

heroes keep their word (and other aspects of truth) regardless of legal procedure. Each virtuous character attempts to defend goodness and truth against falseness, using counsel or action to stop sinful behaviours and correct injustice.

By contrast, Dyoclysyen and his men live in opposition to truth, and their characterisation in the romance can be read in light of John Ball's letters and the addresses of the commons written at the time of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Each letter highlights the importance of 'truth' or 'rightness' to the aims of the rebellion, contrasting these to the falseness and abuses of 'might' witnessed in law and society.<sup>27</sup> The letter by Jakke Trewman explicitly warns that 'falsnes and gyle have regned to long, and trewthe hat bene sette under a lokke, and falsnes regneth in every flokke'.<sup>28</sup> John Ball's letter, surviving in John Stow's *Annales* in London, British Library, MS Royal 13.E.ix, defines 'truth' in relation to the Trinity, evoking the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and calls upon the Peasants' Revolt participants to 'stand manlike together in truth, and helpe truth, and truth shal helpe you'.<sup>29</sup> Ball then uses the falseness and sin that has permeated society as the contrast to both God, 'truth', and the rebels' purpose:

Now raigneth pride in price,  
Covetise is holden wise,  
Leacherie without shame,  
Gluttonye without blame,  
Envie raigneth with treason,  
And slouth is taken in great season,

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<sup>27</sup> J. Dean (ed.), *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 135-9.

<sup>28</sup> J. Dean (ed.), 'Jakke Trewman', in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 138.

<sup>29</sup> J. Dean (ed.), 'The Letter of John Ball', in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 136, ll. 2-3.

God doe bote, for now is time.<sup>30</sup>

Almayn is overrun with sin, and the poet represents Dyoclysyen and his closest advisors as embodying and promoting the sins described by John Ball, especially pride, covetousness, lechery, envy, and gluttony. Despite Beulybon's best efforts, the corruption stemming from Dyoclysyen and his men has been allowed to flourish, and only through an armed rebellion, the eventual reform of the legal system, and by taking *dominium* from sinful men, is Almayn changed for the better.

Dyoclysyen's first sinful act in the romance is the illegal theft of land from multiple vassals:

He *dysberyted many a man,*  
And falsely ther londys wan,

Wyth maystry and wyth myght. (19-21; Italics mine)

Dyoclysyen is introduced to us in the midst of a long series of military campaigns designed to reclaim wealth illegally from his vassals. He has been coveting the lands of his men for some time and reveals his 'false' morals through the use of military might. The romance continually engages with concepts of 'true' and 'false', 'right' and 'wrong', and shows that 'false' uses of 'might' are a sign of tyranny. This vocabulary of right and might, also found in the early fourteenth-century *Sayings of the Four Philosophers*, re-emerges in the literature of the 1381 Peasants' Revolt in the addresses to the commons.<sup>31</sup> The *Sayings of the Four Philosophers* is a political poem that describes the causes of strife in a nation and argues that 'might without right', or the sinful abuses of power by the elite, is a common cause of a kingdom's downfall. From the addresses to the commons, the Jakke Mylner's letter expands

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<sup>30</sup> Dean (ed.), 'The Letter of John Ball', ll. 4-10.

<sup>31</sup> A. W. Astell, "'Full of enigmas": John Ball's letters and *Piers Plowman*', in *Political allegory in late medieval England* (London: Cornell University Press, 1999) 44-72:51-6.

on the right and wrong uses of might, indicating that society is damaged when might is used without right.

And skyl go before wille  
And ryght before myght,  
Than goth oure mylne aryght.  
And if myght go before ryght,  
And wylle before skille  
Than is oure milne mys-adyght.<sup>32</sup>

Ann Astell discusses these lines, arguing that ‘The “Might” of the wealthy can no longer be “Right,” but neither can “Right” by itself be “Might.” Rather, “Right”, understood as social justice, must be furthered by “Might”, in a show of armed resistance from the peasants’.<sup>33</sup>

Barnard, like the rebels, sees Dyoclysyen use might without right and determines that rebellion is the only way to preserve social justice, and the poet agrees, giving Barnard an astounding victory, as we will see.

As witnessed in the letters, the misuse of power was one of the central factors believed to have precipitated the Peasants’ Revolt. There was a trend among fourteenth-century landowners, both secular and clerical, to use social, political, and legal coercion to impress previously free tenants into servile positions, thereby increasing their right to their peasants’ labour, denying their peasants access to the king’s court, and significantly limiting their peasants’ rights and freedoms.<sup>34</sup> In 1356, Thomas, Earl of Warwick, for example, overturned a jury verdict confirming the free status of his peasants, and fined the original jury

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<sup>32</sup> J. Dean (ed.), ‘Jakke Mylner’, in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 137, ll. 5-13.

<sup>33</sup> Astell, *Political allegory*, 55.

<sup>34</sup> E. B. Fryde, *Peasants and landlords in later medieval England, c. 1380-c. 1525* (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1996) 8-53.

‘the enormous sum of £20’.<sup>35</sup> Lionel de Bradenham doubled his income from c. 1338 to 1348 by enforcing serfdom; ‘[h]ow he achieved this we do not know’, Edmund Fryde writes, ‘but in view of his record of violence one has a right to suspect that he imposed these changes by brutal pressure’.<sup>36</sup> Dyoclysyen, like actual fourteenth-century landowners, exerts brutal pressure upon his vassals, changes lines of inheritance, and causes death and strife.

The first and only of Dyoclysyen’s vassals to stand up to him is Barnard, Earl of Toulouse, who raises an army to protect his lands.

He sawe the Emperour dyd hym wronge,  
And other men also;  
He ordeyned hym for batayle  
Into the emperours londe. (32-5)

Barnard, as a vassal of Dyoclysyen, can allegorically represent the nobility as well as any member of society who swore an oath of fealty, a legal agreement outlining the lord’s and vassal’s rights and responsibilities to each other. Peasants, like other types of vassalage within the feudal system, swore fealty to their manorial lords.<sup>37</sup> If Barnard embodies the participants and the goals of the Peasants’ Revolt, then Dyoclysyen represents the attitude of ‘might is right’ visible in fourteenth-century landowners who precipitated that conflict. Many of the rebels from the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 also sought to reform the legal system by executing lawyers and judges—the people they held accountable for legal corruption—and burning the new legal charters that limited their freedoms while, at the same time, searching for older documents that preserved the laws from the past.<sup>38</sup> Barnard rebels against his emperor to achieve similar reforms, returning to the ‘old’ ways of life before Dyoclysyen’s

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<sup>35</sup> Fryde, *Peasants and landlords*, 26.

<sup>36</sup> Fryde, *Peasants and landlords*, 28.

<sup>37</sup> Fryde, *Peasants and landlords*, 18.

<sup>38</sup> S. Justice, *Writing and rebellion: England in 1381* (London: University of California Press, 1994) 42-6.

tyranny. Yet, even under tyrannical rule rebellion was considered to be illegal in political as well as religious systems. Dobson tells us that, for the historians of 1381, ‘By rebelling against their lords it seemed self-evident that Wat Tyler and his fellows had sinned against God as well as against man’.<sup>39</sup> Even John Wyclif, a heterodox thinker desiring social reform, deemed the Peasants’ Revolt illegal and dangerous.<sup>40</sup> The *Toulouse*-poet takes a different approach to rebellion to that of Wyclif and orthodox commentators and uses three arguments—the poet’s own commentary, the consequences of tyranny, and the actions of Beulybon and Barnard—to justify rebellion on legal and moral grounds. When Barnard rebels, Beulybon, identified as the pinnacle of virtuous behaviour, defends the rebellion while condemning her husband’s actions, arguing that Dyoclysyen should ‘Delyvyr the Erle hys ryght’ (48). Dyoclysyen obstinately refuses to do right by his vassal, and gathers an army against the moral counsel of his wife.

Dyoclysyen is shown revelling in the violence of battle and sees his own identity as a knight as bound up with that bloodshed, arguing that ‘Fyrste schall y breke hys brayne, / *Os y am trewe knyght!*’ (53-4; Italics mine). True to his desire to break brains, Dyoclysyen orders his knights to kill every man in Barnard’s army and take none prisoner (76-81). Dyoclysyen’s perspective embodies beliefs held by actual fourteenth-century knights. Richard Kaeuper describes a chivalric manual, the *Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines* (1354), written by Henry of Lancaster (c. 1310-61), an English noble rebuked by the pope for his excessive violence during the Hundred Years’ War. Kaeuper notes that: ‘Henry of Lancaster conceives of the strenuous knightly life itself as meritorious suffering, as a form of penance acceptable, even pleasing, in God’s eyes as satisfaction for sin. In its own way, *militia* is a form of *imitatio*

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<sup>39</sup> R. B. Dobson (ed.), *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381* (London: Macmillan, St. Martin’s Press, 1970) 5.

<sup>40</sup> M. Aston, ‘Lollardy and sedition, 1381-1431’, in *Lollards and reformers: images and literacy in late medieval religion* (London: the Hambledon Press, 1984) 1-47:3-4.

*Christi*'.<sup>41</sup> Where Henry associates his knightly identity with violence of this sort, the poet of *Toulouse* indicates that there are ethical problems with that mentality by showing the emperor's failure— 'For all hys boste he faylyd gyt' (82). By doing so, the poet associates the actual actions of fourteenth-century knights, leaders, and churchmen—who, as landowners, were known to manipulate people and the law with violence and fear—with tyranny, and justifies violent resistance to that tyranny.

By contrast, Barnard does not seek violence for violence's sake. He captures many men as prisoners (169-71), and is rewarded for this action:

Moche gode of them he hadde;  
Y can not telle, so God me gladde,  
So grete was ther raunsome!' (172-4)

Barnard still kills many men, and this violence the poet portrays as necessary, but he tempers his violence with moral purpose and chivalric behaviour. Barnard and his men fight so well that Dyoclysyen, like the sinful King of Tars, flees the battle, leaving his men to die.<sup>42</sup> His love of excessive violence is coupled with cowardice, compounding the bloodshed, and the poet uses the grossly mismatched death-tolls in the battle to illustrate divine censure of the Emperor's cause:

There were slayne in that batayle  
Syxty thousand, wythowte fayle,  
On the Emperours syde  
[...]  
On the Erllys syde ther were slayne

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<sup>41</sup> Kaeuper, *Holy warriors*, 41.

<sup>42</sup> See Chapter Two, 'The reforming Princess'.



But twenty, sothely to sayne. (121-8)<sup>43</sup>

The consequences of the battle—60,000 deaths—are attributed to Dyoclysyen's falsehood. Dyoclysyen's violence has already, it would seem, cost hundreds of thousands of lives, for we are told that Barnard's rebellion comes only after a period of sustained violence, and Dyoclysyen's merciless military tactics suggest that the life cost of his previous military actions would have been significant indeed. Barnard's stand effectively stops the slaughter of innocent lives even though 60,000 men die at Barnard's and his soldiers' hands in order to achieve it.

Dyoclysyen's military choices lead 60,000 of his soldiers to their deaths, of those only 350 noblemen die alongside 59,650 common soldiers (124-6). His illegal war not only affects his life, it grossly impacts the lives of his humbler subjects. Dyoclysyen, for this wasted life, embodies the lament of bad leadership from *Treuthe, Reste, and Pes* and the dangers its poet believed unchecked violence could have upon the community of England at large:

The comouns they wil robbe and slo,

Make fyere, and kyndel stres.

Whan ryches and manhode is wastede and go,

Than dred dryveth to trete pes.<sup>44</sup>

Dyoclysyen does not desire peace at all, for despite his cowardice, wasted life, and horrific defeat, he immediately plans to gather another army to take the field against Barnard:

He sware be Hym that dyed on Rode,

Metē nor drynke schulde do hym no gode,

Or he vengedde bee. (136-8)

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<sup>43</sup> In MS Ashmole 61, 'twenty score' or 400 of the Earl's men die, although the difference between 60,000 and 400 deaths is still marked: Shuttleton (ed.), '*Erle of Tolouse*', ll. 125.

<sup>44</sup> J. Dean (ed.), '*Truthe, Reste, and Pes*', in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 153-8, ll. 117-20.

Beulybon alone stops this battle when she confronts her husband again and finally convinces him that his war is illegal. Beulybon, by contrast with the bad leadership described in *Truthe, Reste, and Pes* and embodied in her husband, desires peace: ‘Hyt ys better ye be acorde / Be oght that y can see’ (140-1). She reiterates that it is spiritually dangerous to declare a war without the ethical right: ‘Hyt ys grete parell, sothe to telle, / To be agayne the ryght quarell’ (142-3). Dyoclysyen laments the deaths of his nobles, and Beulybon uses these deaths as evidence for the immorality of his cause:

Syr, y rede, be Seynt John,  
Of warre that ye hoo;  
Ye have the wronge and he the ryght,  
And that ye may see in syght,  
Be thys and othyr moo. (152-6)

Beulybon in these speeches performs two spiritual works of mercy by admonishing a sinner and instructing the ignorant. Between Beulybon’s advice and Barnard’s military action, Dyoclysyen’s illegal war has been stopped, but only after thousands of lives are lost.

After his defeat, Dyoclysyen is still ruled by his passions and shows signs of emotional distress, laments his defeat, and collapses into a state of depression. Dyoclysyen complains to his wife that ‘Y have a grete dyshonoure; / Therefore myn herte ys woo’ (146-7), and that ‘Sorrow nye wyll me sloo’ (150). Dyoclysyen’s depression embodies the characteristics of emotional sickness, behaviours that, in fourteenth-century romance, generally accompanied unrequited love (love sickness) or familial tragedy:

He wente away and syghed sore;  
Oon worde spake no more,  
But held hym wonder styll. (160-2)

In Dyoclysyen's case, his emotional response is so overwhelming that it paralyses him temporarily, and his depression continues for some time: 'Game ne gle lyked hym noght, / So gretly can he grylle!' (164-5).

At many stages throughout the narrative, Dyoclysyen's emotions get the better of him and his kingship is defined by his inability to rule himself. *On the Times*, another late fourteenth-century political lyric associated with the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, ends with this Latin stanza: '*O Rex, si rex es, regete, et eris sine re rex / Nomen habes sine re, te nisi recte regas* [O king, if you are a king, rule yourself, and you will be a king though you have nothing, / You have the name without the thing, unless you, king, rightly rule yourself]'.<sup>45</sup> *Truthe, Reste, and Pes* also defines good kingship in opposition to the behaviours witnessed in Dyoclysyen's character:

What kyng that wol have good name,  
He wol be lad by wys counsaile  
That love worschip and dreden shame,  
And boldely dar fende and assaile.  
There wit is, corage may not fayle,  
For wysdom nevere worschip les.  
Corage in querell doth batayle,  
And ende of batayle bygynneth pes.<sup>46</sup>

Dyoclysyen does not exhibit any of these behaviours, for although he is obsessed with 'worship' and is affected by 'shame', he does not possess wit or wisdom and therefore cannot have worship or courage; he is not led by wise counsel, and he does not seek peace.

Unfortunately for Almayn, Dyoclysyen has a position of power and can, therefore, affect the

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<sup>45</sup> J. Dean (ed.), '*On the Times*', in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 140-6, ll. 243-4, translation 146, note 2.

<sup>46</sup> Dean (ed.), '*Truthe, Reste, and Pes*', ll. 81-8.

lives of thousands of people. On top of this, Dyoclysyen's closest advisors imitate him in sin, further increasing the social, political, and legal consequences of his tyrannical leadership.

### Dyoclysyen's corrupted nobility

Dyoclysyen's inner circle is represented in *Toulouse* by Trylabas the Turk and the two unnamed Chamber Knights. Trylabas, captured as prisoner during Dyoclysyen's war against Barnard, agrees, through a troth-plight, to help the Earl of Toulouse meet Beulybon in return for his freedom, but he breaks his accord and attempts to kill Barnard. Beulybon is shown rebuking Trylabas and rewarding Barnard, and Barnard's 'right' is further proved by Trylabas' death. The dominant plot of the romance involves the Chamber Knights and highlights falseness, legal corruption, and the misuse of troth-plights in order to motivate reform.<sup>47</sup> The Chamber Knights put selfish desires above ethics, murder good men, and manipulate the law, revealing that Dyoclysyen's legal system is incapable of producing justice.

The Chamber Knights, appointed by Dyoclysyen to protect Beulybon's chastity, instead become sexually attracted to their charge. Like Dyoclysyen, the Chamber Knights have no control over their passions and experience emotional sickness in a similar way to their emperor.<sup>48</sup> The effects of that love sickness are described in terms of physical changes: 'To dethe they were nere dyght' (490), and:

Methynkyth thou fadyste all away,  
Os man that ys clongyn in clay,

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<sup>47</sup> I refer to the knights as a plural, or, based on their order of appearance, as the First Knight and Second Knight for ease of identification.

<sup>48</sup> V. L. Bullogh, 'On being a male in the Middle Ages', in C. A. Lees (ed.), *Medieval masculinities: regarding men in the Middle Ages*, Medieval Cultures 7 (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 31-45:38.

So pale waxeth thy blee!' (493-5)

The knights suffer from changes to their mental states as well, with the First Knight noting that: 'my wytt ys all away' (554). By contrast, the heroic Barnard never shows any sign of love sickness even after he sees and falls in love with Beulybon, and when he returns home his behaviour is unaffected:

Thus dwellyd the Erle in that place  
Wyth game, myrthe, and grete solase,  
Ryght os hym levyst ware. (472-4)

In other Middle English romances where the hero that experiences love sickness, as in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Guy of Warwick*, this intemperance is portrayed as problematic.<sup>49</sup> Guy demonstrates love sickness in his pursuit of Felice, but he later comes to believe that his wooing of her has cost many lives and jeopardised his soul, and so rejects his actions in pursuit of her, and leaves her in order to do God's work.<sup>50</sup> In the case of *Troilus*, his tragic end may well be as a consequence of his intemperate desire for Criseyde. Recent criticism recognises the extent to which romances question intemperate emotions in heroic characters and promote wisdom, temperance, and honour by contrast.<sup>51</sup> In *Toulouse*, intemperate emotion of this type exists only in overtly villainous characters, making explicit the dangers of unchecked emotions on individuals and society.

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<sup>49</sup> F. N. Robinson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987) 471-585, ll. 350-546; J. Zupitza (ed.), *The romance of Guy of Warwick: the 2<sup>nd</sup> of 15<sup>th</sup> century versions, edited from MS. Ff.2.38*, EETS E. S. 25 (London: Trübner, 1875) (i) ll. 191-374.

<sup>50</sup> Zupitza (ed.), *Guy of Warwick*, ll. 1163-91 & 7130-84.

<sup>51</sup> G. Morgan, 'Medieval misogyny and Gawain's outburst against women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *The shaping of English poetry: essays on 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', Langland, and Chaucer* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013) (ii) 1-22:4-7; M. Elias, 'The case of anger in the *Seige of Milan* and *The King of Tars*', *Comitatus*, 43 (2012) 41-56:53-6; C. Saunders, 'Desire, will, and intention in *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*', in P. Hardman (ed.), *The matter of identity in medieval romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002) 29-42:29-30.

The Chamber Knights, proving their immorality, use their love sickness to motivate each other to pursue Beulybon's chastity. The Chamber Knights first notice signs of sickness in each other, but neither trusts the other with the secret lust they feel. It is only after a long negotiation involving troth-plights, indicating the lack of trust between them, that they reveal to each other their love for Beulybon (498-513). Rather than using counsel or works of mercy to help each other to avoid sin, they devise a plan through which both of them can gain sexual favours from Beulybon.

Y rede that oon of vs twoo  
Prevely to hyr goo  
And pray hur of hyr blys;  
Y myselfe wyll go hyr tylle;  
Yn case y may gete hur wylle,  
Of myrthe schalt thou not mys;  
Thou schalt take us wyth the dede:  
Leste thou us wrye, sche wyll drede,  
And graunte the thy wylle, ywys. (516-25)

For 'Augustine', Saunders writes, 'what makes an act sinful is the corrupt intention underlying it rather than the action itself—for instance, the uncontrolled desire behind adultery'.<sup>52</sup> The Chamber Knights experience uncontrolled desire and seek only to satisfy their own lust and they are willing to break their oaths to Dyoclysyen (unsurprising perhaps, since the Emperor is shown breaking his own oath with Barnard), and to defy their role as Beulybon's protectors, in order to do so. This plan also shows how pride prevents them from recognising the flaws in their plan, for both knights are convinced that Beulybon, the pinnacle of Christian ethics and purity of body, will succumb to these desires.

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<sup>52</sup> Saunders, 'Desire, will', 29-30.

The First Knight approaches Beulybon and he appears unwell enough to Beulybon that she asks him outright what the cause of his sorrow is (533-7). He says he would rather not tell her, not for all the gold in the world, 'Bot on a booke yf ye wyll swere' (541). Beulybon is surprised that he does not trust her, and sees his desire for a legal-agreement between them as proof of that.

How may that bee?

That thou darste not tryste to mee,

Hyt ys full orybylle.

Here my trowthe to the y plight:

Y schall heyle the day and nyght,

Also trewe as boke or belle. (544-9)

Beulybon, notably, does not ask for a troth-pledge in return and is in fact never seen seeking a troth-pledge from anyone. The Chamber Knights' insistence on using troth-pledges at every opportunity highlights how villains are more likely to use legal agreements. Barnard occasionally makes a troth-pledge, but only in circumstances where he is seeking information or assistance from someone who has proven themselves to be untrustworthy, as we will see. Beulybon is selflessly motivated and rather than insisting on a legal agreement, she performs a work of mercy when she sees that the First Knight is afflicted in some way and seeks to comfort him.

After securing Beulybon's secrecy, the First Knight reveals his desire to sleep with her and by using manipulative strategies, appeals to her pity by lamenting how close to death he is:

But ye do aftur my rede,

Certenly, y am but dede:

Of my lyfe ys no store. (559-61)

Beulybon is not so easily manipulated and she is unmoved by his potential death because, from her perspective, he is already worthy of execution simply for asking for such favours (571-2). She highlights the ethical expectations of his role as her protector, and how his suit breaks his oath to her husband (563-7). The First Knight reminds her of the promise she made:

Thynke, madam, youre *trouthe* ys plight  
To holde counsayle both day and nyght  
Fully, wythowte drede. (580-2; Italics mine)

Beulybon, in another act of mercy, forgives his trespass easily as prescribed with one last bit of advice:

Loke thou be a *trewe man*  
In all thyng that thou can,  
To my lorde so free. (589-91; Italics mine)

The knight agrees with her, ‘ellys dyd y wronge [...] and wele he hath qwytt mee’ (592-4)—but, true to his villainy, he breaks his word. It is interesting that Beulybon continually encourages ‘truth’ as defined by ethical behaviour, such as being a ‘trewe’ man or a ‘trewe’ knight. By contrast, the First Knight uses ‘truth’ only legally, ironically reminding Beulybon that ‘youre trouthe ys plyght’ so that he can be protected from the consequence of his own falseness.

The First Knight expects Beulybon to comply with his wishes and his pride is such that he cannot imagine that she, the pinnacle of Christian ethics, will deny his adulterous request. The extremity of his fear after her rejection further indicates his surprise at her response. The First Knight returns to the Second Knight full of terror:

Syth y was borne, lefe brothyr,  
Was y nevyr so adredde;



Certys, hyt ys boteles bale

To hur to touche soche a tale

At borde or at bedde. (602-6)

The First Knight suddenly feels vulnerable, fearing that his life is in danger if she tells her husband or a friend. He does not trust the troth-plight she gave, and expects her morals to be as compromised as his. The Second Knight cannot hear the warning; his own pride interferes as he argues:

Thy wytt ys thynne:

Y myselfe schall hur wynne:

Y lay my hedde to wedde! (607-9)

The Second Knight uses even more manipulative behaviour than his friend did, yet the scene unfolds very similarly to the First Knight's attempt. The poet reveals the Second Knight's inner thoughts, telling the audience what the knight 'bethoght' (612):

Certys, spede os y may

My ladyes wylle, that ys so gay,

Hyt schall be thorowly soght. (613-5)

These lines highlight the acting and manipulation that the Second Knight utilises in his suit. The knight determines that he will wait until she is 'in beste mode', or more susceptible to his request, and affects 'sore syghyng', so he appears tragic and sorrowful, when he approaches (616-7). He does not let her come to her own conclusions, as his friend has, but speaks urgently about a problem that only she can solve:

Lady [...] wythowte fayle,

But ye helpe me wyth yowre counsaile,

Yn bale am y broght. (619-21)

She is immediately interested and promises to help if she can (622-30). The Second Knight also demands a troth-pledge before revealing his problem to the empress (628-30), and she promises to hold his counsel secretly (631-3). Where Beulybon saw the troth-pledge made with the First Knight as indicating a lack of trust, the Second Knight believes that trust exists between them only after she makes the legal promise: 'now y am in trust' (634). Beulybon's goodness is being contrasted to the Chamber Knights here, and the troth-pledge becomes associated with villainy and untrustworthiness, whereas heroic and virtuous characters like Dame Beulybon do right simply because it is right.

The Second Knight requests sex from her, also using his love sickness and imminent death to inspire pity: 'How pale y am of blee: / Y dye nere for dere' (642-3). Beulybon is more adamant about her own ethics when rebuffing the Second Knight and contrasts her own reputation with the Second Knight's expectations of her.

Syr [...] ys that youre wylle?  
Yf hyt were myne, then dyd y ylle;  
What woman holdyst thou me?  
Yn thy kepeyng y have ben:  
What haste thou herde be me or sene  
That touchyth to any vylane,  
That thou in herte art so bolde  
Os y were a hore or a scolde?  
Nay, that schall nevyr bee!  
Had y not hyght to holde counsayle,  
Thou scholdest be honged, wythouwt fayle,  
Upon a galowe tree. (646-57)

Beulybon is firmer in her rebuke and reiterates that his execution would be the appropriate punishment simply for soliciting adulterous behaviour from her. The Second Knight's delusions about his wit being superior to the First Knight are crushed. Beulybon will not be moved from her ethical nature, and the Second Knight finally comprehends the fear his partner expressed (658-60). He begs for his life and apologises desperately for offending her:

Wele y wott y am to blame;

Therefore myn herte ys woo!

Lady, let me not be spylte;

Y aske mercy of my gylte!

On lyve ye let me goo. (661-6)

Beulybon, true to her agreement with him, forgives him and sends him on his way (667-9).

Although Beulybon's trust compromises her position, her natural trustworthiness distinguishes her from the corrupt Chamber Knights rather than pointing to problems with her virtue, as Diamond has suggested.<sup>53</sup> She does appear to recognise the connection between these two interviews, and the problem that the troth-plight creates for her. Beulybon does not allow the Second Knight to remind her of the troth-plight as the first has, but references it twice herself, in line 655 above, and in her final statement (668). The Second Knight does not get the chance to use it manipulatively as Beulybon takes the dominant position.

The Second Knight now comprehends the danger his friend warned him of. He, being dishonest himself, cannot imagine that Beulybon will keep their secret even with their legal accord. His unethical nature makes him untrusting of her, and from his fear of death, the Second Knight insists that Beulybon must be killed before she can reveal their secret.

Felowe, y may not spede.

What ys thy beste redde?

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<sup>53</sup> Diamond, 'Price of virtue', 83-92.

Yf sche telle my lorde of thys,  
We be but dedde, so have y blys:  
Wyth hym be we not fedde.  
Woman's tongue ys evell to tryste;  
Certys, and my lorde hyt wyste,  
Etyne were all owre bredde.  
Felow, so mote y ryde or goo,  
Or sche wayte us wyth that woo,  
Hurselwe schall be dedde! (671-81)

The Chamber Knights rely on social and legal misogyny, as Andrea Hopkins argues, noting that 'the guards' indictment of Dame Beulybon relies in part on the implicit assumption that their evidence will carry greater weight in law than her word'.<sup>54</sup> Women's voices were not welcome in courtrooms because women were associated with the deception of Eve and were seen as the source of sin, and to be more susceptible to the devil.<sup>55</sup> Married women, like Beulybon, were subject to their husband during legal proceedings, and would not be able to speak on their own behalf.<sup>56</sup> The Chamber Knights design their plan knowing that Beulybon will not be able to testify in her own defence and therefore cannot reveal their deceit.

The Chamber Knights stage a scene that apparently reveals Beulybon in the act of adultery. The plan also requires the death of an innocent proto-hero called Sir Antore (709-14). Antore's description uses language often used for other romance heroes:

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<sup>54</sup> Hopkins, 'Female vulnerability', 55.

<sup>55</sup> R. M. Karras, *Common women: prostitution and sexuality in medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 110-1; A. Blamires, 'Beneath the pulpit', in C. Dinshaw & S. Wallace (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to medieval women's writing* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003) 141-58:149.

<sup>56</sup> B. Hanawalt, 'Widows', in C. Dinshaw & D. Wallace (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to medieval women's writing* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003) 58-69:67; D. Elliott, 'Wives', in C. Dinshaw & D. Wallace (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to medieval women's writing* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003) 40-57.

He was a feyre chylde and a bolde;

Twenty wyntur he was oolde:

In londe was none so free. (710-2)<sup>57</sup>

Antore's youth and untimely death prevent the heroism latent in his character from developing. The Chamber Knights convince Antore to hide behind Beulybon's bed curtain naked by telling him it is part of a play they will be performing. Antore implicitly trusts their word, and it is only after he waits behind the curtain for some time that the Chamber Knights' request generates confusion:

Thys chylde had wonder evyr among

Why these knyghtys were so longe:

He was in many a thoght. (746-8)

Antore does not wish to injure Beulybon or frighten her and so stays silent and 'style as any stone' (755). His ethics and his desire to protect Beulybon are, unfortunately, his undoing.

The Chamber Knights gather men and arms and burst into her chamber, and kill him:

That oon thefe wyth a swerde of were

Thorow the body he can hym bere,

That worde spake he no more. (776-8)

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<sup>57</sup> For some examples, see H. Hudson (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', in *Four Middle English romances*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006) 5-38, ll. 13-24; H. Hudson (ed.), 'Octavian', in *Four Middle English romances*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006) 39-95, ll. 13-24; H. Hudson (ed.), 'Eglamour of Artois', in *Four Middle English romances*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006) 97-143, ll. 7-12; R. B. Herzman, G. Drake, & E. Salisbury (eds.), 'King Horn', in *Four romances of England: 'King Horn', 'Havelok the Dane', 'Bevis of Hampton', 'Athelston'*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999) 11-70, ll. 13-20; R. B. Herzman, G. Drake, & E. Salisbury (eds.), 'Havelok the Dane', in *Four romances of England: 'King Horn', 'Havelok the Dane', 'Bevis of Hampton', 'Athelston'*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997) 73-185, ll. 6-10; G. Shuffleton (ed.), 'Sir Cleges', in *Ashmole Codex 61: a compilation of popular Middle English verse*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008) 185-98, ll. 7-12.

The poet emphasises that Antore can no longer speak, implying that the Chamber Knights kill Antore so that he cannot give evidence against them in court. Victoria Weiss argues that this danger of stage performance exists within any play put on by nobles, because deception and dishonesty, as depicted here, also permeated noble culture.<sup>58</sup> This is the case for *Almayn* within this romance, because the nobility is clearly corrupted. Some readers of *Toulouse* might have seen a similar danger within England, for, at least according to John Ball, England was rife with sin and corruption in the fourteenth century.

The poet places the common assumptions of medieval misogyny in direct conflict with the actions of his or her heroic characters. The poet tells the reader of the Chamber Knights, that:

Now are they both at oon assente

In sorow to bryng that lady gente:

The devell mote them spede! (691-3)

The poet associates misogyny with the Devil and the villains of the romance and, in so doing, promotes social reform. Beulybon is the pinnacle of moral judgement and honesty and is as close to the Virgin Mary as a woman could be, yet, in *Almayn*, social and legal convention undermines her voice, leaving her vulnerable. This vulnerability is not only necessary for the plot, as Hopkins suggests, but it also allows the poet to show the dangers misogyny presented for medieval women and to write a hero who challenges that misogyny.<sup>59</sup> The poet shows his desire for reform by associating misogyny with evil, and the alleviation of that inequality with Christian heroism.

Dyoclysyen, Beulybon's husband and lover, should be the one to defend her against the Chamber Knights, both physically and legally. Husbands of romance heroines regularly

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<sup>58</sup> Weiss, 'Blurring lines', 87.

<sup>59</sup> Saunders, 'Desire, will', 44.

come to their lovers' rescue no matter what the circumstances. Yet the poet further highlights the problems with Beulybon's and Dyoclysyen's marriage through Dyoclysyen's failure to perform this role. God even sends Dyoclysyen a dream, intended to be a dream vision, in which two boars are seen ripping Beulybon apart, which ought to prepare him for the traitors, but he is unable to understand the message (810-4). Readers assume that the two boars are identifiable with the Chamber Knights, but Dyoclysyen can neither interpret the dream nor recognise the Chamber Knights' guilt when he returns to Almayn. The poet uses the Emperor's return to indicate how his tyranny affects his ability to lead, by showing this tyranny preventing him from learning the truth in time to save Beulybon. Dyoclysyen rushes back to her side, crossing leagues of distance until he comes to her city. There are signs of trouble everywhere:

Wythowt the cyté lordys them kepyd;  
For wo in herte many oon wepyd:  
There teerys myght they not blynne. (830-2)

However, no man will speak to Dyoclysyen about the cause of this sorrow, for:

They supposyd wele yf he hyt wyste  
That hys wyf had soche a bryste,  
Hys yoye wolde be full thynne. (833-5)

Dyoclysyen's subjects already experience sorrow, unable to stop their own tears, but they are afraid to create sorrow in Dyoclysyen, and this prevents them from speaking openly with him.

Dyoclysyen goes to Beulybon's chamber only to find the Chamber Knights waiting within and they reveal to him that she is in prison under sentence of death for adultery.

Dyoclysyen's response is violent and deadly, justifying the servants' fear:

He hente a knyfe wyth all hys mayn;

Had not a knyght ben, he had hym slayn,

And that traytour have broght owt of heele. (866-8)

Laskaya and Salisbury offer various translations which assume that Dyoclysyen attempts to commit suicide here, although I would disagree with this interpretation.<sup>60</sup> Instead, I agree with Walter French's and Charles Hale's interpretation—although I would amend it to read 'had he [the Chamber Knight] not been a knight, he [the emperor] would have slain him, and brought the traitor out of hiding/health'—because the emperor's suicide would not have revealed or injured the traitorous Chamber Knight, and this better accounts for the hesitation demonstrated by the vassals upon the Emperor's return.<sup>61</sup> Dyoclysyen, although prone to depression, is characterised as more violent than suicidal, and his intemperance up until now suggests that his character could very easily lose control and attack blindly those around him. In the *King of Tars*, the Sultan of Damas is shown doing this same thing, beating 'Serjaunt, squier, clerk, and knight, / Bothe erl and baroun'.<sup>62</sup> Elias argues of the Sultan of Damas that 'it is most telling that the victims of his violent fit of rage are not his Christian enemies but his Saracen self and subjects'.<sup>63</sup> Dyoclysyen's uncontrollable violence has been turned against his men before, and that same inability to temper his emotions is likely a factor in the Chamber Knights' success.

On the following day, Dyoclysyen calls a parliament to try and save Beulybon's life (872-4). Even with such a gathering, however:

They myght not fynde in ther counsaile

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<sup>60</sup> Laskaya & Salisbury (eds.), *Breton Lays*, 363.

<sup>61</sup> French and Hale translate the lines more loosely, 'had not a knight interfered he [Dyoclysyen] would have slain his informant, and thus discomfited the traitor', French & Hale, '*Erle of Tolouse*', 409, n. 32.

<sup>62</sup> J. H. Chandler (ed.), *The King of Tars*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2015) Robbins Library Digital Projects, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/chandler-the-king-of-tars>, ll. 107-8.

<sup>63</sup> Elias, 'Case of anger', 54.



Be no lawe, wythowt fayle,

To save hur fro the dede. (875-7)

By this, the poet reveals serious problems with legal procedure within Almayn. The misogynistic weighting of law is such that there is no legal recourse to save Beulybon. *Truthe, Reste, and Pes* describes the possibility that false tale-tellers could corrupt the court system, and prescribes how kings might preserve justice under these conditions:

Yf suche a tale-tellere were

To a kyng apayre a mannys name,

The kyng schulde bothe partyes here,

And punysche the fals for defame.<sup>64</sup>

Dyoclysyen and his court cannot listen to both parties, however, because the law prevents it and therefore he cannot hope to determine right from wrong. Beulybon is kept silent, her voice having no power whatsoever in her own defence, and the Chamber Knights, knowingly, have killed the only man who knew the truth. The romance highlights how gender inequality allows innocent victims to be undermined by legal procedure, and such legal inequality is a common theme in reformist writings of this period. *The Simonie* uses the misogyny of the court to express how dishonest people can manipulate the law to their advantage, giving, as an example, false husbands who use deceit to divorce their wives:

Bringe hire to the constorie ther treuthe sholde be souht;

And bringge tweye false wid him and him self the thridde,

And he shal ben to-parted so faire as he wole bidde

From his wife.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Dean (ed.), '*Truthe, Reste, and Pes*', ll. 17-20.

<sup>65</sup> Dean (ed.), '*The Simonie*', in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) ll. 200-1.

The unfair treatment of the powerless in the courtroom was a major source of unrest in the fourteenth century.<sup>66</sup> Fryde tells us that:

The treatment by the royal courts of a large proportion of the peasantry as servile, thereby denying them the protection of royal justice, except in serious criminal cases, was one of the salient features of the royal Common Law as it emerged in the late twelfth-century.<sup>67</sup>

The 1381 Peasants' Revolt, consequently, focused on unfair legal precedent such as this and particularly targeted representatives of the law.<sup>68</sup> Thomas Walsingham confirms this sentiment in his chronicle of the events: 'the rebels declared that the land could not be fully free until the lawyers had been killed'.<sup>69</sup> Steven Justice demonstrates that the rebels' actions, namely the burning of documents, sought to secure old legal rights and undermine new legislation that had recently compromised those rights.<sup>70</sup> Like the Peasants' Revolt, *Toulouse* shows where tyrannical action undermines truth in the legal setting, and desires that the law be reformed so that justice and truth can be preserved.

Beulybon is doomed to die until wisdom, in the guise of an old knight, speaks. The Old Knight's solution raises more questions than it answers.

Y have wondur, be Goddys myght,  
That Syr Antore thus was bestedde,  
In chaumbyr thogh he naked were;  
They let hym gyf none answer,

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<sup>66</sup> Issues revolving around legal corruption can be found in multiple complaint poems, see Dean (ed.), '*Truthe, Reste, and Pes*', 153-8; Dean (ed.), '*The Simonie*', 193-212; Dean (ed.), '*On the Times*', 140-6. For the use of legal language in reformist poetry, see Scase, *Literature and complaint*, 1-4.

<sup>67</sup> Fryde, *Peasants and landlords*, 8.

<sup>68</sup> Fryde, *Peasants and landlords*, 29.

<sup>69</sup> T. Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, H. T. Riley (ed.), 2 vols. (Rolls Series, 1863-4) (i) 453-6, cited in Dobson, *Revolt*, 133.

<sup>70</sup> Justice, *Writing and rebellion*, 40-6.

But slowe hym, be my hedde!  
Ther was nevyr man, sekurly,  
That be hur founde any velany,  
Save they two, y dar wele say;  
Be some hatered hyt may be;  
Therefore doyth aftur me  
For my love, y yow pray.  
No mo wyll preve hyt but they twoo;  
Therefore we may not save hur fro woo,  
For sothe, os y yow say,  
In hyr quarell but we myght fynde  
A man that were gode of kynde  
That durst fyght agayn them tway. (879-95)

The Old Knight suggests, as if for the first time and with great tact, that the accusers might be lying. He knows that no man can prove Beulybon's innocence because no other witness is left to defend her, so he suggests that they find 'a man that were gode of kynde' who can fight the Chamber Knights on her behalf.

This plan is accepted, and the Emperor praises and blesses the Old Knight, but this is where the larger questions begin to arise, for:

Messangerys, y understonde,  
Cryed thorow all the londe  
In many a ryche cyte. (908-10)

The Old Knight claims a man of good kind can save Beulybon, yet no man within Dyoclysyen's court or parliament puts himself forward for this role. Why is no one from Almayn willing to stand up for her? It is possible that Dyoclysyen's advisors doubt her

honour and therefore are unwilling to stand up for their empress, but this is unlikely, as all the men whose voices we hear believe her to be innocent, as we will see. The poem rather implies that no man of good kind can be found within Almayn at all. *Piers Plowman* explores what kings and knights should do for a realm and it is what all men within Dyoclysyen's inner circle fail to do:

Kynges and knyghtes sholde kepen it by reson—  
Riden and rappen doun in reaumes aboute,  
And taken transgressores and tyen hem faste  
Til treuthe had ytermyned hire trespas to the ende.<sup>71</sup>

It is arguable that Dyoclysyen's sin causes the corruption in his men, and that because of this tyranny there are no good knights in his service. Not a single member of his court can accurately identify, persecute, or punish transgressors—most likely because Dyoclysyen, their leader, encourages illegal activity by frequently breaking laws himself. The only good knight we have met so far who has not been killed is an enemy of the empire. Barnard is, ironically, made outlaw because he insists that the law be upheld.

#### Barnard reforms the law

The messengers crying the message across the kingdom end up in Toulouse, and Barnard hears of Beulybon's plight. Barnard, having only seen Beulybon once at a great distance, decides to risk his own life to be her champion, revealing himself to be a man of good kind.

‘Yf y may wytt that sche be trewe,  
They that have hur accused schull rewe,  
But they stynte of ther stryfe.’

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<sup>71</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, I, ll. 94-7.

The Erle seyde, ‘Be Seynt John,  
Ynto Almayn wyll y goon,  
Where y have fomen ryfe;  
I prey to God full of myght  
That y have trewe quarell to fyght,  
Owt of woe to wynne that wyfe.’ (923-31)

He is willing to risk his life for her without knowing for sure if she is innocent or not, and *Truthe, Reste, and Pes* praises this type of action-based heroism.

A worthi knyght wol worchip wynne,  
He wil not yeld hym though me thret,  
But rathere as Malice doth begynne,  
Quenche hit at the first het.<sup>72</sup>

Barnard immediately takes action and seeks to defeat Beulybon’s accusers without yielding to the threat against him. He has enemies all over Almayn but he is willing to risk his own life just to see whether she is innocent or not—something Dyoclysyen and his entire court refuse to do.

Barnard seeks various opinions on Beulybon’s innocence on his trip to Almayn. His first meeting and interview is with a travelling merchant.

BAR: Wherefore ys yowre Emperes  
Put in so grete dystresse?  
Telle me, for Goddys grace.  
Ys sche gylté, so mote thou the?

MER: Nay, be Hym that dyed on tree,  
That schope man aftur Hys face. (938-43)

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<sup>72</sup> Dean (ed.), ‘*Truthe, Reste, and Pes*’, ll. 57-60.

Barnard begins to learn that all men believe Beulybon to be innocent. This merchant travelling far from Almayn knows she is, and swears by God of its truth. Barnard appears naturally to trust the merchant and does not ask for a troth-plight from him. Barnard sells on several horses and asks the merchant to take him to Almayn in disguise as a horse trader. Presumably, as he travelled into Toulouse, the merchant knows of Barnard's identity and this knowledge could damage Barnard significantly. But the merchant not only brings Barnard into Almayn, he also keeps his identity secret without having to be asked. Barnard, like Beulybon, recognises that honour and trust can exist without legal promises.

Barnard's second interview is with the abbot and personal confessor of Dame Beulybon. Here, a troth-plight is sought and there are legal and moral issues with the abbot's behaviour that can account for Barnard's unwillingness to trust him. The abbot begins well, demonstrating his charity by inviting Barnard and the merchant onto his lands so they can feed their horses and themselves. Over lunch the abbot reveals the cause of his visible sorrow, that he lives in care because Beulybon is sentenced to die 'All agayne the ryght' (1012). Although confirming her innocence, the abbot reveals a lot more about Beulybon to this stranger than one should expect from her confessor.

Be Seynte Poule

For hur y dar ley my soule

That never gylté wa sche;

Soche werkys nevyr sche wroght

Neythyr in dede nor in thocht;

Save a rynges so free

To the Erle of Tullous sche gafe hyt wyth wyne,

Yn ese of hym and for no synne:

*In schryfte thus tolde sche me. (1019-27; Italics mine)*

The abbot reveals one of Beulybon's greatest secrets, shared in the sacred privacy of the confessional, with this strange merchant. It was illegal for a priest to reveal the contents of anyone's confession to a third party. According to the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), in which the rules of confession were outlined, 'he who presumes to reveal a sin disclosed in the confessional we decree is to be not only deposed from his priestly office but also shut up to do penance for life in a monastery of strict observance'.<sup>73</sup> After this breach of ecclesiastical law, Barnard asks for a legal agreement with the Abbot before revealing anything about himself:

Wolde ye sekyr me, wythowt fayle,  
For to holde trewe counsayle,  
Hyt myght be for yowre gode. (1031-3)

Barnard notably appeals to the abbot's self-interest rather than the greater good. It is unsurprising that Barnard does not trust the abbot because he has already broken an oath of his office by breaking the seal of confessional.

After receiving a promise of secrecy, Barnard reveals his identity, seeks confession himself, and puts forward a plan to rescue Beulybon.

Y am comyn, lefe syr,  
To take the batyle for hyr,  
There to stonde wyth ryght;  
But fyrst myselfe y wole hur schryve,  
And yf y fynde hur clene of lyve,  
Then wyll my herte be lyght.  
Let dyght me in monkys wede

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<sup>73</sup> P. J. Geary (ed.), 'Canons of the Fourth Lateran Council', translated from Latin by P. J. Geary, in *Readings in medieval history*, 2 vols., 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2003) (ii) 117-43:127.

To that place that men schulde hyr lede,  
To dethe to be dyght;  
When y have schrevyn hyr, wythowt fayle,  
For hur y wyll take batayle,  
As y am trewe knyght! (1040-51)

Barnard promotes a plan that will involve his dressing as a monk to perform the sacrament of confession for Beulybon, and neither the poet nor abbot question Barnard's right (despite being a layman) to perform this duty. Interestingly it is in this moment where Barnard chooses to perform a sacrament (taking on both religious and secular duties) that he invokes the claim 'As y am trewe knyght'. Its use here is in stark contrast to Dyoclysyen's declaration of true knighthood earlier in the romance;<sup>74</sup> Barnard is not seeking violence and bloodshed, he is defending the innocent against injustice. As *Truthe, Reste, and Pes* argues:

Truthe is messenger to ryght,  
And ryght is counseille to Justice,  
Justice is Goddis stede is dyght.<sup>75</sup>

Barnard is acting in God's stead as the arm of justice, as he says: 'to stonde with right'. In order to be just, he seeks something that no other man in this legal proceeding has done: he wishes to hear Beulybon's side of the story from her own lips.

On the day of the execution, Barnard is brought to Beulybon as her confessor. James Wade argues that because Barnard is not consecrated the confession is compromised and spiritually ineffectual.<sup>76</sup> However, the poet tells us, that 'He examyned hur wyttyrly (1064). In fact, Barnard performs this duty better than the abbot as he reveals none of the secrets that

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<sup>74</sup> See above, pp. 140.

<sup>75</sup> Dean (ed.), '*Truthe, Reste, and Pes*', ll. 9-11.

<sup>76</sup> J. Wade, 'Ungallant knights', in N. Cartlidge (ed.), *Heroes and anti-heroes in medieval romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012) 201-18:206-7.



Beulybon speaks of during confession. Contrary to Wade's conclusion, the narrative seems to suggest that Barnard, as a good man, performs this role better than the ethically ambivalent priest. In this respect, *Toulouse* promotes ideals central to Lollardy, for Barnard, as a man of good kind, is here seen performing sacerdotal duties successfully. He becomes a layman, in a state of grace, who can perform sacraments better than a priest. He has already challenged the tyrannical dominion of his Emperor, and he now enters the spiritual domain, embodying the argument—that any good man can preach, perform sacraments, or interpret the Bible—which made Lollardy appear so dangerous to the clergy and nobility. From this position of supporting Lollard ideas about spiritual authority, *Toulouse* also promotes social reforms that support a woman's right to defend herself in court.

Barnard insists on doing the right thing even if it is not legal. Legally speaking, he did not need to seek Beulybon's side of the story. In fact, legally it was impossible to hear her side of the story. He performs a morally ideal but not a legally necessary action when he acts to undo an injustice caused by the traitorous knights and their reliance on misogynistic legal precedent. In confession with Barnard, Beulybon is shown speaking for the first time since the Chamber Knights' betrayal. Barnard lifts the veil revealing her voice, and with it her wit, truth, and innocence (1067-75). Barnard, simply by hearing this confession, knows Beulybon to be innocent. He immediately stands up and calls across the room:

Lordyngys, pese!

Ye that have accused thys lady gente,

Ye be worthy to be brente. (1078-80)

He has chosen to stand up and fight for her after hearing her speak and sensing her honesty.

In response to Barnard's declaration, someone yells from across the room and accuses Barnard of lying:

Thou carle monke, wyth all thy gynne,

Thowe youre abbot be of hur kynne,  
Hur sorowe schalt thou not cees;  
Ryght so thou woldyst sayne  
Thowe all youre covent had be hyr layne;  
So are ye lythyr and lees! (1082-7)

Although not yet identified here in the narrative, the counter-accusation comes from one of the Chamber Knights. The Chamber Knights are the users of treachery and ‘gynne’ and yet they deflect blame by accusing this monk of deception and lies. This type of behaviour is described in the *Lanterne of Light* in London, British Library, MS Harley 2324 (c. 1409-15):

The sixt synne is fighting agens the truthe that a man knowith. That is, whanne the truthe is tolde to the gilty, the which disposith him not to be amendid, thanne he makith blynde ungroundid resouns with sotil arguments and foltid sophisticacioun, and dampneth the truthe agens his conscience with a boold foreheed that can not schame.<sup>77</sup>

The Chamber Knights insinuate that the entire community of monks may have slept with Beulybon, increasing her reputation for sexual licentiousness.

Barnard is not stayed by this accusation; rather, it leads him to recognise the speaker: ‘Syr, that oon y trowe thou bee / Thys lady accused has’ (1089-90). The knight gives no indication of his identity or role in the plot, but Barnard still knows. Barnard fulfils the characteristics of kingship that *Truthe, Reste, and Pes* prescribed for social reform, and which Dyoclysyen himself fails to perform: ‘The kyng schulde bothe partyes here / And punyshe the fals for defame’.<sup>78</sup> This is precisely what Barnard does.

Y prove on hur thou sayst not ryght.

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<sup>77</sup> J. Dean (ed.), ‘*Lanterne of Light*’, in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 75-91, ll. 240-4.

<sup>78</sup> Dean (ed.), ‘*Truthe, Reste, and Pes*’, ll. 19-20.

Lo, here my glove wyth the to fyght!

Y undyrtake thys case;

Of false men y schall yow kenne;

Yn redde fyre for to brenne;

Therto God gyf me grace! (1094-9)

Barnard captures the chamber knights and drags them before the Emperor and his knights where they confess to their plot and their actions (1127-9), admitting their own guilt and Beulybon's innocence and worthiness before Barnard throws them both into the fire (1130-5). Barnard is the man of good kind of whom the Old Knight spoke, and he also proves himself to possess the virtues necessary for leadership that *Trute, Reste, and Pes* ascribes to good kings.

After the battle, Barnard leaves town without comment and Beulybon is released from prison. If the romance ended here, with Beulybon rescued, Barnard returned to Toulouse, and Dyoclysyen still governing, we might assume that, for the poet, Dyoclysyen's reform is enough to keep him in power. In some ways Barnard has indeed cleansed Dyoclysyen's court, as the three visible traitors, Trylabas and the two Chamber Knights, have been killed. Dyoclysyen is also beginning to temper himself and take good advice from his counsellors. However, the romance does not end here, and Dyoclysyen is punished with a barren marriage and an early death. In other romances, such as *Octavian* and Caxton's *Paris and Vienne*, God is also shown punishing sinful couples with barrenness.<sup>79</sup> Beulybon cannot be responsible as, when remarried, she gives birth to fifteen strong boys. Thomas Stone asserts that, although unwise, the Emperor is 'impossible to regard [...] as a hardened enemy', arguing that the Chamber Knights and Trylabas are more villainous.<sup>80</sup> Reilly agrees, suggesting that

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<sup>79</sup> Hudson (ed.), '*Octavian*', ll. 25-84; W. Caxton, *Paris and Vienne*, McEdward Leach (ed.), EETS O. S. 234 (London: Oxford University Press, 1957) 1.

<sup>80</sup> Stone, 'What woman', 206-8.

Dyoclysyen's childless death is a sign that his great war was 'mere avarice' and less damning than the Chamber Knights' plot, as they are killed and Dyoclysyen is not.<sup>81</sup> Yet, this 'mere avarice' results in far more deaths than any other traitorous knight in this romance, each of whom only has a position of power because of Dyoclysyen's favour. Dyoclysyen breaks the most oaths and 60,000 deaths are attributed to him, whereas even the Chamber Knights only manage to kill one man.

It is not the extent of Dyoclysyen's sin, therefore, but rather the theological implications of his social position, that problematises his removal from power. Kings were believed to receive their crown through God's will, and deposing them, regardless of their ethics, was considered illegal in both religious and secular systems. Rather than use Barnard to depose Dyoclysyen militarily, therefore, the poet uses God and his natural childless death to disinherit the Emperor. God does in *Toulouse* what, according to the clerk of Earl Robert of Oxford, the Peasant Revolt desired to do to their corrupt landowners in 1381. The clerk recorded the first meeting of the court following the revolt, and Christopher Dyer tells us of his report, that:

He stated that the tenants claimed to hold land 'at their own free will for ever, freely, and not at the will of the Lord'. In short, they wished to abolish all customary tenures, depriving the lord of a good deal of his power and wealth, 'in disinheritance of the lord' as the clerk put it.<sup>82</sup>

*Truthe, Reste, and Pes* also uses disinheritance as a warning to nobles who abuse their positions of power, arguing that God can alter bloodlines and borders whenever he chooses:

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<sup>81</sup> Reilly, 'Structure of honour', 522.

<sup>82</sup> W. C. Waller, 'A note on the manor of Wivenhoe', *Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society*, New Series 10 (1909) 320-2; cited in C. Dyer, 'The social and economic background to the rural revolt of 1381', in *The English rising of 1381*, R. H. Hilton & T. H. Aston (eds.) (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 9-42:41; also, see Fryde, *Peasants and landlords*, 8.

God maketh mony heire in a whyle,  
For God ressayveth eche reles;  
God kan breke hegge and style,  
And make an hey way to pes.<sup>83</sup>

*Toulouse* justifies both Barnard's rebellion and his legal reform, by having God's will undermine Dyoclysyen in the story, and using divine and human will to place Barnard in a position of power instead.

After Dyoclysyen's death, the wills of the gathered council elect Barnard as their emperor.

Be alexion of the lordys free,  
The Erle toke they thoo.  
They made hym ther Emperoure,  
For he was styffe yn stoure  
To fyght agayne hys foo. (1203-7)

Barnard marries Beulybon and they have fifteen strong children: 'Doghty knyghtys all bedene, / And semely on to see' (1212-3). God is shown displacing the sinful Dyoclysyen and his bloodline and replacing his failed authority with Barnard and Beulybon, and he blesses their union with children who secure Almayn for themselves. In so doing, *Toulouse* removes *dominium* from sinful men, promoting the reformist ideas of Lollardy as well as the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Both movements express the desire to see an end to corruption in the elite, to see wealth redistributed for the betterment of the poorer members of society, and to reform the law to protect innocent, rather than corrupt, members of society. *Toulouse* supports these desires, placing secular and spiritual authority in the hands of its titular hero. Although Barnard's initial rebellion has no impact on inheritance rights (other than his own)

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<sup>83</sup> Dean (ed.), '*Truthe, Reste, and Pes*', ll. 125-8.

and is no way intended to overthrow Dyoclysyen, *Toulouse* does still support military action as a last resort, if good counsel has been ignored, for the redress of tyrannical and illegal actions by a monarch. By using God to redress the injustices against which Barnard had earlier fought, the poet shows his or her explicit support for Barnard's actions. Barnard also inherits spiritual authority from the abbot (who has broken ecclesiastical law) and is shown performing the sacrament of penance more successfully than the compromised clergy ever could.

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*Toulouse* explores ways in which Christendom can be protected from tyranny and legal corruption, especially long-standing tyranny and social degradation stemming from a corrupt king. Dyoclysyen is dangerous because he corrupts his closest advisors, enjoys breaking the laws of his kingdom and oaths with his vassals, and causes hundreds of thousands of deaths through the illegal wars he wages against his subjects. Beulybon represents a virtuous woman in a state of grace trapped in her marriage to Dyoclysyen, constantly trying to reform society with her words alone and constantly rebuffed by the misogyny within Almayn. Barnard is an enemy of the empire because he insists that 'truth' be kept—legally, socially, spiritually, politically—for the preservation of justice. The romance fashions these contrasts by identifying and differentiating 'true' characters from 'false' ones, and by engaging with 'truth' debates in ways similar to other acts of reform. Through this, the poet's desire for 'truth', and his or her toleration of rebellion as a means of achieving social, legal, and political change, is revealed. Barnard exemplifies the ideal king imagined in *Truthe, Reste, and Pes*, while Dyoclysyen succumbs to tyranny and corruption. His actions justify Barnard's rebellion as a means of limiting the damaging impact of tyrannical leadership and a compromised legal system within a kingdom. Through Barnard, *Toulouse* shows how a 'good man' in a state of grace (with ethics) can rebel, can defy the law to protect the disempowered,

and can take *dominium* from sinful members of the clergy as well as from the ruling elite, with God's support throughout. The romance reveals itself to be embroiled in debates that permeated rebellion, complaint poems, and reformist action of the 1380s. *Toulouse's* circulation in manuscript in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries may well be attributable to its reformist message.

Chapter Four  
The Wife of Bath's Lollard *Tale*

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue* has been critically associated with Lollardy, both through the voice of its protagonist, as the Wife interprets scripture for herself and rejects institutional rulings about her faith and behaviour, and through examining evidence in surviving manuscripts, such as glossing programmes that suggest a Lollard influence on textual design and reception. Alcuin Blamires argues that in the *Prologue*, 'the Wife of Bath, being a lay person determined to confute clerical lore on the basis of unglossed scriptural evidence, is applying Lollard vocabulary in a Lollard manner'.<sup>1</sup> Theresa Tinkle, analysing the complex manuscript glosses associated with the *Prologue* in various fifteenth-century manuscripts, writes that, 'A number of Chaucer manuscripts exhibit Latin source notes in a way likely to suggest a Lollard scriptural agenda to readers'.<sup>2</sup> Rather than focus primarily on the *Prologue*, however, this chapter will instead turn to the Wife's *Tale*, arguing for a Lollard inflection within the *Tale* by focusing on its intertextual connections with Lollard discourse, especially in regards its position on execution, ethical action as the source of authority, and the redemptive potential of preaching. I explore the *Tale's* resonances with an array of early Middle English Lollard texts: from the *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards* (1395),<sup>3</sup> to translations of John Wyclif's Latin writing, such as the Middle English *De Papa* (after 1379) and *De Officio Pastoralis* (after 1379);<sup>4</sup> other Lollard texts, including *On the Leaven of*

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<sup>1</sup> A. Blamires, 'The Wife of Bath and Lollardy', *Medium Aevum*, 58, 2 (1989) 224-42:229.

<sup>2</sup> T. Tinkle, 'The Wife of Bath's marginal authority', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 32 (2010) 67-101:72.

<sup>3</sup> For the date these conclusions were posted, see A. Hudson (ed.), *Selections from English Wycliffite writings* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978) ix.

<sup>4</sup> The translations are difficult to date for both *De Papa* and *De officio Pastoralis*, but must come after the date of their composition in Latin by Wyclif, see Hudson (ed.), *Selections*, ix.



*Pharisees* (before 1400), *Of Prelates* (before 1400),<sup>5</sup> and *Pe Ten Comaundementis* (c. 1390s);<sup>6</sup> evidence from trials, such as Hawisia Moone's confession; and an array of Middle English Lollard sermons. Although Frances McCormack has used a similar canon of Lollard texts in her analysis of the *Parson's Prologue and Tale*, no critic has to date applied a similar intertextual analysis to the *Wife's Tale*.<sup>7</sup> By highlighting the Lollard resonances within the *Wife's* story, this chapter seeks to support Lollard readings of the *Wife's* character within the *Prologue*, thereby illuminating the reformist potential of the whole of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*.

Chaucer's personal feelings about Lollards are not known; however, Chaucer's personal connections with known Lollard supporters is well documented. Chaucer's patron, John of Gaunt, also employed Wyclif from 1372 to 1378, protected him at his heresy trial in 1377, and is thought to have assisted in the trial of 1378 with the help of Joan, the queen mother.<sup>8</sup> Five individuals known as the 'Lollard Knights' had interpersonal relationships with Chaucer: Sir Lewis Clifford, Sir William Beauchamp, Sir Richard Sturry, Sir Phillip de la Vache, and Sir John Clanvowe.<sup>9</sup> There is some evidence that Chaucer had access to the

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<sup>5</sup> This date comes from the dating of Dublin, Trinity College, MS 244, an early manuscript containing both *On the Leaven of Pharisees* and *Of Prelates*, supplied by A. J. Fletcher, 'The criteria for scribal attribution: Dublin, Trinity College, MS 244, some early copies of the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, and the canon of Adam Pynkhurst manuscripts', *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, 58, 237 (2007) 597-632:619.

<sup>6</sup> The dating of this tract is unstable, it (along with other Middle English Lollard texts) had been attributed to Wyclif himself until recently, when the instability of that attribution was highlighted, see A. Hudson, 'Foreword', in *Lollards and their books* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1985) ix-x; M. Aston, 'M. Aston, 'Lollardy and sedition, 1381-1431', in *Lollards and reformers: images and literacy in late medieval religion* (London: the Hambledon Press, 1984) 1-47.

<sup>7</sup> F. McCormack, *Chaucer and the culture of dissent: the Lollard context and subtext of the 'Parson's Tale'* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> S. E. Lahey, *John Wyclif* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 15-21; D. Pearsall, *The life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 82-93.

<sup>9</sup> McCormack, *Culture of dissent*, 23-32; K. B. McFarlane, *Lancastrian kings and Lollard knights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) 182-3; Pearsall, *Chaucer*, 130-1 & 181-5.

Wycliffite Bible, or at least to the philosophy associated with its translation.<sup>10</sup> Some critics believe Chaucer's scribe to have been Adam Pynkhurst,<sup>11</sup> who may have worked with Chaucer from at least 1385,<sup>12</sup> and who possibly transcribed several English Wycliffite texts into Dublin, Trinity College, MS 244 in the late 1380s or early 1390s.<sup>13</sup> Chaucer's access to Lollard ideas through John of Gaunt, the Lollard Knights, Pynkhurst, and the Wycliffite Bible can all account for Chaucer's awareness of Lollard philosophy demonstrated in the *Tales*. It is, however, a moot question whether Chaucer promoted Lollard ideas himself; his textual ambiguity makes it difficult to pin down his political and religious beliefs in this respect.

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is found in eighty-two manuscripts and fragments from the fifteenth century. Eight of these are classed as 'early' manuscripts, having been produced in the first quarter of the fifteenth century. The manuscript now accepted to be the earliest is Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 392 D (Hengwrt manuscript), produced c.1402-1404.<sup>14</sup> The manuscript which most modern editions follow is that of the elegantly crafted San Marino, Huntington Library, MS EL 26 C 9 (Ellesmere manuscript),

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<sup>10</sup> McCormack, *Culture of dissent*, 149-75; A. Cole, *Literature and heresy in the age of Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 75-99; C. T. Fehrman, 'Did Chaucer read the Wycliffite Bible?', *The Chaucer Review*, 42, 2 (2007) 111-38.

<sup>11</sup> L. R. Mooney, 'Chaucer's Scribe', *Speculum*, 81 (2006) 97-138. This is not universally accepted, for a recent overview of the contentious nature of Mooney's theory, see C. de Hamel, 'The Hengwrt Chaucer', in *Meetings with remarkable manuscripts* (London: Allen Lane, 2016) 425-65:425-31.

<sup>12</sup> S. Horobin, 'Adam Pynkhurst, Geoffrey Chaucer, and the Hengwrt Manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales*', *The Chaucer Review*, 44, 2 (2010) 351-67:354-5.

<sup>13</sup> A. J. Fletcher, 'The criteria for scribal attribution: Dublin, Trinity College, MS 244, some early copies of the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, and the canon of Adam Pynkhurst manuscripts', *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, 58, 237 (2007) 597-632; S. Horobin challenges this attribution in 'The criteria for scribal attribution: Dublin, Trinity College, MS 244, reconsidered', *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, 60, 245 (2009) 371-81; de Hamel also concludes that there is insufficient evidence for many of the manuscripts attributed to Pynkhurst, see de Hamel, 'Hengwrt Chaucer', 463-5.

<sup>14</sup> N. F. Blake, *The textual tradition of the 'Canterbury Tales'* (London: Edward Arnold, 1985) 59; there is some evidence that the Hengwrt manuscript was started while Chaucer was still alive in the 1390s, see D. W. Mosser, "'Chaucer's Scribe", Adam, and the Hengwrt project', M. Connolly & L. R. Mooney (eds.), in *Design and distribution of late medieval manuscripts in England* (York: York Medieval Press, 2008) 11-40:37.

composed by the same scribe as the Hengwrt and dated nearly a decade later (c. 1410-1412).<sup>15</sup> Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg.4.27 and MS Dd.4.24 are near contemporaries of the Ellesmere manuscript, the former containing alterations to the Wife of Bath that appear in the Ellesmere as well as later manuscripts.<sup>16</sup> Other early fifteenth-century manuscripts of the *Tales*, in chronological order, are London, British Library, MS Harley 7334 (c. 1400-10);<sup>17</sup> Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 198 (Corpus, early 15<sup>th</sup> century); London, British Library, MS Lansdowne 851 (Lansdowne), composed after the Corpus manuscript;<sup>18</sup> and Petworth, The National Trust, MS 7, composed after the Lansdowne manuscript.<sup>19</sup> The Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts are generally considered to be the most authoritative witnesses to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, although the question of whether Hengwrt or Ellesmere has the most authority is still a matter for considerable debate.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Blake, *Textual tradition*, 59.

<sup>16</sup> Blake, *Textual tradition*, 75-6; there is some evidence that Ellesmere was produced as early as 1400-1405, see Mosser, 2008, p. 12; and its illumination may suggest that Ellesmere was completed before 1407, see T. Jones et. al. (eds.), 'Ellesmere censored', in *Who murdered Chaucer? A medieval mystery* (London: Methuen, 2003) 247-56.

<sup>17</sup> Blake, *Textual tradition*, 68.

<sup>18</sup> Blake, *Textual tradition*, 72

<sup>19</sup> Blake, *Textual tradition*, 74.

<sup>20</sup> T. W. Machan, 'Opportunity's knock and Chaucerian textual criticism', *Colloquium: Manly-Rickert Seventy Years On*, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 32 (2010) 357-63:357; R. Hanna III, 'The Hengwrt Manuscript and the canon of *The Canterbury Tales*', in *English manuscript studies 1100-1700* (1989) (i) 64-84:79; J. Manly & E. Rickert (eds.), *The text of the 'Canterbury Tales': studied on the basis of all known manuscripts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940); N. F. Blake (ed.), *The Canterbury Tales': edited from the Hengwrt Manuscript* (London: Edward Arnold, 1980) 3-13; Blake, *Textual tradition*, 24-57, 65, & 75-95; A. I. Doyle & M. B. Parkes, 'The production of copies of the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Confessio Amanitis* in the early fifteenth century', in M. B. Parkes & A. G. Watson (eds.), *Medieval scribes, manuscripts, & libraries: essays presented to N. R. Ker* (London: Scholar Press, 1978) 163-210; J. Mann, 'Chaucer's meter and the myth of the Ellesmere editor of the *Canterbury Tales*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 23 (2001) 71-107; D. Wakelin, "'Maked na moore": editing and narrative', *Colloquium: Manly-Rickert Seventy Years On*, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 32 (2010) 365-373:369; Mooney, 'Chaucer's scribe', 105; Mosser, 'Chaucer's scribe', 11-40; D. A. Baker, 'Introduction', in P. G. Ruggiers (ed.), *The Canterbury Tales': a facsimile and transcription of the Hengwrt manuscript with variants from the Ellesmere Manuscript*, *Variorum Chaucer* (Folkstone: Wm. Dawson & Sons, 1979) (i) xviii; S. Schibanoff, 'The new reader and female textuality in two early commentaries on Chaucer', in D. J. Pinti (ed.), *Writing after Chaucer: essential readings in Chaucer and the*

Although significant changes are made to the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* in early manuscript witnesses, the *Tale* itself remains relatively unchanged.<sup>21</sup> For this reason, the ongoing Ellesmere-Hengwrt debate does not affect the interpretation of the *Tale* offered here.

Critics have argued that the manuscript layout and reception of the *Canterbury Tales*, and of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* in particular, indicates that medieval readers associated Chaucer's texts with Lollardy. Glossing programmes reveal a scribal awareness of the potential Lollard inflection of the *Wife's Prologue* insofar as they choose either to amplify the Lollard themes, highlighting the *Wife's* treatment of scripture,<sup>22</sup> or to suppress them, by quoting misogynist polemic.<sup>23</sup> The fact that a manuscript copy of the *Canterbury Tales* was given in evidence against an accused Lollard during his heresy trial is highly suggestive in this respect, contributing to the Lollard tradition that marginalia within the manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* foreground.<sup>24</sup> Several *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts do deflate some of Chaucer's anti-fraternal satire, either by improving the friar's characterisation in the *General Prologue*, or for example, in the case of the Ellesmere manuscript, by altering unflattering images of friars in the manuscript's illumination.<sup>25</sup> While anti-fraternal characterisation is not exclusive to Lollards, many Lollard tracts did condemn the fraternal orders, so by improving

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*fifteenth century* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998) 45-80; Horobin, 'Adam Pynkhurst', 351-67; C. A. Owen Jr., *The manuscripts of the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991) 4; A. S. G. Edwards & D. Pearsall, 'The manuscripts of the major English poetic texts', in J. Griffiths & D. Pearsall (eds.), *Book production and publishing in Britain, 1375-1475* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 257-78.

<sup>21</sup> B. Kennedy, 'A misogynous scribal revision of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*?', *The Chaucer Review*, 30, 4 (1996) 343-58; Blake, *Textual tradition*, ix & 129-30.

<sup>22</sup> Tinkle, 'Marginal authority', 68.

<sup>23</sup> G. D. Caie, 'The significance of the early Chaucer manuscript glosses (with special reference to *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*)', *The Chaucer Review*, 10, 4 (1976) 350-60; Schibanoff, 'The new reader', 54; Blake, *Textual tradition*, 135-356 & 146-7.

<sup>24</sup> A. Hudson, 'Lollardy: The English heresy?', in *Lollards and their books* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1985) 141-64:142, n. 5; M. Aston, 'Lollardy and literacy', in *Lollards and reformers: images and literacy in late medieval religion* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1984) 193-217:208.

<sup>25</sup> Blake, *Textual tradition*, 115-6; Terry Jones et. al. (eds.), *Who murdered Chaucer?*, 247-56.

the image of the friar, these manuscripts may have intended to reduce contentious materials. Echoing the polarity of scribal glossing programmes, two different Ploughman's tales were added to the *Canterbury Tales* in the fifteenth century, one that is 'unimpeachably' orthodox,<sup>26</sup> the other undeniably Lollard.<sup>27</sup> Although not the work of Chaucer, the addition of these tales show fifteenth-century compilers making conscious choices to repress or amplify Lollard ideology in Chaucer's work. The Lollard *Plowman's Tale* similarly convinced sixteenth-century audiences of Chaucer's Lollard, and therefore proto-protestant, sympathies, when it was attributed to Chaucer in William Thynnes's revised 1542 and 1550 editions of Chaucer's *Workes*.<sup>28</sup>

Critics have also found evidence of Lollard language and allusions within the text of the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>29</sup> McCormack argues that Chaucer 'toys with the idea of Lollardy throughout his largely anticlerical *Canterbury Tales*'.<sup>30</sup> The negative characterisations of the Pardoner, Summoner, Friar, Nun's Priest, and Monk have been found to illuminate the sins of the Church hierarchy.<sup>31</sup> Peggy Knapp and McCormack argue that the Parson, in dress,

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<sup>26</sup> J. M. Bowers, *'The Canterbury Tales': fifteenth-century continuations and additions*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992) Robbins Library Digital Projects, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/bowers-canturbury-tales-fifteenth-century-continuations-and-additions>.

<sup>27</sup> J. Dean, 'Introduction: *The Plowman's Tale*', in *Six Ecclesiastical Satires*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991) Robbins Library Digital Projects, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/dean-six-ecclesiastical-satires-plowmans-tale-introduction>.

<sup>28</sup> J. Simpson, 'Chaucer's presence and absence, 1400-1550', in P. Boitani & J. Mann (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 251-69:264; G. Walker, *Writing under tyranny: English literature and the Henrician Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 68 passim; S. Mottram, *Ruin and reformation in Spenser, Shakespeare, and Marvell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming) chapter 1.

<sup>29</sup> For a summary, see McCormack *Culture of dissent*, 35-40; also, see I. Davis, 'Calling: Langland, Gower, and Chaucer on Saint Paul', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 34 (2012) 53-97.

<sup>30</sup> McCormack, *Culture of dissent*, 15.

<sup>31</sup> McCormack, *Culture of dissent*, 207; T. Tinkle, 'Contested authority: Jerome and the Wife of Bath on 1 Timothy 2', *The Chaucer Review*, 44, 3 (2010) 268-93:287; P. Knapp, *Chaucer and the social contest* (London: Routledge, 1990) 84-90.

description, and action, resembles the Lollard ‘poor priest’.<sup>32</sup> McCormack states that ‘The character of the Parson appears to be the template against which all other employees of the church are measured,’ exemplified by ‘the type of penance [he offers]’ and ‘[his] fulfilment of vocation and pastoral care’.<sup>33</sup> Anne Middleton connects the Parson to another reformist text, *Piers Plowman*, and states that the Parson’s two key character components ‘are found together in none of the other posited models or analogues for this complex figure, except in Langland’.<sup>34</sup> Although not male, the Wife offers an even more heterodox ‘poor priest’, the old woman in the *Wife’s Tale*, who is willing to upset social hierarchy in the name of ethical behaviour, and who is able to reform people through sermonising in the same way that Lollards imagined ideal priests could.

The association of the Wife’s *Prologue* with Lollardy is now familiar enough in Chaucerian criticism,<sup>35</sup> however the *Tale* itself has received comparatively little attention in this regard. Several scholars have sought to connect the Wife’s *Tale* either to Lollardy or the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, but there has been no intertextual analysis of the kind I attempt below.<sup>36</sup> Yet the rationale for such an analysis is strong; if the *Prologue* sets up the Wife’s

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<sup>32</sup> Knapp, *Social contest*, pp. 90-4; McCormack, *Culture of dissent*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> McCormack, *Culture of dissent*, 207.

<sup>34</sup> A. Middleton, ‘Commentary on an unacknowledged text: Chaucer’s debt to Langland’, *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 24 (2010) 113-37:117.

<sup>35</sup> S. Carter, ‘Coupling the beastly bride and the hunter hunted: what lies behind Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale*’, *The Chaucer Review*, 37, 4 (2003) 329-45:329; J. Root, “‘Space to speke’”: the Wife of Bath and the discourse of confession’, *The Chaucer Review*, 28, 3 (1994) 252-74:255; D. W. Robertson Jr., “‘And for my land thus hastow mordred me?’: land tenure, the cloth industry, and the Wife of Bath’, *The Chaucer Review*, Directions in Medieval Literary Criticism, 14, 4 (1980) 403-20:415; A. Galloway ‘Marriage, sermons, polemical sermons, and *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*: a generic excursus’, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 14 (1992), 3-30; Blamires, ‘Wife and Lollardy’, 224-42; Kamowski, W., ‘Chaucer and Wyclif: God’s miracles against the clergy’s magic’, *The Chaucer Review*, 37, 1 (2002) 5-25; C. S. Cox, ‘Holy erotica and the virgin word: promiscuous glossing in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*’, *Exemplaria*, 5, 1 (1993) 207-37:230; W. Smith, ‘The Wife of Bath debates Jerome’, *The Chaucer Review*, 32, 2 (1997) 129-45:134; Tinkle, ‘Contested Authority’, 277.

<sup>36</sup> Kamowski, ‘Chaucer and Wyclif’, 5-25; S. S. Thomas, ‘What the Man of Law can’t say: the buried legal argument of the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*’, *The Chaucer Review*, 31, 3 (1997) 256-71:264.

perspective in Lollard terms, it stands to reason that Lollard resonances may be found within the *Tale* as well. This chapter will expand this discussion by demonstrating that the *Tale*'s ideological content shares ethical intertextualities with a wide selection of Lollard texts, and to some extent with ideology expressed by participants within the Peasants' Revolt. In so doing, it contends that the *Wife of Bath's Tale* both continues and amplifies the Lollard inflection of the Wife's character in the *Prologue*.

#### Feminine social and legal reform

Chaucer's Wife of Bath is an explicit example of a female middle class reader who combines an interest in romance in conjunction with an interest in history, philosophy, the Bible, and its exegesis. 'Indeed,' Ladd says, 'although she seems to take liberties with her sources throughout, Chaucer presents the Wife (and himself) as quite impressively well read'.<sup>37</sup> Chaucer is known to use popular stereotypes in his character design within the *Canterbury Tales*, and although the Wife is not an 'everywoman' *per se*, her character is stereotypical enough to suggest that the reading and debating habits ascribed to the Wife are not unique to her character.<sup>38</sup> The Wife's 'type', for example, appears in Reginald Pecock's complaint about women, as part of his rebuttal directed at Lollard polemic regarding the Church:

Thilk wommen whiche maken hem silf so wise bi the Bible, that thei no deede wollen allowe to be vertuose and to be doon in mannis virtuouse conuersacioun, saue what thei kunnen fynde expresseli in the Bible, and ben ful coppid of speche anentis clerkis, and

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<sup>37</sup> R. A. Ladd, 'Selling Alys: reading (with) the Wife of Bath', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 34 (2012) 141-71:151.

<sup>38</sup> J. Mann, *Chaucer and medieval estates satire: the literature of social classes and the 'General Prologue' to the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

avaunten and profren hem silf whanne thei ben in her iolite and in her owne housis  
forto argue and dispute aȝens clerkis.<sup>39</sup>

Pecock argues that a wide range of women at this time engaged with scripture and, like the Wife, disagreed with the authority of the clergy. The Wife, in Chaucer's imagination, has an interest in spiritual reform, and uses romance as a further defence of her heterodox position. In her own *Tale*, the Wife describes a supernatural being who also resembles the women Pecock despised, but the Wife gives that woman the power to actualise the dreams of Lollard philosophers by spreading ethics through sermons and spiritual education. In the *Prologue* and *Tale*, then, we read through the lens of Chaucer's imagination to access a world in which women read romances and religious literatures in connection to heterodoxy and reform.

The Wife and the old woman in her *Tale* interconnect with ideas expressed by Wyclif and Lollards regarding female authority, the power of sermons, and *dominium*. Wyclif theorised that 'the grace of the righteous' was 'the basis of authority'.<sup>40</sup> Lollardy centred on the notion that corrupt officials were not fit to preach, and expounded the philosophy that any good man, lay or otherwise, had the right to preach and teach the word of God.<sup>41</sup> Some early Lollard exegetes like Walter Brut, arrested in 1391, expanded this theory and promoted the abilities of women to preach, teach, and perform sacraments. As Margaret Aston tells us, Brut believed that 'women have the power and authority to preach and make the body of Christ, and they have the power of the keys of the church, of binding and loosing'.<sup>42</sup> The Wife, resonating with Brut's theories, believes herself to be a good woman with valuable life

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<sup>39</sup> R. Pecock, *The repressor of over much blaming of the clergy*, C. Babington (ed.), Rolls Series (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1860) (i) 123; quoted by Blamires, 'Wife and Lollardy', 228.

<sup>40</sup> M. Aston, 'Lollardy and sedition, 1381-1431', in *Lollards and reformers: images and literacy in late medieval religion* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1984) 1-47:3.

<sup>41</sup> Aston, 'Lollardy and sedition', 15-7; Hudson, 'English Heresy', 156-7.

<sup>42</sup> M. Aston, 'Lollard women priests?', in *Lollards and reformers: images and literacy in late medieval religion* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1984) 50-70:52.



experience who has the right to interpret the Bible for herself. The old fairy in her *Tale* likewise believes herself to be a good woman, redefines *dominium* based upon ethical qualifiers, and successfully re-educates a sinner through preaching. The Wife challenges orthodox interpretations of biblical passages and gender stereotypes, and sees herself as equal enough to debate and challenge scriptural and social mores prescribed by the medieval church.

That made me that evere I wolde hem chyde;  
For thogh the Pope hadde seten hem bisyde,  
I wolde noght spare hem at hir owene bord,  
For by my trouthe I quytte hem word for word. (419-22)<sup>43</sup>

One Lollard woman, Hawisia Moon, admitted to similar beliefs when recanting her heretical position, ‘Also þat euery man and euery woman beyng in good lyf oute of synne is as good prest and hath as muche poar of God in al thyng as ony prest ordred, be he pope or bisshop’.<sup>44</sup> On top of this, the *Tale* offers significant Lollard inflections beyond these details, including the anti-fraternal leaning of the Arthurian frame, challenges to masculine authority, and the rhetoric of the old woman’s sermon on the subject of reform.

The Wife’s *Tale* begins by making allusions to the failure of the late medieval church to protect women from sinful men. The Wife introduces this idea by contrasting the ‘times of old’ with ‘now’. In the ‘olde dayes’ (857), ‘Of which that Britons speken greet honour’ (858), a female power existed, ‘The elf queene with hir joly compaignye / Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede’ (860-1). This female system has, however, been replaced by male friars, who are, ‘As thikke as motes in the sonne beam’ (868). Because friars are there, the Wife jokes,

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<sup>43</sup> All quotations from, M. Allen & J. H. Fisher (eds.), *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale’: a Variorum edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2 vols. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012) (i).

<sup>44</sup> Hudson (ed.), *Selections*, 35.

‘Wommen may go sauflly up and down’ (878), for ‘Ther is noon oother incubus but he, / And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour’ (880-1). Even though it appears that women may only now travel safely, immediate tensions arise from these lines and the Wife’s irony is clear. The Wife describes fairies solely as female and ascribes no demonic features to them, so ‘incubus’ can hardly apply to the elf queen and her ‘joly compaignye’. James Wade tells us that in medieval England fairies were considered neutral angels, not demons, and were rarely represented as completely evil.<sup>45</sup> As the friars have cast out the fairies, therefore, it is likely to be the friars themselves who remain in Chaucer’s day as the only ‘incubus’ to threaten female honour.

The Wife’s apparent association of friars with incubi who reportedly rape and impregnate women is seen in other medieval texts. Some anti-fraternal texts and Lollard tracts warn that friars are sexual predators,<sup>46</sup> and Chaucer, in the *General Prologue*, also describes friars in this way.<sup>47</sup> Editors of the Wife of Bath generally agree that sexual violence is associated with friars and incubi but they struggle to reconcile the lines.<sup>48</sup> James Winny,

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<sup>45</sup> J. Wade, *Fairies in medieval romance*, The New Middle Ages Series (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 14-6.

<sup>46</sup> J. Dean (ed.), ‘*Preste, Ne Monke, Ne Yit Chanoun*’ in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 47-52, ll. 75-96; J. Dean (ed.), ‘*Freers, Freers Wo Ye Be*’, in *Medieval English political writings* TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 58-9, ll. 21-6; F. D. Matthew (ed.), ‘*Of the Leaven of Pharisees*’, in *The English works of Wyclif hitherto unprinted*, EETS O. S. 74 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1880, revised 1902) 1-27:6 & 12; F. D. Matthew (ed.), ‘*Of Prelates*’, in *The English works of Wyclif hitherto unprinted*, EETS O. S. 74 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1880, revised 1902) 52-107:72-3; F. D. Matthew (ed.), ‘*The Order of the Priesthood*’, *The English works of Wyclif hitherto unprinted*, EETS O. S. 74 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1880, revised 1902) 164-79:170.

<sup>47</sup> ‘He hadde maked ful many a mariage / Of yonge wommen at his owene cost’: Blake (ed.), ‘*The Wife of Bath*’, in *The Canterbury Tales*, ll. 212-3, and glosses these lines, stating that ‘The implication is that he married off the young girls he had seduced’, Blake, ‘*The Wife of Bath*’, 39.

<sup>48</sup> For glosses to line 881, see W. W. Skeat (ed.), *The complete works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (London: Oxford University Press, 1894); J. Winny (ed.), *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); F. N. Robinson (ed.), *The works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957); J. H. Fisher (ed.), *The complete poetry and prose of Geoffrey Chaucer* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich,

Walter Skeat, and F. N. Robinson conclude, for example, that the incubus fathers children, while friars cannot.<sup>49</sup> Dorothy Yamamoto argues, that ‘Compared to what the incubus was capable of, the nuisance of the friar seems—if not trivial—at least of relatively minor importance’.<sup>50</sup> John Pitcher, uniquely, sees the friar posing as great a threat as the incubus, arguing that ‘what her words imply [...] is that the threat of a friar makes him a sexual predator on the order of the incubus’.<sup>51</sup> Several medieval sources corroborate this conclusion. The Lollard *On the Leaven of Pharisees* tells us that friars ‘geten children vpon hem [women] to make hem freris or nunnes’.<sup>52</sup> In this case the potency of friars is clearly not in question. *Of the Leaven of Pharisees* also reveals that friars ‘do fornycacioun and auoutrie wiþ wyues and nonnes, and slen wommen þat with-stonden hem in þis synne’.<sup>53</sup> Friars not only sleep with nuns and wives, producing children, they also ‘slen’—beat or kill—women who refuse them.<sup>54</sup> The *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards* also accuses pregnant nuns of ‘sleyng [...] childrin or þei ben cristenid, aborcife and stroying of kynde be medicine ben ful synful’.<sup>55</sup> Such examples suggest that medieval friars were sexually aggressive, potent, and caused deaths themselves or as a result of their sin. By contrast, the fairy in the *Tale* is a positive force and nothing like the incubus or the friar. In the *Tale*, the old fairy and her ladies, as women, are unlikely to attack females, and no male fairies are shown at all. The old fairy actually protects women by punishing and educating a knight guilty of sexual violence. The Arthurian frame reveals that the fairy of old used to protect women and that this protection

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1977); A. C. Baugh (ed.), *Chaucer’s major poetry* (London: Appleton Century Crofts, 1963); Kamowski, ‘Chaucer and Wylcif’, 12.

<sup>49</sup> D. Yamamoto, “‘Noon oother incubus but he’”: lines 878-81 in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, *The Chaucer Review*, 28, 3 (1994) 275-8:275.

<sup>50</sup> Yamamoto, ‘Noon oother’, 277.

<sup>51</sup> J. A. Pitcher, *Chaucer’s feminine subjects: figures of desire in ‘The Canterbury Tales’* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 31.

<sup>52</sup> Matthew (ed.), *Hitherto unprinted*, 12.

<sup>53</sup> Matthew, *Hitherto unprinted*, 6.

<sup>54</sup> M.E.D., slēn, 1(a) to strike, beat; 2: to kill, commit murder, cause death, destroy.

<sup>55</sup> Hudson (ed.), *Selections*, 18.

has been lost because of the actions of the incubus-friar. The Wife uses an Arthurian tale to highlight the failings of the Church in Chaucer's day.

The story itself introduces a 'lusty bachiler' (883) of 'Kyng Arthour' (882) who is riding by a river. Although, as the *Tale's* subject, he seems a likely hero, we quickly discover that his actions are very far from heroic:

He say a mayde walkyng hym biforn  
Of which mayde anon, maugree hir hed,  
By verray force he rafte hir maydenhed. (886-8)

The knight's villainy is directly related to the physical assault and sexual violation of a woman, and this follows immediately upon the lines associating friars with incubi. The friars' sexual sins are therefore fresh in our mind as we read of the knight's, and for William Kamowski, the rapist knight 'transgresses sexually much like the friars'.<sup>56</sup> By using the frame and the narrative to describe noblemen and churchmen as sources of sexual violence, this rehabilitation story would seem to apply to both medieval estates of men.

Arthur's legal response to the woman's sexual violation is swift and decisive.  
For which oppressioun was swich clamour,  
And swich pursuyte unto the Kyng Arthour  
That dampned was this knyght for to be deed  
By cours of lawe, and sholde han lost his heed. (889-92)

The knight, subject to the king's laws, can be punished legally, whereas a transgressing friar could not, as friars were not subject to English law courts, ecclesiastical or secular.<sup>57</sup> In England in the fourteenth century, execution was the standard penalty for multiple crimes and, over the course of this and the fifteenth century, crimes considered to be executable

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<sup>56</sup> Kamowski, 'Chaucer and Wyclif', 13.

<sup>57</sup> P. R. Szittyła, *The Antifraternal tradition in medieval literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) 8-9.

offenses were expanded to include heretics and rebel lords within England.<sup>58</sup> The Friar in his own *Tale*, which follows the Wife of Bath's, describes the offences that the 'erchedekne [...] in my contree' punishes by execution: 'fornicioun', 'wicchecraft', 'bawderye', 'diffamacioun', 'auoutrye', 'Chirche-reues', 'testamentz', 'contractes', 'lakke of sacramentz', 'vsure', and 'symonye'.<sup>59</sup> This violent male response is accepted by the Friar in his own *Tale* and can therefore be considered culturally normative across secular and ecclesiastical spheres.

By contrast, the Wife shows women desiring rehabilitation rather than the violent punishments associated here with male justice. Although the rapist knight transgresses against women, it is they who seek mercy on his behalf.

So longe preyden the kyng of grace  
Til he his lyf hym graunted in the place,  
And yaf hym to the queene, al at hir wille,  
To chese wheither she wolde hym save or spille. (895-8)

The ladies of court limit male aggression, something Blamires suggests is a part of female cultural responsibility. Whereas men had a right to wrath, women were expected to beg for mercy and, Blamires argues, this 'thereby makes women responsible for tempering masculine aggression'.<sup>60</sup> The Queen does not simply provide mercy though, instead she asks a question of the rapist knight that he is unlikely to know the answer to, 'What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren' (905). Knowing that the answer is something outside of his purview, she offers him a chance to learn the answer:

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<sup>58</sup> D. Matthews, *Writing to the king: nation, kingship, and literature in England, 1250-1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 85; A. K. McHardy, 'De Heretico Comburendo, 1401', in M. Aston & Colin Richmond (eds.), *Lollardy and the gentry in the later Middle Ages* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997) 112-26.

<sup>59</sup> G. Chaucer, 'The Friars Prologue and Tale', in *The Riverside Chaucer*, F. N. Robinson (ed.), 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987) 122-8, ll. 1301-9.

<sup>60</sup> A. Blamires, *The case for women in medieval culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 88.

Yet wol I yeve thee leve for to gon

A twelfmonthe and a day to seche and lere

An answeze suffisant in this matere. (908-10)

Amanda Hopkins suggests that, ‘The task which the queen sets the knight has little relevance to the initial violation and, whilst the arraignment of the violator demonstrates that rape is not acceptable, the ladies’ pleas for his life undermine the law’.<sup>61</sup> I would argue that this quest, and the ladies’ mercy, does, however, have a great deal of relevance within a Lollard context.

Lollards, contrary to the laws and statutes of the fourteenth century, desired forgiveness and education over execution. The *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards* expresses in its tenth conclusion:

And auer þis we knowe wel þat no clerk can fynde be scripture or be reün lawful punschement of deth for on dedly synne and nout for anoþer. But þe lawe of mercy þat is þe newe Testament, forbad al mannisslaute.<sup>62</sup>

Hawisia Moone’s confession explicitly applies these beliefs to court judgements and executions:

Also þat it is not leful to slee a man for ony cause, ne be processe of lawe to dampne ony traytour or ony man for ony treson or felonie to deth, ne to putte ony man to deth for ony cause, but eueryman shuld remitte all vengeaunce oonly to þe sentence of God.<sup>63</sup>

In several treatises, Lollard writers desired individual reform and an increase in preaching and education to reduce the sins of England.<sup>64</sup> The Lollard sermon, ‘The First Sunday of

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<sup>61</sup> A. Hopkins, ‘Female vulnerability as catalyst in the Middle English Breton Lays’, in P. Hardman (ed.), *The matter of identity in medieval romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002) 43-58:57.

<sup>62</sup> Hudson (ed.), *Selections*, 28.

<sup>63</sup> Hudson (ed.), *Selections*, 35.

<sup>64</sup> F. D. Matthew (ed.), ‘*Of Prelates*’, in *The English works of Wyclif hitherto unprinted*, EETS O. S. 74 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1880, revised 1902) 57-

Advent’, argues, ‘þat preching of þe word of God vnbyndeþ men of here synnes mai be proued verbili by Holi Scripture and ground of resoun’.<sup>65</sup> From a Lollard perspective, the sinful behaviours permeating society stemmed from the lack of spiritual education. Here the Queen’s mercy aligns with Lollard philosophy, for she stays the execution in order to save the knight’s soul through education instead. Later in the narrative, this education is provided by the old woman, who delivers the actual sermon that ‘vnbyndeþ’ the knight from his sins.

At this point in the narrative, the rapist knight is selfish, does not feel contrition, and does not comprehend the gravity of his sin’s consequences for his victim or himself. The Queen reminds him repeatedly that his life is in danger— ‘thy lyf yet hastow no suretee’ (903), she states, so ‘keepe thy nekke boon from iren’ (906)—and she again reminds him that his ‘leve’ (908) to live is a gift of mercy. Instead of feeling gratitude for her mercy, however, his immaturity and selfishness shows, ‘Wo was this knyght and sorwefully he siketh. / But what, he may nat doon al as hym liketh’ (913-4). He responds emotionally only to losing freedom and control over his own life and does not appear to recognise that execution would limit his movements far more than this forced journey. Neither does he recognise that he took that very control from his victim. For medieval thinkers, his behaviour makes him adolescent regardless of his age,<sup>66</sup> for as Moss tells us, an adolescent was only considered an adult once ‘temperance’, ‘reason’, and ‘sense’ are achieved,<sup>67</sup> and rape was believed to stem from the

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107:55-7; F. D. Matthew (ed.), ‘*Speculum de Antichristo*’, in *The English works of Wyclif hitherto unprinted*, EETS O. S. 74 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1880, revised 1902) 108-13; F. D. Matthew (ed.), ‘*Of Clerks Possessioners*’, in *The English works of Wyclif hitherto unprinted*, EETS O. S. 74 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1880, revised 1902) 114-40:124 & 135; F. D. Matthew (ed.), ‘*How the Office of Curates is Ordained by God*’, in *The English works of Wyclif hitherto unprinted*, EETS O. S. 74 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1880, revised 1902).

<sup>65</sup> G. Cigman (ed.), *Lollard sermons*, EETS O. S. 294 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 6.

<sup>66</sup> R. E. Moss, *Fatherhood and its representations in Middle English texts* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013).

<sup>67</sup> Moss, *Fatherhood*, 44-5.

immaturity of adolescence.<sup>68</sup> It takes the knight some time to come to the conclusion that it is better to constrain himself to the Queen's will rather than let her kill him on the spot— 'And atte laste he chees hym for to wende' (915). The queen reminds the knight that his path depends upon the mercy of God as well: 'And come agayn right at the yeres ende / With swich answeere as God wolde hym purveye' (916-7). His journey, which stays his otherwise inevitable execution, prefigures Hawisia's belief that 'eueryman shold remitte all vengeance oonly to þe sentence of God'.

The knight wanders for nearly a year without finding sufficient answer to the question of what women most desire. He asks everyone that he can find and hears an array of contradictory answers ranging from marital status, good clothes, flattery, honesty, sexual activity, etc.

Whan that he say he myghte nat come thereby—  
This is to seye, what wommen loven moost—  
Withinne his brest ful sorweful was the goost.  
But hom he gooth, he myghte not sojorne;  
The day was come that homward moste he torne. (984-8)

The rapist knight accepts his fate and chooses to return to Camelot to face his execution. At this very moment, when the knight gives up control and accepts his apparent fate, God provides an unlikely mentor. Although her identity is never explicitly given, the teacher that appears is likely a fairy like the ones described in the romance introduction—the 'elf queene' and her 'joly compaignye', who 'daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede'. The knight, here, sees 'a daunce go' (991) with 'ladyes foure and twenty and yet mo' (992). Yet, the supernatural nature of this dance is proven when the knight approaches, for 'Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where' (996), and the only remaining creature, the old wife, sits upon

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<sup>68</sup> Moss, *Fatherhood*, 53-4.



‘the grene’ (998). These resonances from the *Tale*’s introduction align the old woman with fairies, and it is this woman who provides the wisdom for this knight.

The old woman asks what the knight seeks, stating temptingly (as if she already knows what he is seeking), ‘This olde folk konne muchel thyng’ (1004). The knight reveals his problem, saying ‘I nam but deed but if that I kan seyn / What thyng it is that wommen moost desire’ (1006-7). The woman demands a troth-plight without providing details of what it is the knight is promising to do, save it be ‘the nexte thyng that I requere thee’ (1010). The knight promises blindly to do whatever she asks, ‘Have here my trouthe’ (1013), and she confidently replies that, ‘I dar me wel avaunte / Thy lyf is sauf’ (1014-5). The fairy is unlike any of the human women whom the knight has interviewed; her answer not only does not contradict the other answers, but supersedes and encompasses them.

The rapist knight and the old fairy return to court to meet Guinevere’s assembly of women. Women from the three female estates—‘wyf’, ‘mayde’ (1026), and ‘widwe’ (1027)—alongside ‘The queene herself sittynge as justise, / Assembled been his answer for to here’ (1028-9). The court of law, usually the exclusive purview of men in the Middle Ages, is replaced here by female justice. The knight gives the answer that the old woman has provided:

‘My lige lady, generally,’ quod he,  
‘Wommen desire to have sovereyntee  
As wel over hir housbonde as hir love,  
And for to been in maistrie hym above.

This is youre mooste desir thogh ye me kille.’ (1037-41)

Not a single woman in all the court can deny what he claims, and they ‘seyden he was worthy han his lyf’ (1045). The knight appears to have successfully regained his life and his freedom

despite no obvious change to his beliefs or understanding. However, the old woman forces the education to continue by calling upon the troth-plight made in the woods.

### The old woman's Lollard lessons

The knight is given his life and freedom for only a moment before the old fairy makes her request and she does so with intelligence, forethought, and in a space in which she is most likely to trap him without resistance. Rather than ask the knight directly, the old woman solicits the legal authority of the Queen as Judge:

Mercy [...] my sovereyn lady queen.  
Er that youre court departe, do me right.  
I taughte this answeere unto the knyght,  
For which he plighte me his trouthe there  
The firste thyng I wolde hym requere  
He wolde it do if it laye in his myght.  
Bifore the court thanne preye I thee, sire knyght,  
[...] that thow me take unto thy wyf,  
For wel thow woost that I have kept thy lyf.  
If I seye fals, sey nay, upon thy fey. (1048-57)

She proves herself a very adept negotiator, for troth-plights had legal ramifications, and by demanding compliance within a legal proceeding their agreement now has witnesses and legal sanction. The knight, recognising that his newly won freedom is lost again, attempts to negotiate their deal.

The knight's negotiations are ironic and demonstrate clearly that a true lesson has yet to be learned. He is still adolescent and selfish and he shows little sign of being affected by his sins, and little awareness of their gravity.

Allas and weilawey!

I woot right wel that swich was my biheste.

For Goddes love, as chees a newe requeste;

Taak al my good and lat my body go. (1058-61)

His answer is ironic because he is requesting something that he recently denied the woman he raped: he coveted her body and, ‘maugree her heed’, he took it against her will. He denied his victim the freedom of her body and so too the old woman denies the rapist knight his body: ‘Nay, thanne [...] I shrewe us bothe two!’ (1062). He also offers the old woman worldly wealth to save his body, but she refuses his bribe.

For thogh that I be foul, old, and poore

I nolde for al the metal ne for oore

That under erthe is grave or lith above,

But if thy wyf I were and eek the love. (1063-6)

The old woman reduces his proffered wealth to the bare elements removed from the earth, ‘metal’ and ‘oore’, and shows no interest in their social or earthly value.

Lollards praised the value of the ‘ghostly’ over that of the ‘earthly’ in a similar way. In the sermon *Domina septima* we are told that, ‘Crist techyþ us in þis þat gostly foode is bettur þan þis [bodily foode], and in tokne herof þis secunde feste was algaste lesse’.<sup>69</sup> Speaking of the Eucharist, the Lollard writer argues that the body is the ‘earthly’ aspect of human nature, the lesser element in the Eucharist, while the ‘ghostly’ aspect, that which pertains to God and the soul, has the most spiritual value. Although not speaking of the Eucharist, the old woman emphasises the earthly nature of gold when she denies its value in relation to her ‘ghostly’ intention—to marry and save the soul of a sinner. From this, she remains firm that the knight’s vow of marriage is all she is interested in.

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<sup>69</sup> A. Hudson (ed.), *English Wycliffite sermons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) (i) 251.

The rapist knight then makes a second argument against his marriage to the old woman:

My love [...] nay, my dampnacioun!

Allas that any of my nacioun

Sholde ever so foule disparaged be. (1067-9)

There are two features that make this argument ironic. Firstly, his ‘dampnacioun’ has actually come from his sinful and covetous actions against his victim. The Lollard sermon, ‘Pe Gospel of Oon Confessor and Bishop’, states that, ‘And þos, as Crist techiþe, men synnen in siȝt of wymmen, for he þat seeþ a woman for to coveite her, he haþ in þat done lecherie in the herte’.<sup>70</sup> He was damned to die because of his violence against a woman and not because of this forced marriage. Secondly, he complains that his family should not be ‘disparaged’ by connection with this woman through marriage. Ironically, he ‘disparaged’ his victim and her family by destroying her marriage prospects and her family’s reputation by his violence. Through his words here, the knight proves that he does not feel true contrition; he cannot comprehend why his sin was a problem, and therefore he cannot reform himself.

This argument understandably does not move the old woman nor the Queen’s court to alter the terms of the troth-plight:

But al for noght; th’ende is this, that he

Constreyned was, he nedes moste hir wedde;

And taketh his olde wyf and goth to bedde. (1070-2)

As the knight constrained his victim against her will, so too is he constrained. He is getting an eye for an eye lesson to teach him what he did wrong. Importantly, although the knight rapes his victim, the old fairy does not force the knight to sleep with her. Rather, she wins him over

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<sup>70</sup> H. E. Winn (ed.), *Wyclif: select English writings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929) 47.

with words. She chooses to convert him with her sermon rather than with force. It is the content and persuasiveness of her sermon, its purpose to convert him from sin, and his eventual reform that links these scenes with Lollard ideology.

The rapist knight's behaviour in regards their marriage, and his arguments against loving the old woman, are selfish and not contrite. He still does not comprehend what his sin is or how to correct it. He continues to behave in this way throughout the marriage ceremony.

Ther nas but hevynesse and mucche sorwe.  
For prively he wedded hire on morwe  
And al day after hidde hym as an owle,  
So wo was hym, his wyf looked so foule.  
Greet was the wo the knyght hadde in his thought.  
Whan he was with his wyf abedde ybrought,  
He walweth and he turneth to and fro. (1079-85)

These behaviours act as a foil with which to gauge his later actions. He is still selfishly motivated and unable to see beyond his own desires and sorrows: only the leading female characters in this romance show selfless action. The knight can only be truly educated when he drops his adolescent selfishness and takes on board the wiser role of selfless understanding demonstrated by the female characters.

By contrast, the old woman maintains a positive outlook, despite the great sacrifice she herself is making, 'His olde wyf lay smylyng everemo' (1086). Although Chaucer never explicitly identifies the marriage as a sacrifice, the fairy does marry a known rapist without a guarantee he will change. Where she had great freedom in her single life, through the sacrament of marriage she is bonded to another in life and soul. Although not on the cross, the old woman's sacrifice does still parallel Christ's own sacrifice as described by Lollards. In the Wycliffite sermon '*Dominica prima Aduentus*', Christ's sacrifice is written in these

same terms, ‘Þus Cryst þaf boþe body and sowle for þe releuyng of hise enemyes’.<sup>71</sup> The old woman similarly puts body in jeopardy through her marriage contract in order to save a man who has sinned against women. Wyclif writes in multiple texts that Christ’s sacrifice is his most noble act. For example, in a Lollard translation of his *De Papa*, Wyclif states, ‘Crist lovede so myche His floc þat he puttide His lif for hem, and sufferide sharp peyne and dep for to brynge hem to blis’.<sup>72</sup> All of the advice she offers the knight elevates Christ and minimises social structures and practices that silence or suppress the message of Christ’s teaching as grounded in scripture. She uses her sacrifice to educate and save the soul of one man and through this she likely saves the bodies of other women.

The old woman educates the knight first by challenging his celibate refusal to sleep with her. She plays on the double meaning of ‘daungerous’ to show that his celibacy in his new marriage is a problem. ‘Is this the lawe of Kyng Arthures hous?’, she asks, ‘Is every knyght of his thus daungerous?’ (1089-90). Although some editors comment in the Wife’s *Prologue* that ‘daungerous’ can mean both ‘danger’ and ‘standoffishness’, in this scene the ambiguity is rarely mentioned.<sup>73</sup> Elaine Hansen questions the assumption that ‘standoffish’ is the only possible definition here, stating that ‘given the likelihood of puns and double-entendres in any Chaucerian text, it is impossible not to hear the other meanings of the word, also current in the Middle English lexicon: “domineering, overbearing”, and “fraught with danger, hazardous, risky, dangerous”’.<sup>74</sup> The danger of his actions actually stem from the

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<sup>71</sup> Hudson (ed.), *Wycliffite sermons*, (i) 329.

<sup>72</sup> Winn (ed.), *Wyclif*, 71.

<sup>73</sup> P. G. Beidler (ed.), *The Wife of Bath’: complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996); Root, ‘Space to speke’, 262.

<sup>74</sup> E. T. Hansen, “‘Of his love daungerous to me’”: liberation, subversion, and domestic violence in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*’, in P. G. Beidler (ed.), *The Wife of Bath’: complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996) 273-98:278.

standoffishness of his celibate behaviour, justifying reading a double-entendre here. The knight rapes a lady displaying the unchecked lust of an adolescent, and if his lusts are not checked by their exercise in marriage he will still be dangerous to women. One of Lollardy's main concerns with the clergy was celibate behaviour because of the gross sins they felt it led to. In the *Twelve Conclusions*, the third and eleventh deal with the problems of celibacy, namely that it leads to bestiality, homosexuality, abortion, and sin.<sup>75</sup> The old wife associates celibate behaviour with madness, 'Ye faren lyk a man hadde lost his wit' (1095). The fairy prefers marriage to the dangers of celibate behaviour and encourages her husband to be reformed in this way and so seeks the ability to address and correct the cause of that celibate behaviour, 'What is my gilt? For Goddes love tell it, / And it shal ben amended, if I may' (1096-7). The Rapist Knight replies that, 'It wol nat ben amended neuere mo' (1099). He details her guilt:

Thou art so loothly, and so old also,  
And thereto comen of so lowe a kynde  
That litel wonder is thogh I walwe and wynde.  
So wolde God, myn herte wolde breste! (1100-3)

He is explicit and adamant that she cannot ever correct these problems and she will never win his love.

The old woman, after double-checking that this is the cause of his unrest, promises to fix all of these problems. She is offering to perform an impossible miracle, requiring that her appearance and her social station change. However, rather than change her own poverty or station, she falls into a long sermonic speech intent on reforming the knight's morals, describing, on an ethical and social level, why his arguments have no merit. She, a laywoman providing a sermon intended to reform the ethics of a sinner, is connected to Lollard beliefs.

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<sup>75</sup> Hudson (ed.), *Selections*, 24-9.

Of the sixteen points on which Lollards were condemned, the seventh stated, ‘Pat þer schulde be but oo degree aloone of presthod in þe chirche of God, and euey good man is a prest and hap power to preche þe worde of God’.<sup>76</sup> She is a good woman, and therefore she possesses the right to preach of God and to teach men morality. The sermon she tells is grounded in Biblical texts and therefore could be orthodox. However, because she is a female interpreter of scripture, the old woman’s sermon becomes heterodox in her mouth. Indeed, even Lollards did not deny that they shared many beliefs with orthodox religion; they simply denied that the members of the church taught or lived by God’s laws, negating their power. The arguments the old fairy provides, especially those on ‘gentillesse’ and ‘poverty’, connect her sermon to the beliefs expressed by Lollards.

The old woman addresses ‘gentillesse’ and the knight’s accusations against her station first. She undermines the definition of ‘gentillesse’ that he uses, those ‘descended out of old richesse’ (1110), and she states that, ‘Swich errogaunce is nat worth an hen’ (1112). She undermines the social construct of the nobility entirely, stating that there is no value in such distinctions. She then redefines ‘gentillesse’ as an ethical quality:

Looke who that is moost vertuous alway,  
Pryvee and apert, and moost entendeth ay  
To do the gentil dedes that he kan,  
Taak hym for the gentileste man. (1113-16)

Wyclif and John Ball also make this argument: Wyclif believed that ‘God cannot give civil dominion to man for himself, and his heirs in perpetuity [...] Charters of human invention concerning perpetual civil inheritance are impossible’;<sup>77</sup> John Ball, in a famous construction, challenged the social hierarchies of medieval society, asking ‘Whan Adam dalf, and Eve

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<sup>76</sup> Hudson (ed.), *Selections*, 19.

<sup>77</sup> Aston, ‘Lollardy and sedition’, 3.



span, / Wo was thanne a gentilman?'.<sup>78</sup> So too, the old woman's sermon, drawing on ideas that were central to fourteenth-century reformist action, restructures *dominium*, demanding that only those with ethical behaviour should possess earthly power.

The fairy justifies this redefinition by pointing out how social gentlemen do not always act with 'gentillesse':

For God it woot, men may wel often fynde  
A lordes sone do shame and vileynye.  
And he that wol han prys of his gentrye,  
For he was born of a gentil hous  
And hadde his eldres noble and vertuous,  
And nyl hymselfen do no gentil dedis  
Ne folwen his gentil auncestre that deed is,  
He nys nat gentil be he duc or erl,  
For vileynes synful dedes maken a cherl. (1150-8)

This argument equally applies to the rapist knight, for although he is a gentleman, descended of noble blood, his behaviour makes him a 'cherl'. Lowrie Daly explains that, 'For Wyclif [...] God does not approve of a *dominium* which is held by an unjust man'.<sup>79</sup> The knight behaves with villainy, and although he may have gentle ancestors, 'nyl hymselfen do no gentil dedis'. The Lollard *Pe Ten Comaundementis* argues that if a man fails to possess ethics he must then lose his office:

So eche man in his degree is boundoun to serve God. And ꝛif he wante þis service, he  
is no lord of goodis bi no trewe title. For he þat stondiþ in grace is verrey lord of

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<sup>78</sup> Dean (ed.), *Political writings*, 140.

<sup>79</sup> L. J. Daly, *The political theory of John Wyclif* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1962) 69.

þingis; and whoevere faillip by defaute of grace, he failip riȝt title of þing þat he occupieþ, and unabliþ himself to have þe goodis of God.<sup>80</sup>

The old woman continues to deny that renown and wealth are enough to make him a gentle man and that grace and ‘gentillesse’ comes from ‘God allone’ (1162). McCormack shows that Lollard discourse frequently addresses a ‘conflict between those receiving true authority from God and those receiving a false but seeming authority from man’.<sup>81</sup> The fairy woman redefines ‘gentillesse’ in a reformist and highly controversial way by suggesting that the knight is not truly noble because he does not live ethically like a Christian. The old wife reverses their station, effectively making herself a gentlewoman and the knight a churl through ethical rhetoric.

Ther shul ye seen expres that no drede is  
That he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis.  
And therefore, leve housbonde, I thus conclude,  
Al were it that myne auncestres weren rude,  
Yet may the hye God—and so hope I—  
Graunte me grace to lyven vertuously.  
Thanne am I gentil when that I bigynne  
To lyven vertuously and weyve synne. (1169-76)

The old fairy, like the Wife in her *Prologue*, finds justification for her argument ‘expres’ in scripture.

The old woman connects still further with Lollard polemic by leaving open her judgement of her own purity, recognising that grace is determined by God and not herself. As Christina von Nolcken says, ‘When the Lollards emphasise their collective fidelity, simplicity

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<sup>80</sup> Winn (ed.), *Wyclif*, 62.

<sup>81</sup> McCormack, *Culture of dissent*, 48.

and poverty they are only doing rhetorically what they hoped they were also doing in fact'.<sup>82</sup>

These ideas are expressed in the Lollard *De Officio Pastoralis*, which states:

We may not þit wite for certeyn [...] but we may gesse and þat is ynow. As we gessen þat þis man þat holdiþ wel cristis lawe is a leme of hooly chirche [...] an-oþer man þat reuersiþ cristis lawe, þat he is a leme of þe fend.<sup>83</sup>

The redefinition of 'gentillesse' changes the basis of authority. Sovereignty is no longer based upon blood but is determined by good deeds. The old woman gives 'gentillesse', and therefore sovereignty, value only when gained through an ethical imitation of Christ. Susan Nakely argues that, 'In the *Canterbury Tales* sovereignty is the talisman that restores nationhood's moral value'.<sup>84</sup> Although Nakely mentions the Wife, she focuses on the Parson especially, the only character to discuss the ethical implications of sovereignty directly. For Chaucer's Parson, as for Wyclif, hierarchy should be based on virtue.<sup>85</sup> The Parson also democratizes sovereign power (i.e. ethical behaviour) as something that all people, regardless of station, are capable of. 'Thus', Nakely says, 'all humanity holds the same political and spiritual potential'.<sup>86</sup> The old woman makes the same argument here, arguing that any person from any station is worthy of social authority if ethically minded.

The second strand of the fairy's sermon challenges the knight's valuation of her poverty and defines the merits of poverty in relation to Christ's lifestyle.

The hye God, on whom that we bileve,

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<sup>82</sup> C. von Nolcken, 'Richard Wyche, a certain knight, and the beginning of the end', in M. Aston & C. Richmond (eds.), *Lollardy and the gentry in the later Middle Ages* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997) 127-54:128-9.

<sup>83</sup> F. D. Matthew (ed.), '*De Officio Pastoralis*', in *The English works of Wyclif hitherto unprinted*, EETS O. S. 74 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1880, revised 1902) 422; cited by, von Nolcken, 'Richard Wyche', 129.

<sup>84</sup> S. Nakely, 'Sovereignty matters: anachronism, Chaucer's Britain, and England's future's past', *The Chaucer Review*, 44, 4 (2010) 368-96:371.

<sup>85</sup> Nakely, 'Sovereignty matters', 375.

<sup>86</sup> Nakely, 'Sovereignty matters', 376.

In wilful poverte chees to lyve his lyf.  
And certes, every man, mayden, or wyf  
May understonde that Jesus heuene kyng,  
Ne wolde nat chese a vicious lyvyng. (1178-82)

Christ chose poverty, and this choice is not ‘vicious’, or immoral, implicating wealth as a potential cause of sinful living.<sup>87</sup> In a Lollard translation of Wyclif’s *De Papa*, several statements are made about Christ’s poverty and humility that attribute poverty to the most holy and virtuous lifestyles.

Crist was more pore man fro His birþe to His deþ, and left worldly riches and beggyng, aftir þe staat of innocense [...] Crist was moost meke man and bade lerne þis of Him [...] Crist was moost homely man in life, in dede and in word.<sup>88</sup>

Christ’s decision to forsake wealth makes him ‘innocent’ in deed as well as word.

The old woman’s sermon distinguishes two types of poverty, that of people who covet, and that of those who do not. It is the latter who are rich in spirit, she argues evoking Lollard beliefs.

He that coveiteth is a poure wight,  
For he wolde han that is nat in his myght;  
But he that noght hath, ne coveiteth have,  
Is riche althogh we holde hym but a knave. (1187-90)

For the fairy, the knight coveted the maiden and this makes him poor in spirit. Wyclif became frustrated by the hypocritical behaviour of churchmen, including friars, who were meant to be poor, and many of his theories set out to correct this problem. The Lollard *Piers the*

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<sup>87</sup> M.E.D., Vicious, 2(a) Morally or spiritually flawed, given to immoral or evil practices, full of vices; also, injurious to others, baleful in influence or conduct, licentious, lecherous, unchaste, disposed to wickedness or evil habits, inclined to immorality.

<sup>88</sup> Winn (ed.), *Wyclif*, 71.

*Plowman's Crede* also emphasised the distinction between covetous and non-covetous forms of poverty by discrediting the wealthy friars and showing a poor ploughman as the source of true Christian teaching.<sup>89</sup>

McCormack tells us that 'Most of that [Lollard] programme involved stripping the church of recently acquired "accessories" such as the mendicants or the doctrine of transubstantiation, or even in emphasizing that the poverty of Christ ought to be the template of the church'.<sup>90</sup> This idealised poverty precluding covetousness resonates with Langland's potential defence of Lollardy, unique to his C-text of *Piers Plowman*.<sup>91</sup> It is possible that the C-text is not Langland's own, although critics generally accept that it is.<sup>92</sup> In the C-text, Andrew Cole tells us, Langland, 'writes rather obsessively about "lollares"',<sup>93</sup> a generally derogatory term denoting idol and lazy people as well as false beggars, from which Lollard was derived.<sup>94</sup> Rather than using 'lollare' to denote negative examples of laziness or idleness, Langland distinguishes between good 'lollars' and bad in passus 9 of the C-text. Cole argues that 'Langland insists that those who (mis)use the "lollarne lyf", living falsely "lyke a lollare" and begging with bags, are distinct from the worthy "cotterelles" and from the "lunatyk lollares", the latter of whom beg "Withoute bagge"'.<sup>95</sup> Those carrying bags seek to collect much, coveting more than they need, while pretending to live poorly. Langland argues that

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<sup>89</sup> J. Dean (ed.), 'Piers the Plowman's Creed', in *Six ecclesiastical satires*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991) Robbins Library Digital Projects, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/dean-six-ecclesiastical-satires-plowmans-tale-introduction>.

<sup>90</sup> McCormack, *Culture of dissent*, 236.

<sup>91</sup> Cole, *Literature and heresy*, 25-71.

<sup>92</sup> R. Hanna, 'The versions and revisions of *Piers Plowman*', in A. Cole & A. Galloway (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 33-49.

<sup>93</sup> Cole, *Literature and heresy*, 27.

<sup>94</sup> M.E.D., Loller(e) 1. A lazy vagabond, an idler, a fraudulent beggar. 2(a) An English Lollard.

<sup>95</sup> Cole, *Literature and heresy*, 40, quoting, W. Langland, '*Piers Plowman*': the C Version, G. Russell & G. Kane (eds.) (London: Athlone Press, 1997) ll. 103 & 140; 158; 154; 120; & 139-40.

those ‘faytede in frere clothing’ with ‘fatte chekes’ are those that should ‘ben suche ycald lollares’ for they ‘Lollen aȝen þy byleue and þe law of holy churche’.<sup>96</sup> For Langland, it is not poor priests, but the false friars, coveting wealth and begging with bags, who break the laws of the Church. For the old woman, the covetous behaviours of the nobility were just as dangerous, and in her *Tale* the Wife reveals a desire that women temper the covetous and sinful behaviours of the landed elite.

The fairy goes on to connect spiritual self-awareness to poverty as her conclusion.

Poverte ful often, whan a man is lowe,  
Maketh hymself and eek his God to knowe.  
Poverte a spectacle is, as thynketh me,  
Thurgh which he may his verray freendes se.  
And therefore, sire, syn that I noght yow greve  
Of my poverte namoore ye me repreve. (1201-6)

She pointedly states that ‘I noght yow greve’, although his sins are innumerable. Like Lollards, the old woman defines ethical living in terms of *imitatio Christi* and denies both the power and prestige of those who have wealth but who live without morality. This sentiment is echoed in the Lollard ‘Sermon on John 10.11-18’:

And þus we han þe mesure to knowe a good heerde and an yuel, for þe moor þat an heerde is liche to Crist he is þe better, and þe more þat he straungiþ from him he is þe worse in þis office.<sup>97</sup>

By her speech, intended to correct the life of this man, and by her own good example of a life led in poverty, the old woman represents the ideal preacher whom Lollard ideology desired.

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<sup>96</sup> Quoted by, Cole, *Literature and heresy*, 41.

<sup>97</sup> Hudson (ed.), *Selections*, 64.

The old wife does not give the knight the opportunity to reply to her sermon, but instead, like Arthur's queen, she gives him a choice that will reveal whether he has learned anything from her sermon or not.

Chees now [...] oon of these thynges tweye:

To han me foul and old til that I deye

And be to yow a trewe humble wyf,

And nevere yow displese in al my lyf,

Or ellis ye wol han me yong and fair,

And take youre aventure of the repair

That shal be to youre hous bycause of me,

Or in som oother place, may wel be. (1219-26)

She offers to be either ugly and faithful or beautiful but to bring further shame upon his house through adulterous behaviour. Analogues of this story are found in later fifteenth-century romances, the *Marriage of Sir Gawain* (fifteenth century),<sup>98</sup> *Wedding of Gawain and Dame Ragnell* (fifteenth century),<sup>99</sup> and Gower's *Tale of Florent* (c. 1386-90),<sup>100</sup> all of which present a loathly lady who has been cursed by her wicked step mother.<sup>101</sup> Chaucer's *Tale*

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<sup>98</sup> This romance survives only in one sixteenth century-manuscript problematising dating the romance firmly, London, British Library, MS 27879 (the Percy Folio), see T. Hahn (ed.), 'Marriage of Sir Gawain', in *Sir Gawain: eleven romances and tales*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995) Robbins Library Digital Projects, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/hahn-sir-gawain>.

<sup>99</sup> Like 'The Wedding of Sir Gawain', this romance survives in one sixteenth century-manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 11951 (formerly Rawlinson C. 86), see T. Hahn (ed.), 'The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle', in *Sir Gawain: eleven romances and tales*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995) Robbins Library Digital Projects, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/hahn-sir-gawain>.

<sup>100</sup> J. Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, R. A. Peck (ed.), 3 vols., TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006) Robbins Library Digital Projects, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-confessio-amantis-volume-1>, (i).

<sup>101</sup> D. J. Wurtele, 'Chaucer's Wife of Bath and her distorted Arthurian motifs', *Arthurian Interpretation*, 2, 1 (1987) 47-61:47-8; see also P. J. C. Field, 'What women really want: the genesis of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*', in E. Archibald & D. F. Johnson (eds.), *Arthurian Literature*, xxvii (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010) 59-85.

differs in important details from its analogues. Firstly, unlike the other loathly ladies, the old fairy is supernatural herself and her appearance is fully under her own control. The women in the analogues pose a similar question, stating that they can be beautiful at night and foul during the day, or foul at night and beautiful during the day. This question in the analogues, unlike the old woman's, has more to do with the social standing of the knight and puts conflict between his sexual satisfaction and his reputation at court. In none of the analogues is adulterous behaviour, and therefore inheritance or sovereignty, at issue. In the *Wife's Tale*, the question serves as an ethical test that will reveal to the old woman the success or failure of the knight's education.

Although he says little in reply, there is some indication that the knight has learned something from the sermon. His speech here attenuates the wilful whining that characterises his speeches earlier in the romance, showing that he has somehow matured from adolescence into adulthood during the course of this sermon. For the first time the knight addresses his wife as if she is in fact his lover: 'My lady and my love and wyf so deere' (1230). His earlier claim, 'It wol nat ben amended neuere mo', seems like a long-lost memory. Her sermon has convinced him that her wit and worthiness are greater than his, and he says, 'I putte me in youre wise governaunce' (1231). He has remembered, at least, what women desire most, and offers this to her unequivocally:

Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesaunce

And moost honour to yow and me also.

I do no fors the wheither of the two,

For as yow liketh it suffiseth me. (1232-5)

The sermon education is shown to take hold as the knight relinquishes control over her, recognising that wisdom and the ability to choose the 'moost honour' rests with her and not himself. In another interesting example of Chaucer's word play, 'I do no fors' echoes the



‘verray force’ the knight exerts at the beginning of the narrative to overpower his victim (888). Here, ‘I do no fors’ is often glossed ‘I do not care’ and, although this is a common translation, ‘force’ is itself used to describe overpowering another person physically earlier in the narrative. In the Cambridge MS Dd.4.24 this is written as ‘I do no force’, suggesting that the knight unambiguously relinquishes his domineering behaviour towards women.<sup>102</sup> Susanne Thomas finds his change unbelievable, stating that, ‘The Knight’s resistance to the idea of female sovereignty is so pronounced and overdetermined that his apparent reversal of opinion at the conclusion is too improbable to be believed’.<sup>103</sup> Pitcher also doubts this transformation, stating that ‘In neither the prologue nor the tale does the text make plausible in psychological terms the magical transformation of the obdurate masculinity on which the text turns’.<sup>104</sup> However, Lollard philosophy argued that sermons were the first and best way to convert a man from his sin; after all, Christ himself prescribed it for this purpose. Lollards defended the social need for sermons and Chaucer’s romance promotes this same belief by showing a good sermon actually converting a man from sin.

The old woman asks the knight to confirm what he is relinquishing to her, asking, ‘Thanne have I gete of yow maistrye [...] / Syn I may chese and governe as me lest?’ (1236-7). To which he replies that he does ‘holde it best’ (1238). She replies that the fight is over, ‘we be no lenger wrothe’ (1239),

For by my trouthe, I wol be to yow bothe—

This is to seyn, ye, bothe fair and good.

I pray to God that I mote sterven wood

But I to yow be also good and trewe

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<sup>102</sup> O. da Rold (ed.), ‘Cambridge, University Library, Manuscript Dd.4.24’, in *The Norman Blake editions of the ‘Canterbury Tales’*, <http://www.chaucermss.org/dd>.

<sup>103</sup> S. S. Thomas, ‘The problem of defining ‘sovereynete’ in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*’, *The Chaucer Review*, 41, 1 (2006) 87-97:87.

<sup>104</sup> Pitcher, *Feminine subjects*, 41.

As evere was wyf syn that the world was newe. (1240-4)

The old fairy relinquishes her total dominion over the knight, offering to satisfy his desires as well as fulfilling her own. She does not relinquish power fully, but as Carole Brown argues, ‘the bride and groom give up sovereignty to each other without losing it individually’.<sup>105</sup> This affirms to the reader that the educative potential of the wife’s sermonising voice is preserved.

The Wife argues in the *Prologue* that verbal strength is a natural skill for women, and she retains her verbal potential even after she and Jankyn are reconciled. The old woman’s effect on the rapist knight is very similar to the Wife’s autobiographical story about her fifth husband. The Wife and Jankyn submit to each other in the final lines of the *Prologue* showing a similar desire for equal partnership. Jankyn submits, stating, ‘Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf’ (820). The Wife shares with her fellow pilgrims the fact that:

God help me so, I was to hym as kynde

As any wyf from Denmark unto Inde,

And also trewe; and so was he to me. (823-5)

Although she is ‘kynde’ and ‘trewe’, the Wife is as strong a verbal sparer as ever, as demonstrated by her characterisation within the *Prologue*. The Wife defines sovereignty in such a way that verbal strength is necessarily associated with her ‘kindness’ and her ‘truth’, and these are qualities that extend to expressing her theological opinion openly. Ruth Sylvester argues that:

By giving a female character in the tale so much time to speak freely, and by

attributing this tale to the narrative spirit of the wife, another female character,

Chaucer indicates that the sovereignty which women desire is not merely sexual.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> C. K. Brown, ‘Episodic patterns and the perpetrator: the structure and meaning of Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale*’, *The Chaucer Review*, 31, 1 (1996) 18-35:32.

<sup>106</sup> R. Sylvester, ‘Shifting traditions: Chaucer’s narrative accomplishment in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* considered in the context of the shift from oral tradition to literate print tradition’, *EtCetera*, 71, 3 (2014) 248-57:256.

Like the old fairy, the Wife desires a partnership in which mutual submission leads to understanding and kindness. Jill Mann argues that, ‘The female struggle for “maistrye” (in both *Prologue* and *Tale*) is a struggle towards this vision of *mutuality*, which strips obedience of its oppression by making it an emotional response which matches and balances male surrender’.<sup>107</sup> Each party submits to the other, balancing the scales of male and female natures, to create equal and effective power within a sovereignty imagined as equally female and male. The *Tale* prescribes a balance of masculine and feminine, and like *The Earl of Toulouse* and *The King of Tars*, it shows that women can be the source of education and ethical advice.

The education provided by the supernatural old woman effects a form of spiritual catharsis within the knight, ‘His herte bathed in a bath of blisse’ (1253). Katharyn McKinley writes that, ‘The light which reveals the hag’s new body is itself symbolic of the transformation which has occurred within the knight as well’.<sup>108</sup> Through the old woman’s Lollard education, it is probable that the knight is effectively reborn through a verbal baptism; the sermon she tells exemplifies the potential that Lollards ascribed to sermons. Throughout the narrative, the knight is shown to be wilful, selfish, and unresponsive both to the damage he causes to others and the punishments he is given. His adolescent behaviour continues from his trial to his wedding night, and his inability to recognise his own sins as a problem are writ large in his arguments against wedding the old woman. However, by the end of his new wife’s long sermon, the knight’s negative characteristics have been removed, and he is returned to a state of purity by means of the ethical education that Lollards prescribe. As the Wife’s *Prologue* betrays a Lollard influence, so too her *Tale* represents and enacts what

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<sup>107</sup> J. Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2002)

<http://hull.ebib.com/patron/FullRecord.csp?p=218463>, 74.

<sup>108</sup> K. L. McKinley, ‘The silenced knight: questions of power and reciprocity in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*’, *The Chaucer Review*, 30, 4 (1996) 359-78:362-9.

Lollards fought for: forgiveness and education in order to redeem the spiritual health of England.

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The accumulation of verbal echoes and shared ideas between the *Wife's Tale* and Lollard polemic is striking, covering a desire for female spiritual and political authority; for reforming rather than executing law breakers; and for redistributing wealth and social power based on moral considerations; advocating for non-mendicant forms of poverty; and demonstrating the reformatory power of sermon telling. Within the *Tale*, Arthur represents patriarchal orthodoxy, while Guinevere's government evokes a desire for social reform. Under Guinevere, violence is replaced by the quest for individual reform, and the old woman subsequently prescribes social changes (ethical 'gentillesse' as social authority) and behavioural changes (patient poverty), through which the poem points to the potential of sermons to inspire individual reform. The Knight-Friar parallel encourages the reader to see ethical deviance in both secular and religious hierarchies, but offers hope that moral instruction can affect the social change that Lollards dreamed of and fought peacefully to obtain. Like many of the romances explored here, divine and supernatural powers (God and fairies) are shown supporting the reformist cause, indicating that, for the 'poet', whether Chaucer or his tale-telling Wife, God desires social reform, and the romance allows this reformist dream to be realised on paper.

The accumulation of evidence suggesting a Lollard inflection to the *Prologue* and its reception history in fifteenth-century manuscripts is compounded by the consistent evocation of Lollard ideals throughout the narrative of the romance *Tale* that follows. While I cannot comment upon Chaucer's own beliefs, the consistency of Lollard allusions in the *Wife's Tale* certainly implies assumptions about the readership of Middle English romance. Chaucer imagines middle class merchant women reading texts for religious instruction, yes, but also

romances and complaint. The Wife uses multiple genres (autobiography, theology, and romance) to express discontent at social orthodoxy and prescribe social reform, in political, religious, and legal contexts. Chaucer's stereotypical characterisation of the Wife— as an opinionated, Lollard inflected, polemical advocate for social reform reminiscent of Reginald Pecock's lament of the contrary woman—represents a cultural 'type' associated with reading romance and with desiring and acting towards social reform.

## Chapter Five

### *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the reform of truth

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (SGGK), a late fourteenth-century romance, survives only in London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero A.x (Cotton Nero) alongside three didactic poems most likely composed by the same poet during or shortly after the reign of Richard II.<sup>1</sup> SGGK is considered to be a member of the Alliterative Revival in company with an array of poems, from romances like the *Siege of Jerusalem* (c. 1400),<sup>2</sup> *Awyntyrs of Arthur* (c. 1475-1500),<sup>3</sup> *Alexander and Dindimus* (c. 1370),<sup>4</sup> and *The Destruction of Troy* (c. 1450),<sup>5</sup> to

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<sup>1</sup> For the Ricardian dating, see J. Mann, 'Courtly aesthetics and courtly ethics in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 31 (2009) 231-65; A. Putter, *An introduction to the 'Gawain'-poet* (London: Longman, 1996) 1-37; D. Aers, "'In Arthurus Day": community, virtue, and individual identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *Community, gender, and individual identity: English writing, 1360-1430* (London: Routledge, 1988) 153-78; E. Miller, 'The date and occasion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles*, 28, 2 (2015) 59-62; S. J. Rayner, *Images of kingship in Chaucer and his Ricardian contemporaries* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008); for Edward III's reign, see F. Ingledew, '*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*' and the Order of the Garter (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); for Henry VI's reign, see C. K. Stephens, 'The "Pentangle Hypothesis" a dating history and resetting of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Fifteenth Century Studies*, 31 (2006) 174-202; for authorship debates, see M. Andrew, 'Theories of authorship', in D. Brewer & J. Gibson (eds.), *A companion to the 'Gawain'-poet* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997) 23-33; A. S. G. Edwards, 'The manuscript: British Library, MS Cotton Nero A. x', in D. Brewer & J. Gibson (eds.), *A companion to the 'Gawain'-poet* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997) 197-219:199-200.

<sup>2</sup> R. Hanna & D. Lawton (eds.), *The Siege of Jerusalem*, EETS O. S. 320 (London: Oxford University Press, 2003) xxvii-xxxvii.

<sup>3</sup> T. Hahn (ed.), '*Awyntyrs off Arthur*', in *Sir Gawain: eleven romances and tales*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995) Robbins Library Digital Projects, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/hahn-sir-gawain>.

<sup>4</sup> W. W. Skeat (ed.), *Alexander and Dindimus: or, the letters of Alexander to Dindimus, King of the Brahmans, with the replies of Dindimus*, EETS E. S. 31 (London: Trübner & Co., 1878) xx-xxi.

<sup>5</sup> G. A. Panton & D. Donaldson (eds.), *The 'Geste Historiale' of the destruction of Troy: an alliterative romance translated from Guido de Colonna's 'Hystoria Troiana'*, EETS O. S. 39 & 56 (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1869 & 1874) liv.

religious pieces such as *St. Erkenwald* (c.1380-1410)<sup>6</sup> and the *Pistil of Swete Susan* (1400),<sup>7</sup> and complaint poems, including *The Crowned King* (after 1413),<sup>8</sup> William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (1380s),<sup>9</sup> *Piers the Ploughman's Creed* (1393-1400),<sup>10</sup> *Richard the Redeless* (after 1399),<sup>11</sup> *Mum and the Sothsegger* (c. 1409),<sup>12</sup> and *Winnere and Wastoure* (c. 1450).<sup>13</sup> Many alliterative poets address abuses of power and some critics see this as the motivation behind the Alliterative Revival, for example Stefan Hall tells us that, 'Alliterative poets addressed important socio-political concerns such as plague and famine, over-taxation to pay for the king's wars, and oppression of poor illiterate farmers and peasants'.<sup>14</sup> This chapter argues that *SGGK* shares many ethical perspectives with reformist poets from the Alliterative Revival and it does so by exploring several of the ideological consonances between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Langland's *Piers Plowman*, *Richard the Redeless* (*Richard*), and *Mum and the Sothsegger* (*Mum*). As Patricia Erberle has argued for *Richard*, so this chapter argues for *SGGK*, that it 'comment[s] on the court as failing to offer any

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<sup>6</sup> C. Peterson (ed.), *Saint Erkenwald* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977) 11-5.

<sup>7</sup> R. A. Peck, 'The Pistil of Swete Susan', in *Heroic women from the Old Testament in Middle English verse*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991) Robbins Library Digital Projects, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/peck-heroic-women-pistil-of-swete-susan>.

<sup>8</sup> H. Barr (ed.), *The Piers Plowman tradition: a critical edition of 'Pierce the Ploughman's Crede', 'Richard the Redeless', 'Mum and the Sothsegger', and 'The Crowned King'* (London: J. M. Dent, 1993) 30.

<sup>9</sup> For the date of composition of the B-text, see R. Hanna, 'The versions and revisions of *Piers Plowman*', in A. Cole & A. Galloway (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 33-49.

<sup>10</sup> Barr (ed.), *Plowman tradition*, 9-10.

<sup>11</sup> Barr (ed.), *Plowman tradition*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> Barr (ed.), *Plowman tradition*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Putter, *Introduction*, 29-34; for the dating of *Winnere and Wastoure*, see W. Ginsberg (ed.), 'Winnere and Wastoure' and 'The Parliament of the Thre Ages', TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992) 1.

<sup>14</sup> S. T. Hall, 'Introduction', in E. L. Ridsen (ed.), 'Sir Gawain' and the classical tradition: *essays on the ancient antecedents* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006) 3-15:4; for the origin of this argument, see J. R. Hulbert, 'A hypothesis concerning the Alliterative Revival', *Modern Philology*, 28 (1930-31) 405-22.

resistance to royal power', and that it does so in two main ways, by exploring tyranny and redefining 'truth'.<sup>15</sup> Firstly, I show how Arthur's characterisation in *SGGK* can be seen to embody the tyrannical qualities that complaint poems condemned. I then move on to explore how Arthur's tyranny affects his kingdom and all of his subjects. Neither Gawain nor the courtiers of Camelot, we will see, resist Arthur's authority, regardless of the danger it places them under or the degree to which they complain against those commands in secret.

The Green Knight arrives at Camelot expressly to test Camelot's ethical truth and to pursue peace in contrast with Arthur's tyrannical desires. Gawain lives by a code of morality, independent from his king's tyranny, that is centred upon the politically charged concept of 'truth'. Gawain's truth initially embodies religious, ethical, and legal facets, however as the story progresses we see Gawain sacrifice both the religious and ethical features of truth for the baser legal definition (troth-plights and fealty). Gawain makes this sacrifice at the Green Chapel, where the Green Knight redefines courtesy against prowess, boasting, and reputation, instead arguing for a definition that prioritises the ethical and religious features of truth. This definition echoes approaches to 'truth' in reformist poetry such as *Piers Plowman*, where truth is linked to 'dowel', 'dobet', and 'dobest', terms associated with the performance of virtue (living morally), and with God's divine truth. It is this reformist redefinition of truth that Gawain struggles to own, choosing fealty and the legal troth-plight above the carefully constructed ethics depicted on his shield—ethics which he had previously worked hard to emulate and uphold.

*Richard* and *Mum* critique Richard II for the youthfulness of himself and his court, for his court's vapid fashions, and for the fact that it excludes 'Wisdom' and 'Truth' from the king's presence. I argue that each of these features of ill-advised and tyrannical government

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<sup>15</sup> P. J. Erberle, 'Richard II and the literary arts', in A. Goodman & J. Gillespie (eds.), *Richard II: the art of kingship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) 231-53:251.



are present in Arthur's Camelot. Arthur, young himself, rules a young court in Camelot that is shown to be a dangerous place, full of fashion, and empty of any ethical Christian framework to temper immoral behaviours or protect its subjects. Yet unlike the complaint poems that place blame for social ills upon counsellors and advisors, I argue that in *SGGK* shows us in Fitt One that it is Arthur, not his courtiers, who rejects wisdom and truth. Gawain is the only character at Arthur's Camelot identified as valuing ethics (truth), but through his adventure, I hope to show that he also comes to devalue the spiritual and ethical qualities of truth for the simple and corruptible legal ones. In what follows, I argue that the *Gawain*-poet shows us that Camelot and Gawain falter in virtue because they are commanded by a tyrannical king who sees courtesy as represented only in outward signs, legal truths, and reputation, without possessing the necessary Christian ethics that should accompany true chivalric behaviour.

Criticism of *SGGK* often takes the perfection of Camelot and King Arthur for granted, and although critics have analysed Gawain's character and faults in detail, the same ideas are rarely applied to Arthur's own actions.<sup>16</sup> Gawain is the centre of most critical approaches to *SGGK*, from general analyses of the poem,<sup>17</sup> to more focused studies ranging from Gawain's shame-based heroism,<sup>18</sup> to his emotional limitations including his misogynist outburst,<sup>19</sup> the

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<sup>16</sup> Aers, 'Community, virtue', 153-78; L. Arner, 'The ends of enchantment: colonialism and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 48, 2 (2006) 79-101; P. H. Goodrich, 'Chivalric pilgrimage and King Arthur's court', *Enerratio*, 14 (2007) 79-88; Mann, 'Courtly aesthetics', 231-65; M. Sharma, 'Hiding from harm: revisionism and marvel in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 44, 2 (2008) 168-93.

<sup>17</sup> Putter, *Introduction*, 38-102.

<sup>18</sup> K. McClune, 'Gawain', in N. Cartlidge (ed.), *Heroes and anti-heroes in medieval romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012) 115-28; D. Pearsall, 'Courtesy and chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in D. Brewer & J. Gibson (eds.), *A companion to the 'Gawain'-poet* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997) 351-62.

<sup>19</sup> C. Saunders, 'Mind, body, and affect in medieval English Arthurian literature', in F. Brandsma, C. Larrington, & C. Saunders (eds.), *Emotions in medieval Arthurian literature: body, mind, voice* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015) 31-46; M. Miller, 'The ends of excitement in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: teleology, ethics, and the death drive', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 32 (2010) 215-56; K. Gustafson, '*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in P. Brown (ed.), *A companion to medieval English literature and culture, c. 1350-*

pentangle and his ethics,<sup>20</sup> his mistakes at Hautdesert,<sup>21</sup> his confessions,<sup>22</sup> and his failure to change Camelot.<sup>23</sup> While some critics expand their approaches to the poem to address the

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c. 1500 (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 619-33; G. Morgan, 'Medieval misogyny and Gawain's outburst against women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *The shaping of English poetry: essays on 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', Langland, and Chaucer*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010) (ii) 1-22.

<sup>20</sup> G. Morgan, 'The significance of the pentangle symbolism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *The shaping of English poetry: essays on 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', Langland, Chaucer and Spenser*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010) (i) 1-38; Z. P. Thundy, 'Classical analogues—Eastern and Western—of *Sir Gawain*', in E. L. Ridsen (ed.), '*Sir Gawain*' and the Classical Tradition (London: McFarland & Co., 2006) 135-81; P. H. Goodrich, 'Ritual sacrifice and the pre-Christian subtext of Gawain's green girdle', in E. L. Ridsen (ed.), '*Sir Gawain*' and the Classical Tradition (London: McFarland & Co., 2006) 65-81.

<sup>21</sup> G. Morgan, 'The action of the hunting and bedroom scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *The shaping of English poetry: essays on 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', Langland, Chaucer, and Spenser* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010) (i) 39-62; H. Cooper, 'The supernatural', in D. Brewer & J. Gibson (eds.), *A companion to the 'Gawain'-poet* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997) 277-91; N. Watson, 'The *Gawain*-poet as a vernacular theologian', in D. Brewer & J. Gibson (eds.), *A companion to the 'Gawain'-poet* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997) 293-313; L. Warner, 'Mary, unmindful of her knight: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the traditions of sexual hospitality', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 35 (2013) 263-88; M. G. Leitch, "'Grete luste to slepe": somatic ethics and the sleep of romance from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to Shakespeare', *Parergon*, 31, 2 (2015) 103-28; C. McCarthy, "'Luf-talking" in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Neophilologus*, 92, 1 (2008) 155-62.

<sup>22</sup> O. Burakov-Mongan, 'Supplication and self-reformation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Leeds Studies in English*, 40 (2009) 47-64; D. Aers, 'Christianity for courtly subjects: reflections on the *Gawain*-poet', in D. Brewer & J. Gibson (eds.), *A companion to the 'Gawain'-poet* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997) 91-101; E. L. Ridsen, 'Gawain's ambivalent Christianity', *Enneratio*, 14 (2007) 89-100; M. Sweeney, 'Breaking the romance: identifying sin, earning redemption, and the gift of mercy in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Enneratio*, 16 (2009) 124-39.

<sup>23</sup> R. Schiff, 'Unstable kingship: Trojanness, treason, and community in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *A Journal of Critical Studies*, 40, 2 (2013) 81-102.

Green Knight specifically,<sup>24</sup> Gawain and the Green Knight together,<sup>25</sup> Gawain and Camelot's courtiers,<sup>26</sup> the women of the poem,<sup>27</sup> and to compare Camelot and Hautdesert,<sup>28</sup> Arthur himself is addressed only in passing, if at all.<sup>29</sup> Accepting instead the premise supported by critics like Russell Rutter, Geraldine Barnes, and Bonnie Landers that Camelot could be imperfect, I wish to expand upon these discussions by focusing primarily upon Arthur's characterisation, his ethical failures, and how his problematic leadership impacts negatively on Gawain and Camelot more generally.<sup>30</sup> Arthur's kingship, I suggest, embodies many of the behavioural characteristics that were critiqued by complaint poems from the Alliterative Revival and which had become associated with tyranny. I corroborate these views by

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<sup>24</sup> D. N. Beauregard, 'Moral theology in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: the pentangle, the Green Knight, and the perfection of virtue', *Renascence*, 65, 3 (2013) 146-62; S. F. Ng & K. Hodges, 'Saint George, Islam, and regional audiences in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 32 (2010) 257-94; R. Gasse, 'The fierce Achilles in Chaucer, Gower, and the Gawain-poet', in E. L. Ridsen (ed.), *'Sir Gawain' and the classical tradition: essays on the ancient antecedents* (London: McFarland & Co., 2006) 121-34; M. Storm, 'The Green Knight and other medieval dismemberments', *Enneratio*, 16 (2009) 140-52; J. Wade, *Fairies in medieval romance*, The New Middle Ages Series (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> L. S. Johnson, *The voice of the 'Gawain'-poet* (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984) 37-96; N. Haydock, 'Treasonous founders and pious seducers: Aeneas, Gawain, and aporetic romance', in E. L. Ridsen (ed.), *'Sir Gawain' and the Classical Tradition* (London: McFarland & Co., 2006) 82-111; C. G. Martin, 'The cipher of chivalry: violence as courtly play in the world of Gawain and the Green Knight', *The Chaucer Review*, 43, 3 (2009) 311-29.

<sup>26</sup> G. Barnes, 'The failure of counsel and strategy: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *Counsel and strategy in Middle English romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993) 124-37.

<sup>27</sup> P. Battles, 'Amended texts, emended ladies: female agency and textual editing of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *The Chaucer Review*, 44, 3 (2010) 323-43; L. Warner, 'The lady, the goddess, and the text of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', *The Chaucer Review*, 48, 3 (2014) 334-51.

<sup>28</sup> B. Lander, 'The conventions of innocence and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s literary sophisticates', *Parergon*, 21, 4 (2007) 41-66.

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, *Voice*, 37-96; Lander, 'Innocence', 41-66; M. Sweeney, 'Medieval Solomon and the construction of interpretation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Enneratio*, 14 (2007) 101-17; R. Rutter, 'The treason of Aeneas and the mythographers of Virgil: the classical tradition in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in E. L. Ridsen (ed.), *'Sir Gawain' and the Classical Tradition* (London: McFarland & Co., 2006) 30-48.

<sup>30</sup> Rutter, 'Treason of Aeneas', 30-48; Barnes, 'Failure of counsel', 124-37; Lander, 'Innocence', 41-66.

engaging with the Thomist philosophy of virtue, especially as it relates to the difference between ethical and unethical uses of courage and violence. From this vantage, the chapter contends that the *Gawain*-poet's message becomes one of warning, looking to reform the violent nature of kings and knights, and preferring peace, the central tenet of Christ's message, to the violence of late fourteenth-century court culture.

David Aers has argued of the *Gawain*-poet that a writer coming from the court of Richard II would not compose a poem intended to correct the behaviours of the aristocracy.<sup>31</sup> Yet *SGGK*, as part of the Alliterative Revival, was most likely written by a poet who was part of a community of politically-minded and reformist authors doing just that.<sup>32</sup> In response to critics who argue for the 'moral inadequacy' of Camelot, Aers argues:

What purpose would such an aim serve—to undermine the ethos of the community for which *Sir Gawain* was produced and convert men like Sir John Stanley or Sir Robert Knowles? [...] Yet the poem completely fails to indicate what would constitute such a religious form of life, let alone substantialize it.<sup>33</sup>

Although textual evidence within the Cotton Nero manuscript points to the Cheshire or Lancashire area as the most likely place of composition for *SGGK*, it is still possible that a poet writing from and for that community, of which Sir Robert Knowles and Sir John Stanley were part, would wish to address social and political concerns within his or her work.<sup>34</sup> Aers bases his claim on the imagined audience of *SGGK*, assuming, on the basis that Camelot and Hautdesert both uphold courtly values, that the poem was composed in support of the Lancashire court. Yet he never acknowledges the contrasting characteristics of the two courts.

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<sup>31</sup> Aers, 'Community, virtue', 153-78.

<sup>32</sup> A. C. Cawley & J. J. Anderson (eds.), *'Pearl', 'Cleanness', 'Patience', and 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1962); Andrew, 'Theories of authorship', 23-33; Edwards, 'The manuscript', 199-200.

<sup>33</sup> Aers, 'Community, virtue', 174-5.

<sup>34</sup> M. J. Bennet, *Community, class, and careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire society in the age of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

Against Aers's argument, this chapter contends not only that the differences between Camelot and Hautdesert are notable, but that the reformist message of the poem is contained within these contrasts.

#### Arthur's tyrannical characterisation

The *Gawain*-poet and the Ricardian context of the Alliterative Revival offer multiple avenues for approaching *SGGK* as a potential site of reformist ideology. The complaint poems from this era focus upon moral failings, especially regarding politics and law, attribute these failings to the failure of government under Richard II, and seek to reform Ricardian England in line with Christian ethical practices. *SGGK*'s use of clothing and kingly extravagance is one theme that creates the space for discussion of ethical issues, especially as they applied to legitimate and illegitimate forms of governance. The ethics of Ricardian court fashion is the subject of recent studies by Jenni Nuttall, Nicole Smith, and Jill Mann.<sup>35</sup> Jenni Nuttall, studying the Ricardian era more generally, discusses the influence of Ricardian clothing and extravagance in *post hoc*, propagandistic literature written after Richard's usurpation by Henry IV and she classifies extravagance as both childish and tyrannical qualities. Although Nuttall is convincing in her perceptions of clothing as representative of tyranny, she never acknowledges the actual extravagance practised by Richard II.<sup>36</sup> She does acknowledge, however, that extravagance as a sign of tyrannical behaviour is prefigured in texts written

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<sup>35</sup> Mann, 'Courtly aesthetics', 231-65; N. D. Smith, *Sartorial strategies: outfitting aristocrats and fashioning conduct in late medieval literature* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012); J. Nuttall, *The creation of Lancastrian kingship: literature, language, and politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); see also Sweeney, 'Medieval Solomon', 101-17.

<sup>36</sup> Nuttall, *Lancastrian kingship*.

prior to Richard II's deposition, suggesting that tyranny had been associated with those behaviours for some time.<sup>37</sup>

While Mann and Smith both associate *SGGK* with Ricardian extravagance, Mann unequivocally declares that the *Gawain*-poet promotes clothing as an outward sign of inner morality.<sup>38</sup> Smith focuses on Gawain's girdle, and while she acknowledges that the poem questions fashion as a potentially immoral pursuit, she nevertheless concludes that fashion is elevated as an ethical identifier only once Gawain adopts the girdle as a sign of penitential action at the end of the poem.<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere in the poem, Smith associates Gawain's dress and pentangle symbolism with immorality, arguing that his clothing is not penitential, and that it actually highlights problems with courtly extravagance if unmitigated by Christian principles.

Mann argues, by contrast, that the splendid dress of Gawain and the Green Knight represent, and celebrate, the courtly magnificence that Richard II's court reveled in.

Instead of justifying courtly magnificence in terms of realpolitik, as a means of intimidating the lower classes and maintaining social order by a visible display of wealth and power, the poet sees it as a natural expression of the inner splendor of courtly virtues (especially 'trawþe' and 'clannes') and a reflection of their special qualities.<sup>40</sup>

She goes on to say, 'My own analysis of *Gawain* starts from the conviction that the courtly splendor represented by Arthur and his knights is not being satirized but celebrated'.<sup>41</sup>

Against this argument, however, is the fact that Mann ignores Arthur's own lack of involvement in this courtly fashion, for although Gawain and the Green Knight are described in terms of what they wear, Arthur, the most likely analogue for Richard II, never is. Mann

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<sup>37</sup> Nuttall, *Lancastrian kingship*, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Mann, 'Courtly aesthetics', 231-65; Smith, *Sartorial strategies*.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, *Sartorial strategies*, 103.

<sup>40</sup> Mann, 'Courtly aesthetics', 235-6.

<sup>41</sup> Mann, 'Courtly aesthetics', 243.

also neglects the only other character who is described completely in terms of clothing, Guinevere, who has no visible virtues (74-84). As Kevin Gustafson states, ‘We have little sense of what she thinks or feels—a fact that seems all the more significant in a poem that so carefully reflects on the emotions of male characters’.<sup>42</sup> Guinevere, although beautiful and very well dressed, gives no sign of ethical qualities, she neither speaks nor commands, and unlike Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay, effects no change whatsoever on the events of the poem.

Rather than starting from Mann’s assumption that *SGGK* reflects positively upon Ricardian kingship, this section explores the complexity of its characterisations, by looking at clothing, physicality, and behaviour. The section additionally explores how various characters can be seen to exemplify images of ethical and unethical kingship seen in complaint poetry, as well as in anti-Ricardian propaganda and medieval chronicles regarding Richard’s political strategy, and corroborated by Thomist moral theory. From this vantage, Camelot’s king and knights exemplify negative and sinful behaviours, condemned by these various sources, while Hautdesert’s court embodies behaviours argued to be exemplary by those same complaint texts.

Middle English romances from the fourteenth century generally ignore clothing in a hero’s description and focus upon his physical and behavioural qualities, suggesting that heroic prowess requires a specific type of physicality accompanied by virtuous morality.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Gustafson, ‘*Sir Gawain*’, 621.

<sup>43</sup> For some examples, see H. Hudson (ed.), ‘*Sir Isumbras*’, in *Four Middle English romances*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006) 5-38, ll. 13-24; H. Hudson (ed.), ‘*Octavian*’, in *Four Middle English romances*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006) 39-95, ll. 13-24, H. Hudson (ed.), ‘*Eglamour of Artois*’, in *Four Middle English romances*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006) 97-143, ll. 7-12; R. B. Herzman, G. Drake, & E. Salisbury (eds.), ‘*King Horn*’, in *Four romances of England: ‘King Horn’, ‘Havelok the Dane’, ‘Bevis of Hampton’, ‘Athelston’*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999) 11-70, ll. 13-20; R. B. Herzman, G. Drake, & E. Salisbury (eds.), ‘*Havelok the Dane*’, in *Four romances of England: ‘King Horn’, ‘Havelok the Dane’, ‘Bevis of Hampton’, ‘Athelston’*, TEAMS

The Green Knight, appearing initially as an ambiguous outsider with monstrous features, is in fact described with the physical stature and prowess of a romance hero.

Per hales in at þe halle dor an aghliche mayster,  
On þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe;  
Fro þe swyre to þe swange so sware and so þik,  
And his lyndes and his lymes so longe and so grete,  
Half etayn in erde I hope þat he were,  
Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene,  
And þat þe myriest in his mukel þat myȝt ride;  
For of bak and of brest al were his bodi sturne,  
Bot his wombe and his wast were worthily smale,  
And alle his fetures folȝande, in forme þat he hade,

ful clene. (136-46)<sup>44</sup>

Each descriptor is unambiguously a sign of health, prowess, or age. Even though the Green Knight is also described in terms of his elaborate and expensive attire, such descriptions are accompanied by a physicality that embodies medieval ideals of heroic prowess as well as maturity. Similar qualities are ascribed to Lord Bertilak of Hautdesert, notably his brown beard, huge body, and ‘hyghe eldee’ (842-9, quoted 844). These words indicate that the Green Knight/Lord Bertilak is physically fit and strong, and that his age indicates experience and wisdom. Wisdom, embodied in *Richard*, is described allegorically in similar terms:

With grette browis ybente and a berde eke

[...]

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(Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999) 73-185, ll. 6-10; G. Shuffleton (ed.), ‘Sir Cleges’, in *Ashmole Codex 61: a compilation of popular Middle English verse*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008) 185-98, ll. 7-12.

<sup>44</sup> All quotes from W. R. J. Barron (ed.), *‘Sir Gawain and The Green Knight’: revised edition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).



By governaunce of grete and of good age;  
By styffnesse and strengthe of steeris well y-yokyd,  
That beth myghthffull men, of mydill age.<sup>45</sup>

The Green Knight resembles the character Wisdom, possessing strength and age, and he likewise acts with the mental acuity associated with being wise; his logic is never compromised, and is never shown in an intemperate state. He is the only character who fulfils the ethical ideals held by Aristotle and Aquinas—by maintaining rational control over his passions in order to avoid sin—and he demonstrates this by successfully negotiating what Gerald Morgan calls the ‘mean between extremes of excess and defect’ by tempering his emotion and acting with rational virtues.<sup>46</sup> His heroic features implied by his physicality are complemented by the ethical signifiers attached to his character as well, as we will see, and as David Beauregard convincingly argues, he carries symbols associated with Christ.<sup>47</sup> The Green Knight carries holly as a sign of peace, the axe as a sign of martyrdom, and the green he wears in winter is representative of eternal life.<sup>48</sup> Although appearing monstrous, the Green Knight has the mental strength of middle age and has virtuous ethics supporting the heroism that his strong body implies. The Green Knight/Lord Bertilak’s definition of ‘truth’—as an intrinsic ethical quality that keeps men behaving with Christian morality, and which should take precedence over social and legal truths—complements the positive implications of his physicality. His leadership can be ethical because he is able to recognise that society can often produce laws that undermine Christian principles and so uses wisdom to determine how to apply ethical ‘truth’ to moral judgements and to his interactions with

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<sup>45</sup> J. M. Dean (ed.), ‘Richard the Redeless’, in ‘Richard the Redeless’ and ‘Mum and the Sothsegger’, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000) 7-74, III, ll. 214-252.

<sup>46</sup> Morgan, ‘Medieval misogyny’, 4-7, quoting 4.

<sup>47</sup> Beauregard, ‘Moral theology’, 146-62.

<sup>48</sup> Beauregard, ‘Moral theology’, 154-6.

men. The reformist poetry from the Alliterative Revival also shows the corruption and the unethical practices of nobles and prelates and, in so doing, argues for a return to Christ's teaching, politically, legally, and socially, and that leaders must learn how to apply these Christian ethics to their laws and actions.

Neither Gawain nor Arthur receive physical descriptions that convey the stereotypical heroism of romance. Clare Kinney's critical appraisal of *SGGK* emphasises Gawain's lack of physicality, with no body to compare to that of the Green Knight.<sup>49</sup> Gawain is described only in regards clothing or armour, usually in laborious dressing sequences. The first occurs in Fitt Two as Gawain prepares to leave Camelot (566-78). Of these fifty-three lines, only a half line describes 'thik þrawn þyʒeʒ' in regards the armor protecting them (579). In Fitt Three (1928-31) and Fitt Four Gawain is described entirely in terms of his attire (2015-42). *Piers Plowman* describes apparel in relationship to pride and dishonest self-representation, 'And somme putten hem to pride, apparaild hem thereafter, / In contenance of clothyng comen disgised'.<sup>50</sup> *Richard*, also, addresses how fashion undermines court ethics; its most recent editor argues that, 'the narrator's real object of attack is the arrogance and presumption behind the fashions, the "stroutynge" and viciousness that keep Witt from even entering the court'.<sup>51</sup> From these perspectives, Gawain's sartorial identity might easily become associated with false and transient morality.

Yet, alongside these descriptions of his clothing, Gawain is also described in terms of symbolism relating to his religious and ethical ideals (619-65). The pentangle is used as a

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<sup>49</sup> C. R. Kinney, 'The (dis)embodied hero and the signs of manhood in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in C. A. Lees (ed.), *Medieval masculinities: regarding men in the Middle Ages* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 47-57:49; see also A. C. Spearing, *The 'Gawain'-poet: a critical study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 177-8.

<sup>50</sup> W. Langland, *The vision of Piers Plowman: a critical edition of the B-Text based on Trinity College Cambridge, MS B.15.17*, A.V.C Schmidt (ed.), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Everyman, 1995 Prologue) ll. 23-4.

<sup>51</sup> Dean (ed.), *Richard the Redeless*, 12.

complex symbol denoting ‘trawþe’ (626), the basis of Gawain’s chivalric identity, and which the poet expands upon to mean ‘for gode knawen’ (633), ‘voyded of vche vylany, wyth vertueþ ennoured’ (634), and ‘as tulk of tale most trwe’ (638). Complaint poets and reformist writers frequently align goodness, performing virtues, and speaking honestly with ‘true’ behaviour. The pentangle also denotes five sets of five characteristics ranging from fitness to faith: the five wits, five fingers, the five wounds of Christ, the five joys of the Virgin Mary, and the five ethical/social ideals of franchise, fellowship, cleanness, courtesy, and pity (640-55). Critics have written extensively on the pentangle and its relationship to Gawain’s chivalric code, but the lack of physicality in Gawain’s descriptions impresses upon the reader the suspicion that his ethical ideals are as insecure as his clothing, to be removed, lost, or altered but never steadfast, and this is proven at the end of the poem, as we will see.<sup>52</sup> Gawain’s faults in ethics, Beaugard argues, ‘serve only to emphasize all the more that perfection of virtue is the crucial issue of the poem and that such perfection is achieved by the Green Knight but not by Gawain’.<sup>53</sup> Although Gawain’s intentions for his ethical identity are applauded by the poet, under emotional pressure Gawain sacrifices this identity for a chivalric ethos uninformed by ethical or religious truth.

Arthur is not described in terms of dress, body, or ethics. Instead, the *Gawain*-poet describes Arthur only in a series of negative behavioural characteristics that were associated with tyranny in the Middle Ages. Arthur’s first potentially tyrannical characteristic is named following a general description of his courtiers:

For all watþ fayre folk in her first age,  
on sille,

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<sup>52</sup> Morgan, ‘Pentangle Symbolism’, 1-38; Thundy, ‘Classical analogues’, 135-81; Beaugard, ‘Moral theology’, 146-62; Stephens, ‘Pentangle hypothesis’, 174-202; Sweeney, ‘Medieval Solomon’, 101-17; Barron (ed.), *Sir Gawain*, 10-1.

<sup>53</sup> Beaugard, ‘Moral theology’, 149.

De hapnest vnder heuen,

*Kyng hyzest mon of wylle.* (54-7; italics mine)

Although Barron has translated ‘hyzest mon of wylle’ to mean ‘most noble minded’, it may also suggest Arthur, as their leader, is the highest authority who commands through will.

Richard II’s ‘will’ in this sense was often associated with absolute government and tyranny.

As Nuttall argues:

First and foremost, the disposition articles represent Richard as governing England on his own impulse and in his own interests [...] This stress on Richard’s wilfulness strongly associates him with a pre-existing image of bad kingship.<sup>54</sup>

Nigel Saul likewise notes that, ‘Richard’s emphasis on the prerogative recalls the Angevin world of “vis” and “voluntas”, when the king could override the common law at will [...] an “absolutist” experiment conceived out of its time and predestined to failure’.<sup>55</sup>

Arthur’s tyrannical potential is only amplified by the characterisations that follow.

Bot Arthure wolde not ete til al were serued,

He watȝ so joly of his joyfnes, and sumquat childgered:

His lif liked hym lyȝt, he louied þe lasse

Auþer to longe lye or to longe sitte,

So bisied him his ȝonge blod and his brayn wylde. (85-9)

Arthur is a young man whose restlessness is caused by ‘yonge blod’ and a ‘brayn wylde’ implying that he does not possess the virtues patience, prudence, and temperance that were thought to moderate vice and sin. Lynn Johnson argues as well that, ‘The word “childgered” is not laudatory: it connotes childishness and thoughtlessness and would not have been

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<sup>54</sup> Nuttall, *Lancastrian kingship*, 11.

<sup>55</sup> N. Saul, ‘The kingship of Richard II’, in A. Goodman & J. Gillespie (eds.), *The art of kingship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) 37-57:37.

applied to a king as a form of praise'.<sup>56</sup> Nuttall further tells us that, 'tyrants are dominated by their individual will, passions and desires. Such domination means that they are effectively childish in their governance'.<sup>57</sup> The poet uses pejorative language, familiar from Ricardian complaint, to describe Arthur in order to expose him as childish and tyrannical.

This conclusion is corroborated by other poems within the Alliterative Revival; for example, *Mum* condemns wildness of action and roots it in a limited awareness of the self, God, and good men:

Thus is the court accumbrid and knoweth not thaire happes  
Ne God neither goodman ne thaymselþ nothir,  
Til fortune for foolie falle at laste,  
And al the world wondre on thaire wilde deeds.<sup>58</sup>

Richard II was also condemned in chronicles for wildness of action. John Taylor states that they 'emphasize [...] his volatile and unstable nature', and 'that Richard's uncertain temper was one important factor in a life which was lived in public'.<sup>59</sup> Arthur's wildness is directly linked by the *Gawain*-poet to his youth, and similar associations within complaint poems support reading Arthur's characterisation in *SGGK* as problematic: Langland, in *Piers Plowman*, argues, '*Ve terre ubi puer est rex!* [Woe to the land where the king is a child]',<sup>60</sup> and *Richard* accounts for Richard II's failure as a king because, 'Ye come to youre kyngdom er ye yourself knewe'.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Johnson, *Voice*, 49.

<sup>57</sup> Nuttall, *Lancastrian kingship*, 14.

<sup>58</sup> J. Dean (ed.), '*Mum and the Sothsegger*', in '*Richard the Redeless*' and '*Mum and the Sothsegger*', TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000) 75-169, ll. 129-32.

<sup>59</sup> J. Taylor, 'Richard II and the chronicles', in A. Goodman & J. Gillespie (eds.), *Richard II: the art of kingship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) 15-35:28-9.

<sup>60</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, Prologue, l. 196.

<sup>61</sup> Dean (ed.), '*Richard the Redeless*', I, l. 32.

The fact that Arthur demands adventurous story telling as entertainment on a regular basis also links with vices as they are defined in reform poetry.

And also an oþer maner meued him eke,  
þat he þurȝ nobelay had nomen, he wolde neuer ete  
Vpon such a dere day er hym deuised were  
Of sum auenturus þyng an vncouþe tale,  
Of sum mayn meruayle, þat he myȝt trawe,  
Of alderes, of armes, of other auenturus. (90-5)

Arthur's wildness requires entertainment and he cannot be satisfied enough to sit down and eat until such a tale is rehearsed. Other heroes, like Isumbras, are condemned for listening to romance tales while neglecting more weighty duties.<sup>62</sup> Langland corroborates this belief with his character Haukyn the Actif man, a minstrel stained with myriad sins, yet invited to various feasts because 'clerks and knyghtes welcometh kynges minstrales'.<sup>63</sup> For Haukyn:

Ech day is halyday with hym or an heigh ferye,  
And if he aught wol here, it is an harlotes tonge.  
When men carpen of Crist, or of clenness of soule,  
He wexeth wroth and wol noht here but wordes of murthe.<sup>64</sup>

Haukyn refuses to listen to ethical or religious instruction, becoming angry if those subjects arise, and insisting that humour is the only purpose behind story telling. By relying on spiritually vacuous minstrels like Haukyn for entertainment, Langland suggests that kings, clerks, and knights neglect Christian charity, for the wealthy prefer to be entertained rather than to be charitable, despite the fact that beggars 'ben Goddes minstrales'.<sup>65</sup> Although

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<sup>62</sup> Hudson (ed.), 'Sir Isumbras', ll. 19-21; A. Hopkins, 'Sir Ysumbras', in *The sinful knights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 119-43:132.

<sup>63</sup> Schmidt (ed.) *Piers Plowman*, XIII, l. 437.

<sup>64</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, XIII, ll. 415-8.

<sup>65</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, XIII, l. 440.

Arthur celebrates Christian holidays, he seeks entertainment at feasts and apparently fails to practise charity, since no charitable deeds are mentioned. It is this behaviour, moreover, that is shown to be the cause of the Green Knight's visit at Camelot, 'This hanselle hat ȝ Arthur of auenturus on fyrst / In ȝonge ȝer, *for* he ȝerned ȝelpyng to here' (491-2; Italics mine). The Green Knight comes to test Camelot specifically, 'for' Arthur desires to hear stories, suggesting that Arthur's love of romance is problematic enough to warrant an investigation of his ethics.

On top of these behaviours, Arthur's love of violence puts himself and his men at risk for the sake of mere entertainment.

Oȝer sum segg hym bisoȝt of sum siker knyȝt

To joyne wyth hym in iustyng in jopardé to lay,

Lede, lif for lyf, leue vchon oȝer

As fortune wolde fulsun hom þe fayrer to haue. (96-9)

Arthur allows jousting between his men because it, like listening to stories, entertains him and satisfies the wildness of his youth. Although jousts were not necessarily deadly because the intention was to unhorse rather than kill one's opponent, the poet emphasises the possible life cost, saying each knight will be 'in jopardé', will be staking 'lif for lyf', and that their survival is fully dependent upon fortune. Arthur acts as though witnessing men risking death and listening to stories of adventure are of equal value as entertainment, without recognising that the possible consequences of these actions differ significantly. Laura Ashe argues that, 'Chivalry was intended as a means of preserving life, of enabling knightly endeavour to be economically viable as a day to day activity, with a much lower risk of death than that implied by the earlier warrior code'.<sup>66</sup> Arthur's wildness of thought, extremity of will, and

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<sup>66</sup> L. Ashe, 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the limits of chivalry', in L. Ashe, I. Djordjević, & J. Weiss (eds.), *The exploitations of medieval romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010) 159-72:170.

childishness can all be associated with tyranny, and the desire for unnecessary violence can also be seen as detrimental to a kingdom. These same characteristics colour Arthur's interaction with the Green Knight, and prevent the Green Knight's desire for peace from being realised.

#### Arthur's tyrannical behaviour exposed

*SGGK* takes place over an annual cycle from Christmas to the following New Year. On the first Christmas, the Green Knight comes to Camelot dressed in Christmas pageantry, to assess the ethics of the court. As we learn at the end of the poem, the Green Knight is actually Lord Bertilak of Hautdesert, and he approaches Camelot with a desire to make peace and to test the court through a riddle-type game. The costume he comes in and the objects he carries are part of that same test, and although he carries 'an ax [...] hoge and vnmete', his choices reveal his peaceful intentions (208). Establishing peace requires trust among participants, so he also tests the 'truth' of Camelot and its members, but Lord Bertilak, Arthur, and Gawain all define truth differently. Arthur associates 'truth' with one's renown (accurate or otherwise), the spectacle of chivalry, and above all the belief that his word, because of his position, is law. Gawain defines 'truth' differently at different stages of the romance: for the majority of the story his knightly identity is reflected in symbols upon his shield, crafted to depict a broadly conceptual definition of 'truth' that attempts to encapsulate ethical, spiritual, and legal principles. At the end of the narrative, however, Gawain sacrifices these ethical principles in response to events at the Green Chapel that create conflict between the legal and ethical aspects of his composite construction of truth. Bertilak's 'truth'—weighing ethical and religious truths above manmade laws—insists upon maintaining peace and Christian mores even in conflict with his spoken word.



The Green Knight proves he is a peaceful emissary throughout his interactions with Arthur. First, he describes his dress, the stick of holly he carries, and his purpose at Camelot.

Ȝe may be seker by þis braunch þat I bere here

*Þat I passe as in pes, and no plyȝt seche.*

For had I founded in fere, in feȝtyng wyse,

I haue a hauberghe at home and a helm boþe,

A schelde and a scharp spere, schinande bryȝt,

And oþer weppenes to welde, I wene wel, als;

*Bot for I wolde no were, my wedeȝ ar softer. (265-71; Italics mine)*

In each highlighted statement, the Green Knight explicitly outlines his desire for peace, that he desires no battle or bloodshed, and that he has dressed for, and brought symbols verifying, his peaceful intent. Although this might be undermined by the large axe he carries, he is willing to relinquish the axe to Camelot's champion, thereby removing the ambiguity of his purpose. *Mum* repeatedly asserts that peace should be sought by kings and prays explicitly for a long-lasting one,<sup>67</sup> for example stating:

But God of His goodnes that governith alle thingz

Hym graunte of His grace to guye wel the people,

And to reule this royaume in pees and in reste,

And stable hit to stonde stille for oure dayes.<sup>68</sup>

*Wynnere and Wastoure* also imagines an idealised king as one who is strong of wit, tempers the wrath of his subjects, and works towards peace.

And alle prayed for the pese till the prynce come,

For he was worthiere in witt than any wy ells

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<sup>67</sup> Dean (ed.), '*Mum and the Sothsegger*', ll. 223-6 & 1406-7.

<sup>68</sup> Dean (ed.), '*Mum and the Sothsegger*', ll. 223-6.

For to ridde and to rede and to rewlyn the wrothe

That aythere here appon hate had untill othere.<sup>69</sup>

The Green Knight promotes similar values to these reformist poets and represents himself as such to Camelot in appearance, word, and deed.

Arthur, by contrast, immediately responds in line with his characterisation, but in conflict with the Green Knight's explicit instructions and intentions:

Syr cortays knyȝt,

If þou craue batayle bare,

Here fayleȝ þou not to fyȝt. (276-8)

Despite multiple, explicit assertions to the contrary, Arthur believes that the Green Knight's lack of armour indicates a desire to fight 'bare'. Where the Green Knight embodies the dreams of peace expressed by reformist poets, Arthur's desire for war surpasses his temperance, reason, and wit, and indicates a tyrannical disregard for the welfare of his kingdom and its inhabitants. The Green Knight denies Arthur's interpretation, insists that his desire for peace is genuine, and explains why.

Nay, frayst I no fyȝt, In fayth I þe telle.

Hit arn aboute on þis bench bot berdleȝ chylder;

If I were hasped in armes on a heȝe stede,

Here is no mon me to mach, for myȝteȝ so wayke. (279-82).

The Green Knight believes that his strength is unmatched by Arthur's young court; however, rather than turn his superior strength against them, he offers to make peace with Camelot rather than start a war. While the Green Knight's words stir pride amongst Arthur's knights, it is not his intention to provoke violence with his statements. Although Arthur responds negatively to the Green Knight's words, the Green Knight still speaks only the truth, whether

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<sup>69</sup> Ginsberg (ed.), *Wynnere and Wastoure*, ll. 55-8.

it stirs pride or not. The Green Knight is correct when he compares his strength to the strongest of Camelot's knights. He is larger, older, and more experienced, and we learn later that he has supernatural powers protecting his body from harm. Even before his supernatural powers are revealed, however, Camelot must face an adversary whose words and sheer physical presence casts doubt upon their beliefs about themselves. As Gustafson states, the Green Knight 'literally embodies the single greatest threat to Arthurian masculinity: a manifestly stronger man who is equally well appointed'.<sup>70</sup> When faced with this new and damaging realisation, some members of Camelot show fear, while Arthur defends that false reputation with violence.

The Green Knight offers the Camelot knights a chance, despite their defects, to prove their ethical, rather than physical, 'strength'. To do this, he poses a riddle to Arthur and his court as promised and it acts as a test of reason, courtesy, and peace.

Forþy I craue in þis court a Crystemas gomen,

For hit is þol and Nwe þer, and here ar þep mony.

If any so hardy in þis hous holdeþ hymselfen,

Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede,

Pat dar stifly strike a strok for an oþer,

I schal gif hym of my gyft þys giserne ryche,

Dis ax, þat is heué innogh, to hondele as hym lykes,

And I schal bide þe fyrst bur as bare as I sitte.

If any freke be so felle to fonde þat I telle,

Lepe lyþtly me to, and lach þis weppen;

I quit-clayme hit for euer, kepe hit as his auen,

And I schal stond hym a strok, stif on þis flet,

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<sup>70</sup> Gustafson, '*Sir Gawain*', 621.

Elleȝ thou wyl diȝt me þe dom to dele hym an other,

barlay;

And ȝet gif hym respite

A twelmonyth and a day.

Now hyȝe, and let se tite

Dar any herinne oȝt say. (283-300)

Several critics assume that the Green Knight expressly outlines a beheading game here, thereby negating the seemingly ‘peaceful’ attributes that his character embodies.<sup>71</sup> However, Ashe correctly draws attention to the fact that the Green Knight’s game is ambiguous and that a ‘beheading’ is not required by the game rules, although it is unclear if, as she argues, the holly-bob can actually be considered a ‘weppen’.<sup>72</sup> The ‘giserne’ or axe is offered as a gift to Camelot’s champion, and although he is also carrying holly, which could be used to strike a blow, it is not offered as a gift. The Green Knight says ‘lach þis weppen / I quit-clayme hit for euer, kepe hit as his auen’, connecting the weapon directly to the gifted axe. Ashe is right, however, to point out that the Green Knight does not specify a beheading. Manish Sharma argues against this possibility because Morgan le Fay’s intentions for a beheading game are mentioned in Fitt Four. However, the Green Knight’s and Morgan’s intentions need not align, as we will see further below.<sup>73</sup> Although it is probable that the ‘weppen’ he refers to is the axe, this actually verifies the Green Knight’s peaceful intention. The Green Knight may enter the court carrying a terrible axe, but he is willing to hand it over to his opponent without resistance. The moment the axe leaves his hands he becomes solely the image of peace he describes: a green man, without armour, holding only the holly-bob as a sign of peace.

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<sup>71</sup> Wade, *Fairies*, 34; Johnson, *Voice*, 37; Sharma, ‘Hiding’, 168-93; Martin, ‘Cipher’, 312.

<sup>72</sup> Ashe, ‘Limits of chivalry’, 168.

<sup>73</sup> Sharma, ‘Hiding’, 168-93.

The Green Knight's game also poses a problem that itself becomes a riddle. The first time he addresses the court, he indicates a wish to speak reason, showing that logic and wit will be required of his listener:

Wher is [...]

Pe governour of þis gyng? Gladly I wolde

Se þat segg in syȝt, and with himself speke

Rayson. (224-7)

The riddle he poses itself demonstrates how reason will be required for this challenge: somehow, Camelot's champion must use the axe to strike a blow that *can* be returned in a year's time. In order to do this, and maintain the rules of hospitality, the champion must choose between two options: striking the Green Knight with the shaft of the axe, or giving a slight injury that can be repaid—such as the kind that Gawain receives at the Green Chapel. Although the Green Knight can survive a fatal blow, Camelot does not learn of this until after Gawain strikes off his head. Even if the Green Knight's supernatural survival was obvious, to make the 'gomen' a game and not war, the champion must acknowledge the limits of his own mortality and only strike the Green Knight with a blow such as he himself would be able to survive the following year. By protecting life and promoting peace through martial and rational skill, Camelot's champion has an opportunity to prove that his reason and Christian morality are able to influence his choices even under pressure. *Piers Plowman* shows the figure of Conscience denying a king power unless he possesses reason such as this.

In condicion [...] that thow konne defende,

And rule thi reaume in reson, right wel and in truthe,

That thow have thyn askyng, as the lawe asketh:

*Omnia sunt tua ad defendendum set non ad deprehendendum*

[What is yours is yours to keep in trust, not seize according to your lust].<sup>74</sup>

This riddle, however, goes unnoticed in Camelot as various emotions get the better of the courtiers and the king.

Even without armour and the promise to let go of all deadly weapons and intent, the Green Knight's challenge silences all at Camelot, even the intemperate Arthur. The Green Knight responds to this silence as if it proves his argument about Camelot's weakness and again challenges their reputation (309-15). The challenge against their boasted courage forces Arthur to choose between maintaining this boasted reputation, or accepting that the Green Knight disproves Arthur's beliefs about himself and his knights. As Mann states, 'To uphold one's renown is to prove oneself to be what one asserts one is'.<sup>75</sup> The poet has already implied that Arthur's authority is not based upon strength or ethical considerations, but rests upon his childish pride and a love of violence and power. Arthur is introduced to us desiring to be entertained at Christmas by a life or death fight, so the Green Knight's words about 'myghtes so wayke' are insult enough to damage Arthur's pride, deafen him to reason, and justify the bloodshed he desires.

De lorde greued;

De blod schot for scham into his schyre face

and lere;

He wex as wroth as wynde,

So did alle þat þer were.

De kyng as kene bi kynde. (316-21)

In this state of wild emotions rushing like the wind, keener because of his nature, Arthur chooses war in no uncertain terms. In *Piers Plowman*, this exact emotional phrase is

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<sup>74</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, XIX, ll. 481-483a, translation Schmidt's.

<sup>75</sup> Mann, 'Courtly aesthetics', 249.

used to describe Mede when confronted with Christian truth, contrary to her desires, ‘Also wroth as the wynd weex Meed in a while’.<sup>76</sup> Like Meed, Arthur’s sinful nature prevents him from either accepting correction with humility or applying reason in order to see the peaceful message in the Green Knight’s challenge.

Hapel, by heuen þyn askyng is nys,  
And as þou foly hatȝ frayst, fynde þe behoues.  
I know no gome þat is gast of þy grete wordes.  
Gif me now þy giserne, vpon godeȝ halue,  
And I schal bayþen þy bone þat þou boden habbes. (323-7)

Arthur’s anger, like Meed’s, negates Christ’s teachings (peace, love, charity) in preference for a sinful lifestyle. Arthur could not comprehend the Green Knight’s direct speeches, let alone his riddles, and his mismanagement of this potential peace meeting proves that he lacks the virtues that are necessary for leadership. Arthur and his courtiers all experience rational instability resulting from their fear of the Green Knight’s superior strength, a fear that persists regardless of his explicit message of peace. Beauregard argues in relation to this that ‘fear of the unarmed Christ is the sign of an interior deficiency, whether of outright sin or a simple lack of courage on the part of those who fear’.<sup>77</sup> Where the courtiers’ silence is a weakness, Arthur’s brutality indicates his sinful, violent nature.

The Green Knight speaks with truth, describing Arthur and his court honestly, and yet his message is not welcome at Camelot. *Mum* describes the dangers of telling the truth to intemperate people:

And yf a burne bolde hym to bable the sothe  
And mynde hym of mischief that missereule asketh,

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<sup>76</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, III, l. 331.

<sup>77</sup> Beauregard, ‘Moral theology’, 156.

He may lose his life and laugh here no more,  
Or yputte into prisone or ypyned to deeth  
Or yblent or yshent or sum sorowe have,  
That fro scorne other scathe scape shal he nevre.<sup>78</sup>

The Green Knight resembles the ‘sothsegger’ of *Mum*, speaking the truth and enduring the blows that are delivered in response to that honesty. While his words appear insulting to the court at Camelot, Beauregard convincingly argues that the Green Knight seeks ‘truth’, and that he, like Christ, functions ‘as a two-edged sword keenly discerning the intentions of the heart’.<sup>79</sup> This challenging language functions to ‘provoke’ Arthur and ‘expose’ the fear of his courtiers.<sup>80</sup> *Richard* also shows a young and foolish court seeking the death of Wisdom because he is older and appears alien to them:

‘Lete sle him!’ quod the sleves that slode uppon erthe,  
And alle the berdles burnes bayed on him evere,  
And schorned him, for his slaveyn was of the olde schappe.<sup>81</sup>

Unlike the complaint poems, however, the *Gawain*-poet does not show Arthur’s courtiers or counsellors seeking the Green Knight’s (Wisdom’s) death; rather, it is the king himself that takes up this challenge.

Arthur’s decision to take up the Green Knight’s axe and enter the terms of his ‘gomen’ is not only bloodthirsty but is hastily made without seeking counsel, something Thomas Aquinas condemns as a vice:

Sed si quis ante consilium vellet festine agere, non esset hoc laudabile, sed vitiosum;  
esset enim quædam præcipitatio actionis, quod est vitium prudentiæ oppositum [But if

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<sup>78</sup> Dean (ed.), ‘*Mum and the Sothsegger*’, ll. 165-70.

<sup>79</sup> Beauregard, ‘Moral theology’, 157.

<sup>80</sup> Beauregard, ‘Moral theology’, 157.

<sup>81</sup> Dean (ed.), ‘*Richard the Redeless*’, III, ll. 234-6.



someone chose to act hastily before taking counsel, this would not be praiseworthy but wrong; there would be a precipitate character to the action, and such over-haste is a vice opposed to prudence].<sup>82</sup>

Where the Green Knight did not seek to harm any of Arthur's men, Arthur intends to bathe the Green Knight's bones in blood. Arthur lies, stating, 'I know no gome that is gast of thy grete wordes', contradicting the facts as presented by the poet. The court sees the Green Knight differently to Arthur, although their king never asks for their counsel. As the Green Knight enters, the court feels that, 'Hit semed as no mom myȝt / Vnder his dynteeȝ dryȝe' (201-2). The courtiers also recognise that the Green Knight's features make him supernatural, 'Forþi for fantoum and fayryȝe þe folk þere hit demed' (239). Neither of these conclusions is either recognised or treated by Arthur as a possibility. Although describing Gawain's misogynistic outburst in Fitt Four, Gerald Morgan's research into ethics and emotions also applies to Arthur's behaviour here. Arthur possesses a 'false courage' as described by Morgan in relation to Aristotelian and Thomist ethical theory. 'Strictly speaking, then, courage cannot degenerate into either harshness and cruelty, or arrogance, or boastfulness and boorishness, that is, if it is to retain its character or name of courage'.<sup>83</sup> He goes on to say that:

[T]he virtue of gentleness moderates the passion of anger. Such anger is hardly a passion a knight can be without when fighting in battle [...] But the necessity for a knight to moderate anger when it is no longer appropriate is also very evident.<sup>84</sup>

Although Morgan never applies his theories to Arthur's character, Arthur's errors in ethical ideals are far more pronounced than Gawain's. Where all of Arthur's subjects recognise their

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<sup>82</sup> St. T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Gilby et al. (eds.), 61 vols. (London: Blackfriars, 1963-1976) (xlii) 80, translation 81.

<sup>83</sup> Morgan, 'Medieval misogyny', 4.

<sup>84</sup> Morgan, 'Medieval misogyny', 5.

weakness in relation to the Green Knight, Arthur's pride prevents him from acknowledging this. Morgan tells us that, 'The virtue of humility is the tempering of pride, that is, the immoderate pursuit of great things that are beyond one's power to achieve'.<sup>85</sup> The Green Knight is a giant in size, although as the poet reminds the reader, 'bot mon most I algate myn hym to bene'. The reputation of giants in the Middle Ages is one for violence and arrogance stemming from their great size.<sup>86</sup> Yet whereas the Green Knight's stature is that of a giant, it is Arthur's behaviour that can be seen to embody the arrogance and violence associated with giants more generally.

Although Arthur's young court claims to be the best on earth, the Green Knight disproves this by his very appearance, exposing Arthur's boasts, and Camelot's reputation, as inaccurate. *Piers Plowman* and *Mum* demonstrate the social problems that come from boasting behaviour such as this, and the violent lengths to which people are at times driven to protect their boasted renown. According to *Piers Plowman*, Haukyn, the sinful minstrel, is:

Boldest of beggeris, a bostere that nocht hath,  
In towne and in tavernes tale to telle  
And segge thyng that he nevere seigh and for sooth sweren it,  
Of dedes that he nevere dide demen and bosten.<sup>87</sup>

These boasts are highly problematic, however, so much so that his cloak, metaphorically representing the stains on his soul, is described as follows:

It was fouler bi fele fold that it first semed.  
It was bidropped with wrathe and wikkede wille,  
With envye and yvel speche entisyng to fighte,

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<sup>85</sup> Morgan, 'Medieval misogyny', 6.

<sup>86</sup> W. Stephens, *Giants in those days* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) 67-9.

<sup>87</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, XIII, ll. 303-6.

Lying and lakkyng and leve tonge to chide.<sup>88</sup>

Haukyn defends his false reputation with arguments, slander, and violence.

*Mum* also shows the extremity of violence that people are willing to practise in defence of their renown:

As wilde and as wode and as wrothe eeke,

And braggeth and bosteth and wol brenne watiers

And rather renne in rede blode thenne arere oones.

[...]

For a wood wil and wretthe in thy herte,

And no harme on thy heede in hande no in goodes,

But yhurte on the hert with a high pride.

For suche maniere medling al to many tymes,

Though hit gaine in the bigynnyng, hit groweth so aftre

That lymes been yloste and lyfes ful ofte.<sup>89</sup>

*Mum* extends the dangers of boasts beyond that which Langland describes, showing the extreme lengths of violence to which boasters must go to protect their false reputations, shedding blood and taking limbs and lives. Arthur also experiences wild and uncontrollable anger when his boasts are contested and to defend those lies he, too, is willing to take life and limb. We learn later in Fitt Four, that Morgan le Fay first sent the Green Knight, ‘For to assay þe surquidré, ȝif hit soth were / Þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table’ (2457-8).

‘Surquidré’ is generally translated as ‘presumption’, ‘arrogance’, and ‘pride’,<sup>90</sup> and the *Mirror of Lewde Men and Wymmen* defines ‘surquidré’ thus, ‘þat is when a man demeth

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<sup>88</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman* XIII, ll. 320-3.

<sup>89</sup> Dean (ed.), ‘*Mum and the Sothsegger*’, ll. 1528-38.

<sup>90</sup> Barron, *Sir Gawain*, 163; M.E.D., surquidré, (a) arrogance, pride, presumptuousness.

himself more worthi þan he is'.<sup>91</sup> The Green Knight comes to assess whether true virtue is the source of Camelot's renown and finds that it is in fact false pride; unfortunately, Arthur is willing to kill to protect that lie.

Arthur, now holding the axe, struts and takes practice swings, while the Green Knight stands as the image of peace, holding only the holly-bob, completely unmoved (330-8). He has 'quit claym', as promised, to the violence represented in his axe and handed it over to Arthur. Arthur, strutting about with the axe, resembles the youths whom *Richard* condemns, who 'studieth all in stroutynge and stireth amys evere'.<sup>92</sup> 'Thoru swiche stroutynge', the author of *Richard* writes, these youths together 'stroyeth the rewme'.<sup>93</sup> The Green Knight, by contrast, remains calm, again resembling Wisdom from *Richard*: 'And how stille that steddeffaste stode amonge this reccheles peple, / That had awilled his wyll, as wisdom him taughte'.<sup>94</sup>

Witnessing this incongruous behaviour, Gawain attempts to intervene and alter the course of events set out by Arthur. Ashe points out that Gawain's 'decision is not taken by Gawain, but by Arthur, and Gawain must rescue him from his own folly'.<sup>95</sup> In doing so, Gawain is following the advice Reason gives in *Richard*:

But yif God have grauntyd thee grace for to knowe  
Ony manere mysscheff that myghtte be amendyd,  
Schewe that to thi sovereyne to schelde him from harmes;  
For and he be blessid, the better thee betydyth

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<sup>91</sup> M.E.D., Surquidrie, (b) quotations; quoting, V. Nelson (ed.), *A Myrour to Lewde Men and Wymmen*: a prose version of the 'Speculum Vitae' from B. L. MS Harley 45 (Heidelberg: Winter, 1981) 106.

<sup>92</sup> Dean (ed.), *Richard the Redeless*, III, l. 121.

<sup>93</sup> Dean (ed.), *Richard the Redeless*, III, l. 134.

<sup>94</sup> Dean (ed.), *Richard the Redeless*, III, ll. 209-10.

<sup>95</sup> Ashe, 'Limits of chivalry', 168.

In tyme for to telle him for thi trewe herte.<sup>96</sup>

If Gawain believed that Arthur's decisions regarding the Green Knight's game were good he would not need to intervene. The court also backs Gawain's assessment of events, demonstrating that even in their fearfulness they recognise some fault in Arthur's behaviour that they believe Gawain can correct.

It is often commented upon, the excessive humility with which Gawain gets Arthur to hand the axe, and the risk, over to himself.<sup>97</sup> As William Woods states, 'The brief, sinuous argument makes its way by frequent concession and self-abasement. But its key rhetorical feature is the way Gawain muffles each entreaty within clauses that enhance the self-esteem of the king, the queen, and especially Arthur's knights'.<sup>98</sup> This humility on some level, especially the deference to knights, may rely on a conciliar body agreeing with Gawain's interception:

Ryche togeder con roun,  
And syþen þay redder alle same  
To ryd þe kyng wyth croun,  
And gif Gawain þe game. (362-5)

It may also resemble the realistic advice, given in the dream vision of *Mum*, that telling the truth can be exceedingly dangerous, especially if your audience is a tyrant. Hence, the old wise man suggests:

And loke thou seye ever sothe, but shame not thy brother,  
For yf thou telle hym trouthe in tirantis wise,  
He wold rather wexe wrother thenne forto wirche after.

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<sup>96</sup> Dean (ed.), 'Richard the Redeless', II, ll. 72-6.

<sup>97</sup> W. F. Woods, 'Nature and the inner man in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *The Chaucer Review*, 36, 3 (2002) 209-27:212-4; J. J. Anderson, *Language and imagination in the 'Gawain'-poems* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005) 176-8.

<sup>98</sup> Woods, 'Inner man', 213.

But in a muke maniere thou mos hym asaye,  
And not eche day to egge hym, but in a deue tyme.<sup>99</sup>

Gawain may not be able, in open court, to demonstrate that Arthur has made an error without insulting him. After all, Arthur's angry reaction to the Green Knight's challenge at Camelot suggests that he responds very negatively to perceived insults. Yet by taking over the game, Gawain has the opportunity to change its rules. It is still possible for Gawain to use other parts of the axe or his own martial skill to strike a non-lethal blow and to receive a non-lethal blow in a year's time as a result.

Gawain does not choose to do this, however, and there are several reasons why Gawain may choose to intervene into, but not change the rules of, the game. Traditionally, critics argue that Gawain does so sacrificially in order to protect the life of his king, but there are also two other possibilities. Firstly, Gawain may either lack wit, because he cannot recognise that he should strike a non-lethal blow, or martial skill, as he may not be able to swing the axe with such precision. Secondly, as a vassal, he may lack the ability to change the rules of the game; language and agreements seem to have powerful connotations in *SGGK*. Saul states of Richard II that, 'Richard, brought up to have a high sense of his regality, saw disobedience as tantamount to an act of rebellion'.<sup>100</sup> The Richard-Arthur parallel may imply a similar employment of absolute power by Arthur, and the poem supplies evidence in support of this view. Later in the poem, Gawain offers his host, Lord Bertilak, an unsolicited pledge of fealty:

And I am wyȝe at your wylle to worch youre hest,  
As I am halden þerto, in hyȝe and in loȝe,  
bi riȝt. (1039-41)

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<sup>99</sup> Dean (ed.), *Mum and the Sothsegger*, ll. 1270-4.

<sup>100</sup> Saul, 'Richard II', 52.

Gawain states that he must do whatever Bertilak asks 'by right' because he recognises Bertilak's lordship. Although expectations of vassals and guests may not be identical, Gawain and the knights of Camelot do follow other statements that Arthur makes as if they are commands, as we will see. So, when Arthur says the following it may well function as a command for Gawain:

Kepe þe cosyn [...] þat þou on kyrf sette,

And if þou redeþ hym ryȝt, redly I trowe

Pat þou schal byden þe bur þat he schal bede after. (372-4)

Arthur uses 'kyrf', insisting that a cutting wound be made and in such a manner that Gawain will not need to endure one the following year, ignoring the riddle element of the Green Knight's challenge.<sup>101</sup> If Gawain is required by chivalric law to follow every command of his king, then this would explain why he chooses to make a cutting blow rather than a blow from the shaft. In this case, Gawain may also be required to 'bathe bones' because Arthur said he would.

Gawain, true to Arthur's will, strikes off the Green Knight's head with one stroke. The Green Knight, to the horror of the court, still lives, picks up his bleeding head off the floor, lifts it high, and speaks to the court, reminding Gawain of his promise. In this moment, the Green Knight resembles Truth, another Christ allegory in *Mum*, who is constantly beaten but cannot be killed:

For though men brenne the borough there the burne loiggeth,

Or elles hewe of the heede there he a hows had,

Or do hym al the disease that men devise cunne,

Yit wol be quyke agayne and quite alle his foes.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> M.E.D., Kirf, (a) The action of cutting, slashing, or chopping; also, the cut resulting, an incision, a wound, gash; (d) the edge of a sword.

<sup>102</sup> Dean (ed.), *Mum and the Sothsegger*, ll. 187-90.

The Green Knight, like *Mum's Truth*, and Christ himself, can survive deathblows, be reborn, and continue to judge sinners and promote the virtuous. Gawain is not protected by magic in the way the Green Knight is, and the court watches in horror knowing Gawain, the mortal, must enter an encounter that will likely cause his death. This is further proof that Arthur's 'daring' is a vice rather than a virtue. Aquinas, continuing his discussion of imprudent daring, states:

Præterea, audacia non videtur esse vituperabilis nisi in quantum ex ea provenit vel nocumentum aliquod ipsi audaci, qui se periculis inordinate ingerit; vel etiam aliis, quos per audaciam aggreditur vel in pericula præcipitat [Moreover, daring does not seem to be blameworthy except as a source of harm either to the bold man himself, who takes on an unreasonable degree of danger, or to those others whom in his daring he attacks or exposes to danger].<sup>103</sup>

Arthur takes on an unreasonable degree of danger, and in so doing, exposes Gawain to a possible execution.

This scene, a peace meeting descending into violence, parallels Gawain's early characterization in Galfridian lore, and it also finds its pattern in the more recent events of late fourteenth-century England. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136),<sup>104</sup> Gawain, as an ambassador for peace in Rome, beheads a man for insulting him alone—an action that then leads to war.<sup>105</sup> Richard Moll tells us:

A group of young British knights certainly do not view Gawain as the paragon of courtliness, and they see this [Gawain's presence] as an opportunity to quicken the pace of the war: '...cepit instimulare Galgwinum ut infra castra inciperet quo

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<sup>103</sup> Gilby et. al. (eds.), *Summa*, (xlii) 82, translation 83.

<sup>104</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The history of the kings of Britain*, translated from Latin by L. Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1966) 9.

<sup>105</sup> R. J. Moll, 'Frustrated readers and conventional decapitation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *The Modern Language Review*, 97, 4 (2002) 793-802:795-6.



occasionem haberent congregandi cum Romanis [The group began to urge Gawain that he might incite an incident in the camp, by which they might have the opportunity of fighting with the Romans].<sup>106</sup>

The British knights' belief that Gawain will trigger war through his intemperance is justified:

Interfuit Gaius Quintillianus eiusdem nepos qui dicebat Britones magis iactantia atque minis abundare quam audacia et probitate ualere. Iratus ilico Galgwynus euaginato ense quo accinctus erat irruit in eum et eiusdem capite amputato ad equos cum sociis digreditur. [Gaius Quintillianus was there, who said that the Britons were more bountiful with boasting and making threats than they were strong in courage and prowess. Gawain was immediately enraged, drew his sword from the scabbard, rushed at him, and cut off his head, then withdrew to the horses with his companions.]<sup>107</sup>

Turning to later medieval history, two chronicles tell us that the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 ends because the king's men execute Wat Tyler for a similar insult. In Froissart's chronicle Wat Tyler speaks imprudently before the king and is immediately slain,<sup>108</sup> while the continuator of the *Eulogium Historiarum* states that Wat Tyler does not remove his hat before the king and calls the mayor of London a traitor, and that it is for these offenses that the mayor kills him.<sup>109</sup> The *Gawain*-poet capitalises on Gawain's old reputation as intemperate and discourteous by giving those characteristics to Arthur under similar circumstances instead. Whether intentionally or otherwise, the *Gawain*-poet also reverses the role of the Mayor of London and King Richard II at the end of the Peasants' Revolt. In so doing, *SGGK*

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<sup>106</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *'Historia Regum Britannie' of Geoffrey of Monmouth, I. Bern., Burgerbibliothek, MS. 568*, N. Wright (ed.) (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1984) chapter 166; cited and translated by, Moll, 'Frustrated readers', 795, translation note 18.

<sup>107</sup> Wright (ed.), *Historia*, ch. 177; cited and translated from Latin by, 'Moll, 'Frustrated readers', 795-6, translation note 19, 796.

<sup>108</sup> R.B. Dobson (ed.), *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London: Macmillan, St. Martin's Press, 1970) 195-6.

<sup>109</sup> Dobson (ed.), *Revolt*, 207.

identifies a sinful king, and not an intemperate vassal, as the instigator of violence during a peace conference.

Evidence of Arthur's tyranny continues after the Green Knight's departure. That Arthur's word functions as law becomes evident when Gawain and his courtiers treat his comments like commands. Arthur experiences some negative emotions with regards the Green Knight's visit, but he represses them immediately, 'Þa 3 Arþer þe hende kyng at hert hade wonder, / He let no semblaunt be sene' (467-468). Arthur stands and addresses Guinevere about the events of the day, and argues that his men should repress their emotions regarding Gawain's fate and express only mirth.

Dere dame, to-day demay yow neuer;  
Wel bycommes such craft vpon Cristmasse,  
Laykyng of enterlude 3, to la 3e and to syng,  
Among þise kynde caroles of kny 3tez and ladeye 3.  
Never þe lece to my mete I may me wel dres,  
For I haf sen a selly, I may not forsake. (470-5)

As Langland describes in *Piers Plowman*, Haukyn denies all negatives (including ethical and religious instruction) and 'wol not here but wordes of murthe'.<sup>110</sup> So too, Arthur refuses to acknowledge the seriousness of the day's events and will only allow for humour to be expressed. Gawain 'mad ay god chere', giving no indication that he feels differently from Arthur (562). However, although the courtiers follow Arthur's command in public, they are shown repressing the sorrow they actually feel:

Al for luf of þat lede in longynge þay were,  
Bot neuer þe lece ne þe later þay neuened bot merþe:  
Mony ioyle 3 for þat ientyle iape 3 þer maden. (540-2)

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<sup>110</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, XIII, l. 418.

The court, although feeling joyless, affect good humour as per Arthur's desire. Yet, in private these emotions change, and the courtiers, out of Arthur's earshot, speak of his mistakes and lament the loss of the beloved Gawain.

Bi kryst, hit is scape  
Pat þou, leude, schal be lost, þat art of lyf so noble!  
To fynde hys fere vpon folde, in fayth, is not eþe.  
Warloker to haf wroȝt had more wyt bene,  
And haf dyȝt ȝonder dere a duk to haue worped;  
A lowande leder of ledeȝ in lond hym wel semeȝ,  
And so had better nat ben þen britned to noȝt,  
Hadet wyth an aluisch mon, for angaredeȝ pryde.  
Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take,  
As knyȝteȝ in cauelaciounȝ on Crystmasse gomneȝ! (674-83)

Gawain is identified as one of the greatest men the court has ever seen, while Arthur's actions are called unwise, ill counselled, and caused by 'angaredeȝ pryde'. A lack of counsel, especially as it relates to foolish or dangerous action, is a common theme in romance and reformist dialogues from the fourteenth century.<sup>111</sup> *The Simonie* states that, 'Ac were the king wel avised, and wolde worche bi skile, / Litel nede sholde he have swich pore to pile'.<sup>112</sup> Stephen Justice suggests that such language represents 'common counsel', a legal means for the people to correct ethical failings in leaders.<sup>113</sup> This concept also stems from Magna Carta,

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<sup>111</sup> G. Barnes, *Counsel and strategy in Middle English romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993); see also J. Dean (ed.), 'Truþe, Reste and Pes', in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 153-8; J. Dean (ed.), 'The Simonie', in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 193-212.

<sup>112</sup> Dean (ed.), 'The Simonie', ll. 319-20.

<sup>113</sup> S. Justice, *Writing and rebellion: England in 1381* (London: University of California Press, 1994) 63.

where the king could be constrained by ‘the community of the realm’ and ‘common counsel of the kingdom’.<sup>114</sup> The courtiers reveal that they see myriad vices and sins in their king by accusing Arthur of foolish choices, not seeking counsel, and intemperate pride. Although the courtiers believe this about their king and his actions, they ‘keep mum’ and do not actively correct him. J. Anderson sees this quotation as evidence that the court’s false emotion makes them less mature than Arthur.<sup>115</sup> Arthur is true to his own nature, but by rejecting peace, refusing counsel, and acting through ‘angaredeþ pryde’ he causes the apparent death of Gawain. The incongruity of feelings witnessed between Arthur and his courtiers indicates an internal divide within Arthur’s court, something that *Richard* identifies as a cause of a kingdom’s downfall, ‘*Omne regnum in se diuisum desolabitur* [Every kingdom divided against itself shall be brought to desolation]’.<sup>116</sup> The description of corruption and wasted nobility that the *Simonie*-poet provides parallels the language of the courtiers’ complaint against Arthur in *SGGK*.

Pride prikede hem so faste, that nolde theih nevere have pes  
 Ar theih hadden in this lond makid swich a res  
 That the beste blod of the lond shamliche was brought to grounde,  
 If hit betre mihte a ben; allas, the herde stounde,  
 Bitid,  
 That of so gentille blod i-born swich wreche was i-kid.<sup>117</sup>

For angered pride, the best blood in the land is apparently lost.

From the vantage point of reformist poets, Arthur’s choices evoke tyrannical and sinful leadership, selfishly focused and ignorant of the impact his position of power allows

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<sup>114</sup> J. Ferster, *Fictions of advice: the literature and politics of counsel in late medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996) 16.

<sup>115</sup> Anderson, *Language and imagination*, 170-1.

<sup>116</sup> Dean (ed.), ‘*Richard the Redeless*’, II, l. 52a.

<sup>117</sup> Dean (ed.), ‘*The Simonie*’, ll. 433-8.

him. Arthur is not described physically or in terms of dress, but only in terms of negative, childish, and tyrannical features, and his violent predisposition insists upon bloodshed even when an emissary is explicitly requesting peace. At each moment in Fitt One, Arthur's behaviour evokes myriad complaints against sinful kings (or courtiers), while the Green Knight's seemingly monstrous character in fact reflects the idealised, heroic saviour found in complaint poems contemporary with *SGGK*. As the story progresses, it leaves Arthur and instead follows Gawain on his sacrificial journey to find the Green Knight and lose his head. But Arthur nevertheless continues to influence Gawain's actions at a distance. In what follows, I read Gawain's actions at Hautdesert and the Green Chapel in light of Arthur's ideological influence upon Gawain. Although Gawain is introduced to us as a hero of expert ethics, devoted to his Christian identity as equally as he is to his chivalric one, Gawain ultimately rejects the complex definition of truth that his shield represents, a definition encompassing the broad scope of legal, spiritual, and ethical considerations. Instead, he opts for the simple, and faulty, legal variety of truth—the terrain of troth-plights and the demands of fealty. Although Gawain does not experience a physical death, we will see that he does experience a moral one.

#### Gawain's sacrificial truth

The *Gawain*-poet offers Hautdesert as a chivalric court not dissimilar to Camelot but one where the power of the ruler is limited, where Lord and Lady Bertilak rule in partnership, and where spiritual and ethical truths are valued above legal and social expectations. The poet uses an act of 'destiny' to show divine favour for the lessons Gawain can learn at Hautdesert. Gawain has no success locating the Green Chapel, so on Christmas Eve he prays to God to help him find somewhere to attend Christ's mass and God sends Gawain directly to Hautdesert where the Green Knight lives in his human form as Lord Bertilak. Some critics

have contended that divine intervention is unlikely. Brewer, for example, comes to this conclusion because ‘the castle is not a Christian image’, without accounting for the fact that Langland can imagine a ‘tour’ as heaven.<sup>118</sup> Cooper similarly argues that Mary would not send Gawain into temptation, ‘unless the Virgin is given to answering prayers in very backhanded ways’.<sup>119</sup> Such arguments, however, assume the immorality of Gawain’s temptation at Hautdesert and the intention behind it. All Gawain asks for is a place to pray, and for help finding his adversary. God could just as easily send Gawain elsewhere for Christmas and still reveal the Green Chapel in time. Instead, Gawain’s prayer reveals Hautdesert where courtesy and ‘truth’ are redefined and Christian ethics supersede flawed human law. Rather than trace Gawain’s experience and mistake at Hautdesert, therefore, this final section will evaluate the ethical beliefs and actions of Lord and Lady Bertilak and their courtiers. In so doing, we discover that Hautdesert, as a community, lives up to the ethical ideals depicted on Gawain’s shield and successfully moderates tyrannical leadership. Gawain, however, ultimately rejects the philosophy represented by Hautdesert, and in so doing abandons his own ethical identity.

Hautdesert is in some ways a mirror to Camelot; it expresses chivalric courtesy, participates in feasts, has a similar hierarchical feudal structure to Arthur’s court, and also has a tyrannical leader who, like Arthur, seeks violence. That leader is Morgan le Fay who at the end of Fitt Four is identified as the source of Bertilak of Hautdesert’s earthly—and unearthly—power.

‘Þat schal I telle þe trwly,’ quop þat oþer þenne;

‘Bertilak de Hautdesert I hat in þis londe.

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<sup>118</sup> D. Brewer, ‘Romance traditions and Christian values in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’, in R. Field, P. Hardman, & M. Sweeney (eds.), *Christianity and romance in medieval England* (Suffolk: Woodbridge, 2010) 150-7:151.

<sup>119</sup> Cooper, ‘Supernatural’, 289-90.

Purȝ myȝt of Morgne la Faye, þat in my hous lenges,  
 And koyntyse of clergye by craftes wel lerned,  
 Þe maystrés of Merlyn mony hatȝ taken—  
 For ho hatȝ dalt drwry ful dere sumtyme  
 With þat conable klerk, þat knowes alle your knyȝteȝ  
 at hame.’ (2444-51)

Although most editors of *SGGK* render the lines as W. R. J. Barron has here, there are syntactical problems with placing a full stop at the end of line 2445. Paul Battles has argued that Bertilak appears to have a ‘false start’ followed by a ‘long digression’ without syntactical or logical continuity.<sup>120</sup> Battles makes a strong argument that this section, and others, have been amended by editors who choose complex punctuation and spelling in a way that unintentionally or otherwise undermines female power in the romance.<sup>121</sup> If lines 2444-47 are edited as a single sentence, the syntactical problems resolve and the meaning becomes clear.<sup>122</sup>

‘That schal I telle the trwly,’ quoth that other thenne,  
 ‘Bercilak de Hautdesert I hat in this londe,  
 Thurgh myght of Morgne la Faye, that in my hous lenges,  
 And Koyntyse of clergy, bi craftes wel lerned.  
 The maystrés of Merlyn mony has ho taken  
 For ho has dalt drwry ful dere sumtyme  
 With that conable klerk, that knowes alle your knyghtes  
 at hame.’<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Battles, ‘Amended texts’, 335.

<sup>121</sup> Battles, ‘Amended texts’, 323-43.

<sup>122</sup> Battles, ‘Amended texts’, 331-56.

<sup>123</sup> Battles, ‘Amended texts’, 334; quoting J. J. Anderson (ed.), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ‘Pearl’, ‘Patience’, ‘Cleanness’ (London: J. M. Dent, 1996).

‘With lines 2444-46 [*sic*] punctuated as a single sentence,’ Battles notes, ‘the stanza emphasizes Morgan’s power and makes Sir Bertilak her representative (just as Gawain is Arthur’s)’.<sup>124</sup> Under these conditions Bertilak is, like Gawain, the vassal of a monarchical figure. Bertilak reveals further that Morgan designed the ‘gomen’ and desired the beheading on no uncertain terms for the sake of killing Guinevere.

Ho wayned me þis wonder your wytteȝ to reue,  
For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe  
With glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked  
With his hede in his honde bifore þe hyȝe table. (2459-62)

Morgan le Fay is credited here with designing the beheading game because she believed that it would be necessary in order to achieve her desire of scaring Guinevere to death. At Camelot, any apparent command by Arthur (offhand or otherwise) is followed without question or emendation. Yet the Green Knight, by contrast, acts to reinterpret Morgan le Fay’s orders for his own purposes. It is probable that the holly, a sign of peace, and the ambiguity of the game, a riddle allowing for non-lethal contact, are both representative of Bertilak’s will rather than of Morgan’s. Most importantly, the motivation for Morgan’s order—the death of Guinevere—is not realised. Where Gawain and the courtiers of Camelot follow Arthur’s commands and expectations without emendation, Lord Bertilak alters Morgan’s tyrannical desire.

Without Morgan’s apparent influence, Lord Bertilak and his wife design and implement an ethical test disguised as the Exchange of Winnings game. Gawain and Lord Bertilak make a deal upon Gawain’s arrival; Gawain will hand over any gifts he receives while staying inside the castle, while Bertilak will gift Gawain any quarry he wins while hunting in the woods. During this game, Lady Bertilak attempts to seduce Gawain and each

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<sup>124</sup> Battles, ‘Amended texts’, 335-6.



of their chaste kisses is returned to Lord Bertilak in exchange for a feast. Lord Bertilak claims responsibility for this subterfuge, suggesting that it was outside of Morgan le Fay's influence:

Now know I wel þy cosses and þy costes als,

And þe wowyng of my wyf; *I wroʒt hit myseluen.*

*I sende hir to asay þe, and sothly me þynkkeʒ*

On þe faultlest freke þat euer on fote ʒede.' (2360-3; Italics mine).

The exchange of winnings game, although it appears as a test of legal truth, is actually a test of ethical identity, and the winnings exchanged (and Gawain's mistake therein) are less valued by Lord and Lady Bertilak than the virtuous behaviour they discover. That Gawain has not grasped the true purpose of the game is clear from his conversation with the Green Knight at the Green Chapel, where Gawain focuses upon the broken troth-pledge (as the source of his shame) and the Green Knight repeatedly asserts that, in spite of this, Gawain's ethical morality is faultless. The small 'nick' Gawain receives is a slight punishment for breaking a legal oath, showing how little the Green Knight values legal truth in relation to Gawain's ethical truth. Rather than analyse Gawain's ability to follow absolute commands, Lord and Lady Bertilak assess his understanding and use of natural ethics instead. It is in the space of the exchange of winnings game that Lady Bertilak assails Gawain's defences in order to determine if his ethical identity is something he can maintain under pressure, and under this assault Gawain proves that his ethical, if not his legal, commitment to 'truth' is faultless. It is only after the test, when Gawain's word is shown to have been broken, that Gawain sacrifices the ethical aspects of 'truth' within his identity.

Where Lord Bertilak risked his life testing Camelot, Lady Bertilak risks her body (and her chastity) by using seduction as a ruse to ascertain Gawain's ethics. By risking themselves in order to test the virtues of men, Lord and Lady Bertilak both act with *fortitudo virtuosa*, the highest form of courage as described by Stephen Rigby, 'in which men fight from their

own free will and in defence of virtue and the common profit, as the most superior and authentic form of courage of all'.<sup>125</sup> Both Lord and Lady Bertilak work in concert, from free will, in defence of virtue in themselves and others. As husband and wife, their unity of purpose reflects Langland's arguments about good marriages, 'The wif was maad the wye for to helpe werche, / And thus was wedlok ywroght with a mene persone'.<sup>126</sup> This contrasts with Camelot, where Arthur and Guinevere are not shown working in partnership and Guinevere does not appear to engage in or influence court politics.

In retrospect, it is in the scenes in which Lady Bertilak appears to seduce Gawain that the double purpose of the exchange of winnings is exposed. On one hand, the poet reveals her character to be duplicitous, albeit for the purpose of testing Gawain. We first are told that she intentionally 'ley lyk as hym loued mych' (1281). She pretends to feel romantic love for him, and this pretence is later framed as both a temptation and testing, 'Pus hym frayned þat fre, and fondey hym ofte, / For to haf wonnen hym to woꝛe, what-se sho þoꝛt elleꝝ' (1549-50). 'Frayned' and 'fondey' both have investigative connotations, 'frayned' meaning to question or to inquire, and 'fondey', to put a person or his identity (strength, ethics, etc.) to the test.<sup>127</sup> The first quotation alerts the reader to the fact that her wooing is a performance, while the second reveals that the purpose of this deceitful temptation is the ethical examination that she subjects Gawain to. Although Olga Burakov-Mongan sees the Lady as sinful for such deception,<sup>128</sup> this testing is comfortably situated within the ethical principles defined by Thomas Aquinas:

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<sup>125</sup> S. H. Rigby, 'Worthy by wise? virtuous and non-virtuous forms of courage in the later Middle Ages', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 25 (2013) 329-71:361.

<sup>126</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, IX, ll. 108-18, quoted 113-4.

<sup>127</sup> M.E.D., Frayned, 1(a) to inquire about or ask, (b) to inquire, (c) to ask questions; Fondey, 1(a) to put (a person, his strength, skill etc.) to a test or trial, to try the worth of, also to prove (a person) worthy by trial; 2(a) to subject (a person) to trial by tempting him with sin, to tempt to evil.

<sup>128</sup> Burakov-Mongan, 'Supplication', 54-6.

Dicendum quod tentare est proprie experimetum sumere de aliquo. Experimentum autem sumitur de aliquo, ut sciatur aliquid circa ipsum; ed ideo proximus finis cujuslibet tentantis est scientia. Sed quandoque ulterius ex scientia quæritur aliquis alius finis, vel bonus vel malus; bonus quidem, sicut cum aliquis vult scire quails aliquis sit, vel quantum ad scientiam vel quantum ad virtutem, ut eum promoveat; malus autem, quando hoc scire vult ut eum decipiat vel subvertat. [Properly speaking, to tempt is to put someone to the test. Now, we put someone to the test so as to find out something about him. Hence the immediate goal of any tempter is knowledge. But sometimes, by means of this knowledge, some other goal—be it good or bad—is sought. A good goal is sought when, for instance, one wants to know about some person what kind of man he is with respect to his knowledge or virtue, with a view to promoting him. A bad goal is sought when one wants to know these facts with a view of deceiving or ruining him.]<sup>129</sup>

Although deceit is used to procure knowledge, neither deceit nor ruin are the end goal of this test. Lord Bertilak reveals both the deception and his intention to discover Gawain's ethical characteristics, and therefore preserve Gawain's life, at the Green Chapel on New Year's Day.

During the test scenes, Lady Bertilak focuses on specific types of virtue by tempting Gawain toward vice. On the first day, she ascertains Gawain's ability to resist inappropriate sexual advances, thrusting herself upon him with sexual innuendo (1191-1217). Gawain, true to his commitment to chastity, resists her advances and limits their relationship to conversation (1218-20). She tests whether pride inhibits Gawain's interactions with knights and ladies by suggesting he has no equal on earth (1222-40), and Gawain, humbly, refuses such praise (1241-7). Where Arthur is enraged by the Green Knight's apparent physical

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<sup>129</sup> Gilby et. al. (eds.), *Summa*, (xv) 76, translation 77.

superiority, Gawain refuses to be compromised by the lady's verbal superiority. As Anderson notes, 'His skill in the art of conversation allows him to keep the lady at bay, but never to wrest control from her'.<sup>130</sup> On this day Gawain resists both lust and pride, demonstrating instead the virtues of chastity and humility.

On the second day, Lady Bertilak's ethical questioning relates to abuses of power and desire for stories of love and adventure such as those that Arthur prefers. Her first line of questioning seeks to ascertain Gawain's views on rape (1495-7). Although several critics have interpreted this scene as a voyeuristic rape fantasy,<sup>131</sup> the content of their interaction, and the conventions of fourteenth-century romance, preclude these conclusions. Gawain unequivocally denies the value of rape, stating, 'Bot þrete is vnþryuande in þede þer I lende, / And vche gift þat is geuen not with goud wylle' (1499-1500). Gawain here echoes the conventions of Middle English romance regarding rape more generally. Nearly uniformly, rapists in romances are killed. For example, Horn, in *King Horn*, kills men who attempt to rape Rymenild by forcing her to marry them,<sup>132</sup> and Josian, in *Beves of Hamptoun*, kills one forced suitor and Beves kills the other.<sup>133</sup> On top of this, Gawain gives Lady Bertilak full control over her movements and dominance over their interactions, stating:

I am at your comaundement, to kysse quen yow lykeȝ;  
ȝe may lach when yow lyst, and leue quen yow þynkkeȝ,  
in space. (1501-3)

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<sup>130</sup> Anderson, *Language and imagination*, 194.

<sup>131</sup> Gustafson, 'Sir Gawain', 625-6; M. B. Potkay, 'The violence of courtly exegesis in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in E. Robertson & C. M. Rose (eds.), *Representing rape in medieval and early modern literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001) 97-124; Burakov-Mongan, 'Supplication', 47-64.

<sup>132</sup> Herzman, Drake, & Salisbury (eds.), 'King Horn', ll. 957-60 (forced marriage to King Modi), ll. 1208-10 (Modi killed), ll. 1415-8 (forced marriage to Ffikenild), & ll. 1500-6 (Horn kills Ffikenild).

<sup>133</sup> E. Kölbing (ed.), *The romance of Sir Beves of Hamptoun*, EETS E. S. 46, 48, & 65 (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1894) ll. 3214-24 (Josian kills suitor) & ll. 4234-9 (Yvor killed by Beves).

Gawain naturally appears to support female sovereignty—the lesson that Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s Elf Queen teaches the rapist knight in her *Tale*.<sup>134</sup> The Wife’s *Prologue* and *Tale* argue that women desire sovereignty (control over their own life, body, and movements) in their marital relationships.<sup>135</sup> Gawain here gives that freedom to all the women he interacts with. Although Gawain’s pentangle suggests that ‘pity’ is an ethical characteristic he abides by, Lady Bertilak is not convinced by these outward signs and requires behavioural proof of it.<sup>136</sup> By enquiring about Gawain’s behaviour towards women, it might be inferred that Lady Bertilak is trying to discover his attitude towards any social inferior. As Gawain would not take a woman weaker than him by force, he likely would not take advantage of other social inferiors. Both stealing land and attempting to control the movements of inferiors were practised by nobles under Richard II, precipitating the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt,<sup>137</sup> and both Edward II and Richard II promoted individuals who displaced noble families by stealing lands by force.<sup>138</sup>

Lady Bertilak also learns of Gawain’s lack of interest in stories of love and adventure (1508-48). Arthur’s character, as we have seen, is defined by a desire for such stories. Gawain, on the other hand, does not engage in this type of entertainment at all. This is further proof that Arthur’s behaviour is problematic, since his most ethical knight does not choose to behave in this way. Although the lady seems interested in this type of story telling, she does not take Gawain’s praise as invitation to tell a story of love or adventure; instead, they speak

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<sup>134</sup> G. Chaucer, *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*, M. Allen & J. H. Fisher (eds.), 2 vols. (London: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012) ll.1037-42 & 1230-8; see above Chapter Four, pp. 191-2 & 207-11.

<sup>135</sup> Allen & Fisher (eds.), *Wife of Bath*, ll. 811-28.

<sup>136</sup> Morgan, ‘Pentangle symbolism’, 15-6; Barron (ed.), *Sir Gawain*, 10-11.

<sup>137</sup> Dobson (ed.), ‘Common’s Petition Against Vagrants, 1376’, in *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381* (London: Macmillan, St. Martin’s Press, 1970), 72-4; E. B. Fryde, *Peasants and landlords in later medieval England, c. 1380-c. 1525* (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1996).

<sup>138</sup> For Edward II, see Ferster, *Fictions of advice*, 72; for Richard II, see Taylor, ‘Richard II’, 15-35.

on other subjects. Likewise, for the duration of Gawain's stay at Hautdesert, no member of the household is heard telling such tales. Considering he or she is a romance writer themselves, it is interesting that the *Gawain*-poet has his or her heroic characters appear to problematise romance story telling here. The *Gawain*-poet may be alerting the reader to the fact that he or she sees conventional romance story telling as potentially dangerous and may be suggesting that *SGGK*, although a romance, is not intended simply to entertain wild-minded young men like Arthur. If so, this may suggest that *SGGK* was written with a politically didactic as well as entertaining purpose.

On the third day, Gawain faces three different gift-exchanges that imply a love relationship: to produce a gift for Lady Bertilak (1798-1812), to take a ring from her (1813-23), and to take her girdle (1827-45). Gawain is initially shown resisting each of these exchanges, on the basis that their acceptance might be deemed to imply a love relationship that he does not himself feel. It is only when Lady Bertilak tells Gawain that the girdle can protect its wearer from all harm that Gawain succumbs and finally accepts it (1845-65). It is not adulterous love, but a love of life that leads Gawain to this 'mistake', as the Green Knight later explains (2366-8). Gawain makes a mistake because he does not fulfil his obligation to Lord Bertilak, breaking his troth-pledge with his lord. Yet this legal fault does not condemn Gawain to death. The tiny nick Gawain receives for his legal fault is meant to show Gawain how little the legal truth weighs in comparison to the ethical and Christian truths that Gawain displays. Had vice and sin been discovered in Gawain, the Green Knight may well have taken his head.

Lord Bertilak's ethical position is illustrated by his actions during his second encounter with Gawain in the guise of the Green Knight. The Green Knight/Lord Bertilak does not measure Gawain's 'truth' on the basis of their legal agreement at all. Rather, the

Green Knight describes Gawain three times in terms of exemplary purity and 'trawthe'. The Green Knight says:

Sothly me þynkkeȝ

On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote ȝede;

As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more,

So is Gawain, in god fayth, bi oþer gay knyȝteȝ. (2362-5)

He reiterates this conclusion, 'I halde þe polysed of þat plyȝt and pured as clene / As þou hadeȝ neuer forfeȝed syþen þou watȝ fyrst borne' (2393-4), 'And I wol þe as wel, wyȝe, bi my faythe, / As any gome vnder God, for þy grete traupe' (2469-70). The Green Knight has measured Gawain's truth, less in his ability to keep his word, as his ability to behave with virtue. In contrast to Derek Pearsall's argument that the Green Knight values the body too much, for 'Life is not to be loved—the Green Knight was wrong there', I would argue that the body is less valuable to the Green Knight than the ethical implications of valuing life highly. If a leader has no love of life, not even his own, he cannot fathom the impact his choices have on the lives of the people under his care. Medieval complaint writers frequently insisted that the life impact of leaders' choices is too often ignored, and insist those leaders rethink their paradigms in which the lives of people are devalued and then sacrificed on the altars of chivalry, wealth, and power.<sup>139</sup> The Green Knight/Lord Bertilak recognises with reformist poets that the law can be exploited by unethical people and knows that Christian ethics can and should trump the letter of the law.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> For examples, see J. Dean (ed.), 'The Song of the Husbandman', in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 251-3; Dean (ed.), 'The Simonie', 193-212; J. Dean (ed.), 'Letters of John Ball', in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 135-6; J. Dean (ed.), 'Addresses to the Commons', in *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 137-8; Dean (ed.), 'Truthe, Reste, and Pes', 153-8.

<sup>140</sup> Dean (ed.), 'The Simonie', ll. 200-10, 349-54 & 469-473; Dean (ed.), 'Truthe, Reste, and Pes', ll. 12-32.

The Green Knight/Lord Bertilak, then, redefines ‘courtesy’ in terms of Christian ethics and human kindness and not in terms of the chivalry of royal courts like Camelot. This redefinition is similar to the Elf Queen’s rewriting of ‘gentillesse’ in Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, not as something inherited, but as something exemplified through ethical practice. Leitch finds that all four poems within Cotton Nero share similar definitions of courtesy, ‘as an outward manifestation of inward virtue’.<sup>141</sup> Derek Brewer states of *SGGK* that, ‘courtesy develops from noble manners into the highest moral and spiritual quality, more explicitly developed by the poet than the concept of honour’.<sup>142</sup> The qualities of this kind of courtesy enable Lord Bertilak to defy the orders of Morgan le Fay with impunity in cases where Christian ethics conflict with her desire for retribution. Even though Gawain’s death should be guaranteed by Morgan le Fay’s desire for a beheading at Camelot—a beheading bound up with her desire to scare Guinevere to death—Lord Bertilak defies her expectations, for even though the Green Knight is legally obliged to return the blow in kind and decapitate Gawain, he does not do so. The Green Knight does not act as if he is a slave to his legal agreements; rather, he redefines courtesy and truth to follow Christian laws above human ones. Hautdesert, likewise, chooses to be expert in ethical courtesy and reflect Lord and Lady Bertilak’s ethics rather than Morgan le Fay’s. Even Morgan, when visible, appears to act with expert courtesy as well, deferring to Lord Bertilak as host. Lord Bertilak’s intrinsic ethical courtesy impacts the lives and behaviours of all members of his court, including those superior to him in the social hierarchy.

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<sup>141</sup> Leitch, ‘Grete luste’, 103-28.

<sup>142</sup> D. Brewer, ‘Introduction’, in D. Brewer & J. Gibson (eds.), *A companion to the ‘Gawain’-poet* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 1-21; see also D. Brewer, ‘Courtesy and the *Gawain*-poet’, in J. Lawlor (ed.), *Patterns of love and courtesy: essays in memory of C. S. Lewis* (London: Edward Arnold, 1966) 54-85; A. C. Spearing, ‘*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’, in *Criticism and medieval poetry* (London: Edward Arnold, 1964) 26-45.



The Green Knight's redefined courtesy offers Gawain an ethical system that better reflects his pentangle ideals than Arthur's Camelot ever could. Yet, for Gawain, the small legal failing is all he can see and it grows in his imagination to the proportions of an unforgivable sin (2374-88). Gawain refuses wholeheartedly to accept the Green Knight's beliefs about the value of intrinsic ethics. As with Arthur's response to the Green Knight's insult, blood also rushes to Gawain's face as he feels an extremity of emotions regarding his shame (2369-73). In contrast to Bertilak's *fortitudo virtuosa*, Gawain's honour is based upon the lesser *fortitudo civilis* as Rigby describes it, 'whereby a man fights in order to acquire honor—or to avoid shame—in the opinion of others'.<sup>143</sup> Pearsall shows the extent to which honour, shame, and embarrassment are at the centre of Gawain's beliefs.<sup>144</sup> Gawain does not fight, as the Green Knight does, for virtue alone, and the flaws of shame-based heroism are revealed here, because Gawain's temperance and kindness, shown to be faultless until this moment, begin to fail because his sense of shame is so extreme.

Gawain compromises the strength of his religious and ethical convictions as represented emblematically through the device on his shield described in Fitt Two. In his shame, he denies the spiritual aspects of 'truth' by denying Christ's and Mary's merciful characteristics, as well as the penitential value of confession and absolution, because he believes that his one legal fault is an unforgivable sin (642-50). Nicholas Watson argues that Gawain's 'real error' is 'his failure' 'to realize that, having confessed his sin [...] he cannot continue to treat his sin as unforgivable'.<sup>145</sup> This idea is verified by several contemporary reformist texts. *Piers Plowman* argues that, 'Caton acordeth therwith—*nemo sine crimine vivit!* [no man lives free of fault]'.<sup>146</sup> Gawain does not recognise that all men are sinners and

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<sup>143</sup> Rigby, 'Worthy by wise?', 354.

<sup>144</sup> Pearsall, 'Courtesy and chivalry', 358.

<sup>145</sup> Watson, 'Vernacular theologian', 293-4.

<sup>146</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, XI, l. 402, translation Schmidt's.

that it is not so much the sin as the denial of sin that is problematic in Christian contexts. *Piers Plowman* discusses the consequences of ‘wanhope’, or spiritual despair, on a sinner’s behaviour, ‘And thanne wanhope to awaken hym so with no wil to amende, / For he leveth be lost—this is his laste ende’.<sup>147</sup> Chaucer’s Parson corroborates this view, saying in his *Tale* that a man in wanhope will, ‘ymagine that he hath doon so mucche synne that it wol nat auailen hym though he wolde repented hym and forsake synne / thurgh which despair or drede he abaundoneth al his herte to every maner synne’.<sup>148</sup> Through his ‘wanhope’, Gawain, as the Parson suggests, can no longer accept that either confession or penance have spiritual value and, by abandoning spiritual truth, he begins to sin more by abandoning his ethical truth as well.

Gawain denies his ethical identity as true of word and deed— ‘As tulk of tale most trwe’ (638) —by telling false tales to himself, the Green Knight, and all of Camelot. Gawain argues to each of these audiences in turn that he was compromised by the wiles of Lady Bertilak and that love and lust caused his sin. The poem reveals, however, that Gawain is compromised because he desired to live and he shows no signs of being compromised by love at all. Gustafson rightly argues that Gawain ‘failed not because of lust but out of a desire [...] to save his neck’.<sup>149</sup> Yet, Gawain’s false rendition is repeatedly reasserted regardless (2407-43, 2471, & 2494-2512). As Lander argues, ‘Gawain’s words represent a significant breach in the *trawthe* he maintains so meticulously throughout the text [...] Gawain does not “wear” this breach of *trawthe* as he wears his *couardise* and *covetyse* on his return to Camelot’.<sup>150</sup> Gawain does not acknowledge, here or elsewhere, that it is his love of life and not lust for a woman that causes his shame. Instead, he over simplifies and distorts the story

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<sup>147</sup> Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, II, ll. 100-1.

<sup>148</sup> G. Chaucer, ‘*The Parson’s Tale*’, in F. N. Robinson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987) 288-328, ll. 693-4.

<sup>149</sup> Gustafson, ‘*Sir Gawain*’, 682.

<sup>150</sup> Lander, ‘Innocence’, 42.

of Hautdesert. Like the Chamber Knights of *Toulouse*, Gawain uses the social expectation of female sinfulness to shield himself from judgement. As Gustafson argues, Gawain's misogynist outburst 'also reveals the self-serving way in which men use women [...] to mask their own faults'.<sup>151</sup> The apparent vanity in Gawain's clothing and the transience of his ethical beliefs as depicted upon that attire, implied in Fitt Two, are proven here when Gawain divests himself of the qualities his clothes and accessories used to represent (566-665). Gawain, although still carrying his shield, denies the basis of his identity that it represented by abandoning his truth-telling identity. The girdle represents Gawain's rejection of the Green Knight's redefined 'courtesy' as an ethical quality, and he returns to the simple (and sinful) realm where human rules and the letter of the law are easier to obey.

Gawain is afraid to reveal to Camelot that a love of life compromised his legal agreement, suggesting that Gawain believes that Camelot could not forgive him for such action. Camelot does not even accept Gawain's interpretation of the events, rejoicing only in his return and determining to wear green sashes as an exclusionary fashion symbol, distinguishing Arthur's knights from other men (2490-4 & 2513-8). Lander argues that Camelot's and Gawain's 'disingenuous self-representation' reveals 'Camelot as a conservative community of disingenuously naïve "innocents" whose absolutist moral and social conduct and belief represents the limitations of its members' perceptual ability'.<sup>152</sup> Arthur's absolutist rule, and the behaviours he both exhibits himself and promotes in his knights, creates a kingdom where ethical beliefs, even those crafted by the exemplary Gawain, cannot survive. Hautdesert's unique perspective on Christian ethics, denying tyranny and tyrannical law, clashes with Gawain's sense of legal truth, as well as his fealty to Arthur.

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<sup>151</sup> Gustafson, '*Sir Gawain*', 629.

<sup>152</sup> Lander, 'Innocence', 65.

Gawain rejects the redefinition of courtesy offered by the Green Knight, sacrificing Hautdesert's morality, as well as the ethical identity he fashions for himself on his shield.

Hautdesert becomes a reformist mirror through which the reader is encouraged to reflect on Camelot's ethical failings. Where Lord and Lady Bertilak work in partnership and towards the same goals, Arthur's Guinevere is shown having a very limited impact on the politics of Camelot. Where Camelot's courtiers silently disagree with their king, those at Hautdesert work in concert with Lord and Lady Bertilak to assist in their goals. In Camelot, all of Arthur's statements are followed as if they are commands, yet, although Lord Bertilak gets his power from Morgan le Fay, he does not follow her commands if they clash with his own inner morality. Where Gawain loses his will to live because he breaks a legal accord with Lord Bertilak, the Green Knight/Lord Bertilak chooses to break his word—his agreement to return Gawain's blow in kind—rather than compromise his ethics. Lord and Lady Bertilak value Christian ethics above social and legal expectations, weighing 'goodness' according to the performance of ethics, like Will's quest for 'dowel', 'dobet', and 'dobest' in *Piers Plowman*. It is these multiple contrasts between Camelot's and Hautdesert's feudal and chivalric systems that illuminate the reformist message of the poem, that morality cannot be achieved under a tyrant, and, like *Piers Plowman*, that ethical and religious 'truth' should take precedence where legal and social truths fail to uphold Christian mores.

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Gawain, when he leaves the Green Chapel, is no longer the pentangle knight. By choosing Camelot, Gawain sacrifices himself, not in a Christ-like way, but by sacrificing the Christian ethics to which he once adhered. The *Gawain*-poet shows how ethical truth can get sacrificed to tyranny, and recognises that English kings like Richard II (who sought absolute power), risked the spiritual health of a nation and all of its inhabitants; that chivalry, as a shame-based honour system (inviting vice) must be replaced by virtuous courtesy (defined by Christian

law, peace, and love); that the ‘truth’ of Christian ethics should trump flawed and corruptible legal truth, and that vassals should choose God’s law over the laws of human kings. Thus, courage and virtuous courtesy are elevated by the poet as alternatives to Camelot’s legal and shame-based honour system. Where Lord and Lady Bertilak measure courtesy in accordance with Christian ethics, Camelot under its absolute monarch measures them in terms of legal agreements, violence, and fashion. Arthur’s tyrannical words and deeds are accepted by his courtiers and none of his commands are resisted by his people. While all courtiers (Gawain included) recognise problems with Arthur’s behaviour and vocalise them, they do not stay his tyrannical desires. Their honour system is not moderated by virtuous considerations, and they do not fight against unethical kingship to promote Christian virtues.

The *Gawain*-poet designed a story in which the ethical teacher initially appears to be monstrous. The Green Knight enters Camelot looking fierce and terrible and his alien appearance is frightening to all those present. However, the Green Knight/Lord Bertilak turns out to be an ethically idealised character who attempts to teach wisdom to both Gawain and Camelot. Through this education, the *Gawain*-poet highlights two different forms of ‘truth’ and ‘courtesy’, that based upon the law of Camelot’s tyrannical king and that based on the intrinsic ethical ideals practised by Lord Bertilak—ideals which even the tyrannical Morgan le Fay cannot undermine. The poet does not demand that kingship or inheritance change; however, he does suggest that ethical ideals can be better maintained when limitations are placed upon a monarch’s power. The *Gawain*-poet proposes that if good counsel and ethical truth (in law and morality) are allowed to limit kingship, then tyranny will in turn have a limited effect on the health of a nation. Camelot is shown by the *Gawain*-poet to be a court without this ability to limit the powers of the absolute monarch, and the poet illustrates the damage that unchecked tyranny can pose to good men like Gawain, the courtiers of Camelot, and the Green Knight/Lord Bertilak. Gawain sacrifices his self-fashioned identity, negating

the religious and ethical parts of ‘truth’ and reducing ‘truth’ to a legal agreement between men.

It is possible that the extremity of Gawain’s reaction to breaking his word has less to do with any intrinsic ideas about morality, and more with his deep-seated fear of disobeying a monarch whose tyrannical characterisation and the poet’s insinuation thereby that his word, because he is king, is tantamount to a legal command regardless of its rationale. Gawain likely exhibits this fear because he is schooled in Arthur’s values at Camelot—legal truth, fealty, and renown above religious or ethical considerations—and this leads Gawain to sacrifice his multifaceted scheme of ethics for the immoral code of Camelot. As Anderson argues, ‘[Gawain] puts his reputation for *trawthe* ahead of *trawthe* itself’.<sup>153</sup> In so doing, he sacrifices his ethical ‘truth’, denying the deeper quality of truth that fourteenth-century reformist poets both desired and attempted to define.

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<sup>153</sup> Anderson, *Language and imagination*, 226.

## Conclusion

This thesis has hoped to show that fourteenth-century romances could be reformist, and that they engaged with ideas that were central to other contemporary acts of reform, such as Lollard writing, complaint poetry, and the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Romances are an ideal space for writers to comment upon social ills that stem from the powerful, those whose decisions can impact a wider array of people. Romance does this by portraying their heroic characters—usually in positions of power—as either naturally in possession of ethics and fit to replace unethical leaders, or else learning how to behave ethically from a starting point of sin, thereby showing their desire for ethically driven policy and leadership. The romance writers explored in this thesis all show an awareness of social commentary and reformist ideas and engage with the dominant social ideas, concerns, and problems that complaint poets addressed in order to argue that Christian ethics have been lost to continuous warfare, heavy taxation, violent chivalric honour, splendid dress, or extravagant courts. Romance writers promoted Christian ethics alongside reform minded individuals as a means to limit the negative aspects of chivalry, court, and landowning cultures. Their aim in so doing was to reduce violence, dearth, and unnecessary death, and to return the moral compass of England to Christ's message of peace, good behaviour, and ethical action.

Romance poets are amongst the fourteenth-century writers and actors of reform, speaking for the members of society who were disillusioned by the unethical behaviours that they witnessed in people across the social strata. The disparate reformist strategies attempted throughout the fourteenth century ended disastrously without affecting the social change in their own lifetimes that they desired, yet this does not negate the acts they took to achieve

change.<sup>1</sup> To this day, the question of how to successfully assert morality onto powerful people, corporations, and countries is one that we can only wish to answer. In the fourteenth century, a time in which significant limitations were placed upon the lives of the poorest members of society, those same disempowered classes stood up to that oppression and sought to change the world by highlighting the sins of their social superiors, equals, and inferiors, and demonstrating where law and morality disagreed.<sup>2</sup> Even though Langland doubted that positive change could be achieved and ends the B-text of his great poem on a surely pessimistic note, he still wrote a poem expressing his dream that change could be possible.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, some of Wyclif's Lollard followers were perhaps naively positive, hoping for a large scale 'grass-roots movement', one in which the multitude of the powerless could, through their own ethical example, slowly change the world.<sup>4</sup> They, like their predecessor, saw power as problematic, and hoped to encourage the practice of more ethical behaviour in accordance with Christ's scriptural message. They believed that education,

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<sup>1</sup> R. B. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London: Macmillan, St. Martin's Press, 1970) 1-31; M. Aston, 'Lollardy and sedition, 1381-1431', in *Lollards and reformers: images and literacy in late medieval religion* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1984) 1-47:38-44; A. K. McHardy, 'De Heretico Comburendo, 1401', in M. Aston & Colin Richmond (eds.), *Lollardy and the gentry in the later Middle Ages* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997) 112-26.

<sup>2</sup> E. B. Fryde, *Peasants and landlords in later medieval England, c. 1380-c. 1525* (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1996) 8-53; Dobson, *Revolt*, 49-149; F. Somerset, *Feeling like saints: Lollard writings after Wyclif* (London: Cornell University Press, 2014) 25-98; S. E. Lahey, *John Wyclif* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 102-221; E. D. Craun, *Ethics and power in medieval English reformist writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 85-119.

<sup>3</sup> H. Barr, 'Major episodes and moments in *Piers Plowman*', in A. Cole & A. Galloway (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 15-32:29-32; M. Giancarlo, 'Political forms and institutions in *Piers Plowman*', in A. Cole & A. Galloway (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 115-35; S. Wood, *Conscience and the composition of 'Piers Plowman'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 87-106; J. Simpson, *'Piers Plowman': an introduction to the B-text* (London: Longman, 1990) vii-x; W. Langland, *'The vision of Piers Plowman': a critical edition of the B-Text based on Trinity College Cambridge, MS B.15.17*, A.V.C Schmidt (ed.), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Everyman, 1995) xxx-xlvi.

<sup>4</sup> Somerset, *Saints*, 25-62.



communication, and community were the keys to widespread social reform.<sup>5</sup> They did not believe that power of any kind, used immorally, was true power and argued that true *dominium* could only rest with the morally pure.<sup>6</sup> Complaint writers experiment with these ideas across the spectrum of complaint and reformist ideology, from Langland's pessimism to the Lollard's hopeful imagination.<sup>7</sup>

Romance writers demonstrate an awareness of reformist ideology through the textual allusions described throughout this dissertation. The manuscript miscellanies containing romance and complaint content speak to scribal awareness of these shared ideas. We can see the links between romance and complaint texts, and although the direction of influence is not always clear, their shared resonances reveal that the sentiments that motivated reformist movements and complaint texts also influenced romance culture. Whether romance writers believed the changes they espouse can be achieved is a question for further research, but they generally present positive outcomes elevating truth in behaviour and word, refusing *dominium* to sinners, and investing power in the righteous. *SGGK* is unique amongst the romances surveyed here as the poet offers a pessimistic outlook on change similar to that of

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<sup>5</sup> Somerset, *Saints*, 25-62; Aston, 'Lollardy and sedition', 13-17.

<sup>6</sup> Lahey, *Wyclif*, 199-221; Somerset, *Saints*, 25-62 & 273-83.

<sup>7</sup> Craun, *Ethics and power*, 52-142; D. Hazell, *Poverty in late Middle English literature: the 'meene' and the 'riche'* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009) 157-69; M. S. Nagy, *The alliterative tradition in early Middle English poetry: political complaint and social analysis in 'The Song of the Husbandman' and beyond*, foreword by T. A. Shippey (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2011) 1-250; W. Scase, *Literature and complaint in England, 1272-1553* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 5-186; H. Barr (ed.), *The Piers Plowman tradition: a critical edition of 'Pierce the Ploughman's Crede', 'Richard the Redeless', 'Mum and the Sothsegger', and 'The Crowned King'* (London: J. M. Dent, 1993) 1-35; J. Dean (ed.), *Medieval English political writings*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 1-265; J. Dean (ed.), *'Richard the Redeless' and 'Mum and the Sothsegger'*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000) 7-169; W. Ginsberg (ed.), *'Wynnere and Wastoure'*, in *'Wynnere and Wastoure' and 'The Parlement of the Thre Ages'*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992) 13-42; Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman*, 1-361.

Langland. Through Gawain's sundered truth he or she cannot seem to imagine successful reform.

All of the romances explored in this thesis intersect with reformist ideology across multiple axes. Many highlight 'truth' and complicate the term beyond simple troth-plights and honesty, testing the boundaries of ethics, morality, and socially beneficial behaviour. *SGGK* and *Toulouse* take interesting stances upon the law and 'truth', highlighting that 'troth-plights' can be socially and ethically problematic whilst elevating 'truth' as an ethical trait both valuable and rare. Many of these romances use God as an actor or an influence upon the narrative, revealing their poets' beliefs about divine will, and in these moments often echo ideology from complaint and reformist poetry. *Isumbras* imagines what God, in an ideal world, would do to a man who inadvertently causes the deaths of thousands of men, and the twenty years of suffering he experiences reveals the poet's condemnation of irresponsible leadership.

Interestingly as well, most of the romances surveyed here promote King-Queen (husband-wife) partnerships in which sovereignty is shared, although different but equally valuable roles are performed—women generally give counsel, are driven by ethics, and are charitable, whereas men have characteristics like wisdom, temperance, strength, and justice—undermining traditional views of medieval misogyny in which women are seen as subservient, villainous, or untrustworthy. *Tars* and the *Wife of Bath's Tale* both present positive models of female authority to replace compromised male leadership in both spiritual and political contexts, showing 'truth' to be located in morally superior characters regardless of their gender.

The extent to which reformist ideas can be found in fourteenth-century romances is highly suggestive and problematises the reputation of these romances among some medievalists. Even as critics strive now to vindicate the literary merits of Middle English

romances, recent studies still suggest that entertainment alone is the motivation behind both producing and listening to such stories.<sup>8</sup> Other critics highlight the perception that romances represent hack work written for poor men.<sup>9</sup> Some argue that romance was written for the gentry and *nouveau riche* merchants attempting to ape nobility, and that romances, therefore, are invested in cultural mores that support the upper classes and justify the social climbing aspirations of the new middle class.<sup>10</sup> Others still argue for the inherently misogynist views of romance authors, suggesting that women in romances are weak and empty, or only monstrous women are strong;<sup>11</sup> or highlight their racism, arguing that Saracens are vilified to justify crusade violence, central to late medieval self-fashioning.<sup>12</sup> Yet if we approach romances with fresh eyes, we find that they are not so generically simplistic as they first appear. Although not all romances seek reform, each romance offers information about the poet's social consciousness and their beliefs about morality, kingship, nobility, honour, and truth, and not all of these 'perspectives' are socially or religiously orthodox. If romance engages

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<sup>8</sup> N. McDonald, 'A polemical introduction', in N. McDonald (ed.), *Pulp fictions of medieval England: essays in popular romance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) 1-21:1-2.

<sup>9</sup> D. Pearsall, 'The development of Middle English romance', in D. Brewer (ed.), *Studies in medieval English romances: some new approaches* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988), 11-35; for a summary of critical perspectives and a rebuttal, see N. Cartlidge, 'Introduction', in N. Cartlidge (ed.), *Boundaries in medieval romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008) 1-11; McDonald, 'Polemical introduction', 1-21.

<sup>10</sup> H. Cooper, 'When romance comes true', in N. Cartlidge (ed.), *Boundaries in medieval romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008) 13-27:13; M. Johnston, *Romance and the gentry in late medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 1-20.

<sup>11</sup> A. N. Vines, *Women's power in late medieval romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011); M. Urban, *Monstrous woman in Middle English romance: representations of mysterious female power* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> R. Field, 'Introduction', in R. Field (ed.), *Tradition and transformation in medieval romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999) xi-xv:xiii; L. Ashe, 'The hero and his realm in medieval English romance', in N. Cartlidge (ed.), *Boundaries in medieval romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008) 129-47:143; N. Cartlidge, 'Introduction', 1; J. V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the medieval European imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 120-3.

with reformist ideas, then its audience and purpose in society may be broader than we assume.

Evidence of reformist ideology in romances in the early fourteenth century suggests that these stories may very well have been influential to the reformist movements after the 1380s. If complaint and reform influenced (or was influenced by) fourteenth-century Middle English romance, then the romances explored in this thesis can tell us more about the Middle English cultures of reform, and how romance, complaint, and spiritual literatures fed into, and were arguably among the catalysts of, fourteenth-century rebellion and reform. This strongly suggests a need to revise our current assumptions about the production, dissemination, and purpose of romance, and its place in medieval culture. This may in turn reveal more about the culture of Middle English speaking and reading in England before the turn of the fifteenth century. If late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century reformist activity was informed by early fourteenth-century romances, then the ideological origins of reformist activity may well be visible much earlier in medieval England than is generally supposed. From this, fourteenth-century reformist romances can inform critical explorations of fifteenth-century romances, and of the origins of the reformist visions witnessed in the fifteenth century.

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