Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century, ed. Norman Davis, Part 1 (Oxford University Press, 1971), 516–18.

7 See G. A. Lester, *Sir John Paston's "Grete Boke": A Descriptive Catalogue, with an Introduction, of British Library MS Lansdowne 285* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1984). It contains, among many other items, a formulary (pp. 80–83) for creating Knights of the Bath (a ritual mentioned at the end of *Greene Knight*), descriptions of armor, accounts of particular battles (historical and fictional), passages from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History*, proclamations for tournaments, and so on.

8 Robert Laneham, *A Letter: Whearin part of the entertainment untoo the Queenz Maiesty . . .* [1575], ed. R. C. Alston (Menston: Scolar Press, 1968), 34–36. I have modernized the spelling in the descriptions of the festivities and of Captain Cox which occur in this facsimile edition. The Captain's reputation as a performer was sufficiently extensive for Ben Jonson to mention him and "his Hobbyhorse" in his *Masque of Owls* (1624); in his novel *Kenilworth* (1821), Sir Walter Scott gives an account of the festivities.

9 Laneham's *Letter* (pp. 46–56) gives an account of the "sollem song" of an "auncient minstrell" of Islington, who performed alongside Captain Cox at Kenilworth in 1575; for further information on the nature of this improvised performance, and its possible relationship to oral traditions and written texts, see *Sir Gawain* (note 1), 10–18.

10 See Valerie Krishna, *Five Middle English Arthurian Romances* (New York: Garland, 1991), 24–26 (on *Carlisle*). These remarks are on the whole representative of critiques found in standard literary histories.

11 See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review, 1983), 177–205.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

The last decade or so has been a golden age for the study of medieval English romance. In particular, many poems that had previously been available only in hard to find and hard to use scholarly editions have now been printed in reliable and accessible format by the Middle English Texts Series, sponsored by the Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages at the Medieval Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan. (Bibliographical and ordering information are at www.wmich.edu/medieval/mip/mipubshome/html.) Other basic works include:

Barron, W. R. J. *English Medieval Romance*. London and New York: Longman, 1987.

Brewer, Derek, ed. *Studies in Medieval English Romances*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988.

Crane, Susan. *Insular Romance*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986.

Mills, Maldwyn, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol Meale, eds. *Romance in Medieval England*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991.

Ramsey, Lee C. *Chivalric Romances*. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1983.

Severs, J. Burke, ed. *The Manual of Writings in Middle English*, fascicle 1: *Romances*. New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967.

14

FELICITY RIDDY

Middle English romance: family, marriage, intimacy

The purpose of this essay is to look at Middle English romances from the perspective of private life. It sets them in the context of late medieval patterns of family and marriage, and presents them as part of a literate but unlearned lay culture centered on the home, where many of them seem to belong. It does not provide a survey, because that has already been done several times,[1] but rather, by looking at around half-a-dozen, suggests a new approach.

The late medieval family can be thought of in two ways. First, as a group of people living together in the "nuclear family household" formation consisting of wife, husband and dependent children, whose home would also include servants and apprentices. The nuclear family, then as now, is always in process, because it comes into being with a marriage and is reshaped by the children's departure. Another way of thinking about the family, though, is as a lineage that is the route for the transmission of property and privilege. In late medieval England wealth and ownership of land provided access to social prestige and political power; the family, especially the male line, was the means whereby these were passed on from one generation to the next. From the point of view of the lineage the son's role was crucial because his marriage ensured its continuity; the marriage of the daughter who inherited took the property to another family. All this is the stuff of Middle English romance; many of its plots are derived from the crises and hiatuses of the nuclear family and the lineage, as I shall show.

What follows is divided into four sections. The first section is concerned with the household context for romance in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which I define socially as "bourgeois-gentry", and with ideas of intimacy and privacy. Then I consider some implications of the fact that the heroes of romances are mostly male, relating this to the ideology of the late medieval nuclear family, to the role of sons, and to the public–private divide. This leads to an argument that the romances are the site of a reconfiguration of the love relationship under the influence of companionate marriage. The last section shifts to the family as lineage, and suggests that the demographic crisis which produced

the marriageable heiresses who figure so frequently in romances of love and marriage, also generated narratives of despair at the failure of the male line.

I

One reason for treating Middle English romances as domestic is that they were read at home. "Home" does not necessarily mean a manor-house in the country: the evidence of the surviving manuscripts is that romance was also an urban phenomenon in England. One of the earliest of the major romance collections, the Auchinleck Manuscript, was compiled in London in the 1330s for a wealthy buyer.[2] In the next generation, we know from his expert parody, "The Tale of Sir Thopas," that Chaucer, a London merchant's son, must have been a romance reader. Moreover his *Troilus and Criseyde* is set in the dying city of Troy, in roomy urban "palaces" like John of Gaunt's Savoy, with parlors, chambers, stairs, gardens, and windows that overlook the street.[3] The poem is the scene of intimate activity, but there is also a sense of spaciousness about it, of the elegant living available to the rich in late fourteenth-century London. Several fifteenth-century manuscripts containing romances were owned by merchants who must have known this city ambiance well.[4] In the 1420s the London skinner, Henry Lovelich, translated *The History of the Holy Grail* and *Merlin* for his friend Henry Barton, twice Lord Mayor of London, and in the era of print many romances were published for the urban market. The urban aspect of romance production and readership is unsurprising, since towns were centers of literacy and wealth. It was in towns that the professional manuscript producers were located, and towns were also culturally heterogeneous, which may account to some extent for the diversity of the genre. Nevertheless, Harriet Hudson is not wholly wrong in arguing that romance readers were members of the gentry,[5] since this is clearly also an identifiable group: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was composed for an aristocratic household in the late fourteenth century, while in the mid-fifteenth the Yorkshire landowner Robert Thornton copied out romances in his own hand, including *Sir Percyvell of Gales* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*.[6] Sir John Paston's list of books contains several romances, as Thomas Hahn has shown in the previous chapter, and Sir Thomas Malory was also a knightly romance reader. Nevertheless, Caxton's preface to his edition of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* aims at an audience (whom he may be flattering, of course) of "gentlemen and gentlewomen," who were no doubt as much metropolitan as rural. Urban and rural audiences converge because these were not wholly separate realms, though they can be seen separately as undergoing different kinds of change.

Late medieval towns maintained their population levels by the constant recruitment of incomers. The Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century was cataclysmic, of course, but, like all disasters, only for some. For the survivors it created new opportunities to acquire jobs, property and land, and for the young, the ambitious and the active, in particular, to leave home and try their luck. Although there was economic contraction in the fifteenth century, nevertheless general standards of living rose.[7] The Dick Whittington legend does not appear until the late sixteenth century, and yet Sir Richard Whittington and many other men like him in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries who made their fortunes as London merchants did start out as boys from the provinces.[8] Their lives, like romances, are narratives of ambition, risk, and success.[9]

During this period the gentry as a class also underwent transformation.[10] Between the late twelfth and late thirteenth centuries, knighthood became increasingly exclusive and expensive to maintain. The effect of this exclusiveness was that many of the kinds of men who had earlier been knights were by the fourteenth century relegated to the lesser ranks of esquire and gentleman. Together these three groups formed the gentry. Nevertheless, while the knights consolidated at the top of the gentry, the gentry itself was increasingly distinguished from the nobility – dukes, earls and barons – as the thirteenth-century baronage transformed into the fifteenth-century peerage, now defined as "those who received a personal summons to attend the house of lords in parliament."[11] Gentry and nobility seem to have shared an outlook that derived in part from the fact that they lived off other people's labor and did not do manual work themselves. Nevertheless it also is true that gentry and urban elites, the groups that seem to have been readers of romances, also converged, though differently, and especially in their private identities. This convergence took place during the period in which romances were being composed and read: romances are thus one source of evidence for what I call a new "bourgeois-gentry" cultural formation.

The romances mostly survive in manuscript anthologies, many of which look broadly similar, containing miscellaneous vernacular texts in verse and prose.[12] The diversity of their contents seems to cater to the reading needs of a range of household members, including children and servants in both gentry and mercantile households, and apprentices in the latter as well.[13] Romances are not only read within the family, but also frequently take the family as their subject. They explore courtship and marriage, as in *King Horn, Horn Child and the Maiden Rymnild* and *King Ponthus and Fair Sidone*; married love, as in *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Amadace*; childbirth, infants and children, as in *Floris and Blancheflor, William of Palerne* and *Chevelere Assigne*; separated and reunited families, as in *Octavian, Torrent of Portyngale* and *Sir Isumbras*; sons and foster-sons, as in *Sir Percyvell of Gales, Sir Degaré* and *Havelok*; brotherhood or sworn brotherhood, as in *Gamelyn, Amis and Amiloun* and *Athelston*; sisterhood, as in *Lai le Freine*, and motherhood, as in *Emaré*. These stories all have happy endings and are sometimes differentiated by historians of romance from others which end in

disaster.[14] Nevertheless the disasters are still frequently familial, as I have already suggested: the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* are, in the end, tragedies of fathers, brothers, and sons.

The domestic nature of romance reading in England does not mean that it is a genre only for women and children. For men as well as women, the domestic sphere in the pre-modern household, in which elementary family relationships were paramount and private identities were formed, was one of intimacy and feeling. Romances were one of the vehicles of its differentiation. The domestic sphere generated plots of individual progression or self-fulfillment, in which marriage was frequently seen as the goal. The public sphere was, by contrast, the political realm of formal and impersonal relationships in which the knight or the civic official acted, not as father or son or lover, but as upholder of the law. These male public identities had no female equivalents, and the public sphere in this sense seems to have been structured on the exclusion of women. The private sphere required women's inclusion, because the family had as its heart the married couple. And yet public and private were mobile categories: the same men could speak both as fathers or husbands, and as aldermen or M.P.s.

II

Middle English romances almost always have knightly male protagonists, and this is one of their most striking differences from modern popular romance. This is not to underestimate the active if subsidiary roles played by women in many narratives, or to discount the possibility of reading the texts from other points of view than that of the hero. Nevertheless, fewer than a handful of romances take women's lives as their subject. Although romances are about knights, however, this does not necessarily mean that they are written, as the aptly named Stephen Knight argues, from "the viewpoint of a landowning armed class."[15] Once established in the course of the thirteenth century as a social identity, the knight became available – like the cowboy in our own day – for myth. As myth, he is a ubiquitous signifier of male autonomy and power, a focus for the fantasies of people who are not themselves members of the knightly class, just as cowboys are part of the imaginative lives of people who have never ridden a horse. From the mid-thirteenth century on, there are increasing numbers of representations of individual knights in armor, apparently detached from any social context: in stained glass, on tombs, in manuscripts, on monumental brasses, on floor tiles, in statuary and carvings.[16] The knight, like the cowboy, is instantly recognizable by his accouterments: his sword and shield, his armor and his great horse. Separated from the mundane business of landholding, office, or even army, he floats glamorously and alluringly free, always at the ready – there is a tomb-type in which he lies with his arm reaching across his body to his sword

hilt – and restless for action even at prayer. The knight's horse and his social status are emblematic of mobility and freedom. Although he looks archaic, he is in many ways a new man in fourteenth-century England: an adventure-seeker and risk-taker, a uniquely accessible and adaptable locus of fantasy and desire. In late medieval English romances the knight can be seen as a "bourgeois-gentry" myth of young manhood.

The knight as myth in this sense is used explicitly in the fourteenth-century *Sir Percyvell de Gales*,[17] which does not bear much resemblance to Chrétien's *Perceval*, its point of origin. Percyvell's mother takes the boy into the woods in order to keep him in ignorance of the deeds of arms that have caused his father's death in a tournament and to save him from the same fate. Nevertheless if the romance is to go anywhere, knighthood is inevitable: romance is not a genre about boys who stay with their mothers. As young Percyvell emerges into adult life, he meets members of Arthur's court who tell him they are knights. There is a good deal of comedy in the way he has to learn to his surprise that knights are not gods; that they do not fight with darts, or ride mares; and that the best way to get a man out of his armor is not by setting him on fire. The point of the joke about Percyvell is not so much that he does not know what a knight is, as that he does not know what a knight means. He is ignorant of the cultural codes by which young men are supposed to position themselves in the world of adult male knowingness, like the uncool kid who does not recognize the brand-names or the nerd who lets his mother buy his trainers. Once he has assumed the glamorous adult identity that knighthood offers, Percyvell can get on with his role in what is essentially a family story in which he rescues his mother from a monstrous suitor and brings her home. *Sir Percyvell of Gales* raises the question, what is a knight? and then supplies the answer given by many romances: he is his father's son.

The use of the mythical figure of the knight in the domestic context of romance-reading reveals much about the role of young men in the ideology of the family and household. It both endorses the independence of the son on whom the family's hopes for the future rest, allowing him to be a risk-taker, and yet in the end makes him follow the same course as his father. The nuclear family is, after all, precisely the family formation in which the son does not necessarily move into his father's place, especially in a period of opportunity. We know that the late medieval practices of service and apprenticeship sent many, perhaps most, boys into other men's homes, to follow other men's callings. As for marriage, we probably know even less about whether it was possible for men to remain single in late medieval England than we do about women. Yet urban and county government increasingly required male-headed households and male household heads, and so one of the tasks of household ideology was to control boys' dreams of alternative futures in a changing environment. It is not

surprising that romances that seem to be fantasies of freedom should turn out to endorse, again and again, the view that the supreme goal for boys and men of the propertied classes is to marry and settle down.

The thirteenth-century *King Horn* is paradigmatic in this respect. Possibly composed in London towards the end of the thirteenth century, and certainly owned by a London merchant in the fifteenth,[18] it is the story of the dispossessed prince Horn, who is loved by a princess, Rymenhild, and who, after banishment by her father, returns twice in disguise to beat off other suitors, regains his kingdom, and takes her home as his queen. *King Horn* is also paradigmatic in that its plot rests on a differentiation of private and public spheres which might be said to set Middle English romance along the course towards interiority which produced *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Troilus and Criseyde* in the late fourteenth century. Horn and Rymenhild meet in her "bur" (bower) or her bed, while public life goes on in the "hall"; he moves more easily than she does between the two locations. The "bur" is not only a place, but a state of feeling: it is where the emotional dynamism of the plot is generated. The public/private binary – like the gender binary – is not simply a modern way of thinking about the Middle Ages; it is one of the ways in which the Middle Ages thought about itself. The "bur" is not literally private – on one occasion the couple meet in the presence of sixteen maids – but it is a feminine place of intimacy, love and a different kind of speech. Rymenhild, who falls in love with Horn at first sight, invites him there because "heo ne mighte at borde / With him speke no worde, / Ne noght in the halle / Among the knightes all" (She could not speak a word with him at table, nor in the hall among all the knights; 253–56).[19] The private language of the "bur" is an enigmatic lovers' talk of dreams and objects – the ring, the horn – which only they can interpret. Rymenhild's passion for Horn is described as "wild" (252, 296, 950), and "out of witte" (652), but its wildness is not anti-social – what she wants from the very first is marriage, after all – although it might be called "pre-social," like Percyvell in the forest. Rymenhild does not envisage a world outside the "bur," or recognize that there are things Horn has to achieve in the public world, such as status, esteem and a source of livelihood, before he can take a wife.

In this narrative, as in many others, the woman has no life outside the home, but simply moves, plotlessly, from daughterhood to wifehood. Rymenhild's wildness suggests that she does not belong in the "rational" realm of the exercise of law and justice, but in the realm of fantasy and feeling. This is the location of the clandestine marriage – the unwitnessed vow made in the bedroom rather than publicly solemnized at the church door – which, precisely because of its uncontrollability, was a source of anxiety to parents and churchmen alike.[20] As I have already said, Rymenhild wants to marry Horn, and at their third secret meeting

Horn agrees, with the words: "I shal me mak thin owe / To holden and to knowe / For euerech other wighte: / And tharto my treuthe I thee plighte." (I shall make myself yours to keep and to acknowledge before all others, and thereto I give you my promise; 669–72). This sounds remarkably like the promise of future consent which, if followed by intercourse, constituted a legal marriage according to medieval canon law.[21] The question of whether it is a marriage or a betrothal, though, depends on whether the couple subsequently have intercourse and this is left, it seems, deliberately opaque.

What is clear, though, is that marriage is a process in this poem rather than an event, just as it was in contemporary English society.[22] It begins in private, and then is publicly solemnized after Horn has routed the treacherous Fikenhild, but the couple do not take up residence together until the end of the poem. The male role may be to integrate the woman's single-minded passion into the more complex trajectory formed by the man's public identity, but he does not revalue it. He learns the primacy of feeling in the course of socializing the intimate sphere.

In the two most ambitious romances of the late fourteenth century, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the shift from the hall to the bower – by then called a chamber – is almost complete. It is a commonplace about both these poems that the action has been displaced from the usual sites of male heroism into domestic settings. In both poems, unlike *King Horn*, what goes on between the couple in the privacy of the bedroom is made explicit: in the one case they have intercourse and the other they do not. But both romances create a new opaque interiority in the scrutiny of conscience in *Sir Gawain* and of intention in *Troilus and Criseyde*. Both construct the mental life as a zone even more private than the "bur," and one which in the end remains secret. Whether the Green Knight is hostile or friendly, why his wife behaves as she does, whether Gawain makes a bad confession, are questions which the romance generates but refuses to answer. And in *Troilus and Criseyde* the opacity of the heroine's motivation in betraying Troilus is a byword.

III

In late medieval England, so demographers tell us, the "companionate" model of marriage dominated. This is a model in which husband and wife are close in age and marry in their twenties, after a period of independence.[23] Marriages are entered into by choice, rather than being simply arranged. Many family historians regard the "sentimental" family as a post-medieval development, and treat medieval marital relations as distant and patriarchal. Romances suggest otherwise, however. Throughout the medieval period and beyond, marriages among

the nobility in England were undeniably arranged for dynastic reasons, with the couple sometimes betrothed as children. Some gentry marriages were of this sort, but recent work has emphasized the extent to which love between the couple, even at this level of society, was felt to be a prerequisite.[24] In the fifteenth century there seems to be some divergence between the nobility and gentry in this area, and it is likely that the source of the "romantic" view of marriage was urban, since we know that marriages among urban immigrants, away from family pressure, were entered into by choice.[25] They were supported by a theology of marriage that from the twelfth century had emphasized the primacy of mutual consent. The romances can be seen in this context. They provide evidence of a "bourgeois-gentry" family ideology in which private relations were governed by feeling and marriages were made for love. This ideology includes an idea of romantic love that associates the freedom of choice exercised by the landless and unproperticd with higher-status ideals of gentility and worth. This is no doubt why some family romances seem to be a form of courtesy text.

The sociologist Anthony Giddens has suggested that romantic love "provides for a long-term life trajectory, oriented to an anticipated yet malleable future, and it creates a 'shared history' that helps separate out the marital relationship from other aspects of family organisation and give it a special primacy."[26] Although Giddens believes romantic love is modern, nevertheless this seems apposite to many medieval romances in which the hero shapes the "anticipated yet malleable future," which is a future as a couple. The optimism of romance derives from a largely secular view of the world, which assumes that the goal of life is to be happy and that happiness is to be found in the marriage made for love, as in the early fifteenth-century *King Ponthus and the Fair Sidone*. This is a prose translation of the near-contemporary French *Ponthus et Sidoine*, which derives in turn from the Anglo-Norman *Roman de Horn*, as *King Horn* does. An almost complete text of *King Ponthus* survives in a manuscript made for a Yorkshire gentry family in the third quarter of the fifteenth century,[27] and another version was printed in London in 1511. It is partly a courtesy text and partly – though these are not separable – a story of romantic love. Towards the end, Ponthus takes his cousin Pollides aside and gives him this advice on how to treat his new wife:

> And also it is to vndrestonde that ye shuld be curtes and gentle vnto your wyf afor any othre, for dyuers resons; for by worshipp and by curtesie beryng vnto hir, ye shall hold the love of hir bonde vnto you; and forto be dyvers and roode vnto hir, she myght happenly chaunge, and the love of hir, so shuld ye wors reioys . . . And also be war that ye kepe selvyn true vnto hir, for it be said in Gospell that ye shuld chaunge hir for noon othre. And if ye doo thus as I say, God shall encrese you in all goode welthe and worship.[28]

Romantic love constructs gender relations within marriage as more egalitarian than the patriarchal systems of the public sphere: this courteous and faithful husband is not an authority figure, and the ideal married relationship is envisaged as a loving and mutual end in itself.

In the narrative of intimacy which romantic love furnishes, Giddens argues that "the element of sublime love tends to predominate over that of sexual ardour . . . Love breaks with sexuality while embracing it; 'virtue' begins to take on a new sense for both sexes, no longer meaning only innocence but qualities of character which pick out the other person as 'special'".[29] This helps to clarify what is going on in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as an ideology of romantic love evolved, in which romances must have played a crucial part. We might compare *King Horn* with *King Ponthus and the Fair Sidone* in these terms. In *King Ponthus* all possibility of a clandestine marriage between the hero and heroine has been removed, and it is made elaborately plain that Sidone's desire for Ponthus is throughout not merely chaste but lady-like. For example, when she invites him to her chamber and makes her declaration of love to him, she says: "'I shall say you,' said she, 'that I wolle loue you as my knyght, and [= if] that ye be of suche maner that I may perceyve that ye thinke noon othre wyse bot forto kepe the state and the worshipp of me; and if ye thinke any velanye, I shall neuer loue you.'"[30] "Velanye" conflates class and moral terms, and means both "sexual impurity" and "ungentlemanliness." Sidone's qualified declaration to Ponthus is a long way from the anguished urgency of Rymenhild's plea: "Horn, have of me rewthe, / And plist me thi trewthe!"(Have pity on me and give me your promise; 409–10). One way of describing the difference would be to say, with Giddens, that in *King Ponthus* "sublime love triumphs over sexual ardour." The explicit emphasis on the propriety of their relationship – even in thought – is maintained throughout, while simultaneously the text stresses the power of Sidone's feelings for Ponthus, and the intensity of the bond between them. Ponthus's attractions – his piety, his humility, his gentleness, his courtesy – may be traditional knightly virtues, but seen from Sidone's perspective, as they frequently are, they are husbandly. They are what marks Ponthus out for Sidone, in what might be called an erotics of virtue, as marriageable. In Hoccleve's near-contemporary *Regement of Princes*[31] there is an attack on the marriage customs of the propertied classes, who are said to marry "for muk & good / Only, & noght for loue of þe persone" (1632–3) and thus bring only "stryf" (1635) and "heuynesse" (1637) upon themselves. *King Ponthus* does not share this preacherly premise, that money is "muk" – filth or shit. It is the product of quite a different set of attitudes to wealth, exemplified in a gift Ponthus gives to Sidone: "itt was mervell to see the riches that ther wer, for they wer prased to more value then x thovsand besantes of golde."[32] Nevertheless the discourses of luxury and of

asceticism in these very different texts converge on the value they place on "loue of þe persone" as the basis for marriage.

Romantic love, then, places a particular value on the "person," and on marital personableness.[33] In *Havelok the Dane*,[34] which has an unusually wide social scope, there is a terrible moment for the heroine Goldeboru, an English princess, when she is forced to marry Havelok, believing him to be "sum cherles sone" (1092) instead of the dispossessed prince he really is. Although he is "fair," "stronge," "meke" and a virgin, she is outraged at this disparagement of her rank, complaining that no one should marry her unless he is "king or kinges eir" (1115). Luckily, about 250 lines later, lying awake in bed grieving over the fact that she has been "yeven un-kundelike" (given in marriage unnaturally, or in a way that does not conform with her descent; 1250), she realizes from a light coming out of his mouth while he sleeps that Havelok is, after all, a nobleman. This makes all the difference: "She was so fele sithes blithe / That she ne mighte hire joye mithe; / But Havelok sone anon she kiste, / And he slep and nought ne wiste" (She was so very happy that she could not restrain her joy, but immediately kissed Havelok, and he slept and knew nothing; 1277–80). Personableness in *Havelok* is more inclusive than in most romances, but it retains a sense that is found throughout them, that like should marry like. The limits of marital personableness are not only social, however. In *Le Bone Florence of Rome*,[35] Sir Garcy's plan to marry Florence is regarded by her and everyone else as disgusting because he is so old and thus inconceivable as an object of her love, while in *King Ponthus*, Sidone refuses to marry the king of Burgone because he is "evill condicioned, fatt, olde, scabbyd, and frentyke."[36]

The constraints placed upon romance by its ideological function within the "bourgeois-gentry" household prevented it from developing a radical critique in relation to what constituted marital personableness, however. Marriages made for money were condemned by sermon-writers, who fulminated at the way in which virtuous poor girls were rejected in favor of horrible rich old widows.[37] Sermons, though, are written out of a value-system that stresses the spiritual superiority of the poor over the rich, which is hardly the "bourgeois-gentry" outlook. Virtuous poor girls in romances always turn out to be princesses, like Emaré, who is an exemplary product of that outlook. *Emaré* occurs in a household anthology of the early fifteenth century and is one of the few romances with a female protagonist.[38] Emaré is a princess who is cast out from her widowed father's palace in a boat because she rejects his incestuous advances. She is rescued by a king's steward, who takes her into service in his household where she teaches embroidery and etiquette, both of which she is wonderfully skilled in. She attracts the attention of the king, who marries and has a son by her, and then is tricked into repudiating her. A complex family story of jealousy and re-

onciliation is thus set in train. Emaré's skill as an embroiderer is a female equivalent to the knightly skill at arms: it is a status attribute. Embroidery in late medieval England was not only a lady-like pastime but a household craft in which women of good family could serve apprenticeships. It mediated the worlds of the urban elites and the gentry, as is shown in the words of a petition to parliament from the silkwomen's gild in 1459: they claimed that it was "convenient, wurshipfull and accordaunt for gentilwymmen and oþer wymmen of wurship," and a "vertueux occupation and labour . . . to the norishing of vertue, and eschewing of vices and ydelnes."[39] This eliding of moral and social categories on the one hand, and of bourgeois and gentle categories on the other, is precisely reproduced in this romance's handling of the erotics of virtue. In her second exile, Emaré and her little son are taken into the household of a rich merchant where she embroiders "yn bour" (731) as she had done at court and teaches the boy manners. In *Havelok*, the exiled hero – a Danish prince – has to earn a living as a kitchen porter. Emaré, by contrast, moves from the court to the city without ever being required to transgress the boundaries of gentility, and is never perceived as anything other than a lady.

IV

Many Middle English romances are, like *Emaré*, about the marriages of heiresses, but they are usually told from the perspective of the hero's lineage and not hers: the failure of the male line in her family is not seen as a disaster but as an opportunity. Failure of the male line in the hero's family is a different matter entirely and produces a different kind of story: the tragedies of descent are presented as catastrophes of sonlessness. Many romances were composed in a period which has been described as one of a "crisis in male succession" for landowners, lasting from the Black Death until around 1450. In the late 1370s and early 1380s, the worst decade of all, fewer than half of landowning families produced sons.[40] In 1419 Sir Thomas Erpingham, who had no male heir, felt the end of his line sufficiently keenly to have a window built in the church of the Austin friars in Norwich bearing the coats of arms of all the eighty-seven noble and gentle families of Norfolk and Suffolk which had died out without male issue since 1327. According to K. B. McFarlane, the antiquary William Worcestre, describing the window, "added another 29 knights and 25 esquires to bring the list down to 1461."[41] Sonlessness did not only afflict the aristocracy: London mercantile dynasties were the exception rather than the rule.[42]

The Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, which survives in the same gentry household manuscript as *Sir Percyvell of Gales*, is, by comparison with *Emaré*, public and male. It rests on a sense of the family as a blood-line and not as a domestic group.

In *Emaré*, her son is the hope for the future; in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* the lineage has no future because it has no sons. Probably composed in the late fourteenth century, it tells the story of King Arthur's death in the version, ultimately derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, which omits the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere. As a "historical" narrative of states and nations, it looks like a product of the public sphere: chronicles were, after all, consulted by kings in the formulation of government policy. Nevertheless here, too, the poem's focus also turns out to be an intimate one, giving primacy to feeling. The personal relationships that lie at the heart of the Arthurian story mean that the public and patriarchal narrative of national aggrandizement constantly threatens to – and in the end does – collapse into the private zone of family loves and hatreds.

The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* starts with the visit to Arthur's court of envoys from the Roman emperor, demanding feudal homage which Arthur refuses to pay. It is quite different in its initial focus from the Stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*, which belonged to a London mercer, John Colyns:[43] that poem opens on a scene of marital intimacy, with the king and queen lying in bed. The Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, by contrast, is mostly concerned with military action in the course of which Arthur conquers half Europe until news reaches him that his nephew, Mordred, has usurped his throne and seized his wife, Guenevere. Then the narrative of public history becomes a family tragedy: Arthur returns to England, and Gawain, his nephew and Mordred's brother, is killed on the English shore. Mordred is asked by one of his allies who the dead man is, and as he identifies the body he weeps "for the sake of his sib-blood [kinsman]" (3891).[44] Arthur's grief when he learns of Gawain's death is that of a father deprived of a future:

> Dere cosin of kind in care am I leved,
> For now my worship is went and my war ended!
> Here is the hope of my hele, my happing in armes,
> My herte and my hardiness holly on him lenged! (3956–59)

[Dear kinsman of my lineage, I am left in care, for now my worship has gone and my war ended! Here is my hope of comfort, my success in arms, my heart and my courage depended entirely on him.]

Patriarchal power is not vulnerable to male aggression or female treachery: what it yields to in the end is the death of promise, of "the hope of my hele" which the next generation embodies. Arthur's followers are shocked by his distress, and tell him that this is unkingly conduct:

> It is no worship, iwis, to wring thine handes:
> To weep als a woman, it is no wit holden!
> Be knightly of countenance, als a king sholde,
> And leve such clamour, for Cristes love of heven! (3977–80)

[There is certainly no honor in wringing your hands; to weep like a woman is not accounted wise! Be knightly in your bearing, as a king should, and leave such clamor, for the love of Christ in heaven.]

Kings and knights, participants in the great deeds of history, do not cry. In that impersonal public world from which women are excluded, weeping, clamoring and wringing the hands are seen as women's work. In the unhistorical sphere of the family, though, fathers do cry; Middle English romances have plenty of fathers distraught at the loss of their sons.

A little scene between Arthur and the young Idrous in the ensuing battle shifts to the son's perspective, making him the mouthpiece of the patriarchal ideology of the public sphere. Idrous's father, Sir Ewain, is surrounded and Arthur tells Idrous, who is fighting at Arthur's side, to go and rescue him, but Idrous refuses. "He is my fader, in faith, forsake shall I never– / He has me fostered and fed and my fair brethern– / But I forsake this gate, so me God help." (He is my father, truly, I shall never desert him – he has raised and fed me and my fair brothers – but I refuse this course, so God help me; 4142–44). This clean-cut youth says he has never disobeyed his father in his life and now he will be no different. His father has told him to stay with Arthur and stay he will, even though he knows that this will mean his father's death and his own: "He is elder than I, and end shall we bothen; / He shal ferk before, and I shall come after" (He is older than I, and we shall both end; he shall go before and I shall come after; 4151–52).

The good son is the spokesman for the "natural" order of things, an order in which paternal authority is the highest there is (Idrous does not give a thought for his mother), and in which sons die after, and not before, their fathers. But the death of Gawain has already shown that such an order cannot be assumed, and the horror of Arthur's last hours lies in the catastrophe of sonlessness. Confronted by the corpses of all his knights on the battlefield, half-crazed, Arthur buckles at the knees ("stotays for mad" [4271]) and collapses. He is given a speech which summons up God, king, lord, master, might and man in an over-determination of masculine public power:

> King, comly with crown, in care am I leved!
> All my lordship low in land is laid under,
> That me has given guerdones, by grace of Himselven,
> Maintained my manhed by might of their handes,
> Made me manly on molde and master in erthe . . . (4275–79)

[O fair crowned king, I am left in sorrow! Laid low under the earth are all my lords who have given me rewards, through His grace, maintained my authority through the strength of their hands, made me powerful in the world and master on earth . . .]

Without sons, all this patriarchal authority is utterly ineffectual and Arthur is a figure of destitute and feminine abjection: "I may helpless on hethe house by

mine owne, / Als a wofull widow that wantes her berne!" (I may take shelter all alone on the heath, helpless, like a grieving widow whose child is gone; 4284–85). Here, momentarily, Arthur merges with Idrous's mother, and all the women's work that has been rigorously excluded in the name of history, as history turns into a family affair.

Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, completed by the end of the 1460s, makes the Arthurian story of dynastic failure into a wider crisis of masculinity. *Le Morte Darthur*, very unusually, tells the whole life of Arthur, from his conception to his death, as a self-contained story. Many English chronicles include accounts of Arthur's reign but they embed it in the continuing line of English kings, so that it is part of a larger genealogical narrative. Removing the life of Arthur from royal genealogy disengages it from notions of lineage and descent, and yet does not reconfigure it in terms of the nuclear family either, though we might see the adulterous wife and the misbegotten son as the idealized nuclear family's deformed shadow. The structure of the life is inception, apogee, crisis, downfall – without aftermath. It is the story of a last generation, of the impossibility of imagining a future, the very negative of the plot engendered by the ideology of romantic love. By the end all the central figures are old or at least middle-aged. Almost all the young people are dead: the Maid of Astolat was only the first in this final phase. The fathers have outlived their sons. Arthur has killed Mordred and received his death's wound in the process. Guinevere, who in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* has children by Mordred, remains childless until she goes into the nunnery and cuts herself off for ever from all sexual contact. She rejects Lancelot's offer of marriage and will not even kiss him. Thereafter the wholesale retreat of the survivors into the religious life, which is much more complete than in any of Malory's sources, seems to have to do with celibacy rather than other religious values. It is a repudiation of lineage, a refusal or an inability to project forward to future generations. I suggested earlier that *Sir Percvyvell de Gales* poses the question, what is a knight? and answers: he is his father's son. Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* could be said to ask the same question, but here the answer is tragic: he is his dead son's father.

The way of reading romances that I have proposed in this essay pays particular attention to the roles of sons, fathers and husbands in the late medieval "bourgeois-gentry" family and the ways in which the knight's story constitutes its aspirations and fantasies. By contrast, the heroines' lives are, as I have already said, plotless. Girls of all classes in late medieval England did not move directly from their fathers' homes to their husbands', as in southern Europe, but spent their teenage years in service in other people's households. This phase is largely effaced in the romances, with their primarily male focus. It is apparently not until the scene of reading – the home itself – becomes the scene of adventure, rather than the place that action starts out from and returns to, that women's lives can be retrieved from silence. That, it seems, is the task of the novel, not the romance.

NOTES

1 See Dorothy Everett, "A Characterisation of the English Medieval Romances," in Dorothy Everett, *Essays on Middle English*, ed. P. Kean (Oxford University Press, 1955), 1–22; Derek Pearsall, "The Development of Middle English Romance," *Medieval Studies*, 27 (1965), 91–116, and "English Romance in the Fifteenth Century," *Essays and Studies*, n.s. 29 (1976), 56–83; Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968); Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English Romances* (Austin, TX and London: University of Texas Press, 1978); J. A. W. Bennett, *Middle English Literature*, ed. Douglas Gray (Oxford University Press, 1986), 121–201; Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Romance* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1986); Stephen Knight, "The Social Function of the Middle English Romances," in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History*, ed. David Aers (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), 99–122; W. R. J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (London: Longman, 1987).
2 National Library of Scotland, Advocates 19. 2. 1, containing fifteen romances.
3 See John Schofield, *Medieval London Houses* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 34–51.
4 Examples are Manchester, Chetham's Library, 8009; London, British Library, Harley 2252, London, Lambeth Palace Library, 306; Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson C 86.
5 Harriet Hudson, "Middle English Popular Romances: The Manuscript Evidence," *Manuscripta*, 28 (1984), 67–78.
6 Cambridge, University Library Ff. II.38.
7 See Richard Britnell, *The Commercialisation of English Society, 1000–1500* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).
8 See Caroline Barron, "Richard Whittington: The Man behind the Myth," in *Studies in London History Presented to Philip Edmund Jones*, ed. A. E. J. Hollaender and William Kellaway (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1969), 197–250.
9 See Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Ann Arbor: University of Chicago Press, 1962), Appendix A, "Aldermanic Families," 321–77.
10 See David Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000–1300* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 132–38, Peter Coss, *The Knight in Medieval England 1000–1400* (Stroud: Sutton, 1993), 30–71, and Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England c. 1200–1520* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 13.
11 Dyer, *Standards of Living*, 12–13.
12 See Gisela Guddat-Figge, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Middle English Romances* (Munich: W. Fink, 1976).
13 See Malcolm Parkes, "The Literacy of the Laity," in *The Medieval World*, ed. David Daiches and Anthony Thorlby (London: Aldus, 1973), 565–66.
14 See Helen Cooper, "Counter-Romance: Civil Strife and Father-Killing in the Prose Romances," in *The Long Fifteenth Century: Essays for Douglas Gray*, ed. Helen Cooper and Sally Mapstone (Oxford University Press, 1997), 141–62.
15 Knight, "The Social Function of the Middle English Romances," 102.
16 See Coss, *The Knight in Medieval England*, 72–99. For floor-tiles, see Schofield, *Medieval London Houses*, 111.

17 In Maldwyn Mills, ed., *Ywain and Gawain, Sir Percyvell of Gales, The Anturs of Arthur* (London: Dent, 1992).

18 See Rosamund Allen, "The Date and Provenance of *King Horn*: Some Interim Assessments," in *Medieval Studies Presented to George Kane*, ed. E. D. Kennedy, R. Waldron and J. S. Wittig (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1988), 99–125, at p. 121; G. V. Smithers, *Havelok* (Oxford University Press, 1987), xiii–xiv.

19 Quotations from "King Horn," in Jennifer Fellows, ed., *Of Love and Chivalry: An Anthology of Middle English Romance* (London: Dent, 1993).

20 See R. H. Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England* (Cambridge University Press, 1974), 27–31.

21 See James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 189–90, 277, 441–43; Neil Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage: Literary Approaches 1100–1300* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1997).

22 See R. M. Smith, "Marriage Processes in the English Past," in *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure*, ed. L. Bonfield, R. M. Smith and K. Wrightson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 43–99.

23 See J. Hajnal, "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective," in *Population in History*, ed. D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (London: Edward Arnold, 1965), 101–43; R. M. Smith, "Geographical Diversity in the Resort to Marriage in Late Medieval Females: Work, Reputation and Unmarried Females in the Household Formation Systems of Northern and Southern Europe," in *Women is a Worthy Wight: Women in English Society c. 1200–1500*, ed. P. J. P. Goldberg (Stroud: Sutton, 1992), 16–59.

24 See A. S. Haskell, "The Paston Women on Marriage in Fifteenth-century England," *Viator*, 4 (1973), 459–71; C. F. Richmond, "The Pastons Revisited: Marriage and Family," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 58 (1985), 24–36, and Keith Dockray, "Why Did Fifteenth-Century English Gentry Marry?" in *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Later Medieval England*, ed. Michael Jones (Gloucester and New York: Sutton, 1986), 61–80.

25 See *Love and Marriage in Late Medieval London*, intro. and trans. Shannon McSheffrey (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995).

26 Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 44–5.

27 Oxford, Bodleian Library, Digby 185. A fragment of another late fifteenth-century copy is in Bodleian Library, Douce 384. For Digby 185, see the study by Carol Meale in Felicity Riddy, ed., *Prestige, Authority and Power in Late-Medieval Manuscripts and Texts* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, forthcoming).

28 F. J. Mather, ed., *King Ponthus and the Fair Sidone*, PMLA, 12 (1897), 1–150, at p. 146.

29 Giddens, *Transformation of Intimacy*, 40.

30 *King Ponthus*, 17.

31 Thomas Hoccleve, *Hoccleve's Works: The Regement of Princes and Fourteen Minor Poems*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, EETS. es. 72 (Oxford, 1897). A text of this poem is in Oxford Bodleian Library, Digby 185, which also contains *King Ponthus*.

32 *King Ponthus*, 108.

33 See Marie Collins, "Feminine Response to Masculine Attractiveness in Middle English Literature," *Essays and Studies*, 38 (1985), 12–28.

34 Quotations from "Havelok the Dane" in Donald B. Sands, ed., *Middle English Verse Romances* (New York and London: Holt, Rinehart, 1966).

35 See C. F. Heffernan, ed., *Le Bone Florence of Rome* (Manchester University Press, 1976).

36 *King Ponthus*, 90.

37 See G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), p. 381.

38 British Library, Cotton Caligula A. ii. Quotations from "Emaré" in Maldwyn Mills, ed., *Six Middle English Romances* (London: Dent, 1973).

39 J. Strachey *et al.*, eds., *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, 6 vols. (London, n.d. [1767–77]), vol. 5, 325.

40 See S. J. Payling, "Social Mobility, Demographic Change, and Landed Society in Late Medieval England," *Economic History Review*, 45 (1992), 51–73, at pp. 54–55 and 61.

41 See K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford University Press, 1973), 145–46.

42 See *ibid*, 166.

43 It is included in his commonplace book: London, British Library, Harley 2252.

44 Quotations are from "Morte Arthure" in Larry D. Benson, ed., *King Arthur's Death* (Exeter University Press, 1986).

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