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When Romance Comes True*

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The romances that form the subject of this paper were not written by famous named authors, or by identifiable poetic masters. Almost all are anonymous, and so do not lend themselves to the kind of traditional criticism that one can apply to writers who have a known life and context; and since the dates of composition and the intended audiences for some are uncertain, and others are translations of works originally written within different political circumstances and a different social and linguistic culture, it is not at all easy to historicize them in the new or the old senses. They tend to be open about their meanings, avoiding subtexts and codes, so they are not amenable to the kind of hermeneutic of suspicion that fuels New Historicism. They are often talked about as ‘popular’ romances, though the term is somewhat misleading, since any text that was written down in the Middle Ages has by definition at least something elite about it. They are, however, written in English, not French or Anglo-Norman, and so mark themselves as linguistically accessible to all social classes. They do not generally carry the markers of high culture that characterize medieval French-language romance, though a number of them exist in continental or insular French versions as well as English; and several of the later ones were ‘popular’ almost by definition in the sense conveyed by the shift from individual manuscript copies to entire printed editions. It remains true, however, that all these romances overtly address the concerns of the gentry and the upper classes rather than peasants or townsmen; they emerge from an elite culture, first that of the Anglo-Norman romances written for aristocratic readers, later that of the ducal court of Burgundy, and throughout the Middle Ages their link with the aristocracy remains close – a fact that is of some importance for much of what follows.

The title ‘When Romance Comes True’ probably sounds like a paradox. ‘Romance’ has become the accepted antonym of ‘realism’, and we accordingly tend to define romance in terms of what is *not* true: much killing of dragons and giants by knights in shining armour. Those elements are of course there, but it is tempting to emphasise them to a degree that makes us overlook just how closely much Middle English romance connects with real life. Perhaps the very obviousness of those connections has something to do with the ease with which they are overlooked:

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dragons and giants make their presence more strongly visible, and are indeed what the authors seem most proud of. They are interesting just because they are not part of real life. There are, none the less, four major ways in which romance can 'come true'. Two of those processes are deliberate and self-fulfilling. First is the writing of romances as a retrospective explanation of what is happening in the present; and second, the deliberate re-creation of romance in actual practice. The other two processes are more complex, in that the impact of immediate contemporary (or to us, historical) concerns on the writer serves to place romance at least partly outside his control: he is responding to a given context of historical or cultural incident that limits his freedom to invent or adapt or explain. Of these next two processes, the first has to do with how cultural practices, cultural changes, helped to create romance; and the second, with what happens when specific historical events appear to model themselves on romance structures, and how those events can be given a conscious extra boost by romance authors or patrons to make the parallels even closer. Across all four of those phenomena, there is a turning of history into romance, or romance into history.

The first two of those processes, the deliberate and self-fulfilling connections, are comparatively straightforward, and require only a brief outline to indicate how they work. The use of romance to offer a retrospective explanation, or indeed a justification, of the known facts of the present, is something with which any scholar of romance will be familiar. Texts of this variety often develop romance into a kind of myth of origin; and in a Christian culture, such a mythic element carries with it a strong implication of endorsement by God. This usage emerges most often in genealogical romances, which tell the stories of the origins of countries, or towns, or aristocratic families. Geoffrey of Monmouth is in this sense writing a gigantic myth of origin, which runs from the foundation of Britain by Brut forwards; and if he wrote it generically as history, many of his stories were given a later development as individual romances. Not all such stories are purely glorificatory, and romance can stretch itself to accommodate a degree of personal or political downfall alongside its celebratory function. Legends of origin can be invented or adapted to explain a present disaster, and therefore to shift the blame for that disaster back from the present onto the past. *Melusine* offers a particularly clear example. In its primary form, it tells of the foundation of the house of Lusignan by a woman who is half-fairy, and who is, in Donald Maddox's term, the 'mega-mother' of the dynasty in all its numerous branches.¹ In the late fourteenth century, however, a series of disasters that befell one particular branch of the family was given just such a retrospective explanation in the form of a curse imposed on one line of her descendants that was set to last for nine generations.² The story does not obviously qualify as 'true' in any normal sense of the term; but to an age that lacked the techniques of historical

¹ Donald Maddox, *Fictions of Identity in Medieval France* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 172, 177–86. On the historical parallels for Melusine's sons, see the introduction to the edition of the metrical version by Eleanor Roach, *Le Roman de Mélusine ou Histoire de Lusignan par Coudrette*, Bibliothèque française et romane B.18 (Paris, 1982), pp. 20–52. The prose version was composed in the 1390s in support of Jean de Berry's claims to the lordship. Both versions were translated into Middle English around 1500.

² The history is set out in the introduction to Laurence Harf-Lancener's modernized edition, *Coudrette: Le Roman de Mélusine* (Paris, 1993), pp. 26–35.

investigation that we take for granted, it was perhaps the best that could be done (and we need to remember how frequently we do exactly parallel things even though we know better: the American myth of the colonizing of an empty and unpeopled land, for instance, is a close replication of what is found in Geoffrey's legend of Brut; and film habitually rewrites history in favour of the audience for whom the film is made, as with the *U-571* version of the capture of the Enigma codes in the Second World War that turns it into an American rather than a British achievement). So far as the Middle Ages were concerned, the present state of affairs had to be reached somehow: how did the facts of the contemporary world come to be? Those facts, moreover, could themselves appear to 'prove' the romance version of the past invented to explain them. Such versions of history were not always or altogether received without some degree of scepticism, even at the time; but at least they provided a kind of just-so story that was impossible to better. To borrow a term from the early development of science, such legends 'saved the appearances', provided a working hypothesis that accounted for the observed phenomena, and so offered a functional stand-in for truth until such time as it was either proved to be true or replaced by a better hypothesis.

Such a readiness to accord truth to a romance version of the past was confirmed by the deliberate recreation of romance in life, in a process of life imitating literature. The medieval social elites, particularly aristocratic and royal courts, had something of a genius for turning their lives into art, or ritual.³ This is what happened, for instance, with the creation of the Order of the Garter by Edward III in 1348. The Order was specifically and deliberately modelled on the fellowship of the Round Table; and indeed there was already a round table in existence that Edward could use if he so wished, which had probably been commissioned by his grandfather, and which is still preserved in Winchester Great Hall.⁴ The table seems to have been linked with Edward I's revival of Arthurianism as courtly play,⁵ but it was play with a serious edge: the revival, and the ton-and-a-bit table as a physically massive endorsement of the point at issue, were above all a deliberate propaganda move, to show how the greatness of the imperial British past as embodied in King Arthur was recreated in himself, with particular reference to the dispute concerning the overlordship of Scotland. At some point, however, the origins of the table were forgotten, and it began to look as if it might be the real thing; and if it were, then, as Caxton noted in his Preface to Malory's *Morte Darthur*, it constituted a proof of the historicity of

³ The adoption of chivalric values and the rituals of knighthood in both romance and aristocratic life is of course a dominant feature of medieval culture, and the processes of imitation and symbiosis appear to have been mutual. The numerous studies include Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven and London, 1984); Richard Barber, *The Knight and Chivalry*, rev. edn (Woodbridge, 1995); Michel Stanesco, *Jeux d'Errance du chevalier médiéval: Aspects ludiques de la fonction guerrière dans la littérature du moyen âge flamboyant* (Leiden and New York, 1988); and, for a series of case studies, the essays in *Chivalric Literature: Essays on Relations between Literature and Life in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Larry D. Benson and John Leyerle (Kalamazoo, 1980). For more extensive modes of performance, see for instance Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity during the Hundred Years War* (Philadelphia, 2002).

⁴ Not all the evidence is conclusive, but this is the best hypothesis reached in Martin Biddle *et al.*, *King Arthur's Round Table: An Archaeological Investigation* (Woodbridge, 2000).

⁵ The classic article is Roger Sherman Loomis, 'Edward I: Arthurian Enthusiast', *Speculum* 28 (1953), 114–27.

Arthur, just as the whole cult of chivalry seemed to promise a way back to a golden age of the past.

There are strong arguments for regarding romance as always retrospective, always nostalgic, from the moment of its inception; the *romans antiques* describe the lost chivalry of Troy, Chrétien locates the chivalric Golden Age in the reign of Arthur. To set against that, however, is the fact that romance as we know it is the product of identifiable and specific changes in social practices, and therefore much more closely modelled on the immediate conditions of contemporary life than our association of the form with dragons allows. Far from being always exotic and implausible, romance would be almost unimaginable without those changes, which were happening just ahead of, or contemporary with, the emergence of romance itself in the mid-twelfth century. The simplest example is a purely technological one: the introduction of the stirrup in the early Middle Ages. That in turn enabled the mounted charge, impact combat, of the knight with the heavy lance couched under his right arm.⁶ Chivalric romance appears within a couple of generations of the introduction of such horseback combat (and of course the French terms *chevalier*, *chevalerie*, literally 'horseman' and 'horsemanship', make the connection explicit, as the English 'knight' and 'kighthood' fail to do). Fighting of that kind in turn demanded heavier armour – plate armour. Knights in shining armour may look like fantasy figures to us, but shining armour developed out of the same practical considerations that enabled the emergence of chivalric romance; and its authors did not forget, as we tend to do, that armour needed to be kept shiny, to have the rust removed.⁷

Still more important to the emergence of romance, and indeed to the whole history of western Europe, were two more far-reaching social changes, both of them to do with those central concerns of the medieval secular world, inheritance and the family. One was the categorization of the principles of primogeniture in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It had long been normal practice for the eldest son to succeed to his father's lands and title; but if there were no suitable or obvious heir, then the title had commonly passed to the most competent claimant – a system enshrined, for instance, in the election of the Holy Roman Emperor. Alternatively, a king could name his own successor, as Edward the Confessor named William of Normandy. Primogeniture as it developed in these centuries, however, insisted that there was only one right heir to a title, or a throne. That was in the first instance the eldest son and his issue (so that if the eldest son predeceased his father, his own eldest son was given precedence over the next living brother); if there were no son, then the inheritance passed to the eldest daughter; or if a direct line failed altogether, an elaborate series of rules was devised for working back up the generations and down again to establish the correct inheritance. What was initially set up as a legal principle rapidly came to be interpreted as ordained by God, a divine as well as a human law. On the death of a prince, you have to identify not just the legally correct heir, but the true heir in sight of God.

⁶ Discussed in e.g. Keen, *Chivalry*, pp. 23–25.

⁷ A rust-removal process is part of the service provided for Gawain at Bertilak's castle (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, 2nd edn rev. Norman Davis (Oxford, 1967), lines 2017–18); and Launfal returns from time to time from Olyroun to joust in order to 'kepe his armes fro the rustus' (*Middle English Verse Romances*, ed. D.B. Sands, EMETS (1969; repr. Exeter, 1987), line 1028).

The rules of primogeniture were presumably designed to prevent disputes over inheritance. In practice, they made them much worse. Historically and politically, they made the problem of a weak or tyrannical or mad king, or of an infant heir, or of an heir whose paternity was in doubt, impossible to resolve, since the replacing of a king or an heir meant, by definition, unrightful rule. It was that kind of situation that enabled successive English kings to lay claim to the throne of France in the Hundred Years' War, when all the lines of inheritance except that of Edward III lay in an impossible tangle. It was the need for divine endorsement too that made Joan of Arc's advent at the end of the war so important, not so much for military strategy, but because her appearance seemed like direct divine intervention on behalf of the man who therefore must be the true king, whatever the English claims or the doubts over his paternity.

The other social change occurred in the mid-twelfth century, with the papal decision that what made a marriage valid was not a public ceremony nor parental arrangement, but simply the consent of the spouses.⁸ In everyday practice, this probably made very little difference; arranged marriages (as distinct from forced marriages) continued to be the norm. Combined, however, with those new principles that bestowed a father's lands and titles on his daughter if he had no son, it potentially gave extraordinary political, economic and erotic patronage to the heiress. Her erotic patronage, moreover, was interpreted in romance not just as consent, but as free and faithful sexual choice. So if the invention of stirrup and armour and lance enabled chivalric romance, these other changes enabled all those romances about the dispossession and return of the true heir, or about the fair unknown who turns out to be the missing claimant; and they enabled too those other twinned romance plots, of the young man who makes good by marrying the titled heiress, and of the young woman who makes her own choice of husband and pursues that choice through all kinds of adversity – plots that constitute a high proportion of Middle English romance.

Given the basis of such stories in actual inheritance practices, it becomes less surprising that history and romance can sometimes chime very closely: closely enough for poets to rewrite history into romance, to mythologize history, even as it happened, or for people caught up in political events to see themselves as participating in those quasi-mythic romance structures, structures that insisted that what was happening was providential, willed by God. There was a particular incentive to cast events in these terms if what you were doing (deposing the king, for instance) was driven by political ambition or desire for power, or if you knew that your claim to the title you held or desired was not as indisputable as you might have hoped. In such cases, there was all the more reason to present your claims and actions – to spin them – in just such patterns of divinely sanctioned romance. Spin is most typically thought of as antagonistic to truth; but events could also be spun to resemble romance motifs in ways that endorsed genuinely held beliefs rather than setting out to fabricate belief where none might otherwise exist. The rest of this paper will consider some instances of historical spin of all these kinds: romance as

⁸ On the edict and its context, see Neil Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage: Literary Approaches, 1100–1300* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 12–19.

propaganda, whether employed idealistically or cynically, or, as is normal with human motivation, something of both at once.

An early story of a dispossessed heir, Havelok, furnishes a familiar and transparent point from which to start. It was in origin an English legend that first appears in a chronicle setting, Gaimar's Anglo-Norman *Estoire des Engleis* of about 1137. Over the course of the next century or so, it was reworked as an independent romance, first in Anglo-Norman, then in English. It re-entered chronicle history in the Prose *Brut* at about the same time as it was given its English romance treatment; and the story then cut between chronicle and romance for the next few centuries, becoming increasingly unrecognizable in the process, until it dropped decisively away from history with its conversion into a sentimental ballad in the eighteenth century.⁹ It is in fact a story about two dispossessed heirs, children who are disposed of after the deaths of their fathers by wicked guardians who want to keep power for themselves. Havelok, son to the king of Denmark, is ordered by his guardian to be killed; but he is saved when the wife of the fisherman Grim, his designated murderer, sees a light coming from the child's mouth, and they recognize a bright birthmark on his shoulder as a 'kynemark',¹⁰ a birthmark defining his kin as royal, a king-mark. Grim escapes with him to England, where his homestead becomes the origin of the future Grimsby: a major function of the legend, in fact, was to provide a foundation legend for the town, a legend recorded on its seal and still familiar in the early seventeenth century. Meantime Goldeburh, the orphan daughter of the king of England, is also being raised by a wicked guardian. (In the chronicle versions, he is her uncle, the male equivalent of the wicked mother-in-law, and for analogous reasons: both are cut off from potential or real power, one by the existence of the heir or heiress who prevents what would otherwise be his own inheritance, the other by the advent of the young wife who supplants her as the senior woman of the dynasty.¹¹) In order to keep power for himself, he decides to interpret literally the promise he made to her dying father to marry her to the strongest and highest man in England, in the form of a heroically tall and athletic young scullion employed by the Bishop of Lincoln – a scullion who is, of course, Havelok. On their wedding night, Havelok, exhausted by his day's labour, falls asleep; and she in her turn, grieving over her compelled fate, sees the light from his mouth, and a further sign of royalty, a king-mark on his shoulder in the form of a gold cross:

On his shuldre, of gold red,
She saw a swiþe noble croiz.
Of an angel she herde a uoyz:
'Goldeborw, lat þi sorwe be!
For Hauclok, þat haueþ spuset þe,
He [is] kinges sone and kinges eyr –
þat bikenneth þat croiz so fayr.' (lines 1263–69)

The angel's message not only interprets the physical symbol, but gives his royalty divine endorsement. Only at that point does Goldeburh make her own willed election of Havelok as her husband, with the implication that the consummation of their marriage, her full sexual choice, follows from that act of her will. In due course he wins back both his kingdom and hers, and rules them jointly; and the wicked guardians come to a nasty end.

Whatever Gaimar or the compiler of the Prose *Brut* or the good folk of Grimsby or Lincoln thought about the story, there is no historical evidence that anything like this ever happened. What is likely is that the legend emerged in response to cultural pressures: in this instance, it has been argued, by the need retrospectively to legitimize Danish rule in England, especially in the eastern areas, not least Lincolnshire, that had embraced it so readily.¹² The romance of *Havelok* addresses precisely that historical fact. It casts itself as predictive of the Danish rule of England that did indeed come about, even if it did not occur in anything like the way the romance represents it. If the Danes had been defeated, a romance might still have been produced at some point in the future, but it would not have been one that put a Dane on the throne of England, and that made his heirs legitimate linear English rulers through his marriage.

To us, *Havelok* is a romance precisely in the sense that it is not true, and the element of miracle it contains, that divine symbol of true royalty, confirms that; but it is dangerous to make assumptions about its fantasy on that basis. Let me step aside into the historical record, to the year 1238, when the legend of Havelok was apparently already long established in oral tradition and familiar in written form in Anglo-Norman, though probably still before the Middle English romance had been composed. Here is another story, from the *Greater Chronicle* of Matthew Paris, about Henry III:

In the same year, a great danger beset the king, such as astonished all those who heard it. On the morrow of the nativity of the blessed Virgin, a certain squire who was said to be educated came to the royal court at Woodstock, and pretending to be mad, he said to the king, 'Resign to me the kingdom which you have usurped unrightfully and held for yourself too long.' He also added that he bore a king-mark on his shoulder (*signum regale in humero*). The king's servants seized him and wanted to beat him out of the royal presence, but the king stopped them as they ran on him, saying, 'Leave the lunatic alone, as it's natural for someone like that to play the fool; such men's words carry no weight of truth.' But in the middle of the night, that same man got in

⁹ For its early history, see the edition by G.V. Smithers, *Havelok* (Oxford, 1987), pp. xvi–lvi. For its post-medieval history, see Helen Cooper, 'The Elizabethan *Havelok*: William Warner's First of the English', in *Medieval Insular Romance: Translation and Innovation*, ed. Judith Weiss (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 169–83, and, for a text overlooked there, a reworking of Warner entitled 'A Song of the Strange Lives of two Young Princes in England', which relocates the story to Devonshire and entitles the lovers Raymond and Maudlin (in *A Collection of Old Ballads*, vol. 3, possibly ed. Ambrose Philips (London, 1725), pp. 1–10).

¹⁰ Ed. Smithers, line 605.

¹¹ The uncle in question is thus most often the father's brother, the second son whose inheritance is foiled by the existence of the child. In the *Havelok* stories, he is the dead mother's brother: he therefore has no lineal claim to the throne, but his selection as guardian shows him to be the highest-ranking competent male, and therefore the kind of man who under the older more flexible inheritance patterns that were in the process of being displaced, or under a system of election or acclamation, could have expected to succeed as ruler.

¹² See Thorlac Turville-Petre, 'Havelok and the History of the Nation', in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Carol Meale (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 121–34.

through the window of the king's chamber, carrying an unsheathed dagger, and rushed in a frenzy on the king's bed. He was baffled at not finding him there, and hurriedly searched for him in all the corners of the chamber. By the Lord's providence, however, the king was lying with the queen. A certain maid of the queen's was by chance awake, reading her psalter by candlelight; she led a holy life in devotion to God, and was called Margaret Biseth.¹³

So Margaret screams and raises the alarm, and the king is saved. The squire who had wanted to assassinate him (to kill him in the manner of the assassins, *more Assassinorum*) is tortured until he names his co-conspirators, whereupon he is condemned as a traitor and executed in appropriately nasty ways. It is a story about a claimant with a king-mark who did not succeed; and it remains as history, not romance.

It is however worth pausing on the evidence that the madman, or the feigned madman, cites for his demands: to paraphrase just a little, 'Resign the kingdom to me, for *you* have usurped it unrightfully, and *I* bear a kingmark upon my shoulder.' How do you know who is the rightful king? The laws of primogeniture insisted that there was one, and one only. Henry's father, King John, was not such a rightful heir, having overridden the claims of Prince Arthur, the young son of his elder brother Geoffrey: John was, in fact, the conventional wicked uncle. And even if a man plausibly claims to be the son of the rightful king, how can you be sure that he is what he asserts, in an era before DNA testing? Another unknown young squire, named Arthur, drew a sword from a stone to prove his right to the throne; the scullion Havelok had his king-mark, the gold cross inscribed on his body, and the light from his mouth that became visible in the dark, which marked him indelibly even in the most adverse of circumstances – providentially endowed and endorsed signs. So the squire of Woodstock who demanded Henry's throne from him, claiming a similar king-mark, was much more dangerous than we might at first glance think. Henry's dismissal of his words as the ravings of a madman may have been humane, but it was also politically astute, since it disarmed the force of his demands. The rest of the story, however, recasts the lunatic as only pretending to be mad, as his naming of a further group of conspirators confirmed. If the man were indeed sane, it none the less seems a crazy way to go about mounting a conspiracy; but the claim he makes about his king-mark was presumably thought by the other malcontents, if they indeed existed, to carry real weight – for if a king is faced with a man who makes such a claim, how can he prove his rival is not what he says he is?

¹³ Eodem anno accidit regi periculum, omnes audientes nimis reddens attonitos. In crastino enim nativitate beatae Mariae, venit quidam armiger literatus, ut dicitur, ad curiam regis apud Wodestok, se fingens infatuatum, dicens regi: 'Resigna mihi regnum, quod injuste tibi usurpasti, et diu detinuisti.' Addidit quoque, quod signum regale gestabat in humero. Quem cum ministri regales arripissent, volentes eum baculatum a praesentia regis propellere, rex irruentium in eum impetum compescuit, dicens: 'Sinite infatuatum ut talem decet desipere; verba enim talium carent pondere veritatis.' Media autem nocte, ecce ille idem per fenestram regii thalami introgressus, cultellum portans extractum, lectum regis adiit furibundus; quem cum non invenisset, confusus est; sed festinus quaesivit eum per plura thalami diverticula. Erat autem tunc temporis, Domino providente, rex quiescens cum regina. Quaedam autem puella reginae, cum forte vigilaret, psalterium psallebat ad candelam; erit enim sancta et Deo devota, nomine Margareta Biseth (Matthew Paris, *Chronica Maiora*, ed. H.R. Luard, Rolls Series 57 (London, 1872–83), 3.497; my translation).

At one level, Matthew Paris, like the king himself, seems to want to dismiss the affair as the actions of a madman; but he is also anxious to prove the claim untrue, and therefore treasonable not just in men's sight but God's.

Havelok being a romance, the king-mark is a true, and therefore also divine, signifier, and the story records its hero's restoration; there, the man who holds the throne unrightfully is the one who comes to a sticky end. In Matthew Paris's story, Henry's legitimacy as king is confirmed by enlisting God on his side. It is by God's providence, *Domino providente*, that the king is not in own bed; and the devout Margaret Biseth, reciting the psalms and therefore with a hotline already open to God, serves as the divine agent in raising the alarm. That may indeed have been what happened; but if it was not, something of the kind would have had to be invented – something that demonstrated that the man who occupied the throne was indeed the true king in the sight of God.

The contemporary stories of the scullion of Lincoln and the squire of Woodstock invite reading against each other. Jump forward two and a half centuries, and you find another set of contemporary romances that invite similar parallel readings between their own texts and the sequence of children, men and one woman who in the years following 1483 all claimed to be the true heir to the throne of England. Two of these are fifteenth-century prose works emanating originally from Burgundy that were translated into English on either side of 1500: *Blanchardyn and Eglantine*, translated by Caxton around 1489; and *Ohyer of Castyle*, printed in 1518. Probably dating from slightly later is a third text, a ballad-style romance entitled *Lady Bessy*, much more demotic in style and dissemination,¹⁴ that fictionalizes history more directly: most of its characters are historical, but their actions, as in a historical novel, are rewritten to produce a version of events that is close enough to fact to be credible but that reaches its final outcome (here, the Tudor takeover) by imaginative means.

The background to the late fifteenth-century struggle for the English throne went back almost a century, and demonstrated all the problems consequent on the equation of the rightful monarch with the true heir as defined by the system of primogeniture. The trouble had started in 1399 when Henry Bolingbroke deposed Richard II; both were grandsons of Edward III, Richard through his eldest son, the Black Prince, Bolingbroke through the third son, John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster. Since Richard was so evidently the true king in linear terms, this necessitated the fiction that Richard had not been deposed, but rather had freely resigned the crown to Bolingbroke as his designated heir, somewhat as Edward the Confessor had designated William the Conqueror. Bolingbroke's reign was, however, haunted by stories that Richard was still alive, that he was a king in waiting, like the dispossessed heir of romance, for the moment of his return.¹⁵ In addition, and less spectrally, Bolingbroke was beset by the descendants of Edward's second son, whose claims he

¹⁴ It now survives in two manuscripts, one among the papers of John Stowe in London, British Library, Harley MS 367, and also in the collection of popular literature assembled in the Percy Folio Manuscript. It is printed as *The Most Pleasant Song of Lady Bessy*, ed. J.O. Halliwell, Percy Society 20 (1847), and in *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript: Ballads and Romances*, ed. John W. Hales and Frederick J. Furnivall (London, 1868), 3.319–63.

¹⁵ On these issues see in particular Paul Strohm, *England's Empty Throne: Usurpation and Textual Legitimation, 1399–1422* (New Haven and London, 1998).

had simply overridden – and done so all the more easily since the grandchild initially in question was female. The importance of the equation of rightfulness with the rules of primogeniture necessitated the further fiction, accepted by Parliament as underlying his claim, that he was ‘desendit *be right lyne* of the Blode comyng fro the gude lorde Kyng Henry therde’, on the grounds that Edmund Crouchback, earl of Lancaster and younger brother of Edward I, was in fact the elder son of Henry III, and so carried a superior right to the throne. Bolingbroke accordingly claimed the crown not by virtue of his descent from Edward III, but through his mother, Blanche of Lancaster.¹⁶ Perhaps not surprisingly in view of its implausibility, this rewriting of history proved no deterrent to the displaced descendants of the senior line from Edward III. It was their claims that haunted the whole Lancastrian dynasty and finally overturned it, even though it took five generations of Yorkists before they succeeded; for a claim based on primogeniture never goes away so long as the line continues. The Yorkists could and did represent themselves as the equivalent of Haveloks, true heirs emerging from the shadows to claim the throne that was rightfully theirs. While a strong man held the crown, rival claimants stood little chance, as the Lancastrian Henry V disposed of the earl of Cambridge, and as the Yorkist Edward IV could keep the last Lancastrian claimants at bay; but Edward died when his sons were still children, and the linear system promptly broke down. There followed two successful usurpations by men who had no valid claims from primogeniture; and a third, unsuccessful, attempt by a pretender who did make such a claim, but who failed to impress it on history.

The first usurpation was Richard duke of Gloucester’s seizure of the throne from the young heirs of Edward IV. He justified his action by claiming that they were illegitimate, on the grounds that an earlier contract of marriage entered into by Edward rendered his marriage to their mother bigamous or adulterous, or indeed both; but that still left the child of an intervening brother, the young earl of Warwick, surviving, just as Bolingbroke had ignored the line intervening between the Black Prince and John of Gaunt. In the late fifteenth-century case, the boy in question may well have been feeble-minded; but in genealogical terms, that made no difference to the linear strength of his claim. Richard might pragmatically be the man best equipped to rule, but in no way was he the rightful heir. The disappearance of the princes from the Tower, whatever in fact happened to them, did not help; for it was all too familiar as an act of a usurping tyrant or a wicked uncle, like the ones in the Havelok story, to try to kill the child heir. Whether or not Richard was actually guilty counted for nothing beside the fact that he was believed to be guilty.

The next usurpation followed from the first both chronologically and logically: Richard’s failure to impress his legitimacy on his subjects made Henry Tudor’s takeover all too easy. Henry had an even less plausible claim than Richard: his accession indeed marked the biggest disruption to the linear descent of the crown since the Norman conquest. He too was descended from John of Gaunt, founder of the Lancastrian line, but illegitimately, and even though the duke had eventually married their mother, the Beauforts had been explicitly excluded by Act of

Parliament from any claim to the throne. Richard, however, was killed in battle against him at Bosworth, and Henry had Parliament declare him king by virtue of the indisputable fact that he occupied the throne; and he proceeded to liquidate every possible rival claimant over the next few years, the feeble-minded earl of Warwick among them. It was all the more necessary, therefore, for Henry to mythologize his seizure of throne on the romance model, to claim a status as the divinely identified true heir. How well he succeeded can be measured by the fact that we never describe him as a usurper: we still buy into the Tudor myth of rightful kingship.

It was not, however, an easy myth to create. There were indeed Welsh prophecies ascribed to Merlin of the advent of a ‘son of prophecy’, which Henry could apply to himself; and prophecy, the foreseeing of the present in the past, was a way of guaranteeing that what was happening in the present was right, was divinely foreordained. Writing the *Faerie Queene* a century later, Edmund Spenser similarly found Merlin useful for prophesying just such a providential advent of the Tudors.¹⁷ Henry also claimed that God had made His own views clear, not by a king-mark, but through trial by battle on Bosworth Field. He made some claim to being in the line of descent from Arthur, though he did not press that too hard, as it lacked plausibility as grounds for asserting a contemporary right to the English throne even in the age of Sir Thomas Malory;¹⁸ he famously called his eldest son Arthur, but the ploy died with the child. In addition, Henry’s mother, Lady Margaret Beaufort (who, if his linear claim had anything in it, should herself have been the one to be occupying the throne), commissioned a translation of a romance from Caxton that offered a story analogous to Henry’s. She was renowned for her piety, and this was the only secular work in which she ever showed any interest. *Blanchardyn and Eglantine* describes how a young prince leaves home to test himself in chivalry; in his absence, his father is overthrown by pagan enemies, and he himself in due course returns to claim his own title and to marry a neighbouring heiress. The story offers a series of parallels to the overthrow of Henry VI, Henry Tudor’s sojourning on the continent to keep himself safe from any Yorkist attempts to harm him, and his return from over the sea (a distinctly English motif, as Rosalind Field has pointed out) to recover his throne and to marry the heiress to the Yorkist line, Elizabeth of York, Edward IV’s eldest daughter and, since the presumed death of her younger brothers, his linear heir.¹⁹ *Blanchardyn and Eglantine* thus provided the romance patterning that the Tudor takeover so singularly lacked. It suggests that what happened was not usurpation but the return of the rightful heir, and so offered a way to assimilate the deeply disturbing historical and genealogical upsets of the Tudor accession as right and proper.

Blanchardyn was not the most obvious, nor at first glance the most appropriate, choice of romance for Lady Margaret to have selected for translation. She might

¹⁷ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A.C. Hamilton, 2nd edn (Harlow, 2001), III.iii.48. In II.x.75, he invents an elfin genealogy for the Tudors, so bypassing the problematic nature of their lineal claim.

¹⁸ See Sydney Anglo, ‘The *British History* in Early Tudor Propaganda’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 44 (1961), 17–48, and his revisions to those views in his *Images of Early Tudor Kingship* (London, 1992), pp. 40–60. Direct descent from Arthur was of course impossible, as he died without legitimate issue.

¹⁹ Rosalind Field, ‘The King over the Water: Exile and Return Revisited’, in *Cultural Encounters in the Romance of Medieval England*, ed. Corinne Saunders (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 41–53.

¹⁶ John Ashdown Hill, ‘The Lancastrian Claim to the Throne’, in *Tant d’Uprises – So Many Undertakings: Essays in Honour of Anne Sutton*, ed. Livia Visser-Fuchs, *The Ricardian* 13 (2003), 27–38; quotation from p. 30 (my italics), citing *Rota Parliamentorum* (1832), 3.422–23.

more logically have chosen the mid-fifteenth-century French *Ohyner of Castyle* (which is also discussed elsewhere in this volume by Elizabeth Williams), for this romance already fortuitously contained a wicked duke of Gloucester who usurped the throne of England. He is overcome in battle and killed by a stronger claimant named Arthur, whose claim derives from his wife's status as the true heiress; and so the rightful line is restored. *Ohyner* does, however, have one decisive drawback, evident even in that short plot summary: it makes it very clear that the husband's claim of kingship lies solely in his wife. That was a step too far for Henry Tudor. He claimed the throne in his own right, not in that of Elizabeth of York; and he was careful to establish his own hold on the crown before he married her, so that there could be no question that his kingship was in any way dependent on her. It is perhaps, therefore, not surprising that *Ohyner of Castyle* was translated into English only after his death, in the reign of his son Henry VIII, who inherited the claims of both his mother and his father to the English throne.²⁰ At first glance, *Ohyner of Castyle* might seem like the perfect example of romance that comes true; but for all its coincidences with history, it was not a model that Henry VII himself could have tolerated.

That did not mean, however, that there was no contemporary awareness of the possibility that both Henry and Lady Margaret rejected, that the crown rightly descended through the Yorkist line as embodied in Elizabeth. Her own historical story was given a romance treatment some time in the next few decades, to bring it into line with that social change mentioned earlier in this paper: the location of political and erotic patronage not just in the passive consent of heiress, but in her own active personal choice. *Lady Bessy* turns the story of Elizabeth of York, the Lady Bessy of the title, into a romance of the dispossessed heiress who herself instigates the wooing of the man she loves.

It might sound as if the true heir and the true heiress should have analogous biographies, but in fact there are interesting differences between them. Typically, the true heir is lost from sight: he becomes a foundling, a fair unknown, who may himself not know his true identity, and others certainly do not. He is brought up away from the court, out in the world at large. A woman, by contrast, is oppressed or imprisoned rather than lost. She typically remains within the land that constitutes her inheritance, as if she were a metonym for the territories she owns. The process of restoring her to her rightful position and power is a matter of rescuing her from a tyrannical father who forbids her choice of marriage partner, or from rival suitors of a highly undesirable sort (such as pagans), or from a usurper. Thus Havelok's wife, Goldeburh, the heiress to England, is never 'lost' in the same sense as he is. He is brought up as a fair unknown in an alien country; she remains under her guardian uncle's control. She does not need to be found, but to be rescued and married to the *right* man. Goldeburh is an unusual romance heroine in that her active choice of husband comes after her forced marriage. Most heroines make their own choice much more positively, as do Lavine in the *Eneas*, Rimenhild in *Horn*, Josiane in *Bevis of Hamtoun*, or the eponymous Melusine. Willed choice of this kind is especially common in genealogical romances, with their concern with the founding of a family, as if the future of a dynasty must lie in the active choice of the founding mother

²⁰ The nearest thing to a modern edition is by Gail Orgelinger, *The Hystorye of Ohyner of Castyle* (New York and London, 1988).

(Maddox's 'mega-mother') more than the founding father; and *Lady Bessy* accordingly rewrites history to fit.

The poem opens when Richard III is already on the throne. Bessy, who is consistently presented as the true heiress to her father, herself decides to woo the exiled Henry Tudor, whom she loves despite never having met him; and she sends messengers and money to bring him back over the sea. She possesses a book of prophecy foretelling that she will be queen, and there is no mention of any Tudor claim to the throne at all; Henry is merely the means to her own declared end. Bessy is accordingly present at the battle of Bosworth, as a kind of spirit of rightful victory, and she marries Henry on the field of battle. This gives a decisively Yorkist spin to the Tudor takeover – indeed it turns the Tudor myth into a Yorkist myth. Here, the Plantagenet princess legitimizes the Tudor gentleman, as if he were a squire of low degree winning the hand of a superior lady; which is perhaps precisely why Henry in fact made so sure that he established himself on the throne before he did marry her. There is no evidence whatsoever as to what the historical Elizabeth thought about the marriage, whether she was enthusiastic or reluctant, though she certainly had no choice in the matter. She is unlikely to have objected to becoming queen, especially in view of what the alternatives would have been: all the evidence we have indicates that Henry was much more ruthless than Richard III.

A romance should end at that point, with the 'true' heir restored to the throne; that was how Henry and his mother and the Yorkist author of *Lady Bessy* aimed to structure their propaganda. Another claimant, however, soon made his appearance on the field of history, and this one had a still more compelling claim to a biography modelled on romance. There is something of the Havelok about him, and also something of a more up-to-date romance hero, the Valentine of *Valentine and Orson*, for Valentine becomes a foundling in consequence of a charge of adultery brought against his mother, just as this new pretender has lost his status as a result of a comparable charge. Valentine has no idea who he is; he too, however, bears 'a crosse upon [his] shoulder, the whiche is also yelowe as the fyne golde', a mark that makes him suspect that there is more to his lineage than he knows and that impels him to seek his true parentage; and in due course he recovers his status as heir to the emperor of Greece.²¹ His real-life counterpart was the young man we know as Perkin Warbeck; but to most of the crowned heads of late fifteenth-century Europe, he was Richard of England, a name he was accorded by virtue of his claim to be Richard duke of York, the second son of Edward IV and the younger of the princes in Tower.²² He had, he said, been spared (like Havelok) by the man who had been

²¹ *Valentine and Orson*, ed. Arthur Dickson, EETS OS 204 (1937), quotation from p. 85; the English translation was made by Henry Watson. Its first edition dates from some time in the first decade of the sixteenth century – interestingly, after the threat represented by Warbeck had been eliminated (both he and the earl of Warwick were executed in 1499); but it may date from as late as 1510, by which time any coincidence between the stories would have ceased to resonate.

²² For a double biography of Warbeck/Richard, see Ann Wroe, *Perkin: A Story of Deception* (London, 2003). Warbeck did declare himself to be an impostor on the scaffold, a moment when it would be very unlikely indeed that he would not tell the truth; but by that time he had an infant son, and therefore also a strong motive to try to protect the child from the consequences of royal birth. Nothing further is known about the child, or the circumstances of its death.

ordered to murder him; he had then (like Havelok) escaped over the sea; and he now came back from the dead, returned to claim his throne. He further declared that he bore marks on his body that proved his identity – in effect, king-marks, like Havelok's and Valentine's, though the reference is presumably to distinctive birthmarks (also widespread in romance: Cymbeline's lost eldest son and heir is identified by just such a birthmark).²³ He furthermore carried himself with a natural grace and authority such as all those other fair unknowns had possessed who turned out to be indeed the heirs to great fathers. His supposed aunt, Margaret of Burgundy, seems to have believed he was genuine, as did Charles VIII of France. James IV of Scotland gave him a close kinswoman as his wife; and Margaret's son, the emperor Maximilian I, recognized him as Richard IV. If he were indeed the son of Flemish parents, as Henry VII claimed, it was odd that he spoke English perfectly, with no accent; and it was odd too that after he had captured him, Henry absolutely refused to have him brought face to face with those supposed parents. Was he afraid that they might confess that they were not his true parents, just as Grim was not Havelok's father, nor Sir Ector Arthur's? Francis Bacon, writing his history of Henry VII a century later, confessed himself baffled as to just what the truth of the matter was.²⁴ John Ford, in his play with the double-edged title *The Chronicle Historie of Perkin Warbeck: A Strange Truth*, has Henry (of course) insist that Perkin is no more than that, but neither Warbeck nor the play offers support for that insistence: it leaves the question of his real identity, the 'truth', unresolved and 'strange', though the play's sympathies clearly lie with the pretender.²⁵ That we speak of him now as Perkin Warbeck simply echoes the verdict of history. If he had succeeded – if, when he invaded England with a pitifully small force, the people had risen in his support – then we too would know him as Richard IV. Henry Tudor would be no more than a brief interlude in the royal line of the Plantagenets, an adventurer who had seized the throne and forced the heiress into marriage, only for the foundling prince who had escaped death to return and claim his crown, to assert his own right above his sister's; for if Henry is cast as the wrongful king, then the shape of his life becomes not romance wish-fulfilment, but nightmare.

The point at which we traditionally mark the end of the Middle Ages, when the dynasty of the Plantagenets was replaced by the Tudors, thus offered itself as four different romance plots: as a story of the fulfilment of supernatural prophecies; as a story of the dispossessed heir, Henry Tudor; as a story of the dispossessed heiress, Elizabeth of York; and very nearly, as a story of the true heir spared as an infant from murder by his wicked uncle, and who returns as a fair unknown to claim the throne that is rightfully his – though we hear of Richard of England now only as Warbeck, a mere impostor on the edge of more significant political events. The only

²³ *Cymbeline*, 5.6.365–70, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford, 1986). Warbeck is unlikely to have had *Havelok* itself in mind, as the romance is not known to have been copied after c. 1400 (Smithers, p. xv) and the chronicle versions omit the king-mark; he could well have known the French *Valentin*, but that itself witnesses to the continuing currency of the motif. The return of an exiled hero from over the sea was also widespread: e.g. in *Blanchardyn*, or in the prose reworking of the Horn romance entitled *Ponthus and Sidoine*.

²⁴ Francis Bacon, *History of the Reign of King Henry VII*, ed. Brian Vickers (Cambridge, 1998), p. 96.

²⁵ In *John Ford: Three Plays*, ed. Keith Sturgess (Harmondsworth, 1970).

figure of all these ambitious climbers whose story comprehensively resists any such romance shaping is Richard III, the one among them most demonized by history; for history, as we know it, is romance written by the victors.