Desiring Discord: Political Conflict in Medieval Romance

by

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements …………………………………………………………………………. ii

Abstract ……………………………………………………………………………………. iv

Chapter 1 - Introduction …………………………………………………………………… 1

Chapter 2 - Decomposing Heirarchy in *The Squyr of Low Degree* ……………………………. 26

Chapter 3 - Stewarding Treason: The Political Instability of *Amis and Amiloun* ……………… 58

Chapter 4 - Testing "Treweth": Systems of Dissent in *King Horn* and *The Erle of Tolous* …. 92

Chapter 5 - Sir Kay as Gatekeeper to *Le Morte DArthur* ……………………………………. 135

Bibliography ……………………………………………………………………………….. 183

Abstract

Desiring Discord: Political Conflict in Medieval Romance contends that medieval romance frequently creates and dwells on discord and political tensions left unresolved by the narrator. Accusations of treason in particular become a critical aspect of romance adventures, where the nature of the traitor's crime or transgression is ambiguously defined at best, but is often central to the hero's success. The steward frequently embodies this dissent and treason, even as he is silenced and vilified by the protagonist, text, and scholarship. This project clarifies why the figure of the royal steward repeatedly stands at the center of such treason. Why, for example, does the unnamed (and loyal) steward in *Amis and Amiloun* become the "fals traytour" blamed for Amis's judicial battle or Amiloun's leprosy when it is the heroes themselves who commit crimes against the duke? Through my analyses of *Amis and Amiloun*, as well as *King Horn*, The *Squyre of Low Degree*, *The Erle of Tolous*, and *Le Morte D'Arthur,* I argue that the treasonous stewards open up avenues to engage in political dissent and alternative methods of political activism—where the political intrigue of the medieval court can be functional and productive of good governance rather than obstructionist. These narratives' political multiplicity—diversifying rather than preventing treason—raises questions about the value of internal conflict and the boundaries of criminality. Tensions over how to define and set boundaries around the reach of the crown in these romances persists from 1200 to the early sixteenth century, arguing that the steward's literary vilificafrtion exceeds any particular historical anxieties.

The steward Maradose calls attention to the diverse and competive political environment in *The Squire of Low Degree*, where his failed support of the duke's law results in the princess's rejection of the court and the narrative's turn away from the hero. The steward is both "traytour" and faithful vassal, both "trewe" and "fals," and both lover and villain. He unveils the multiple value systems competing within the romance court. *Amis and Amiloun* divorces treason from its political definition by condemning the steward as traitor while the text's characters support his integrity. Not only is the court divided, but the very means of understanding and unifying it are unstable. The traitor turned steward turned emperor in *The Erle of Tolous* expands an unstable court structure to treat treason as a productive and beneficial response to the emperor's misrule. The political "ryght" championed by the treasonous Erle Barnard suggests that readers' sympathy may extend as much to the court's traitors as to the hero. The characters' and narrators' dissonant conceptions of justice suggest that effective leadership relies on a system of power rather than an individual—a system that requires and thrives off the competing voices of political and social actors. The final chapter demonstrates that Malory's steward Kay acts as gatekeeper to Arthur's court. Kay's stewardship opposes sovereign desire, statutory laws, as well as common laws and highlights the inconsistency among various affinities' interpretive approach to power. His rude and abrasive opposition to many Round Table knights emphasizes their multiple and competing identities—but in doing so he also foregrounds diversity as a unifying factor. He allows the conflict between identities and approaches to inspire negotiation and solidarity to an overarching unity.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In many medieval romances the royal steward negotiates for or obstructs the hero's amorous or political success. In *Sir Orfeo* the steward protects Orfeo's throne during his exile while *Amis and Amiloun*'s and *Bevis of Hamptoun*'s stewards block the heroes' amorous conquest—Amiloun undergoes moral and physical hardship while Bevis earns the princess's love thanks to the steward's jealousy. In these, and many other medieval romances, the royal steward serves as a liminal figure who personifies loyalty or treason but receives little narrative or critical notice.[1] Despite his presence across the genre and his centrality to the progression of many romance plots, scholarship marginalizes and dismisses the figure as the stock "evil steward," quickly dismissed or killed, as K.S. Whetter has noted.[2] Even as the romances (and critics) dismiss him as "fals traitor" or stock villain, the steward's dissent within his romance

[1] Very little scholarship pays attention to the steward. Exceptions are Catherine Kelly's discussion of marginalized historical stewardship, Hazell's assertion of literary stewards serving as catalysts, and K.S. Whetter's focus on Malory's Sir Kay. Catherine Kelly, "The Noble Steward and Late-Feudal Lordship," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 49.2 (Spring, 1986): 133-148; Dinah Hazell, "'Trewe Man' or 'Wicke Traitour': The Steward in Late Middle English Literature," *Medieval Forum* 6 (2007); K.S. Whetter, "Reassessing Kay and the Romance Seneschal," *Bibliographical Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society* 51 (1999): 343-63.

[2] The trope emerges repeatedly in the genre, appearing in *Amis and Amiloun*, *Sir Degrevant*, *Sir Cleges*, *Havelok the Dane*, and *Guy of Warwick* (to name a few), and usually reveals the steward as a potentially dangerous figure opposed to the protagonist's success. Whetter has commented briefly on the repeated trope of villainous stewards as a standard feature of romance, stating "that evil seneschals are taken to be one of the stock features of medieval literature. […] *wicked stewards* could easily be moved from one romance to another without causing any disturbance in the narrative" ("Reassessing Kay," 344). Harold J. Herman argues for the critical importance of Malory's Kay, and traces his literary heritage in multiple sources, but notes his unique status: "Sir Kay, Seneschal of King Arthur's Court," *Arthurian Interpretations* 4.1 (Fall 1989): 1-31.

court frequently functions in support of sovereign directive, legal precedent, or common laws. Though the steward is regularly dismissed, my analysis takes the figure seriously, asking why the steward must be 'fals' for the hero to succeed. What does his vilification say about the political system he seeks alternately to protect or overthrow? I argue that the steward's simultaneous centrality and vilified irrelevance reveals the conflicted and sometimes ambiguous political order imagined by the text. This project argues that the steward makes visible the multiple dissenting opinions within the court as he mediates between and renegotiates the constantly shifting conditions offered by the romance. When we look at the steward, we see romance treating betrayal, treason, and dissent as questions for the reader to ponder—questions that the works do not resolve.

The steward's supposed "treason" not only activates the hero's adventure, his complaint, following legal and social guidelines, raises issues of justice, legitimacy, or loyalty—and his vilification critiques the political climate that would allow favoritism, corruption or mis-rule to overlook justice. The steward "participate[s] in the aspect of social commentary in romances related to complaint and protest literature" in response to and ideologically related to "actual events," as both Hazell and Stephen Knight show.[3] Even if the traitors are marginalized or quickly killed in order to achieve this 'harmony,' their simultaneously legal and treasonous desires complicate the narrative. I argue that the stewards' defense of particular court hierarchy or royal precedent, in the face of the hero's and narrative's censure, foregrounds competing value

[3] Stephen Knight asserts that romance "filled the role of the imaginary" for a "complex audience," referring to the Althusserian concept of "culture as an 'imaginary' in which people produce for themselves an ideological relationship with actual events": "The Social Function of the Middle English Romances," 99. The community imagined by romance is therefore both distinctly fantastical *and* engaged with "actual events" of the English polity, just as the readership of those texts actively shared in the creation of an "imagined" community in conversation with romance. Dinah Hazell argues the stewards of various tales trouble the "bold" heroes reign, serving as catalyst for him to prove his chivalry: "'Trewe Man' or 'Wicke Traitour,'" 1. Whetter refers to the "wicked steward" as mirroring or contrasting heroic qualities: "Reassessing Kay and the Romance Seneschal," 344.

structures within the court and among political actors. By highlighting (and negotiating between) the competing socio-political values, stewards model the ways that dissent may productively impact the court. They show us that power functions as a dispersed or even unstable system with multiple competing actors and concepts of correct legal or social action. The narratives' political multiplicity—diversifying rather than preventing treason—raises questions about the potential value of internal conflict and about the impact of criminality. Is treason necessarily dangerous? Can political conflict, especially between individual figures, be productive? By maintaining conflicts, rather than criminalizing or sanctioning any, the stewards complicate the binary of legal/illegal action.

Some scholarship has looked to the traitor or steward as a direct counter to the hero, whose narrative purpose is to force the hero to improve (frequently by recognizing their deficiency, but sometimes simply setting them on the path of adventure). David Slater, for example, sees the "treacherous steward" as a common romance traitor whose "dishonesty" and "active" cunning highlights the hero's "passiv[ity]."[4] The traitor serves as a mirror, revealing "certain weaknesses in the hero," even as he represents the "reprehensible" qualities that the hero must destroy.[5] This dissertation considers those traitors whose actions fail to manifest as "abhorrent qualities," as in *Amis and Amiloun* or *The Squyr of Low Degree*, where the stewards act according to their duty or the express command of their sovereign lord. The "traitor" steward can, in fact, manifest courtly and judicial virtues. Even those stewards who act "un-gently" or treasonously, as *King Horn*'s Fikenhild or Malory's Kay, still conform to legal codes or

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[4] Slater borrows Jung's philosophy of the mind to explain the traitor, who he argues "manifests the negative values of the [genre]"; in the bond between the hero and traitor, or between the romance's moral urges and those abhorrent to society, Slater applies Jung's concept of the "shadow figure"—where one's conscience projects "those qualities which it finds most adherent in itself upon another being"; *The Hero-Traitor Relationship in the English Metrical Romances* (Ph.D. diss., University of New Mexico, 1975), 25.
[5] Slater, *The Hero-Traitor Relationship*, 24.

ambiguous precedent. While David Slater and Neil Cartlidge both aptly note the "complementary" nature of the hero-traitor connection, their relationship does not always simply highlight a weakness that the hero may then repair. Stewards often reveal disjunctions between competing value systems within a court. The "shadow figure" (or treasonous steward) of Slater's rhetoric mediates between heroic and treasonous values, only arriving at heroism by the incorporation of the active qualities of the traitor with the weak hero—in other words the traitor in fact acts as a gatekeeper to heroic status.[6]

While various critics have discussed the historical king and court's decreased control over the language governing "the commonweal," these romance stewards show us that the court's political identities are heterogeneous and in flux.[7] The recurring conceptual elasticity of treason in romance suggests transhistorical anxieties. The "commonweal" becomes the central focus in charges of treason, where a rebel's "subversion of…the comen wele" is castigated more than the intended subversion of the crown, but the demarcation between these categories is not always clear, just as control over what or who defines that "commonweal" is similarly unstable. Both the crown and commons sought to control and define "the community of the said realm," and the struggle fostered multiple sites of linguistic power coexisting: the protagonist, king, parliament, commons, and even villain all exercise authority and exert influence. As Roger Virgoe demonstrates, during the reign of Richard II and after, "not only did actual power (in the sense of military power and economic might) fluctuate and thus become the object of

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[6] More than simply a mirror, the traitor serves as impetus for the hero to improve and develop into the hero he becomes. Slater, *The Hero-Traitor Relationship*, 25.

[7] During the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the "crown" became an "unmoored" floating signifier for the socio-political community while the "king" as a specific human political actor no longer controlled that body—as Paul Strohm and Kantorowicz famously demonstrate. Kantorowicz's seminal work on "the King's Two Bodies" discusses the duality (or separation) between the king's "body natural" and the immortal body of the sovereign "body politic." Megan Leitch, *Romancing Treason: The Literature of the Wars of the Roses* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 30.

negotiation, but the prestige of the English crown and the terms used to define that crown were also in flux."[8] Addressing a later era, Megan Leitch asserts that "the conceptual horizontality, or at least mutuality, of the idea of the commonweal was deployed to wrest control over discourses of treason from the king." This produces, according to Leitch, a "multi-directional" and insecure conceptualization of the English commonweal.[9] Leitch persuasively elucidates the ambiguous and manifold approaches to and definitions of treason and of royal authority in both political and literary discourses. The importance of a voice for the commons was increasingly stressed as the court emphasized the need for good counsel—and the romance stewards' dissenting voice of justice emphasize the ways good counsel can masquerade as treason. I engage with Leitch's study of the fluidity of treason in romance and with the resulting instability of governance, while enlarging the contexts to show how the steward exposes the conflicting values systems within the court.[10] The steward's contentious position within the court epitomizes the general instability of the court's function within a "multi-directional" community.

This multi-directionality within sovereign and court relations is compounded by similarly competing locations of judicial authority, as Christine Chism shows. Legal centralization towards institutional kingship resulted in "conflicting sources of authority to resolve legal conflicts."[11] The steward sits at the intersection of these conflicts, as a central interpreter and enforcer of the king's justice. The royal steward had "special jurisdiction" over

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[8] Virgoe, "The Death of William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 47.2 (1964-5); 499. Lynn Stanley articulates the "negotiation and fluctuation" in the language used to define or script sovereignty and the scope of "power"; *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 1.

[9] Leitch, *Romancing Treason*, 31. Leitch argues that "the commonweal was used to reconfigure the nature of authority and governance, but accordingly, often added to the complexities and uncertainties of community and loyalty for landowners and citizens alike"; 33.

[10] I engage significantly with Leitch not only because she considers discourses of treason at length, but also because she is one of the few scholars to account for the many *literary* texts which engage with contemporary concerns and representations of treason.

[11] Chism, "Robin Hood: Thinking Globally, Acting Locally," 12-13.

the "court of the verge," King's Bench, or "Marshalsea court"—which governed a range of complaints, such as any "breach of the peace" or threats to "the royal dignity"—which gave the steward judicial power even as his affective bond with the sovereign complicated judicial boundaries.[12] The steward's judicial power, however, is complicated, according Simon Walker, by the late medieval period's increasing sensitivity to perceived social lawlessness—witnessed by contemporary complaints that "the peace of the land was not kept as it ought and as it used to be."[13] This belief, that the king's law and social order were increasingly under threat or misused, led to a historical increase in demands for legal intercession and judicial oversight. As a result, a complicated framework of courts and justice grew, beginning with the "justices in eyre" and eventually evolving to also include county courts, hundred courts, assize justices, and ultimately the "keepers of the peace."[14]

The steward's role at the center of the king's bench, only one aspect of the network of legal administration, focuses the tension and conflicts which arose as local and royal authority

[12] W.R. Jones studies the ambiguous distinction between the court of the verge and the *Curia Regis*, concluding that traditionally any "domestic" matters or "breaches to the king's peace" or the "royal dignity" within twelve miles of the king's residence counted as a matter for the court of the steward ("Court of the Verge: The Jurisdiction of the Steward and the Marshal of the Household in Later Medieval England," *Journal of British Studies* 10.1 (Nov 1970): 1-29, quote 2). Even after the stewardship was stripped of official political powers, his position still exercised significant judicial powers within the king's court (meaning that occasionally there is very little to distinguish between his legal authority and political weight). Historically, stewardship of the king and his court was "characterized by its close connection with the king…and its complete subjection to the royal will"; Jones, "Court of the Verge," 2. Thus, the steward held legal authority while also enjoying an affective bond with the king.

[13] Walker, quoting D.W. Sutherland's *The Eyre of Northamptonshire, 1329-30* (5), asserts that there was a "growing body of opinion disturbed by the apparent growth in lawlessness that contemporaries dated back to the later years of Edward I's reign" (93). Complaints against the decline of order or peace "became an increasingly frequent feature of political discourse in later medieval England, and successive kings sought to respond to it by a variety of more interventionist expedients" ("Order and Law" eds. Rosmary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod, *A Social History of England 1200-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 91-112, quote 93).

[14] Walker shows that "the court" (covering its various justices and benches, but especially the local justices) continued to expand into the fifteenth century: "Order and Law," 94. The "justices in eyre" traveled around the kingdom at irregular intervals to punish criminals, enforce royal and fiscal law, and settle private disputes. The "office of the coroner" saw regular pleas between eyres, "county courts" met every month under the local sheriff, "hundred courts" met every three weeks for minor civil litigation, "assize justices" who saw criminal pleas systematizes into a series of county circuits, and the "kings bench" (which was disassociated with the person of the king, even as it implied the interest if not the presence of the king). See Walker, "Order and Law," 92.

(or various circuit courts and justices) intersected.[15] The "overlapping structure of local, county, and central courts," with an "evolving pattern of supervision and intervention in the shires," resulted in some judicial confusion. [16] This is reflected in literature, such as the tale of *Gamelyn*, where the competing local and regional legal systems reveal "the violence and corruption rampant at every level of judicial government."[17] How law was enforced was therefore dependent on which court heard the case, what authority it held, and which justices oversaw it. *Gamelyn*'s corrupt Sherriff, who bribes jurors while acting as the local assize justice, highlights the ways the justice system may incorporate criminality.

In the romances of this study, the steward may reflect the perceived "rampant" corruption within English judicial structures, but he is marginalized—he receives very brief (if any) direct discourse and is almost no narrative space. He is the "fals" or "wicked" traitor who sparks the protagonist's adventure. His frequent vilification for his role in catalyzing judicial action, reveals that his legal authority (or ability to determine what warrants legal action) is critical to the poets. Unlike the historical steward—who functions as a court official and judge—the romance stewards are rarely defined or referred to by their judicial role. Instead, the narration of their legal roles takes on affective dimensions as they appeal to a personal connection with the

[15] As the need for justice increased (with increasing urban and commercial populations), in addition to the popular belief of increasing lawlessness, private or independent courts developed. For those outside urban centers, their legal experience was shaped by the "workings of the court of the manor"—a private institution "usually presided over by the steward of the lord of the manor, which had as its principal purpose the protection of seignorial interests." The steward, then, controlled how many areas experienced justice. For details, see Walker, "Order and Law," 97.
[16] Trevor Dean, *Crime in Medieval Europe 1200-1550* (London: Longman, 2001), 7. Dean argues that English criminal law and procedure developed through judges and custom (common law).
[17] Jean E. Jost asserts that "great violence between local and monarchical authority" persisted (in the tale of *Gamelyn* in particular) partially as a result of this common law judicial structure: "Retribution in *Gamelyn*: A Case of the Courts," eds. Albrecht Classen and Connie Scarborough, *Crime and Punishment in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Mental-Historical Investigations of Basic Human Problems and Social Responses* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012):175-88, quote 175. Jost considers the evolution of English judicial system, which relied on juries, local and regional justices, and the ordeal or inquisitorial methods. She posits that the "overlapping [court] structure" resulted in corruption and confusion as to whose authority controlled what, and how that how that authority was acquired. "Retribution in *Gamelyn*," 176.

sovereign. The steward's close personal "connection with the king and his *familia* and complete subjection to the royal will" distinguishes him from other figures—which suggests that romance texts' frequent attention on the steward figure derives from this dual judicial and affective role.[18]

The repeated appearance of the steward as a figure of decried criminality throughout these romances—where his treason is frequently cast as a problem of knowledge (who controls access to it, and how it is used legally)—scripts his disfavor as both an affective and judicial problem. How the law is defined, who interprets it, and what role it has within the court, seems both unstable and contentious. Tensions over how to define and set boundaries around the reach of the crown in these romances persists from 1150 to the early sixteenth century, arguing that the steward's literary vilification exceeds any particular historical anxieties. The steward's position as a liminal courtier with unique legal and affective authority becomes significant—but his marginality and namelessness also direct the textual gaze onto the legal and court structures and value systems highlighted by that figure. These transhistorical stewards manifest an intersection between judicial and personal authority.

The royal steward demonstrates both the competitive courtly network and the elasticity of treason. The steward not only had the potential to control the royal administration, but also influenced what was defined and charged as treasonous. The steward's court, for much of the

[18] Jones, "The Court of the Verge," 2. The steward's access to power and royal favor may continually rouse communal unease, but the recurring instances of historical royal favorites gaining patronage and sparking court conflict trouble the unique affection of or for the steward. Edward II's Gaveston or Despenser and Richard II's De Vere or Hugh Depenser are notable examples of royal favor incurring strong court opposition, opposition which the steward historically did not receive. For historicist arguments, see Peter Cross, "An Age of Deferenace," eds. Rosmary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod, *A Social History of England 1200-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 31-73. Curtis Perry articulates the dangers of unequal patronage, which were frequently framed as "sodomical," but "tell us more about ongoing concern with the meaning and function of royal favor and the politics of access than about the sexual mores" of the king: "The Politics of Access and Representations of the Sodomite King in Early Modern England," *Renaissance Quarterly* 53.4 (2000): 1054-1083, quote 1056. Don-John Dugas demonstrates the insecurity of such legal language as "the legality of conducting a trial for treason in Parliament remained very much in doubt": "The Legitimization of Royal Power in Chaucer's 'Man of Law's Tale'," *Modern Philology* 95.1 (1997): 27-43, quote 41.

thirteenth through seventeenth centuries, frequently held "judicial competence" and oversaw inquests of treason more commonly under the domain of the "common law courts," such as the partisan nobles of Richard II, which contemporaries saw as an "encroachment" and "threat" to justice.[19] The jurisdictional role of the historical steward points towards a more general ambiguity of jurisdictional authority as partisan or dispersed.

Richard Firth Green notes the "wide range of meanings" for treason and the "potential ambiguity" and anxiety such changes in meanings had for contemporaries.[20] For example, legal codification of treason as a hierarchical offense competed with the "traditional" definition as a "breach of mutual agreement" or a threat to "friends" and the "bond of vassalage."[21] Breaking faith, or even "imagining a breach" with the king came under the definition of "treason," and was punishable by death. However, even as the political community sought to stabilize how the law was coded and who controlled it, the locus of "institutional" power was continually shifting. Strohm demonstrates the manipulation of political discourse for partisan purposes as various political parties used "treason" to retroactively redefine legitimacy, but in so doing allowed the same propaganda tactics to be used by other political actors.[22] Treason, legitimacy, and the

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[19] Jones, "The Court of the Verge," 6.
[20] Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 207. The case of Gerberg in 1347, for example, which Green summarizes as a possible impetus for the parliamentary petition of 1352 to define treason's parameters—as a crime against the state, "institution of kingship," or stability of the sovereign himself—shows the conflict between transgressions "generally recognized as treasonable" and those codified as offenses against the law. Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, 208. The Statutes clarified and "limited the relevant crimes, articulating definitions for both high and petty treason." The laws for charging and punishing treason were therefore set down and widely accepted, stipulating "compassing or imagining the death of the king" or even intent to harm the king's authority as treasonous. In fact, in "English law, treason meant the breach or intended breach of a strictly hierarchical loyalty, with intent to effect critical harm." Leitch, *Romancing Treason*, 22.
[21] Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, 214. Green articulates the affective "mutual agreement" between oath takers as the "primary" and traditional reading of treason, even after the 1352 Statutes attempted to codify it as an institutional crime (209). Both Hearn and Ojars Kratins discuss the betrayal of lateral bonds as treason, as well as those which threatened "vassalage" (Hearn, 81). Matthew Hearn, "Twins of Infidelity: The Double Antagonists of *King Horn*," *Medieval Perspectives* 8 (1993), 78-86; Ojars Kratins, "Treason in Middle English Metrical Romances," *Philological Quarterly* 45.4 (Oct 1966): 668-688.
[22] The pro-Lancastrians, for example, attempted to show that "not only was Richard now displaced as king, but he *was never entitled to be king in the first place*." By scripting Richard as illegitimate, Adam Usk (amongst others)

conceptualization of political virtue became similarly ambiguous and available to "counter-deployment."[23] Treason becomes a "mobile signifier available for application and use by either party," used for political capital by various actors with diverse justification and with little basis in legal theory.[24] Leitch argues the elasticity of treason created a "conceptual horizontality…of the idea of the commonweal…producing more multi-directional, unsecured accusations of treason."[25] In other words, because of the historical lack of a shared understanding or discourse of legality, romance critically reflects on an unstable network between king, steward, court, and commons. As a consequence, the community, or commonweal—how it was imagined, who comprised it, and its relationship to more traditional hierarchical governmental organization—comes to the fore.

The steward is the central focus for this study not only because his tendentious vilification calls attention to conflicting value systems, but also because he embodies a conflict which romance invites despite the celebration of unity that opens and closes most works. [26]

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retroactively redefined what political legitimacy looked like. Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, 5. Strohm looks at historical texts, but I argue that the frequency and mutability of romance charges mirrors his argument.

[23] Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, 6

[24] Paul Strohm, *Politique: Languages of Statecraft between Chaucer and Shakespeare* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 188.

[25] Leitch, *Romancing Treason*, 30.

[26] Until recently, scholarship passed over Medieval Romance as "the ugly ducklings" of Medieval English Literature, according to Stephen Knight, "The Social Function of the Middle English Romances," ed. David Aers *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology & History* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), 99-123. And while discussions of the boundaries of the "baggy" genre are hazy or blurred, Helen Cooper shows us that "both readers of earlier romances and writers of new ones were fully aware of the tradition in which they were writing": *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8. In general, she regards romances as telling stories of "providence, the disruption and restoration of order and lineal succession, innocence accused and vindicated" and the ways new meanings or justifications are employed to renew and give each successive romance "continued life" (2). Other critics discuss the multiple possible bounds and haziness of romance, but acknowledge the idea that readers nonetheless recognized the tropes, making it possible to talk about the general parameters and ideas of the genre. See Yin Liu, "Middle English Romance as Prototype Genre," *Chaucer Review* 40.4 (2006): 335-353; K.S. Whetter, *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008); Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in Middle English Romances* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978); Raluca Radulescu, *Romance and its Contexts in Fifteenth-Century England: Politics, Piety and Penitence* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013); and Carol Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987). While some scholars attempt to define the genre in opposition to other types of literature (Whetter defines romance against drama and

Romance became a vehicle for secular debates on current legal and social issues, where questions of "union" and "community" were considered.[27] Green, for example, contends that medieval court literature, both instructional and popular, saw itself as "instructing political wisdom" and even engaging in "political and diplomatic propaganda."[28] Romance's manipulation of popular motifs in the vernacular allowed the genre to appeal and continually adapt to a broader public while seriously considering the nature and structure of governance.[29] Scholars note that medieval romance's "adaptability" allowed the genre to gain immense popularity while also offering critical engagement.[30] Romance was a "dominant genre of secular literature in the Middle Ages," as Green and McDonald both propose, enjoying a "broader audience" than many other medieval genres.[31] Green, for example, contends that medieval court literature, both instructional and popular, saw itself as "instructing political wisdom" and even engaging in "political and diplomatic propaganda."[32] Romance popularity did not dissuade

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even epic), others define it through types of adventure sequences (chivalric vs courtly such as Robert Burlin, "Middle English Romance: The Structure of Genre," *The Chaucer Review* 30.1 (1995): 1-14) or through levels of exemplarity (Yin Liu, "Middle English Romance as Prototype Genre," 335-53). Whetter gives a more detailed overview of critical conversations around the definition of romance. See Whetter *Understanding Genre*.

[27] This study turns to romance because the genre takes these questions about governance and the politicization of the community seriously, but asks them of a more socio-economically diverse readership beyond "court and political circles": Crane, *Insular Romance*, 53. Crane sees English romance as both "sustain[ing] and resist[ing]" the ideas and ideals of their time: *Insular Romance*, 53. Patricia Claire Ingham also takes seriously "the role of imagination in making (and contesting) notions of union in late medieval Britain": *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 2.

[28] Green, Richard Firth. *Poets and Princepleasers,* 195.

[29] See Jordi Sanchez-Marti, "Reconstructing the Audiences of the Middle English Versions of 'Ipomedon'," *Studies in Philology* 103.2 (Spring 2006): 153-77 for readership of romance. In Geraldine Heng's reading of Arthurian romance, "fantasy" becomes the means for "safely memorializing" historical trauma and fear: "Cannibalism, The First Crusade, and the Genesis of Medieval Romance," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Culture Studies*, 10.1 (1998): 98-174. Ingham similarly employs fantasy to discuss the ways romance recalls a conflicted past to inspire a united future (*Sovereign Fantasies*). Like the "royal advice texts" or "Mirrors for Princes," romance questioned authority and governance. Emily Steiner invites us to ask "how medieval texts go about theorizing authority rather than simply responding to it"—and opens this critique of "authority" to a broad spectrum of medieval texts: "Authority," ed. Paul Strohm, *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007): 142-59.

[30] Wadiak, *Savage Economy*, 1.

[31] Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*, 195. Stephen Knight similarly claims romance enjoyed a "broader audience" than many other medieval genres ("The Social Function of the Middle English Romances," 99).

[32] Green, *Poets and Princepleasers,* 195.

engaged or critical readership, according to Helen Cooper. In fact, romance became a vehicle for secular debates on current legal and social issues.[33] Even the texts imagined themselves as manuals for "self-betterment" or methods for improving the socio-political environment: witness Malory's advice to "exercise and follow virtue, by which we may come to and attain good fame and renown in this life."[34] I argue that the genre's diverse audience allowed its cultural models to be appropriated and challenged by a broad and diverse readership.

Medieval romance's intense focus on what Nicola McDonald calls "structures of desire"—desire for narrative authority, social capital, or political supremacy, for example—and wide readership across diverse social and cultural demographics make it ideally suited to considering questions of political systems, contemporary understandings of the court, and individual identity formation within the political community.[35] Rather than simply "accept the values" of those "in power," I argue that romance offers its diverse vernacular readership multiple value systems to choose from.[36] As McDonald has shown in relation to *The Squyr of*

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[33] Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 13.

[34] Paul Strohm, "Writing and Reading," eds. Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod, *A Social History of England, 1200-1500* (Cambridge UP, 2006): 454-73. Strohm notes the ways literary culture was more widely discussed and accessed than previously believed in the middle ages, and the ways various literary genres participated in "personal" and political "refinement" (472).

[35] Romance audiences (actual and implied) have been discussed by Paul Strohm, "Chaucer's Audience(s): Fictional, Implied, Intended, Actual," *The Chaucer Review* 18.2 (1983): 137-45 and *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Nicola McDonald, "Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, Ladies at Court and the Female Reader," *Chaucer Review* 35.1 (2000): 22-42; Stephen Knight, "The Social Function of the Middle English Romances," ed. David Aers, *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986): 99-122. Velma Bourgeois Richmond demonstrates that romance was a popular and widespread genre and was in fact widely read/encountered by the emerging lay public: *The Popularity of Middle English Romance* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1975). Sanchez-Marti asserts that romance was unique in that it catered to a "heterogeneous audience" of both popular *and* elite, and attracted the "widest possible" readership (154). Jordi Sanchez-Marti, "Reconstructing the Audiences of the Middle English Versions of 'Ipomedon'," *Studies in Philology* 103.2 (Spring 2006): 153-77. Velma B. Richmond's *The Popularity of Middle English Romance* similarly proclaims romance as a popular and widespread genre for the emerging lay public.

[36] Based on this scholarship, I believe that the audiences would have reached many within all these strata: the aristocracy, civil servants within the court, and the economic class (merchants and tradesman) before being disseminated by readers to their larger circle. I argue that the audience not only would have included the gentry and lords at least peripheral to the court if not within it, either directly or through secondary sources (oral performance or accounts of the tale), but that audience would also wield more power and imagine themselves within this imaginary

Low Degree, decentering the lovers' desires onto diverse and competing objects "undoes our confidence in romance's ability to contain the impulse to disorder that is inherent in desire."[37] Who controlled access to the king, who gave advice, and how those advisors governed policy and law are issues of central concern, contributing to the perception of instability in "kingship and governance" during the late medieval period.[38] Even the transmission of these texts points towards a desire for social and cultural relevance and "political legitimacy" within the contemporary audiences, as Thomas Croft posits in relation to Caxton's legitimization of contemporary kings through Arthur.[39] The audience's investment in actual events informs and produces real (social, political, and communal) stakes within the romance.

Hoccleve, in his *Regiment of Princes*, famously laments the loss of "this worldes stablenesse," which prompts him to advise Prince Harry on the importance of counsel and observing royal virtues as the solution to social unrest.[40] Romance raises similar concerns about governance and the perceived instability of political values, and addresses them to heterogenous vernacular readers.[41] Scholars have noted the ideological and political work that romance does,

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culture more actively than Knight credits. I contend that this mercantile, middle class, or even gentry audience would not simply "accept the values of those who were [in power]": Knight, 100.

[37] McDonald, "Desire out of Order and Undo Your Door," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer.* 34 (2012): 247-75, 257.

[38] Raluca Radulescu posits that the perceived political and social instabilities of "kingship and governance" in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries coincided with a literary "war of ideas" as the duties of rulers and subjects were "re-evaluated" by contemporaries: "'John Vale's Book' and Sir Thomas Malory's 'Le Morte Darthur': A Political Agenda," *Arthuriana* 9.4 (1999): 69.

[39] Croft looks to Malory, and the later publications of the *Morte* in print, as an attempt to create a "cultural continuum which, with *exempla* from its earliest history, could determine and legitimize present undertakings": *Malory's Contemporary Audience: The Social Reading of Romance in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2006), 109.

[40] Hoccleve, *The Regiment of Princes*, (TEAMS Middle English Texts) ed., Charles R Blyth (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999) outlines "the vices and virtues a prince must avoid or observe. These include: (1) on the dignity of a king (lines 2164-91); (2) on a king's keeping his coronation oaths, and on truth and cautious speech (2192-2464); (3) on justice (2465-2772); (4) on observing laws (2773-2996); (5) on pity (2997-3311); (6) on mercy (3312-3458); (7) on patience (3459-3626); (8) on chastity (3627-3899); (9) on the magnanimity of a king (3900-4004); (10) that a king must not base his happiness on riches (4005-4123); (11) on the virtue of generosity and the vice of prodigality (4124-4473); (12) on the vice of avarice (4474-4746); (13) on a king's prudence (4747-4858); (14) on keeping counsel (4859-5019); and (15) on peace (5020-5439)."

[41] Sanchez-Marti asserts that romance was unique in that it catered to a "heterogeneous audience" of both popular *and* elite, and attracted the "widest possible" readership (154). Jordi Sanchez-Marti, "Reconstructing the Audiences

arguing that the genre "at a profound level" was invested in "the subject of identity."[42] How the community was defined, what identity (socially, politically and regionally) it imagined readers possessing, and how that imagination emerged in literature are centrally important to romance. Susan Crane argues that English romance "particularly attended" to issues of "order, justice, power" while actively redefining itself against its Norman and French continental counterparts.[43] Crane sees this identity modeled and reimagined by the romance hero, who mirrors the insular baronial interests of the English elite.

These English romances both "sustained and resisted" the ideas and ideals of their time.[44] Patricia Claire Ingham takes seriously "the role of imagination in making (and contesting) notions of union in late medieval Britain," arguing that Arthurian romance in particular offers a "fantasy of insular union, an 'imagined community' of British sovereignty" defined against and through its struggle with colonial domination.[45] Even as the genre fantasizes an English "nation" and coherent social identity, scholars see it as deeply conscious of its own "self-fashioning of identity"—conscience of "a contested history" of a British past and a fragmented political identity.[46] As Ingham astutely demonstrates, "the medieval community is imagined not through homogenous stories of a singular 'people,' but through narratives of sovereignty as a negotiation

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of the Middle English Versions of 'Ipomedon'," *Studies in Philology* 103.2 (Spring 2006): 153-77. Velma B. Richmond's *The Popularity of Middle English Romance* similarly proclaims romance as a popular and widespread genre for the emerging lay public.

[42] Phillipa Hardman, ed., *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 2. Karen Robinson also looks to romance as asking similar questions of governance as the advice texts and offering political commentary: *Reflections of Royalty: Late Middle English Arthurian Texts and the Mirrors for Princes Tradition* (Ph.D. diss., Purdue University, 2009), UMI 3379720.

[43] Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 52.

[44] Crane, *Insular Romance*, 53.

[45] Patricia Claire Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 2. England's fragmentation away from France and within its own borders simultaneously allows for the rise of a parallel "imagined community," 6.

[46] Lee Patterson, "Court Politics and the Invention of Literature: The Case of John Clanvowe," ed. David Aers *Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities, and Writing* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1992), 4 emphasizes the genre's influence in fashioning a courtly or political ideology.

of differences, of ethnicity, region, language, class, and gender."[47] The genre's investment in and contestation over an English identity, even as it recognizes its own "self-fashioning," highlights the multiplicity and excess of possible intersecting communities, political actors, legal structures, and value systems. Romance's intense focus on what defined or shaped the socio-political community, and the centrality of that community to its readership, make romance ideally suited to asking what role dissent and crime have in these imaginations. Romance stewards focus our attention on the rifts and conflicts within the court, and invite us to consider the larger implications of those conflicts.

The romances I analyze narrate multiple forms of court conflict in which the steward becomes central.[48] We are left with images of a court fragmenting or at war with itself—the tensions between characters' desires and values pulling the imagined community apart. But more than excessive discord, the repeated tropes of romance, where conflicts and characters return and recur across multiple texts, continually repurpose and reconsider the same issues. Walter Wadiak argues that the narrative structure and formal qualities of romance "consistently points us back to the beginning," there the end of the tale serves less as a resolution to the text's problems than a return to beginning; they "typically…restate the initial problem" rather than arriving "someplace

[47] Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies*, 9. Ingham qualifies that the "differences" negotiated are "not absolute," but "signify instead a complex of shared spaces, histories, and imaginings. It is the combination of shared imaginings and differential politics embedded in British Arthuriana that [Ingham] attempt[s] to convey" through her term *national fantasy* (10).

[48] Despite the texts' frequent assertions of final "blisse," unresolved conflicts between characters and between ideological viewpoints remain to trouble the reader. Romances' address to the reader—in the opening and closing—celebrates a unified space of prosperity for the hero and community, which conclude the narrative's conflict and brings the hero "out of his care." These opening and closing lines are not formally structured frames or prologues, although some scholars, such as Carol Fewster, describe them as such. Other critics to acknowledge this aspect of romance are Bonnie Irwin and William Holland. However, scholarship on this point is largely silent. I argue that these addresses close down the narrative conflicts without resolving them—conflicts which the steward highlights. The formal structure of many romances therefore mirrors the court dissent by attempting (and failing) to mask conflicts. See William Holland, "Formulaic Diction and the Descent of a Middle English Romance," *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 48.1 (1973): 89-109 and Bonnie D. Irwin, "What's in a Frame? Medieval Textualization of Traditional Storytelling," *Oral Tradition* 10.1 (1995): 27-53.

new."[49] By referentially returning the reader to the beginning, I argue that the ideological, political, or communal problem that inspired the tale persists. The protagonist's claim to the throne may be resolved, but the destabilized legal, social, or political community beyond that figure frequently remains in flux.[50] As one narrator admits, "y ne can telle no more" (*Launfal*, 1037). The poet implies there *is* more to "telle" but that he *cannot* share it. Just as the line "in romance as we rede" implies a tradition of multiple tales about these figures, this omission reminds the reader of the other "tellings" and conflicts which occur elsewhere. The *Squyr of Low Degree,* for example, elides "thirty winters and some deale moe" (173-4) of the lovers' lives, imaging that the treason and violence narrated within the tale does not resurface. Though the losses inflicted by the text's initial trauma are reversed, the impetus for such trauma (social unrest, economic anxiety, political conflict) implicitly foreshadows further "adventures."

The cyclical return in romance to the motifs and heroes of other tales not only returns us to the initial instability, it also diversifies and questions the values espoused by each hero with each repetition. Every romance narrates a "unique" hero, but the adventures and growth undergone by each revisits the adventures and episodes of other romances so that each referentially linked, "exemplary" hero offers a "model of how to act and how not to act."[51] The repetition of motifs and adventures across romances allows each hero and tale to be unique, but precisely because of this repetition the hero carries with him the ideological or idealized weight

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[49] The typical opening lines introduce the superiority of the hero as "of more" might, beauty, honor etc. than any other, situate him within his landscape, and finally promise his "avetures"—which he overcomes. Wadiak, *Savage Economy: The Returns of Middle English Romance* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), vii discusses the repetitions of the opening lines of romance, which "return us" to where we began. His intervention mainly focuses on the ways economic issues return, but his assertion is true of other conflicts as well.
[50] These specific lines comes from *Sir Degare*, 1102 and *Sir Isumbras*, 816 respectively, but is also mirrored in *Sir Orfeo*'s "Thus com Sir Orfeo out of his care" (603) and *Lay Le Freine*'s "Thus ends the lay of tho maidens bright" (407) and *Sir Isumbras*'s "out of his care" (816)
[51] Cooper, *English Romance in Time*, 52

of many others, according to Cooper.[52] Each protagonist and tale imagines itself working within an ideological system that is tied to other similar narratives and heroes—which, I argue, recalls for the reader those heroes' struggles as well.[53] The adventure promised in one romance not only exceeds that tale's conclusion; the invocation of other romances within the tradition also invites those other conflicts into the tale in question. The works frequently recall a long tradition of other "gestes as ye shal rede" that places one text into a network of others.[54] The conflicts—highlighted by the stewards—exceed those resolved by any single narrative, leaving the competing value systems intact, the conflicts merely glossed over in the end. The "treason" committed by Fikenhild in *King Horn* receives no mention by the narrator as he proclaims the hero "out of his care."[55]

Rather than look at romances through a historicist lens, taking *Amis*'s steward as a symptom of fourteenth-century judicial instability or *The Squire*'s Maradose as witness to sixteenth-century civil unease, I argue that the typical steward's liminal yet vital status to court functions within thirteenth to sixteenth-century romances to suggest a critical intersection between criminal voices and political change. His position at the court's social and hierarchical fringe, but the judicial center, prompts readers to appreciate how romances rethink political

[52] Helen Cooper argues that romance not only enjoyed immense popularity, it was able to remain culturally central because of its familiarity and adaptability. Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 4. The source tale and longstanding tradition are recalled in the text by brief references, or "memes," to the reader. Thus, while the motifs may remain "superficially the same," the usage changed over time. This allowed romance to remain socially relevant even as the narratives recirculated.

[53] Liu, "Middle English Romance as Prototype Genre," argues that the comparison invïged by describing the hero as "never man of flesch ne felle nas so strong" brings other protagonists to mind (*Avowyng of Arthur,* 14 and *Bevis of Hampton*, 14 respectively). Susan Wittig and Liu variously demonstrate that these sequences form a syntactical pattern found in multiple texts where the protagonist is set into competition with other figures to define them as either "so grete" or "never so strong," establishing the hero as a prototype of exemplary action: *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in Middle English Romances* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), 32.

[54] Variations of "as ye rede" are found in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (100), *King Horn* (3 and 32), *Sir Isumbras* (129), *Sir Bevis of Hamptoun* (1), or *Sir Orfeo* (7). These lines come from *The Erle of Tolous*, 7-8.

[55] *King Horn* commends the tale's conclusion as "glad": "Make us glad evre among,/ For thus him endeth Hornes song" (1541-2). Ashmole 61 and Bliss's edition of *Sir Orfeo* both conclude the tale with Orfeo "out of his care" (596 and 604 respectively).

networks as conflicted, wherein dissenting voices may be simultaneously disruptive and beneficial. I engage with a long temporal range of "evil stewards" in order to consider the persistent centrality to romance of a conflicted English socio-political body. As David Aers and Stephen Knight have pointed out, until recently noncanonical romances have received little critical attention.[56] The lack of critical depth on the non-canonical romances thus becomes an opportunity for new insight into both canonical and non-canonical works. Accordingly, each chapter of this study will consider a less studied text and put it into conversation with more widely discussed work. By closely examining the ways treason or criminality shapes romance courts, we will be able to recognize the works' constant re-visioning of court politics, suggesting a pervasive and long-standing anxiety. From the steward in *The Squyr of Low Degre,* who falsely venerates *Guy*'s villain Calobrand, to Malory's imagination of Kay's stewardship (informed by and reflecting the twelfth-century French prose romances), what is important to this study is the repetition of motifs rather than their original historical contexts. The interconnected network of romance courts arises from the genre's intertwined diffusion and re-transmission of characters, themes, and motifs.[57] Romance stewards' ambiguous "treason" helps us think about the relationship between ethics and politics just as they emphasize the competing network of affective relationships that make up the court.

Desiring Discord contends that competing value and legal systems, as well as affective relationships, continually center on the figure of the steward. I argue that the steward grounds conversations about justice and treason and serves as a case study for the wider types of conflict

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[56] See Aers' edited volume *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986) and Knight's "The Social Function of the Middle English Romances," 99-122.
[57] For this repetition, see Susan Crane, *Insular Romance* (15) and Helen Cooper, *English Romance in Time* (1-15). Not only were themes (or "memes") recycled from one romance to another, but such reproduced elements of the genre were discussed or used with "the safe assumption of shared knowledge," according to Cooper (1).

that surface in romance courts. The divisive steward has only one political voice among many, but I argue he plays a critical role in disclosing and mediating the text's competing judicial, ethical, political, and affective relationships. Each chapter expands on the resulting tensions by examining how the steward navigates (successfully or not) romances' various competing value systems and ideological priorities. Ultimately this study demonstrates that the narratives' constant return to and diversification of conflict as a means for enacting necessary social reform reveals such discord as an important part of narrative. Amis's wife's late reminder of the steward's virtue before her death, Malory's return to the divisive names Kay gave various knights, and Maradose's long presence in the princess's chamber continually returns the reader to the text's initial discord as well as the steward's function in revealing a narrative desire for that conflict. The steward's treason and divisive court mediation exposes the virtue of such disorder in either revealing or correcting competing systems.

Chapter Summaries

The following chapter frames *The Squyr of Low Degree*'s steward Maradose's "treason" as promoting rather than subverting justice. The steward Maradose acts as a central (and solely named) figure within the conflicted community, catalyzing the narrative violence and highlighting the protagonist's failure both as an active aid to the king and as the embalmed corpse within the princess's bedchamber. The king initially orders that Maradose watch the squire to ensure he does not violate the princess, commanding the steward to "take [the squire] with the dede," an order the steward follows by promising to "suffre death and endlesse wo" before allowing the squire to "defame" the king (390/403). The squire's attempted liaison with the princess serves as just such a "defamation," legitimizing Maradose's violent action. Oddly,

after commanding his proxy to act, the king then rejects that proxy as treasonous. The text vilifies Maradose as “that false stewarde full of yre” (291) for fulfilling his duty, which suggests this fictional English justice system lacks coherence.

The princess then mistakes the corpse for her beloved and embalms Maradose. The steward’s corpse remains an erotic object for the lady to “kysse…twyse or thryse” (698-9) a day until it disintegrated into “powder small” (931). The princess’s devotion to this body removes her from the political world, where her marriage could create alliances or succession, therefore thwarting the tale’s and court’s progress. But it also casts doubt onto the king’s role in this body trick and his questionable favoritism for the squire—and therefore calls attention to the ambiguous scripting of power across a range of figures. The steward is both “traytour” and faithful vassal, both “trewe” and “fals,” and both hero/lover and villain. I demonstrate that *The Squyr*’s steward invites us to read the political landscape as ambiguous and undefined—that the structures of power frequently compete with one another. Most importantly, the court’s competitive structure rejects the traditional idea of a vertical hierarchy in favor of a dispersed horizontal network.

While *The Squyr of Low Degree* undermines a stratified hierarchy, *Amis and Amiloun*’s morally superior steward establishes a judicial structure where law supersedes the interpersonal conflicts within the court. In fact, his “treason” adheres to traditional justice and common law—a cause supported by the characters within the text. Yet the narrator condemns him as traitor—divorcing “treason” from its political and legal context. “Treason” becomes a “mobile signifier” of propagandistic motives.[58] The steward and heroes simultaneously occupy “right” and “treason,” juxtaposing the characters’ evaluation of the text’s moral landscape with the

[58] For a historicist argument on this point, see Strohm, *Politique*, 188.

narrator's. Tensions between these perspectives force the audience to choose between the narrator's perspective and the hero's. The narrator becomes just another fallible figure set against his characters, rather than an authoritative and reliable speaker. The disjointed understandings of treason propose each figure operates within different understandings of political values. The steward champions legal precedent; the characters articulate self-interest at war with such norms; and the narrator allows for both options but ultimately and surprisingly condemns not self-interest but precedent. The steward's so-called treasonous role supports traditional justice and the entire political community, making him unique within the text's political landscape. While the "douhti" steward, always "at crie" for the duke, is castigated as a traitor for threatening the brothers, the romance's other figures avoid this censure even as they transgress political and moral boundaries. Not only does the duke abstain from actively governing his own land, but the lady Belisaunt participates in blackmail while each brother individually and jointly commits crimes (such as the infanticide with which critics have grappled).

Conflict between diverse definitions of treason or justice becomes particularly apparent in *King Horn* and the *Erle of Tolous*, where preservation of "treweth" often lies with the steward, who must "teach" it to the hero. Chapter four proposes that these stewards' discordant or dissenting voices can actually aid the court by offering good counsel to the sovereign. Using the multiple stewards who both threaten and support Horn in *King Horn* as a guide, this chapter turns to the complex enactment of treason in *The Erle of Tolous*, where the steward is both traitor and successor to the throne. Treason, in legal terms and as it is played out in both romances, covers any deception or threat to "friends," the "bond of vassalage," or the stability of the sovereign.[59] Under these conditions, if every figure posits a threat to "feudal society," then none

[59] Ojars Kratins argues that treason was not limited to the physical violence against the lord, but also included a range of activities "considered to be ultimately destructive to the very fabric of feudal society, which was envisioned

of the charges of treason stand out as more legitimate than others, thereby perplexing the audience's ability to vilify or venerate any figure. Internal dissent is not only common, but also inevitable in the power structure of these courts.

Instead of one strong, chivalric character, *The Erle* offers—and renders unsatisfying—multiple competing powerful figures. The text introduces Diocletian as an emperor that "all Chrystendome" held in "dowte," whose first narrative act is to "dysheryte many a man/ And falsely ther londys wan/ Wyth maystry and with might" (19-21). This mention of "dowte" functions to critique his rule as "false" and one based on a "might makes right" mentality. The Erle Barnard may present a preferable alternative for standing against tyranny, yet even he is cast as a flawed actor whose military "styffe[ness]" and "strength" earns both the poet's praise and censure. He pursues civil war and the empress's release for personal gain—using the same self-interested military strength the poet censured in Diocletian.

Trylabas, who fights with the emperor in the initial war before being captured by and pledged to Barnard, outlines his logic as he subsequently betrays the Erle: "he ys to us a foo…y rede we hym sloo;/ he hath done us gret grylle" (276-9). Trylabas focuses here on the "grylle" or betrayal that the Erle committed against Diocletian, which sparked the civil war—calling attention to his treason and therefore Trylabas's legitimate complaint against the Erle as "foe." Furthermore, the poet reminds us that Trylabas "yn herte he held hym [Barnard] foule schente" and "moche harme he [Barnard] hath done us," which not only emphasizes the competing loyalties of the collective "us" against "hym," but also casts Trylabas' agreement to the Erle's plan as the deceptive pledge of a captive (299/425). By calling attention to the initial civil conflict and original vassalage both figures owed to Diocletian, the poet allows for us to

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as depending upon the unswerving loyalty and devotion to the bond of vassalage" (352): "The Middle English Amis and Amiloun: Chivalric Romance or Secular Hagiography?" PMLA 81.5 (1966): 347-54.

sympathize with Trylabas's divided loyalties (between remaining "trewe" to his "covenaunt" with Barnard, and preserving his initial faith to his lord Diocletian). Trylabas's ethical predicament offers a method of reading Barnard's actions as complex—simultaneously treasonous and in pursuit of justice. The political "ryght" championed by *Horn*'s and *The Erle of Tolous*'s liminal (and traitorous) stewards suggests that readers' sympathy may extend as much to the court's traitors as to the political court. The characters' and narrators' dissonant conceptions of justice suggest that effective leadership relies on a system of power rather than an individual—a system that requires and thrives off the competing voices of political and social actors. In other words, the stewards in these two historically distant texts index the value to the court of a fractured political community. Treason is not necessarily a simple threat to the court; it can be productive of desirable change.

Opening with non-canonical texts covering a variety of temporal moments which forefront the genre's desire for political conflict allows us to turn to the canonical Malory with fresh eyes. In the final chapter, I seek to re-orient our interpretation of his court as one undermined and destroyed by factional affinities. Malory's steward Sir Kay offers a glimpse of querulous gatekeeping that maintains individual affinity, juxtaposed to Arthur's failed attempt to overlook or elide difference. Kay's emphasis on what makes the knights different or unfit for Arthur's service draws attention to the divisiveness always present in Arthur's court—and Kay's celebration of faction and affinities invites a reading of the Round Table as combative. It is not conflict, but rather Arthur's attempt to eradicate conflict within the fellowship that prompts its collapse. Focusing in on Kay's role as Arthur's gatekeeper, as he slows Sir Gareth's entry into the fellowship and mocks Brewnor, I consider the ways Kay's stewardship calls attention to newcomers' self-interest or factional loyalty.

When Gareth fights the Red Knight, for example, he refuses to name himself, saying instead, “that will I nat tell you, but Sir Kay on scorne named hym Bewmaynes” (VII.14). Not only does Malory continue to refer to Gareth as Beawmaynes, but Gareth himself also retains Kay’s involvement and control over his identity. This linkage reminds the reader of our initial suspicion about Gareth. Brewnor similarly adopts the mocking name “La Cote Male Tayle” that Kay gave him: “insomuche that Sir Kay hath so named me, so woll I be called” (IX.1). Brewnor’s identity becomes intertwined with Kay’s, even as the text simultaneously emphasizes the conflicting filial duty that brought him to Arthur’s court. In primarily naming knights in terms of their connection to the court (and Kay), and the ways their identit(ies) intersect with others, Malory highlights the multiple factions each member occupies. Juxtaposed to Kay’s view of an interconnected network, Arthur’s unifying approach—which ignores echoes of previous or competing identities—appears simplistic. In juxtaposing these two approaches, Malory opens space for (or models the virtues of) imagining a competitive and diverse political court that mirrors the larger community. Ultimately, attempting to suppress or penalize any perceived threat as treason weakened the court.

By engaging later fifteenth and sixteenth-century texts (Malory and the *Squyr of Low Degree*), with earlier thirteenth-century romances (*Horn* and *Amis and Amiloun*), I demonstrate that conflicts within courts (and diverse approaches to treason and disunity) cannot be pinned to one single historical crisis or another. The genre’s consistent return to conflict and competing ideas of political power through the figure of the steward, continually redefining and questioning the nature of treason, embraces the potential value in discord. The loyal steward’s treason and the sovereign’s competitive navigation of the court establishes discord as a desirable method of negotiating power even as it defers any political stability. These narratives also put pressure on

how the romance and reading communities defined the court, their position within it, the power of the sovereign—and therefore what constituted a transgression worthy of the label "treason." This dissertation develops a positive reading of romances' competing value systems and power positions in order to recognize and embrace the ambiguity, complexity, and constantly shifting alliances and mis-alliances at play within the courts.

CHAPTER 2

Decomposing Hierarchy in *The Squyr of Low Degree*

In the anonymous *Squyr of Low Degre*, the squire and princess pledge their love on the condition that the squire improves his "low degree." The king orders his steward Maradose to watch the squire and ensure he does not violate the princess, commanding the steward to "take [the squire] with the dede," an order the steward obeys, promising to "suffre death and endlesse wo" before allowing the squire to "defame" the king.[1] The squire's "dede" (sex or amorous discourse with the princess) constitutes a threat to the king's power, oversteps his position in court, and undermines the established avenues for political promotion—which traditionally rewards loyal service with knighthood, then land, then an advantageous marriage.[2] While the squire and princess ignore customary hierarchy, Maradose attempts to preserve the "common laws" of the political community against 'defamation.' Oddly, after commanding his proxy to act, the king then rejects his acts as treasonous. The text vilifies Maradose as "that false stewarde

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[1] Erik Kooper, ed., *Sentimental and Humorous Romances: Floris and Blancheflour, Sir Degrevant, The Squyr of Low Degree, The Tournament of Tottenham, and The Feast of Tottenham* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006). Lines 390 and 403. All future references are parenthetically cited from this edition.

[2] The squire never gains his knighthood within the tale, yet he moves from unnamed "squire" to the princess's beloved and then Hungarian heir without following the traditional steps for this social mobility. Spearing sees this as the tale's "explicit defense of male upward mobility" while Kiernan sees the tale's "obsession with money as the root of all happiness" as the humorous undercutting of both the squire's character and his social mobility. While there is no critical consensus as to the meaning of the text's social mobility, the squire's non-traditional advancement is a unifying concern in scholarship. A.C. Spearing, "Secrecy, Listening, and Telling in *The Squyr of Lowe Degre*," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 20.3 (1990): 273-92; and Kevin Kiernan, "Undo Your Door and the Order of Chivalry," *Studies in Philology* 70 (1973): 345-66.

full of yre" (291) for fulfilling his duty, suggesting this fictional English justice system lacks coherence.

The steward Maradose attempts to prevent the squire's forbidden entry into his beloved's chamber, resulting in the squire's men killing and defacing him. In an odd twist, the soldiers then dress the mutilated corpse in the squire's garb and leave him for the princess to discover and confuse for her lover. The steward's dead body takes the place of the hero in the princess's chamber, inspiring her to abandon society and enclose herself with this defaced and embalmed corpse. Despite the king's promises of wealth, the princess refuses to "let be all [her] mournynge" or to "be wedede to a kynge" (971/76). Her devotion to the corpse, turned to dust after seven years, diverts her from her conventional role within the court. It also diverts the narrative from the squire's tale of conquest in the Levant—leaving the eponymous hero off-stage. As the steward's body decomposes in the princess's chamber, the princess offers a meta-criticism of hierarchical authority. Instead of the hero or king determining legitimacy and controlling political power, the steward's body, the princess, and the squire all compete for influence over the court while traditional methods of scripting legal or treasonous action become less clear.

The princess fantasizes over the corpse of the wrong man, the squire flounders attempting to follow his lady's commands, and the king conflates wealth with authority. Each figure positions their individual desires above the public needs without regard for the political body's need for leadership or communal governance.[3] Instead, the "commonweal" ranks below the

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[3] The competing articulations of duties between the king, the steward, and the hero is exacerbated by the political and social community of the "hero" we are invited to join—which offers the hero as our moral guide through the text. The narrator reminds us of his "gentyll" and "curteous" nature, "loved" by "ech man," making his values central to our evaluation of the text, explicitly turning to "leve" a character in order to "speke we more of that squyer." (4/301-2) Yet the narrative removes the hero from our central focus and erases his authority, which removes our ability to negotiate the community we are invited into. We are encouraged to similarly "love" the squire

competing personal interests. The decaying steward's failed care for the "commonweal," while no other figure considers this polity, emphasizes the text's complex scripting of royal power. Royal authority serves as a talisman of proper rule, yet it fluctuates or is pulled between personal justice and legal structures. In the Percy manuscript of the text, for example, the squire himself arrives in Hungary as a criminal exiled from England, which further emphasizes the fluidity between criminality and royal authority.[4] The steward's decomposing body reveals the decomposing political system, reminding the reader of the steward's loyalty to the king, stigmatized as treason.

In many romances the royal steward acts as a secondary character who interferes with or catalyzes the protagonist's authority, stepping in to betray the hero's confidence, usurp the crown or stake a claim on the beloved, only to be quickly suppressed, ignored, or vilified by the narrative.[5] The stewards in *Amis and Amiloun*, *Havelok* and *Sir Orfeo*—for example—all directly influence the sovereign's position either by deception or secret knowledge, but play a minor role. *Amis*'s steward instigates the judicial combat that results in Amiloun's leprosy and Amis's infanticide, but speaks only once within the text. These stewards' criminality or villainy is exhibited even as their actions frequently imply loyalty to their sovereigns. In the *Squyr*, however, the steward (or more accurately, his corpse) plays a central role in diverting the narrative's and audience's gaze. His simultaneous centrality and liminality (for his presence is due to mistaken identity) highlights the intersection between criminal and legitimate action.

The *Squyr of Low Degree*'s criminalization of the steward's loyalty and obedience to his

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and allow his 'hendeness' to guide our understanding of the tale. For the hero as moral and social guide or exempla, see Yin Liu, "Middle English Romance as Prototype Genre," *Chaucer Review* 40.4 (2006): 335-353.

[4] The Percy folio introduces the squire as an English exile who committed a crime "against the crowne… and the fee" (Percy 1-3). Therefore, his ambiguous crime against the king's directive not to "undo" the princess's door is compounded by this unnamed previous crime in England. See "Valorizing the Traitor" later in this chapter.

[5] Dinah Hazell is one of the very few scholars to focus on romance stewards, arguing that they "explicate the world around them." Hazell, "'Trewe Man' or 'Wicke Traitour'," 13.

sovereign, and his decomposing corpse's presence throughout the tale, remind the reader of the competing modes of political authority at play. The steward's duty is translated into "treason," breaking down the potential for political order. Traditional vertical hierarchy assumes the smooth transition of authority from loyal vassals up to their lords (and vice versa), where both groups benefit from their unequal social status.[6] When the narrative rejects the steward's correct actions, his loyal service to the king precipitates his death and destroys the mutuality of vassalage. This in turn destabilizes the vertical hierarchy between the king and the steward. As Paul Strohm asserts in relation to Richard's disposition, the king "has been unfit for rule from the very beginning…he has, in effect, 'always already' been unfit."[7] If the king is always unfit, then the steward becomes only one vehicle by which that unfitness is made visible. By rejecting the king's authority as "always unfit," but refusing to transfer it onto the steward or squire, the author renders political legitimacy unstable. The "traytour[ous]" steward's decomposing and disemboweled corpse mirrors the dismemberment that punishes treason. Nonetheless, Maradoes's treason is his support of judicial orthodoxy and legal precedent. The narrator reveals at the end of the text that the king in fact ordered the steward's body to be defaced and left for the princess to find, suggesting he orchestrated the elaborate seven-year mourning period as well as invited the princess's and court's resistance to his rule—which parallels Strohm's assertion of the sovereign's "unfitness."

This text's turn away from the traditional centrality of the hero has prompted much scholarship to focus on the *Squyr of Low Degre*'s "self-conscious generic style" or to assert the

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[6] T. Brandsen, "Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle,".*Neophilologus* 81 (1997): 299–307.
[7] Strohm, *England's Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation, 1399-1422*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998), 23. Strohm shows that multiple writers, political actors and poets, retroactively comment on the "unfitness" of Richard and their willingness to change or redefine the boundaries and values of legitimacy. While he makes a historically situates argument, his assertion of rhetorical fluidity aptly illustrates the retroactive recoding of the Squire and Maradose here.

text is a parody of the "norms of the genre."[8] Critics of medieval romance recognize the genre as capacious and widely variable, but nonetheless many see *The Squyr*'s manipulation of these tropes as satirical rather than serious.[9] While the poem's late composition (late fifteenth century) and relative literary "inferiority" has meant that scholars largely look at the text's historical situation to reflect on Tudor values or contemporary devotional practices, I argue that the *Squyr*'s necrophilia and unconventional steward go beyond generic conventions to raise questions about the ways political conflict and legitimacy were imagined and scripted.[10] I build on Nicola McDonald's study of power relations and A.C. Spearing's view of knowledge transfer as a form of authority in order to demonstrate the ways each character scripts power and access differently. The competition between each figure's vision of authority—as knowledge, as negotiation, as wealth, as chivalric adventure—results in a complex and conflicted system of

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[8] Glenn Wright, K.S. Kiernan, and Bryan Rivers identify the *Squyr* as a parody, either through the poem's intent or reception, while Carol Fewster pushes back against the straight reading of satire to instead appreciate the poem's constant demonstration of the genre's "own limits" and "incongruities." Carol Fewster stresses the narrative structure of romance while Myra Seaman proposed that the text's acute self-awareness works to critique the genre's value system and to demonstrate its incompatibility with life in Tudor England. See Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre*; Myra Seaman, "The Waning of Middle English Chivalric Romance in 'The Squyr of Lowe Degre,'" *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 29 (2003): 174–99; Bryan Rivers, ''The Focus of Satire in *The Squyr of Low Degree,*'' *ESC* 7 (1981): 379–87; Kiernan "'Undo Your Door' and the Order of Chivalry" and Glenn Wright, "'Other wyse then must we do': Parody and Popular Narrative in *The Squire of Lowe Degre,*'' *Comitatus* 27 (1996): 14–41. Rivers shares Keirnan's sense of parodic *intent* but emphasizes ''the sexual timidity of the princess'' (386); and Wright argues instead for its ''multi-layered *reception*,'' encompassing both ''straight'' and parodic readings (38).

[9] The genre of medieval romance covers many variable tropes (sometimes bleeding into hagiography) and can be reduced to many different themes. For example: the hero departing to prove himself against other knights and foreign enemies before returning to claim his patronage or lady (*Horn*, or *Guy*), or the unknown hero realizing his parentage and questing to claim his birthright (*Sir Degare* or *Libeaus Desconus*), or the sinful hero learning penitence and going through poverty or similar struggles before being divinely rewarded (*Sir Gowther* or *Sir Isumbras*). These are just some ways to summarize the themes of romance, which frequently defy any such attempt to contain the genre. See Yin Liu's "Middle English Romance as Prototype Genre" (338), Helen Cooper's *English Romance in Time* (a thematic reduction, p5) and Robert Burlin's "Middle English Romance: The Structure of Genre" (a structuralist reading, p3) for an articulate overview of this argument.

[10] William Mead (1951 edition) dates the poem to c.1450 based on the language and formal elements while more recent critics, as Erik Kooper asserts, date it later (end of the fifteenth century, but not later than 1500). For arguments on the "inferiority" or weakness of the text based on its historical composition, see Seth Lerer, *Courtly Letters in the Age of Henry VIII: Literary Culture and the Arts of Deceit* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997). For a more historicist reading, see Margaret J. Allen, "The Harlot and the Mourning Bride," eds., Jane Campbell and James Doyle, *The Practical Vision: Essays in English Literature in Honour of Flora Roy* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1978): 13–28.

political desires.[11] McDonald's discussion of amorous desires as exceeding the romance's ability to "contain the impulse to disorder that is inherent in desire" calls attention to the "disorder" writ large across the text's entire political network.[12] I would like to pause at the discomfort caused by the princess's desire to focus on the body at which that desire is directed. The necrophilia or amorous desire the steward's corpse inspires certainly offers some intriguing insights into the court's political system of desire, but it also centralizes the steward as the body that creates these uncomfortable reflections.

Here I rely on Megan Leitch's argument about the ethical and lexical complexities of "treason and treachery" which, I propose, dominate the amorous and political discourse of this text.[13] The steward can be both "traytour" and faithful vassal, both "trewe" and "fals," and both hero/lover and villain. Building on Leitch's analysis of treason in romance and McDonald's emphasis on the text's power structure, I demonstrate that *The Squyr*'s steward invites us to read the political landscape as lacking clear structures of power or definitions while exhibiting frequently competing power bases. This project begins by analyzing the ways each of the text's dominant figures defines (or cannot define) political efficacy differently, differences that are not reconciled or resolved by the narrative. From this dispersed network of power, the steward's sole support of the polity stands out—but because of the several competing political desires, he is marginalized and villainized. Ultimately, the text's shifting loci of power (among the squire, princess, steward, and king) function to reject stratified hierarchies and present a competitive network of political authority.

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[11] A.C. Spearing argues that the king becomes the poem's narrator by manipulating and trading in the economy of secrecy while the squire lacks all such knowledge. Spearing "Secrecy, Listening, and Telling in *The Squyr of Lowe Degre*." Nicola McDonald posits that the princess's mastery over romance conventions and the hero himself makes it more her poem than her male counter-parts. Nicola McDonald, "Desire out of Order and Undo Your Door," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer.* 34 (2012): 247-275.
[12] McDonald, "Desire out of Order," 257.
[13] Leitch, *Romancing Treason*, 57 and 61.

Defining Legitimacy

The steward's narrative authority—as the only named figure—and the protagonist's comparative weakness parallel a general insecurity amongst the other characters over how legal or political actions are defined. While the princess dictates accepted modes of attaining knighthood (in comparison to the squire's complete ignorance), her list is almost too capacious—suggesting that she has simply demanded all rather than define any. The squire's search for legitimate heroism involves following the princess's superior knowledge and diplomacy. At the same time, the king imagines the accumulation of wealth as his central method of controlling the polity. Each figure defines and then pursues competing modes of legitimacy and authority while prioritizing personal desire above the polity. Maradose's disruption of the love plot and his corpse's ability to keep that romance in suspense for the duration of the text demonstrates his superior command of political strategy. While he may not survive it, his manipulation of the court exhibits an awareness of the undefined or unstructured nature of power—and his dead body seems to critique this.

Many romances reduce characters to *types* in a general way rather than specifying individuals with names beyond their social position. The Carle in Gawain's tale remains in name the "churl" while Arthur frequently battles unnamed "knyghts" whose "lady" becomes a stand-in for any such female. The protagonist's name gives him narrative centrality and aids the audience in "defining [the] themes" of the tale.[14] And yet, *The Squyr of Low Degre* provides only "Syr Maradose" with a name while refusing to identify any other figure—even the titled character

[14] Jane Bliss argues that "namelessness" in romance is one of the central features of the genre and helps establish the hero as the morally upright figure. If the named figure defines the "themes" and ideology of the tale, then Maradose takes responsibility in this text. Jane Bliss, *Naming and Namelessness in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012).

remains simply "the squyre of lowe degre" which prioritizes his social class (or lack thereof) but fails to distinguish him from any other lowborn hanger-on at court. *Sir* Maradose becomes an individual of social prominence and significance to the reader simply by his title and the poet's belief that he warrants a name. If naming and gaining recognition is an underlying objective to the genre, as Jane Bliss contends, then Maradose becomes the only figure capable of determining the narrative ideology.[15] Yet his vilification as "traitor" and mistaken identity as the beloved simultaneously advances Maradose to recognition and rejects him as the stock antagonist. This ambivalence towards who controls the text's ideological voice diffuses the political vision away from any one figure—by both endorsing and rejecting the hero's and villain's methods of authority, the power structure is dispersed and diversified.

The steward's lingering political identity and the protagonist's comparative weakness are compounded by the princess's commanding voice. The squire seems unsure of what avenues to pursue and how the polity defines legitimacy. His list of desired traits loses any organizational framework as he confuses what values or social ideals to employ to overcome his "low degree":

> Alas…that I were riche of gold and fe…
>
> Or golde good or some treasure…
>
> or elles come of so gentyll kynne
>
> ….wolde God that I were a kygnes sonne
>
> …or els so bold in eche fight
>
> As was Syr Lybius that gentelle knyght
>
> Or els so bolde in chivalry
>
> As Syr Gawayne or Syr Guy;

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[15] Bliss, *Naming and Namelessness*, 11

Or els so doughty of my hande

as was the gyaunte Syr Colbrande (68-82).

The squire wishes himself wealthy to be worthy of the princess, then generalizes this wish by desiring “some treasure,” but then abandons this hope to imagine becoming the princess’s equal as a King’s son. The squire believes that being of “gentyll kynne” is enough to make a character heroic. Abandoning concrete materiality, the squire then turns to “boldness” in battle and chivalry, as modeled by Gawain or Guy.[16] He finally culminates his prayer with a desire to be as “doughty” as Colbrande, the violent giant of *Guy of Warwick*—rather than heroism, the squire wishes for the strength of a hero’s foe here, confusing villainy with heroism and illustrating his confusion about of modes of courtly and political power.[17]

The squire’s list of “what els” might elevate him, a long list of sometimes contradicting tropes, suggests the poet is implicitly critiquing the genre as too “baggy,” but also implies—by the squire’s frank confusion about “what els” he should do—that he is unprepared for his own tale.[18] His wish to be like “Syr” Colbrande elevates the giant to knighthood, thereby simplifying chivalric ideals to those men with “doughty” hands or success in battle. This erases the hierarchy of values and moral fiber within romance by allowing all figures to be heroic who can win conflicts—but this also emphasizes the overwhelming presence of conflict. If all “bold” or “riche” figures are equally worthy of heroism and reward, with no clear figure worthy of distinction, then all figures who compete for success within the text are equally deserving—hero, villain or giant.

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[16] Interestingly, the squire’s idealization of Guy returns us to the steward’s contentious presence, as Guy was himself the son of Warwick’s steward who successfully gained status through his strength and love of the princess. Very little distinguished Guy from the steward here or in *Amis and Amiloun*, as McDonald notes.

[17] Carol Fewster notes the ways characters within romance frequently display meta-critical awareness of the tropes of their own genre, even as they confuse them. See Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre*, 142.

[18] Yin Liu discusses the “bewildering” and “infinitely expandable” boundaries of the genre, which are at play in the squire’s catalogue here. Liu, “Middle English Romance as Prototype Genre,” 335-53.

In addition to courtly love tropes and military might, the squire borrows pious discourse when promising to "forsake" the kingdom and "become an hermyte" with a "staffe" in "lynen cloth…ever in travayle" (135-141). While a hermit would "begge [his] bread" as the squire suggests, he would not travel with a staff to sites of religious significance, but would rather stay confined to one location. Nor would a hermit or a pilgrim wear linen, but wool.[19] The squire conflates these two figures and types of religious devotion, only dimly aware of religious, court, or amorous standards as he searches for any possible avenue to gaining the princess.[20]

The squire's desire to employ all possible routes to heroism hampers our ability to identify one appropriate metric of interpretation. His character's ignorance about which ideal to pursue suggests this is not his tale to manipulate but rather belongs to those of higher "degree" within the poem's hierarchy of narrative capital. While the narrator opens multiple ideas for how the squire's story might develop (become a shoeless hermit, be killed by the king for his love, or become a knight and win the lady), the choice for how his narrative will proceed lies with the princess, the steward, or the king. In this way, the squire is relegated to a secondary character in another character's narrative, yet one whose goal or organizing frame is obscured.[21]

The poet goes so far as to explicitly accuse the squire of dishonesty when he returns to the castle asking to enter the princess's chamber. The squire suspects no trap as "he wende no man in the worlde had wyste…all his counsayl" (522). However, knowing of no guards, the squire pleads with the princess to undo her door:

[19] Footnote by Erik Kooper, ed. *Sentimental and Humorous Romances* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: TEAMS Middle English Texts, 2005).
[20] The squire's combination of military, chivalric, and pious romance tropes reminds us of the genre's "bagginess," as Liu would say (335).
[21] In this way, the princess becomes the narrator or storyteller after her experience spying on the squire's confession and holds the power/authority in this interaction both as the beloved but also by controlling secret knowledge. A.C. Spearing emphasizes this by describing the squire's departure "to participate in the story she has set down for him." Spearing, "Secrecy, Listening, and Telling," 280.

"I am beset with many a spy.

Lady as whyte as whales bone,

There are thyrty agaynst me one.

Undo thy dore, my worthy wyfe,

I am besette with many a knyfe.

Undo your dore, my lady swete,

I am beset with enemyes great" (536-43)

The steward and his men are hidden and we are assured that had the squire "wyste" of a trap, he would not have returned "alone" (522). In fact, the narrator reaffirms that the squire "thought on no mystruste," but went in with sword "drawen" regardless (521/507). Immediately following the poet's assurance that the squire knew of no enemies, the squire enters court armed and claims to be "beset" with armed spies and "enemies great." In his ignorance, his complaint that he is "beset" rings false. Our hero's dishonesty reminds us of his chivalric ineptitude and invites us to read his entire tale skeptically. His repetition of "undo" also emphatically reminds us of the king's command that he not gain entry.[22]

The squire's disregard for the king's rule further diminishes his ability to serve as chivalric or political guide for the reader. Even before he pleads to gain entry, the squire departs with his gold and men for his adventure but surprisingly "forgets" to take his leave of the princess who commanded this quest. Not only does the lovesick figure "forget" to take leave of the one who prompted his adventure in the first place, the poet skeptically claims that "he *sayd* he had forgete" (emphasis mine 498), suggesting that we ought to doubt the squire's word or his

[22] In addition to this suspicious dishonesty, the squire's praise of his lady as "whyte as whales bone"—while a common praise within romance—directly contradicts the king's articulation of her complexion as "ruddy as any chery" with "eyes full mery" (714), which raises questions about the squire's real knowledge of his beloved and therefore his motivation.

performance of duty to the lady. While it seems improbable that the devoted lover would forget to bid farewell to his lady, the narrative also questions his honesty by the poet's emphasis on "he sayd." His return with "sword drawen" into a court that "loved" him also questions his honesty or motives. Megan Leitch proposes that this "calling" or claim of forgetfulness was a trope used to distance a traitor from their official post—linking the reminder of a verbal act with treasonous activity.[23] The poet's disbelief reveals a "breakdown of social and political faith" in the squire's truthfulness and motives.[24]

Even the princess's love for the squire seems a bid for political or narrative capital, rather than devotion to his person. She presents her love for the squire as a consequence of a lack of any other suitor; "ye alone that have loved me" (580). The princess simply accepts the love of her "only" suitor and uses this lover (or his absence) to manipulate court "offycers" and the king. Her detailed instruction about how the squire ought to pursue heroism and knighthood—with which he may win her love—consistently returns to his need to "gette your name" (194). While scholarship has often noted the passive role of women within courtly love, I wish to highlight the princess's decidedly active narration of romance tropes, which contrasts with her passivity within that amorous discourse.[25] She turns generic fantasies into political capital, extracting the

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[23]Leitch, *Romancing Treason*, 42. Leitch draws a connection between "claiming an identity" or a figure "*calling* hym self," suggesting the act of labeling or "saying" calls the subsequent statement into doubt. Thus John Mortymer *calling* "hym selfe capiteigne" highlights his treasonous usurpation of this title. "When calling someone a traitor, the accuser often deliberately contrasted this label with the identity that the accused claimed for him or her self, that is, what the accused is 'called'" (42).

[24] Leitch, *Romancing Treason*, 2.

[25] As Nicola McDonald has articulated, her gender is one of the reasons the princess's power and direct discourse is surprising. Peggy McCracken has also written on the unequal gendering and power afforded women in romance, (particularly those that shed blood). In terms of the generic traditions, most romances deal with the male protagonist while overlooking the lady as the object of amorous desire: critics such as Aranye Fradenburg, Dorsey Armstrong, and Carolyn Dinshaw discuss this aspect admirably. Peggy McCracken, *The curse of Eve, the wound of the hero: blood, gender, and medieval literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Nicola McDonald, "Gender," ed. Marion Turner, *A Handbook of Middle English Studies* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013): 63-76; Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Duke University Press, 1999); Fraydenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer*. Medieval Cultures, 31 (Minneapolis: University of

promise from her father that she will have “offycers all at [her] wyll” (799). Even the love “desease” she suffers from—something typically suffered by the male hero for his nameless lady—is merely the means by which she can secure these armed “offycers” and the court’s attention.[26]

The princess’s prioritizing the decomposed corpse makes him the readers’ point of reference and “violently decenters the squire as both lover and adventurer.”[27] The two men, hero and “traytour,” become indistinguishable to the princess. “In doing so, [the narrative] undoes our confidence in romance’s ability to contain the impulse to disorder that is inherent in desire,” as McDonald concludes.[28] The princess becomes a pseudo narrator by instructing the squire about how to complete a romance quest or achieve knighthood, but she also misrecognizes and conflates the steward and squire as her love interest.[29]

While the princess may dominate the rhetorical space of the poem, defining knighthood to the squire and employing “counsayl” to achieve her desires, the king imagines materiality as the primary discourse of power (110). He offers “diamoundes,” “popinjayes pyght,” and “all maner delightes” to control his daughter and the court (798-800)—demonstrating a firm grasp of how to achieve control, even if his view is unshared by other figures. His place in the tale is reduced to material concerns, and he fails to sway the princess. The text problematizes the king’s preference for material objects in his failed (144 line) catalogue of “fynne golde” and “wyne,”

Minnesota Press, 2002); Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory’s ‘Morte d’Arthur’* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

[26] Chaucer’s Black Knight in *The Book of the* Duchess, for example, mourns over his beloved in a secluded garden rather than join the hunt. Orfeo goes into self-imposed exile in the wilderness and gives up his crown for ten years after the fairies take his queen. Both not only loose their vivacity and “hewe” upon the loss of their lady, they also remove themselves from civilization.

[27] McDonald “Desire out of Order,” 257.

[28] McDonald “Desire out of Order,” 257.

[29] A.C. Spearing uses this same detail about the princess’s and king’s control of the squire’s actions to assert the prominence of secrecy and knowledge as a form of social capital and narrative authority in which the steward and king are both master narrators. A.C. Spearing, “Secrecy, Listening, and Telling,” 273-92.

which he will provide to remove her amorous "desease."[30] He offers her "clothe of damaske with saphyres set" (718) to reject the corpse, refusing to recognize that the princess does not share his valuation of material goods. The king's reliance on wealth reveals his political impotence, for he fails to control the succession to the throne or his daughter as a subject. In the recent memory of the poet, Henry VII was similarly admonished by contemporaries for "los[ing] all sense of moderation and…[being] led to into avarice"—while his exploitative economic practices "obscured" any of his "good qualities" and leadership, giving some rebels justification for their uprising. [31]

The problem of the king's misplaced use of material wealth as social capital is compounded by his conflicting directives, which confuse the court and reader about his intentions. He "ordayne[s]" that the squire should win his fortune and then "wedde my doughter dere/ and have my landes both farre and nere" (878-80). Yet he also "ordeyned" Maradose "to spy"—two commands that contradict one another (641).[32] The king's affection for the squire troubles his own articulation of proper governance (through economic superiority) by casting himself as the love-sick supplicant. The court "loved" the squire, but

> So dyd the kyng full soddenly,
>
> And he wyst not wherefore nor why,

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[30] lines 708-852 catalogue the material objects which the king desires his daughter to partake in.

[31] Sydney Anglo, "Ill of the Dead: The Posthumous Reputation of Henry VII," *Renaissance Studies* 1.1 (March 1987): 30. Anglo outlines perceptions (both historical and contemporary) of Henry VII as avaricious and fiscally greedy. Paul Dalton and David Luscombe's collection of essays details the various rebellions that called on the king's misuse of wealth for justification. Dalton, Paul and David Luscombe, eds., *Rulership and Rebellion in the Anglo-Norman World, c. 1066-c. 1216: Essays in Honour of Professor Edmund King* (New York: Routledge, 2015). The reign of Edward IV, in the decades before *The Squyr of Low Degree*, was similarly critiqued for his taxation and civil war that "ruined" his kingdom, which further casts the Hungarian king's fascination with riches as dangerous here. Edward Kennedy, "Malory and the Marriage of Edward IV," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 12.2 (1970): 155-162.

[32] Following McDonald's assertion of the king's intense love for the squire (he seems to sexually desire the squire) I see the dual desires of personal and private leading to his "ordaining" both the squire and the steward under different avenues of royal directive.

The kynge beheld the squyer wele,

And all his rayment every dele.

He thought he was the semylyest man

That ever in the worlde he sawe or than.

Thus sate the kyng and eate ryght nought,

But on his squyer was all his thought (331-8)

He confuses the amatory economy of the text by making it "explicit" and "unmanageable"—making visible "other desires that likewise refuse to be managed."[33] Like other victims of love-sickness, the king is "soddenly" struck by the squire's "semylyness," and as a result cannot "eate" or think of anything but his love object. Even in his transfixion, however, the king still frames his love in economic and material terms, calling attention to the squire's "rayment" in "every dele" and imagined ownership of "his" squire. McDonald asserts the king's potential lust for the squire as "extraneous to the amorous economy of romance." By "explicitly recognizing [desire's] unmanageability, *Undo Your Door* makes possible other desires that likewise refuse to be managed."[34] The king's desires (calling attention here to their plurality) emphasize the other figures' desires which cannot "be managed" by the court or brought to serve its interests. The king's command for the squire to wed his daughter (after commanding Maradose to spy) is superfluous, as the princess had already commanded the squire's quest and the hero himself already pledged to marry her. The king maintains the illusion of authority by sending the squire on his quest, but the princess dictates the adventure that will prove he is "a venturous knight" (250).

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[33] McDonald, "Desire out of Order," 258.
[34] McDonald, "Desire out of Order," 258.

The squire's partial conceptualization of how to navigate the polity, the king's "queered" desire for economic and amatory control, and the princess's manipulation of amatory discourse for political capital all "disorder" and confuse the text's avenues for advancement. While McDonald contends that the closure of a romance's amorous desire "usually affirm[s] prevailing social and sexual hierarchies," the multiple amatory, economic, and political desires and competing conceptions of power held by *The Squyr*'s characters result in a disordered if not reversed court hierarchy.[35]

Valorizing the Traitor

While the text confuses effective or legitimate avenues for textual or political authority, the steward's actions to protect the princess align with judicial expectations and the king's own orders. The hero's role is destabilized and undermined by the avowed villain usurping his place, even when the text concludes by reinstating our expected order.[36] In contrast to these other figures, Sir Maradose betrays the squire's love to the king in order to maintain the political body's status quo through legal avenues. This section emphasizes that the steward's political actions are legitimate or legally orthodox in comparison to other figures' often-immoral personal desires. The squire is not only ignorant, his honesty and morality are called into question while the king's role in the body-trick further complicates his probity and motives for sovereignty. And while Maradose's personal envy of the squire may complicate the political atmosphere, he nonetheless champions an orthodox vision of sovereign authority.

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[35] McDonald, "Desire out of Order," 253.

[36] As McDonald notices, the princess's easy transference of her lover for the steward—despite kissing him daily—demonstrates the easy doubling of the hero. In fact, there is "little" to "distinguish the two men" and both are unsatisfactory "romance hero[es]" (261). The hierarchy or narrative structure that might "distinguish" the hero (squire) or his beloved (the princess) from secondary characters is erased by the steward's ability to mimic the hero and confound the princess.

While Maradose may "envy" the squire, his readiness to "suffre death and endlesse wo" in order to protect the king's interest (and his own) suggests that he is concerned with supporting the political body (404). His assurance that he will "never go therfro" (406) demonstrates loyalty to the king and his duty as steward. He alerts the king to the lovers' intent and offers "my hand to fight with him" (354), promising to "stand therby" and catch the squire "in the dede" (404)—as his oath requires. His violence against the squire is ordained by the king, and while he specifically defines his motives as "vengeance," this "envy" and need for vengeance is undefined (412). Regardless of the steward's possible personal motivations, the poet implies that the squire's secret love for the princess and circumvention of the king's command provokes Maradose's envy. Even the king implies the steward's suspicions are justified. Despite protesting the squire is "true of worde, and eke of dede," the king instructs Maradose to watch him:

> Therfore, stewarde, beware hereby,
>
> Defame hym not for no envy…
>
> [but] watche that lady muche of pryce…
>
> And if the squiere come to-night,
>
> For to speke with that lady bryght,
>
> Let hym say whatsoever he wyll…
>
> And herken well what he wyll say.
>
> So he come not her chambre within (382-9)

The king does not simply dismiss Maradose's complaint, suggesting the steward does hold some power within the court. Nor is Maradose's concern enough, for he must only "watch" the squire, respecting the king's favor for the squire even as he attempts to maintain traditional class interaction. The steward must "herken" to the squire's words, but himself remain in the

shadows—only authorized to “watche” unless the squire seeks entry into “her chamber.” While he may bid the lady farewell “curteysly” without violence from the steward, he may not seek entrance or bid farewell ‘uncourteously.’

The king’s commands are rather specific about what actions the squire may not perform, and thus the parameters of Maradose’s authority. However, the boundaries of what taking a “courteous leave” may be are less clear. Similarly, the king demands that if the squire “betraye” the lady by any unsanctioned actions, he will not allow the squire to “wedde my doughter dere” (445):

> But yf he wyl her chamber breke,
>
> No worde to hym that thou do speke
>
> For to betraye that fayre lady,
>
> Loke he be taken soone anone,
>
> But yf he come with company…
>
> [have him be] brought with strength to my pryson
>
> As traytour, thefe, and false felon.
>
> And yf he yelde hym to thee,
>
> Brynge him both saufe and sounde to me (424-43).

The squire may address the princess courteously, but he may not ask or attempt to enter her chamber, nor come with “company.” If he tries to overstep these commands, the king authorizes the steward to bring this “traytour” “with strength to my pryson.” Maradose’s authorized actions are to wait for the squire and allow him to take his leave of the lady. If our hero tries to “undo” her door, speak discourteously, or come with “company” then Maradose is not only allowed, but

obligated to take him "with strength." The squire's subsequent actions violate these parameters and legitimize the steward's violence.

Despite the king's threats and limitation on his actions, the steward renews his pledge to the king (403). The king requires visual or physical proof of the squire's intentions, allowing Maradose to seize him only if "thou myght take hym with the dede" (390). A.C. Spearing observes that "the only acceptable evidence of illicit sexual relations was to catch the culprits *in flagrante delicto*," which implies the king's favoritism for the squire by requiring such specific evidence to convict him and placing the impetus for justice and proof of the "dede" onto the steward.[37] Regardless of the king's ambiguous judicial virtue, he specifically "ordeyned" the steward "to spy" and condemns any who attempt to "breke" into the lady's chamber as a "thefe and false felon" (641/441). Since both the king and the squire attempt to gain entry into her chamber or "undo" her door, each man is "thefe and false felon" according to the king's own ordinance.

By ignoring his own mandate for the squire to be brought to prison "as traytour" if he should "her chamber breke," the king highlights his own failure to secure justice or follow the law. The squire indeed attempts to coerce the princess into opening her door, inventing "spies" and demanding she "undo [her] door." Undoing "her door" carries sexual connotations, as Nicola McDonald suggests, making the squire's imperative a request for entrance and for sex, a decided violation of the king's mandate.[38] Thus, according to the king's own command, the squire acts as a "traytour" and "false felon," obligating Sir Maradose to fight him. Accusations of "treason" are loosely traded throughout the text as the king, squire, and steward are all culpable of treason

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[37] A.C. Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur: Looking and Listening in Medieval Love Narratives* (Cambridge University Press, 1993): 183.
[38] McDonald, "Desire out of Order," 259.

(either against the state or against sovereign directive). The flexibility of the charge of treason obscures the distinction between legal and illegal actions.

As a guide for morality or communal governance, the *Squyr*'s king fails more definitively than the "traytour" by using the squire's "death," absence, and return as political capital with his daughter. The king responds to the steward's report of the lovers by ordering the steward not to harm the squire, for "I woulde not for my crowne so newe / That lady chaunge hyde or hewe" (387-8). As a king and as a father, he explicitly forbids upsetting the princess by unnecessarily harming the squire and seeks to preserve her "hewe." Yet, after the princess mistakes the faceless steward's body for her lover's, the king actively continues this deception for seven years while the princess becomes "pale as any stone" (712) and loses her marital value:

> He made revelation unto me
>
> That he knewe all your pryvyté,
>
> And howe the squyer, on a day,
>
> Unto your chambre toke the way,
>
> And ther he should have lyen you bi,
>
> Had he not come with company (989-94)

Without any judgment attached, the king acknowledges that the princess and squire were acting in "pryvyte" and that the squire did indeed attempt to break into her chamber to "lyen you bi." Their secrecy implies wrongdoing that, had the steward "not come," would have resulted in sin. Thus the king justifies Maradose's actions while failing to justify his own.

The dispersal of criminal agency from Maradose to the squire, and back again, and the fluidity of the charge of "treason" is made more complex by the king's agency in the body-switch. We are told that the king "knewe" of the squire's actions "every deale," yet "kept it in

counsele” from his daughter, preserving her lovesickness and isolation (737). Knowing of the squire’s victory, he keeps silent for seven years while his daughter mourns over the wrong body. The king effectively organizes the steward’s death by commanding that the squire “swere his counsayl he should never discure” (865). Thus the king is now the only character who may resolve the lovers’ dilemma but chooses to preserve the fiction and contain the princess in her chambers. While illogical, the king at once preserves the princess’s mourning and offers “fynne golde” and “wyne” to remove her “desease,” which only serves to accentuate his inept focus on materiality for a ‘desease’ he caused. The text problematizes the king’s preference for material objects over the succession of his crown, distracting the reader (but not his daughter) with these promises of material riches.

His decree that the squire’s whereabouts must be “kept in counsele” from the mourning lady calls his motives and ability to govern into question and implies his active participation in the body-switch. The king’s language when revealing to his daughter the squire’s survival almost directly parallels the poet’s omniscient narration, suggesting his orchestration of these violent events. Both the poet and the king share the language they use to inform the reader that

> The squyre sone in armes they hente,
>
> And of they dyd his good garmente,
>
> And on the stewarde they it dyd (651-3 and again 1025-7).

By focusing on the squire’s arrest and “good garmente” which they transfer onto “the stewarde there,” the king reveals knowledge only available to a direct actor in the deception.[39] His accusation to the princess that “ye have kept your enemy here...and [the squire] done in pryson for your sake” (1030-2) becomes emotional or political misdirection or manipulation by

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[39] A.C. Spearing similarly argues for the king’s narrative control in this scene, but does not touch on the culpability or ethical implications. Spearing, “Secrecy, Listening, and Telling,” 273-92.

suggesting the princess participates in the immoral scheme with the active construction of "*ye* have kept." The king's desire to misdirect blame onto the princess reframes his leadership and political control as personally motivated and fluid, if not malicious and criminal. As Leitch notes, the king's will was imagined or "understood to constitute the common interest."[40] Here, the king's orchestration of the steward's body-switch and the princess's prolonged mourning not only goes against her "interest" but also the "common interest" by preventing succession, political alliances through her marriage, and the court's progress away from her mourning.

We are invited then to question why the father would deceive his daughter when he had no objection to the squire as an heir.[41] The princess articulates such concern by asking "Alas, father, why dyd ye so? […] why hath this traytour me betraid?" (987&1043/1040). While the traitor she may intend is the steward for his violence against the text's hero, she noticeably fails to specify the pronoun or distinguish the 'traytour' from the one who betrayed her: her father. She asks why "*this* traytour me betraid," not a specific traitor. The treason is left ambiguous: the orchestrator of the body trick or the steward for his original ambush. The king becomes either the one to "betray" the princess by enclosing her with the traitor/steward, or the "traytour" who allowed her to be "betraid" by the corpse, or perhaps traitor for "betraying" his loyal steward Maradose in the first place. The legal and historical parameters of treason specify a crime against the king or his dependents as well as (in the latter half of the fourteenth century) against the political body or state.[42] The princess's complaint highlights the king's transgression against his

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[40] *Romancing Treason*, 30. Leitch points out the problems with the "circularity" of conjoining the king's will to communal interest. Her argument arises from historical tensions during the Wars of the Roses, but she links evidence of such tension in literary romances.
[41] The king welcomes the squire as "sonne" even without a knighthood or explicit reference to any improvement in his social or economic standing upon his return to Hungary.
[42] The 1352 Statutes codified and "limited the relevant crimes, articulating definitions for both high and petty treason." The laws for charging and punishing treason were therefore set down and widely accepted, stipulating "compassing or imagining the death of the king" or even intent to harm the king's authority as treasonous. In fact, in "English law, treason meant the breach or intended breach of a strictly hierarchical loyalty, with intent to effect

own heir and succession, which would fall under the range of personal "treason." While betraying the bonds of vassalage eventually became treasonous, although arguably not for the king himself, the princess's accusation of "betrayal" again questions his legal and moral authority.

If it is treason for the squire to attempt entry into the lady's chamber "alone," then the king shares culpability as well. The king's approach "hymselfe alone" (915) to his daughter's bower (in the same words as the squire's visit) draws a parallel in their visitations which invites suspicion of his motives, especially given his orchestration and obscure motives for the corpse ruse.[43] The king rejects the steward's warning for no other reason than "[the squire] served me syth he was younge and redy with me in every nede" (359)—offering favoritism as a problematic justification for overlooking his own laws. The squire's personal care of the king's "every nede" suggests the king has conflated the immediate gratification of his personal "nedes" and good service with good public governance. Good governance then is reduced from "a concern for 'yowre common welth'," or the defense of the "traditional rights" of the commonwealth, to simply good personal service.[44]

One lesser cited version of the text found in the Percy folio makes the implication more apparent by explaining the king's motive was "to have marryed thee [the princess] to a king" (166), which stresses that the social or political class of the suitor was of primary concern. In

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critical harm": Leitch, *Romancing Treason*, 22. However, this hierarchical definition gradually shifted to "the bonds of vassalage" and to the "imagined state" as well (Kratins, "The Middle English Amis and Amiloun," 352). By the 1450s the "commonweal" became the central focus in charges of treason, where a rebel's "subversion of…the comen wele" was of equal if not more import than the intended subversion of the crown. For the legal distinctions of treason in this period, see Leitch's *Romancing Treason*, 19-54.

[43] A.C. Spearing posits this is a problem of knowledge, asserting that the king becomes the master narrator—as is fitting for a Tudor monarch—by successfully orchestrating the plot and his daughter's seven-year internment before he allows for the squire's return and happy ending. I believe that his knowledge becomes a stumbling block obscuring his motivation by coupling knowledge with blame or wrongdoing.

[44] Strohm, Paul and Jean Howard, ""The Imaginary 'Commons'," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37.3 (2007): 554.

fact, Sara McDougall demonstrates that the criticism “bastard” more appropriately questioned the legitimacy of the offspring of unequal social pairings rather than unmarried ones—the rank of both parents needed to be equal for the heir to be worthy.[45] The squire’s "degree” therefore would have been insurmountable. Unlike other romance heroes who overcome birth to gain crowns, such as Guy of Warwick or Floris in *Floris and Blancheflour*, the squire marries the princess without a knighthood or title within the text.[46] The Percy’s squire succeeds to the Hungarian throne after being exiled from England before the tale for some unknown political crime “against the crown” (which includes the possibility of treason). Despite the squire’s landlessness and previous “crime against the crown,” the king nonetheless hails him as “my sonne so dere” (910), which grants advancement and imagines patrilineal succession in the face of dishonesty. The manuscript makes his rule reliant on or predicated by this crime. The “source” of future Hungarian succession is thus a low-born criminal—which forcefully questions his suitability to rule and suggests his loyalty is rewarded out of proportion to his value. The steward’s emphasis on and protest against the ways rule and reward are dispersed shows an anxiety about identifying legitimacy on a broader level.

The Percy folio alters the mistaken corpse to even more clearly problematize the king and destabilize ‘treason’—supplementing the squire’s body with a “hanged man” which the king’s guards “feitched downe” (78). The print version of the romance by Wynkyn de Worde and Copland (c1520/1560) not only adds the steward as the embalmed corpse, it also lengthens the duration of the corpse’s worshipped presence in the princess’s chamber and makes him the

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[45] Sara McDougall, *Royal Bastards: The Birth of Illegitimacy, 800-1230* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)
[46] Floris, for example, receives knighthood for sneaking into the Emir’s harem in *Floris and Blancheflour* while Guy is more traditionally knighted by King Athleston before becoming the “greatest knight” in *Guy of Warwick*. The *Squyre*’s self-conscious articulation of the genre suggests the king and the squire, as well as the audience, would be vividly aware of the failed knighthood here. The poet’s continued reference to the “hero” as “the squire of low degree” attests to this.

whistle-blower to the entire affair. Rather than a nameless criminal whom the guards find momentarily useful, the full poem has the substituted corpse belong to a legitimate member of the king's court and judicial body—one, moreover, who is obligated by his post to reveal treason and crime against the court. Sir Maradose is therefore not only a useful catalyst for the plot, the poet also emphasizes his position within the political community by naming him where he has no name in the alternate versions of the text. The "hanged man" also questions the king's motives, as the criminal body that the father uses to manipulate his daughter. But this situation also brings us back to the squire's own criminal history and reminds us of the pervasive political conflict and criminality at the heart of this romance.

The Percy's "squier of England borne" also amplifies this sense of conflict by having his presence in Hungary be the result of a "forffett" he "wrought…against the crowne…and against the fee."[47] The Percy poet magnifies the romance's derogatory description of the squire as one "of low degree" with the addition of some undefined crime, which renders his heroism suspect, and destabilizes the court when this criminal succeeds to the throne. The Englishman's crime was not only against the king, but against the entire "fee" or estate, which suggests the squire disrespects both the sovereign and the community. While a "forffett" or "transgression" against the crown and community does not necessarily equate to treason, it does imply the potentiality of treason, as a crime which "compassed or imagined" damage to the king or his justice.[48] Percy aligns or implies an alignment between the squire's unnamed crime and treason, which the text so vehemently critiques in the steward Maradose.

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[47] *The Squyr of Low Degree, Percy Folio* from Kooper, *Sentimental and Humorous Romances* (2006). Lines 1-3

[48] Leitch articulates the 1352 statutes articulation of treason as acting "contrary to the king's interest" or imagining the death or damage to the king, his heirs, companions, Realm, or even his currency, chancellors, or justices. Thus, a transgression against the crown and "estate" suggests damage to the king's interest. See Leitch, *Romancing Treason*, 21. See the MED entry for [forfeten, v.]: http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED16929

As various scholars argue, the charge of treason during the tumultuous fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was ambiguously defined or mutable at best—being used by multiple political actants as propaganda.[49] However at the core, any who "thought or acted" against the king "or his dependents" or "attempted to commit adultery with the princess" were legally traitors.[50] While the king is exempt from "treason" against the crown, he overlooks the squire who attempts to "commit adultery" and "acted against the king."[51] Instead, he punishes the one who sought to protect the crown, which throws the justice of his actions into doubt. The king ignores the squire's treasonous actions of "insulting public authority" and "adultery" with the heir.[52] By rejecting any firm meaning of treason or felony (the charge applied to Maradose and the squire in this scene) in favor of personal interest, the king is culpable for sharing in the squire's actions and for dismissing the legal apparatus or consequences of treason.

Perhaps the squire's ambiguous legality is what prompts the narrator to preserve his title as "of low degree," as he retains this identifier even after wedding the princess. His status within the court and within the text remains fixed, regardless of his marital success, strengthening McDonald's claim that the two men (the squire and the steward) are interchangeable. The princess's seven year dedication to the corpse might centralize her amorous constancy, but her desire not only unsettles the court by refusing to recognize her father's authority or recognize the

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[49] As Paul Strohm and Megan Leitch have notably proven, the term of "treason" was broad and covered a multitude of possible crimes beyond the 1352 Statute, but the use of the term was also fluid as various parties and loyalties employed and "counter-deployed" the charge. For more details, see the Introduction to this dissertation, Strohm's *Politique*, 188; and Leitch's *Romancing Treason*, 1-19.

[50] J.G. Bellamy, *The Law of Treason in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970): 1. Leitch and Strohm similarly discuss the ambiguities of treason, especially during the Wars of the Roses in the fifteenth century. Megan Leitch locates the 1352 Statutes as an attempt to codify treason and criminal laws, but as Strohm's analysis points out, as the crown shifted between various claimants and factions (Yorkists and Lancastrians), political actors employed the charge of treason to suit their objectives regardless of the traditional legal definition of the term.

[51] Bellamy, *The Law of Treason in England*, 1.

[52] Bellamy, *The Law of Treason in England*, 1.

steward's identity, her sexual desire for the "impregnated" embalmed body also unsettles traditional sexuality.

Dispersing Desire

The implied necrophilia in this text has garnered little critical attention; however, Elisabeth Bronfen articulates the similarly "ambivalent" embalming of the lady in the eighteenth-century novel *Clarissa*, arguing the body "afford[s] erotic pleasure even though or maybe because death has made her completely inaccessible."[53] The impossibility of attaining the beloved is what makes them desirable, meaning that lust and desire are only made possible by indefinite deferral. For the princess, the steward's body serves as a talisman or stand-in for her beloved, who is perhaps even more beloved for his "inaccessibility." The corpse remains an erotic object as she "kysse[d] that body twyse or thryse" (698-9) a day until it disintegrated into "powder small" (931). As an object of her erotic desire, the corpse mocks the princess's promise to become an "ancress" and deny her physical urges and material pleasure. It continually draws the princess back from mass and directs her desire onto itself rather than Christ as she "knele downe on her kne" every morning to "kysse that body" before falling into "a swowne" (697-700). While in Bronfen's analysis, Clarissa's corpse "obscures the possibility of decay" and becomes merely the fantasy of the love object, the steward's decaying body emphasizes the impossibility of stasis and reminds the reader of the moment of his mortality. Despite his embalmment, princess's physical attentions and misplaced desire hasten Maradose's decay into "powder small."

Rather than emphasizing amorous inconstancy or fallibility, Maradose's embalmed

[53] Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1992): 96.

decomposing body becomes a way for the princess to persist in and defer her desire. Even as his physical decay belies stasis within the court, the corpse does preserve the princess's emotional consistency. The steward's body "indefinitely stabilizes the relation between desiring subject and its object" and "eternally defers" the erotic or social consummation.[54] By remaining in stasis, the corpse offers the beloved "indefinite" access to their love—thus the princess remains the mourning lady who seeks to deny political change. The steward's preservation is meant to ward off physical "decay," but it highlights the decay of political and legal justice. In preserving the lady's love for the wrong hero, the corpse also preserves the squire's political failure, the king's narcissism, and calls attention to the body's substitution and ambiguous criminality.

The princess's desire for the body certainly causes the court and reader some discomfort (as Nicola McDonald notes), but returning our attention to the body itself also refocalizes the steward's vision of political authority. The body's failed support of commonweal (and legal precedent) is consistently centered—even if the steward failed, his body's importance may have more efficacy than his live resistance achieved. The princess's devotion and the king's failed pleas for her to abandon the corpse and "wedded a kyng" prevent the tale's or court's progress. The treason with which the steward is falsely charged remains a problem for the reader every time our attention returns to the corpse, which is continually. It is not only Maradose who becomes associated with criminality; the squire, the princess, and the king all share in some of the culpability. The narrative stresses treason's diversification by lamenting that "treason walketh wonder wyde" (520). The criminal element remains dispersed as the personified "treason" walks "wyde," rather than the steward himself—which suggests that any or even all figures are susceptible to being caught. By immobilizing the narrative, the corpse does what the

[54] Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, 96

steward did not: it calls attention to how power is dispersed across a range of figures, none of whom properly exemplify lawful authority.

According to Patrick Lantschner, medieval urban politics "revolved around" and even "relied on conflict," which suggests the *The Squyr of Low Degree*'s centralized criminal body serves a productive function.[55] The squire's "forfette," the king's backing of the squire's "felon[y]," and the steward's "treason" all offer different visions of political conflict which are integral to the social and political body. The English court relies on and participates in this conflict—the king's desire for wealth, the princess's desire for the performance of love, the steward's desire to serve the king and the squire's desire for heroism all compete and produce conflict. Yet the steward's willingness to interfere and instigate conflict allows these competing authorities to recognize the absent voice of the political community at large. Justice, like the romance's idealized hero, is a fantasy that can be deployed by multiple opposing sides or actors.[56]

The plural institutions governing legal political action in the medieval city further complicates articulating any superior authority. "Statutes, customs, *ius commune*, canon law, as well as other legal sources" – sometimes hierarchical, sometimes diverging – were all legitimate methods of controlling political authority.[57] We see this in the steward's appeal to the "custom"

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[55] Patrick Lantschner, *The Logic of Political Conflict in Medieval Cities: Italy and the Southern Low Countries, 1370-1440* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015). Lantschner specifies his argument around the City-states of medieval Italy and focuses primarily on urban conflict within groups, rather than individual actors already in power. From this position, he asserts that "the multiplicity of political units in these cities also provided the very bases for the formation of political action groups" (16). I believe this argument still applies even beyond separate cities and large "actions groups" to apply to the multiple political ideologies of the medieval English community. While the one "system" of conflict Lantschner discusses is the conflict and legitimization between the separate Italian city-states, he also notes the multiple systems and avenues for legitimacy taken by individual actors and rebels within one polity, which directly relates to the type of conflict within the English court.

[56] Lantschner asserts that conflicted "systems" sought different (legal and cultural) strategies of legitimization. Paul Strohm similarly articulates that political actors during the Wars of the Roses used accusation of treason as "political propaganda" which could be harnessed by various factions against one another—demonstrating it was a "mobile" term with mobile definitions according to the current seat of political power. See Strohm, *Politique*, 188.

[57] Lantschner, *The Logic of Political Conflict*, 22.

of his position when he pledges to “fulfyll” the king’s desire, watching the lady “nyght and daye” (456/454). As loyal steward for the king, his “customary” role is to aid and support the king’s household and oversee any legal or social complaints made to the “king’s bench.” As such, he is obligated or “ordayned” (641) to preserve the princess’s chastity and the king’s command. Maradose goes further to reinterpret “common law” when he acts to be “venged of that squyer” (412). While he explicitly desires to be avenged on the squire out of jealousy, the text also offers the inequality of their social status as an explanation of the steward’s actions. Rather than maintaining “eche man in his degré,” as Maradose desires, the king is opening social rank to all those who may acquire it by “herytage and by *purchace*.”[58] Common law would not only prevent the squire from “purchasing” a title, as “testamentary disposition” was not possible during the time, it would also prevent or frown upon a social inferior inheriting a title.[59] Medieval English models of inheritance and common law governing land tenure and titles did not allow landed elite to give or dispose of their titles to heirs of their choice. The king’s obsession with wealth presumably makes him amenable to dignities for sale, which only further critiques the king’s methods of governance.

While Eileen Spring notes that common law was not the only regulation over succession, common law *does* support Maradose’s actions here over the king’s.[60] Maradose’s subordinate position allows the king to silence his voice, but this liminality allows his decomposing body to critique the king and the political landscape. In this text, Maradose’s “ordayned” and legal action triggers the other figures into ambiguous and often problematic responses: the king’s body-switch, the princess’s necrophilia and rejection of her father’s authority, and the squire’s

[58] line 380, emphasis mine. The term includes every way to acquire an estate *except* for inheritance.
[59] Eileen Spring, *Law, Land and Family: Aristocratic Inheritance in England 1300 to 1800* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994): 13.
[60] Spring, *Law, Land and Family*, 13.

narrative absence. But his retention of a name, to return to Jane Bliss's reading, elevates his legitimacy and heroism within a genre that prioritizes attaining a name as central to one's status. That the king, princess, and squire fail to warrant names taints their ultimate succession and ability to dictate legal or political terms. As such, Maradose's perspective or interpretive position is elevated to compete with that of the tale's protagonists. Despite his implied distaste for the squire (as one of "low degree") the steward's corpse invites skepticism towards how the traditional hierarchy evaluates political actors. His stewardship questions the hierarchy that would imagine the protagonist or king defining justice to instead script legitimacy as a fluid and amorphous construct. Ultimately this very fluidity is what opens space for the reader, the court, and the princess to assert their own political voices—dispersing power across the communal space.

Raluca Radulescu sees a "contemporary nonexistence of royal authority" during the fifteenth century, pointing towards the continuous rebellion, deposition, and death of a succession of rulers as the culprit.[61] While Radulescu observes the weakening of royal authority and communal confidence, this text posits the dispersal of and uncertainty toward what court authority looked liked, rather than its dissolution.[62] Rather than focusing as Radulescu does on royal absence, I find that the steward's simultaneous centrality and criminality disperses political authority, which comes to be defined and acquired by multiple political players. In *The Squyr of Low Degree*, there is no royal absence but a multiplicity of actors all wielding competing forms

[61] Radulescu asserts "the contemporary nonexistence of royal authority." Raluca L. Radulescu, *Romance and its Contexts in Fifteenth-Century England: Politics, Piety and Penitence* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013): 10.
[62] Historical critiques of Henry were linguistically coded, according to Radulescu, in "accusations of treasonable language," where even the lower classes "expressed their irreverent views of the king in public places"(15). Romance and literary propaganda of the fifteenth century responded to anxiety over Lancastrian or Yorkist revolt and stories about Henry VI's insanity, inability to secure succession, or excessive piety by "reissuing" or "reinterpreting" traditional material to focus on the "urgent issues of regal behavior, of human suffering and of genealogical uncertainty": Radulescu, *Romance and its Contexts*, 26.

of power. This (late) romance may be responding to England's tumultuous and over-populated political sphere, but the "wicked" steward long pre-dates the Lancastrian and Yorkist bids for sovereignty. As early as *King Horn* or *Amis and Amiloun* in the early thirteenth century, stewards acting according to law, precedent, or moral codes are called treasonous or "fals." That the divisive voice of treason in these texts is also necessary for narrative or heroic progression and follows legal or royal authority suggests a dispersal and diversification of political power. The steward, as central to the legal structure yet liminal to the court, is able to highlight in this text the diverse methods for scripting royal or political authority and the ways such diversification challenges traditional modes of governance. The stewardship of a fluid and dispersed polity in the hands of traitors is what I take up in my next chapter on *Amis and Amiloun*.

CHAPTER 3

Stewarding Treason: The Political Instability of *Amis and Amiloun*

While *Amis and Amiloun* celebrates the death of the traitorous steward, his actions cast doubt on the heroes' "grete honoure."[1] The poet praises the brotherhood for their "trewth and godhede" and condemns the steward as "fals" and "ful of felonie," yet simultaneously calls on us to witness the nameless steward's moral and political honor during and after the judicial battle.[2] Amis does indeed commit the treason of sleeping with Belisaunt, and then deceives the duke in order for his brother Amiloun to fight in his place. The narrator's authority acknowledges this crime while other characters compound this condemnation by labeling Amis as being in the "wronge"—and yet the steward's orthodox fulfillment of his duty is similarly defined as "felouny." The steward activates, upholds, and serves as an instrument of the legal structure, where "lawe" takes precedence above the personal desires of those in power—frequently in ways which contradict the text's or hero's negotiation of power. In fact, both the steward and Amis are alternately condemned as "traitour" and "fals men" in the course of the tale (847). We are therefore left with an unstable political framework and a shifting definition of 'treason' as the political and social authority of the heroes and the villain are equally brought under suspicion. Despite the brothers' infanticide, murder (of Amiloun's wife and the steward), false swearing,

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[1] E. Foster, *Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle, and Sir Amadace* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: TEAMS in association with the University of Rochester by Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2007): line 72. All subsequent quotes will be taken from this edition and cited parenthetically within the text.
[2] Lines 2506, 311, 700 and 407 respectively.

and prioritization of their oath above communal bonds, the romance praises their loyalty and rewards the two knights while condemning the steward as a "traitor." What are the legal and moral implications of the romance's legal multiplicity—which defines the steward, heroes, and the ladies as alternatively "traitorous" and "trewe"?

In the previous chapter, the royal steward allowed us to shift our understanding from a vertical hierarchy of political authority towards an image of dispersed and competitive power negotiations. The *Squyr of Low Degre*'s steward articulates the needs of the community and mediates his personal desires with public duty while the hero fails, but in so doing reveals the limitations of both figures' constructions of authority. The more generically conventional steward in *Amis and Amiloun* takes this partial or competing authority even further as the nameless steward's orthodox politics undermine sovereign superiority. The steward's conflicted characterization underscores the court's conflicting systems of justice and exposes the ways competition governs the text's political discourse and community of political actors.

The text endorses the validity of the judicial battle and the steward upholding the legal system, yet nonetheless punishes the steward's actions as antisocial while praising the "heroes." I argue that the steward activates and serves as an instrument of the legal structure, where "lawe" takes precedence above the personal desires of those in power—frequently in ways which contradict the text's or hero's negotiation of power. By turning our attention to how the text cautiously validates the steward's dissenting political voice, I argue that the traditional hierarchy is troubled. Such instability or conflict appears necessary to the text's imagination of political legitimacy; socio-political status is not enough to merit authority. As the steward's conflict demonstrates, the heroes' authority must be ratified amongst a community of competing political

actors. The poem imagines the steward's dissidence productively negotiating the diverse political landscape as his actions cause other court members to oppose the brothers' self-interest.

Critical attention on Amis and Amiloun's ambiguous heroism has generally split over the brothers' hagiographic characteristics (seen in their divine favor despite their infanticide) or chivalry (their amorous adventures)—frequently in relation to how such categorization influences their fraught morality.[3] Ken Eckert, Ojars Kratins and Dean Baldwin, for example, argue the knights' sacred absolution overshadows their infanticide and murder; while Ralph Hanna, Thorlac Turville-Petre, and Sheila Delaney posit the romance's social and amorous concerns signal the text's chivalric qualities.[4] Concerns over the brotherhood's social, divine, or sexual nature have been well documented, but scholars remain puzzled by the narrator's moral uncertainty and refusal to define a moral center within the romance. The steward's simultaneous

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[3] Leah Haught astutely summarizes critical uncertainty as arising from the text's articulations of a "variety of competing "trewths";" as a secular, sacred, personal, social, or moral consideration. Leah Haught, "In pursuit of 'Trewth': Ambiguity and Meaning in Amis and Amiloun," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 114.2 (2015): 241. Ken Eckert, Ojars Kratins and Dean Baldwin, for example, argue the knights sacred absolution overshadows their infanticide and murder. See Baldwin, "*Amis and Amiloun*: The Testing of *Treuthe*," *Papers on Language & Literature* 16.4 (Fall 1980): 353-365; Eckert, "Amis and Amiloun: A spiritual journey and the failure of treuþe," *Literature & Theology: An International Journal of Religion, Theory, and Culture* 27.3 (2013): 285-296; and Kratins, "The Middle English Amis and Amiloun: Chivalric Romance or Secular Hagiography?" PMLA 81.5 (1966): 347-54. Ralph Hanna, Thorlac Turville-Petre, and Sheila Delaney posit the romance's social and amorous concerns signal the text's chivalric preoccupation, see Hanna, *London Literature, 1300-1380* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290-1340* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); and Sheila Delaney's "A,A, and B: Coding Same-Sex Union," in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004): 63-8.

[4] Marginalia in the Auchinleck manuscript suggests that readers actively compared protagonists across genres and evaluated based on these observations, condemning Floris and his scribe in *Floris and Blanchflour* as "idle" in comparison to Guy of Warwick's "valiant[ce]," for example.(101v) Guy was held, by this reader at least, to be the "valiant" hero by which others are evaluated, while *The Short English Metrical Chronicle* was used as a praise of piety or nationalism, rather than chivalric might. Auchinleck MS readers highlighted/underscored "king" and "jhesu" multiple times throughout *The Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle* 303v-316v and inscribed "we praise the…Domine" in 107v *The Battle Abbey Roll*. In contrast, a reader concluded a line of *Sir Bevis of Hamptoun* with "England," demarcating the text's language or locality as a specifically national concern, rather than a divine one.(184r)As Percy notes in his manuscript demonstrate, audiences compared romance heroes to others both within the genre and outside it, offering often "curious" and unstable categories of heroism as a result. The moral frameworks for evaluating the steward or brothers in *Amis* are therefore conflicted and unstable in either generic category.

“right” and “treachery” have been overlooked in favor of what the battle means for the knights or the genre.

Leah Haught in particular considers the effect their exclusivity has on the social community, asserting the protagonists “adhere to their private conception of *trewth* above not only their other obligations but also the needs and responsibilities of other characters.”[5] The lack of a shared legal or political vocabulary, and the brotherhood’s inviolable exclusivity, challenges the traditional power structure of a court. The poet’s emphasis on the steward’s political conventionality, the brothers’ treason, and the retained problem of the ending infanticide suggests that moral conflict pervades the text’s political and social landscape. The linguistic slippage between “treweth” and “treson,” as terms that refer to both specific acts and abstract values, invites competition between dissonant approaches to such values, as R.F. Green and Haught both articulate.[6] Rather than assess the “contentious” morality of the poem (as scholarship has already noted), this essay will consider legal multiplicity and the effect of the romance’s shifting political center.[7] Reading through the steward’s dual treason and fidelity

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[5] Haught, “In pursuit of ‘Trewth’,” 242.

[6] I lean on R.F. Green’s articulation of “truth” and “treason” as ambiguous “keywords.” Green demonstrates that *truth* and *treason* “had a far wider range of meanings in the fourteenth century than it does now, and changes in its meaning were proving a source of potential ambiguity for contemporaries” (207). Haught has similarly noted the wide range of definitions available for “truth.” The MED cites “sixteen different definitions…ranging from ‘fidelity’ and ‘honesty’ to ‘a promise…oath…or covenant,’ to ‘goodness,’’ a set of beliefs or doctrines’…” Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England*, 241. Haught comments on the “complex spectrum of competing values” which arise from such various approaches to “truth”—which simultaneously intensifies the word’s many possible meanings and strips it of any manifest connotation, directing audiences’ attention toward linguistic and ideological slippage and away from consistent or stable signification.” Haught, “In Pursuit of ‘Treweth’,” 242. The assumed link between “truth” (as rectitude or honesty) and moral superiority is clearly undermined by the lack of a stable definition of what that rectitude ought to look like, but the linguistic link remains nonetheless—as each character’s protestations of their “treweth” demonstrates. This paper specifically explores the linguistic slippage and resulting ethical space created between “truth” and “falsity,” or between “legal” and “criminality/treason.” Philosophers and historians have also tackled the problem of “truth,” commenting on the “multiplicity of co-existing truth games” (Weir, 368). The “politics of truth” therefore refers to not only localizing the specific form of “truth,” but also the power dynamics of those in question. Lorna Weir, “The Concept of Truth Regime,” *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 33.2 (2008): 367-89.

[7] Haught argues that the “impact of the romance as a whole might best be understood as contentious rather than as exultant...” Haught focuses on the effect this multiplicity and contentiousness has on *trewth* or morality within the

highlights the text's ambiguous political economy, offering criminality as a politically motivated charge with considerable socio-political capital.

Beginning with the ambiguity of treason's parameters, this study will trace the legal and political ramifications of the steward's duality. If justice requires and punishes the steward challenging Amis, how does the legal system function? By establishing the social and political obligation of the steward within the court network, the work emphasizes his correct performance of his duty, as well as his unique advocacy of justice. The narrative's other court figures manipulate policy or display moral failures, which further underscores the steward's vision of the polity as a dispersed network. The narrative validates the steward's disruptive action and fosters multiple power centers and ongoing conflict.

Revaluing the Traitor

Despite the poem's condemnation of the nameless steward as a "wicked traitour," the narrator offers him as an alternative to the text's protagonists and a safeguard against improper rule—giving him the voice of the "ryght" quarrel. Unlike self-interested desires of the brothers, duke, or Belisaunt, who all disregard socio-political obligations to the community, the steward's "trecherie" is valorized. "Envie" may be the steward's motivation, but the poet allows this envy to be both personally and politically defined.

> For thai were so gode and hende,
>
> or the douke was so wele her frende
>
> He hadde therof gret envie (211-3)

The steward's "gret envie" is a product of the duke's close friendship with the "gode and hende"

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text. This essay picks up on this same question, but explores how it provides interpretive purchase on the romance's political body. Haught, "In pursuit of 'Trewth'," 244.

knights above any other courtly bonds. We are told the duke loved the knights "so wele" that he provided "al that thai wald" (170), granting them high positions within his court and supporting them financially. This gives the brothers disproportionate access to power, which the steward is obliged to prevent. The steward's jealousy over the knights' popularity "*or*" the duke's love suggests both are problematic. The knights becoming too powerful *or* the duke showing disproportionate affection threatens the stability of the court. This suggests that the steward's request to join Amis's brotherhood and for the knight to "be me kende" (358) is motivated by his desire to break apart the brotherhood (or simply prevent the powerful brotherhood from such anti-social exclusivity), rise in favor himself, or to reduce the duke's dangerous favoritism. Even if his spying is initially inspired by personal jealousy, his actions conform to the legal parameters of his position.

In fact, the steward's disclosure of Belisaunt's and Amis's secret union goes beyond his personal envy or political jealousy. The traditional duty of the steward "to protect his overlord's interests and property, including the reputation of the duke's daughter," is coupled with his desire to join or dismantle the brotherhood.[8] Sheila Delaney reads his dual desire as introducing "queer" politics and desires into the heteronormative space of the poem. She argues the emotional intensity of these scenes suggest that queer desire and jealousy for Amis's love (and resentment at his rejection) trigger the steward's spying—allowing for a queer reading of other scenes as well. While some critics read the brothers' oath to one another as hinting at a sexual union, the steward's "resentment" demonstrates that sexual politics have become purely political. The text does not clarify what form the steward's "envy" or anger takes, but the resulting conflict is cast as political by the involvement of the entire court in the judicial battle. Sexual politics

[8] Delaney, "Coding Same-Sex Union," 69.

become politics tout court.

The steward's envy or bitterness at the unequal treatment was not abnormal; in fact such favoritism caused major rifts within Edward II's and Richard II's courts in the poet's and audience's recent memory.[9] Whether this mistrust arose from the brotherhood's implied or potential homosexuality or from their influence over the duke, their favor reflected back on the duke's political authority. Michael Hanrahan, quoting Adam of Usk, asserts that allegations of favoritism within court were frequently framed as sexual deviance—which rhetorically castigated political crimes as deviant "intimacies" and "sodomies," sometimes completely divorced from any sexual or physical acts. Richard II's marked favoritism for Henry Despenser, for example, was criticized as a sexual sin that made the king "unfit for rule."[10] Favoritism and unequal political intimacy may be of greater importance to the poet here than sexuality, but such criticism was frequently articulated in sexual terms. A figure's sexual practices—sodomy, homosexuality, and even extramarital desire—became linked to political deviance.[11] Of importance here are the ways that unequal "intimacies," whether political or sexual, caused political tension. The steward's "envie" cannot be isolated to purely sexual or social desires, but informs the political sphere as well.

The long delay between the steward's initial envy and his actions against the knights similarly reframes his intervention as proper stewardship of the court's interests. The knights' "hendness" and favor with the duke might initially inspire the steward's "envie" and initiate his

[9] Sheila Delaney outlines the close similarities between Edward II and Piers Gaveston and the brotherhood as a critique actively offered by the text. Richard II's favoritism toward Henry le Despenser, Michael de la Pole and Robert DeVere was likewise a main factor in the Merciless Parliament of 1388. Poor negotiation or lack of equality between political actors was a particularly contentious issue for Richard, but also plagued Edward II, Louis XI and James III of Scotland. See Sheila Delaney for specific details relating to the romance and Gerald Harriss, *Shaping the Nation: England 1360-1461* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2005) for a more general historical critique.
[10] Michael Hanrahan, "Seduction and Betrayal: Treason in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*," *Chaucer Review* 30 (1996): 235.
[11] See Paul Strohm's *England's Empty Throne* for more on sexual legitimacy signifying political legitimacy.

desire "to don hem schame," yet "yeres t[wo]" pass before he acts (215/17). Only after Amis engages in his secret relation with Belisaunt (a crime even according to Amis himself) does the steward move against him, and even then his action follows the required parameters of his post by bringing this news to the duke. If personal envy were the steward's only motivation, then his two-year delay is hard to justify.

While the duke takes the steward's word as proof of Amis's guilt—which itself suggests the close affective bond between the duke and his steward—there is "no wight [in the court]… durst ben his borwe among" (1096-8). The text is ambiguous, but the court's reticence in supporting or seconding Amis, who is described as so loved by the Duke, suggests that either the court fears the steward's power or they, like him, resent the brothers' status. The poet is silent on the precise justification of the steward's envy, but the court's refusal to "borwe" Amis suggests that they back the steward and similarly share his envy or concern over Amis's actions. In a chivalric community, seconding or guaranteeing a fellow knight was common, which suggests the court's reluctance has more to it than the steward's physical "might" but instead implies his honor—and Amis's lack. In fact, Robert Bartlett demonstrates that "charges of treason…or perjury involved not only the imputation of wrong, but also the implicit accusation of bad faith…for the charge implied that no trust could be placed in the word of the accused."[12] Even when the "judicial battle" occurred between second parties, the accused's word would be suspect, according to Bartlett. Amis's difficulty finding a peer to "borwe" for him may be related to the reticence of the accused, but it may also (or instead) suggest a pre-existing prejudice against Amis—perhaps because of his great love for Amiloun which excluded the court from their brotherhood, their belief in his liaison which breaks faith with their lord, or a chivalric or

[12] Robert Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1986), 108.

political failing the poet has not explicitly narrated.

And while the court expresses joy upon Amiloun's victory, their joy hints at appreciation of public spectacle rather than a particular love of Amiloun/Amis:

Alle the lordinges that ther ware,

Litel and michel, lasse and mare,

Ful glad thai were that tide.

The heved opon a spere thai bare (1369-73).

Mounting the steward's head within the public square and rejoicing in the knight's success where stanzas earlier they refused to support him questions their authentic support for Amis. The lords of the court might have justified loyalty to Amiloun or hatred of the steward, but the "litel and michel" of the entire community are also "ful glad." The poet's explicit inclusion of multiple social classes removes the court or political factions as an interpretive metric for the battle. Instead the steward's death becomes a spectacle for public consumption divorced from the precise justifications for the conflict.

Larissa Tracy and Elaine Scarry both suggest that depictions of torture and public executions represent satire, critique, and dissent against the status quo rather than celebrations of the regime's stability.[13] It is "precisely because the reality of that power is so highly contestable, the regime so unstable, that [execution and] torture is being used."[14] The text emphasizes the entire community's presence at the judicial combat and the steward's subsequent beheading, and turns his head into a symbol of Amis's (and the Duke's) power. Yet this reaction indicates the "fiction of absolute power" more than it proves the brotherhood's dominance. In Scarry's

[13] Larissa Tracy, *Torture and Brutality in Medieval Literature: Negotiations of National Identity* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012).
[14] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 27.

argument, textual representations of excessive violence and torture are an attempt to stabilize and secure the "contestable" and unstable nature of power. Kathryn Royer similarly looks at the English execution narrative to claim that the absence of blood, as we see in this scene, suggests the text's attempt to "dehumanize" the traitor and "remove him" from the civic and Christian community.[15] Depictions of abstract violence (without the visceral representation of bleeding and blood) allow the audience to "dehumanize" the victim and distance him from their civic community. If this is the case, it would not matter to the audience of *Amis*'s battle which combatant succeeded—either man would have been joyously supported while the corpse would be vilified and removed from their "civic and Christian community" in order to symbolically support the court's strength. Moreover, mounting a head on a spike was specifically reserved for *high* traitors (not just petty), so this performance of joy at the spectacle of the steward's death is also a politically necessary performance of loyalty and national identity.

Amis demonstrates this instability linguistically when he explicitly claims that "Ich have that wrong and he the right" (940), casting the steward as the morally and politically superior figure, despite being branded a "traitor" (951). The steward's protest that Amis will be "ataint" by court reminds the reader of the steward's legitimacy in the civil courts while also suggesting that Amis is morally "tainted" within the canon courts.[16] The steward condemns Amis as a "traitour [and] fals man," just as the text calls the steward himself the same (848). "Traitour" and falsity now describe the heroes of the text with equal validity as the words apply to the villain. Amis tells us the steward has the "right," while this upstanding figure tells us the knight is a "traitour" and "fals." The audience is invited to up-end the text's justice and social hierarchy

[15] Katherine Royer, *The English Execution Narrative 1200-1700* (New York: Routledge 2016), 11.
[16] Edward Foster glosses "ataint" (849) in his edition of the text as a civil term relating to "property and civil freedoms."

here, yet the poet remains steadfast in describing the steward as "that feloun" and "fals" while Amis is "bold" and "hend."[17] The juxtaposition of the steward's right and his accusation of Amis's false "treason" closely followed by the poet's accusation against the steward using these same terms creates a disjunction between the characters' understanding of justice and our own. If the hero admits his lack of "trueth" but the poet continues to vilify his judge, political merit and justice become arbitrary.

As Megan Leitch demonstrates, the English had "a constitutional understanding of treason" codified in the 1352 Statute of Treason, which "clarified and limited the relevant crimes…for both high and petty treason" as anything that "compass[ed] or imagin[ed] the death of the king" or even intended to harm the king's authority.[18] In fact, Richard Firth Green and Leitch demonstrate that the "institutional view of treason" defined it as "the breach or intended breach of a strictly hierarchical loyalty."[19] However, as this steward demonstrates, identifying treasonous thoughts and activity was much more fraught than the Statute imagines, and frequently depended on political and personal motivation. While according to legal statutes, "hierarchical crimes" were perhaps the most egregious acts of treason, disloyalty, hypocrisy and offences against peers (or kin) could also be generally discussed as treason. The steward's "tresoun and gile" is not necessarily a hierarchical crime, as Amis is a peer rather than a lord, but his disclosure to the duke of Amis's tryst is framed as treason (407). However, Amis's amorous

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[17] Lines 1082 and 1106 describe the steward's falsity while Amis and Amioun are "hendi" knights and "bold" in 1108 and 1123.
[18] Megan Leitch, *Romancing Treason: The Literature of the Wars of the Roses* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 22.
[19] Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, 208; and Leitch, "Romancing Treason," 22 respectively. Green defines treason as having "two centers: a personal conception in which the offense was committed against someone who had good reason to trust the traitor…and an institutional view of treason according to which it could only be committed against someone in political authority, particularly the king, his immediate family, or his judicial officers." Green proposes that "the [Statutes], by trying to insist that treason should be defined as any challenge to the king's sovereignty, found itself in conflict with some deeply held traditional ideas about the nature of social order." In effect, "troth" (as plighted oaths of loyalty) works at odds with the institutional view of treason.

relation with Belisaunt, according to English law, would be a hierarchically treasonous crime for its transgression against the lord and succession, making it a more serious offense.

Legal chronicles and critics agree that hierarchical transgressions (treason) were perceived as more serious than any other offence, but defining its boundaries was challenging.[20] While the repeated condemnation of the steward as “fals” because of his “tresoun” demonstrates the narrator’s censure of the crime, the steward’s actions were in fact within his “jurisdiction” to oversee the “Court of Chivalry.”[21] The steward is obligated by the same legal codes that condemn him to reveal Amis’s affair to the duke. Historically, stewardship of the king and his court was “characterized by its close connection with the king…and its complete subjection to the royal will” even as the steward retained control over certain judicial matters of the court. The steward had “special jurisdiction” to oversee legal and domestic complaints within the king’s domain—through the “Marshalsea court” or “court of the steward and marshal”—which frequently included any “breach of the peace” or threats to “the royal dignity.”[22] Not only was the steward obligated through his oath of loyalty to the duke to report Amis’s dalliance with Belisaunt, his role as judge over domestic affairs within the “court of the verge” required him to act against the knight. In fact, by the late fourteenth century, it appears that the royal steward and the Marshalsea court oversaw inquests of treason more commonly under the domain of common law courts, as happened with the partisan nobles of Richard II, and it was not until centuries later

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[20] Leitch, *Romancing Treason*, 24.
[21] Leitch, *Romancing Treason*, 22.
[22] Beginning in the late thirteenth century, the royal steward had jurisdiction over the “court of the verge” or “Marshalsea court”—which governed a range of complaints within the royal court. The distinction between the court of the verge and the *Curia Regis* is not entirely clear, but traditionally any “domestic” matters or “breaches to the king’s peace” or the “royal dignity” within twelve miles of the king’s residence counted as a matter for the court of the steward (2). Even after the stewardship was stripped of official political powers, his position still exercised significant judicial powers within the king’s court (meaning that occasionally there is very little to distinguish between his legal authority and political weight). W.R. Jones, “Court of the Verge.”

that parliament transferred all "judicial competence" of treason into the "common law courts."[23]

The steward, then, not only had the potential to control the royal administration, but also influence what was defined and charged as treasonous. The jurisdictional role of the steward may be a factor in his textual vilification—a reflection of contemporary anxiety about his authority—but it also points towards a more general ambiguity of jurisdictional authority as partisan or dispersed. Rather than look at *Amis*'s steward as a symptom of fourteenth-century politics, his liminal yet vital status to court function in multiple romances (spanning the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries) suggests an ongoing anxiety of how justice was defined and who controlled legal narratives. Stewards, across these romances, flag a critical intersection between criminal voices and political change—documenting the gradual dispersal of government authority away from the central court to a wider (communal) network.

This text's destabilization of treason's parameters, by making the steward both judge and criminal, similarly points towards the multiplication of the political community. The narrator describes the steward's desire to "bring hem [Amis] into care" as "with tresoun and with gile," which is repeated three times in reference to the steward's actions (707-8). Leitch picks up on the literary uses of "treason" in late medieval texts to argue that while it may have a fluid application, it nonetheless carried a "sense of gravity" well above that of "betray" or "treachery"—which held less legal and political weight.[24] *Amis and Amiloun* specifically employs the term towards Amis, Amiloun, and the steward to condemn Amis's rejection of the

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[23] Jones identifies a grouping of pleas and records from the court of the verge of "inquests into the treasonable activities of certain nobles, partisans of the late king, Richard II, before the steward and marshal sitting at Oxford on January 12, 1400." The nature of the defendants and charges suggest that "it was the sort of 'state trial' which usually came within the jurisdiction of the court of the Constable and Marshal." Finally, "an exasperated parliament abolished it and transferred its judicial competence to the common law courts" in 1849. Jones, "The Court of the Verge," 6.

[24] For example, Leitch notes that in the *Roman de Tristan* Mark is condemned as "cowardly" and "disloyal" while Malory translates the episode to "traytourly and cowardly," suggesting the English were particularly attuned to the legal vocabulary of treason as well as its parameters: *Romancing Treason*, 26.

steward's oath, Amiloun's bed-trick, and the steward's exposure of Amis's dalliance to the duke. In fact, "traitor" and "treason" appear over 25 times throughout the text—more than any other condemnation (well above terms such as "treachery" or "false"). The poet chooses to define most conflicts in the text as "treasoun" rather than any other legal or cultural category of crime. One explanation is offered by Paul Strohm, who asserts "treason" had "become a mobile signifier, available for application and use by either party," harnessed by any political actor as an attempt to undermine their opponent or more firmly grasp power themselves.[25] Here, however, the shifting uses of treason result from different speakers. This is certainly apparent in *The Erle of Tolous*, discussed in chapter four, where charges of treason are thrown at each figure by the narrator and individual characters intermittently.

While the steward condemns Amis as "thou traitour [of] unkinde blod" and Amis calls himself an "ivel traitour" if he accepts Belisaunt, the only accusations of treason made directly by the narrator are against the steward (389/608). The duke claims Amis is a "traitour stronge" and "vile traitour," Amis condemns himself and even calls Amiloun a "traitour" when he mistakes the leper as his brother's killer, and the steward explains Amis is "a traitour strong,/ when he with tresoun and with wrong/ thi douhter hath forlain!"[26] The steward's articulation of treason conforms to the Statute's articulation of a hierarchical offense, and in fact the most frequent repetitions of "treason" are applied to the one of the knights directly by a character—frequently by the steward, but also by the duke himself who promises to "the traitour slon" (827).

[25] Strohm, *Politique*, 188. Strohm, Wendy Scase and Megan Leitch all comment on "treason" as a "floating signifier" (Scase, 237) or "an anti-principle, a recognized component of most mid- to late fifteenth-century English political smear campaigns" (Leitch, *Romancing Treason*, 29). Wendy Scase, "'Strange and Wonderful Bills': Bill-Casting and Political Discourse in Late-Medieval England," *New Medieval Literatures* 2 (1998): 225-27.

[26] The duke calls Amis a "traitour stronge" and "vile traitour" on lines 790, 800, 822, 824, and 827. Amis condemns himself a traitor if he "deshonour[s]" his lord (608) and calls Amiloun a "traitoure" twice when he mistakes the leperous Amiloun for stealing his brother's cup (2045/2076). The steward accuses Amis multiple times as a "traitour" for "tresoun," of which this quote above is only one example (790-2).

In terms of frequency and consistency, the brothers are the traitors—yet these accusations are made by a character and countered by the narrator's consistent praise. The only treason defined by the narrator is that against the steward. The poem therefore sets up a conflict where fallible characters may hold the knights in contempt but the authority of the poet condemns only the steward. The audience must choose between the narrator's political evaluation and the hero's. Treason indeed becomes the "mobile signifier" Strohm outlines, but the narrator becomes one such fallible "political actor" set against his characters, rather than an objective speaker. The disjunction between understandings of treason demonstrates that each operates with different models of the political structure or action and that any normative principle is subject to negation by a range of political participants. The steward champions legal precedent, the characters articulate self-interest at war with such norms, and the narrator allows both visions to stand before ultimately condemning precedence.

As the vilified voice of legal precedence, the steward's "tresoun" casts him as a scapegoat who nonetheless highlights the failure of our hero and the system he operates within. Judith Weiss uses Mordred, himself the temporary steward of Arthur's kingdom, to demonstrate romance's willingness to "sometimes allow" the villain "redeeming features" despite his role as traitor—even while sowing the "seeds of destruction" within the hero's "own character."[27] *Amis* describes Amis's "wrong" in the same breath as accusing the steward of "falshede," which destabilizes the text's definition of justice rather than convincing the reader of either party's corruption (940/945). If the steward is "redeemed" by his moral quarrel, which the narrator and Amiloun's wife support, then criticizing him "sows seeds" of distrust (if not "destruction") not only within Amis's character, but in the political and judicial system generally.

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[27]Judith Weiss, "Mordred," ed. Neil Cartlidge. *Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance*. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012): 81-98.

Rethinking the Heroes

The steward's ambiguous treason—which advocates for traditional justice and the entire political community—is unique within the text's political landscape.[28] We meet the "chef" steward as a "douhti knight" who is always "at crie" for the duke, a loyal servant of the court who mirrors the traditional romance hero's "douhtiness" (206). While this "gentil" steward, always "at crie" for the duke, is castigated as a traitor for threatening the brothers, the romance's other figures avoid this censure even as they politically and morally fail. The steward's unique voice for justice (or at least he negotiation of how the system functions) becomes pronounced in juxtaposition to the other central figures' moral and political failures. Not only does the duke abstain from actively governing his own land, Belisaunt participates in blackmail while each brother individually and jointly commits crimes against the polity and morality (such as the infanticide with which criticism has grappled).

The steward's distinctive manipulation of the political network and his constant attendance on the duke allows him to "aspie" both lovers "withouten les," which links his access to (truthful) knowledge and his power in the court (728/731). The lovers Amis and Belisaunt agree to their secret love in a garden "togider alon" (568), yet the steward "parceive[s]" their secret while none of the court suspect. Belisaunt "an hundred time…cast hir sight" onto Amis in full view of the court:

Wel fast [the steward] gan hem aspie

[28] We might consider the steward an "anti-hero," as Neil Cartlidge articulates, where his "rebellion" rejects the organizing metrics of romance and in fact provides "imaginative power" and bolsters "the idealization of heroism." We expect heroes "to be distinguished from anti-heroes by their ethical virtue, cultural identity, and ultimately success in combat," yet the steward illustrates the ways Amis and Amiloun fail this structure. Our villain is effective enough to intimidate the court and reveal Amis's treason to the duke—which causes Amis to run and hide in a locked room rather than display "success in combat." See Neil Cartlidge, *Heroes and Anti-Heroes*, 159.

Til he wist of her fare

And bi her sight he parceived tho

That gret love was bituix hem to (701-4)

Without overhearing their pledged love, the steward "parceived" the "sights" exchanged by the lovers in court and accurately intuited their "gret love." From this knowledge, he is then able to obtain proof of their illicit affair to reveal to the duke. And while Beliasunt was "casting" these "sights" a "hundred times" under the very eyes of her father and the court, they nonetheless failed to "parceive" the couple's intentions. The romance steward frequently obtains secret knowledge by eavesdropping and overhearing conversations that other court members don't have access to, as with *The Squyr of Low Degree*'s Maradose. *Amis and Amiloun*'s steward is unique amongst the court by intuiting this secret knowledge "withouten les," which frames his knowledge as indisputable while the duke and other figures operate with only partial or insufficient understanding.[29] The duke is similarly unable to perceive the threat posed by the knights' anti-social bond, Amis is unaware of the divine voice warning Amiloun of leprosy, and Amiloun's wife is unable to discern that the wrong knight sleeps in her bed. The entire romance is filled with characters with limited knowledge or an inability to interpret their roles within the tale, with the exception of the steward.

The steward's greater understanding of courtly negotiation is evident in his demand to hold and participate in the narrative's judicial combat after he reveals the lovers:

The steward was michel of might;

[29] The entire romance is filled by characters with only partial or limited understanding. The Duke recognizes the knights are "brothers" and that their bond is exclusive, yet cannot recognize the threat this poses to his other courtiers or that their bond may allow them to circumvent justice: "Were ye bothe went me fro,/ Than schuld me waken al mi wo,/ Mi joie were went oway" (271). The duke instead prioritizes his "joie" in their company over the threat his favouritism will pose to his court.

In al the court was ther no wight

Sir Amis borwe durst ben.

Bot for the steward was so strong (868-71)

His ability to "aspie" and "parcieve" demonstrates his intellectual superiority or physical mobility throughout the court, but his "strength" here also implies his political and physical influence within the court.[30] His "might" and "strength"—which may apply equally to his physical and chivalric qualities—has a marked effect on the political body. After the trial by combat has been announced, none within the court are willing to "borwe" Amis—simultaneously casting doubt onto Amis and demonstrating the steward's powerful influence. The steward's physical participation in the duel, regardless of the outcome, further illustrates his commitment to the political system.

While *Amis and Amiloun* recounts a conventional romance duel (that need not conform to the historical reality of judicial trials), the text's very ambiguity about the court's position, the steward's relative strength, and Amis's lack of support calls attention to the combat's structure. As Jacqueline Stuhmiller contends in relation to Malory's romance, "duels of law" could also have functioned "as a means by which personal goals can be fulfilled…under the guise of impartial justice" as well as an attempt to "preserve communal cohesion" by sharing the burden of justice across the community.[31] Amis's lack of courtly support and the praise for (or potential intimidation by) the steward's "strength" acknowledges that such trials were not truly "impartial."[32] When we approach the steward's challenge in this light, his call for battle can be

[30] The steward's ability to occupy physical spaces unnoticed, or sneak into these spaces, allows him to occupy many positions from which to see—which I include as an aspect of his superior knowledge here.

[31] Jacqueline Stuhmiller, "'Iudicium Dei, iudicium fortunae': Trial by Combat in Malory's 'Le Morte Darthur'," *Speculum* 81.2 (2006): 429 and 434.

[32] It is important to note here that the poet clearly deviates from historical or real judicial combat, in which combatants (champions in civil cases and appellor and appellee in criminal duels) "had to shave their heads, wear leather suits, and fight with horn-tipped batons." The poet is either romanticizing the practice or is ignorant of the

simultaneously motivated by a personal grudge against Amis *and* out of obligation to the community's "cohesion."

In contrast to the steward's quick perception or pursuit of communal unity, the duke is surprisingly marginalized. Amis's transgression, for example, is discovered and 'punished' by the steward on the field while the poet leaves the duke "off-stage" and silent within the text. The steward confronts the duke, asking him to "herken to mi sawe!...Therefore ich aske jugement" (1206/10). *Amis*'s "riche douke" is primarily identified through his material wealth, which he uses to "drive" traitors "of [his] lond" (725). And while his wealth and feasting surely appeal to his court, he remains on the narrative and judicial sidelines, allowing his "grete love" to sway his political actions. Despite "asking" for judgment, the steward's imperative "herken!" and reminder that "it is londes lawe" (1212) turns this request into a demand. His reminder that it is the duke's land's "lawe" to judge Amis implies the steward's fear that the duke may be swayed by favoritism. Law taking precedence over the duke conforms to political ideology, but his silence while the steward is the voice for that law is surprising. The "fals" steward demands "jugement" and by doing so divides the court into factions of support, but his purpose is to support the "londes law" and traditional legal structures. By championing the judicial combat and demanding the court "herken" to his accusation, the steward protects the legal system while the duke is comparatively silent.

We might expect the duke's second to act as the proxy in the trial; however, upon the steward's death the duke's authority is restricted to the knight's amorous future. While before the battle, the duke was ready to burn his wife and daughter (who acted as guarantors for Amis),

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real procedures when narrating the duel as a chivalric combat. Regardless of contemporary accuracy, the poet imagines the duel as a chivalric exercise in which the community believes the stronger knight will win—which in this case is the steward (as the court refuses to fight him). See Stuhmiller, "'Iudicium Dei, iudicium fortunae'," 434; and George Neilson, *Trial by Combat* (Glasgow: William Hodge & Co., 1890) for details.

after the duel the poet leaves him silent about the legal outcome. His willingness to "tho levedis take…to bren" when Amis/Amiloun did not arrive for the combat displays his prioritization of the law above his familial loyalty—even when the initial crime was defiling the daughter he was about to burn. Yet after the combat and the steward's death, the duke is silent, offering comment on Amis's amorous desire but eliding the political or judicial nature of the combat:

> Y graunt the ful yare,
>
> For Belisent, that miri may,
>
> Thou hast bought hir ful dere today (1386-8)

The steward called for a duel to determine Amis's potential betrayal, which enraged the duke. Yet upon determining that "no" defilement happened, the duke offers the "miri [maiden]" as payment. There is a disconnect here between the trial's terms and the duke's reward, which the poet glosses over in favor of the knight's amorous sucess, but which nonetheless remains for the reader. Legal resolution would dictate Amis's pardon, not a crown or matrimony—yet the duke's response entirely neglects legal justice in favor of personal desires.

The personal desires of the brothers similarly take precedence over the communal polity with their anti-social oath to one another "in wrong and right" (149). This binary offers competing conceptualizations of the brothers' moral and political voices as well as the text's vision of their political community. Amis admits that conceding to Belisaunt's love would do "deshonour" and make him "an ivel traitour" (607-8), but nonetheless returns her favor. We have already discussed the instability of "treason" as a personally motivated charge, but here Amis's decision to act regardless of this "deshonour" merits attention. By committing this "dede"—taking Belisaunt's maidenhead and then compounding this "sinne" by lying about it—Amis becomes the "ivel traitour" he initially condemns. Furthermore, he explicitly declares that:

"yif y do mi lord this wrong,

With wilde hors and with strong

Y schal be drawe also" (643-5).

Amis himself positions his actions as politically problematic against "his lord" and reminds the reader of the expected punishment—and by specifically contemplating being "drawn" by "wilde hors" he suggests real experience with treason's dangers. Yet Amis implicitly accepts this punishment by committing the "wrong." While we might sympathize with Amis's dilemma here—either falsely condemned for rape or legitimately condemned for doing "mi lord wrong"—he nonetheless accepts Belisaunt's love, and compounds his passivity by attempting to displace blame and conscript his brother to fight in his place. Amis may recognize the parameters of legal, political, and moral action, but he conforms to the system that forces him into such a dilemma—or at the very least expose to the reader that system's failures which sustain such a dilemma.

Amis inability to choose any course or mediate the conflicted pressures of the court is most apparent when the steward reveals his sin to the duke—prompting Amis to run and "heved his hide" (811). The text establishes competing desires amongst the court, which Amis is unable to negotiate—the lady's lust, his bond of brotherhood, the Duke's anger, and the court's envy of his position. Faced with this dilemma and the angry Duke, Sir Amis "into a chamber ran tho…for drede" (813). The romance audience might expect the protagonist to easily overcome his angry foe with superior "douhty[ness]" and "bold[ness];" instead Amis displays cowardice by running away into a chamber.[33] Rather than the steward's aggressive approach to the competing

[33] Even in romances where the hero is confronted by an angry overlord, as in Malory's Gareth—who fights the Black Knight and Lancelot despite being a "kitchen knave"—the hero performs chivalric prowess by engaging in combat. Horn similarly fights even when outnumbered, praised by the text for his "doughtiness." As Hume notes, we anticipate romances reward "the good" and "punish the bad," but we get neither in this text. Kathryn Hume, "'Amis and Amiloun' and the Aesthetics of Middle English Romance," *Studies in Philology* 70.1 (1973): 28.

political systems, Amis attempts to escape that conflict by hiding. Amis's fear comes hand in hand with the duke's loss of reason in the same scene. The duke becomes "egre of mode…as he were wode" and "smot to Sir Amis ther he stode,/ And failed of him biside" (805-10). The entire court attempts to placate the duke's madness without success, implying the duke's inability to rule his own humors, let alone his court or country. While "boldness" is praised, the narrator critiques those who lose reason or "hende[ness]," making the duke's loss of reason here a question of political fitness as well as emotional control. The romance thinks through the way that the political structure requires negotiation of various constituencies, which both the duke and Amis fail to do in this violent scene. Their failure to manage their own and the court's competing desires signals the necessity of the steward's (treasonous) negotiation.

In contrast, Belisaunt's threat to cry rape if Amis refuses her love is surprisingly aggressive, emphasizing the knight's comparative passivity and the ways sexual politics are intertwined with court politics. Belisaunt suggests that if he refuses to sleep with her, then "thou no schust have ben no knight, to gon among maidens bright" (619-20) which predicates knighthood on sexual aggression and makes a knight's value entirely dependent on his sexual desirability.[34] Such value being placed on a knight's sexual availability is not unusual in romance, as *Launfal*'s queen demonstrates in her accusation that since he "lovyst no woman," Launfal "were worthy forlore" (689-90). What is surprising here is Amis's sexual passivity throughout: his reluctance to accept Belisaunt or find an alternative to her choices of treason or

[34] As Carolyn Dinshaw convincingly shows, "there is good late medieval evidence that sexual acts were fundamental to an individual subject's sense of self and location in larger cultural structures" (208). Olga V. Trokhimenko argues in Medieval German literature, clerical celibacy caused anxiety as it precluded the sexuality which traditionally defined masculine gender identity. If a cleric's masculinity is questioned by his inability to pursue or engage in sex, then masculinity and sex are linked. Carolyn Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just a Kiss: Heterosexuality and its Consolations in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *Diacritics* 24.2/3 (Summer-Autumn 1994): 205-26; Olga V. Trokhimenko, "'Believing that which Cannot be': (De)Constructing Medieval Clerical Masculinity in 'Des Münches Not'," *German Quarterly* 85.2 (2012): 121-36.

sex and his abstinence towards Amiloun's wife. After agreeing to Belisaunt's lust and conscripting Amiloun's help, Amiloun's wife comments on Amis's passivity—asking "whi farstow so" when he refuses her sexual advances (1168).[35] While the reader is conscious of the difficult choices Amis faces between Belisaunt's threat and Amiloun's wife's misdirected desire, the text does not make Amis an aggressive or authoritative presence. The women's desires are in conflict and Amis is incapable of negotiating them—which not only implies failures in Amis's authority, it casts female aggression above and at odds with the knights' political order.

Belisaunt's position as politically and socially superior to the knight reverses the frequent occurrences of male violence in romance (such as the actual rape in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Sir Gowther* and attempted rape in chapter three's *Erle of Tolous* or *Guy of Warwick*) and allows her to coerce the knight. She threatens Amis that

> Bot yif thou wilt graunt me mi thought…
>
> Y schal torende doun ichon
>
> And say with michel wrong,
>
> With strengthe thou hast me todrawe
>
> Ytake thou schalt be londes lawe
>
> And dempt heighe to hong (632-6)

She not only highlights the sexual violence at play, but also the "wrong" inherent in their union because of their social inequality. Belisaunt details the physical ramifications of disobedience, shared amongst thieves and traitors, and she emphasizes her superior position and privilege which requires the knight "graunt me mi thought." It is irrelevant in this scene what the lady

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[35] Amiloun's wife asks why Amis lays a sword between them and refuses her advances, which implies that Amiloun is usually more sexually open or aggressive than Amis here. While Amis refuses to sleep with the lady out of faith to his brother, this still reminds the reader that he did not remain faithful to his lord the duke and that his sexual passivity seems to be a constant factor.

desires—the emphasis is instead on the political and physical ramifications if the knight refuses. This is unusual in romance, where the beloved (of either gender) is more likely to lapse into lovesick melancholy, as Orfeo does upon the loss of his queen or Troilus for love of Creseyde, than to threaten their life.[36] While the "michel wrong" Belisaunt speaks of is that of rape, the emphasis on "and *say* with michel wrong" allows the reader to interpret the "wrong" action as Belisaunt's speaking (or crying rape) rather than the fictional rape itself. Like Amis, she is conscious of her own coercive ploy. "Saying" wrong becomes more notable than doing wrong, which makes this sexual debate one of politics (who "says" what, and to whom). Belisaunt's admission of being "with wrong" also allows for the dual interpretation of the crime: her false "saying" and his imaginary rape. The lady demonstrates skill at manipulating the social hierarchy and political system with greater aptitude than Amis, but unlike the steward, her negotiation is self-interested.

Edward Foster sees her persistence going beyond the bounds of "propriety and morality" while highlighting the knight's subordinate position.[37] Amiloun's wife similarly turns Amis's sexual hesitation (during the bed-trick) into a political failure, "missay[ing] hir lord" for his false usurpation of Amis's place, asserting "with wrong and michel unright thou slough ther a gentil knight; ywis, it was ivel ydo!" (1489-94). She censures him for his "ivel ydo" and "slough[ing]" the steward with more vigor than she questions his sexual passivity. Just as Amis recognized the steward's "right," Amiloun's wife views the knight's judicial and political failure as more

[36] Troilus describes his lovesick symptoms as a "wonder maladie" for which he swoons and "loste his hewe" (419/491) just as Orfeo goes into the forest as a hermit. Both show the classic symptoms of depression, anxiety, and passivity associates with the melancholy beloved—rather than aggression or violence. Mary Wack discusses the physical and literary tropes of lovesickness in relation to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* as an intensely physical ailment which goes back to Ovid and Petrarchan Sonnets. See Mary Wack, "Lovesickness in 'Troilus'," *Pacific Coast Philology* 19.1/2 (1984): 55-61.
[37] Edward Foster, "Simplicity, Complexity and Morality in Four Medieval Romances," The *Chaucer Review* 31.4 (1997): 413.

problematic than his amorous inconsistency. Rather than blame her outburst on her "shrewd[ness]" to distract from her legitimate complaint, the text provides space for the reader to support the legitimacy of her criticism by restricting Amiloun's reply to "oft times his honden he wronge" (1570). The lady calls him a "chaitif" or coward for killing the steward "with wrong," and Amiloun's simple hand-wringing in response seems to support her (1565). The text again turns sexuality in this scene into a comment on the court's political systems.

Just as the narrator condemns the "treasounous" steward for his legitimate complaint, Amiloun's lady becomes "wicked" for calling attention to her husband's "ivel ydo." Nonetheless, Amiloun's failure remains with the reader even after the wife is vilified. The lady chooses to focus on Amiloun's political "unright" for killing the "gentil" steward rather than his bed-trick which had Amis "lay with hir in bed ich night" (1487) in the place of her husband. Amiloun praises his brother as a "trewe knight" for not sleeping with his wife, which defines truth here as between knights and sworn brothers rather than between spouses, who exchange similar vows. Yet it also offers celibacy as one possible defining aspect of knighthood, which conflicts with Belisaunt's and the lady's imagination of a knight's sexual proclivity. Despite the poet's focus on the knight's truth, Amiloun betrays his bond with his wife by requesting Amis "lay with hir." Edward Forester notes that this tale shakes the conventions of romance by "having Amiloun's wife" reflect on her "husband's uncharacteristic sexual restraint" in the bedroom scene, which not only unsettles a conventional reading, it illustrates the narrative cynicism sitting oddly within a genre "we associate with idealism."[38] Rather than question the knight's sexuality, the wife's reaction turns to his political "ivel." The wife and narrator focus on

[38] Foster comments on the generic conventions in a footnote to the text on pg 416 while Field notes romance's idealism. Rosalind Field, "Romance in England, 1066-1400," ed. David Wallace, *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 159.

the steward's "les of life" instead of the bed trick, turning the readers' attention to the political landscape and discord over the amorous aspects of the tale. As we saw earlier, the knights' conformity to traditional sexual desires decided their political authority—the text's subordination of traditional heterosexual practices here again reframes sexual politics as intensely political.

The Brotherhood's Exclusivity

The political failures of each figure individually pale in comparison to the textual centrality (and approbation) of the brotherhood. Even if an individual actor or brother is found wanting, the text imagines their fellowship has the potential to benefit the community. We are instructed to have "grete joy" for merely beholding "that frely foode" (56-7), and the political body of the court is imagined to prosper or thrive because of "how feire they were of sight" (80). The text invites the entire community of "pore [and] ryche" to be "blyth" because of the knights' beauty and true love for one another. The poet promises the brothers "the blisse of hevyn" in reward for their "trewth and her godhead" (2506-7), which imagines their loyal oath as an instructive lesson for the reader. However, the knights' bond is exclusive and frequently at odds with the needs or interests of the larger community called on to witness the tale. The "pore and riche" who are called to celebrate the knights' beauty find it burdensome, as the entire court is required to bear the weight of "susten[ing] hem" (119). The narrative imagines that because of the knights' beauty, love for one another, or duke's "love" for them, they are no longer obligated to support themselves; instead the court as well as the poor *outside* the court must "susten" the idle knights "for ever mo as lordinges proude in pride" (120). Not only must the community sustain the knights, they must pay to keep them at an elite status. The text explicitly contemplates this economic structure, denaturalizing the commoners' support of the aristocracy, and implicitly

critiques the system's dysfunction.

Critics have aptly noted the "dangerously antisocial" element of the knights' exclusivity, which operates at the cost of the community and destabilizes traditional moral or political structures, "since it promotes a highly personalized and apparently unrestricted loyalty above any and all other responsibility."[39] The brothers' bond "so powerfully defines these knights that forming other amatory and familial relationships becomes difficult."[40] While Amis and Amiloun's oath is not unusual within the genre, it nonetheless rejects other structures of social authority.[41] Scholarship on the brotherhood's exclusivity centralizes the infanticide and murder of Amiloun's wife, questioning the portrayal of homosocial bonds within the polity. Building on such criticism, I argue that by focusing on the steward's unique negotiation of personal and public justice to build on criticism, the brotherhood's threat to other social structures becomes pronounced. When the steward asks to "swere ous bothe brotherhed" (362) this does not necessarily negate Amis's earlier oath to Amiloun, yet Amis nonetheless reacts with anger that his "truethe" is threatened and curses the steward, for whom "give y nought a slo" (395). While Amis emphasizes the exclusivity of his bond, the steward brings together personal and communal structures. He imagines that "bothe" of them may be in a brotherhood, suggesting that the court may similarly operate with multiple networks interwoven and supporting one another.

[39] Haught, "In pursuit of 'Trewth'," 247. Pugh similarly sees the oath "debasing" larger social obligation. Pugh uses *queer* and *queering* as a term to capture the "disorienting effect of non-normative identities and their frequent clash with ideological power" over and above simple "homosexuality." Pugh argues that the potential homosexuality of the same-sex oaths implicate the ideological system and links this "eroticism with cultural disenfranchisement" (305). In using "queer desires" here, I wish to similarly encompass the larger implications of non-normative or anti-social identities. Tison Pugh, "'For to be Sworne Bretheren til they Deye': Satirizing Queer Brotherhood in the Chaucerian Corpus," *The Chaucer Review* 43.3 (2009): 282-310.

[40] Pugh, "Satirizing Queer Brotherhood," 288.

[41] *Athleston* and *Amis and Amiloun* both "show idealized same-sex friendships," but *King Horn*, *Eger and Grime* and *Guy of Warwick* (to name just a few) similarly have knights who swear fealty and friendship to one another. *Eger and Grime* is quite similar to *Amis and Amiloun*, both by their sworn oath and the ways the brothers switch identities. For details on other romance brotherhood oaths, see John C. Ford, "Merry Married Brothers: Wedded Friendship, Lovers' Language and Male Matrimonials in Two Middle English Romances," *Medieval Forum* 3 (2003).

Instead, Amis rudely rejects the steward as worth "nought a slo," imagining that socio-political relationships are mutually exclusive and binary—his bond with Amiloun precludes any productive relation with others, which includes that of his lord or his children. In the steward's vision, the court's multiple desires and factions support and negotiate with one another while Amis's vision creates firm boundaries between these factions that must compete against one another.

Their promise "in wele and wo, in wrong and right" (148) notably usurps the language of the marriage sacrament, which places the brotherhood above amorous or heterosexual marriage while also casting the political community as a threat to their union.[42] The knights swear to "frely…hold togider at everi nede" just as the official sacrament obligated both parties to freely enter into the union that will endure "sickness and health." While the knight's union is a private mirror of heterosexual (and public) marriage, and is not unusual within the genre, it imagines an entirely private or enclosed space that rejects other structures of social authority. Shannon McSheffrey tells us that "the household, the neighborhood, the parish, the ward, the crafts and livery companies, and the court of the mayor and aldermen" all imagined wielding power within and above the marriage sacrament.[43] Patriarchal governance over marriage expressed itself through political structures, social politics and even violence, attesting that marriage between

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[42] Marital language of brotherhood's bond: "Trewer love nas never non" (144); "While thai might live and stond/ That bothe bi day and bi night,/ In wele and wo, in wrong and right,/ That thai schuld frely fond/ To hold togider at everi nede,/ In word, in werk, in wille, in dede,/ Where that thai were in lond,/ Fro that day forward never mo." (146-54) They use both present tense (to "hold togider…fro that day") and future tense ("forward never mo" and "thei shuld") which is required of the official sacrament of marriage, as well as emphasizing that both parties entered into it "frely." Speaking the words of consent constituted the marriage contract, regardless of written proof or the presence of a priest. The only aspect missing from the brother's bond was explicit physical consummation. For a full articulation of the obligations and regulations of Medieval English marriage, see Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006) and John C. Ford, "Merry Married Brothers."

[43] McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture*, 13. McSheffrey demonstrates that "the regulation of marital and sexual relationships…was an important element of civic culture and political rule in the late medieval City of London" (14).

two people was never divorced from the political community. McSheffrey demonstrates that "the regulation of marital and sexual relationships…was an important element of civic culture and political rule in the late medieval City of London."[44] The steward, duke, court and even Amiloun's wife (away from the court) all comment on the brothers' union, which imagines they have a voice within the brothers' private bond even as the knights reject notions of public power.

The steward's unmet desire to join the knights' fraternal brotherhood reveals the hierarchical relationship between the court and brothers. The knights' rebuff of the steward situates their oath as both exclusive and superior to any oaths they may hold in the court. The knights prioritize their love even above their physical and Christian health (accepting leprosy and infanticide, for example) and above their political and marital bonds ("shaming" the duke and starving Amiloun's wife). Their amorous loyalty blinds them to socially accepted binaries of "wrong and right." It also becomes a political problem by preventing a unified male brotherhood with the court or larger community. Their binary oath creates a binary of affective relationships and loyalty; their love for one another prevents attachments with any other figure, which presumably includes their political obligation to the duke or their own vassals. Belisaunt's sole attachment to Amis causes her to allow her children's' deaths, which similarly displays a dangerous unsociability in a political figure. The knights' amorous bond also prevents the expansion of a courtly network, supplanting the narrative's otherwise unified community, which was previously joyful "in [the duke's] servise" (116).

The steward's failed intercession reveals the limits of the current political system (comprised of the competing desires of the Duke, the "riche" and "poor" of the community, and the "lordinges") that made no attempt to curb the knights. His assertation that Amis is of

[44] McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture*, 14.

"unkinde blod" (389) or "unnatural breeding" for rejecting his fellowship emphasizes the brothers' antisocial bond as bordering on the unnatural.[45] The steward's condemnation underscores the dangers of such exclusivity within the political network. Amiloun's leprosy similarly traces the text's concern over the ways the knights' exclusivity conflicts with public justice. God's "voice fram heven" (1250)—warning that "yif thou this bataile underfong," he will be punished by "fouler mesel nas never non" (1255-9)—directly links Amiloun's untruthful "batail" with his leprous "mesels" and God's anger. The poet refrains from censuring or supporting Amiloun's action here, offering no narrative judgment. Yet we get a potential guide in Amiloun's wife; while Amiloun and the audience know the cause of his ailment, his wife may only guess what caused "so foule a thing" (1593), which opens his sin to any interpretive frame. Exclusivity also endangers their patrimonial succession—requesting the death of Amis's heirs in order to cure Amiloun's "foule[ness]." The narrative acknowledges that such violence is a "dedli sinne" (2247) that defies secular and canon law as well as the political structure. Nonetheless Amis prioritizes "his brother out of sorwe bring" over "his childer so ying" (2249/46). Both of these "woes" (Amiloun's leprosy and exile and the infanticide) arise from the knights' love for one another.

Susan Crane reads the personal desires of the hero becoming "subsumed" in the community's desires, asserting the hero's "impulse toward personal achievement is in harmony with a broader, impersonal impulse toward national stability."[46] Crane astutely demonstrates the ways popular romance subverts the idea that royal and national interest must coincide with the

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[45] Stephen Morris demonstrates that "there seems to have often been a sexual aspect to the made-brothers' relationship. Regardless of any implied or potential sexual union between the knights, their exclusive attachment to one another undermines any bonds to other political actors. Stephen Morris, *"When Brothers Dwell in Unity": Byzantine Christianity and Homosexuality* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2016), 13.
[46] Crane, *Insular Romance*, 218.

crown, or that conflicting factions within the court and nobility is necessarily problematic for national stability. Instead, these romances imagine that "the desires of the noble hero subsume the desires of his community" and propose "that baronial interests are the key to the public good."[47] The noble hero's desires should therefore align with the court's and "public's" desires. Yet, as we have seen, the brotherhood's desires result in violence and conflict, which the narrative attempts to displace onto the steward. While the king's desires are frequently ignored or detrimental to the community, the heroes' personal desires do not always align with "the public good" either. Instead, the desires of the duke, brothers, Belisaunt and steward compete, while none except the steward offers a method by which to negotiate and mediate these conflicts. The text's 'traitor' voices the most coherent "nationalism" and the needs "of the people" despite the narrator's criticism of him.

Centralizing Discord

Rather than explicitly condemn the brotherhood's deviance or Belisaunt's aggression, the text turns this discord into a problem of stewardship. Yet the steward also gains praise, which suggests he is both the cause of and the solution to the socio-political conflict. Discord introduces an ambiguity crucial to the story *and* to the steward. The instability here comes down to the constantly shifting definition of treason, or political obligation, and of the dispersed network of the political body. Moreover, the narrative's apparent pleasure in vilifying and killing the steward suggests that this conflict is more than an inherent part of the system; it is a desired component of the court and narrative structure. While "wicked," the steward's political vision follows the genre's traditional hierarchy of the political body as one firmly stratified, but

[47] Crane, *Insular Romance*, 219.

ethically obligated to the community below it. Yet the text goes beyond rejecting his voice to instead celebrate his death—which suggests that the romance *desires* his presence and opens space for the audience to enjoy the brotherhood's failure, the steward's intervention, or political treason more generally. By desiring the disruptive presence, which rejects categorization and definition of effective governance or moral action, the text actively sustains ambiguity and conflict for its reader.

In the culminating scene of the brothers' heroism we are again reminded of their moral and political ambiguity, as they "caught" with "grete strokes" all the guests ("both grete and smale") who attended Amiloun's wife's remarriage (2466-9). Even the wife's remarriage is only ambiguously inappropriate in light of his three year absence following Amoraunt's assertion that "no schal we never com eft here,/ Thei hunger ous schuld slon" (1775-6), which would justify her belief in his death. Regardless of her villainy or the narrative's condemnation of it, "al that they there…both grete and smale" are not similarly culpable of her sin. Amis and Amiloun nonetheless cut down innocent guests of all classes and ranks "both grete and small" who are unrelated to Amiloun's exile or the wife's bigamy.

The knights' treatment of Amiloun's wife is also the only scene in which the poet directly critiques their actions. After the brothers slay all the wedding party, they enclose her into an anchorite's cell "Tyl her lyvedays were goon" and she was "brought to dede,/ Who therof rought, he was a queede" (2481-3). Amis and Amiloun starve Amiloun's wife and are specifically blamed for "bringing" her "to dede," for which the ambiguous "who" thought "*he* was a queede." Foster glosses "queede" as "bad person," which can imply the knights who "rought" the lady's death or perhaps the lady herself. Given the poet's earlier approval of the steward's "right" and the lady's championing of his cause, we are invited to read the knights as the "bad

person" here.

In the face of such injustice, the poem encompasses this scene with lines rejoicing in the knights' "love" and goes so far as to describe this "bredale" as "glad and blyth" (2470), linking violence to their—and our—gladness. The reader is invited to applaud the knights' "victory" and rejoice at their violent punishment of the lady and her bridegroom just as we are expected to share the court's bloodthirsty joy at the steward's beheading. Through the text's heroes, we are implicitly encouraged to share "alle the lordinges" gladness when Amiloun defeats the steward and "heved [his head] opon a spere" (1373). Regardless of the possible divine sanction on the brotherhood's actions, the text allows or even invites the audience to take pleasure in their corrupt actions.

Similarly, we are encouraged to applaud Belisaunt's successful threat of rape to obtain Amis's love. The knight agrees to Belisaunt's terms "and so thai plaid in word and dede,/ that he wan hir maidenhead" (766-7). Defining it as "play" rather than sexual sin in which he "won" her maidenhood resituates their actions as pleasurable games, where the audience might applaud his victory rather than lament either the maiden's coercion or Amis's disloyalty. The narrator elides Amis's oppression here by turning him from a "pover man" who is threatened with improper action on both sides to the "hende knight" who restores his masculine authority and "riches" through Belisaunt (755/761). The steward's presence is cast as the sinful and problematic component of this scene, as he overhears and "unskere[s]" her "conseil" (780). Disclosing or betraying council is primarily reserved for romance villains, as betraying confidence is aligned with forfeiting one's honor (as Amis himself demonstrates when he refuses to be "forsworn"[379] and pledge truth with the steward). Therefore, we are encouraged to censure the

steward again for betraying confidence and congratulate the “bird bright” for her love, even if it was “won” through deceit (776).

The narrator offers these scenes of morally ambiguous murder and lust as critical moments of the brotherhood’s strength by concluding this scene with the knights “in muche joy without stryf” (2494). There may be a lack of “stryf” between the brothers, but this assertion comes on the heels of a stanza dedicated to the heroes’ violence and their strife against Amiloun’s wife. Their “joy” is juxtaposed to the “stryf” they cause all around them. Their “treweth” and narrative power are intrinsically linked to the conflict they cause, which the audience is nonetheless advised to support. Reading through the steward’s “treason,” which destabilizes his criminality as an act of loyalty, asks the audience to fundamentally question the socio-political structure—and their position within it.

CHAPTER 4

Testing 'Treweth': Systems of Dissent in *King Horn* and *The Erle of Tolous*

As we have already seen with Maradose and *Amis*'s "ryhgt" steward, the "treacherous seneschal" can offer a more judicially legitimate approach to negotiating the complex and competitive court than the protagonist, despite his narrative and critical marginality.[1] More than illuminating the multiple legal and political systems (authority based on royal, parliamentary, common or canon law, etc.), the steward can also function as the moral mirror for the sovereign. The steward underscores the hero's limitations and the poem's multiple approaches to gaining and maintaining authority, which in turn clouds the text's central political authority. Countering the "evil steward" trope, *King Horn*'s steward works in concert with Horn's amorous and political agenda, offering stewardship as a potential strength within the court. *The Erle of Tolous* similarly confuses the trope by rewarding the traitorous earl with stewardship and ultimately succession to the throne. Using *King Horn*'s Athelbrus, Athulf and Fikenhild as models of negotiating power, this chapter highlights the conflation of treason and fealty in The *Erle of Tolous*. The Erle Barnard betrays his fealty to the emperor after Diocletian unjustly appropriates his lands—taking many nobles captive before rescuing the empress Beulybon from "traitorous knights." Barnard's rebellion and subsequent heroism exist simultaneously, just as the two knights are both traitors and loyal brothers to one another, and the emperor is himself both an

[1] K.S. Whetter, "Reassessing Kay and the Romance Seneschal," *Bibliographical Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society* 51 (1999): 344.

unjust leader and loyal husband. Treason and misplaced 'trowth' are claimed everywhere in this text. The (future) steward acts as a replacement for Diocletian's troubled political and amorous sovereignty—yet even he is condemned as traitor at one point.

If we imagine romance as corrective—of inept or improper governance, resolved by the hero's ascension to the crown—then the steward's treason is central to political rectification. This chapter proposes that these stewards' discordant or treacherous voices can aid the polity; Horn's stewards and problematic rule introduce a system of power which relies on the stewards' "teching" and treachery in dialogue with Horn's sovereignty. Barnard's power comes from his dissent against Diocletian and the two knights (or the parliament which follows their lead to convict Beulybon). By elevating and rewarding the Erle's combative stewardship, the text demonstrates that the court relies on a contentious system of competing political voices. Although some scholarship posits "internal dissention" as the "true threat" to a polity—this chapter demonstrates that internal discord and "treason" against the status quo can productively resolve the conflicted polity.[2] We will begin by discussing *King Horn*'s advisory stewards as both loyal and contentious political actors who highlight the diverse (and competing) systems of power in the romance. Using *Horn*'s advisory and affective stewards as models, this chapter will consider how *The Erle*'s complex networks of political allegiances multiply and destabilize the text's social and political value system. *The Erle*'s political economy, where stewardship becomes the reward for civil conflict, places political dissention at the center of the romance's final harmonious polity.

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[2] In their editorial introduction to the poem Eve Salisbury, Ronald Herzman and Graham Drake support Lee Ramsay's claim that the poem "seems to say that internal dissension is the ultimate threat to a state": *Chivalric Romance: Popular Literature in Medieval England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 32. Herzman, Drake and Salisbury see *Horn* as "an object lesson about loyalty and betrayal in a real-world political sense": *Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hamptoun, Athelston* (Kalamazoo: TEAMS, 1997).

"Teching" Horn Stewardship

King Horn's Athelbrus bolsters Horn's authority through his successful orchestration of Horn's amorous desire, offering intriguing insight into how the text and its audience subscribed to and actively shaped the political community around discordant desires. Athelbrus functions as a central participant in Horn's amorous pursuit (frequently with greater efficacy than Horn himself) while his reward of title and land reveals that such affective oaths are politically defined—granting him political power for his affective "teching." Yet his loyalty to Horn competes with his loyalty to his lord Aylmar. As we have seen in chapter two, romance offers frequently competing representations for attaining or negotiating power, so that even when the steward works in concert with his lord, there can be divergent agendas at play. Horn's success is facilitated by the competing figures of Athelbrus, Athulf, and the treasonous Fikenhild—creating the political body as a competitive and ambiguously defined network where the protagonist's authority is circumvented *and* enhanced by his necessary reliance on these figures. Effective leadership in the poem exists in a system of power made up of these competing and fraught voices.

Athelbrus ostensibly supports Horn as the strong hero who regains his patrimony and wins the lady. However, the text's imagination of heroism is centered on Horn's courtship of lady Rymenhild, as Matthew Holford and Chelsea Skalak discuss, which leaves us without a clear view of his political identity or how the court is structured. [3] Horn relies on his stewards to

[3] As Chelsea Skalak notes, the poem does follow the "typical plot of the exile-and-return romance, [but] it stands out among its fellows in the way that its major plot points turn less upon Horn's battles than on his repeated failed marriage contracts with the lady Rymenhild, each of which invoke questions of social identity." The passages which take the most time and offer the most narrative comment are those centered on Horn and Rymenhild's union, which Skalak employs to build her argument about the "the limitations of Church authority," failure of social knowledge and the role of individuals in regulating marriage.(140) Skalak, "Clandestine Marriage and the Church: *King Horn* After the Fourth Lateran Council," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 47 (2016). Matthew

secure and maintain his dominance—while he consistently fails to address Fikenhild's deceit—establishing the important role of the steward in the text's political action. Athelbrus's counsel, Athulf's management, and Fikenhild's betrayal fashion stewards, either loyal or traitorous, as a critical component of *Horn*'s court. I include Athulf and Fikenhild in this discussion as they provide similar services to a steward's; they manage Horn's households in his absence, offer judicial and economic counsel, and provide a gateway for guests to the lord (even before Horn attains his throne). Fikenhild may be a negative example of stewardship, but his actions conform to the traditional "evil" seneschal trope found in *Amis and Amiloun* or *Guy of Warwick*.[4]

Unlike the traditional evil steward, Athelbrus envisions his role as guiding and "teching" the hero. He offers "gode teching" and counsel to Horn, who is sometimes unable to recognize or discern good from bad counsel. For example, Athelbrus exchanges Athulf for Horn in an audience with Lady Rymenhild, claiming he is "sore…ofdrede/ Heo wolde Horn misrede" (295-

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Holford takes a similar approach to *King Horn*'s matrimonial focus, positing that the "primordial dominance" of the English within the "British Isles" in *Horn Child* is not found in the text's source: *King Horn*. Instead, "love and marriage represent the pinnacle of Horn's ambition and achievement, to which even the recovery of his patrimony is subordinate" (153). While *Horn Child* fantasizes a kingdom effectively united against its foreign foes with a dominant and strong king, Holford argues that *King Horn* prioritizes matrimony over political duties or patrimony. Matthew Holford, "History and Politics in *Horn Child and Maiden Rimnild*," *The Review of English Studies* 57.229 (Apr., 2006): 153. In fact, political kingship in general is critiqued, according to Marilyn Corrie's analysis of the Harley MS. She argues that in the context of the miscellany, the poem destabilizes the importance of kingship: "the way those texts are treated, so that they gather, and sometimes lose, meaning from their place within the manuscript, altering the ways in which they can be read" (79). Ultimately, she claims that Harley's *Le Roi*'s presentation of Louis's authority as "vulnerable" and "petulant" deals a "blow to kingship as a whole, to deflate the dignity with which it is normally surrounded" in a way which colors our interpretation "of the other texts about kings." Marilyn Corrie, "Kings and Kingship in British Library MS Harley 2253," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 33, Medieval and Early Modern Miscellanies and Anthologies (2003): 64-79.

[4] I believe the slight ambiguity of the steward's duties encompasses Athulf's and Fickenhild's roles, casting them as "proto-stewards." Hazell defines stewardship or the steward as one who "directed the management of land, crop and livestock productivity and manorial finances, and might oversee village judicial proceedings. At court, in addition to the administrative steward, there was the household steward in charge of domestic affairs and perhaps other various duties. The king had a high steward, constable and marshal…although their responsibilities and benefits were not always clearly defined" (1). Athulf is charged to protect Rymenhild after Horn's initially exile, and Fickenhild is left to oversee Horn's land and his wife Rymenhild while he is fighting with Athulf to regain his patrimony in Sudene. Thus, both act as "constables" and oversee "domestic affairs" as well as the military support expected of loyal knights. Hazell, "'Trewe Man' or 'Wicke Traitour': The Steward in Late Middle English Literature." *Medieval Forum*.

6). Athelbrus disguises Athulf to deceive Rymenhild—not because he is envious or against their union, as other romance stewards are, but because he is afraid she may "misrede" or "advise [him] badly."[5] Counseling the king plays a major role in this romance, separating Athulf and Athelbrus from the deceitful Fikenhild, and separating those who give "gode" counsel from those who "misrede" the hero. Yet even Athelbrus's "techings" and "rede[ings]" are circuitous, suggesting that Horn may not be receptive to counsel or that he is easily "bigile[d]" (324) by Rymenhild. Athelbrus's suspicion may arise from a mistrust of Rymenhild (or perhaps women's counsel more generally), but it also implicitly undermines Horn's ability to discern good from bad advice.[6]

Athelbrus's important counsel is again evident in the lovers' need for him to mediate between Horn, Rymenhild, and King Aylmar. On Rymenhild's request, Athelbrus "biseche[s]" the king "with loveliche speche" to "knight" Horn and his companions (456-7). The steward persuades the king with "loveliche speche," which suggests a close "loving and affectionate" connection between the speakers.[7] While the phrase usually applies to familial requests, Eve Salisbury notes that Athelbrus's appeal suggests a similarly close relationship between him and the king. Unlike other romances where the heroine cautions against trusting the steward for fear he might betray them, Rymenhild trusts Athelbrus's ability to persuade the king. Aylmar demonstrates a similar trust in the steward's counsel, as he showed no interest in knighting Horn until Athelbrus argues that it would serve as a "fair geste" or fitting entertainment for the feast

[5] The steward in *Amis and Amiloun* and *The Squyr of Lowe Degree* both attempt to prevent the union out of jealousy or "envy"—quoting Salisbury's gloss to line 296 in TEAMS *Amis and Amiloun*.
[6] Suspecting Horn will "misrede" may also be a commentary on Horn's prioritization of Rymenhild, whose counsel is personal and amorous, while Athelbrus's "teching" favors moderation between amorous and political desires.
[7] Salisbury's note to line 458 highlights the term "loveliche": "Allen notes that this reading 'does not make sense since Rymenhild is begging Athelbrus (through Horn) to make a persuasive appeal to her father to knight her lover.'" Hall glosses the term as "loving and affectionate": Rymenhild's appeal to her father is predicated upon a close personal relation (father/daughter) just as much as it is based upon the political relation of king and subject.

(481).

However, in this act of protecting Horn, Athelbrus's stewardship to Aylmar becomes problematic, as being loyal to Horn forces his oblique disloyalty to Aylmar. As "steward of his [Aylmar's] hus," Athelbrus is bound to obey the king's order to "take nu here my fundlyng for to lere of thine mestere" (230-33). Athelbrus's lord orders him to teach this socially inferior foundling to learn "thine mestere": stewardship. Loyalty to Aylmar might require Athelbrus's care for and instruction of Horn, but it may not excuse his deception of Rymenhild, or Aylmar by extension. Athelbrus admits that he exchanges Athulf for Horn out of fear of "the gode kyng" who "withouten othe" would "maken us wrothe" if he discovered the lovers' union (351-2). Despite intuiting that Aylmar would not sanction the union between Rymenhild and Horn, Athelbrus still brings the two together. In fact, Rymenhild is angered Athelbrus fails to perfectly obey her orders, denouncing the steward as a "fule theof" and further advising that he should "on highe rode anhonge" (327-32). Rymenhild imagines the steward deserves not just her displeasure, but capital punishment.[8] In similar situations in *Amis and Amiloun* or *The Squyr of Low Degree*, the steward is required by his position to inform the sovereign of the lovers' desired union. The poem's support of Horn partially obscures the crime his union with Rymenhild poses (as taking the king's daughter without his consent would be treason), and thus Athelbrus's duty to report it to Aylmar. Ironically, it is Rymenhild's anger at the steward that reminds us of his criminality.

Fikenhild offers a more traditional image of the traitorous steward, and Horn's passive

[8] The use of "rode" (or "rood") here both means any "means of capital punishment" or "cross," but it can also specifically mean "The cross on which Christ died" or "The crucifixion." The MED notes that when used with "hongen on" it can mean "to crucify." Rymenhild's directive therefore aligns the steward with traitors *and* with Christ or religious martyrdom. "Hongen on tree" is used elsewhere without the religious connotation, which makes the use of "rode" here notable. See MED [rode, n.(5)] http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED37732.

response to his rebellion discloses the text's approach to political dissent. While the audience knows to expect Fikenhild's treachery, as "the wurste moder child," Horn is unaware of his companion's villainy (652). Fikenhild's "false tunge" is blamed for Horn's exile from Aylmar's court and Rymenhild's subsequent marriage to Modi, yet Horn's violent return to prevent this wedding spares Fikenhild:

> Here lif hi lete there.
> Horn ne dude no wunder
> Of Fikenhildes false tunge.
> Hi sworen othes holde,
> That nevre ne scholde
> Horn nevre bitraie (1258-63).

Horn takes vengeance on "alle" the wedding guests, yet makes "no wunder" of Fikenhild, promising to "nevre bitraie" his "othes" even while the poet reminds us of Fikenhild's falseness. This juxtaposition of Horn's loyalty to his companions even in the face of a "false tunge" exposes the possibility of betrayal and conflict within such oaths. The repeated negation in "ne" and "nevre" emphasizes Horn's reliance on such unstable oaths.

When Horn does finally break from Fikenhild, it is for his amorous crime rather than any political aggression. Fikenhild builds a castle and "woghe[s] Rymenhild" (1416), which the king Aylmar "ne dorste him werne," which suggests Fikenhild has already amassed intimidating military and political power. Yet Horn made no move to prevent Fikenhild's growing strength, only responding to his amorous threat to Rymenhild. It is important to note the text calls attention to this "betrayal" without using the legal term "traitor." Fikenhild betrays his fellow, but arguably does not categorically commit treason against Horn. However, both Fikenhild and

Athelbrus display questionable loyalty (or even treason) against their lord Aylmar. If treason was any action or thought that "compass[ed] or imagin[ed] the death of the king," intended to harm the king's authority, or even a member of king's family, then neither steward officially sins.[9] While this codification of treason was not established during *Horn*'s composition in the late thirteenth century, Matthew Hearn demonstrates that a similar idea of treason existed in the thirteenth century (as any plots for the king's "death or to disinherit us of our kingdom") but also included lateral crimes that sought to "do mischief" to "one who he pretends to be a friend."[10] The fourteenth-century Statutes later reserved high treason as specifically those crimes against the king's authority, but the term also applied to those who desired the death or even loss of wealth of any social superior or those whose loyalty is assumed (such as fellow vassals and lords).[11] If lateral crimes (against sworn companions) and hierarchical offenses against one's lord constitute treason, then Fikenhild is a traitor against both Aylmar—by building a fortress on his land and abducting Rymenhild—and Horn for betraying his sworn oath. And despite the text's support of Athelbrus as a loyal follower of Horn, he does "threaten" the authority of Aylmar by facilitating an alliance between Rymenhild and Horn that the king does not sanction (which threatens Suddene's succession). The text's refusal to use the term "treason" allows Athelbrus to escape blame, but it also refuses to identify Fikenhild's criminality. *Horn*'s reluctance to define

[9] Megan Leitch discusses the contemporary definitions of treason during the late fourteenth and fifteenth century in *Romancing Treason: The Literature of the Wars of the Roses*, 22.

[10] Matthew Hearn discusses and quotes from the thirteenth-century legal 'textbook' *Britton*, which defined both petty and high treason in language that is later shared by the 1352 Statutes. The intended harm or death of a king (or his line of succession) was high treason, just as Leitch defines from the Statutes and is apparent from the various disputes during the Wars of the Roses in the sixteenth century. However, the *Britton* also allows for some lateral or non-royal offenses to be high treason. Offending the hierarchical bonds of vassalage was also high treason, and any offense against a peer or friend who was thought to "be a friend" was also treason (petty treason). Matthew Hearn, "Twins of Infidelity: the Double Antagonists of *King Horn*," *Medieval Perspectives* 8 (1993): 81.

[11] Ojars Kratins argues that treason was not limited to the physical violence against the lord, it included a range of activities "considered to be ultimately destructive to the very fabric of feudal society, which was envisioned as depending upon the unswerving loyalty and devotion to the bond of vassalage." Kratins, "Treason in Middle English Metrical Romances," *Philological Quarterly* 45.4 (Oct 1966): 668-688.

any figure's treason possibly preserves Horn from being contaminated by the charge, but it also obscures the legal system within (or behind) personal bonds.

Rather than highlight the stewards' problematic infidelity as points of internal disunity or criminality, the poem displaces and "projects" any traces "of domestic social tension" onto "a set of fictional antagonists more ideologically digestible to its audience: infidel Saracens."[12] But as Matthew Hearn and Rachel Snell have both argued there were no actual Saracens in or threatening England during the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries. The poem's Saracens act as a foil through which Horn may perform superior strength without threatening domestic stability. The stewards' treason nonetheless emphasizes the reality of such domestic "social tensions."

Internal tensions may be imagined as external, but Horn's division of land as reward for stewardship rescripts external divisions as internal dilemmas again, as each new king approaches sovereignty differently. The loyal Athulf weds a princess, his steward receives the kingdom of Reynes, and Arnoldin (Athulf's briefly introduced cousin who guards against Fikenhild's treachery) receives the entire reign of Westernesse (1461-72). While the divided kingdom retains the traditional hierarchy of loyal vassals subordinate to the king, these new kings display widely divergent ideas of sovereignty that may not align with Horn's:

Horn makede Arnoldin thare
King after King Aylmare
Of al Westernesse

[12] Matthew Holford, "History and Politics in *Horn Child and Maiden Rimnild,*" 152. As Matthew Hearn, Rachel Snell, and Matthew Holford have all variously demonstrated, there was historical Saracens threat. Matthew Hearn and Rachel Snell both argue that the fantasy of the external and thoroughly evil Saracens allow Horn to rise as a supremely moral, virile, and undisputed internal ruler. Holford similarly argues that Horn's leadership is a fantasy of an English "primordial dominance" against any foreign kingdom, but his matrimonial success is above his patrimony (152). Hearn, "Twins of Infidelity," 78-86; Rachell Snell, "The Undercover King," ed. Judith Weiss, *Medieval Insular Romance: Translation and Innovation* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000).

For his meoknesse.

The king and his homage

Yeven Arnoldin trewage…

And ladde with him Athelbrus,

The gode steward of his hus…

Ther King Modi was sire

Athelbrus he makede ther king

For his gode teching (1507-22)

Arnoldin achieves the throne by his "meoknesse" rather than boldness, as Horn does. His governance is based on his loyalty and meek "homage" to his overlord without any traditional qualities of kingship. Similarly, Horn "makede [Athelbrus] ther king for his gode teching," which locates sovereignty and legitimacy in Athelbrus's good teaching or counsel (the traditional duties of stewardship). Offering "gode" counsel is of critical importance, making Athelbrus a worthy recipient of a crown. Yet Arnoldin's "meoknesse" has equal power and claim to a throne as "teching" and "strength," which makes their shared claim to sovereignty or power surprising here. The text stresses Athelbrus's retained identity as Horn's "gode steward" lines before granting him a crown, reminding the reader of his initial stewardship to Aylmar (which he betrayed). In fact, only Athulf remains steadfastly loyal to Horn without deceit. Arnoldin meekly offers no counsel, Athelbrus offers sometimes deceptive counsel, and only Athulf actively supports Horn's lordship. Even amongst the unity of Horn's loyal companions, the new political community conceptualizes their responsibilities differently. As Athelbrus and Fikenhild's mutual treason demonstrates, even stewards who provide deceptive or competing counsel aid the hero's political rise to power.

"Treweth" and Treason in 'The Erle'

The Erle's stewardship in *The Erle of Tolous*, which resolves the amorous and individual conflict between Barnard and Diocletian, nonetheless unsettles the system of authority by rewarding a traitor with the throne. *Horn*'s contemplation of virtuous stewardship may help us understand *The Erle*'s fraught system of power. The presence of loyal steward and proto-stewards—who question Horn's ability to negotiate counsel—suggests that dissent is vital to the political body. *King Horn*'s treatment of stewards teaches us to recognize a system of governance, wherein the ruler operates within a network of often competing voices. This model helps illuminate stewardship as an undervalued avenue to navigate power within the court.

Horn's fraught network of governance illuminates *The Erle's* similar multiplicity in its approach to "treweth." Loyalty or "treweth" becomes a fluid and mobile virtue available to be claimed by multiple actors. The *Erle of Tolous* offers a "styffe yn stoure" leader who upholds "trewe knyghthood," guiding the reader through the text's moral landscape, but the opening lines about an "unknowthe lede" and a lady's "grete myschefe" (9-10) obscure who this "trewe knight" might be. The emperor Diocletian is both powerful ruler—capable of inspiring intense loyalty in his lords and his wife while he actively defends his throne—and one of the text's villains for usurping his vassals "agayne the right quarell" (143). Similarly, the earl Trylabas is both traitor, when he plots to "betray" Barnard "falsely" (251), and "trewe knyght" who remains loyal to his lord Diocletian. The Erle of Tolous himself has difficulty rising above the fray of deception and dishonesty; he defends the "ryght" by confronting Diocletian but betrays his lord by leading a battle against him. He maintains distance from his lord's wife Beulybon yet still claims her ring as a love token. Beulybon herself is similarly conflicted: she both advocates for

"the ryght…counsayle" (630) (which she cannot convince others to follow) and sins in her "love" for Barnard (which is treason against Diocletian). Even the unnamed "two knyghtys" who plot to defile Beulybon possess some claims to chivalry, which makes it difficult for the reader to reject them as simple villains and further diversifies the text's already crowded value system. While dismissed as "false thefe[s]" (527) who make Barnard's heroism possible, the two knights identify themselves as "trewe knights" and remain loyal to one another, just as Amis and Amiloun do. They "plyght" their "trouthe" over their shared love for the empress and remain loyal "at oon assente" as they jointly plot her death after her rejection (691). "Treweth" is claimed by *both* hero(es) *and* traitors with equal frequency, and the charge of "treason" is bandied about with similar ease. The narrative's constant reconfiguration of the central terms allows multiple (and sometimes competing) values to co-exist.[13]

Instead of one strong, chivalric character, multiple competing figures appear as unsatisfying narrative examples. The frequent exchange of a figure's "treweth" for "traytory" (even with the central hero) destabilizes and "debases" the romance's moral economy.[14] My use of "moral economy" here expands beyond the actual economic or monetary negotiation present in the poem (such as the ransom Barnard exacts) to consider how "treweth" can be capitalized. For example, Trylabas is able to convince Barnard that he will help the earl to meet the empress *because* he is a "trewe knyght." Similarly, the merchant and abbot refuse to believe Beulybon's affair because she is credited with a "moral" and chaste reputation. And while a "moral

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[13] I am borrowing Barbara Newman's articulation of "both/and" in relation to sacred *and* secular interpretations, however I believe that a similar coexistence of treason and virtue are possible here. Newman, *Medieval Crossover: Reading the Secular Against the Sacred* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013).

[14] "traytour" or variations of "treason" is employed with great frequency (over 10 times) as is "trewe" (17 times in the 1217 lines). Scholarship on commerce and economy during the period frequently quote Gerard of Sienna, asserting that economic relations and negotiations of credit (monetary or political) which seeks to aid the society is *moral* while such negotiations which seek to advance the lender/creditor is a "broken" economic model. For a discussion on a "moral" monetary economy, see Laurence Fontaine, *The Moral Economy: Poverty, Credit and Trust in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge UP, 2014).

economy" triumphs—in that Beulybon survives and ultimately marries the earl—those without "treweth" are still able to capitalize on their false reputation (e.g. Trylabas and the emperor). In *Horn*, truth is not 'falsely' traded so much as performed. For example, superior "fairness" separates Horn from less worthy figures, yet this kingly quality can be disguised or passed off onto Athulf: "ne knew heo noght…Horn hymselve nothing" (1159). If "chaungi[ng] wedes" might obscure the trait that distinguishes nobles and knights from beggars and traitors, then fairness becomes the external performance of royalty rather than inherent virtue (1062). If being able to claim "trewe" knighthood allows Diocletian access to superior authority (even if he lacks the virtue), then Barnard's, Trylabas's, and the two lusty knights' claims to a different understanding of "treweth" complicate the virtue.[15]

From our first introduction to the emperor "of moche mayne," his character and leadership is suspect:

> All Chrystendome of hym had dowte,
>
> So stronge he was in fight;
>
> He dysheryted many a man
>
> And falsely ther londys wan
>
> Wyth maystry and with myght (17-21)

Anticipating a romance concerning the lady, we instead get a narrative of an emperor's "false" rule and civil strife between his nobles. All of the empire, all of Christendom in fact—which the poet imagines under Diocletian's control—"dowte[s]" or fears their lord's "strength," traditionally a point of honor and pride for a romance hero. *King Horn*, for example, praises

[15] lines 54, 214, 226, 589 all copy "os y am a trewe knight," but "trewe" is used in other lines and other senses as well. This is not to say that each figure ultimately proves their "treweth" or "fairness," but that the text allows them to all stake a claim and thus "debase" the moral economy by making it difficult to identify the "trewe" characters from the false.

Horn for being “gret and strong” (97) as a clear indication of his chivalry. Diocletian, however, is not similarly idealized for his power. His strength is “false” and politically dangerous. The poet goes further to decisively criticize the emperor for “falsely” “dysheryt[ing]” his vassals with “maystry and myght.” Laskaya and Salisbury read this as Diocletian falsely disinheriting lords “with *intrigue* and might,” which not only casts the emperor as a violent lord who controls through force, but one who also employs trickery or political deception and conspiracy to control the polity.[16] Diocletian conceptualizes the political body and the community as one to be conspired against, “dominated,” or “mayst[ered]” rather than something to support. The text presents conflict as the dominant language of politics and vassalage.

Despite the narrative’s hesitation towards Diocletian’s “mayne,” he nonetheless defines himself as “a trewe knyght” (54), just as Barnard does. The Erle is lauded as “an hardy man and a stronge,” who overcomes Trylabas’s treason because he “was a man of mayn” and “a trewe knight” (31/439). Barnard’s strength fits our expectation of romance heroes—impressing the empress, gaining followers, overcoming rebellion, and using his “strength” in pursuit of “ryght”—as the poet defines it. Certainly, we are encouraged to side with Barnard’s approach to truth, as he stands up for the rights of his companions; “[he] sawe the Emperor dyd hym wronge, and other men also” (32-3). Regardless of Barnard’s legitimate anger, the poet juxtaposes the emperor’s “wronge” with Barnard’s reaction to invade “the Emperours londe…And there he began to brenne and sloo” (35-6). If Diocletian is “wrong” for denying his lords of their land and its income, then Barnard’s destruction of that land and murder of its innocent tenants is at least equally problematic. In the narrative’s and Beulybon’s understanding, the emperor receives all

[16] MED [maistri(e, n. 2a]. “maystery” may also mean “control, dominance,” “authority,” or “superior strength, force, violence” and “violent deeds.” Such definitions come before “special skill” or “ability” in the MED. Thus Diocletian’s “mastery” suggests forceful or “violent” control of his lords rather than a skillful management of his court. See page 7 for “mastery” in the context of stewardship.

the censure, but because the poet introduces and defines "much mayne" and "treweth" as values available to tyrant, traitor, and hero, the terms become morally diverse. Both men's claim to "treweth" and the "ryght quarrel" over-populates the landscape of political legitimacy—even if the narrator only ironically applies them to Diocletian.

Similarly, while the poet condemns Diocletian, suggesting his use of "on *ryght*" (51) is ironic rather than moral, he nonetheless legitimizes the emperor by allowing him to retain his throne. In other romances where the sovereign commits crimes against his crown or neglects his duties, he traditionally either loses his title or undergoes some clear transformation that makes him worthy again. For example, the poet censures Gamelyn as "fikel and felle" for his failure as a Christian knight, so in order to retain his throne at the tale's conclusion he must undergo a pious transformation under the Pope's supervision (*The Tale of Gamelyn*, 151). When the ruler does not transform, the text usually deposes or kills him, as *Bevis of Hamptoun* does to the emperor of Almayn, and *Guy of Warwick* does to Duke Otous (both examples of reviled or "evil" rulers). That our poet refuses to punish Diocletian (as we will see later) suggests that even if he does not act morally, he cannot be treated as merely a villain Barnard must overthrow. In fact, the emperor is in much the same position of power after Barnard's victory as he was before, and only vacates the throne after dying of natural causes. His death has no clear relation to his problematic rule earlier in the text, nor is he deposed by Barnard or the poet. The narrative instead suggests that Barnard rises to power as a result of the empress's love and parliamentary favor.

As Arlyn Diamond argues, the tale is "invested in the romance ethos" of "treweth," but "debases" it by supporting the "masculine authority" of Diocletian and Barnard while silencing

or ignoring Beulybon as the voice of "trowth."[17] Beulybon argues her husband has "the wronge" while Barnard has "the right quarrel," and advises the two knights to "be a trewe man" despite breaking their vow (143/589). She consistently adheres to "treweth," yet the poet ignores her voice in order to legitimize the "masculine authority" of the competing male figures. As each man's proclamation of his own "treweth" demonstrates, the text has no single standard of "treweth," so the empress cannot articulate one model for others to follow. The empress advises Diocletian to "delyvyr the Erle hys ryght" (48), suggesting that the Erle has the superior claim to land and moral action in this conflict, yet the emperor replies:

> Yf y may ride on ryght,
>
> that he schall have hys londe agayne;
>
> Fyrste schall y breke hys brayne
>
> Os y am trewe knyght! (51-4)

Diocletian contends that if he rides and fights "on ryght" (properly), he will prove his "truth" by breaking Barnard's "brayne." Diocletian reads "ryght" as a divine and/or physical category (where God will decide the winner, or where his "might" will support his "right") while Beulybon articulates a less flexible definition of the term. And again later, Diocletian asserts he will "bete them downe *ryght*" (78)—equating physical strength with the moral virtue endorsed by Beulybon. Thomas Aquinas lists the conditions necessary "to sanction a just or 'right' war" in his *Summa Theologica* as "the authority of a sovereign, a just cause, and 'a rightful intention.'"[18] The poet upholds Aquinas's conditions by denouncing Diocletian for "falsely" taking land and

[17]Quoting line 154. Arlyn Diamond argues that "treweth" is frequently considered by critics to be the guiding ethos in this romance, yet she argues that it is debased (as a category or term), and advocates for "prudence" as a guiding metric instead (85). Diamon, "*The Erle of Tolous*: The Price of Virtue," eds. Judith Weiss, Jennifer Fellows, Morgan Dickson, *Insular Romance: Translation and Innovation* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000): 83-92.

[18] *Summa Theologica*, Pars II, Q. 40, Art. I. Aquinas as quoted by Laskaya and Salisbury in their footnote to lines 33-48. See also Margaret Gist, *Love and War in the Middle English Romance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1947): 114.

having no "rightful intention." At the same time, the repetition of "rightful" as a variously military, moral, and political virtue applied to various actors challenges the hierarchical order.[19] Diocletian clearly considers militaristic qualities as the basis for chivalry and "rightful intention," believing that conquest and superior "might" justifies his "right."

The emperor's use of "ryght" here and elsewhere might suggest irony, but it also calls attention to his belief in his own "trewe" authority. "Ryght" can be claimed by multiple actors about multiple events, often without merit. For the reader, "right" becomes ambiguous. As Paul Strohm puts it, political truth, or "treason" (both the term and the attending legal significance) had "become a mobile signifier, available for application and use by either party," frequently attached to factions and affinities rather than identifying actual crimes against the crown.[20] The legal category of "treason" may have been firmly codified in English law by the 1352 Statutes as anything that "compassed" or imagined "the death of the king" or harmed his authority, but social uses of the label varied widely.[21] Factions and political affinities motivated many accusations of treason (especially during the contentious Wars of the Roses) and the legal reactions to such claims. Here, various political actors employ "ryght" and "treweth" with similar mobility, and while these virtues lack the codified legal and criminal significance of "treason," the political landscape is nonetheless cluttered by each figure's redefinition of

[19] The multiplication of "rights" challenges the hierarchical order of meritorious action and therefore of the court.
[20] Paul Strohm, *Politique: Languages of Statecraft between Chaucer and Shakespeare* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 188. Strohm, Wendy Scase and Megan Leitch all comment on "treason" as a "floating signifier" (Scase, "'Strange and Wonderful Bills'," 237). See chapter 3 for a longer discussion of treason as fluid and politically dependent.
[21] Paul Strohm and Megan Leitch outline the historical reality of "treason" as a legal crime and social anxiety during the late medieval period. Leitch in particular focuses on the contemporary consideration and representation of treason within literature. The English had a "constitutional understanding of treason" firmly codified in the 1352 statues, which "clarified and limited the relevant crimes…for both high and petty treason" as anything that "compass[ed] or imagin[ed] the death of the king" or even intended to harm the king's authority. In "English law, treason meant the breach or intended breach of a strictly hierarchical loyalty." Megan Leitch, *Romancing Treaon*, 22.

legitimate action.

If we use Beulybon as a guide for "treweth" and justice, as the champion of morally "ryght" counsel, we are still invited to read even her position suspiciously. The text praises the "Emperour's wyf" for "hyr body sche was trewe" (43). By identifying her *body* as true or chaste but remaining curiously silent on the chastity of her mind, the poet suggests that perfect treweth is unattainable, even for her. By calling the empress's body "trewe" to Diocletian, the text leaves her intentions open to interpretation and foreshadows her adulterous love for the Erle. While championing "ryght" conduct to the knights who attempt to defile her, her husband, and Trylabas, Beulybon nonetheless "schewed opynly hur face/ for love of that knyght [Barnard]" (335-6). She may remain physically "trewe" to Diocletian, but her "love of" Barnard prompts her to gift "a rynge" as a "tokenyng" (389/405). Her determination that the Erle "beholden hur welle" (358), along with Barnard's accepting her ring as a love token, suggests that even Beulybon performs something less than moral "treweth." Her physical truth (chastity) contradicts her emotional truth (love).

In fact, it is precisely Beulybon's "honourable conduct," and her belief in the shared honor of the court, which places her "in danger."[22] Counseling "ryght" action to Trylabas and the "two knyghts" is actually dangerous if the rest of the society does not support that "right." While the text ultimately rewards the truthful, honorable Barnard and Beulybon, it makes no move to reform the political community that initially punishes honorable actions—which leads the reader to believe that such conflict is ongoing, unresolved. Shearle Furnish argues that "the treachery

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[22] Shearle Furnish argues the narrative disunity of the poem leads to a lack of moral growth in the poem's main characters (given that the reader cannot witness any psychological depth or evolution), and perhaps a lack of morality within the poem's court—which in turn supports her argument for the poem's modernity and ultimately its transformation into "short fiction" or "novella" (77). Furnish, "The Modernity of the 'Erle of Tolous' and the Decay of the 'Breton Lai," *Medieval Perspectives* 8 (1993): 69-77.

[Beulybon] faces is inherent in her husband's society: Trylabas and her persecutors partake alike in it and build an impression of its pervasiveness."[23] Furnish sees the Erle's intervention on the lady's behalf at the tale's end as "reuniting" the poem "retrospectively," asserting that Diocletian's court is overrun by treason, but Barnard and Beulybon's union unifies the community and "retrospectively" cures this falsity. But what of the political disunity and ideological conflicts left unresolved? I contend that the "pervasive" treason or disloyal "treweth" of the political community touches each figure and interaction to such an extent that narrative unity cannot rectify or retrospectively correct it.

The various visions of "treweth" similarly preclude a united community at the tale's conclusion. Diocletian claims "trewe knighthood" for riding into battle against the Erle; the two knights pledge their "trowthe" to one another as loyal knights; Trylabas and Barnard claim true knighthood when vowing oaths to one another. "Trewe" is a socially defined chivalry based on physical prowess, secrecy, and/or loyalty to fellow knights. Diocletian's "treweth" rests on his military skill to best Barnard. Trylabas's truth relies on maintaining his original allegiance and his ability to revenge his lord's lost patronage. Barnard's truth rests on his patrimony (his loyalty to his men and control of land) and his love of Beulybon: "y have trewe quarell to fyght, owt of wo to wynne that wyfe" (930-1). To be "trewe" is to be loyal to fellow knights, as these oaths suggest, but "trewe" elsewhere signifies militarily bravery and skill or trickery. These pledges make no reference to maintaining truth to those outside the knightly class. For example, the two knights pledge loyalty to one another as "trewe knyghts" but have no difficulty betraying Beulybon or the "feyre chylde" Sir Antore, which suggests their understanding of truth extends

[23] Furnish, "The Modernity of the 'Erle of Tolous'," 72.

only to equals, not to women, social superiors, or even junior knights within the court.[24] Beulybon's victimization and threatened sexual abuse while within her own palace suggests that the complex negotiations of chivalric honour and "trowthe" were only accessible to the knights—Beulybon's mistake is in thinking she has access to "trewe counsel." My argument seeks to complicate and destabilize the text's categories of political power, political "treweth," and its own understanding of the political body—but it is important to keep in mind the vastly different experience of the text's females. While I do not go in depth into the gender politics of this text, Beulybon is "impotent" (as Diamond articulates) not because she misunderstands political truth, but because others do not share this definition, and (most importantly), she is female.

The narrative marks "treweth" as a fluid term, able to define "trewe quarrel[s]," "boke[s]," "gyde[s]," and even "trewe counsayle."[25] The judgement used to locate a true book and guide is distinctly different from the truth implied in chivalric battles or counsel—some refer to military morality or socially prescribed chivalric action while others imply a universal doctrinal truth. The "trewe" book imagines a singular divine truth—except that the text specifies "*a* trewe boke," rather than "the" book, which covers *any* book and therefore *any* individual definition of such truth. Despite the implication of a central "treweth," Diocletian and the Erle both claim "trewe knighthood" from opposing sides of their conflict; as do Trylabas and Barnard and even the two unnamed knights while plotting Beulybon's death. The knights pledge "trowth" as "trewe knyghts," Barnard pledges trowth "yf y fynd [Trylabas] trewe," and Beulybon promises her "trowthe" is as true as "boke or bell," all of which predicate truth on the speakers'

[24] The "feyre chylde" the knights allow to die is "an erles son" and a young knight within the court, making him social equal (if not superior) to these knights. Yet they feel no obligation to maintain treweth with him—which demonstrates their truth to be "untrue," too narrowly defined. Line 710
[25] "trewe" gets applied to quarrel (912/930), "boke or bell" (549), guide (980), wife and "counsayle" (1032).

changeable and individual interpretations (236/549). "Trewe" is a socially defined construct based on physical prowess, secrecy, and/or loyalty to fellow knights. The poet offers some critical judgement of characters' claims (Diocletian's truth is "false" for example), yet the various "treweths" create an ambiguous and competitive standard.[26]

As Arlyn Diamond demonstrates, "the villains plight their *trowthe* over and over again, or affirm their sincerity 'as I am trewe knight,' which ultimately has no bearing on their actions. Their words simultaneously signal the centrality and the debasement of such oaths in the world of the poem."[27] Beulybon's ignored counsel both "validates and distances her," which makes her vision of social or political truth unstable and conflicted. Truth as a chivalric touchstone is therefore both central and "debased," as Diamond puts it, leaving us with an ambiguous standard precisely where clarity is needed. Rather than negating the importance of "treweth," the constant repetition of the term adds complexity and interpretive weight to the virtue within the world of the poem. As Julian Wasserman and S.L. Clark have argued in relation to the *Pearl*-Poet, a word's employment "within the physical and auditory contexts of the poem" may also shift and re-present "its intellectual meaning."[28] Thus the authors assert that the meanings of "purity" and

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[26] "fairness" in *King Horn* occupies a similar space, marking Horn as physically superior and confirms his royalty, but the term is also clouded by multiple references to actors and things which do not conform to Horn's category of "fairness". Horn's notable fairness saves all Horn's companions: "yef his fairnesse nere: the children alle aslaye were." (91-2) Yet the poet also describes "faire speche," a "fair stronde" (or shore), a "fair" request, a "fair and not unorn" geste, and even "fair" height, marking the virtue as a physical description of beauty, height or strength, as well as moral superiority, linguistic clarity, poetic skill, and political or rhetorical diplomacy. Athulf successfully mirrors Horn's "fairnesse" and convinces Rymenhild he is her beloved while all of Horn's companions (including the "wicked" Fikenhild therefore) are described as "fair." Lines 391, 1148, 1198, 1540, and 908 respectively. While Horn's "feire" or "feren," (which Salisbury glosses as "companion") can mean an "equal peer," "beloved friend," and a "spouse or mate," these companions may conflate or blur into "faier," "fare," and "fere," which blurs the boundaries of both "fairness" and "companion." The repetition of "twelve feren" carries similar difficulties, as amongst those twelve 'companions' the traitor Fikenhild is included, which shifts "companion" to potentially also include traitors and enemies. See the MED "Fair" http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED15158 and "fere" http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED15650

[27] Arlyn Diamond, "*The Erle of Tolous*: The Price of Virtue," 85.

[28] S.L Clark and Julian N. Wasserman, "The Significance of Thresholds in the Pearl-Poet's 'Purity'," *Interpretations* 12.1 (July 1980): 114.

"intellectual thresholds" within *Pearl* multiply upon each repetition and new context of the term. The poem's stance on "justice" is similarly complex, according to A.D. Horgan, who demonstrates the simultaneity of God's justice and man's legal or customary justice.[29] The potential of words to "signify many things at once" here subverts any "straightforward interpretation" not only about "trewe," but about what signifies "gode counsayle" and through what system we are to interpret the poem's politics.[30] Paul Strohm similarly points out that "rather than conform to preexisting political ideas, words might contain within themselves not only corroborative but also innovative possibilities."[31] Do we judge Barnard's "quarell" with Diocletian as just, rectifying the emperor's land grab, or as treasonous for leading an uprising against his lord? The shifting moral thresholds of the poem may allow him to be both.

Shifting thresholds and terms allow for—or perhaps cause—levels of ambiguity within the romance's court. As the two knights demonstrate, their "trewe counsayle" implies levels of secrecy between them, suggesting that the text's community contains "factions—not a cohesive community, but a divided court where shifting alliances based on mutual self-interest make oaths a matter of verbal emphasis, or expedient formulas which only fool the naive or trusting."[32] Most figures within the tale treat counsel as secrets relayed within the courtly network or power-plays between figures rather than advice for moral or political action, which Beulybon continues to offer with no success.[33] Protestations of "trewe" counsel are self-interested and more likely to introduce conflicts than to offer "right" or "true" solutions. For example, the two knights convince Sir Antore to hide half-dressed in the empress's chamber as a game, using him to

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[29] A.D. Horgan, "Justice in the Pearl," *The Review of English Studies* 32.126 (May 1981): 173-180.
[30] Joanna Luft quoting Maureen Quilligan (*The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* Cornell, 1979. p26). Luft, "The play of Repetition and Resemblance in the Romance of the Rose," *Romanic Review* 102.1/2 (2011): 49-63.
[31] Paul Strohm, *Politique: Languages of Statecraft between Chaucer and Shakespeare*, 8.
[32] Diamond, "*The Erle of Tolous*: The Price of Virtue," 86.
[33] Beulybon believes moral "counsayle" to be imperative, but no other figure supports this, either ignoring her or claiming "Womans tonge ys evell to tryste" (676).

revenge themselves on Beulybon. They ask Antore, as an uninitiated (or naïve) knight, to "do os we the say"(713) and take on this role so that they may preserve themselves and their faction. The knights phrase their treasonous plot against Beulybon as good counsel to aid Antore achieving royal favor. Although in other versions of the tale the queen is caught with someone "distinctly below her in rank—a dwarf or a scullion," in this text Sir Antore's equality with the aristocratic knights draws attention to the friction within that group.[34] This text turns an unnamed dwarf into a noble *Sir* Antore (who desires to curry favor with his chivalric companions), defining socio-political relations as governed by conflict and self-interest, rather than by a shared moral code (chivalry or treweth).

The emperor's approach to military action further obscures the place for such moral codes. While depicting an already ambiguous civil conflict over the emperor's rulership, the tale emphasizes the two men's visions of warfare and ransom—in ways that highlight their competing values. The Emperor instructs his men to:

> Leveth non on lyve;
>
> Loke that none raunsonyd bee
>
> Nothyr for golde ne for fee,
>
> But sle them wyth swerde and knyfe! (78-82)

Diocletian insists that no "golde or fee" should spare his opponents and that this violent approach to warfare should allow his cause to "thryve." However, the Erle "had fele men chyvalrous takyn to hys preson," and apparently gained much profit from them (170). While Diocletian, "for all hys boste…faylyd," and Barnard succeeds with the "ryght quarrel," the text opens space to question the "chyvalry" of ransom practices for making war profitable (82). Diocletian seems

[34] Arlyn Diamond discusses the trope of dwarf or "churl" who traditionally occupies this space in Beulybon's chamber and the scapegoat for the knights' bed-trick. "*The Erle of Tolous*: The Price of Virtue," 83-92.

eager to “sle wyth swerde and knyfe,” but the poet goes into surprising detail on the negative repercussions of warfare:

> Many a stede there stekyd was;
>
> Many a bolde baron in that place
>
> Lay burlande yn hys own blode.
>
> So moche blode there was spylte,
>
> That the feld was ovyrhylte
>
> Os hyt were a flode.
>
> Many a wyfe may sytt and wepe,
>
> That was wonte softe to slepe,
>
> And now can they no gode.
>
> Many a body and many a hevyd,
>
> Many a doghty knyght there was levyd,
>
> That was wylde and wode (97-108).

This stanza dwells on the bloody toll of war, perhaps especially civil war, for not only the “bolde barons” who fight, but also on “many a wyfe” and “stede.” We encounter a scene of carnage “ovyrhylte” and “flooding” with “blode” and are forced to confront the consequences of such bloodshed on chivalry and the community. Barons “burlande” (or drowning) in their own blood as their wives and men “sytt and wepe” paints a heavy picture of violence, while the repetition and alliteration of “many” and “moche” emphasizes the negative consequences for the “many” in contrast to the individual emperor who ordered the action.

At the same time, the poet offers potential censure to Barnard’s more mercantile approach for making “moche gode of them…so grete was ther raunsome” (174). If refusing

ransom gets “no gode” for the knights or community, then ransoming these knights for “moche…golde and fee,” which equates their life to the wealth they represent, also presents difficulties (80). Molly Murray suggests that medieval ransom practices were both “a tragic instance of military injustice or chivalric corruption”—when captors demanded “great and excessive ransoms” that the captive could not pay—and an example of “new opportunities for active negotiation on the part of both captor and captive.”[35] Ransom could increase cultural exchange and political negotiation and/or reduce the captive to their monetary equivalent, causing economic hardship on those dependent on the captive. According to the fourteenth-century Benedictine Honoré Bonet, placing a price on a captive opponent “such as is possible for the prisoner to pay” was “reasonable.”[36] However, demanding “excessive amounts” for the captor’s profit exceeded the bounds of chivalry and demonstrated “more avaricious motives for leaving knightly prisoners” alive than a dedication to “chivalry.”[37] Such excessive sums were frequently bemoaned throughout the fifteenth-century English conflict with France, suggesting that ransom was commonly “avaricious” or “[un]reasonable.” What may initially appear merciful, couched within the language of “chivalric forbearance,” might become avaricious and exploitative.

The very laws of warfare that allowed ransom transactions also brought the two sides

[35] Murray quoting Honore Bonet from *The Tree of Battles*, which layed out the “rules” (if slightly idealized) that ought to govern warfare and ransom. Molly Murray, “The Value of “Eschaunge”: Ranson and Substitution in Troilus and Criseyde,” *ELH* 69.2 (2002): 340. Murray discusses Criseyde’s exchange in Chaucer’s *T&C* as an allusion to “the particular principles and methods of medieval ransom” and sees Criseyde’s exchange as both a threat and positive conjoining of meaning within the narrative structure. The rules governing female ransom captives were different than knightly male captives (and in fact frowned upon) in medieval warfare, as Christine de Pisan and Bonet both express (in *The Tree of Battles* and Pisan’s *The Booke of Fayttes of Armes*). However, the guidelines Bonet articulates are specifically governing male ransom amongst elite soldiers and give context for our poem.
[36] As quoted by Murray, “The Value of ‘Eschaunge’,” 336.
[37] Murray articulates the dual incentive for ransom as “chivalry” and “avarice,” which would have always been present for knightly combatants (336).

together, "demarcating a larger culture of chivalric observance."[38] Ransom had the potential, in an ideal scenario, to diminish violent deaths and increase the socio-political negotiation between the two sides. Specific political or regional loyalties are subsumed into a "larger culture" of shared chivalry. *The Erle*'s long passage detailing the violent and bloody repercussions of war when ransom is denied prioritizes "chivalric forbearance" over mercantile considerations, rejecting Murray's censure of the practice. However, despite a lack of forbearance, Diocletian's rejection of a shared chivalry between his knights and competitors also allows him to retain a clear vision of the boundaries of treason by firmly separating loyalties. By keeping his opponents' "syde" firmly differentiated from his own men and cause, killing all who fall outside those parameters, Diocletian maintains his vision of "ryght" action against Barnard (85).

In contrast, Barnard complicates "treason" by accepting the brotherhood of his enemies through the bonds forged by ransom. Barnard disregards Trylabas's enmity by pledging "trowthe" with the ransomed knight yet is surprised by his subsequent betrayal. According to England's 1352 Statutes, treason was not restricted to hierarchical acts against the king; any lateral betrayal of a fellow knight/lord would also be considered treasonous.[39] Thus, Trylabas's betrayal of Barnard, as a captor and as a lord he swore an oath of allegiance with, would be firmly categorized as treason. Yet Trylabas's ransom does not eliminate his original oath to Diocletian. Barnard "play[s]" with Trylabas and treats him with the respect of an equal lord after taking him for ransom, which makes determining Tryalabas's treason difficult (182). He upholds the "chivalric culture" by preserving the lives of enemy combatants rather than killing them out

[38] Murray, "The Value of 'Eschaunge'," 337.

[39] Leitch, *Romancing Treason*. As McVitty informs us, "treason" did not begin to equate betrayal of a lord or the king with the state at large until the Tutors. The treason in this poem however, considers the different forms of treason (against different factions and lords) and the effect any such treason may have on the larger polity. Amanda McVitty, "Traitor to the *Chose Publique*: Negotiating Constitutional Conflict Through the Law of Treason 1399-1402," eds. James Bothwell and Gwilym Dodd, *Fourteenth Century England IX* (NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2016).

of hand. And yet, by reducing Trylabas and his companions to their monetary equivalent and forcing them to betray their initial loyalties to Diocletian, he imagines that captives' loyalties may be equally substituted. As Bonet and Murray allow us to recognize, the Erle's ability to imagine Trylabas's "monetary" value or shared chivalry makes their competing political loyalties less obvious and make Barnard susceptible to Trylabas's later "treason." It also suggests Barnard himself views political allegiance as a fluid concept, which may adapt or change—as his conflict with Diocletian already demonstrated.

While the violent narration of "many a body…ovyrhylte" with blood clearly demonstrates the risks of war (and perhaps the poet's views on ransom practices), Richard W Kaeuper and Anne Baden-Daintree offer us a different reading which reintroduces some ambiguity. Although ransom and traditional chivalric practices urge us to read this image of violence as the poet's censure of the emperor's dismissal of human life, it may also function as a voyeuristic initiation. Building on Kaeuper's argument that both religion and chivalry were "elastic behavioral code[s], which vindicated and facilitated violence," Baden-Daintree suggests that "aesthetic" images of violence may "riff on 'affective piety' that stimulated similarly intense, emotional—and even pleasurable—visualizations of violence."[40] Just as hagiographies and Biblical episodes imagined the martyrdom and torture of Christian saints as a pleasurable and ethically productive experience for the reader, depictions of wounded and dying bodies in *Morte Arthur* served a similar function for Baden-Daintree. The tournament in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* likewise contemplates blood as an aestheticized religious symbol as well as a celebration of chivalric ferocity and strength. The tournament's violence evinces the two

[40] Anne Baden-Daintree, "Visualizing War: The Aesthetics of Violence in the 'Alliterative Morte Arthure'," eds. Joanna Bellis and Laura Slater, *Representing War and Violence, 1250-1600* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2016): 14. Aslo see Richard W Kaeuper, "Medieval Warfare-Representation Then and Now," eds. Joanna Bellis and Laura Slater, *Representing War and Violence, 1250-1600* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2016).

knights' chivalric worth. Here, the bloody field after Diocletian and Barnard's battle may function as a critique of the emperor's lack of mercy, commenting on the dangers of civil war, but it may also simply serve as an aesthetic (or pleasing and cathartic) visualization of violence for the reader and a celebration of both sides' military skill.

If we imagine Trylabas as Barnard's social equal during his "captivity," and one who not only receives the Erle's "love" but also pledges his "trowthe" in return, then he becomes a companion whose captivity is ambiguous (209/19). As a companion and sworn brother who "nevyr more…agayne yow to bee" (225), then his subsequent betrayal and attempted murder become treasonous rather than excusable acts of enemies at war. The text legitimizes this interpretation by calling Trylabas' plot "a traytory he thoght to doo" (481). In fact, the poet makes Trylabas' "thinking" of treason equally culpable to the treasonous act itself. However, in the economy of ransom, perhaps Trylabas is merely attempting to remain loyal to his true lord Diocletian. As Peggy McCracken demonstrates, while some captives, such as Richard Lionheart, discuss their experience, most accounts are reticent about what happened to captives and about what "captives may have felt or thought about imprisonment."[41] McCracken posits the toll on ransomed captives may be emotionally and socially high, even if the monetary demand is not. She argues that romance narratives provide "lengthy accounts of the suffering captives that focus on the interpersonal dimensions of captivity: the knight's loyalty to his lady, the absence of the company of knights, and his potential loss of reputation at court."[42] While the reader has a detailed image of the material comfort which Trylabas enjoys with the Erle and may begin to

[41] Peggy McCracken, "Romance Captivities in the Context of Crusade: The Prose Lancelot," *PMLA,* 124.2 (2009): 578. McCracken looks at the *Prose Lancelot* to suggest the gendered captivity during the Crusades and the "assumed" or "unspoken" sexual abuse of female captives. Peggy's articulation of the gendered captivity reminds us of Beulybon's role. While not a priority here or throughout romance, sexual abuse of female captives "was assumed" even while the narratives pay less attention to their experiences and suffering than their male counterparts.
[42] McCracken, "Romance Captivities in the Context of Crusade," 578.

grasp the complex negotiations governing ransom, what the narrative elides is the imprisoned earl's continued loyalty to his lord, his reputation within Diocletian's court which will be tarnished by his captivity, and his unfailing faithfulness to Beulybon when he reveals to her his desire to "sloo" Barnard as their "foo" (278/77). McCracken helps us interpret Trylabas's actions through the romance captive's perspective where he remains loyal to his lord that "hym lovyd, sekurly" (179) and attempts to preserve his courtly reputation by slaying his "foo." The "trowthe" which he "plyghts" to Barnard is therefore the deception of a faithful vassal while his subsequent assassination attempt demonstrates this loyalty - rather than his "traytory," as Beulybon describes it (295).

Maurice Keen would take a different view, arguing that betraying the "contractual relationship" between captive and captor would be "akin to a bonded relationship between free knight and his lord."[43] So rather than focusing on the treason such a betrayal would incur, Keen looks at the "active negotiation on the part of both captor and captive" which could broaden the political and social network of both courts/regions. The text's emphasis on Tryalbas's belief in Barnard's "grete grylle" and his continued anger at the factions and violence Barnard introduced into his lord's (Diocletian's) court, places importance on his unbroken loyalty to Diocletian (and his "suffering," as McCracken's argument highlights).

As a "trewe knyght" who advises the Erle "tryste to mee" (228), Trylabas clearly fails. Yet his advice to Beulybon that "he ys to us a foo…y rede we hym sloo;/ he hath done us gret grylle" (276-9) suggests that "tryste" and "treweth" require more than mere pledges. Trylabas focuses here on the "grylle" or betrayal that the Erle committed against Diocletian, which sparked the civil war—calling attention to his treason and therefore Trylabas's legitimate

[43] Keen, *The Laws of War in the Late Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 1965), 165.

complaint against the Erle as “foe.” Barnard’s actions against the emperor hold more weight than his new love for the empress, which makes him an enemy to Trylabas despite his verbal pledge. Furthermore, the poet reminds us that Trylabas “yn herte he held hym [Barnard] foule schente” and “moche harme he [Barnard] hath done us,” which not only emphasizes the competing loyalties of “us” and “hym,” but also casts Trylabas’ agreement to the Erle’s plan as the deceptive pledge of a captive (299/425). By offering to “forgyve” Trylabas’ ransom debt in exchange for seeing the empress, Trylabas has a limited capacity to refuse. Thus, while Beulybon defines Trylabas’ actions as “velany” and “a traytory,” the poet allows for us to sympathize with his divided loyalties (between remaining “trewe” to his “covenaunt” with Barnard, and preserving his initial faith to his lord Diocletian). Beulybon either relies too heavily on “treweth” as a simple virtue, or reveals her own competing loyalties that are similarly divided between the emperor and the Earl.

It was considered “moral” to negotiate or invest social, political, or monetary capital to help others “cast off their poverty” or advance the general social good, according to Gerard of Siena, while doing so for personal gain or self-interest was immoral.[44] Laurence Fontaine links morality with social (or public) good, arguing that economic negotiations of credit (monetary or political) which seek to aid the society are *moral* while such negotiations which seek to advance the lender/creditor indicate a “broken” economic model. Lawrin Armstrong posits that the commodification of human activity or land as subordinate to the economy “characterizes modern capitalism,” and works at odds with a “moral economy”—in which “human needs,” justice, and

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[44] Laurence Fontaine, *The Moral Economy: Poverty, Credit and Trust in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge UP, 2014). In effect, the ‘moral economy’ that Lawrin Armstrong outlines, via Gerard of Siena from the fourteenth century, is opposed to modern capitalism, in which “human activity (labour), the natural environment (land), or the medium of exchange (money)” is commodified (26). Lawrin Armstrong, *The Idea of a Moral Economy: Gerard of Siena on Usury, Restitution, and Prescription* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

charity “take precedence over profit.”[45] In the competing negotiations between Diocletian and Barnard, as they variously manipulate or commodify their knights, neither acts morally. We might consider the ransoming, trading, and manipulation of Trylabas—or the knights’ use of Antore as a politically expedient commodity—as translating *The Erle*’s political landscape into an economic system which primarily advances self-interest rather than “social good.” Diocletian manipulates political power for his own gain—taking land from his vassals—while Barnard initially opposes him for both his own and a common good, yet ransoms knights, preserves the empress and is pacified out of self-interest. Both men act counter to a “moral economy” or social good, even if the Erle ultimately champions Beulybon’s idea of “trewe” counsel.

The two knights’ “treason” against their lord (and to one another) further troubles firm categories of moral or political “trowth” when they break faith with Diocletian. The two are selected “to kepe” or guard Beulybon “day and nyght” for being so “dere” to the emperor (481). These unnamed knights are only defined by their “dere-ness” to their lord, yet within two lines they betray their office:

> The oon his love on hur caste:
>
> So dud the todur at the laste,
>
> Sche was feyre and bryght! (484-6)

These lines present multiple problems. First; both knights simultaneously succumb to lust for the empress, which surprisingly strengthens their bond with one another rather than setting them apart as competitors, but also makes them interchangeable to the reader. Second; the passage blames the empress’s “feyre[ness]” and “bryght[ness]” for causing or in some way justifying the

[45] Armstrong, *The Idea of a Moral Economy*, 27. Negotiating, trading, and growing either monetary or political capital for self-interested desires to obtain or legitimize power—rather than an economy “embedded in the social”—commodifies all these relations and dehumanizes the market and the society.

knights' deceit. They "make avowe" (496) to one another even as the text recognizes them as "a traytour in thy sawe, worthy to be hanged and to-drawe" (571-2). The text makes no differentiation between the "velanye" of the knights. In fact, the lady responds to both of them in identical ways, asking "what woman holdyst thou me" (648) and reminding the knights they "were worthy to be brent" or "thou schouldest be honged" (569/656) for their request of love. Following their pleas, she gives them the same assurance: "y the forgeve…cousayle schall hyt bee" (586/88) and "y graunt [mercy]; hyt schall be counseyle" (667-8). The repetition of their treasonous love and her response makes them interchangeable "traytours" to the reader and to the empress. By reducing the knights to symbolic traitors (through the empress's repetition), the poem not only highlights the pervasive presence of treason, it also forces us to question Beulybon's reaction to it, which posits a "one size fits all" approach to conflict.

Despite the knights' central identity as traitors, they surprisingly do not betray each other. As we have already seen, the knights convince young Sir Antore to take the fall for them when tricking the court about the empress's fidelity. The "fellowship" between the knights "in sorow to brygne that lady" (691) remains steadfast despite their oaths to the emperor and their pledge to Beulybon to be "trewe" knights in the future. Rather than implicate their fellow knight, which may have been the simpler method to conceal their deception, the knights promise Antore "thy frende schulde sche bee" (718). The elaborate plot to catch the naked knight in Beulybon's chamber suggests that the two knights take at least their "trowthe" to one another seriously, even if they do not share such loyalty to their lord. The horizontal fidelity of brotherhood seems more important than hierarchical or feudal bonds, which simultaneously problematizes our ability to reject the knights as mere traitors and creates problems by its exclusivity. The knights' sole loyalty to one another, which excludes their lord, their fellow knights, and their lady, creates a

self-serving faction set against the court.

In fact, the text grammatically mirrors such difficulty by rallying the "lordys that there wore" to follow "wyth these traytours" (769) and kill the "false traytoure" (764). The court both pursues and is guided by traytour(s). Interestingly, even if the poet uses "traytour" ironically in reference to Antore, the label proves true. Even though tricked and lacking intent, Antore does commit what could be termed treason by his naked and hidden presence in the empress's chamber, which is a breach against his lord. Treason "had both vertical and lateral dimensions" where the "horizontal betrayal of one's neighbor, brother-in-arms, friend, or even foe could be considered treasonous" as a "subversion of [the] community."[46] The two knights might remain loyal to one another, but they commit both vertical treason against Diocletian and lateral treason against their fellow courtier. With so much treason in the community, the text invites speculation about forms of betrayal if Antore's accidental treason is punished as equal to the knights' intentional crime.[47]

Competing personal interests may also account for the Erle serving as judge for the two knights, rather than the parliament or emperor himself: "The Erle answeryd hym then, 'Therfore,

[46] Leitch, *Romancing Treason*, 4.
[47] Leitch demonstrates that "various powerful figures" all vied for control of the kingdom, often accusing each other "and each other's supporters of treason" during the Wars of the Roses. These accusations were frequently made along party/faction/affinity lines, and only loosely based in the accused transgression. Leitch and Strohm both articulate the unstable political reality of the fifteenth century as power shifted amongst different regions and houses, making identifying treason and legitimate loyalties both urgently necessary and difficult to locate. Leitch notes that "The gentry and aristocracy thus had to rely upon horizontal networks and friendships as well as hierarchical loyalties in order to maintain social order." (*Romancing Treason*, 9) These lateral networks sustained the social order and community when the sovereign was unstable, but as each faction vied for power, they shifted and redefined their allegiances, thus accusations of treason shifted with their allegiance—making such claims "mobile" and personally defined (as Strohm articulates). The two knights' faction redefined their allegiance (from the court as a mutually chivalric or unified space) to instead only sustain their brotherhood, and therefore accused Antore with treason. The court as a whole appears susceptible to factions if Barnard so easily gains a large following for his civil uprising or if Antore occupies the same space as the "two knyghts" yet is unfamiliar with their reputation (which the "old knyght" in parliament is). See Paul Strohm, *Politique: Languages of Statecraft between Chaucer and Shakespeare*, 188 and *England's Empty Throne*, especially 6 and 23.

traytours, ye schall brenne'" (1130). From the moment the Erle arrives until the traitors are punished, the emperor makes no appearance in the narrative. His absence from such a critical scene suggests the poet is already making him marginal to the Erle's future succession. Barnard does not ask the emperor or parliament if the "traytours" *should* burn, he declares that they "schall." He effectively replaces the emperor by fulfilling Diocletian's duty. The impetus for identifying and eradicating the treasonous brotherhood lies with the Erle, just as rectifying the emperor's "false" control of land falls on the Erle. In fact, the two knights' unity breaks apart due to the Erle's presence, where it did not for the emperor: "they redyn togedur, wythowt lakk…that othyr faylyd thoo" (1112-14). The transition from "togedur" to "oon" and "othyr" emphasizes the final dissolution of the brotherhood in the face of the Erle's violence. "The Erle smote hym wyth hys spere" while "that odyr, and faste can flee" (1115/18). When confronted by the emperor, the two knights remain adamant in their support of one another's' deceit, yet when confronted by the Erle, "thys traytour can hym yylde" (1121). Diocletian's resistance to eradicating treason, or his inability to inspire loyalty in these "dere knyghts," suggests a failure in governance. The Erle not only identifies and resolves this treason, he does so while masquerading as a monk with no official position within the polity. In fact, if the Erle has any identity within Diocletian's government while championing the empress, it is as traitor himself for his earlier conflict with the emperor. Treason is treated as relative here and may be circularly corrected by a traitor. The emperor's, empress's, and Erle's ability to call various acts "treason" makes it is a fluid political charge. The text's validation of the "treasonous" Erle enacting justice on the "traytourly" knights calls on the reader to compare such charges and perhaps participate in deciding what constitutes "trewe" political action.

As the future steward of the realm, Barnard might ultimately gain the right to judge and

put to trial the two criminal knights—but this does not retroactively legitimize his action. The emperor's steward holds legitimate judicial authority over the royal household, those immediately related to it, and transgressions against or within the court—such as the empress's affair or the knights' treason. However, Bernard's judgment is that of an outlawed courtier before he attains stewardship. His impersonation of a priest and canon judge similarly presents problems for scripted authority. While politically and legally expedient, Barnard's impersonation of a monk goes against canon laws and religious morality. The Erle hears the empress's confession and "assoyled hur wyth hys honed" (1076), and upon his absolution rests the court's trust in her innocence. As an unordained layman, the empress's confession and Barnard's absolution would not carry any official weight—and in fact would be problematic to a community plagued by anxiety over ecclesiastic legitimacy.[48]

According to the number of regulations and repeated indictments to the clergy to avoid drinking, gambling, fornicating, lending money or otherwise debasing their office during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Church was unsuccessful in enforcing clerical behavior. Councils across England and the continent adjured priests to avoid women, forbade them from selling liquor or frequenting taverns (unless necessitated by travel), and made the lending of money or use of weapons punishable offenses—but the frequency with which these regulations were repeatedly published suggests the Church's failure to control clerics or suppress such practices.[49] Amidst this anxiety over maintaining proper conduct, the "multitude of clerical

[48] Impersonating a priest (with false papal bulls or granting false absolution) faced excommunication. For example, the 1125 Council of London forbade the "usurpation of ecclesiastical offices" to preach, hear confession, or administer sacraments, as well as forbidding clergy from exacting payment (for baptisms, penance, absolution, burial etc). R.W. Collins, "The Parish Priest and His Flock as Depicted by the Councils of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries," *The Journal of Religion* 10.3 (July 1930): 313-32.

[49] Collins discusses the repetition of the same regulations and rules published by the church on a local and widespread scale throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, asserting (from these publications) that the church was ineffectual in regulateing priest behavior. Collins, "The Parish Priest and His Flock."

vagrants, charlatans, and imposters, many of whom were probably unbeneficed and unordained," plagued the Church.[50] Traveling clerics or pardoners with forged papal letters or relics, such as Chaucer's Pardoner, who claimed the ability to hear confession or preach prompted councils to decree, "that no wandering clerk should be admitted to a church…without the approval of the bishop."[51] While a priest financially supporting his illegitimate child or mistress was punished with (or threatened with the punishment of) deposition, anyone impersonating a priest (with false papal bulls or granting false absolution) faced excommunication. For example, the 1125 Council of London forbade the "usurpation of ecclesiastical offices" to preach, hear confession, or administer sacraments, as well as forbidding clergy from exacting payment (for baptisms, penance, absolution, burial etc). However, the repetition of this prohibition well into the thirteenth century demonstrates the lack of success in enforcement.

But more than complicating or corrupting the theological and moral boundaries of the ecclesiastic legal system, Barnard's usurpation of canon jurisdiction rejects the legitimacy of his judicial decision. Common lawyers of the medieval and early modern period shied away from commenting on the boundaries and rights of ecclesiastical courts' decisions on marriage, tithes, sacraments, etc.—demonstrating the civil and common courts' recognition of the Courts Christian jurisdiction.[52] Barnard's usurpation of such canon justice mocks the secular judicial systems (and the separations between church authority, civil authority, and his own role within that system as an outlaw and traitor). The treason the two knights accuse Beulybon of would have put their case firmly within the royal or civil courts, not a canon court overseen by a priest, which makes the Erle's masquerade irrelevant. Nonetheless, the Erle claims as a monk to

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[50] Collins, "The Parish Priest and His Flock," 322.
[51] Collins, "The Parish Priest and His Flock," 323.
[52] David Seipp, "The Reception of Canon Law and Civil Law in the Common Law Courts Before 1600," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 13.3 (Autumn, 1993): 391.

"undyrtake thys case" and upon his own satisfaction of the lady's innocence proclaims the knights "schall brenne yn thys fyre" (1096/1131). Barnard self-appoints himself as judge of "this case," as a man "of relygyon" (1091), and again self-selects the two knights' guilt and punishment without the aid or intercession of a secular jury, council, or even true ordained priest. As such, his rights to oversee the case were moot, even if the narrator grants him the moral and just voice.

Reconsidering Stewardship

Despite the Erle's problematic usurpation of justice, his advocacy for it, and his willingness to engage with parliamentary counsel—set against the emperor's duplicity—poses his ultimate succession as a solution to the poem's initially corrupt leadership. Rather than the crown, however, the poem rewards the Erle's military prowess and loyalty to the empress with stewardship:

> Togedur lovely can they kysse;
>
> Therof all men had grete blysse:
>
> The romaunse tellyth soo.
>
> He made hym steward of hys londe
>
> And sesyd agayne into hys londe
>
> That he had rafte hym froo.
>
> The Emperoure levyd but yerys thre;
>
> Be alexion of the lordys free,
>
> The Erle toke they thoo.
>
> They made hym ther Emperoure,

For he was styffe yn stoure

To fyght agayne hys foo (1196-1207).

The "dishonor" and anger the emperor earlier felt in the Erle's presence is replaced by their "blysse" here. The two men, with very little transition, go from enemies and "traytours" to living "togedur" with Barnard acting as the "steward of hys londe." It is unsurprising that the poem resolves the conflict between the competing protagonists, or even that the empress and Barnard marry following the timely death of Diocletian. However, the reward of a stewardship is unique. Recall, for a moment, the crown awarded to Athulf or Arnoldin for their service to Horn. Both perform their service as stewards, for which they then receive thrones, which makes stewardship the prerequisite action that earns the sovereign's and poet's reward. Here, "he made hym steward" rewards Barnard's service, while the crown he ultimately receives is the poet's (or Beulybon's) fortunate intervention. The free lords reward the Erle for being "styffe yn stoure" against "hys foo," suggesting his military prowess makes him eligible to rule, rather than his loyal stewardship. This seems dangerous in a poem that dismantles Diocletian's "might makes right" attitude and predilection to violence.

Despite the poet's prayers, he again reminds us of the "falseness" and "treason" which initially fractured the land. The Erle-cum-steward returns to the land "that he had rafte hym froo," which returns us to the initial moment of failed "treweth." The emperor's death "but yerys thre" which follows this, specifically "*but*" three years, connects his death to his false "rafting" of the Erle's land. If the emperor's quick death is directly related to and implicit punishment for his violent rule, then the Erle's stewardship is directly related to his superior negotiation of political factions and allegiances, even if he committed similarly violent military feats. The "alexion of the lordys free" legitimizes the Erle through political merit, but again firmly links

this merit to Barnard's superior ability to "fyght." The narrative further elevates the Erle over Diocletian by leaving the latter's union childless while the former fathers "fifteen chyldyr" who might continue his patrimony.

Ultimately, the narrative returns to the relationship between lord and steward, not Beulybon's "myschefe" or the Erle's amorous "blysse." In a political romance about the hero's lost patrimony, such as *Horn*, the "care" which is resolved is that of the political succession and/or the hero's union with his queen. Here, Diocletian makes Barnard "steward of hys londe" and the two men "togedur lovely can they kysse." The poet focuses on the resolution of internal political conflicts and factions, but not the competing approaches to "treweth." Even though the narrator abandons both Barnard and Diocletian in favor of the empress's trials in the body of the romance, the bracketing moralization returns us to the political landscape as our point of reference. The narrative emphasizes the lords' relation to one another and makes the steward's original treasonous actions the vehicle for correcting the empire's immoral leadership.

Just as Athelbrus's "gode" stewardship is predicated on his loyal teaching of Horn, the Erle's stewardship is retrospectively defined by his attempt to rectify the emperor's failure. But as Athelbrus and *Horn* demonstrate, good stewardship sometimes relies on competing factions. Here, while the resolution goes some way towards settling Diocletian's conflicted political authority, the polity's conflicted truth and vassalage remains. The Erle, who champions the abused lords that the emperor "falsely" usurped, now "kisses" his lord before returning to "hys londe agayne," which suggests that the other lords are similarly returned to their positions and favour Diocletian with their vassalage. Conflict between the lord and the Erle may be resolved, but the conclusion offers no solution to the poem's disjointed depiction of "trewe" political action or treason. The Erle's "trayson" that introduces the emperor's failed leadership is

addressed by Barnard and Diocletian coming together, but the two knights' guise as "trewe knyghts" even while they plot against their lord and fellow nobles remains. The villains are killed, but the emperor's and Erle's union does not consolidate the multitude of political discourses and claims to truth or power.

In fact, the tale troubles all avenues to power—the Erle maybe "hardy" and the emperor "stowte," but both undermine the judicial system and socio-political stability of the realm. Laura Ashe demonstrates that in Anglo-Saxon and Middle English there was no term for "hero" as we understand it—the Latin term for a "man of superhuman strength" or a "demi-god" went out of use while the Old German "hero" simply denoted a "warrior" or "man."[53] So this text's lack of a clear "heroic" figure mirrors the vernacular's lack of a clear term for such a figure. Ashe argues that this void pushed Anglo-Norman and Middle English romances to develop a "self-consciously localized ethos of lordship and kingship" in the absence of a "clear terminology of heroism"—an ethos that specifically combined the hero-king with his ability to uphold justice and piety "for the people of his land."[54] The hero does become king, but the basis and goals of that heroism is also "unclear"—he follows personal interest and redefines "justice" just as Diocletian and Bernard do.

Beyond the individual justice and ambiguous heroism, Shearle Furnish argues that the social world of the poem is inherently treacherous. If so, then for the Erle's coronation to offer redemption and ensure a harmonious community, the court must demonstrate moral or political growth to overcome such "treachery." The prevalence of "treason" and the lack of shared virtues within the court make the poet's claim of "grete blysse" between the emperor, the Erle, and "the

[53] Ashe, "The Hero and His Realm in Medieval English Romance," ed., Neil Cartlidge, *Boundaries in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008): 147.
[54] Ashe, "The Hero and His Realm," 147.

lordys free" difficult to imagine (1197/1203). The political body must be shored up if the "inherent treason" is to be resolved.[55] However, like *The Squyr of Low Degre*, the *Erle of Tolous* abandons the hero to focus on the empress and the two knights. Shearle Furnish proposes that this turn away from the hero, and the narrative disunity it creates, denies any "psychological" progression in the protagonist. She compares the *Erle*'s narrative break to *Sir Orfeo*'s "famous problem of unity," concluding that *Orfeo*'s "unity" or absolute focus on the hero allows the audience to consider the political victory over an outside enemy and to examine the "psychology" of the "individual hero."[56] By contrast, the *Erle* "does not put characters to trial[s] of development, and this flatness contributes to its ostensible narrative disjointedness."[57] Despite being tested and their "resolve" shaken, these characters never question their positions or their moral fiber. Their lack of growth is problematic, especially in a poem whose optimistic ending hinges on the emperor's ability to question and change his character from "falsely" taking advantage of his vassals to a reciprocal political bond. Without such psychological evolution, the treason and immoral governance that characterizes the tale's opening remains as a possibility.

If every figure posits a threat to "feudal society," then none of the charges of treason or protestations of "treweth" stand out more than others, thereby challenging the audience's ability to vilify or venerate any figure. These dissonant conceptions of legitimacy suggest that effective leadership relies on a system of power rather than an individual—a system populated by diverse meanings and open to interpretation. The narrative's condemnation of Diocletian and praise for Barnard is limited by the tale's resolution—which upholds the emperor and casts the Erle as

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[55] Furnish, "The Modernity of the 'Erle of Tolous'," 72.

[56] Furnish sees the lack of moral growth, or the impossibility of any psychological depth, as contributing to or causing narrative disjointedness and messiness. Thus, she argues, the text is difficult to follow and narratively "flat"—making it read similar to a modern 'novella' (71). I would like to consider the ramifications of this observation on the political structure the tale imagines and supports.

[57] Furnish, "The Modernity of the 'Erle of Tolous'," 72.

steward. In refusing to cast firm judgment and allowing the audience and romance court interpretative potential on what defines truth, political merit, and legitimate authority, *The Erle* maintains political leadership as an ongoing (and fluid) process. This process positions legitimacy as something unstable within a shifting political landscape, but also commodifies it as something acquirable through savvy diplomacy, deception, or violence (as Barnard does in various stages).

As *Horn*'s loyal—yet traitorous—stewards teach us, internal dissent and competing counselors are both inevitable to the power structure and potentially constructive. Betrayal against the "institution" of the state *and* against the individual or "mutual bonds" of loyalty equally disrupt the internal realm of *The Erle*, yet each instance of treason allows the text to correct failures in governance. Fikenhild's betrayal, Athelbrus's counsel, Barnard's war, Trylabas's loyalty to Diocletian and oath to Barnard, the two knight's love, Beulybon's token to the Erle, and Diocletian's abuse of "vassalage" are all scripted as "treason," but each allows for the recognition or negotiation of political flaws (especially those within the protagonist). Athelbrus's simultaneously deceptive and loyal stewardship and Barnard's faithful treason both demonstrate that legal and personal conflict within the polity can aid and legitimize the sovereign. While *The Erle*'s depiction of the dangers of civil war recall Lee C. Ramsay's assertion that "internal dissension is the ultimate threat to a state," the stewards of these romances offer internal discord as potentially beneficial to advancing the common good.[58] The "external" Saracen threat in *King Horn*, according to scholars, masks tensions within the English court, but *The Erle of Tolous* explicitly confronts internal conflicts (both individual and institutional). The conflict between "trewe" and treasonous actions takes place within

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[58] Eve Salisbury, Ronald Herzman and Graham Drake's editorial introduction, quoting Lee Ramsay. *Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston*. (Kalamazoo: TEAMS, 1997).

Diocletian's circle, and even amongst those he holds "dere." The factions, dissent, immoral and treacherous companions, and ineffective governance are not displaced onto a fictional and distant other (Saracens). Instead, *The Erle* recognizes the impulse to treason and "oppression" that *Horn* traces but contains these conflicted impulses within the English court and English political community. Competition within the court between the emperor and Erle complicates and even diminishes effective governance. The only dissent in *The Erle* is internal, which initially "threatens the state" as Ramsay remarks, yet the poet's solution to such dissent is not to externalize the threat or to silence that dissenting voice. Rather, the body politic recovers and thrives by giving greater space and legitimate office (by granting Barnard stewardship of the empire) to that dissenting voice.

CHAPTER 5

Sir Kay as Gatekeeper to *Le Morte DArthur*

Upon being knighted by Lancelot, the knight named in "scorn" as Beaumaines by Sir Kay chides the seneschal as "an unjantyll knyght of the courte" (VII.4), establishing a trend of mockery throughout *Le Morte DArthur*.[1] Kay restricts access to Arthur's Round Table, seeking to prevent "villaynes" from taking advantage of the court by calling attention to newcomers' self-interest or factional loyalty, such as Gareth's desire for personal honor or Brewnor's filial revenge. In this chapter, I seek to resuscitate Malory's steward Sir Kay from critical and narrative marginality by positing that his querulous gatekeeping draws attention to the divisiveness already present in Arthur's court.[2] Kay's exaggerated emphasis on the individuals and affinities that fracture the court might offer a path towards unity while Arthur's attempt to eradicate or dismiss conflict within his Round Table prompts its collapse. Arthur's performance of courtesy as the basis of his Round Table's power merely puts a gloss of courtly unity over competing urges. Kay's brusque and "ungentyl" rhetoric refuses to perform courtesy and his divisive gatekeeping privileges individualized identities above fellowship, but perhaps offers a

[1] Malory, Sir Thomas. *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. Helen Cooper (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), VII.4. All subsequent quotes will be from this edition and cited parenthetically within the text.
[2] Kay is the largely overlooked knight of Arthur's table. Whetter and Herman are notable exceptions to this, but draw attention to the critical silence. Harold J. Herman, "Sir Kay, Seneschal of King Arthur's Court," *Arthurian Interpretations* 4.1 (Fall 1989): 1-31. K.S. Whetter, "Reassessing Kay and the Romance Seneschal," *Bibliographical Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society* 51.343 (1999): 343-63. Whetter argues that Kay's tradition within the chronicle and epic offer him as a "strong" and heroic figure central to Arthur's inner circle. Refer to *Kay's Gatekeeping* in this chapter for details.

more effective method of communal unity through coalition than Arthur's ideology does. Ultimately, Arthur's attempt to suppress any perceived threat weakened the court while Kay models how divisiveness and conflict can have positive political potential by requiring those competing voices to negotiate across individual distance.

Discounted by scholars and his fellow knights alike, Sir Kay's despised and often argumentative stewardship reminded Arthur's court that their duties as vassals to their lord lay beyond individual chivalry. Unlike the other stewards of this study, Kay remains a relatively silent figure who only appears briefly to either win "worship" on the battlefield or criticize and mock a newcomer to court. His role as gatekeeper to Arthur's fellowship is antagonistic and "ungentyl" rather than following the Pentecostal Oath's ideal of unity and harmony.[3] Arthur, in contrast, upholds the Oath and its unifying function, which frequently requires him to overlook division within that fellowship. While both Malory and Arthur lament the diverse affinities within his court for causing its downfall (the knights following Lancelot compete with those loyal to Aggrevaine or Arthur, turning adultery into civil war), clearly Arthur's approach of celebrating unity and performing a shared commitment to the Pentecostal Oath does not eradicate these conflicting factions. Despite Kay's liminal status, his continual reminder of various knights' competing affinities outside and beyond the fellowship linguistically maintains divisions within the court. The juxtaposition between Arthur's failed unity in the final book with Kay's mocking role within the various affinities at Sir Urre's healing, in which competing knightly networks share in their common connection to Kay and Arthur's court, offers the

[3] Corra and Willer define the "gatekeeper" as a figure who controls access to "benefits" that are not their own, and when granted their clients "incur obligations" to the gatekeeper. "Gatekeepers control access to, but never own, the benefits received by their clients" (180). The gatekeeper, therefore, not only controls the access to the "benefit" (here, the court and Arthurian patronage), but they also mediate between the disparate identities which seek access. Kay controls how knights enter Arthur's court and what patronage they receive. See Mamadi Corra and David Willer, "The Gatekeeper," *Sociological Theory* 20.2 (July 2002): 180-207.

steward's approach to difference as central to this scene's harmony.

Kay's individualization of knights, in mockery or otherwise, cultivates difference. However, in these differences and regional affinities, composite loyalties and allegiances may be forged. For the fellowship to succeed, bridges across divergent ideas and identities must be sought (while nonetheless retaining differences of experience and identity).[4] Kay's churlishness offers an alternative to Arthur's uniform ideology: a coalitional political community that allows individual independence to interact and negotiate for a shared "imagination" of national identity.[5] Arthur's political vision imagines a shared court identity through the Pentecostal oath—using Kay, we can see that leveraging difference is another way of producing shared language and ideology. This is not to say that Kay divides knights in an active attempt to bridge difference. This study attributes the marking of disparate identities to Kay, but not the political network or negotiation that can arise from those divisions. Rather, by reading the echoes of Kay's political voice, I argue a model of coalitional politics becomes visible.

I wish to consider the ways Arthur's unified polity relies on competing or rival conceptions of chivalry and community. Rather than eliding the court's diversity (of chivalries, political factions, or personal affinities) as Arthur rhetorically emphasizes I his assertions of "fellowship," I offer Kay's model of emphatic difference as a unifier—where division becomes the consistent value shared amongst the knights. Micheal Wenthe argues that while "Malory shows the persistent tensions—ideological, religious, and national—caused by the disparate

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[4] I borrow the "bridge" terminology as a method for discussing the negotiation of structural gaps in knowledge, information, and access from Corra and Willer. Corra and Willer, "The Gatekeeper," 183.

[5] I borrow from Kenneth Hodges's articulation of Arthurian nationalism as he identifies the various regional loyalties which collectively develop into Arthur's concept of "Englishness." As Hodges notes, the "composite monarchies" which come together to form England's "common identity" had to be "negotiated in response to region's pre-existing identities and desires for sovereignty" (12). In order to imagine a nation or a unified community within that, the diverse identities which make up that space need to negotiate a shared imagination. Dorsey Armstrong and Kenneth Hodges, eds., *Mapping Malory: Regional Identities and National Geographies in 'Le Morte DArthur'* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2014).

origins of the knights in Arthur's would-be fellowship," it is Arthur's "failure to overlook differences among the knights" which results in his court's collapse.[6] This study takes the opposite approach. As Wenthe demonstrates, opposition and internal conflicts—inspired by the divergent identities, factions, and ideologies of the fellowship—are the central impetus for Arthur's failure. But Arthur indeed "overlooks" factions and difference in favor of highlighting his knights' unity to their chivalric oath—I argue that by *not* speaking of or acknowledging these conflicts, such factions are able to build without addressing how such separate identities coalesce. With no shared basis for coalition, each knight's differences compete rather than aid in producing a shared political stability.

In what follows, I build on questions posed by critics of gender, network theory, and chivalry to consider the role of difference in the Round Table. Dorsey Armstrong astutely shows that "the compulsion to fulfill" the very ideals and values which the Arthurian community attempts to harness as supports "drives the narrative towards its inevitable ending."[7] This chapter demonstrates that the court's ideology against political dissent paradoxically "undoes" Arthur's fellowship. Kenneth Hodges demonstrates the ways Malory altered his source texts in order to emphasize Arthur and his Britain as a unified nation (more civilized than its neighbors), not indebted to Rome. Hodges's main intervention illustrates the "various chivalric styles" competing within Malory's Arthurian rendition, asserting that Malory's "chivalric diversity" and his consideration of how "chivalry changes" gives his work a "unifying structure."[8] Throughout the text, the Round Table's "code" of chivalric action is "constructed, rather than discovered,"

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[6] Michael E. Wenthe, *Arthurian Outsiders: The Dynamic of Difference in the Matter of Britain* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2006), 23.
[7] Dorsey Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 1.
[8] Keneth Hodges, *Forging Chivalric Communities in Malory's 'Le Morte Darthur'* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 5.

which allows “multiple legitimate codes [to] coexist and coevolve.” The political motivations and realities of chivalry resulted in “conflicts and rivalries inside the putatively united ‘high order of knighthood’,” which in turn “becomes a way to talk about rival conceptions of community and nation.”[9]

While Hodges shows us the ways rival codes of community and chivalry ultimately coexist in Malory’s text, I argue that these tensions offer unifying potential only when explicitly addressed. As Armstrong, Corra, and Willer variously discuss, the inter-referential network of court faction or affinity results in intersecting identities which sometimes compete. For Armstrong, the connecting fabric between fluid and contentious chivalric identities relies on the subjugation of women, where women become the connective tissue to address (and either alleviate or exacerbate) the tensions within the ideal community.[10] The distance between ideological perspectives, chivalric expression, or court factions creates “structural holes” or gaps in information, social networks, or patronage—which Corra and Willer see as necessary for socio-political or economic growth.[11] I add to this discussion of how networks are formed or coalesce by asserting that while Malory’s factions are traditionally seen as opposing unity, the shared tensions between individual loyalties, shifting affinities, and a larger Arthurian collective identity invite political figures to coalesce around commonalities in difference—even if the knights reject this invitation.

Beginning with Arthur’s unifying code, the language of unity is conflicted and

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[9] Hodges, *Forging Chivalric Communities*, 9.
[10] Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community*, 1. Dorsey Armstrong focuses on the role of gender in Malory’s imagination of Arthur’s chivalric community, arguing “the *Arthuriad* focuses on the masculine activity of chivalry while simultaneously revealing the chivalric enterprise as impossible without the presence of the feminine in a subjugated position.” I am indebted to Armstrong’s work for teaching me to ask about the network of oppressive power and identity within the court and the ways tensions may “exacerbate” the very ideals they seek to support.
[11] Corra and Willer, “The Gatekeeper,” 181. The authors see holes in information, access, and power as beneficial to socio-economic and political growth when these “holes” are mediated and “bridged.” Their argument provides a useful framework for trying to think through the fluid nature of Arthurian loyalty and divisiveness.

contradictory. The Pentecostal Oath offers an ideal of chivalric values and conduct which will bring the Round Table fellowship together towards a common purpose—however its boundaries and language are vague and defined through negation. Even the threats of punishment and exile promised for contravening these boundaries are unenforced, leaving the community of knights unrestrained and following multiple paths. The prior assumption of unity, which this oath rhetorically and ritually performs, is fragile—merely "a fiction…[used] for self-definition."[12] Kay's churlish stewardship of Arthur's court, where he controls access to the fellowship and to Arthur's patronage, highlights divisions between affinities and the ways various knights conform to their Pentecostal Oath in widely diverging ways. Kay's characterization runs counter to the court's performative chivalry or unity, which frequently simply masks individual affinities. The oath imagines the individual as subsumed and incorporated into the fellowship, so that individual urges conform to that of the fellowship. Reading through Kay reveals the failure of this fantasy. His brief appearances recall the individuality and competing regional or familial loyalties of each knight and the performative aspect of chivalry that cannot always be erased by an Arthurian ideology of unity.[13]

Expecting Failure in the Pentecostal Oath

As the foundation of Arthur's unified and ideal chivalric community, the Pentecostal Oath establishes contradictory expectations in and between legal, personal, and courtly duties while also trying to conscript individual desires. This becomes a problem as the court

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[12] Armstrong notes that the oral performance of not only the annual Oath, but the stories each knight tells about their various adventures, is essential "for validating that knightly individual." The entire Arthurian community "depends upon the process of storytelling—of fiction—for self-definition." *Gender and the Chivalric Community*, 58.
[13] Dorsey Armstrong reads the imperial growth and gradual reduction of the Arthurian geographic realm as a result of "local and regional antagonisms that cannot be eased or erased by a "pan-Arthurian" unity." Armstrong, *Mapping Malory*, 158.

disintegrates as each interprets the vague oath or legal direction differently, which leads them to follow sovereign desire, legal precedent, or fellowship affinities while nonetheless conforming to their chivalric oath. Arthur "stablished" an oath for "all his knights"

> and charged them never do outerageousity nothir mourthir, and always to fle treson; also, by no means to be cruel, but to give mercy unto him that asketh mercy, upon pain of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of King Arthur for evermore; and always to do ladies, damosels, and gentlewomen succour, upon pain of death. Also, that no man take no battles in a wrongefulle quarell for no law, nor for no world's goods. Unto this were all the knights sworn of the Table Round, both old and young. And every year were they sworn at the high feast of Pentecost (III.15).

The oath, sworn every year, seeks to create boundaries of acceptable courtly behavior that will extend to establish and maintain admirable conduct throughout the court and community. While coded in legal terms, the oath also rhetorically affirms the social unity of the fellowship and the knights' commitment to Arthur's table as they "all" come together to swear adherence to it. However, the need for all the "old and young" to renew their oath "every year" suggests that such conduct will be difficult to maintain or anticipates (foreshadows) the failure of its members to maintain this oath. Moreover, the actual instruction to his knights is vague: to avoid abusing damsels or entering "wrongful quarells" leaves much open to interpretation. The oath begins by simply criminalizing "mourthir" and "treson," which ought to apply to any member of the community, but then broadens proper chivalric conduct to anything *not* "wrongful," which fails to distinguish the ideal from the merely acceptable. As Robert Kelly notes, the oath "threatens

the death penalty for rape" but not for murder or treason, when English law "requires death for all felonies"—suggesting this fellowship is both less than ideal and above the law.[14]

Arthur's code does promote an ideal of chivalry used to create the Round Table, requiring members to reaffirm annually and reminding them of the duties of their vassalage ("succor" women, give mercy, and avoid murder or treason). The ritual performance of the court coming together to renew the oath similarly prioritizes unity—"but the inherent violence of chivalry demands the creation of opponents and exacerbates the tendencies to factionalism latent in a body of knights who remain all too aware of their diverse and sometimes hostile geographic and family backgrounds."[15] Arthur's court is made up of often-competing family affinities, individual desires, and ideologies, leading to multiple overlapping factions within the court—in which the knights must compete in order to "win" worship. Arthur's ritual oath fails to address these fault lines by simply reaffirming annual fellowship.

The ethical ideal set by the oath imagines an unmarred group identity, as Arthur and his competitors demonstrate in their praise of the fellowship's "worship" as an entity. Even the reports of Arthur's Round Table from his detractors hold his fellowship as "such a fellowship [that] they may never be broken" (III.14). The Romans praise his court as "the most noble" in the world and the "noblest fellowship" for upholding their sovereignty against Lucius (V.2). In

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[14] As Robert Kelly notes, the Winchester manuscript version of the text omits "soccour," simply instructing the knights to "allwayes to do ladyes damesels and jantilwomen and wydowes strengthe hem in hir ryghtes and never to enforce them uppon payne of dethe." Kelly, "Royal Policy and Malory's Round Table," *Arthuriana* 14.1 (2004): 43-71. The oath instructs the knights to "strengthen" ladies' "ryghtes" and never to rape, but those rights are unspecified. Caxton attempts to "fix" the syntax by adding "succor"—but even this is vague in its boundaries. Robert Kelly comments on this linguistic and political ambiguity. "An even greater difficulty is a lacuna in the clause concerning the defense of women: 'to do' lacks a direct object, resulting in a syntactic break between 'wydowes' and 'strengthe.' Caxton supplied the word 'succour' ('to do...succour') to correct the syntax, a change Vinaver adopted. In addition to the syntactical problems, there is a logical one: why is the death penalty threatened for rape, and not for treason or murder, when English law requires death for all felonies?" (52).
[15] Michael E. Wenthe, *Arthurian Outsiders: The Dynamic of Difference in the Matter of Britain* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2006).

Gareth's supplication to join the court, Arthur and Malory refer to "the whole number of an hundred and fifty" knights, imagining the "Round Table fully complished" despite its numbers not being complete (VII.1). Arthur and his fellow knights do not refer to the Round Table's fissures until after the civil war with Lancelot, where they identify Lancelot's amorous faith to Guinevere as the moment which breaks the fellowship, for only "*now* the felyshyp of the Rounde Table ys brokyn" (XX.18 emphasis mine). Arthur laments the "noble felyshyp" as "brokyn" only after Aggrevain is slain, despite other moments of chivalric conflict before this (XX.7). If the fellowship only breaks after the civil war, the court implies that no disunity occurred prior to Lancelot's "treason" and exile. In linguistically referring to the "fellowship" and "Round Table" above and in place of any participants or identities within it, Arthur (and his companions or adversaries) grant it a unified identity.

However, by foreshadowing the violation of the code through its rhetorically negative position to swear *not* to commit crime, the oath creates a dichotomy that diametrically contrasts discord and unity. The knight is either a "mourthirer" or "worshipful," which rejects legal or social ambiguity—and to be a fellow of Arthur's court, the knight must unify with the oath's positioning. However, as the knights seek to conform to this ideology, the very vagueness of the oath and its boundaries allows them to pursue different means. Kenneth Hodges identifies such ambiguity and diversity in Arthur's composite monarchy, in which "knights sometimes act as members of the same emerging nation and at other times as postcolonial subjects negotiating their roles in empire."[16] Despite Arthur's sovereignty and the knights' fealty, their membership does not erase or harmoniously engage with their previous affinity. The "imaged community" of Arthur's fellowship depends, as Hodges and Anderson point out, on "who does the imagining."

[16] Hodges, *Mapping Malory*, 12.

In Arthur's linguistic performance of one fellowship and one court identity, affinities overlooked by that imagination become its downfall. While composite or multiple identities are acknowledged in the formation of the Round Table—and fealty to Arthur does not necessitate a rejection of former affinities—Arthur's (and the Oath's) linguistic assertions of *a fellowship* that is *unbroken* marks a singular group identity that supersedes others. Malory depicts his Arthur striving for "a national" identity, yet the multiple complex affinities of that community "did not automatically accept the king's claim of a capacious and unified realm superseding regional loyalties."[17] As Hodges notes in relation to Lancelot's non-English *and* non-French identity, "Malory allows tension to flourish and knights to establish political identities within or beyond their Englishness."[18]

The Oath's legal parameters, which only define what is *not* acceptable, mirrors this stark juxtaposition of either an Arthurian identity or a regional lord separate from the Round Table. Critics have noted the unique legality of Malory's version of the oath, which codes Arthur's fellowship as a legal as well as a social unit, where justice and community are essential.[19] However, rather than establish ideal conduct with explicit actions to perform, the oath is defined by negative actions the knights ought "never do." The knights swear to *not* commit treason or cruelty, but what constitutes such crimes is less clear. The text's characterization of Balyn as "*without* treason," for example, despite Arthur exiling him for killing the lady of the lake, indicates a "failure of institutional definitions of treason to identify what truly constitutes

[17] Hodges, *Mapping Malory*, 154.
[18] Hodges, *Mapping Malory*, 155.
[19] Dorsey Armstrong argues that "Malory's text differs from other Arthurian and medieval romance literature in the explicit legislation (as opposed to implicit coding) of chivalric values, most notably in the swearing of the Pentecostal Oath, an event unique to Malory's text." Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community,* 1.

treacherous behaviour."[20] Balyn is significantly *defined* by treason (or its lack), but even after committing murder, he is characterized as "moste of worship *without treson, trechory or felony*."[21] A failure to define treason, in an oath that specifically defines heroism by avoiding such a crime, results in a lack of "defining rhetoric" for effective governance.[22] Lynn Stanley locates anxiety over the rhetorical fluctuation of power during the fourteenth century under Richard II, but as Kaufman, Hodges, and Leitch (among others) have pointed out, a similar "crisis" of legitimation and fluctuation in the rhetoric of power continued during and following the fifteenth-century Wars of the Roses.[23] The "mutability" in rhetorical and practical authority of Malory's moment certainly informs the text, but the Oath's boundaries located by relation to criminalized action does more to identify non-Arthurian conduct than specify chivalric action or offer resolution to historical tensions. While exemplary action is undefined and therefore loosely practicable, the linguistic binary offering either "treason" or "worship" nonetheless rejects the possibility of complex duality or negotiation of difference—while simultaneously reminding us

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[20] Megan Leitch draws our attention to this focus on criminalization in the negative rhetorical positioning of Arthur's establishing ideal. Leitch, "Speaking (of) Treason in Malory's *Morte DArthur,*" *Arthurian Literature* 27 (2010): 111.
[21] 64.2-3, as quoted by Leitch, "Speaking (of) Treason," 112. (Emphasis hers).
[22] Lynn Stanley considers the "language of power" was "subject to negotiation and fluctuation," asserting Richard II's reign marked a moment when "kingship appeared to lack a defining rhetoric." Malory's oath seems to refer to this fluctuation as an issue which effected more than Richard's reign. Stanley, *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 1.
[23] "The problems of legitimation remained at the forefront of political consternations…from the ascension of the ten-year-old Richard II in 1377 to the Wars of the Roses, all the kings of England faced crises of legitimation." Alexander L. Kaufman, "To Write: Sir Thomas Malory and his Cautionary Narrative of Legitimation," *Enarratio* 11 (2004): 62. Kaufman notes that Malory's *Morte* has a chronicle style, focusing less on the "metaphysical and symbolic character of romance" to instead chronicle battles and struggles between characters which highlight the "inherent problems of war and legitimation" (67). Martin B. Shichtman similarly comments on the 'Sankgreal' as an attempt to "repair fissures between clerical and knightly communities" but is nonetheless "subjected to the skepticism and doubt of an age troubled by constant political disruption." Schichtman, "Politicizing the Ineffable: The *Queste del Saint Graal* and Malory's 'Tale of the Sankgreal'," eds. Martin B. Schichtman and James P. Carley, *Culture and the King: The Social Implications of the Arthurian Legend, Essays in Honor of Valeire M. Logorio* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 163. Certainly, the power struggles between the barons which inform and influenced the struggle for the thrown during the Wars of the Roses has strong ties to Malory's retelling of Arthur's court—and that baronial competition may help us unpack some of the affinities within the text. My purpose here is to consider how Kay's divisiveness might reframe or rethink the competitive court dynamic beyond the historical, but such historical realities certainly intrude in Malory's tale and inform our reading.

of the constant possibility for failure, treason, and conflict.

The complex negotiation of composite identities within and separate from Arthur's imagined realm results in opposing *and* harmonious identities. The fellowship simultaneously rejects and invites misconduct. In fact, the very "founding act" of the community "places evil on the inside of chivalry and makes it a necessary part of the order it forges," according to Christopher Cannon. He argues that Arthur's court "*included*"—if not relied on—criminals by allowing "noble knights" to also be "outrageous" murderers.[24] Gareth kills two "murtherers," for example, who are also called "two good knyghtes" (VII.6), which demonstrates that "knights can be both 'good' *and* 'murderers'." In fact, the lady critiques Gareth here for acting "un-doughtily" while Malory praises him as a "fair knight" (VII.7). These two knights may be both criminals/traitors and noble knights, but Malory also characterizes Gareth as a participant within this contradictory system by his violent involvement.[25] The contradictions inherent within chivalry—the ability of knights to transgress against the Pentecostal Oath and commit treason against Arthur while nonetheless maintaining their status—also suggests this order is too vague or unpoliced to effectively guide knightly conduct. If failing to meet the legal framework of Arthur's community (by simply "avoiding treason" and "murder") has no negative repercussion, then the community these knights lead is similarly unpoliced. The oath's legal and linguistic capaciousness is another example where knights can follow separate ideals while still maintaining the fiction of unity. In fact, the oath anticipates this failure.

Despite the Round Table's identification as "a highly idealized society," the Oath stages a

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[24] Christopher Cannon, "Malory's Crime: Chivalric Identity and the Evil Will," ed. David Aers *Medieval Literature and Historical Inquiry: Essays in Honor of Derek Pearsall* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000): 159-83, 161.

[25] Cannon, "Malory's Crime," 175. Cannon argues for the contradictions and ambiguity of the chivalric order. I argue that Gareth and the other central figures of Arthur's court share this ambiguity and make the entire fellowship culpable.

conflict between legal structures and personal impulses.[26] Rather than establishing chivalric conduct above that of ordinary knights, Malory initiates his knights with a warning to avoid treason and three separate Common Law felonies (violent assault, murder, and rape), which judges the knights by the same legal and social regulations as the community at large, rather than making them protectors of it. Robert Kelly sees these specific calls to avoid felony as "setting a shockingly low standard of behavior. While the definition of 'chivalric' can cover a wide range of behavior, the base line requirement must be at a level higher than the avoidance of felonies."[27] Not only does Arthur have low standards for his knights, he "evidently believes the Round Table knights are capable of such crimes as are forbidden, for he twice specifies penalties for violation [loss of worship and death]."[28] Kelly posits that Arthur and the Oath anticipate the Round Table's violation by so specifically establishing the punishment. While 'chivalry' may demand more of the fellowship than the Pentecostal Oath does, many of these knights fail at the negative regulations specified.

To be a member of the Round Table, perhaps neither chivalry nor avoiding crimes is necessary. Lancelot obviously comes to mind with his affair, but so do Mordred, Aggrevaine, Balyn, and Kay for not "fle[ing] treson," protecting "damesels," or avoiding "wrongefull quarell[s]." Even in minor episodes, such as Lancelot's dual with Meliagant, Lancelot fails by refusing mercy when the knight "yields," as the Pentecostal Oath stipulates he must (XIX.9). Yet these knights are simultaneously upheld as models of Arthurian honor and justice, despite their inability to follow legal codes or Pentecostal expectations. Armstrong convincingly reveals the

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[26] Robert Kelly argues that Malory's rhetoric of the Pentecostal Oath, in contrast to many of his sources, not only makes the oath one of vassalage to Arthur, but inscribes the probability of their failure to meet Chivalrous expectation. The bond therefore becomes a contract between lord and client rather than establishing an ideal for conduct or the society. Kelly, "Royal Policy and Malory's Round Table," *Arthuriana* 14.1 (2004): 43-71.
[27] Kelly, "Royal Policy," 56.
[28] Kelly, "Royal Policy," 56.

Oath is a "master signifier" through which all knightly action is judged, but its contradictions and allowance for failure render the "signifier" ambiguous at best.[29] The Oath's negative boundaries may be both ambiguous and fail to perfect the knights, as Armstrong shows, but it nonetheless stands as a rhetorical center through which the fellowship share a common language and ideology of unity.

The dual criminality and chivalry available to Arthur's knights mirrors the ways the court's affinities simultaneously support and destroy the Round Table. As Christopher Cannon sees it, Malory uses criminality "to delineate fundamental problems within chivalry," but by doing so "he can also employ the concept more productively—to re-build chivalry and its principles in a more positive form." Chivalry, and the pursuit of Arthur's ideal may be both good and bad, make a knight both "criminal" and "noble." The courtly ritual and swearing of unity on Pentecost may advertise a similarly shared ideological unity; however, the Oath's contradictions and ambiguity which are specifically understood through negative or criminalized action make such unity merely performative. The violent impulses of chivalry, which require or at lease allow for combat and tournaments, set knights against one another within the court as they either compete for honor or desire revenge for a previous slight. Kay's mocking identification of many Round Table knights along these lines—as the sycophantic vassals, disguised knights merely seeking combat in order to win personal glory, or as ill-dressed imposters—recognizes and accepts chivalry's dualism. Modeling Kay, Gareth may be Beaumains, the "kitchen knave" who

[29] Armstrong sees the Oath as establishing "proper behavior *throughout* the narrative," citing them "as law." Despite being "disregarded or deliberately violated" by various knights "does not render it any less important in interpreting the actions of the chivalric agents of the community; on the contrary, the vehemence and/or cautiousness with which knights who transgress the Oath offer defenses for their behavior suggests that it is indeed the "master signifier" to which all knightly behavior is referred and through which it is interpreted": (Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community*, 31).

behaves "shamefully," and the "fair knight" with the "fair hands."[30]

While the Pentecostal Oath theoretically supports Arthur's rule of law and the legal boundaries of his court, at various moments the Oath's support of justice through chivalric pursuits fails under the pressure of personal desires. For example, upon hearing Aggrevaine's charge Arthur denies trial by combat, claiming "for my queen [Lancelot] shall nevermore fight, for she shall have the law" (XX.7). Arthur establishes a dichotomy between chivalric "fight" and the "law," which draws a similar line between the Round Table's "code" and legal justice.[31] Not only is trial by combat rejected here (which is unsurprising), but the ideal that chivalric valor aligns with justice is similarly suspended. Lancelot has long been upheld by Arthur and Malory as the most chivalric of the Round Table, conforming to the Pentecostal Oath's strictures to "soccour" women, pursue right "quarells" and "worship." Therefore, denying him the right to "fight" as an action directly contradicting "law" suggests that chivalry's ideology may similarly compete with legal forms of justice. According to Arthur's complaint, Lancelot's pursuit of personal chivalry out of desire for the queen threatens communal legal structures. Indeed, by denying Lancelot's chivalry or judicial combat, Arthur seems to recognize the limitations of the chivalric oath to either prevent criminality or maintain justice.

If an adulterer and a murderer can also be a "noble knight," as Cannon demonstrates, then the Pentecostal Oath is both prescriptive and merely performative. Arthur's approach is to elide treason's, chivalry's, and his court's divisions in order to perform communal unity. The Pentecostal Oath's very ideology of unity, for "all the knights" to come together behind Arthur, makes individual loyalty and conflict an anathema which must be expelled. The fantasy of one

[30] Both the damosel with Gareth and the Black Knight accuse him of acting "shamefully" and un-knightly. These lines are from book VII, chapters 6, 9 and 7 respectively.

[31] Arthur recognizes that Lancelot's strength will likely override the law regardless of divine inspiration, as Bedwell notes. Laura Bedwell, "The Failure of Justice, the Failure of Arthur," *Arthuriana* 21.3 (Fall 2011): 3-22.

identity goes beyond Arthur's Round Table to Malory's treatment of the fellowship's imperial expansion, which masks internal division by spreading outward. Malory's Arthur defeats Rome early in his career and struggles to maintain a collective of monarchs under his sovereignty, expanding his imagined community over "all Ingelonde, Walys and Scotlonde, and of many other realmys."[32] The divisions within the conquered lands, as they attempted to coalesce into a chivalric fellowship, mirror the divisions internal to Arthur's Round Table—emphasized by Kay.

Kay's characterization as both loyal seneschal and deficient knight, inviting and maintaining conflict within the court, mirrors and runs counter to Arthur's Oath—which fantasizes a single unified entity even as it ignores crime and individuality. Rather than ignore the "criminals," competing urges, and inevitable failure of individuals to live up to the ideal, Kay's political voice recalls these ambiguities. His strategy of gatekeeping, which we will see highlights each knight's individuality and competing affinities, shows us there is rudeness, nepotism, and conflict already within the court despite its idealism. Kay's gatekeeping creates a shared language of individuality—thus while his actions may be as prejudiced and "churlish" as his critics suggest, he nonetheless allows for a commonality within difference amongst the knights.

Kay's Gatekeeping

I argue that Malory's redacted Kay emphatically calls attention to division within the court and within its affinities, rather than idealizing unity. In his interaction with courtly

[32] (1.371.10) Malory's treatment of the battle with Rome early in his career demonstrates Arthur's court as not only internally unified, but an imperial force of unity as well. Radulescu asserts that "both in its clear divergence from the source material and in its repetition, the concept of a unified Britain gains significance in Malory's text": "Malory and Fifteenth-Century Political Ideas," *Arthuriana* 13.3, Rhetorical Approaches to Malory's 'Le Morte Darthur' (Fall 2003): 36-51, 45. Kenneth Hodges sees Malory's adaptation as a rescripting of Arthur's "unity" as both national *and* imperial, while the Pope's presence crowning Arthur "Emperoure" places his chivalric nation at the center of European civilization and faith. Hodges, *Forging Chivalric Communities*, 64-5.

newcomers (Beaumaynes/Gareth and Coté Male Tail/Brewnor), Kay acts as an effective gatekeeper who mediates access to authority and maintains order.[33] Kay's unchivalrous and critical attitude towards Gareth (as "villain" and mocked for his "fair hands") and Brewnor (for his badly tailored coat) highlights many of the issues within Malory's political fellowship. Their antagonistic relationship is emblematic of the conflict between familial bonds and court loyalty, between competing affinities and the communal court, between chivalry and personal interest, and between inauthentic rhetorical acts and sincerity. Kay's gatekeeping draws attention to the ways in which a knight's status within court is "merely contingent" upon his "appearance"—either physical or rhetorical—of chivalric qualities and familial affinities.[34] Gareth's "fair hands" initially win approval before his kinship and affinity with Gawain (and therefore Arthur) solidifies his status. His rhetorical performance of vassalage and chivalry towards both Arthur and Lyonesse similarly proclaim his place within the Round Table.

However, Kay's consistent reminders of his "fair hands" and "vylany" not only draws attention to the self-interest and performative nature of Gareth's rise, but also the multiple (and often competing) metrics for gaining authority within Arthur's court. In this and other interactions, Kay maintains divisions between figures—such as Gareth's suspicious appearance at court or Breunor's prioritizing filial duty. In effect, Kay advocates for maintaining divisions

[33] Kay's undefined role as gatekeeper, with authority over Arthur's vassalage, also provides a lens to the court and reader into the fellowship's ethical and social framework. Scholars on Shakespearean "porters" (also liminal or lower-class gatekeepers of sorts) have noted the "ethical perspective" offered by the comedic figure of the porter (395). The "comically imagined porter" is also critical in medieval cycle drama as the devil guarding "Hell's gate"—which informed dramatic and literary references to porters thereafter, as John Harcourt has articulated. Harcourt argues that the "garrulous" porter of *Macbeth* "intensifies our growing awareness of the Castle as the dwelling place of evil" and "social order['s]" similar corruption or inversion (400). His ignorant comedic commentary nonetheless draws linkages between symbolic socio-political flaws and real tensions happening within the narrative/stage. See John B. Harcourt, "'I Pray You, Remember the Porter,'" *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 12.4 (1961): 393–402.

[34] Despite their oaths of fellowship, Arthur's knights sometimes lack "real" sincere bonds to one another (or to their sovereign). By "real," I refer to their relationships as having "existence in fact and not merely in appearance" or as having "an absolute and necessary, in contrast to a merely contingent, existence." "real, adj.2, n.2, and adv." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2017, www.oed.com/view/Entry/158926.

and individualized identities, rather than performing unity by erasing affinities. Kay's naming of knights based on individual affinity creates a shared language amongst the court; each knight might pursue his individuality and regional loyalty, but the linguistic link between him and Kay consistently asks him (and the court) to reconsider his affiliation within the fellowship and Arthur.

Gareth arrives at court and "require[s]" two gifts from Arthur: a year's lodging and food, and a second gift in a year on the next feast of Pentecost. Arthur agrees, as the unknown figure is "one of the goodlyest yonge men that ever I saw." Arthur places the youth in Kay's charge to receive "all maner of fyndynge as though he were a lordys sonne"—

> 'That shall lytyll nede,' seyde Sir Kay, 'to do suche coste uppon hym, for I undirtake he is a vylayne borne, and never woll make man—for and he had com of jantyllmen, he wolde have axed horse and armour; but as he is, so he askyth—and sythen he hath no name, I shall gyff hym a name whyche shall be called Beawmayes—that is to say 'Fayre Handys'— and into the kychyn I shall brynge hym'…[where Sir Kay] scorned and mocked hym (VII.1).

Kay's "rebuke" of Gareth, which inspires such anger from Gawain later, is limited to Gareth's role as a "vilayne" and vassal in Arthur's service. If he were a knight, he ought to have asked for knightly accouterments and offered his service to Arthur. It is Kay's responsibility as steward to oversee the servants within the king's household and maintain justice and order, which would include supervising servants, distributing money, maintaining order, and preventing such figures overstepping their roles.[35] According to Welsh and English laws, the 'dapifer' or 'distein' (origin

[35] Harold J. Herman, "Sir Kay, Seneschal of King Arthur's Court," *Arthurian Interpretations* 4.1 (Fall 1989): 1-31. According to Welsh and English laws, the 'dapifer' or 'distein' (origin to the steward or seneschal) was the third most important figure in the king's household. He was principally concerned with the service of the royal table, supervising the kitchen, testing the liquors, waiting on the sovereign, his guest of honor, the Edling (prince), and the

to the steward or seneschal) was the third most important figure in the king's household. Harold Herman sees Kay's actions following official guidelines for his office where he functions "only by the rules of the book."[36] Herman astutely recognizes Kay's legitimate execution of his "destein" duty, describing his various instances of "discourtesy" or "churlish[ness]" as byproducts or misreadings of his role.

Kay's reminder that Gareth has no claim on the king's favor as a commoner with no measurable skills aside from his beauty is the accepted performance of his duties—however, Kay's gatekeeping goes beyond merely overseeing or orchestrating Arthur's household. His suppression of Gareth seems centered on Arthur's and Gawain's favoritism. The other knights to encounter and fight Gareth as the "kitchen knave" with desires above his "station" mirror Kay's anger. As an unknown vassal, Gareth has no claim on "courtesy" and must prove his loyalty to the king. Kay's treatment reminds the reader and his fellow knights that the foundling's beauty does not justify unequal treatment. K.S. Whetter argues that the seneschal is responding to Gareth's "suspicious" request (by only asking for food and lodging) and "justifies Kay's role as catalyst for action and a guardian against sycophants and hangers-on."[37]

Kay certainly catalyzes or enables Gareth's "necessary initiation into knighthood" and heroism by providing the opportunity for the knight to overcome a "low position," but his

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chief falconer. He was also in charge of the hospitality of the palace, apportioning lodging for all in attendance at court and ushering the people to seats in the hall. And he was head of all the servants, with the task of maintaining order and of distributing "supper money" among them" (6).

[36] Herman, "Sir Kay, Seneschal of King Arthur's Court," Herman argues, based on these duties, that Kay's advice to Arthur that he must wait on an adventure before beginning the meal or allow the guest to enter the hall is directly related to his duties as distein and therefor simply following his duties to the letter of the law. Kay appears, in Herman's analysis, to be the type of official who "functions only by the rules of the book," and only exercises legitimate authority.

[37] K.S. Whetter, "Reassessing Kay and the Romance Seneschal," *Bibliographical Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society* 51.343 (1999): 343-63, 360.

stewardship also reminds us of Gareth's uncomfortable status between "peasant and lord."[38] Faye Rignel characterizes Kay as a "churlish" figure who "mediates" access to food and the court, demonstrating the sometimes ambiguous boundary between social classes—but her analysis points out the central (if invisible) authority of the steward as he reminds the court of its unstable consolidation of multiple factions, affinities, classes, and desires. If Kay sits at the "uneasy" borderline between "peasant and lord," which makes him both "liminal" and necessary, then the boundaries and categories which structure the court around ideals of courtliness and chivalry are similarly uneasy. Kay mediates not only the court's access to food, as Rignel describes, but also access to power, methods of performing vassalage, and factions' ability to circumvent such gatekeeping.

Gareth's eventual rise to knighthood and fame relies on his beauty and his connection to Gawain—he is only knighted by Lancelot when his identity as "brothir unto Sir Gawayne" is revealed (VII.5)—which predicates knighthood and Gareth's naming in the text to his blood-relation to Gawain. Inter-personal favoritism and familial ties are paramount to courtly influence. This lineage becomes of greater importance than Arthur's vassalage, as Gawain later uses Gareth's accidental death as impetus for breaking with Lancelot. Kay's "unjantyll" treatment of Beaumaynes serves as contrast and an attempt to curb such favoritism and factionality. Kenneth Hodges looks at Gareth's "public performance" of love for Lyones to assert the artificiality of "many of the knightly conventions," where Gareth employs disguise, adventuring, and "public performances of love" as "a tool for winning the appropriate place within the national

[38] Faye Rignel, "Pluto's Kitchen: The Initiation of Sir Gareth," *Arthurian Interpretations* 1.2 (Spring 1987): 29-38. Rignel considers Bakhtin's assessment of cooks and the frequently humorous or "carnivalesque" representation of cooks, especially in Dante's figuration of demons in various levels of Hell, where cooking and controlling access to food is both grotesque and comedic. Rignel argues that "stewards and cooks…are liminal figures…and move on the borderline between peasant and lord" and we are made uneasy by them "because mediators are needed between us and our food" (34). Sir Kay mediates not only the court's access to food, but also controls who prepares it.

community.”[39] His amorous “performance” is therefore for political, social and economic advancement—which intrinsically links his amorous desire with personal political goals. Similarly, as Beaumaynes he pursues purely personal advancement, rather than the good of the Round Table or Arthur. Kay’s suspicion of him as a member of the lower class seeking upward mobility may demonstrate Kay’s prejudice, but it also attempts to privilege Arthur’s vision of the court as a communal fellowship where honor is earned rather than bought or born into.

Despite Gareth’s central role and military skill and Kay’s characterization as discourteous, the text continues calling Gareth “Beaumaines” well after his name and lineage are revealed. When Gareth fights the Red Knight for Dame Lyones, he again refuses to name himself, saying instead “that will I nat tell you, but Sir Kay on scorne named hym Bewmaynes” (VII.14). Not only does Malory continue to refer to Gareth as Beawmaynes, but the dwarf and Gareth also retain Kay’s involvement with this name and therefore retain the link between the two. This linkage reminds the reader of our initial suspicion and the family affinity that ultimately knighted Gareth. Despite the “fairness” and complimentary aspect of the name “Beawmaynes,” Kay and the narrator remember the intended “scorne” of the title, and therefore call attention to the fraught basis of Gareth’s success. Malory only changes his textual name to “Gareth” after Dame Lyonesse learns his identity—not after Arthur does (which happened prior to Lyoness). So his individual identity is tied to Lyonesse’s amorous recognition—and suggests his loyalty to her supersedes that to Arthur.

In a similar interaction, Kay controls our (and the court’s) introduction to Brewnor le Noyre. When the “bygly” young knight comes in an ill-fitting coat requesting to join Arthur’s knights, Sir Kay “in mokkynge” dubs him “le Cote Male Tayle”—to which Brewnor retells the

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[39] Hodges, *Forging Chivalric Communities*, 81.

tale of how his father was slain in his sleep in that same coat by an unnamed "enemy," pledging to not mend or repair it until he avenges his father (IX.1). Kay's nickname may originate in mockery, but he continues to call him "Cote Male Tayle" even after learning the cause, and the knight himself adopts that name—"I requyre you…that ye call me non other name but La Cote Male Tayle: insomuche that Sir Kay hath so named me, so woll I be called" (IX.1). Brewnor's identity becomes again intertwined with Kay as his namer, and that initial ridicule becomes the active remembrance of the knight's duty and fidelity to his father. Brewnor seems to adopt Kay's mocking name as a reminder to pursue filial honor and to correct the unnamed enemy's crime. But it also reminds the court and the reader of Brewnor's competing loyalty (or self-interest) that may not always align with or prioritize Arthur.

"Le cote male tayle's" consistent identification aligns with familial lines, but his assertions of fellowship as a "noble knight" simultaneously scripts him within the political or communal collective. Malory continues to refer to Brewnor as "this yonge man that Sir Kay named La Cote Male Tayle" (IX.1) after his identity has been established—even when he slays the lion, Brewnor instructs Guinevere to "calle me none other name but La Cote Mele Tayle." Breunor not only maintains anonymity until his quest to revenge his father is complete, he emphasizes Kay's role in identifying him. Even in his ritual admittance at Pentecost into Arthur's fellowship, "Sir La Cote Male Taile, called otherwise by right Sir Breunor le Noire, [was] made Knight of the Table Round…and wedded that damosel Maledisant. And after she was called Beauvivante, but ever after for the more part he was called La Cote Male Taile" (IX.9). Sir Brewnor's identity inside Arthur's community as still both regionally affiliated and indebted to Kay (even as his wife gains a new and communal identity) demonstrates the power Kay holds and the interconnected systems of power.

Kay gains authority over newcomers, and therefore controls access to the court, by his ability to name and grant identity to these knights. By repeatedly identifying these knights by their relation to Kay, the reader is continually reminded of Kay's authority as gatekeeper to the court. Jane Bliss contends that "namelessness" is a central feature of romance that helps to establish the hero's worth—only once the hero has "earned a name" is he worthy of the text's or his beloved's attention (such as Lyones telling Gareth to "make his name").[40] Despite revealing his name, the narrator's continued use of "Beaumaines" rather than "Gareth" retains his nameless (and therefore unworthy or questionable) status. Malory's reminder of the steward's mockery suggests an active play on the "fictionality" and performance of the romance "naming trope" as a marker of morality or heroism, but also places the steward in a position of power as he controls court access for the 'nameless' figure.[41] Rather than gaining "moral uprightness," Malory's continued use of Kay's mocking names questions these knights' loyalty, valor, or chivalric virtue—which is tied to their named identity. But this process of referential identity—where knights are known as the "yonge man that Sir Kay named"— ties Round Table knights to one another and creates a shared rhetoric where identity and position are predicated on other members' similarly referential positions.

Kay's contentious rhetorical relationship with Beaumaines initiates his reputation (within the text and court) as both rhetorically and physically unchivalrous. For his gatekeeping, Gareth censures Kay as "an unjantyll knyght of the courte, and therefore beware of me" (VII.4).

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[40] Jane Bliss argues that "namelessness" in romance is one of the central features of the genre and helps establish the hero as the morally upright figure. Bliss, *Naming and Namelessness in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012), 114.

[41] Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987). Riddy has noted that Malory's use of romance (as a genre, "rather than treatise or debate") to discuss the pressures and uncertainty of knighthood is appropriate within the fifteenth century, as "the myth of class is now appropriately expressed only in a fiction that seems to play with its own fictionality" (83). Class and a knight's position within the fellowship are intertwined and interdependent—which both inform how that figure is identified and known within the text. I argue that Riddy's assertion of Malory's explicit manipulation of fictionality is applicable to the knights' frequent use of disguise and naming.

Beaumaynes correlates Kay's role as guardian of Arthur's court with a lack of chivalry, which suggests that rhetorical courtesy is a necessary component of chivalric action. The court begins interacting with Kay according to his negative stereotype (as discourteous) and therefore ignores or actively counters his advice. When the unknown "damsel" with the black shield comes to court requesting a "good knyght," Sir Kay initially steps up, but the damsel demands that he "lay down that shylde, for wyte thou well hit fallyth nat for you, for he muste be a bettir knyght than ye that shall welde this chylde" (IX.2). Kay's identity is known, as the damsel "wete[s] well" he is the seneschal—but his unchivalrous or inferior reputation is also taken for granted as the lady goes so far as to claim that even Kay "wyte[s]" that a "bettir knyhgt" ought to claim the shield. "Bettir" may cover various and ambiguous categories of knighthood (of which valour, chivalry and reputation clearly play a large part), but the damsel already assumes Kay fails to meet these requirements—characterizing him as multiply deficient.

Kay's failure or rejection of traditional chivalry and courtesy leads the court to mistake a lack of rhetorical performance for a general courtly and/or martial inferiority. In fact, while his military prowess is documented intermittently throughout the text, fellow knights and strangers alike nonetheless ridicule him for his lack of verbal courtesy and align his lack of rhetorical polish with chivalric inferiority.[42] Lancelot takes Kay's armor, for example, knowing other knights will "be bold" against Kay but will allow Lancelot to "ryde in pease" (VI.11), which nods towards Lancelot's superior reputation but also seems to presuppose Kay's ineffectuality. However, Malory and Arthur both tell us Kay "dud passyngely well, that dayes of hys luff the worship wente never from hym" (II.10) and that he "dud many mervaylous dedis of armys, that

[42] Whetter argues for Kay's heroic characterization in the earlier Welsh tradition, where the epic and chronicle genres show his counsel and rude rhetoric as laudable. Whetter cites Kay's origins as the primary cause of his misplaced romance characterization as "petty" in "Reassessing Kay and the Romance Seneschal," 343-63.

there was none that dud so welle as he that day" (I.11). In an outmatched contest between Arthur and five advancing knights, Kay advises the group to "macche them…I woll undertake for two of the beste of hem, and than may ye three undirtake for all the othir three" (IV.3). Kay is not only successful, but more "worshipful" than his companions, for which Arthur promises to "honoure the." With no evidence of Kay's subsequent failure, the damsel nonetheless immediately assumes Kay's status as an insufficient knight. Kenneth Hodges points out that the other knights of the Round Table similarly fail, are wounded, and act badly, but these injuries are seen as "integral to masculinity" and are "transformed into evidence of courage and…occasions of fellowship."[43] For other knights, some physical weakness is elided in favor of chivalry, but for Kay his courtly failures become the total of his character. This inconsistency underscores the inherent conflicts at play in Arthur's chivalric ideology, where membership to certain affinities offers advantages and protection that others do not.

Unlike the other knights, Kay does not seek his own chivalric promotion, as Lancelot does for example (by masquerading as other knights in order to fight them in book VI). While the other knights actively attempt to promote their image and perceived prowess through adventure and combat, Kay notably does not partake in these quests.[44] This might portray Kay as "ungentle," but it also suggests he is more interested in actions over courtly performance, and in promoting Arthur's power rather than his own. As a result, he resists factions within the court which may detract from Arthur's unified objective—but his discourtesy or brusqueness might

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[43] Kenneth Hodges, "Wounded Masculinity: Injury and Gender in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte DArthur*," *Studies in Philology* 106.1 (2009): 14.

[44] In some instances, Kay is refused when he offers to join a quest (as the damsel episode shows), but more often his name is simply not present in the text, when in sources he is. For example, when Meliagant abducts the queen and Lancelot rescues her, Chretien de Troyes' *Knight of the Cart* specifically notes Kay rebuking the king for not protecting his people or the queen more actively and joins in her rescue. Malory notably removes him from this and other scenes. Whether Kay participated or not, the effect for the reader is the same—he remains invisible during episodes which might win him honor, but his name is still visible in his association with and authority over other knight's names.

also (or instead) suggest his awareness that Arthur's agenda of ideal chivalry (the Pentecostal Oath) to uphold the kingdom is doomed from the outset—that courtesy is an inauthentic mask that cannot prevent self-interested factions from forming despite the verbal performances to the contrary. His discourtesy dissuades fellowship between himself and others, but also maintains divisions between court factions—just as his mockery intensifies individual difference, his denial of fellowships recognizes factions without rejecting Arthur's dominance.

By maintaining divisions and separating himself from other knights within the court, acting as a gatekeeper and spectator rather than a participant at court, Kay assumes his role (as steward and liminal spectator of the court) as an ideal counselor to Arthur. Good rule, in contemporary chronicles and manuals and in recent scholarship, frequently relies on the sovereign's ability to seek and execute the advice of his counselors. Mediating the wisdom and council he receives is the duty of the king, but such a task is difficult in practice, as Radulescu points out by the gradual decrease of "counsel" in the closing books of *Morte*.[45] According to K.S. Whetter's reading of Kay's "callous and petty" characterization throughout romance, his transformation from the legends' "chief warrior and counselor" to Malory and Chretien's "ungentyl" depiction is the result of the genre's condemnation of the same diplomacy and counsel which was praised in Kay's origin in chronicles.[46] One account criticizes Kay as one

[45] Even while Arthur sought advise from various members, mediating it to the satisfaction of all was not always successful. For example, Gawain's advice to not fight with Lancelot while Agravaine calls for punishment, or Gawain's later demand for war while Arthur himself desires peace. Radulescu examines Malory's discussion of kingship and "proper governance" in order to identify "reflections of contemporary political ideas," arguing his work "reflects anxieties over the contradictions present with Arthur's political system…rather than presenting an ideal to be imitated or admired": Radulescu, "Malory and Fifteenth-Century Political Ideas," 37. Radulescu further highlights the moments where Malory altered known source material or mirrored contemporary chronicles to express the importance of the sovereign seeking and executing the input of his advisors and vassals.

[46] Whetter, "Reassessing Kay and the Romance Seneschal," 343. Whetter's study revives Kay from Chretien's depiction as a "mocking and enfeebled bully" to the earlier Welsh characterizations of Kay as one of Arthur's "chief warriors." The epic tradition from which Kay finds his origins value and praise his diplomacy and counsel, but his transformation into romance condemn these same traits.

"who will not be silent nor draw his sword," traits which in legend are laudable but in romance are criticized or anxiously guarded.[47] Even while Arthur sought advice from various members, mediating it to the satisfaction of all was not always successful. In other romances the steward acts as a prominent voice of counsel to the king—usually against the hero, as in *The Squyr of Low Degree* or *Bevis of Hampton*, where the royal steward sees the hero's actions as encroaching on the sovereign's power (or his own), or in support of him, as in *King Horn*. Surprisingly, Kay lacks a voice of counsel in Malory's rendition, his role overshadowed by the multiple other advisory voices within the fellowship. This alone is significant in the reduction of the steward's autonomy and authority. In fact, the entire fellowship act as counselors to the king, or to one another (such as Gawain advising Aggrevaine and Mordred), effectively demonstrating the diversification of advisors and political stewardship amongst a network of political actors. However, the stewardship Kay pursues throughout the course of the narrative is for the recognition of the individual, of division, and of networks of affinities—emphasizing the ways individuality and divisiveness in fact link and tie all Arthur's knights together.[48]

Affinities and Treason

[47] Whetter, "Reassessing Kay and the Romance Seneschal," 363. Whetter quotes Christopher Middleton, *The Famous Historie of Chinon of England*, ed. William Edward Mead (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), 130.29.

[48] Instead of Kay's advocacy, the counsel Arthur receives from the barons is in support of Aggrevaine. Kay Harris suggests that the barons, in the final moments of the Round Table, *do* function as counselors, "but to Aggravaine, and not to Arthur": "Evidence against Lancelot and Guinevere in Malory's *Morte Darthur*: Treason by Imagination," *Exemplaria* 7.1 (1995): 191. Harris and Radulescu note Aggrevaine's strong characterization as advisor to Arthur—Radulescu identifies Aggravaine and Mordred as "false counselors," whom she links to the bad counselors blamed for Henry VI's misrule. "In his deviations from source material, in his characterization of Arthur's decisions, judgements, actions, and errors, Malory expresses an awareness of what ideal kingship ought to be, but also an understanding of the very real tensions and intrigues that dismantled any ideal in the actualized political arena of the fifteenth-century": Radulescu, "Malory and Fifteenth-Century Political Ideas," 48. Arthur's failure is his inability to discern advice. He initially errs by ignoring Gawain's counsel to overlook Lancelot and Guinevere's affair and listening to Aggravaine, but he errs again by then taking Gawain's advice to fight against Lancelot. Sir Gawain may have started as a wise counselor, but functions as a "false" advisor later whose personal desires outweigh national interest.

While Kay guards access to Arthur's court by creating a shared language of divisive individuality, reminding the knights and the reader of competing factions which both divide and link the fellowship, Arthur disregards these conflicting impulses. Rather than confronting head-on the conflicting identities within his court, Arthur promotes the Oath as a unifying impulse—allowing personal favoritism or a desire for communal unity to continually redefine or re-center ideological boundaries. Just as the Pentecostal oath anticipates failure but ritually performs unity, Arthur demonstrates a similar desire for absolute unity in the face of factions. Even criminality, which the Oath seeks to define and eliminate from the court, becomes enmeshed with familial, regional, and chivalric affinities. This is made clear in the 'poisoned apple' episode, in which Mador feels the need to remind the king of his impartial duty to the fellowship, instructing him that "for favoure, love, nother affinité there sholde be none other but ryghtuous jugemente, as well upon a kynge as upon a knyght, and as well upon a queene as upon another poure lady" (1055.11-15). Mador emphasizes that Arthur owes loyalty to the fellowship above personal interest, but that even this "affinité" may not take precedence over "judgment" or law. Malory fantasizes that "in tho dayes" righteous judgment acted equally upon kings and queens as any other "poure" citizen, and that love and favor did not affect the proper functioning of justice. This equality allowed all members of the community to claim the same rights. However, by stipulating that Arthur must (and therefore has the potential to not) act as "ryghtfull juge" rather than husband or knight, Malory simultaneously sets up a nostalgic ideal that in a previous time justice was served, and that even within this fantasy individuals did not always live up to expectation. By reminding the king of his duty to oversee justice, and allow the court and jury to decide the case, Mador implies that Arthur was allowing "affinité" to dominate.

However, Mador makes this request out of a desire to avenge his brother Patryse's death,

which he believes the queen caused. He asks for Arthur to overlook "affinite" out of loyalty to his own familial affinity. According to the laws of treason and regulations for court appeals, the "vanquished party, whether he was the appellant or the defendant," would be sentenced to hang (or be beheaded). In the poisoned apple episode, Mador makes a formal appeal of treason against the queen, which follows both prior romance models as well as the fourteenth-century *Britton*'s prescribed oral court regulations.[49] Upon learning of his brother's death, Mador immediately appeals to Arthur for revenge or justice against the queen. Yet when Lancelot defeats him in judicial battle, Mador "prayed that knyght to save hys lyff," which Laneclot and the queen grant in return for Mador's oath to never quarrel again. Instead of beheading him, as custom and law dictates, Arthur allows Mador to recover—with no mention of a pardon, the knight is simply accepted back into the fold (XVIII.4-7).[50] This episode aligns with Muckerheide and Elizabeth Pochoda's emphasis on Malory's prioritization of "unity and peace among the fellowship" and "the community," as well as the Pentecostal Oath's dictate of "mercy."[51] Arthur and Lancelot allow Mador to perform unity with the queen as a way of erasing his difference with them and ignoring his affinité. However, his mistrust for the queen and the court's mistrust of Mador is not

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[49] The *Britton* is one of the earliest summaries of English law, written in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century.

[50] Ryan Muckerheide, "The English Law of Treason in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*," *Arthuriana* 20.4 (Winter 2010): 48-77. Muckerheide looks at treason as a crime which was frequently "expanded" to cover multiple offenses by "construction"—that is, "a judge could interpret the laws because the text had no special authority in themselves" (49). The "words of the law" were not binding—it was the "internal sense" of them, as the sixteenth-century lawyer, Edmund Plowden writes. Since laws were interpreted variously by the judge, and any offense which "touched upon" the welfare of the state was considered treason, then accusations for treason were far more prevalent and easier to convict than more firmly defines crimes (49). However, when an accusation of treason was made, there were certain actions and legal procedures which followed. A jury would be formed to collect and hear evidence, with a judge to determine whether the crime was committed. If sufficient evidence was found, then the appellant and defendant could compete to determine the outcome, or (during the thirteenth century) the private appeal gave way to "presentment"—a process where another jury would hear the case. In either case, the proven "guilty" party would be sentenced to a traitor's death (hung or beheaded for a man, or burned for a woman).

[51] Elizabeth Pochoda notes that "the code displays a striking concern for the welfare of the realm" and calls the Pentecostal Oath a "code of public service" where the values and virtues of "mercy and justice" change according to context when in service of "the community." Pochoda, *Arthurian Propaganda: Le Morte Darthur as an Historical Ideal of Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 84.

as easily erased. Enfolding Mador within the order upon threat of death effectively compels his "loyalty" and invites conflict into the fellowship.

Malory may emphasize the equality, "consistency, and continuity of justice," but he also demonstrates that justice is "somewhat arbitrary," according to Larissa Tracy.[52] Factions and "affinities" are dangerous to the "equality" of justice, but ignoring them in favor of law is also dangerous—as Arthur's later actions indicate. When Mordred and Aggrevaine insist upon judging the queen and Lancelot, Arthur is caught between his personal desire to overlook Lancelot's crime and his knights' demand for legal justice. Arthur is grieved not by Lancelot or Guenever betrayal, but because "wyth hym will mony a noble knyght holde" which will "break for ever" the "noble felyshyp of the Rounde Table" (XX.2). Arthur's love for Lancelot urges him to keep faith with Lancelot, and placate his followers, but Mordred "*caused* Arthur to communed the Quene to the fyre" (655.8).[53]

As critics have noted, the factions and familial ties of the various court affinities lie at the heart of the Round Table's collapse. Malory juxtaposes Mordred's and Aggrevain's "prevy hate unto the Quene" to their spoken justification that her adultery will bring Arthur "shame" (XX.1-3). The two knights perform loyalty to Arthur as justification for exposing Guinevere's adultery, using their fellowship to cover what Malory identifies as their long standing "private" hatred for the queen. Characters frequently lament the court's division, but the narrator explicitly blames

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[52] Larissa Tracy, "Wounded Bodies: Kingship, National Identity and Illegitimate Torture in the English Arthurian Tradition," eds., Elizabeth Archibald and David Johnson, 1-30, *Arthurian Literature XXXII* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2015), 18.

[53] Malory assimilates the language of English law when he stipulates that the knights "appealed of treason," which mirrors the Merciless Parliament, who appealed Richard II's favourites of treason pre-emptively. As Fletcher and Paul Strohm have both shown, the accusation of treason could be made by a king against one who encroaches on his rights, but more commonly was made by other barons/nobles against oppositional movements. The power of leveling accusations of treason became available to everyone, and was frequently mobilized as a propaganda tactic. See Paul Strohm, *England's Empty Throne* and Lydia Fletcher, "'Traytoures' and 'Treson': The Language of Treason in the Works of Sir Thomas Malory," in *Arthurian Literature XXVIII: Blood, Sex, Malory: Essays on the 'Morte Darthur,'* eds. David Clark and Kate McClune (Boydell & Brewer, 2011), 75-88.

Aggrevaine and Mordred, grieving that "the flower of chivalry of all the world was destroyed and slain" all because of "two unhappy knights, the which were named Aggrevaine and Sir Mordred" (XX.1). Megan Leitch similarly comments on the "prevy hate," drawing attention to the fact that "while Agravain and Mordred may be on the side of law against treason in undertaking public denouncement, they do so out of ill-will. In contrast, Lancelot and Guenevere are portrayed as honorable, noble characters caught in difficult circumstances and a tragic conflict of loyalties."[54] The unspoken competition between loyalties allows Mordred and Aggrevain to verbally hide behind assertions of communal loyalty and duty to Arthur.

The supporters of Aggrevaine and Mordred are notably "of Scotland" or "kynne" to Gawain, making family factions—which must conform to their internal group before performing loyalty to the king (or the larger group of the court)—responsible for the final dissolution of Arthur's kingdom. Gawain initially supports Launcelot; however, he "subsequently privileges the ties of kinship over those of the Round Table"—Leitch notes that it is Gawain's "private blood-vengeance" which completes the Round Table's division (by inciting Arthur to declare war on Launcelot). Just as Mador cautions Arthur not to allow "affinité" to dictate decisions, the 'slander and strife' episode shows Gawain's and Aggrevaine's "kynne" or affinity dividing the fellowship. Affinité, according to the MED, referred to "relationship by marriage; kinship"; "association, fellowship, companionship, alliance" and also the "ties between families or their members that result from a sexual encounter out of wedlock."[55] Arthur's Round Table contains all of these forms, which becomes problematic. All the knights are interconnected to either

[54] Leitch, "Speaking (of) Treason," 126.
[55] MED [affinite, n.]: "(a) Relationship by marriage (as distinguished from blood relationship); a kinship between families which results from a fornication committed by a member of one family with a member of the other; also, the relationship between married persons, wedlock; (b) kinship of any kind." http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED706

Arthur and/or to one another (as immediate or distant kin or as the offspring of extra-marital encounters), and those that are not related become so by marriage, oaths of loyalty, or "fornication." As a result, all affinities in some way conflict or converge with other affinities—as Kay highlights in his identification of knights through their relation to or encounters with others.

According to the laws of *lèse-majesté,* which encompassed treason and any crimes against the king's authority, if any knew of such a crime they were required to bring the matter "to the king himself" and if "he dissembles for a time and keeps silent…he will be a manifest betrayer of the lord king."[56] The law clearly urges and even legally binds Aggrevaine and Mordred to come forth with Guinevere's affair in Mallory's final book. Through a strict legal definition, Gawain, Gareth, and Gaheris are the traitors and 'manifest betrayer[s] of the lord king' by remaining silent. Despite their legal validity, Mallory does not portray Aggrevaine and Mordred as the valorous figures here. Arthur's lament that the "realm [is] wholly mischieved" through Aggrevaine and Mordred's interference attests to Malory's support of Gawain's actions (XX.2). Muckerheide asks why, then, Malory gave "the villains the support of law and portray the heroes as accomplices to treason?"[57] By doing so, Malory implies that the "welfare of the fellowship and the kingdom (which are essentially interchangeable terms here) must come before the welfare of the individual."[58] Aggrevaine and Mordred may be law abiding knights, but their motives are self-serving and personally motivated by their "prevy-hate," rather than for the welfare of the fellowship. Gawain and his brothers may technically commit "treason," but as their reminder of Lancelot's good services indicates, their motives are to preserve the fellowship.

Meliagant's similar accusation of treason against Guinevere for her bloody bed also

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[56] Henry de Bracton's thirteenth-century *On the Laws and Customs of England* (2:335) as quoted by Muckerheide, "The English Law of Treason," 67.
[57] Muckerheide, "The English Law of Treason," 68.
[58] Muckerheide, "The English Law of Treason," 68.

abides by legal boundaries while inviting narrative censure. His interpretation of her bloody sheets as evidence of adultery is legitimate—even if he misplaces blame, he nonetheless arrives at the correct answer, as the blood does prove Lancelot's illicit nocturnal visit and the queen's infidelity. Rather than supporting the knight, Malory authorizes the adulterous couple, as he does again when Aggrevaine reveals them. As Paul Strohm asserts, "Mellyagant is a pleasure-seeker" who intruded upon the queen's bed without invitation and for his own desires.[59] Meliagant first introduces treason, "accusing Guinever of being 'a traytouras untomy lorde Arthur,' yet Meliagant's 'treson' against Lancelot overshadows any other possible offense."[60] Instead of confirming Lancelot's guilt, Meliagant's audience "were all ashamed on hys behalffe," which places the blame and the treason onto Meliagant rather than the adulterer, allowing Lancelot to become "more cherysshed" than ever (IX. 9). In Strohm's analysis, the text "moves treason out from its center to its periphery, away from Lancelot's bloody tumble with his queen and toward Meliagant's impermissible viewings and base…imputations."[61] Here, Meliagant's private desires for the queen may conflict with the text's pursuit of fellowship—which permits the court's disregard of Lancelot's crime. But those "base" desires mirror Lancelot's. Lancelot's love for the king and support of the Round Table's fellowship exceed Meliagant's (and most other knights'), but his adulterous love for Guinevere betrays an equal level of self-interest as the "traitorous" knight's. Nonetheless, the text "moves" treason to apply to Meliagant, as the liminal knight to the court, rather than attaching to the central (and idealized) knight of Arthur's rule. However, Malory's vision of this episode poses Meliagant's motives for crying treason as both personal and legal—anger that the queen refused him, but also that she criminally cuckolded the king—a

[59] Paul Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 208.
[60] Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text*, 208.
[61] Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text*, 208.

shift from source texts which "forces the reader to consider the ulterior motives that can accompany an[y] accusation of treason."[62]

Strict legal codes would demand here, and in the 'poisoned apple' episode, that the text endorses the punishment of Lancelot or Mador. The law promotes such an action, and in other romances the steward frequently advocates for such judicial regulation as a way of safeguarding the polity against lawlessness or transgressors. Yet Malory favors Lancelot, punishes Meliagant, and invites Mador into the fellowship—pushing some treason and "illegality" into the periphery while inviting others in, as Strohm states. Kay again lacks a presence in these scenes (although in Chretien de Troyes' version of the bloody sheets episode, it is Kay who sleeps in the queen's chambers and is accused of treason), but his tradition of churlish antagonism which centers on personal affinities would seem to support Arthur's personal desires or the court's longevity above such legal codification. The law remains blind to various personal urges—yet both of these episodes incur narrative judgment.

According to the laws of treason, as Muckerheide demonstrates, Aggrevaine follows legal protocol—however, in this case "the strict application of the law should not precede the well-being of the fellowship."[63] Unlike *Amis and Amiloun*, whose narrator provides space for valorizing the steward and advocates for legal justice as a solution to sovereign fallibility, Malory suggests that favoritism may offer a better solution to court conflict than the law does. Here, Malory demonstrates that using the law to pursue self-interest is equally dangerous.[64]

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[62] Fletcher, "'Traytoures' and 'Treson'," 87.
[63] Muckerheide, "The English Law of Treason," 69.
[64] According to Richard Firth Green and Megan Leitch's reading of Malory's legal rhetoric, it is the public nature of the affair (Aggrevaine's publication of his complaint) that is at issue, rather than the affair's treason. In both Leitch and Green's readings, it is the "speech act" or "publication" of the treason that defined a transgression, and that transgression could be any act against the polity, not just the king. Publicizing "the shame of the traitor figure" was critical to Malory's approach, which figures the *performance* of chivalry (and therefore its antithesis—treason) was of equal importance as defining or punishing the act. Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, 121. Rather than identifying or

While the law may pursue equality and unity, those who apply it do not. Dissenting affinities may variously interpret the law in pursuit of personal desires. Most importantly, Malory intimates that acting against Arthur is less egregious than acting against the fellowship or betraying the ideals of the Round Table. Therefore, division that arises from competing affinities is acceptable as long as that divisiveness does not split or counter the fellowship. That Malory retains Kay's naming and mockery of individuality in the knights' various chivalric honors late in the text indicates that some division is acceptable—when those knights still uphold Arthur's code and fellowship.

The imagined conflict between the law and Arthur's will, or between inflexible legal codes and political negotiation, is especially seen in Guinevere's judgement, where Malory's legal rhetoric stresses the law's agency acting upon Arthur (he is "*caused*" to judge Guinevere). The law both protects and endangers Arthur's rule, but this also imagines Arthur as the passive recipient rather than agent of the queen's trial. Arthur appears powerless, "compelled to act against the best interests of his realm by the dictates of institutional legal practices."[65] Leitch sees the *law* acting with no express agent, such as "the queen *muste nedis* be jouged to deth" and "these previs and experyenses *caused* kynge Arthure to commaunde the quene to the fyre."[66] Both Robert Kelly and Leitch agree that Malory "makes the lawfulness of Arthur's judgment of the queen problematic,"[67] but the issue is the law itself (or, more specifically, the laws of treason), not necessarily Arthur's agency in applying it. The laws compete with Arthur's desire

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pinning down Arthur's (or legal) definition(s) of treason, Malory elides criminality with the public performance of moral or chivalric action. Also see Leitch, "Speaking (of) Treason," 103-34.

[65] Megan Leitch look at this linguistic passivity to argue that "the peculiar phrasing of the Arthurian law of treason in fact elides or circumscribes Arthur's agency. The text places the emphasis on the influence that the law exerts on Arthur, figuring him instead as compelled to act against the best interests of his realm by the dictates of institutional legal practices." Leitch, "Speaking (of) Treason," 130.

[66] As quoted by Leitch, "Speaking (of) Treason," 132. Emphasis hers.

[67] Robert Kelly, "Malory and the Common Law: Hasty Jougement in the 'Tale of the Death of King Arthur'," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, NS, 22 (1995): 111-140.

to maintain harmony, and his refusal to break with his own Pentecostal Oath makes it impossible to please both. Arthur is compelled by his own laws to punish Guinevere and Lancelot, but he is also compelled to satisfy the family bond and desires of Gawain, whose faction "wolde nat suffir" Lancelot's return (XX.14). The internal competition between factions and knights is compounded by the text's competing systems: Arthur's sovereign will, the Pentecostal Oath as an organizing metric, and a legal code that over-rides even Arthur. Kay's quarrelsome gatekeeping, which inadvertently or additionally draws lines between affinities, the law, and regional loyalties, prioritizes the fellowship above strict legal action. This is a reversal of other royal stewards, where good stewardship of the polity requires following judicial structures *or* sovereign directive. Here, good stewardship encourages a more fluid understanding of political action and a flexible application of the law.

Arthur being compelled to convict the queen paints the law as ruling the sovereign in problematic ways. Part of this difficulty stems from treason's alternate applications as a crime against the king or against the commonwealth/community. As Amanda McVitty demonstrates, "treason" as a criminal charge was shifting during the early fifteenth century from a crime against a peer or lord to the state or "*chose publique*" (commonweal).[68] McVitty argues that

[68] Amanda McVitty, "Traitor to the *Chose Publique*: Negotiating Constitutional Conflict Through the Law of Treason 1399-1402," *Fourteenth Century England IX,* eds. Bothwell, James and Gwilym Dodd (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2016): 149-68. McVitty outlines the case between Morley and Salisbury in 1399—where Morley added an addition to his complaint of personal betrayal of one nobleman by another to a charge of treason against the commonweal. Morley's repeated allegation that "Salisbury was a *faux chivaler*" was subsumed by the more pubic charge. When the Court of Chivalry was called into session, Morley introduced an *addicion* that added onto Salisbury's "treason" against his fellow knight the charges that Salisbury "advised and assisted Richard II to destroy the lords and the community of the realm, and other actions 'against the *chose publique* and common profit of the realm'." To which Salisbury protested that these two charges (against the individual and against the realm) cannot "be so conjoined" (150). By seeking to connect an individual act of betrayal to the more abstract idea of treason as attacks on public authority (the *chose publique*), Morley's *addicion* elevates this case from a personal matter of honour between two noblemen to the status of a crime that directly impacted the king himself as the embodiment of the sovereign authority of the Crown" (156). While McVitty discusses a case over the turn of the century, Strohm and Leitch have variously discussed a similar ambiguity in the "locus" of power and a rhetorical shift of treason as a politically expedient charge which may be harnessed by different political groups throughout the fifteenth century. See Strohm, *Politique*, 181-90 and Leitch, *Romancing Treason*.

Henry IV progressively "redefined treason as a crime against the state" and that a transgression against the king was a transgression against the state. Henry attempts to condemn those who challenged his legitimacy as traitors to the state (*chose publique*) and gradually aligned his "problematic body natural" to the abstract political body of the crown. The allegations, definitions, and boundaries of treason were continually shifting and redefining the "locus of sovereign power," and its role within the wider government. As Henry IV sought to strengthen his claim (after usurping the throne from Richard II), he similarly sought to "redefine treason as a crime against the state"—aligning sovereign authority with that of the state, and therefore the stability of the entire community.[69] The gradual transition before and during the Wars of the Roses in legal rhetoric which combined the crown (both the body natural and body politic) with the commonweal makes any transgression against one a crime against the other, and therefore subject to parliamentary and communal mediation.[70] If the "locus" of power is no longer solely the state nor solely the sovereign, then the rhetoric of power shifts between the two, as Arthur finds here in his failed attempt to control or mediate legal interpretation—which sees the Pentecostal Oath at war with strict treason laws and his sovereign desire to pardon Lancelot.

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[69] "The 1352 statute blended customary feudal and chivalric perceptions of treason as a personal betrayal of one's lord with some civil law innovations derived from fourteenth-century continental practice, but the emphasis remained on treason as a crime against the king's person…. In the parliament of September 1397, Richard II had attempted to expand the definition of treason by enacting a new statute that criminalized conspiring to depose the king or to renounce liege homage; these were more abstract conceptions of treason that would have brought English statute law closer to the civil law idea of *lèse-majesté.* (which suggested the impersonal public authority of the state). However, these extensions were seen as a manifestation of Richard's tyrannous rule and one of Henry IV's first acts as king was to have them revoked as an expression of goodwill towards his new subjects": McVitty, "Traitor to the *Chose Publique*," 152. Critics (both of Richard II and modern scholars) read Richard's attempt to expand "treason" to those who renounced homage as another instance of his tyranny and therefore these new laws were reformed once the tyrant was deposed. However, as McVitty's central argument suggests, Henry IV nonetheless pursued 'traitors' who threatened his legitimacy as a threat to not only his body natural and his personal authority, but the impersonal authority of the state. "Traitor to the *Chose Publique*," 151.

[70] Leitch and Muckerheide have both articulated the ways Malory uses treason to "test the boundaries of community, of inclusion and exclusion." Leitch, *Romancing Treason*, 93. Treason during the Wars of the Roses is not only mutable, it is categorized as a crime against the community as well as a hierarchical or lateral betrayal. Muckerheide, "The English Law of Treason in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur,*" 48-77.

Managing Divisive Affinities

While Kay has no active presence in the court's destruction, Malory maintains his controversial characterization of his fellow knights—highlighting his authority as gatekeeper to the court while simultaneously stressing Arthur's relatively passive role. Even as the court begins fracturing and choosing sides between competing affinities, Kay remains silent. Malory gives little to no space to the steward in the final books—but his presence can still be felt in his retained authority in identifying knights and categorizing the court.

Loyalty to kin and to the increasingly large network of affinities often "problematically supersedes loyalty to the Round Table order," as Dorsey Armstrong succinctly proposes. In her analysis of gender, she points out the intersecting relations between women at court:

> "Morgan le Fay causes problems with her numerous attempts to destroy her brother Arthur… Queen Morgause is killed by her own son for betraying the memory of her husband (King Lot), by sleeping with Lamorak, the son of the man (King Pellinor) her sons believe killed their father; Morgan rescues a knight named Manassen from certain death (and kills his captor) for no reason but that he is her lover Accolon's cousin; a maiden demands that Torre behead a knight—despite his pleas for mercy—in order to avenge the death of her brother…."[71]

Not only do these women all hold familial or amorous bonds with each other and various knights at court, these multiple affinities intersect to create conflict and tension amongst that expanded

[71] Dorsey Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's 'Morte d'Arthur'* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 35. Armstrong sees the regulation of the community through a select few blood-relations and kin groups as producing "blind spots." She argues that violating or betraying the Pentecostal Oath's ideal is *less* destructive than the violation of one's own blood relation. A full articulation of her argument follows, but here I want to highlight the ways that not only kin groups, but amorous exchange and favoritism inadvertently connect most of the fellowship to one another in competing and complex way.

network. While Armstrong highlights the complex gendering of court, I argue this gendered system also points towards the court's multiple political intersections. Morgause's amorous connection to Lamorak—who is himself connected with Pellinor—begins a chain reaction by inciting Gawain's anger, who later incites anger within his affinity for Gaheris's death. Morgan creates an affinity with Manassen based on his relation to her lover Accolon. As each knight's connection or relationship with other Round Table members (or their extended kin group) is revealed, their connections are complicated by mistaken slights, perceived threats, or amorous interest (such as Torre's desire to aid the maiden despite her demand's incompatibility with the Pentecostal Oath). Thus, even while the Pentecostal Oath acts as a "code of public service" that strives to protect Arthur's fellowship, affinities created by that very oath become its downfall.

Kay's brusqueness similarly highlights the competing urges and affinities held by each knight as a potential threat that must be acknowledged rather than overlooked. In the final moments of the fellowship, Malory lists the knights present, specifically referencing the names Sir Kay gave them: "Sir Brewne le Noyre (that Sir Kay named La Cote Male Taylé)" and the three brothers who Lancelot defeated "In Sir Kayes armys" and even "Sir Perymones…which was called the Rede Knyght, that Sir Gareth wanne whan he was called Bewmaynes" (XIX.11). In naming not only the knight, but their connection to the larger court and the ways their identity intersects with others, Malory highlights the multiple factions each member occupies. The three brothers are remembered through Kay's armor while Sir Perymones, the red knight, is remembered by his defeat at Beaumaynes' hands and his competing loyalty to his brothers (the Black and Green knights). Gareth himself, despite his fame within the Round Table and loyalty to Arthur, is identified even at this late hour by his link to Kay and Kay's suspicion of his motives.

More than illustrating the central—if invisible—role of the gatekeeper, these final scenes accentuate the intersections of personal, legal, and political affinities within the court. As scholarship has noted, the "blood-vengeance" or kinship between Round Table knights presents difficulties in the final episodes of Malory's text, as each identity intersected with others.[72] Each knight occupied multiple affinities either directly through Arthur or through various sexual or familial encounters that often intersected and competed with one another, such as Lamorak's tie to both Morgan's affinity and Arthur's through Pellinor. In the final episode before Aggravaine exposes Guinevere's affair, all of Arthur's knights "search" Sir Urre's wounds to heal him. Malory provides a list of all the knights who assay and fail to heal Urre with not only their connection to Arthur's court, but also their connections and quarrels with others within the court.

> Then came in Sir Gawaine with his three sons, Sir Gingalin, Sir Florence, and Sir Lovel, these two were *begotten upon Sir Brandiles' sister*; and all they failed. Then came in Sir Agravaine, Sir Gaheris, Sir Mordred, and the good knight, Sir Gareth, that was of very knighthood worth all the brethren. So came knights of *Launcelot's kin*….Then came in Sir Sagramore le Desirous, Sir Dodinas le Savage, Sir Dinadan, Sir Bruin le Noire, *that Sir Kay named La Cote Male Taile*, and Sir Kay le Seneschal…Then came Sir Aglovale, Sir Durnore, Sir Tor, *that was begotten upon Aries, the cowherd's wife, but he was begotten afore Aries wedded her*, and King *Pellinore begat them all*, first Sir Tor, Sir Aglovale, Sir Durnore, Sir Lamorak, the most noblest knight one that ever was in Arthur's days as for a worldly knight, and Sir Percivale that was peerless *except Sir Galahad* in holy deeds, but they died in the quest

[72] Hodges, *Forging Chivalric Communities*, 64. Leitch, "Speaking (of) Treason," Green, *Crisis of Truth*, and Hodges (just to name a few) discuss kinship and affinities prompting Mordred's initial action and Gawain's subsequent opposition to Lancelot.

> of the Sangreal. Then came Sir Griflet le Fise de Dieu, Sir Lucan the Butler, *Sir Bedevere his brother*, Sir Brandiles, Sir Constantine, *Sir Cador's son of Cornwall, that was king after Arthur's days,* and Sir Clegis, Sir Sadok, Sir Dinas *le Seneschal of Cornwall*, Sir Fergus, Sir Driant, Sir Lambegus, Sir Clarrus *of Cleremont*, Sir Cloddrus, Sir Hectimere, Sir Edward *of Carnarvon*, Sir Dinas, Sir Priamus, *that was christened by Sir Tristram* the noble knight, and *these three were brethren*; Sir Hellaine le Blank that was *son to Sir Bors*, he begat him upon King Brandegoris' daughter, and Sir Brian de Listinoise; Sir Gautere, Sir Reynold, Sir Gillemere, were *three brethren that Sir Launcelot won upon a bridge in Sir Kay's arms*. (IX.11. Emphasis mine.)

Of all the knights to respond to Arthur's call to "search" Urre's wounds, the connections Malory highlights are those between and within multiple affinities. Rather than the fellowship as a unit with Arthur at its center, or the Oath's code as a shared identity, the knights are remembered for the ways they intersect with one another—sometimes through the Oath, and sometimes not. Sir Florence and Sir Lovel are not remembered for their chivalrous deeds in Arthur's Round Table, but their blood relation to Sir Brandiles (by his sister). Sir Lancelot's "kin" are listed not by their similar love for Arthur, but their membership within Lancelot's affinity. Sir Tor, like Brandiles, is remembered by his filial connection to Pillinore, who "begot" him on a "cowherd's wife." Most knights are named by their role or by their intersection with others, such as Sir Lucan, who may be the butler, but also "Bedever's brother"; or Dinas, who is seneschal of Cornwall (which further reminds the reader of his competing national loyalty as well); or Sir Hellaine who was "Bor's son" and also "begot" on Brandegoris's daughter. Even Percivale, who is hailed as "peerless" is defined in conversation with (and therefore a peer of) Galahad's worship.

The sexual "encounters out of wedlock" listed here form the "families" and "affinities"

which tie Arthur's knights together, but also create competing intersections as the offspring occupy multiple "kin" groups. The frequent mention of the sexual exchanges amongst Arthur's fellowship not only highlights the problematic ways that chivalry frequently relies on the gendered performance of masculine sexuality, but also the ways that such encounters identify the offspring.[73] The important connecting fabric between the knights is not their chivalric skill, but that of their male relatives. Sir Brandiles' sister is not named, nor does she need to be according to Malory's framework. Similarly, Aries' wife is only important by her affinity with Aries—although Malory is careful to specify that Sir Tor is not the product of adultery, for he was "begot" before Aries' marriage.

Clarrus, Edward, and Constantine are similarly known by their association and blood relation to other men and to other lands (Cleremont, Carnarvon, and Cornwall respectively), and therefore with regional loyalties. Despite their pledging loyalty and affinity with Arthur as sovereign, Malory emphasizes their retained national identity separate from or in addition to an "English" or "Arthurian" one.[74] Meanwhile, other knights are identified not by their own position, but by the role they play in another knight's tale, such as Gautere, Reynold, and Gillemere, who Lancelot defeated "upon a bridge in Kay's arms." Their own identity is less important than the opportunity they presented for Lancelot. By this simple act of defeat, their

[73] The gendering and sexualization of women within English romances and Arthurian narratives is deftly handled by scholars such as Dorsey Armstrong, Susan Crane, and Peggy McCracken (to name just a few). See, Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's 'Morte d'Arthur'* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in the Canterbury Tales* (Princeton: Princeeton UP, 1994); Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Molly Martin, "Castles and the Architecture of Gender in Malory's 'Knight of the Cart'," *Arthuriana* 22.2 (2012): 37-51; and McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, The Wound of the Hero* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

[74] Kenneth Hodges illustrates the multiple intersecting regional and national identities, but also the ways these identities were actively being imagined, constructed and changed throughout the text and historical moment. The regional identity of a knight did not necessarily prevent a simultaneous national loyalty, but nor did it necessarily always align. As shown earlier, "Malory allows tension to flourish and knights to establish political identities within or beyond their Englishness." Hodges, *Mapping Malory*, 155.

chivalric, political, and social identities become linked and subsumed by Lancelot's. Sir Bruin le Noire (Brewnor) is simply the knight named by Kay as "le cote male taile"—which links him to Kay as his namesake (as we have noted), but also reduces him to a figure within more notorious men's identities (Kay and Tristram, in this case). By continually referring to these knights by the ways their identity and tale intersect with others, either by military defeat or through amorous exchange, Malory highlights the ways that each figure participates in a network of factions, affinities, and self-interest of others.

Kay, as the agent of naming, and so of retaining distinct identities, affiliations, histories and chivalric networks, is central to the narrative's referentiality. Like Kay's rude or mocking gatekeeping, Malory's identification of each figure (frequently through Kay's participation) by their loyalties or affinities beyond Arthur's Oath prioritizes their differences above their identity as a knight within the Round Table. While the Oath and Arthur may linguistically perform a singular dominant identity—that of Arthur's fellowship—the narrative (and Kay) imagine inter-referential identities as the common feature of the fellowship. But, as Laura Ashe shows, these individual commitments need not necessarily threaten or limit their participation within the Oath's and Arthur's community. Each knight's reputation, or worship, "subsists in a series of inter-referential and mutually confirmatory layers: the mind and heart of the imagined beloved, the estimation of his fellow knights, his intertextual existence, and, perhaps most importantly, his fame with the extratextual aristocratic audience."[75] Laura Ashe emphasizes the intertextual and inter-personal relationships which mutually structure and identify Arthur's knights within the text and beyond it. Thus, each member only achieves "worship" by recognizing and interacting with the individual affinity of other members, which makes these divergent loyalties beneficial to

[75] Laura Ashe, "The Hero and His Realm in Medieval English Romance," *Boundaries in Medieval Romance*, ed. Neil Cartlidge (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 138.

the worship of the entire fellowship.

Political Solidarity

Unlike the other romance stewards we have encountered, Sir Kay frequently controls at least the initial access to Arthur for prospective knights and court figures. Kay determines their initial identity within the court by naming them and controlling the ways in which they have access to Arthur or chivalric adventure. The text's continual emphasis on Kay's role in individualizing knights illustrates his gatekeeping, and the importance it has on the shape, makeup, and ideology of Arthur's networks. In doing so, he creates a shared language of individuality and internal conflicts.[76] While a gatekeeper may negotiate access without ownership, anyone seeking entry nonetheless "assumes obligations to the gatekeeper."[77] The gatekeeper therefore not only exercises power by controlling access, but also by retaining debts from multiple clients. Kay may control knights' access to the Round Table (as he does with Gareth or Brewnor) and in some ways receives obligation from them, but what Malory highlights are the resentment and ostracization directed at the steward.

Rather than collapsing the distance between Kay and the various factions within Arthur's knights, the text emphasizes his distance from them. The distance between Kay and the other courtiers, as well as between separate court factions, is a central problem to the text and to Arthur. These disconnections between factions—or "structural holes"—are necessary for socio-political or economic growth, according to Corra and Willer.[78] But to become opportunities,

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[76] Corra and Willer define the "gatekeeper" as a figure who controls access and mediates between the "structural holes" of knowledge, power, and access within the system (in this case, the court and patronage). (182). Corra and Willer, "The Gatekeeper," 180.
[77] Corra and Willer, "The Gatekeeper," 181.
[78] "Players" receive the maximum social capital when they are in a "network rich in information." To receive rich, nonredundant information, "the player will invest in connections to diverse others; those others must be disconnected because, if not, they form a single cluster with redundant information." The Medici family, for

these “holes” need to be bridged or mediated. Unique and disparate identities within the court or community are beneficial as long as a common goal or gatekeeper bridges these divisions. The emphasis Kay places on individuality and the gaps between a knight’s familial affinity and his court loyalty funcrions to retain these “structural holes.” However, there is a disjunction between Kay’s understanding of the fluidity of chivalric speech acts and Arthur’s belief in their stability and unity. While Kay offers a model of bridging the court’s holes by continually returning to the shared commonality that is individual difference, Arthur linguistically re-inscribes the ethical ideal of the Pentecostal Oath.

Lynn Stanley shows us that the “language of power” during the fourteenth and fifteenth century was particularly “subject to negotiation and fluctuation…. Not only did actual power (in the sense of military power and economic might) fluctuate and thus become the object of negotiation, but the prestige of the English crown and the terms used to define that crown were also in flux.”[79] Richard II’s kingship, for example, lacked a “defining rhetoric” and appeared to “fluctuate.” Richard’s unstable sovereign authority fluctuated in different ways from the Wars of the Roses’ local versus national struggle of Malory’s text, but the locus and rhetoric of power (where it resided, how it was obtained, taken and coded) was similarly under negotiation. Malory’s oath seems to refer to this fluctuation as an issue which affected more than Richard’s reign. Stanley’s argument about the instability of a defining rhetoric with which to discuss and categorize the reach of Richard’s authority is applicable to Malory’s fictional court, but also extended beyond the crown to affect the polity at large. As Megan Leitch demonstrates, English

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example, remained in power by their central position within a system of “network holes,” where they were often the only connective bridge between parties, families and disjointed groups. The Medici’s patronage worked much like gatekeeping, providing “brokerage, favors, and access to networks of friends of friends.” Corra and Willer, “The Gatekeeper,” 186.

[79] Stanley, *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II*, 1.

civil strife during the fifteenth century and beyond "made the volatility of social bonds an ever-present preoccupation…[which] fostered an atmosphere of anxiety about the breakdown of social order and of traditional loyalties." It was not just the noble or aristocratic social relations which came under pressure—the "horizontal relationships" between friends, family, and faithful alliances all shared this sense of breakdown and "mutability."[80] Kay's critique exemplifies a lack in "defining rhetoric" as neither he nor the knights he mocks share a language in how to code or negotiate power.

In the political landscape of the fourteenth and fifteenth century, the shifting conceptualizations of policy and political equilibrium (or a fluid or shifting rhetoric for this polity) resulted in "political states of exception and reinvention."[81] As each new coalition seized power, a repeated pattern or strategy emerged as they attempted to "assume the aura of a group identity and claim to speak for something larger than itself."[82] However, as Chism articulates, the coalitions frequently attempted to reinvent social structures by unifying disparate identities and affinities, which caused "their collisions [to] bristle with such dramatic gestures of group identification."[83] The Round Table knights' personal, familial, and chivalric affinities, which they used to perform unity, also created competing bonds. Tristram's bond to Arthur identifies him within the Round Table community while his service in Ireland sometimes competes with Arthurian unity and his love for Isolde may counter both. Similarly, Arthur's or Gawain's reaction to the loss of their kin emphasizes what Chism calls the "inter-subjectivity of chivalric

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[80] Leitch, *Romancing Treason*, 2.
[81] Christine Chism uses the term "states of exception" to discuss the moments of political instability or "reinvention" which prompt large-scale political and social change—such as the Merciless Parliament, overthrowing Richard II or the repeated "states of exception" during the Lancastrian and York revolts (or Wars of the Roses). Christine Chism, "Friendly Fire: The Disastrous Politics of Friendship in the Alliterative 'Morte Arthur'," *Arthuriana* 20.2 (Summer 2010): 66.
[82] Chism, "Friendly Fire," 66.
[83] Chism. "Friendly Fire," 67.

love." The text's dramatization of the loss of these bonds "signals the extremes of revenge that will ensue; they are like a political red flag to onlookers to prepare for future states of exception."[84]

Malory's "passionate chivalric friendships" become problematic and highlight "the faultlines within the governance of its own political milieu."[85] These faultlines multiply by Malory's coalition of multiple identities and affinities above and outside of chivalric friendship—national, amorous, filial, sexual etc. While Arthur embraces these "friendships" in ways that seek to erase what Chism calls "faultlines," Kay maintains the distinct identities of each knight—which has the (perhaps unintentional) consequence of emphasizing division and divisiveness within Arthur's fellowship. According to Chism's and Kay's logic, if each member can be categorized within multiple competing affinities or coalitions, and these "solidarities" can be made visible, then each knight may be unified by their similarly competing memberships.

Kay's divisive method of stewardship draws attention to the fluid network of knights' individual relationships (both horizontal and hierarchical) which potentially limit their participation or absolute unity to an Arthurian fellowship. Rather than impose statutory justice *or* sovereign desire, Kay's model of continual renegotiation (and mockery) of difference encourages such fluidity. Some romance stewards interact with moments of political tension by championing legal precedent—the law as traditionally enacted (also common law)—to combat sovereign tyranny or aristocratic treason, as in *Amis and Amiloun*. Others seek to rectify multiple charges of treason and a weakening polity by supporting sovereign desires (sometimes above the law), as

[84] Chism. "Friendly Fire," 69.
[85] Chism's argument revolves around the ways that various knights react to death and the disintegration (or betrayal) of chivalry's unifying ideals in *The Alliterative Morte*—and while the nuance of her argument rests on that text, the very similar moments and narration in Malory's *Le Morte* make her claims resonate here. See Chism, "Friendly Fire," 66-88.

Maradose does when confronting the Squire. However indirectly, Kay's stewardship opposes sovereign desire, statutory laws (the law as coded, rather than interpreted), as well as common laws (the traditional interpretation of legal statutes) by highlighting the inconsistency among various affinities' interpretive approach to power. Instead, Kay's methodology emphasizes the fluidity and porosity in the rhetoric and locus of power—that sovereign law, statutory justice, nor interpretive precedent should reign uncontested—therefore allowing the conflict between these approaches to inspire negotiation and solidarity to an overarching unity. Just as Claire Valente challenges us to put aside our "anachronistic disapproval of revolt" in order to appreciate the ways revolt or its threat played an important role in "negotiation, conciliation, and reform," Kay's divisiveness indirectly encourages the harmonious intersection of diversity.[86]

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[86] Claire Valente, *The Theory and Practice of Revolt in Medieval England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 3. Valente examines revolt in England between 1215 and 1415, outlining the various structures and nature of conflict and the form revolt took over that time. While her focus is on the type of revolt or violence enacted or threatened, and the reform it sought, her approach to conflict as a viable method of conciliation and reform is valuable here.

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