THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

FANTASTIC WORLDS:

THE WORK OF AFFECT IN MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
JUNE 2018

for my dad
“the crops are in, and the harvest done”

Contents

Abstract

This dissertation revisits a set of Middle English romances of the thirteenth and fourteenth century to ask what motivates their forms. In the verse romance *Havelok the Dane*, readers are given three signs of the dispossessed Havelok's royal heritage: a bright light that shines from his mouth, a birthmark in the shape of a cross on his shoulder, and the entrance of an angel who identifies him as prince of Denmark. Ultimately, however, his subjects recognize his nobility from his face, which resembles that of Birkabeyn, the former king. Why does the romance linger on these elaborately fantasized signs of his heritage when the most effective proof turns out to be the simplest? Any answer that maps narrative onto ideology sidesteps the seething narrative pleasures of such tangents. Such seemingly inconsequential reiteration is common in romance, a genre that reliably rejects ordered causality in favor of prolific repetition and elaboration of crucial narrative moments. From Patricia Parker to Jacques Lacan, critics have long noticed that the episodic forms of romance are characterized by a deferral of closure; romance makes conventional its very rejection of teleology, endorsing a form marked specifically by its meandering, open-ended embrace of possibility.

The narrative conventions of romance set themselves purposefully at odds with ideological narrativity, producing a space wherein expansion is privileged over explanation. But what does such radical openness accomplish? My dissertation interrogates the productive capacity of extended moments of integration, literary spaces that narrate the transition between the comprehensible and the strange. Todorov, in a very different literary context, called these moments "the fantastic": hesitations that arbitrate between a familiar world and the unknown. Affect studies, with its emphasis on the way that actors receive and interpret the world, offers a model that resembles Todorov's fantastic on the scale of the body rather than that of the narrative

world. I use both concepts as resources to map romance's commitment to dilated interstices between sensual experience and articulable understanding. This dilation, I argue, offers the writers of romance a way to play out political possibilities that rejects allegory and direct narrative causality, dwelling instead in the deliberately artificial space of the narrative's formalizing constructs. Romance is crucially oriented around the moment at which the predictable becomes unpredictable; it focalizes the relation of form to content in a way that offers up a distinct discursive mode.

In each of the four chapters of "Fantastic Worlds," I consider a single romance in Middle English as a case and examine how the distention of moments of narrative intensity alienates recognizable cultural forms. Romance interrogates political possibility by setting its own formal expectations, of dilation and delay, at odds with predictable structures—forms of closure, forms of comprehensibility, forms of cultural presumption. The collision between the articulable and the persistently strange offers a new archive for affect theory's attention to literary spaces of intensity and atmospheric contingency. Further, attention to such effects illustrates how romance, typically understood as simple or propagandistic, can in fact produce complex and compelling ethical scenes, crafting a world that allows for—and more importantly, produces—possibilities opposing the determinate, categorical shapes of ideological expectation.

Acknowledgments

I could not have completed this dissertation without the efforts of a great many people.

Thanks are perhaps most crucially due to my committee: to Mark Miller, whose tireless patience, insight, and encouragement provided both motivation and support, and to Julie Orlemanski, without whose constant availability and commitment to detail I would never have finished this dissertation (nor felt the support of a wider medievalist community at conferences and on social media). Their complementary work was perfectly visible in the recent revision process for my introduction, where Julie noticed and commented on precisely the lines wherein I'd fudged an argumentative trajectory, and Mark offered the most generous hypothetical reading of what I'd meant to say. Without exactly that balance of those two sorts of input I couldn't have done this. Thank you also to Christina von Nolcken, who told me very early on in the course of my graduate work that "the most important thing is that you just write it!" and who provided a vital support and pedagogical model for me both in classwork and more recently on the market; and to all of the faculty I encountered in the English department in the course of the program, who taught the classes that inspired me and acted as interlocutors on various matters professional and personal when conversation was needed.

I want also to thank my cohort and the larger graduate student community at the University of Chicago. Hadji Bakara, Oscar Chavez, Katie Krywokulski, Andrews Inchiosa and Peart, Peter Lido, Abigail Marcus, Jose Moctezuma, Cass Picken, Amanda Swain: you are the wind beneath my wings, or something—thanks for doing this wacky thing with me. I especially relied on the friendship of Kevin and Kristin Kimura and Rachel Kyne: thank you for your generous conversation, your empathy, your hospitality, and your companionship over the last too-many years. And thank you to Hank Scotch, another friend and a remarkably patient boss.

Much of this dissertation was written in the *Critical Inquiry* office, and your generosity with deadlines and distractions is appreciated.

Of course graduate school, and life in general, wouldn't have been possible without the support of my parents, especially Lisa Christensen—even when not materially, emotionally. Knowing someone believes in you is pretty much a prerequisite to accomplishing anything, for me at least; thanks for always making clear that you did, and for listening to me rant and rave about everything, always, with patience and kindness. And last but maybe most significantly: thank you to my husband, Daniel Sito, who is kind of the point, who made a home with me, and who always believed that this work was important, even when I didn't.

Introduction

On the Threshold

This dissertation proposes romance as a genre of radical affect: characterized by instants of intensity that concretize and embed fundamental narrative openness and so suggest a spectrum of infinitely variable cultural scenes and interpretations. By and large, I sidestep questions of romance as a category or mode and inquire instead into its motivating forms. What does romance do, uniquely, and how does it achieve its ends?

Critics have long categorized medieval romance by means of a set of generic imperatives. Happy endings; magic; nobility or royalty; warfare; heterosexual relationships: all are plot markers that may or may not characterize the romance, what Helen Cooper calls "the memes of romance," as "a good story composed of motifs that are already familiar is the most mind-engaging form that there is, and . . . romances are the very best such stories."[1] But identifying the genre of romance by such plot motifs does not necessarily produce a cogent set of cases. John Finlayson remarks that "anyone reasonably familiar with Middle English fictitious narratives will be aware that the only thing which many of them have in common is the fact that the *personae* are aristocratic."[2] "But happily," Melissa Furrow notes, "frustration with the fluidity of the category . . . has not resulted in an abandonment of the very idea of the genre of romance altogether."[3] If plot motifs cannot provide the connective node (others have suggested) perhaps

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Unless otherwise noted, all translations or transliterations in this and the following chapters are my own.

[1] Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmoouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 2008), p. 4; my emphasis.

[2] John Finlayson, "Definitions of Middle English Romance" [Part I], *The Chaucer Review* 15 (Summer 1980): 45.

[3] Melissa Furrow, *Expectations of Romance: The Reception of a Genre in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 58.

romances have something stylistic in common rather than something categorical. In this vein, romance has been envisioned transhistorically as a generic mode, as in Patricia Parker's comment, "'Romance' is characterized primarily as a form which simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object. . . . 'Romance' is that mode or tendency which *remains on the threshold* before the promised end."[4] It is this latter definition, or rather this large-scale insight into the tendencies of romance, that provides what I see as a useful window into the contours and complexities of romance as a form.

What is the nature of the "threshold" to which Parker refers? Understanding romance as a deferral of a promised end—as does Parker or, more tangentially, Jacques Lacan, who describes the "techniques" of courtly love as "techniques of holding back, of suspension, of *amor interruptus*"—suggests that its delays and detours are substantively structured by their distancing of an idealized object; that structurally, what creates the form of romance is the relation between that which is not yet achieved and that which defers its achievement.[5] Indeed, for Lacan, the shapes not just of the detours but of the object itself are irrelevant; the Lady, the object of courtly love discourse, is for Lacan articulated as a "vacuole," a structuring absence.[6] What matters is not the object or the shape of what prevents the subject from achieving it, but rather the very tension between the object and its deferrals. However, on Parker's account, the deferral is the *substance* of the romance; the detour, the sidestep, the deer that darts across the path of the knight who, in Finlayson's most concise definition of medieval romance, "rides forth to achieve an adventure and proceeds through a series of encounters to a final encounter which 'resolves'

[4] Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton, N.J., 1979), p. 4.
[5] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York, 1997), p. 152.
[6] Ibid., p. 150.

the problem."[7] What makes a romance a romance is not its end, but its anticipations and suspensions: its interstitial events.

This, then, is a dissertation about those interstices, about the form and substances of the moments when the potentiality of narrative progress and closure is emphasized, expounded, dramatized; moments when the romance crosses between narrative worlds, and sustains the experience of that "threshold." How are the literary worlds of romance constituted? What dynamics mark their boundaries and the space that distinguishes them? What is the narrative materiality by which we understand the motion from one generic form to another, and what happens as those rhetorical shapes transform? What does it mean for the romance to linger "on the threshold" before some imagined achievement or closure, some definitive establishment of form and narrative shape? All these questions are crucial to the form of romance, particularly in its Middle English iterations in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. I contend that the texts I consider here open a space for social flexibility and fantasy in their transformative narrative passages.

As a brief illustration of such moments, consider the Middle English Breton lay *Sir Orfeo*, a poem that deliberately echoes the events and figures of the Greek myth of Orpheus, but transforms it according to the prototypical shape of the medieval romance. The poem reimagines gods as fairies, the afterlife or underworld as a fairy realm, and a tragedy of human passion as a tale of magic and marvel with a happy ending. Midway through the lay, the eponymous knight Orfeo crosses—like his Greek inspiration—into another world. The world Orfeo enters is not specifically the underworld, as in Virgil, Ovid, and Boethius, but rather an alternative to the

[7] Finlayson, "Definitions of Middle English Romance" [Part II], *The Chaucer Review* 15 (Fall 1980): 179.

human world: the world of the fairies, who are both like and unlike Orfeo and his human subjects. When Orfeo enters the fairy world, he walks through a stone ("in at a roche")[8] to find himself approaching a shining castle, surrounded by what critics have dubbed a "gallery" of human subjects suspended in moments of bodily extremity.[9] Women in childbirth, headless bodies, armed men astride, some drowned or strangled or burned: these bodies are not described as living or dead, but have rather been "thider y-brought / And thought dede, and nare nought" [brought there, and thought dead, and were not] (ll. 389–90). Part of what mystifies about the "gallery" is the opacity of these bodies' related states. What common quality joins these women in childbirth, drowned men, soldiers, subjects in the grip of madness?

The subjects in the gallery are linked by their capture at moments when their bodies were already beyond rational control; when they had already slipped the circle of comprehensible reality and ordered narrative life. All are suspended in moments of overwhelming materiality, states in which bodily experience subsumes rational causality—and in that space of uncontrollable experience, they have been transported into a world of illogic, of fairy magic: violence and beauty that transgresses the bounds of human capacity. "Al that lond was ever light," the poet notes, "For when it schuld be therk and night, / The riche stones light gonne / As bright as doth at none the sonne" [that entire land was always light, for when it should be dark and night, the rich stones gave light as bright as the sun does at noon] (ll. 369–72). This is not simply another kingdom or a different part of Orfeo's own world; rather, it is cosmically

[8] Anonymous, "Sir Orfeo," in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1995), l. 347; hereafter cited in the text by line number.
[9] "The gallery has captivated readers of *Sir Orfeo* but no consensus has been reached on its nature or significance" (Tara Williams, "Fairy Magic, Wonder, and Morality in *Sir Orfeo*," *Philological Quarterly* 91 [Fall 2012]: 541; hereafter abbreviated "FM").

distinguished by a different cycle of day and night, as in a science fiction narrative that sets its stage by depicting a sky with two suns.[10]

This world rejects mundane chronology and predictable order to not just an indescribable, but an unthinkable, degree: "No man may telle, no thenche in thought" [no man could tell nor think in thought] how richly crafted the castle's decoration is (l. 373). The kingdom of the fairies is distinguished both from the preexisting world of the text and from the possibility of its effective articulation into the text itself. Understanding the world of fairy in this way alters our understanding of the bodies in the gallery, which have been transported into this new scene at the very moment when their experience had already exceeded the mundane. The magical world into which they have been brought is one that is concomitant with their sensory events: it is one that, in its own transgressions of articulable experience, embraces the material transgressions these formerly articulable bodies have undergone.

How do we describe the way that this world, and these bodies, exceed narrative articulation? How do we talk, in particular, about the way this excess collapses experience (in the text) and rhetoric (the text itself)—what is narrated, and its narration? One name for this might be affect. By "affect," I refer to the description of atmospheric narrative intensity articulated in recent work by critics like Brian Massumi and Patricia Clough; I do not mean to invoke (or infringe upon) the conception of historicized "affects" as delineated, for example, in Holly Crocker's capacious review essay "Medieval Affects Now."[11] "Affects," as a medieval category

[10] See, perhaps most famously, the viewer's introduction to the planet Tatooine in *Star Wars, Episode IV: A New Hope* (dir. George Lucas, 1977).

[11] "Affects are not disturbances. . . . They are not passions. . . . Affects were not para- or pre-emotions, nor does the catchall 'feeling' capture their significance. Affects were a function of the intellectual soul, which was thought of as the domain of the 'higher' faculties, will and reason" (Holly A. Crocker, "Medieval Affects Now," *Exemplaria* 29 [May 2017]: 83).

or set of categories, denotes an array of responsive relations between the soul and environment. This is related, but not identical, to the terminology of contemporary affect theory that I adopt, which conceives of affect as a broader description of the zone that intercedes between the body and its environment, or that which permeates a text with empathic force not fully channeled into narrative or rhetorical form.

In *Orfeo*, the world of fairy is a world that can't be made sense of by means of the intellectual or emotional resources of the human world: it exceeds the structures of the world that anticipates it. Indeed, once Orfeo returns from the fairy world with Heurodis (for yes, in keeping with the conventions of Middle English romance, the poem has a happy ending, absent the moral rigidity of its Greek counterpart) the romance seems uncertain what to do with her. Can a human who has once experienced the utter breakage of human delineations, in favor of the sustained suspension of human bodies and interiority in the fairy world, ever be returned to a normative role in the comprehensible universe? Heurodis is largely elided from the end of the text, which focuses instead on Orfeo's relation to his steward. Only at the very end of the poem are we briefly reminded of Heurodis—"Now King Orfeo newe coround is, / And his quen, Dame Heurodis" [now King Orfeo is newly crowned, and his queen, Dame Heurodis]—and then not even in a syntactically coherent way: note that the poet does not say "King Orfeo and his quen, Dame Heurodis" are newly crowned, but rather appends Heurodis's recognition awkwardly onto the following line as subject of no particular predicate, neither "is crowned" nor the following "and lived long afterward" (ll. 593–4, 595). Heurodis remains an uneasy footnote to an ending that claims (and yet fails) to be neat, formulaic, and closed.

Not even the poems themselves, in other words, quite know what to do with the way their own intensities overflow narative shape. Like Heurodis, affect figures a compelling problem that

becomes too compelling, too capacious, to be effectively managed back into a fully articulable social scene. Romance (I argue) is particular in that it recognizes the problem of affective excess and simply lets it linger—exploring that excess, frequently, rather than forcing it away and out of the trim narrative particulars that might structure a tidier poem. For this reason I have chosen to analyze anonymous "popular" romances, whose structures are notably more ragged than the tightly nuanced romance pastiche of Geoffrey Chaucer or the *Pearl* poet. Something is consistently visible in these poems that have broadly resisted canonical inclusion, and that something can usefully be called affect, in all its messy, uncomfortable, productive, overflow.

Suspending Belief

Let me return, for a moment, to Orfeo's transition into the fairy world in order to think through a few possible models for articulating romance's transitional space. One such model might be the classic structural analysis of Tzvetan Todorov, whose "fantastic" also provides a descriptive terminology for that which intercedes between depicted worlds. Todorov narrates the prototypical work of a "fantastic" nineteenth-century text as follows: "In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions." The fantastic is a product of the collision or contact between two worlds; the natural and the supernatural. "The fantastic," Todorov states, "occupies the duration of this uncertainty."[12] On this account, the "fantastic" moment is the moment at which both character and reader are arrested between the mundane

[12] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993), p. 25.

world—the explicable, the recognizable, the predictable—and a new, but also conventional, world; the world of the extraordinary, the miraculous. Once it has been established that the character has moved into a world of recognizably supernatural event, once the expectations of a new scene have been introduced, the fantastic ends.

Medieval texts present obvious complications for this account. The world of medieval literature at large—even setting aside for the moment the question of romance, a genre that might be distinctively concerned with the supernatural—is one that interweaves and entangles, much more regularly than nineteenth- or twentieth-century texts, fact and fiction, leading some critics to ask if "fiction" is even the right name for imaginative medieval texts, or when it became applicable. Longstanding debates about the understanding of the modern novel as the quintessential fictional form imagine the Middle Ages as somehow insufficiently self-aware for true fictionality. Responses from medievalists such as Laura Ashe—who notes "Fiction is a mode of writing in which both author and reader are aware—and know that the other is aware—that the events described cannot be known to have happened" and locates its origins in the twelfth century—seem merely to push the dawn of such deliberate distinction back, without negating the idea *of* an inceptive moment for fiction.[13] Wherever or however we locate fiction's history, it seems clear that medieval attitudes toward marvels and their fictionality were in many ways both more established and more open-ended than modern ones; broadly acceptable formal structures incorporated or even relied on the miraculous, and did so not easily, as simple truth (as some medievalisms, both academic and pop-culture, might have us believe), but as a deeply invested, intellectually nuanced endeavor.

[13] Laura Ashe, "1155 and the Beginnings of Fiction," *History Today* 65 (Jan. 2015): 41.

The question of medieval faith offers an analogy or parallel to the problem of literary fictionality. A simplistic understanding of medieval religion might presume that medieval subjects accepted religious narrative and tenets of faith unthinkingly, bowing to doctrinal forms regardless of their unlikeliness. In Steven Justice's now-classic article "Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?," however, Justice argues that a conflicted appeal to truth is *fundamental* to medieval systems of belief: "belief does not settle the mind, but riles it."[14] The substance of faith is the mental effort of accepting something unlikely or even untrue. As a counterformation to this effortful shape of belief, Justice evokes the periodizing conception of an "enchanted world" espoused by Charles Taylor and Max Weber; in *A Secular Age*, Taylor coolly asks "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500[?] . . . People lived in an 'enchanted' world."[15] Taylor's reading offers up a vision of the Middle Ages as a time of innocent embrace of ignorance, the magical and superstitious merging unnoticed with the comprehensible and verifiable. Justice, on the other hand, argues that exactly those sources of magic and superstition were the subject of sustained intellectual effort; the mysterious presents occasion not for unthinking belief, but for an intentive re-commitment to the balance between curiosity and resilient trust.

I call up Justice and Taylor's differentiated account of medieval faith not to suggest that religious faith is identical to the work of literary fictionality, but to analogize Justice's imagined medieval efforts of belief with the *work* of arbitrating between fictionalized worlds. In literature as in religion, we cannot presume that medieval subjects were fundamentally more credulous or simplistic than modern ones. Where Taylor's "enchantment" distances the medieval subject from

[14] Steven Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?" *Representations* 1 (Aug. 2008): 13.
[15] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (New York, 2007), pp. 25–26.

the modern, Justice insists on a conceptual continuity between medieval subjects and modern readers to suggest that the difference is one of forms and expectations, not of fundamental capacities or insight. What happens if we borrow Justice's articulation of the intellectual endeavor of belief—the thick, effortful motion that constitutes an act of medieval faith—and ask how a subject accustomed to such dense engagement with integrative thresholds might encounter a different kind of scene or text? We would, I think, be forced to conclude that moments of contested event or supernaturalism in medieval texts such as romance are posed deliberately, intentionally, to craft an effortful and complex process of recognition and assimilation—not as a contemptuous appeal to credulous audiences. Romances are intended to entertain, not (directly) to teach, but they still engage active attention; they insist on and presume their readers' capacity to grapple with transitions amongst different sorts of acceptance, different fictive worlds.

Recent work on "wonder" has attended to something like this very question, and offers yet another account of specular or spectacular transformation. Caroline Walker Bynum set the stage for this when she asked, at the American Historical Association in 1996, "Where do . . . surviving sources give us access either to intensely heightened reactions or to events and objects calculated to evoke or stage such reactions?"[16] The answer, for Bynum, is in moments of "the wonderful," which—she goes on—"was never the *merely* strange or the *simply* inexplicable. It was a strange that mattered, that pointed beyond itself to meaning."[17] Tara Williams, one of the most frequent commentators on wonder, notes (in an essay on *Orfeo*), "Wonder can be an emotion, a way of seeing, or a mode of engagement; it can be a reaction to objects or events that are aesthetic, natural, or supernatural. In every case, however, wonder is an active and productive

[16] Caroline Walker Bynum, "Wonder," *The American Historical Review* 102 (Feb. 1997): 17.
[17] Ibid., p. 23.

response that can operate on readers, listeners, or viewers as well as characters" ("FM," p. 537). Wonder, on this account, is a relational form: it is a way of describing a state of witnessing, an open-eyed and open-ended glimpse over the threshold of a strange new world.

The term *enchantment* is important for Williams's work, too, but she uses it very differently from Justice or Taylor. For Williams, enchantment functions as a kind of developed analogue to wonder: "a deep curiosity that is broader and more active than wonder." The *action* produced by wonder or enchantment, here, is crucial; she argues that scenes of specular adjustment are fundamentally conducive to moral perspective. The "marvel"—the subject of her recent book *Middle English Marvels*—, she notes, "is so extraordinary and urgent that it pushes past the edge of existing ethical systems. . . . A response that begins with wonder, which has cognitive as well as affective components, may also be moral."[18] In Williams' work, *enchantment* is not a characterization of a whole world in a historical moment, as it is for Taylor, an unthinking acceptance of the existence of "witches, demons, and moral forces" (or, in a related frame in Todorov, "devils, sylphides, and vampires"); it is an individual state of perceptual engagement that opens onto an ethical scene.

Though Williams draws heavily on the work of Jane Bennett, her interest lies specifically in the moral work of possibility, and so she takes as a given some of the "vibrancy" Bennett sites as a crucial node of enchantment. In Bennett's introduction to her recent book *Vibrant Matter,* she notes her intention to "highlight what is typically cast in the shadow: the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things."[19] This "vibrancy," Bennett's version of enchantment, has I think something more to do with the affective than Williams's account, which

[18] Williams, *Middle English Marvels: Magic, Spectacle, and Morality in the Fourteenth Century* (University Park, Penn., 2018), p. 127.
[19] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C., 2010), p. ix.

is slanted towards the cognitive and coherent. Bennett's scene of wonder emphasizes the scintillating complexity of humans and that which surrounds, affects, and is affected by them; and it is worth pressing further upon what kind of scene is generated by the mere presentation of such an expansive range of actants. The sensibilities of romance are indeed profoundly imbricated with the concepts and thematizations of their social worlds, but they allow a space of suspension and distraction that opens onto narrative indeterminacy. The poet of the Middle English verse romance *Sir Degaré* pauses in his recitation of events to remark on the "chaunse and wonder strong" [chance and powerful wonder] that characterizes his text's contingencies and vagaries in an instant of charged, productive affect: he makes the text a metatextual commentary not on the political *content* of its narrative, but rather on the very capacity of narrative to contain, to collate in seeming coincidence event, affect, and poetic form.[20]

Incipient Form

Romance often features for both its readers and its intratextual characters, I contend, an event world that is productive in its very lack of definition, its refusal to move forward into precise moral content. The work on belief, wonder, and the fantastic cited above provides several accounts of reader and character united in a passage between worlds—and moreover, accounts that emphasize a threshold of integration, a moment of assimilation between familiar forms and those which might develop. Where Todorov's reading of nineteenth-century examples emphasizes the narrative event of the character who awakens to his changed world, Bynum and Williams's articulations emphasize the effect of this change upon the reader: its moral

[20] Anonymous, "Sir Degaré," in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1995), l. 613.

dimension, the ethics of spectacle and witnessing. The human gallery in *Orfeo*, Williams writes, "is moral as well as magical" ("FM," p. 538). Williams's audiences, here, seem to be doing the very work Justice articulates as a crux of belief: they are struck by a spectacle that forces them to work through and with their own structures of acceptance and resistance. They must manage a dense tangle of conflicting impulses and information about the textual world, or rather the depicted *worlds* that the romance sets in succession and contact. I think it is possible to locate in romance an articulated scene of perception that is one of neither assumed credulity (pace Taylor), defined skepticism (as in Justice), nor of moral intent (cf. Williams), but rather of densely depicted stimulus and sensibility that is solely affective, not yet delineated as moral or even signifying content.

The articulation of a moment of specular arrest as one of possibility—of a contingent conjunction of possible narratives—is crucial to an account of potential (aligned with the work of Brian Massumi and other cultural theorists of affect) that cultivates sustained interest in a condition of potentiality rather than of teleological narrative. In their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth describe affect as "in the midst of *in-between-ness*," and describe its attention to "the singularly and intimately impersonal—even sub-personal and pre-personal—folds of belonging (or non-belonging) to a world."[21] Affect is relational and impinging; it incorporates the potential for action that intersperses between subjects in anticipation of future narrative. Patricia Clough, in her essay on "The Affective Turn," renders Massumi's articulation of affect as "the openness of a body," "potential that as

[21] Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers," introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregg and Seigworth (Durham, N.C., 2009), pp. 1, 3.

soon as it begins to take form dissolves back into complexity across all levels of matter."[22] She links such bodily potential to Mark Hansen's work on technology and the body, citing a literal, technical moment, a fraction of a second, in which neurophysiological integration of an image occurs: both Massumi's and Hansen's work, Clough says, support an understanding of affect as "bodily capacity, or incipient act" ("TAT," p. 213). All these theorists imagine affect as a space of relationality between environment and perception: "a 'visceral perception' preceding perception," Clough paraphrases Massumi ("TAT," p. 209). Massumi's own work draws on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to insist on the body as a site delineated by gradients of potentiality, defined by its proximity to and capacity towards other bodies and worlds; like Deleuze and Guattari's "body without organs,"[23] Massumi's affective body is an entity bounded by imminent narrativity rather than by material distinction: "In motion, a body is in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own nonpresent potential to vary."[24]

Affect, then, is on these accounts a scene of contingency located through and around bodies: it describes a material density that anticipates narrative unfolding, a sensorium that eludes meaning while containing the charge of meaning's possibility. To illustrate such a scene, Massumi describes the "suspension" experiments of performance artist Stelarc, whose body was suspended from a series of hooks that reshaped the body by way of gravity. The body was thus positioned, Massumi suggests, in a "limit-state"—"a pre-past suspended present" that reduced (or expanded) the body to a state of pure sensation, an ongoing "felt futurity." On Massumi's

[22] Patricia Clough, "The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedia, and Bodies," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, p. 210; hereafter abbreviated "TAT."
[23] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "The Body without Organs," in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York, 2009), p. 9.
[24] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, N.C., 2002), p. 4.

account, Stelarc's bodily suspensions defied the forms of conventional linearity: the body was constantly maintained in a state of generating its own existence, its own imagined capacities and boundaries, in a condition of perpetual transformation. For Massumi, the suspensions—and Stelarc's subsequent "prosthetic" experiments, wherein electrical attachments to his body were controlled by himself and audience members—represent an image of the "critical" state, a component of chaos theory "conceived as the literal co-presence of all of the possible paths the system may take, their physical inclusion in one another."[25] Linear futurity is not just delayed but enfolded in a dilated moment of presentness. This kind of presentness helps us to understand moments like that in *Orfeo*'s "gallery," whose bodies are arrested in instants of horror or pain. A body "adreynt" or "with fire al forschreynt" [drowned, utterly shriveled by fire] is no longer a living human body, but neither is it reduced to irrelevance; it is defined by its contingency, its suspension in a crucial moment (ll. 397–98). The reader does not know if these figures are living or dead, or whether they will ever revert to life or progress to death. And such a state of indeterminacy lingers in the body; even after Heurodis is returned to her husband, her status, her human world, she is evacuated from the narrative, remaining extraneous to the normative narrative business of the kingdom's reestablishment.

This version of affect is crucially related to the generic state of romance as a form invested in moments of transition and suspension. Intensities, zones of potentiality, atmosphere, forms defined by relationality, imminent forms, incipient acts: the romance itself is in some ways *defined* by its interest in potential and its flirtation with possible forms. In her recent *Forms: Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network,* Caroline Levine offers a new version of formal reading that posits the juxtaposition and clash of forms as a space of aesthetic and ethical productivity. Levine

[25] Ibid., p. 109.

suggests that forms—frequently imagined, particularly in the critical moment of the 1990s and early 2000s, as a constricting or conservative influence on literary texts—might be "set . . . against one another in disruptive and aleatory as well as rigidly containing ways." "What if," she asks, "we understood literary texts not as unified but as *inevitably* plural in their forms—bringing together multiple ordering principles, both social and literary, in ways that do not and cannot repress their differences?"[26] This proposition might seem, at first blush, banal. Of course literary texts contain in themselves multiple formal demands: the concerns of lineation and rhyme scheme; the syntactic shapes of their language; the political demands of the hierarchical social worlds they depict and are informed by; the narrative demands of their plot and internal logics. But Levine's question, taken seriously, has the capacity to free criticism from the binding necessity of aligning form reductively to content. What if instead, we recognized the internal incoherence of a text and interrogated its conflicting imperatives, the sources of that incoherence and the burgeoning, inchoate, promissory episodes that result?

The generic imperatives of romance as they have long been understood are fundamentally incoherent: if romance is a category defined by its adherence to recognizable narrative structure, how can it also be defined by its evasive and elusive shapes? Romances are frequently recognized for their divergence from a neatly plotted path, but assessed on the basis of their adherence to that path, as when Finlayson assesses the stylistic sophistication of the romances of Chrétien de Troyes: "The manner of treating or seeing adventure, the context in which it is placed, the way it is related to the hero—these are . . . frequently concomitants of literary value." He acknowledges that most or all romance is structured around a journey and a set of tangential encounters, but insists that its validity lies in how tightly meshed those encounters are with some

[26] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, N.J., 2015), p. 40.

crucial object of pursuit, whether they constitute "stage[s] in his journey towards internal harmony."[27] And though Parker, who helpfully describes romance as a "tendency" to "remain on the threshold," is clearly focused on the space of immanence that defers the narrative's end, her project still analyzes the romance in *terms* of that projected end: "The threshold or 'twilight' space before the final revelation or ending," she writes, "is thus not only the veil of an unfolding narrative but part of the nature of all mediation."[28] Here the project of analyzing romance's delay and dilation is collapsed into the larger literary project of depiction itself, the impossibility of true mimesis in the face of insistent ongoing-ness. Relatedly, historicist readings of romance like those of Geraldine Heng and Patricia Ingham render brilliantly effective schemas of certain romances' connection to their ideological moment, but they do so by mapping similarities and structures, rather than by noting the vibrantly arbitrary ways the romances evade those maps.[29] What more disordered or elusive fantasies are visible in romance episodes that seem to openly controvert or avoid the ideological goals of their text? What do we gain by granting the romance its spaces of incoherence?

It is in these moments when the material detail of the text resists tidy incorporation into a clear cultural reading that we see the complex ways romance explores exactly those cultural questions. At the moment of Heurodis's captivity in the court of the fairies—alongside the other humans arrested at moments of high intensity or sensual climax—the forwardness of narrative is indefinitely suspended, and the reader is forced to consider what qualities in such a scene are

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[27] Finlayson, "Definitions of Middle English Romance" [Part I], p. 57.
[28] Parker, *Inescapable Romance*, p. 13.
[29] See Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York, 2003), which argues for a postcolonially-inflected reading of romance based on the cultural trauma of the Crusades, and Patricia Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain* (Philadelphia, 2001), which reads Arthurian romance through the developing national consciousness of medieval Britain.

continuous and disjunct with the scenery of the human world Heurodis and Orfeo have left behind. Heurodis and her companions are in the fairy world, but they are suspended in crucially human states: the border-worlds of mortal experience. Are all subjects poised at the potential entrance to another world at any moment of overwhelming pleasure or pain? How do instants of sensual excess jar subjects out of their predictable experience of their familiar worlds? What does it mean about the mundane kingdom Heurodis has left that it is a space which cannot assimilate or accommodate such experience, that it limits available narratives to those comprehensible in terms of its articulable categories and future narratives? Romance offers its authors a chance to open up narrative possibilities that explicitly fail to align with its apparent political intent, and it is in those moments of suspended narrative progress, of affect that refuses clarification, that its most radical scene of possibility occurs.

In each of the following chapters, I examine a romance through its scenes of excess. I take each poem as a case study in the relation of densely material, apparently tangential event to the ideological preoccupations of the poem. These texts are not available, I contend, only to the efforts of ideological excavation; they do not always respond to a hermeneutics of suspicion or an insistence on comprehensive intention. Rather, they are suffused with enchantment, with engaged attention to intensities, knots of conceptual difficulty that produce affective overflow irreducible to formulaic exegesis. In the gaps between two understandings of a world, affective intensities mark narrative contingencies, moments that concretize a multiplicity of possible futures.

In "Affect and the Limits of Form in *Sir Amadace*," I ask how commodification of the living and dead human body in the fourteenth-century romance *Sir Amadace* articulates an

expanded conceptual frame for structures of social governance that might be thought to order the romance. Critics have suggested that *Amadace* is motivated by a mismatch between aristocratic and mercantile understandings of economic exchange or social contract: the disjuncture between monetary scales of arbitration and more abstract edifices of exchanged power is persistent throughout the text. But the persistence of the body as an intractably complex object resists systematic readings of the text. At both the start and the close of *Amadace,* a body suspended between life and death—first, a merchant's unburied corpse, and finally the living but potentially transactional body of his wife—controverts the neat semantic distinctions between currency and custom that might be suggested by a historicist alignment of the text with mercantile versus aristocratic social coding.

In " 'Neggh forlorn': Enclosure and Errancy in *Sir Degaré*," I expand on the idea of narrative potentiality and its relation to depicted bodies by offering a reading of the "Breton lay" *Sir Degaré* that troubles classical readings of the poem's debt to the Oedipus story. Though the poem is related to Oedipus on a selective reading of its plot points, its introduction by a scene of rape—the scene of the hero's conception—suggests a nuanced understanding of contingency rather than a simplistic reliance on incestuous fate. Rather, I argue, *Degaré* embeds an uneasy priority of female experience that unsettles the heroic narrative itself by associating the genericc strictures of romance with the courtly world and its limiting or dangerous gender dynamics. The most effective heroic character in the world of *Degaré*, surprisingly, turns out to be its central maternal figure, whose struggles for recognition and voice emphasize the universality of her son's own conflicts.

"The Potential Bodies of *Havelok the Dane*" picks up on forms of narrative investment in the body by articulating a set of potentialities at work in the contested royal bodies of *Havelok*,

and particularly by delineating the conflicted possibilities of the royal female body for romance. *Havelok* is set up as a pair of conjoined narratives: one the story of the dispossessed Danish prince Havelok, and one of his future wife, the dispossessed English princess Goldeboru. As the romance progresses, however, the two narratives become asymmetric as the figure of Goldeboru comes to represent a subtextual space for Havelok's own narrative, figuring the problems of essential substance. This chapter works through three bodies in the poem—Havelok's, Goldeboru's, and the bodies of the criminals Godrich and Godard—to demonstrate the text's conflicted allegiance to the innate potential of the human body.

This chapter functions in a kind of diptych with my fourth and final chapter, "Transforming Affect in *The King of Tars*," which maintains a focus on the potentiality of the body to consider forms of transformation in the early thirteenth-century conversion romance *The King of Tars*. Critics have often regarded this poem as a window into medieval views of race; I argue that propagandistic raciality is a pretext for other sorts of change, making use of normative form to render permissible a discourse around the deep possibility of intimacy. The poem features two primary transformations and a third problematic transformation: the change of the "lump baby," an infant born as a fleshy blob, into a recognizably human child; the change of the body of the sultan of Damascus, a "Saracen" subject, from black to white on the occasion of his conversion; and the apparent conversion of the princess of Tars from Christian to Saracen, which undermines the poem's apparently propagandistic Christian resolution. Taken as a sequence, each of these alterations suggests the power of the field of interpersonal representations of belief as a figure for the field of potentiality.

Chapter One

Affect and the Limits of Form in Sir Amadace

It is tempting to read the Middle English romance *Sir Amadace* as an allegory or parable about mercantile and aristocratic economies. Modern critics have quite effectively done so, and the romance itself, with its insistent juxtaposition of merchants and knights as economic actors, offers its audience a story that looks like such a parable. The story of a knight errant whose chivalric ideals stand directly at odds with the financial demands of a mercantile world, the poem sets up a clear contrast between two systems of obligation. It claims to resolve this conflict through a judicious application of a third model, the religious mode of Christic sacrifice. Readings of the poem that focus on these explicit systems, however, fail to account satisfactorily for the narrative's excess, its gratuitousness, the bodily and sensory overflow that permeates the text. Though *Amadace* does make legible the ways that a climactic religious scene—a sacrificial economy—might reconcile conflicting aristocratic and mercantile perspectives, the romance is also suffused with narrative intensity that evades these structures. Understanding the poem solely as a staged contrast between two economic systems requires readers to ignore the affective excess that everywhere undercuts and disproves the narrative's attempts at systematization.[1]

This chapter was published as an article in *Exemplaria* 29 (June 2017): 99–117; a great many thanks are due to Patricia Ingham, who provided extensive editing and commentary.

[1] The desire to see romances as rigid formal constructs is a longstanding one. Indeed, the basic elements of *Amadace*'s plot coincide with a category in Thompson's *Motif-index of Folk Literature*, motif E341.1, "Dead grateful for having corpse ransomed" (see Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends* [Bloomington, Ind., 1955]). Cataloguing or describing the romance by way of its motifs or types, however, like analyzing it on the basis of its structural conflicts, reduces the text to its visible forms rather than investigating the ways in which it exceeds those systematic shapes.

A review of *Amadace*'s plot suggests its focus on the complex interactions of financial calculation, embodiment, social obligation, and social status. At the outset of the story as it survives, Amadace is in debt and decides to mortgage his land and set out into the world to seek "gold" and "silvyr" and so amend his financial woes.[2] Almost as soon as he departs, he encounters a chapel from which a vast and resistant stink emanates; upon approach, he discovers the body of a merchant (and his living wife) whose creditors have refused him burial until his debts are paid. With the last of his coin, Amadace pays the debt, buries the merchant, and proceeds on his way. He encounters a mysterious pale knight, who promises to help Amadace enter a tournament if he will afterwards grant him precisely half of his winnings. Amadace agrees and wins the tournament prize: a kingdom and the hand of a princess. Some time later, a stranger interrupts the domestic peace of Amadace's castle and proves to be the mysterious knight, who now demands his reward—half of Amadace's wife and son. Amadace demurs, but his wife throws herself on the dinner table and demands that he cut her in half to save his honor. When Amadace raises his sword, the stranger stops him and jovially relents—he was the dead merchant in the chapel, and so Amadace's debt to him is already paid. The tale ends happily.

A number of contemporary critical accounts attest that the poem counterposes the forms of mercantile and aristocratic economies—the gift and the commodity—against an incommensurable form of exchange, bodily sacrifice. James Simpson notes that it is "obvious from the plot of *Amadace"* that "the principal opposition is clearly that between merchants and

[2] Anonymous, "Sir Amadace," in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Maldwyn Mills (London, 1973), l. 35; hereafter cited in text by line number. As the poem is acephalous in both extant versions—one in the Ireland and one in the Advocates manuscript—we do not know the source of Amadace's debt. Based on Amadace's generosity elsewhere in the text, however, it might be reasonable to assume that his bankruptcy is a result of feudal obligation or charity.

nobles";[3] Edward Foster comments that the most complex and compelling aspect of the tale is its apparent "reduction of ideals to wealth."[4] In Ad Putter's insightful "apology for *Amadace*," he demonstrates compellingly that *Amadace* "sets in competition with each other" "two different kinds of economies," which Putter calls gift exchange and commodity exchange.[5] Putter defends *Amadace,* moreover, from George Kane's accusation of "gratuitousness" as regards its ending with the comment that the ending is "*conceptually* justified" if not "*realistically*"; it is "the ultimate test of the hero's willingness to give."[6] Kane's charge of "gratuitousness" is offered as an exemplum of the poem's aesthetic failure, and so Putter is right to point out that in fact the poem's ending is consistent with its project throughout.

But even as critics judge the narrative as an illustration of competing and changing economic systems, they have also recognized a narrative excess not fully accommodated by these models of exchange. Putter's neat assimilation of the gory vivisection of a mother and son to her husband's promises does not fully account for the the problem of excess. The lingering discomfort denied by this account—the grotesquerie of this scene that cannot quite be contained by matching graphic execution to feudal obligation—illustrates, I will argue, the affective overflow of the text as a whole. While the poem sets up a coherent set of themes and oppositions for its readers, there remains more to be discovered by *not* reducing the romance to this sort of structure. There is indeed, as Kane claims, a gratuitousness to the poem's scenes of bodily

[3] James Simpson, *The Oxford English Literary History: Reform and Cultural Revolution, 1350–1547* (Oxford, 2004), p. 271.
[4] Edward Foster, "Simplicity, Complexity, and Morality in Four Medieval Romances," *The Chaucer Review* 31, no. 4 (1997): 408.
[5] Ad Putter, "Gifts and Commodities in Sir Amadace," *The Review of English Studies* 51 (Aug. 2000): 378.
[6] Ibid., p. 384.

depredation: and this gratuitousness, this excess, represents an important and irreducible dimension of *Amadace*'s appeal and import.[7]

Amadace begins and ends with fraught bodies. At the start of the text, Amadace encounters a decaying body, unburied, in a forest chapel; at the close, his wife offers her body for vivisection. These and other bodies littered throughout the text turn out to be foci of deep affective investment, an investment imagined in the terms of economic investment: the corpse is unburied because of his debts, the wife's flesh stands as surety for Amadace's debts. As such, bodies in *Amadace* figure the conflict between economic systems. But they also signal that there is something more at work in the text than the illustration of these systems and the conflicts they produce: these figures represent an irreducible affective dimension, a bodiliness that defies simple exegesis by way of economic content. This bodiliness is indeed both, as Kane has it, "gratuitous and improper." I will refer to both conventional generic structures and to recognizable social systems (such as mercantile or aristocratic economies) as "forms," or formalizations. Both of these structures do the work of shaping and constraining that which precedes or escapes or disrupts them in the text. Form, in other words, functions or attempts to dispel the intensity of a text's affective content. Literary form itself is a way of reducing a scene or situation to a comprehensible generic structure or system; as such, years of criticism imagining romance as a genre governed by formal conventions would seem to suggest that romance should be highly conventional. In my own account of these moments, I draw on the resources of affect theory to elucidate the complexity of these scenes wherein a focus on bodily intensity produces narrative intensity.

[7] Kane notes, "…The 'grateful dead', who returns to reward him, first subjects him to an agonizing emotional ordeal both gratuitous and improper in view of his obligation to Amadas" (George Kane, *Middle English Literature* [New York, 1970], p. 19).

This ineradicable intensity nonetheless persists in the face of all attempts at reduction or systematization. Some scenes—for example, the overwhelming and persistently unbearable stench that attends an apparently explicable unburied body—are particularly striking in a genre which has traditionally been understood as deeply formulaic. However, one need only glance at John Finlayson's essay defining Middle English romance to note that texts typically labeled romance constantly overflow the definitions of romance assigned to them.[8] In this chapter, I examine how *Amadace* evades or exceeds the local formalizations or systematizations it purports to embrace as an introductory gesture towards the ways that romance, generically, evades its own structures and intentions.

Fantastic Economies

The social fault lines that destabilize the world of *Sir Amadace* are almost immediately evident from its plot. *Amadace* conveys intrigue and instability around debt and financial contract, brings into question the virtue of aristocratic charity, and raises the possibility of Christic sacrifice as a solution to worldly debts. These areas of complexity are narratively manifest as richly inexplicable situations: a dead merchant whose resolved debt makes him into an undead knight, a contract between knight and merchant misunderstood by both parties, fraught scenes of dead or dying bodies for whom the line between human and object is continually blurred. By the end of the poem, a gendered body graphically demonstrates the complexities of economic liquidity: because women's bodies function as both agent and object, Amadace's wife's sacrifice fundamentally disrupts any available economic form.

[8] See John Finlayson, "Definitions of Middle English Romance" [Part I], *The Chaucer Review* 15 (Summer 1980): 44–62 and "Definitions of Middle English Romance" [Part II], *The Chaucer Review* 15 (Fall 1980): 168–81.

Amadace interrogates, through a range of scenes and figurations, the imposition of form. By way of a series of fantasies of systemic coherence—what Lauren Berlant calls "idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world 'add up to something'"—the tale demonstrates the repeated inadequacy of those fantasies.[9] As I have noted above, the romance seems to stage a collision between two economic and social systems, the mercantile and the aristocratic. Such tensions would be apt for the time. The integration of these two scales of reckoning marks one of the most fraught areas of social change in the late fourteenth century. While many nobles struggled to maintain the distinctions of aristocratic privilege, a growing mercantile class actively unsettled such hereditary networks of status and wealth.[10] These marked political concerns are clearly at work in *Amadace* right from the start of the romance. The eponymous hero is in debt—" 'I myghte lung spare / Or all these godus qwitte ware, / And have noghte to spend'" [I could scrimp for a long time before all these goods were repaid, and I would have nothing to spend] (ll. 13–15)—and sets off into the world "for sevyn yere" (l. 31) in a venture to find "gold, silvyr to spende, / And be owte of dette full clene" [gold, silver to spend,

[9] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C., 2011), p. 2.

[10] The growth of a mercantile class in the late fourteenth century highlights the simultaneity of landholding and mercantile economies which provoked anxiety in those navigating the the two systems. If knighthood is a symbol of social capital, what does it mean when merchants' wealth makes them eligible for knighthood? D. Vance Smith notes the complex sociality of writs of distraint such that "profits, while not intrinsically evil, could force one to assume a social position more elevated and prominent than might otherwise be desirable" (D. Vance Smith, *Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary* [Minneapolis, 2003], p. 29). Where once markers of aristocratic privilege indicated straightforward equivalencies, this system of social rank was complicated by its growing integration with a system of financial gains. Keen notes that "landowning wealth and rank" "provides the key to the [social] gradations, and in doing so testifies to the continuing dominance of the landed interest in a still predominantly rural population" (Maurice Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages, 1348–1500* [New York, 1991], p. 11). In other words, a highly developed, consequential scale of social capital was at this moment coming into direct conflict with a scale of capital in the modern sense. Those two scales were in friction, and this friction is clear in the plot of *Amadace*.

and be entirely out of debt] (ll. 35–36). Cleanly delineated economic facts—bankruptcy; a precise period of exile; the straightforward financial goal of redeeming his debt—quickly give way to romantic solutions—he sets off as a knight errant in search of the vague hope of reward. Is the prospect of Amadace's redemption of his debt a concrete and achievable financial goal, or the object of a romantic quest?

The negotiation between mercantile and aristocratic accounts of Amadace's situation becomes all the more pressing later in the poem, when Amadace and the white knight fundamentally misunderstand each other's "forwart" [contract], the agreement they make around Amadace's entrance into the tournament. The knight deems it a calculable debt: he is entitled to half Amadace's winnings. Amadace, in contrast, imagines it as a feudal obligation; this man has done him a favor, and henceforth should be treated as a brother. In this reading, the fundamental discord of the poem might be traced to the disjuncture between mercantile and aristocratic systems. But such a reading accounts for neither the sensual delay that occurs at various points throughout the story nor the abrupt and inexplicable resolution of the debt at the end. Furthermore, there are inadequate systems at work besides the aristocratic and the mercantile; the romance stages a collision of systems not just binary but multiple. On its face, the wife's selfless sacrifice represents an apparent solution to the conflicting systems whose incompatibility has generated an unpayable debt. Yet, if Christic sacrifice represented the true "solution" to the conflict of competing economic systems, then surely the wife's sacrifice would produce a neat and satisfying end to the story. The romance would be a version of the story of Solomon and the two women, or of Abraham and Isaac, in its moral effect: it would propose an effective final authority. Derrida notes of Abraham's almost-sacrifice of Isaac that "the moral of the fable would be morality itself. . . . The absolutes of duty and of responsibility presume that one

denounce, refute, and transcend, at the same time, all duty, all responsibility, and every human law."[11] The "gift of death," on this account, is the gift of the evacuation of worldly form to absolute authority: the appeal of sacrificing what one loves is that one entirely gives up responsibility to a higher power. *Amadace* holds out the possibility of this kind of submission, but never quite authorizes it: the proferred system of narrative logic or authority is always, ultimately, inadequate. Mercantile economic form, aristocratic social form, the authority of the supernatural intercessor, the generic imperatives of the romance itself: all are conventional narrative structures that never quite maintain their grasp on the text.

"Suche a stinke"

The sensual intensity that overwhelms the narrative at its climaxes offers one emblem of excess. This sensory material is a manifestation of affect, of the kind of narrative potentiality that Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth describe in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader* as the "bloom-space of an ever-processual materiality."[12] Affect appears in text as burgeoning narrative atmosphere, a sense of the import of that which is about to happen or is already happening but has not been articulated explicitly. The interplay between imposed structure and affective content is manifest as a surreal overflow, an uncontrollable shudder of intensity that disrupts both moral imperative and narrative motion. The first noteworthy instance of this occurs when Amadace encounters the unburied corpse, an episode which initiates the central plot of the story.

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[11] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills (Chicago, 2007), p. 67.
[12] Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers," introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Seigworth and Gregg (Durham, N.C., 2010), p. 9.

Shortly after setting out on his quest, Amadace—with "no more" "lafte...in his cofurs to spende, / But evyn forty powunde" [no more left in his coffers to spend except for forty pounds] (ll. 59–60)—encounters a "chapell of stone and tre" [chapel of stone and wood] (l. 65). He sends his "knave" to investigate, and the boy is arrested by "a stinke" so great "that dwelle ther he ne myghte" [a stink so great that he cannot remain nearby] (ll. 71–72). Persisting, he "stopput his nase with his hude; / Nerre the chapell dur he yode, / Anturs for to lere" [stopped his nose with his hood, made his way to the chapel door, in order to learn of events (therein)] (ll. 72–75). Reaching the chapel window, he sees a sorrowful woman sitting near a bier. Without asking her what she's doing, he returns to Amadace and describes the scene nearly word-for-word, reciting the same lines given by the narrator only ten lines earlier: "Ther stondus a bere and canduls toe; / Ther sittus a woman, and no moe. / Lord! carefull is hur rede" [There stands a bier and two candles; there sits a woman, and no more. Lord! distressed is her expression] (ll. 88–90). Even his exclamation, "Lord!", is taken directly from the preceding lines. The repetition of this description emphasizes the sense of suspension in this scene; the events are described over and over from different perspectives without any narrative progression, so that the reader, like the characters, is caught in a static moment.

Suche a stinke as I had thare,	Such a stink as I perceived there,
Sertis thenne had I nevyr are	I had certainly never perceived before
Noquere in no stid.	Nowhere in no place.
For this palfray that I on ryde	For this palfrey on which I ride
Ther myghte I no lengur abide;	I can no longer abide there;
I traue I have keghte my dede. [Ll. 91–96]	I believe I have caught my death.

Rather than approaching the chapel himself, Amadace next commands his squire to investigate, "To witte quat woman that there ware, / 'And tithinges bring thu me'" [To discover what woman

the one there is, 'And bring me news'] (ll. 98–99).[13] Himself unwilling to approach the chapel, Amadace makes use of his retainer to investigate: his squire acts as a second interlocutor between himself and the disturbing scene.

Throughout this section, the poem emphasizes the sense of delay and deferral. Amadace finds himself repeatedly removed from any true contact with the event that exudes such a stench. By rehearsing the squire's approach to the stench twice, by emphasizing Amadace's distance from it, the text focalizes the reading experience on this moment. This scene halts the narrative in its tracks; sensation not only exceeds but overwhelms narrative content, preventing forward motion. A rotting body rests in a chapel, and the sensory and psychological consequences of that body arrest the characters and slow the plot; the episode vibrates through the narrative just as the horrific smell vibrates through the scene. The multiple, unconvincing explanations given by the knave for his distance from the chapel support this point. He claims, first, that he couldn't approach because he simply couldn't bear the stink (ll. 71–72); second, that his horse prevented him from lingering near the chapel, whether because it refused to move nearer or because the knave feared its reaction (ll. 94–95); and finally, and following rapidly on the heels of the last, he fears that he has "keghte" his "dede" (l. 96)—i.e., that the smell stands in for some deadly miasma or contaminant. Any one of these explanations might be feasible enough. Their rapid accretion, however—why produce multiple explanations when one would do?—suggests some stronger, unspoken reason for the delay or hesitation, either one that both Amadace and his men know and refuse to announce, or one that no one can articulate.

[13] Notably, the word "tithinges" in these lines, though most obviously intended to mean "tidings" in the sense of news or a report, can also mean a "tithe" or fractional payment (as in the modern sense) and so reduplicates the ongoing play among formalizing terms for both finance and narrative.

Is the smell a smell? The power of the smell for the characters in this scene suggests that it is something more, and more complex, than an external circumstance. Rather, its effects—delay, horror, simultaneous withdrawal and attraction—suggest something more capacious, more troublingly central to the text's concerns, than its symptom, a physical odor generated by a decaying body. The smell is excessive. It exceeds its narrative explanation—that it emanates from a corpse. In its intensity, the scene offers a sensualized manifestation of affect, a scene charged with unintelligible social force. Coding affect as a smell lends it recognizable bodily context. Amadace and his retainers repeatedly attempt to manage or articulate it in a way that would make intelligible the way in which its intensity relates to and interacts with their own bodies. This particular smell, I argue, offers a way of imagining an affective investment; it offers a tangible—or rather, olfactory—concretization of the overwhelming affective force that permeates this scene.

Affective Investment

When Amadace, the knave, and the squire try, and fail, and try again, to approach the chapel, they are caught in a moment of hesitation before an altered world. This account of such a moment of transition resonates with Tzvetan Todorov's description of the instant of the fantastic. For Todorov, the "fantastic" occupies a space of hesitancy: "In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions. . . . The fantastic occupies the duration of

this uncertainty."[14] Struck by conditions that do not conform to any comprehensible version of the world in which he lives, the subject hesitates, contemplates, reflects before he accepts one version of reality or another. "Either total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life," Todorov says.[15] Once the hero or the reader decides that he is in the space of the real or the supernatural world, he no longer occupies that period of hesitation.

Though Todorov's space of hesitancy does not quite map onto Amadace's approach to the chapel, this account of transition and integration makes legible important features of the scene. Like Todorov's nineteenth-century hero, Amadace is confronted with something incomprehensible, which must be assimilated to his narrative before he or it can continue. When the strange smell impinges upon Amadace's previously predictable journey through the forest, it forces the insertion of a new or adjusted framework for both sensation and narrative. While Todorov's account of the transition from the familiar to the supernatural suggests the importance of the moment of hesitation he terms "the fantastic," Todorov does not identify the substance of that moment, instead tying it solely to its textual symptom. Affect theory offers a more capacious account of what occurs in this transition between worlds: the transformation of intensity to recognizable content. Affect is managed by its articulation or explanation, by being named as a familiar experience (just as the unmanageable and excessive events of *Amadace* are coded into the shape of romance). This scene illustrates with particular emphasis the ongoing desire for coherence, for affect to be articulated in terms of comprehensible sensory, and ultimately narratively contingent, content.

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[14] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975), p. 25.
[15] Ibid., 31.

Affect in its pure form is unmanageable, unbearable. The smell's still-incomprehensible intensity demonstrates that the affect it conveys remains in excess of a sensory identification. In other romances, as in *Amadace,* the affective content of a scene—its strangeness, its excess—often seems to precede the articulation of that affect as a comprehensible social event. This belated naming helps manage the textual intensity, as Brian Massumi's account of affect suggests. Massumi describes affective intensity as "an emotional state, and that state is static—temporal and narrative noise. It is a state of suspense, potentially of disruption. It is like a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it."[16] In the chapel, stink is "narrativized" as a kind of "temporal sink"—it draws the narrative into itself and freezes it, forcing its subjects to live and relive the sensory situation, to repeatedly describe it in an attempt to come to terms with its apparent unmanageability, even as the scene resonates with the continued clamor of that intensity.

Inscription into a sensory form—a smell—fails to adequately account for the intensity of this narrative vibration; accordingly, the next effort to manage affect is a turn to coherent social form—to emotion. The knave's repetitive statements modulate the scene through the frame of multiple bodies: the knave and the squire (in their recitations), the woman in the chapel (by way of the squire's quotation and then by her own speech), and Amadace himself—as well as, perhaps, the horses.[17] Through the scene's accumulated perspectives, the overstimulation of an

[16] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect,* Sensation (Durham, N.C., 2002), p. 26.

[17] Whether the horses represent an additional bodily frame depends upon the squire's ambiguous "For this palfray that I on ryde." He might mean that he will not approach even if compensated in the amount of the cost of his palfrey—i.e., "I would not approach for any amount of money"; or, on the other hand, that he declines to approach out of sympathy for his mount. This ambivalence represents a more local instance of the poem's confusion of economic and ethical concerns—is the squire's hesitance grounded in financial or affective anxiety?

excessive sensory environment is managed, corralled, or at the very least made recognizable to characters and readers. Each successive iteration makes clearer not just what is happening within and around the chapel, but why it is happening. The shift in focus from amorphous smell to the dramatic sorrow of a grieving widow mirrors the differentiation Massumi makes between affect and emotion. Where emotion is describable in socially coherent terms—the wife wrings her hands and sobs—affect is an atmosphere, a set of bodily circumstances that exist without explanation. The subject blushes, trembles, weeps: the symptom anticipates its explanation, just as the smell anticipates its cause in the corpse.[18] The emotional detail in the squire's final description—the wife who "sore . . . sikes and hondus wringus, / And evyr…crius on hevyn kynges" [sighs sorely and wrings her hands, / And continually cries upon heaven's king] (ll. 112–13)—finally makes the emotional investment of the characters somewhat equivalent to the smell and to the affective miasma it conveys. The text has seemingly sufficiently managed the initially uncontrollable intensity of the scene by means of comprehensible emotion. Not until the stench is adequately assigned emotional coherence is Amadace persuaded to enter the chapel.

Such intensity looks, in theory, like a moment of hesitation or arrest in a narrative that gives way, generally, to understanding. The "temporal sink" forces both the reader and the figures inside the narrative to pause and realign their expectations. The world of the text must confront and assimilate undifferentiated forms of intensity; a smell must be attached to a body, tears to sorrow. This process, as Patricia Clough notes in her summation of Mark Hansen's work, relates Massumi's "sink" to physiological processes; it is the "half second of brain activity before a subject indicates a conscious response to stimuli" that Francisco Varela terms a "'frame' or

[18]See, for example, Eric Shouse, "Feeling, Emotion, Affect," *M/C Journal* 8 (Sept. 2014), journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php

'window of simultaneity.'" For Hansen, Varela emphasizes the split second wherein the human brain processes what it sees as a "'horizon of integration,'" "always emergent and intrinsically unstable, a metastability."[19] This moment of "integration" is the moment at which the human body, itself an organizational entity, incorporates and interprets a set of uncoded stimuli (or rather, both external stimuli and their physiological effects) to register an event.

Theorists conceptualize affect, then, as potentiality, the conjuncture of the swirling atmosphere around a body alongside that body's response. Affect comes poised for coding into comprehensibility. In the affective moment, the vagaries of the external world, of the "superempirical," align with the signals of the bodily machine and are, accordingly, organized. Such concepts shed considerable light on the romance episode under consideration here. Amadace and his companions hesitate as they struggle to contemplate and comprehend the scene that confronts them—and so this pause, like Todorov's fantastic, is a pause that arbitrates between two worlds. Todorov's fantastic and Varela and Massumi's moments of integration share a concept importantly applicable to *Amadace*: they each articulate moments in which the subject, stymied by the overwhelming sensory conditions of the world surrounding him, hesitates, defers, delays.[20] In the romance, this is a moment in which the apprehending, apprehensive subject pauses or repeats, demonstrating a need to order the affective in a

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[19] Patricia Clough, "The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedia, and Bodies," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Seigworth and Gregg (Durham, N.C., 2010), p. 210.

[20] I am not suggesting that Todorov's space of hesitancy is identical to Clough's iteration of Varela and Massumi's moments of code integration: it can't be, since as Clough points out, Massumi's summation of affect is set up partly as an alternative to a nineteenth-century model of the bodily organism. Where Todorov's is a process of mental effort, of contemplation and decision, the affective model is useful specifically for its negotiation of pre- or noncerebral environments and bodily reactions. For a useful critique of affect theory's approach to noncerebral bodily engagements, see Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Spring 2011): 434–72, as well as William Connolly's response, "The Complexity of Intention," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Summer 2011): 791–98.

comprehensible way. When multiple characters (the narrator, the knave, the squire, the wife) describe the scene occurring in the chapel, these are multiple attempts at managing the scene. Each character must approach, describe, decide, instantiating a set of boundaries that dictate the form of the event within the narrative and so the narrative itself.

Affect theory makes legible this moment of delay, particularly in its attention to, and its refusal to articulate precisely, the form and function of overwhelming narrative atmosphere. As Gregg and Seigworth note, affect may be articulated as the openness of possibility and sensory input. The narrative conditions the subject encounters can be qualified or described in terms of their very overwhelmingness, rather than their specific content, because such content does not (yet) exist in the subject's world, in the narrative scene. The smell of the corpse, then, is not the smell of a corpse at all: rather, it is a way of characterizing a moment of incomprehensible affective turmoil in sensory terms. Amadace encounters something imagined as a smell so as to organize chaotic input. The smell from the corpse stands as a condition of possibility, of contingency, one that is only partially captured by a sensory experience. Once such potentiality is coded as a smell, effects are managed by gestural and explanatory strategies: the knave covers his nose and speaks of the dangers of illness; Amadace asks the widow what has happened to bring this about.

Investment in the Body

The progress of this scene in *Amadace*, therefore and like other progressive depictions of affect and emotion, assimilates environmental stimuli to a communicable narrative. Within the narrative, however, even the widow's sorrow does not provide adequate explanation for the corpse's smell. The squire, compelled to mention the stink again, judges it in excess of the narrative he's produced of "the grete soro that ho opon him se, / *Stingcand* opon his bere" [the

great sorrow that she sees upon him, stinking on his bier] (ll. 116–17) (my emphasis). Ultimately, only an account of emotion's bodily value fully accounts for the overwhelming affect of this scene: The widow's declaration that she will remain by his side, "Till ho fall dede downe to the stone, / For his life was hur full dere" [till she falls down dead on the stone, for his life was to her fully dear] (ll. 119–20). The valuation of her own body manages to compensate for the intensity of this scene: though the other descriptions of the event have attempted to contain its affective fullness on the basis of sensory perception and emotional investment, ultimately only the loss of her own life constitutes sufficient representation of its import. As in the opening stanza of the poem, "full dere" operates here as a mournful pun. While "full" means "greatly," the word's semantic range includes worth, signifying here the totality of her husband's worth. His life is fully, wholly costly: it is dear since it requires the recompense of her whole body for his. The only adequate signifier for the affective content of her husband's dead body must be her own.

This equivalency between the wife's and the husband's bodies achieves a tenuous balance, at least momentarily poised between logic and lunacy. The deep incomprehensibility of these bodies comes into focus in the face of questions of literal worth. The merchant's widow explains that her husband has been refused burial because of his debts, doomed by his own generosity. Although a rich man in life, upon his death he still owed thirty pounds to a merchant who, "This corse the erthe forbede, / And sayd, howundus schuld his bodi to draw, / Then on the fild his bonus tognaue" [forbade this corpse the earth, and said, hounds should pull apart his body, then gnaw his bones in the fields] (ll. 189–91). Not content to cancel his debts upon death, the creditor demands bodily dismemberment and utter disrespect for his debtor. This is why the widow continues to sit by the man's body; she intends to remain, "Till dethe cum and take me

to" [until death comes and takes me too] (l. 197). This moment emphasizes the problem of the widow's body in this pivotal scene. For Amadace, as for the reader, the presence of the wife's living body mediates the male dead and rotting one: she functions, for one thing, as the narrator of his death and circumstances. She occupies a kind of lingering, excessive life attached to the corpse, a living prosthetic. Her body functions, moreover, as the only effective valuation of her husband's. But once her body is marked as equivalent to her husband's corpse, the material fact of the corpse's debts calls up the fundamental impossibility of such calculations of the body's value.

The illogic of this system of equivalencies is illustrated by Amadace's own excessive affect in relation to the corpse. When he pays the dead man's debts, "Unnethe he myghte forgoe to wepe" [He could hardly keep from weeping] (l. 206), the narrator explains. As Amadace notes, "He myghte full wele be of my kynne, / For ryghte so have I wroghte" [He might just as well be of my kin, for just so have I done] (ll. 209–10). The nameless corpse closely mirrors Amadace's own mistakes, and so Amadace imagines him to be a part of his spiritual family; and as if it were possible for us to miss the dead man as double, the narrator goes so far as to have Amadace explicitly state that he feels as though the man were a part of his own family. "The hero's dead companion is his *Doppelgänger*, his mirror," as Danielle Bohler notes, ["Le mort compagnon du héros est son *Doppelgänger*, son miroir"].[21] For Bohler, Amadace's designation as the corpse's potential relative registers the obligations owed by the living to the dead. Living relatives are responsible for the burial and rituals when a family member dies; they ensure the dead progress to Heaven. Yet in this case the dead man does have family alive to bury him: he

[21] Danielle Bohler, "Béances de la terre et du temps: la dette et le pacte dans le motif du Mort reconnaissant au Moyen Age," *L'Homme* 29 (July–Dec. 1989): 173–74.

has a widow. Viewing Amadace as fulfilling the obligations for burial overlooks living presence of the corpse's wife. She could be responsible for her husband's burial. The affective network around the corpse emerges as more complex than any straightforward relation between a debt and its fulfillment.

Like Amadace, the merchant to whom the corpse is indebted demonstrates an emotional intensity around the body of the man he's wronged. His reaction is motivated not by the logic of the narrative but by the powerfully conflicted terms of bodily economies on view here. When Amadace confronts the merchant whose unsatisfied debt has deprived the nameless man of burial, the merchant grouses, "'God gif him a sore grace, / And all suche waisters as he wasse…For he lise there with my thritti powunde / Of redy monay and of rowunde, / Of hitte gete I nevyr more" [God give little grace to him and all such wasters as he was…For he lies there with my thirty pounds of ready and round money, which I can never get back again] (ll. 247–52). The resentment of the creditor is not merely a philosophical or economic: it is a deeply felt bodily reaction. The creditor desires to redeem his losses, damaging his opponent's physical body in recompense for the damage to his own financial self. The merchant's intent to refuse burial in the absence of payment—"That body schall nevyr in the erthe come / My silvyr tille that I have; / Till ho be ded as wele as he, / That howundus schall, that I may se, / On filde thayre bonus tognaue" [That body shall never come into the earth until I have my silver; until she be dead as well as he, that hounds shall, that I may see, gnaw their bones in the field] (ll. 260–64)—makes visible the collapse of the financial and the physical. Some strange reversal has occurred in these lines. And it is a reversal that mirrors Amadace's assertion of kinship: the physical body of the stinking corpse has been overwhelmed by its financial value.

The physical form that should be merely a figure for profligacy—debt, imagined as a body that can't be ignored—has literally collapsed into its abstraction: the body is somehow identical to the debt. The merchant seems to claim that financial losses embed the debtor's body, that his money can somehow actually be redeemed by the death and mutilation of his debtor and the debtor's wife. The body, he insists, shall never be placed in the earth until the creditor regains his silver; the body shall never be placed in the earth till his wife is as dead as he, so that dogs can gnaw their bones. Though an "or" seems to be implied—"I won't let him be buried until I get my silver back, *or* until his widow is dead as well and I've seen the hounds gnaw their bones"—it is never stated. Syntactically, "Till ho be ded" stands in apposition to "tille that I have [my silvyr]," so that the two are made strangely equivalent. The merchant blurs these bodies such that the corpse's wife (excluded from the economic transaction through Amadace's intervention) becomes again an element of the debtor's financial body, making bodily boundaries harder to trace. Apparently, the uncomfortable sensual intensity with which the merchant invests his financial losses requires that all forms of the body—the corpse, his possessions, his wife—be collapsed into one affective whole. The merchant's vehemence suggests the unsettled financial reckoning in this text; payback can blur and collapse bodily boundaries, it can render the human body abstract as payment of a debt; it can, and conversely, make an abstract monetary instrument bodily and human.

Gifts and Bargains

In these sections the poem has pointed to the problematic equivalencies amongst the embodied and the abstracted—the human body and its value, the status of knight and the wealth it requires, the affect and its articulated form. This varied field becomes clearest in the bargain

struck between Amadace and the white knight, which captures many of the major ambiguities driving the narrative. This unreliable bargain simultaneously occupies divergent social codes; as we shall see, it blurs the terms of economic exchange and beneficence. By the end of the text, this "forwart" [contract] calls into question the distinctions among gift, exchange, and sacrifice.

When Amadace and the white knight make their deal, the knight is very clear on two features of their agreement to whose problematic alignment Amadace seems blind. The primary purpose of the tournament is the acquisition of the princess's hand. Furthermore, the white knight takes care to state explicitly that he will expect precisely half of "whatever" Amadace wins—"evyn to part betwene us toe / The godus thu hase wonun and spedde" [to divide evenly between us two the goods you have won and acquired] (ll. 503–04). Amadace seems blind to the dire consequences that the narrative makes clear. If Amadace succeeds, the white knight will win half of the princess. Nonetheless, he blithely agrees. Many romances are motivated by moments like this one, in which simpleminded heroes treat complex agreements in straightforward terms. Readers are, however, on notice: a romance bargain regularly poses something fraught—even life and death—as uneasily assimilated to cleanly mathematical systems of calculated debit and exchange. A similar moment occurs in the near-contemporary *Gawain and the Green Knight*; readers of *Amadace* may well recall Gawain's too-easy bargain with the Green Knight, presaging danger. ("I schal stonde hym a strok, stif on þis flet, / Ellez þou wyl dʒt me þe dom to dele hym anoþer Barlay" [I will allow him a stroke, standing upright on this ground, and you will give me the right to deal him the same. Agreed].[22] Anyone who proposes such a trade must have something (or several somethings) up his sleeve. Both the Green and the white knights intend to

[22] Anonymous, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Andrew Malcolm and Ronald Waldron (Liverpool, 2008), ll. 294–95.

unmask the hero's failings; they also both know themselves to be exempt from the limitations of mortal life.

The strangeness of the white knight's bargain suggests, also, the difficulty of assimilating form to content, a point foregrounded in the scene of the shipwreck that follows the knights' agreement. The crux of the contract is an exchange of goods: the knight will provide Amadace with resources, and Amadace will invest those resources with the intention of repaying the knight at an agreed-upon future date. As soon as the contract is made, however, the instability of its terms are revealed. The bargain between the two relies on the assumption of the knight and Amadace's respective possession of wealth: the knight has it now and will give it to Amadace, Amadace will then give it back in the future. It turns out, however, that the fulfillment of the bargain relies not on any wealth the knight possesses, but on a shipwreck of mysterious provenance whose location he describes to Amadace. The white knight's treatment of tragedy as resource destabilizes the bargain. He does not give Amadace wealth; he gives him information. Further, the lack of clarity around the shipwreck itself—did the white knight somehow cause it, or is the reader to understand it as a coincidental detail of the narrative?—foregrounds the artificiality of the romance narrative.

In the earlier scene of the chapel, affect preceded any articulation of cause; a vibrant scene awaited explanation. In the fulfillment of the bargain between Amadace and the knight, on the other hand, cause or need drives the production of a scene. The knight explains to Amadace that he should seek out a shipwreck and outfit himself from its contents. But he describes the shipwreck by way of a kind of alibi for Amadace, emphasizing the creative construction of the shipwreck rather than the horror of the scene itself. "Thu say," the knight tells Amadace, "the menne that come with the, / That thay were drounet on the see, / With wild waturs slone" [You

will say that the men that came with you were drowned on the sea, slain by wild waters] (ll. 487–89). The "real" scene, the scene as it manifests in the poem, emerges from a doubly fictional (the knight inventing a story that Amadace is to perform) account of that very scene. In the next stanza, the shipwreck appears as truth; Amadace encounters a ship "wrekun amung the stones" amongst "Knyghtes in menevere for the nones, / Stedes quite and gray, / With all kyne maner of richas" [wrecked among the stones . . . Knights in fancy trim at that instant, steeds white and gray, with all related sorts of wealth] (ll. 520–22). In these lines, one character in the poem provides another with an account of a fictional adventure, and that fictional adventure appears wholesale in the text.

The knight's advice to Amadace makes inescapable the arbitrary fictionality of romance events. We know that the poet has the power to narrate contingent events, but now even characters within the text can construct events to answer to their needs. In this sequence, description anticipates affect and so dispels it. If the scene in the chapel was overflowing with intensity that escaped narrative structure, the scene of the shipwreck is all plot. It acts as the earlier scene's direct obverse. In place of a singular corpse overflowing with affective intent, this scene depicts a multitude of uncorrupted, undescribed bodies: the men's deaths are never exactly explained; Amadace almost seems to be investigating a party somehow frozen or suspended in time, rather than bodies in the process of sensual, physical decay. Unlike the earlier scene, in which the dead man's body presented a problem for his family, his community, and with the stench of his corpse, even for passersby, this scene emphasizes death in sterile terms, as the arrest of life. Life has been lost, money is available to compensate for burial. No one remains to ensure burial is done. No one remains to smell any decay. Amadace unabashedly takes what he needs from the wreckage with no hesitation; he dresses himself in cloth of gold, and takes an

unexpectedly surviving horse to use in the tournament. Unlike the earlier scene of death, this one is rife with objects but devoid of affect; the scene stages death and loss but ignores their effect.

Neither Amadace nor the narrator bother with the narrative processes of recognition and integration notable in the earlier scene. Absent the vibrating intensity of that earlier scene, this moment attends to surfaces, materials, and objects—stones, miniver, chests of treasure, all empty form. These bodies serve an instrumental purpose for Amadace. He makes no effort to bury the dead. In the earlier scene, on the other hand, affect precedes plot. The smell happens first. The sensory and emotional account of its intensity follows after. In contrast, in the shipwreck episode, although they are stunningly visible, causes of affective disturbance engender no effect. Here, explanation precedes experience: the text has already made clear that these objects have been generated to supply the hero's need. This anticipatory explanation dispels any affective atmosphere that dozens of dead bodies might create.

The instrumentality of dead bodies in this scene further complicates the calculation of a human body's value. As in the scene of the unburied body in the chapel, the poet presents a troubled equivalency between wealth and a human body. But if the earlier scene anticipated the body's worth in excess of its material context, here atmosphere suggests it may be worth little or nothing. These bodies exist only as resources, as a stockpile of wealth for Amadace to plunder. There is here no fraught negotiation of their worth. These deaths are purely structural and instrumental: their only function is to further the narrative, without pause for the kind of aimless affective resonance that introduced the earlier scene. The bleak atmosphere of this scene proceeds not just from its aesthetics—the empty sea, the sky, the bodies, and Amadace alone—but from its seeming senselessness, its nonspecific and purposeless destruction treated not as tragedy but as trove, as a resource: knights dressed for a tournament, horses ready to be ridden,

money waiting to be spent, all unmoving and unused and only present as signifiers of exchange value, not of feeling.

The Lingering Debt

The poem's emotional or psychological investment in the problems of exchange ultimately culminates in the payment of Amadace's debt to the white knight. Yet the final events of the narrative again call into question the calculable value of human lives or bodies. When the nameless knight arrives at his gate, Amadace's reception of his guest is marked again by affective overinvestment. He tells his men, "To serve him wele to fote and honde, / Ryghte as ye wold do me" [To serve him well at food and hand, just as you would me] (ll. 689–90). This is followed by the indecipherable comment that Amadace's lady, also, "did wele that hur aghte to do; / All that hur lord lufd worschipput ho" [did rightly what she ought to do; all that her lord loved, she worshipped] (ll. 694–95). Presumably "that hur aghte to do" refers to household preparations that she might oversee; its nonspecificity, in the context of Amadace's command that his guest be treated just like him, seems just shy of innuendo. Amadace's emotional priorities seem just as unbalanced here as they were at the beginning of the poem: there's something uncouth about his intensity of his affections. A knight should be generous to his men, but not so generous that he bankrupts himself; he should be loyal to a companion who has aided him, but not so loyal that he forgoes his loyalty to his wife.

Moreover, Amadace's unrestrained affection perpetuates the confusion of economic and emotional debt: Amadace stands in a significant, but measurable, debt to the nameless knight. Having promised half his winnings, he should be under no obligation to feel the kind of fanatical devotion that he seems to feel. Such devotion goes beyond hospitality or gratitude and into

slavishness—or rather, converges on vassalage and noblesse oblige, the obligations and responsibilities of a knight and lord that are fundamentally incompatible with the kind of bargain the white knight understands them to have. The poem emphasizes this when Amadace's overwrought attempts at service to the knight—to stable his horse himself, to lead him into the hall—are met by a firm rebuttal and declaration of economic debt: "I will nauthir ete, drinke, no duelle," he says, "Butte take and dele hit evun in toe, / Gif me my parte, and lette me goe, / Gif I be wurthi oghte" [I will neither eat, drink, nor stay, but take and divide it evenly in two; give me my part, and let me go, if I am worthy of anything] (ll. 704–8). The desire to maintain stringently financial terms is palpable here, and produces a discordant social scene: where Amadace wishes to reaffirm and do justice to a passionate debt of honor, the nameless knight insists on the quantitative contract that formalizes that debt.

The text draws a clear distinction between Amadace's aristocratic, romantic formulation of obligation and the white knight's essentially mercantile formulae. Amadace is hurt by this division and by the knight's implication that Amadace's gratitude and fellowship represent an evasion of the monetary debt he owes. "'For Goddus luffe,'" he says,

lette suche wurdus be!	let such words be!
Thay grevun my herte full sore.	They grieve my heart very sorely.
For we myghte noghte this faurtenyghte	For we could not this fortnight
Owre rich londus dele and dighte,	Divide and distribute our rich lands
Thay liun so wide quare.	That expand so broadly from here.
Butte lette us leng together here,	Rather let us stay together here,
Righte as we brethir were,	Just as though we were brothers,
As all thin one hit ware. [Ll. 710–17]	As though it were all your own.

Amadace implores the knight to forget not just the injustice he seems to think Amadace is perpetrating, but also the very idea that the debt should be payable in any precise terms.

While Amadace thinks of the service done him as a chivalrous act of generosity between knights, the merchant sees it as a contract, a "forwart." "Butte a forwart make I with the…/ That

evyn to part between us toe / The godus thu has wonun and spedde" [But an agreement I make with you / To divide evenly between us two / The good you have won and earned] (ll. 502–4). The knight makes clear the terms of repayment at the start of the bargain: the goods that Amadace has won or acquired (he employs synonyms or variants to eliminate ambiguity) should be divided evenly (he emphasizes this precise, calculated division) between the two parties. He is specific to the point of redundancy. Amadace, understanding the bargain in his own way, responds, "Thu schalt fynde me true and lele / And evyn, lord, for to dele / Betwix the and me" [You shall find me true and loyal / And fair, lord, in dividing / Between you and me] (ll. 508–10). Absent the specificity so marked in the white knight's lines, Amadace's grateful acknowledgement is not of legal or financial debt, but of the service that has been done for him, couched in the terms of chivalric virtue. He calls the knight "lord," reassures him of his "truth" and "loyalty." It's not that he declines the bargain; he agrees to the bargain he heard and codifies it in terms he understands, just as the merchant did. But where the white knight thinks in terms of contractual obligation, Amadace thinks in terms of honor and promises. The noble obligation to act rightly takes the place of legal culpability. What this finally means is evident in the scene of the knight's arrival: Amadace treats money as though it were continuous with or equivalent to emotion, to love, to family: to avow a man his brother is, for Amadace, the literal equivalent to offering that man all his worldly goods. Every service rendered deserves such a payment.

The contract and its misunderstanding between Amadace and his rescuer finally stage the conflict between the two profoundly incommensurate systems of value that govern the poem: one of a set of complex and interrelated legal contracts, of formal calculations, and one of a set of honorable knightly deeds, of chivalric ethics. For the merchant (and the way of life that he represents) truth, or honor, or virtue is a result of contractual obligation, a set of specifically

defined parameters laid out in terms of economic exchange and substitutability. For Amadace (and the aristocratic perspective that he demonstrates), honor is always a result of men acting according to a code of action, a set of loyalties to one another whose complex hierarchy responds to shifting social and familial connection rather than crisply monetary rules of exchange. Brought in this way face to face with the incompatible vocabularies of their two positions, the nameless knight/merchant brings the economic consequences of the situation to an abrupt head by making literal the equivalency between money and family bodies: "'Broke wele thi londus brode, / Thi castels hee, thi townus made, / Of hom kepe I righte none,'" he tells Amadace. "'But, be my faythe, wothouten stryve, / Half thi child, and halfe thi wyve, / And thay schall with me gone'" [Enjoy your wide lands, your high castles, your acquired towns, I will keep none of them; but, by my faith, without argument, divide your child, and divide your wife, and they will go with me] (ll. 721–23, 730–32). Amadace is stunned: "'Alas . . . That evyr I this woman wan / Or any wordes gode'" [Alas . . . that I ever won this woman, or any praise] (ll. 733–35). Money won would be easy to surrender, but not his family. Amadace is unable to conceive of division in any terms, but particularly those of the human: better to have won nothing than to have to split it into pieces. The collapse of the financial into the bodily finally achieves the breakdown of the mercantile/aristocratic dynamics that have seemed to rule the poem up to this point. In the context of the divided worth of a human body, neither a kinship-based nor a purely financial system can account for the horror of the affective situation. Faced with this direct conflict and the formal dissolution that attends it, the poem offers a new paradigm for reading its excesses: a Christic, sacrificial account.

The Final Economy

Seeing that Amadace is unwilling to kill her and their son, the lady of the house takes decisive action. "'Loke yaure covandus holdun be, / Yore forward was full fyne'" [Take care that your covenant is maintained, your agreement was proper] (ll. 761–62), she admonishes them. With this abjuration she achieves the blending of Amadace's and the knight's perspectives that neither of them have been able to enact: she suggests that what is most important is the fulfillment of responsibility. By the simple expedient of appending "covandus" to "forwart," she points out that Amadace's debt is a debt of honor, not merely a financial obligation. Requesting that their son be brought to her, she lays herself down "mekely enughe" (l. 790) on the table to be cut in two—as all the men in the hall faint.

Though it may seem as if a sacrificial gesture will reconcile the conflicting economies of the poem, the court's communal faint suggests otherwise. "Thenne all the mene in that halle, / Doune on squonynng there con thay falle, / Before thayre lord thay stode" [Then all the men in that hall / Down they fell, swooning / Before their lord they stood] (ll. 784–86), the narrator notes, crisply marking again the poem's entry into the realm of overwhelming affect in the space of three lines. This articulation of the event posits three distinct features: a disruption of chronological order; an emphasis on Amadace's presence as the instigating factor for this faint; and the faint itself, an autonomic response that negates the self-organization of the body (and the narrative). A faint is a total loss of bodily constitution: the men observe a scene so overwhelming that they are unable to sustain consciousness. Instead, they give up sentience and fall, relinquishing both mental and bodily integrity. Further, this loss of physical and mental wholeness directly follows from Amadace's own relinquishment of order, as the lines directly preceding demonstrate. The narrator notes that, "quen Sir Amadace see / That no bettur hitte

myghte bee, / He ferd as ho were wode" [when Sir Amadace saw that it could be no better (than for his wife to be cut in two), he behaved as though he were mad] (ll. 781–83). Every organized unit in the story collapses in this moment: faced with his wife's dismemberment, Amadace gives up his grip on sanity, and his men correspondingly give up their own bodily and mental order. As a final salute to the disintegration of this narrative moment, chronology jumbles: the line "Before thayre lord thay stode" occurs *after* the men faint, and though it could be translated as something like, "*As* they stood before their lord" (my insertion emphasized), the omission of any preposition suggests the basic rupture of cause and effect in this scene.

The idea of sacrifice functions as an effective cumulation of the clash of form and affect that has suffused the poem. Sacrifice is understood as an interruption of economies in the work of L .O. Aranye Fradenburg, who locates sacrifice amidst an "*aneconomy*, an instant when actions cannot be referred to as a future, products cannot be anticipated, and rewards cannot be calculated."[23] Fradenburg refers here to Jacques Derrida's comment that sacrifice "presumes the putting to death of the unique in terms of its being unique, irreplaceable, and most precious. It also therefore refers to the impossibility of substitution, the unsubstitutable" (Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 59). Sacrifice is, in other words, the fantasy of an ultimate economy: it imagines that bodies are fundamentally exchangeable, even as it posits the body as the most unique and thus irreplaceable object. Sacrifice occupies this central paradox: if it permits substitution, it is not truly sacrifice; but sacrifice itself works through substitution, the positioning of a sheep's body in exchange for a good harvest, for example. The moment of the princess's—now queen's—sacrifice, the moment at which she places herself on the table to proffer her own (and her son's)

[23] L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis, 2002), p. 15.

death as closure to an agreement of which she has no part, is a moment that both suspends and intensifies economies. Or, indeed, narratives. In *Sir Amadace*, the wife's sacrifice institutes an economy wherein the establishment of absolute substitutability—a body for land, a body for wealth, for goods—confronts and stymies the specificity of the requested body. The white knight will not accept the land, but instead demands the familial body.

Rejecting Order

It is tempting to say—and this would be a very Christian thought—that the sacrifice here represents a religious economy finally able to reconcile the mercantile and the aristocratic imaginings of debt. In the end, though, a Christic account of the wife's sacrifice as somehow, effectively, all-redeeming seems another insufficient account of the romance. Sacrifice represents both a sort of ultimate economic scene and the dissolution of all economies. The wife's gesture, as an all-consuming, overwhelming act, constitutes the same kind of affective overstimulus offered by the dead body at the beginning of the poem. All sense of order, of narrative coherence, fails, and the tale's subjects and reader are plunged again into a sensory morass that defies clear narrativization. This scene reiterates the problematic economies of intensity that appear throughout the poem. Like the merchant's wife, Amadace's wife confronts the problem of what a body is worth, and finds that the answer is: everything. In the face of such extreme and often nameless experiences, all systems of coherence are lost. Pain and joy are equivalent. They are each equivalent to "all that evyr thu hade"—not merely to all Amadace's possessions at the moment when he paid the merchant's debts, but rather to all the possessions he has ever had, up to and including his wife and child.

To imagine this scene as an effective religious solution would give the edifice of system itself too much credit. Such a reading imagines that there is some conventional narrative with the capacity to resolve this deeply conflicted story. Rather, this instant of sacrifice throws into focus both the appeal and the untrustworthiness of any coherent narrativization of an affective scene. Amadace is eased when he submits to his wife's revision of the problematic narrative he has encountered—when he lets her resolve the conflict between two perspectives. But the imposition of a pseudo-Christian sacrificial scene opens up all the same questions that it attempts to curtail. Why is this single body sufficient to the existing debt? Why can a body be both an object and an agent? How can the value of a body, including its resident life, to its possessor, to its relations, to its executioner, be calculated or understood? The overwhelming and persistent nature of these problems produces the same kind of affective overflow as other narrative impositions seen earlier in the story. Here, though, rather than continuing to multiply narrativizations of the scene, the text submits to its own intensity. Every witness faints.

Inasmuch as the demands of monetization or formalization are arbitrary and cruel, in *Amadace* they are simultaneously the focus of great desire because they would provide the source of a comprehensible narrative. Every interaction, every moment of intensity, stages the simultaneous impossibility and desirability of normalizing uncontrollable environments by some stable set of terms. Amadace's initial encounter with the nameless corpse—a moment of atmosphere figured as unbearable smell—finally seems attached to a body, an emotion, a comprehensible sum of money. Amadace's interaction with the vengeful merchant who believes that bodily mortification could be equivalent to a debt owed illustrates the merchant's compulsive fantasy that the collapse of corpse and cash might satisfy his disorderly desire. Amadace's wife offers the hope that a debt (whether viewed as honor or solid cash) might be

reconciled by means of a willing body. All these imagined solutions are haunted by the ambiguities of the problems they purport to solve. This is especially true of the wife's sacrifice. Even the original debt is ambiguous: faced with the problem of what ought to be owed to a man who has saved his life, Amadace gladly promises whatever he is asked. But he fails to consider that this sloppy equation of life for goods might result in a correspondingly messy future equivalency, one in which his wife and son's life are equivalent to a division of goods.

The final (averted) "sacrifice" represents a coming together of multiple fractures in the story. Rather than offer a Christianizing fulfillment, it refuses to amend any of them. The romance ends with this knot of difficulty. The suspension of economies does not bring competing economies into agreement, but holds them in a tension sustained beyond the apparent ending of the narrative. It is important to note, moreover, that it is a gendered body—a female body, of the sort specifically marked throughout the poem as somehow both extraneous and essential—that effects the narrative's conclusion, such as it is.

Thenne Sir Amadace and his wive,	Then Sir Amadace and his wife,
With joy and blis thay ladde theyre live,	With joy and bliss they led their life,
Unto thayre ending daye.	Until their ending day.
Ther is ladis now in lond full foe	There are now few ladies in the land
That wold have servut hor lord soe	That would have served their lords so;
Butte sum wold have sayd nay. [Ll. 829–34]	Rather, some would have said no.

"With joy and blis thay ladde theyre live." This dubious happy-ever-after sustains the problems of representation that obsess *Sir Amadace*. As in many other romances, the hasty resolution of the narrative's problems by means of a blissful domestic scene tries and fails to cover over the poem's enduring affective conflicts. Not all wives would have made the offer of Amadace's wife, the poet points out, despite the fact that her hypothetical sacrifice ensured the happiness of the couple. In particular, the banality of this note suggests the helplessness of the poem and its narrator in the face of such an anticlimactic ending. If there is any satisfaction in the scene of

blunted sacrifice, it resides only in the thought that something precious was *not* sacrificed, that something importantly unique was preserved. By folding this back into an appeal to the conventional figures of the romance world—the other "ladis now in lond"—the poet attempts to finally return the poem to the safe, familiar parameters of the genre. Yet even here, the poet only succeeds in emphasizing the vibrating intensity that rejects any fantasy offered by conventional form.

Chapter Two

"Neggh forlorn": Enclosure and Errancy in *Sir Degaré*

Like *Sir Amadace*, *Degaré* seems to reinforce certain normative roles and structures, but its underlying conceptualizations produce fields of intensity that may render the normative secondary. The formal opportunity romance provides to expound upon the wide-reaching possibilities of fractional narrative moments allows the genre to center the peripheral. Thus categories of personhood classically understood as motivating objects, or as appendages to a central narrative—women, children, animals, disabled or otherwise unconventional bodies—can take on great focal agency, even if apparently, as Frye has it, "all the reader's values are bound up with the hero."[1] The focalization of one figure as the presumed center and the "binding" of the reader's attention to that figure needn't preclude the romance's own attentiveness to subtler intensities and perspectives that surround him. Indeed, romance frequently *authorizes* this very attention, foregrounding distraction so as to offer new avenues for sympathy and identification.

Degaré, like many other romances, has frequently been imagined as a story about men. Despite frequent identification by contemporary and modern commentators as a genre of the feminine—read by women, invested in feminine concerns—romances are typically imagined, marketed, and critiqued as centering masculine experience. David Salter, for example, calls romance "a feminine genre with virtually no female heroines." "Middle English romance," he notes, "is a genre that deals almost exclusively with male concerns, and that puts male experience at the centre of its universe."[2] Susan Crane notes similarly in her 1994 *Gender and*

[1] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, N.J., 1957), p. 187.
[2] David Salter, "'Born to Thraldom and Penance': Wives and Mothers in Middle English Romance," *Essays and Studies* (2002): 42, 43.

Romance in Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" that for romance, "the social position occupied by those gendered male becomes conflated with that of humanity at large, exiling those gendered female to the position of difference, otherness, and objectification."[3] Romance does indeed speak to and frequently reinforces normative gender distinctions; however, accepting at face value romances' appeal to hierarchical gender perspective can miss the more complex perspectival landscapes they might offer. As Nicola McDonald points out, romances "*work hard* to privilege the trajectory of the knight—the pursuit and satisfaction of his desires—while simultaneously diminishing the claims of competing story lines, other desires" (my emphasis). McDonald's account captures the *effort* required to center male concerns at the cost of other narratives and "desires"; she notes the publication history of the romance originally called "Undo Your Door," subsequently retitled "The Squire of Low Degree" to better respond to genre marking and market forces.[4] The fact that romances are named after their male protagonists does not indicate an organic foreclosure of divergent purposes, but rather a deliberate generic fencing. Think of *King of Tars*; the eponymous character appears only briefly at the start and end of the poem, most of which is dedicated to the experience and exploits of the princess of Tars—a woman who is never named. Romance or its authors may look to deal with "male concerns" and "male experience," but these narratives are not necessarily centered on maleness.

In this chapter, I consider the Middle English romance *Sir Degaré* and its treatment of Degaré's mother to argue that reading the poem as a story about the development of its supposed hero obscures the radical potentialities of female experience manifest in romance narrative.

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[3] Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales"* (Princeton, N.J., 1994), p. 13.
[4] Nicola McDonald, "Desire Out of Order and Undo Your Door," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 34 (2012): 249.

Salter observes that women in romance are "not so much . . . protagonists in their own right, but . . . the mothers, wives, sisters, and lovers of the protagonist" and notes that such attachments render these female figures marginal but "central . . . in moulding and developing the identity of the male hero."[5] This acknowledgment looks like an uneasy deference to perceived misogyny, positing women's nurturing contributions as a kind of consolation prize. But it neglects the thought that such roles—of shaping and development—suggest a deep alignment between creator and female character. If it is a women's experience that shapes her heroic son's narrative, she is implicated in his creation and trajectory in much the same way that the poet is: as a source of motivation and a manager of that motivation's results.

Though the princess of Brittany, like the princess of Tars, is never even named, the fundamental misalignment of her experience with her son's points to one of the deep concerns of this romance and indeed romance in a larger sense: the integration or disintegration of gendered narratives, the way in which romance's narrative topologies run up against the problem of gender so as to emphasize and complicate it, not necessarily to reinforce dominant norms. The social rifts that initiate the romance—the princess's fear of her father's incestuous court and her assault by a "fairy knight" in the forest of her father's land—recur in the persistent threat of incest and the insistent reinscription of all characters into the role of spouse, child, or both. The violent restriction of the romance world to the elements of the family unit enforces upon Degaré, as well as his mother, a suffocating social world that echoes the prospects available to aristocratic women, continually closing off the anticipated possibility and openness of romance narrative characterized as errant, meandering, and unpredictable.

[5] Salter, "'Born to Thraldom and Penance,'" p. 43.

I take as my theoretical starting point for this argument the repeated association of *Degaré* with an Oedipal narrative that effortfully centers the male hero. Many scholars have commented on the resemblance between *Sir Degaré* and the story of Oedipus: James Simpson jokes, "Were it not for the date of the texts, one would have sworn that this was written by Freud," while Cheryl Colopy calls the poem a "fairy tale Oedipus" and notes that the story's purpose is to "demystify [Degaré's] monsters for himself and for the audience and resolve the Freudian triangle."[6] Most scholars, however, disregard the rape with which the story begins or neatly enclose it in a Freudian package. A psychoanalytic reading based on selective literal mapping fails to account for the sexual assault that initiates and haunts the entirety of the romance and metonymically its titular hero. Simpson, for example, claims that in retrospect the rape becomes "a marriage in disguise, dislodged from its proper place by the father's improper possessiveness of his daughter" ("VNP," p. 129). On this account, the violation of the female body that initiates the poem is relevant only insofar as it initiates Degaré's restorative narrative; it figures a male transgression that will be answered by a male emendation.

Though a psychoanalytic perspective does, I think, have something to offer the analysis of this poem, it must account for the fundamental trauma that initiates Degaré's existence as well as the conflicts Degaré himself confronts. Degaré's incestuous journeys are precipitated and haunted by the violence that embeds his mother's origins as well as his own; he was conceived by a patriarchal assault upon a woman fleeing patriarchal assault. Reading Degaré himself, and the progress of his story, as a soothing reinstantiation of patriarchal domesticity overwrites a

[6] James Simpson, "Violence, Narrative and Proper Name: *Sir Degaré*, 'The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney', and the *Folie Tristan d'Oxford*," in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance* (London, 2000), p. 128; hereafter abbreviated "VNP." Cheryl Colopy, "Sir Degaré: A Fairy Tale Oedipus," *Pacific Coast Philology* 17 (Nov. 1982): 38.

narrative that the poem itself depicts as continually suppressed and overwritten. I argue that the poem addresses this persistent rift in the flexible terms of loss, imagining Degaré—whose name means (not unproblematically) "one who is lost"—as a metonymic instantiation of loss with both destructive and redemptive dimensions.

In *The Romance of Origins*, Gayle Margherita notes that it is Julia Kristeva who "most precisely theorizes" "the conceptual relation between loss and representation," and I turn to Kristeva's account of depression and loss as providing a productive psychoanalytic reading of the primal loss typically imagined as Oedipal, the detachment from some originary space of affective wholeness.[7] In *Degaré* and perhaps in romance as a genre, the narrative scene of loss is a space of excitement as well as of melancholy; for the princess, in particular, her lost-ness takes the form of a positive suspension in affective space, a habitation of potentiality and possibility that is curtailed by the instantiation or reinstatiation of ordered heteropatriarchal law. I take Kristeva's work, in this vein, as a bridge or transitional vocabulary between psychoanalysis and affect theory: Kristeva notes in *Black Sun* that "representations germane to affects . . . are *fluctuating* energy cathexes, insufficiently stabilized to coalesce as verbal or other signs."[8] This language anticipates later developments in affect theory in its articulation of affect as potential, as a world of relationality and response not yet integrated (by the brain or the narrative) into signification. Affect offers one name for the ways that *Degaré*'s scenes exceed the signification or mapping of reductively Oedipal accounts of the romance.

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[7] Gayle Margherita, *The Romance of Origins: Language and Sexual Difference in Middle English Literature* (Philadelphia, 1994), p. 4.
[8] Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon Samuel Roudiez (New York, 1989), p. 22; hereafter abbreviated *BS*.

This chapter begins with a reading of the princess's interactions with familiarity and strangeness at the start of the romance; with the ways that the trauma of her assault duplicates and actualizes the forms of her life in the Breton court. I then consider the form of the hero Degaré's quest, which uncannily echoes the violent restriction of his mother's experience. In the final section, I read the *Degaré* poet's articulation of chance and narrative form in Degaré and his mother's abortive marriage alongside the shape of the poem's end, and consider how we might understand an interaction between form and suspended affect as a frame for both the social and the literary world of the romance.

Incest and its Ends

Sir Degaré is, as I have noted, a poem structured by the possibility, if not the actuality, of incest. One of the so-called "Breton lais" first recorded in the Auchinleck manuscript,[9] *Degaré* is a hybrid narrative that probably dates from the early fourteenth century; it combines motifs from a variety of sources to come up with a whole so melodramatic as to sometimes be imagined as a kind of "parodic" text.[10] What ties the text together is the pervasive fear of erotic relations amongst too-close kin. The poem opens in the court of Brittany, where the queen has died, leaving her daughter in uncomfortable domestic proximity to her father, the king. In the course of an annual procession in memory of her mother, the princess slips away into the woods, ostensibly to address her bodily "nedes" [needs] and becomes pleasurably lost.[11] Her forest idyll

[9] See Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, "Introduction to Sir Degaré," *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1995).
[10] Claire Vial, "The Middle English Breton Lays and the Mists of Origin," in *Palimpsests and the Literary Imagination of Medieval England: Collected Essays*, ed. Leo Carruthers et al. (New York, 2011), p. 176.
[11] Anonymous, "Sir Degaré," in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1995), l. 54; hereafter cited in text by line number.

is interrupted by a "fairi knyghte" [fairy knight] (l. 100) whose seeming courtesy is belied by the violence of his actions. He rapes the princess and leaves her pregnant with a son; she returns to her father's court but fears, she tells her maid, that if the pregnancy is known the court will suspect the child to be her father's. When he is born, the maid takes him away and gives him to a hermit to be raised in ignorance of his origins. When Degaré comes of age, he goes out to seek his family and inadvertently, in the course of a series of knightly adventures, wins his mother's hand in a tournament. Their union is narrowly averted by his sudden recollection that he has in his possession a glove that can identify a woman as his mother. He goes on his way and rescues a more suitable maiden from her own rapist; shortly thereafter, he finally finds his father and they fight (marking his father as an analogue of the other rapist Degaré has just bested). The revelation of his father's identity by way of Degaré's inherited and distinctively chipped sword initiates a seemingly "happy" ending where Degaré settles down with his rescued maiden and his mother with her rapist.

The events of the poem and their insistently repetitive contours—parent-child incest, maidens raped or rescued, identificatory notches and their corresponding insertions—delineate an intensively restricted world. This is a narrative with a strictly delimited cast, whose outliers function primarily as mirrors of more essential players: Degaré's wife as a more permissible version of his mother, the wife's rapist as a killable version of the father. Critics such as Cheryl Colopy have understood the story as a relatively simple iteration of a familiar trope; "*Sir Degaré* is concerned," Colopy writes, "with the same problem that preoccupied the father of psychoanalysis. . . . it is the story of an Oedipus with a happy ending who marries his mother, fights with his father and wins the princess in the end." Such an understanding is motivated by the mirroring or condensation of characters, by the way that the maiden reproduces the mother

and the rapist the father, but it neglects—in its evocation of the poem's "irrepressible good spirits"—the suffocating narrative foreclosure established by such a limitation of persons and relationships.[12] The only wife available to Degaré is a nominally distinct version of his mother; the only husband available to his mother is her rapist. The narrative is defined from start to finish by the progressive curtailment of any sense of narrative possibility or openness.

The discomfort of this stringently restricted cast of characters and its metonymic relation to the foreclosure of narrative openness is firmly established by the poem's opening events. Seeking possibility in the form of escape from an incestuous domestic sphere, the princess quickly discovers that exogamy merely reduplicates in more violent form the restrictions and foreclosures of her existing life. She leaves the structured, socially constituted path of the annual procession—a path literally memorializing a normative parental relationship—to follow her own "nedes," her bodily demands or desires, into the more capacious narrative space of the forest. The forest, we know from conceptions like Northrop Frye's "green world," is traditionally figured as a space of openness, of play, of possibility, as in the transmutations of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* or other comedies. "The action of the comedy begins in a world represented as a normal world," Frye writes, "moves into the green world, goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world."[13] Although romance is of course not identical with comedy, the Shakespearean comedies to which Frye refers have much in common with medieval romance, in particular their negotiation of "real" concerns by way of a magical world, one which "has analogies, not only to

[12] Colopy, "Sir Degaré: A Fairy Tale Oedipus," p. 32.
[13] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Robert Denham (Toronto, 2006), p. 170; hereafter abbreviated *AC*.

the fertile world of ritual, but to the dream world that we create out of our own desires" (*AC*, p. 171).

Frye refers here to the "dream world" of the Freudian unconscious. "There can be no doubt," Freud writes in *The Interpretation of Dreams,* "that the connections between our typical dreams and fairy tales . . . are neither few nor accidental." "The wishes which are represented in dreams as fulfilled . . . may also be wishes of the past which have been abandoned, overlaid and repressed, and to which we have to attribute some sort of continued existence only because of their re-emergence in a dream."[14] Both fairy tale and dream offer the capacity to live out unacknowledged conflict, to work through demands that the conscious mind rejects. The green world, the comedic space, the space of romance, is a manifestation—on Frye's account—of this space of conflict made figurative. In the world or worlds of *Sir Degaré,* the space of the forest offers a particularly pronounced version of this space of contemplation or narrative play, a space wherein the rigid problematics of the court give way to a stage for possible solutions. The distinction between the structured, formulaic shape of the court procession and the digressive, unpredictable world of the forest—adjacent to, but seemingly distinct from, the kingdom of Brittany—anticipates the forms of closure that characterize familial space in the poem in contrast to the broader possibilities of errancy and adventure in romance generically.

The court of Brittany is marked by its foreclosure of exogamy or productive genealogical futurity. The king, possessed of a single heir, insists that a worthy suitor for his daughter's hand must be able to best him in single combat: "the Kyng answered ever / That no man sschal here halden ever / But yif he mai in turneying / Him out of his sadel bring, / And maken him lesen

[14] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1965), pp. 279, 282.

hise stiropes bayne" [the king answered always that no man should ever hold her unless he could bring him out of his saddle in a tournament, and make him lose both his stirrups] (ll. 31–35). The "sadel" here—the seat from which the King guides and controls his kingdom—is metonymic with his royalty. By "unseating" him, a son-in-law will oust him from his position both literally and figuratively, replacing the king in a variety of constitutive niches—kingship, saddle, stirrups, the position of the man in the Breton princess's life. In and of itself, this rigidity seems unexceptional and even logical. An aspirant to his daughter's hand will need to take his place as ruler of Brittany; as such, the king resembles other romance kings in his demands of potential sons-in-law.

However, juxtaposed with the king's singular affection for his daughter, such a challenge looks less wholesome: "This Kyng he hadde non hair," the poet notes in his introduction of the princess, "But a maidenchild, fre and fair. . . . This maiden he loved als his lif, / Of hire was ded the Quene his wif" (ll. 19–20, 23–24). The phrase "als his lif," which might be employed—as in *Havelok the Dane*, whose Birkabeyn loves his children "so his lif"—to express the overwhelming love of a child, here evokes a passion more like the wedded love of *Sir Amadace*—"his life was hur full dere"—as a consequence of its juxtaposition of "maiden" and "the Quene his wif." Moreover, the phrase sits uneasily with the following line. Though the poet neatly avoids saying the king loves his daughter "als his *wif*", the rhyme associating "wif" and "lif" haunts the line with an implied chiasmus. And the agrammatical line break that refuses a conjunction between "lif" and "of" teases a causal relation between the two clauses. What would it mean that the king loves his daughter *because* his wife the queen died "of hire"? There seems to be no unproblematic reading of this inference. The king might love his daughter because she reminds him of his wife; he might love her because she caused his wife's death. Even glossing

over the grammatical trouble of these lines, the daughter and wife look uneasily coterminous; "in travailing here lif she les" [in childbirth she lost her life] (l. 25) the poet tells us, shortly after his declaration that this king loves the princess "als his lif." The king, and by extension the kingdom, have a finite amount of love and space for a woman, and the princess has neatly replaced her mother in that position.

The presentation of the princess's far-flung marriage prospects in this section illustrates the marked distinction between the closed world of the court and the open-ended erotic possibility of the world at large. "Kynges sones to him speke, / Emperours and Dukes eke, / To haven his doughter in mariage, / For love of here heritage" [Kings' sons spoke to him, emperors' and dukes' too, to have his daughter in marriage for love of her heritage] (ll. 28–30). The form of marriage proposals here explicitly articulates the function of marriage as a route for national and international cooperation and community. "Kinship systems," Gayle Rubin notes, "do not merely exchange women. They exchange sexual access, genealogical statuses, lineage names and ancestors, rights and *people* . . . in concrete systems of social relationships."[15] In the above-quoted lines, the poet carefully articulates a set of suitors who delineate a diverse range of possible social relations: kings, or rulers in social systems that resemble Brittany's, with whom the Breton king might form alliances; emperors, rulers implied to belong to more exotic realms, in positions of similar power but qualitatively distinct regions; and dukes, or vassals, whose recruitment by marriage might solidify the king's intranational power via connection to a secondary, and thus broader, noble population. All of these men apply for the princess's hand "for love of here heritage"—not for appreciation of her intrinsic qualities, though the poet praises

[15] Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York, 1975), p. 177.

those, but for the familial capital that the marriage would bring them; as Rubin has it, "genealogical statuses, lineage names and ancestors, rights." Marriage is a mechanism for expansive and enriching connection across regions, nations, perspectives, and the king of Brittany is rejecting all of those prospects on behalf of both his daughter and his kingdom in favor of closure and sameness. Rather than seeking out the wide-ranging possibility of connection with other people and indeed peoples, he resorts to incestuous insularity, closeted in his court and his castle with a single family member who looks nightmarishly like both daughter and wife. Importantly for the romance, moreover, exogamy is analogous to narrative expansion. It is in the setting-out-into-the-world or in the engagement with far-flung interlocutors that the imaginative world of the romance, as well as the fictional territory of its kingdoms, is expanded, and the romance draws its narrative motivation from this need. If, in other words, there were no problem with incest—if the king could simply make his daughter his wife—there would be no story, or at any rate no romance, merely a violently restrictive domestic event. The poem draws its force from the impossibility of that enclosure: only in the recognition of and drive towards openness or expansion is the narrative created.

Affect and Open World

The scene of the princess's departure from the memorial procession exemplifies the clash between the incestuous rigidity of this domestic space and the expansive possibilities of a more adventurous romance space. When she enters the forest, she enters a space of indeterminacy, an undefined social world motivated by impulse and fantasy rather than by the familiar or the familial. This contrast is motivated by generic features of romance as well as by the existing structures of the poem. The unpredictability of the forest space offers a space of possibility both

narratively and erotically: one that might answer both the fear of incest and the generic expectation of adventure. Romance's attachment to the figure of *aventure*—a conventional depiction of change that leans heavily on its attachment to narrative predictability even as it explicitly privileges randomness or the incidental encounter—indicates its generic focus on the intersection of narrative form and openness. In *Degaré*, the incest trope provides rigid formal constraints both intra- and metatextually—e.g., incest presents a suffocatingly restrictive world in contrast to the spaces of possibility signified both by the episodic narrative and by material scenes of wandering or loss such as the forest.

The princess leaves the procession in response to her body's needs, which the poet depicts as both urgent and aimless. Riding with her father, she takes several servants "And seide that hii moste alighte / To don here nedes and hire righte" [and said they must dismount to attend to her needs and her right] (ll. 53–54). Laskaya and Salisbury note of these lines "The poet considers 'nature's call' to be a natural right whereby the woman can stop the entourage according to her will and privilege" (note 54), but I'd point out that the procession does not, in fact, stop to await her will; the wanderers "longe while ther abiden, / Til al the folk was forht iriden" [abode there a long while, till all the folk (of the procession) had ridden forth] (ll. 57–58). "Here nedes and hire righte" is, in fact, ambiguous in a way that is irreducible to euphemism. Though it seems to refer to the princess's need to answer what Laskaya and Salisbury describe as "nature's call"—to urinate or defecate, presumably—it turns out that the princess and her attendants wish to absent themselves from the procession, to answer "nature's call" in a much larger sense.

The poet obfuscates intent here so as to eliminate teleological purpose for both the princess and the poem itself. He does not offer an explanation for the "longe while [that they]

ther abiden," which suggests that the group deliberately *waits* until the procession has gone by. In the subsequent lines, however, he claims that they tried to follow but found themselves unable, having lost the way: "Thai wolden up and after wolde, / And couthen nowt here way holde" [they wished to arise and follow after, and they could not find the right path] (ll. 59–60). This structure is duplicated shortly afterward, when the princess leaves her sleeping retainers to go "aboute and [gather] floures, / And [listen to] song of wilde foules" [about and gather flowers, and listen to the song of wild birds]; "so fer in the launde she goht, iwis, / That she ne wot nevere whare se is. / To hire maidenes she wolde anon. / Ac hi ne wiste never wat wei to gon" [she goes so far into the wilderness, indeed, that she knows not where she is; she wishes to return now to her maidens, but she does not know which way to go] (ll. 77–80). Does the wanderer wish to become lost, or to return to the structured path and comprehensible goal? Both these moments present a compulsive response to stimuli—the princess's "nedes," and the lure of the "floures" and "wilde foules"—followed by regret and abdication of responsibility. The wanderers are so preoccupied by the world of sensation that they forget the forms and demands of the social world; or, those demands are subsumed to larger-scale narrative demands.

The depiction of the experience of the forest as a space of rich sensual experience apparently uninfluenced by narrative contingency or urgency—or one whose urgency is dictated by desire and the escape from restrictive enclosure, by motivation in excess of those delimited by the structural demands of the court—marks it as a space of affective transition. Affect, critics like Brian Massumi attest, is a space of interstitial potentiality: it is the experience of atmosphere perceived but not yet articulated or brought into expression by the actors in a scene.[16] In this way,

[16] See, for example, Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, N.C., 2002): "Approaches to the image in its relation to language are incomplete if they operate only on the semantic or semiotic level, however that level is defined. . . . What they

affect privileges the space of fraught emptiness that precedes signification and exceeds structured narration.

I contend that romance particularly inhabits affective space in its emphasis on wandering or aimlessness. John Finlayson notes that the central motif of romance as such is the knight's "riding out to seek adventure"; "adventure . . . is the real core of romance, whether it be popular or courtly."[17] Erich Auerbach calls adventure "the real meaning of the knight's ideal existence." Romance is deeply reliant on the image of the knight who adopts a path with no end in sight: facing a problem or difficulty, he sets out into the world in the (usually justified) expectation that the world will offer a solution. This is the form of "errancy," in the sense of the knight errant. The knight's pathless path marks romance's engagement with the troubled interaction of form and formlessness. Auerbach notes that "when we moderns speak of adventure, we mean something unstable, peripheral, disordered, or, as Simmel once put it, a something that stands outside the real meaning of existence," whereas for the knight of romance that adventure is a narrative focus.[18] The peripheral, the shapeless, the affective, becomes essential. The very matter of the romance's standard form looks like a divergence from the known, the predictable, from what Todorov calls "this same familiar world."[19]

The generalized desire of romance, of the mode of errancy, is the desire to seek out strangeness as a solution to familiar problems. The princess's departure from the familiar—or

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lose, precisely, is the expression *event*—in favor of structure. . . . The expression-event is the system of the inexplicable: imergence, into and against regeneration (the reproduction of a structure)" (pp. 26–27).

[17] John Finlayson, "Definitions of Middle English Romance" [Part I], *The Chaucer Review* 15 (Summer 1980): 57.

[18] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton, N.J., 2003), p. 135; hereafter abbreviated *M*.

[19] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975), p. 25.

familial—procession—from the restrictive insularity of her domestic world—marks her own desire for the solvency of strangeness. From the start of the poem, "distant and unexplored regions," as Auerbach has it, represent a proposed solution to the problems of restriction and rigidity at home; exogamy is the logical obverse of endogamy taken to the problematic point of incest. Further, the scene of the princess's venture into the forest introduces a ghostly third option, neither incest nor exogamy but a radical narrative openness: a space of possibility or expansion that deliberately extenuates narrative nondeterminacy, affective experience unbounded by the determinate strictures of plot or family. "Nedes" *become* "right"; where we might expect right to align with the rigid, the social, the rectifying, in the moment of the princess's departure, bodily demands and affective experience define social privilege or power and the two become one, and moreover, one that illustrates a potential way out of the variously overdetermined structuration of the tale.

The princess's lost-ness in this moment prefigures her son's constitutive identification as "one who knows not what he is, or who is nearly lost" (ll. 256–57). In psychoanalytic terms, such paradoxically aimless questing might find an analogy in the subject's pursuit of *das Ding*, the fantasized, prelinguistic object which is lost in the subject's assimilation to a world of signification. The subject here is the one that Julia Kristeva called the depressed or melancholic subject: one whom she describes as acutely aware of the loss of the Thing. He "has the impression of having been deprived of an unnameable, supreme good, of something unrepresentable, that . . . no word could signify" (*BS*, p. 13). Depression is a cognizance of loss, the state of being all too aware of the insufficiency of signification, and consequently spending one's life in the search; "the depressed person wanders in pursuit of continuously disappointing adventures and loves" (*BS*, p. 13). For Kristeva, the melancholic is both lost and has lost—his

fantasized loss precipitates his own lost-ness. The "originary loss" that Kristeva describes as fundamental to the depressive identity is, ultimately, the Oedipal loss; it is the disjunction of the subject from the mother's body that triggers the dynamic of seeking. This is almost laughably true for Degaré; the object of his quest is the family he has lost, the mother who gave him up and who will ultimately stand, as for his grandfather before him, in both a spousal and a parental relation to his own body. For the moment, however, I merely want to gesture to the ways in which lost-ness, as experienced here by the princess of Brittany in the forest and as constitutive of romance as a set of generic expectations, might posit an openness that can both repudiate and desire the uncomfortable closeness of incestuous family structures. Familiar and strange in *Degaré* are symptomatic of the larger way that the narrative form of romance tantalizes with openness, only to find that openness superseded by the return of obsessive plot structures. The princess of Brittany finds her desire for strangeness gratified, but the event itself duplicates in horrific form the threats that haunted her domestic world, and indeed thrusts her back into that world with its limitations freshly relimned.

The Fairy Father

For the princess, the space of openness represented by the forest is embedded with both excitement and fear. The predictable closure of court and of narrative world at the start of the poem is restrictive, but such restriction can be reassuring. In her analysis of the conventional forms of Middle English romance, Susan Wittig notes that comfort is a fundamental function of genre; narrative conventions manifest "an implicit faith in the already established workings of the world on the social, the political, and the natural levels, an unquestioning assumption of regularity and stability and unfailing order that provides a structure of understanding and order in

life but at the same time reduces the opportunities for innovation and change."[20] Genre assures a reader that he or she already knows what will happen; indeed, it assures us that the world, like the tale, is knowable. In romances like *Degaré,* however, generic form functions self-consciously, playing on and calling into question expectations of generic form as an instantiation of comfort and predictability. As Helen Cooper notes in her survey of romance tropes, "conventions of the romance . . . can be used straight, for emphasis, poignantly, and in all kinds of variations, including absence." While familiarity can be turned to soothing ends, such use more often anticipates an alteration or slant; Cooper describes the way many romances "mix modes, operate enough conventions straight to lull their audiences into a sense of familiarity, then shock them . . . by withholding or perverting what is expected."[21] In *Degaré,* the "perversion" of formal predictability in the fairy knight's rape works to inflect strangeness back into prior familiar forms, to force the audience to recognize the sexual violence that underlies existing generic shapes.

The familiar (the knight's courtly form and language) and the startling or disturbing (the princess's rape) are not merely juxtaposed. Rather, the revelation of the violence that inheres in the familiar operates retroactively to emphasize the preexisting dangers of antecedent familiar forms. The fairy knight who appears in the forest looks at first like a perfect prospect for courtly exogamy; but his menacing presence and the princess's rape demonstrate the way that generic comfort can introduce violent limitation, and so force a reassessment the dangers of the domestic space the princess left. So chivalric fulfillment is revealed, ultimately, by the knight's

[20] Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English Romances* (Austin, Tex., 2014), p. 54.
[21] Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 20, 21.

intervention, to be a further dimension of the dangerously insular structures of violence the princess already knows, rather than a form that points toward the radical openness of the romantic forest. The abrupt enclosure of that open space is not presented as an alteration of courtly form, but rather as the logical result of tendencies that already embed the rhetorical position of the romance knight. And so this revelation of the knight's threat curtails both the possibilities of world-expanding exogamy and narrative openness that the forest offered, demonstrating in the form of the renewed threat of sexual violence the narrative defeat that might attend generic predictability. This connection between sexual violence and the familiar forms of courtly rhetoric, in other words, models the way that *Degaré* imagines destructive domesticity as a figure for the restrictive predictability of generic narrative.

When the princess loses herself a second time—first with her retainers and second, following the flowers she gathers and the sound of birds, entirely alone—she expresses anxiety not over her liminal isolation specifically but rather in response to the possible dangers of unknown narrative outcomes. At first, the value of the forest's space of affective nondeterminacy looks to reside in that space's openness to more dispersive and thus productive social worlds: to the exogamy the poet gestures towards in the earlier evocation of the kings and dukes who have sought her hand. But this generically acceptable potential of the space is rapidly dissolved into a more ambiguous cry: she seems nonspecifically overwhelmed by the unpredictability of her situation. " 'Allas!'" she says, " 'that I was boren! / Nou ich wot ich am forloren! / Wilde bestes me willeth togrinde / Or ani man me sschulle finde!'" [Alas that I was born! Now I know I am forlorn (lost)! Wild beasts might eat me before (with a pun or possible reading, importantly, as *or*) any man/person shall find me!] (ll. 85–88). The princess's anxiety and its shifty, attendant desire, here, delineates her relation to the narrative, her status as a potential narrator. She is adrift

in nondeterminate linguistic space, anticipating its possible ends with both trepidation and excitement. *Now I know I am lost,* she says, aligning her own certainty, her narrative voice, with her consciousness of the open space of possibility that surrounds her. The danger of such openness is that one might be swallowed up by it, the thread of narrative itself (which, for a character in a narrative, is one's very constitution) lost in the trackless lyric wilderness: "Wilde bestes me willeth togrinde." At the same time, though, utter dissolution is appealing; even as she fears her absorption into the space of intensity that surrounds her, she bewails it by wishing for that very dissolution: " 'Allas . . . that I was boren.'" A conventional formulation here takes on pointed intent in its relation to the attractions and terrors of formlessness: the princess is drawn into and evokes the thrill of this moment of narrative nonspecificity, of the moment at which anything might happen, even as she performs apprehension about the possible dangers of the multifarious narrative scene. Brian Massumi describes scenes like this, wherein linear narrative is disrupted by apparently excessive affective atmosphere, in terms of intensity: "not exactly passivity," he explains, "because it is filled with motion, vibratory motion, resonation. And it is not yet activity, because the motion is not of the kind that can be directed . . . toward practical ends in a world of constituted objects and aims."[22] The princess is suspended amid the vibrating possibilities of all possible narrative ends held in tension, frozen as potential, and her affect overflows, not clearly identifiable as positive or negative emotion but merely pervasive and persistent excitation coterminous with the space of potentiality.

This vibratory inbetweenness is interrupted, as it perhaps always is, by the entrance of plot and generic structure: the princess's solitude is invaded by a courtly prospect, a reassertion of the simultaneously patriarchal and generic shape of the narrative, a beautiful knight.

[22] Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, p. 26.

Toward hire comen a knight,	Toward her came a knight
Gentil, yong, and jolif man . . .	A gentle, young, and handsome man . . .
His visage was feir, his bodi ech weies;	His face was fair, his body too, in every way;
Of countenance right curteis;	Of countenance courteous;
Wel farende legges, fot, and honde:	Well-formed in the legs, feet, and hands;
There nas non in al the Kynges londe	There was in all the King's land
More apert man than was he. [Ll. 90–97]	No man more attractive than he.

The knight's attractiveness is articulated in terms that emphasize form's alliance with social order. He is remarkable for his shapeliness—"wel farende" in all his parts—and for his integration into a network of social comprehensibility—"curteis," and "gentil." He is a generic ideal: perfectly shaped "in every way" for the story into which he fits. The perfect shape of the knight is telling. If any danger arises from him, it will not be a danger that is distinct from the shapes of the court. He is *of a piece* with the narrative structure he inhabits: any danger he presents is a danger invited by that generic shape. He is metonymic with the courtly world.

The knight's self-identification as "fairy," however, introduces a slippage into his ideality. Some early manuscript editions of the poem render this adjective as "fair" rather than "fairi," a textual ambiguity that points to an underlying ambiguity in the figure. Is the knight a perfect, "fair" figure for chivalric virtue, or is he just alien enough for the narrative to authorize his actions as a product of his inhumanity? Both in his speech and in his actions, the knight represents himself as violent, particularly identified by his arms: "'Iich am comen here a fairi knyghte,'" he tells her, "'Mi kynde is armes for to were, / On horse to ride with scheld and spere'" [I am come here a fairy knight…It is my nature to wear arms, to ride on horse with shield and spear] (ll. 100–102). Knights do, of course, bear arms. But this particular knight's identification with martial prowess, not just declamatory but constitutive—it is his *nature* to wear arms, to ride to war—sits uneasily with his identification as a courtly prospect for the princess's attachment, reminding us that the romance use of knighthood as a prospect for

productive heteromarital union is concurrent with the expectation of knighthood as a martial and professional standard. This chime of cognitive dissonance is emphasized by his identification as "fairi." The categorization does not necessarily, in this instance, mark him as inhuman; he looks human, he speaks like a human knight. Rather, it emphasizes the inhumanity of a narrative element that fits generic expectation *too* neatly.

He menaces by enforcing the expectation that his arrival represents the narrative doing what it should—he is the predictable outcome of generic stricture and, it turns out, a reinstantiation of the patriarchal control that the princess fled. The knight's speech bears out this threat by silencing the princess's reactions and desires, by negating her affect in favor of a male-gendered narrative of intent. When he tells her that she should not be "afered" [afraid] (in l. 99 and again in 103), he provokes fear rather than quieting it: why *should* a princess who has recently worried that no "man me sschulle finde" be afraid of the "wihghte" [man] (l. 99) she does meet? As further explanation, he demurs, "'I ne have nowt but mi swerd ibrout'" [I have brought nothing but my sword] (l. 104)—again, forcing the question of what other disturbing tool he *might* have employed. Surely a sword is threatening enough, from a knight whose narrative role is as courtly suitor, not attacker. In the guise of reassurance, the knight's speech continually posits a scene of hypothetical dread, one where she should be afraid of men she meets, one wherein he has some weapon other than his sword, and by implying such a scene he brings it into being.

It turns out, of course, that the dangers the knight represents are the very dangers that we already know embed a courtly scene, the dangers of coercive or violent sex that elides feminine voice and narrative possibility. He acts out that violence that was a passive structure in the (human) Breton court. The knight's articulation of his intent imbricates violence with the

conventional terms of courtly romance, asserting a new narrative to which the princess has no choice but to accede: "'Iich have iloved the many a yer, / And now we beth us selve her, / Thou best mi lemman ar thou go, / Wether the liketh wel or wo'" [I have loved you many a year, and now that we are alone here, you will be my lover before you go] (ll. 105–08). The direct violation, or rather the elimination, of the princess's will—her desire is not just obstructed here but made irrelevant—is articulated as a normal component of courtly narrative: because the fairy claims to have loved her from afar for some time and they are now alone together, erotic interaction is not just expected but inevitable. She *will be* his lover. Just as the princess slipped into the role of queen in the court by the mere expedient that she was the sole woman left in the king's family, the knight's assumption that his having "loved [her] mani a yer" indicates her acquiescence to a sexual alliance disregards entirely the princess's agency or decisionmaking capacity: "wether the liketh wel or wo."

The use of familiarity to justify intimacy here is exactly calculated to align with the dangers of the world the princess has escaped. A figure that looks like he should be an exemplar of narrative openness then becomes, instead, a reinstantiation of the strictures and abuses of the world the princess has escaped. The two actants' wills and thus the possibilities of their respective narratives are directly juxtaposed: she "wep and criede and wolde fle" [wept and cried and wished to flee] (l. 110) while he "dide his wille, what he wolde" [did his will, what he wanted] (l. 112). While the knight's desire is active—he *does* it; his will is identical with the poem's events—the princess's is vocal but nonverbal, affective, and ultimately reduced to nothing: "nothing ne coude do she" [she could do nothing] (l. 109) except maintain her affective resistance to the forward course of the narrative. The knight's "wille, what he wolde" (l. 112) becomes a force of narrative shape: his will is identical with the progress of events, and it is

contrasted only with the affective shape of the princess's resistance, which remains preverbal. She does not argue with him—indeed, she does not speak in the entire course of her assault. This negation of her will is all the more poignant in the context of the poem's recent excavation of the princess's slow reckoning with her own private affective world, her attention to her bodily "nedes" that gave way to the hazy joys of "foules" and "floures," now firmly excised in favor of the reassertion of a patriarchal narrative that stringently fulfills generic expectation.

The knight's command of the narrative is consolidated after the rape, when he calmly informs her of the ways her body will be subordinated to the further (patriarchal) course of the narrative. "'Lemman,' he seide"—still insistent that her position is that of "lover," not victim—"'gent and fre, / Mid schilde I wot that thou schalt be; / Siker ich wot hit worht a knave'" [Lover, gentle and noble, I know that you will be with child; I am certain that it will be a boy] (ll. 115-117). This seeming prophecy is the only indication of any specifically "fairi" ability of the knight; his "magical" power takes the form of an alignment of his knowledge with that of the poem's narrator. It is the power of knowing what will happen in the story and of relegating the princess to the role of the hero's mother, rather than of hero. His inhumanity is his narrative power; the thing that separates him from the other men in the text (the king, or Degaré himself) is not his predilection for violence, sexual or otherwise, but his *explicit* alignment with the narrative. When he describes the future, he is anticipating the rest of the poem: he is identical with the narrative voice at this instant, not acting within the text but describing its events.

Crucially, the moment of the fairy knight's alliance with male narrative power comes at the moment when he designates himself a father figure—the moment of the hero's conception. His identity as father is simultaneous with his association with narrative designation or linguistic dominance. Tying the moment of conception to the moment of dominance in the realm of

signification suggests the way that *Degaré* designates itself as an Oedipal narrative, but it also offers up the princess's nonverbal experience as an instance of female resistance to a narrative dominated by patriarchal networks.

Loss and the Maternal Affective

From this scene, then, it is evident that the character of Degaré comes into being at the moment when narrative authority is eliminated for his mother. He is constitutively attached to the moment at which patriarchal narrative subsumes her voice and determinate generic shape overwhelms the brief window of indeterminate possibility she found in the forest. This evocation of simultaneous loss and determination points us to a subtler psychoanalytic reading of the poem, grounded in Julia Kristeva's work on language and loss. For Kristeva, the moment of the subject's integration into the linguistic field is a moment of simultaneous constitution and alienation: the subject recognizes itself in its detachment from the undifferentiated field of matter or meaning. The moment of the princess's assault is something like such a moment because it represents a moment when linguistic articulation is allied to the literal formation—or here, conception—of the hero. The text imagines the bodily formation of its hero as simultaneous with the assertion of his narrative dominance: the moment of the rape represents a transition from the ungoverned, undifferentiated narrative space of the princess's experience in the forest to the named, articulable world of the romance as it continues from this point.

However, the name of the hero—and thence the text—illuminates a lingering nostalgia for the moment of undifferentiation, of textual nonspecificity. *Degaré,* the poet explains when the hermit gives the parentless hero his name, "nowt elles ne is / But thing that not never what hit is, / Other thing that is neggh forlorn also" [nothing other than a thing that never knows what it

is, or a thing that is nearly lost] (ll. 255–57). This explanation is deeply weird in both its syntactic paradoxes and its fundamental ambivalence. The hermit begins with the assertion that the term—or the thing named by the term—"Degaré" is *only* a certain thing—is, emphatically, *not* anything *other* than a single thing, but he then continues the clause with an "or": an "other thing" that it might be instead. Further, as I've indicated obliquely, "Degaré" here seems to refer to both the *term* "Degaré" and to the "thing" that is Degaré—the human body so named in this instant. This seeming explanation incorporates, then, deep ambivalence about distinctions between things, and between humans and things, and indeed, distinctions between things and the words that seem to name them. It calls into question the *problem* of naming, both describing and performatively enacting language's ultimate incapacities or uncertainties.

Moreover, this moment of linguistic frustration is one whose explicit contextual meaning describes a genealogical problem, associating the linguistic and the familial. Degaré's lack of knowledge of "what he is," his status as "neggh forlorn" refers, ostensibly, to his relation to his parents. He does not know his legacy or social standing. His name replaces knowledge with its lack; rather than a name that ties him to a social context, he is given one that ties him to his constitutive detachment. The critical tendency to read *Degaré* as parodic or metafictional makes sense when we consider the way that Degaré's name casts him as a proto-hero. His identity is tied to a field of absence, a field that metonymizes the larger tendency of romance to imagine narrative as something like Vladimir Propp's lack-liquidated structure, which imagines a quest as motivated by its missing object. Degaré is not simply, as heroes generally are, "that character who either directly suffers from the action of the villain . . . (the one who senses some kind of lack), or who agrees to liquidate the misfortune or lack of another person"; rather, he *is* the lack

that the text narrates.[23] His name identifies him not just as one who is subject to loss or seeks to redeem it but rather as a constitutive version of that loss; and this understanding is supported by his conception as the result of a violent dislocation. Degaré is the material product of "suffering"—his very existence memorializes the narrative rift engendered by the fairy knight's imposition of a destructive and dictatorial narrative force upon Degaré's mother. The desire of the text, then, is indeed an Oedipal desire, but not one defined solely by literal mapping of the narrative onto the events of an Oedipus narrative that largely ignores Jocasta's will and wishes. The poem does evince a desire for a reunion with the undifferentiated, the prelinguistic, the nondeterminate affective sphere of possibility, but this sphere cannot be narrowly read as a heterosexual desire for the maternal, since the mother herself is subject to the same desire and the primary rift or loss in the story is not Degaré's but her own. The positioning of the maternal as a character with her own narrative space makes very clear the universality of the fantasy of prestructural potentiality. I argue, then, that Degaré's Oedipal desire is only one version of a more encompassing narrative desire, the desire of narrative to evade its own determinacy.

Narrative figures the fundamental frustration of signification: as soon as a story takes shape, it alienates that which is prelinguistic, undifferentiated, nonspecific. The romance's desire, then, is to return to the space of, e.g., the forest, the nonnarrativized, the affective. Kristeva notes of the depressive that they are "prisoners of affect. The affect is their thing" (*BS*, p. 14) and her articulation of affect and its potential analytic force seems in many ways to anticipate later developments in affect theory: "No conceptual framework in the relevant sciences (particularly linguistics) has proven adequate to account for this apparently very

[23] Vladimir Propp et al., *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin, Tex., 1968), p. 50.

rudimentary representation, presign and prelanguage" (*BS*, p. 21). As I see it, Kristeva's anxiety about the figuration of prelinguistic or nonlinguistic bodily effects—"mood"—is the same impulse that directs theorists like Massumi and Catherine Malabou to engage neuroscience and other fields that theorize affect in nonliterary or nonpsychological terms. Language about language has trouble conceptualizing nonverbal fields of communication or event.

Kristeva posits, however, that the act of sublimation—creation as reconciliation of exactly this kind of overwhelming affect—ties literary production fundamentally to the moment of affective struggle. "Let us say," she writes, "that representations germane to affects, notably sadness, are *fluctuating* energy cathexes: insufficiently stabilized to coalesce as verbal or other signs" (*BS*, pp. 21–22). For Kristeva, then, the threshold between affect and signification—the difference, perhaps, between affect and emotion, insofar as affect is bodily and emotion social—represents the crucial index of sublimation. "Literary creation is that adventure of the body and signs that bears witness to the affect—to sadness as imprint of separation and beginning of the symbol's sway; to joy as imprint of the triumph that settles me in the universe of artifice and symbol" (*BS*, p. 22). "Sadness" and "joy" are literary iterations of affective states, ways of communicating and transmitting affective forms via social record; "the communicable imprints of an affective reality" (*BS*, p. 22). The goal of literary creation, then, is the translation of a formless affective moment into a form that can be comprehended, transmitted, duplicated. For the romance, this moment is the imposition of narrative. *Degaré* theorizes this moment as one of loss: as a moment when the vibrancy of affective scene is reduced to the sequential formulae of story.

Chance, Wonder, and Aventoure

The problem of the maternal and its signifying properties comes to its narrative climax at the moment of Degaré's marriage to his mother. This marriage joins the achievement of Degaré's explicit object—finding his family—to the fulfillment of the narrative's central fear—the collapse of parent and spouse. As such, the moment of the marriage's potential consummation figures the most restrictive possible form of narrative closure manifest in an event that the poet casts as deeply unlikely—e.g., the ultimate operation of "chance" in the narrative. These conflicting readings of this instant, the one focused on its narrative inevitability and the other on the deep chaos of its occurrence, come together in the poet's iteration of the wonder of *aventoure*, which casts probability in narrative terms.

The syntactic confusion of this instance of narrative shock demonstrates the reflexively coincidental mechanisms of romance "fate." "Lo, what aventoure fil hem thar!" (l. 626), the poet marvels. He seems, on first glance, to be reflecting on the *unlikeliness* of the event that has occurred (Degaré's happening to win his mother's hand in marriage). But a closer look at these wondering lines casts them differently: "Lo, what chaunse and wonder strong" [Lo, what chance and wonder strong], the narrative reflects,

Bitideth mani a man with wrong	Conveys misfortune to many a man
That cometh into an uncouthe thede	That comes into an unknown land
And spouseth wif for ani mede	And marries a wife for any reward
And knowes nothing of hire kin,	And knows nothing of her kin,
Ne sche of his, neither more ne min,	Nor she of his, neither more nor less,
And beth iwedded togider to libbe	And they are wedded to lie together
Par aventoure, and beth neghth sibbe.	By [aventoure,] and they are closely related.
[Ll. 613–20]	

First, these lines are difficult to parse at all, because the reiterative predicates, unattached clauses, and pileup of conjunctions render them near-impossible to arrange into an effective syntactic order. But they might be paraphrased, "What a wonder conveys wrong to *many* men,

who come into an unfamiliar land and marry an unknown, *and they are closely related."* The poet's intimation seems to be that this is a frequent occurrence; that adventurous men are beset on all sides with potential occasions of incest. This is, in fact—according to the poet—a frequent function of adventure, particularly; men and women are wedded, with the intent of consummation, "par aventoure," and are close kin. It's not clear whether "par aventoure" should be attached to the fact of marriage which precedes it or to the kinship which follows, but for the purposes of this moment of reflection the two are identical: the mechanisms of "aventoure" enact both the marriage and its incestuous event.

These lines capture the insidious doubleness of *aventoure* in a romance context. It indicates both the conventionally tragedic forms of fate—the inevitability of Degaré's incestuous marriage—and its seemingly random manifestations. *Aventoure* is always pattern-bound, narratively enclosed, but it requires the semblance of narrative openness, the possibility that the narrative might turn out differently. The poet offers three terms here for this kind of openness: in addition to *aventoure*, *chaunse* and *wonder strong*. All three evoke a space of possibility that opens only onto predictable rigidity, just as the space of the forest only leads the princess back to the restrictions of domestic space. While "chaunse" and "aventoure," though, both seem to appeal to narrative convention, "wonder strong" offers an iteration both of narrative form and its affective shape: it illustrates for us the poet's reaction to narrative probability and an expanded image of the narrative field that opposes structure.

Something is at work in the moment of Degaré's marriage to his mother, in the "wonder" with which the poet treats the simultaneous likelihood and unlikelihood of this event, that troubles a clean distinction between narrative and nonnarrative space. Romance requires us to "wonder" at such narrative imposition, the enforcement of narrative shape: it instantiates moments of deliberate hesitation before or around the rigid structures of narrative predictability. James Simpson refers to

such narrative shape, writ large, as "propriety": "the establishment of the 'proper' name is in all senses the end of this narrative," he notes. Such an establishment "represents…the restoration of propriety both in the order of language and in the social order" ("VNP," pp. 132, 127). I take Simpson's account as an apt illustration of the goals of the romance for its implicit linkage of the "proper" form of social order, the establishment of unproblematic dynasty, with an articulation of "name," whose effective assignment reinstates the patriarchal order both in the sense of primogeniture and of the dominant generic forms that govern the romance. "Propriety," of course, offers a deep association between social order and ownership, though this isn't explicit in the chapter. Simpson notes the irony in the name "Degaré" and claims for it a structural function in the narrative as a whole: "The obvious meaning of Degaré's name ('lost') clearly generates a narrative of being found, but a deeper coding authorizes that finding, so that the name comes to mean 'nobly born'" ("VNP," p. 135). The reestablishment of "propriety" in *Degaré* is set against the destructive entropy of the Tristan and Isolde narrative in the *Folie d'Oxford*, wherein "what his name encodes disallows the narrative from ever ending, as Tristan himself becomes an increasingly indecipherable and opaque sign" ("VNP," p. 138). Unlike Tristan (Simpson argues), Degaré is able to live up to or fulfill the promises of his name in a way that establishes a final resolution, a neat domestic scene despite the danger and disruption through which the poem moves on its way to that ending.

On the contrary, however, it seems to me that *Degaré* similarly ends on a discordant note—not one designated, as in Tristan, by the explicitly unsuccessful ending of the story, but rather one generated by the clear portrayal of dissenting narratives whose absence in the final scenes of the romance renders the "happy" ending jarringly artificial. As we have seen, the narrative of departure and return is predicated primarily on Degaré's reunion with his mother, and the form of that reunion—the impingement of incest, again, on the shape of constructive domesticity—reiterates rather than dispelling the "lostness" that inheres in Degaré's name and quest. If Degaré finds his mother, he finds her in all the wrong ways, reinstantiating the violence of the domestic sphere rather

than achieving, by a disconnection with his destructive ancestry, any kind of fresh start. This violence is emphasized further by his battle with his father. Both scenes are resolved by the revelation of a proper "fit"—with the princess, the glove, and with the father, the sword's broken tip—whose stringently visible objectification seems intended to do the metonymic work of proving that a good fit has been achieved in a larger sense; order restored, the social and domestic world reaffirmed.

Such a valorization of "propriety" or fit, the satisfying alignment of structure to narrative, though, neglects consideration of the moments of the romance wherein desire for less "fitting" narrative interventions—weirder, suspended, vibratory story-space, the excesses of the romance—bubble up around its neat structures. The dislocation of "being lost" can be alarming, but it can also be liberating, as we see in the princess's jaunt through the forest, shuddering with the dangerous excitement of not knowing what will happen next. Degaré's encounter with the woman who will be his wife similarly seethes with that which doesn't quite fit, and the near-dangers of that which does. The wife's siege by her would-be rapist in what turns out to be the same fairy forest of Degaré's conception marks her as a tidy parallel to his mother, so that Degaré's defeat of her attacker, as many critics have noted, nicely stands in for Degaré's defeat of the violent aspects of his own conception; effectively, he kills "his father, the rapist" and so makes way for his mother's marriage to his redeemed father, all menace excised.[24] But of course this is not how parallels work. After Degaré defeats his future wife's rapist, she implores him,

[24] And indeed, coercive marriage to one's rapist would, historically, have constituted a kind of retroactive legitimation of rape into consensual intercourse; see, for example, Suzanne Edwards' work on consent in the "Wife of Bath's Tale" (Suzanne Edwards, "Outrage Against Rape and the Battle Over Survival in Fourteenth-Century Legal Discourse and the Wife of Bath's Tale," *The Afterlives of Rape in Medieval English Literature* [New York, 2016]). Here the reality of marriage as an effective mode of rape's assimilation only further marks the forceful imposition of male legal control over women's experience.

"'Sire, par charité, / I the prai dwel with me'" [Sir, I beg you by charity to dwell with me] (ll. 974–75). Faced with the offer of a stable domestic space, Degaré demurs; "'Grant merci, dame,' saide Degarre, / 'Of the gode thou bedest me: / Wende ich wille into other londe, / More of haventours for to fonde'" ["Thank you, lady," said Degaré, "For the good you offer me; I wish to go into other lands, to seek further adventures"] (ll. 978–81). While we may infer that Degaré wishes to continue his search because its object is not yet gratified (the knight's rescue of the maiden is conventionally an appendage to his quest, rather than its primary end, and so it's not unusual for him to return for her once his quest is complete), he does not point this out; rather, he expresses his desire for attenuated adventure, for further exploration, for the delay of the closure of his narrative.

The narrative ends with the establishment of propriety in the terms of definitive form opposed to worry and insecurity. Not only does Degaré return for his rescued wife, he reunites his parents, rapist and victim, in a mockery of intergenerational domestic harmony: "'I thank, by God,'" the king (Degaré's grandfather) comments, "'Now y wot, wythowtt lesyng, / Who Syr Degaré his father was!'" [Thank God, now I know without uncertainty who Degaré's father is) (ll. 1086–88). *Certainty* is crucial at the poem's closure. Degaré's grandfather knows with certainty who his grandson's father is. The fairy is wedded to the mother "now sykyrly" [now surely/certainly/securely] (l. 1090) and Degaré to his rescued maiden, "wyth gret solempnité" (l. 1100). The "solemnity" and "security" of these marriage rites denote patterning and enclosure in the terms of legitimacy: the marriages are witnessed and assured. None of these characters will ever again be adrift or detached in a world of social lack or unpredictability. But the placement of this confirmation in the mouth of Degaré's grandfather violently reinserts the problematics of social certainty. The surest way for the king of Brittany to *know* who is grandson's father is

would be to father him himself—as we worried, at the start of the poem, that he might do. The clearest forms of certainty are those that are insular and closed, and at the poem's close all its inhabitants are bricked into this very sort of domestic surety.

"Thus cam the knyght outt of his care" [thus the knight was freed from worry], the poet notes in closing (l. 1102). Presumably the "knyght" in question is Degaré, though it could as well be the fairy or the king, both also knights, or rather, the generic figure of the knight himself. No mention is made of the women's satisfaction at the end of the poem; rather, it assures us that for those implicated in the poem's structure of closed narrative privilege, the narrative's closure is successful. As Simpson notes, though "the final moment has each of the three generations harmoniously in consort with the other two, this image of familial integration is premised on the near-infringement of incest- and parricide-taboo" ("VNP," p. 129). All that proves disruptive and unsettling in the course of the story—the unmarried king of Brittany, the incestuous potential of Degaré's proximity to his mother and later his father, the violence of his conception—is maintained and condensed into the domestic space of the story's closure. What is missing from this ending is the *positive* form of disruption or uncertainty that the poem briefly allows; the space of narrative openness or possibility that counterbalances its murky reiteration of incestuous suffocation. The very evacuation of this potentiality, of any version of the prestructural, affective space of the princess's forest adventure, or indeed of any mention of the women at all apart from their position as buttresses to male marital continuity, reminds us that one actor's certainty is always at the cost of another's "care." When Degaré's mother is presented with her new husband, the rediscovered fairy knight, she swoons: the presence of her erstwhile attacker, now to be legitimized as a part of the social order, annihilates instantly both her voice and her consciousness, her capacity for affect (l. 1089). By the very excision of women from the poem's

final contentments, we are reminded of what must be elided or sacrificed to achieve such narrative and social security.

Chapter Three

The Potential Bodies of *Havelok the Dane*

The late thirteenth-century Middle English romance *Havelok the Dane* is a poem about royalty. Some critics, such as David Staines, who calls it "a portrait of the ideal king delineated from the point of view of the lower classes," or Sheila Delany, who claims that its "main purpose" is to "define the nature of kingship in the person if its eponymous hero," argue that it is didactic, directed at princes and their subjects to instruct them in how to rule and be ruled, to delineate the responsibilities and obligations of kingship.[1] Others, like Robert Mills in "Havelok's Bare Life and the Significance of Skin" and Scott Kleinman in "The Legend of Havelok the Dane and the Historiography of East Anglia," are more interested in how *Havelok* propagandizes the monarchy, insisting in fantastic terms on the necessity of its relevance and endurance.[2] In all these readings, the *bodies* of royal subjects are crucially imbricated with their political relevance, their embeddedness in a social system predicated on hierarchy justified by innate qualities. However we read its figures and narrative, *Havelok* projects a fantasy of royal power that emphasizes over and over the embedding of nobility in certain bodies. Havelok's own identity is a stream of light, ready at any moment to burst forth from his innards; his wife Goldeboru's status is imbricated with her very name. The bodies of criminals like Godrich and Godard, conversely, are torn apart and unpacked in the course of their executions to uncover a

[1] David Staines, "Havelok the Dane: A Thirteenth-Century Handbook for Princes," *Speculum* 51 (Oct. 1976): 602, and Sheila Delany, *Medieval Literary Politics: Shapes of Ideology* (Manchester, 1990), p. 63.
[2] See Robert Mills, "Havelok's Bare Life and the Significance of Skin," in *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture*, ed. Katie L. Walter (New York, 2013), pp. 57–80, and Scott Kleinman, "The Legend of Havelok the Dane and the Historiography of East Anglia," *Studies in Philology* 100 (Summer 2003): 245–77.

lack of royalty, their merely meaty human bodies disclaiming their aspirations to the throne. All these bodies hone in on the ways that royal power, royal futurity is and is not invested in the body. *Havelok* is obsessed with the potentiality of the body, but the potentiality it depicts disrupts the very wholeness of the sociality the poem claims to endorse.

Near the middle of *Havelok*, there is a moment of lengthy, perplexing detail. The young Havelok, dispossessed from his Danish throne, has fled his usurper Godard and traveled with the family of his faithful retainer Grim to the shores of England. Recognizing that his growing (royal) body eats too much for his foster family to effectively sustain, Havelok seeks work as a royal porter to supplement their income. At the castle in Lincoln, he spends his days hauling fish for the castle cook—"He bar up wel carte lode / Of segges, laxes, of playces brode, / Of grete laumprees and of eles" [He carried easily a cartload of squid, salmon, of broad plaice, of great lampreys and of eels] and we are assured that he "bar the turves, bar the star, / The wode fro the brigge he bar, / Al that evere shulden he nytte" [bore the turves, bore the star grass, the wood from the bridge he bore, everything that he might ever use].[3] Ostensibly, this moment calls attention to Havelok's physical prowess: he is strong and well-built, he can learn anything, do any sort of work, and excel at it. Moreover, his fish-carrying talent brings him to the attention of Goldeboru's guardian Godrich, who sets up a match between the two, imagining that nothing could be more insulting to a princess than to marry a robust young fish-thrower. But neither of these seem like a fully effective explanation for the presence and extension of this episode in the romance; the evocation of the fish and Havelok's strength and competition with the other porters is brashly pedestrian, evincing a working-class dedication and a vivid sensory scene. So many

[3] Anonymous, "Havelok the Dane," in *Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston*, ed. Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1999), ll. 896–98, 940–42; hereafter cited by line in text.

fish, so precisely named; the events rise before the reader in all their local specificity and color, filled with smell and feel, exploding beyond the bounds of any prim reduction of the moment to a demonstration of Havelok's physical strength.

Despite the poem's (and its critics') insistence that this scene supports the overall plot interest in Havelok's demonstrated royalty, the materiality of fish-hauling is hard to understand as a proof of nobility. Havelok's body is marked as royal by his virtuosic manual labor? There is a problem with the way that bodies work in *Havelok*. They both cement identity and expand it: render the poem's figures familiar and strange. Moments like this make Havelok's body look oddly democratic—like you, the reader, perhaps, he carries fish; you can imagine yourself carrying those very fish, lighting that very fire. This popular bodiliness stands at odds with Havelok's recurrent indication of exceptionalism: the light that beams from his mouth to mark him as a prince, also embedded deep in his body. His body is emblematic of other bodies in the poem that are described as both innately *something*—royal, wicked—and comprehensible in the terms of typical human bodies. The bodies of the criminals Godrich and Godard are ultimately torn apart in an effort to show their difference, to uncover some germ of cruelty or vice, and all that appears is a lack of distinction: they remain gobbets of merely human flesh.

The crucial body in the poem, for this chapter, is Goldeboru's, a body that both enacts and transcends signification. Goldeboru, a vehicle for both the most conventional versions of femininity and royalty and also an emblem of the deep narrative indeterminacy the body can code, conveys the body's very capacity to *be* identified and misidentified (as both Havelok and the criminals' also are). She iterates the way that this very codability represents a source of infinite potential; despite the poem's stringently bodily identification of Havelok as royal, Goldeboru's transmutably valuable body reminds us that every human body is potentially royal,

home to an infinite array of possible narratives. The body itself is the poem's source of wealth and of narrative possibility. Goldeboru's body indicates that the poem's most effective tool for interrogating cultural predictability and how bodies might escape it is the manipulation of gender. If a reader were to take *Havelok* at face value, he might assume that Havelok's and Goldeboru's stories occupy symmetrical positions; their ultimate lack of symmetry, however, opens onto the deep complexities of the narrative presented.

The two are set up as carefully matched storylines: both Goldeboru and Havelok are royal heirs—Goldeboru of England, Havelok of Denmark—dispossessed by an evil conspirator. The poem follows their efforts to reclaim their kingdoms and reestablish peaceful rule. The text begins in the well-governed reign of Goldeboru's father, Athelwold, who falls sick and consigns her and his nation to the keeping of his duke Godrich with the expectation that when Goldeboru comes of age Godrich will marry her to "the best man that micthe live" [the best man alive] (l. 199). (Godrich later attempts to foil this plan by marrying her to Havelok, whom he believes to be a beautiful peasant.) Meanwhile, across the sea, Havelok's father Birkabeyn is dying and chooses his friend Godard to watch over his son and two daughters. Instead, Godard locks them in a tower and kills the two girls in front of Havelok, who escapes only by pleading for his life, forcing Godard to pass off his assassination to Grim, a fisherman. Grim stows Havelok in his cottage and discusses the plan with his wife, Leve, who suddenly notices a bright light shining from the sleeping Havelok's mouth. A birthmark on Havelok's shoulder reveals him to be the rightful heir; Grim brings Havelok to England, where poverty forces Havelok to seek out work at the palace and his strength and beauty bring him to Godrich's attention. At this point the two stories of deposition and dejection are conjoined; Havelok and Goldeboru are married.

The union of the two heirs, however, disrupts the apparent equivalence of their biographies. Two royal subjects divested by treachery may look symmetrical, but the pair's marriage brings to light the structural imbalances imposed by their respectively gendered royalties. Goldeboru shortly discovers (through the intervention of the light, the birthmark, and an angel's declaration) Havelok's heritage, and they set out back to Denmark on a lengthy effort to reclaim his kingdom. Formerly in the same structural position as Havelok—a dispossessed heir attempting to escape death—Goldeboru is, after her marriage, reduced to the status of wife and witness. Her spousal position reinforces Havelok's claim even as it reduces her own visible royalty to mere royalty by marriage. Accompanied by Goldeboru, Havelok reclaims his kingdom, punishes Godard, and takes Goldeboru back to England, where she is finally recognized by her father's erstwhile nobles. Godrich is "brend" "to dust" [burned to dust] (l. 2832). The punishment of Godrich and Godard and the reascension of both Havelok and Goldeboru seem to establish their equivalence once again, but the intervening marriage plot irrefutably marks Goldeboru as differently royal. She is a sign of royalty, a witness to Havelok's royalty and the progenitor of royal descendants, but her innate power is disregarded for much of the poem. At the end of the romance, Havelok and Goldeboru quickly anoint all their loyal companions noble and set about having many children, "hwar-of the sones were kings alle…and the douhtres alle quenes" [whereof all the sons were kings and all the daughters queens] (ll. 2980–82). Their union produces a vast network of ennobled supporters and royal children who effectively rule the world, but such wide-ranging change is only produced by the deep asymmetry of Goldeboru and Havelok's marriage.

Goldeboru's gendered body, in short, is the poem's most fraught figure. She represents a nexus of social convention but also a site of deep narrative possibility. Her body produces the

revolutionary world of the narrative in very real ways even as it negotiates the normative functions of female royalty. She is the literal mother of a new order of royalty, but also contains within herself all the potential power that accrues to the fencing of generativity by conventional gender. As such, her body, one which captures all the conventional signifiers of the female body, also engages the fundamental openness of the romance world, in which literally anything can happen. Her body is a possession (herself and others'), a producer of children, a prop for her husband's power: but its reduction to an object as a way to contain something more forceful only ultimately calls attention to the deep instability of the body's potential, her status as a threat to the conventional forms that code her. In conjoining these two identities, moreover, her body calls into question all the apparently static implications of those gendered functions, emphasizing the broader capacity of all exchange objects in general as agents of transformation. Exchange objects, on this reading, are items that by their ability to signifiy as not just goods or possessions but as narrative futurity itself (e.g., currency that opens vistas of possible purchase or investment) reveal the deep mutability captured by exchange. Goldeboru, I argue, is the site through which we must read the complex and intersecting imperatives of the romance world, one which infuses and complicates a set of (didactic, illustrative) social principles with an interrogation of sources of its narrative potential.

Social Consequences

In order to track what turns out to be the centrality of Goldeboru's difference, it is helpful to begin with an account of the poem's apparent norms—the scenes that appear most durably integrated into a cogent social world. The poem begins with an image of a well-ordered and comprehensible sociality, largely undisrupted by inexplicable affect. This world is marked by

effective laws, benevolent rule, and neatly arranged, categorizable bodies. Those bodies, marked by and emblematic of the fantasmatic social world in which they occur, demonstrate both the priorities and the potential disturbances of that world. Athelwold's court functions as the primary model of a normative scene—a prelapsarian image of the perfect world that structures the subsequent narrative as a struggle for its restoration. And Athelwold's court is set up as a world quintessentially defined by protection of the vulnerable: dedicated in its laws, its structures, and its roles (the knight, the father) to the preservation of some iteration of purity coded as precarious blankness in the form of maidens and infants. By the end of the narrative, it is clear that these very instances of vulnerability provide the occasion for disruptively ambivalent potential, but it seems on a first reading that the fantasy of the court aligns neatly with the priorities of the well-governed nation the poem presents as a model for sociality.

As many romances do, *Havelok* begins with an iteration of "the good old days"; "It was a king bi are dawes, / That in his time were gode lawes / He dede maken and ful wele holden" [There was a king in earlier days that in his time made good laws and held them strong] (ll. 27-9). From the start the poet's description of the perfect kingdom is imagined in terms of legislation and authority; a good kingdom has a good king who makes and maintains good laws. Moreover, the king and his laws function in relation to a loving populace: "Hym lovede yung, him lovede holde— / Erl and barun, dreng and thayn, / Knict, bondeman, and swain, / Wydues, maydnes, prestes and clerkes, / And al for hise gode werkes" [The young loved him, the old loved him—earl and baron, vassal and retainer, knight, peasant, and commoner, widows, maidens, priests and clerks, and all for his good works] (ll. 30-34). What makes Athelwold's kingdom great, in other words, is his strength supported by his subjects' love. He stands in a

relation to his people that conjoins the affective and the legal—a filial relation, one of authoritative protection. They love him because his strength and laws keep them safe.

This conjunction of the affective subject with its authoritative defender is fundamental to the constructions of power relations throughout *Havelok:* all relationships are defined by the dynamic of protector and protected object, and moreover by the way that this binary constructs properly constituted social bodies. Bodies are categorizable according to whether they are protected or protecting. The importance of this dynamic and its structuring of possession and value becomes clear in further description of England as a realm of protected possession and exchange. "In that time a man that bore / Wel fifty pund, I wot, or more, / Of red gold upon hiis bac…Ne funde he non that him misseyde, / Ne with ivele on hond leyde" [In that time, a man that carried a good fifty pounds, I think, or more of red gold on his back would not find anyone that spoke roughly to him, nor laid a hand on him in evil] (ll. 45–50). A traveller through Athelwold's land—even one who carries a great deal of money—need fear harm by neither word nor deed. England is imagined as a refuge, here, for those who have something material to protect.

Fittingly, the quintessential form of malfeasance with which the poem begins this section is one of robbery. In Athelwold's land, a traveller can retain his possessions, his wealth; moreover, he is safe to exchange that wealth. "Chapmen," the text continues "michthe…fare / Thuruth Englond wit here ware, / And baldelike beye and sellen, / Overal ther he wilen dwellen…Ne funden he non that dede hem sham, / That he ne weren sone to sorwe brouth, / And pouere maked and browt to nouth" [Merchants might travel through England with their goods, and boldly buy and sell wherever they wished; they would find none to do them shame that were not quickly brought to sorrow, made poor and brought to nothing] (ll. 51–58). England is not

merely a protected economic sphere in that wealthy citizens are protected from depredation; it is also imagined as a safe zone for trade and mercantile activity, a place where goods and currency can be not only held but made use of, where economic activity is not only protected—one surmises—but favored.

These lines subtly change the reader's understanding of the protection that characterizes Athelwold's rule. At first, a fairly abstract ability to set and uphold laws constituted the king's power. Here, those laws take the form specifically of the punishment of those who would act against subjects' economic interests or attack the value of their possessions. Possession and value, then, are revealed as crucial indices for successful government: the king is a good king because he can protect his citizens, and that protection takes the form of protecting the citizens' valuable possessions. The clarification that merchants are safe to trade isolates the object of protection even further to the construction of value itself: if value is established by exchange, and the king protects his citizens by protecting their ability to exchange goods, then what is fundamentally protected is value itself, the capacity to produce and traffic in valuable items—whatever those might be. The text uses "red gold" as a shorthand for wealth, but it's easy to imagine that red gold is a stand-in—an iteration of exchange value—for goods, services, resources, or whatever else one might expect merchants to trade, buy, or sell.

Standing opposite the abstraction of value, in this image of the idealized kingdom, is the depredation of that value or exchange by criminals who seek to make the realm unsafe. Such crimes, the text hastens to explain, meet an absolutely fitting reward: The merchant traveller finds "non that dede hem sham" [none that did him shame] who was not quickly brought to justice, "sone to sorwe brouth, / And pouere maked and browt to nouth" [soon brought to sorrow, and made poor and brought to nothing] (ll. 56–58). This iteration of punishment suggests again

the way in which all activity in the kingdom is reduced to its exchange value. The criminal is punished by being "made poor," and so "brought to nothing," because wealth itself is in a certain way the only signifier recognized by this law. The criminal is deprived of his wealth, his value, and thus of his social existence; his punishment reduces him, explicitly, to a non-entity.

The characterization of the crime against the merchant is importantly ambiguous, in a way that seems to answer to the "nothing" of its punishment. The hypothetical criminal in this scenario "dede hem sham" [did him shame]. First of all: the syntax here is ambivalent. Does this clause mean that "shame" was done *to* the merchants—"none that brought him shame," one might paraphrase—or that the merchants *were shamed*—"none that did shame him," would be the other reading. It is not clear, in other words, if "shame" is an object or a verb; it is an all-encompassing event, action and thing at once. This shifty syntax emphasizes the larger strangeness of the line: "Sham," here, or shame, is a strangely empty crime, pointedly nonspecific—or ambiguous—about its activity. Common sense might suggest that the crime merchants would face would be robbery and possibly associated assault—as the poem says in an earlier line, "with ivele on hond leyde" [laid on a hand with evil intent] (l. 50)—but here such details are carefully elided in a way that suggests "shame" is a more comprehensive term. It connotes, it would seem, a crime that diminishes value.

Such a reading takes on a highly pointed tone in the following lines, when "shame" is used to connote the ambiguities of rape or sexual violence. "Wo so did maydne shame / Of hire bodi or brouth in blame, / Bute it were bi hire wille, / He [Athelwold] made him sone of limes spille" [Whosoever did maidens shame (note the continued syntactic ambiguity here) of their bodies or brought them to blame, unless it were by their will, he (Athelwold) soon made their limbs fall off] (ll. 83–86). The "bute it were bi hire wille" points to the legal ambiguities of

sexual violence. These are partly a question of he-said-she-said and still a rampant issue in legal cases today; but they are also due to a fundamental wobble in medieval law over whether women could consent to sexual congress unsanctioned by their communities.[4] Here, naming the crime of sex—consensual or not—"shame" incorporates those ambiguities, and it further participates in the same sort of elision of specifics as did the earlier "shame" against merchants. "Shame" in both cases is a crime of reduction. It can be understood as either a social or a physical diminishment of its subject.[5] It represents a transgression that takes away some valuable property—in the sense of either possession or of characterization, or both—of the victim, and it provides a category of criminality that is both precise (in its iteration of diminishment) and vague (in its absolute lack of specificity as to the mode of the crime).

In light of this ongoing characterization of crime as "shame" against citizens variously constituted, I want to return to the idea that the function of Athelwold's government is to protect its loving subjects. If what Athelwold's legislation prioritizes is its subjects' value—where value incorporates possession, exchange, and the production of value—it makes perfect sense that punishable crime is imagined as diminishment of value. In the case of the "maydnes" who are

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[4] In medieval England—as now—rape cases were fraught and difficult to try. In describing the complications of medieval rape law, James Brundage quotes Egidio Bossi's opinion that "even if [a] woman consented to intercourse, the incident still counted as rape if violence was employed to induce her consent. The municipal statutes of Belluno (1428) specified, however, that admiring phrases, persuasive speeches, and promises uttered in order to persuade a woman to have sex did not constitute violence" (James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Mediaeval Europe* [Chicago, 1988], p. 532). The question not just of force and consent but of what constitutes force—why should "persuasive speeches" be imagined as a form of "violence"?—is one deeply imbedded in the problem of rape. That the discussion of medieval rape cases commands anxiety even today is indicated by accounts like Derek Pearsall's account of the famous (apparent) rape case against Chaucer, of which Pearsall notes, "Some violence of passion is hidden away somewhere behind the legal documents, which reveal only the manipulation of the resources of the law necessary to achieve a settlement" (Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* [Cambridge, Mass., 1995], p. 137).

[5] Middle English Dictionary (online), s.v. "shame."

shamed in these later lines, it seems clear that the value in question is their virtue, their purity, their unblemished state; their virginity is the property that renders them valuable, that which the government struggles to protect. Indeed, these maidens might be understood as those of Athelwold's subjects who are most vulnerable and most valuable. Because the site of their value is bodily, is identical with their very existence, they have the most to lose.

This reading is supported by the inclusion of the maidens in a set of categories of vulnerability; "To the faderles was he rath, / . . . And wo did widuen wrong, / Were he nevre knicth so strong, / That he ne made him sone kesten / In feteres and ful faste festen" [To the fatherless was he solace; and whosoever did widows wrong, there was no knight so strong that (Athelwold) did not have him cast in fetters and bound fast] (ll. 75–82).[6] The function of the king is to act as an authoritative protector to his subjects—a father; and never more so than when the subjects in question are literally fatherless or husbandless. These subjects are citizens of the state, but unlike the merchants, who are citizens with property to protect, these helpless women and children are themselves the property in question: an attack on them, "shame" done to them, diminishes not their possessions but their selves, their "properties" in the sense of the "properties" that qualify and characterize an object's existence.

It may be useful to consider for a moment how bodies and sociality are interconnected, as the bodies of these vulnerable women are here crucial to the constitution of Athelwold's court,

[6] These categories are, as Herzman, Drake, and Salisbury note in their introduction to the TEAMS edition of *Havelok*, borrowed from Psalm 146:9: "The Lord keepeth the strangers, he will support the fatherless and the widow: and the ways of sinners he will destroy" (Psalm 145:9 in *The Douay-Rheims Bible Online,* www.drbo.org). They are conventional ways, in other words, of depicting helplessness: the fatherless, widows, maidens—those who no longer or do not yet have a man to protect them.

the poem's fantasized ideal social world. In a delicate articulation of the relation of defined bodies to the social matrix, Judith Butler writes,

> Consider the medical interpellation which shifts an infant from an 'it' to a 'she' or a 'he,' and in that naming, the girl is 'girled,' brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But [it] does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authories and throughout various intervals of time to reenforce or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm.[7]

Bodies in *Havelok* are distinguished as protector or protected, and, as in Butler's formulation, this distinction follows the lines of normative gender. The constitution of a body as worthy of protection is simultaneous with its coding as female, and this coding is fundamental to the structures of the social fantasy. The "setting of a boundary"—this body is vulnerable and must be protected—is coextant with, supported by and supportive of, its social forms; society as a whole *exists* to protect and shelter its innocent subjects, its purest bodies.

Part of the fantasy of the ideal social world of Athelwold's court resides in the transparent alignment *of* bodies to a social system. In this fantasmatic polity, the vulnerable bodies of maidens and their knight-protectors map neatly onto a larger-scale systematization wherein the vulnerable are protected by the powerful, and the vulnerable are carriers of both material and bodily wealth—in other words, both merchants burdened with gold and maidens burdened with the unmarked purity that makes them bearers of a social future. In *Amadace*, the poem fantasizes that a narrative space might exist wherein the human body might be neatly mapped by monetary value, but the system never quite settled: from the start of the poem, we are already in a space of conflict and confusion, where valuable subjects question the power of currency. In *Havelok*, however, the poem begins with a scene that *executes* this fantasy: where

[7] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993), pp. 7–8.

vulnerability maps both financial and bodily precarity, and currency or wealth as forms of compressed potential neatly align with the bodies of women and children as bearers of futurity, of predictable genealogical growth and thus of wealth in a narrative context, the forward motion of the royal family that the poem values. It turns out, of course, that this fantasy is always already disrupted by its own terms: the body as carrier of future potential only functions if one has the conviction that such potential is predictable, that the body hosts the *right* outcome, the outgrowth of potential in approved narrative and political shapes. The precarity of these bodies on which the system of protection/protected is constituted is also an instability that renders the system's possible dissolution, as, for example, when Havelok's sisters—bearers of purity, infant potential, mappable genealogical futurity—are slain by Godard, abruptly turning the potentiality of their bodies toward disaster rather than serenity. The fantasy of stably valuable bodies is always a fantasy, because the very investment of potential in the body renders that body mutable. When Godard kills Havelok's sister, the entire kingdom—and the rest of the romance—is altered; the fact of potential, of investment, acknowledges the possibility of a bad outcome.

Conventional Value

This problem of the disruptive openness of the potential body takes its most dramatic form in the princess Goldeboru, who is readable as both a highly conventionalized female figure and a site of deep possibility for the narrative, and who demonstrates most intensely the inextricability of these two modes. In Athelwold's court ethical imperative is neatly attached to financial forms: The protection it is the king's duty to extend constitutes a defense of his subjects' valuable property/ies; the category of "shame," the denigration and depredation of value as such, euphemizes all crime and its necessary punishment. Thus, that which is valuable is

subject to predation. In fact, if we follow the concept of exchange-based value to its conclusion, value is *established* by a vulnerability to predation. Predation indicates demand, and it is demand which determines value. In the terms of the poem, then, vulnerability is constitutive of value. In the initial conception of the poet, which collapses the bodily into the economic, this concept looks alien, but when imagined in terms of gendered bodies its predictability is clear. In this familiar conception, that which is valuable is uncorrupted, but it is its very potential for corruption that renders its purity attractive.

The alignment of beauty with innocence is an eminently recognizable social and literary structure. No medieval author better articulates the sinister form of this appeal than Geoffrey Chaucer in his "Physician's Tale." Virginius' daughter

wolden fleen the compaignye	would flee the company
Where likely was to treten of folye,	Where there was likely to be foolish conversation
As is at feestes, revels, and at daunces,	As there is at feasts, revels, and at dances
That been occasions of daliaunces.	That are opportunities for flirtations.
Swich thynges maken children for to be	Such things make children
To soone rype and boolde, as men may se,	Too soon ripe and forward, as anyone can see,
Which is ful perilouse and hath been yoore.	Which is very dangerous and has been for a long time.
For al to soone may she lerne loore	For all too soon she can learn the lore
Of booldnesse, whan she woxen is a wyf.[8]	Of boldness, when she becomes a wife.

The insidious discomfort of the Physician's anxiety about "booldnesse" in a fourteen-year-old indicates the power of potentialities in this sort of description. The enjambment between "to be" and "To soone" that lets the line linger on "maken children for to be . . . " illustrates the graphic opportunity for perversion in such a thought, and the intense potentialities that dwell even in the space between two lines of poetry or two words. "Daliaunces" might indeed "maken children for

[8] Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Physician's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Dean Benson (Oxford, 2008), ll. 63–71.

to be," though the explicitness of this line is narrowly averted by the hasty "…to soone rype and boolde" which itself immediately slides back into suspect territory. "Al to soone may she lerne loore / Of boldnesse," he leers under the guise of avuncular concern. Part of what is unsettling about Chaucer's Physician's narration is his certainty that he knows about women past and future—that he can see, crystallized in the form of a fourteen-year-old girl, the "boolde" "wyf" she will become. Caught up in his own fetishistic vision of a specific form of potential, he imposes a rhetoric insistently his own upon the form of a young girl. Innocence and corruption, however, go hand in hand; it's difficult to articulate a criticism of the Physician without fetishizing innocence just as he does. What is the appeal of blankness, if not its capacity to be filled? A desire to keep children pure is inextricable from the anticipation of their dangerous future (adult) selves. So the Physician is enthralled by the thought of the unblemished Virginia, but only insofar as he simultaneously imagines the contaminants that may lie in wait for her.

The *Havelok* poet's description of Athelwold's rule, then, pointedly articulates an economic system that emphasizes and exaggerates the paradoxical nature of this particular erotic form. It is conventional to suggest that women and their bodies are imagined as treasure or commodities; Gayle Rubin's now-commonplace account of "the traffic in women" aptly indicates the deep structures of exchange that underlie familiar social and romantic forms.[9] But the *Havelok* poet, in establishing this initial scene of analogy between women and finance and emphasizing the very arbitrariness of their value, does the opposite: he casts value itself as provocative or exciting, setting a stage wherein the deep ambivalence *of* value is an impetus to narrative. In Athelwold's England, gold is like a woman (rather than a woman who is like gold

[9] Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York, 1975), p. 174.

or, proverbially, like rubies): its value is commensurate with its vulnerability. By imposing such forms of desire and danger on an economic scene, the poet opens up a field of narrative possibility.

The princess Goldeboru serves as the perfect form for articulation and transmutation of the alignment of the economic and the erotic. Her very name, "Goldeboru," suggests her intervention into a text all too aware aware of the availability of conventional forms for figuring female value. The poem has recourse to a set of established conventional narratives about her importance, and it foregrounds these conventions: She is a princess. She is a human embodiment of wealth; she is the future mother of royalty; she will have some degree of political power. Goldeboru, like any medieval noblewoman, is recognizably important for her status as a form of currency. "If women are the gifts," notes Gayle Rubin, "then it is men who are the exchange partners. And it is the partners, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange convers its quasi-mystical power of social linkage" (p. 74). On this account, rather than the possessor of power, Goldeboru is the sign of power: she signifies genealogical potential, packaged in the shape of a golden treasure to be passed amongst men.

In Geoffrey Gaimer's Anglo-Norman version of the tale in the *Estoire de Engleis*, Havelok's wife is called Argentille; the name "Goldeboru" is an interpolation by the Middle English author of *Havelok the Dane*. "The name probably entered the legend because its meaning was appropriate as an English-sounding equivalent of *Argentille*," notes Scott Kleinman in his essay on *Havelok*. "The name *Goldeburgh* may have been chosen by someone deliberately looking back…for evidence of a more authentic name for the character than the French-sounding

Argentille."[10] Though Gaimar and the *Havelok* poet's accounts vary even in basic matters of plot, the rough linguistic content of the princess's name was effortfully preserved. Regardless of the name's precise provenance, then, it seems clear that the author prioritized an association of the character with wealth and its possession or transmission.

The name's construction bears out on a linguistic level the poet's interest in contested forms of worth. The first part of the name, like "Argentille," is a precious metal. Kleinman notes that the addition of "burgh" or "burc" "may have also been influenced by the frequent occurrence of the ending *–burh* among names of women before the Norman Conquest in the East Anglian royal genealogies" (266). However, the *Havelok* author or transcriber's use of the ending "-boru" forcibly calls attention to a similarity to "borwen," a form of "beren," and especially "borw" (a resonance that becomes particularly strong when Havelok and Goldeboru encounter Ubbe). The princess's name is fundamentally tied to her position, her role: she is a gold-bearer. The specific import of this assonance is harder to parse. It is impossible to say if the gold of her name is gold that she herself possesses, gold she herself will give, gold borne by her family, gold possessed by her suitor, gold promised by one party or another, gold given in surety; does she herself "bear" gold, and if so, is it as agent or as a material possession whose gold is metonymic with herself? Is the "gold" her children? Once again, a woman is caught "between one genitive and the other."[11] Is Goldeboru's "gold" "her gold," or "the gold of her"?

The discomforting power and wide-ranging implications of this conventional narrative are most pointedly made clear in Havelok's alliance with Ubbe (a Danish lord Havelok and his

[10] Scott Kleinman, "The Legend of Havelok the Dane and the Historiography of East Anglia," p. 266.
[11] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills (Chicago, 2007), p. 76.

men encounter in the course of their return to Denmark to reclaim Havelok's throne). When Goldeboru and Havelok join Ubbe for a feast, Ubbe jokes to his own wife, "Dame, thou and Havelok shulen ete samen, / And Goldeboru shal ete wit me" [Lady, you and Havelok should eat together, and Goldeboru will eat with me] (ll. 1717–18). Though Ubbe is not literally suggesting that he and Havelok trade wives, he makes the facetious suggestion that they should in order to establish their participation in a genial relation, a discursive connection. In Linda Hutcheon's terms, "in ironic discourse, the whole communicative process is not only 'altered and distorted' but also *made possible by* those different worlds to which each of us differently belongs and which form the basis of the expectations, assumptions, and preconceptions that we bring to the complex procession of discourse, of language *in use*."[12] Though Goldeboru has not literally been traded to another man, the facetiously deployed suggestion that Havelok and Ubbe might do so functions to create an allegiance between the two men. They are bound by ironic understanding and by the imagined deployment of a gift exchange—an exchange of wives.

All this uncertainty points to the poet's elision of the status of royal women by way of their metaphoric association with material wealth. The reason for Ubbe's joke, he claims, is Goldeboru's superiority: "In al Denemark is wimman non / So fayr so sche, by Seint Johan" [In all Denmark, there is no woman as fair as she, by Saint John] (ll. 1720-21). The truth of an aristocratic woman's exchange value—fundamentally, as the bearer of aristocratic children—is, in romance, covered over by appeals to her innate passive qualities—beauty, purity, goodness. In many ways this presents a direct parallel with precious metals or other forms of material wealth translated into currency: valuable fundamentally for that which it can buy, gold is imagined to be valuable by virtue of its beauty or pure and visible richness. Though gold or other currency must

[12] Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London, 1994), p. 89.

be, at some level, a symbol for more mundane forms of material wealth—clothing, food, land, chattel—it is imagined, in romance and particularly in *Havelok,* as innately desirable. Good things in *Havelok* are shining, glowing, golden, like gold: "ful shir" (l. 589), . But this apparently superficial beauty is always a cover for more transactional value; the nation that makes a man royal, or the children that perpetuate his royalty.

Infant Potentiality

The link between Goldeboru's conventional values and the narrative excesses of the text—the strangeness of Havelok's detached signifiers, for example—lies in the ambivalent image of potentiality the poet conveys in Goldeboru. She participates, almost to the point of irony, in all the conventional signs of female value and objectification. At the same time, however, she represents a kind of narrative openness or possibility that undercuts her identification as a mappable, predictable figure of narrative futurity. Like the Physician's Virginia, Goldeboru's potential looks like an appeal to hegemonic prurience when it takes the form of insinuation or suspicion: when we see it through the eyes of those who want to cast her in a conventional mold. But when the deep ambivalence of such potential is disclosed, it looks much more disruptive of such anticipatory narrative frames.

As a baby, Goldeboru's body is distinguished by its misalignment with normative human function. A figure of social lack, she is "so yung that sho ne couthee / Gon on fote ne speke wit mouthe" [so young that she did not know how to go on foot or speak with mouth] (ll. 111–13). From the start, she looks like the most extreme version of the vulnerable political body; not only a woman, but a baby, she is associated with her nation, England, soon to be left vulnerable by Athelwold's death. If vulnerability produces value, Goldeboru is the ideally valuable subject, as

she is about to be fatherless, laden with wealth but unprotected, and moreover, a woman whose worth includes herself, her monetary possessions, and her metonymic kingdom. But Goldeboru's baby value is more noticeably abstract than, for example, that of the shamed "maydnes." As a baby, Goldeboru is not merely a child but rather not yet human in some fundamental way. If a person is defined (as *Havelok* seems to have it) by the effective pairing of function to form, Goldeboru is marked as a proto-body, a virtual body, because the parts of that body do not correspond to their adult function. She lacks not only the actual sovereignty she will possess as queen, but the essential elements of personal sovereignty: the ability to use one's feet to walk, one's mouth to speak.

In the terms clarified by Chaucer's Virginia, baby Goldeboru looks like a prototypical instance of blankness as a fundamental erotic signifier. Unlike Virginia—who is always already overwritten by the Physician and her father's expectations—Goldeboru is depicted, albeit briefly, as a body of pure possibility. Her body is both tempting and terrifying for the way it concretizes susceptibility: such susceptibility may herald great things or terrible dangers, depending on how it is used or exploited, by her or others. Looked at differently, though, beyond the terms of the text itself, the infantile body in these lines signifies not danger, but possibility. She cannot speak, but it's not stated that she can't communicate; rather, the text notes that she could not "speke *wit mouthe*."[13] It's not impossible for babies to make themselves understood; they simply do not do so in the manner of a properly constituted human, a rational being who walks "on fote" and speaks "wit mouthe." Athelwold's daughter is too young to assign the parts of her body their proper functions. By an alternate formulation, though, Athelwold's daughter is young enough

[13] While romances frequently depict their heroes as infants in anticipation of their adult exploits, this particular phrasing that names the parts of the body as distinct from their adult functions is, I believe, unique to *Havelok*.

that the parts of her body do not yet correspond to specific functions. She inhabits, instead, a condition of potentiality that fundamentally distinguishes her from an adult—and one more marked, in its ungendered, formless, unmapped essentialism, than the iteration of potential for exchange that might characterize a merely conventional female figure.

Some consideration of the contemporary conceptions of fetal development gives context and weight to the state of deep openness figured by the infant princess, to the field of immanent narrative her body inhabits. In his recent book *Becoming Human: The Matter of the Medieval Child*, J. Allan Mitchell describes the broad range of medieval concepts of the child, the infant, and the fetus. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, English writers had recourse to a number of texts—medical, philosophical, religious—which attempted to account for the processes of generation and birth. In Bartholomaeus Anglicus' *De propriatibus rerum* [On the Properties of Things], translated into English by John Trevisa at the end of the fourteenth century, the process of fetal development proceeds, Mitchell notes, through four stages: "in the first stage, seed becomes as milk; in the second, seed cogaulates or clots to become a 'lumpe of blood' and is called *fetus;* in the third, the principal organs are shaped; and in the fourth, the other members of the body are formed and the creature is called *infans.*"[14] Mitchell is particularly interested in the number of infinitesimal alterations that herald the child's development; "Embryonic and infantile life requires so many circumstantial catalysts, producing successive transitional species within a single being" (*BH*, p. 16). The embryo is not (yet) human; rather, it is in a transition or set of transitions from formless pre-human matter, through various iterations of life (mineral,

[14] J. Allan Mitchell, *Becoming Human: The Matter of the Medieval Child* (Minneapolis, 2014), p. 12; hereafter abbreviated *BH*.

vegetable, animal) on its way to the—surprisingly successful—solidification of specifically human life.

The process of growth from conception to birth, then, is a process of narrative contingency: it is the progression from a form of infinite possible variety to a concrete, worldly body. Mitchell's articulation of medieval concepts of development looks partly like an assessment of risk. "Human gestation and growth," he notes, "expose primordial sites of connection, cross-contamination, and incompletion" (*BH*, p. 16). The development of the body is fraught or continually engaged in moments of decision and change, any one of which might produce disaster. Goldeboru's body, as royal prize and progenitor, has a great deal to do with the course of the romance. But in Mitchell's terms, the infantile body writ large is already a focus of a multitudinous spectrum of possibility and danger. Mitchell's comprehensive iteration of a set of conflicting and anxiety-producing understandings of human gestation points to the importance of infancy as a crossroads for two zones of potentiality—potentiality as predictable futurity and potentiality as investment of possibility—that come into play in the course of *Havelok*'s preoccupations with Goldeboru's body.

One of these zones is that of the social, already described here in terms of the social value that attaches, generically, to a noble woman. The exhilarating resonance of the other account is evident in Mitchell's summation of the multitudinous contingencies that must align to produce something properly human. At any moment in the course of fetal development, something may go wrong; Mitchell quotes Nicole Oresme's concern that " 'error can happen from many causes but only in one way can it complete all things successfully'" (*BH*, p. 17). The residual product of this cascade of successful events is an improbable outcome, an outcome that contains within itself a number of highly ordered systems. We might imagine this chain of events in terms of

thermodynamics. Ascent to a higher level of order requires energy; dissolution of that order releases it. The production of fossil fuels requires heat and pressure and produces a highly concentrated source of energy. Burning this source—oil, gas, coal—results in a release of energy in the form of light or heat (as well as a set of climactic byproducts). Brian Massumi uses this example to describe the scene of affect: "One way of starting to get a grasp on the real-material-but-incorporeal" (he writes) "is to say it is to the body, to a positioned thing, as energy is to matter. Energy and matter are mutually convertible modes of the same reality."[15] By the time the human creature is fully formed, gestated, developed, limbs and all, it is a product that concentrates a vast degree of energy—potential energy—in a highly ordered package. This energy is affective. It is both the crux of a great amount of psychic tension, anxiety, stress, and the outcome of a vast investment of contingency; it compacts force waiting to be released as power.

In the context of the romance, of *Havelok*, this force is narrative energy. The body of the infant Goldeboru might be understood, then, as a knot of potential energy: of the cumulative effect of a series of contingencies that progressively ratchet up the unlikelihood of her existence. By the time she is a queen fully formed, she will not only be a human woman, with all the attendant improbabilities that accord thereto—limbs fully formed, internal organs properly distributed, appropriate functions assigned to their respective limbs—but also a ruler and a focus of genealogical power. She is a princess, one who will be queen. By the time she is an adult, the number of circumstances that have colluded to produce her will reach a near-unaccountable level.

[15] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, N.C., 2002), p. 5; hereafter abbreviated *PV*.

The breadth of the potentiality evoked by the body of the infant Goldeboru, then, escapes its incumbent forms of futurity. Not even quite, yet, human, the infant princess evades the vast and rigid system of social mapping that will be applied to her adult form. Though Athelwold and Godrich attempt, like Virginius, to impose upon the formless baby a version of her later potential—specific, economic, genealogical—she remains for the moment solely a body, with the essential potential thereof. Sooner rather than later (as emphasized by Godrich and Athelwold's speculation about her marriage at "twelf winter hold" [l. 192]), her femaleness will render her pointedly responsive to the confluence of different sorts of wealth and predation, but at this moment her incapacity suggests a related but very distinct account of affective potential. For Massumi, the conditions of possibility and potentiality (which are distinguished by their proximity to form: potentiality a state of immanent form, possibility one of utter openness to form) are both states of virtuality: "a word for the 'real but abstract' incorporeality of the body is the *virtual*," the body's habitation of material but never static existence in motion. "For the virtual to fully achieve itself," Massumi notes, "it must recede from being apace with its becoming" (*PV*, p. 21).[16] The virtual names the space of transitionality filled by affect or intensity; the virtual body is the body not caught, but described, in the process of becoming, and unmappable in terms of static categories or narrative frames. The world's incumbent demands are present; they inform an atmospheric tension in the text, an anticipatory density of narrative expectation around the formless, nonspecific iteration of physical life.

The body of the infant Goldeboru, then, is a virtual body. It is embedded in the affective center of a futurity she does not yet embody and so presents an important figure for affect in the romance, a figure of bodies as virtual, as potential. She looks like the presocial—pure potential,

[16] For the distinction between potentiality and possibility, see *PV*, p. 9.

but not yet participatory in all the social mapping that makes such potential comprehensible as futurity.[17] Because the infant lacks adult capacities—the capacity to codify affective sensibilities into emotions, for example—her body engages a social scene without taking on its terms. Like currency independent of the purchases it authorizes, Goldeboru's infant body is pure potential, a figure in the romance that stands for the absolute openness of possibility, and so figures the deep flexibility of the romance's social world (and, by extension, the activity of romance in the world). The space of the romance is the space of virtual bodies, bodies that are open to multifarious narrative prospects, some normative, some radically unfamiliar.

Social Bodies

How does Goldeboru's virtual body ramify through other bodies in the text? Havelok's body, obviously, is contaminated by a related sort of potential—the light, literally a form of potential energy, that spills from his mouth—contained in a recognizable hegemonic body: the body of the king, the absolute symbol of the carefully formed and delineated social world with which the text begins. Godrich and Godard's bodies are simultaneous and identical; unlike the noticeably asymmetric bodies of Havelok and Goldeboru, the two criminal bodies bear out the symmetry initially established by the two coincident royal plotlines. Their echoic and reiterated punishments and deaths, excessive and spectacular, forcibly reintegrate the fantasized social

[17] It is worth noting that in the terms of affect theory, sensation is not "presocial." Massumi notes in "The Autonomy of Affect" that "Intensity is asocial, but not presocial"—it incorporates and complexifies existing social structures ("The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique* 31 [Autumn, 1995]: 91). He reformulates this in *Parables for the Virtual* with the comment "The field of emergence is not presocial. It is *open-endedly social*" (*PV*, p. 9). Because of the specifically chronological positionality of the infant Goldeboru, however, her body is emphatically prior to social embeddedness, although it does indeed anticipate the demands of the social.

order. The body stripped down to meat, literally flayed, claims to reject or reduce all possible radical potential: its possible signifiers are removed one by one until the body is *only* material, denied all virtual extension into imagined futures. Both Havelok's and the criminals' bodies, then, work differently to insist on the fantasy of ordered bodies. Havelok's manages its potentiality by subsuming it in social meaning: insofar as it conveys possible futures, they are *only* the possible futures of justified kingship. Godrich and Godard's are denied all possible futurities, cast out of the virtual world. But Goldeboru's body, her *female* body, manages to be both material and vulnerable in the terms of the text, and also to maintain a relentless hold on the more capacious virtuality of utter narrative nonspecificity, an indeterminacy that outlives even the final efforts of the poem to close off allowable futures.

As in the meta-example of the criminal who is "browt to nouth," Godrich and Godard's fates make clear that the goal of their punishment is not just pain or humiliation, but annihilation. When Godard is brought to justice, a "ladde with a knif…bigan rith at the to / For to rite and for to flo" [a lad with a knife began right at the toe to cut and flay] (ll. 2493–95). He is bound to a mare, "skabbed and ful ivele o bone" [scabbed and infirm], and transported to a gallows where he will be bound and displayed beside the legend " 'This is the swike that wende wel / The king have reft the lond ilk del, / And hise sistres with a kinf / Bothe refte here lif'" [This is the traitor that intended to have robbed the king of each part of the land and his sisters both of their lives with a knife] (ll. 2482–85). His execution comes in two parts, bodily destruction and didactic display, both directed toward the goal of making his crimes legible on his body and eliminating him from the social world.

Godrich and Godard's shared fate has two very different and indeed counterposed effects. The first is to encode their bodies as legible components of a system, outliers whose exclusion

establishes the boundaries and norms of the political world. As Mills and others have noted, "skinning targets the traitor's identity, a radical act of destruction that totally obliterates their assimilable difference."[18] The removal of the skin identifies the criminal as nonhuman, noncitizen, nonsubject; it reimagines them as that whose exclusion protects the community from which they are rejected. Godrich's punishment conveys the same intent: he is "brend til asken" [burnt to ashes] (l. 2841), and Goldeboru "thanked God fele sythe / That the fule swike was brend" [thanked God many times that the foul traitor was burned] (ll. 2844–45). Further details of Godard's punishment reinforce this dehumanization. His association with the "skabbed" mare marks his dissociation with a whole and human skin and by implication a whole, human exterior. His position on the mare—"rith at hire tayl" [right at her tail] (l. 2506); his nose "unto the crice" [into the crease/cleft] (l. 2450)—will echo Godrich's later position on the mule "Andelong, nouht overthwert, / His nose went unto the stert" [Endwise, not across, his nose went into the tail] (l. 2823), and both suggest the criminals' association with the foulness not just of their mounts but of their mounts' excretory functions. The traitors' punishment dissolves their human forms; they are associated with the animal, the scatological, the foul and formless.

But marking a criminal as inhuman is not so easily achieved, or rather, it is not a simple process. What, after all, is inhuman about the interior of a human body? In summation of her debt to Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, Julia Kristeva notes that maintenance of a social whole depends upon "*excluding filth*" by means of a "purification rite"—like that of the villains' punishment. "Defilement is what is jettisoned from the '*symbolic system,* '" Kristeva says. "It is what escapes that social rationality, that logical order on which a social aggregate is based,

[18] Mills, "Havelok's Bare Life and the Significance of Skin," p. 63.

which then…in short, constitutes a *classification system* or a *structure*."[19] Kristeva is well aware, however, that the image of a system that excludes or "jettisons" the foul unspeakable is a useful fiction. In fact, such systems are formed by their exclusion of selective substances; "filth is not a quality in itself, but . . . applies only to what relates to a *boundary* and, more particularly, represent the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin."[20] Butler echoes this formulation in *Bodies That Matter* when she describes "'girling'" the gendered body as "the setting of a boundary," drawing on Kristeva's terms to note that the "attributions or interpellations" of gender "contribute to that field of discourse and power that orchestrates, delimits, and sustains that which qualifies as 'the human.' We see this most clearly in the examples of those *abjected beings* who do not appear properly gendered; it is their very humanness that comes into question."[21] The abject is that which is represented as excluded from the body, either the material body or the social body: Godrich and Godard's dissolutionary punishments represent their definition as filth, as excrement, as that which is excluded from and thus defines the system.

There is however something more complex about the delimitation of Godrich and Godard as not human, not a part of the virtual enterprise of human polity. Their reduction to meat both refuses and acknowledges that their bodies were initially host to a *problematic* virtual polity: a vision of the social world that did not correspond to the poet's preference. This may seem obvious, but consider for example Godard's slaughter of Havelok's sisters, which frames the kind of reduction of virtual life later punished by similar acts on Godard's body. " 'Us

[19] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, 1982), p. 65.
[20] Ibid., 69.
[21] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 8; emphasis mine.

hungreth,'" Havelok tells Godard angrily, after his guardian imprisons him with his sisters—"'we aren ney ded!'" [We hunger—we are nearly dead!] As though in response, Godard

tok the maydnes bothe samen,	took both maidens together
Al so it were up on hiis gamen,	As though in fun,
Al so he wolde with hem leyke	As though he would play with them . . . .
Of bothen he karf on two here throtes,	He cut both their throats in two,
And sithen hem al to grotes. [Ll. 464–72]	And then [cut] them all in pieces.

His reaction to Havelok's indignant point that he and his sisters are alive, still a part of the human world, is to brutally murder the children. The particular forms of the murder are meaningful: there are three gestures here. First, he feigns play, aping avuncularity, and then cuts their throats, silencing them, before mutilating their bodies. The imagined play performs an impossible future, a scene of appropriate intimacy that is brusquely foreclosed by what follows. He cuts this possible scene, this virtual family, short by eliminating in one stroke the princess's access both to speech and to life, to a future; he then emphasizes this absolute foreclosure by cutting their bodies to pieces, demonstrating that they are reduced to meat, material stripped of potential.

The same intent permeates the criminals' punishment at the close of the poem—not just to reward their villainy, but to foreclose all the potential narratives it subtends; to emphatically insist on the reduction of their bodies to meat, object, removed from human sociality and future narrative. But the poet neglects the insight of the earlier scene, that acknowledging such virtuality, even to eliminate it, grants it power. The persistent and lingering potential of those princess's bodies—which might be imagined to produce, in some way, the entire rest of the narrative as a reaction, casting Havelok's royal body as a virtual extension of his sisters' corpses—haunts any attempt to excise Godrich and Godard's acts by the mutilation of their bodies. The very meatiness of the bodies dissected posits the *possible* humanity of those bodies. Perversely, then, the reader's empathic recognition of the torment inflicted on their bodies fails

to strip them of their humanity, to effectively cast them out; instead, it strips them of their socialized markers of criminality so as to *return* them, inadvertently, to the human. At the conclusion of Godard's punishment, the poem lingers on the image of his body, destroyed to the point of nonspecificity—"henge . . . thore bi the hals" [hanged there by the neck], no name, just a body—and on its defiant insistence on its social definition: "Datheit hwo recke: he was fals!" [Cursed by anyone who cares; he was false!] (ll. 2510–11). The sign erected by the body, then, represents a final and desperate attempt to counteract the universality that his flayed body opens onto; to mark him as not just another human body, but as still criminal, still excluded, still recognizably bad. The two registers—the inescapable, insistent body and the stringently assigned social categorization—persist in coexistence.

Havelok's body, likewise, is so emphatically marked by the human, the material, the relatable, that the markers of his excellence dissolve into incomprehensibility, becoming a mark of strangely universal human potential. His defining characteristic, we are told, is his royalty. It is constantly and remarkedly visible: in his size, in his beauty, in his kindness and courage. In case we might consider general bodily markers insufficient, his heritage is manifest in a literal insignia on his body, his "kynemerk," a cross-shaped, glowing sign on his right shoulder. Still not convinced? When Havelok sleeps, his mouth emits a bright light like "a sunnebem" [a sunbeam] that shines "so brith so it were day" [as bright as though it were day] (ll. 593, 590). Even these signs, apparently, cannot satisfy the relentless need for definitive proof, and so sometimes an angel appears to explain the significance of the light and the mark (l. 1265). However, the final proof of Havelok's birth is his face. When Havelok is finally restored, the poet remarks smugly "'it was nevere yet a brother / In al Denemark so lich another, / So this

man… / Als Birkabeyn'" [there was never yet in Denmark two brothers who resembled each other as strongly as this man does Birkabeyn]: he looks exactly like his father (ll. 2154–57).

Yet Havelok's royalty, arguably the topic of the entire poem, is surprisingly elusive. The poem continually produces new, more farfetched ways to demonstrate royalty, and undercuts them by producing yet another just as fast. This shifty uncertainty, I think, is the result of the forms of potential and virtuality at play in the poem: having called up the specter of virtual narrative, virtual body, the poet finds it nearly impossible to dispel, confronted at every turn by alternate possible futures that might proceed from each contingent moment. I want to linger for a moment on what is surely the weirdest of these forms of evidence, the mouth-light. An angel or a birthmark—and certainly a resemblance to one's father—seem like reasonable or conventional testimonials next to this bizarre outpouring. What is the import of a light that shines from a prince's mouth? For one thing, it manifests an obsession with making the internal external. Like the flaying of Godard, it suggests that if only what is inside could be visible to the world, we might understand—deeply understand—more about a person's essence. We might see, straightforwardly, their criminal or princely nature. But Godard, when opened up, turned out to be merely human; Havelok turns out to be something much more—or something very different, at any rate. He too reinstantiates the social order, but where Godard's death did so by insistently eliminating his virtual body, Havelok's body gives the virtual a stringently delineated hegemonic shape.

Light, as Leve notes, "al so brith so it were day" [as bright as though it were day] (l. 590) looks like a manifestation of pure energy. Something inside Havelok is so powerful that it can only emerge as a semi-physical presence, a presence that could never be generated by a typical human body. But the tale tells us, sternly, that we do know what this light signifies:

"Goddot!" quath Grim, "this ure eir,	"God knows!" said Grim, "this our heir,
That shal louerd of Denemark!	That shall be lord of Denmark!
He shal ben king, strong and stark;	He shall be king, strong and powerful;
He shal haven in his hand	He shall have in his hand
Al Denemark and Engeland.	All Denmark and England.
He shal do Godard ful wo;	He shall do Godard great injury;
He shal him hangen or quik flo,	He shall hang him or flay him alive,
Or he shal him al quic grave.	Or bury him living.
Of him shal he no merci have. [Ll. 605–14]	He shall have no mercy on him.

It's striking not just that Grim predicts Havelok's entire trajectory—how can he possibly know this from a light and a birthmark?—but that so much of his prediction describes Havelok's punishment of Godard, tying the mark of Havelok's royalty decisively to the rejection of Godard's bid for the throne. Havelok does indeed end up flaying him and hanging him, and very little mercy is shown. It is the light itself which produces this account. Grim mysteriously articulates his prophecy as soon as he sees Havelok's light and birthmark (which in this moment is effectively elided with the light in its description—"A swithe brith, a swithe fair" [very bright, very fair] [l. 606]). So narratively, the light directly inspires Grim's prophecy; and in the terms of plot, it is the light that we are assured will demonstrate Havelok's legitimacy (as it just has to Grim) and so bring about the events that Grim describes. The light acts like a manifestation of narrative energy—a deus ex machina, yes, but one which exactly figures the force of potentiality and futurity it instantiates.

Light is active energy, the expenditure of energy, and it is simultaneous in this instance with the expression of narrative force—the burgeoning events of the story. Grim's prophecy suggests, partly, how deeply imbricated kingship is with punishment, a feature we've already seen emphasized in the poem's depiction of Athelwold's rule. Living out one's kingly destiny requires not only execution of that narrative future, but the execution of other possible futures. In order to be read as verification of a royal future, the light must represent not only Havelok's

legitimacy, but the channeling of his potential into a very specific narrative, which forecloses other possibility.

Openness Elsewhere

How, then, are we to think about bodies in the poem as a whole, given that they both perform and evade its didactic aims? What stands out about Goldeboru's infant body is not its incapacity, but rather its boundless and unformed possibility, its unformed energy whose mapping into worldly parameters could only represent a reduction of power. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's articulation of affect in the essay "How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs?" offers a useful account of such power divorced from signifying instrumentality. Deleuze and Guattari imagine the affective subject as a kind of formless body, a virtual body of sensation rather than of ordered function. "Is it really so sad and dangerous to be fed up with seeing with your eyes, breathing with your lungs, swallowing with your mouth, talking with your tongue, thinking with your brain, having an anus and larynx, head and legs?" Deleuze and Guattari ask at the start of the essay. "Why not walk on your head, sing with your sinuses, see through your skin, breath with your belly[?]"[22] In this account, the condition of relinquishing the proper parts of the body is one of possibility, of imaginative extension. The body as we know it is an ordered collection of functional items: to dissolve that order is to release a degree of pent-up energy and give rise to a new sort of existence, a new experience of life. There is a richness to the dissociation between form and function. Blankness itself is, for the poet of *Havelok*, a virtue whose disruptive potential is just as appealing as its seeming manipulation: the image of political

[22] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "November 28, 1947: How Do You Make Yourself a Body without Organs?," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1987), p. 151.

potential unmarked by specificity is an ongoing source of affective excitation and narrative development in the text.

Havelok's own body is affected by these terms: he is never more attractive, more kingly than in the drawn-out descriptions of his nonroyal peasant life that we saw at the start of this chapter. Havelok's excess of power produces the poet's lyrical efflorescence of material. It's not enough to merely recite his feats of strength; rather, the text becomes vibrant in the course of Havelok's demonstration of his abilities, overflowing with colorful detail that we haven't seen before. This kind of narrative excess—an unanticipated descriptive outpouring, a set of signifiers attempting to capture the power of Havelok's presence—mimics the literal bodily efflorescence that supernaturally marks Havelok's royalty. When Grim kidnaps Havelok and brings him to his hut, his wife Leve witnesses the "lith ful shir, / Al so brith so it were day, / About the knave ther he lay" [light shining strongly, as bright as though it were day, about the boy as he lay there] (ll. 589–91). Havelok's royalty, in this scene of revelation and those which follow, is manifest as a bodily symptom, a pure internal flame that permeates and escapes his mundane body. "Of hise mouth it stod a stem / Als it were a sunnebem; / Al so lith was it thereinne / So ther brenden cerges inne" [From his mouth rose a ray as though it were a sunbeam; it was as light therein as though candles were burning] (ll. 592–95). Descriptions of the light that emanates from the prince express the fundamental push of pure potential for the Havelok poet. As with Goldeboru's infantile formlessness, Havelok's nobility is visibility as an untainted expression of power or energy, but it is continually and relentlessly mapped by worldly signifiers. Havelok's "light" can only be imagined as being like candles, or like the sun; finally, it is explained by the discovery of the "kynmerk" or birthmark on his shoulder (l. 605).

The efflorescent release of Havelok's nobility, manifest both formally as the poet's sudden, exuberant loquacity and fantastically within the narrative as the light that bursts uncontrollably from the prince's body, suggests the great capacity of formless affect as a site of power. The power and possibility of the body's dissolution is familiar in medieval literature. In the Middle English translation of Thomas of Cantimpré's *Life* of Christina Mirabilis, for example, Christina enters a shapeless state during prayer, becoming what Thomas calls "a lumped body."[23] Often, Thomas tells us, "whan she prayed and Goddes grace of contemplacyone come to hir, euen as she were made hote and chaufed, alle hir membrys were closed togedir on a lumpe, nor there myghte nothinge be perceyued of hir but allonly a rownde gobet" [when she prayed and God's grace of contemplation came to her, as she was heated and warmed, all her limbs were closed together in a lump, nor could anything be perceived of her except a round gobbet] (61). It is this prayerful form—Christina as "gobbet" of flesh—that I wish to examine as a final illustrative tangent to the reduced forms of Goldeboru's infantile flesh in *Havelok the Dane*. Christina's *Life* is, of course, not a romance; it is a hagiographical text of a sort, a patchwork biographical narrative conceived by a near-journalistic effort on the part of Thomas of Cantimpré, the author of other *Vitae*. The deformations of Christina's body, however, as a result of her religious experience, present a compelling and disturbing image of a medieval human body reduced to a fundamentally inhuman form. Under the affective alterations of prayer, Christina's body loses its limbs, its human definition, and becomes an unadorned thing of flesh. In the throes of spiritual—and seemingly cerebral—"contemplation," the body is reduced to a form that de-emphasizes the body's complexity even as it demonstrates its earthliness. A body

[23] Jennifer N. Brown, *Three Women of Liège: A Critical Edition of and Commentary on the Middle English Lives of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, Christina Mirabilis, and Marie d'Oignies* (Turnhout, 2009), p. 62.

could be no more quintessentially fleshly than this, a "rownde gobet" of meat, a "lump." At the same time, here the body is fully in service to the mind, allowing for new forms of energy distribution and expenditure. The human form is stripped of its specialized functions (the hand to grasp, the foot to walk) and brought to a state of near-vegetal stasis, solely a grounding form for the mind.

For Thomas, the process of Christina's alternation between the two is one of growth compelled by feeling. He continues with further description, "And after that spirituel felynge, whan the actuel felynges come to hir kynde ageyne, in the maner of an vrchyn, the lumped body yode to the owne shappe and strekyd oute the membrys that were firste stoken vndir an vnlikly mater and forme" [And after that spiritual feeling, when the actual feelings returned to their type again, in the manner of a hedgehog, the lumped body returned to its own shape and spread out the limbs that were previously packed into an unlikely matter and form].[24] Like a hedgehog, Christina's rotund, indecipherable form resumes its mammalian shape. It does so, moreover, under the compulsion of altered affective state: after the "spirituel felynge," the "actuel felynges" return to "hir kynde." The term "felynge," it should be clear, means something very different in its first and second iterations in this line: the "spirituel felynge" is a state of being, an affective condition in which the body and mind are suborned to the spirit. The "actuel felynges" are sensations, physical impulses and perceptions—they are the proper functions of the body's "membrys." The transition between these two definitions of "felynge," between a condition of spiritual contemplation and the proper perceptive and instrumental functions of the human body in its "owne shappe," governs the transition from "lumped body" back to its human form.

[24] Ibid., p. 62.

The loss of specific functionality expressed in Christina's body—its elimination of limbs and traditional assignment of part to whole, part to need—allows for the construction of a different kind of body, a body where the fleshly and the spiritual are united in a new sort of wholeness. Something similar occurs in Goldeboru's body; she is "a mayden swithe fayr, / That was so yung that sho ne couthee / Gon on fote ne speke wit mouthe" [A very fair maiden, / That was so young that she could not / Go on foot nor speak with mouth] (ll. 110–13). The imbrecation of "fairness" with incapacity is emphasized by the faint grammatical ambivalence, here, in "that"; Goldeboru is a fair maiden, who cannot function. Notice, however, that "swithe" can also function like the intensifying "so"—this sentence could be read "a maiden so fair / that she cannot function." Logic forbids this reading, but the trace is there.

Goldeboru's body—and, to a lesser extent, the male bodies that surround and manipulate her—capture something related to the formlessness Christina experiences in prayer. In the infant princess, as in Havelok's persistently inexplicable symptoms and the criminals' persistent humanity, the romance presents figures of narrative openness: of connection and atmospheric association, rather than of moral stricture and intent. The appearance of these dilated bodies in the text is tied to the impulse toward openness and narrative expansion in the poem itself, its willingness to wander and open onto new worlds and inexplicable systems. Far from answering the question of royalty, *Havelok the Dane* exposes its deep ambivalences, so as to explode even the problem that critics have sometimes suggested the romance intends to solve.

Instead, the poem offers a glimpse of the very real possibilities of narrative itself, both frightening and exhilarating. If power is imagined as based not in exchange but rather in possibility—or rather, when even exchange is revealed as a technique for coding possibility—the body becomes valuable not insofar as it can be read, but insofar as it resists definitive reading.

And narrative itself is the place where such inscrutable potentiality is most visible, because it displays the ever-changing play of contingency that inhabits bodies and situations. I argue, then, that though *Havelok* offers up a set of bodies constituted by the structures of the state, it also offers its reader the redemptive possibility—obscured by larger normative shapes of economy, biology, and law—of the virtual body, the human imagined as a limitless source of narrative potential.

The final figure of the poem is that of the innumerable bodies produced by Havelok and Goldeboru's union, the dissemination of royalty throughout the world both legally by their ennobling of vassals and biologically by their production of "sones and doughtres rith fivetene, / Hwar-of the sones were kings alle . . . / And the douhtres alle quenes" [fully fifteen sons and daughters, whereof the sons were all kings and the daughters all queens] (ll. 2979–82). The poem imagines the bodies of Havelok and Goldeboru as literally unbounded, so productive as to fill the world with affective and narrative force: "So mikel love was hem bitwene / That al the werd spak of hem two" [so much love was between them that all the world spoke of them] (ll. 2967–68). In the poem's final image, the power of royal bodies collapses the legal, the biological, the affective, and the verbal to bring the entire world under their influence—and so offer an image of the romance's own potential. The potential of these bodies, these innumerably productive narratives, to fill the world and make over the entire world into the space of romance, continues in the following chapter, which interrogates the colonialist impulses of affective transformations in the conversion romance *The King of Tars*.

Chapter Four

Transforming Affects in *The King of Tars*

Illustrating Change

In the Auchinleck manuscript version of *The King of Tars*, copied probably between 1330 and 1340, the poem begins with its title, *þe king of tars*, followed closely by a miniature illustration before the poem begins ("Herkneþ to me . . ."). On the left side, a crowned figure kneels, praying, before a pedestal holding a small animal, something between a deer and a dog. A column whose texture and color mimic that of the image's decorative frame separates the left image from the image on the right, which depicts the same crowned figure beside a kneeling woman, both raising clasped hands to a crucifix.[1]

The images depict *Tars*'s crucial scene, or rather two crucial scenes: the first, the Saracen sultan praying to his deities, the second, he and his Christian wife praying together to a Christian god. On more careful consideration, though, these scenes are not in fact the literal scenes described in the romance, which would centrally feature the "lump child" born to the sultan and the princess and transformed (in the course of these very moments) by prayer to a human child. Rather, the images, or the image as a whole, depict the poem's purported essence—the transition from idolatrous to Christian belief. As Judith Perryman notes, this transition, the "conversion from heathen to Christian worship" is "the essential idea of the romance."[2]

[1] Anonymous, "The King of Tars" [transcription and facsimile], The Auchinleck Manuscript, first photographed page, auchinleck.nls.uk/mss/tars.html
[2] Judith Perryman, "Introduction," *The King of Tars*, ed. Perryman (Heidelberg, 1980), p. 10; hereafter cited by line in the text.

If this transition is the crucial event of the romance's plot, its shape and implications offer readers a rubric for understanding the romance's interests. What form does the progress from "heathen to Christian" take? How is conversion or transformation in the romance staged, characterized and marked—as a moment of process, or one of separation? In the illustration, the columnar separation between the two panels functions both as material and as narrative division. Both the posterior of the animal on the pedestal in the first panel and the robe of the sultan trailing behind him in the second panel slightly overlap the shape, suggesting that it might be read as a physical element in the depicted space; but since we know, retrospectively, that the two events occupy temporally as well as spatially distinct moments in the narrative, the partition must also be readable as a sign of *narrative* separation, marking not just the passage of time but also the transformative events that intercede between the first and the second scene of prayer.

So if Perryman is right, as she must be, that transition—transformation, *change*—is crucial to the shape of this romance, the forms and qualities of its transformations must be essential resources for an understanding of the romance's function and operation. And like the columnar division in the introductory miniature, the transformations within the literary text are both material and conceptual. They take fully realized physical forms, impinging upon and profoundly altering the bodies of figures in the text, but that material change is, we are told, responsive to less visible change: it is evidence of altered belief, altered understanding, altered emotion—in other words, the text's material transformations are the product of affective transformations.

Critics have grappled with two such transformations in the story of *Tars*: the first of a baby born as a "rond of flesche" into a recognizable infant form, and the second of the sultan of Damascus from a "blac and loþely" Saracen to a "white" Christian subject (ll. 580, 928, 929).

These transformations, and more specifically their contingent relation, suggest that the poet of *Tars* is working with a complex and sophisticated understanding of biological chronology. As critics such as Jane Gilbert have noted, the child's shapeless form at birth indicates his association with Aristotelian *materia* rather than with the clarifying shape imposed by the active principle; however, I argue that the retroactive association of the newly converted sultan with his biologically altered son, and the interaction of these paired changes with a third affective transformation—the imagined conversion of the princess from Christian to Saracen—illustrate a more nuanced interaction of action and potentiality, an emphasis on the troubled thresholds of material transformation. Potential is not simply overcome by its teleological transformation to action; their interaction is multidirectional, looking both forwards and backwards as well as at the spreading field of possibility. *Tars* is fascinated by achronological interactions between the two, by the affordance of nonlinear networks of association that are possible to posit and sustain in narrative—though not in reality.

These transformations are affective both in a colloquial sense, in that they participate in the emotional affect of the romance's characters, and in a technical sense, in that they represent moments of narrative contingency or sensual density that focuses change. Narrative intensity is coterminous with what we might in a different context call psychological stress for the narrative's characters; of course, here the figures in the romance are not psychologized as such, but rather function to map affective force onto comprehensible social forms, to code intensity as nameable emotion, motivation, personal desires and attitudes. This chapter explores, in other words, the functions and forms of affect in *Tars* and their arbitration between the personal and the built world. I argue that in *Tars*, atmospheres of cultural coercion—conversion, conquest, recognizable shapes of political force—are made manifest and executable as scenes of personal

feeling. This approach to experience is symptomatic of the strategies of romance at large: It renders as personal experience political exertion, but in so doing opens the depicted experience up to the more numinous material possibilities of the personal, which form virtualized extensions of historical motivation.

Tars's plot indicates the narrative's commitment to the interrelations of the personal and the historical; from the start, the poem is framed as a negotiation of intimate personal relations with dynastic or national effect. Hearing from afar of the beauty of the King of Tars' daughter, the sultan of Damascus sends envoys to request her hand in marriage. The King of Tars resolves to reject the offer, but consults with his daughter, who confirms "Lat me never þat day yse / A tirant forto take" [Let me never see that day that I take a tyrant {as husband}] (ll. 62–63). Upon this rejection, the sultan sends his forces to attack; after several battles and many dead, the princess accedes to his wishes to prevent the death of more "Cristen folk" (l. 236). She travels to Damascus and they are married, but the sultan refuses to consummate the marriage unless the princess converts to his religion.[3] Authorized by Christ's intervention in a prophetic dream, the princess avows her adherence to her husband's faith; they consummate the marriage and live happily together until the birth of their first child. The child appears in a form commonly described as "the lump child": "lim no hadde it non. / Bot as a rond of flesche yschore / In

[3] This religion is ostensibly a version of Islam, but as numerous critics have pointed out, the figure of the "Saracen" stands apart from any realistic historical depiction of nonchristian populations. Jeffrey J. Cohen notes, "The Saracen is a monster, an abjected and fantasmatic body produced through category violation in order to demarcate the limits of the Christian possible. As such, there were no real Saracens in the Middle Ages" (Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "On Saracen Enjoyment: Some Fantasies of Race in Late Medieval France and England," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 [Winter 2001]: 121; hereafter abbreviated as "OSE"). In keeping with this generic figure of the Saracen other, the sultan's faith incorporates "Seyn Mahoun" as well as "Teruagant," "Iovin," and "Plotoun" (ll. 471, 474–5).

chaumber it lay hem bifore / Wiþouten blod & bon" [it had no limbs, but lay before them in the chamber like a carved round of flesh without blood or bone] (ll. 579–82). The princess and the sultan agree that they will each ask their respective gods to amend the child's shape. When the sultan's deities fail to do so, he smashes their statues and returns to the princess, who orders the child baptized, a procedure that successfully renders it human. At this point she tells the Sultan that he has and will have no right to or influence over the child unless he converts to Christianity; he does so, and his skin—which has only after the child's transformation been described as "blac" (l. 799)—becomes "al white…þurth Godes gras" [all white through God's grace] (l. 929). Here the poem turns to a mass conversion narrative; the Christians held captive in the sultan's dungeons are released, and "þritti þousende" of his subjects are forced to convert or be slaughtered (l. 1225).

I contend—in this chapter especially, but throughout this dissertation—that romance frequently functions *as* a kind of virtual space for public conflict: e.g., that romance offers intimate scenes which hold in tension those large-scale, multiplicative, conflicting futures. Brian Massumi says of the virtual that it is "a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect; where what cannot be experienced cannot but be felt."[4] Romance bustles continually through scenes of feeling, thick with possibility that never reaches fruition: it acts as a repository for all the coexistent political and historical alternatives that more programmatic literature is unwilling or unable to witness.

[4] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, N.C., 2002), p. 30.

Affective Transformation

As a way into the complex interactions of affective scenery on coexistent personal and national levels, consider another instance of transition in *Tars*. In the fourteenth stanza, we see the sultan's and the king's men riding into battle against each other: "Þe soudan com wiþ his pouwer, / Wiþ briȝt armour & brod baner / Into þe feld to fiȝt . . . þe king of Tars com wiþ his ost / Wiþ gret pride & michel bost / Wiþ mani an hardi kniȝt" [The sultan came with his force, with bright armor and broad banner, into the field to fight . . . the king of Tars came with his host, with great pride and great proclamation, with many a brave knight] (ll. 157–59, 163–65). The parallelism between the two armies is clearly established here. They share an aesthetic vocabulary of courtly strength, a connective culture of knightly valor despite their supposedly distinct ethnic identities.

However, in the next stanza, this connection is abruptly made asymmetric: "Þer hewe houndes on Cristen men / & feld hem doun bi niȝen & ten. / So wilde þai were & wode / þat men miȝt sen alle þe fen / Of Cristen boþe fremd & ken; / þe valays ren on blod" [There houndes hewed Christian men and cut them down by nine and ten; they were so wild and mad that men could see the field covered with Christians, both friends and relatives; the valleys ran with blood] (ll. 169–74). Here a distinction is drawn clearly between the (animal, alien, uncontrollable) Saracen troops and the (friendly, familial, vulnerable) Christian men. As soon as the battle is joined, the martial forces formerly recognizable as all belonging to a shared ethic of knighthood are transformed into the good and the bad; the sympathetic and the predatory; the innocent and the violent. This transformation is *seemingly* instantaneous: there is no negotiation, no process of transition. One moment the reader is marvelling at the sameness of the forces, the next he is acknowledging their opposition and coding them as fundamentally disjunct figures.

What brings about this change? Obviously, the events of the story bring it about—the entrance into battle transforms the participants into two sides rather than one shining array. But what, narratively, enjoins the shift in the narrator and reader's perception of those figures, and how is it manifest on the page? What is transformed is not action but affect: clearly, it was already a given that the two sides would be fighting each other, but the *affect* of that fighting is distinct for characters, for narrator, and for reader. One side is imagined as fighting with violence in the form of madness, brutality, indiscriminate gesture and bodily attrition; the very language is excessive to the point of incoherence—how would "houndes" "hewe"? The other side is vulnerable, attacked, civil in the face of animality—"Cristen men," "fremd & ken," shedding blood in the peaceful "valays."

Such moments of inexplicable change, where narrative demands rather than apparently organic alteration govern a shift in event, are sometimes cited as an instant of romance's artistic failures: of the way that romance's authors cannot depict as organic a motion ordered by the requirements of plot. I contend, however, that such abruptness indicates rather a different order of priorities; an interest in the possibility of affective differentiation rather than of attempted mimesis. The mode of this sort of transition is affective change, an alteration of atmosphere that mediates between different sorts of subjects. And such transitions are focalized throughout *Tars*. On the one hand, characters are cast as predictable and knowable human subjects, to be depicted and understood in the context of conversation, personal emotion, and belief; on the other, they are categorizable in the contexts of national motion, as didactic forces that portray a nation or race's class of selfhood and contribute to the large-scale forces of history. A scene like that of the princess's dream casts in dramatic relief the interpellative importance of affect: the princess shakes with arousal, neither fear nor desire but both at once, or a material condition that

anticipates either, as she witnesses an allegorical scene that casts her as lover, supplicant, and savior, confronted with a figure simultaneously familiar, threatening, and cosmically powerful, inhabiting many narratives united by sensation.

In her introduction to *Critical Inquiry*'s special issue on "Intimacy," Lauren Berlant describes the relation between the collective and the personal as one of scaled intimacy, where intimacy describes a set of attachments that "links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective." Though we think of intimacy as interpersonal, constrained to small groups, Berlant emphasizes its capacity to inflect public as well as private experience, and indeed the artificiality of a distinction between public and private: by defusing that distinction, critics can begin to produce more generous narratives, "transformative analyses of the rhetorical and material conditions that enable hegemonic fantasies to thrive in the minds and on the bodies of subjects."[5] Intimacy—like the "cruel optimism" Berlant describes elsewhere—functions as an alibi to naturalize the fantasies that duplicate and reinforce normative structure, and to defer those desires and relations that fail to fit.

In *Tars*, the rubric of "intimacy" helps us to understand the relation between the interpersonal and the dynastic, the terms of the changes that arbitrate between human and national conflict, conversation and war. Both of these are stages of intimacy—what is more intimate than killing men for their beliefs? But they are interactions imagined very differently, and the interpersonal is corralled as structural motivation for the national. In order to demonstrate the ways that articulations of potential in *Tars* slide from the personal to the dynastic, I analyze four moments in the poem that theorize the relation between intimate affect and historical contingency. The first is the sultan's marriage proposal, which illustrates the

[5] Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue," *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Winter 1998): 283, 286.

centrality of the household—the space of intimate, interpersonal affect—to the romance. The second is the scene of the princess's dream, which picks up the fraught atmospheres of domestic space and demonstrates their capacity to produce multiplicitous and complex scenes of affective possibility. The final two are the paired transformations of the lump baby and the sultan, whose alterations carry out the active performance made available by the affective scene. I analyze the causal relation between the first two scenes' latent potentialities and the final two scenes' enacted material changes to show that the romance imagines the domestic space of the text as a virtual prosthesis for much larger change in the world. Taken together, the readings illustrate a process of narrative change that links the intensity of interpersonal possibility at the start of the poem to its sensualized depiction of transformation and finally to their activated national ramifications.

In *Tars*, the crux of the poem's dramatic action occurs around bodies, and particularly around those bodies' transformations. Two bodies—possibly three if we count that of the poem's princess-protagonist, transformed imaginatively by her false conversion—are transformed in the course of the text. They are transformed from possible forms to realized ones: the lump baby to a human boy child, and the ambiguous Sultan to indexically white Christian subject (and the princess from white Christian subject to hypothetical Saracen wife). The narrative shape of the poem heavily emphasizes the pre-transformational forms of these bodies: the poem moves, as it were, in a series of waves, gathering the social weight and potential of a body that cannot yet be understood, or defined, or mobilized, until finally a crucial turn illustrates the wave's crest and its dispersal, the ambivalent form's relapse into comprehensibility and categorization. At another moment in Massumi's articulation of the virtual, he uses this very analogy to depict its motion; "the virtual . . . cresting in a liminal realm of emergence, where half-actualized actions and

expressions arise like waves on a sea to which most no sooner return."[6] We might think of these oceanic changes in contrast to the illustrative diptych with which I began this chapter: though the poem's changes perform themselves as oppositions between one state and another (like the painted illustration), such shifts are in fact motivated by gathering affective force. The seemingly abrupt transformation from sameness to difference in the scene of the armies, for example, may look like a sudden alteration of identity; but in fact, it illustrates figures on a national scale altering in response to an affective dynamic, an undergirding *feeling* of difference or an anxiety that the text makes articulate in a changed characterization of the pertinent forces.

Critics have long been convinced that *Tars* represents a crucial illustration of English medieval moral attitudes toward conflict and identity: that it justifies the ideological brutality of the crusades and of large-scale racial prejudice. It's impossible to argue that *Tars* does not engage with a space of ethics, of moralization. It is a story, ostensibly, of the formation of the perfect Christian family on both an interpersonal and a national level. But it is also not the case that the attitude *Tars* illustrates toward the problems of personal responsibility, of belief, of identity and witnessing is a simple one, expressing only the righteous triumph of Westernized religious and racial conquest. The very structure of romance entails a stretching out, a torturous dilation of event that makes it nearly impossible to read these texts as endorsing any simple articulation of event and process, let alone of ideologically transparent propaganda. The changes bodies undergo in the text are satisfying, but they are violent. The poem emphatically dramatizes the trauma of change and the losses enacted by categorization. Even as the wave's crest represents a release of surface tension that produces a sudden flattening into manageable,

[6] Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, p. 31 (a reading of Henry Bergson).

manipulable space, its shape—the shape of anticipation, of the possibility of unlimited, uninhibited growth and perpetual change—is destroyed.

It's my hypothethesis that affect theory has something to say about the way that the personal and the political converge in romance, and moreover that romance has something to say about the way that affect mediates between the personal and political. By "the political," here, I mean the large-scale ideological forces that seem to shape historic event; by "the personal," I mean smaller-scale interactions or forces amongst individual characters or actual people. Ultimately, the two fields are scalar, and coedependent; as Berlant notes, intimacy is both large- and small-scale, and affective modes manage effects along these scales. Affect is the convergence that operates in and around bodies, agents, actors: it is the subtle shading of desire into event, and atmosphere into activity. In an interview with Mary Zournazi, Brian Massumi delineates the ethical dimensions of affect as follows: "Ethics . . . is situational. It's completely pragmatic. And it happens between people, in the social gaps. . . . The ethical value of an action is what it brings out in the situation, for its transformation, how it breaks sociality open." Massumi writes of "social gaps," of the way that affect can allow us to interpretively inhabit the space in and around determinate event; "good" and "bad" can exist independent of "good and evil," where the not-bad is defined solely in terms of potential, in terms of maximizing the scene of possibility: the crucial scene, Massumi notes, is one of "becoming."[7] For *Tars* the fundamental sources of this tension, this potential, this forward motion shaped by possibility, are political. Not political in the baldly exegetical sense of a narrative crafted to illustrate racial propaganda, but political in the sense of a deep interrogation of the shapes of polity and individuality, the

[7] Brian Massumi, *The Politics of Affect* (Malden, Mass., 2015), p. 11, 11, 12.

question of how power relations harness and transform personal tendency and desire into large-scale social edifice.

Intimate Potential

As a way into the entanglement of the personal and the historical, we might begin by thinking about the ways *Tars* imagines and engages domestic space. Romance is deeply invested in the domestic, but *Tars* imagines the noble household as fundamentally a space of plot as few other romances do. The "domestic" can mean, of course, both the internal engagements of a nation and the more diminutive internality of a household: as D. Vance Smith notes, "Even before the fourteenth century the national economy had been, for all practical and symbolic purposes, a household—the specific one belonging to the king."[8] I call on both meanings to suggest the way in which the problematized human scale of *Tars* is visible from its setting in spaces of habitation and domestic interaction. Other romances I've discussed have of course incorporated interpersonal event; the dramatic sacrifice of Amadace's wife or the battle between Degaré and his unknown father are certainly personal experience. They are articulated, though, via epic scenery, instances of large-scale social motion acting upon human figures and playing out on national stages. *King of Tars* illustrates, in a way, the opposite: the unsettling way that human decisions and attitudes inform historic force, or at least the deeply embedded relation of the personal in the historical. For *Tars*, the household is a fantasy space, one where personal interaction bears witness to the multiplicity of possibility. In the inconsequentially small scale of the domestic, national possibility is defused: blasphemous conversion, animal rage, the

[8] D. Vance Smith, *Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary* (Minneapolis, 2003), p. 2

redemptive futurity of intercultural marriage and birth can play out on an experimental personal scale before their ramifications animate national violence.

This fantasy of the household as a space of the virtual, set apart from and anticipating dynastic consequence, looks different in *Tars* from other romances. *Havelok*, *Amadace*, and *Degaré* are romances of dispossession: they feature a hero who is deprived of his home and homeland, and sets out to regain it. Home, the fatherland, the motherland, the domestic as nation, is the *substance* of their plots. The motion of these narratives is a return. (And many critics have noted the rich genealogy of the romance of return, especially in relation to *Havelok* and *Horn*; Northrop Frye has gone so far as to suggest that it is one of the fundamental shapes of romance.)[9] *Tars*, on the other hand, is a romance of invasion or of expansion; for *Tars*, the motion of the romance is the spread of the household's potential outward into the world. It is something like what Leila K. Norako, in her work especially on *Sir Isumbras*, has described as a "recovery romance"[10] and is—as Geraldine Heng notes—one of a group of romances, which she categorizes as the Constance group, that specifically feature a woman whose miscegenative journey to a foreign land results in conversion and the instantiation of a sort of home away from

[9] "Here," David Staines wrote of *Havelok*, "was a vivid example of the male Cinderella motif, the young orphan deprived of his kingdom and unaware of his regal parentage" (Staines, "Havelok the Dane: A Thirteenth-Century Handbook for Princes," *Speculum* 51 (Oct. 1976): 602). Frye says of the story of Apollonius and by extension romance in general: "The story proceeds toward an end which echoes the beginning, but echoes it in a different world" (Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture* [Cambridge, Mass., 1978], p. 49).

[10] "Within the genre of crusades romance, I argue for a subcategory of 'recovery romance' whose texts revolve around desires to reclaim the Holy Land and recover from historical trauma." Though *King of Tars* does not depict a reclamation of "the Holy Land" as such, it does evince a desire for an establishment of Christianized society so as to, perhaps, enlarge the category of habitable national space for Christian characters; it "projects," as Norako argues of *Isumbras*, "an idealized an universal version of Christianity that can, by means of its cohesion, permanently defeat Islam" (Leila K. Norako, "*Sir Isumbras* and the Fantasy of Crusade," *The Chaucer Review* 48, no. 2 [2013]: 167).

home. These women make the exotic over in their own image, rendering the world their home.[11] They are explicitly engaged with the transposition of a domestic motif onto a world stage—with bringing their performances of Christianity to a distant land and forcing its citizens to mimic that performed belief. *Tars* in particular, though, is noticeably distinct from the romances categorized here in two significant ways.

First of all, most of the action takes place within the walls of the private (though noble) household. There are grotesque and elaborate battle scenes and journeys, but—unlike Norako's crusade romances or Heng's romances that mostly feature shipwrecked heroines adrift on the sea—they are all grounded in or bounded by the familiar insularity of domestic space. Messengers seek out kings and sultans in their homes and return with messages for other kings and sultans, to be read in their palaces; the princess of Tars journeys to marry the sultan, but her journey takes up almost no space in the text, whereas her experiences in the rooms she inhabits in her father's and husband's castles swell disproportionately large in a poem that skips lightly over landscapes of carnage. Secondly, it is that space of domesticity that enables and motivates the action of the world beyond. In Heng's Constance cycle, princesses are embattled and embroiled in social forces beyond their control, escaping only by virtue of losing their way—"they are victimized by the machinations of unjust authority and set adrift together, away from English shores, alone on the vast, vast sea: a poignant, floating tableau of twinned human connection in its earliest, primary moment, around which emotion strategically collects" (*EM*, p.

[11] "Wherever she goes—her narrative has two parts, two locales, in the East and in the West—the lovely innocent (whom I will call 'Constance,' though she also has other names) sets in motion a chain of events that culminates in the Christianization of a local populace and the disruption of local families, including the royal family that she re-creates as a new family system through Christianization" (Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* [New York, 2003], p. 181; hereafter abbreviated *EM*).

182). In Norako's crusade romances and dynastic romances like *Havelok* or *Degaré*, the force of the narrative is the impulsion back "home," toward a space of loss and regeneration: "*Isumbras* . . . gazes both outwards toward a recovered Holy Land and expanded Christendom, and inwards toward the ideal of a (re)united Europe and an individual's recovered soul."[12] In *Tars*, there is no separately articulated originary space: the domestic forms the static space of the narrative in beginning, middle, and end. The princess moves amongst insular spaces, but never beyond them; she does not seek to return home, but rather to make the wider world resemble her home.

King of Tars begins with rumor—a rumor that links kingdoms. Despite the distance and religious or cultural division between Tars and "Dames" (Damascus), the two kingdoms are at least similar enough to engage in dialogue about a possible marital alliance.[13] Jeffrey J. Cohen has argued that the figure of the "Saracen" in medieval text is "an abjected and fantasmatic body produced through category violation in order to demarcate the limits of the Christian possible": the imagined bodies of Saracens in romance and other texts tell us more about their self-consciously Christian authors than they ever do about real populations or people ("OSE," p. 121). Thus right from the start of the romance the supposedly "Cristen" and "Sarazin" characters are intimately conjoined by the very possibility of their alliance: the "soudan" lives in a land in close enough proximity and cultural relation to Tars to hear of the princess (ll. 4, 43, 19–21). The daughter of the king of Tars is famed far and wide for her beauty, not just in her own land, but

[12] Norako, "*Sir Isumbras* and the Fantasy of Crusade," p. 176.
[13] The titular "Tars" of the poem, John Chandler notes, is a "fictional Christian kingdom in the Orient" (*The King of Tars*, ed. John H. Chandler [Kalamazoo, Mich., 2015], p. 54, note 7). Judith Perryman points out, "By *Tars* [the poet] may indeed have meant 'Tartars', or 'the land of the Tartars', but there is a second possibility, that he intended *Tarsus*, the port in Armenia Minor" (p. 47). Regardless of precise geographies, the name "Tars" is used in this and other romances to suggest a nation that is unfamiliar and yet relatable; exotic, but comfortably Christian and thus an acceptable avatar for the reader.

“in oþer londes bi ich a side” [in other lands on every side], and word of her virtue (she is not just beautiful, but chaste) reaches the sultan of Dames (Damascus), who “þouȝt his hert it brast ofiue, / But ȝif he miȝt haue hir to wiue” [thought his heart would burst into five pieces unless he had her as a wife] (ll. 20, 22–23). He calls for messengers, “& bad hem wiȝtly wenden alle / To hir fader þe king” [and bade them all quickly go to her father, the king] (ll. 26–27) to demand her hand in marriage. The king of Tars is enraged by the sultan’s approaches, and “wex ner wode” [became nearly mad], but resolves to ask his daughter what she thinks; she is “brouȝt in plas” [brought to that place] (ll. 38, 50) to give her opinion.

This may seem like a fairly conventional exchange. But note what is implied in it: first, that though the Saracen sultan is distinct from the Christian king, he is not so distinct as to find the rumor of the Christian princess’s beauty unappealing, or to be unable to issue a diplomatic request for a union; second, that the alignment of the two kingdoms and the castles whence rumor and messages issue within them brings the similarity of the two populations into immediate focus. The kingdoms are, presumably, some distance apart, but the messengers’ journeys are elided, the two spaces presented as nearly simultaneous; again, the affective exchange looks like an instant of barely mediated transformation. In this passage, at least, the travel between different spaces tapers in breadth: first the rumors travel abroad to lands on every side, then the messengers travel specifically from Dames to Tars, and then the princess travels from room to room (presumably, though we have little information about where the “plas” is). The progress of this passage and its description of the poem’s spaces methodically reduces the distance between its framing scenes, until travel is as intimate as the stroll from one room to another.

Romance as a genre, I noted in discussions of *Sir Degaré* and *Havelok the Dane*, is at least partly about marital exchange and exogamy. In romance, marriage is the mechanism by which cultural interaction occurs; it is the impetus, if not the sole form, for messages and conversation among farflung lands. In these early lines of *King of Tars,* we witness some of the mechanism of that interaction—of the conversation among nations instituted by the possibility of exogamous contracts. The messengers kings and sultans send amongst themselves are merely a medium for a prolonged and consequential arbitration over marital rights. The princess's reply—that she will not marry a "tirant" [tyrant, though presumably here the dictatorial implications of that word are expanded by the valence of "barbarian" or "other"]—is transmitted to the king, and thence back to the messengers, who convey it to the sultan; "wiþ þat word þai turned oȝain / & to þe soudan þai went" [with that word they turned again and to the sultan they went] (ll. 63, 83–84). Though the governments are separated by space and intermediaries, they are in dialogue, and the depiction of royal households as spaces of interactive dialogue is not necessarily conventional in romance. Smith claims that "the household is the setting of the fourteenth-century romance in two important ways"; first, it is "the initiating space…the first scene and the narrative's initial problematic" (as we have certainly seen) and second, that it is "the appropriate space for the performance or enjoyment of other romances.[14] In *Tars,* perhaps atypically, the household is not just the initiating scene or the concluding goal (as it is in the other three romances I've described) but the literal stage for the romance's fundamental conflicts: it is the place where contingent narrative motion happens.

The messengers' interaction with the sultan features the first specific depiction of domestic routine that the reader witnesses. And this image of domestic routine is also an image

[14] Smith, *Arts of Possession*, p. 5.

of the transformative power of affect: within this homely scene, the sultan transforms from human to beast, and the reader's perception of him as civil conversational partner and potential agent of exchange shifts abruptly to a vision of the sultan as a powerful, uncontrollable animal force. As the sultan "sat at his des, / Yserued of þe first mes" [sat on his dais, being served the first course], the messengers reenter the hall and kneel before him (ll. 85–86). Their message renders the sultan animal in his rage; "Also a wilde bore he ferd. . . . & loked as a lyoun" [He acted like a wild boar. . . . And looked like a lion] (ll. 98, 105). The abrupt transition in these lines from civilized feudal lord to roaring beast illustrates the poet's effortful depiction of the sultan as both sympathetic and monstrous: it illustrates the sudden overflow of his affective presence. It also depicts, though, an unlikely intimacy of long-distance communication: despite the distances traversed by the ambassadors, the result is immediate. The sultan acts as though he is participating directly in an argument, confronted by his enemy, and the immediacy of his anger takes the form of destructive action. He strikes the table so hard it "fel into þe flore fot-hot" [fell to the floor quickly (literally, foot-hot)] and "al þat he rauȝt he smot doun riȝt — / Seriaunt, squier, clerk, & kniȝt, / Boþe erl & baroun" [all that he touched he struck down, servant, squire, clerk, and knight, both earl and baron] (ll. 104, 106–08). The sultan's rage is violent and personal, not political: he does not (immediately) dispatch his armies, but lashes out at furniture and companions. Personal rage produces national interaction.

In this scene, the sultan's small-scale destruction models large-scale intervention, anticipating the brisk and ruthless national assault that gains him the object of his desire. In the following lines the sultan calls his barons to a parliament in which he declares war on the king of Tars, but this national imperative is dictated by a conversational anger produced by his interaction with the king, whose immediacy transcends the circumstances of messengers

traveling great distances as go-betweens. Political decisions are motivated in this scene solely by personal desire, by the fear that his "hert" will "brast." And the princess's response occurs in the same way: Though the sultan sends his armies to acquire the princess, she is not in fact won on the battlefield. Rather, worn down by attritional battle, the princess approaches her father the king "in his halle" to declare her acquiescence, "for me haþ mani men ben schent" [on my behalf, many men have been killed] (ll. 217, 226). By the end of the poem, in contrast, the genocidal motion of imposed conversion is motivated by a desire for conversion itself, for the national event it orders: in a final conversation, the sultan takes the priest by the hand and asks him to visit the king of Tars, to "do him al to vnderstond / Hou Ihesu Crist, þurth his sond, / Haþ brouȝt hem out of care" [make him understand how Jesus Christ, through his belief, has brought him out of worry] (ll. 964–66). In the course of the poem, the focus of action shifts from an emphasis on individual desire to a larger-scale desire for national change—a horrifying desire for coercive change, yes, but nonetheless in the poem's terms a utopian one. Even in its initiating scenes, then, part of the force of the household as scene in *Tars* lies in its position as the setting for personal affects with national consequences.

Bare Affect

After the marriage takes place, the princess's dream offers a concurrent model for the interaction of personal and national affect. Like the sultan, she experiences erotic frustration and sublimates that frustration into personal interaction fraught with national implications: she performs a conversion to the Sultan's religion in order to produce his acquiescence to their marriage. In so doing, she transmutes the potentiality of her own household—her marriage—into a scene of hypothetically altered belief. She imagines the Sultan's potential transformation into

the ideal Christian knight and responds to this fantasy by performing her own transformation into the ideal pagan lady. The dream, then, initiates a sequence of reciprocal hypotheticals that sets the stage for both the Sultan's "real" conversion and the transformation of the lump into a child: it sets up a persistent model of the household as a staging ground for material change. The dream, the experimental appeals to both spouses' deities, the lump child itself, all are instances of the virtual world of the household, scenes in which historical efforts are first realized as possibilities in the space of the domestic.

After the sultan refuses to consummate their marriage, the princess dreams that a black hound chasing her transforms to a knight clad in white and promises her Jesus's support. The poem stages this event for us in the terms of imaginative extension: "Wel loþe war a Cristen man / To wedde an heþen woman," the poet proclaims, ". . . Also loþ was þat soudan / To wed a Cristen woman" [Just as loth as a Christian man would be to wed a heathen woman . . . so loth was the sultan to wed a Christian woman] (ll. 409–10, 412–13). The episode begins with this intimation of hypothetical sameness, of empathic identification between the readers' fantasy of a Christian man and the sultan. Having cast the two religious identities as parallel, both scenes of a subject desiring a partner from whom he is separated by belief, the poet primes the reader to cross distinctions of gender as well as religion: to furtively inhabit the princess's hypothetical desire for the sultan, as well as his for her. "Þat miri maiden litel slepe," the poem goes on, "Bot al niȝt wel sore sche wepe" [That lovely maid slept little, but wept sorely all night] (ll. 417–18). Though a straight reading of the poem—the reading imagined, perhaps, by adherents to an account of the poem as ideological propaganda—might understand the princess's tears as a result of fear, the foregoing lines cast them at least possibly as frustrated desire.

And this section of the poem is all about possibility, about the virtual worlds created by desire and performance. Exhausted by weeping, the princess falls asleep and sees before her "An hundred houndes blake . . . & on þer was that greued hir sore, / Oway þat wald hir take" [a hundred black hounds; and one [in particular] that grieved her sore, that wished to take her away] (ll. 423–26). As she flees the supposedly menacing black hound, he turns to a man "þurth miȝt of Ihesu" and reassures her [through Jesus's might] (l. 449).[15] The scene of the princess's dream holds in careful tension erotic desire and fear. The princess's "drede" [dread] and her

[15] As these lines are seemingly disputed—and dependent on punctuation and interpretation for their meaning—fuller analysis might be useful. Perryman's edition reads:

Als sche lay in hir sweuening . . .	As she lay in her dream . . .
þat blac hounde hir was folweing	That black hound [that] was following her
þurth miȝt of Ihesu, heuen king,	Through the power of Jesus, heaven's king
Spac to hir in manhede,	Spoke to her in manhood
In white cloþes, als a kniȝt,	In white clothes like a knight
& seyd to hir, "Mi swete wiȝt,	And said to her, "My sweet one,
No þarf þe noþing drede . . . [Ll. 446–53]	You shall dread nothing . . .

There is an ambivalence in these lines caused by a missing relative pronoun in line 448 (missing from Auchinleck, at least; Perryman notes that in Vernon and Simeon the line reads "þe blac hounde þat hir was folweing") but even without precision in that clause, the lines do *not* suggest that Jesus himself is present, as many readers have assumed. Chandler comments in his note to lines 446–48 (*his* lines 446–48; Chandler's lineation is slightly different from Perryman's, but this is the same passage he describes), "Christ here appears in the guise of a knight. This widespread image appears in the *Gesta Romanorum* . . . among other places." However, the line itself suggests that through Jesus's "might," the hound already present in the dream takes on the appearance of a knight in order to convey Jesus's support to the princess/dreamer. Christ himself does not appear in the dream; the image of Jesus as "lover-knight," as in the article by Rosemary Woolf that Chandler cites (Woolf, "The Theme of Christ the Lover-Knight in Medieval English Literature," *The Review of English Studies* 13 [Feb. 1962]), is indeed evoked by these lines, but only by the shape into which the hound transforms to speak.

This seemingly confused sequence of events is not a product of troubled transcription in Auchinleck. The other manuscripts resolve the confusion by inserting "þat," but even if we accept the elision of the relative pronoun in line 448 and insert a conjunction to force grammatical sense from the line (so making "was folweing" a predicate of the main clause rather than of an intercessant adjectival clause), the sentence's now-compound predicates "was folweing" and "spac" must still refer back to the "hounde" as their subject, not to Ihesu, who is firmly embedded as the object of two nested prepositional phrases: "þurth miȝt" "of Ihesu." That said, the tendency toward grammatical slippage between the hound, his transformed body, and

"sweuening" [dream, vision] look increasingly hard to define as discomfort, as the poem's language moves steadily from clearly delineated markers of emotional distress to more ambigous affective signs; her swoon, the poet remarks, is "selcouþe . . . to rede" [strange to recount], and when she wakes, "wel sore sche quaked, / For loue of her sweuening. / On hir bed sche sat al naked" [she quaked a great deal for love of her dream. On her bed she sat completely naked] (ll. 428, 446, 447, 458–60).[16] The Vernon and Simeon manuscripts of *Tars* emphasize the voyeuristic nature of this moment by transposing Auchinleck's "preier" with "mone"—"To Ihesu hir mone sche maked"—but also come down heavily on the side of anxiety rather than arousal by repeating "drede"; "Hire flesch iwis was al aquaked / For drede of her sweuening" (see Perryman's notes on stanza 39). The other manuscripts, then, align more closely with the language of something like Heng's "sexual martyrdom" than Auchinleck, which makes subtler use of a vocabulary of excitation disjunct from, or deliberately overdetermined by, its emotional intent. As the dream progresses, the poet emphasizes the princess's physical responses rather than her emotional state, drawing the reader's attention to the uncomfortable impossibility of dividing fear from arousal—indeed, both states of arousal, simply with different causes or

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the figure of Ihesu is not coincidental at all: the sentence deliberately associates the three in a tricky rhetorical alliance, even as it never quite allows the reader to collapse Ihesu himself into the conjoined figure of hound and knight.

[16] Though it's complementary rather than essential to the meaning of the passage, it seems worth noting the near-homophonic relation of the princess's "sweuening"—a noun meaning a dream or vision—and its root "sweven"—a verb meaning to sleep, recline, dream, etc—to the verb "swīven," meaning to copulate. The *Middle English Dictionary* notes the first copied instance of "swīven" at the close of Chaucer's "Cook's Tale" [c. 1390] (the "wyf" who "swyved for hir sustenance," l. 4422), but it's not hard to believe that it was extant in spoken English significantly earlier. Given the existing innuendo of the princess's "quaking for love of her swevening, naked on her bed," such a linguistic inflection would render the poem not just suggestive but overtly vulgar.

content. What defines the princess's dream is how she or the reader interpret her affect: not the form of the affect itself.

When the princess awakes from her dream, she asks that the sultan "Teche me now & lat me here / Hou y schal make mi preiere / When ich on hem bileue" [Teach me now and let me hear how I should make my prayer when I believe in them (e.g., the gods of her husband)] (ll. 484–86). Her dream has authorized what the poem insists is the *performance*, not the reality, of conversion—"Ihesu forȝat sche nouȝt" [she did not forget Jesus], the poet assures us (l. 507). At the same time, such assurance has little force in the face of the problems of thought and act that the moment presents. What is the substance of religious belief? Is it truly a matter of belief, or of action?[17] What is the value or validity of "remembering" Jesus if the princess "couþe" "al þe lawes . . . / And seyd hem openliche wiþ hir mouþe" [knew all the laws and said them openly/outwardly/out loud with her mouth] (ll. 505–6)? Regardless of her interior state, the princess is living the life of a Saracen woman; she dresses as a Saracen wife, professes belief in the sultan's deities, knows the names and laws of his faith. As Jamie Friedman notes, "While a professed charade, her conversion—longer and more detailed than the Sultan's or than in any other analog—nonetheless appropriates her whole being, mind and body, interior and exterior, and leaves no part of her untouched."[18] Critics have, however, generally accepted that the poem successfully dispels anxiety over the apparent thoroughness of this transformation; "Unless we wish to misread events as the Soudan does," Calkin notes, "we must accept that the Princess is

[17] This is obviously a much larger question, much discussed particularly in a theological rather than a romance context.

[18] Jamie Friedman, "Making Whiteness Matter: The King of Tars," *postmedieval* 6 (Apr. 2015): 57.

still essentially, in some way, Christian."[19] But the space of uncertainty opened up by this moment—by the way that the poem shows its reader one thing, but proclaims another to be occurring—emphasizes and changes the reader's own structures of faith, problematizing the seeming transparency of the poetic event.

This performance of Saracen belief makes pointed the romance's interest in the mechanisms of possibility specifically in relation to religion. For the sultan, the princess's actions transparently indicate her interior state; for the reader and the poet, her actions are intended as irrelevant beside her interiority. Other moments in the poem, however, suggest that religious *belief* is secondary to the assertions and activity that demonstrate it: no one asks the multitude of Saracens at the end of the poem about their understanding of Christ, if they do submit to conversion. The mismatch between conditions of conversion for the princess and conditions of conversion for her Saracen subjects (and the sultan as well) might indicate the fundamental disjunction between the treatment of Saracen and Christian characters that disproves their seeming relationality at the start of the poem (e.g., the sultan's unwillingness to marry a Christian woman, just as a Christian man might be unwilling to marry a Saracen). It also, however, confirms the problem of coexistent and expansive narrative space in the text.

What I mean by this is that the rupture between depicted event and asserted meaning fundamentally alters the reader's resources for understanding future events in the poem. The problem of belief is directly invoked by the princess's dream—a dream prominently featuring bodily affects impossible to interpret definitively as fear or lust, merely articulable as *arousal*, and so an indisputable scene of the body's relation to possibility, not certainty. Material events

[19] Siobhain Bly Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity* (New York, 2005), p. 112; hereafter abbreviated *SM*.

can no longer be taken to represent narrative truths: and so, in the dream's aftermath, the princess performs the business of being nonchristian, even as the poem strenuously asserts her continuing internal Christian devotion. We are now thrown entirely onto the poet's assertions to understand the true progress of events. And as Calkin notes, the sultan's interpretation of events fundamentally differs from the reader's: two narratives now coexist within the poem, the reader's—presumed to coincide with the poet's, which matches the princess's—and the sultan's. But because these narratives are initially presented on equal footing—in the sultan's portrayal as "Als loþ" to marry a Christian woman as a Christian man might be to marry a "heþen woman"—the sultan's perspective retains weight and persistent value, despite its divergence from the poet's. Further, by performing conversion, the princess grants the sultan's narrative primacy, if not truth, within the space of the poem.

In the series of nondefinitive hypotheticals introduced by the princess's dream, then, the poem lingers in the pleasures of what escapes its propagandistic intentions. Why *does* the princess perform conversion? The poem does not answer this question directly. Critics have taken the dream to convey—as the poem seems to expect—Christ's *permission* for the princess to apostasize in order to . . . establish marital harmony? Why? Surely if the poem is analyzed according to the model of, as Heng proposes, the Constance stories, even or especially considering Griselda as a variant, a Christian princess should be delighted that her heathen husband is unwilling to consummate their marriage, or subject her to—as *Tars* cheerfully avers—his animal appetites. The sultan is a "hounde," a "wilde bore," a "lyoun" (ll. 93, 98, 105); Friedman, e.g., sums up the poem's characterization of the sultan as "wild, dog-like, and sexually predatory."[20] In the Constance romances broadly speaking, Christian princesses are effectively

[20] Friedman, "Making Whiteness Matter," p. 57.

martyred by sexual subjugation to heathen appetites; as Heng notes, "The hagiographic aura of the Constance romances…makes her feminized crusade over into a kind of sexual martyrdom…a martyrdom akin to the sufferings endured by heroines in hagiography who have no desire of their own but are sacrificed to the desire of others" (*EM*, p. 189). In theory, the sexual animality of the Saracen body is an added dimension of its monstrosity or distasteful intervention into the world of Christianized literary bodies.

It would be naïve, of course, to assume that such "sexual predation" is uncomplicatedly repellent. The titillation of the Constance romance is one of the threat of violation, the imminently menacing animal body that disrupts the princess's purity or sanctity. The Saracen body in romance is a body fantasized for its brutality both as an object of violence and as one of uncompromising sensuality; naming a body as Saracen permits a narrative, in many cases, to allow it a frankness of desire that is refused to a white body. In *Sir Isumbras,* for example, the "Sawdon" that Isumbras encounters with his family is largely indistinguishable from a typical romance king; the poem intermittently refers to him, indeed, as a "kyng," and to his vassal as a "knyght."[21] What distinction does appear seems to be one of desire and its articulation: the Sawdon is overcome by the beauty of both Isumbras and his wife, "hym rewyd sore, / So fayre as they bothe wore, / That they ne were clothid a-ryght" [he sorely rued, as lovely as they both were, that they were dressed so poorly] ("SI," 247–49). The Sawdon's observation reminds us that Isumbras's family have been stripped of their clothes as a result of his debt; they were naked and are now roughly clad in random bits of Isumbras's own clothing. His wife wears only her husband's cloak. The Sawdon's affective relation to Isumbras's family's insufficient clothing

[21] "Sir Isumbras," in *Four Middle English Romances: Sir Isumbras, Octavian, Sir Eglamour of Artois, Sir Tryamour*, ed. Harriet Hudson (Kalamazoo, Mich., 2006), l. 232; hereafter abbreviated "SI."

authorizes the reader's titillation; the audience is forced to envision Isumbras and his wife scantily clad, perhaps with glimpses of bare limbs, and this voyeuristic relation is permissible because couched as a Saracen perspective. Isumbras's perspective, on the contrary, is rigidly moralistic, unswayed by visual desire: when the Sawdon asks him to join their brotherhood, Isumbras "sawgh an hethene man he was; / 'Sere,' he sayde, 'nay! / God wolde that nevere more / That I gayn Crystyndome wore'" ['Sir,' he said, 'no! God wants/may God allow that I will never in future be against Christendom'] ("SI," 258–60). The difference between Isumbras's uncompromising recognition of a Christian/heathen dichotomy and the Sawdon's fellow-feeling in response to physical beauty suggests a generally maintained literary distinction between Saracen and Christian in the terms of sensual susceptibility.

Tars refuses simple characterization along these lines, insisting—as few of the Constance tales do—on the complex interplay of desire and distance between the princess and her Saracen husband. Though the sultan marries the princess after hearing of her beauty, he rejects intimate action on the grounds of her religion. The princess, by contrast, seems unexpectedly crestfallen at her new husband's rejection; she "litel slepe, / Bot al night wel sore sche wepe" [slept little, but wept grievously all night] (ll. 418–19). The appearance of the dramatically Christian knight figure in her dream is generally understood to authorize the princess to perform her conversion to the Saracen faith, and his transformation from the black hound to foreshadow or presage the sultan's transformation from Saracen to Christian, black to white. But the dynamics of enjoyment in the scene of the princess's dream are not so simply assimilated to Saracen dangers and Christian joys: the poet delicately balances the titillating danger of the "black hound" against the permissible attractions of the "white knight." Her fear with regard to the hound is "þat he wald hir bite," but in fact if we are to imagine the hound as analogous to her husband the sultan,

he has already declared his intent *not* to "bite" her (l. 428). His "maistri," then, or strength, or power, begins to look less like a threat and more like an attraction, the ability to bite or otherwise overpower restrained by moral judgment (l. 429). Such a reading, further, subtly but significantly alters the subsequent change of black hound to white knight: if the hound was already an eroticized object not just as a threat (as in other Constance stories) but by virtue of its (or his) strength and restraint, then the Christic knight's white garments and reassurance only makes visible an erotic prospect that was already embedded in the form of the dog. This understanding confirms the ambivalence of the erotic in other Constance stories as well; as Cohen notes, "racist representations inevitably conjoin desire and disgust"; the prospect of expunging the messy complications of the white Christian body, fantasized now as the blank default, onto othered and racialized bodies marks those bodies as a site of titillation as much as of abjection ("OSE," p. 119).

This transformation—the transformation of dog to knight, and the subsequent transformation of the princess from Christian to (at least seeming) Saracen—takes place, we might note, on the princess's and the sultan's wedding night. Though consummation in the physical sense does not take place, the marriage bed does prove to be a zone of change, of amendment by intimacy. The princess goes to bed the night after her marriage and undergoes an experience of bodily intimacy that changes her actions, if not (we are told) her beliefs. Auchinleck's ambiguous iteration of the princess's dream and its outcome suggests the affective weight of the poem's indeterminate spaces. The emotive burden of the princess's dream and her wedding night is nonspecific and overdetermined; she feels neither simple fear or straightforward pleasure, she *feels*. Such a space of nondeterminate affect is a productive space, and one whose persistence provides a nuanced look at the complexities of racialized discourse. The body of the

other is a pleasurable body both in its fantasized excesses and in its presentation of an opportunity to reject or curtail those excesses. And such intensity of pleasure and restriction resides not just in the body of the other but in the body of the subject delimited by the other's body.

Tars makes particular use of the blurred and euphemized spaces of otherness to explore the intimate enjoyment of colonized or converted bodies. And marriage, the household, is the space in which it does so, because marriage is already a space of transformed bodies, of bodies merging and changing shape, productive bodies conjoined in a space that changes them both literally (in the form of pregnancy) and legally, economically, culturally. The space of difference provides an ideal setting for a story about the strangenesses and transformations produced by marital intimacy—even as we recognize that the poem maintains and delights in the performance of difference, insisting that union can only be a product of erasure (not coexistence). Romance, for the *Tars* poet, is a space of becoming: and affect is that threshold, that moment when concrete existing things are transformed by ontological change into other kinds of things or experiences.

Transformative Spaces

As I've obliquely noted above, critical accounts of *Tars* have frequently emphasized its conceptions of racial identity, reading the poem as an articulation of racial and cultural clash and division. Figuring as it does the "Saracen" in a moment of fluidity or transition that illustrates the simultaneity of cultural and biological signifiers, *King of Tars* presents an illuminating case study for critics interested in clarifying the expression and uses of racial distinction for a medieval author and audience. Moreover, the presence of the poem's most commonly cited

manuscript form in the Auchinleck manuscript of the 1330s or 1340s suggests its connection to concerns of nation and identity. Siobhain Bly Calkin notes in her book on the Auchinleck manuscript that the "otherness" of Saracen figures in Auchinleck "demands medieval English readers' consideration of what counts as cultural, ethnic, and religious difference, what is to be done about such difference, and how differences and borders between groups are to be negotiated" (*SM*, p. 7). Calkin's interest in *Tars* as an important illustration of medieval racial ideologies is broadly consistent with most recent critical attention to the poem.

Calkin asserts that "the text as a whole . . . explores the opposition of the categories of Saracen and Christian, troubles this opposition, pushes the collapse of division to its utmost point, and, having shown that collapse as a horror, forcibly re-inscribes the original differences" (*SM*, p. 128). She makes a connected point in an article that claims that the Sultan's "change of color actually constitutes a reactionary fantasy about the ways in which sociocultural affiliations may be read from people's bodies, and about the ease of categorizing and differentiating individuals."[22] Geraldine Heng, in a related move, proposes a reading of *King of Tars* as a response to or expansion of the Constance texts, an outlier that plays out rather than sidestepping the consequences of miscegenation or erotic clash between East and West. "The inescapable, explicit lesson in this representational script of hideous birth," she comments, "is that religion, which we had assumed to belong purely to the realm of culture, can shape and instruct biology: a startling logic suggesting that secreted within the theory of religious difference in this tale is also a theory of biological essences seemingly indivisible from religion" (*EM*, p. 228). For Heng, as for Calkin, the fundamental critical relevance of *Tars* is to discourses of medieval race and their

[22] Calkin, "Marking Religion on the Body: Saracens, Categorization, and 'The King of Tars,'" *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104, no. 2 (2005): 238.

complex conjointure of culture and materiality, or in other words, of what can be attested and what can be displayed on the body. Cohen, too, notes *King of Tars* as "a striking example of the inextricable *bodily* link between Saracen race and Saracen masculinity" ("OSE," p. 121). All these accounts turn to *Tars* as an example of a medieval text that reads the body as demonstrative of an internal state of belief, and they read that state primarily via the body of the Sultan; even Calkin, who notes that "the even more startling narrative events that precede [the Sultan's] change of color, namely . . . the birth of their child as a formless lump of flesh, complicate the text's apparent ease and simplicity of categorization," turns to the Sultan's conversion and attendant change in appearance as the solution to the problem posed by the text, an explanation or clarification of medieval fantasies about race, religion, and their respective visibility.[23]

All these accounts, however, index *Tars* as a portrait of medieval racial fantasy and bias, imagining that its complexities are explicable in the terms of ideological intent. Conflicted, nuanced, uncertain, the poem may be, but ultimately (most argue) it is written with the intent of valorizing colonization and Christianity. I am not sure, though, that the poem does (in Calkin's words) "show that collapse [of distinctions between Saracen and Christian] as a horror." In order to accept this premise we must accept that the lump baby *is* a "horror," a monster, something wrongly formed. Readers of the poem note quite rightly that it is engaged with matters of performatively biological alterity, but how exactly the lump baby is related to the dramatic transformation of the sultan's skin color is more variously understood. I contend that the sultan's transformation and the baby's cannot be read separately, or rather, that the two changes are intimately connected in a deeply revisionist account of potential and actuality: that the baby is an image of suspension, not of discord. According to the purported ideology of the poem, the sultan

[23] Calkin, "Marking Religion on the Body," p. 220.

as a Saracen is unworthy of a fully realized Christian child: thus, he cannot be recognized as a father until he has converted and transformed. Reading the two events in sequence requires a recognition of the possibility of reading backwards, an allowance that from a religious perspective, it is quite possible for a child to be born from a version of a character that does not yet exist (God's time is all time, in other words, and thus nonlinear). In this sequence of events, the child quite literally takes the form of the potential for the sultan's change: the child's transformation into a recognizably human infant is, in other words, a promise or anticipation of the sultan's related transformation, a prefigurement of the Christianized, utopic familial space the poem envisions.

Like the infant form of Goldeboru in *Havelok the Dane*, the lump child in *Tars* signifies some form of proto-human life, the potential for humanity divorced from the recognizable forms of function and physical assignment. Unlike Goldeboru, though, the lump baby's incapacity is specifically marked as *out of order*, a consequence of some disarray in its composition or conception. The substance of this disorder is contested: many critics understand it as a marker of deformity or lack, whereas I see it as an indication of delay.[24] Children *do* begin their fetal development as a lump or cluster of cells, before limbs are differentiated and articulated, and medieval scientists and writers knew this; the iteration of the child not as monstrous (as analogous texts suggested) but as *incomplete* seems crucial. The poem carefully notes that the

[24] The "lump" is widely discussed as a further evocation of the monstrous; Jane Gilbert notes that seeming analogues "have the child born half-animal and half-human, others half-hairy and half-smooth or completely hairy." In the closest instance to the Middle English version a Latin source renders the child as " 'ursi non viri praeferens pignus, utpote frustum informe carnis, non filium'…[bringing forth the child of a bear not a man, rather a formless piece of flesh than a son]" (Jane Gilbert, "Putting the Pulp into Fiction: The Lump-Child and its Parents in The King of Tars," in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald [Manchester, UK, 2004], p. 104; hereafter abbreviated "PPF"). The child in *Tars* seems deliberately distinct from these more pointed depictions of monstrosity.

temporal frame of the birth is normal, though the baby itself is not: "Atte fourti woukes ende / þe leuedi was deliuerd. . . . & when þe child was ybore / Wel sori wimen were þerfore, / For lim no hadde it non" [At forty weeks' end, the lady was delivered. . . . and when the child was born, the women were sorry for it, for it had no limbs] (ll. 574–75). The women attending the princess regret that the child has been born, for it has been born wrong, but the attachment of their sorrow to the temporalized *event* of the infant's birth rather than to the princess's pain or the child's incapacity suggests the women's cognizance that the problem is one of delay, not of deviation. The child is not fundamentally inhuman, merely incomplete. We know, of course, that the princess's pregnancy should have been long enough; clearly something is not misdirected, but out of joint between the child's development and its duration.

A reading of the infant's development as delayed is consistent, in many ways, with medieval understandings of infant growth. J. Allan Mitchell notes that his book *Becoming Human* springs from the same "mystery that is also [a] mundane reality" that Augustine explores in his *Confessions*: the "barely animate and emergent creatureliness that is nonetheless necessary for human flourishing."[25] What interests Mitchell—and, on his account, Augustine—is then the *humanness* of human proto-life; the question of whence emerges the personhood that emerges within and eventually beyond the womb. My own interest relates specifically to literary forms of emergent life, which is to say not their humanness but their narrativity: their depiction not of moral life but of the conjunction of narrative or causal forces in literature. Narrative accounts of potential existence both correspond to and diverge from canonical accounts of procreation and development: Aristotle's hylomorphic account of generation, for example, one of the primary

[25] J. Allan Mitchell, *Becoming Human: The Matter of the Medieval Child* (Minneapolis, 2014), p. xii.

sources of medieval understandings of conception, asserts that the male active principle of the sperm mobilizes the female passive material of menstrual blood to produce the material of the fetus and eventual child: "does the semen communicate nothing to the material body of the embryo but only to the power and movement in it? For this power is that which acts and makes, while that which is made and receives the form is the residue of the secretion in the female. Now the latter alternative appears to be the right one both *a priori* and in view of the facts."[26] In *King of Tars* specifically, as Jane Gilbert notes, the lump child is restricted to something like its maternal "matter" rather than (initially) undergoing reification by the animating principle of the father; it is "the result of a conception in which the paternal role has failed"—presumably because its father is not Christian and so not, in narrative terms, a normative human contributor to the child's substance ("PPF," p. 105).

The sultan offers a different account of the child's deformity, ascribing it to its mother's deception. "O Dame," he tells her "Oȝain mi godes þou art forsworn . . . þe childe þat is here of þe born / Boþe lim & liþ it is forlorn / All þurth þi fals bileue" [oh lady, you are forsworn against my gods; the child that is born of you here is lacking both limbs and life, all as a result of your false belief] (ll. 589–94). According to the sultan, the child's failure to develop is a result of its mother's failure to believe; he directly mirrors what many critics presume to be the poem's understanding, that the child's incapacity is a product of the mistaken beliefs of its inadequate father. Like Heng's account of the Constance romances as social world reduced to the baseline community—a mother and child—and presumably like the romance itself, Gilbert's analysis, for example, discounts the sultan's role in the narrative, taking at face value the princess's

[26] Aristotle, "Generation of Animals," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York, 2001), I:20:5–9, p. 676.

declaration that "þou no hast no part þeron, ywis, / Noiþer of þe child ne of me" [You have no part, I say, in either the child nor in me] (ll. 813–15). Without a fully realized (Christian) father, this argument goes, the baby cannot take its fully realized (baptized) form. The princess's comment, though, does not present a material reality, merely one of desire: the princess disavows, but cannot in fact invalidate, her own relation to the sultan or his to the child. If we read the poem as strictly Aristotelian in this vein, we must infer either that the child is somehow retroactively fathered by the newly-Christian sultan, or that an entirely different father—the Christian god, the Father—supplies the active principle that imbues the lump with human features. The first account cannot hold, as the sultan does not convert until after the child is transformed, and the second possibility—while compellingly tidy—requires us to believe that the child's biological relation to the sultan is *never* acknowledged, his integration into a family unit never reestablished.

There is another way to read the baby's stunted growth, however, that leads more easily into an understanding of the achronological circumstances of the child's final development. Yes, presumably the poet of *Tars* does endorse the poem's conversion narrative and thus privilege Christianity; however, such a conception does not obviate his clear interest in the troubled question of truth and its consequences for (particularly religious) event. For the poet of *Tars*, in other words, whatever his overt political agenda, his articulation of the poem's events is structured by an obsessive interest in the action of the affective upon the material, in how feelings—Christian *or* Saracen—inflect not just belief, but events in the world. What the sultan actually tells the princess is that she is "forsworn" "þurth [her] fals bileue." Where does the emphasis of this statement fall? Is the problem the princess's supposedly mistaken belief in Christianity (or, conversely, the sultan's supposedly mistaken belief in his own gods)? For the

reader to accept either requires us to accept one of two possibilities, when the romance itself has offered us both—has deliberately preserved the argumentative capacity of both sets of beliefs. We have good reason, of course, to think that the poet and the poem come down on the side of Christianity: the fact that the child's baptism consolidates its humanity indicates that on a propagandistic level at least, the poem holds Christianity ascendant and the sultan's pagan deities unworthy. But why then does the poem proffer a carefully mirrored staging of religious belief, if only to demonstrate—not very convincingly—that one side is right?

If we take the poem on its own terms, the poet presents us with an entirely different possible reading of the child's suspension, one motivated by the poem's embedding of the personal in the ethical rather than by its Christian agenda. The problem, the sultan tells the princess, is that she is forsworn—that her *falseness* has interrupted the child's growth. We can read this as a reference to her false belief in Christianity (from his perspective), but we might equally read it as articulating her false semblance of belief in his religion. Perhaps it is the performance itself, and the very ambivalence it offers the reader, that produces the child's incapacity. The narrative engages with the artifact of conflicting and conflicted belief—with how one should deal with concurrent, coexistent narratives. By performing a conversion in which she does not believe, the princess has introduced into the narrative two simultaneous versions of events: one (borne out in some ways by the plot and held by the sultan) in which she has converted and is now a dutiful wife; and one held by the princess herself (and, presumably, by narrator and reader), that she is a Christian who merely pretends allegiance to her husband's deities. As we saw in the scene of her dream, the line between thought and action is not so clearly delineated as one might hope; once the poet acknowledges the possibility of duplicitous performance and its possible efficacy, all acts of belief become questionable, all perspectives

granted clemency. How can we know which is real? The narrative is a scene that holds these two possibilities in tension, and its attachment to both held in balance represents a crucial explanation for the child's own arrested contingency.

The problem with the lump baby, then, is not that its Saracen father has failed to provide the active principle that will stir its materia to life, but rather that it is suspended between conflicting narratives. As the child of a Christian and a Saracen, both of whose real relation to their own beliefs and actions are ultimately unknowable, the lump child is the crossroads of innumerable potential becomings: it is undefined by the narrative, because the romance itself has been caught up in its own allowance of conflicting beliefs and realities. Recognizing that the poem *does*, in fact, end with an ideally constituted (in the terms of the poem) family unit set amidst an ideally constituted (again, in the terms of the poem) polity requires the reader to come to grips with the extent to which the narrative views not just biology but chronology, time in sequence, as fluid. This is most evident in the case of the lump child—whose development is arrested at the stage of materia, rather than advancing to fully formed infant, and subsequently sped up in an instaneous growth to infancy—but is apparent also for the sultan, whose change in color operates retroactively to assert his paternal influence. In other words, his child is transformed into an ideal (white, Christian) infant before he himself is transformed into an ideal (white, Christian) father. The infant enacts the father's *potential*, the future transformation that lies latent in the process of belief, before such potential achieves its final realization.

The episode of the lump child stages trials of Christanity and the Saracen religion. "Lat be þat þouȝt," the princess tells the sultan; "þe child was ȝeten bitven ous to; / For þi bileue it farþ so" [Let be that thought (that its deformity is a result of the princess's beliefs); the child was conceived between us two; because of your belief it fares so] (ll. 603–5). Both parents assert that

the problem is the result of the other's beliefs. Though the princess turns the blame on her husband (in nearly the same words in which he blamed her), she also emphasizes the scene of the child's birth—"bitven ous to." The crucial element of the lump's form is not which parent is to blame, but its provenance: it is the product of the relation between them. Materially, this is obviously so, as it is their child. Conceptually, however, the problem they have created is a function of the relation between the couple. They disagree on fundamental ontologies, and as a direct result have created between them a subject—a world—wherein ontology is fundamentally suspended.

Such a world is one of experimentation: two subjects, two hypotheses, the introduction of a trial to determine which hypothesis is provable. "Take now þis flesche, & bere it anon / Bifor þine godes euerichon," the princess tells her husband, "& pray þine godes al yfere . . . To liue þat it be brouȝt" [Take now this flesh and bear it shortly before all your gods, and pray to all your powerful gods that it be brought to life] (ll. 607–8, 610–12). Note that moving miracles into the sphere of proof—demanding a sign to confirm or negate the existence of a deity—is a practice both deeply habitual and problematized for the medieval Christian church; medieval "belief," Steven Justice reminds us, quintessentially "concerned what was uncertain, difficult, inaccessible" and so engaged ceaselessly in acts of both investigation and acceptance.[27] It is rare, however, to see two religions, apparently recognized as two religions, set up against each other on a trial basis: positing the Saracen against the Christian in this way reflects, again, the extent to which *Tars* allows for moments whose materiality opens onto conflicting and controversial possibilities and holds those possibilities in tension.

[27] Steven Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?" *Representations* 103 (Summer 2008), p. 12.

The scene of the sultan's failed constitution of his son, then, is the moment of greatest intensity in *Tars*, because it is the moment when the poem offers up the possibility that its narrative might diverge from a conventional ideological intent. The lump baby captures all the potentiality of this fraught alternative. In another vein, however, the lump is merely a dilated image of the mundane: in the real world, in the typical process of infant development, a lump of flesh develops into a child (perhaps with the help of the gods). The only difference in *Tars* is that this transformation happens in the open, visible as a suspended moment of uncertainty that lingers in the text as a knot of unpredictable outcome. When the sultan's prayers are unsuccessful, he destroys the idols in a rage, and "when he hadde beten hem gode won, / ȝete lay þe flesche stille so ston / An heye on his auter" [once he had beaten all his gods, the flesh remained as still as a stone, high on his altar] (ll. 661–63). The sultan's destruction of the gods reprises his rage at the start of the poem, when his rage drives him to strike the table "so heteliche . . . It fel into the flore fot-hot" (ll. 103–4). These scenes of fury are notable for their evocation of energy and destructive strength—of potential energy in the sense of physics: the sultan is hot with anger, he exerts power on the table so that it falls to the floor *quickly*, but speed is rendered by the colloquial "hot-footed." The sultan's passion, in other words, is always iterated as potential force; as heat or possible motion—falling; speed. His role as active potential, or as energy misused, is constitutive.

The sultan, at least as a Saracen, is a potential Christian, a possible normative subject, a virtual instantiation of political futures; like the lump baby, he concretizes the possibilities of the romance's propagandistic aims but does so in the context of a multitude of other possible narrative avenues. The infant lies *high* on the altar as the sultan destroys his idols, still a source of potential. *Tars* is a text about possibilities and the forms by which those possibilities are

depicted and deployed. The lump baby is one such form, holding inert the unrealized shapes of many possible narrative futures. The sultan's Saracen body is another: as the poem demonstrates by the analogy of the princess's dream, a body understood as animal or threatening can shift, under the pressure of marginal affective adjustment, into a body associated with the most normative or celebrated identity available, that of a Christ-like knight clothed in white and conveying messages from heaven. Both the lump baby and the sultan act as virtual subjects, instantiations of potentiality.

When both baby and sultan are baptized and so assume their normative place in the narrative's conceptual world, the potential energies of their virtual bodies are felt as destructive action. Interestingly, Auchinleck differs from Vernon and Simeon in its ending; both feature two hundred lines of battle between the combined army of the sultan and the king of Tars and the forces of five Saracen kings (Canadok, Lesias, Carmel, Clamadas, and Memarok) who stand against them, but Auchinleck ends with a recitation of mass conversion:

Þritti þousende þer wer take	Thirty thousand were taken there
Of Sarraȝins boþe blo & blac,	Of Saracens both blue and black
& don in his prisoun	And put in his prison . . .
& þai þat wald be cristned nouȝt	And they that would not be christened
Into a stede þai [weren] ybrouȝt . . .	Were brought into a stable
& Cristen men, wiþouten wene,	And Christian men without pity
Striken of her heuedes. [Ll. 1225–35]	Struck off their heads.

In Vernon and Simeon, by contrast, the poem ends with a few saccharine lines in praise of the princess: "þus þe ladi wiþ hire lore / Brouȝte hire frendes out of sore / þorw Ihesu Cristes grace" [thus the lady with her learning brought her friends out of sorrow through Jesus Christ's grace] (Perryman, note to ll. 1202–35). As in the episode of the dream, Auchinleck more pointedly articulates the conflicted imperatives of the romance's structures of belief. If belief, not action, is what matters, why are the Saracen prisoners not asked what they believe? If action is the substance of belief, why are we asked to note that the supposed Christians are "wiþouten wene"

in their executions? The poem suspends to the last its vague intimations that a more complex conception of belief might be possible: it reads the problematics of action and faith both forward and backward, maintaining the carefully inflected networks of possibility that accrue to the text's potential bodies, even after their narratives have been determined.

Coda

The substance of narrative's political potential, I think, is its capacity for imagining alterity. Such alterity needn't take the form of a fully realized differential narrative or a radically divergent perspective: rather, the moment of openness can be in itself an instant of powerful nonreality. The ethical scene of the romance, then, does not necessarily take the form of a deliberate crafted specular array that forces the viewer to reevaluate. Rather, it might be as simple as a moment of utter indecision, a pause that allows the reader to recognize that in that hesitation the possibilities of what comes next are virtually limitless. "Virtually," here, holds not just its colloquial meaning of "nearly" or "effectively"; rather, it points to the virtuality of romance itself, the way that the thresholds of romance hold in their moments of crossing or arrest the embedded potential for any number of forthcoming narratives—some predictable, some startling; some deeply conventional and some radically disjunct with any hegemonic ideology contemporaneous with the text's composition.

When I say that affect, in *King of Tars*, functions as a mediating technology amongst scales of intimacy, I mean *Tars* to stand as an illustrative referent for the larger work of affect in romance. Romance speaks both to national narratives (as Geraldine Heng, Patricia Ingham, and any number of others have shown) and to the minute empathic detail of interpersonal interaction. In a romance like *Gawain and the Green Knight*, one of the more frequently cited for its artistry and nuance, the figure of Gawain, the hero, stands as an exemplar of his social world: his stumbles and achievements are at once born from the virtues and vices of Arthur's court and uniquely his own. As Frederic Jameson notes, the hero of romance is "[made] . . . over into something like a registering apparatus for transformed states of being, sudden alterations of temperature, mysterious heightenings, local intensities, sudden drops in quality, and alarming

effluvia, in short, the whole semic range of transformation scenes."[1] Though I think Jameson's approach places too much emphasis on the *hero* of romance—surely we have just seen that any number of figures in romance function as this sort of "registering apparatus" for transformation and alteration?—this evocation of the human figure in romance as directly responsive to the intensity of romance scenery seems effective and astute. And the effects Jameson describes, those transformations, "alerations," "heightenings," "intensities," and "effluvia," are surely the effects of what Massumi and others call affect, those uncoded atmospheres that swarm through narrative and inflect its events and acts without ever quite surfacing as visible, identifiable influences.

These effects, these affects, are crucial components of the romance read as an ethical scene. How can we understand a romance as ideologically driven—as critics frequently do—without attending to the fundamental murkiness introduced by affective irruptions in the text—by unexpected transformations, moments of uncertain materiality, or instants when the sensory scene of the romance subsumes its purported moral intent? The affective events that work upon the bodies of romance constitute a mediating technology that arbitrates between the ideological and the narrative, the political and the personal, the scales of intimacy at work in the text. Figures of romance like Gawain or like Havelok, Goldeboru, Amadace, Degaré and his mother, the princesses and sultans and knights of these narratives, provide mechanisms for the translation of affect into either interpersonal interaction or national drama, and they subtend the relation, or rather the spectrum of event, between the two. Affect, then, and the scenes of potential it composes, creates a space for barely narrated possibility: for incipient cournternarratives that

[1] Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981), p. 112.

gesture toward fantasized perspectives. The freedom Degaré's mother finds briefly in the forest; the momentary possibility that the princess of Tars might convert to Islam—whether or not ahegemonic viewpoints are actively manifested or endorsed, the immanent narrative freedom of romance means that they are just there, lurking, out of sight of the text's articulated intentions. Romance is dense with what might be.

In its initial moments, this project was partially inspired by Carol Clover's 1992 *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* and her insightful attention to popular fiction, genre fiction, as a site for experimental cultural commentary. "Horror," Clover wrote, "has come to seem to me not only the form that most obviously trades in the repressed, but *itself the repressed* of mainstream filmmaking."[2] This idea of popular fiction as figuring the *repressed* is a very psychoanalytic one, and one that I can't fully accept: surely the strength of horror—or of romance, come to that—is in its open-eyed embrace of those troubled and troubling arousals. This is presumably partly what Clover means—that in the context of horror, the repressed ceases to be repressed and is instead foregrounded. But more than that, I think romance explodes those underlying tensions or anxieties; it celebrates them, it brings them to the fore in all their incoherence, manifesting *not*, as a psychoanalytic take would have it, some articulate and dangerous counternarrative (for example, for Clover, the fear and compulsion of gender disruption, or as, Barbara Creed has it somewhat more reductively, the irruption of the monstrous feminine[3]) but rather the scrambled and burgeoning mess of a multitude of possible fears, possible desires, the celebrated clutter of cultural imagery that bubbles up and lingers in romance scenery.

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[2] Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, N.J., 1992), p. 20; emphasis mine.
[3] See Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1993).

The material of romance needn't constitute a return of the repressed in order to matter. In Charles Taylor's account of the "enchanted world" that I quote in the introduction, he brushes aside an articulation of "enchantment" in the terms of "light and fairies." "An 'enchanted' world," he comments, "is perhaps not the best expression; it seems to evoke light and fairies. But I am invoking here its negation, Weber's expression 'disenchantment' as a description of our modern condition." Without offering a comprehensive account of Taylor and Weber and the debate around premodern states of enchantment, I want to consider momentarily what it is that Taylor sets aside in his brusque dismissal of "light and fairies." Taylor is delineating a historic moment of credence (which we may choose to accept or not), and in order to lend veracity to his claims, he clarifies that the terms of that credence are *serious* ones: that the subjects of this medieval world of "enchantment" are grappling, like modern subjects, with weighty concerns, life or death conceits: "spirits, demons, and moral forces," he elaborates.[4] The medieval "world," on Taylor's account, is one animated by ethical dilemmas no less, and indeed perhaps more, epic than our own: one whose ordinary subjects are intimately compelled by profound mysteries.

I don't particularly agree with Taylor's periodizing distinctions; for one thing, as Julie Orlemanski notes, "One has only to think of paternalistic colonizers educating a so-called childlike people to wish that Taylor had taken some distance from . . . modernity's sense of itself." Taylor's categories are skewed, in other words, by a patronizing alignment of nonmodern with non-Western that calls uneasy attention to his troubled "geocultural politics."[5] Setting this aside, however: if one *were* to take seriously Taylor's articulation of a credulous premodern state of being, why should "light and fairies" not be a component in the magical mental field he

[4] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (New York, 2007), p. 26.
[5] Julie Orlemanski, "Who Has Fiction?" (working paper), p. 11.

describes? Why is religion more important, more plausible, as a locus of belief than fairy tales? The reason is, of course, that there are different sorts of belief and suspensions of disbelief: "spirits, demons, and moral forces" compose the field of religious belief and large-scale sociohistoric determinants of life; "light and fairies" embed the field of entertainment, flighty romance reading, and fantasy.

What, though, is trivial about light and fairies—or, more precisely, about the stories they subtend? To come full circle, Taylor's aside could hardly be more pointed if it were intended as a reference to *Sir Orfeo*, wherein (as in my introduction), the castle of the fairy king is marked specifically by light, by the "riche stones" that "light gonne / As bright as doth at none the sonne."[6] Far from some decorative episode, the detail of light that shines from the castle's stones sets the stage for a profoundly inhuman encounter: a world wherein not just the behavioral norms but the fundamental physics of the mundane are disrupted, subverted, and altered. What might seem to be a small detail of specular delight in fact establishes a discourse about norm and alienation, the positing of a world deeply other, and one that opens onto a narrative that could not have occurred in the human world. The bodies in the gallery and Heurodis's own particular experience of the fairy world indicate its primacy as a space for voicing that which cannot typically be voiced. Heurodis's encounter with the fairy king, for example, renders visible her own internal disjunctures; stricken by terror or disgust, she tears at her body and face with her fingers, seeking to disrupt or deform her normative human presence to reveal, we might infer, some crucial interior lack or rupture.

[6] Anonymous, "Sir Orfeo," in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Even Salisbury (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1995), ll. 371–72.

None of this is trivial. The context of the romance is one in which new worlds are posited that open up a space of discourse on topoi for which no space exists in a normative or mundane narrative. The bodies of romance and that which marks them as other—light that spills forth from the mouth, an odor of death so redolent it forbids approach—figure the impossible potential forms of familiar bodies. They are the virtual prosthetics of the bodies that meet the normative standards of acceptable coding: the inexplicable that underwrites familiar social worlds. It is in romance that this deep inexplicability is brought up, brought back, brought out, and its stories allowed to linger, if not always to fully manifest. The space of "light and fairies" is one of possibility, not belief: it is a literary construct, not a habitable periodized world. When asked what my dissertation is about, I sometimes joke that it is about princesses: and in a world where Disneyland is a focal point in many children's lives, the joke is that something so serious as a dissertation could be about something so silly as princesses, a childish, feminized genre form. But in fact princesses are no sillier than anything else—no less crucial to the manifestation or the aura of possible narratives that give voice to marginalized subjects. For the Middle English romance, princesses figure the extraneous material of patriarchal hegemony, and the romance is a genre that gives scope to that which is cast out of hegemonic models of being, of living, of culture. Romance is not, as Clover suggests of horror, the space of the "repressed," but rather the space wherein what might otherwise be invisible flourishes in what Seigworth and Gregg describe as "a vibrant incoherence that circulates about zones of cliché and convention."[7] The production of mainstream narratives and conventions elides alternate narratives, alternate forms

[7] Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 9.

of life, alternate conditions of possibility, and romance is the space where those forms are permitted not just as excrescence but as the substance of the genre.

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