Chapter Three

Religion in Pious Romances

Religious and moral commitment is strong in England's medieval fictions. Constance Birt West noted that a "strain of deep piety" affects Anglo-Norman romances, and the perception has become a commonplace, echoed most recently in the preface to the Anglo-Norman Alexander: "There is to be found throughout... a strong moral tone of the type familiar to students of Anglo-Norman literature." The continued presence of moral and homiletic approaches in Middle English romance provides one of the most direct connections between Anglo-Norman and Middle English literature. Studies of Middle English romance even propose, with increasing frequency and conviction, that some of the morally committed romances are so distinctive as to constitute a separate genre of "exemplary romance" or "secular hagiography.

On the continent, by contrast, romances rarely incorporate motifs or standards of value from saints' lives.

England's pious romances interact extensively with hagiography and, through that literature, respond strongly to changes in the status of church and Christians. To many readers Guy of Warwick's conversion to God's service, Amis and Amiloun's perfect faith in brotherhood, and Athelston's repentant submission to his archbishop exemplify a harmonious and mutually supportive union of religious and secular material. The absorption of Christian fervor in romance is, however, less complete than may at first appear. The tenets of the church are not fully compatible with the secular values that inform romances. Where these conceptions are at odds, the romances uphold secular values of self-determination, family strength, and worldly success. Piety enriches and broadens the importance of heroic action, but in so doing it becomes in some ways merely an attribute of secular heroism.

The issue is inextricably historical and generic. Hagiography, the immediate context for pious elements in romance, flourished when the church turned some of its resources from consolidating its institutional strength and appropriating state power, most spectacularly in the calls to Crusades, to undertaking pervasive reforms directed toward the laity. From the early thirteenth century into the fourteenth, these reforms stimulated an outpouring of texts designed to educate the clergy and sustain the spiritual health and development of lay Christians. Saints' legends are part of this powerful movement, and it is easy to imagine the pious romances swept up in it too, carried beyond their generic origins into full sympathy with reform doctrine. But the history of church reform itself resists this conclusion.

To be sure, thirteenth-century reforms profoundly altered the relationship between lay Christians and the church. They brought to the laity on the one hand improved and more regular pastoral care, but on the other hand increased supervision and restraints on behavior. Enforced confession, for example, allowed parish priests of "exemplary romance" or "secular hagiography.

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over their social inferiors. Such strictures against established group behaviors, often behaviors important to economic or broader social advancement, produced daily conflicts for parishioners between the church's ideals of abnegation and secular ideals of prosperity and success.

These conflicts originate in differences that oppose even the romances called "exemplary" to the claims of sermons and saints' lives. As a group the insular romances that pay close attention to Christianity are not as politically informed as the romances of English heroes, which defend baronial and mercantile values in the face of royal power and class disharmony. Generally, the pious romances attend less to conflicting secular powers than to the broad differences between religious and profane conceptions of the world. These romances do accept and incorporate Christian impulses from hagiography, but they temper their acceptance with clearly defined resistance to those implications of religious teaching that are incompatible with pursuing earthly well-being. The church's condemnation of the exemplary romances along with the others indicates that contemporary observers recognized the subordination of religious to worldly impulses in romance.

**Veyn Carpyng**

"There was once a king named Arthur!" cries Abbot Gevard, arousing his sleepy congregation to alertness. Immediately he reproaches them:

"Videte, fratres, miseriam magnam. Quando locutus sum de Deo, dormivastis; mox ut verba levitatis inserui, evigilantes erectis auribus omnes auscultare coepistis."

"You see, my brothers, to how sad a pass we have come; when I was speaking to you about God, you fell asleep; but as soon as I began a secular story, you all woke up and began to listen with eager ears."

Again and again religious writers complain that secular tales, although less true, valuable, and important than the stories of Christ and the saints, are nonetheless more appealing to lay audiences. What is to be done with the man who listens impassively to the Gospel account of Christ's Passion but weeps when he hears a reading of *Guy of Warwick?* Many insular religious writers reproach their audience for enjoying tales that are "bot fantum o bis warld." Denis Piramus begins the *Vie Saint Edmund* by admitting that *Parthenopeus* has a fine dreamlike quality, that Marie's *Laies* are admirable, and that many such "cuntes, chanceuns e fables" [stories, songs, and fables] relieve sorrow and care. But, he continues,

\[
\text{Je vos dirrai par dreite fei.}
\]

Un decret, qui mielz valt asez

\[
\text{Ke oes autres ke tari amez,}
\]

E plus delitable a oir.

\[
\text{Si purez les almes garie}
\]

E les cors gareste de hunte.

\[
\text{Si purrez les aimes garir}
\]

E les cors garantir de hunte.

\[
\text{Mult deit hom bien oir tel cunte.}
\]

Horn deit mult mielz a ois entendre

\[
\text{Ke en folie le tens despendre.}
\]

I will tell you truly a pleasant tale that is worth much more than those others you love so much and is more delightful to hear. And it can cure souls and protect bodies from shame. One should surely listen well to such a story. Better that one should pay attention to sense than waste time on folly.

William of Nassington condemns *Guy of Warwick* and *Sir Ysumbras*, often considered exemplary romances, together with the rest:

\[
\text{I warne ferst ate benyngnyng,}
\]

\[
\text{Y wyl make yow no veyn carpyng}
\]

\[
\text{Of deeths of armes, ne of amours,}
\]

\[
\text{As doth menstrales and jestoures,}
\]

\[
\text{That maketh carpyng in many place}
\]

\[
\text{Of Octovyane and Ysambrace,}
\]

\[
\text{And of many other gestes.}
\]

\[
\text{Namely when they cum to testes;}
\]

\[
\text{Ne of the lyf of Bewys of Hamptone,}
\]

\[
\text{That was a kny3t of gret renone,}
\]

\[
\text{Ne of syre Gy of Werewyke,}
\]

\[
\text{Alle 3if hit my3te some men lyke.}
\]

Although / it might please


8. *Cursor Mundi*, ed. Morris, line 91 (and lines 1-26, 55-100); see also *Cursor Angere*, *Gregory the Great*, ed. Cloran, fols. 9.a.21-30, 10.a.9-14 (pp. 12, 14); and Robert Gretham, quoted in *Aitken, Etude sur le Miroir*, Prologue, lines 1-78.


In these as in all the ecclesiastical protests, romance and religion are at odds. The religious writers' attitude counters the modern contention that, in the more seriously moral romances at least, secular and Christian values are successfully integrated.

Readers who seek to defend the religious integrity of particular romances must discount or ignore the substance of ecclesiastical comment. For example, Laural Braswell finds "an essential irony" in the condemnation of Sir Ysumbras by Nassington and by the author of the Cursor Mundi—an irony because, she argues, Ysumbras teaches about faith and God's providence more successfully than either the Speculum Vitae or the Cursor Mundi. We are to dismiss the religious authors as blind to literary merit and perhaps jealous of others' success. Similarly, G. W. Owst deems "somewhat strange" the avoidance of romance material in sermon literature, since the stories of romance often teach lessons effectively. Owst and M. D. Legge believe that the ecclesiastical condemnations of romance arise from professional competition, a rivalry between authors of sacred and secular literature for the attention of the same audience. But whatever the immediate motive for the ecclesiastical condemnations of romance, they have substantive importance. These attacks are comparable to the passages in chronicles that inveigh against the unrealities of romance, or to those in romance that condemn ribald tales for their baseness. Such attacks reflect not merely professional rivalry, but salient generic differences that set romance at odds with history and fabliau at odds with romance. Likewise, ecclesiastical animosity for romances is neither ironic nor strange, but rather openly recognizes that romances and religious literature are animated by different values and ultimately endorse separate truths.

11. "Sir Isumbras," p. 151. Another proposal is that Sir Ysumbras has allegorical significance that Nassington did not see; but if both he and the Cursor Mundi poet missed it, the allegorical reading is hardly relevant to Ysumbras's reception (Breden, "Sir Isumbras").

12. Owst, Literary and Political, pp. 10-14; Legge, "Anglo-Norman Hagiography." Metf (Middle English Romances, pp. 18-20) proposes that the versions of certain romances to which murials objected differed from the extant, morally exemplary versions—a doubtful proposition that again dismisses attention from the substance of ecclesiastical objection.

13. Religious writers often claim their works are "true" that romance is not. See, e.g., Angier, Gregory the Great, 166, 9:23-28; 30:9-14 (pp. 12, 14); Pantin, 'Manuel des péchés,' p. 5 ("l'oeuvre de sa vie soucieux ! Les romans de la diversité qui le devraient de son monde"). On the hagiographical conception of "truth" in contrast to romance, see also Dombrowski, "Literary Problem," pp. 12-15, 120-7.

Even the most pious insular romances bear out ecclesiastical suspicions by redirecting the religious impulses they absorb. As the romances of English heroes confront a centralized royal power that challenges baronial independence, the pious romances confront a centralized and increasingly powerful religious institution that opposes secular values. But whatever the religious writers' attitude to the laity in general, asserting new control over each Christian's conduct and spiritual life. The English church promoted reforms with particular zeal, perhaps in reaction against the peculiar demands of royal power and rights, owned and rented properties, fielded troops, and developed in further respects a corporate structure that made it a social institution of great importance.

In the thirteenth century, as the power of royal governments increased sufficiently to resist papal commands, the church directed its attention to the laity in general, asserting new control over each Christian's conduct and spiritual life. The English church promoted reforms with particular zeal, perhaps in reaction against the peculiar demands of royal power and rights, owned and rented properties, fielded troops, and developed in further respects a corporate structure that made it a social institution of great importance.
period of King John's disputes with Innocent III. From 1208 until 1213 in England all rites of the church except for baptism and confession of the dying were suspended, and even these minimal ceremonies could not be performed in church buildings. There is little evidence of the Interdict's effect on the faithful, but Guillaume le Clerc expresses a moral discomfort that may have been widespread:

Ceste oseigne fu fete noove
El tens que Phelipe tint France,
El tens de la grant mocesante
Que Enleterre fu entedim.  
Se qu'il avoit messie dixe
Ne cors mis en terre sacrée.
De l'entedit ne lui avoient
Que a ceste feiz plus en die,
Per ceo que dreiture mendie
E lealte est povre e basse.
Tote ceste chose trespasse
Guillaume qui forment s'en doelt,
Que n'ose dire ceo qu'il voelt
De la tricherie qui cort
E en l'une e en l'autre cort.
Mais a plus hait dire se prent.

This work was translated in the time when Philip held France, in the time of the great unhappiness when England was under interdict, so that no mass was said nor any body placed in consecrated ground. He who writes this does not wish to say more of the Interdict at this time, for right goes over all this, for he dares not say what he wishes of the falsehood of the Interdict Guillaume takes refuge in the "plus hait dire" of his bestiary. Although excommunication and interdiction were relatively common tools of controversy in the thirteenth century, the Interdict of 1208-1213 probably intensified that runs through the one and the other court. But he takes up a higher discourse.

From the abased conditions of the Interdict Guillaume takes refuge in the "plus hait dire" of his bestiary. Although excommunication and interdiction were relatively common tools of controversy in the thirteenth century, the Interdict of 1208-1213 probably intensified the need for personal devotion in ceremonies performed on their behalf by the clergy alone. Some twelfth-century innovations, such as kneeling for prayer and contemplating the Host, derived from a new understanding of the relationship between Christian and God as a close personal one. The reforms of the thirteenth century were designed to regulate and enhance that relationship. Decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) sought to improve pastoral care, and required of all Christians annual confession to their parish priest and communion at Easter. The Council of Oxford (1222) extended the Lateran decrees; of the other councils of the century, Lambeth (1281) was particularly important for standards of clerical education and performance. A tremendous outpouring of penitentials, manuals of instruction, and books of sermon themes responded from early in the thirteenth century to the councils' demands. Sermons probably became common, even weekly, in parish churches during the century. These developments together with the laity's access to churchwardenships, vestry associations, and charitable groups made the following century "the age of the devout layman, when it was becoming possible, more easily than before, for serious-minded laymen to have a deeper and more intelligent participation in the life of the Church."9 However, where church reforms claimed authority over the daily life of parishioners, the result was conflict and evasion as well as grateful obedience.

Again, the analogy with royal systematization is telling. In the Middle Ages each person (with few and formal exceptions, as for the Jews) was just as surely and necessarily a member of the church as a citizen of the state. In an examination of the church's structure as it affected the faithful, R. W. Southern concludes: "In a word, the church was a compulsory society in precisely the same way as the modern state is a compulsory society. . . . [In an] extensive sense

20. Powicke, Thirteenth Century, pp. 49-54; Moorman, Church Life; Cheyney, English Synodalia.
22. Moorman (Church Life) and Lang (Bishops and Reform) indicate a low frequency of preaching, but higher estimates are defended by Godfrey, English Parish, pp. 78-81; Boyle, "Oculos Sacerdotis," pp. 81-82, 97-92, 102; and Robertson, "Frequency of Preaching."
the medieval church was a state.” The church was, in its state-like capacity, intrusive and coercive in handling its subjects' behavior. For example, the expansion of religious instruction was in part designed to combat heresy. The Lateran decree of 1215 requiring secular authorities to pursue and punish heretics complemented the call to fuller religious instruction of the laity, for both decrees imply a stringent spirit of correct versus incorrect belief. That spirit soon led to the formal establishment of the Inquisition (1231) and the sanction of torture for extracting confessions from suspects (1252). Although the church had long opposed heretical beliefs, the establishment of the Inquisition gave to the cause of orthodoxy institutional sanction, new importance and visibility, and great coercive force.

Similarly, the Lateran decree requiring annual confession to parish priests modified the church's earlier stand that contrition and faith were sufficient to win pardon and that a sinner should confess only the internal but the external life of each member of his flock, "in E. J. Arnold's opinion "une innovation disciplinaire dont il serait difficile d'exagérer les conséquences"; in H. C. Lea's assessment, a reform that empowered "every parish priest to mould not only the internal but the external life of each member of his flock," assigning to the church "a spiritual domination without example in the history of mankind." 24 Manualists of instruction for priests and penitents further illustrate how extensive and concrete were the church's strictures on socializing, family relations, and economic transactions.

The insistent pressure of these controls on daily conduct aroused considerable lay opposition to the institutional church. The Lateran decree requiring confession was evaded for some time. 25 Georges de Lagarde attributes the development of a "secular spirit" in the thirteenth century to conflicting secular and ecclesiastical interests in the economic and judicial spheres. Disputes over clerical immunity, town liberties, and merchant practices are all facets of this secular spirit, "l'expression passionnée de l'effort tenté par les laiques pour reprendre un domaine que l'Eglise leur conteste." 26 The sharp decline of the church's authority in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries cannot be attributed to corruption or inadequate education among the clergy, since these problems also existed at the height of the church's power in the thirteenth century. Rather, Gordon Leff argues that the church's "corporate aspect," its hierarchical structure and state-like systems, of itself generated a reaction in the laity of all classes, and in some ecclesiastical circles as well. This reaction encouraged people to seek spiritual fulfillment in extraintitutional, often heretical movements stressing the imitation of Christ and the direct experience of God. 27

The insular romances called "exemplary" align themselves not with the church's new supervision of secular life, but with lay resistance to the constraints that supervision imposed. In the broadest terms, the church's antipathy toward romance arises from the conceptual distinction between eternal and temporal on which the practical division between church and state was based. This distinction also informs the opposed conceptions of life's meaning that divide hagiography from romance. 28 It is not that romances speak for the state. Rather, they are concerned with the relations between personal autonomy and social engagement. Insular romances assess the uses and the limitations of a baronial ideology valuing control over heritable land along with actions which explain and extend that control. The exemplary romances provide a poetic ground on which this ideology can interact with religious claims, and they develop imaginative versions of the resulting conflict in which faith sustains baronial desires. These romances speak neither for the emerging state nor for the institutional church, but rather for the validity of private achievement within such structures. The saints of hagiography may seem also to exemplify a kind

25. Lang, Bishops and Reform, pp. 46-48; Lagarde, Esprit laïque, 1, 311-12 (quote at p. 228).
26. Arnould, "Manuel des péchés," p. 42; Lea, Auricular Confession, I, 211-12 (quote at p. 42); Lang, Bishops and Reform, pp. 96-98; Lagarde, Esprit laïque, 1, 158 (see I, 157-88 et passim).
28. Lea, Auricular Confession, pp. 333-34.
of private achievement, but, as we shall see, their surrender of identity and of will to God as well as their transcendent goals divide them from heroes of romance.

The differences between hagiography and romance are the more intriguing for the extensive interaction between the two literatures. Many insular saints' lives of the later Middle Ages adopt the verse forms and the dramatic, event-centered narrative presentation of romance. Echoes of the sensibilities of *fine amour* animate Clemente of Barking's *Life of St. Catherine*; the heroine abandons her marriage to seek the superior love of God, while her desolate husband laments, "Coment viveras tu sanz mei, / Et ge coment viverai sanz tei?" ["How will you live without me, and I, how will I live without you?"] 32 In the *Anglo-Norman Voyage of St. Brendan* familiar structural elements of romance, the quest and cyclical design, are infused with religious purpose. Religious writers probably developed from a popular tale the legend of St. Eustace, which resembles the story of Bevis's second exile from England. And Derek Pearsall argues that John Capgrave's *Life of St. Katherine* is heavily influenced by Capgrave's familiarity with *Havelok the Dane*. 33 These brief examples indicate that although the authors of religious works condemned romance, they were sensitive to its sources of appeal. Hagiography and romance may hold conflicting ideal visions of what constitutes human achievement, but both genres adopt from religious writing the doctrine, the models of conative, affective, and dramatic elements from romance when they can make images of the holy life more compelling. While tacitly adopting these elements, religious literature overtly condemns the romances themselves.

Romances follow the inverse of this pattern. Openly and joyfully they adopt from religious writing the doctrine, the models of conduct, and the narrative patterns that can deepen their ultimately secular endeavor; tacitly they resist or subvert the full implications of the same religious material. This dual process is superficial and clearly discernible in many works, but in a few insular romances it is not so facile or so easily explained—namely, in works that pay particular attention to moral conduct and Christian principle, the "exemplary romances" or "secular hagiography."

Ojars Kratins originated the concept of a work lying midway between hagiography and romance in his study of *Amis and Amiloun*. Several studies have since argued that the didactic and homiletic romances should be considered a separate genre. Although the boundaries of the genre are variously defined, proponents agree that the essential feature of the group is the subordination of all other concerns to moral ones, whether Christian or broadly ethical. Other more specific characteristics, such as the direct intervention of God in the course of events, a hero whose moral character develops or who undergoes trials patiently, and connections between the story material and saints' legends, also help to define the group. 34

But can the exemplary romances really be distinguished from other romances in generic terms? Considerable disagreement over the canon of romances that should be counted as exemplary indicates the elusiveness of the proposed genre. Hanspeter Schelp and D. N. Klausner include Guy of Warwick while D. T. Childress excludes it; *Amis and Amiloun* fits the pattern for Kratins and Childress but not for Dieter Mehl or for Schelp; Childress and Mehl agree on Athelston's exemplary status but Schelp excludes the work. As these differences of opinion indicate, the proposed genre shares so many characteristics with romance that in a given work, the degree—rather than the mere presence—of exemplarity, hagiographic connections, and divine intervention becomes decisive in different ways for different readers. Unlady as that "commodious bottom drawer" labeled romance may be, 35 to sort out the exemplary romances from the others is to missapprehend their deep allegiance to romance's generic norms and secular ideals. In generic terms, even highly moral and pious insular romances sustain the movements toward social integration and earthly apotheosis that are typical of romance and anathema to hagiography. In doctrinal

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32 Ed. MacBain, lines 2175–76; similar echoes occur at lines 3173–86, 2165–214, 2281–96. Bloomfield points out that hagiography's adoption of some procedures typical of romance (marvels, motived episodes) predates the rise of romance and draws directly on folk tradition ("Epicidal Motivation and Marvels in Epic and Romance," in Essays and Explorations, pp. 118–21).

33 Jones, "Poesiecy"; Heftermann, "Legend of St. Eustace"; Pearsall, "Life of St. Katherine." See also Strubm, "Passion."
terms, if these works did subordinate all to a Christian or moral purpose they would indeed differ from other romances, but instead they reconcile moral commitment to secular models of success and happiness.

This chapter concentrates on the pious romances that exist in both Anglo-Norman and Middle English versions: Guī de Varrocc and Gayr de Waraucci; Amis e Amilun and Amis and Amiloun. These works offer contrasting images of heroic life. The story of Guī develops an ideal of knightly piety in which the hero actively seeks adventure; the story of Amis and Amiloun presents suffering heroes who must patiently accept sacrifices for each other. Both stories illustrate how insular poets adapt models of saintly life to new purposes.

Sir Beues of Hamtoun

Several insular romances anticipate Guy's Christian knighthood in some respects. Well before the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century pious romances, religious devotion was a significant feature of heroic perfection. The most common expression of knightly faith, in epic as in romance, was to oppose paganism. Most of Horn's military triumphs, while they serve his personal plan of vengeance and self-advancement, are also victories over pagan aggression. Heroes who are carried off to pagan lands oppose the religion they find there: Fulk Fitz Warin agrees to undertake the defense of Tunis only if its king and his followers will convert to Christianity; Bevis of Hampton, brought up in a pagan kingdom, refuses to convert there: Fulk Fitz Warin agrees to undertake the defense of Tunis only if its king and his followers will convert to Christianity; Bevis only if its king and his followers will convert to Christianity.

The story of Bevis provides the fullest illustration of this kind of Christian heroism. The cause of religion is frequently invoked to justify Bevis's actions, but it provides only ancillary support for motivations that are centrally personal and political. Indeed, in his Christian heroism. The cause of religion is frequently invoked to justify Bevis's actions, but it provides only ancillary support for motivations that are centrally personal and political.

Bevis is naturally "hardi & of gode hert," but he is capable of fear and knows that he succeeds "pour3 godes grace & min engyn [ingenuity]" rather than by force alone. But although religious faith deepens Bevis's character and increasingly colors his actions, no reader would be tempted to call Sir Beues of Hamtoun an exemplary romance. In both Anglo-Norman and Middle English, the story's affiliations to the legends of St. George and St. Eustace are marginal, and Christian faith remains a subsidiary aspect of a knighthood whose goals are aggressively secular and political.

This model of knighthood resonates tellingly with the history of the church's efforts to incorporate knights into its service. Through its growing influence over the wording and trappings of investiture ceremonies and vows of knighthood, the church in the later Middle Ages won partial control of this military institution. However, the church's version of ideal knighthood "had to find its expression within the framework of a secular ideology that was founded on a Christianized version of heroic traditions, and that sacerdotal teaching and sacerdotal priorities could only modify, not transform." In promulgating an ideal standard for knighthood, the
church had to sanction an institution whose violence and worldly designs it had previously condemned. Christian ideals come to embellish and justify secular motives, but rarely was secular gain truly subordinated to Christian principle. The romances of Bevis recognize this historical development. Bevis's career presents an ideal knighthood that is inspired by faith but that acts, in the final analysis, less for the advancement of faith than for political status and power.

The idea that knighthood should be transformed by faith fares even worse in *Richard Coer de Lyon*. This work survives only in a Middle English version that probably expands considerably the lost thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman source. The English poem traces the whole course of Richard's life (with many historical inaccuracies), but the action concentrates on his captivity in Germany and on the Third Crusade. Richard's crusade and his own nature are far from exemplary in Christian terms. Rivalry between the French and English forces, especially between Richard and Philip Augustus, becomes as important to the exercise of Richard's greatness as the campaign against the Saracens. The English can find no courage in the French; the French insult the English in turn with the old fable that Englishmen have tails. When the Crusaders' rivalries erupt in armed conflict, Richard urges his men, "Slee downe righte the Frenshe cowarde, And ken them in batayl teach That ye haue no taill."

This current of vengeful prejudice sorely blurs the Christian-pagan dichotomy and contaminates the Crusade's ideal of Christian unity and superiority. Slurs on French and Saracens even lie side by side:

Ffrenssche men am arwe and ffeynte, cowardly / deceitful
And Sarazynys be war, and queynte, dy / coming
And oth here dedes enyous; of thee / treky
be Ffrenssche men be coaytous."

Further vitiating the moral justification for crusade is Richard's own thunderous violence. Viewed most favorably, he is a winner, "in dede lion, in thought lybarde [leopard]" (2194), always in control and always resourceful. But he is also a ferocious prodigy, child of a demon mother, who relishes a dish of roast Saracen and serves the Sultan's emissaries the boiled heads of the hostages whose release they have come to negotiate. "\(\text{Scorning Philip's mercy on cap­}


pleting me}\]" (4687), explains the French king—Richard embraces any conduct that will advance the Christian forces.

In this frenzied world the occasional interventions of God and St. George on Richard's behalf do not raise the tone of Richard's exploits so much as they implicate divinity itself in the abasement of crusading ideals to human prejudice and bloodthirstiness. The process is perfectly coherent in generic and thematic terms. The patterns of action and achievement typical of romance encourage knighthood's temporal significance at the expense of Christian ideals of transcendence. The design of St. George's legend, in which martyrdom demonstrates the futility of earthly power, is exchanged in these romances for Richard's bloody victories and Bevis's acquisition of crowns and queens for himself and his sons. The exchange negates the church's attempted appropriation of ideal knighthood and even recruits crusading zeal to the service of private success.

The pre-Christian Alexander cuts a somewhat better figure than Bevis or Richard. The Anglo-Norman *Alexander* and its Middle English descendant *Kyng Alisaunder,* like other works on Alexander, have considerable moral appeal. Schelp drosses some Alexander works with exemplary romances, and M. D. Legge characterizes the Anglo-Norman *Alexander* as an "exemplum" governed by a "moral purpose." The maxim which begins the Middle English version, that "Opere mannes lijf is oure shewer [teacher]" (18), directs the presentation of Alexander; as in the Anglo-Norman he is a bold strategist, generous and concerned for his men. Schelp, echoing episodes develop his character: in Anglo-Norman he rejects a drink of water in the desert when his armies would go thirsty (4772-92), and later he insists on being the first to taste a potentially dangerous water (4772-92).
water supply (483–36); he pardons an enemy soldier who attempted to assassinate him (AN 316–26, ME 3886–4059), but he hunts down and executes the treacherous murderers of Darius, his enemy (AN 3565–79, ME 4547–718). Alexander’s model leadership develops through such actions and through commentary on the moral issues raised by his deeds, issues such as human acquisitiveness, the transitoriness of earthly life, and God’s power to chastise.  

This moral treatment also colors scientific (or pseudoscientific) information in the Anglo-Norman Alexander. King Alexander, most fully illustrated in the campaign against Gog and Magog (AN 5951–6891, ME 5938–6287). The romances’ quasi-anthropological perspective tolerates many cultures but establishes that the practices of Gog and Magog are “vers humeine nature” [against human nature] (1964). Alexander declares their people to be “oile folk . . . but ben of be kynde [breed] of hel” (5988–99) for their cannibalism, incestuousness, and consumption of raw meat and venom. The campaign then gains an eschatological framework, in which “leaus escommunicer” [those excommunicated ones] (6335) are to be shut up “in tyll domesday” (6335), when Antichrist will lead them out to harry the peoples of earth. The episode thus fuses moral commitment with learned curiosity about cultural differences. Alexander judges that “dame nature” (AN 6352) is on his side in attacking the people of Gog and Magog, but he also prays for divine guidance. In response God reveals that the evil peoples may be enclosed by a dike of bitumen, a substance Alexander has learned about on his travels. Thus natural science and faith together overcome these people who are culturally marginal and morally “La racine de mal e tote trecherie” [the root of evil and all deception] (6115).

But Alexander’s virtue is circumscribed by his drive to conquer: he risks lives needlessly (AN 4454–6, 4539–41), tricks adversaries into battle (AN 5237–310, ME 5457–538), and generally lives for victories and domination. Theologians and moralists of the period interpret Alexander negatively, as an example of pride, mad ambition, envy, dissolution, and even as a figure for the devil tormenting the world before the advent of Christ. Alexander is exemplary in the secular strengths of leadership and aggression rather than in Christian virtues; in this he resembles the conquering Bevis and Richard of other insular romances.

A subtler relationship between knighthood and morality develops when a hero not only undertakes military causes in God’s name but also follows a course of action that closely recalls the legends of saints. Guy of Warwick’s life after his marriage, in his rejection of social honors and family ties, his service to God, and particularly his anonymous and devout retirement just before death, parallels the legend of St. Alexis. West senses a “hagiographical spirit” in these episodes, and Mehl sees the spirit fully embodied as the “poem turns into a legend toward the end.” Childress virtually concurs: “What began as a romance ends as a secular legend.” But the romances of Guy finally raise the expectations of hagiography only to frustrate their fulfillment. Guy’s imitation of Alexis constitutes both a homage to saintly life and a secular corrective of its fundamental tenets.

In Alexis’s legend the young Roman leaves home on his wedding night in order to avoid earthly ties. He resigns his life to God, becoming for many years a poor anonymous beggar at the shrine of a sacred image. When the image miraculously reveals his holiness, he escapes again to anonymity. God directs his journey back to Rome, where he begs his own father for shelter, asking pity in the name of the lost son Alexis. He lives as a beggar for years in his father’s household, mocked and insulted by the servants. Just before his death, he records his life story in writing; then a voice from heaven announces his presence in Rome and guides the Christian congregation to his obscure corpse. His amazed parents and wife lament his deliberate anonymity, while miracles demonstrate his saintliness.


32. West, Courtly; p. 81; Mehl, Middle English Romances, p. 244. Children’s Between Romance and Legend,” p. 127.

33. This summary and the following discussion reflect the most widely shared interpretations of Alexander include Giraldus Cambrensis, John of Salisbury, Ranulph Higden, Alexander Neckham, and Walter Burley.

34. Examples of moral commentary are AN 1215–24, 2839–45, 3164–61, 3846–54, ME 255–261, 3086–92, 3517–74, 3750–72. Examples of cultural diversity accepted in the Alexander works are the messenger, a hairy one-eyed monopod, who persuades Alexander to campaign against Gog and Magog, and the support of the Amazons, among other armies, in the campaign. See also Friedman, Monstrous Races; Anderson, Alexander’s Gate.

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Similarly, Guy leaves Felice soon after their marriage (but not before conceiving a son), in order to expiate the wrongs of his youthful chivalry. Guy exercises his devotion in combat rather than in begging, but like Alexis his experiences deepen his spirituality. The people Guy savors feel his closeness to God, give thanks for his arrival, pray for him in battle, and celebrate his victories with religious processions. Guy himself acquires an ability to make moral pronouncements about the situation he faces. Like the Anglo-Norman Horn, Guy never accepts land or gifts from grateful lords; in his service of God he rejects in addition the comforts of baths, fine clothes, and traveling companions. His asceticism, his spirituality, and his avoidance of honors associate him with St. Alexis. At the same time, several features distinguish the lives of the two heroes. Centrally, whereas Alexis has no concern other than to serve God, Guy wishes as well to aid or avenge his friends, to defend baronial principles, and to protect England. That Guy's inspirations to battle are both religious and secular is in accord with a wider difference between Guy's and Alexis's lives: Guy does not suffer the marginal social role of the beggar Alexis. Alexis's voluntary isolation from the fine life that his parents envisioned for him demonstrates, like the martyrs' deaths, the essential incompatibility of secular and sacred goals. This incompatibility underlies the saints' claim to have discovered a life superior to ordinary secular life, seeing their secular values into question. Martyrs, in accepting death gladly and at the same time foiling all attempts to execute them until God wills their deaths, demonstrate the incompatibility of earthly life and temporal power in the face of God's power. Alexis recognizes the dichotomy of secular and sacred, when he rejects family ties, marriage, and social standing as incompatible with the saintly vocation. His asceticism, his spirituality is compatible with a variety of worldly interests. Although Guy chooses to evade honors and adulation, both his causes and the mass gratitude they attract unite hero and world in a way that, for Alexis, is out of the question.

The contrast between Guy's social integration and Alexis's abnegation extends to the way in which each hero claims anonymity. Both leave their high stations for humbler ways of life, and both hide their identities in the process. But Alexis, unlike Guy, sets about to destroy his old identity completely. Desiring to follow God rather than his earthly father, Alexis gives away all his goods, rejoices when his father's messengers do not recognize him begging at the shrine of the holy image, and speaks of himself as another turnet (Alexis puts it out of his thoughts; it means nothing to him, he is so turned toward God) (244-45). The radical rejection of an earthly father or spouse figures in the legends of other saints, such as Francis and Catherine, as well. A Christian maiden calls Queen Catherine to the faith with a similar reaction to the family's sorrow in 45: "Axelis, I mon so fre, / Afterward I shal telle bee' (664-65). He conquers his old identity through seventeen years of silence, and it calls his family's sorrow but continues to serve God rather than earthly forms:...
Insular Romance

"... bele amie,
Mun Deu a ses noces t'envie... .
Ne dutez cest mortel mari.
Sa poissance ne deis duter,
Ne s'amur guaires désirer."

'Dear friend, my Lord invites you to his wedding. . . . Do not fear this mortal husband. You must not fear his power nor in any way desire his love.'

Often the families in saints' lives are left confused and sorrowful, unable to comprehend the superior life for which they have been deserted. When Alexis's name is revealed after his death, his grief-stricken family question his obduracy and his motives, blind to the incompatibility of Alexis's spiritual life and their family life (1009-92). It is illuminating that the posthumous discovery of Alexis's autobiography does not bring about the fusion of his identities as saint and as son. What is published at Alexis's deathbed is a record of the irreparable break in his identity. His family's inability to accept the break emphasizes in a new way the disjunction between saintly and secular life.

Guy's life as an anonymous pilgrim recalls Alexis's anonymity but does not entail a surrender of his previous identity. In the first place, Guy reveals his name to his closest friends after each of his combats. These scenes sustain a connection between the hero's identity as repentant pilgrim and his identity as earl of Warwick. Guy's old friend Tirri even reproaches himself for not having made the connection:

'Ben me deveie aparceveir
Par tes granz fez, par tun poeir,
Que eriez Gui le vaillant,
Le preuz, le hardi, le combatant.'

Well my3t I know a ryght
That yt was Gye, the noble kny3te,
By the strength, and by the my3te,
And by the strokis so bold in fy3te.'

Rather than isolating him from society, Guy's pilgrim identity replenishes his knightly identity, replacing his youthful vainglory with sober dedication to Christianity but not at all shifting the theater of his involvement from earthly engagements. Guy seeks to amend his chivalric pursuit of renown, not to reject human society.

Nor does Guy ultimately deny his identity within his family or abandon its interests for the interests of God. Guy sends for Felice when death is near, although their reunion at his deathbed is only long enough for a glance, a kiss, or a gesture begging her pardon. Still, the meeting reaffirms their union, and Felice's acceptance and understanding of Guy at his death contrasts with the prolonged complaints of Alexis's family. Guy's reconciliation to his family is more broadly illustrated when he reveals his identity to King Athelstan after defending England from Danish servitude in his last combat. Rejecting the honors proffered by the king, Guy asks instead that Athelstan's gratitude be commuted to the benefit of Reinbrun and his guardian Heral:

'Sire,' fait Gui, 'nel pus faire,
Quite ves claim tule leve.
Mais si Deu doinst Heral repairer
E il puisse mun fiz ramener,
Ent es ves vurer ben afer.'

"Sir king," said Gui, 'y nil nou3t so.
Hose oue je fond for euer-mo,
& god y vey bi-tenche.
Ac yf Herhaud to jis fond com,
& bring wip him Reynbroun, mi sone,
Help him, y pe breeche;
For jai er hope bende & fe.'

The emotional and material well-being of his family are legitimate concerns for Guy, so that Reinbrun's return and accession to his father's title make a fitting conclusion to the trials Guy endures. Finally, whereas Alexis surrenders his freedom of action when

58. Clémence of Barking, St. Catherine 1633-34, 1654-56. Alexis's two antithetical lives are discussed at length by Hatcher, "St. Alexis."

59. Guy's revelation of identity to Athelstan has a similarly integrating effect:

'... amen cunten, pur Deu, merci! Entre vus clame joi Gu?' (1134-41) "Pilgrm," said the kynge, 'mercy! I Art sowe the noble kynge joi Gu?' (C. 1083-45) (B alles enue.)

60. Gui 11154-61; Guy A 292-93, C. 1067-72 (the latter includes a kiss); Guy of Warwick: The Second or 13th-century Version, ed. zagptel, lines 1066-69 (includes a kiss, embrace, and gesture of pardon: "hau money for to crye / Of jis wonen, siche chau for hyn drys" [1066-69]).

61. Earlier, Guy also asks Tirri to help Reinbrun if he can: Gui 1069-73. Guy A 288-91.
he turns to God. Guy's will to act and determine events remains as strong as in his youth. The few choices Alexis makes are self-abnegating gestures that rid him of identity and free his will for God: leaving home, giving away goods, fleeing fame when the holy image speaks of him, and so on. Alexis is quintessentially "goddes knyght" (245) in passivity, led to ship by the Holy Ghost (246), pointed out by the sacred image (445-68), brought back to Rome by Jesus (557-58), and finally revealed by a voice from heaven (817–73). God determines the course of events; Alexis frees himself to accept God's determination. In contrast, Guy maintains his autonomy. He chooses his route, his combats, when to obscure his identity and when to reveal it. He never suffers ostracism; he rejects honors by choice, while Alexis passively accepts insults and blows. At the end of his life, Guy determines for himself to return to Warwick, and he maintains a servant in his retirement through whom he announces his impending death to Felice and gives instructions for his bural. "So great is Guy's seignorial authority that he can even warn Felice that she will not live long after him; fittingly, she lives in prayer "Pur sun seignur qui tant ama" (11616) ["For Gye, her lord, that was so dore" (C 11047)] for just as many days after his death as he had lived in marriage with her."

This contrast between Guy's heroic independence and Alexis's submissive dependence on God maintains Guy's status as temporal lord, master of his destiny, even during the time of his penance. Alexis's sharply reduced autonomy makes room for the powerful presence of God's will in the text. According to E. B. Vitz, God's role interventions are essential differences. Most obviously, the reward of Eustace's search is the crown of martyrdom, while the reward of Sir Isumbras is a temporal crown. Their different rewards culminate quite different struggles. From a course of similar misfortunes, Eustace in consequence of his conversion to Christianity and Isumbras as a result of his proud life. Both suffer the loss of all their goods, then of their wives and children, who are abducted. The two men demonstrate their endurance and acceptance of God's will and, following their return to arms, they are reunited with their families.

This brief outline cannot indicate fully the striking parallels in incident that link the two stories. But underlying these connections are essential differences. Most obviously, the reward of Eustace's search is the crown of martyrdom, while the reward of Sir Isumbras is a temporal crown. Their different rewards culminate quite different struggles. From a course of similar misfortunes, Eustace learns to transcend worldly desires, while the sinner Isumbras revives his right to fulfill those very desires. Eustace, like Alexis, comes to understand that devotion to the

53. Gui 7150–1, 11158–61, and Guy A 148.10–11 (Felice warned of her own death); Gui 7752, 11616 (marriage and Felice's survival are fifty days each); Guy A 19.5–6, 247–50 (marriage and Felice's survival are fifteen days, respectively). The addition in the Latin text of a further variation by King Athelstan emphasizes Guy's temporal nobility (11074–11025).
56. These parallels are emphasized by Braswell, "Sir Isumbras"; Mehl, Middle English Romances, pp. 128–35; and Schlep, Exemplarische Romanzen, pp. 54–57 in addition, Heffernan, "Legend of St. Eustace," provides a fine study of the legend's narrative qualities.
world and devotion to God are mutually exclusive. His terrible trials wear him from earthly concerns:

'If his world is so changeable, / pou / send mee youth / poverty In 30wthede pouerte / send mee youth / poverty / Inne is stable. . . .

As these statements imply, Isu...
nally was not religious, although its later medieval versions grow more and more cognizant of its spiritual possibilities. But sworn brotherhood remains at the heart of the romance versions, and that bond's strength, stability, and virtue rival the bond between saints and God in legend. Sworn brotherhood is well suited to demonstrating the worth of worldly allegiances, in that it unites the oath-keeping of feudal relations with the blood ties of kinship in one powerful, voluntary gesture. Little wonder that hagiographers sought to absorb this story of brotherhood into religious literature or that its worldly appeal continued to attract secular poets.

Amis e Amilun and Amis and Amiloun draw on saints' lives for elements of suffering and sacrifice, religious devotion, and divine intervention. But these elements are inverted, emptied of their legendary significance as signs of saintly life, and filled instead with new meaning as stages in the testing and development of a perfect friendship: Amis and Amiloun


God tests and rewards friendship, validating it and conferring on it the sanction of the divine. Although this process honors Christian principles by finding a place for them in a secular tale, that place is finally defined and delimited by the capacity of Christian principles to support the tale's secular ideal of brotherhood.

MacEdward Leach and Kathryn Hume have explored the contrasting purposes of the hagiographic and the romance versions of Amis and Amiloun's story.” Disagreement still abounds on how to interpret the differences from legend in Amis e Amilun and Amis and Amiloun, but I take the differences themselves to be sufficiently established and discuss here only the Anglo-Norman and Middle English versions. These “must be considered as a unit, an important member of the romantic family of the Amis and Amiloun story.”

They cannot be treated accurately as source and translation, but they are related versions whose divergences illustrate the expanding influence of hagiography on romance from the twelfth century to the fourteenth.

The story's events are nearly the same in Anglo-Norman and Middle English. Amis and Amiloun, identical in appearance, swear eternal friendship while youths in service to a count (duke in Middle English). When the count's daughter Florie (Belisaunt in Middle English) seduces Amis, a seneschal betrays the lovers. Amiloun takes Amis's place in swearing to no fault against the count and thus by deception wins a judicial combat and the hand of Florie. Just before marrying her in Amis's stead, Amiloun hears a voice warning him that if he goes through with the ceremony he will be stricken with leprosy (this warning precedes the judicial combat in Middle English). He continues to hide his name and marries Florie for Amis, assuring his friend's happiness. Amiloun returns home but is soon cast out by his own wife when he becomes leprous. Helped only by Owein, a faithful young relative, Amiloun eventually arrives to beg at Amis's door. The friends are reunited by Owein's faithfulness and by recognition tokens, identical cups they exchanged at parting. Soon Amis hears from a voice in a dream that the blood of his two children would restore Amiloun to health. He kills the children, cures Amiloun, and finds the children miraculously restored. Amiloun takes vengeance on his wife and gives his land to Owein, then returns to live the rest of his life with Amis. The two lie buried together in Lombardy.

As it appears in the two complete manuscripts, Amis e Amilun is told with extraordinary simplicity. Its spareness throws into relief the reciprocity and equality of sacrifice in friendship that give this story its meaningful balance. Studies of the Middle English Amis and Amiloun contrast this characteristic linearity to the cohesive development and frequent foreshadowing of the Middle English re-daction.” The earlier version accentuates the story's hyperbolic and exemplary quality, while the English version adds details and digressions that must then be brought under control by a heightened narrative intensity.” Often the later version strengthens a crucial scene's violent or pathetic possibilities so as to infuse its expanded

70. Kathryn Hume, "Amis and Amiloun," p. 21; Mehl, Middle English Romances, pp. 107-8; Leach, edition, p. xcv.
concreteness with thematic meaning. Perhaps the finest example of such counterbalancing of naturalistic detail with new emotive intensity is the sacrifice of Amis's children (2257-322). A host of small circumstantial actions—sending the servants off to church, finding the nursery keys, taking a candle, relocking the nursery door, hiding the keys under a stone—surround a central passage in which Amis stands poised before his decision:

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Alone himself, wip-outen mo,
Into the chamber he gan to go,
By that his children were,
& he heeld hem bothe to,
Hou fair lay to-gider beside there.
& slepe hope together.
Jan seyd him-self, 'Bi Seyn Jon,
It were gret rewebe 30U to slay, great pity / slay
tat God hap becon do dere!' at such cost
His kniif he had drawen bat tide,
For sorwe he sleynt oway beside & wepe wip reweful countenance.
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In this passage the physical evocation of the scene is subsumed in the universal pathos of the father's sorrow, the mythologizing analogy between the children and the sacrificial Christ, and the transcendent simplicity of the style. The event thereby overcomes its own specificity to achieve the absolute narrative necessity and merit that are more directly and simply achieved in the Anglo-Norman text (1086-106) through the hero's freedom from emotional conflict and an unspecific, emblematic approach to the story. The two scenes diverge in treatment but not in purpose.

The thematic development of Amis and Amiloun has appeared to literary critics to differ sharply from that of the Anglo-Norman version. Brotherhood is, in the asocial, minimally Christian atmosphere of Amis e Amilun, the unquestionable arbiter of right and wrong. In the more naturalistic and more sensitively Christian Middle English poem, but not in the Anglo-Norman version.

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Characters in Amis e Amilun swear in God's name and the narrator prays for the heroes, establishing a Christian background for the story, 72 but only at two points do these appeals have a narrative function. Both are moments in the story that could be considered morally ambiguous, and the interjection of piety functions to remove any possible doubt of the heroes' righteousness. When Amilun impersonates Amis, he recognizes that Amis has wronged the count in according to Floris's demands (493-96); yet he can immediately pray for success (501-2), a prayer the narrator shares:

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Ore li sei deu en sie
E dount, le il poiue biem faire;
Grant chose enprent pur son freere.
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(522-24)
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Now may God assist him and grant that he may do well; he is undertaking a great thing for his brother.
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By associating the friends' loyalty to each other with the firm hope of God's support in these two prayers, Amis's fault against the count and the consequent need to trick the count and his court become morally irrelevant in the face of the exalted cause of friendship. A similar process associates piety with the sacrifice of Amis's children. Amis prays that his dream is true and that his brother may truly be cured (1086-96); after it proves true, Floris dismisses the children's deaths in giving thanks to God for Amilun's recovery (1126-34). The connection between Amis's act of friendship and Christian piety evades the claim that Amis's sons deserve his protection as much as does his friend. The moral issues inherent in both episodes are never confronted directly but are instead deflected by these perfunctory invocations of piety.

Thus religion in Amis e Amilun supports the plot without becoming important to it. The deity is a passive force at the disposal of the poet, to be invoked as necessary in support of friendship's demands. A more clearly present supernatural force and absolute arbiter of right in the poem is friendship itself. The perfection of the bond between Amis and Amilun confers upon them superhuman endurance of suffering, in their unhesitating acceptance of sacrifices for their friendship; prescience, in Amilun's warning against
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72 Yet God has no clear part in the action; disembodied voices announcing the heroes' tests have no apparent source or commitment to the action, though the vaguely Christian background of the poem as a whole must suggest a heavenly origin; the miraculous restoration of the children is clearly a result of the heroes' total dedication to friendship, but not necessarily a reward from God.
the steward and in his dream of Amis’s peril (74–92, 965–70); and an interdependent sympathy whereby vengeance on the seneschal becomes entirely mutual (901–3).

The uniquely exalted position friendship holds in Amis e Amiloun makes Amis’s failure to recognize the leper at his door the central crisis of the poem, because here alone the omniscient sympathy of friendship fails temporarily to unite them. The poor leper’s possession of a gold cup which Amis recognizes as the friendship token leads to his ferocious physical attack on the supposed thief. Amiloun has been too miserable in his affliction to entreat his friend to help him; he seems to realize his isolation fully when he hears Amis pronounce his name as if it belonged to another: “Kant Amilun s’oit nommer, / De douir pout son quer crever” (when Amiloun hears himself named, his heart could break for sorrow) (1017–18). Nor does Amis manage to sense his friend’s presence. As he moves to kill the leper, Owein warns “Si l’occiez, vus friez pecche” [“If you kill him, you will commit a sin/terrible act!”] (1042), but Amis then laments his deep sense of “pecche” simply for not having recognized his brother (1047–49). In Amiloun’s hopeless plea for death and in Amis’s remorse, a sense of mutual shame, if not of mutual sinfulness in the full sense of the word, is essential. The Anglo-Norman poet not only makes Christianity a passive referent for the righteousness of friendship above other claims but even infuses friendship with a quasi-religious power and vocabulary. In this treatment of the story it is impossible to doubt the correctness of the friends’ actions and therefore impossible to consider the consequence of these actions—leprosy and child sacrifice—as punishments in any sense, but rather only as tests of loyalty leading to reunion and happiness.

The author of Amis and Amilun introduces complexities that make moral judgments more difficult for both characters and critics. God is more immanent and actively benevolent in this version; He is more involved in the friends’ actions and therefore impossible to consider the consequences of these actions—leprosy and child sacrifice—as punishments in any sense, but rather only as tests of loyalty leading to reunion and happiness.

It becomes entirely mutual (501–3).

and Legend,” p. 318).

Numerous epics and romances represent judicial ordeals that verify not a whole human situation, but only the sworn statements made by participants. In the case of a literally true though functionally deceptive oath, it is not God and justice who are being tricked, but simply the human onlookers. As a result, in medieval literature the equivocal oath is not inherently sinful but is rather a locus for resistance to social pressure in deference to personal allegiances. Amis e Amiloun follows this tradition. If the equivocal oath were punished in Amis and Amiloun, it would contradict the conventional understanding of judicial oaths and negate the Anglo-Norman exaltation of friendship above other values. It would also contradict the heroes’ belief that, while Amis would indeed be "forsworn" if he maintained his own innocence, Amiloun is free moral difficulties presented by Amis’s false statements (940–47, 1099–102) and by the sacrifice of children (2245–47).

But the issues of crime and punishment that seem to be introduced in this heightened Christian context are suppressed by retaining the Anglo-Norman exaltation of friendship above all other values. The single change in plot from Amis e Amiloun has often been seized upon as a sign of the Middle English poet’s desire to show a morally wrong action punished. In Amis and Amiloun the warning that Amiloun will be stricken with leprosy if he continues his course of action comes not before his false marriage, as in Anglo-Norman, but before the judicial combat. From a purely narrative standpoint this change is a great improvement, since it consolidates Amiloun’s sacrifice in one action: the friendly service leads from the first to leprosy, rather than only half the service (marriage but not duel) resulting in disease. It is tempting to see in the Middle English alteration not just a structural improvement but also an attempt to make leprosy a “punishment for false swearing” or for the “sin” of accepting the duel for Amis. Yet this widely voiced explanation is tenable neither in terms of the nature of judicial combat nor in terms of the poem itself.


to "sware so god me speke / As icham giltes of pat dede." (1120-21)

In fact, there is no hint of wrong or punishment in the insular romances. Although the hagiographic versions treat Amiloun's choice as a sinful one, in Amis and Amiloun (as in Anglo-Norman) the warning angel avoids any suggestion of sin. The right and wrong of Amiloun's decision turn on the test, the virtue central to sworn brotherhood, rather than on a Christian ideal of honesty. Amiloun must choose between triple and self-preservation: he reasons "for drede of care / To hold mi treupe schal y nou3t spare." (128-83); the narrator recognizes the same basic choice in describing Amiloun's leprosy as "what swepe he hadde for his treupe." (1347). Only Amiloun's wife, a character so "wicked & schrewed [depraved]" (1361) that her accusations suggest their opposite, believes his husband's leprosy to be a punishment for falsifying the ordeal. (1564-69). She refers to the medieval tradition that God could inflict leprosy to purge sins. In this tradition Hennyson shows fallen Criseyde cleansed by the suffering of the illness, and Langland writes of poor lepers, "For loue of here lowe [humble] hertes / our lord hath hem graunted / Here penaunce and here purgatorie / vp-on thys pure [very] erthe." But Amiloun's leprosy is only a test, since the equivocal oath requires no repentance. His redemption draws on another medieval tradition: that bathing in the blood of children cures leprosy. Paul Remy has suggested that this treatment was so widely believed to be infallible that, in many medieval literary examples, the leper's physical condition is felt to be more horrifying than his longing for the cure. Amiloun's restoration to health follows this tradition rather than one of purgatory.

Religion in the Middle Ages

**Note on the Angel's Wording:** The angel's wording: the voice "does not threaten Amiloun with punishment [as suchal beare an examynor stryng] is a mor­
him a choyse." ("Amis and Amiloun," p. 351). On the hagiographic versions, see Baldwin, "Amis and Amiloun," believes we are meant to see grace rather than triple resolving the trials, but he ignores the poem's contrary statement (lines 14-15).

77. Kratins notes the significance of the angel's wording: the voice "does not threaten Amiloun with punishment [as suchal beare an examynor stryng] is a mor­him a choyse." ("Amis and Amiloun," p. 351). On the hagiographic versions, see Baldwin, "Amis and Amiloun," believes we are meant to see grace rather than triple resolving the trials, but he ignores the poem's contrary statement (lines 14-15).

romances discussed in this chapter, however, the action of Athelston supplies earthly problems and desires with earthly resolutions and rewards.

The four messengers of Athelston bind themselves "in trefwe trefwey" with oaths of friendship "for esmere" (32–34), but the lie of one friend that another plots Athelston's death destroys reliability at all levels of the brothers' interaction. This work treats not the trefwe of Amis and Amiloun, but the falseness of broken friendship:

Because the betrayer works "por wyrd" [through speech] (87), his falseness renders even language untrustworthy, so that truth becomes accessible only through direct appeal to God (see pp. 71–72). Yet the truth sought is a temporal one. Its recovery is a political event that restores a kingdom's justice and stability, rather than a transcendent event such as a martyr's death. And in his efforts to discover this political truth, the archbishop is concerned with sworn brotherhood, not faith:

Through interdict and excommunication the archbishop begins to implement his threats of war and social dislocation as he strives to win control of the prisoners (465–530). In this temporal struggle the value of divine power is measured by its political effectiveness. God's justice is indeed valuable by this measure, testing "be trefwe" (776) of brotherhood in the fires of the ordeal. Peace returns, and the birth of St. Edmund reverses the wrong of Athelston's own son's death. Yet there is nothing hagiographic about this resolution, despite the saint's presence. No surrender of earthly for heavenly desires and values occurs; no martyrs die in this fire. Rather, the ordeal answers the temporal problem of the crown's succession:

The hour of Edmund's birth is primarily "iblessyd" because of his future kingship, which signals the restoration of brotherhood, not because of his future saintliness. As in many other insular romances, the incorporation of faith and of God's sanction into the pursuit of secular destinies enhances the seriousness of the work without affecting its essential concerns. The ordeal re-creates temporal order and brotherhood; the birth of Edmund reestablishes the line of inheritance and the bond between friends; the archbishop's success restores the political balance between church and monarchy. The work's assertion that heaven's guidance is necessary to the pursuit of earthly ends remains aggressively the subject of interest.

Both Amis and Amiloun and Athelston have been called "homiletic romance" or "secular hagiography." Yet to put the case most radically, both substitute human for divine salvation. In Athelston the bond of brotherhood motivates the archbishop to protect the innocent victims of a broken oath. The ordeal gives conviction to the archbishop's faith in his "weddyd brober" (379), but the work's resolution is fully secular nonetheless. Similarly, Amiloun's redeemer is his friend Amis; the blood redeeming him is that of brotherly love, not of Christ. The evocation of Christ's sacrifice and the intervention of divine voices emphasize, because they sustain, devotion to brotherhood over devotion to any other value.

This analysis of the relation between divine and human love in Athelston and in the Amis poems contradicts analyses by those who believe that "homiletic romance" is a generically intermediate category. These romances are not in sympathy with hagiography's orientation. Brotherhood dominates; divine power aids in its development and provides validating analogies for acts of friendship.

79. Ed. Trounce, lines 7–9. Trounce translates "Listen, my courteous lords, (to a tale) of unfaithfulness, and to the fate it brings any man who concerns himself with it" (p. 93).
80. Lines 738–81; see also 399–414.
This structuring absorbs divine power into a secular framework of values. The wonders and miracles of these romances—the children laughing in the fires of the ordeal, Amioun's deliverance from leprosy, the birth of St. Edmund and the rebirth of Amis's sons—all these joyful moments grant divine affirmation to the importance of friendship. If in so doing they imply an analogy between brotherhood and divine love, between earthly rewards and heavenly peace, the analogy redounds to the credit of the romances' primary concerns, those of the world, conferring exceptional value on the threatened and restored peace of brotherhood, family, and nation.

In this we see not so much the fusing of romance and hagiography as romance's answer to hagiography's challenge.

Insularity and the Pious Romances

From Amis e Amiloun in the twelfth century through Athelston late in the fourteenth, England's pious romances increasingly accept and incorporate religious impulses, but they do so with increasingly well-defined resistance to certain implications of religious teaching. The immediate context for the development of exemplary romances is the hagiographic vitae, which share many features with romance. In turn, many of the romances that show deep Christian influence have hagiographic analogues. Guy, like Alexis, leaves his family to follow a humble life of service to God; Isimbres, like Eustace, is rewarded for his acceptance of heaven-sent misfortunes; Amis and Amioun in both romance and hagiography are visited by God and accept the tests heaven imposes upon them. Saints' legends influence the growth of new patterns of heroism in insular romance: the hero who seeks to glorify God through his chivalric exploits, the hero who knows God's part in his daily life and who accepts trials and tests imposed directly by God.

But the adoption of hagiographic patterns raises certain expectations that are thwarted in the exemplary romances. Acceptance of God leads a saint to understand existence as bipartite and to reject earthly concerns in favor of transcendent concerns, which are superior to and incompatible with those of the world. When a saint realizes God's power, he or she surrenders not only earthly identity but autonomy of action, allowing God as a desiring presence to counterbalance the saint's desire in the course of events. Finally, a saint's apotheosis in death rejects earthly desires and worldly power but brings the saint a heavenly reward.

Exemplary romances deny these consequences of faith. Rather than rejecting the world, their heroes integrate faith with involvement in profane affairs. Guy and Isimbres fight for personal vengeance as well as for God; Amis and Amioun and the sworn brothers in Athelston value the truce of their friendship above all else. They support their worldly concerns and their secular identities with a freedom of action that the saints do not wield. The heroes of pious romances even take initiatives or suffer dilemmas that are at odds with their religious commitment, giving them a substance and complexity that contrasts with saintly singlemindedness. Guy takes time out from anonymity to say goodbye to his friends and make provisions for his son; Isimbres supplements his humble acceptance of God's punishment with an economic aggressiveness that restores his social standing and avenges his wife. Amioun knows the divine origin of the message announcing the cure for his leprosy, yet he suffers great anguish in killing his children; Athelston's archbishop fights the pervasive corruption of falseness by calling on divine truth, but also by laying a deceitful trap for his untrue brother. The broad range of these characters' emotions and actions does not leave space in the works for God's actively determining presence. Divine intervention merely guides and supports the development of the hero's personal drama, a drama culminating in earthly adulation, success, and status—and perhaps in heavenly salvation as well.

In all these respects, the pious or exemplary works keep to the generic tendencies of romance rather than absorbing those of hagiography. Curiously, the restraints that romance poets place on religious elements are less immediately evident in moral romances that do not have hagiographic analogues. Havelok the Dane creates an immanent universe in which it is "miracle fair and god [good]" that Godard spares young Havelok's life. Years later, when returning to his patrimony, Havelok asks Christ's assistance:

"And bringe me wel to pe lond
Pat Godard haldes in his hond;
Pat is mi riht, eueri del: birthright / every bit
Iesu Crist, pou wost it wel!" 82

82. Havelok the Dane, ed. Skeat, lines 500, 1381-84.
Government and faith seem entirely compatible in Havelok’s prayer as in Athelwold’s ideal rule (27–247)." Because the romance has no hagiographic analogue, the harmonies it establishes are undisturbed by resonances with the conflicting standards of Christian life established in saints’ legends.

Similarly, the Anglo-Norman Alexander and Kyng Alisaunder fuse moral and scientific impulses, indeed so successfully that the prologue to Kyng Alisaunder introduces the pre-Christian hero with conventional admonishments taken from religious works: many there are in the audience

\[\text{Pat hadden leuer a ribauye}\]
\[\text{run hire of God ojer Seint Marie,}\]
\[\text{Other to drynk a copful ale}\]
\[\text{I wish that such / that a good thing}\]
\[\text{that hadden leuer a ribauye Who would rather have a lewd tale}\]
\[\text{Pan here of God oiber Seint Marie,}\]
\[\text{Oiber to drynk a copful ale}\]
\[\text{Pan to heren any gode tale.}\]
\[\text{Swiche Ich wolde weren out bishett, I wish that such / that a good thing}\]
\[\text{For certeynlich it were nett.}\]

That the author admonishes his audience not just to listen seriously but to listen religiously, as to a tale of God or Mary, indicates how compatibly the Alexander story can coexist with a moral tone. Yet in the Alexander poems, even more than in Havelok, the dominant values and concerns are unworldly ones; the appeals of heroic leadership, history, and scientific observation are more compelling than moral appeals.

The incompatibilities between romances and hagiographic vitae may be more evident in those insular works with hagiographic analogues, but other works classed as homiletic and briefly sampled here are also best understood as romances rather than as generically distinct from romance. Medieval romance itself is an exemplary form, which builds and animates varied ideals of self-realization, social harmony, and love. H. R. Jauss places the genre among the forms inspiring an "admiring Identifikation." This concept captures more precisely than that of exemplarity the nature and effect of romance: the genre presents not models for direct imitation but inspiring figures of ideal achievement that dignify a way of life, a history, or a standard of conduct." Saints’ legends, too, invite an admiring reaction, but as have been seen, their figures of achievement differ fundamentally from those of romance. Moreover, these generic incompatibilities express important cultural tensions between Christian and secular interests. The insular romances that draw on hagiography do not merely alter the model of sainthood to a model of Christian lay perfection. Rather, they absorb piety into a value system distinct from that of medieval Christianity.

As outlined in the first section of this chapter, church and state began to find themselves in strong conflict during the twelfth century. Henry II’s disputes with Thomas Becket crystallized for contemporaries the opposition between new state coherence and the church’s values and power. As the church turned its attention to pastoral reform, the thirteenth century witnessed important expansions in the church’s authority and role in the lives of Christians. These expansions produced wide-ranging improvements in spiritual care, and at the same time exacerbated oppositions between religious and secular demands on lay Christians.

Resistance to hagiographic patterns in romance comments on these conflicts. By substituting worldly victories for legendary transcendence, the pious romances validate secular concerns. Political stability replaces heavenly rest, and sacrificial brotherhood stands in for martyrdom. Such substitutions assert the worth of pursuing security and prosperity and of respecting oaths and family ties. And in the romances’ ideal vision, these goals lie within the

\[83. \text{Haskin examines the similar mutuality of a Christian ideal of generosity and the feudal virtue of largesse in “Food, Clothing and Kingship”; and Mill points out in “Havelok’s Return” the importance of divine protection in Havelok’s escape from and return to his patrimony. Nonetheless, social imperatives do conflict with Christian associations in HD, e.g., “as Havelok bows down his fellow workers, we wonder what happened to the aura of Christian humility that surrounded his journey to Lincoln” (Garnin, Style and Consciousness, p. 24).}\]

\[84. \text{“Negativität und Identifikation”; see also Jauss, “Cinque modelli.” Wehrh judges that exemplarity is insufficient to distinguish hagiography from romance (Formen mittelalterlicher Erzählung, p. 431).}\]

\[85. \text{Türk, Nugae Curialium.}\]

\[86. \text{Literature and Pulpit, p. 308.}\]
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reach of human power. Where the legend subordinates a saint's will to God's desire, these insular works give the hero center stage. Problems and their resolutions wait on his choices and actions, making him the prime mover of the poetic universe, the source of change and of order.

Establishing a correlation between the insular pious romances and the context of church reform raises one further issue. The impulse to religious reform in the thirteenth century may have been somewhat stronger in England than on the continent, but the reform movement was international and so followed in many countries the course established by the church in Rome and its councils. Why then should England have developed so many examples of morally committed romance, while in France the influence of religious writing on romance was so limited? Old French romance offers a few examples from the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries of vital hagiographic influence, but in general the thirteenth century saw the triumph of hagiography over romance. Analyzing this continental development, Peter Dembowski concludes that religious reform gave impetus to the writing of hagiography in France, just as was the case in England, but that additionally Old French romance lost its vitality, its capacity to express important concerns, in the early thirteenth century: "Here lies the fundamental importance of hagiography for the history of Old French literature. When . . . romance becomes 'fluffy' and flippant, or allegorical and abstract, the function of the literary presentation of reality in a serious vein is taken over by the hagiographic narratives." Yet during the same and the following century in England, romance retains its vitality, manifesting varied and increasingly subtle responses to hagiography.

This difference can be accounted for in both historical and literary terms. In addition to the striking changes of international religious reform, the thirteenth century saw the development of a Middle English literary culture that supplemented and later supplanted Anglo-Norman literary culture. The shift is related to England's increasing separation from the political and cultural patterns of the continent: the losses of Normandy in 1204 and of the

87. "Literary Problems," p. 122. Wehrli describes a parallel separation of romance and hagiography in Germany; and Hurley further describes differences between romance and hagiography in "Saints' Legends." Mehl also reviews this difference between insular and continental romance (Middle English Romances, pp. 17-20).

Anglo-Norman territories by 1243 are only the most prominent signs of isolation. The accompanying shift from Anglo-Norman to English as the dominant language of culture attenuated the patterns of literary development observable on the continent, prolonging the prominence of romance through the process of translation. And translation only partly describes the emergence of Middle English romance, as works move from French to English they find new meanings, voices, and audiences. Together, the change in language and the change in substance give romance an extended period of vitality in England. At the same time hagiography achieves literary prominence in the wake of the church's pastoral reforms. In consequence the two genres are active—and interacting—over a considerable period in England.

At the intersection of generic pressure from the vital and popular saints' legends and ecclesiastical pressure toward fuller Christian commitment, romance in England stands confronted with a great challenge to its validity and its power to generate ideal images of human potential. Its response is in part adaptive, in accepting religious concerns more deeply and in proposing new models of conduct for morally sensitive heroes. However, the response of the insular works is at the same time resistant: in these works, religious sensibilities uphold fundamental commitments to the importance of earthly achievement, the value of earthly life, and the centrality of the hero's power.

88. The earliest ME romances all have AN or OF antecedents, but they postdate those antecedents by fifty to one hundred years; see Helaine Newstead's chart of dates in Severs, ed., Manual, I, 13-16.