

Conclusion

Over two centuries the Anglo-Norman and related Middle English romances were insular in their divergences from continental romances, their distance from the royal court, and their specific engagements in English baronial milieus. Even the earliest Anglo-Norman romance poets expressed their separateness from France by resisting its literary conventions, by choosing English heroes, or by directly distinguishing themselves from the French as does the *Alexander* poet: "Ces sunt les esteilles qe nos Charle Wain nomon. / Char l'apellent Franceis" [these are the stars we call Charles's Wain; the French call them the Cart].¹ In the later twelfth century, "Normans in England were ceasing to call themselves Normans. . . . If they had to be described by a collective or national name, it was not 'Norman' but 'English.' The change was universal because from 1154 even the king of England was not a Norman."² The Anglo-Norman poets' insular identity was consolidated as Henry II's reign gradually changed England's cultural and administrative relationship to Normandy and other Angevin territories. The local affiliations of many Anglo-Norman romances—Lincoln for *Havelok*, Hereford for *Ipomedon*—extend to their Middle English adaptations, whose origins read like an itinerary of the realm, from Lan-

1. Thomas of Kent, *Alexander*, ed. Foster and Short, lines 4674–75; cf. "Fort est a translater; suffreite ay de romanz" [this is difficult to translate; my French is insufficient] (4662)

2. R. H. C. Davis, *Normans and Their Myth*, p. 131.

cashire and Yorkshire to Dorset, from East Anglia to Erceldoune. Works often made their way to London, but this is first of all a provincial literature, and stylish urbanity is not one of its identifying features.

Nonetheless, this is an aristocratic literature. The Anglo-Norman works addressed England's briefly bilingual elite in the language of their superiority. English adaptations spoke to a broadened but still largely baronial public. By the later thirteenth century, many nobles were not at ease with French, while the mercantile sector began to share some baronial interests. The two groups were in significant contact and competition during the fourteenth century, but the English descendants of Anglo-Norman romances continued primarily to examine baronial preoccupations and ideas about the world. The English works' aesthetic level, too, is consistent with a baronial public. *Guy of Warwick*, *Amis and Amiloun*, and *Beues of Hamtoun* may be unsophisticated in comparison to some court productions, but we have seen that they are in sympathy with and often polish Anglo-Norman sources of narrower aristocratic milieu.

These romances do not treat their subjects as if they had no correlates in life. On the contrary, insular poets seem as interested in their ability to comment on the world as in their capacity to escape life's necessities or to idealize life's processes through the transformations of poetry. They are sharply aware of contemporary political, religious, and cultural principles, and they examine as well a set of convictions important to the barony: that noble power rests in the land and its heritability, so that noble merit inheres in perpetuating the patrimony and the family; furthermore, that the behaviors fostered by this system—courageous initiative in war, respect for law and custom in peace, cultivation of social graces through wealth—are virtues that justify and expand the dominance brought by landholding. The insular romances give poetic form to this ideology and to other beliefs, dramatizing their confrontations and finally picturing all of them contributing to baronial advancement.

The romances of English heroes tell of political crises resolved by military and legal action. Usually the hero loses his inheritance and wins it back; typically the hero's community loses and gains with him. Horn and Havelok go into exile accompanied by loyal followers and restore the rights of those followers by overthrowing wicked usurpers. As Fulk and Horn demand justice for them-

selves, they correct royal injustice toward their fellow vassals. Bevis and Guy defend Christians from pagans and barons from rapacious lords, altering social conditions for the general good. The external and political crises, the national scale, and the heroic support of whole communities are so marked in these works that some of them (*Boeve*, *Fouke*, the Anglo-Norman *Horn*) are occasionally called epics rather than romances. But it is the hero's program of landed and lineal fulfillment, not the nation's need, that determines the course of events, no matter how closely the two are allied in these plots.

That baronial and national interests do appear to coincide in these works is significant in relation to the historical tension between barony and king. Centralization was in many ways congenial to England's landholders, yet the gradual subordination of feudal rights to royal control, and of family fortunes to national well-being, demanded that the barony accept a new political ideology. Feudal custom must bend to the king's will; private rights must accommodate themselves to the national good. John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* expressed this ideology in the Anglo-Norman period, invoking the metaphor of head and body for king and subjects and urging on knights a full acceptance of authoritative rule. Two centuries later Walter Burley was still claiming that a virtuous king's subordinate social order was a good one in which "quilibet est contentus de gradu suo sub rege" [everyone is content with his station beneath the king].³

The romances of English heroes acknowledge the dominance of national ideology by recognizing the right and power of kings, placing high value on communal stability, and representing the legal system as a legitimate source of redress for the barony. But at the same time, these romances reinterpret nationalism to the advantage of the newly constrained barony. The desires of the noble hero subsume the desires of his community, so that the hero's impulse toward personal achievement is in harmony with a broader, impersonal impulse toward national stability. Through this pattern the romances of English heroes consistently subvert the political principle that royal and national interests must come before those of landed barons. Indeed, these romances stand the ideal on its

3. Thomson, "Walter Burley's Commentary," p. 578; *Policraticus*, ed. Webb, 5.2 and 6.29.

head by proposing that baronial interests are the key to the public good. This confident cohesiveness diminishes in the later romances, but generally the desires of a noble hero and of the people at large are inseparable and are to be realized concurrently through the hero's struggle to recover his patrimony and establish his lineage. King John's insistence on controlling Fulk and his fellow barons is thus misguided; King Edgar's desire to punish Bevis for the death of the heir to the throne is doomed to failure—because only when the desires of kings and commons follow those of the dispossessed hero will harmony be achieved.

A similar literary refraction turns Christian models of abnegation to the purpose of private, worldly advancement. Particularly during and after the great thirteenth-century institutional reforms directed at expanding the church's role in the lives of the faithful, religious content infused romances written in England. The most pious romances seem to construct so symbiotic an interrelation of religious and secular impulses that some critics coin new generic designations for them—"homiletic romance," "exemplary romance," "secular hagiography." For these critics the pious romances express perfectly the church's new emphasis on lay piety and on the instruction of the laity through sermons and saints' legends. But as with the move toward governmental centralization, the church's extended and regularized control benefited its members only at the price of their reduced autonomy and increased compliance with institutional standards. The pious romances resist these implications of Christian teaching as they revise hagiography's ideal models of surrender to God, transcendent faith, and heavenly apotheosis.

The stories of Guy of Warwick and Amis and Amiloun illustrate the tendency most fully. Guy's conversion to God's service and his wandering life recall the legend of St. Alexis, while Amis and Amiloun demonstrate their constancy in willing submission to tests from God. But piety is subordinate to profane achievement and happiness in these romances. St. Alexis effaces his identity, abdicates control of his life to God, and rejects his family and all worldly ties. In contrast, Guy retains control of his life of service to God, acts on secular (as well as religious) motives, and attends to the well-being of his family. His mature pattern of life is a deliberate reversal in the secular sphere of his earlier proud actions, rather than an irrevocable surrender of will and identity to God. Amis

and Amiloun's story also bears strong resemblances to religious literature in the heroes' submission to divinely imposed trials and in the rewards sent from God. Indeed, the story exists in hagiographic versions. But the source of the friends' trials in legend—God's chastening of those he truly loves—shifts in Anglo-Norman and Middle English to the testing of an oath of brotherhood. Heaven rewards earthly friendship, not Christian faith. In keeping with this substitution of the flesh for the spirit, an earthly apotheosis replaces the hagiographic translation of saints to heaven with the restoration of domestic happiness and years of brotherly companionship.

Despite the deep moral commitment of these romances, their ultimate refusal of hagiography's vision compromises their religious element and finally makes it contingent on impulses opposed to Christian teaching. Preachers' objections to the "veyn carpyng" [foolish chatter] of *Guy*, *Sir Ysumbras*, and other romances are well taken from this perspective.⁴ Religious faith, like nationalism, cannot alienate the insular hero from his freedom of action or his private and profane concerns. Even the devout romances build an ideal of worldly achievement in which piety contributes to political and economic success, and divinity supports baronial causes.

As Christian principles fail to dominate secular allegiances in some insular romances, so too the cultural ideal of *courtoisie* does not disguise for Anglo-Norman poets the capricious and irrational ambitions of lovers. *Tristan* and *Ipomedon* take such detached attitudes to *courtoisie* that some critics deny them generic status as romance. These critics emphasize the typical continental presentation of noble characters refined by a sublimating love that generates numerous virtues and complements morally informed prowess. Thomas of Britain and Hue de Rotelande write of this ideal with full consciousness of its aspiration to perfecting sentiment and behavior, but both poets hesitate to discover in their heroes or in humanity at large the ability to fulfill that aspiration. In *Tristan* penance and suffering acknowledge the rift between *fine amor* and human frailty. Rigorous self-denial counterbalances the sexual passion of love, and violent devotions oppose love's violent jealousies. Hue approaches the problem differently, narrating a conventional story of noble courtship from a conflicting stance on so-

4. The phrase is used by William of Nassington, MS Bodleian 48, fol. 47; quoted in *Thornton Romances*, ed. Halliwell.

cial and emotional behavior that questions the plot's model of ideal love, troubles the relationship of love and chivalry, and diminishes the characters' stature.

For the early insular poets Old French *courtoisie* is alien and implausible, but later poets embrace it as a source of heroic value by rejecting its claims to exclusivity and high refinement. Amadas and Ydoine are mutually supportive partners whose loyalty is powered by pragmatic watchfulness, restraint, and cleverness. Similarly, the English poets complement their removal of ironic perspectives with alterations designed to make their material less troubling and more open to understanding. In their works love is natural and productive; *curtesye* is a straightforward set of teachable virtues.

State and church theorists contributed to the formation of courtly and chivalric ideals, as did literature, but the practical use for *courtoisie* as an ideology lay with the aristocracy's claims to superiority and special rights. In twelfth-century France the claim through *courtoisie* was largely an imaginative one not connected to operative principles of conduct, a disjunction observed with particular irony by Anglo-Norman poets. But by the later Middle Ages the English barony's claims to status located value in a range of behaviors that qualified and supplemented their landed and more distant military character. Here the late medieval nobility found a prestige that seemed to make up for its losses in economic and political status. Later insular poets adapt *courtoisie* in ways that enhance its usefulness for the English barony. They deny the ideology's first and deepest claims by developing a courtliness that is facilitating and imitable rather than exclusive. The *fine amor* that rejects madness and isolation for a carefully arranged marriage in *Amadas et Ydoine* and the links Guy's career establishes between marriage, chivalric excellence, and faith draw literary ideals closer to didactic exemplarity and imply that courtliness is directly accessible to the audience.

In summary, insular romances resist the political principle that national or royal interests must come before baronial ambition, the Christian teaching that religious values are superior to concern for the world, and the cultural principle that courtliness transforms its adepts beyond the merely human. To be sure, these dominant ideologies deeply affect the romances, providing them with important measures of value. Guy of Warwick's enormous popularity may be due to the conjunction of ideals called upon in his story: Guy is

a national figure who defends England from foreign threats, he strives for years to answer his lady's command to become the best of all knights, and he serves God during lonely years of pilgrimage. At the same time Guy like other heroes of this study evades the very ideals that nurture him. His defense of the nation is only a function of his private commitments, first to love and then to God. His love, though intense and aspiring, occasions regrets in his youth and repentance in age. And in serving God he does not surrender his identity, worldly motives, or concern for his family. The Guy poems, and other insular romances, seem to invoke dominant ideologies precisely in order to examine the telling differences between them and the hero's contrary program of fulfillment. By this process the romances answer generic and historical challenges together.

Insular romances often draw on epic, hagiography, and courtly romance, yet they take pains to distance themselves from these strong influences. To epic's heroic sacrifice and national commitment the English heroes respond that self-advancement guarantees the community's good and that the family's perpetuation can stand for the nation's security. In opposition to hagiography's polarizing of earthly and heavenly preoccupations, pious romances integrate faith into worldly identities and secular pursuits. Without becoming simply parodic, insular works reject continental versions of self-transformation through love for images of courtliness more natural, plausible, and even imitable. Their generic interactions are so marked that insular romances often seem to be themselves generically marginal. Yet their interactions usually sustain broadly characteristic features of romance: a successful hero who forges his own destiny; a world that defines and measures heroism but is at last controlled and made subject to heroic will. The insular poets' sensitivity to the strength of other literatures thus leads them not to exclude so much as to suggest and then engulf their generic opposition, consolidating their allegiance to a particular version of romance.

Generic interactions resonate with the insular romances' investigation of ideal systems in relation to baronial desire. The three ideologies that can be associated with epic, hagiography, and courtly romance aspire to direct the barony away from autonomous action and private gain, and toward behaviors that serve the wider interests of nation, church, and peacetime society. Insular ro-

mances recognize the growing power of these systems of conduct, in English even adopting them more fully into the noble hero's presentation. Yet one indication of the romances' baronial milieu is their resistance to all in these ideologies that would check baronial achievement. The insular heroes are eminently principled, but their principles finally support rather than check their pursuit of titles, property, lineage, and status. The move would seem to return the barony to a golden age of free autonomy when warriors dominated unquestioned, but the evocation of current social issues in the works denies that they are escaping to an imagined past. Resisting the dreams of ideological system and nostalgic class desire alike, the insular romances offer the barony nothing less than its future.

Insular romances are indeed nostalgic in that they draw material from tradition and distant history, and conservatively endorse hierarchy and feudal custom. Yet their nostalgia is only a first expression of their poetic liberation from time, and they are more importantly visionary than reactionary. They move beyond class identity, in that the noble hero's successes are primarily personal and only secondarily of broader significance. Attending to the heritage sustains the nation—not the reverse. Religious commitment is not to crusading solidarity with the church, but to personal faiths that support private goals. Courtliness, too, makes self-improvement the center of value, and public estimation only one of its results. These solutions to ideological tension do respect baronial ideals, yet they disperse class interest by insisting that success lies in private pursuits. The insistence stretches the insular romances beyond the specifics of their baronial milieu and addresses any listener for whom the manipulation of social constraints could have meaning. In these works baronial values become contiguous with many ambitions, and private action becomes stronger than communal commitment. And when private action is imagined to succeed at everything from defending the nation to achieving salvation to finding a wife, we are on the threshold of the competitive mercantile world that displaced feudalism. In celebrating the noble hero's ability to make every social ideal serve personal ends, the insular romances reinforce the barony's image even as they intimate that the barony's time is passing.